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**Teaching for social justice: A pedagogy for Twenty-first Century
early childhood education**

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Abstract

At the turn of the new millennium there was an ardent call for research into innovative pedagogies that might engross students in critical dialogues where complex cultural particularities and social traditions are investigated, with the aim of encouraging new ways of relating to and understanding social relations (Apple, 2004, 2006; Elenes, 2002; Lingard, Hayes & Mills, 2000; Mac Naughton, 2003a). Similarly there is a need for researchers and educators to explore ways whereby young children's negative attitudes toward difference are challenged and they are encouraged to appreciate diversity (Connolly, 2003; Denman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). These challenges, it appears, have been set in light of the fact that, although social justice and anti-bias curricula are of definite concern in educational circles, many educators were struggling to promote such curricula in their classrooms because they were not equipped with appropriate pedagogical strategies (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006; Lingard et al., 2000; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). These concerns are highlighted through a brief literature review that underpinned the participatory action research outlined in this paper.

Social justice in education is of great significance. "In fact, [social justice] remains the central debate in education and should remain the central pursuit of educators at all levels of education" (Sturman, 1997, p. xiii). Indeed, exploring critical consciousness in education is important and should be pursued in educational research (Siraj-Blatchford, 1994). This area of research has attracted considerable attention in the upper primary, secondary and post secondary levels of education (Siraj-Blatchford, 1995). However, while there is a large amount of research regarding young children's physical and intellectual development, there is much less research focusing on their development of critical consciousness and social justice understandings regarding difference, diversity and human dignity (Glover, 2001; Mac Naughton, 2003a, 2003b). This is rather surprising given that the preschool years are critical in forming attitudes towards diversity and difference (Dau, 2001; Carlsson-Paige & Lantieri, 2005; Connolly, 2003; Mac Naughton, 2003b; Nixon & Aldwinkle, 2005; Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2003). To this end the research project reported on in this paper addressed the above gap and examined strategies to enhance teaching for social justice in preschool settings and how these strategies raised critical consciousness in both students (preschoolers) and early childhood educators. This paper reports the major finding of the study (i.e. the judicious use of children's literature is an appropriate catalyst to teach for social justice) and also outlines further results that complement this pedagogical strategy.

Introduction

This paper begins by briefly explaining how social justice was defined for the purposes of the participatory action research project. It then reflects on literature that became the catalyst and the foundation for this study and reflects Noddings (1995) concern that as educators we should be about encouraging the development of a loving, caring humanity. Along these line King (1963/1994) asserts that injustice of any and every kind is a threat to a loving, caring humanity on a global scale and must be challenged. This paper, therefore, argues that social justice is an important educational issue in the Twenty-first Century and it upholds that teaching for social justice is an imperative which must begin in the early years. However, it is revealed that this is not always an easy task as research has shown that many teachers struggle to find appropriate pedagogical strategies to implement such a curriculum (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006; Lingard, et al., 2000; Siraj-Blatchford & Clark, 2000). The paper then discusses the participatory action research project that examined the specific pedagogical strategy of employing children's literature as a vicarious experience to initiate critical discussion regarding social justice issues of difference, diversity and human dignity in two Australian preschool settings (Preschool A and Preschool B). The chapter concludes with a brief comparative analysis of initial and concluding conversations held with each child and puts forward the study's findings.

Towards a definition of social justice

Social justice is a difficult concept to define as it means different things to different people and it has a temporal and spatial aspect (Rizvi, 1998; Vincent, 2003). What is considered as just at one point in time, or in one place, or among one social group, is not necessarily considered so in another. Indeed, there can be different traditions of thinking about social justice in the one sector of society (Rizvi, 1998). Social justice can be seen in terms of fairness (Rawls, 1971), entitlement (Nozick, 1974) and democracy (Beilharz, 1989). These traditions look to the distribution of goods and resources. However, this distributive paradigm that highlights material inequality is no longer adequate in capturing the complexities of injustice (Rizvi, 1998). A fairly recent paradigm of social justice has emerged that not only focuses on exploitation, interest and redistribution (on which the distributive paradigm was centred) but also focuses on issues of cultural domination, identity, difference and recognition (Fraser, 1995; Rizvi, 1998; Young, 1990). While this recognition paradigm sees injustice as being entrenched in the political/economic construction of society that results in economic exploitation and marginalisation which leads to inequitable and inadequate material standards of living; it also sees injustice resulting from cultural disrespect (Fraser, 1995; Rizvi, 1998; Young, 1990). The recognition paradigm believes that marginalisation and exploitation results from inequitable and inadequate recognition of difference.

An even more recent position on social justice believes that it should be upheld not only among people within society (internally to each social group) but also across societies in a global sense (Hurrell, 2003). Therefore social justice involves people who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility and accountability towards and with others not only in their society, but also in the broader world in which they live (Bell, 2007).

The participatory action research project highlighted in this paper embraced the recognition paradigm of social justice to uphold and celebrate recognition of difference and diversity in two Australian preschool settings. Indeed, the research team believed that all people are entitled to social justice, regardless of differences such as economic disparity, class, gender, colour, ethnicity, citizenship, religion, age, sexual orientation, disability or health (The Charter of the Global Greens, 2001). To this end this research project asserted that these conditions are wished not only for members of our own society but also for members of every society in our interdependent, participatory, Twenty-first Century global community (Bell, 2007).

From the above discussion this study formulated the following key features to shape its position on teaching for social justice. Social justice:

1. Values and upholds the dignity, freedom and human rights of each individual and/or cultural group through inclusion, acceptance and respect. Therefore teaching for social justice guides children to identify and challenge prejudice and discrimination and aims to counter stereotypes;
2. Values and upholds the rights of individuals and groups to practice their religion, traditions, relationships and such like. Therefore teaching for social justice guides children to identify and challenge any form of oppression;
3. Respects freedom of speech and ensures that each person's voice (opinion) is valued. It gives voice to minority groups and upholds the concept of multiple truths. Therefore teaching for social justice guides children to listen respectfully to others while understanding that opinions may not be the same as their own. Constructively critical dialogue and debate are encouraged;
4. Promotes peaceful practices. Therefore teaching for social justice guides children to employ peaceful practices to resolve disputes and maintain harmony.

Social justice: An important educational issue in the Twenty-first Century

Owing to improved telecommunications and transport the planet is becoming increasingly 'smaller' (Milanovic, 2003; Mittelman, 2001; Nyamnjoh, 2006; Sachs, 2002). Hence the need increases to examine global perspectives on a local scale to appreciate diversity, difference and human dignity through inclusion, understanding, compassion and the valuing of human rights. Racial, ethnic, cultural, religious and language diversity is increasing in schools throughout the Western world (Banks, 2004, 2006). Indeed 21st century Australian students are members of a global community in a localised setting (Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2003). Classrooms may be shared among Indigenous Australian, Anglo Australian, European Australian and Asian Australian classmates from varying religious, political, cultural and economic backgrounds. An optimist may claim that these classrooms are a rich source of cultural exchange. Yet this 'melting pot' often breeds severe discontent (Siraj-Blatchford, 1995). Indeed, racism, sexism and prejudice are problems in today's society (Baird & Rosenbaum, 1999; Chin, 2004; Sachs, 2002). Tom Calma (2007a; 2007b), Australian Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner, attests that race and racism are burning issues in Australian society.

These concerns highlight the need to educate children against racism, prejudice and violence. Many researchers and scholars, including Apple (2004), Connolly (2003), Darling-Hammond and Ancess (1996), Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2006), Elenes

(2002), Friere (1993), Giroux (1993, 1994) and Shannon (1989), have challenged educators to create classrooms and schools that are inclusive, give space for all voices and respect and recognition to all personal and cultural narratives. Indeed, education is a priority in combating the social ills of racism and prejudice (al-Hussein, 2000; Calma, 2007a, 2007b; Hollinsworth, 2006; Sukkarieh, 2004).

It is quite obvious that social justice is of paramount concern to researchers, academics and educators in the beginning of the Twenty-first Century. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states the aim of educators should be to prepare

the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin
(Save the Children, 1997, Article 29. 1d, p. 109)

To address the United Nations' challenge to prepare children for responsible life in a multicultural society a curriculum that supports and promotes teaching for social justice must be implemented. Embracing such a curriculum is not an easy task but an imperative one for a harmonious, just and peaceful future.

Teaching for social justice

Teaching for social justice is about educating students to value and care for themselves and others (intimate, close or distant) in an atmosphere of compassion, understanding and respect (Greene, 1995). It celebrates and positively recognises difference, diversity and human dignity while encouraging unity and solidarity (Greene, 1998; Rorty, 1989). Teaching for social justice challenges and counters stereotypes and upholds the dignity of each individual and/or group and it promotes freedom and peaceful practices in the classroom and beyond (Burns, 2004).

There are two essential beliefs that relate to and underpin teaching for social justice. The first belief is that there is injustice in the world where some people are consistently and undeservedly privileged while others are consistently and undeservedly disadvantaged. The second belief is that educators can be agents for change and interrupt (or challenge) the cycles of oppression of race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, religion and others. Therefore, teaching for social justice means identifying oppression in its numerous forms and taking action in the classroom to challenge the cycles of oppression (Russo, 2006; Bell, 2007).

Teaching for social justice may be conceptualized in two different, yet complementary ways (Hutchinson & Romano, 1998). One way is to employ strategies that afford students opportunities to experience and practice the traits and attributes that enable social justice to flourish. This may be achieved by allowing students real life opportunities in the classroom to handle conflict, trust one another and build a democratic community. Another way to view teaching for social justice, as conducted in the study outlined in this paper, is to address specific topics relevant to social justice issues as a class group. This can be done by examining social justice issues in the media and literature. In the case of this study the two preschool groups involved in the research project examined social justice issues of difference, diversity and human dignity highlighted in children's literature.

Teaching for social justice seeks to expose, critique, challenge and transform ideas and actions that oppress and/or subjugate any individual or group. Therefore teaching for social justice is

teaching what we believe ought to be – not merely where moral frameworks are concerned, but in material arrangements for people in all spheres of society. Moreover teaching for social justice is teaching for the sake of arousing the kinds of vivid, reflective, experiential responses that might move students to come together in serious efforts to understand what social justice means and what it might demand.

(Greene, 1998, p. xxix – xxx)

Consequently teaching for social justice as a form of conscience raising (Adams, 2007; Freire, 1993; Greene, 1998) that encourages students to explore social justice issues where sensitivities are raised to the point that make injustices intolerable. This raising of consciousness and sensitivity does not separate principled action from sympathetic identification, rational judgment from emotion, and logical projection from care (Greene, 1998) as does Kant (1959) and, perhaps, to an extent, Rawls (1971). Therefore, teaching for social justice encourages students to not only engage with issues of social justice on a cognitive and impersonal level but also on a sensitive and personal level.

Teaching for social justice requires of the teacher and the students *reflection* and *action* (Freire, 1993; Greene, 1995, 1998; Torres, 2004). If social justice is only talked about, it is merely rhetoric; and if action is taken without reflection it becomes reactionary. A good starting point for reflection, awareness and action is classroom discussion. Although not directed to *classroom* discussion both Habermas (1979) and Young (1993) agree that discussion helps to alter people's preferences and perceptions relating to social justice issues. They refer to this as 'communicative democracy'. In classroom situations, then, discussion may help students challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, refine their perceptions of the interests and needs of others, understand their relations to others and process collective problems, aims and resolutions (Greene, 1998; Young, 1993). Classroom discussion encourages the student to clarify and justify her/his preferences, ideas and beliefs with a group that may or may not agree.

By listening to others and trying to understand their experience and claims, persons or groups gain broader knowledge of the special relations in which they are embedded and of the implications of their proposals. These circumstances of a mutual requirement of openness to persuasion often transform the motives, opinions, and preferences of the participants. The transformation often takes the form of moving from being motivated by self-interest to being concerned with justice.

(Young, 1993, p. 230)

These communicative spaces must be encouraged in classrooms where honest, open debate and multiple voices are heard. Educators can bring warmth and motivation into the classroom lives of young children: "we can bring in the dialogues and laughter that threaten monologues and rigidity. And surely we can affirm and reaffirm the principles that center around belief in justice and freedom and respect for human rights" (Greene, 1995, p. 43). Teaching for social justice "is to teach so that the young may be awakened to the joy of working for transformation in the smallest places, so that they may become healers and change their worlds" (Greene, 1998, p. xiv).

Therefore teaching for social justice is not simply an awareness of the existence of injustices and the respect and acknowledgement of diversity; it is an active engagement in, and commitment to, social transformation. It may be asked: why focus a study that explores strategies to assist teaching for social justice, and is grounded in a critical approach, in the early years? Authoritative literature (Dau, 2001; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 2006; Nixon & Aldwinkle, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004; Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2003; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2002) points to the importance of the early years when teaching for social justice.

An imperative: Teaching for social justice in the early years

Clearly, today's preschoolers are tomorrow's parents, citizens, leaders and decision makers (Connolly, 2003; Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2003; Noddings, 2005) and early childhood education sets the foundation for lifelong learning and participating productively in a multicultural society (Carlsson-Paige & Lantieri, 2005; Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2003).

Current theorists, based on research on the affective and cognitive development of the young child, place an emphasis on the importance of beginning the study of global education during the earliest years of childhood... To resolve world issues, protect the environment, seek viable means of employment, and ensure peace and tranquility within and between nations, tomorrow's citizen will need to be comfortable working cooperatively in settings with a diverse membership.

(Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2003, p. 18)

There is no doubt that throughout the preschool years children are not only becoming more conscious of their world and how to act in it but also developing their moral structures by absorbing the attitudes and values of their family, culture and society (Dau, 2001; Nixon & Aldwinkle, 2005).

During the early phase of the research project that is outlined in this paper a critical moment occurred during a parent meeting that was called to explain the study and ask for informed written consent. The critical moment almost halted the project and highlighted a parent's negative attitudes towards difference. This critical moment may have not only been detrimental to the study but, if left unchallenged, also to a young boy's developing understandings of difference, diversity and human dignity. During the meeting Bob (father of Michael from Preschool B) explained: "*My boy doesn't even know about black, white or yellow. If you start confronting the kids with this it might start them thinking about difference.... It might make them look for difference... and I don't want him to feel uncomfortable at this young age.*"

Bob's comment highlighted that he felt 'difference' was confronting and uncomfortable and that this message was, perhaps subliminally, being projected onto his son. This sparked a debate and discussion among the parents in attendance on celebrating difference. This discussion gave an opportunity to elaborate on teaching for social justice and that this study was to be neither confronting nor uncomfortable. Bob conceded, and the meeting concluded, that young children have the right to understand that there are others in the world who are different from themselves and that all people deserve the same rights, inclusion and respect.

Indeed, children develop an understanding of the social world through a lengthy process of construction and they utilise what they see, hear and experience in their lives as a foundation for building an understanding of how people treat each other (Carlsson-Paige & Lantieri, 2005). Therefore the preschool years are crucial in shaping cultural and racial understandings and are critical in forming attitudes toward diversity and difference (Mac Naughton, 2003a). However, prejudices form very early in life (Brown, 1998; Dau, 2001; Mac Naughton, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, 1995; Swinarski & Breitborde, 2003). Research has demonstrated that by the time children reach preschool age they have already become socially proficient in the ways they appropriate and manipulate racist discourses (Connolly 2003; Mundine & Giugni, 2006; Palmer, 1986; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2002; Siraj-Blatchford, 1995). Research has shown that children have the capability to distinguish racial differences and to develop negative attitudes and prejudices towards particular groups from the age of three (Ayers, 2004; Connolly, 2003; Ehrlich, 1973; Harper & Bonanno, 1993). Indeed attitudes regarding race and sex roles “are manifesting themselves by the age of three, and may have formed earlier even than that” (Klein, 1990, p.25).

Thus, early childhood educators share a major responsibility in teaching for social justice and fostering an anti-bias curriculum that challenges racism and prejudice and upholds equity, justice and human dignity. Indeed, “without curriculum intervention by teachers, the racial attitudes and behaviours of students become more negative and harder to change as they grow older” (Banks, 2006, p. 145). Of grave concern, however, is that a number of researchers discovered that many educators struggle to find appropriate pedagogical strategies to support and promote positive recognition of difference in their classrooms (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 2006; Lingard, et al., 2000; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke 2000).

How then, without specific strategies and appropriate attitudes, are these educators supposed to implement curriculum interventions promoting positive recognition of difference and upholding human dignity? These educators must be assisted with and encouraged to implement a curriculum that “becomes a practice of freedom” (Shaull, 1996, p. 16) where children are guided towards an appreciation of difference and diversity while honouring peaceful and just practices and taking a stand against injustice. Such a curriculum will prepare future global citizens to participate in an inclusive and respectful multicultural society.

The participatory action research project

Where to begin?

In light of the above discussion this research project recruited participants from two Australian preschools to explore strategies that might work to teach for social justice in their classrooms (see also Hawkins, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b). The recruited research team included two preschool directors, a preschool teacher, two preschool assistants and the author of this paper. The team believed that the judicious use of stories would be a valuable starting point in their classrooms for preschoolers to vicariously experience difference and diversity, critical thinking and moral and ethical study (Greene, 1995; Noddings, 1998, 2005). Therefore the main research question was formulated as such:

How might children’s literature be used with young children in preschool settings to heighten, nurture and support their awareness and understandings of, and sensitivities

to, social justice issues related to difference, diversity, and human dignity and encourage them to identify social injustices?

During the last week of the orientation phase of the research project (which encompassed a ten week school term) a critical picture book was read to each preschool group by the preschool teacher. The educators from Preschool A chose to read *Bunyips Don't* to the preschool group as the text highlights bullying and unfair behaviour and they had noticed a slight amount of bullying from a small group of boys and a few girls refusing to play with others who were not dressed in what they considered appropriate attire. The educators from Preschool B chose to read *The Paper Bag Princess* that highlights gender issues as they had noticed gender stereotyping occurring during play with boys ostracising girls from their play and a small number of girls stating that boys should not dress up in the 'home corner'.

Immediately following each storytime an individual conversation with every preschool child was held. These conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed. There was no group discussion regarding these texts as the research team wished to insure that individual understandings and sensitivities to the social justice issues raised in the texts were not influenced by the group. Each conversation began in the same way by the child being greeted by name and then asked to share her/his thoughts regarding the text; however, for the most part the conversations were child led. This meant that each child could take the conversation where s/he wished it to go. This technique lessened stress on the preschoolers, promoted individuality and creativity, and encouraged candid dialogue.

The research team analysed and reflected upon these initial conversations which supported their assumptions that children in both preschool groups held stereotypical ideas regarding gender and that these children placed importance in maintaining a *status quo* that upheld the dominant discourse and culture (even though prejudice, suppression and bullying were employed by characters in the picture books who held power in the dominant tradition). The team, however, was surprised by the preschoolers rather exclusivist language; for example "*All bunyips should act the same*"; "*All people should be the same*"; "*...kids made fun of Young Bunyip because he was big and fat (different) so he wouldn't sing or dance or play ever again*"; "*She's yucky and different*"; "*I don't like shabby people*"; "*Girls shouldn't save boys*"; "*I'd save her (pointing to the picture of the neat and clean princess in a regal gown adopting a submissive stance to the prince) but I wouldn't save her in that paper bag... she's all dirty (pointing to the illustration of a dirty, disheveled princess adopting an aggressive stance to the prince)*". These examples highlight that the preschoolers were using the language of a dominant hegemony that upheld the importance of physical appearance and negated difference and diversity. The research team wished to guide the children to challenge and counter these stereotypical views to celebrate and uphold difference, diversity and human dignity. Thus ended the orientation phase of our study and set the scene for the next part of our research journey: the action research phase.

The action research phase

Over the course of the action research phase (an eleven week school term) the research team analysed 36 videotaped storytime sessions. Each week usually two storytime sessions from each preschool were videotaped and analysed at weekly

research meetings. Therefore, typically four storytime sessions were analysed at each meeting. This analysis sought to identify emerging themes, keywords or phrases, and critical moments.

Prior to this study the educators used storytime as a transition activity between indoor activities and morning tea, or between rest time and home time with little group discussion. However, over the course of the action research phase the educators realised that, when encouraged, stories promoted examination, deep reflection, and critical discussion on specific social justice and/or ethical issues, and prompted deep existential discussion regarding what the 'other' was going through and also prompted empathy for the 'other' (Noddings, 1998; Weil, 1977). Therefore, the status of storytime in each preschool setting was quickly raised with it becoming an integral part of the preschool curriculum.

Picture books were chosen each week by the research team to reflect the preschoolers emerging understandings of difference, diversity and human dignity as analysed from the previous week's videotaped storytime sessions. Themes emerged that highlighted social justice issues: gender; appearance; poverty; loneliness; integrity and self worth; indigenous issues; issues of skin colour and ethnicity; and (dis)ability. Picture books that encouraged the themes to emerge and were examined and discussed by the preschool groups included *Princess Smartypants*, *Esmeralda and the children next door*, *Arnold the prickly teddy*, *A bit of company*, *I like myself*, *White fellas are like traffic lights*, *We share one world*, *Mumma zooms*, *Rainbow fish to the rescue*, *Big Al*, *Let's eat*.

Over the course of the action research phase the research team noticed keywords and phrases such as '*unfair*', '*not right*', '*it's what's in your heart that matters*', '*it's okay to be different*', '*don't leave her out*', '*let the boys dress up. It's okay*', '*we shouldn't be bullies*'. These keywords and phrases were not part of the preschoolers' vocabularies prior to the study and developed through the course of the research project.

Critical moments occurred when the research team and the preschoolers were challenged by someone's thinking. As an example the theme of integrity and self-worth became surprisingly apparent during the reading of *Nicketty nacketty noo noo noo* with Preschool B during week three of the action research phase. Surprising because the research team initially considered this text non-critical which would inspire only mundane responses. The story is about an ogre who kidnaps a 'wee woman' and puts her to work cooking and cleaning for him. She in turn tricks the ogre and escapes. The following vignette is taken from the middle of the reading:

Kate (Teacher): *Wow, the little wee woman has to cook and clean for the ogre. I wonder what she'll do? Calissa...*

Calissa (Preschooler): *Well she... she should cuddle and kiss the ogre and do whatever he wants and then he might be nice to her.*

Kate (Teacher): *Mmm... so you think she should cuddle and kiss the ogre... mmm even though he's keeping her in his castle against her wishes? Do you think she'd feel good about herself if she did that?*

Tilly (Preschooler): *She'd feel embarrassed and she'd feel sad because she doesn't like him*

Kate (Teacher): *Okay...*

Ellery (Preschooler): *She'd be dumb to kiss him 'cos he's mean to her... he's bad*

Caddy (Preschooler): *Well she should stand up for herself. She shouldn't kiss him 'cos that's sort of pretend and lying and she'd feel bad 'cos she's saying something that she doesn't mean*

Kate (Teacher): *Mmm... true. Yes Calissa...*

Calissa (Preschooler): *Well maybe she shouldn't kiss him; but he shouldn't keep her. He's not good. It's not right.*

Kate (Teacher): *Yeah, Calissa. No-one has the right to keep another person against their wishes.*

Don (Preschooler): *He's real bad. The police should get him. That's what should happen if someone hurts you, or kidnaps you, or takes stuff away from you. It's not right. She should get outta there and tell the police.*

This vignette shows children of three and four years of age displaying reflection well beyond their years. Initially, Calissa's strategies for survival highlight practices that may damage one's integrity and self-worth; however, the preschoolers are quick to pick this up and challenge. Ellery's comment is almost a 'put down' of Calissa's suggestion saying that the 'wee woman' would be "*dumb*" to do this; however, Kate let this go to see what direction the discussion would take. This was wise because had Kate intervened Caddy may not have had the chance to voice her very eloquent and insightful comment that pretending to be someone you are not is like lying and can make you "*feel bad*". It also gave Calissa the opportunity to re-think her position and highlight the fact that something "*not right*" was taking place. Interestingly her brother, Don, also uses the term "*not right*" which almost reflects a stance to promote human 'rights' and to stand against human 'rights' violations: "*she should get outta there and tell the police*".

During the last week of the action research phase concluding conversations were held using the same books and the same techniques as the initial conversations (outlined previously in this paper). Contrary to the initial conversations all children from Preschool A identified that Old Bunyip acted in a bullying and unjust way and all but three children stated that Young Bunyip had the right to be himself and to live in peace. It was clear that the children were developing a metalanguage with which to discuss issues of difference and diversity. For example children stated that "*we're the same on the insides*", "*it's okay to be different*", "*it's what's in your heart that matters*", "*it doesn't matter what you look like on the outside*", "*it's okay to have different skin. That's just the way it is*".

Contrary to the initial conversations, where most children from Preschool B focused on the princess' untidy appearance in a negative manner, most children now identified the Paper Bag Princess as brave, clever, kind and caring. The gender issue of girls rescuing boys, which was an issue for many preschoolers in the initial conversations, was not raised. Most children identified the unfair behaviour of the prince. Although, over the eleven week action research phase, the preschoolers' cognitive and language development would have strengthened, the research team believed that the disparity between the initial and concluding conversations for both preschools was directly due to the intervening pedagogical strategy of critical discussion before, during and after storytime sessions carried out over the preceding term (see also Hawkins 2007a,

2007b, 2008a, 2008b). At the time of the initial conversations the children had not engaged in critical discussion regarding texts read. If any discussion had occurred at all it usually focussed on literal recall of the text's story. Following the action research phase and at the time of the concluding conversations the children were used to and enjoyed discussing social justice issues raised during storytime sessions. They were now prepared to reflect deeply on, not only the story of the text, but also the social justice issues highlighted in the texts and share their thoughts in a coherent and articulate manner.

Through the action research phase it emerged that all texts do have the potential for critical analysis in the classroom; however, the team believed that treating explicitly critical texts (those overtly and sensitively treating issues such as gender stereotyping, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, socio-economic status) have a greater impact and encourages deeper, more critical reflection and discussion. As Noddings (2005) suggests "if literature is to be effective in shaping moral and social attitudes, it has to affect readers – make them feel something. And it is those feelings that lead to lively discussion and reflection" (pp. 133-34).

Further Findings

By examining the classroom discussions that developed over the course of the action research phase and by comparing the initial and concluding conversations held with the preschoolers the research team believed that the intervening pedagogical strategy of critically examining social justice issues related to difference, diversity and human dignity through storytime sessions heightened the preschoolers' awareness and understandings of, and sensitivities to these social justice issues. The following is a summary of further findings that complemented the use of children's literature as a strategy to teach for social justice and therefore impacted positively on this awareness, understanding and sensitivity:

- ✓ elevating the status of storytime sessions from simple transition activities to important components of the preschool day;
- ✓ reading explicit texts that may be considered critical texts that highlight and celebrate difference, diversity and human dignity;
- ✓ engaging, as a group, in 'shared sustained thinking' characterised by 'sustained cognitive engagements' (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004) regarding picture books read during storytime;
- ✓ actively and carefully listening to children's responses, thus practicing a 'listening pedagogy' (Egan, 2009) and reflectively choosing, and allowing children to choose, texts that consolidated the social justice issues that had been highlighted in previously read texts;
- ✓ engaging in 'shared sustained thinking' characterised by 'sustained cognitive engagements' with individual children to gauge their understandings of and sensitivities to the social justice issues raised in the texts;
- ✓ employing guided questions or comments to introduce the literature and orientate the children to the social justice issues highlighted in the texts;
- ✓ utilising open-ended and higher order questioning techniques;
- ✓ revisiting whole texts or parts of texts for clarification;
- ✓ placing the social justice issues covered in the texts into real-life and the preschool context;

- ✓ responding to social justice issues through action (for example encouraging the sharing of what the children have – clothes, toys – with those who go without; supporting inclusion in play situations at preschool);
- ✓ inviting, on a regular basis, people of diverse races, cultures, abilities and backgrounds to the preschool to share their ideas, games, food, music, art, language, wisdom, expertise and knowledge;
- ✓ encouraging artistic response to the texts read (for example re-enactment, drawing, construction, dramatic play, music, singing and dancing);
- ✓ reinforcing and consolidating social justice issues read in texts by displaying preschoolers' artistic responses and related posters and making available relevant jigsaws, dolls and games; and
- ✓ involving and informing parents.

By employing the above strategies the early childhood educators were able to embed teaching for social justice into the curriculum of their preschool settings.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the importance of teaching for social justice in the Twenty-first Century and the imperative to begin this teaching in the early years. The research project outlined in this paper has extended and enhanced our knowledge in the area of teaching for social justice in early childhood education. As noted, prior to this study educators were struggling to find appropriate pedagogical strategies to support and promote teaching for social justice. This research project has equipped the educators involved in the study with pedagogical strategies to teach for social justice in their settings. Principally the strategy of employing the use of children's literature, particularly the use of texts that explicitly highlight and celebrate difference, diversity and human dignity, was successful in facilitating the preschoolers' awareness and understandings of, and sensitivities to these social justice issues. It was identified that the preschoolers involved in the study developed capabilities of critical reflection and capacities to participate in profound discussions that challenged taken-for-granted assumptions on issues of physical appearance, gender, colour, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and ability.

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