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**The story so far .... “A Cry for Justice: The use of children’s literature in facilitating preschoolers’ awareness of, and sensitivities to social justice issues.”**

**Karen Hawkins  
 The University of Southern Queensland**

**Abstract**

This paper will outline and discuss qualitative research into the above topic at the time of the conference. The PhD research project will be at the point of beginning to synthesise findings; hence the title “The story so far...”

The aims of the research, guided by interpretative perspectives, hermeneutics and a constructive paradigm, are:

To investigate ways in which children’s literature (picture books) can help preschoolers’ to reflect upon, clarify and articulate their awareness of, and sensitivities to social justice issues;

To explore whether preschoolers can critically examine children’s literature to identify social injustices;

To identify transformative and productive ways of sharing the teaching/learning experience that work to enhance preschool children’s awareness and understanding of social justice issues through storytime sessions.

The research design is one of Participatory Action Research.

This paper will discuss the research process so far: the topic’s background and literature review, purposeful participant recruitment, methodology, data gathering and initial findings and how they may contribute to early childhood education as a whole and specifically to teaching for social justice. However, this research story is a work in progress as data gathering was only recently completed and synthesis and thorough analysis are now in progress. As the title suggests this research story is “To be continued ...”

Table 1: Definitions for the Study

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<u>Social justice</u>	The concept of social justice is founded on the principle that each individual and/or group within a certain society has a right to equal opportunity, autonomy, fairness, and participation in the economic, educational, institutional, social and moral liberties and responsibilities valued by that community (Levy, 2002; Vincent, 2003; Kelly, 2004; Degan & Disman, 2005; Hurrell, 2005). For this study social justice means to uphold the dignity, equality, rights and freedoms of all individuals and communities especially those who are disadvantaged, oppressed and/or discriminated against. (Benjamin, George, King, Lerner and Nagara cited in Kikuchi, 2004).

<u>Children's literature</u>	Picture books chosen by the preschool teacher to read to the preschool group.
<u>Critical texts</u>	Picture books that address social issues such as racism, sexism, prejudice, exclusion; or which highlight another's perspective. These books typically focus on social issues and involve situations where characters are marginalised in some way as a result of the existing systems of power.
<u>Non-critical texts</u>	Picture books that address lighter issues than critical books. They usually attend to mundane experiences that maintain the status quo.
<u>Storytime</u>	When a picture book is read to the whole preschool group and discussion follows.
<u>Preschoolers / Preschool Children</u>	Children aged between three and five years of age attending a registered kindergarten and/or preschool.
<u>Preschool</u>	An educational facility set before formal compulsory schooling.

**Main Research Questions:**

How is it possible to examine critical texts in preschool settings to heighten young children's awareness and understanding of, and sensitivity to social justice issues and encourage them to identify social injustices? What facilitates this critical examination?

**Research Aims:**

To investigate ways in which children's literature may help preschoolers to reflect upon, clarify and articulate their awareness of social justice issues;  
 To explore how preschoolers may be guided and scaffolded to critically examine children's literature to identify social injustices;  
 To identify transformative and productive ways of sharing the teaching/learning experience that work to enhance preschool children's awareness and understanding of social justice issues through storytime sessions.

**The beginning:**

The Literature Review

Sturman (1997, p. xiii) asserts that 'social justice in education matters greatly. In fact, it remains the central debate in education and should remain the central pursuit of educators at all levels of education.' It follows that examining **teaching for** social justice should be of importance to educational researchers. Teaching for social justice is not only theorising on the concept but it must inspire positive action (Greene, 1995; Leistyna, 2005).

Elenes (cited in Aldma & Quinonez, 2002) calls for research into new pedagogies that promise to 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 with the view to encouraging a peaceful and just world. Similarly Connolly (cited in Vincent, 2003) affirms that there is a need for researchers and educators to explore ways whereby young children's negative behaviour toward difference is challenged and they are encouraged to appreciate diversity.

There is no doubt that throughout the preschool years children are not only becoming more conscious of their world but are developing their moral structures by absorbing the attitudes and values of their family, culture and society (Nixon & Aldwinkle, 1997). By the time

children reach preschool age they have already become socially proficient in the ways they appropriate and manipulate racist discourses (Van Ausdale and Feagin, 1996, 2001; Connolly, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, 1995). Connolly (in Vincent, 2003, p.166) states 'studies first pioneered in the 1920s and 1930s and repeated in a variety of formats since then have consistently shown that children have the capacity to recognise racial differences and to develop negative attitudes and prejudices towards certain groups from the age of three onwards.' Undeniably the preschool years are crucial in shaping cultural and racial understandings (Mac Naughton, 2003). Indeed, the preschool years are critical in forming attitudes toward diversity and difference. Clearly today's preschoolers are tomorrow's parents, citizens, leaders and decision makers (Connolly, cited in Vincent, 2003; Noble, 2003; Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2003). Thus, early childhood educators share a major responsibility in fostering social justice. Therefore, it is imperative that early childhood educators take responsibility in guiding children towards a positive attitude regarding difference and diversity, and upholding equality, justice and human dignity.

However the literature review found that educators were struggling to find appropriate pedagogical strategies to promote positive recognition of difference and other social justice issues in their classrooms (Lingard, Mills and Hayes, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford and Clark, 2000). For the sake of a future characterised by peace and justice, researchers and educators must answer the challenges presented by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Sturman (1997), Elenes (cited in Aldama et al., 2002), Connolly (cited in Vincent, 2003) and Leistyna (2005).

Research in the US and the UK has revealed that addressing social justice issues through critical texts were impacting positively and enhancing student's conceptions of social justice in primary and secondary grades (Galda & Beach 2001; Arizipe & Styles cited in Bull et al. 2003; Wolk 2004; Damico & Riddle 2004; Mills et al., 2004; Burns, T. 2004; Leland et al., 2005; Whitmore et al. 2005). However, examination of recent research into teaching for social justice has identified three key gaps:

1. Very little research involving social justice and children's literature has been undertaken in preschool settings. Furthermore, such research has seen little investigation in Australia.

This study addresses the above gaps in current knowledge by examining the use of children's literature to highlight social justice issues in Australian preschool settings by investigating the main research questions.

2. Research often overlooks the children's voices.

This study joins the international movement in research that aims to give children a voice by critically listening to preschoolers during storytime sessions with the view to analysing and theorising their awareness of social justice issues. The study also examines children's creative responses to storytime sessions. It asks the following which extend the main research questions:

What do preschool children have to say regarding issues of social justice in the form of articulated and creative responses to storytime sessions?

How can practice be improved by listening to preschool children discuss social justice issues during and following storytime?

3. Transformative and productive ways of sharing the teaching/learning experience that facilitate preschoolers' understandings of social justice need to be explored.

This study bridges this gap that has educators struggling to find appropriate pedagogical strategies that will heighten social justice awareness in preschool settings by addressing the following which relate back to the main research questions:

How can teachers lead storytime discussions to scaffold preschoolers' awareness of social justice issues and further extend critical skills?

How can teachers use children's literature and storytime discussions as a springboard to real life action relating to social justice issues?

How can exploring children's literature in a preschool classroom, using a critical literacy approach, assist teachers to develop strategies that will enhance positive recognition of difference and bring about transformational learning?

### The Methodology and Sample Selection

To answer the main research questions this study examines how critical and non-critical texts impact on two preschool groups. It investigates storytime discussion and follow up sessions to discover how teachers scaffold and encourage preschoolers toward an awareness of social justice issues. This study examines whether positive recognition of difference and transformative learning can take place in the preschool classroom by using children's literature.

Approach: Qualitative research underpinned by:

- Interpretive research – places importance on gaining insight into the meaning that people formulate in their everyday situated actions (Erickson, 1986; Bruner, 1990; Le Compte and Preissle, 1993).
- Hermeneutics – ‘the theory and practice of interpretation and understanding ... in different kinds of human contexts’ (Odman cited in Keeves, 1990, p. 63).
- Constructivist paradigm – makes the assumption that children are active participants in the construction of their own socio-cultures (Vygotsky, 1978; Hatch, 1995).

Therefore, this study makes use of rich narrative and data collection tools include semi-structured and informal interviews, observation (using videotaping, proformas and checklists), field notes and reflective journals. Most important to this study is the collaborative design of Participatory Action Research.

### Design: Participatory Action Research

This study was inspired by Participatory Action Research (PAR), a relatively “new approach to research” (Torres cited in O'Donnell et al., 2004, p. 27). The application of PAR was appropriate for this study because it is a means that produces knowledge and improves practice through its collaborative nature: the direct involvement of participants in setting the schedule, data collection and analysis, and use of findings (Mac Naughton cited in Mac Naughton et al. 2001). Fine et al. (cited in Weis & Fine, 2004, p. 95) claim PAR ‘represents a stance within qualitative research methods, an epistemology that assumes that knowledge is rooted in social relations and most powerful when produced collaboratively through action.’

According to Torres (cited in O'Donnell et al., 2004, p. 29), ‘PAR ... is instrumental to the social justice movement. Its participative character and transformative action enable people to critically understand their worlds by actively and collectively shaping and reshaping them.’

To this end, the following cyclic action research process was undertaken: observing, reflecting, sharing / collaborating / theory building, planning (based on observations), implementing planned action; re-observe, re-reflect, re-collaborate, re-planning, re-implementing; ... the cycle repeats (Mac Naughton cited in Mac Naughton et al., 2001, p. 211).

### Sample Selection: Purposeful recruitment

The researcher desired to get to the “grass roots” where the entire research process would be of benefit to those who would use the findings. She felt PAR would give those people who would use the findings a voice and, therefore, give an authenticity to the research project. Purposeful sample selection to establish the PAR team took place during Term One of the school year 2006 in the Gold Coast, Brisbane and Hervey Bay regions of south east Queensland. The researcher was searching for at least two preschool teachers who were sensitive to and conversant with critical literacy approaches and committed to teaching for

social justice and who would be willing to embrace a collaborative role in the proposed study for at least one year. The researcher was not selecting participants as much as the participants were selecting the research and researcher. This was no easy task as PAR requires from its participants an enormous commitment to the research. After gaining clearance from the university and governing bodies, Early Childhood Teacher Association (ECTA) groups and Early Childhood Australia (ECA) were approached to help recruit participants. Also letters of introduction were sent to Education Queensland schools and Catholic schools to which a preschool was connected.

Two preschool teachers and their assistants (Lisa\* and Pippa\*: Preschool A; Kelly\* and Shelly\*: Preschool B) and a preschool director (Sandra\*: Preschool A) from the Hervey Bay region expressed interest and so meetings were set in place to further explain the research and its design. These educators had a declared interest in teaching for social justice and exploring strategies that would work to enhance their students' understandings of and sensitivities to social justice issues. They wanted to investigate children's literature to discover what texts worked to enhance young children's interest, reflection and understanding of social justice issues. Kelly had previously taught in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory and had an interest in exploring strategies that would empower young children to celebrate cultural diversity. She and Shelly also wished to explore the quality provided in children's literature when exploring texts. Sandra and Lisa were driven to join the PAR team due to the fact that unlike the two kindergarten groups at their centre, Lisa's preschool group was homogenous, coming from mostly middle class families of Anglo-Saxon backgrounds. They also had noticed gender stereotyping and exclusion occurring during play. Sandra and Lisa wanted to explore how this action research could positively impact on this homogenous group to value difference and diversity and challenge stereotypes. Pippa and Shelly were considered co-educators by their respective preschool teachers. It was felt by the teachers, the preschool director and the researcher that these experienced assistants would bring other significant perspectives to the team. (\* Pseudonyms used).

These dedicated and committed professionals, with the researcher, became the PAR team.

**Ethical Considerations:**

Like all research involving human beings, it was imperative for this study to gain informed written consent from not only the Par team members and parents but also the children. As Coady (cited in Mac Naughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001, p. 66) asserts, 'it is good practice ... and in keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to ask the child also to give consent, or 'assent' as it is known in these circumstances.' The participation and voice of children in this research was very important. Therefore the challenge to this study was to gain children's consent (written consent is problematic given their literacy capabilities). To this end a child-friendly consent form was devised and explained to each individual child. All consent forms outlined the fact that videotaping and photography would be used and may be displayed in the final thesis.

Table 2: Timetable of data collection and initial analysis

<u>School Term (2006)</u>	<u>Research Activity</u>
Term One	Purposeful Sample Selection: Two Preschool Teachers and Settings. Letter of introduction circulated to schools. ECTA and ECA contacted to explain research and ask for assistance in recruiting collaborative research participants. Meetings with interested teachers and principals in Hervey Bay, Queensland. Teacher and principal consent forms issued / signed / returned. Letters of introduction sent to parents.
Term Two	Meetings with parents.

	<p>Parent consent forms issued / signed / returned.</p> <p>Preschools visited weekly as a “getting-to-know-you” phase to establish rapport with preschool children. Videotaping for “fun” to get children used to videotape (no analysis).</p> <p>Proforma devised and trialled.</p> <p>Fortnightly PAR Team Meetings: Reflection and discussion between teachers and researcher re children’s literature and critical literacy; storytime structure; interview procedure; cyclic process of PAR.</p> <p>Critical text read to preschool groups prior to pre action research interviews: Preschool A: <i>Bunyips Don’t</i>; Preschool B: <i>The Paper Bag Princess</i>.</p> <p>Pre data collection semi-structured interview with preschool children (with consent).</p>
Term Three	<p>Data collection begins:</p> <p>Child-friendly consent from issued / signed / returned.</p> <p>Storytime sessions observed, videotaped and transcribed; Creative responses photographed and discussed; Descriptive and reflective field notes written; Teacher journals entered; Proforma utilised.</p> <p>Weekly PAR team meetings to critically reflect upon and discuss what has been observed and noted with the aim of implementing action in response to observations. Data analysis is collaborative, continual and ongoing.</p> <p>Selected critical text (same as term 2) read to preschool groups towards the end of term 3.</p> <p>Post data collection semi-structured interviews with preschool children (with consent).</p> <p>Data collection completed.</p>
Term Four	<p>Further data analysis.</p> <p>Fortnightly PAR team meetings for collaborative analysis.</p>

Procedures:

The PAR team met fortnightly during term two as an orientation phase. The team needed to develop both a personal and professional bond. These meetings discussed expectations, critical literacy, social justice issues and what we believed to be critical and non-critical texts within children’s literature. The researcher visited each preschool weekly to build a warm and happy rapport with the preschoolers. This “getting-to-know-you” phase was invaluable to the study as the researcher was to not only videotape storytime sessions during term three, but personally interview each preschooler in a pre and post action research interview. For trustworthy results the children had to feel valued by, and secure and comfortable with the researcher (Bone, 2005; Booker, cited in Mac Naughton et al. 2001; Coady, cited in Mac Naughton et al. 2001).

Before the team embarked on the intense data gathering that was to ensue during term three it revisited action research literature to make sure the team was on the right track.

Mac Naughton cited Carr and Kemmis (1986), which helped validate that what we were doing and planning to do was, in fact, action research:

“All action research must:

- Have social practice as its subject matter and see the subject matter as open to strategic action and capable of improvement;
- Proceed systematically and self-critically through the action research process of observing, planning, doing and reflecting (the action research cycle) in a deliberate and ongoing way; and
- Involve those responsible for the practice and be based clearly on principles of collaboration.”

(Carr & Kemmis cited in Mac Naughton et al. 2001, p. 209)

To address the first dot point: To our team the social practice of storytime in preschool settings was indeed open to strategic action and capable of improvement by way of critically highlighting social justice issues in children's literature with the aim of enhancing preschoolers' awareness of and sensitivities to these issues.

To address the second dot point: Our PAR team met weekly during intense data gathering to observe videotaped storytime sessions of both preschool groups, reflect on observations and discussions, share and collaborate ideas / theories, choose appropriate texts based on observations of children's responses and plan action for the following week, implement planned action; re-observe, re-reflect, re-share and re-collaborate, re-plan, re-implement ... and the cycle continued at each meeting for the eleven weeks of term three 2006.

To address the third dot point: Our PAR team involved the teachers, assistants and directors who were responsible for the day-to-day activities of the preschools including storytime sessions; and, of course, the children and their responses were an integral part of this process and partnership. The direction of the study was driven by the reflective observations and collaborative ideas and theories of the team. All members shared an equal voice.

Crucial to this research were two sets of semi-structured interviews with each preschool child regarding a critical text. Consistency was maintained by a set of questions asked to each child (Breakwell, 1995); however, for the most part each interview was child-directed, allowing the child freedom to discuss what interested him/her. The text was read to the preschool group by the preschool teacher with no group discussion because untainted individual responses were required to set the scene for the research and give it direction. One set of interviews was conducted at the end of the orientation phase during the last week of term two. This was a pre action research interview. The text read to preschool A was *Bunyips Don't* which addresses bullying, suppression, stereotyping and freedom of speech. The text read to preschool B was *The Paper Bag Princess* which also addresses bullying, stereotyping and prejudice.

Children's responses during the pre action research interviews highlighted the need to investigate what strategies would best facilitate an understanding of suppression, stereotyping, bullying and prejudice and challenge these social ills. The following points give brief summaries of these interviews:

#### Pre Action Research Interview Preschool A

##### Critical Text: *Bunyips Don't*.

##### Summary of Children's Responses:

- Twenty one children were interviewed.
- Every child happily agreed to be interviewed; however one child became withdrawn and non-verbal when the interview began. The researcher did not wish any child undue stress and so concluded the interview before the child could become uncomfortable.
- Nine of the twenty one children responded with answers such as "I don't know", "I can't remember" or with responses unrelated to the story.
- Eight of the twenty one children identified the old bunyip as an authority figure who suppressed the young bunyip but they said that is how things should be e.g. "All bunyips should be the same 'cos old bunyip says so" and "Bunyips should do what their told".
- Only two children challenged the right of old bunyip to suppress young bunyip.
- One child discussed the fact that children would make fun of young bunyip because he was "big and fat" and this would cause him to "give up and never go to parties or sing or dance again." This is a very interesting interpretation as both the pictorial text and the written text support the fact that young bunyip, although big and fat, was welcomed by the children.

**Pre Action Research Interview Preschool B**

**Critical Text: *The Paper Bag Princess***

**Summary of Children’s Responses:**

- Fourteen children were interviewed.
- Every child happily agreed to be interviewed; however, three of the fourteen children became very shy and non-verbal when the interview began.
- No child identified the bravery or resourcefulness of the Paper Bag Princess. All (verbal) children concentrated on the lack of cleanliness of the Paper Bag Princess in a negative way.
- Four children stated that it was “OK for boys to save girls but not OK for girls to save boys.” One boy said that he would save Princess Elizabeth (pointing to the picture of the neat and clean princess in a regal gown adopting a submissive stance to the prince) but would not save her in her paper bag (pointing to the illustration of a dirty, scrappy princess adopting an aggressive stance to the prince).
- No child identified that Prince Ronald acted unjustly. Even though Prince Ronald was rude and thankless when Princess Elizabeth saved him six children said that she should marry him “but only when she gets cleaned up.” Three children stated that “Prince Ronald should not ever marry her because she’s dirty”.
- Each child was asked if he/she would play with the princess: Three children were non-committal. Six children said that they would not play with the Paper Bag Princess because she was dirty: “I don’t like shabby people.” Five children said they would only play with the regal looking princess.
- When comparing the two illustrations of Princess Elizabeth, one in her regal gown the other in a dirty paper bag, every (verbal) child said that she would be a better, more kind and likeable person when she was wearing her regal gown and crown to when she was dirty in a paper bag. One non-verbal child pointed to the illustration of the regal looking princess being the “better person”.

Thus ended the beginning of our study and set the scene for the next part of our research journey.

**The middle:**

Data gathering

Intense data gathering and weekly PAR meetings began in earnest in term three. During our weekly PAR meetings the team critically studied two storytime videos and post discussion from each preschool (i.e. four storytime sessions) using a proforma devised and trialled during term two (below) and a “Children’s Response Sheet” (see page 9).

<b><u>Observational Proforma</u></b>			
<b><u>Preschool:</u></b>	<b><u>Tm3Wk:</u></b>	<b><u>Date:</u></b>	<b><u>Critical/Noncritical</u></b>
<b><u>Text:</u></b>	<b><u>Author:</u></b>	<b><u>Illustrator:</u></b>	
<b><u>Pre Story Discussion / Introduction:</u></b>			
<b><u>Discussion during reading:</u></b>			
<b><u>Post story discussion:</u></b>			
<b><u>T Directed Questions:</u></b>	<b><u>Y/N</u></b>	<b><u>W</u></b>	<b><u>HO</u></b>
<b><u>Number:</u></b>			



**Ending of storytime session / Duration:**

**Creative responses:**

**Further comments and text rating:**

**Children’s Response Sheet**

**Preschool: Tm3Wk Date Critical/non-critical**

**Text: Author / Illustrator**

<b><u>Name</u></b>	<b><u>Answer Question</u></b>	<b><u>Ask Question</u></b>	<b><u>Comment</u></b>	<b><u>Non-related</u></b>	<b><u>Interruption</u></b>	<b><u>Nil</u></b>

Through observation, reflection and analysis of what the teachers and children were saying and doing, picture books for the next week were chosen and a plan of action discussed. Although the study was going to compare critical against non-critical texts all term. The PAR team decided that after only three weeks, critical texts were by far producing much more reflective discussion and so it would be best for the study to concentrate on critical texts only (note table 3, page 10). As the term progressed discussions following storytime became longer, more reflective and in depth (on the part of both teachers and children). Teachers became aware that higher order and open-ended questioning produced more reflective responses and that planning storytime and questions produced a superior learning experience for both teachers and children. However, more importantly the teachers found that carefully and purposefully **listening** to children’s responses and clarifying, without judgment, what was being said drove the post storytime discussion and further action. Children “bounced off each other” during post storytime discussion to examine their world and the social justice issues that the stories highlighted.

Storytime and discussion encouraged children and teachers alike to explore further the social justice issues highlighted in the books e.g. similar stories were brought in by children and sought from the preschool library, jigsaws and posters reflecting the social justice issues in the texts were utilized; even a wheelchair was acquired for the preschoolers to experience.

The following table outlines the texts read during Term three.

Table 3: Texts read during Term Three Weeks 1 - 11:

Week	Monday Preschool A	Tuesday Preschool A	Wednesday	Thursday Preschool B	Friday Preschool B
1		Princess Smartypants (C)	<b><u>WEEKLY PAR MEETINGS</u></b> 3.30 Preschool A		Caps for Sale (NC)
2	Snow White (NC)	Paper Bag Princess (C)		Marty and Mei Ling (C)	The Little Mouse, The Red Ripe Strawberry and the Big Hungry Bear (NC)
3	Cinderella (NC)	Discussion following children's assertion of the importance of appearance. etc		Nicketty Nacketty Noo Noo Noo (NC)	Let's Eat (C)
4	Esmerelda and the Children Next Door (C)	Role play on stereotyping (C)		What is Bush Tucker? (C)	Whitefellers Are Like Traffic Lights (C)
5	Nini at the Carnival (C)	Cleversticks (C)		Enora and the Black Crane (C)	Fish Out of Water (NC)
6	Let's Eat (C)	Pumpkin Paddy Meets the Bunyip (C)		I Like Myself (To be continued) (C)	I Like Myself (Continued) (C)
7	A Piece of Straw (C)	Rainbow Fish to the Rescue (C)		Prince Cinders (C)	Princess Smartypants (C)
8	The Kuia and the Spider (C)	I Like Myself (C)		A Bit of Company (C)	Kindy Excursion
9	Milly and Molly and Different Dads (C)	Mumma Zooms (C)		The Sad Little Monster and the Jellybean Queen (C)	Big Al (C)
10	The Race (C)	Whoever You Are (C)		Arnold the Prickly Teddy (C)	Esmeralda and the Children Next Door (C)
11	Post Action Research Interviews: Bunyips Don't	Post Action Research Interviews: Bunyips Don't		Post Action Research Interviews: The Paper Bag Princess	Post Action Research Interviews: The Paper Bag Princess

**Key:**

- (C) - Critical texts
- (NC) - Non critical texts

Both preschool populations were homogenous, coming from backgrounds that were mostly Anglo-Saxon. First reactions to stories highlighting other cultures were often negative eg children said “yucky” and made disdainful faces when Spanish food or bush tucker was discussed. However, these very children were observed creating a Spanish feast at the playdough table or finding bush tucker and cooking up a “bush tucker stew” in the sand pit. Clearly, the stories read to these children allowed them to explore their world and realise that other cultures **do** exist and have the right to be upheld and celebrated.

During the last week of term three post action research interviews were conducted; using the same books, the same technique and the same interview schedule, as the pre action research interviews. The following points give brief summaries of these interviews:

#### Preschool A Post Action Research Interviews

##### Critical Text: *Bunyips Don't*.

##### Summary of Children's Responses:

- Twenty-three preschoolers were interviewed.
- Nineteen children identified the bullying of Old Bunyip as inappropriate and said that Young Bunyip should be able to dance, sing and go to parties; therefore, it is acceptable for bunyips to be different. Twelve children said that Old Bunyip's demands on Young Bunyip were “not fair” (a phrase that was not used at all in the pre action research interviews).
- Twenty children said that it is reasonable and right for people to be different with Twelve children volunteering that they would play with children who looked different to them eg skin colour, eyes, hair, (dis)ability. One child felt that bunyips should act the same and it was “okay” for Old Bunyip to say nasty things to Young Bunyip BUT it is acceptable for people to be different.
- Twenty children identified that Old Bunyip was unjustifiably nasty to Young Bunyip. Only three children considered Old Bunyip's behaviour to be acceptable.
- Three children stated that all bunyips and people should be and act the same. Two are twins. One twin stated that she “wouldn't play with people who had dark coloured skin or in a wheelchair.” The other twin said: “all people should have white skin” but then said “it's okay for people to have dark skin”.
- One child's response was interesting: “it's okay for people to be different but I wouldn't play with them.”

##### Comparison with pre action research interviews:

- Contrary to the pre action research interviews where eight children were either unwilling to respond or made non-related comments not one child fell into this category. All children responded appropriately and willingly.
- In the pre interviews only two children agreed that Young Bunyip should rebel against unreasonable and unfair demands. In the post interviews nineteen children concurred that Young Bunyip should not bend to these unjust demands.
- As opposed to the pre interviews where no child made the parallel between bunyips and people twenty children made the link and commented that it is OK and right for people to be different.
- In the pre interviews only two children showed concern toward injustice. In the post interviews nineteen children displayed concern toward injustice with twelve children using the phrase “not fair”. This phrase was not used during the pre interviews.

#### Preschool B Post Action Research Interviews

##### Critical Text: *The Paper Bag Princess*

##### Summary of Children's Responses:

- Twenty children were interviewed as opposed to fourteen in the pre interviews. This was due to three children being away at the end of term two and new enrolments during term three.

- Fifteen children identified that Prince Ronald was unkind.
- Fourteen children identified that the Paper Bag Princess was kind and brave.
- Ten children stated that the Paper Bag Princess should not marry Prince Ronald because he was “mean” to her.
- Even though four children (all boys) identified that Prince Ronald was unkind to the Paper Bag Princess who saved him, they still felt that she should marry him.
- Three children mentioned that it was acceptable for girls to rescue boys. No child mentioned that it was **not** acceptable for girls to rescue boys.
- Twelve children identified that Princess Elizabeth and The Paper Bag Princess were in fact the same person inside: kind, brave, clever, nice were words used to describe the Paper Bag Princess/Elizabeth. Many children mentioned that it does not matter what a person wears.
- Five children mentioned negatively that the Paper Bag Princess was dirty.

Comparison with pre action research interviews:

- Contrary to pre action research responses only two children were considered non-verbal. These two children were not involved in the pre interviews. The three children who were considered non-verbal in the pre interviews all verbalised in the post interviews. One child’s responses in particular in the post interviews were clear, articulate and displayed great depth of understanding re gender issues and justice.
- In the pre interviews no child mentioned Prince Ronald’s ungraciousness or the Paper Bag Princess’ bravery. In the post interviews fifteen children discussed Prince Ronald’s nastiness describing him as mean, nasty, not nice, angry, mad, naughty and a toad. Fourteen children discussed the kindness and bravery of the Paper Bag Princess.
- As opposed to the pre interviews no child mentioned that it was not right for girls to rescue boys.
- In the pre interviews only four children wished to discuss the impending marriage between Prince Ronald and the Paper Bag Princess. These responses revolved around the princess’ cleanliness: Two children stated that she should marry Prince Ronald “only when she gets cleaned up”; two other children stated that they should not get married because “she’s dirty”. However, in the post action research interviews ten children felt that the princess should not marry Ronald due to his nastiness.
- In the pre interviews all children identified the better, kinder, nicer person to be the regal Elizabeth in her gown (seen in the opening illustration). The post interviews reveal twelve children identified Princess Elizabeth and the Paper Bag Princess as the same person, describing her as brave, clever, kind, funny and friendly.
- As opposed to the pre interviews where no child would play with the Paper Bag Princess, six children voluntarily stated that they would play with her. However, five children said that they would not play with her because she was dirty.

**The end (?):**

The initial findings are very encouraging as to the success of the action research.

The children’s responses during the post action research interviews display a heightened awareness of and sensitivities to the social justice issues of bullying, stereotyping, suppression, prejudice and freedom of speech. For preschool A where only two out of twenty-one children in the pre action research interviews showed concern toward bullying and injustice; post action research interview responses revealed nineteen out of twenty-three children displayed concern against injustice with twelve of these children using the term “not fair” (a term not used in the pre action research interviews).

For preschool B where every (verbal) child equated physical beauty and cleanliness with goodness in the pre action research interviews; post action research interview responses

revealed that this stereotype was being challenged with only six of the twenty children equating beauty and cleanliness with goodness.

These interviews also highlighted the fact that the preschoolers recognised characters acting unjustly, something not noticed by the children in the pre action research interviews.

There may be contributing factors to the disparity of children's responses between pre and post action research interviews. Indeed, cognitive and language development of these preschool children can have a bearing on results. Intense and regular discussion following storytime on any topic may encourage children to articulate their individual thoughts and ideas. Also the increased familiarity between the preschoolers and the researcher at the time of the post action research interviews could have a bearing on results.

However the PAR Team feel that initial results suggest that the intervening pedagogical strategy of examining social justice through critical children's literature has been successful and impacted positively to enhance preschoolers' understanding of and sensitivities to social justice issues. Teachers have documented that the preschool groups involved in the study are more cohesive, harmonious and inclusive than they were before the study began. Therefore, transformational learning may have taken place because of the action research.

Unlike most narratives this research story does not have a definitive conclusion on two counts:

1. These are initial findings only and much more cross referencing with video transcripts and exploring emergent themes are needed to truly validate the studies results.
2. The topic itself is a never ending story ... the social justice issues keep changing ... globalization, technology, the media, popular culture, medical "advancements", terrorism, world poverty, world hunger, homelessness, the AIDS pandemic ... the list goes on ... and this study has not touched on the plight of our environment!

This is not an ending but a beginning that may only provide some answers. Social justice: care of self, others and the planet should be of paramount importance in education. Eleven years ago Maxine Green wrote the following which is still pertinent today:

*We can bring warmth into places where young persons come together ... we can bring in the dialogues and laughter that threaten monologues and rigidity. And surely we can affirm and reaffirm the principles that centre around belief in justice and freedom and respect for human rights ...*

Maxine Green (1995, p. 43)

Teaching for social justice matters. It is the responsibility of researchers to help educators discover pedagogical strategies that will positively enhance their students' understandings of, and sensitivities to social justice issues.

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