THE STORY SO FAR …. THE USE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN FACILITATING PRESCHOOLERS' AWARENESS OF, AND SENSITIVITIES TO SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES.

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ABSTRACT

This paper will outline and discuss qualitative research into the above topic at the time of the ARECE 2007 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 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 …"

Key Words: Social justice; children's literature; early childhood education.

TABLE 1

DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
<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 (Benjamin, George, King, Lerner and Nagara cited in Kikuchi, 2004).

Children's literature	Picture books chosen by the preschool teacher to read to the preschool group.
Critical texts	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.
Non-critical texts	Picture books that address lighter issues than critical books. They usually attend to mundane experiences that maintain the status quo.
Storytime	When a picture book is read to the whole preschool group and discussion follows.
Preschoolers / Preschool Children	Children aged between three and five years of age attending a registered kindergarten and/or preschool.
Preschool	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 students' 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 in the current body of knowledge in early childhood education:

- 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.
- Research often overlooks the children's voices.
- Early childhood educators are struggling to find appropriate pedagogical strategies that heighten awareness of and sensitivity to social justice.

THE METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE SELECTION

To answer the main research questions and address the above gaps this study investigates the use of children's literature during storytime sessions in two Australian preschool settings over a six month period. It investigates storytime discussion and follow up sessions to discover what the children have to say and how teachers respond to, scaffold and encourage preschoolers toward an awareness of social justice issues. This study also 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
- An interpretive perspective that 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).
- A constructivist paradigm that makes the assumption: children are active participants in the construction of their own socio-cultures (Vygotsky, 1978; Hatch, 1995).

This study makes use of rich narrative. 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: observation, reflection, collaboration / theory building, planning (based on observations), implementation of planned action; re-observation, re-reflection, re-collaboration, re-planning, re-implementation … 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, afford an authenticity to the research project. Purposeful sample selection to establish the PAR team took place during Term One of the 2006 school year in the 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 study. After gaining clearance from 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, Catholic and independent schools to which a preschool was connected.

A preschool director, two preschool teachers and their assistants from the Hervey Bay region expressed interest, and so meetings were set in place to further explain the research and its design. These dedicated and committed professionals, with the researcher, became the PAR team. They 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 also wanted to investigate children's literature to discover which texts worked best to enhance young children's interest, reflection and understanding of social justice issues.

Interestingly both preschool groups were mostly homogenous, coming from middle class families of Anglo-Saxon backgrounds. The PAR team wished to explore how this action research could positively impact on the two groups to value difference and diversity. These

educators had also noticed gender stereotyping and exclusion occurring during play and wanted to explore strategies to challenge these social ills.

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 (and is) very important. Therefore the challenge to this study was to gain children's consent (written consent was 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 and that consent may be withdrawn at any time during the study with no reprisal.

TABLE 2

TIMETABLE OF DATA COLLECTION AND INITIAL ANALYSIS

School Term (2006)	Research Activity
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 directors in Hervey Bay, Queensland. Teacher and director consent forms issued / signed / returned. Letters of introduction sent to parents.
Term Two	Meetings with parents. Parent consent forms issued / signed / returned. Preschools visited weekly as a "getting-to-know-you" phase to establish rapport with preschool children. Videotaping for "fun" to allow children to become familiar with the camera (no analysis). Proforma, to assist storytime observations, devised and trialled. 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. Critical text read to preschool groups prior to pre action research interviews: Preschool A: *Bunyips Don't*; Preschool B: *The Paper Bag Princess*. Pre data collection semi-structured interview with preschool children (with consent).
Term Three	Data collection begins: Child-friendly consent from issued / signed / returned. Storytime sessions observed, videotaped and transcribed; Creative responses photographed and discussed; Descriptive and reflective field notes written; Teacher journals entered; Proforma utilised. 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. Selected critical text (same as term 2) read to preschool groups towards the end of term 3. Post data collection semi-structured interviews with preschool children (with consent).

	Data collection completed.
Term Four	Further data analysis.
	Fortnightly PAR team meetings for further collaborative analysis.

Procedures

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 it was necessary for the children 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). 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 storytime.

Before the intense data gathering that was to ensue in term three the PAR team revisited action research literature to make sure it was on the right track. Carr and Kemmis (cited in Mac Naughton et al. 2001, p. 209) 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."*

To address the first dot point: The PAR team believed 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. Also, the team felt that the status of storytime itself needed to be elevated in both settings from simply a transition exercise (before home time or between inside/outside activities) and given greater emphasis. Timing and setting became important. Preschool A moved storytime inside (previously it was conducted outside under an awning, yet allowing traffic noise to negatively impact on the experience) prior to morning tea and inside activities. This not only afforded the children time to informally discuss the story during morning tea but creatively express any ideas during inside activities while these thoughts were fresh. Preschool B moved storytime from home time to the first group activity of the day. This allowed greater discussion time and also gave the children opportunity to express their thoughts both verbally and aesthetically during the day.

To address the second dot point: The 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: The 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.

Brief Summary of Pre Action Research Interviews
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. From both groups only two children identified a character acting unjustly. Many children could not articulate their thoughts and answered with "I don't know". Twenty-one children were interviewed from preschool A with most children contending that the status quo of the story should be upheld even though the authority figure acted in a bullying and unjust way. Fourteen children were interviewed from preschool B with all (articulate) children concentrating, in a negative way, on the Paper Bag Princess' appearance and lack of cleanliness. No child identified her bravery or resourcefulness and no child identified Prince Ronald's lack of grace and unjust behaviour. Six children said that the Paper Bag Princess should marry Prince Ronald "only when she gets cleaned up" and three children said emphatically that "Prince Ronald should never marry her because she's dirty!" For four children the issue of a girl rescuing a boy became problematic.

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 and a "Children's Response Sheet".

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 outlined. (A list of children's literature used for this study may be found at the end of this paper's reference section).The study was going to compare children's responses to critical against non-critical texts all term; and while, what we initially considered to be critical texts were encouraging reflective discussion within the preschool groups, the PAR team quickly came to realise that indeed all texts (including what was considered non-critical) had the potential of critical examination, thus becoming "critical texts". Often the children's responses to what the team considered a non-critical text produced such reflective discussion that both the children and teachers were driven to explore underlying social justice issues; for example the text *Nicketty Nacketty Noo Noo Noo*, initially thought to be a non-critical text, encouraged a discussion on valuing and upholding self worth. As the term progressed discussions following storytime became longer, more reflective, more articulate and in depth (on the part of both teachers and children). Teachers became aware that higher order and open-ended questions produced more reflective responses; and reflective planning of 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 during storytime and clarifying, without judgment, what was being said drove the post storytime discussion and further action. Children "bounced off each other" during discussions to examine their world and the social justice issues that the stories highlighted.

As stated previously both preschool populations were homogenous, coming from backgrounds that were mostly Anglo-Saxon. First reactions to stories highlighting other cultures were often negative e.g. 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.

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; a wheelchair was procured for the preschoolers to experience.

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.

Brief Summary of Post Action Research Interviews
Twenty-three children were interviewed from preschool A. Twenty children drew a parallel between the characters in the story (bunyips) and people, saying that is it acceptable to be "different" and that the authority figure was "not fair" and a "bully". Three children contended that bunyips (and people) should "all be the same". Twenty children were interviewed from preschool B. Fourteen children identified that the Paper Bag Princess was "kind and brave". Fifteen children identified that Prince Ronald was unkind. Five children negatively mentioned the princess' lack of cleanliness.

Comparison with Pre Action Research Interviews
Contrary to the pre action research interviews all children who were involved in the first interview and subsequent action research could articulate their thoughts, feelings and ideas. For preschool A, in opposition to the pre action research interviews where no child made the parallel between bunyips and people, twenty children made the link and commented that it is "okay" and right for people to be different. Nineteen children showed concern toward injustice and used such terms as "not fair" (a phrase not used in the pre action research interviews).

For preschool B where twenty children were interviewed, only five children concentrated on the importance of appearance. Most of the children could identify the bravery of the Paper Bag Princess and the ungraciousness and bullying behaviour of Prince Ronald. In opposition to the pre action research interviews ten children felt that the Paper Bag Princess should not marry Prince Ronald due to his unkind behaviour. The gender issue of girls rescuing boys was not raised.

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. These interviews reveal that the preschoolers

now recognise 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:

- These are initial findings only and thorough cross referencing with video transcripts and exploration of emergent themes are needed to truly validate the study's results.
- 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 aides 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 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 were 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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