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[McArdle, Felicity, Knight, Linda M., & Stratigos, Tina](#)  
(2013)  
Imagining social justice.  
*Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 14(4), pp. 357-369.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2013.14.4.357>

Special Edition of CIEC (Issue 4, 2013) entitled *Social Justice in Early Years Education: Practices and Understandings*

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**Title: Imagining social justice**

**Abstract:**

This paper examines how creativity and the arts can assist teachers who teach from a social justice perspective, and how knowledge built through meaningful experiences of difference can make a difference. Just as imagining is central to visual arts practice, so too the capacity to imagine is a necessity for social justice. The authors ask what art can *do*, and how art can *work*, to bring about greater understandings and practices around social justice and the early years. A 'recognitive justice' (Fraser, 1997, 2000; Cazden, 2012) requires the capacity to be sensitive to the multiple voices that need to be heard, and the ability to imagine how lives might be lived differently. The arts can provide powerful means for thinking social justice, and the experiences described in this paper can have application in addressing social justice in the professional preparation of prospective teachers. Three teacher educators who teach from a social justice perspective apply a collective biography methodology to their stories of art activity. Data were collected from three sites: transcripts, notes and digital images from a salon evening; ethnographic observations, field notes and artefacts from a school classroom; and a/r/tographic data generated in a university art classroom. Data were analysed using Foucault and the conceptual work of other post-structuralist philosophies, to explore how aesthetic and creative artistic activity could excite imaginations and open up multiple possibilities for richer forms of educational outcomes – for teacher educators, their students, and ultimately for young children.

## **Title: Imagining social justice**

The capacity to imagine is a necessity for social justice — imagining a future self, imagining how we might all live together, imagining different ways of doing and being. Without this capacity, it is difficult for any preservice teachers to be prepared for teaching students from diverse backgrounds. In this contribution to the special edition, the proposal is that art is, and has always been, a crucial methodological and intellectual tool for engaging with social justice issues. This proposal reflects a possible pathway for conceptualising a recognitive element of social justice (Fraser, 1997, 2000; Cazden, 2012). In their framework for exploring cultural pedagogies and Indigenous cultural knowledges in Australia, Luke et. al. (2013) propose that rethinking marginalised cultural knowledges, practices and standpoints can lead to “new representations within previously monocultural and exclusionary knowledge systems” (p. 190). Rather than focussing on belief statements about race, gender, social justice and equity, the focus of the three stories shared in this paper reflects attempts at trying new ways of thinking, and at theorising by doing. For the three researchers, all of whom are teacher educators, arts practice is one of the most effective modes for implementing understandings around social justice in early years education and care.

At a time when standards, measures, testing, evidence based, longitudinal studies are fast becoming the ‘only game in town’, this paper examines different readings of social justice practice through a methodology that enables new questions to be asked. There is no single homogenous view of best pedagogical practice for social justice, that can be applied across the diversity of people, places and curriculums. Nevertheless, contemporary approaches to schooling that are increasingly and ‘obsessively measuring and managing the mundane’ (Thomson, Lingard & Wrigley, 2012, p.1) and ‘evidence-based’ practice may be ‘fundamentally undemocratic’ (Vandenbroek, Roets & Roose, 2012, p.537). Standardisation produces high levels of standardness (McWilliam, 2010), denying populations of children their capacities and their capabilities. At the same time, learning about social justice matters through experience may result in individual educators changing their beliefs and ideals, and yet may have little or no impact on the larger structural and institutional injustices experienced every day. Failure in school might be the effect of globalisation, marketisation and the knowledge economy, but this ‘event’ is transformed into a problem of the individual, educators and/ the necessity for parental support (through pedagogization) ( Vandenbroek, 2009). Social problems are systematically translated into problems of the individual, or of education.

A collective biography methodology (Davies & Gannon, 2006) was applied as a means to think together and analyse the data generated for this study. Davies' method is a process whereby a group of researchers worked together on a particular topic, social justice, and drew on 'their own memories relevant to that topic and through the shared work of telling, listening and writing' (Davies & Gannon 2006, p.3). The three researchers are members of a group who came together purposefully in order to methodologically seek out and present 'moments where something else, something surprising, can come to the surface' (Davies & Gannon 2006, p.2). This method favours critical reflection and shared learning, and addresses some of the main tensions and paradoxes that exist today in studies based on interpretative-critical methods (Suárez-Ortega, 2013). Each of these stories is instructive but not exhaustive. Each of the three stories go some way to illuminate *what art can do* when it comes to social justice.

The three researchers applied collective biography to share, trace and interrogate three stories of learning that collectively offer opportunities for thinking and performing the task of social justice work — the personal, the school classroom, and preparing quality teachers. Collective biography facilitated the researchers' interrogation of the topic of social justice through 'storytelling and writing and analysis of those stories' (Davies & Gannon 2006, p.8). By bringing together a poststructural concern with power relationships and a Deleuzian interest in engendering new synergies and possibilities (Wyatt, Gale, Gannon & Davies, 2011), this methodology led to some new connections on the question of difference. Each story is distinct. Taken together, they illustrate the importance of the cultivation of imagination, and how aesthetic approaches develop intellectual, social, cultural and personal identities (Bates, 2012). Ultimately, the collective process helped to develop motivation for implementing socially just practices.

The stories are presented in this paper as partial accounts of arts practices in different contexts: (i) part of a Doctoral study, (ii) a small-scale research project, and (iii) an assignment task with preservice teachers. Through collective biography, the stories were brought together to enable questioning and brainstorming the topic of social justice, and to build understandings and concepts around the topic. Bringing the stories together is not just about context and subjects of the stories, but also forces a visibility 'in oneself and on oneself [to] become available for inspection' (Davies & Gannon 2006, p.11). This visibility extends to the ways that, through the work produced by their students and themselves, the teacher educators' thoughts on social justice are made visible. The question of motivation to 'do social justice' in early childhood education and care carries history and emotion. Through this

particular methodology, it becomes possible to ‘interrogate the discourses in which we have constituted others and have ourselves been constituted ... as moral or immoral beings’ (Davies & Gannon 2006, p.11). For instance, the difference between being an activist, an advocate, and a ‘do-gooder’, proved a strong provocation for this inquiry. In the history of the field of early childhood education and care, there are entrenched traditions around improving the chances of success for all children.

Contemporary shifts in social and cultural ways of being call for responsive modes for thinking about teaching and learning, and research — approaches that are inclusive and democratic. Collective biography is a mechanism not for establishing empirical or statistical findings, but ‘local and situated truths ...to interrogate the materiality of our lived experience’ (Davies & Gannon 2006, p.4). The three narratives in this paper are partial accounts that emphasise the significance of place, people and communities in ways that can be overlooked in more conventional concepts of ways of knowing and find resonance, indirectly, with Indigenous standpoint theories (Smith, 2005; Nakata, 2007). The question of what constitutes knowledge is particularly pertinent when it comes to matters such as post colonial approaches to learning and understanding. The history of privileging particular languages over ‘others’, the use of certain symbols and symbol systems and ignoring others, and the failure to recognise unfamiliar pastoral practices, are all part of Australia’s sorry history of interaction between colonisers and Indigenous Australians. In this same sense, the focus on recognitive social justice challenges the hierarchy of curriculum and discipline subjects which marginalises art as non-essential, a frill only offered after the ‘work’ is complete. The focus of this paper is on what art can *do*, how art can *work*, and the proposal is that art provides the means for ‘the insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ (Foucault 1980, p.81). Through creative activity and imagination, children and educators can place social justice at the heart of the curriculum.

The collective biography presented in this paper investigated how artistic activity might open up multiple possibilities for richer forms of educational outcomes – for teacher educators, their students, and ultimately for young children. Each of the three stories in different ways, tested ways in which aesthetic and creative artistic activity could excite imaginations, engage reasoning and emotions, and prompt the projection of self into possible futures (Bates, 2012, p. 68). The stories in this paper are one way of starting a conversation about the ways in which art can do more than represent particular cultural practices. Art can

work as teaching and learning and research – in the exchange of information, ideas, symbols, artefacts, performances, and stories.

The three stories occurred in extraordinary spaces. Firstly, there was a *salon* evening, where early childhood academics came together to have their ideas meet and collide, their talk was interrupted, stories overlapped, and thoughts were incomplete or tangential (for more on this, see Sandra & Spayde, 2001). Second, a small team of researchers worked with recently arrived refugee students in a school classroom. The children arrived with disrupted educational backgrounds, and most had experienced and witnessed traumatic social and emotional events. The third space was a university art classroom with undergraduate early childhood education students enrolled in a storytelling elective unit of study.

The stories are intensively remembered in relation to poststructural theories. The analysis took ‘the texts of Foucault and other post-structural writers as rhizomatic, as open, in a Deleuzian sense, to the work that we want to do with them’ (Davies & Gannon 2006, p.5). The first story describes an embodied experience with Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) smooth and striated space and the subversive possibilities of stitchery. The second describes working with disadvantaged young people who have come to Australia in recent history, and explores how artistry prompted the researchers to ‘produce knowledge differently’ (St Pierre, 2000, p.27). Possibilities for more socially just pedagogies emerged from this experience. The third story connects social justice matters with teacher education curriculum and pedagogies, and asks students to explore and rethink issues of diversity and identity through fantasy, metaphor, drawn imagery and sequential narrative. The stories build theory that connects creative activity, imagination, and social justice. They do this by focussing on ways in which claims and identities can be contained in symbols of belonging.

### **First story: Learning, the embodied experience, the personal**

Tina is currently engaged in a doctoral study, researching with infants (since we are using the collective biography methodology, we use our own names when recounting the personal). This is a story about her own personal learning experience, and how an invitation to imagine, think and learn differently, enabled Tina to arrive at a rich and robust understanding of complex theory. At the same time, this experience led to her producing a new, more satisfying and more confident version of self. In brief, the story is an illustration of how a textile/art process helped a student think her way through Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) philosophical concept of striated and smooth space. The experience revealed

connections between the arts, social justice and education. The implications for young children and the connections we made between Tina's experience and some related contexts in the experiences of young children in ECEC settings, form the conclusions to Tina's story in the account provided here in this paper.

For a doctoral student, coming to grips with theory is often a major concern. For her research into the ways in which the politics of belonging operate for infants in family day care, Tina had been drawn to work with concepts from the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. She had spent 18 months reading, reflecting, discussing and writing about their work, and constantly making connections with her own research project. An invitation to attend a salon on Deleuze, however, opened up the possibility of different ways of experiencing, understanding and sharing theoretical understandings. The purpose of the salon was to promote egalitarian engagement (Author and other, in press) with Deleuzian ideas and theories and attendees included researchers from PhD students to professors and senior academics. The salon was to take place in the evening at a restaurant and each person was asked to share something such as an object, poem or artwork as a prompt for discussion. For someone who is not an artist, this was an exciting but unsettling opportunity. What to present? How would it be received?

The salon evening provided the impetus for Tina to engage with theory in an unexpected way: the creation of two objects through crochet. The process of creating, manipulating and sharing these objects provided a deeper understanding of difficult concepts and how they could be put to work. In addition, the creative activity led Tina to recognise the value of other ways of learning and expressing. The language-based experiences she had become used to producing were more generally expected of her in the academy, and now the embodied, tactile and visual proved powerful tools for her thinking and communicating.

Leading up to the salon evening Tina had been wrestling with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of smooth and striated space. Deleuze and Guattari used various types of fabric such as woven cloth, felt, patchwork, and in particular, knitting and crochet as models to present various characteristics of smooth and striated space. This struck a chord with Tina, since, on a personal level she had long been interested in handicrafts. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) point out, woven fabric and knitting create striated spaces made up of vertical and horizontal lines intersecting at right angles, and this space is closed in at the sides with a clear boundary. Next, they look to felting, patchwork and crochet, and how this work

involves the creation of smooth spaces that may be prolonged in all directions, and have no predetermined boundaries or orientation. Such theorising then can be applied in reading early childhood education, and thinkers such as Lenz Taguchi (2010) have pointed to striated space associated with classroom routines, pedagogical plans, and observation and assessment protocols which grid and structure the ways in which children and adults behave and interact. Smooth and boundless space might involve the questioning of habitual ways of doing and thinking, in an effort to do or think differently (see Lenz Taguchi, 2010). In Tina's case, she went on to use smooth and striated space to think about the existing research in relation to her doctoral study with infants.

Through her knowledge of the artistry and processes of crochet, Tina was led to delve deeper into the models of striated and smooth space discussed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and their discussion of mathematics, particularly Riemannian spaces as a model of the smooth. The starting point for Riemann's thinking about space was non-Euclidean geometry (Plotnitsky, 2006). In 1997 Taimina (Henderson & Taimina, 2001) discovered it was possible to crochet a form of non-Euclidean geometry, a hyperbolic plane, thereby creating the first durable model of a hyperbolic plane on which the unusual properties of this geometry could be explored in a tactile manner. Prior to this discovery, the hyperbolic plane had already inspired artworks by Escher: the Circle Limit series of woodcuts (Taimina, 2009). Following Taimina's discovery the Crochet Coral Reef was initiated, a project involving mathematics (hyperbolic geometry), marine biology, handicrafts (crochet) and community art practice (The Institute for Figuring). The Crochet Coral Reef has been exhibited in art and science museums around the world. These connections between Deleuze and Guattari, mathematics, crochet, and striated and smooth space led Tina to create her own crocheted hyperbolic plane, along with a flat, Euclidean plane. She shared both at the Deleuze salon.

On reflection, it was clear to Tina that through her engagement with the process of making and then seeing, manipulating and sharing the crochet objects, she came to a different understanding of smooth and striated space than would otherwise have been possible. When we consider knitting, or crochet, as a way of learning that "de-centers pedagogical practices", then we come to think of bodies as "implicated in the processes of meaning making" (Springgay, 2010, p. 114). This way of learning afforded Tina a deeper connection with complex philosophical and mathematical concepts and made possible the connecting of disparate and unexpected knowledge, experiences and objects.



The understanding afforded by the crochet process was, for Tina, an embodied one. For example, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest that space can escape the limits of striation through the smallest of deviations. The process of crocheting the hyperbolic plane in which small deviations, made through a single stitch increase, allowed Tina to see and feel this in action, as the hyperbolic plane grew exponentially and the ruffled edges appeared.

The de-centering described by Springgay (2010) is particularly relevant to the salon. For Tina it was a moment of letting go of the ways in which she had been taught that a doctoral student should engage with theory. It meant taking a leap toward the possibility that crochet, something generally associated with grandmothers and booties, was an appropriate thing to do and share in relation to complex philosophical thinking. It also involved a certain loss of control, stepping away from the traditional structures and conventions that prescribe how the various actors should behave when researchers interact in more customary ways (such as PowerPoint slides, lecture style arrangements and agendas).

Finally, to return to the introductory remarks in this paper about the imagination and constructions of self, it was not only connections between the philosophical and mathematical concepts that were enabled through the crochet activity. This way of learning also created a connection between what Tina thinks of as her self as doctoral student and her personal self.

*Tina: When I first became a PhD student it was directly after a period of being a stay at home mother to my two young children. It seemed to me at the time that a schism was created in who I was. There was the personal me and there was the professional me, but at the same time, particularly as I was often working from home, these often came into contact and even conflicted with one another. Bringing crochet to the PhD process was a satisfying experience. I felt as if rather than the two selves being in conflict with each other, they were suddenly harmonious and complementary. For me, crocheting, knitting or sewing is something that I do for the people I love. It is something that I feel connects me with my family, with my mother, my aunty and my grandmother and their ways of creating things for their loved ones. The process of connecting crochet with theory provided a connection between where I come from, where I am and where I am going.*

Tina's story is situated particularly within the context of higher education, and can also serve to illustrate two key, interrelated ideas in relation to recognitive social justice, art and early childhood education. The first is the ability of the arts to create a bridge between

home and educational settings. Evidence suggests that access and attendance to quality education and care programs is lower for children from marginalised families (Graue, 2006), and the use of creative and artistic pedagogies has the potential to increase participation in quality early childhood services, by attending to the aesthetic components of children's learning. The overall environment of the setting impacts on children's attendance and engagement, and it is a powerful support, for young children especially, if they can make connections between home and their education and care setting. This bridge between home and education setting is critical in early childhood contexts (Vandenbroeck, 2007). Tina's story illustrates a deeper understanding of this point, which leads beyond the clichés of including sofas and artefacts in the décor of the setting.

The second is the value of the arts as an alternate way of knowing, learning and expressing. By valuing, indeed encouraging, a connection between Tina's home crochet practice and her PhD student practice, the salon afforded not only a powerful learning experience, but a greater sense of belonging, of a place within the academic world that she had newly entered. While the bridge between home and school environments is crucial, so too are the less easily identifiable matters of difference — language use, everyday practices and routines, ways of knowing and being. Evidence shows that Indigenous children in Australia are less likely to access early childhood education services. The same is true of children from economically disadvantaged families. However, culturally relevant programs have been shown to improve participation rates (Harrison, Goldfeld, Metcalfe, & Moore, 2012). One aspect of more culturally relevant programs may include educators reconsidering what counts as knowledge in early childhood classrooms (Ballenger, 1991, as cited in Hyland, 2010). Educational practices communicate strong messages about what is and is not valued with enormous consequences for children (Hyland, 2010). By valuing the arts, as an alternate and powerful method of knowing, learning and expressing, as well as a cultural practice, early childhood settings contribute to children's multiple and complex belongings.

### **Second story: Research, agency, bordercrossings**

This second story is about art and research and social justice. It is a partial account of a research project that was designed as an inquiry into the needs of children who are from arguably the most disadvantaged group of young people in Australia's recent history. They are 'Horn of Africa' refugee migrant students who arrived in Australia in recent years with

disrupted educational backgrounds, and traumatic social and emotional experiences. More detailed accounts of this project can be found elsewhere (see Author & other, 2012), but the focus of this story is the use of art based methodology in the design and conduct of a part of the larger study. The aim was to investigate what these young children (in middle school) needed in order to be able to 'do school'. The team of researchers, including the school personnel, knew that more was required beyond simply acquiring English language skills and levels of literacy. The teachers had become alarmed at how little these new arrivals seemed to have experienced about being a school student. Power / knowledge relationships (Foucault, 1980) would see them vulnerable as they transitioned to 'mainstream' schooling, and diminished their chances for success. Here, the aims of the research commissioned by the school could be said to be driven by a redistributive concept of social justice (Fraser, 2000; Cazden, 2012). The teachers in the school were focussed on equitable distribution of mainstream forms of social, intellectual and educational capital (Luke et al., 2013). With the inclusion of the arts component of the research undertaking, an element of recognitive social justice also came into play. The parallels with everyday issues encountered in ECEC were always noticeable to the researchers. Issues around acquisition of language, knowledge, and social and cultural capital are as relevant to young children's successes with education, as they are with older children.

In the absence of shared language, more traditional, word-centric methods for generating data (e.g. interviews, focus group discussions) were rendered deficit, although not entirely impossible, with the help of interpreters. The researchers introduced an artist to the classroom, and she worked with the children as a group, setting them the task of creating a 'self-portrait', through the use of digital photography. First, the artist showed the children examples of other artists' work, and these included portraits, self-portraits, photography, pop art montages, bricolage, traditional, modernist, European and African artists, and some of the artist's own personal attempts at representing herself. The children were engaged by the books and artefacts, and attended to the artist's talk, even though she spoke entirely in English. It was her contention, based on previous experience, that this method had never failed her, and that the children appeared to understand her 'message' if not her words. Traces of some of these works were later identified in the works the children produced.

Next, the children were each given a digital camera, and the researchers explained that they wanted the children to use the cameras to show them about their lives outside school. Key words were written on the whiteboard, and these included suggestions about what the

children might capture on camera (e.g. your home, your family, where you go after school). Before taking the cameras home, the researchers and the artist worked alongside the children, teaching them skills and terms such as: long shots, close-ups, texture, pattern, composition. When the children returned the cameras after the weekend, there was much excitement within the research team, and the feeling that they had been invited to peek through a window into the lives of the children was something that more than one researcher mentioned. Similarly, when the children were assisted in downloading their shots, printing them out, and reassembling into montages and artist books, there were many cheerful exchanges between the children and the research team, interspersed with still and quiet times suggesting deep engagement with the task. The children's teacher commented on their level of engagement, and her surprise at how well the children were working alongside each other.

The invitation to engage in hands on learning through the artform of photography enabled the children to produce versions of themselves, whether real or/and imaginary, for sharing not only with the researchers, but also with each other. One way of 'reading' the images was to examine the content for objects and semiotic features that might indicate the children's accumulating capital. For instance, many children chose to photograph plants and flowers growing in their gardens and in their homes. The literature points to the importance of gardens and flowers to refugees, because they indicate permanence and a level of affluence, previously unavailable to those who have travelled for extended periods of time (Rutter, 2006). In this way, the children might be said to have used art as a language, as a means of expressing, when words were unavailable and/or inadequate. This multiliteracies view of art can and does serve its purpose, but is not the focus of discussion in this paper on social justice.

Perhaps the children were doing what Bates (2012) refers to as employing and constructing aestheticised symbols of belonging, of status, of authority, of belief. However, it would be a mistake for a team of 'white' researchers to fall into the intellectually arrogant trap (Aveling, 2012) of thinking that we know what it is like to be an 'African' student recently arrived in a new country. Indeed, their 'African-ness' is a process of becoming that starts 'out of Africa' – it is not a given. These young people find themselves constituted as 'African' for the first time in their lives after they enter Australia (see Author & other, 2012). Instead of reifying cultures as immutable 'ways of life', invariant and unchanging, it is possible to think of the multiple and complex interactions the researchers were part of, and outside of, in the classroom. The children were engaged with a series of endless

bordercrossings, represented in images, but possible also in music, drama, literature, and dance. The use of the digital cameras made it possible for the researchers and the children to 'imagine alternative ways of life, alternative ways of being' (Bates, 2012, p.63). This was not just about adding to repertoire, but also letting things go, subtracting, 'giving up some learned ways of being and thinking' (Bates, 2012, p.63). Here the engagement with arts practices provided a humanising space for the researched and the researchers.

The inclusion of the art component into the language learning curriculum afforded opportunities for the children's agency, shifting them from being the 'described and imagined' to the 'describers and imaginers' (Aveling, 2012, p.3). Through the children's creative and imaginative use of digital cameras, new understandings were produced, and the school staff and the researchers gained increased knowledge and representation of the children and their cultural knowledges. The everyday engagement with the children made a difference to how the researchers understood the range of cultural resources and influences that young people were bringing to the classroom. Analysis led to a number of findings and recommendations about the research process and how social justice matters in approaches to pedagogy and research. The use of a methodology that bypassed the barriers created by the lack of a shared 'language' meant that the children were not positioned as deficit. They were enabled, at least to some degree, to make visible their knowledge, their feelings, their individual personalities. The shared understandings established between the researchers and the children meant that the encounters were pleasurable for all involved. The capacity to locate some power with the children had the effect of shaping a more reasonable understanding of the children, their needs, and also their interests and strengths.

### **Third story: Teaching, empathy and emotion**

The third story overlaps, interrupts and disrupts the earlier two stories, and adds to this conversation about social justice by introducing possibilities for using art pedagogically, with a sense of responsibility for teaching a social justice standpoint as part of the process for preparing quality teachers. The salon evening prompted Tina to discover ways in which a particular artform (crochet) worked as a tool for learning and thinking. Linda's story, the third in our collective biography, takes another view of the arts in relation to social justice. In January 2009, Linda began producing a research-based graphic novel to explore themes of social justice, within a critical theory context.

Graphic novels and picture books such as *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006), *Passionate Journey* (Masereel, 1919/1987), and *The Sun* (Masereel, 1919/1990) explore aspects of

transience and diaspora. The central character in each novel conveys the challenge of being oblivious to the multiple meanings that spring forth from a new environment. The imagery of the central characters is not created in a vacuum but is read through external referents, which the artist pulls on during construction and the viewer draws on in reception. The image therefore relies upon any number of 'retranscriptions' (Venn 2010, p. 325) in order to function and communicate. The characters and events in a graphic novel are not real, but neither are they totally fantastical. They can explore, through fiction and to some critical depth, the possible experiences of others.

Linda's graphic novel project prompted her to initiate a small-scale project with a cohort of undergraduate students who were enrolled in a program of study, preparing to be early childhood educators. The task for them was to use arts-based methods to produce picture books about social justice issues. There were a number of drivers that influenced the design and conduct of the project. The perceptions about childhood, families, identities and education that most pre-service teachers bring with them to their studies are likely to travel with them into their professional careers – if unchallenged. Visual works can provide alternative views about lives and experiences. Traditionally, many cultures have understood the values in image making and storytelling for learning, and Leland & Harste (2005) found that engaging student teachers in studying picture books about refugee and asylum-seekers facilitated 'conversations about power relationships and how they determine who wins and who loses in any situation' (p. 65). The arts can connect us with the world of others, and can stimulate connections in all directions. In their work of engaging pre-service teachers in critical thinking, via arts-based researching, Leland and Harste (2005) also noted the value in making 'a difference in how graduates see themselves and how they judge their ability to succeed' (p. 60). They learn through the processes, that learning and achieving rely on persistence and resilience, and only they can reflect on what is needed for them to succeed (Davis, 2012).

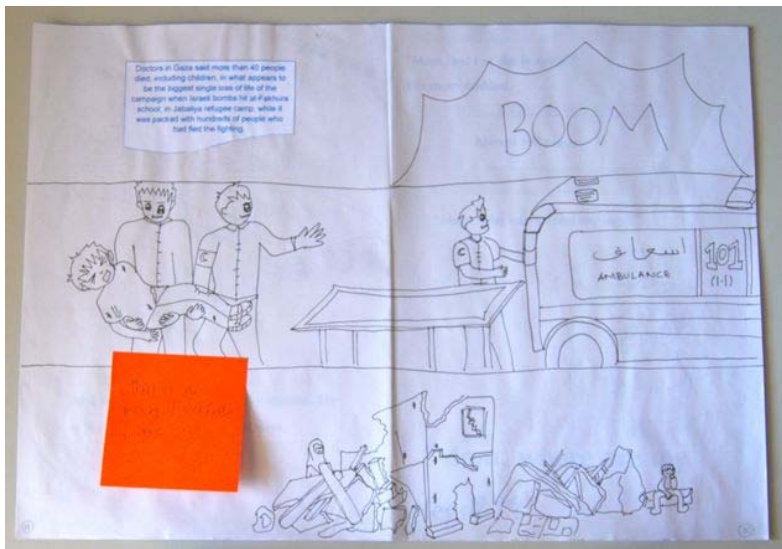
The pre-service early childhood education teachers in Linda's project were required to each produce a picture book, and their work was assessed across two assignment tasks. For Assignment 1 students researched a social justice issue and developed a storyline around it. For Assignment 2 they were required to illustrate their original story in the style of a children's picture book. They each created a complete 'mock-up' draft book and one completed double-page colour illustration. As the students conducted their research, at the

same time and with the students' consent, Linda had designed a study that ran parallel. Her inquiry was an investigation into whether critical thinking, and in particular, her goal of encouraging the students to challenge existing beliefs and values about social justice in education, could be effected through arts-based educational researching.

The project used drawing practices as arts based education research (ABER) methodology. ABER was developed by Elliot Eisner in the early 1990's as an approach to research that enabled inquiring in the social sciences. In this methodology, imagery is not seen as simply data to be mined for interpretation or analysis.



The work of producing the images can function as 'a method of data analysis as well as a means of data representation' (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund 2008, p. 99).



This medium is highly appropriate for research and teaching about social justice issues 'precisely because they verbalize discrimination and then illustrate such practices in logical sequences for younger readers.' (Horn 2009, p. 92)

ABER not only enables critique and an unsettling of the politics of education, it unsettles the politics of research and its dissemination in the academy.

But this story is about more than arts based research methods. Linda's cohort of pre-service teachers were introduced to a process of working that they could in turn take into their classrooms and, at the same time, their engagement with this artform has taught them about social justice issues. This interweaving of agendas is what Irwin and Springgay (2008) conceptualized as *a/r/tography*, in order 'to explore the interstitial spaces of art making, researching, and teaching. Process becomes intertextually and multiply located in the context of discursive operations' (p. 106). *A/r/tography* presented Linda with opportunities to research her students' learning and her teaching by multiple means. It is these in-between spaces that reflect the generative nature of the project. Her process enabled a shifting between thoughts, action, reflection, and generation, of theory, information, production, and analysis as the research progressed. As part of the research cycle, data generated from the student's results fed into the contents of Linda's graphic novel, via story development and sequence.

While graphic novels exist within certain contexts (a politically charged fine art edition or a politically charged children's picture book), graphic novel production can be seen to exemplify *a/r/tographic* research as it engages in 'theory-as-practice-as-process-as-complication' (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. 107). The production of a graphic novel is potentially of great value to contemporary teachers who work in increasingly, culturally-diverse classrooms. The experience of making a picture book enabled the preservice teachers to think about a societal group on an individual basis. This is a significant way to disrupt stereotyping and the dehumanization of vulnerable children. The process of constructing a character, in a particular context, and with a story, forces the picture book creator to think about many issues in great detail. This too works against homogenizing views about particular groups. And this characteristic is especially vital to address in the context of teacher beliefs.

Constructing picture books with pre-service teachers was not attached to the good literacy sources/practices for literacy skills agenda. Rather, the intent was to guide the preservice teachers to connect with critical issues in education, and to help develop their empathy skills in thinking about the experiences of others on an individual basis. Through this project, they explored issues of diversity and identity through fantasy, metaphor, drawn



imagery and sequential narrative. When teachers create and make a picture book, whether collaboratively or alone, the experience and the skills required can help teachers to deconstruct their assumptions and subsequently their responses to diverse identities and education contexts.

### **Concluding reflections**

Each of the three accounts that shaped the collective biography in this paper produced certain versions of teaching and learning, and certain thinking about art and its effects, what art can do. In the conclusion to this paper, there is no declaration about what ‘needs to be done’. Art is not the answer to the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. Nevertheless, curriculum and pedagogies that aim to flatten or ignore differences are not fair. Tests that measure narrow skill sets and ways of knowing do an injustice to those who depart from rigid ‘norms’, especially when chances for success are directly impacted by such test scores. There are any number of social issues, beyond the scope of the early years educator to address, that impact on the chances of success for all children. However, one of the essentials for a socially just childhood is access to education and opportunities to learn and develop knowledge. In this paper, we argue that all children learn through and with creative activity and imagination, and that these are not just options, frills, or cultural curiosities — they are requirements in any approach to education and care that aims for high equity, and success for all children.

Social justice work can at once require reflection and engagement with the personal, with others, and with the broader community and institutions that shape and are shaped by the work of education. The process of collective biography through reflections on three narratives worked to surface some of the dominant discourses embedded in early childhood learning, research and teaching. By troubling and contesting the ‘constitutive effects of dominant discourses’ (Davies & Gannon 2006, p.5), it became possible to open both the biographers and the discourse ‘to the possibility of change’ (p.5). The capacity to be sensitive to the multiple voices that need to be heard, and the ability to imagine how lives might be lived differently – these are required ingredients in Foucault’s (1980) ‘toolbox’ for thinking. Art is a powerful and eloquent tool for imagining and expressing difference – not only for children, but for early childhood educators, parents and carers, and researchers.

The capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise (Dewey, 1934) is what art can do. Tina’s crocheted model and the children from Africa who produced photomontages of themselves, imagined possibilities through the skills and knowledge brought about by

making art. The future teachers in Linda's class learned about social justice issues, as well as socially just approaches to pedagogy and curriculum. Striving for childhood experiences that respect complex, diverse and uncertain worlds requires aesthetic imagination fundamental to the process of incorporating the new and strange into our consciousness, and fundamental to the negotiation of differences.

This is a great challenge. If the current regimes of testing and measuring evident in education and care contexts are to work in ways that do not result in the reinforcing social inequalities, then perhaps it is time to link issues of aesthetic construction of the self with questions of power and social justice. Art may not be the complete answer, but used as it is in this paper as a methodological tool, it can prompt different questions (Abouet, 2007; Delisle, 2010; Satrapi, 2006). This paper is an attempt at articulating socially just educational inquiry that attempted to present a series of multiple realities, illustrated struggles and negotiations with others through the aesthetics of language, symbolism, performance and artifice (Bates 2006). There are strong pressures to measure, classify and 'treat' differences, often times as a result of mistaking culture as an explanation rather than explaining culture (Latour, 2005). The recent shift towards critical investigations of education offers opportunity, not only to consider pedagogical practices and their effectiveness in recognising differences, but also to utilize researching techniques that have capacities to authentically engage with differences, but that might be considered non-traditional in the field.

The collective processes involved in interrogating issues of social justice required the researchers to wrestle with difficult and complex issues of identity, belonging and inclusion in ways that are unconventional but sophisticated. As a result, new possibilities became available for articulating and explaining the place of art in matters of social justice. The three stories make apparent how artforms and art processes are suited to the task of reimagining alternatives. In this case, the alternatives we were focussed on were the possibilities for better alternatives for young children, their families and the sites that provide them with education and care. Our collective conversations inevitably led us to conclude that a quality learning programme for young children must include everyday opportunities for engagement through some form of art. In addition, our own experiential learning highlighted for us the rich possibilities for using the arts as research method, when inquiring into questions of social justice.



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