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### **Critical pedagogy and social inclusion policy in Australian higher education: identifying the disjunctions**

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## Critical pedagogy and social inclusion policy in Australian higher education: identifying the disjunctions

### Abstract

Within neoliberalism, policy implementation assimilates issues of social justice, such as diversity, by incorporating them into frameworks that pay “lip service” to important issues affecting both students and educators. This paper critically engages with higher education policies in Australia dealing with social justice, diversity, and social inclusion. Our discussion draws largely from Freirian pedagogy as well as a selective range of critical theorists to consider what we see as a radical disconnection between policy and practice in our teaching. We argue that this disjunction can adversely affect students and educators and that attention to policy’s limitations is necessary in efforts to instate a transformative teaching and learning praxis, while negotiating the contradictions we see between policy and practice. We augment our claims with fictionalised narratives from our teaching practice. These reflect but a small sample of the daily realities we experience in teaching students from a wide range of socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The paper asserts that the uncritical and undifferentiated compliance with political and moral imperatives that exemplify neoliberalism’s assimilation of social justice can produce deleterious effects on students and untenable tensions for educators.

### Keywords

inclusion, policy, australian, pedagogy, higher, identifying, education, social, critical, disjunctions

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## **Critical Pedagogy and Social Inclusion Policy in Australian Higher Education: Identifying the Disjunctions**

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### Abstract

Within neoliberalism, policy implementation assimilates issues of social justice, such as diversity, by incorporating them into frameworks that pay “lip service” to important issues affecting both students and educators. This paper critically engages with higher education policies in Australia dealing with social justice, diversity, and social inclusion. Our discussion draws largely from Freirian pedagogy as well as a selective range of critical theorists to consider what we see as a radical disconnection between policy and practice in our teaching. We argue that this disjunction can adversely affect students and educators and that attention to policy’s limitations is necessary in efforts to instate a transformative teaching and learning praxis, while negotiating the contradictions we see between policy and practice. We augment our claims with fictionalised narratives from our teaching practice. These reflect but a small sample of the daily realities we experience in teaching students from a wide range of socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The paper asserts that the uncritical and undifferentiated compliance with political and moral imperatives that exemplify neoliberalism’s assimilation of social justice can produce deleterious effects on students and untenable tensions for educators.

*Keywords:* social inclusion, social justice, neoliberalism, policy, Freirian critical pedagogy

[E]ducation, as a specifically human experience, is a form of intervention in the world. In addition to contents either well or badly taught, this type of intervention also implies both the reproduction of the dominant ideology and its unmasking. (Freire, 1998, pp. 90-91).

This essay engages with what we identify as a disjunction between much of what we do, see and hear in our pedagogical and research activities as university educators and the institutional policies and guidelines that steer our practice. Our analysis is framed by the work on critical pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire and others, specifically Henry Giroux and bell hooks, as it also draws on our shared background in cultural studies theory. These combined theoretical terrains provide productive ground from which to stage an examination of selected policies designed to facilitate social inclusion in higher education at our university. The three academic policies that constitute the focus of our discussion are: “The non-discriminatory language practice and presentation policy and guidelines” (NDLP, 2012); “The Respect for Diversity Policy” (RDP, 2012); and, the “Disability Policy” (DP, 2008). Variations of these policies can undoubtedly be located at most Western higher education institutional sites.

While of course we welcome initiatives in Australian higher education to create more inclusive university cultures through widening participation, it is the case that institutions, policy creators, colleagues — ourselves — are too often positioned merely to react to the latest government drivers and marketplace trends. Fazal Rizvi and Bob Lingard (2010) acknowledge the economic drivers of higher education equity policy and argue that despite considerable progress across the international sector, it is still the case that this progress “has been uneven both within and across nations and across social groups, particularly in relation to indigenous populations and low socio-economic groups” (p. 140). It is also the case that the contexts in which we try to imagine and realise higher education policy remain striated by sometimes irresolvable ideological tensions that frame what Freire (1998) calls the “human experience” of education; that intervention into human experience that “implies both the reproduction of the dominant ideology and its unmasking” (p. 91).

The following discussion focuses on the broad and somewhat nebulous area of “social justice” as this has come to signify in neoliberalist parlance which informs university policies, specifically those geared toward issues of social inclusion, social diversity, equity, disability policy, non-discriminatory language, and the like. These policies are inscribed through a range of appellations and contexts but manifest generally across the higher education sector in current times as often well-intentioned members of institutions attempt

to attend to, and grapple with, equity imperatives through policymaking. What is of concern is that much social justice policy reduces subjugated bodies to a “one size fits all” model that glosses important differences within student cohorts.

We frame this discussion according to the discourse of neoliberalism and so take a moment to articulate precisely how we understand this discourse in relation to our praxis and to the concerns raised in this paper. We see neoliberalism in the context of our work as the relationship between the corporatization of the university and imperatives to fit public initiatives ostensibly devised for the public good (such as policy), into what is increasingly a privatised sphere of activity where individual endeavour is recognised and rewarded.

We do not suggest that neoliberalism constitutes a totalising discourse. Nor would we argue that it is deterministic or uncontested; rather, that it constitutes statements and practices about pedagogy, and education more generally, that emphasise, foreground and promote the legitimising of private interests over public, economic priorities over social concerns, individual ‘success’ over collective or collaborative social relations. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) suggest a concomitant and reductionist conceptualisation of social justice in higher education as merely referring to access, thus glossing the more complex issues of student experience and consequences. Neoliberalist discourse has acquired a level of dominance in the university that, although contested, is increasingly difficult to challenge. Moreover, and as Giroux (2004) claims, the ascendancy of neoliberalism “thrives on a culture of cynicism, insecurity, and despair” (p. 249). While remaining aligned with these perspectives, we seek in this discussion to move beyond these paradigmatic features of neoliberalism’s dictates in order to identify some of the fractures we see between higher education policy and the practice of teaching and learning and attempt, in identifying these schisms, to contribute to productive conversations that challenge the legitimacy of neoliberalism in higher education.

Typically, within the rationale of neoliberalism as this ideology drives university policy and practice, social justice initiatives and policies are designed to draw those who have been marginalised closer to the centre of socio-economic and educational development. A central concern of our current research is that too often social justice / social inclusion policies are conceived and implemented without engaging critical conversations so necessary to meaningful application. In our haste to be seen to be “doing” social justice we — that is, workers within universities — come up against a radical disconnect between policy implementation and those who are subjects of and subjected to the policy. Social justice, then, becomes a thoughtless exercise where we check

policy criteria, tick the boxes relevant to a particular situation, and fulfil institutional requirements with no real political or ethical engagement with content and often, with no consideration for the sometimes damaging effects of application.

In mobilising a Freirian-inspired analysis to explore the production and application of ideas of social justice as they are scripted in Australian higher education policy, we ask what this term means, or can mean, in the context of policymaking informed by neoliberalism's emphasis on the equation of democracy with free markets and competitive international forces. We want to consider how, given the dictates of neoliberalism, we can make any meaningful sense of university policies of social justice, and whether these policies can serve us as a yardstick for praxis given the diversities within our student cohorts and the complex range of issues these diversities imply in multiple pedagogical settings.

### **Theoretical Framework: Freire, Critical Pedagogy and Social Justice**

One of the central questions raised in Freire's work is how to bring together theory and practice in ways that produce democratic pedagogical possibilities for embodied and active citizenship, for social justice as a conscious activity resistant to oppression, and for better lived realities for students and educators. Freire (2005) reminds us that "our job implies that we teach ... with sobriety and competence, but it also requires our dedication to overcoming social injustice" (p. 104). For Freire social injustice is a consequence of inequitable power relations that must be acknowledged and confronted: social justice is thus a set of principles and political actions. In pedagogical terms social justice applies to those bodies / subjects who are often outside of what is normalised or regularised within western education systems. Social justice is not an attempt to equalise as much as an attempt to disrupt; under an inequitable and consumer-oriented system where students are "clients", social justice is about recognising inequity and addressing it.

Freire's concept of what constitutes social justice cannot be simply or narrowly defined in the context of good works or a cursory nod to universal human rights agendas. Neither would a Freirian approach to social justice embrace education policy whose primary focus is investment into human capital as a contribution to the growth of global markets. It has been argued by some researchers, Ronald LaBonte (2004) among them, that, in fact, social inclusion initiatives are to a significant degree about the needs of the marketplace and that an "[u]ncritical use of social inclusion can blind us to the use, abuse and distribution of power" (p. 118). Freire's pedagogies of hope are grounded in a liberatory praxis that depends on a consciousness — *conscientization* — which

demands knowledge and understanding of “the process in which men [and women], not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and their capacity to transform that reality” (1972, p. 51). This deepening awareness, it may be argued, emanates from a knowledge of discourse; of the effects of broad, institutional, societal structures that regulate how social justice is made meaningful in its current formation within neoliberal thought.

In relation to an analysis of higher education policy’s application in praxis, Freire’s work offers useful insights, although we recognise a challenge in grounding analysis in the context of “justice” or “inclusion”: any critique can only be partial, and never unproblematic, due to the nature of neoliberal discourse itself which constructs policy and our own subject positions as academic critics of higher education policy. It has been argued elsewhere (McGloin & Stirling, 2011) that neoliberal discourse contains ethics for its own use, purposes and interests so any critique of justice is always already discursified. This does not mean, however, that trenchant critique is not possible. As Freire (1970) notes:

[P]eople as beings “in a situation”, find themselves rooted in temporal-spatial conditions which mark them and which they also mark. They will tend to reflect on their own “situationality” to the extent that they are challenged by it to act upon it. Human beings *are* because they are in a situation. And they *will be more* the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it. (p. 90).

Escobar (1994), in conversation with Freire and Margolis (pp. 131-159), speaks of the influence of Gramsci’s thinking on the dialectic between power and intellectual function that underscores much analysis of higher education policy and practice. Escobar marks the “false position” or contradiction between theory and practice in universities, which is increasingly evident as universities adhere to corporate, market-driven ideologies, and particularly so in the gap between policy and practice. If, for example, as Olsson (2008) suggests, social justice embraces social inclusion as “the empowerment of individuals to participate as fully as possible in society” (p. 6), we have to consider how that participation functions. Is it merely a box-ticking exercise? What does it look like in the context of social inclusion policies? How does it fit with regulative forces that prescribe academic behaviour in such broad and general terms that the nuances of differential histories and experiences are unmarked and unnamed?

In addition to Freire, other theoretical formulations are useful in disclosing the disconnection we identify between policy and practice. Haggis (2008), for

example, mobilises complexity theory as a way to articulate key aspects of those phenomena so relevant to diversity policy but currently uncapturable in any meaningful way. She argues that complexity ontology:

[P]rovides a way of thinking about institutions, cultures, groups and individuals as systems of interactions which are, in some important ways, always unique. This uniquely presenting system of interactions, however, is partially constituted by the interactions of other, larger systems; systems of governance, for example, of culture, language, policy, or of funding. (p. 169).

Intersectionality theory (Knudsen, 2007) derives from late twentieth century feminist, cultural studies and post-colonialist scholarship. As its name suggests, it facilitates a critical examination of how intersecting socially and culturally constructed identity categories of gender, race, class, disability, and so forth, interact on multiple levels within various systems and institutions.

Giroux's (2007) work allows us to see beyond the linguistic limitations of neoliberalism in the academy. He argues for a form of radical education whereby practice can engender democratic change through "a particular kind of practice and a particular posture of questioning received" (p. 2). Giroux warns against adapting to what he calls "dominant education philosophies" rather than interrogating and critiquing them. He asserts that "democracy is a celebration of difference, the politics of difference" (2007, p. 2). It is these politics which generate unresolvable tensions and "fear" for those who uphold the dominant philosophies (2007, p. 2). If it *is* the case that dominant philosophies fear the politics of difference — rather than, for example, merely striving to manage through institutional homogenization — then all the more reason for cultural theorists to be relentless in their examination of policy and what generates its implementation, particularly in relation to policies purporting to deal specifically with issues of difference. But more urgently, critique needs to incisively disclose the very nature of policy itself and to uncover its often seamless and naturalised deference to issues of social justice and ethical practice. We are reminded of Freire's insistence that education is both political and moral, a practice that necessarily involves both considerations and whose aim is ultimately a form of civic engagement that generates change precisely because it opens up a space for possibility. The problem with policy is that it invariably threatens possibility; its very nature is to impose limits.

### **Policy and Praxis: Intention and Disjunction**

The NDLP (2012), RDP (2012) and DP (2008) policy directives at our university have critical relevance to our teaching practice because many of our



students operate from complex and diverse subject positions and we often find ourselves and our students struggling to make sense of how these directives inform / delimit actions and interactions within our classrooms. We have found, though, that efforts to disclose what we see as fractures between these policies and practice can be perceived as endeavours to affect change from within; to scratch away at the disjunctions for the purpose of trying to “fit” into the picture our own politics, bending and shaping policy where possible as we go. This may be a futile exercise given the point raised by Freire (1994). He asks:

...what is the relationship between politics and academic policy? Because if you talk about academic policy it is because it seems to you that there is another policy that is not “academic”; otherwise it would not need to be called “academic” ... [T]hen for you, what would be the relationship between academic policy and the policy given in connection with society and power structures, within which, as subsystems, academic policy is found. (p. 134).

Freire’s dialogue with his contemporaries proceeds to mark out the difficulties between political affiliation, political commitment and academic life generally. Specifically, he also identifies the necessary connections between the academy as a bureaucratic system, the global political domain and a commitment to critical and transformative pedagogy. He notes that “[T]here are certain impasses that I do not know how to overcome” (1994, p. 142). Freire also asserts that the question of power is central to academic policy. We are cognizant that much of this discussion takes place in the context of Brazilian education. Nevertheless, there are pertinent points in his work that inspire us to think through those issues of power that regulate the language of policy in our own teaching and learning contexts, where social *injustice* hierarchizes student access to rights and equity at a number of levels, as we will demonstrate.

Higher education policy is conceived and set up to lead and shape our practices as educators. However, in fact — and perhaps necessarily so — once implemented, it is already in some way redundant because cultural dynamics are such that those inequities we seek to address through social inclusion policies in higher education have quite often already shifted, become more nuanced, and organised around different frames of reference. Culture as a dynamic force has its own rhythms that are at times indifferent to bureaucratic process. Policies, then, are essentialist in that by their very nature they reduce complex and layered subjectivities to key signifiers: they do not, for example, capture the multiple intersections of identity categories and subjectivities as they manifest in the classroom or, indeed, as they sometimes manifest within an individual student. It is in this context that we work to adapt our praxis to social inclusion and social justice policy. Despite social inclusion and social justice being a

central tenet of higher education policy for most if not all western universities in the 2010s, the concept in practice can be unclear and too often invoked without critical discussion of intent, parameters, and implementation; a point also made by Rizvi and Lingard (2010) who point to the debates around associations between neoliberalism, globalization and equity policy. They argue that globalization, while having some positive impact on inequity, has also served to “reinforce and even extend social hierarchies” (p. 141).

The RDP (2012) policy preamble states that “[T]he University aims to achieve its goals of developing and maintaining an inclusive environment through educational and developmental strategies. These include: “Considering the principles which support diversity, anti-racism and non-discrimination when reviewing the content of subjects and courses” (Education strategies, 1.b. RDP 2012). The policy aims endorse:

Encouraging student and staff involvement in celebrating diversity through campus wide activities including: International Week, Diversity Week, Naidoc<sup>1</sup> Week. (RDP, 2012, 1.d).

In 2014-15 it is a testament to the persistence of institutional racism that we are still siphoning off a week here and there to “celebrate” cultural diversity. How does the emblematic “Week” impact on knowledge production, on pedagogical practice or, indeed, on the subjectivities of those who identify as “international”, “diverse” or Indigenous and from within the complex matrices that constitutes those categories? The very term “celebrate” connotes that which is singled out and made special; it has positive connotations but is marked by a temporality that locates it in a particular space and time as opposed to being normalised within *all* spatio-temporal teaching and learning contexts. The logic of “celebrating” diversity suggests that we are praising difference, giving it precedence and marking its extraordinariness, when in fact, a week to acknowledge selected strands of diversity (and we know these move across time, according to neoliberalism’s assimilation of particular causes) can only ever be seen as lip service.

This does not mean that the only option is to flatten difference or obscure it under the banner of sameness; this logic incurs the very essentialising we are attempting to dismantle. What must be considered is how the recognition and avowal of cultural difference works in practice. In other words, what are the real and experiential *effects* of a token “Week” and is one week a year an exercise in recognising the particularity of a certain group (including perhaps their opposition to what comprises the mainstream), or is it merely an exercise in the aforementioned lip service that “ticks” the cultural diversity box of neoliberal policy guidelines? We must also ask how these annual forms of tokenism

impact on power relations between teachers and students in the everyday. And what are the opportunities for agency for those students represented through the stories relayed below when mantras of social justice are touted through revamped articulations of social inclusion and widening participation only to end up perpetuating what Ward (2011) calls “the shoe that never hits the floor”: institutional racism.

Higher education policymaking arises, is produced within, and aims to regulate institutional systems of orderliness. Policy frameworks are always operating according to the tension between what some policymakers might see as fair and equitable practice and what the ideological market-driven forces deem expedient and necessary. The competing forces of this tension are located within contemporary discourses of neoliberal thinking and this tension continues to present us with a challenge that requires reflection and intervention into current discourses of equity and social justice as they are inscribed in higher education policy. As Giroux (2011) suggests, “we need to address what the optimum conditions are for educators to perform their work in an autonomous and critical fashion. In other words, we need to think through the conditions that make academic labor fruitful, engaging, and relevant” (p. 5).

### **Disconnection: Narratives from the Classroom**

Before bringing narrative representations of classroom experiences into our analysis, we want to articulate our position in regard to the methodology of anecdote to support points raised. We use narrative examples here for two reasons: firstly, class situations such as those represented in these fictionalised accounts are not uncommon and have given rise to what we see as quite a radical disconnection between policy and practice, between what we do and the guidelines that inform our practice. Secondly, while of course we have taken considerable care to ensure that actual students and teaching staff have been de-identified in these narrative accounts for reasons of respect and confidentiality, the representations nevertheless remain empirically faithful and offer just a glimpse of our everyday practices where considerably diverse bodies and subjectivities come together as recipients of what higher education — and we as its practitioners — have to offer. As bell hooks (2010) notes, narrative can be a useful force in understanding diversity: “[S]tories help us to connect to a world beyond the self”, and that “[A] powerful way we connect with a diverse world is by listening to the different stories we are told” (p. 53). In including these narratives of student experience we feel some burden of responsibility to be honest about the genesis of our concerns in this paper by elucidating its impetus. And in another sense, given the nature of our critique on what constitutes inclusion, the presence of these narratives constitutes a political act that

transforms them into generative devices for us to explicate our concerns about policy's disarticulation from practice.

Any useful analysis of the disconnections we locate between policy and practice are underscored by the term "discrimination" which appears variously in most policy statements of this kind. Discrimination as defined in our institution's policy guidelines means that

... someone is treated unfairly or unequally because they happen to belong to a particular group of people or have a particular characteristic. (RDP, 2012).

On the face of it, this sounds reasonable. However, we need to know precisely what constitutes fairness as much as we require a yardstick for "unequal" in order to make any sense of this or to be able to apply it to some of the situations we face on a daily basis.

For example, how does the above definition apply to the following narrative involving a young female Aboriginal student who describes her shock on hearing a no doubt well-meaning instructor in one of her courses say: "it's difficult for Aboriginal women to parent, their children die younger statistically and they face a lot of difficulties as mothers". The student later expresses her feeling of shame, of being "outside" of the cohort, apart from others, excluded by their non-recognition of her as a fair-skinned Aboriginal student, and yet being included statistically as a potentially incompetent parent due to her Aboriginality. The student is in no doubt that this is an instance of discrimination; she names it as such. She sees herself as having been "unfairly treated"; whether or not there was intent is immaterial to her at that moment of acute discomfort and humiliation when recognising that she is the subject *and* object of the discussion.

This kind of experience is captured by Hall's (1996) discussions of Fanon and "the split of the divided self" that produces the "internally divided condition of absolute depersonalisation" (p. 18). Fanon (1967) articulates this experience for colonised peoples as a process of internalisation where all forms of cultural signification are recognised through the psychological acquisition of dominant cultural values that inform and produce subjectivity. The dominant cultural values communicated by the teacher in this narrative are expressed, ostensibly, within a discourse of anti-racism. However, as decontextualized statements, such "facts" obfuscate a number of racialised and gendered assumptions: about Aboriginal culture; Aboriginal mothers' parenting generally; and, indeed, about the student body; all of which are measured according to the dictates of western pedagogical practice. In this scenario the student is able to recount this

experience in another classroom setting where she feels free to critique the authority of the teacher thus following hooks' (1994) claim that for education to be a practice of freedom, the authorial voice of the teacher requires deconstruction (p. 8). Nonetheless, in policy terms, the teacher *is* following guidelines. In the spirit of social justice, ethics, western morality and so on, the statement made can be read as an expression of general concern or sympathy that is abstracted from its context of colonial violence — now scripted as “difficulties” — and oblivious to the presence of subjects whose histories are marked by that violence.

Considering this from a Freirian perspective, if nurturing democratic citizens is the aim of Freirian pedagogy, and if entry into that citizenry assumes a pedagogic subject who has acquired an understanding of themselves and their relationship to the world (as we would argue is fortunately the case in the above narrative), how is policy working here in a course where Aboriginal health is the focus? In order to tease this out, we need to look more closely at what is said: “it’s difficult for Aboriginal women to parent, their children die younger statistically and they face a lot of difficulties as mothers”. As a decontextualized statement, this presents some truth. Unfortunately, it is precisely the decontextualizing of the statement that is of concern. Effectively, the instructor can make a case for acquiescing to policy by “maintaining an inclusive environment through educational and developmental strategies” and by “[C]onsidering the principles which support diversity, anti-racism and non-discrimination when reviewing the content of subjects and courses” (Education strategies, 1.b. RDP).

When the Aboriginal student is asked whether or not this statement was historically contextualised in any way, she replies that it was not and that statements such as this were made often. Although the Aboriginal student in our narrative is able to “read” this classroom event, and bring it into discussion in another class where contextualising colonial histories is given emphasis, this may not always be the case. As Freire (1996) reminds us, “[P]edagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression” (p. 36). It is therefore reasonable to surmise that most other classes where similar “statements of fact” are indiscriminately and decontextually taught to students, pedagogy remains comfortably secured by a policy where maintaining inclusive environments and supporting diversity are unstipulated and decontextualised generalities that say nothing of, or to, the lived realities of some students.

This next narrative involves a student with schizophrenia who, although sometimes struggling with the effects of the illness, refuses to be categorised as

“disabled”, arguing that the sort of support he has seen at the university does not really connect with his requirements. He is nevertheless referred to disability services at the instigation of a well-intentioned student support adviser. The student is upset that this intervention has occurred in the absence of any request for support from him and resents the intrusion into what he considers a private matter between himself, his health care providers and family. Even so, he feels that he should comply with the university’s directive and present for at least one consultation. Although the student sees the value of the disability unit in principle, he decides that it is not for him. Overall, he manages his illness effectively in class and seems to have appropriate medical support beyond the university. Where his “difference” becomes an issue is in the highly metaphorical language he sometimes uses in oral in-class presentations and written assignments. When speaking with a subject coordinator about the matter, however, he concludes that he would prefer to address this as an academic language and learning issue rather than as a symptom of his mental health condition. Although this aspect of his condition occasionally continues to create problems in subsequent classes, he maintains that the disability framework which allows for some sort of academic consideration for his situation “does not help him with his needs” and prefers to continue to negotiate solutions as required on his own behalf.

The Disability Policy marks its primary purpose to “support the provision of a physical, social and learning environment that complements and enhances the university experience for students with a disability on the same basis as other students, in an environment free from harassment and discrimination” (DP, 2008). Once again the ambiguity enshrined in generality leaves intact the practitioner’s assurance that policy has been followed, but fails in every way to nuance a student’s needs or to acknowledge her / him as a social agent capable of managing their disability. In our narrative above, this student is referred, no doubt with the best interests and attentiveness to policy guidelines, without consultation, or deference to any awareness that this might not be within the ambit of the student advisor: for all intents and purpose, he becomes scrutinised, over determined by his episodic mental health problems and unrecognised as a student whose scholarship might make a valuable contribution to class learning. As with the earlier narrative, this student demonstrates agency through active resistance. That both of these students are pedagogic subjects who exemplify *conscientization* through action and knowledge of their social world is beyond doubt. We offer these narratives because they reflect the examples we hear about; however, we have to wonder how many more students are subject to spurious interpretations of policy and who do not have the political capital to articulate their frustration.

Our third example again exemplifies the potential for rupture between policy and practice. One of us, a teacher in Indigenous Studies, is approached by an international student from China who confides how troubled she is after being told by one of her tutors in another humanities course that her lack of English language proficiency will probably prevent her from passing that course. The student is visibly distraught and although over half way through the semester, considers withdrawing from the course. It is important to note here that the student also gives a presentation in the Indigenous Studies class on the Uyghur people of China which is exemplary; she theorises her topic using knowledge acquired from *all her learning*, and generates much critical debate about Indigenous issues in addition to teaching the class about content beyond the scope of localised knowledge.

What is at stake here in policy terms are the guidelines that stipulate respect as “[A] positive feeling of esteem or deference for a person or other entity (such as a nation or a religion), and also specific actions and conduct representative of that esteem” (RDP, 2012). In this instance, it is difficult to countenance how policy is followed at all; however, for the sake of argument, the tutor is following academic guidelines that, according to the “Assessment Committee Standards” (2013), state “Equity - compliance with relevant policies, guidelines and procedures ensures universal principles are applied consistently with fairness and impartiality”. What we identify here is a disjunction between those policy guidelines and their sub clauses that again posits generalities uncondusive to the vast range of subjectivities found in most Western university cohorts. This, of course, points to curriculum development and the emphasis on writing as an assessable form of evidence in student learning. Pedagogically, we are aware of the obvious flaws that are evident in policy as it applies to practice, but politically, this must be understood as a violation of the student’s rights to engage intellectually because of the perception that understanding course content can only be evidenced through one form of assessment. That this student, in a Freirian pedagogical sense, is able to bring new knowledge to a class, and impart without any difficulty, her knowledge from another context, relating it orally to a range of theoretical perspectives, is testament, surely, to her dedication as a student and her intellectual ability not only as a pedagogic subject, but also, as an aspiring democratic citizen. That she is warned, indeed, threatened, due to a perceived lack is testament to the inadequacy of any policy guidelines.

The above are but three narrative examples of policy-appropriate interventions or actions that can nevertheless leave students feeling marginalised and not always able to articulate why. As examples of how students are “treated unfairly or unequally because they happen to belong to a particular group of people”, such utterances complement and comprise a

neoliberal discourse of inclusion that allows the neat insertion of deference to ethical practice as it simultaneously shuts down those whom the policies purportedly address.

### **Neoliberalism and Policy**

Undoubtedly neoliberalism has fuelled the globalization of the university sector and the growth of a free market knowledge economy. It has also recalibrated the argot of higher education to resonate around “strategic plans”, “key performance indicators”, “measurable outcomes” and so forth. Working within this linguistic framework as an academic can be perilous for a range of reasons. Marginson and Considine (2000) argue that the reinvention process of the “Enterprise University” in accordance with neoliberalist philosophies has too often “worked around academic cultures” rather than “*through* academic cultures” (p. 237; see also Rizvi & Lingard 2010). Ball (2003), Olssen and Peters (2005) variously contend that this process has resulted in a teacher identity inscribed by the “performativities” — which can be merely reflexive gestures — of compliance to the indicators that policy has been successfully implemented.

Because policy cannot differentiate diversities in productive ways, as the above examples show, it always necessarily, at least to some degree, remains subject to its own discursive parameters that are, by definition, restrictive, constrictive and limited in their capacity to direct an ethical praxis. Adorno (cited in Bennett, 2001, p. 16) suggests that culture and administration are inextricable, arguing that speaking of culture necessarily implies speaking of administration whether intended or not because organising culture demands the assembling, distribution and organisation of groups often lacking a common frame of reference. Bennett (2001) states that “the language of cultural diversity is used to bring together into the same administrative purview forms of cultural difference whose histories and social articulations often have little in common beyond the forms of cultural administration which constitute them as similar” (p. 16). As we have previously noted, administration — or policymaking — does not necessarily keep pace with cultural shifts; rather, changes in culture invariably precede and inform administrative policy.

We hear the term “common sense” invoked at certain times when the ambiguity of policy self-discloses; indeed, neoliberalism’s sleight-of-hand is often the common sense catchcry! As Hall and O’Shea (2013, p. 8) note, the taken-for-grantedness of common sense confers its own legitimacy while shaping and influencing it. Armed with this knowledge, we still search for a common sense to direct us in our efforts to find some coherence in the policies that regulate what we do and how we do it while acknowledging that in



pedagogical terms there is no effective interface between the increasing diversity of student bodies and our practice as educators. What this means for us is that we draw from our professional capacities as skilled teachers of a certain age, gender and experiential background as well as researchers who engage with critical pedagogy in our praxis. Our experience tells us that cultural difference, within the overarching framework of neoliberalism's diversity, can produce tension and conflict for universities. They must be seen to be addressing issues of social justice in all their manifestations of inclusion, widening participation, diversity, disability, and so on, but cannot adequately produce policies that engage or address the multiple subjectivities that comprise any given cohort at any given time. We argue that this makes lip service to social justice increasingly inevitable. It will also continue to reduce any meaningful interpretation of social justice.

In the classroom scenarios we have included above, clumsy but well-meaning efforts to endorse inclusivity only succeeded in producing situations whereby the students felt subject to discriminatory practice. As Freire (1994) tells us, "the expression of academic policy implies the problem of power" (p. 142). Therefore, the experiences cited above are contrary to any capacity students have for acquiring transformative learning because they are neatly encapsulated in reductive policies that accord power to policy frameworks and their regulative bodies, and not to students. Policy in these instances is not supported by any comprehensive knowledge of the diverse matrix of socio-cultural relations that comprise our student bodies. Policy is also not supported by any wide-ranging knowledge of cultural competence. Consequently, students who are the intended recipients of equitable or socially inclusive practice suffer, at best, disregard for their differentiated autonomy and at worst, humiliation.

Policy subjects us to the specificities of its language and the ambiguities of its directives. Policy maintains its dominance through a discursive authority that inscribes policy documents with a language culturally understood as the final word on a set of practices. Policy, therefore, is a 'go to' text of 'expertise'; not a flexible document but a set of guidelines that are sanctioned institutionally. Its proficiency is assured, enforced and reinforced as it is simultaneously renewed to keep pace with cultural change. While we are subjected to the language of policy, we are also subjected to the power relations that produce it: as Rizvi and Lingard (2010) note, "policymaking is a fundamentally political process; it involves major trade-offs between values" (p. 72) which, in the case of diversity and social equity policy and the commitment to market values, can mean a re-defining of ethical considerations such as equity, justice and so on. Challenging the authority of policy can be dangerous and can incur penalties.

Characterised often by neoliberal terms of reference, social diversity policies represent an attempt to categorise, rein in and assimilate bodies whose differences resist reduction. To not “fit” posits a threat to the perceived cohesiveness of the institution. So it is that social diversity policies, while purporting to be representative of fairness, equity and inclusion, are assimilationist by definition. They must be *seen* to be addressing diversity and the only way to do that is through a neat process of categorisation — a process of “truth” production — that binds together un-like bodies in readily recognisable, hence governable, groups. In an Althusserian (1971) sense, policy is an ideological apparatus that unifies the interests of intuitions by calling forth its subjects:

[I]t “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very process which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most common everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there” . . . . (p. 174).

Policy, for Freire, is intrinsically connected to the role of university academics or intellectuals. And the university, according to Freire, must be understood in relation to broader spheres of public activity.

Freire’s question cited previously regarding the relationship between politics and academic policy (1994, p. 134) therefore resonates as we address the same question while raising further concerns about the relationship between our own teaching praxis and sites of institutional power in the broader sphere of public pedagogy that continue to regulate universities. We are constantly in search of effective ways to undermine, sidestep, and where possible, ignore the contradictions, gaps and generalities of academic policy. Our practice shows us that social justice policy in its current formulations is an expedient way of dealing with the messy, difficult business of a practice of social justice that requires a more concerted spatio-temporal focus. As we understand it, education policy is a product of what Giroux calls “corporate time”, a temporality embraced by neoliberalism that strips away any worthwhile application of social justice by nurturing “a narrow sense of leadership, agency, and public values . . . largely indifferent to those concerns that are critical to a just society, but are not commercial in nature” (2011, p. 116). Although Giroux’s application of this concept focuses on faculty and academics’ roles within corporatized structures, corporate time can be applied also to the time and space applied to the development and fostering of knowledge, of pedagogical practice, all forms of scholarly enterprise, and in this instance, to the rapid and expedient

development of policies that are seen to be in place as exemplars, evidence and testament to universities' commitment to social justice principles.

### **Implications for Critical Pedagogy**

The disjunctions between policy and practice that we have marked above are but a very small sample of what we see and frequently hear as educators and have considerable implications for any form of critical pedagogy that seeks to dismantle the seeming hegemony of neoliberalism in higher education. Policy itself is a pedagogical tool. It 'teaches' us and our students how to behave, what is at stake, what is important. Often under the guise of social justice, policy appears to defend the defenceless and yet, as we have shown, policy's inability to differentiate can have real, political and social consequences because it can only be interpreted through the lens of generality. As a pedagogical device, therefore, policy flies in the face of any meaningful or critical engagement with discriminatory practice. At the level of social justice, decontextualized and undifferentiated statements about the specificities of marginality, whatever they may be, can act as impediments to critical pedagogy because they conform to the generic codes of generality. Within policy frameworks, the vicissitudes of race, gender, class, disability and so on are recycled and co-opted into an overarching schema that positions us — students *and* educators — as subjects in the vagaries of a power structure which cannot be clearly understood or articulated because it is dis-articulated from the broader network of power that informs it, but whose force nevertheless governs our practice.

This situates us in a domain of ambiguity where meaning and interpretation are always up for grabs and where boxes have been institutionally ticked to conform to the dictates of diversity, inclusion, equity and so on. We, educators, are lured into what we have referred to elsewhere as a "dance" (McGloin & Stirling, 2011), using this metaphor to nuance our analysis and to inject some pleasure into the deconstructive practices we deploy when "pulling the rug out from under oneself while standing on it" (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 389). This is not always a simple process. What is encouraging, indeed satisfying, in all of this, however, is the creativity or hope often expressed in works engaging with critical pedagogy that propel us to think, then think again, and again — and to invite our students to join us in thinking beyond the boundaries of the 'known'.

### **Conclusion**

The unresolved tension in this paper is how to sustain an ethical praxis underpinned by transformative social justice practices as outlined in Freire's work while simultaneously raising questions about the very framework in which

ideas of ethics are contained: that is, liberal humanist notions of ethics as ideas, rather than principles, grounded in a certain type of goodness which can be seamlessly transferred regardless of context; the “just is” factor. Policy is that which seeks to drive or direct practice whereas, in fact, it is generally what follows or is *informed* by practice. This being the case, policy is never able to keep pace with social realities; it operates merely as a set of recommendations comprising a framework that always lags the experiential as it seeks to give voice to it. Despite the tension for us as critics of neoliberalism's effects on higher education policy, and more generally of the mismatch between policy and praxis, it remains essential that we attempt to engage with and influence the policy making process itself. It is also crucial that we keep marking the experiential, the anecdotal, as narratives that not only provide us useful evidence of policy limitations, but draw our attention to the multiple positions and needs of our students. Finally, as we incorporate and value the anecdotal in our teaching and learning environments, as feminist practitioners, we also seek to remain attentive to the real, lived, and at times, harmful effects on students of the blind application of policy recommendations at the expense of our own judgement.

### Endnotes

1. NAIDOC originally referred to National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee, but now refers to the week set aside for this observance.

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