Chapter 13
Social Justice Dimensions of Starting School

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13.1 Introduction

At a recent professional development evening with local early childhood educators, I asked the question What do you understand by "social justice" in early childhood? Most of the educators remained silent in response to this question, even though this was the advertised topic for discussion. No doubt, they were concerned that they would not provide the right answer or guess the answer that was in the professor's head. However, some did respond and mentioned matters such as equal opportunities, equal outcomes, equity, cultural diversity, language diversity, poverty, reacting to stereotypes, patience and respect. The participants continued to discuss social justice largely in terms of the respect that needed to be shown to individuals, particularly children and families, with whom they interacted. It was generally agreed that such respect was most likely to arise from the building of positive relationships with people. These two elements – respect and relationships – are evident in broader discussions of social justice.

13.2 Social Justice

The term "social justice" is not well defined. Some argue that it fundamentally

> rests on two overriding principles. First, social justice is viewed primarily as a matter of redistributing goods and resources to improve the situations of the disadvantaged. Second, this redistribution is not presented as a matter of compassion or national interest but as a matter of rights of the relatively disadvantaged to make claims on the rest of society. (Bankston 2010, p. 165)

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Others suggest an increasing focus on "identity politics", moving away from the central notions of redistribution towards emphasis on recognition of identity:

> Many actors appear to be moving away from a socialist political imaginary, in which the central problem of justice is redistribution, to a 'postsocialist' political imaginary, in which the central problem of justice is recognition. With this shift, the most salient social movements are no longer economically defined 'classes' who are struggling to defend their 'interests', end 'exploitation', and win 'redistribution'. Instead, they are culturally defined 'groups' or 'communities of value' who are struggling to defend their 'identities', end 'cultural domination' and win 'recognition'. (Fraser 1997, p. 2)

Fraser (1997) promotes a critical approach to social justice that combines both recognition and redistribution. North (2006, p. 514) continues this argument, noting that

> The remedying of recognition injustices therefore does not require eliminating group differences, as suggested in the redistributive model, but instead revaluing them or reinventing conceptualizations of the human being that lead to oppression and domination.

As individuals strive for recognition within society, they become participants in many different relationships both within and outside of their "groups" or "communities of value". It is these relationships that provide the loci of social justice for the individual, the groups and all the people involved, for social justice is not something that can exist in isolation from society. Young (2011, p. 157) suggests that while 'Enlightenment' principles might declare that 'people should be treated as individuals, not as members of groups; [and] their life options and rewards should be based solely on their individual achievement', 'the very success of political movements against differential privilege and for political equality has generated movements of group specificity and cultural pride'.

While the notion of being treated as an individual and being free to choose one's own life is seductive, it is not particularly practical given that we all live in social groups that will be affected by our choices and which, in turn, will affect the wider society. Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998) labels these social groups 'microsystems'. So, while individuals might like to be treated by society in ways that recognise and support diversity, there needs to be realisation that decisions made within society have a potential impact on all members of that society; for justice to be genuinely "social justice", benefits need to accrue beyond the individual level. Issues such as the needs, interests, rights and power (Blackmore 2006) of all involved need to be considered as we strive towards a socially just society.

The position I take in this chapter is that social justice is about treating all people with dignity and respect. It is about a community recognising and acknowledging injustices and the development of both appropriate and collaborative actions and processes to address these injustices for individuals or groups so that there is a degree of equality in the overall outcomes (Howard et al. 2011). It is about the establishment of strong, positive relationships based on social respect, personal regard, perceived competence and perceived integrity (Bryk and Schneider 2002).

13.3 Social Justice in Early Childhood

For the first time ever in Australia, there is a national curriculum framework for early childhood (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2009). While there is no definition given for social justice in this document, many of the aspects mentioned by the professional development participants introduced earlier and by those scholars advocating a recognition theory of social justice are apparent. For example, the document includes the following statements:

> Early childhood educators who are committed to equity believe in all children's capacities to succeed, regardless of diverse circumstances and abilities. (p. 12)

> There are many ways of living, being and of knowing. Children are born belonging to a culture, which is not only influenced by traditional practices, heritage and ancestral knowledge, but also by the experiences, values and beliefs of individual families and communities. Respecting diversity means within the curriculum valuing and reflecting the practices, values and beliefs of families. Educators honour the histories, cultures, languages, traditions, child rearing practices and lifestyle choices of families. They value children's different capacities and abilities and respect differences in families' home lives. (p. 13)

To honour and value as suggested here is not straightforward. It does require a consciousness and sensitivity, based on positive relationships and knowledge, when interacting with children and families. Many early childhood educators do not find this easy (Durand 2010). Most importantly, it requires the suspension of judgement about cultural practices that may be different from those used by the educators in their own families and communities (Rogoff 2003). Social justice in early childhood requires educators to deal with situations in which

> the beliefs, values, practices and socialisation goals for children are fundamentally different across the home and school microsystems. … we have to acknowledge that the children and families we serve don't start in the same place. They come from different places. They don't look the same. They don't act the same. They don't speak or use language in the same ways. (Durand 2010, p. 837)

While the quality and nature of interactions among early childhood educators and young children are important for the development of the children's identities within the diverse worlds in which they live and play (Brooker and Woodhead 2008), we must not forget that these same children are learning about social justice in practice, through these interactions.

> Children from very young ages internalize messages about power and privilege with regard to gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and language, which they perpetuate through their play and talk … classroom practices communicate and reinforce strong, subtle, and repeated social messages about what is and is not valued. (Hyland 2010, p. 82)

Early childhood education can play a critical role in the achievement of social justice. Success will depend on early childhood educators becoming critically aware of the historical and contemporary roles of education in further marginalising disadvantaged groups, realising the potential for them to play a major role in this marginalisation and acting to counter this potential (Schoorman 2011) through practices

such as those outlined in Australia's national early childhood curriculum framework. Indeed,

> early childhood educators need to view themselves as leaders who possess insightful voices regarding the growth and development of all children, regardless of ability, race, class, gender, culture, or language. This type of leadership becomes increasingly important, as early childhood education does not exist in isolation from the broader world. (Dana and Yendol-Hoppey 2005, p. 191)

In the remainder of this chapter, the transition to school is considered as an opportunity for the enactment of social justice. How this opportunity plays out for all involved in the transition will determine whether the opportunity becomes reality.

13.4 Theoretical Foundations

The work on transition to school that Sue Dockett and I (and a number of other collaborators) have undertaken since 1997 began with investigations of the experiences and expectations of children, families and educators as they engaged in the transition to school. One of the key innovations in our work, particularly in the Australian context, was the emphasis we placed on listening to children as they explained their experiences. We established the theoretical foundations for our studies using the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998) with its clear message that a child lives – and goes to school – within many different contexts, all of which impact on the child and are impacted by the child. As well, our research was designed to reflect the rights-based approaches established in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) and drew on commitments to strengths-based perceptions of children, where children are regarded as competent social actors who are experts on their own lives (James and Prout 1997; Rinaldi 2006).

Our understanding of transition to school is anchored in Rogoff's (2003) conceptualisation of transitions across the life span as times when individuals 'change their roles in their community's structure' (p. 150). 'This view reflects both individual and community influences on children's changing participation in activities' (Dockett and Perry 2012, p. 7) as children start school.

However, transition to school is not just about the child. Children prepare to start school from within a very wide variety of contexts, most of which involve family. Families come in all shapes and sizes but all influence, and are influenced by, the individuals who are in the group. All families have rights and responsibilities, derived from the grouping as well as the individuals that make up the family. All families have strengths which determine what is possible for them, as well as challenges that establish some constraints on their actions. Our theoretical foundation is strengths-based – we emphasise and build upon the strengths of families, while recognising, but not being bound by, their challenges (McCashen 2005; Saleebey

2006). In particular, we emphasise and build upon the strengths of children within these families.

Other important players in a child's transition to school include educators in schools as well as prior-to-school educators. These people also have rights and responsibilities derived from the professional role that they play in the transition process. These educators bring much power to the transition to school endeavour, both in terms of their ability to control transition practices and processes in their own institutions and through their professional education which often leaves them in a perceived position of knowing more about education than any of the other stakeholders in the transition exercise.

Power differentials abound as children start school. Very often, there is a clear power difference between educators on the one hand and families and communities on the other, in terms of knowledge about education. Sometimes, this extends to knowledge about children and their potential adjustment to school. This may be evident when some educators indicate that they do not need to access family knowledge about the child, or even information related to the children offered by prior-to-school educators, preferring instead to observe the child as they start school and find out for themselves (Dockett and Perry 2007a; Dockett et al. 2007). There can be a very strong belief that because school educators hold power in the settings to which the children are moving, they know best and that the structures within the schools are the most appropriate to determine the approach to transition used. Referring to this situation, Woodhead and Moss (2007, p. 40), note that

> … relationships between primary education and the early childhood sector are often one-sided. Schools and early childhood centres do not interact with each other sufficiently, often because ECEC [early childhood education and care] tends to be viewed as the weaker partner. This needs to change, and the educational role of the early childhood sector needs to be recognised.

For transition to school to be socially just for all, there must be 'a strong and equal partnership' (Woodhead and Moss 2007, p. ix) among all stakeholders.

Finally, the theoretical and practical position that transition to school is an opportunity for societies to enhance their social justice quantum has driven much of our work. In Australia, as in many other countries, children and families do not live in environments that provide equal opportunities and are not treated equally by school systems or, even, by individual schools or prior-to-school settings. Stereotypes abound as children start school. Children are judged on perceptions of their families' previous schooling (e.g. one boy was cautioned by a teacher who had taught the boy's mother that 'He needed to be better than her at school'). Some judgements are based on race (e.g. 'She is Chinese so she will do well' or 'Those kids come from [an Indigenous settlement], so they will not be ready for school') or socio-economic class (e.g. 'What can be expected from these kids; their families cannot support them properly' *or* 'The parents are just not interested in the kids'). The theoretical stance taken in our work is that transition to school must be seen as an opportunity to provide an excellent start to schooling for all children.

The Australian *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR 2009) suggests that transition to school offers both opportunities and challenges and that children, families and educators all have roles to play in ensuring successful transitions between settings. However, the emphasis is on preparing the children 'to understand the traditions, routines and practices of the settings to which they are moving and to feel comfortable with the process of change' (DEEWR 2009, p. 15). The *Early Years Learning Framework* continues 'Early childhood educators also help children to negotiate changes in their status or identities, especially when they begin full-time school' and 'Educators work collaboratively with each child's new educators and other professionals to ensure a successful transition' (DEEWR 2009, p. 15). There seems to be a lot more emphasis on what the children are to become rather than on what they have been. Compare this with the following excerpt which highlights a different way of considering transition.

> For Aboriginal children, we not only use the term 'transition' which can imply a one-way journey towards something better, but also the term 'fire stick' period (an Aboriginal term for a stick that is kept alight to ensure the availability of fire). This highlights the way in which culture is not something to be left behind, but is an integral part of their lives. The 'fire stick' period is particularly difficult for young Aboriginal learners, who need to adjust to an extra range and layer of experiences, demands, and expectations relating to their cultural, language, and social skills. If these children are to succeed in the school context then they must know that it is safe and acceptable to move backwards and forwards between these cultures. … Such terminology can be applicable to children from many cultural groups where the 'fire stick' period equates with the time needed for them to learn how to navigate between their home and school cultures. For young children beginning their school lives, it is critical that this time is framed in a climate of mutual trust and respect. (Simpson et al. 2001, p. 57)

These two perspectives on transition to school highlight the need for consideration of social justice issues within the context of such transitions. Bourdieu (1991) has described schools as institutions that are much more likely to reproduce existing social relations and inequalities than change these. Hence, schools are more likely to serve the interests of children and families who have similar values to those of the schools. In Australia, these values are still seen to emanate from white, middle-class society, the source of most teachers and educational administrators.

On the other hand, the "fire stick" philosophy places transition to school within a context of cultural relationships where children and families are valued for what they bring to the new setting and are encouraged to maintain those values as they develop those of the school. For this to happen successfully, schools need to change or adapt to the new entrants – both children and families – and seek to meet their needs, just as children and families make adjustments to the new setting. It is not assumed that in order for a successful transition to school to occur, the children and families need to change to fit in with the school. Such an approach requires the development of trustful and respectful relationships among all the players in the transition enterprise and a social justice perspective on transition to school.

13.5 Some Examples

The following four examples are taken from earlier work in which I have been involved (Dockett et al. 2011; Perry 2011). They will be used to illustrate the opportunities and challenges to a social justice approach that can occur during the transition to school process.

1. Julie was a single mother with five children – 4 older boys, two of whom were in primary school, and Maddy who was old enough to go to school. Julie suffered from a mental illness caused by a chemical imbalance. She felt that she was engaged with her children's school because she walked to the school gate every morning and every afternoon to deliver and collect her children. 'I would like to know more about the school but no one comes out to talk with me'.
2. In Queensland, a new curriculum framework (Department of Education, Training and the Arts 2007) has been introduced into Indigenous preschool classes in 35 communities. Among many other aspects, the framework emphasises the need for young children to develop:

   - Pride in their personal and cultural identities
   - Their first language as well as standard Australian English
   - Ability to actively participate in learning
   - Literacy and numeracy skills
   - An understanding of their roles, rights and responsibilities

   All of these are seen as building upon the children's strengths and preparing them for school. The Director of one of these preschools expressed her frustrations about the value of the approach once the children go to school 'Why are they failing in grade 1? Why aren't they listening in grade 1? Why isn't Gary [preschool child from 2 years ago], who always gets in trouble, being an active participant … Because he just showed us he can be a learner, imagining and responding, investigating environments. Why can't he do maths?'

3. Tess is a single mother with two children – Astrid in Year 3 and Damien about to start school. The family lives in a regional city without support from extended family. Tess is looking forward to being able to get a job once Damien starts school, both for her own sake and in order to bring in some extra money.

   Damien attends a local preschool and has had a tough time with his behaviour. He has been diagnosed with a conduct disorder, is on medication and is quite often disruptive both at home and preschool. The family does not have support from friends: 'Every time we visit anyone, Damien plays up and I get embarrassed. So, we just stay at home or go out to the local park when no one else is there'.

   Tess decided that teachers at Damien's new school, which is about 3 km from home, should know about his behaviour. She talked with the Principal and with the kindergarten (first year of school) teacher. They thanked her and told her that they would let her know about plans for Damien's school start.

For the first term of kindergarten, Damien is placed on a "partial enrolment". That is, he comes to school in the morning and is sent home at lunchtime. Tess needs to pick him up from the school. She also needs to be available during the time he is at school 'Just in case something goes wrong and we need to send him home'.

4. Sarah's son, Harry, had been diagnosed with Down syndrome. Harry was to attend the local mainstream school, hopefully with support from a teacher aide. To be eligible for this support, Harry needed to be assessed as having at least a moderate intellectual disability. As a result of assessment, he was judged to have a severe intellectual disability. While Sarah was pleased that this made him eligible for additional support, she was upset about the process and the label:

> …for his whole life we've been trying to build him up and working on his strengths and everything and then all of a sudden it's the exactly opposite, you want him to perform badly and you don't want him to do this and you have to tell them about all of his weaknesses and so it's the exact opposite to what we've been doing for the last five years with him.

One must assume that all people involved in the process of a child's transition to school have the best interests of the child at heart. Parents want the best for their children, want them to learn at school and want them to be happy. Teachers want to have children at school who want to be there and display positive learning dispositions. Children want to learn at school, be with their friends and be happy. Administrators, bureaucrats and politicians want children to be successful at school, do well in national and international tests of literacy and numeracy and move towards being productive citizens. However, in spite of all the best intentions, do we sometimes make matters worse for the children and their families, especially for those who are positioned outside the mainstream?

Julie in Example 1 just wanted someone from the school to talk with her. She did not have the agency to commence the conversation and no one seemed to notice. (This is not a criticism of the school or its teachers. Rather, it is a criticism of a system in which such 'noticing' is constrained by the other duties required of teachers.) Transition to school is about building sound, trustful and respectful relationships (Dockett and Perry 2007a; Pianta and Cox 1999). In any relationship there are gradations of power. With transition to school, it is much more common for the locus of power to be with the school and its teachers than with the parents and children. Care needs to be taken in exercising this power, and, at times, it is necessary for those with power to take steps to ensure that those with less power are provided with opportunities to show their strengths and express their needs.

I have often heard the lament that schools seem to destroy many of the 'good things' that preschools develop in young children. While the situation is certainly not as one sided as this might suggest, there are questions that need to be raised about continuity and change as children start school. Prior-to-school settings, including children's homes, and schools have different purposes and different ways of achieving these purposes (Dockett et al. 2007). Children want school to be different from what they have experienced before. 'Children expect to engage in tasks that are different from those in prior-to-school settings and they expect to work

rather than play in school' (Dockett and Perry 2007a, p. 55). However, if things are so different in school that a child moves from being proud and strong in his own identity to failing, what has been achieved through a quality early childhood programme? Example 2 reports a Director pondering this issue. Have things been made worse for Gary just as they are supposed to be better? Has the gap between Gary and the mainstream children widened? The chance that 'differences between early education and school may create new difficulties for children as they enter school' (Woodhead and Moss 2007, p. 30) must be avoided because we know such a chance will impact differentially on the most vulnerable within our societies.

The situation in which Tess finds herself in Example 3 provides evidence of unintended consequences of efforts to meet the needs of children and other players in the transition to school. The partial enrolment arrangement is designed to provide Damien with as successful a start to school as possible; to provide Damien's teacher with an opportunity to work with him over shorter periods of time so that conflict and tension can be avoided; and to provide the other children in Damien's class with a less stressful beginning of their schooling than might otherwise be the case. All of these people have a right to be treated with justice in these ways, but what about Tess and Damien? Is it reasonable for Tess to have to postpone even partial fulfilment of her needs in order to fit into the system's constraints? Is it just for her? Is it reasonable that Damien is missing out on valuable learning at the very beginning of his school career?

Sarah's anguish in Example 4 shows how bureaucratic processes can impact on the wellbeing of families as well as the children starting school. While no one will deny the need for equitable processes in the allocation of scarce resources, one wonders what might have happened in a family less confident in exercising their agency than this one. It seems unnecessary for a family to be placed in such an unenviable position, and it certainly impinges on the social justice quantum of the community involved.

13.6 Conclusion

There are many challenges and issues that arise from the theoretical foundations for researching transition to school that I have considered in this chapter. The first is to convince other researchers and practitioners that in a diverse society such as Australia's, the potential for breaches of social justice as children and families start school is high. There are many examples of expectations based on stereotypical views of children and their families becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. Often these occur around determinations of the readiness of children to start school. (For example, shouldn't we think it odd that all boys who are younger than five when they start school *or* all Aboriginal children *or* all children from low socio-economic status families are likely to struggle throughout their schooling?) A detailed commentary on readiness is outside the scope of this chapter, but many colleagues have already

written on the social justice aspects of this concept (Bernard van Leer Foundation 2006; Dockett and Perry 2009; Graue 2006; Meisels 1999).

My stance on the strengths and agency of children as they start school has caused me to reconsider the appropriateness of my methodologies for researching with children in this area. In fact, the topic of researching with children has, in some ways, overtaken our work in transition to school. A social justice perspective that respects children's rights and recognises their strengths places in question many of the traditional research approaches that I have used in the past (Dockett et al. 2009; Dockett and Perry 2007b; Harcourt et al. 2011). As well, it means that researching only mainstream, generalised transition approaches and programmes – where Dockett and Perry began their transition to school explorations – is no longer adequate. Since, 1997, our transition to school research programme has expanded to include various groups in Australian society that are often described as vulnerable or disadvantaged, including Indigenous Australians (Perry 2011; Perry et al 2007), culturally and linguistically diverse families (Sanagavarapu and Perry 2005) and families with complex support needs (Dockett et al. 2009, 2011).

From 2009 to 2011, I evaluated the implementation of a preschool curriculum framework in Indigenous communities in Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts 2007; Perry 2011). I believe that it is an excellent framework which recognises and celebrates the strengths and values of Indigenous children and families. Even over the brief evaluation period, however, I have seen and heard of many Indigenous children who have moved onto school following a successful preschool experience only to be confronted with unreasonable and unsupported expectations. As a result, these children are moving from seeing themselves as successful learners in preschool to seeing themselves as failures in the first year of school. Clearly, there is still much to be done to ensure that for all the stakeholders in transition to school, social justice is paramount.

Many challenges and issues arise from a social justice stance. None is more important, however, than the stance itself which 'necessitates a commitment to recognising and respecting the human rights of children whilst they are in school - including respect for their identity, agency and integrity' (UNESCO 2006, p. 2).

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