‘Cultural capital’ and the literacy needs of a new generation of pre-service teachers

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Introduction
The ‘quality’ of teachers has been again in the policy and media gaze in recent times, sometimes used as an excuse for ‘teacher bashing’ and at other times a response to perceived needs for a changing teacher workforce to deal with the changing societal conditions facing children and schooling. Our interest in teacher quality lies in our work as educators of pre-service teachers, at a time when our program continues to grow – and is indeed the biggest ‘cash cow’ undergraduate program in the university. We are still overwhelmingly organised to teach on-campus, face-to-face in Australia’s third-smallest university in what seem fairly ‘traditional’ teacher education programs for primary, secondary, graduate entry, early childhood, conversion, and dip ed enrollees.

In this paper, we raise issues about a problem of ‘literacies’ among certain cohorts of our pre-service teacher education students. We do so very cautiously, recognising first how easy it is to play into discourses antithetical to positive images of teachers, the university sector or the education sector more broadly through teacher bashing, escalation of ‘literacy crises and a more rampant anti-intellectualism in Australian society. Second, we recognise how little control we in the sector have over how any issue we raise is more widely discussed and this is a particularly tense time for teacher education debates, given the policy examples of efforts to remove teacher education from the university sector in the UK, and the proliferation of the standards movement as a means to further control the work of both teachers and teacher education programs. Thus, in the first section of the paper, we attempt to wrestle with the problem of pre-service teacher literacy by framing it in a particular conceptual tradition, developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1992) which pays due attention to what is at stake in discussions of literacy ‘standards’: the issue of dominant cultural capital. Next, the paper poses the problems as necessarily ethical as well as educational in character, by focussing on the contradictions involved in coming to terms with what to do to address literacy problems in teacher education, specifically our own. Third, we suggest a way forward, paying due attention to the current constraining context in which action on this topic can be developed. We draw not only on the work of Bourdieu but more specifically on the work of Lisa Delpit (1988/1993) to make specific suggestions in the context of our program, in a move we call ‘utopian pragmatics’, emphasising both the difficulties inherent in shifting the share of dominant cultural capitals around literacy and the practical educational problem of re-valuing alternative approaches to literacies.

Prior to theorising how we understand these literacy problems, we need to sketch out some aspects of that context at the university site which help to constitute the ‘literacy problem’ in particular ways and constrain both our imaginations of what is possible and our capacity to deal educationally and ethically with what we outline below. Education faculties were particularly affected by the shift from CAEs to universities in the late
1980s, when the ‘unified national system’ of universities was promulgated. Primary
education was almost entirely conducted through the CAE sector, and almost all the
secondary pre-service education – certainly the three or four year courses and many of
the Diploma of Education programs, while universities had largely dealt with the end-on
dip eds, and not in such large numbers as the Colleges. The shift into universities might
not have altered the education sector greatly except that it occurred simultaneously with a
move to massify tertiary education: during the nineties, numbers doubled but staffing and
funding to the sector did not expand at the same rate. Indeed, Commonwealth outlays on
universities as a percentage of GDP reduced from a high point of 1.6% in 1975-6 to
approximately 0.8% in 1998-99 [ABS 5510.0 and 5518.0.48.001], one of the lower
percentages in OECD countries.

When the massification of Australian tertiary education began, there was seen to be an
oversupply of teachers and thus education faculties bore a large part of the expansion,
either by redundancies in experienced teachers educators which went to fund other parts
of the university, or disproportionate cuts to resources and programs experienced in the
discipline area as a means to expand other areas such as business, law, and IT. Even with
the looming shortage of teachers because of the age shape of the current teaching force
(Preston 2000), in many universities it remains hard for the Education area to attract their
(rightful) share of the university pie (Ramsey 2000), even based on numbers, let alone on
the weighted amounts that nationally recognise the additional expenses of professional
experience in four year courses. Education as a discipline is low on the pecking order of
university priorities.

The problems of the 1990s have left many faculties with inadequate staffing levels, with
gaps in their capacity to find or promote experienced staff, with poor salary levels in
comparison even with teachers, and with programs that are controlled both by university
regulations in a competitive marketised setting, and by state authorities who have
statutory but no fiscal responsibilities for tertiary education. In our university, 2000
DETYA published staff-student ratios in the area of education are 82.5:1 (DETYA higher
education statistics 2001: http://www.detya.gov.au). We suspect there are a few
problems with this overall figure, but we effectively had 16 full time staff on board,
approximately a thousand students and eleven different pre-service programs, as well as
postgraduate ones. The workload problems for staff are massive. Even just locating and
briefing sessional staff (and of course our sessional staff budget has blown out) in a
small, isolated city is a huge job, let alone coordination. This has consequences for
student consultation: sessional staff are not paid for student consultation so this ends up
with the full time staff. Certainly the four-year program students take a major outside the
School of Teacher Education but each semester we are putting in close to 900 Equivalent
full time student load’s worth of assessment items (according to Examiners’ Board
meeting records). Staff are thus stretched just to provide basic quality teacher education,
let alone to participate in the many initiatives in the school sector or conduct relevant
research as many would like to by inclination and higher qualifications. The university
attempts to deal with this in typical managerial fashion: assessment load is reduced, a
week is lopped off tutorial offerings, the sessional staff budget is monitored tightly, and
the climate of narrow human capital reasons for attending university - vocationalism - are
used to bolster program reductions on the basis of claimed student ‘need’. That the DETYA standard attrition rate for students is accepted (and universities funded on) 25% loss per annum is already scandalous in educational terms. But then that still others who pass are not really in the position to teach adequately adds to the inequality. Meanwhile, the university internally escalates its own accountability and performance measures: the ‘new academic program’ is streamlined, staff are enjoined to engage in income generating activities, and reporting of ‘quality’ becomes standardised.

As part of the massification of tertiary education, teacher education has continued to draw in large numbers. Currently career prospects are relatively good in terms of medium term hopes for permanent positions in the next five years – in the ACT alone, it is expected that one third of the current teaching force will leave in the next five years. And Canberra graduates tend to serve country NSW and other states as well. Yet we fear that the situation in the universities may well leave us open to similar policy moves to the UK, where the de-professionalisation of teaching, the emphasis on narrow, vocational skills, and the valorisation of ‘the practical’ resulted in a large shift of teacher education outside the universities to schools (Furlong et al. 2000, Mahony & Hextall 2000), largely to the detriment of teacher quality and to the discipline as a whole. This makes the issue of being able to name and do something about any perceived deficiencies in the literacies of some of our students an even more urgent task. However, as can be seen from this short discussion, the prospect of doing something systematic and rigorous is also minimised.

A Certain Kind of ‘Literacy Crisis’: Pre-Service teachers without ‘standard’ (i.e. dominant) literacies
Generally, we do not work with the terms that define literacy/numeracy in terms of a ‘crisis’ (Luke, Green & Hodgens 1994), seeing this as a largely ideological mobilisation that usually serves to obscure other salient problems or re-position the education sector to serve other political purposes. However, we believe there are good reasons for developing literacies other than for narrow functionalist or human capital rationale, currently so prominent. We see issues of literacies as centrally connected to issues of power, whereby the task of educational institutions is to assist in the development of a broad range of literacies, escaping the reductionist definitions used as the basis of much ‘standards’ discussion. It is in this context we wish to brave discussions about poor standards of literacies among a significant group of our pre-service student teachers.

What is the kind of problem we see? There are in our program increasingly diverse groups of students, often ‘first generation’ students, particularly in the primary and the early childhood programs. Many of them are mature age, converting from other jobs or upgrading qualifications to degree status, many with children, and jobs needed to keep the family and/or themselves. A significant proportion of these students do not have the ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1977) brought from their home backgrounds which equip them almost automatically with the kinds of dominant literacy practices on which university study generally relies. Some of the students with poor literacy levels have entered through traditional means – ie they have a reasonable tertiary entrance score. [Note that our university has arbitrarily raised entrance scores to 75 (above ANU with 73
as its admission score) and that the median for teacher education was approximately 87 last year so there are significantly high performing students among our cohort.] Another group are converting their TAFE Diploma in Childcare or are undertaking a joint course with Canberra Institute of Technology and UC: a significant proportion of this group do experience significant challenges in converting to the university-level literacies expected. Yet these are not largely underclass, Indigenous or NESB students, rather the majority are anglo-background students. While we use our current setting as the example to explore issues, we expect this demographic is not isolated and probably even less severe in the ACT, where the clientele is closer to ‘middle’ than ‘working’ class, relative to Teacher Education programs in other ex-CAE universities, e.g. CQU or Ballarat; and even some older ‘red brick’ universities where demographic shifts and distance education have become prominent.)

In the third and fourth year undergraduate subjects “Diversity in Educational Settings” and “Social Contexts of the Curriculum” in the Early Childhood and Primary cohorts, we find perhaps 15% of final papers showed lack of very basic literacy skills, e.g. spelling, grammar, sentence structure, etc. An even larger portion, perhaps 40%, lack significant abilities to read a text for main argument, to make and write one’s own thought-out arguments in one’s own voice, etc. Our final papers have asked for such ‘thought work’: not opinion papers, but ‘show-us-you-understand-and-can-apply-main-ideas’ papers. Yet we receive many papers that would not be far off or fit the official University definition of ‘plagiarism’: i.e. other people’s concepts and words strung together as if theirs, without citation; or, at best, a ‘research’ paper that uses long quotations extensively. Typically, the latter sort of paper does not draw at all, or minimally, on readings, lecture and tutorial materials, but rather from other secondary sources with ideas that somewhat relate to our subject’s topics, but not very well. However, they entail summarisations of, say, ‘multicultural education’, in a few pages – i.e. the students do not even need to synthesise the various readings in the Subject Brick. An associated problem with the latter approach to a paper is that, in wholesale quoting from sources, it is easier to hide a lack of literacy skills. We suspect this is a motive, and that if students had to write their own thoughts in their own words, we’d see more extensive sentence structure problems than the 15% noted above. However, we don’t believe that hiding illiteracy is the only motive. We’ve talked with a number of students about this. Some even say they recognised that we were asking for a different sort of paper, but they’ve never had the practice of doing it, and don’t know how. When we asked if they’d never written such a paper in their school careers, a number said – and, from body language, we believe them (even though it seems extraordinary), not only that this sort of paper passed muster in secondary school, but they were never asked/taught to do any other kind of long paper other than the sort of ‘research’ paper they’d handed into us, as well as some in-class short summarisations of text which did not entail extracting argumentative main ideas or arguments.

These conceptual abilities we were trying to assess, alongside facility in spelling and sentence structure capacities of standard English, are those by which elite students win the academic contests of schooling. The lack of habits and capacities to ‘read the world’ (often explored in terms of ‘critical literacy’) is usually discussed in terms of ‘poor
general knowledge’ of teachers and would-be teachers in the sector and among some of our colleagues. The poor presentation and grammatical work is usually called the ‘literacy’ problem. We wish to argue something slightly different to either of these descriptions: that the broad analyses of the world, its power systems and institutions is part of the problem of literacy that has, as Bill Green (1988) among others points out, different but related dimensions. He argues that literacy needs to be seen as consisting of operational, cultural and critical dimensions, that bring together language, meaning and contexts. The students we worry about clearly have trouble at the operational level with functional levels of writing and reading of particular discourses and genres. These are not merely ‘skills’ of grammar and sentence structures but also critically connected to students having their own meaning-making purposes. Culturally, they do not relate their literacy work to the contexts they know, nor are they able to frame our tasks in ways meaningful to them. They do not ‘read’ the institution and its genres well and so they remain largely a mystery. Most importantly, they do not understand the socially constructed nature of the discourse practices in which they are expected to engage, the scope for interpretation and the ways in which power operates in and through these discourses. ‘Critical Literacy’ among our students requires integration of these three dimensions of the operational, cultural and critical; these re needed to understand disciplines, representational genres, to develop and position themselves and to communicate with others. Somehow, in the current climate, students are able to ‘succeed’ in schools and TAFE and other fronts of living without exercising broad literacies. We, it has to be said, are not good at ‘teaching’ them in ways that encourage integration of these dimensions and thus the encouragement through experiencing success in working through the difficulties for those most in need of it.

Why would students such as these choose teaching as a career? The jobs are there; and it’s on the career menu for which they are eligible by gender and by entry scores, or else through TAFE back-doors (Teese, 2000). We infer that many who make this ‘choice’ suppress their memories of their own felt humiliations through schooling. We infer that many have developed rationales that, at Early Childhood and Primary levels, it isn’t ‘really teaching’, but rather ‘child care’. Some are positively motivated by importance of teacher as identity role model, while avoiding the notion that it also counts in terms of pedagogy that sets kids on the trajectory that affects how they’ll do in later years of schooling. In other words, the early years ‘don’t yet count’ in the academic contest in which they suffered their own school-related humiliations. However, with more jobs likely, because of the upcoming teacher shortage, it is likely that they will finish and be appointed, although it is most likely their jobs will be in the most educationally disadvantaged areas – with high unemployment, populations who are newcomers to the country, indigenous and rural schools, and/or areas of low socio-economic status. Thus, it is likely our exiting new teachers will unwittingly be placed in those areas where students do not come with strong literacy backgrounds and expectations of success in literacy terms, thereby continuing a vicious cycle of reproducing poor literacy among particular cohorts of pre-service teachers and in turn their students.
**Standard Literacies as ‘Cultural Capital’**

We want to place our arguments about literacy achievement and teaching/learning within the broader framing of Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1987, 1992). For Bourdieu, people’s primary habitus or dispositions for being in the world are created through engagement in practices seen as a normal part of their societal location in family and early childhood. Schools, in French and Anglo-American contexts, normally work largely within the primary habitus/dispositions that the students bring with them – including orientations to books, the world of print and visual representation, habits of inquiry and knowledge of their worlds. Despite claims to the contrary, schools largely do not extend much the primary habitus into secondary habitus that includes other kinds of literacies than those valued in the home. It is largely assumed by the school system that students’ performance in school is related to their *ability* rather than by reproduction of what different groups bring to school and what capacities match what schools teach. Schools thus systemically, without overt acknowledgment, reproduce social-positional inequality through all sorts of mechanisms that encode the privilege of dominant cultural capitals (Apple 2001).

Literacy teaching and learning at the school is a crucial aspect of being able to be recruited into a range of secondary habitus/dispositions, of building on and extending home/family/class positions and being able to engage with the world in a range of ways, thereby avoiding mere reproduction of the social order. If schools only assess what is not taught but rather what is brought from home, then those whose cultural habitus does not match what the school arbitrarily assesses fail. Schools thus do not alter the frame of cultural capital exchange which sees some groups unable to ‘trade’ on their cultural ways of being in the world. Nor are these other ways of operating culturally able to interrupt the dominant modes of what schools value. ‘Cultural capital’, according to Bourdieu, occurs in a marketplace where there is an unequal trading of the cultural dispositions brought from home to school. Bourdieu’s importance to this debate is precisely because he names it as a problem of unequal exchange value – capital – and shows the assessment game up as arbitrary rather than connected to skills, abilities or quality teaching. If schools are merely reproducing (or exacerbating) cultural inequality, then most educational claims for value cannot be sustained.

Our interest in literacy is precisely because it has the potential to interrupt schools’ automatic privileging of some cultural dispositions as high cultural capital, by broadening what counts as valuable and also providing access to those for whom different literacies are not automatically available. If we aim for schooling that is about social justice – ‘curricular justice’ in Bob Connell’s terms (1993) - in the sense of equitable empowerment of those who do not start out from relatively empowered backgrounds - those we send into the teaching force will need to be able to impart such capacities, or cultural capitals, most especially to those who don’t come to school with home cultivation of such capacities for faring well in school contests. How can this be done by teachers who themselves do not embody such cultural capitals, never having gained them either from home or in schools? If such teachers taught in elite schools, they would be seen as a problem even though most students there would experience little change to their rate of success since they already possess the cultural capital needed for academic...
success. However, when teachers who are unable to impart those dominant literacies teach students who do not start out with them, this is a recipe for amplified cultural reproduction of inequality through education. If we are conscientiously to send these pre-service students into early childhood and primary teaching settings – where they will get jobs – a substantial intervention would seem to be called for. In Bourdieu’s terms, those pre-service teachers who did not start out with high cultural capital did not get much transferred to them through schooling, TAFE or university.

Who Are Our ‘Clients’, and What Do We Owe Them: The Need to Wrestle with Complex Ethical Contradictions

In approaching what to do about the problems of pre-service teacher literacy outlined earlier, we lay out some tense ambiguities regarding whom we understand ourselves to be serving, and what sort of ‘service’ we ‘owe’, in teaching pre-service teachers. This will amplify the complexity of what needs to be solved if we are going to serve all stakeholders in ways that live up to ethical standards of self-integrity and social justice.

In the current funding and ideological context, the university sector has given itself and been given little option but to sell university education as a ‘client service’ in which the ‘customer’ can expect to get what s/he pays for: a degree that certifies employability. In other words, this is both a vocationalist and marketised moment in university degree work and award – especially in the ex CAE strata of Universities – and we could be construed to owe both delivery of ‘satisfied customers’ to our University employer, and satisfaction to the customer in terms of their ‘needs’ as they perceive them. [Since perceptions of what they need, and what will satisfy, are to a great extent market-constructed by the ‘marketers’, this can’t really be called a ‘buyer’s market’. But from the point of view of those of us who care about the disciplinary knowledges we teach, if we’re the ‘sellers’, it isn’t a seller’s market. (But to the extent that we’re captured in this ‘market’ logic, we’re not the sellers; we’re proletarian ‘deliverers’ who must sell our labour in terms of what employers and customers demand.) See Marginson and Considine 2000]

By this market reasoning, if our Teacher Education students can get jobs with the outcomes as they are, and they don’t want to work toward more than this vocational end, who are we to say they should show mastery of the disciplinary knowledge to a reasonably educated standard? And we do discern a good percentage of our ‘less literate’ students – as well as others – as increasingly expecting that they will be treated as ‘customers’ who are owed satisfaction without having to satisfy our requirements or ‘standards’. Moreover, those who construe early childhood and primary as not significantly about literacy learning, thus justifying their entry into careers as teachers without the dominant cultural capitals, expect not to have us interrupt these rationalisations of their entitlement to ‘teach’ very young children with insistences that those early years do count in terms of absorption of literacies that matter for later academic success.

However, as responsible teacher-educators, we have to affirm that we know better than the commonsense of some of our students. It is not merely that we want our students to
value a university education as a contribution to their broad and general education. We also know that students who come from backgrounds in which they do not acquire the literacies that work as cultural capitals for success within mainstream schools, and who do not rub up against such literacy ‘capitals’ in early school years through contact with teachers and/or other students who can transmit it to them, endure an amplification of their ‘deficits’ – in terms of ‘capital’ value of their cultural repertoires for academic achievement (not the social-cultural validity of their cultural repertoires). This ‘amplification of deficits’ becomes harder and harder to redress. And this means that, while we do believe we owe some degree of satisfaction to students – and to our employing institution’s managers who want us to ‘keep the customers happy’ – this ‘debt’ has to be balanced by a negotiation of students’ terms of satisfaction with other debts that, ethically, we must understand ourselves to owe to other clientele. (The fact that we have to defend this stance exposes the ethical bankruptcy of ‘marketisation’ trends of the higher education sector of late.) That is, we owe the students/families of Australia – and especially those who start from ‘disadvantaged backgrounds – the kind of education that can counterbalance disadvantaged starting points.

This social justice agenda is, to us, a prime directive that, if it contradicts our obligations to ‘customer satisfaction’, outweighs those customer/employer obligations. Indeed, we might remind our employing institution that it is part of a tertiary public sector, within a broader public state sector – in which it has obligations to publics in broad senses. Since the outcomes of K-12 education entail such high-stakes consequences for families/students – so long as we live in a credential society (Collins 1979), in which educational institutions are the key passport portals – university Teacher Education programs especially have a strong ethical obligation to those family/student stakeholders most likely to miss out.

However, here we run into the structural-functional dirty secrets of public states and their public and private-supported school systems. That schools function to sort and select for academic success in terms of greater or lesser inheritances of cultural capitals acquired in early childhood, as we noted earlier, is so deeply systemic that schools, teachers, and Teacher Ed programs that prepare teachers for schools, tend to be tacitly implicated in reproductive mechanisms, despite the best intentions of most teachers and leaders. (As Raymond Williams says, it happens through covert and persuasive saturations of “selective tradition”; if it were overt and blunt, it would be challenged and changed (Williams, 1961; see also Apple 1979). It is our own implication in and the ubiquity of the problem that makes it difficult for us to acknowledge publicly our pessimism of the intellect while arguing for optimism of the will (Gramsci 1971).

In other words, what is needed is not a single program but a serious intervention, requiring political-ethical agenda and consciousness-raising, to interrupt illiteracy as usual. Deep down, we believe, all of us who become implicated in the reproductive functions of schooling recognise these implications of what we do. However, covering over this deep-down knowledge are all sorts of denial mechanisms that keep a sense of self-‘crisis’ suppressed as we enact the implications. It thus too often becomes ‘easier’ – in the sense of taking paths of least resistance – to keep our underlying knowledge of the
dirty secrets of educational reproduction repressed. It takes political-ethical courage to act against this, often without the support of those working around us. It also takes appreciation of the irony in which it is a gutsy, radical, perhaps revolutionary act to actually teach— and thus redistribute – the cultural capitals that, if we had the socially just society we wanted, might very well not be chosen to be taught. (That is, aspects of current ‘standard’ literacies might be taught, taught to the degree that they were deemed, by participatory democratic processes, to have convincing uses for many, along with other cultural ways of knowing and valuing. In other words, there would be no such thing as dominant cultural capitals – or, rather, there would be no such thing as cultural capitals.)

Redistributing Cultural Capitals, While Defusing their Domination: Lisa Delpit’s Ingenious ‘Solution’ to Tough Ethical Contradictions

In her famous essay, “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Education Other People’s Children” (1988/1993), Delpit thinks her way towards a schooling approach that best ‘answers’ the question of how to bring about redistribution of cultural capital in ways that are also sensitive to the cultural identities of kids from social positions that, in ‘mainstream’ (i.e. dominant) terms, are ‘other’. She recognises that inequitable structures of capitalism/racism/sexism will not go away any time soon, and thus most schools will continue to undergo all sorts of pressures and constraints likely to induce complicity through mechanisms that function to reproduce inequitable structures. However, herself an African-American who has worked with both African-American and Native Alaskan communities as a teacher and teacher-educator, Delpit is also compelled to devise ways to educate for both upward mobility of those kids within mainstream institutions, and social change towards multi-cultural inclusion.

Delpit’s ‘answer’ to how best to educate ‘other people’s children’ is complex and sophisticated. To summarise briefly, Delpit works on what in Australian Indigenous education circles is called a ‘2-way’ scaffolding logic (See Harris, 1990). A key is to recognise that codes of dominant Cultural Capitals are generally implicit standards of expected performance, which, for those whose families don’t culture them from early childhood as implicitly familiar ‘second natures’. Teaching those ‘codes of power’ thus need to be made explicit for those who have not got them. However, if this becomes the foundation of all the curricular/pedagogical approach, then that classroom offends and alienates the worthy cultural ways of being of those from other than dominant positions. Rather, she suggests, the dominant cultural capitals need to be scaffolded around a respectful base in the home culture/s. Her strategy involves making the dominant codes of power practicable, showing their uses and their abuses, in contrast with home culture. Thus critically reflective ‘meta-language capacities (‘critical literacies’) are developed, by which students can appreciate (1) that both their own and ‘standard’ literacies have their uses, depending on context; (2) where and when they themselves might best engage in dominant literacies; and 3) that the latter having dominance over the former is both arbitrary and ethically wrong.

In other words, the codes of dominant cultural literacies/capitals must be learned and performed, where appropriate, in order to get needs met through ‘mainstream’
institutional expectations that cannot at present be avoided; but they don’t have to
dominate one’s own experience of teaching-and-learning; rather, one can scaffold them
around, and evaluate their uses/abuses from, one’s preferred centre of cultural gravity.

This strategy is what we call utopian pragmatism. It knows better than to expect power
to be easily converted by this redistribution of cultural capitals. For one thing, not all
Cultural Capitals that count can be redistributed so easily. Consider Malin’s (1994)
example of the ‘hidden curriculum’ of traditional Aboriginal students at primary school:
if the code of mainstream teacher expectations is made explicit – in schools, you should
look teacher in eyes, and answer quickly. This practice goes against what Bourdieu calls
“habitus”, i.e. deeply self-structuring subjective habits in most Aboriginal communities.
Even if such young kids could performatively master such radical shifts in disposition,
would it be wise in terms of ethics, psychic health or cultural continuity. Moreover, even
if the new habits were successfully inculcated, it is most likely that the system would
develop all sorts of new mechanisms to re-establish the privileges of dominant cultural
capital/habitus. After all, power is powerful and powerfully flexible.

Nonetheless, it’s a ‘revolutionary’ act of sorts, a provocation against the powers of
dominant positions, to redistribute dominant cultural capital. It brings more exposure of
how Cultural Capital usually operates through tacit/subtle coding. And to some degree it
works. (When at a scale not too challenging to system, it can work remarkably; e.g.
Central Park East School, as Deborah Meiers shows (1990.) The provocative exposure is
that schools usually assess what they do not teach, but with the pretense that they do.
And the compensation is to teach, in ways that make it explicit/practicable, what is
usually left implicit for ‘others’ – the non-dominant – to ‘sink or swim’ (and most always
sink). Combined with scaffolding around the central privileging of home culture –
especially through communication w/ that culture (un-silencing the ‘silenced dialogue),
this meets most critical social justice criteria of cultural inclusion, voice and power
participation, and more equitable redistribution of the ‘equity’ of dominant Cultural
capitals, thereby rendering unto Caesar in the very process of working towards defusion
of the reality of Caesarian dominance in social relations.

Applying Delpit’s Strategies to Our Australian Instance of Pre-Service Teacher
Illiteracies.
education program in Alaska, with a pre-service teacher who was Native Alaskan, and
whose standard English development was meagre. Thus, she’d been struggling in the
program for years, not getting through. Bringing this to attention of her Teacher
Education colleagues, Delpit found a ‘conservative-progressive’ split in which a certain
portion of her colleagues argued the student shouldn’t be in the program because she
lacks suitable skills for teaching, whereas the contrary portion argued: Why should we
impose our values about literacy on her different cultural values? Delpit saw both sides
as crazy, in their dualistic division. Of course, this student wanted to maintain pride in
the use-values of her culture, but also needed standard English capacities to teach in the
mainstream school system – and knew this, and wanted these capacities, as consultation
with the student (conducted by Delpit) ascertained. Delpit worked with her, first getting
her started on basic skills of sentence structure and language genres/contexts, working toward point where analytic powers and meta-linguistic reflectivity develop and became competencies within the student’s own autonomy as learner. She’s now a successful teacher in school system.

This story illustrates why it is unjust to preclude those who do not start with ‘standard’ cultural capital from home, nor gain it in K-12 schooling. It can be gained; and it is vital to have a healthy component of the teaching force comprised of those who, through experience, (a) understand the hidden class/ethnic injuries of schooling that fails to provide, and (b) are ethically-politically committed, through identity, to redistributing the empowerments of dominant cultural capital to those from less empowered positions in the social structure. We owe it to those who feel called to be teachers a chance to be teachers; and we owe students/families a diversity of teachers such that culture/power-sensitivity and inclusiveness is enabled. But so long as our ‘multicultural society’ is constrained by capitalism, racism, sexism, etc., these teachers need means to acquire a culture/power-sensitive secondary acquisition of the ‘standard’ literacies that only elite kids acquire in the primary family/neighbourhood contexts of early childhood.

To a degree, our University is quite similar to Delpit’s: in expecting students to have cultural capital, and evaluating what we in fact don’t teach. Indeed, the experience of many staff in the University sector now very typically (although it depends on staff member and the student) to tend to lower the ‘pass’ bar, if not the higher grade bar, and let certain forms of illiteracy earn a pass. Either the assignments are made simple enough that they do not entail literacies that matter for mainstream institutional success, such that those students, if they didn’t get them at home or later schooling, could still get them through our work with them. Or they do entail literacies that matter, and that those students don’t embody; however, in the last instance the students are often passed anyway by counting what they can do (eg classroom performance or group presentations) against the formal literacy outcomes which appear less important in the overall scheme of things.

To a degree, the latter can be ‘justified’ by the reasoning that it is unfair to fail students for competencies they don’t have that we did not teach them. We’ve both used that reasoning to pass students, especially international or NESB students. But we’ve also become too uneasy with it, because as a strategy it doesn’t do justice to those who most need it: the kids/families in the schools where these teachers are likely to get jobs – i.e. the schools with more ‘disadvantaged’ students. They’ll thus be teachers who will unwittingly reproduce rather than interrupt insufficient literacy empowerment, and structural inequality, of those kids/families.

What’s the solution? Only to take in students who have inherited ‘gold-standard’ Cultural Capital through the good luck of their birth in relatively dominant social-cultural positions? Even if this were desirable, it wouldn’t be possible; those from ‘gold-standard’ Cultural capital families tend not to select teaching careers in numbers that fill the places. But if we could do this, it wouldn’t be desirable. A teaching force only of those from relatively elite social-cultural positions would not be able to appreciate
enough about, and be sufficiently committed to meeting the educational needs of, those with diverse and less empowered backgrounds. The pressures of teaching/assessing classrooms full of kids, with ‘normal curve’ outcomes expected roughly to match the shape of the unequal social structure, would induce too many to take paths of least resistance, and let these kids select themselves for failure or very low grades.

What do we need to do with/for the students we teach, such that we best serve both them and those they’ll teach? Ideally, the University should provide staffing necessary for our program, with all students who need it, what Delpit did with her Native Alaskan student, without intensification of already stretched workloads. Unfortunately, that’s not likely to happen in the medium term, given current government funding priorities. But if we raise our consciousness to the problem – and this paper is part of an effort to provoke such critical consciousness – then we can’t sustain denial mechanisms any more; and thus, the ethical burn is great in us if we do nothing. (This sort of burn, and radical doubt about any likelihood of having means to do anything about it, is what keeps the psychology of denial mechanisms going, such that teachers live daily crises of self-doubt, without turning the crises into articulate critique.)

We must make efforts towards utopian pragmatism – i.e. that which works towards social justice goals - within the possibilities of our stamina (which, sad to say, still likely means working harder than we already are). We suggest the following principles for our program, which might make sense for others. To begin, our School of Teacher Education needs a literacy policy, stating expectations of students who will be teachers in schools. This policy needs to express a strong social justice ethic, including importance of teachers being able to interrupt the reproductive tendencies of schooling by explicating and thus re-distributing dominant cultural capitals, while not marginalising the cultural ways of knowing/being of diverse student groups (i.e. Delpit’s 2-way scaffolding). We need to explain to students, clearly at the beginning of the program, this ethical justification for expectation of literacy competencies by end of their studies – before the degree can be awarded – as well as what these competencies comprise. These literacy competencies would include abilities to speak and write in coherent, well-structured sentences with ‘standard’ syntax, grammar, punctuation and genres. Beyond this we would argue for critical literacy competencies to think analytically, demonstrated in spoken and written ways, including the ability to read a text and articulate its main argument; to grasp key concepts of subjects and how they systematise in an analytical framework or lens; the ability to apply such a lens to problems; the ability to argue a point and see where arguments of oneself and others go wrong/right; the ability to unpack key assumptions between the lines of texts and vocal statements, and, if they differ, as covert assumptions, from the overt messages of the text/statement, to say how so; the ability to unpack one’s own tendencies, in classroom action, to assume ‘lesser abilities’ and ‘deficits’ among kids who don’t start out with dominant Cultural capital capacities.

We have a subject “Literacy for Teachers”, given in first semester of undergraduate student’s entry into University, which teaches differences in language genres, and concentrates on how to organise an essay. At present, this subject involves much re-drafting and ‘assessment’ – much of it in-class (so more work over-load for
Lecturer/tutor than students). This is important and necessary; but students generally pass it even if they’re far from ready in terms of literacies needed for good teaching. This should be the case: i.e. grading should be criteria-referenced grading based on hard work and improvement, not just inheritances of cultural capital. However, at the same time those students without prospects for good teacher literacy, without further structured intervention, should be identified.

Sentence structure, genre and other such skills are well-covered currently in various workshops and one-on-one work within the UC Academic Skills Centre. Our students who need this work currently don’t generally avail themselves of it, and most do not even know about it. We’ve talked with the people who work in it; they’ve said they can handle 25 or so of our students in special workshops of a limited number. It’s another place to begin. Those identified in “Literacy for Teachers” could tactfully be apprised of the recognition by their teachers of the need for further academic skills work, and brought into workshops given by Academic Skills Centre for them in collaboration with our Education staff. From this start, we could work politically within the university to recognise the need for expansion of staffing capacity of the Academic Skills Centre to do this sort of work. We know that this issue is not restricted to teacher education students but the influx of international students, of first generation students, especially of mature age, and the declining demography of school leavers suggest that attention to retention of students will have a high priority in institutional survival. In such a context, literacy, plus numeracy and technological literacies, operational, cultural and critical, are likely to need university-wide support.

Within our programs, we need to target certain subjects – those with the right sorts of conceptual content – for development of assessment items that help students to develop analytical reading/thinking/articulating powers. These subjects need to exist in every semester and entail, over their sequence, a well-designed scaffolding set of stages across the years of program. Currently there is too much tendency for people to treat subjects as ‘private’ contracts with students rather than as elements of a coherent program. An example is the reading log we set in Diversity in Educational Settings (3rd year primary, 2nd year early childhood), that uses guiding questions to lead students to the heart of concepts/themes/arguments within texts they read for subject content. We could start this earlier with subjects in first year such as core subject Education Foundations; and so on. If this is done with proper trade-offs of student workload, it doesn’t increase their workload. Students in the past have tended not to read until exam time, causing a lack of tutorial dialogue and retarding conceptual development within the in term of the subject. We are thus asking them to do more work week-by-week; but we’ve been successful in getting students to appreciate both the value of the log, and the point that the elimination of the mid-term exam they used to have to cram for compensates in terms of their workload. Also, we can make these logs count as assessment, thus lightening the weight of final paper, which the logs train them to be able to write.

We need staff development in terms of how to integrate operational, cultural and critical dimensions of literacies in the assignments we set, the feedback we give to students and the impact of this on our judgements of progress. We also need to de-construct our
pedagogical content knowledge in the Teacher Education program to see how we
do this we ourselves need to include in our academic staff Indigenous, NESB and other
staff who themselves have experienced being ‘other’ to the high cultural capitals
privileged in school and who have an ethic to change educational priorities. We also
need to investigate the ‘big ideas’ underpinning our programs so that there is something
worthwhile for our students to be literate about. The Queensland “productive
pedagogies” (Luke, Lingard, Ladwig, Hayes & Mills 1999) argue for a balance between
intellectual quality, recognition of difference, connectedness to the world (relevance) and
social support in order to increase achievement for all students, but particularly those for
whom schools currently fail. Jennifer Gore and others have begun to put this work into
practice in the tertiary context and it seems to offer promise as at least a checklist on how
we address the development of meta-language, rigour, higher order thinking, increasing
judgement about quality and so forth.

While this works out in terms of student workloads, it is more work for staff, in a period
when management is more likely to tell us to simplify and reduce the load of our
assessments, rather than to see the pedagogical value of this. We must work politically to
persuade – or if we cannot, then embarrass – our managers into the proper recognition of
‘additional’ workload associated with good pedagogy, and to thus cease rationalising bad
pedagogy while affirming primacy of ‘budget at all costs’. Our managers do suggest to
us that less time-consuming assessments, such as more multiple choice, less written
commentary, are not only easier on workload but somehow pedagogically ‘better’. Sometimes
we really do have to expose the ethical bankruptcy of these sorts of rationalisations. But we should not kid ourselves that we will not have to shoulder more
assessment load to do it right, so long as the discourse of ‘budget’ reigns anything close
to as supreme as it now does. We’re asking our pre-service teachers to prepare
themselves for harder work when in-service teachers; and we suppose we must model
this. But we must also remain proactive ethicalists who seek to induce Universities and
school systems to staff our institutions better so that we can do it right within fair and
decent workloads. In this, it would behoove us to pursue the formation of a Teacher
Education Interest group across the ‘sector’ within universitiess, and to forge Teacher
Education/school teacher/union alliance on the politics of demanding well-trained
diversity of our teaching force. We need to go public, and win awareness and support
among various stakeholders and ‘publics’.

**Conclusion**

There have been two simple answers provided to the problem we experience at UC: the
first is to run literacy competency tests either as entry requirement or as part of the
graduation; the second suggestion (which UC has in its program) is to run an extra
‘literacy for teachers’ subject as part of the undergraduate program. Neither is adequate,
although both might well be part of a more coherent and socially just solution. We
should make clear that we are not objecting to these candidates entering our programs.
On the contrary, it is important to have a wide range of teacher backgrounds in the
teaching force, especially to work with the wide range of populations in Australia. We
would want them to add to the variety of literacies and knowledges of the world than are
currently taught in schools such that schools themselves change the exchange value operating through education.

In Teacher Education, we believe it essential to name and come to understand how we ourselves are built into the structural-functional reproduction of educational disadvantage by the ways in which we treat literacies in our program. We understand we cannot just ‘pass through’ our pre-service candidates without the literacies necessary to interrupt the cycle of educational disadvantage. But neither can we simply fail them out (even if that is superficially appealing as ‘efficient’) because teachers who originate from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds are necessary for culture/power-sensitivity among the teaching force of society’s schools.

To further develop Teacher Education literacy policies and practices driven by moves to redress social injustice is not easy in any context; it is particularly challenging in a context in which ‘discursive practices’ of managerial/budget regimes discipline and punish academics who don’t follow their norms (see Foucault 1977). However, there are a range of spaces in which such efforts make sense, as well as ethically warranted. The factors which support a redistribution of cultural capitals inside the university include the pressure on universities to retain students, a history in teacher education of more progressive programs and assessment than is common in other parts of the university, and the parallel logic for our students and their prospective students which may convince them to take up the challenge. The difficulties include our own history of over-work, our implication in the culture of power and its distributive functions, other students who pressure based on normal curve distribution logics, unsympathetic colleagues in other parts of the university and lack of knowledge and skill in making the codes of power explicit in our teaching in worthwhile ways. Nevertheless, we believe it is time to resurrect the traditions of teacher education to be more educative and socially just - ‘utopian pragmatic’ in a university setting.

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