Australian Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs About Educational Disadvantage and Socially Just Teaching: Beyond a Neoliberal Imaginary?

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Abstract: Neoliberal education reforms have altered the way social justice is imagined in relation to schooling. These reforms reframe social justice as 'equity' through conceptions of standards, evidence and teacher quality, while detracting attention from the moral and political dispositions required for socially-just teaching. Knowing more about how this context may be shaping the beliefs of pre-service teachers (PSTs) is important. This paper reports on beliefs about educational disadvantage of a group of PSTs about to embark on a specialised program in Australia designed to promote socially just schooling outcomes. 24 PSTs across two cohorts completed a survey prior to entering the program designed to illuminate their motivations and beliefs around disadvantaged schools and children. The findings highlight how PSTs' beliefs are shaped by the neoliberal policy context and provides recommendations for teacher educators wishing to recover stronger notions of socially just teaching.

Introduction and Background

Policy makers' neoliberal education reforms have altered the way social justice is imagined in relation to schooling. These neoliberal reforms reframe social justice as 'equity' through conceptions of standards, teacher quality and accountability, while detracting attention from the moral and political dispositions required for socially-just teaching. As Lingard et al. posit "the proliferation of testing and new data-driven accountabilities has changed what counts and what is counted as social justice in education" (2014, p. 710). They refer to this as a rearticulation of "social justice as equity in schooling policy" and they explore how earlier notions of social justice have "given way to weaker conceptions of equity as fairness in a meritocratic society" (p. 712) highlighting that these reforms sideline attention to broader structural inequalities that impact on educational opportunity.

These reforms are global, and they have had significant impact on the way equity is framed in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (Cochran-Smith & Keefe, 2022). As Mills and Lingard (2023) have argued, the current context has eroded many of the previous features of ITE courses that may have explicitly focused on social justice such as sociology of education units. Despite this context, educational and political scholars continue to argue for 'strong' or 'thick' notions of justice, equity and democracy in ITE (Lampert & Browne, 2022; Riddle & Apple, 2019; Villegas, 2007). It is considered particularly important for disadvantaged schools and students because teachers in these schools need to have dispositions toward social justice that see all children as educable (Villegas, 2007) and understand the complex structural reasons for educational and social disadvantage so that they can avoid constructing disadvantaged children and their families through deficit models (Mills, 2009). For Lingard et

al. (2014) the ascendancy of data and measurement opens an important question of how we might use this context to re-invigorate a social justice project in education.

Some ITE providers have tried to maintain these stronger approaches to social justice, by offering programs such as the National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools Program (NETDS) (Burnett & Lampert, 2018; Longaretti & Toe, 2017). Understanding PSTs' motivations and beliefs about disadvantaged schools and teaching when they commence such a program is important, so that it might be designed to best support the development of strong social justice dispositions (Lampert & Browne, 2022; Villegas, 2007). Knowing more about how the current education policy environment may be shaping PSTs' beliefs is critical, and highly pertinent for PSTs aspiring to work in disadvantaged schools and communities. It might help teacher educators work with the beliefs PSTs bring with them to ITE programs, and potentially seek to shift and augment them (Mills, 2009). For the ITE research field, it is useful to know more about how competing ideologies may be shaping PSTs' beliefs about educational justice, to map how shifts and developments in global policy scapes come to shape their imaginaries and emerging professional stances.

In this paper we report on beliefs about educational disadvantage of 24 PSTs across two cohorts of the Access Quality Teaching (AQT) program. The AQT program aims to prepare high performing PSTs to work in schools where they are most needed. At Deakin University, the program invites high performing PSTs to become part of a community of practice for their final two years of a four-year Bachelor of Education course. AQT students study their usual curriculum, but through the lens of disadvantage. They undertake all school placements in disadvantaged schools and are supported with visits from staff, and additional learning opportunities around educational disadvantage. Our research questions were:

- What do teachers entering AQT program believe about teaching in disadvantaged schools and how do their beliefs reflect competing educational ideologies?
- In what ways and to what extent is social justice reframed as equity based in a neoliberal imaginary?
- In what ways and to what extent is social justice framed by 'stronger' notions that include attention to broader structural inequalities?

To investigate these questions, we issued a survey to PSTs on entry to AQT program. The survey was designed to illuminate their motivations and beliefs around disadvantaged schools and children. The findings highlight progressive ideology that values children's dignity and inherent worth, without necessarily contemplating structural problems and solutions to educational disadvantage. While this aims to promote stronger notions of social justice to some extent, PSTs' beliefs are also shaped by the neoliberal reforms driving contemporary education policy. We conclude the paper by drawing out the implications of our findings for curriculum our program and others like it.

The Ascendence of 'Teacher Quality' Discourses and the Evacuation of Social Justice in Solutions to Educational Disadvantage

The reframing of social justice as equity involves emphasising measurement and accountability related to in-school factors, while ignoring structural inequality. The ascendancy of a discourse focused on 'teacher quality' is a key part of this reframing (Lingard et al., 2014; Mills & Lingard, 2023). For the past several decades, government responses across multiple national contexts to educational disadvantage have become dominated by the aim of raising teacher quality. Furthermore, quality teaching is often defined in mechanical ways that are about best practice and 'scientifically proven' pedagogical approaches (Gore et al., 2022; Scholes et al., 2017). This discourse now exerts significant influence in the

accreditation and evaluation of ITE courses in Australia and other countries such as the USA (Cochran-Smith & Reagan, 2022). Specific references to social justice in the guidelines for teacher quality set by accreditation bodies such as the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2017) and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) are few and far between. Instead, PSTs are encouraged to think of their professional learning through a discourse of technical efficiency. Justice is framed through the language of inclusion and differentiation, framed as an objective measure (Villegas, 2007), and there is little attention to learning about the underlying structural causes of disadvantage.

Advocates for socially just teaching contend that a different kind of teacher knowledge is important. Hill-Jackson and Craig (2023) argue that we need to "recommit to the moral purpose of teaching as a humanistic and public service discipline…entrenched in democratic ideals" (p. 8) and that "teacher knowledge… must prepare the teacher (and by extension, their learners) to be fully engaged and conscious participants in a democratic society" (p. 7). Similar claims are being made by many other critical teacher education scholars round the globe (Lampert & Burnett, 2016). Drawing on Benjamin Barber's work on 'thin' and 'strong' democracy, Cochran-Smith and Keefe argue for a 'strong equity' in teacher education that acknowledges "the complex and intersecting historical, economic and social systems that create inequalities in access to teacher quality in the first place" (2022, p. 19).

For teachers working in schools serving disadvantaged communities stronger rather than weaker orientations toward social justice are important (Cochran-Smith & Keefe, 2022; Lampert & Browne, 2022). Such an idea can be informed by the work of US social justice philosopher Nancy Fraser. Fraser (2009) outlines three dimensions of justice – economic redistribution, political representation (voice) and cultural recognition. All three are important with regard to building social justice. Fraser also distinguishes between *affirmative* and *transformative* justice. Affirmative justice is a practice where difference may be celebrated and supported but without challenging the underlying structures which produce inequalities. Transformative justice requires teachers to work in ways that challenge these underlying structures by, for example, constructing democratic classrooms. Transformative justice focuses on changing systems, rather than individuals and can be seen as a stronger type of justice disposition. This is because it promotes an awareness of how society is organised to benefit those who hold power. The burden of social change is shifted to systems rather than individuals in a stronger orientation to social justice.

Drawing on Nancy Fraser's framework, Mills et al. (2019) investigated the social justice dispositions of teachers in a variety of schools including low SES. They show how some teachers moved beyond affirmative notions, toward transformative practice. It is in transformative practice that they argue social justice is more effectively realised for children in low SES environments. This means that teachers in disadvantaged schools require high level skills. They must be prepared to reflect upon the structures of power in society that make some people more vulnerable than others, and to avoid making value judgements toward those in their care. In addition to affirming and being compassionate, they must commit to challenging and transforming structural inequalities.

Significant Australian research into exemplary schools for students in high poverty contexts has shown that good teachers in these contexts have a strong moral purpose about their role, and work to challenge deficit beliefs about what their students can achieve (Comber & Kamler, 2004; Keddie, 2012, Munns et al., 2013; Smyth et al., 2014). What this suggests is that underlying some of these excellent teachers' professional qualities, are beliefs related to social justice, and the "determination that their students' life circumstances should not be an insuperable barrier to their success" (Munns et al. 2013, p. 87). These scholars highlight the way that teachers in disadvantaged schools need to be able to see capacity and

strengths in children from disadvantaged backgrounds, rather than viewing them through deficit discourse.

PSTs' Beliefs About Social Justice: Complexities and Contradictions

There is already a vast international body of research literature investigating PSTs' beliefs[1]. Many education researchers interested in socially just schooling have noted that PSTs' beliefs upon entering teacher education programs are important, and not always flexible (Mills, 2009; Thompson, 2020; Villegas, 2007). Villegas traces research back to the 1980s, showing that "the beliefs PSTs bring to programs of teacher education…shape what and how candidates learn from their formal preparation, and eventually influence what and how they teach in classrooms" (2007, p. 373). Mills (2009) draws on Lortie's famous study (Lortie, 1975) to argue that the predispositions of PSTs are perhaps more influential than the program of ITE itself. For this reason, Villegas contends that "teacher educators cannot ignore their students' entering and developing beliefs" (p. 373). This is supported by Mills (2009) who draws on Kangan's (1992) observation that the beliefs PSTs bring to ITE programs are crucially important predictors of future practice.

The beliefs that PSTs bring to ITE programs are formed through their earlier lives and are shaped by their social and cultural positioning. We know from research across Anglo-European nations that PSTs are often from dominant cultural groups and may have limited skills, and feel underprepared, for working with diverse families and children (Lee, 2011; McCandless et al., 2019; Santoro, 2014; Singh & Akar, 2021). Furthermore, even when well-intended, they may inadvertently construct disadvantaged children, families and schools in deficit ways that do not challenge dominant power relations in society. Ideas such as 'they don't value education' or other common stereotypes about poverty may be present among pre-service teacher's beliefs about low SES communities (Mills, 2009; Shulz, 2015; Sleeter, 2017). The cohort or PSTs entering the AQT program are no exception, with most being white, at least second-generation Australian women who may have had little exposure to linguistic and cultural diversity and who most likely grew up in more privileged circumstances than some of the children they may encounter in disadvantaged schools (Charles, 2017). For these reasons we need to interrogate their beliefs coming into ITE programs so that we can better target them toward strong equity.

The literature on PST beliefs uncovers a variety of constructions about democracy and social justice. There are tensions in PSTs' beliefs that reflect the competing ideological underpinnings of the 'war' (Villegas, 2007) about the purpose of public education and what it means to be a teacher, as well as the different national and political contexts in which they are being educated. In liberal democratic countries such as the USA and Australia, PSTs often express beliefs that education ought to serve the needs of all children and be able to offer equity. Yet at the same time they may fail to recognise the full implications of the dominant neoliberal political framing of education and equity in these contexts, despite expressing a desire to resist it (Brown et al., 2022). They may struggle to move beyond liberal democratic notions of equity that are based on a deficit model (Mills, 2009; Villegas, 2007). The literature certainly depicts nuances in different national contexts. For example, Dadvand (2015) explores how Iranian PSTs' beliefs are shaped, but not determined, by a top-down education system that obfuscates the moral and political dimensions of teaching. Verma

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[1] In the literature examining PSTs' understandings about social justice there is a variety of terminology utilized including 'beliefs', 'dispositions' and 'sense-making'. Although these terms are clearly similar, we use the term 'beliefs' drawing on Villegas' (2007) discussion in which she distinguishes between the beliefs that PSTs might bring to an ITE program when they enter it, and the dispositions they may eventually develop through their ITE.

(2023) explores Indian PSTs' dispositions toward social justice in the context of a society characterised by a caste system. Yet although there are clear distinctions depending on the national and cultural context, there are also some consistent themes in the literature, including the way PSTs may struggle to show awareness of their own deficit constructions of diverse children and families (Verma, 2023), as well as awareness of the role of structural inequalities in educational or social disadvantage (Mills, 2009; Singh & Akar, 2021).

We seek to contribute to this collective literature on PST beliefs by exploring the beliefs about teaching in disadvantaged schools of a group of PSTs in Australia, building on the identification in the existing literature of tensions and contradictions in PST beliefs about educational justice. Like Brown et al. (2022) we are interested in investigating PST beliefs within a neoliberal policy context. Where Brown et al. focus on whether neoliberal policies in education are echoed in PST beliefs, our analysis also includes attention to social justice, by exploring whether and how the neoliberal reframing of equity, evacuating social justice, is echoed in our PSTs beliefs.

Methodology

Methodological approaches for researching PST beliefs used in the studies reviewed above often include a variety of mixed methods including surveys, interviews and observations of practice. In some studies, such as Mills (2009) the beliefs are examined at different points in the teacher education program. This research project was a small part of a larger program of research. A fuller picture of our insights from this program of research can be found in other publications (Longaretti & Toe, 2017, 2021; Thomas et al., 2024) Here we report on the findings from one method – a survey distributed to PSTs at the point of entry into the AQT program. The survey was originally intended to be delivered pre and post AQT program so that we could explore its impact on PSTs' beliefs about teaching in disadvantaged schools. However, due to the departure of a key member of the research team from the University we were unable to deliver the survey when the relevant cohorts were exiting the program, and the findings are limited to 24 participants upon entry to the program. We acknowledge the limitations of this method for exploring our research questions. We nevertheless offer some insights that add weight to previous findings in the literature about PSTs' beliefs about social justice and we put forward suggestions for future research and actions that can expand on the findings offered here.

Participants

24 PSTs across two cohorts completed the survey between 2021 and 2022. The participants were not asked to provide any demographic, or personal or educational history details. We recognise that this is a further limitation of our study because we do not have specific information about the participants' gender, ethnicity, language background, or socio-economic histories. We do know, however, about the general demographic profile of the students entering our program as described above. It is therefore likely that most survey respondents were white women between 20 and 40 years of age.

Survey

The survey was designed to provide insight into PSTs' motivations and ideas about what is important for teaching in disadvantaged schools, including their beliefs about what is needed for social justice. Survey items included a combination of short answer questions, and Likert scale items where participants were invited to rank a series of statements in order of perceived importance. The short answer questions invited participants to write short responses to questions such as "What motivated you to study to become a teacher?" (Q1). The Likert scale questions included ranking a series of statements in order of most to least important, such as "The biggest challenge for teachers working in low SES schools is: Please rank the following items from one (most challenging) to six (least challenging)" (Q8). The survey included a total of nine questions in which three items invited a short-written response. A further three items involved ranking a series of statements in order of importance, and the final three questions included a combination of both.

Respondents were asked to rank a series of six items that students in low SES schools need most in order of importance (Q3). This question was explicitly informed by Gale and Densmore's (2000) work on social justice dispositions based on Nancy Fraser's political theory (Fraser, 2009) and was designed to look for evidence of distributive, recognitive and political dispositions toward social justice. We included items such as 'Extra resources to support their learning' (distributive justice), 'Advocacy to help them develop their own voice (retributive justice) and 'Understanding of their family and community background' (recognitive justice). Question Four "What are the most important skills needed by teachers who work in low SES schools?" and Question Six "What are the most important qualities that a teacher in a low SES school needs?" were designed to explore how PSTs' responses may echo or contrast with broader global shifts away from social justice as defined by political and democratic theorists, toward data-driven notions of equity and teacher quality that now dominate education policy scapes. Surveys were distributed via email by the project manager and consent was provided on the first page of the survey if the participant chose to continue.

Analysis

The data were provided in the form of short written responses, and bar graphs depicting the results of the Likert scale items. This enabled us to see how many participants had ranked particular items as important or less important, and whether there were any trends. As this was a small number of participants, no statistical analysis was necessary. Data were initially read through by the research team and anything noteworthy, or that seemed to be repeated across a number of participants, was highlighted. The next step was coding the data according to the themes discussed in the literature above. Codes included the following items and were identified using different colours: Social efficiency/neoliberal ideology, progressive/social reconstruction ideology, deficit discourse around low SES, teacher as agent for 'quality', and Nancy Fraser's three dimensions of justice: cultural recognition, economic redistribution and political representation. Following discussion and consideration of the coding by the research team, the following two key themes were generated from the data:
1.   The passionate teacher: a labor of love
2.   Echoes of a neoliberal imaginary: the quality teacher as agent

Results

The results show that our PSTs' beliefs about teaching in disadvantaged schools evoke a range of educational ideologies including progressive and social justice ideologies through to neoliberal ideologies that emphasise impact and measurement. The following sections present our results and discussion. The first section focuses on the underpinning links to progressive educational ideology that were evident in the PSTs' responses to the short answer questions. We identified a high frequency of affective words such as 'love' and 'joy' when describing their motivation for the teaching profession and for teaching in low SES schools and we explore the implications of this for social justice. The second section focuses on the second theme which was around the location of agency in the PSTs' beliefs about low SES schools, students and their needs. We identified many responses that related to teacher actions, but fewer that depicted the agency of future children in their care. The implications for the aim of our program, around generating strong social justice dispositions, are explored.

The Passionate Teacher: A Labour of Love

"I love to work with children and want to be able to help them grow and develop into the best versions of themselves"

This comment was typical of many participants' responses to the first question in the survey, which invited them to write a short response about why they chose to enter the teaching profession. Many of our participants' comments suggest a persistence of progressive and social-reconstruction ideologies, in spite of the rise of the neoliberal and social efficiency discourse that dominates contemporary education policy. When responding to the first two questions, about their motivations for becoming teachers and why they want to teach in low SES schools, many mentioned a desire to make a difference in children's lives, to help them, and to build relationships and witness learning growth in their future students:

Wanting to make a difference in people's lives - Enjoying being with younger students and gaining connections with them
[I want to] help children be their best possible selves
I've always wanted to make a difference in people's lives
Guiding young people through tough situations in their life, and celebrating the positive things that happen
Ensuring that all children feel that they are valued and they have options and have a bright future ahead of them

These kinds of statements suggest a desire to experience the human element of teaching, which is about connecting with others and supporting them to experience growth and success. Not because of a desire to tick boxes, but a desire to make a difference and ensure that children feel that they are valued. While contemporary rearticulations of social justice as equity evacuate the moral purpose from teaching, these comments speak to the persistence of progressive ideology and the more 'human' motivations of PSTs in which people are prioritised over knowledge, or systems. This ideology can be linked with many progressive education theorists (see Darder, 2017; Freire, 2017; hooks, 2000; Noddings, 2003; van Manen, 1991) whose influential theories about the role of education in a democracy emphasise humanity and pedagogic love.

These kinds of comments continued resoundingly when respondents were asked about the qualities that teachers need in low SES contexts (Q6) (as opposed to *skills* - Q4), with many highlighting qualities such as compassion, empathy, and respect for students and their backgrounds:

Ability to build meaningful relationships have empathy and understanding
Respect - need to have respect for students their interest in order to form a good
bond with their students in order to create a healthy classroom
Compassion, empathy and understanding. Patience
Patience Understanding Tolerance Confidence Kindness
Patience. Perseverance. Compassion
Compassion, patience, creativity, considerate and caring.
Caring, nurturing, friendly, understanding
Respect -Trust -Friendly -Caring -Enthusiastic

These sorts of qualities were repeated many times by almost all respondents. All of the 24 responses to Question Six 'What are the most important qualities that a teacher in a low SES school needs?' resulted in colour coding for progressive ideology, in which teaching includes compassion, empathy and caring. This demonstrates the salience of these imagined qualities, and their continuing endurance in how PSTs imagine their work.

In addition to comments about building relationships and compassion, we were struck by the frequency of highly emotive language in the data. A strong theme arising across both sets of data was the affective pleasure found in working with children in general, and in the growth of the other and the imagined meritocratic fantasy they may bring about as a teacher in this environment. There is a clear pleasure that seems to arise from the joy of relationality with children, and the capacity to feel joy at the achievements and pleasure of the other. Words like love, passion, and joy are peppered through many of the survey responses. Several mentioned a love for children, seen in the quotes when asked about what motivated them to choose teaching:

My love of young children
I fell in love with working with kids
[a teacher I had] sparked the desire to be a teacher within me
I am passionate about working with kids
I love working with young people as they put a huge smile on my face

And then, why they wanted to teach in low SES schools:

I find extreme joy in showing students that there can be light at the end of the tunnel
I am deeply passionate about closing the gap and promoting equal opportunities for all people
Sharing a passion for helping the student to learn

There is great potential here around reinvigorating the strong social justice that Lingard et al. (2014) advocate, because it suggests that some PSTs can see their selves as relational and have an openness and empathy to the other. It is this capacity for a relational view of the self that carries a promise of social justice. As progressive education scholars have argued, we are all interconnected, and it is important for social justice that we can recognise our interconnections with others and act in ways that enable further growth in our students, rather than stultification of their growth (Freire, 2017; hooks, 2000; Wolfe, 2022). The pleasure we may take in another's growth has potential for more socially just outcomes and aligns with the qualities advocated by the research reviewed above on socially just teaching in which teachers must work to challenge deficit beliefs about what their students can achieve. One survey respondent had clearly observed this shutting down of capacity in a mentor teacher, writing that "*a key motivator for me was a placement mentor saying a child with a disadvantaged background was likely to have a terrible future, I felt like she'd given up on him.*" For this respondent, there was a clear belief about the value and potential strength of children in disadvantaged contexts that must be nurtured through relationship building. Similar ideas were evident in the following responses:

> *[teachers need the] ability to build meaningful relationships have empathy and understanding*
> *Ability to form connections with students*
> *Respect - need to have respect for students their interests in order to form a good bond with students*

Here ideas about building relationships, forming connections and bonds are salient. These beliefs about teachers' work have great potential when it comes to social justice because they suggest deep understanding of the relational nature of teaching, and the significance of relationships to support student learning. Teachers who form connections and bonds with their students motivated by empathy and respect are more likely to support disadvantaged children to feel validated and therefore achieve educational success and belonging, as shown in the research by Munns et al. (2013) in which exemplary teachers in high poverty schools were able to see capacity and strength in children rather than viewing them as deficient. Each of Fraser's three dimensions of justice can be seen in our dataset, with economic redistribution featuring most prominently, exemplified in the following three comments:

> *I think quality education should be accessible for all, especially those in low SES areas. Education is necessary to break the poverty cycle and lead to better outcomes for students.*
> *Removing barriers that are created by disadvantage*
> *It's a basic human right to have access to quality education, and being in a low SES area should not determine that they should not have access to the learning they deserve.*

These comments featured key dimensions of social justice such as access, and barriers. They demonstrate awareness that education may assist with economic redistribution and the possibility of better life chances for children. Another dimension of justice in Fraser's theory is cultural recognition, which is about celebrating and including the diverse cultures of the children in our care as a dimension of social justice. The following comment indicated some awareness of this dimension: '*The teacher needs to ensure that they don't hold biased opinions on different cultures and backgrounds and ensure that they are accepting of these within the classroom'.* However, this comment is the only one of this nature across both data sets. Cultural recognition was a silent dimension of justice in the beliefs of our respondents. Instead, there were more examples of deficit constructions of disadvantaged children and families which we explore in the next section.

Echoes of a Neoliberal Imaginary: The Quality Teacher as Agent

Alongside great potential for seeing children's strengths and supporting them through strong relationships, the data also included a strong trend toward teacher 'heroism' (Thomas et al., 2024). It is this dimension of the participants' responses that aligns more clearly with a neoliberal imaginary and the ascendancy of teacher quality solutions to educational disadvantage. Part of the pleasurable affect evident in the responses is tied to PSTs' imagined personal agency as teachers, and less about the agency of children. Indeed, children in disadvantaged schools are sometimes constructed as deficit within their beliefs. One respondent stated, 'you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink', implying that teachers cannot act if parents do not value education. Three other respondents also made comments that implied that children and their families may be lacking:

> *If a parent does not understand the importance and necessity of education, then the child will take these views on as well.*

> *Some parents may just lack the knowledge/education of how to best help their child.*
>
> *Students … are falling behind due to a lack of support and guidance.*

These sorts of statements imply a deficit belief about children and families facing disadvantage which work to support PSTs' imagined pleasure in being the 'saviours' of these children. The pleasure imagined by the respondents is often in relation to their role, as a teacher, in helping, guiding or impacting students who are positioned as deficit, to learn, grow or become better. As one respondent put it:

> *I believe low SES schools could benefit from teachers like myself, who show a lot of positivity and carry the intention that with hard work and dedication, you can turn your life around. I am extremely interested in sociology which has a lot to do with class, gender, and demographic. Being able to implement my knowledge is fascinating and I find extreme joy in showing students that there can be light at the end of the tunnel.*

Another respondent gave a similar comment:

> *I believe students at low SES schools have great potential which can be unpacked through nurturing and patience. These children often need more support so I would to be able to make a difference in their life and help them to be the best version of themselves.*

These statements align with the ascendancy of quality teaching as the solution to educational disadvantage, in which the teacher becomes the most significant agent. The teacher is imagined as assisting a dream of meritocracy that underpins notions of equity in a neoliberal imaginary. This in fact supports the endurance of deficit discourse because, as Lingard et al., 2014 observe, children's backgrounds within this imaginary are 'only recognised in so far as [they are] framed as a potential barrier to achievement on standardised tests (2014, p. 726).

This resonates with other studies finding that PSTs can sometimes construct low SES students in deficit ways (Lampert & Browne, 2022; Mills, 2009). Lampert and Browne identify the presence of a 'saviour discourse' whereby PSTs construct low SES students in ways that make them 'feel special' (2022, p. 164) because they can help them seek a brighter future. For Lampert and Browne, and Mills, these kinds of responses lack the activist orientation they hope to foster in PSTs. We also recognise that responses such as these suggest an opportunity to further engage PSTs in strong social justice and progressive education literature that might help facilitate further critical awareness. We note the positive nature of the PSTs' beliefs about prioritising connection and relationships, and there is certainly a level of affirmative justice at work in many of the sentiments about everyone being valued equally. Yet we also recognise that these comments lack the stronger transformative justice advocated by critical education scholars. Instead, they locate the potential for social justice in the body of the individual, compassionate teacher.

Frasers' third dimension of justice relates to political representation or voice – student agency. It is to this issue that we now turn, as our data indicated that teacher agency was mobilised in the PSTs' beliefs than children's agency. There were many comments in the data about the desire to 'make a difference' or 'have an impact' – teacher agency. The focus was on the teacher doing something rather than the possible *result* of their actions. The child in disadvantaged schools and their agency was underplayed across the data set. It was the teacher that tended to be constructed as the agent, which can be seen in many of the comments shared so far in this paper and are further exemplified in the following statements:

> *To use my knowledge and skills to be able to benefit students who may require additional assistance within the classroom.*
>
> *I feel like I want to have an impact on students' lives*

I always liked the idea of being able to help shape the lives of young people
I would to be able to make a difference in their life

In part this is due to the design of the survey instrument. For example, Question Four in the survey asked PSTs to list what they believe are the most important *skills required for teachers* working in low SES schools. Question Five asked them to rank *how much they believe teachers can have an impact* on helping families to support their children's learning in low SES schools. Both these questions construct the teacher as an agent who 'does' things, perhaps helping explain the strong theme around the teacher as agent in the data, and the absence of constructing children as agents. Skills such as communication skills and classroom management feature prominently, alongside the capacity to adapt. Other skills mentioned resonate with contemporary developments in teacher education around trauma informed practice (Southall et al., 2022) with a number of PSTs mentioning that skills in this area are important for low SES teaching.

However, Question Three did not automatically prioritise teachers' actions. It asked respondents to rank a series of things that students in low SES schools might need most. Responses to this question across both cohorts shows that two items that are explicitly about student voice and agency – 'advocacy to help them develop their own voice' and 'empowerment to make their own learning decisions' – are both ranked lower than two further items that place far more emphasis on teacher agency – 'a meaningful relationship with teachers' and 'differentiated teaching that acknowledges their needs'. This shows that, even in a question that included options that highlight student voice and agency, respondents were selecting options that emphasise teacher agency and action, rather than children's representation and voice. There is only one example where a respondent mentions that 'advocating' for children is an important quality in teachers (Q5).

The highlighting of teacher agency over children's agency in our data suggests that affirmative justice was more prominent than transformative justice. The frequent comments indicating an awareness of the need to build relationships and to support children in disadvantaged schools can be associated with *affirmative* justice because the PSTs are aware that disadvantage exists and must be compensated by teachers. Yet *transformative* justice requires that teachers go further than compensating the injustices in children's lives, by also working toward transforming inequitable structures that produce disadvantage. As Mills et al. suggest, children's agency is an important dimension of transformative justice. They note that democratic classrooms allowing students a voice in decision making is an example of transformative justice (2019, p. 619). Yet this kind of transformative, democratic classroom structure was under-emphasised in the PSTs' understandings of what children in low SES environments need.

Like Lampert and Browne (2022), we would not expect PSTs to enter our program with strong social justice dispositions, especially in the context of neoliberal policy solutions to social and educational disadvantage and the rise of teacher quality solutions that detract attention away from structural issues. This analysis is not designed to criticise our PSTs, but rather to find the opportunities for adapting our program in ways that may further enhance their social justice knowledge.

Discussion and Conclusion

We live at a time when fairness and justice in education have been co-opted by a neoliberal imaginary that emphasises data, measurement, efficiency and accountability. Recent political moves in Australia following the latest expert review into ITE are focused on quality teaching as a solution to equity issues and include claims that explicit teaching works

better for disadvantaged students (ABC, 2024). The ascendancy of evidence informed teaching as a solution to educational disadvantage detracts attention from the broader structural inequalities that cause disadvantage in the first place. This context shapes the ways that PSTs imagine educational disadvantage and their beliefs about teaching in disadvantaged schools. The figure of the quality teacher was very strong in our data, alongside a relative silence around structural aspects of disadvantage.

PSTs' beliefs about the problems faced by disadvantaged schools and their students, as well as the solutions, often located them within individuals rather than systems. This was shown in the many comments implying that it is teachers that make a difference for disadvantaged students, and there were five statements suggesting that educational disadvantage may be explained by families not valuing education. Their beliefs are comparatively silent when it comes to structural issues such as school funding, the cost of living, or housing affordability. Another issue that did not feature significantly in our data was critical pedagogical principles of empowering young people to transform the world they live in – there was only one mention of 'leaders of tomorrow'. Instead, the data generates more affirmative notions of justice that gather around generalised comments about the importance of everyone having the right to access education, or comments about valuing children, which do not mention the underlying structures causing injustice and disadvantage. This echoes a policy environment that emphasises individual factors in educational disadvantage and in-school factors such as teacher quality in addressing disadvantage.

Yet the PSTs' beliefs were not entirely co-opted by neoliberal rearticulations of social justice. A human dimension featured strongly in the data, through the figure of the caring compassionate empathetic teacher motivated to help children feel valued and foster growth in children. Their beliefs are redolent with ideals around compassion, care and patience. Our data clearly indicated the affective power of this figuration of the teacher. We are intrigued with the affective pleasure that participants conveyed in their comments about relating to learners in low SES schools. These beliefs in PSTs may lead to teaching behaviours in which children are more likely to feel validated and valued by their teachers. In this way, we wonder if such beliefs offer potential for reinvigorating the moral purpose of teaching in disadvantaged schools.

Lingard et al. (2014) argue that the renewed focus on equity that 'big data' has enabled could potentially be used by educators and policy makers to stretch beyond a reductionist position and recover some of the stronger notions of social justice inherent in political and critical education theory. They contend that we need to 'resuscitate those meanings and practices of equity, or rather social justice, that are being extinguished in the neo-social condition' (p. 726). Like other critical teacher educators, we aspire for PSTs to better understand the competing ideologies in education that define equity in distinct ways. Building on Scholes et al's argument that teacher education should 'offer a bridge between graduate standards and principles and practices for social justice' (2017, p. 36), and Brown et al's (2022) suggestion that teacher educators need to help PSTs better understand the impact of neoliberal policies on their practice, we recommend explicit teaching of the distinctions between how fairness is constructed in progressive and socially just theories of education and how it is constructed within neoliberal education policies, including those related to teacher quality and professional standards. Teacher educators could use Nancy Fraser's concepts to help PSTs make links between the neoliberal policy context and social justice theory. As part of this, PSTs could be asked to consider the questions that Lingard et al. (2014) pose such as whether NAPLAN includes forms of cultural and political justice.

We also wonder if our participants' investments in relationships and the joy of another's growth may also represent potential for the resuscitation of stronger notions of social justice that Lingard et al. (2014) advocate. Many critical educators and theorists define

the investment in another's growth as the cornerstone of loving and thoughtful pedagogy (Darder, 2017; hooks, 2000; Van Manen, 1991). While PSTs may not yet understand the broader structural causes of poverty and educational and social disadvantage, the commitment to the growth of children evident in so many PSTs' responses is perhaps another way to recover stronger notions about social justice via progressive ideologies that focus on a loving pedagogical relationship. By engaging PSTs in literature and theory on pedagogic love teacher educators might further assist them to move toward stronger approaches to socially just teaching. Together these interventions might go some way toward supporting PSTs to better understand and enact socially just teaching in ways that move beyond the neoliberal imaginary.

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