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The place of pedagogy in an uncertain world: propositions for pedagogical justice

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ABSTRACT

The world is becoming increasingly characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA). How education systems, policies and practices respond to the challenges facing young people and their communities is of critical importance, including questions of pedagogy and curriculum in mainstream and alternative education contexts. Knowing how systems and institutions can address the challenges of a VUCA world is important in striving for justice in educational contexts. This paper draws on a series of reflective dialogues undertaken by members of a newly formed pedagogy research group at a regional Australian university in response to a provocation regarding the place of pedagogy in an uncertain world. In this paper, we provide a range of conceptual and theoretical considerations for pedagogy across diverse disciplinary and educational contexts, which arose through the dialogic process of the group. These are presented here as prompts towards a series of propositions for pedagogical justice in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS

Pedagogical justice;
volatility; uncertainty;
complexity; ambiguity

Introduction: education in uncertain times

Young people who inhabit mainstream classrooms and other diverse forms of alternative education spaces across the world face a future of profound complexity and challenge. They are growing up in a world that is becoming increasingly marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), with the effects on education only beginning to be understood (e.g. Shields, 2013; Stein, 2021). For example, rapidly increasing social and economic inequality (Dorling, 2019), climate change (Meijers, 2023) and interconnecting global crises (Riddle, 2022) have profound effects on the ways in which schools approach curriculum and pedagogy, which vary significantly across different communities and education contexts. In this paper, we argue that a commitment to pedagogical justice in response to a VUCA world must be shared by all educators, regardless of their disciplinary expertise, education context and communities they serve.

As Shields (2013) argued, 'in a VUCA world, there are no prescriptions and no right answers (good for all times and places) – simply an engaged messiness, a determination to solve dilemmas' (p. 10). Similarly, in their report for UNESCO on the role of education for managing uncertainty and ambiguity, Haste and Chopra (2020) described three major levers of societal change: increasing human displacement and migration due to political, economic and environmental instability; rapid and disruptive changes to communication and other technologies; and widespread effects of 'rupturing' events, which can be unexpected and often catastrophic. We agree that, in response to the complexities and challenges of a VUCA world, 'education can make the difference as to whether people embrace the challenges they are confronted with or whether they are defeated by them' (OECD, 2018, p. 3).

In relation to education, it is critical that children and young people are taught how to navigate a VUCA world. Multiple reasons are offered for this in the literature, including to improve tolerance and acceptance

of others (Grace, Mejia, Inhofe Rapert, & Thyroff, 2021), to be discerning about the types of information that are available specifically through 'fake news' on social media (Housand, 2021), and to ensure the mental health and wellbeing of young people is protected and addressed when in need (Bartlett, Griffin, & Thomson, 2020). As such, we were interested in exploring pedagogical philosophies and approaches that might expand this type of support for students during unsettling times, with a view to the ethics of pedagogy being an act of social justice.

This paper presents some propositions for pedagogical justice, which emerged from a collective dialogue regarding the ways in which pedagogy might engage with the challenges of a VUCA world by addressing social justice issues of redistribution, recognition and representation (Fraser, 1997, 2009) in diverse educational contexts. We contend that pedagogy needs to be at the centre of education policymaking and practice, with a commitment to relational and deeply contextualised knowledge-making that considers the intersections of places, cultures and communities. In doing so, we suggest that pedagogy can play an important role in responding to a VUCA world by taking a stand against injustice, by forming stronger bonds of solidarity through collaborating and co-constructing knowledge with students, and by committing to more sustainable and inclusive communities.

Engaging in a collective, reflective dialogue

Towards the end of 2023, a series of reflective dialogues were undertaken by members of a newly formed research group at a regional university in Queensland, Australia. Our group included education researchers who were interested in exploring learning innovation and excellence with a focus on pedagogy. However, we were immediately struck by the diversity of our disciplinary, methodological and theoretical approaches and experiences, which included curriculum experts in mathematics, the sciences, languages and humanities, as well as expertise across quantitative and qualitative methods, aesthetics and philosophy. As such, we were mindful to ensure that the dialogues were inclusive of disciplinary differences and perspectives, with an emphasis on how our individual and collective endeavours related to the place of pedagogy in an uncertain world.

The reflective dialogues were conducted using a process of 'collective reflection' (Muth, Frumento, & Reid, 2019), which involved interactions between members of the group that emphasised the social nature of meaning construction, while maintaining conditions of interactions that 'sustained awareness of common purposes as well as respect for the integrity of differences' (DeLawter & Sosin, 2000, p. 1). In this instance, the group brought together early career and mid-career researchers alongside professors with extensive research experience to explore the concept of pedagogy within their diverse paradigms. This collaborative approach leveraged each group member's strengths, which led to rich debates about knowledge, pedagogical practices and issues of social justice in education.

The collective reflection process began with each member individually reading and thinking about the key concepts of 'pedagogy' and 'uncertainty' within educational contexts. This individual reflection enabled each author to consolidate ideas and understandings so that individual perceptions could be brought to the collective (Beliveau & Corriveau, 2021). Each member then brought together key papers, quotes, and ideas to support the conceptual framing of the concepts of pedagogy and uncertainty. Through a series of online meetings over four months, the group engaged in deep, reflective dialogues about pedagogical concepts and issues of social justice. This allowed for time and opportunity for a deeper collective understanding of perspectives to coalesce around the focus concepts (Nissilä, 2005).

Research group members had the opportunity to participate in discussions during online meetings or share their thoughts individually at any stage. This approach ensured that both synchronous and asynchronous contributions were valued, which fostered an inclusive environment where everyone's input was considered. Dialogues were structured around key themes and questions that emerged from initial discussions exploring the concept of pedagogy in an uncertain world. These dialogues were intended to negotiate the meanings of key concepts and concerns regarding pedagogy, which is key in collective reflection (DeLawter & Sosin, 2000).

The lead author facilitated these sessions, assembling notes, quotes, and drafts of ideas of each reflective dialogue into an initial draft of the paper, collating the group's collective thinking. The writing process was iterative and collaborative, in which each member contributed from their disciplinary expertise and

experiences. The group reviewed and revised each other's work, providing constructive feedback and integrating diverse perspectives. This process enriched the paper's content and strengthened our collective understanding of pedagogical justice and, importantly, each other's research strengths. Our collaboration was characterised by a strong sense of mutual respect and a commitment to create a cohesive piece of scholarship (DeLawter & Sosin, 2000). The focus of this paper was developed from our collective reflections regarding the place of pedagogy in an uncertain world.

This paper draws together the conceptual mapping undertaken as part of the collective reflection process. It presents them as a series of propositions for pedagogical justice in response to a VUCA world, which has salience for educational researchers working across diverse contexts. We contend that pedagogical justice involves an ethical orientation towards the 'why' of teaching (p.6) and learning, which is imperative in our contemporary times. In this paper, we do not seek to provide a definitive overview of pedagogical theories and approaches but rather to present our collective expression of the place of pedagogy within an uncertain world in which students and educators face a future of complexity, change and enormous challenge. We acknowledge that in the process of developing a *common ground* with respect to pedagogical justice, we have necessarily left aside much of the complexity and contestation within curriculum and pedagogy inquiry. However, we contend that the process of engaging in a reflective, collective dialogue has enabled us as individuals, and as a group, to highlight some possibilities for building a shared ethical vision and commitment to pedagogical justice. We suggest that such dialogic encounters can help educators to push back against systemic constraints in ways that strengthen bonds of solidarity and open up new possibilities for thinking about pedagogy in a VUCA world.

Why pedagogy?

We are aware that 'pedagogy is often used as a synonym for teaching, thus reducing its saliency' (Loughran, 2013, p. 121), which can become problematic if pedagogy is simply reduced to technicist forms of curriculum delivery and classroom management (Lusted, 1986). Similarly, the proliferation of the use of the term 'pedagogy' creates confusion from the diversity of different approaches, which Thiessen et al. (2013) have described via the following extensive list of pedagogies:

Some pedagogies seem related to, or derived from, critical pedagogy (defined by an adjective that precedes the term, for example, unruly pedagogy, resistant pedagogy, revolutionizing pedagogy, radical pedagogy, enraged pedagogy, plantation pedagogy, transgressive pedagogy, disrupting pedagogy, social justice pedagogy, hip hop pedagogy, etc.). Some are connected to particular processes or qualities (e.g. sentepensate pedagogy, relationship-based pedagogy, flexible pedagogy, humanizing pedagogy, transformative pedagogy, reflective pedagogy, playful pedagogy, dialogic pedagogy) or to causes and concerns (expressed in terms of the pedagogy of 'X,' for example, pedagogy of hope, pedagogy of emancipation, pedagogy of freedom, pedagogy of confidence, pedagogy of possibility, pedagogy of creativity, pedagogy of unveiling, pedagogy of indignation). Still others are associated with particular groups in society (e.g. Maori pedagogy, Red pedagogy, Christian pedagogy, Islamic pedagogy, pedagogy of the poor). And others sometimes use the terms teaching and instruction as a synonym for pedagogy often within the same article, chapter, or book (e.g. classroom pedagogy, music pedagogy, bilingual pedagogy, informal pedagogy, experiential pedagogy, student-centred pedagogy, design pedagogy). (pp. 2–3)

One thing is clear: 'there is no general pedagogy: only pedagogies, like horses, for courses' (Hall, 1983, p. 6). Additionally, it is evident that 'it is through pedagogies that education gets done' (Lingard, 2007, p. 247), so careful attention must be given to the place of pedagogy in how education might meaningfully respond to an increasingly complex world in ways that promote sustainability, inclusivity and engaged participation by all. We consider Hattam and Zipin's (2009) provocation that 'as discursive interventions in contemporary educational politics, new movements in pedagogical thinking foreground "why" questions, linking classroom practice explicitly to debates about ethical purposes' (p. 298). Through our collaborative reflection, we have attempted to focus on the ethics of pedagogical practice, with an emphasis on 'why' rather than 'what' and 'how' pedagogy is done.

However, in recent decades, there has been a shift away from focusing on what we might call 'effective' pedagogy, towards an emphasis on achievement and performance metrics that take a narrowly conceived and understood range of parameters for making judgements about education systems, education sites such as schools, universities and early childhood centres, as well as the work of teachers and students (e.g. Biesta,

2015; Daliri-Ngametua, Hardy, & Creagh, 2022; Salton, Riddle, & Baguley, 2022). Worse, such transactional approaches make judgements about children's and young people's academic abilities through extremely narrow lenses.

Further, the neoliberal education policy landscape has washed out the possibility for innovative pedagogical practice, and instead moved education towards tightly scripted and controlled versions of what are officially mandated and permissible teaching and learning experiences, such as Direct and Explicit Instruction (e.g. Hickey et al., 2022; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Savage & O'Connor, 2015). Drawing on Anyon's work on social reproduction through pedagogy and curriculum, Luke (2010) argued that such scripted and standardised pedagogies only offer marginalised and disenfranchised young people 'basic skills, rule recognition and compliance' (p. 180).

As a result of decades of neoliberal education policy reform failure (Ball, 2016; Connell, 2013; Reid, 2019), education systems have become increasingly unfit for the purpose of preparing young people to work in collaborative, inclusive and sustainable ways to meet the challenges of a VUCA world. Comber and Kamler (2004) have argued that educators need to 'engineer pedagogic redesigns that [make] a difference' (p. 307) for all young people, but especially those who are most marginalised and disenfranchised by contemporary education policy and practice.

We argue that the time has come for pedagogy to be placed at the centre of the educational experience, with close attention given to its philosophical, ethical and pragmatic conditions. Asking questions about the 'how' and 'why' of knowledge production and transmission is at the heart of pedagogical theory, to understand that 'how one teaches ... becomes inseparable from what is being taught and, crucially, how one learns' (Lusted, 1986, p. 3). Therefore, paying attention to questions of pedagogical justice is an important consideration in the ethical and moral practices of education in a VUCA world. Indeed, we argue that it is essential that young people who are in early childhood education settings, schools, universities and other sites of further education, are enabled to build the collective, collaborative skills of problem-solving and critical and creative thinking necessary to address the challenges facing them now and in the future.

We agree with Loughran (2013), who argued that pedagogy is problematic because it must be dynamic and responsive to context, in which teaching is 'not bound by a script or routines, but depends on a teacher making informed decisions about practice' (p. 120). However, the tightly controlled regimes of educational policymaking and practice currently experienced in many systems around the world seek to close down, rather than open up, possibilities for dynamic and responsive forms of pedagogy (Connell, 2009; Liasidou & Symeou, 2018). Instead, tightly controlled approaches to assessment and curriculum foreclose pedagogical innovation through an emphasis on narrow understandings of evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning, which are subject to ongoing processes of datafication, metrification and surveillance of teachers and their work (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Comber & Nixon, 2009; Daliri-Ngametua & Hardy, 2022; Mockler, 2014; Sefton-Green & Pangrazio, 2022). In response, we argue for more socially just pedagogies (Lingard, 2005), which require 'a political orientation towards the good life. ... To characterise pedagogy as relating merely to ways or methods of instruction is, therefore, reductionist. It misses the point that [pedagogy is] defined in terms of social values' (Hamilton, 2009, p. 14).

Further, we are mindful of the ways in which pedagogy is underpinned by knowledge and values systems, which means that pedagogy can never be neutral. We contend that in a VUCA world, it is essential for educators, educational leaders and policymakers to reconcile the tensions of contemporary educational policies and practices by critically examining core values and practices (Sarid & Levanon, 2023). The reconciliation of the core values in contemporary educational policies and their enacted practices requires understanding the ethical assumptions that guide education systems (e.g. Forster, 2012).

Critiquing the pedagogical literature, Lingard (2007) argued that 'educational research and educational theory on pedagogies can be seen to sit within either an abstract political and theoretical frame or within an empiricist reductive frame' (p. 251). This is where the concern regarding *pedagogies of...* in Thiessen et al.'s (2013) list above seems particularly salient in highlighting the purposes and social values that underpin diverse pedagogical approaches.

We contend that educators need to assemble new conceptual and analytical perspectives on pedagogy that include the 'kind of theory-busting paradigm-building necessary for sustained and principled educational change' (Comber & Kamler, 2004, p. 308). Our proposition is that a commitment to the ethical practice of pedagogical justice as an underpinning ontological premise – regardless of which flavour of

pedagogy is practised – is key to positioning pedagogy as an active, ethical stance within a VUCA world. It is imperative that pedagogy is centred in education as a practice of intergenerational and intragenerational justice (Meijers, 2023). This requires an ethical understanding of pedagogy as being critically futures-oriented (Beauchamp, Adams, & Smith, 2022; Giroux, 2011), which is to say that pedagogical justice requires an ethical and ontological commitment to the futures of young people in classrooms and other spaces of education. To do so is to use *hope* (Freire, 1994) for the possibility of more inclusive, sustainable and democratic futures as an ontological anchor for activations of pedagogy, wherever it may occur.

We are aware that pedagogical justice has often been referred to in the literature, although the concept is not clearly defined (e.g. Hernandez, Sabati, & Chang, 2023). Indeed, as Wessels, Bakker, Wals, and Lengkeek (2024) argued, pedagogical justice is a ‘wicked’ term, which represents multiple perspectives, each casting different visions of desirable futures. For example, Zwiers (2024) defined pedagogical justice as ‘using our energies, resources, and time to their fullest in pursuit of helping all students reach their many potentials’ (p. 8). We contend that this definition falls somewhat short, in that pedagogical justice should embody a philosophy of education that goes beyond preparing learners for participation in an economic society encompassing ideas of social reconstruction. Underpinned by the work of early critical pedagogues such as Freire (1970), Rawls (1971), Giroux and McLaren (1989), Darder (1991), and hooks (1994), we define the concept of pedagogical justice as the *practice of creating equitable, inclusive, and contextually responsive educational experiences that address the diverse needs, backgrounds, and perspectives of all students*. Pedagogical justice requires an ethical orientation towards the ‘why’ of teaching and learning, emphasising the importance of relational, reflexive, and dialogical practices. Additionally, pedagogical justice seeks to empower students to navigate the complexities of a VUCA world by fostering critical, creative, and collaborative modes of pedagogy, and aims to promote sustainability, inclusivity, and social responsibility, ensuring that education contributes to a more just and liveable world.

Conceptual perspectives on pedagogy

In our series of reflective dialogues, we traversed a wide range of different *pedagogies of ...*, which derived from the multiple disciplinary and paradigmatic perspectives brought to bear by members of the group. While this was engaging and productive in terms of better understanding the diverse disciplinary knowledges and approaches brought by each member to pedagogical concepts, what we were more interested in was moving from practical sets of teaching strategies and techniques to deeper conceptual, ethical and epistemological underpinnings of pedagogy, with a view to understanding the role of pedagogical justice in a VUCA world.

This section outlines an attempt to draw our diverse perspectives on pedagogy together into a collective conceptualisation, building from and extending Bernstein’s (1990, 1996) pedagogic device, which provides a set of principles for how knowledge is produced as pedagogic communication in educational contexts, through distribution, recontextualisation and evaluation. These interrelated elements work to regulate power relations through the distribution of knowledge, by recontextualising its discourses for pedagogic purposes (e.g. taking nuclear physics into high school classrooms) and the judgements made regarding the pedagogical value of particular forms of knowledge (e.g. debates regarding the study of canonical literature and/or contemporary literary and everyday texts). What follows is a summary of our conceptual perspectives on pedagogy and its place in education during uncertain times.

Burke, Fanshawe, and Tualaulelei (2022) have argued that what appears to matter most to students are pedagogical aspects that cannot be measured through visible means, which deeply relate to the exercising of pedagogical care. Such an approach ensures that students’ sensibilities and emotive needs are met through responsive and relational means. There is a strong ethic of care (e.g. Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013) at work in relational approaches to pedagogy, which centre the educational relation as an ethical and ontological commitment to rich, meaningful learning (e.g. Hickey & Riddle, 2024; Riddle & Hickey, 2025). This can also be experienced through the aesthetics of the pedagogical encounter in arts practices and education settings that have a focus on beauty (e.g. Barton & Burke, 2024).

Ryan and Ferreira (2024) have argued for critical and transformative pedagogies that support active agency and engaged participation in environmental and sustainability problems, including place-based learning, whole-eco-school approaches, linking-thinking (systems) and inquiry learning. There is a need

to move towards more integrated and transdisciplinary knowledges because sustainability problems are often cross-cutting issues, which require understanding across a range of disciplines to address the complexity of inactions and relationships across a whole system. As such, collaborative problem-based learning is an example of a key pedagogical strategy used in critical and transformative pedagogies of sustainability.

However, we contend that simply increasing students' knowledge about pressing environmental issues is insufficient. Instead, young people need to be empowered to engage in collaborative action and activism in building collective hope. Such critical approaches to pedagogical sustainability are often enacted through a variety of strategies and approaches such as role-play, simulation/gamification, experiential learning, futures thinking and controversial issue analysis. The salience of place-based approaches is particularly felt in the 'placeless' space of online learning, where there are substantial challenges to engaging students in experiential, visceral and personally relevant learning (Maxwell, Burke, & Salton, 2024).

Added to these critical-cultural approaches are place-based pedagogies, which are 'needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit' (Gruenwald, 2003, p. 3). Further, Nicholls, Hall, and Forgasz (2018) described the possibilities of framing pedagogy and acts of pedagogy within informal education contexts such as arts events. Not only does such a perspective encompass and acknowledge the diversity of ways in which efforts to mediate experience and learning occur, but also asserts that there is an essential quality of relationality inherent in pedagogy and pedagogical acts. Nicholls et al. (2018) demonstrated this by adapting the work of Small (1998) on the verb *musicking* to understand the multiplicity of ways in which pedagogy can be relationally infused, culturally responsive and inclusive for all people involved in the pedagogical encounter as active agents, through both educating and learning.

Discipline-specific pedagogical research has included analysis of the differences between pedagogies described in syllabus documents and those employed by teachers in physical education (SueSee, Edwards, Pill, & Cuddihy, 2019), as well as the pedagogical content knowledge required to teach mathematics (Getenet & Callingham, 2021). Regardless of the disciplinary context, it is important that pedagogical practices support the development of students' capabilities for self-regulated learning, through which students actively participate in their education and can adapt and transfer their self-regulatory capacities to different contexts outside of schools (Peel, 2020). In addition to deeply contextualised and connected classroom-based approaches, school-wide pedagogical practices need to be inclusive and culturally relevant to the context of schools within broader communities (Abawi, Carter, Andrews, & Conway, 2018).

Culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive (Pirbhai-Illich, Pete, & Martin, 2017; Rigney, 2023), culturally nourishing (Lowe, Skrebneva, Burgess, Harrison, & Vass, 2021) and culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017) approaches to pedagogy work towards forms of epistemic justice through the inclusion of cultural knowledges, histories and voices of marginalised peoples. They also deliberately seek to destabilise and make visible cultural violences, including racism, colonialism, economic and educational inequality, and social injustice (Vass & Hogarth, 2024).

Additionally, it is important to consider how educators can address the obstinacy of the white patriarchal norms (Mackinlay, 2016) and gendered biases (Mwakabenga & Komba, 2021) that pervade schools, as well as the internalised forms of racism and sexism that often function in insidious ways (Saunders & Wong, 2020). There is a clear need to negotiate the pedagogical complexities of successfully teaching students the moral obligation to bother by being bothered (Ahmed, 2014) when it comes to issues like racism and sexism.

Given that 'schools and classrooms, as microcosms of society and as primary sites of knowledge construction and production, are key determinants of how we think, feel and talk about race' (Rudnick, 2019, p. 217) and gender (Keddie, 2021), there needs to be opportunities to intellectually and affectively speak back to dominant deficit narratives and to pedagogically address the ethical imperative of unravelling these 'hidden and problematic politics' (Adams, 2008, p. 179) in ways that serve a larger social justice agenda (Ellis, 2009). For example, Teo (2024) deployed an 'ethic of incommensurability' to provide a critical pedagogical autoethnographic account that speaks back to racism, while also acknowledging that each classroom is different, and that the corresponding strategies used must be changed and reconceptualised for each new pedagogical encounter (hooks, 1994). In other words, it functions as less of a 'class plan for duplication ... [as opposed to] a path to praxis' (Hinchey, 2008, p. 20).

While each of the conceptual perspectives on pedagogy described above have unique aspects, there are commonalities across the range of perspectives, which include an emphasis on the ethical dimensions of

pedagogy as a relational, reflexive and dialogical practice undertaken within educational contexts in service of connecting knowledge-making practices across communities. Similarly, there is a commitment to advocating for change against systemic injustices and for considering the holistic nature of education as a social practice, in which pedagogy plays a central role.

Here, we are careful to ensure that we situate knowing as tenuous (Pillow, 2003), through which pedagogy engages ‘examples that may not always be successful, examples that do not seek a comfortable, transcendent end-point but leave us in the uncomfortable realities of doing’ the work (Pillow, 2003, p. 193). Put differently, reflecting on the conceptual apparatuses of pedagogical practice must be an ongoing project, which does not seek to fold nor ‘take refuge in the futility of self-critique [but rather is] as aware as possible of its inevitable shortcomings [to] learn from ruptures, failures, breaks, and refusals’ (Lather, 1998, p. 495). Included in these possibilities of pedagogical practice are spaces for educators to be passionate about the particular ‘how’ and ‘what’ of their disciplinary pedagogical knowledge and to be committed to the diverse approaches to caring for students and themselves in a pedagogy of care (Noddings, 2003, 2013).

Following our collective, reflective dialogues, we are left with some further prompts for reflection, including consideration of the intersections and lines of flight made available through different conceptual approaches to pedagogy. It becomes an open question regarding not only ‘how’ pedagogy gets done, but also ‘why’ these diverse ontological and epistemological perspectives offer important insights into the potential of opening up possibilities for rich pedagogical practices in response to a VUCA world, which involve deep engagement in critical reflection, creativity, collaboration, communication and compassion (e.g. Anderson et al., 2022; Jeferson & Anderson, 2017).

We are convinced that pedagogy needs to remain unfixed and always tenuous, fluid and shifting dependent on social, political and technological contexts. Implications for pedagogical practice include the imperative of guiding and developing a strong moral compass within educators. Not so that they always know ‘what to do/teach’, but so that they are ever critical of ‘why’ they teach in the ways they do within the context of a VUCA world. However, we are also aware that focusing on pedagogy and curriculum are not enough to address the complex issues facing communities, but we are convinced that opening the discussion to more relational ways of knowing and engaging in education is a potentially productive response. It is here that we turn to the consideration of what pedagogical justice might mean in an increasingly challenging social, economic, political and ecological context.

Towards pedagogical justice in a VUCA world

Stein (2021) argued that within the contemporary VUCA context, there is a need to change how we think about education, given that ‘desires for certainty, security, continuity and pleasure within our existing system are not only untenable but also harmful, because they have always come at a significant cost to marginalised communities and to other-than-human beings’ (p. 493). Importantly, the challenges of our time require that pedagogy moves from hegemonic modes of transmission, reproduction and the control of knowledge-making practices through curriculum (e.g. Apple, 2004; Gough, 2021–23; Riddle, Mills, & McGregor, 2023), towards much more critical, creative and collaborative modes of pedagogy, which are deeply connected to the political, social and ethical lives of young people within schools and their broader communities. Such a move is intimately bound up with Bernstein’s (1975) argument that the selection, classification, distribution and transmission of knowledge through curriculum and pedagogy ‘reflects both the distribution of power and principles of social control’ (p. 77).

While there are many different pedagogical approaches, which vary depending upon educational contexts, designs and outcomes, we suggest that there is an underlying sense of justice that needs to permeate through pedagogy, regardless of the specific strategies and tactics deployed by educators in classrooms and other formal and informal sites of education. Here, we take up Fraser’s (1997, 2009) tripartite formulation of justice as being about redistribution, recognition and representation, and from this we argue that pedagogical justice requires that pedagogical approaches engage meaningfully and honestly with the socio-material realities of students’ lives, drawing upon communities and contexts to enrich the educational landscape. The alternative is to allow the current neoliberal logics of education to continue to dominate, whereby a *paint-by-numbers* pedagogy is entrenched in policy and practice, thus removing the capacity for pedagogical justice in all its diverse manifestations to take shape.

Further, drawing on Rancière (1991), Säfström (2021) made the case for a pedagogy of equality, which is focused on radical pedagogical change to evoke ‘the possibility of education beyond instrumentalist education and the distributive paradigm which reproduces privilege for an already advantaged few’ (p. x). A rich, meaningful and connected education must be available to all as a first commitment to pedagogical justice. The complexities of the twenty-first century demand a radical rethinking of how we conceptualise the act of teaching and learning, indeed the very idea of education itself (OECD, 2018; Scott, 2015).

Fazey et al. (2020) have argued that our current knowledge systems have failed (and will continue to fail) humanity, when what is required are rapid and deep societal changes to avoid catastrophic outcomes due to climate crisis and ecological collapse. We contend that pedagogical justice in a VUCA world requires a keenness to embrace new knowledge-making practices, drawing from decolonialist ontologies, epistemological plurality (Ryan & Ferreira, 2019) and deeply contextualised, place-based engagements with the more-than-human world (Gough, 2021–23) in ways that respect and acknowledge the importance of all life on the planet. Similarly, pedagogical justice includes the disruption of *sameness* of schooling curriculum and official forms of knowledge (Apple, 2014), as well as unsettling the taken-for-granted assumptions about the power structures of society, including economics, politics and social institutions, such as schools, universities and other sites of education. Similarly, pedagogical justice relies on disrupting the Western logics of rationalism and positivism, which relies on dualistic, objective, reductionist, linear, discrete and deterministic logics.

Further, a commitment to pedagogical justice in a VUCA world requires that educators, educational leaders and policymakers attend to the tensions of contemporary educational policies and practices in terms of reconciling core values and practices through critical reflection and dialogue (Sarid & Levanon, 2023). Through the navigations of these spaces and values lies the essence of ethical pedagogical encounter. In committing to pedagogical justice, the questions regarding what makes for appropriate pedagogical redistribution, recognition and representation become part of the ongoing activist professionalism of teachers and other educators (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002).

While we do not suggest that we have *the* answer to what pedagogical justice should and could look like in all educational contexts for all people at all times, we do contend that pedagogical justice requires, at a minimum, the following set of commitments by educators, educational leaders, policymakers and systems:

1. Placing pedagogy at the very centre of educational policy and practice in ways that enable educators to be brave and prepared to face complexity and challenge.
2. Making a stand against injustice and seeking to increase space for justice within educational contexts.
3. Committing to relational forms of pedagogy, which are deeply contextualised and connected to the lives of students and educators.
4. Paying close attention to the intersections of place, culture and community in the knowledge-making practices of education contexts.
5. Understanding the ways in which official and hidden curriculum systems, institutional structures and discursive practices play out within education sites, including how they extend out into communities.
6. Recognising that deep societal inequalities exist, which are beyond the remit of education to address, yet need to be acknowledged and called out in terms of the effects (and affects) of injustice on education.
7. Supporting teachers’ professional judgements, passions and pedagogical choices within the diverse educational contexts in which they work.
8. Understanding the deeply contextualised knowledge-making practices of disciplinary approaches to pedagogy.
9. Collaborating and co-constructing knowledge together with students that considers the implications for living in a more sustainable and connected way with their communities in a VUCA world.

In this paper, we have presented a series of propositions for pedagogical justice, which were drawn from a series of reflective dialogues undertaken by a newly formed pedagogy research group at a regional university in Queensland, Australia. We do not suggest that these provide a complete and stable framework for thinking about the place of pedagogy in a VUCA world, but rather act as a set of conversation starters for others to consider in the context of urgent and radical change required to human societal systems, including mainstream and alternative education in early childhood settings, schools, universities

and other sites of further education. There is a need for pedagogical bravery and for resisting the current status quo in education policy and practice. We contend that it is through a commitment to pedagogical justice that educators working in mainstream, alternative and informal education contexts can make the most powerful contribution to helping children and young people to become critical, creative agents of democratic change.

We have attempted here to draw together a diverse range of perspectives on pedagogy, without simply adding to the extensive list of *pedagogies of...* and hope that this paper helps other educators, researchers, leaders and policymakers consider the importance of centring pedagogy within education policy and practice as a response to an increasingly unliveable world due to human activities that have caused enormous harm to ecological and social systems. While we certainly do not suggest that pedagogical justice can mitigate the worst effects of human excess, we do argue that education needs to do *something* about making the world more liveable, and that our work in schools and other education contexts points towards possibilities of an education that is more affirming, inclusive and sustainable for all.

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