

Bridging the gap between rhetoric and practice: data from 4 studies into the arts and creative writing for personal and professional learning

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Abstract: Findings from four research studies offer a challenge for systemic practices of formal education in Australia, in relation to the national government's strategies for reducing the widening achievement gap for students of low socio economic status or who are of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage. They point to another gap between the 'talk' of transformative pedagogies, sustainability and lifelong-and-lifewide learning and how this is embodied in the practices of educators and teacher educators working within the developing frameworks of national systems of curriculum, testing and reporting. This gap between rhetoric and practice has the potential to undermine the visionary intent of the Melbourne Declaration and may go some way to explaining the worsening performance of Australia in comparison with other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries as shown by statistics gathered by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2006 and 2009. The Primary Review of Education in the United Kingdom reported that an intensified focus upon literacy and numeracy had negative impacts upon learner enjoyment and motivation. Similar concerns arise in the following data which include journals and films captured during the researcher's participatory engagement as an arts facilitator in a non-traditional primary school where the curriculum emerged from children's play; a large-scale mixed methods study into pre-service teacher beliefs and perceptions of their future careers, and the level to which their school experience included the arts, captured across two intakes in 2010 and 2011; the third data set consists of visual images, graffiti and facilitator journal notes captured in 2012 in a juvenile justice context of education; and the fourth is reflections of final year pre-service educators upon their perceptions at being asked to engage in creative writing. For the researcher who is a lecturer in the arts in a university program for teacher education, the findings indicate that her own and other educators' practices of pedagogy appear to be constrained by systemic factors, creating a divergence between what we believe our practice should be, and our lived experience. That distortion manifests as a split between the conscience and consciousness, expressed at both individual and institutional levels. To address the equity gap, and to counter student disengagement, the researcher recommends a repositioning of the arts for greater learner agency, supporting the affective, cultural, intellectual and creative dimensions of learning that are features of an enacted transformative pedagogy.