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ON BECOMING/BEING A TEACHER EDUCATOR IN LIBERATORY WORK

CONVERTIRSE EN EDUCADOR DEL PROFESORADO EN EL TRABAJO EMANCIPADOR

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I focus on the role of the teacher educator in education for cultural democracy and social justice work. I have been a teacher educator for many years and wanted to examine how one becomes a teacher educator, the personal, cultural and societal antecedents that shape such a role. Using a self-study and critically self-reflective approach, I interrogate my role in the context of the technocratic and bureaucratic control that threatens to extinguish the joy and liberatory potential of truly democratic education. I reflect on the processes of becoming a liberatory teacher educator and how this has translated into being responsible for teaching teachers how to teach. I conclude with some reflections on the challenges facing a teacher educator who wants to preserve joy and liberation of the human spirit in their profession.

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a teacher educator'. Instead, for me, it has been a circuitous life journey where the impacts of my personal journey of discovery of the amazing cultural diversity that has been created by human societies has deeply influenced who I am as a teacher educator and what I bring to the classroom. This paper is part autoethnographic and part self-study. The work of Connelly and Clandinin (1990) has been influential in my approach to this paper, employing narrative inquiry to examine many 'small stories' to help build an inductive, more extensive picture of how I have grappled with the challenge of being a teacher educator working in the intersecting fields of Indigenous Education, Wisdom Studies in education, culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum, and international and comparative education. I have previously explained that to undertake such work, "It has been necessary for me to work in the space of dialogical exchange (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986) and communicative action (Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1992) to tease out the intricacies of the position of the self in dialogic exchange. For example, many scholars (for instance, Besley and Peters, 2011) have raised issues related to ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, and universalism that have been central to my ongoing efforts to bring the vital particulars of different expressions of pedagogical considerations to hermeneutical challenges I have faced" (Diamond, 2021, p. 14).

From where does a sense of justice arise? For me, I reflect that the idealized version of justice, and in particular, social justice came from my upbringing in the Catholic church. While the Popes and priests were speaking of social justice, the importance of missionary work, and teaching us how to live as young Catholics, my progressive school religious education classes exposed me to the writings of Gutiérrez (1973) and liberation theology. The inconsistencies between the ideal and the practice at a local level became amplified by the passionate argument for change

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my horizons. Being born and growing up in an Australia that had become increasingly multicultural during my young life, I witnessed the society around me struggling to come to terms with different and often clashing worldviews. The local high school where I was a volunteer religious instruction teacher counted 97 different ethnic cultural groups in early 1970s. I quickly realized that I had no idea of my cultural identity and how this intersected with being Catholic. To resolve some of the dilemmas posed by this turbulence, I became Buddhist and vegetarian. The wisdom that a fish does not know she is in the water until she finds herself on the land spoke deeply to me and motivated me to get out and see the world, with copies of Rawls, Shakespeare, and Thomas Cook's European Rail Timetable tucked into my backpack and an admixture of Catholic liberation theology and Theravada Buddhism in my heart.

I decided, much to the consternation of my friends to start my travels of the world in Beograd, capital of what was then Yugoslavia. I made my way to Sarajevo to see the place where World War I had started. I then went to Czechoslovakia to understand what had happened in World War II with the Russians helping to free Jewish people only to then occupy and control that country (as it was) and deny many Czech resisters of their citizen rights. In Italy, I was able to practice my school Italian and Latin and immersed myself in the Catholicism of my childhood. After travels to see the midnight sun and to visit Sami friends in Norway and Sweden, I returned to France where my uncle and his friends had settled and was able to finally live in the world of which I had caught glimpses during French classes at school.

In 1982, I found my way to London. I immediately felt its familiarity from the echoes of my enculturation and schooling in Australia. I was walking along Marble Arch and standing in Trafalgar Square and Piccadilly Circus, remembering the times I had 'owned' property on those famous streets and collected all sorts of items during

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del Sol. Backpackers and tour groups found the restaurant and stayed for days, and sometimes weeks. Nigerian second sons who had been sent to serve in the Spanish Foreign Legion found the restaurant and shared their friendship with me. They didn't much dig the vegetarian food but loved that I was happy to play their music. The locals liked their music too, so would come for morning or afternoon tea in between the foreigners who came for their main meals, breakfast lunch and dinner.

Armed with my well-thumbed version of Madhur Jaffrey's *Eastern Vegetarian Cooking*, I began to source local produce. There were chickpeas and chickpea flour from a local commune where they used big grinding wheels pulled by donkeys to make the flour. Both fresh and superb tasting, I was also introduced by one of the commune members to a favorite story *Platero y Yo* written by Juan Ramón Jiménez (1914). I found a farmer who grew vegetables and herbs on the steep slopes of the 100-plus-meter-deep El Tajo canyon. He agreed to sell me seasonal verduras y legumbres. I slowly opened up relations with people at the local Mercado, curious about this vegetarian restaurant. Some were happy to do negocio with me, to barter to an agreeable price. Others seemed wary and prices seemed to go up when I tried to negotiate prices.

Over time, I realized I had become enmeshed in social and political networks formed over centuries. In quiet conversations, it was explained to me that the family of my jefe, the owner of the property, was on the side of the Fascista, the others were the Comunista. The wives of the old Fascista families started to visit the restaurant. Vegetarianism was coming to Spain as a method of weight loss and these wives wanted to see what all the fuss was about. I had consciously avoided cooking Spanish vegetarian food, not wanting to insult the local palate but with the encouragement of these formidable wives and the older women from the nearby fincas, I cautiously experimented with Gazpacho and an eggplant dish. "¡Que no!..."

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one older lady said, politely letting me know that “...¡eso no sabe muy bien!” that doesn’t taste so good. My kitchen became home to a group of older women who became my friends. They would take over my kitchen or come with local dishes that had always been vegetarian, just not called by that new name. The customers loved these dishes and we began to serve a line of vegetarian tapas that could hold its own along with the other tapas bars.

The threads of these experiences overseas laid the foundations for my becoming a teacher educator: history, languages, food, politics, and a deepening development of myself as an ambassador for an approach to education that has at its heart a liberatory approach to justice.

2. IN THE SPIRIT OF CANTE JONDO AND INMA NYI NYI

These foundational elements would not be complete without a reflection on the importance of the role of education in cultural celebration, preservation, and maintenance in my story and in my classroom practice. To create the ambience for the restaurant, I had been playing European classical music for foreign customers for the main meal times and reggae and other world music during the afternoons and early evenings. One day, Joachim, the owner of the bar opposite my restaurant called out to me to shut off the music. Suddenly the air was filled with the most exquisite music I had ever heard in my life. Saturated with the power of the flamenco guitar work, the cante song and the jaleo hand clapping, foot stomping and shouts of “¡Ole!” and “¡Venga! ¡Vamos!”, my little restaurant came alive. People pushed back our tables to make a dance floor in the courtyard. This was the first of many encounters between locals, foreign visitors, returnees from the bull fights, and retired soldiers, all happily sharing vegetarian tapas and magnificent flamenco music. Over

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time, we started showing silent movies projected onto a sheet hung against an old limewashed wall with these moments of flamenco swirling around us. Over time, too, the older women of the local gypsy families began to visit, to eat a meal, and take food home so that it would not go to waste. Later, as I began to know people better and they had taught me how to cook proper, local, vegetarian food, I was also invited to witness cante jondo deep song. These music-filled years in Ronda found an enduring space in my soul that only deepened as I continued on my life's journey.

In 1991, after returning to Australia, the land of my birth, I enrolled in a Diploma of Education at Flinders University that prepared me to teach in remote Australian Indigenous communities. The course was unique for a number of reasons. In order to enroll, we were asked to get references from people who knew us in the local Indigenous community. I had never heard of such a request and have not heard of it since. Gladly, my friends were happy to give me such a reference even though they too were bemused by this request. Important for me given my experiences both in Australia and overseas, the course of study offered an unashamedly critical, bilingual, bicultural approach to teaching, particularly in remote desert schools where English was a foreign language, but of relevance in any classroom. The approach continues to stand out as unique and I would say visionary in these last 30 years. Fortuitously, this course also introduced me to an emerging literature in the sociology of education about Indigenous education and multicultural education that was focusing on social justice.

The state of South Australia, where I was studying, had a reputation for being progressive and I was privileged to be able to attend seminars conducted by advocates of education for cultural democracy. As early as 1979, professor J. J. Smolicz was advocating the need to take 'culture' into account in the development of the curriculum in a plural society (Smolicz and Curriculum Development Centre,

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1979). In 1984, a report of a task force investigation of multiculturalism and education chaired by professor Smolicz was delivered to the Minister of Education, the Honorable Lynn Arnold (Smolicz Report: South Australia. Task Force to Investigate Multiculturalism and Education, 1984). Professor Smolicz was a well-respected advocate of the need to develop multicultural education policy, to allocate resources and professional development to teachers, to develop a curriculum that reflected Australia's increasingly culturally diverse communities, and to ensure equal opportunities and employment to these communities. Another was Professor Adam Jamrozik. I was first drawn to his work because we shared a social work background, shared knowledge of Indigenous matters, and had both become sociologists. His early work in the Indigenous world (Jamrozik, 1982) resonated with mine. His work with Boland and Urquhart (Jamrozik *et al.*, 1995) theorized the impact of multiculturalism as a significant driver in both social change and cultural transformation in Australia that had important implications for me in the sociology of education. I was able to listen to these erudite Polish-Australian academics, together with other scholars of education, the humanities, and social sciences who gathered to tease out the necessary conditions for Australia to develop an education for cultural democracy, that recognized the *sui generis* claims of Indigenous Australians, together with the cultural rights of Australia's immigrant populations in education (Ma Rhea, 2014a, 2014b). It was clear to me that we were also discussing the broader issues of Australia becoming a proper political democracy as an essential part of the work. In Darder's provocation for this volume, she asserts that:

[...] a critical project of cultural democracy requires us to challenge dominant ideologies, structures, and practices that perpetuate the subordination of cultural communities, in the name of a unified national identity. A key factor in the democratization of diverse societies necessitate a culturally democratic

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structure of governance that cultivates and preserves the rights of ethnic populations to speak for themselves. Through such an approach, the multiplicity of national identities can be fostered, offering greater possibility for the critical democratization of societies and its institutions.

The echoes reverberate. My life journey had taken me into the urban Aboriginal world of Sydney, to Europe, Scandinavia, and England, and now took me to a remote desert school in the heart of Australia, ultimately leading me to make a commitment to engage in solidarity with the struggle of Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara to improve the western education being imposed on their children. In this remote location, Indulkana, I heard ancient ancestral song cycles and learnt to dance amongst desert sunsets as the dust from the movements of our feet lifted in the breezes. In this place, the concept of time expands to contain 80,000 years of cultural knowledge, of pedagogies and a curriculum that have prevailed and thrived into the contemporary era. In sharp contrast to my education in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara world, what I encountered in the school was a version of the western education system that was appallingly bad. The optimism I had heard expressed in my university Diploma of Education, the vision that my lecturers held that as teachers we were responsible for offering the best of western education to all our students, the passionate arguments amongst us about the tensions of enacting bilingual and bicultural education in the classroom, and the excellent western education that I had as my perspective of education, all these aspects were crushed by the version I saw in that school. Echoing Gutiérrez's critique of the vested interests of the powerful, I found myself in a colonial nightmare, a school and its daily practices hidden from mainstream view, where despite the efforts of well-educated, bilingual, bicultural Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara elders and some non-Indigenous teachers, the monolithic, monocultural assimilationist tendencies of the

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western education model were on show for all who cared to see. Bilingual texts produced in the literacy production center were gathered up by the principal and burnt. Children were humiliated into having showers before class. The school regimes were coercive and confronting. As I became more established, began speaking Pitjantjatjara in the classroom, invited the old ladies into the classroom to work with me, and began teaching the students rather than giving them busy, life-wasting work, I found over time that the daily expressions of colonial authority practiced by the principal and most of the teachers were completely unnecessary. Intellectually, I knew this to be the case but to see the change happening by adopting liberatory teaching methods we had been taught was all the confirmation I needed.

I saw echoes and resonances with what Darder had powerfully and patiently written in her 1991 text about mechanisms used to suppress and contain the joy of teaching and learning in the modern education system and her words cried out to me in that spirit of evocation – el duende of Federico García Lorca – that I first felt in the courtyard of my little restaurant in Ronda.

The duende [...] Where is the duende? Through the empty archway a wind of the spirit enters, blowing insistently over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents: a wind with the odour of a child's saliva, crushed grass, and medusa's veil, announcing the endless baptism of freshly created things (Lorca, 1933/2007, pp. 22-23).

3. BEING: EMBEDDING PRINCIPLES OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE DEMOCRATIC TEACHING AND LEARNING

My formative early life experiences, an undergraduate radical social work degree, overseas work and travel, a Diploma of Education (Aboriginal Education)

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qualification, my experiences in Indulkana, and a PhD in Thailand, all in their ways breathed winds of the spirit into my development as a teacher educator. I found myself responsible for Indigenous Education in the initial teacher education courses at my university. How was I to respond to the cultural imperialism I had witnessed in Indigenous Education? Would it be pedagogically possible to bring the spirit of cante jondo and inma nyi nyi into my classroom? To some degree even more importantly, how was I to begin the work of reshaping an approach to teacher education that brought a concept of culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum to the fore? In 2001, I was invited to give a keynote to TESOL (Ma Rhea, 2002) where I was able to speak publicly for the first time about the education of Indigenous children and the coercive nature of mainstream Australian education that seemed insistent on maintaining an idealized replica of an English education, frozen in time. I knew enough of the modern English education system to recognize that the artefactual colonial mindset being used to justify schooling methods in remote Australian Indigenous communities bore little resemblance (Ma Rhea, 2002, 2015). I knew that the preservation and maintenance of mother tongue languages would be a key element in creating culturally democratic classrooms (Ma Rhea, 2012). I also knew that preservice teachers needed to be taken on a scaffolded process of professional development that would start with developing their sense of themselves as having a 'culture', then encouraging their cross-cultural awareness, moving them eventually into having the skills to be culturally responsive in their curriculum choices and pedagogical approaches.

For this aspect of my work, I drew on Young (1990) and Frankenberg (1993), understanding that the possibilities of a liberatory cultural democracy relied on there being Aboriginal people and people from minority ethnic cultures in the classroom educating preservice teachers. For example, accreditation requirements and many

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other bureaucratic hurdles commonly prevent Aboriginal people from working in education faculties except as guest lecturers. The marked lack of Indigenous bodies, embedded Indigenous experts in education employed as academics with ongoing tenure, means that students can avoid, for example, having their work assessed by Indigenous people, which supports the maintenance of the colonial structures of power and privilege. Harris (1990) argued convincingly for a bilingual and bicultural 'two way schooling' approach but it has always been challenging for teacher educators to produce graduates who are able to work within such an approach when our teaching practices are avowedly 'one way'.

The scaling of bodies (Young, 1990) provides a stark reminder of how cultural imperialism continues to operate in universities where future generations of teachers are being trained (Ma Rhea, 2015). The lack of diversity in the teacher education workforce is apparent in the minimal representation of immigrant communities since the mid-1970s as noted by Smolicz, Jamrozic and others. For example, Smolicz and his taskforce members (1984) noted the lack of participation and equal opportunities for people from minority ethnic communities to fully participate as decision makers, curriculum writers and as classroom teachers, saying that this effectively excluded them from power, status and influence (pp. 260-265). Beyond Australia, the work of Darder has highlighted this matter in the United States as another society comprising Indigenous societies and a substantial immigrant population (Darder, 1991). The work of these scholars that emerged in the 1990s asked many questions, albeit indirectly, of teacher education. There were many who could identify the problem, make recommendations on how to address aspects in terms of governance, legal, and bureaucratic measures but how was the profession of teacher educators to approach the development of critical cultural democracy in teacher education?

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Twenty years later, Darder (2012, p. 103) sharpened her specific criticism of teacher education, observing that:

Teacher education programs are notorious for reducing the role of teachers to that of technicians. Instead of empowering teachers by assisting them to develop a critical understanding of their purpose as educators, most programs foster a dependency on predefined curricula, outdated classroom strategies and techniques, and traditionally rigid classroom environments that position not only students, but teachers as well, in physically and intellectually restrictive situations. This occurs to such a degree that few public school teachers are able to envision their practice outside the scope of barren classroom settings, lifeless instructional packages, bland textbooks, standardized knowledge, and the use of meritocratic systems for student performance evaluation.

In the spirit of this paper, I want to respond to two of the recommendations made by Darder (2012, pp. 103-130) in *Chapter 6: Creating the Conditions for Cultural Democracy in the Classroom*. I focus here on those aspects that I have experienced to be the most challenging to address in my attempts to create a culturally democratic learning environment in my role as a teacher educator: the questions of language and authority. I am particularly wanting to take up her challenge that we “engage with the historical, cultural, and dialogical principles that are essential to a critical learning environment” (Darder, 2012, p. 104). As I have noted (Ma Rhea, 2012), our profession knows that there is an array of technical and situational aspects of the modern western classroom that have to be learnt by children who come from other cultures such as dealing with stranger adults, sitting still in a classroom, holding a writing implement, and using a computer. In 2022, I remain concerned that teacher educator lack of skills in culturally responsive

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initially oral. The pedagogies to teach from oral mother tongue to written standard Australian English are not well formulated.

If the student is a monolingual English speaker with little or no expertise in having learned a second language, I have observed that they barely glimpse the problem. Despite a marked lack of professional knowledge and little or no training during undergraduate study, this lack of skill and the lack of connection between the skills of teacher educator, pre-service teacher, and the languages of the students they will encounter in the Australian classroom, there are 14 languages other than English that are offered in the Australian Curriculum. The languages are: Arabic, Auslan, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Modern Greek, Spanish, Turkish, and Vietnamese (Australian Curriculum, 2022a). In addition, there is a Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages (Australian Curriculum, 2022b) and a Framework for Classical Languages (Australian Curriculum, 2022c).

I am privileged to have been taught many languages and, being something of a polyglot, I often commence my classes having conversations with students in a variety of languages. I observe that most Australian born students with a British ancestry prefer to communicate in English. They have often studied French or German at school, those being two of the most common additional languages offered. It is the students who are from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) who are at least bilingual and often multilingual who come alive in these conversations. My pedagogy to engage students, particularly post COVID 19 where all teaching was conducted online for nearly 2 years, has been to use language to accustom them to be confident to speak in such a disembodied teaching and learning context. I also notice that often starting in a student's preferred language gives them confidence to speak in English later in the class. I also check my

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and students' democratic formation as both critical and communal citizens of the world. For it is precisely a critical use of directive strategies by teachers in the classroom that permits them to counter social inequalities and exclusions at the heart of the hidden curriculum.

To speak to the dilemma posed by this approach, I draw on the work of Angus and Rizvi (1989; for a fuller discussion, see Ma Rhea, 2014b). In their article, Angus and Rizvi draw a very useful distinction between the legitimate structural authority we are given to teach and assess student performance and the opportunity we have as teacher educators to exert personal power. All humans have personal power but many are limited in expression of their personal power by the systems of structural authority that we learn to be constrained by, in the Foucauldian sense. It is unsurprising that expressions of personal preferences become entwined with professional authority for teacher educators. How we exercise our gatekeeping role becomes foregrounded by questions such as the exercise of authority. The identity profile for teacher educators in Australia is instructive of what worldview would be mobilized as personal/cultural preferences, reflecting the majority of the profession: non-Indigenous, female, and raised in predominantly British or Irish ethnic cultural backgrounds, reporting little internal awareness of the issues involved in either the Indigenous or 'multicultural' domains, having rarely considered their pedagogical approach in terms of Indigenous rights, and basing their pedagogical approach predominantly about including curriculum resources about Indigenous and other culture's lifeways as a response to these challenges.

In the negative expression of personal power, teacher educators are in a position to express personal values, attitudes, and behaviours that are disguised through exercise of our structural authority. Setting the tone for a classroom environment that ensures the epistemological comfort of 'people like me' that

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demands that others fit in or risk failure is an obvious example. Daily micro aggressions can be subtler and more veiled, disguised as ‘high quality academic practice’, leaving the marginalised pre-service teacher wondering if they would be better training in another profession as many Indigenous and ethnic minority students have concluded in the past.

I remind my students that as employees of the state, they are required to develop their professional skills, knowledge and understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum, as justified by Australia’s adoption of education policies to address multicultural education and reflecting Australia’s endorsement of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2008). This means first understanding themselves in terms of their ethnic cultural ancestry. The process begins with self-awareness, self-education, a willingness to understand how their personal life preferences are culturally located, and how they understand citizen rights and education. Many students reveal a very shallow understanding of democracy, particularly the quasi-democracy in Australia, or of how their values, attitudes and behaviours have been shaped by their cultural specificity. This raises conversations about social justice in the context of Australian politics and what their theories of justice are and how these ideal versions have been shaped by their cultural specificity. These are lively conversations!

The field of education has become transfixed with ‘diversity’ and now even ‘superdiversity’ but I have found that by paying attention to personal and cultural specificity, students begin to be able to locate themselves (self-awareness) in discussions about how to develop cross-cultural awareness. Without awareness of what has shaped them as a person and as a teacher, it has proved impossible to invite students to begin to develop cross-cultural awareness. Without cross-cultural awareness, students become stuck in what Bennet (1986, 1993, 2004) usefully

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labelled as ethnocentrism. He defines ethnocentrism as *using one's own set of standards and customs to judge all people, often unconsciously*. He proposes a continuum of development moving towards ethnorelativism. He describes someone who exhibits ethnorelativism as *a person who has come to be comfortable with many standards and customs, someone who can set aside their own value judgements, even temporarily, to understand another point of view*.

Through purposefully developing cross-cultural awareness within the context of justice, I have seen my students begin to move towards a more comfortably ethnorelative understanding of students, colleagues, and friends who come from a cultural background different from theirs. By doing so, they are also able to untangle their growing professional authority as an emerging teacher from their personal prejudices and biases in a more conscious manner. In this way, I have seen students able to embrace diversity in the specificity of their learning with an understanding of both distributive and restorative justice.

4. ON PROVISIONAL CERTAINTY: LESSONS FROM THE WORK

As the teacher educator, I explain to my students that I approach each class in a state I call 'provisional certainty'. I can draw on what I know from my years of study, professional practice, and also from my extensive life experiences. I can appear to express certainty about what I believe to be important for them to learn. Equally, I acknowledge that what I know is my story and in the tradition of phenomenology, I explain that my story is saturated with what I have been taught in the past. The present sociopolitical circumstances and future change can relegate my stories to being wrong or unhelpful. Culturally democratic work in the classroom

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For this last consideration, I am drawn to the perspective given by Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (350BC, Chapter V, p. 5). His advice, I think very useful to the contemporary teacher educator, is: “Now in truth it is impossible that things differing so much should become commensurate, but with reference to demand they may become so sufficiently”. I have witnessed in my career that by creating the understanding in pre-service teachers about the importance of education for social justice and democracy as argued by Darder and seen for myself how a democratically enacted, by teacher educator authority, and by democratic, dialogic exchange about its specific requirements, teaching and learning space provides respect and safety to experience the joy of learning. One of my Indigenous colleagues reflected on the pointlessness of wasting Aboriginal lives on trying to fix teacher education or get more teachers into Australian classrooms saying, “Teacher education isn’t my business. It’s White business. You created the problem. You have to fix it. What I dislike most about your system of teacher education is that it kills the joy of learning”. To me, this is a tragedy, and one that we indeed need to fix. Thankfully, over these last 30 years as a teacher educator, as Lorca observed of *duende*: “[...] it’s impossible for it ever to repeat itself, and it’s important to underscore this. The *duende* never repeats itself, any more than the waves of the sea do in a storm” (Lorca, 1933/2007, p. 19).

Teaching is like that. Darder is right to emphasize that there is no recipe for this work. I reflect that while little of what I have done leaves a trace, that each moment of ‘a-haa!!’ that has happened in my classrooms leaves that afterglow of the sense that *el duende* has been evoked from the depths of our being to give us a brief moment of respite from the slow strangulation of rubrics, assessment tasks linked to learning outcomes, linked to aims and objectives, linked to online learning portals,

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