Educational Justice Journal

SPECIAL EDITION
Educational Justice Symposium 2026
Volume 6, Issue 2 · Double-blind peer reviewed

SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTION

From Access to Educational Justice: Truth Telling, Renarrativisation, and Belonging in Enabling Education

Dr Trixie James[1]

[1] Acting Associate Dean, School of Access Education, Centre for Research in Equity and Advancement of Teaching and Education (CREATE), CQUniversity Australia
Correspondence: t.james@cqu.edu.au

DATES
Submitted: 15 September 2026
Accepted: 20 October 2026
Published: 20 November 2026

DOI
https://doi.org/10.64262/C2Y73.V6I2.002
Educational Justice Journal, Volume 6, Issue 2
ISSN 2642-8660

HOW TO CITE
James, T. (2026). From access to educational justice: Truth telling, renarrativisation, and belonging in enabling education. *Educational Justice Journal*, *6*(2), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.64262/C2Y73.V6I2.002

PEER REVIEW
This article was reviewed under the journal's double-blind peer review process, in which the identities of authors and reviewers are concealed from one another.

EDITORIAL TEAM
Dr. Chevelle S. Hall, Virginia State University (Editor-in-Chief)
Dr. Aaron Livingston, Grambling State University (Editor-in-Chief)
Dr. Brian S. Maiden, University of West Alabama (Editor-in-Chief)
Dr. Corey Bloomfield, CQUniversity Australia (Editor-in-Chief)
Dr. Linda Lorenza, CQUniversity Australia (Editor-in-Chief)

ABSTRACT

Australian Enabling programs provide an important alternative route into university for students excluded by conventional admission pathways, yet opening the door does not make the field equitable. This paper offers a conceptual reinterpretation of previously published findings on belonging and academic legitimacy among eight students in an Australian Enabling program, integrating three connected processes—truth telling, renarrativisation, and subversive habitus—into a framework for educational justice. Truth telling relocates the source of struggle from individual deficiency to unequal institutional structures; renarrativisation supports students in reconstructing deficit-shaped identities into accounts of capability and legitimacy; and a subversive habitus enables critical participation without requiring students to abandon prior identities. Together, these processes reposition belonging as a pedagogical and institutional responsibility rather than a student attribute, and point toward concrete institutional actions: embedding explicit teaching of academic conventions, resourcing relational pedagogy, and involving Enabling students in reviewing policies for deficit assumptions.

KEYWORDS: Enabling education; educational justice; truth telling; renarrativisation; subversive habitus; belonging

Access is not yet justice

Australian Enabling programs provide an important alternative route into university for students excluded by conventional admission pathways. Yet opening the door does not make the field equitable. Higher education continues to privilege particular forms of cultural capital, academic language, and institutional familiarity, while its expectations often remain tacit (Bourdieu, 2005; Webb et al., 2002). Students unfamiliar with these rules can interpret difficulty as evidence that they are deficient, rather than an encounter with an institution designed around other people's prior knowledge. Deficit labels such as 'at risk' or 'non-traditional' can compound this positioning by locating the problem in students rather than in unequal structures (Drury & Charles, 2016; James, 2024). Educational justice must therefore extend beyond formal access to include the conditions under which students can participate, be recognised, and exercise agency. Here, educational justice means institutional conditions that enable meaningful participation, recognition of students as legitimate knowers, and agency to question and influence academic practices. Belonging is central to these conditions because it concerns whether students experience themselves as accepted and legitimate members of the university community (Allen et al., 2021). For Enabling students, this is not simply an interpersonal feeling. It is bound to identity, recognition, and access to the knowledge needed to act within the academic field. The guiding question for this article is consequently justice-oriented: How can educators support students who have been positioned as outsiders to recognise and exercise their legitimacy within higher education? This paper contributes an integrated framework linking truth telling, renarrativisation, and subversive habitus to educational justice through recognition, epistemic agency, and critical participation.

A conceptual reinterpretation of existing findings

This paper builds on previously published findings about belonging and academic legitimacy by considering what they reveal about educational justice. It brings these findings together through three connected processes: truth telling, renarrativisation, and subversive habitus. These processes offer a new interpretation of the existing findings; they were not developed through further analysis or re-coding of the interview transcripts. The analysis draws on the narrative accounts of eight students who commenced an Australian Enabling program in 2019. Participants completed up to 15 semi-structured interviews across one year or the duration of their study plan. The original case study used reflexive thematic analysis and Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital (Braun & Clarke, 2022; James, 2024). The present re-analysis does not claim new data. Instead, it foregrounds the pedagogical conditions through which students challenged deficit subjectivities and developed academic legitimacy.

Truth telling: relocating the problem

Truth telling makes structural inequality and the hidden rules of higher education visible. It interrupts the assumption that struggle demonstrates personal inadequacy by explaining how academic

conventions, institutional processes, and valued forms of participation have been socially produced and unevenly distributed (Humphry, 2013). Unlike orientation that explains how to comply, justice-oriented truth telling asks whose knowledge shaped these conventions, whose prior experiences they privilege, and how they might change; unfamiliarity is not personal deficiency (James et al., 2026). The accounts show that truth telling became possible within student-educator relationships characterised by care, responsiveness, and dialogue. One example from a student highlights how lecturers "actively worked to help me grasp the concepts" and sought to "remove the barrier that dyslexia imposed" (James et al., 2026). These were not peripheral acts of kindness. They created sufficient safety for students to disclose uncertainty, ask questions, and reconsider struggle as a navigable feature of learning. A pedagogy of care thus becomes justice work when it combines recognition with practical action and refuses to treat institutional arrangements as neutral (Motta & Bennett, 2018; Seary & Willans, 2020).

Renarrativisation: restoring epistemic legitimacy

Truth telling creates an opening, but students must also reconstruct the stories through which they understand themselves. Renarrativisation describes the gradual reworking of identity through dialogue, reflection, achievement, and affirming encounters (James et al., 2026). Participants in the study arrived with narratives shaped by exclusion, disrupted schooling, or repeated messages that university was not for people like them. Across the program, these accounts shifted. One participant moved from feeling like an imposter to recognising themself as "intelligent and capable" (James et al., 2026); another concluded that the experience had "proved [they] had the capacity to study" (James et al., 2026). This finding matters for educational justice because deficit narratives can silence students as knowers. Renarrativisation supports epistemic agency by enabling students to speak, question, and contribute without adopting a single dominant academic identity. Repeated affirmation and authentic mastery provided cumulative evidence of capability, allowing students to reconsider inherited judgements and their entitlement to participate (James et al., 2026).

A subversive habitus: participation without erasure

The third process was the development of a subversive habitus: a practical feel for higher education accompanied by the capacity to resist its deficit positioning (James et al., 2026). Students reported that they no longer simply accepted information but questioned evidence, expressed their ideas, and saw themselves as able to meet university expectations (James et al., 2026). They accumulated academic capital, yet this did not require the abandonment of prior identities. Instead, they developed hybrid identities that enabled confident participation while retaining the capacity to question whose knowledge and conduct the university values (Crozier et al., 2019). This distinction prevents the framework from becoming an assimilation model. Teaching students the rules of the game can reproduce injustice if institutional norms remain beyond critique. A subversive habitus couples access to academic practices with critical awareness and agency. The justice outcome is therefore not merely that marginalized students become better adapted to an unchanged university; it is that they become legitimate actors capable of negotiating, challenging, and potentially reshaping the field.

Discussion: making belonging a matter of institutional responsibility

James et al. (2026) reposition belonging from a student attribute to a pedagogical and institutional responsibility. Truth telling exposes how exclusion is produced; renarrativisation enables students to reject internalised deficit accounts; and a subversive habitus supports critical participation. Together, these processes strengthen belonging, agency, and academic capital, demonstrating why access and skills instruction, while necessary, are insufficient. Educational justice also requires recognition, transparent access to institutional knowledge, and meaningful opportunities for students to contribute as knowers. These findings suggest three institutional actions. First, universities should embed explicit teaching and critical discussion of academic conventions in curricula and assessment. Second, they should allocate workload and professional learning to support relational, accessible teaching that treats students' histories as resources. Third, they should involve Enabling students in reviewing assessment and support policies for deficit assumptions and barriers, and report how students' feedback informs change. Through these actions, universities can advance educational justice by making their rules visible, challenging the deficit stories their systems reproduce, and recognising equity students as legitimate participants with the agency to transform the field as well as enter it.

Reflection

The Educational Justice Symposium reinforced the value of collaboration and of hearing how colleagues across higher education, Enabling education, pathway programs and Indigenous and First Nations initiatives are working to improve access, equity and participation. An important takeaway was recognising that Australia and the United States face similar inequalities, especially for students from culturally diverse and historically marginalised communities. The symposium created a space to bring these challenges into the open and engage in discussion about how we might address them. It also reinforced our responsibility to advocate for students by listening to their experiences and ensuring their voices guide our research and practice. These conversations connected closely with my PhD research on Enabling students' experiences, belonging and transitions into university. It was rewarding to share this work with an international community and to see its relevance across national contexts. I left feeling energised to continue research that amplifies student voice and advances educational justice.

References

Allen, K.-A., Kern, M. L., Rozek, C. S., McInerney, D. M., & Slavich, G. M. (2021). Belonging: A review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 73(1), 87–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409

Bourdieu, P. (2005). Habitus. In J. Hillier & E. Rooksby (Eds.), *Habitus: A sense of place* (2nd ed., pp. 43–53). Ashgate.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.

Crozier, G., Reay, D., & Clayton, J. (2019). Working the borderlands: Working-class students constructing hybrid identities and asserting their place in higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 40(7), 922–937. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2019.1623013

Drury, H., & Charles, C. (2016). Overcoming disadvantage, achieving success: What helps. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*, 10(2), A48–A49.

Humphry, N. (2013). *Reconciling educationally displaced young people and education* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Wollongong]. https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uow.27660174

James, D. T. (2024). *Is university for me? Bridging the gap: Equity students' journey to university through an enabling program* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Tasmania]. https://doi.org/10.25959/27927849

James, T., Barnes, N., & Muir, T. (2026). Truth telling, renarrativisation, and belonging: The peregrination pedagogical framework for supporting equity students in higher education. *Student Success*, 17(2), 58–69. https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.4023

Motta, S. C., & Bennett, A. (2018). Pedagogies of care, care-full epistemological practice and 'other' caring subjectivities in enabling education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(5), 631–646. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1465911

Seary, K., & Willans, J. (2020). Pastoral care and the caring teacher—value adding to enabling education. *Student Success*, 11(1), 12–21. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v11i1.1456

Webb, J., Schirato, T., & Danaher, G. (2002). *Understanding Bourdieu*. Allen & Unwin.