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Discursive Brokers: Enabling Educators Working Within and Against Equity Logics

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ABSTRACT

Efforts to widen participation in higher education are shaped by multiple, often competing, social equity discourses. This article draws on qualitative email interviews with seven Enabling educators across four Australian states, analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes are discussed: structural marginalisation and emotional labour; coexisting and conflicting discourses; educators' personal commitments and identities; and care-full pedagogies as equity practice. Together, these themes illustrate how Enabling Educators act as discursive brokers, mediating between institutional norms and the needs of structurally disadvantaged students. The article argues that recognising and supporting this mediating work is essential as universities strive toward more equitable futures.

KEYWORDS: Enabling education; social equity discourses; discursive brokers; emotional labour; care-full pedagogy; Australian higher education

Efforts to widen participation in higher education are shaped by multiple, often competing, social equity discourses. Larsen and Emmett's (2021, 2023a, 2023b, 2025) typology neoliberal, human potential, social justice, and meritocratic provides a useful lens which simplifies these complex discourses and enables an examination of how educators make sense of these discourses in their everyday practice. As with many nation states, equity has been embedded in Australian policy for

decades (Bradley et al., 2008; O'Kane et al., 2024), yet inequity persists, and educators continue to navigate tensions between institutional expectations and the lived realities of diverse student cohorts.

Enabling Programs occupy a particularly complex position within this landscape. Designed as alternative pathways into university, they serve high numbers of students from structurally marginalised backgrounds (Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES), 2026; Hattam et al., 2024). At the same time, they operate within neoliberal universities where competition, market logics, and meritocratic standards shape policy and practice (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2024; Sanchez-Campos et al., 2024). Enabling educators therefore work at the intersection of competing discourses, often performing emotional and pedagogical labour that is undervalued within the academy (Balloo et al., 2023; Davis, 2023; Olds et al., 2023).

This article draws on qualitative email interviews with seven Enabling educators across four Australian states. Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), four themes are discussed: structural marginalisation and emotional labour; coexisting and conflicting discourses; educators' personal commitments and identities; and care-full pedagogies as equity practice. Together, these themes illustrate how Enabling Educators act as discursive brokers—mediating between institutional norms and the needs of structurally disadvantaged students.

Methodology

Following ethics approval (0000022965), thirty-five Enabling Educators completed an online survey distributed through the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA). Survey questions explored demographic characteristics and initial alignment with Larsen and Emmett's four discourses. Participants were then invited to complete an email interview. Seven educators participated, representing rural and metropolitan campuses across four Australian states.

Email interviewing was selected for its flexibility and reflective potential (Amri et al., 2021; Fritz & Vandermause, 2018). Interviews followed Brondani and Mariño's (2019) nine-step asynchronous interview process, including piloting questions, iterative exchanges, and clear closure. Transcripts were deductively coded using Larsen and Emmett's typology, then refined into four themes through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Participants, assigned pseudonyms below, represented diverse backgrounds: First Nations Australians, low socio-economic status, first-in-family, rural upbringing, and former Enabling students. Their demographic diversity mirrors the broader Enabling educator workforce (Baker et al., 2020).

Findings & Discussion

1. Marginalisation and Emotional Labour in Enabling Education

Participants consistently described Enabling Programs as structurally marginalised within their institutions. This aligns with existing literature documenting precarity, limited resourcing, and deficit framings of Enabling work (Baker et al., 2020; Davis, 2023; Olds et al., 2023). For educators, marginalisation was not abstract but rather it shaped their daily practice, professional identity, and emotional labour.

Anna described being excluded from faculty-level processes: "Fighting attitudes that [Enabling] students are not real university students, or those who teach in Enabling Education are not real university lecturers is actually very common." She later added:

> *"I received an email from marketing yesterday saying the Enabling Program is not a priority those exact words!"*

Others emphasised the marginalisation experienced by students. Karla noted that "the system is not designed for them," while Kevin argued that "extra efforts need to be made to open the door of higher education." These statements reflect educators' emotional labour as they hold the struggles of their students while navigating institutional constraints.

A significant aspect of this labour involved decoding the hidden curriculum. Liz highlighted the importance of teaching "academic conventions and basic strategies for analysing a task," while Anna described her role as "pulling back the curtain on what universities are and why they are like that." Andrea articulated the emotional tension inherent in this work: "I try my best to help students understand university rules… but I often feel that I end up perpetuating systems that I simply do not agree with." These accounts show educators performing cultural interpretation, advocacy, and pastoral care. The literature notes this work is essential for student success but often invisible within neoliberal performance metrics (Balloo et al., 2023; Motta & Bennett, 2018; Olds et al., 2023).

2. Coexisting and Conflicting Social Equity Discourses

All participants recognised that multiple discourses coexist within higher education. As Karly put it: "I can see elements of each [discourse] in my perspective so don't feel I could be boxed into only one." Yet the coexistence of discourses did not imply harmony. Most educators described tensions between their own values and institutional expectations. Anna articulated this clearly: "What the students need and how universities operate are fundamentally at odds with one another." This tension reflects the clash between neoliberal logics (targets, efficiency, standardisation) and educators' commitments to social justice and human potential. Andrea echoed this conflict: "I often feel that I end up perpetuating systems that I simply do not agree with."

A second area of tension involved meritocratic discourse. Participants held varied views, but all acknowledged its complexity. Anna critiqued meritocratic assumptions: "Expecting those who have not had the same opportunities to achieve the same is misguided." Karly, however, argued that meritocracy can coexist with social justice: "It simply is not true that anyone can do anything." Yet she also recognised structural inequity: "Living costs are a massive obstacle to opportunity even for very capable students." Kevin strongly supported meritocratic standards but still acknowledged structural barriers: "Universities still need to remain meritocratic… but also ensure access is not dictated by structural barriers." These tensions illustrate how educators negotiate merit not as a fixed belief but as a situational, emotionally charged, compliance-driven requirement (Napoletano, 2024).

3. Personal Commitment, Biography and Educator Identity

Educators' personal histories played a central role in shaping their teaching identities and commitments to equity. This aligns with broader research on teacher identity formation (Richardson & Watt, 2018; Rushton et al., 2023) but extends it into the marginalised space of Enabling Education. Andrea described feeling "well out of my depth socially and culturally at a G8 [elite] university,"

explaining that this experience "has become a great motivation for striving towards social equity." Jane drew on her experiences of exclusion during school: "I do not want anyone to have to go through that."

Anna, who had a more conventional educational trajectory, noted that her difference from her students allowed her to "offer my enabling students a means of moderating their own experiences." These accounts show educators using biography as a tool for empathy, advocacy, and boundary-setting. Their identities were shaped not only by personal history but by the marginalisation and discursive tensions explored in earlier themes.

4. Care-Full Pedagogies as Active Equity Practice

Care-full pedagogies were central to how participants enacted equity. Consistent with Motta and Bennett (2018), educators rejected deficit discourses and embraced relational, intentional, and emotionally engaged teaching practices. Andrea emphasised patience and non-judgement:

"I take the time to explain the hidden curriculum patiently and without judgement… students have come to me with discussions that necessitate a safe space." Similarly, Anna stated:

"In Enabling education, you need to be willing to care, which may go beyond the strict classroom interaction." Kevin was even more explicit: "Pastoral care is obviously an important part of this role… If you can't be compassionate, you are unlikely to have the patience required for being an enabling educator." Karla described teaching strategies that "reduce their anxiety and support their motivation," while Jane grounded her pedagogy in a belief that "every single person has a worth." These practices were not romanticised acts of kindness; they were deliberate forms of resistance to neoliberal norms and intentional strategies for fostering inclusion, belonging, and academic success (Hughes, 2017; Motta & Bennett, 2018; Song et al., 2026).

Conclusion

Enabling Educators operate within a complex discursive landscape shaped by neoliberalism, meritocracy, social justice, and human potential. Their accounts reveal structural marginalisation, emotional labour, and persistent tensions between institutional expectations and equity-driven practice. Yet they also demonstrate deep personal commitment, reflexive identity formation, and intentional care-full pedagogies that actively resist deficit discourses.

These educators act as discursive brokers, mediating between the lived realities of structurally disadvantaged students and the compliance-driven norms of the neoliberal university. Their insights offer valuable contributions to mainstream higher education policy and practice, particularly regarding emotional labour, hidden curriculum, and equity literacy. Recognising and supporting this work is essential as universities strive toward more equitable futures.

Reflection

Each of us has a set of values, discourses and beliefs which form our teaching philosophy and identity as well as impacting pedagogical practices. I am a researcher and an Australian educator working in Enabling Programs; programs which prepare students for the challenge of university study. Attending the Educational Justice Symposium strengthened and encouraged me by normalising and validating

my teacher identity. This was especially impactful as I learnt more about the differences in the American context. We shared knowledge about our practices but despite our vastly different contexts that was not the key take away. For me, it was feeling a sense of belonging, connectedness and shared values.

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