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Research article

## Unsettling teacher preparation: cultivating liminality and remaking space

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## Abstract

In the USA, university-situated teacher education programmes are hierarchical, with tiers of students and faculty progressing through ranks that structurally confer power. Teacher education programmes purporting to engender democratic ideals must remake teaching and learning spaces to encourage the teachers that they prepare to do the same in their pre-school through to twelfth-grade classrooms and schools. In this article, we explore social pedagogy in a US context, describing the work of a tenured teacher educator, two graduate students and more than 40 undergraduate students as they experimented with practices of democratic education in a midwestern US land-grant university elementary literacy methods course. We centre our analysis on three questions: How do efforts to democratise a teacher education literacy course influence teaching and learning? What

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is the nature of those efforts? How do different social actors in the course make and remake space? We then present three findings that speak to the work of unlearning institutionalised norms that sustain hierarchical teaching and learning relationships and that demonstrate the nature of a maieutic disposition in bringing to life more democratic conceptions of teaching and learning. We illustrate throughout the overlaps between democratic education and social pedagogy.

**Keywords** democratic education; social pedagogy; maieutic disposition; teacher preparation; liminal space

## Introduction

University-situated teacher preparation programmes purporting to engender democratic ideals in an ongoing effort to create a more equitable and just society must disrupt and remake teaching and learning spaces in order to encourage the teachers that they prepare to do the same in their pre-school through twelfth (PK-12) grade classrooms and schools (for example, Ayers, 1993; Hargreaves et al., 2001; Zmuda, 2010).

In this article we explore social pedagogy in a US context, describing the work of a tenured teacher educator, two graduate students and more than 40 undergraduate students as they experimented with ideas and practices of democratic education in a midwestern US land-grant university<sup>1</sup> elementary literacy methods course. A professor's simple post-class question about what democratic education looks like in practice grew into a two-semester exploration of three research questions: How do efforts to democratise a teacher education literacy course influence teaching and learning? What is the nature of those efforts? How do different social actors in the course make and remake space?

In posing these questions we must define what we mean by *democratic education* and what it means to *democratise* teacher education. Democracy, as a form of government, affords citizens opportunities to participate in deliberation about shared living (Dahl, 1998; Gutmann, 1999). Drawing on the work of John Dewey, Apple and Beane (1995) have asserted that 'if people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led' (p. 7). Gutmann (1999) has acknowledged education as a way to teach democratic decision-making (that is, deliberation), noting, 'Children must learn not just to *behave* in accordance with authority but to *think* critically about authority if they are to live up to the democratic ideal of sharing political sovereignty as citizens' (p. 51). As such, democratic education must cultivate the democratic citizen who has a sense of interdependence with their fellow citizens, can deliberate about issues related to how they will live together and has the capability and the will to act in service of the common good (Gibson, 2020; Gutmann, 1999; Parker, 2003). In this case, education is an instrument of democracy. Democratic education is also about the ways in which citizens are educated; that is, through critical pedagogies that draw out diversity and dissent to honour multiple perspectives and identities, and through problem-posing education that prompts thoughtful social action (Cammara, 2011). We conceptualise democratic education as both an aim and an experience.

We also aim to demonstrate how explorations of democratic education in the USA enter into extant conversations about social pedagogy and critical social pedagogy in Europe (for example, Anderberg, 2020; Kalagiakos, 2015; Kyriacou, 2009; Matikainen et al., 2018). We present three findings that speak to the necessarily messy work of unlearning institutionalised norms that sustain hierarchical teaching and learning relationships and demonstrate the nature of a maieutic<sup>2</sup> disposition in bringing to life more democratic conceptions of teaching and learning.

## Literature review

The current realities of teaching and learning in PK-12 schools and teacher education are framed within neoliberal aims. The complex work that constitutes the pedagogical project is masked by mandates for more scripted and technical performances of teaching and learning (Viesca and Gray, 2021), having

demoralising effects (Santoro, 2018). Given the innumerable 'next best things' rooted in the latest reform efforts, teachers often resist because of the harm they will do to students. It is an ethical imperative in teacher education to imagine what better might look like. Aiming for more democratic purposes of schooling implies a need to attend to more democratic means of educating teachers. Below, we present themes in recent scholarship related to democratising teacher education.

### **Commitments of democratic teacher education: agency and belonging**

Democratic education aims to cultivate a sense of belonging within a larger community of learners. Each member must experience belonging as they exercise their agency. We follow Biesta and Tedder's (2007) definition of *agency*:

That actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment [so that] the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular, and in a sense, always unique situations. (p. 137)

By extension, teacher agency is a dialogical process that engages actors in particular time and space (Priestley et al., 2015); in the case of this study, the teacher educator asserted teacher agency within a specific university context. A community of democratic co-learners within a teacher preparation programme encourages teacher candidates to see themselves as agentive in the making of themselves as teachers (Moss and Petrie, 2019, p. 397). The reciprocal nature of the co-learning community 'assumes that we have something to learn from each other as well as something to give to each other' (Lambert et al., 1996, p. 12). We can envision a democratic learning community to be one that encourages and promotes structures that value the participation of all the individuals in the community and honours the needs and contributions of all members.

### **Democratising teacher education: authorising students and honouring liminality**

Within university teacher education programmes, 'a starting point for teacher educators interested in [democratising] classroom practices is to understand how authority is negotiated in the classroom' (Brubaker, 2009, p. 99). People act to push against the boundaries and rules of spaces, as mobile spatial actors (Munn, 1996), remaking space (Ahearn, 1999; Goffman, 1959). Remaking society into a more equitable space, a central aim of social pedagogy, requires understanding the landscape of power and employing 'spatial tactics' – the assertion of agency to resist 'use of space as a strategy and/or technique of power and social control' (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003, p. 30). We chronicle social agents' actions and the authorising of new liminalities in what seemed to be institutionally fixed roles and spaces for teachers and students – both physical (for example, classrooms, hallways) and figurative (for example, lesson planning, course design) (Phillips and Gray, 2021).

We draw on the work of scholars who have explored democratising teacher education spaces in the USA. For example, Brubaker (2009, 2010) examined negotiating authority through individualised grading contracts. Morrison (2009) co-constructed undergraduate social foundations courses with her students. In their edited volume, Pearl and Pryor (2005) explored the ways that teacher educators define and enact democracy in classroom practice. Bucci (2005) contended that teachers must be prepared to participate in deliberation and shared decision-making. We rely particularly on Cook-Sather's (2002) work that asserts *authorising* students requires changes in how we think about the student-teacher relationship and changes in how we structure our programmes and institutions. Specifically, she issued 'a call to count students among those who have the knowledge and the position to shape what counts as education, to reconfigure power dynamics and discourse practices within existing realms of conversation about education' (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3). Authorising students' perspectives, however, should not negate or nullify the expertise and experience of teacher educators, nor should it be tolerant of harmful student perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2011). The proliferation of research exploring *Students as Partners* speaks to the work that teacher educators are doing to engage in what Fielding (1999) calls 'radical collegiality' with their students: positioning students as agents in transforming their learning-to-teach experiences. While there are a number of roles that scholars have identified in efforts to democratise education (for example, Bovill et al., 2016), the concept of *students as partners* emerged as a way to visualise the co-learning relationship between students and teachers. In launching the *International Journal for Students as*

*Partners*, Cliffe et al. (2017) explained that this terminology is important because it insists 'on the inclusion of students among those who can and should shape educational experiences and knowledge generation about teaching and learning in higher education' (p. 4). Cook-Sather et al. (2018) added that the concept 'rejects traditional hierarchies and assumptions about expertise and responsibility' (p. 1). It is as much about an authentic co-learning relationship as it is about disrupting the systemic power embedded within university structures that complicates such a relationship.

Teacher education constitutes a web of interconnected spaces that pre-service teachers make and remake as they transition to their professional worlds. These liminal, in-between spaces that Turner (1967) defined as 'a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise' (p. 97), exist in any learning experience. Considering all the private worlds that make up any space in which social actors interact, liminal spaces are space for collaboration, transition and transformation, and agency; as such, a liminal space is 'a potential as well as an occupied space' (Cook-Sather, 2001, p. 114).

## Social pedagogy and teachers as agents of change

We borrow from broader definitions of social pedagogy, such as Eichsteller and Holthoff's (2012) description of social pedagogy as an art form grounded in relationships and humanising learning processes to define social pedagogy in a teacher-education context in the USA. Equally, we draw on descriptions of critical social pedagogy that acknowledge the power constructs that exist in higher education and formal PK-12 schools. We also define education in a more holistic sense, as 'fostering and supporting the general well-being and development of children and young people, and their ability to interact effectively with their environment and to live a good life' (Moss and Petrie, 2019, p. 399). Like Hämäläinen (2015) and Matikainen et al. (2018), we describe an education context where social pedagogy is enacted with democratic design. If an aim of schooling is to prepare citizens for full participation in a democratic society (Meier and Schwarz, 1995), then an aim of teacher preparation is preparing teachers to 'have a more critical and emancipatory stance toward education' (Matikainen et al., 2018, p. 7).

Social pedagogy provides a framework to disrupt, reflect and co-design more inclusive and holistic spaces for teaching and learning (Anderberg, 2020; Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012). Enacting social pedagogy with democratic intention in teacher education requires the social pedagogue to act differently in order to unsettle the current hierarchical power structures so that teacher and students become co-learners, 'inhabiting the same "life space", rather than occupying some separate hierarchical domain' (Moss and Petrie, 2019, p. 398). A social pedagogue in this context, then, is an individual that recentres what it means to be a teacher in its fullest sense, beyond neoliberal reform efforts that constrain the work of a teacher to narrowed curricula and performance on high-stakes assessments (Kalagiakos, 2015; Moss and Petrie, 2019; Schoone, 2020). A social pedagogue is one who encourages critique, appreciates diverse approaches to learning and knowledges,<sup>3</sup> intentionally remaking the teaching and learning space to remake society.

## Methods

The National Research Council's *rhetoric of rigour*, grounded in positivist criteria for what counts as quality research, has thwarted more democratic ways of exploring experiences in education (Torres and Reyes, 2011, p. 1). A more democratic approach to educational research is necessary if we are to acknowledge honestly the complexities of educating all students within the sociopolitical context of schooling within a democratic state.

We draw on Students as Partners or consultants (Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011; Cook-Sather and Luz, 2015) and teacher solidarity co-design (Philip et al., 2022) in our research approach. Teacher solidarity co-design (Philip et al., 2022), which comes out of participatory design research, provides a model for collaborative research grounded in educational justice and intentional efforts to mitigate power structures in research. This kind of approach is intended to expand possibilities in research contexts and in schools. Our approach and researcher roles reflect our commitment to democratising teacher education and research about teacher education.

Discussions of power in research are often based on assumptions that the researcher exerts power over the subjects of the research; likewise, discussions of power in education and schooling are often

based on assumptions that the teacher exerts power over students. The maieutic researcher position, informed by Lipman's (2003) description of 'maieutic thinking', is a role of 'intellectual midwifery' (p. 252), in which the researcher acts in ways that draw out thinking to bring about transformation. As researchers, we explored how a professor enacted democratic education. As the semester course progressed, our roles moved beyond the boundaries of traditional notions of the researcher, even those within the interpretive paradigms of qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Neither of us was the instructor of record, nor were we students on the course. We engaged in discussions with the students, the professor and with the students and professor together. In this way, our identities as teachers and graduate students influenced our enactment of the researcher role, leading us to participate in the space between the professor and the students and ourselves, motivated by our belief that all people – even researchers – have agency; we sought to transform the situation by acting within it.

Lou (he/him) was an experienced teacher educator, having taught for more than 10 years in schools in his native Israel and for another 10 years in universities in the USA (one in a coastal state and another in a midwestern university). While Lou presented himself as a white man, he acknowledged that his Jewish ethnic and religious identities, along with his Euro-accented English, complicated his whiteness, especially in the midwestern USA, throughout which Judaism was minoritised. Lou had recently attained US citizenship through naturalisation, having immigrated to the country to attend graduate school.

The students in the class were in their second semester of their elementary teacher education programme. In this semester's block of literacy courses, all the students were white, monolingual English speakers and from the state in which they attended university, some from rural areas, others from one of the two larger urban centres in the state. Consistent with this programme's demographic trends, the large majority of the class identified as women, with only three students who identified as men.

## Data sources and analysis

We participated in more than 80 hours of class time and engaged in planning sessions (non-content related) and ongoing weekly dialogue with Lou. We also engaged undergraduate students in the research process, facilitating four focus-group discussions with students. Additionally, we conducted two semi-structured interviews with Lou. We twice recorded what emerged as a particularly significant class routine, which we called 'opening circle'. We documented our observations of the class sessions in field note journals. Like Neumann (2009) we used a guiding analytical question, or guiding theme, on the democratisation of a teacher education methods course to guide our data analysis. We employed a *constant comparative method* data analysis technique, integrating each new set of data that we collected, with attention to how they related to the previous categories that we had established (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). *Outlier* (Merriam, 2009) codes that did not fit an existing category or theme constituted a theme that we revisited with each round of analysis. What follows is a review of key findings and a discussion of implications related to social pedagogy.

## Findings

Three interconnected themes emerged from our data. First, constructing and reconstructing the classroom space required that Lou and the students unlearn the expectations and norms of schooling into which they had been socialised. Second, the work of remaking space required that all participants – including Aprille and Tricia – assume a maieutic disposition. Third, the complexities involved in unlearning socialised expectations and navigating the ebbs and flows of the maieutic disposition made the experience messy and uncomfortable, what Lou called 'squishy'.

## Remaking space requires unlearning

A part of inhabiting new behaviours is unlearning<sup>4</sup> others. When Lou's course was posted with a notice that students participating in his section could opt into participating in a study on democratic education, he made it clear that he planned to experiment with new pedagogies. For practice to become more democratic, students also had to inhabit new behaviours. Lou and the students unlearned roles, remaking the classroom space through intentional action, reflection, dialogue, collaboration, co-learning and co-construction. Early in the semester, Lou and the students were excited to discuss democratic

possibilities. They co-constructed the course syllabus and Lou shifted the daily structure of the course to include an opening circle, where students and Lou sat in a large circle around the perimeter of the room. Lou offered a prompt and the space for collaborative discussion and sat among the students in the circle.

Within the first few weeks, the first tensions of unlearning roles and ways of interaction emerged. For example, in an early post-class focus group with Aprille and Tricia, students presented their grievances about the class, hoping that they would represent their concerns to Lou. Carrie said, 'I'm just saying, it might be different coming from you.' Students perceived that graduate student researchers' words would hold more weight with Lou. They remained sceptical that their agency mattered. Post-class, students debated whether Lou would really listen and described their position in the class as 'lower' than Lou. Aprille challenged students to think about how they could support each other's voices in the classroom. She said, 'I want you to continue grappling with the question of "how do you accomplish having a voice?"'. Once the students left, Aprille reflected to Trish, 'I hear anger ... frustration.' Speaking what she imagined the students were feeling, she said, 'I don't know how to exercise this right to talk without having a discussion about the power.'

Students' uncertainty about their agency in the course continued to emerge. They described feeling powerless even while Lou continued to articulate his desire to be more democratic, creating time after class to listen and to collaborate with students. The desire to experience something more democratic was evident; however, unlearning roles and trusting new structures of power was necessary. In another post-class focus group, students were frustrated when Lou asked them why they hadn't talked with him about changing the format of the quizzes they didn't like. Speaking with Aprille and Tricia, Emily said, 'Even though it's like democratic, we still don't feel comfortable approaching [Lou] – I still think of [him] as a professor and we shouldn't [question him].' Carrie jumped in and said, 'Who's gonna be like, "They're on the schedule – can we not take them?" Why would I say that?' The group nods in agreement. Carrie, unconvinced, pushed back: 'But how do you ... when it's like a professor we have this common thing like we need to see you as higher ... which, I completely agree. When you're in a classroom you want kids to treat you the same way, but then like where's that fine line to question it?'

The students remembered that Lou had said, 'I want you to disagree with me', but they had trouble believing that he meant it. Thomas said, 'It's so hard to change our thinking. We've only seen it like, this is right, and then you're wanting to [change that].' Unlearning the role of passive student required a demonstration of bravery because students believed that asserting agency was a risk. The stakes seemed high – they knew their grade in Lou's class and his influence as a tenured faculty in the department held great institutional power.

Later in the semester, Emily and Monica spent a good portion of a nearly three-hour post-class debriefing to plan their approach to assert their agency by speaking up with Lou. Monica said, 'Nothing in this class is going to change unless we say something, but how much is it going to change? Will it affect me or impact me enough to say something?' There was a pause as Emily considered that. Emily said, 'Is it going to throw things off if we rattle the cages?' She responded to Monica's question of whether it was worth speaking up, 'even if it doesn't change the current semester, perhaps it was worth it if it changed future classes.' Again, there was a pause, as though both students felt the weight of the conversation that they planned to raise with Lou. Then Monica asserted, 'I highly doubt this [confronting the instructor] has ever happened before.' Unlearning required self-reflection on the structures of power in higher education and students' roles as agents to make change. This transformation felt groundbreaking and 'emancipatory' even while it felt scary (Matikainen et al., 2018).

Ultimately, democratising Lou's class was about more than his actions as a social pedagogue to state an explicit intention, repeat invitations to collaboration or encourage through time and space to foster collaboration. It required unlearning expected roles and instantiated hierarchies in higher education (Anderberg, 2020). Similar to what Eichsteller and Holthoff (2012) found in their study of an implementation of social pedagogy in a children's home in Essex, we also found that unlearning and trust were developed through ongoing dialogue, trusting relationship and the development of a new culture. Ultimately, Lou and the students described being able to bring more of themselves to class they began to try on new roles.

## The spaces of unlearning are messy and uncomfortable

Unsettling work requires preparedness to be unsettled or disconcerted. It is risky business. It involves asking hard and provocative questions, disturbing complacency, troubling norms and interrogating conventional truths. It involves interrupting the business-as-usual of everyday life and practice (p. 1). Lou and the students engaged intentionally in a process of unlearning in order to create a more democratic space in a teacher-preparation course and that process included moments that Lou described as 'squishy'.

One of the first shifts in practice that Lou put in place was the use of an opening circle protocol, inviting students to speak as co-teachers and co-learners as he sat among them in the circle. At first, the open structure felt uncomfortable for students and scary for Lou. In one example, Lou made the decision to take the opening circle outside. Lou reflected, 'That going outside – I thought was good – but it also threw me off track.' He laughed and groaned as he noted, 'I was like, "Aghhh". So it was longer than I planned on it – but ... then coming back [inside], trying to readjust all the pieces ... which requires me to plan for [the next class] with great care.' Lou saw the students' vulnerability and wanted to respond sensitively to it, but he also acknowledged the course content that he had set aside that day. When Brandi joined the debriefing with Lou, she noted that she *liked* that the circle 'wasn't so structured' because some had sat on benches and some on the ground.

The tension of a structured versus unstructured class was a consistent theme throughout the semester. Post-class, in a focus group with students, Carrie lowered into her chair, leaned back and said, 'Can we talk about this class? I don't love this class at all.' One complaint that got a lot of traction was that Lou asked the class when they wanted to have an assignment due (his way of inviting their voices into the administrative decisions of the class). The students, now overlapping each other's perspectives as they told the story together, agreed that they all said, 'Tuesday!' to which Lou responded, 'How about Sunday?' They wondered incredulously, 'Why did [he] ask?'

Students wanted a tidy enactment of democratic practices, describing the simplicity of decisions based on majority rule. When Tricia asked, 'When you hear *democratic classroom*, what do you think?' They offered, 'voting, decisions'. Thomas said, 'like when everybody said can we have it due Tuesday.' Emily continued, 'he shoulda been like "yep, we're doing it Tuesday". So he asked us but it didn't really matter.' Over time, it became clear that democratic processes included dialogue, negotiation of power and trust for students. In one example, Monica debated whether she should speak up on an issue related to the class. She acknowledged, 'But like nothing with this class is going to change unless we say something. But how much is it going to change and how much is it going to impact me?' The question was a cost–benefit analysis of how much it will benefit me versus the harm I could bring on myself. Then, Monica extended her individual cost–benefit analysis to consider the common impact among students in the class if they asked to be heard by Lou, she noted, 'This is gonna be new for everyone to push against authority and that's gonna be really weird and scary for a lot of people.'

Students were accustomed to the structures and expectations of higher education teacher preparation and the subjectivity of their roles within that structure. Like Matikainen et al. (2018) described in their study of social pedagogy in teacher education in Finland, an aim of Lou's class was for students to experience a more democratic learning space in the hopes that problematising the structures and hierarchies in higher education might also illuminate the structures of power in PK-12 classrooms in the USA, so that pre-service teachers might act to democratise their own classroom spaces.

## Transformation as collective effort

As Lou and the students engaged with what democratic education looked and felt like in practice, there were moments that challenged participants to see and reflect on their identities and commitments. The liminal spaces that began to develop among Lou and the students illuminated a maieutic (Lipman, 2003) disposition manifested in critical or weighty moments, and powerfully when they were labouring together.

This was evident in our post-class debriefing sessions. A verbal thinker, Lou thrived on being able to speak his reflections about the class. During one of these sessions, Aprille shared observations about how he had drawn out what the students already knew about phonics and asked him to talk about his thinking as he planned for that. Lou acknowledged that after a particularly long opening circle he felt disorientated about how to connect the experiences they had shared with the class material he had

intended to explore that day. He clearly felt the pressure of time and curriculum for the course, but he was swimming in the space between those pressures and what he had drawn out of the students in the opening circle. As he grappled with how to navigate this space, he seemed to be asking, 'Now that I see them and I see the curriculum, what do we do in that gap?'

Lou was still processing this when he saw Brandi in the hallway, and he jumped up to ask her to join us. He acknowledged that he needed to enlist Brandi in helping him reflect. When Brandi arrived, we talked about the moving story she had shared in opening circle. Lou said, 'I was thinking about how to leverage what you said – because you said fantastic things – and how do we collect all of that and what it means for teaching ... and I'm still not there.' There was a brief silence, then he continued, 'Just finding a way to collect that – and have [those contributions] have some staying power after – it could be that it needs to stay – you know, what happens in the circle ... to leave it there. There's a part of me that wants to do more, and to bring it into different pieces.' He was still working to understand how to draw together what he had elicited from the students, but his thinking was aimed at bringing into being something new; the space for reflection made that visible.

Another example of the maieutic disposition at play surfaced a few weeks into the semester, at which point many students were feeling overwhelmed. They felt like Lou was saying that he was aiming for a democratic classroom, but that they did not feel like they had a voice. Monica pointed back to a situation in the classroom of her feeling shut down. During that particular class, Tricia sat next to Monica and she listened as all the members of the table group expressed confusion about a part of the reading assignment. Tricia encouraged Monica to ask Lou about it on behalf of the group. Monica didn't want to interrupt what Lou was saying, which assumed that the students understood the earlier material. 'Ask him,' Tricia had whispered to Monica, who reluctantly raised her hand and asked Lou to clarify the earlier part of the lesson. He responded abruptly, 'We're not talking about that right now.' Monica was taken aback by his tone and didn't push back. Neither did any of her tablemates, even those who had the same question she had voiced. Tricia wrote a note and slid it over to Monica: 'Are you mad at him for saying that?' Monica shrugged, and then Tricia wrote another note: 'Are you mad at your group for not saying anything – for not backing you up?' Monica whispered that she didn't expect that they would because of how Lou had treated her.

When we discussed this incident in the focus group, Thomas admitted, 'I was scared.' Tricia asked, 'But [if you had backed up Monica], what would have changed?' When they argued that it was easier said than done, given their past experiences, Aprille asked them to think about the students in their practicum classrooms. 'How would you want your students to ask you?' Monica admitted, 'I completely agree, but at the same time nobody wants to feel like they asked a stupid question.' Tricia pushed, 'Why do you think I was egging you on to [ask] Lou?' Monica considered and then said, 'To push ... us and Lou.'

In this example, there are several spaces in which the maieutic disposition is at play. In the table group, the students had been vulnerable to each other in expressing their confusion. In the classroom space, Monica asked a question for the good of the collective. Tricia's encouragement to ask the question was oriented towards the current class of students and the students that they would teach in the future. In the reflective space of the focus group, the students were able to grapple with the issues of power that suppressed their voices. And finally, the maieutic disposition of Aprille and Tricia manifested in the space of the focus group as they listened to the concerns of the students while also inhabiting solidarity with Lou.

These examples demonstrate the radical collegiality Fielding (1999) describes, especially in relation to the intergenerational learning and democratic fellowship (Fielding, 2011) between students and others in higher education. And, like Cook-Sather's (2011) study of student consultants' participation in teacher education classes, these examples demonstrate how the maieutic disposition manifests itself in nested ways when considering the liminal spaces that we construct. They also demonstrate the complicated nature of these spaces.

## Discussion and implications

Social pedagogy is only now being explored as a framework in the context of US PK-12 schooling and teacher education, despite ongoing consideration in Europe (for example, Anderberg, 2020; Matikainen et al., 2018; Moss and Petrie, 2019). A central aim of social pedagogy is to reconstruct society into a more equitable space, which happens in the everyday work of PK-12 classrooms and teacher education,



and which is also an aim of democracy, particularly in more critical conceptions of democracy (for example, Freire, 1996; Giroux and McLaren, 1986). Our findings suggest implications for the practice of social pedagogy and the work of the social pedagogue in unsettling teacher preparation through the renegotiation of power among students and professor, and, ultimately, remaking the classroom space through the cultivation of a liminal space where agency and new roles are rehearsed and then enacted.

## Liminal space and power

A number of scholars describe the space that exists between individuals or between individuals and institutions and the ways that power, agency and roles are negotiated. Gutiérrez et al. (1999) describe the 'third space' where 'cultural and linguistic practices, histories, and epistemologies collide' (p. 288). It is in this space where individuals negotiate their experiences within a larger institutional framework embedded in society. Biesta (2004) similarly refers to the space between teacher and student as a gap, the site where education takes place. Social pedagogy further elucidates this idea, with the theory of the common third, distinguishing the space between *child* and *professional* as a shared experience that equalises the relationship and brings understanding (Moss and Petrie, 2019; Schoone, 2020). Certainly, we observed a liminal space among the students and Lou, the students and Aprille and Tricia, and among Lou and Aprille and Tricia.

Initially, these spaces were those of reflective practice. Lou relied on Aprille and Tricia and on students, inviting them to post-class conversations. Like van Manen (1982), these were not random conversations. They supported Lou in designing and implementing his democratic pedagogical intentions, especially because they approached their work with a maieutic disposition committed to bringing into being new ideas and actions. Similarly, Aprille and Tricia shared a space of the common third with students in Lou's class and with one another. This liminal space and the common reflection and experience of engaging in an effort to democratise teacher education began to illuminate the structures of power and anticipated roles within the institution. Once seen, those structures and roles required the status quo in Lou's class to be unsettled and a new reality to be remade.

Lou came to describe spaces of contested power as the 'squishy spaces'. Just as Matikainen et al. (2018) found in their study of transforming teacher agency in Finnish teacher education, we observed students' resistance to exerting their agency and assuming a new role, instead, maintaining a passive student role while expressing their frustrations in spaces away from Lou. Much of students' frustration and reluctance to practise their agency remained grounded in uncertainty about whether Lou's intention to practise democratic education could be trusted. If a teacher says they want a democratic classroom, how do students believe them? What are the indicators that show they mean it?

There's a difference between democratic ideas, democratic practices and democratic living. There had to be a shift for Lou and for the students, moving beyond more symbolic examples of democracy. Students' understanding of democratic education evolved from 'we should have just voted' to thinking about deliberation for the common good. For students, having more voice in class through democratic structures like opening circles or a task like co-developing a course syllabus felt different from challenging one of Lou's decisions or disagreeing with one another. Students considered the ratio of risk to reward, considering whether to act in light of the impact on themselves as individuals. For Lou, there was also frustration in moments where he realised his institutional position silenced students, such as when he asked for student feedback only to have students remain silent or ask for change without ideas about how to make alterations to a class assignment. Lou and the students acknowledged collectively that living democratically in the classroom is much more complicated and requires action in the 'squishy spaces'.

## Rehearsing in liminal space

Learning to live democratically in the classroom required practise for Lou and for the students. Lou needed opportunities to rehearse becoming a social pedagogue, 'applying both theoretical knowledge and self-knowledge to the sometimes challenging demands' (Moss and Petrie, 2019, p. 399) and students needed opportunities to rehearse pushing back (Souto-Manning, 2011). Rehearsal took place in the liminal spaces, the in-between teacher and student space. Lou and the students discussed what was possible in democratic teacher preparation; they anticipated individual and collective actions and potential outcomes that might result, and they considered the broader implications that their own questions and actions might have in remaking teacher preparation.

For Lou, creating a liminal space required unsettling the traditional structure of student and teacher and engaging in positional liminality (Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011). Lou departed from the traditional role of teacher and assumed a new democratically aimed co-learner role, inviting students to join him as co-learners and co-teachers; he embodied the role of social pedagogue (Moss and Petrie, 2019). The shift from the understood and practised hierarchies created a sense of uncertainty. Lou encouraged students to journey with him through the 'squishy', which ultimately created spaces for students' voices and selves, moving from those acted on to subjects co-creating the learning environment with Lou. Cultivating democratic living happened in debriefing sessions with Aprille and Tricia, which acted as a rehearsal space for teacher agency, similar to the kind of 'orientation toward teacher agency' that Matikainen et al. (2018) described (p. 5). It happened with the ongoing cultivation of trust between the students and Lou as they navigated frustrations, misunderstandings and restorative dialogue. It was evident in the evolution of the opening circle structure in class when the questions posed were not Lou's and discussion became a space where students grappled with the connections between theory and practice in their own practicum classroom experiences.

At the end of their semester in Lou's class, students not only practised agency as co-learners with Lou, they also observed Lou's modelling of what it is to be a social pedagogue within a larger democratic framework. Lou encouraged dialogue and deliberation and over time, students asserted their agency. Lou and the students ultimately created a liminal space where transformation, while often messy, could take place. Lou's exploration of democratic education in a teacher-preparation classroom allowed for the same kind of 'becoming' and 'process of change' that Moss and Petrie (2019) described, creating the space for students to develop as social pedagogues.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>According to the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU, n.d.), 'a land-grant university is an institution that has been designated by its state legislature or Congress to receive the benefits of the Morrill Acts of 1862, 1890, and 1994' (n.p.).

<sup>2</sup>We draw on Lipman's (2003) work theorising maieutic thinking, which centres care in understanding and encouraging new learning. The maieutic disposition that we describe is one that acknowledges an aim towards the good in learning relationships. Thus, we assert that care is central to the project of democratic education.

<sup>3</sup>We draw on Lang (2011) here in using the plural *knowledges* to acknowledge that 'epistemologies of situated knowledges hold that knowledges are not simply stored, intact, in their abstract form in a person's brain; rather, they take the shape of the bodies and minds that construct them, and to the extent that they are shared, they are constructed interdependently with others, most often dialogically or conversationally' (p. 93).

<sup>4</sup>We draw on Klein's (2008) description of unlearning as 'letting go of deeply held assumptions about what it means to be a teacher, what classrooms look like, what the essence of teaching and learning is' (p. 80).

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln institutional review board.

### Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

## Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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