# The transformative potential of critical pedagogy for Education Studies students in interrogating neoliberalism

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## Abstract

*With neoliberal policy central to the many challenges faced within the education system including an increasing gap between rich and poor (Reay, 2017; Giroux, 2014), this article explores how an Education Studies programme, drawing on the principles of critical pedagogy, can help students to better understand and interrogate neoliberalism and its impacts on the wider education system. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, 19 participants participated in five focus groups. The article argues that participants demonstrate sophisticated understandings of neoliberalism's impact on themselves as students, future educators and the wider education system. They also engage in active inquiry, problematising their lives, studies and future as educators. However, students often felt a sense of hopelessness and disempowerment to change a 'fixed' system and were concerned about becoming 'part of the problem' once in practice. Consequently, we argue that whilst Education Studies programmes underpinned by critical and relational pedagogy have the potential to support student interrogation of neoliberalism, space needs to be created to foster student agency and hope for change agency once in practice. This could be achieved through*

*students and lecturers building alliances with teachers and educators that disrupt neoliberal hegemony in practice to help students envision post-neoliberal education, a deeper exploration of how neoliberalism perpetuates inequalities through classroom policies, educational materials and teacher-student relationships and greater lecturer critical reflection upon how they are complicit in the systems they wish to challenge.*

**Keywords:** *Critical Pedagogy, Education Studies, Neoliberalism, Relational Pedagogy*

## Introduction

Neoliberalism, which Harvey (2007) defines as a series of economic practices that promote the idea that well-being is best attained within a society that promotes free markets, free trade and private property, has become central to many of the challenges facing the UK education system. This realignment of education with economic goals (Giroux, 2014) has widened the gap between the rich and poor (Reay, 2017), promoted a Eurocentric curriculum that disadvantages and excludes BAGM (Black, Asian and Global Majority) and LGBTQ+ (Peterson and Ramsey, 2020; Johnson, 2023) and ignores meaningful responses to the climate emergency (Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2019). Neoliberal ideology has become so all-pervasive that the logic of education for economic prosperity has usurped other conceptualisations of education as a worthwhile pursuit in and of itself and its potential to transform society towards a greater good (Smyth, 2011). Furthermore, neoliberalism renders education an investment to be consumed rather than as a wider social good and consequently students (as consumers) are obliged to take on increasing levels of debt to be educated (Davies et al, 2018). The all-pervasive

nature of neoliberal ideology means it can be difficult to challenge (Visano, 2016) as it has become such a dominant discourse that it is now part of the social imaginary (Taylor, 2004).

Universities are not immune to these changes, particularly when considering that without public funding they must compete for students in national and global markets (Allen, 2011; Morgan, 2022). Moreover, neoliberalism permeates the student experience of higher education, impacting how students learn. In education and teacher training, an emphasis on standardisation through the introduction of the national teacher standards and preparation for a national curriculum encourages teaching to the test and undermines the importance of developing critical thinking skills (Davis et al. 2018, Naidoo and Williams, 2015). Furthermore, this technical approach to education privileges western hegemonic norms that favour rationality over experience (Burke, 2017).

Education Studies courses are distinct from teacher training courses in that they study education as an academic discipline in its own right and critique prescribed frameworks and pedagogies. Consequently, Education Studies courses offer more space for lecturers and students to explore and critique the education system than standardised teacher training courses, they are still under pressure from a range of 'quality assurance' measures, like the NSS (National Student Survey), and must negotiate complex accountability cultures to ensure student satisfaction and the future employability of students on these courses (Jarvis, 2014). This means less time to focus on criticality and social justice issues (Morgan, 2022) and more time following a functionalist view of education that prepares students for the world of work. This article argues that Education Studies courses which draw from the principles of critical pedagogy - with its emphasis on dialogue (Freire, 2017), the social construction of knowledge (Smyth, 2011) and the empowerment of traditionally marginalised groups (Darder, 2017) - has radical transformative potential to help students

understand the impact of neoliberalism on themselves and the wider education system. Additionally, as an academic discipline, it can support students in challenging inequalities within the education system and preparing them to be 'critical, active citizens, in the interrelated local, national and global public spheres' (Giroux and Giroux, 2006: 28) in imagining a post-neoliberal education system and society.

Consequently, this study addresses a gap in the literature by asking whether an Education Studies programme free(er) from government pressures of standardisation and compliance (Kumashiro, 2015), which draws on the principles of critical pedagogy and an ethics of care (Noddings, 2013), helps students to better understand and interrogate neoliberalism and its impact on them as students and future educators. This study utilizes an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework comprising of five focus groups and lecturer field notes to develop a deeper understanding of students' lived experience as neoliberal subjects, their perceptions of how lecturers perpetuate neoliberalism and what possibilities exist for alternative approaches to student provision within the confines of neoliberalism.

## An education system in crisis

With social mobility stalled in the UK, class privilege 'entrenched' at virtually every stage of life (Wright, 2019) and the impacts of austerity, the pandemic and a cost-of-living crisis continuing to be felt the UK education system is facing challenges on an unprecedented scale. Political and economic choices shaped by neoliberal ideology underpin these challenges.

Significantly, it is proving increasingly difficult for schools to recruit and retain teachers (DfE, 2019), which denies students stability in their learning. Teachers also face high workloads, the anxiety of high-stakes OFSTED inspections (Ball,

2021) and a decrease in autonomy and professionalism (Giroux, 2014), where the main goal of educators has been reduced to increasing student test scores (Hara and Sherbine, 2018). Moreover, teaching is becoming an increasingly unappealing profession for students and schools are rendered 'intolerable institutions' (Ball and Sabé, 2021). Consequently, those training teachers and future educators have a responsibility to facilitate questioning and understanding of the impact of neoliberal policy choices and ideology on education, and to facilitate alternative discourse and imaginaries from the grassroots up (Foucault, 1979).

With a small but increasing number of studies recognising the impact of neoliberalism on university student lived experience and via teacher training courses (e.g. Hara and Shebine, 2018; Schmidt, 2021; Rodriguez and Magill, 2016), there is a lacuna in this area particularly around the experience of students on Education Studies courses in the UK. Studies which challenge the all-encompassing nature of neoliberalism propose critical pedagogy (Davis et al. 2018) as a way to challenge neoliberal norms and recentre the role of student experience and dialogue in the education process. Killam (2022) proposes a counter ethos of compassion, hooks (1994) espouses the importance of education as the practice of freedom and Hölscher (2018) argues for the development of relational pedagogy centred around an ethics of care, which can become a subversive practice in an environment which commodifies aspects of human existence and is at odds with the marketisation of education (Baice et al. 2021).

Evidently, higher education teacher training courses are under increasing government pressures related to standardisation and compliance (Kumashiro, 2015), where teacher trainers are under pressure to prepare teachers as technicians (Hara and Sherbine, 2018). This leaves little space for critique of how neoliberalism is impacting the education system, resulting in trainee

teachers entering the workforce with little understanding of neoliberalism and its impact (Hara and Sherbine, 2018). However, Education Studies courses, which explore education from an academic perspective, free from OFSTED and government teacher training regulations like the ITT core content framework (gov, 2019), provides an important space for future teachers and educators to challenge neoliberal discourse and explore the challenges facing the education system in a more open, caring and critical environment. Consequently, this paper explores how student experience can deepen our understanding of how neoliberalism is contested in higher education spaces.

What follows is a review of the relevant literature concerning the potential of critical pedagogy to contest neoliberalism within the education system and the methodology of the study is then discussed and outlined. Findings are then analysed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis framework and the implications for practice are discussed.

## The potential of critical pedagogy for contesting the impact of neoliberalism on the education system

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, the education system should not be primarily a 'banking' system where students are conceptualised as vessels to be filled with knowledge from a pre-determined and fixed curriculum (Freire, 2017). This approach renders students passive, obedient and ready to acclimatise to the status quo (Chomsky, 2002). Alternatively, critical pedagogy holds counter-hegemonic potential by conceptualising education as a process of transformation where power is transferred more towards students. They are encouraged to develop the skills and dispositions necessary to challenge an increasingly unequal status quo by developing their collective critical consciousness. Critical pedagogy draws upon the ideas of critical theory and

was founded in Paulo Freire's 1968 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Since then, Freire's ideas have been expanded upon by a range of philosophers and educators. Illich (2010) emphasised the difference between education and 'schooling,' McLaren (2016) and Giroux (1988, 2014) critique the impact of neoliberalism on the education system, whilst others have emphasised the centrality of relationships to enacting critical pedagogy, emphasising compassion (hooks, 1994), care (Noddings, 2013), hope (Freire, 1997) and its potential to enact social justice and support marginalised groups (Smyth, 2011; Darder, 2017).

Davies et al (2018) argue that neoliberal accountability measures, such as the NSS (National Student Survey) and TEF (Teacher Excellence Framework), are letting down students by reinforcing individualism and constraining possibilities to meaningfully challenge inequalities that impact their own lives and communities. They argue that critical pedagogy still has the potential to move non-traditional students into spaces of collective and empathetic modes of learning that disrupt neoliberal narratives and redress inequalities in higher education. However, Pollard's (2020) research into exploring if preservice teachers develop critical consciousness when taught by critical pedagogues found teachers leaving the course with limited levels of critical consciousness, perhaps limited by the constraining nature of teacher education programmes. Moreover, Education Studies courses, with their emphasis on studying education as an academic discipline, drawing from the fields of philosophy, psychology and sociology, is freed from many of the pressures and constraints of traditional teacher training routes, like the teacher standards, OFSTED inspections and the ITE (Initial Teacher Education) framework. Accordingly, Education Studies offers mores space to foster the principles of critical pedagogy and challenge the negative impact of neoliberal ideology and policy on the education system. However, in a neoliberal system, social consciousness

must actively be cultivated and nourished if it is to have a chance of creating new visions for schools and societies (Darder, 2017).

Whilst the benefits of the dialogic approach are at the heart of critical pedagogy, in creating more participation and a greater sense of inclusion, Gibbs et al (2021) remind us that the privileging of dialogue and criticality is not a panacea and careful attention needs to be paid to those students unfamiliar with the Socratic Method, those without English as a first language and the needs of some neurodivergent and disabled students.

## Methodology

The Education Studies degree programme in this study is underpinned by the principles of critical pedagogy, meaning small classes based around dialogue and the social construction of knowledge. These take place at a small, post-92 institution that has been offering Education Studies programmes for over 20 years with a typical annual cohort of between 50 and 80 students. As part of the degree programme, all students complete a work experience module in their second year, the majority of which opt for an educational setting. Furthermore, many students on the course also have part-time work within the education sector. After graduating from the programme many students go onto further postgraduate study, postgraduate Initial Teacher Education programmes or graduate employment in the education sector. Traditionally, Education Studies modules draw upon the philosophy, psychology and sociology of education exploring topics including the impact of digital technologies on pedagogy, social justice education, SEND and Inclusion support and alternative approaches to education, for example. The course is taught be a diverse range of staff all with wide ranging experience of the education system with a commitment to critical, progressive and inclusive education. The students are

invited into a participatory (Shor, 1992) mutual process of co-constructing teaching, learning and assessment (Bovill, 2020) including enhancing opportunities for digital collaboration (Dixon et al. 2013). They are encouraged to bring in texts and artifacts for discussion, negotiate assessments and contribute to how seminars are taught. As part of a continuing process of decolonisation (Bhambra et al, 2018), a multiplicity of perspectives from student experience, theorists, educators and philosophers of the global South and its diaspora are brought into class by students and teachers. Finally, student-staff hierarchies are challenged through student-staff partnership work and social opportunities designed around student-led projects to raise money for charity and teach each other wider skills like sewing and puppetry. Accordingly, as progressive educators, we believe that challenging neoliberal hegemony with students is fundamental in creating fairer, more democratic education systems and societies. Therefore, as lecturers and researchers, we arrive at this research with our own biases and assumptions around what an education system ought to look like which includes an epistemological belief in the co-construction of knowledge, the troubling of hierarchical teacher-student relationship and a commitment to fostering democratic space in higher education.

Asking students to critique neoliberalism and its impact upon their experience as students and future educators required continuous sensitivity to the ethical concerns and welfare of the students involved. Semi-structured focus groups were selected for data collection which are well suited to explore sensitive topics (Elam and Fenton, 2003), each group was asked to discuss the same questions. The students who volunteered to participate in the research came from a range of backgrounds, races, gender, sexualities and religions. All students on the course were invited to participate and in total nineteen participants from years one to three agreed to contribute as well as some students on the Education Studies Foundation degree. In total six men and

thirteen women participated. Although demographic information was not an explicit focus of this study, the participants reflected the overall demographic of the programme which included five who self-identified as Muslim women and eight currently having part-time jobs in schools. Although, the amount of men who volunteered as participants was higher than the overall demographic of the programme. Students were assigned to five focus groups, which lasted between one and two hours, and were asked to reflect upon their understanding and experience of neoliberalism and its impact on their studies, possible affordances and constraints, the role of the lecturer in perpetuating and/or disrupting neoliberalism and their hopes for the future of education and how they felt about their role within the education system.

Once ethical approval had been granted by the university in alignment with BERA (2018) guidelines, three lecturers gathered the data via focus groups using semi-structured interview questions. Data was collected in person and as a small-scale qualitative study, generalisations cannot be made. Drawing on the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), our aim was to focus on in-depth exploration of the experiences of the participants and the meaning they attribute to them (Smith et al. 2009). Participants were asked about their own understanding of neoliberalism, its impact on their studies, lives and experience of the education system (as students and via placement/work) the aim from a phenomenological perspective was to understand how they make sense of neoliberalism and its impact on their lives and the meanings they gain from their experience. There are many ethical considerations in terms of lecturers researching their own students. Whilst knowing the students well through the course offered its benefits in helping them to feel comfortable sharing their experience, we recognise the role of student bias within this research as they may want to avoid sharing negative experiences of the course with their tutor. Evidently, researching one's own students poses ethical

challenges related to the navigation of asymmetrical power relations, as students may feel obliged to give up their time to talk to their tutor (Taber, 2007) or please them with their answers. However, as Marvasti (2004) contends, this could also be considered a mutually beneficial situation where students are given one-to-one time to more deeply explore the issues and content of their studies. Therefore, the call for participation was presented as entirely voluntary and an opportunity to more deeply explore the issues raised by the module with the lecturers. For student convenience, focus groups took place after teaching had ended during the summer break. Due to the potential for reinforcing asymmetrical power relations, we were mindful of maintaining an ethics of care (Noddings, 2013) throughout data collection, for example by making ourselves available to students to talk through any sensitive issues arising from the focus groups. The focus group data was triangulated with lecturer field notes. Once transcribed, the interviews were coded line by line (Charmez, 2006) and analysed using a thematic approach (Guest et al. 2012). Particular attention was paid to discourses around neoliberalism and the moments of challenge to the status quo. The main themes to emerge out of the data were challenging the impact of neoliberalism, students forming a critical consciousness, and experiencing relational pedagogy.

## Understanding and critiquing the impact of neoliberal hegemony

Participants demonstrated rigorous critiques of neoliberalism's impact on themselves and their experience of university. Shabina explained how:

> So, it's actually about like, passing...do they care if I pass, or if stay, and to make sure I don't drop out of uni? I think it's a money game, like a lot of people I know, they don't even care about the uni course at all. They just say, 'Oh, we're just going in to get their maintenance loan.' It's just money. Everything goes back to money.

The participants felt like 'numbers' (Dom, Halima) in the eyes of the university. This created a disconnect between some students and the university: 'when it comes down to a personal level, it's like us and you' (Dom). Students acutely felt the impact of neoliberal cost-cutting measures undertaken by the university, particularly around the practice of employing increasing numbers of visiting lecturers (on fixed-hours contracts) over full-time permanent staff members. Samantha detailed how:

> We had people, teach us things that weren't their area of expertise. It was written a certain way for a certain lecturer. And that's not reflected on the person who has been brought in to teach it. It's not fair on them as much as it's not fair on us. To be marked on that when it's not taught well is not fair.

Students called out these cost-cutting measures and their impact on the education they were paying for, Shabina described how:

> I think as well that they didn't know as much as they should have known. It was like I'm asking a question, and we're both confused. But I don't feel like that with my lecturers who I'm always with.

Furthermore, there were frustrations levelled against neoliberal accountability systems that ask for constant student feedback but result in nothing changing. '[Feedback] It's like a good thing, but at the same time nothing's been done. I haven't seen any change' (Amir). As increased lecturer workload and increases in temporary staff mean staff being asked to do more with less, this impacts the quality of the student experience. For some students, the lecturers (as part of the university system) became part of the problem. Dom explained:

> You are part of the problem. That's inevitable. If the system is the problem, then inevitably you are part of that problem.

Whilst many of the participants critically articulated the impact of neoliberal ideology and policy on their studies and the wider education system, there was a distinct lack of hope in being able to challenge the status quo. Students mostly

felt disempowered, describing an 'entrenched' government unable and unwilling to change things (Matthew). Tracy explained how:

> That's the only thing that depresses me a little bit about the course, is the fact that we can all talk about all this talking and talk about all these wonderful things [but] are we just going to become part of the problem? Because it's higher up. It's not the teachers. It's not the students. It's not even like the Head teachers, really, because I still don't think they have that power really. It's the whole of the system. The system is at breaking point. You look at the teachers going on strike and the strain and the stress of SATs. You don't have an education secretary that is in for long enough. If you are going to transform education, you should have had a reasonable amount of experience.

For Samantha, there was a real disconnect between what was learnt on the course and then trying to actualise progressive education in practice, whether that be part of the work experience module on the course or their own part-time work within the education system:

> And then you go into the school and then you realize it'-s actually very restrictive and as much as you want to make all these changes. It's out of your hands because it's only the higher people they get to make those decisions.

Whilst students were adept at critiquing the problems unleashed by years of neoliberal reforms on the education system, they felt powerless to change them and demonstrated a sense of anxiety that they would become part of the systems they found unjust and sought to challenge. They also wondered if the transformative practice presented in their Education Studies seminars would be 'frowned upon by other members of staff' (Dom) when out in practice. This was due to the education system being understood as 'business-like' dominated by academies which hire, 'newly qualified teachers… and then let go of them when they move up the pay scale' (Faye). Whilst the students demonstrate a robust critique of neoliberal ideology and policy, this critique had not yet been channelled into a sense of change agency. One of the key elements of critical

pedagogy is to instil hope in students that unjust systems can be changed and that individuals can be empowered to do so: a message that did not appear to be resonating with the participants.

**Developing a collective critical consciousness.**

Whilst the students expressed frustration towards the challenges of an unfair system, they did, however, demonstrate many of the skills necessary to effect change out in the wider education system, which had been fostered through their participation in the Education Studies programme. Engagement with a diverse range of theory and critique helped students to problematise taken for granted notions of what it means to educate. For Matthew, this provided a sense of relief as he encountered research of how education can be done differently. Dom recognised how, through dialogue, discussion and group work, his own critical consciousness had developed:

> I think as part of the subject you're constantly questioning those practices.... It's trying to break down the current curriculum, and [ask] should we even have a curriculum?

Students were prepared to question ideas of who education serves and what knowledge is deemed appropriate to be taught in schools? This sense of criticality was enhanced through the programme design, which is built upon student personal and professional experience of the education system. These dialogues opened counter-hegemonic possibilities by bringing together students with experience in a range of education settings. Upon hearing the experience of a fellow student at a SEND school, Matthew described how:

> It was really interesting like with them, you know, seeing a special needs school and the fact that actually that they have chucked the [national] curriculum out the window and... really valuable seeing that actually schools have done that you know, it's not

> just a theoretical thing 'Oh you could chuck the curriculum out the window,' oh someone's actually done it. You actually start to see the possibilities.

As such, Matthew's experience of working in schools and sharing that experience with other students in the focus groups allows him to identify possibilities for counter-hegemonic practice and alternative provision. His comment 'you actually start to see the possibilities' is emblematic of the awakening of the teacher-activist within.

The programme design facilitated the sharing of experience and opened space for other imaginaries of how to educate, an experience not necessarily available on heavily structured teacher training routes. Ana's experience was unique in having been a part of the ITE undergraduate programme and having switched to Education Studies. She found the former course constrictive in terms of developing her own identity as a teacher:

> It's [ITE] basically a crash course of how to become a teacher. This is what you're taught. This is information. This is the theories. Then you come in and you kind of… put into practice what you've learned in a group work. Or maybe you have a slight discussion, but you're not challenged to actually discuss what's wrong.

The fixed nature of the curriculum here serves to perpetuate the status quo and limit opportunities for exploration into how to develop a more egalitarian education system. The students who most readily engaged with the co-constructive nature of the teaching and learning opportunities within the programme understood how the nature of the education process need not be fixed. Tracy explained how:

> I liked the fact that because we can challenge things. The amount of times we have been in your lecture and we have picked something out of the assignment brief and asked yes but do I have to do it like that? Or can I push it a little bit? I'm not scared to ask you what I can get away with.

Having space to critique the challenges facing the wider education system and share experience with other students who have differing experience of the education system helps students realise their agency and the possibilities afforded to them to challenge hegemonic practice.

## Experiencing relational pedagogy

For students to feel comfortable sharing their experience, critiquing the status quo and entering into opportunities to engage in the co-creation of teaching and learning espoused by a programme routed in the principles of critical pedagogy, students need to feel safe in doing so. As Hölscher (2018) argues, in a neoliberal, individualised world, to care becomes a subversive practice. Central to critical and relational pedagogy is an ethics of care (Noddings, 2013) that centres relationships at the heart of education (hooks, 1994; Bovill, 2020). Evidently, this approach is fractured by a neoliberal system that students perceived as considering them as numbers rather than human beings, and with lecturers experiencing increased workloads and more temporary zero-hours staff hired to teach the potential for meaningful connection, care and support is reduced. However, even within these constraints there were moments of experience of relational pedagogy, Ana described the support she received during her ADHD diagnosis:

> I probably wouldn't get the support and the help [on another course]. Also, that kind of understanding, I feel like my lecturers are very understanding, especially with regards to, you know, the ADHD process I'm going through at the moment. And then the educational assessment.

For others it was the availability of staff and the openness to talk about whatever they are experiencing:

> And then just the way that is, it's open-door policy, you don't have to be shy about going to give it a talk about anything, you can just go in (Anjum).

Efforts were made by staff to break down the hierarchy between student and teacher through adopting a more relational approach, including student-staff partnership projects, informal catch-up spaces sessions and group activities with lecturers and students, as well as an openness to inviting students into the process of co-constructing teaching and learning. Lola explained how:

> I think, like, the students coming straight from high school, they see a lecturer or a teacher as a teacher and the student, they don't really see that there can be the bridge that they are not just there to teach you but to support you and help you, whereas like here, it's a lot different. You can go to your lecturer and just like ask for support or whatever. But then your teacher might not necessarily be able to do that in high school.

Evidently, some participants were able to articulate this sense of care from lecturers and each other within the course, and how lecturers had sought to break down some of the barriers between lecturers and students, developing a caring environment where 'all grow' (Freire, 2017).

## Discussion

From the perspective of the impact of how a critical pedagogy-informed Education Studies programme impacts student understanding of neoliberalism and its impact on them and their studies, students critically articulate its impact and demonstrate potential as 'critical, active citizens' (Giroux and Giroux, 2006: 23) intent on demystifying the workings of neoliberal hegemony. Furthermore, unlike those on teacher training courses (Hara and Sherbine, 2018), these Education Studies students are entering the workplace with a well-developed understanding of neoliberalism and its impact. However, their critiques of neoliberalism are mostly at an individualistic level exploring how the system disadvantages them personally in terms of their experience of university and how the wider context of cost-of-living etc may impact their

abilities to find a job. The articulation of the education system as being for the greater good or a concern about those disadvantaged by the system in terms of class, gender, race (and other protected characteristics) was largely absent from their discourses. This is perhaps because they see themselves as disadvantaged by the system and speak from that position and perhaps too because most have had limited experience teaching and working within the education system. There is also space for lecturers to make more explicit the links around how neoliberalism perpetuates disadvantage and marginalisation. Also, it is perhaps more difficult to reflect on the suffering of others when you yourself are suffering.

However, there is simultaneously, a recognition of how neoliberal cost-cutting measures impact 'us' as a student cohort, as connections are made between the injustices suffered by the individual student and the suffering of their peers. This is seen as creating a sense of solidarity which, when channelled appropriately, has the potential to effect change. The sense that the system was unable to change and that efforts to do so would be ineffective demonstrated an understanding of systems as 'entrenched' and unable to be changed by individuals at the grassroots level (Foucault, 1979). This is an example of the totalising nature of neoliberal ideology, how it is unconsciously internalised and demands that there is no alternative (Saltman in Apple et al, 2009) making it increasingly difficult to challenge (Wood, 1998). There is a sense of insecurity as the students demonstrate anxiety about not being empowered to enact change to a broken system and potentially becoming part of the system they seek to critique: an example of how the consciousness of the oppressor becomes internalised (Freire, 2017). Worryingly, from the standpoint of critical pedagogues, the participants demonstrated a lack of hope. For Freire (2021: 16), he argues that hope is an ontological need and that educators need critical hope 'the way a fish needs unpolluted water.' According to Freire (2017), only

through a total rejection of fatalism could power be unleashed to resist and create new visions for the education system. Evidently, there is a sense of liminality as students contemplate their emergence into the education profession and their ability to align their values and practice. Matthew's example of seeing the possibilities afforded to those working within a special school and the possible implications for his own practice highlight the importance of collaborative space and communities of practice oriented around innovative, fairer and more progressive educational practice. Consequently, more opportunities need to be built into the programme to help students and lecturers build alliances with activist-teachers in the community to share their experience of transformative pedagogy in practice to help inspire students to envision a fairer, more democratic education system. Darder (2017) advocates forensic explorations of how educational materials perpetuate neoliberalism and inequality. Additionally, lecturers are positioned as agents perpetuating the neoliberal agenda of the university, through surveillance acting as the friendly faces of neoliberal regimes of accountability. Hence, there is a need for more robust critical reflection into the totalising nature of neoliberal discourse and how even those seeking to disrupt neoliberalism can subconsciously perpetuate it, as critical pedagogues are also implicated in the very system they seek to change (Ellsworth, 1989). There is a need to consider those students who believe in neoliberalism and how lecturers can support these students and avoid usurping one dominant ideology for another. Whilst participants had seemed hopeless about changing the education system, many of them were demonstrating tendencies that could help empower them to effectuate change once in practice.

Through dialogue, collaboration and opportunities to co-construct teaching and learning participants were able to engage in active inquiry, problematising their lives, studies and future as educators. Seminars centred in student experience

derived from generative themes (Freire, 2017) and the social construction of knowledge (Smyth, 2011) enabled students like Matthew to make connections between their practice, that of their peers and the teachers they ideally envisage becoming. The participants demonstrated a critical consciousness that questioned current practice as well as their own personal and developing teacher identities within this system. Being taught in this manner challenges neoliberalism's aims to undermine solidarity (Giroux, 2014) as students make wider connections between their individual experience and broader structural challenges (Shor, 1992) with transformative praxis beginning in the stories of everyday experience (Ledwith, 2016). The ability to challenge neoliberal orthodoxy as well as the perceived authority of the lecturer demonstrated active engagement with education in a way many students are not familiar with, having experienced many years of passivity in the 'banking' model of education (Freire, 2017) which encourages obedience and subordination (Chomsky, 2002) over criticality and democratic citizenship (Shor, 1992). These skills are crucial to developing critically reflective practice (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). Whilst these students revealed their potential as transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1988) there was a distinct lack of any articulation around how intersections of race, gender, sexuality and class compound the impact of neoliberalism. Consequently, as lecturers, there is a role here to make these connections more explicit to develop a more holistic understanding of how neoliberalism operates. In an Education Studies programme underpinned by the principles of critical pedagogy, knowledge and theory are not fixed and bound by the standardisation of the initial teacher training course. Instead, this approach invites students into a conversation whereby they are positioned as agents capable of transforming processes and systems rather than adapting to them.

Without a course grounded in relational pedagogy, it is impossible for lecturers to create safe, trusting spaces where students feel comfortable articulating the

challenges they face within a neoliberal education system (Hollweck et al. 2019). Freire described how the gap between students and teachers is the key barrier to education (2017) and Rogers (2004) argued that unconditional positive regard is central to human self-actualisation and flourishing. Crucially, building caring spaces is integral to challenging some of the dehumanization students experience in a neoliberal education system. If lecturers can help students grow as powerful, capable educators (Bovill, 2020), this can help them in developing as agents of change. Participants understood that the lecturer-student relationship was different than the student-teacher relationship in school in that there is more openness, acceptance and understanding of them as individuals with particular needs. The challenge to this approach again resides in neoliberal cost-cutting measures which replace permanent members of staff, who have the time and stability to build up meaningful relationships with students, with staff on zero-hour contracts who cannot provide this level of support. Additionally, for those permanent members of staff still teaching (and negotiating ever-increasing workloads (Baice et al. 2021), the increased need of the student body after years of austerity, the pandemic and increases in mental health, creating a relational environment informed by an ethics of care (Noddings, 2013) can be a psychologically demanding 'whole person' experience (hooks, 1994).

## Conclusion

This article set out to explore how an Education Studies programme drawing on the principles of critical pedagogy can help students to better understand and interrogate neoliberalism and its impacts on the wider education system. The findings show that students are able to carefully articulate their understanding of the impact of neoliberalism on themselves as students, future educators and upon the wider education system. An Education Studies programme

underwritten by the principles of critical pedagogy and grounded in an ethics of care and support for student well-being supports student confidence to critically reflect upon their experience as future educators. Whilst students demonstrated a well-developed critical consciousness, participants sometimes felt disempowered to channel their frustrations into positive change once in practice, feeling they would become 'part of the problem' as they enter a fixed system unwilling to change: a rigid system which is at breaking under the weight of years of austerity, cost-of living and post-pandemic malaise. This could be challenged through students and lecturers building alliances with local teachers and educators engaging in transformative post-neoliberal practice and social justice-oriented pedagogy, a deeper engagement with how neoliberalism perpetuates inequalities through teaching materials, classrooms and policy and space for lecturers to critically reflect upon the ways they contribute to the neoliberal systems they seek to critique. Evidently, we recognise that the scope of this research is limited to one programme but can lay the groundwork for further investigations into how Education Studies programmes drawing on the principles of critical pedagogy can interrogate neoliberalism and support new post-neoliberal imaginaries for the education system. Additionally, the opinions and experience of the students involved may not be reflective of the wider cohort. These students are not yet working full time within the wider education system, as such the views espoused could be seen as aspirational rather than as a form of critical practice. Longer term research would be needed with these students to see if these critical aspirations could be realised. Future research could explore how Education Studies programmes help foster hope within students to act as change agents to improve and reimagine post-neoliberal education systems and spaces. Further research could explore their experiences once in practice and the extent to which they are able to actualise their agency in challenge the neoliberal status quo.

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