

**‘Am I an easy unit?’ Challenges of being and becoming an activist
teacher educator in a neoliberal Australian context**

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‘Am I an easy unit?’ Challenges of being and becoming an activist teacher educator in a neoliberal Australian context

Over the past decades, a body of scholarship has highlighted the possibilities of critical pedagogies in Health and Physical Education Teacher Education (HPETE) (Fitzpatrick, 2018; O’Sullivan, 2018; Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018). Although we have a body of research on social justice and critical pedagogy in HPETE, there is much to learn about the challenges activist teacher educators face in the process of being and becoming activists, especially in neoliberal contexts. This collaborative self-study explores the challenges of being and becoming an activist teacher educator in a neoliberal Australian context and how those challenges were negotiated. Participants included the lead researcher and a critical friend. Data collected included: (a) lead researcher observations collected as field notes; (b) lead researcher reflective diaries after each teaching episode; (c) meetings between the lead researcher and the critical friend; (d) material produced in the lead researcher’s classes. Data analysis involved induction and constant comparison. The lead author faced internal and external challenges. First, the lead author had to negotiate her struggles to share power with students. The teacher educator started to be seen as a ‘very cool person’, teaching ‘an easy unit’. Second, the teacher educator struggled to understand the complexities of teaching in a neoliberal context. The teacher educator [with the help of the critical friend] negotiated those challenges by understanding the importance to set expectations for learning within an activist approach and understanding the power of activist approaches to challenge a neoliberal system. Future studies should continue to explore the challenges activist teacher educators face in a context where students are socialized in neoliberal context, and educator’s performance is measured in the same system.

Keywords: sport; activist approaches; self-study; challenges; adolescent health

Introduction and Theoretical Perspectives

When I came to Australia, I imagined I would become another person, but I never thought it would be so challenging in the beginning... I was completely lost in my

first week when teaching my first unit¹. I lost myself. I was not the same lecturer I used to be. I was nobody with a funny accent and teaching an ‘easy class’. I had to believe in my pedagogy (Lead author field note 29/04).

The lead author is an activist teacher educator, teaching in an Australian university. Her first assigned teaching load in this new context included designing and delivering a unit called ‘Adolescent Health’. Based on critical pedagogy, the lead author invited her students to co-create the unit with her based on young people’s voice. Although she tried to develop a meaningful unit, she faced many struggles in her day to day practice. It was after delivering her second class and seeing a student nickname in a *Kahoot!*² game as ‘easy unit’, that the lead author decided to study her own practice. Why did a student publicly label the unit as ‘an easy unit’? Why did it impact so much on her identity? Why did she find it so challenging to teach in the Australian context? The lead author decided to invite a critical friend to come on this journey with her to understand the challenges she faced in the process of being and becoming an activist teacher educator in Australia. Although the lead author had experience in studying her own practice in delivering critical pedagogy (C. Luguetti & Oliver, 2017; C. Luguetti, Oliver, Dantas, & Kirk, 2017), for this project, she needed a critical friend to help her to understand the complexities of teaching in Australia.

As it turned out the ‘neoliberal’ models of higher education that shape Australian students’ experiences of learning and their expectations of learning environments became a significant aspect of the critical conversations in this study and thus form an important part of the analysis in this paper. To provide some context for what will follow we outline some of the broad features and explanations of neo-liberalism in higher education before looking to the specific literature on this topic on Health and Physical Education Teacher Education (HPETE) and identifying the gap that this paper addresses.

¹ A unit is a component of study focused on a particular subject or topic. Units are normally worth 6 credit points and involve 150 hours of student workload (including contact hours, personal study and exams).

² Kahoot! is a game-based learning platform of multiple-choice quizzes that allow user generation and can be accessed via a web browser, phone, or the app itself. Kahoot! was designed with learners gathered around a common screen such as an interactive whiteboard, projector or a computer monitor.

According to Giroux (2011) education has been held hostage to market-driven modes of accountability. This mode of ideology and teaching stifles critical thought, reducing citizenship to the act of consuming, defining certain marginal populations as contaminated and disposable, and removing the discourse of democracy (Darder 2002; Giroux 2011). There is evidence that neoliberal educational environments promote competition, control via indirect accountabilities, create self-managing citizens, and encourage entrepreneurial activities, perpetuating inequities (Azzarito et al. 2017; McCuaig et al. 2016). In that sense, education has transformed into 'a market commodity that can be controlled, bartered, and sold, without transparency or substantive regulation against the capriciousness of capital' (Darder 2002, p.2). Neoliberal environments seek to limit education to technological practice or what Paulo Freire called the banking concept of education where education is no longer understood as formative, but simply as training (Freire 1987, 2005).

In this paradigm, students are educated primarily to acquire rote learning, memorization, and high-stake testing, producing an atmosphere of student passivity and teacher routinization (Freire, 1987, 2005). Sleeter (2008) examined related neoliberal pressures in teacher education in the US and described: (a) preparing teachers as technicians to implement measures school districts are taking to raise student test scores; (b) defining teacher quality terms testable content knowledge with emphasis on testing as a way of determining teacher quality also reduces the significance of that which is not testable, such as the ability to connect academics with culturally diverse students; (c) shortening university-based teacher education in the wave of financial pressures on US university budgets. In summary, teacher educators must become much more aware of what neoliberalism in order to create spaces for change (Sleeter, 2008). This change is important as a political defense of teacher education's value as a public good; a space where critical thinking should reign (Freire, 1987; Giroux, 2011).

Internationally a growing body of research claimed that the discourses of markets, opportunity, choice, and competition as paths to excellence have been very seductive for all those with an interest in health and physical education (HPE) (Evans & Davies, 2015; Macdonald, 2014; Macdonald, Hay, & Williams, 2008; Petrie, Penney, & Fellows, 2014). Research has indicated that HPE has become to some extent an open market, with rapid growth in the number of external providers and diversity of resources targeted towards schools and teachers (Petrie et al., 2014). It is argued that neoliberalism in HPE entails processes in which learners tend to be treated as

consumers and education as a consumer good, while teachers become mere ‘brokers’ rather than ‘producers’ of knowledge (Evans & Davies, 2015; Macdonald, 2014). Macdonald (2014) argued that to talk of the teacher-as-knowledge-broker is to buy into discourses that position teachers as technicians, functionaries of state-sponsored surveillance systems of teacher and student performance standards and abandon aspirations such as teachers as intellectual or creative workers. It is important to highlight that the neoliberal agenda in HPE promotes the persistent rhetoric that current educational market models can provide an education for all, despite the fact they deepen inequality, marginalizing students because of their social class, race, disability, and gender/sex (Azzarito, Macdonald, Dagkas, & Fisette, 2017).

Another particular concern it is in HPETE. There is a debate about the impact of the neoliberal turn on academic staff (Barker, 2017; Casey & Fletcher, 2017; Hartung et al., 2017; McLachlan, 2017). These scholars have argued that neoliberal developments disrupt social relations and impact negatively on the health and well-being of academic staff (Barker, 2017). Some researchers have described academics as exhausted, stressed, overloaded, suffering from insomnia, feeling anxious, experiencing feelings of shame, aggression, hurt, guilt and out of placeness (Varea, 2019). Although we have a body of research that describes the many challenges staff face in their workplaces, we have a lack of studies that reflect on their teaching practice. Most of the studies focus on their experiences as researchers.

In summary, there is a dearth of research that seeks to understand how teacher educators are negotiating or challenging neoliberal influences on their teaching. The aim of this study is therefore to explore the challenges of being and becoming an activist teacher educator in a neoliberal Australian context and how those challenges were negotiated. In the next section, we introduce a critical theoretical framework based on critical pedagogy and social identity.

Being and becoming an activist teacher educator

We are unfinished beings... The reason for the existence of education is the fact of being an uncompleted being and having the consciousness of this incompleteness (Freire, Freire, and Oliveira 2014, p. 16)

According to Paulo Freire, becoming an activist teacher educator requires us to recognize that education is a consequence of our incompleteness. Identity is a complex, multi-layered, and dynamic phenomenon that is both fluid and situational (Jenkins,

2014). ‘Identity can only be understood as a process of being and becoming’ (Jenkins 2014, p. 18). Each of us has multiple identities, influenced by our ascribed characteristics (e.g. our race/ethnicity, cultural background, skin color, sexual orientation, ability, and most often, gender); our achieved characteristics (e.g. our education, job, social position, and for some, gender shifts); how we view our identities; and how others see us (Jenkins, 2014; Muhammad et al., 2015). As argued by Enright, Alfrey and Rynne (2017), there is nothing settled about an academic’s identity; it is a constant process of being and becoming.

Being and becoming an activist teacher educator challenges us to imagine a world that is less dehumanizing, more just, less discriminatory, and more substantively democratic (Freire, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2000). It should be viewed as an educational philosophy where a teacher educator concerned with questions of justice, democracy and ethics creates spaces for social change (Giroux, 2011; Hill et al., 2018; O’Sullivan, 2018). Being and becoming an activist teacher educator requires us to understand and negotiate power relations (Muhammad et al. 2015). As activist teachers educators, we embody the obligation to speak these speed bumps aloud in order to negotiate them (Lac & Fine, 2018).

In that sense, activist teacher educators must be prepared to engage in a very personal and internal struggle with their own stereotypes and assumptions about the students they are working with (Mcintyre, 2006; Oliver et al., 2015). It is because critical pedagogy is not simply a process through which privileged teachers blindly advocate the dialogical model that would allow oppressed students to share their experiences and state their grievances. According to Freire et al. (2014), these white teachers often speak with great pride of their benevolence – ‘a form of paternalism that turns the minority students into trophies’ (p.10). It highlights the egotistic interest of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes the oppressed the objects of its humanitarian, itself maintains and embodies oppression. This ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy: a binary position where white teacher believe that they need to ‘help’ or ‘save’ his/her student (Ladson-Billings, 2000; McIntyre, 2006).

Activist teacher educators also may be uncomfortable with the necessary change in power relations that results from the necessity of a more democratic pedagogical process (Bovill et al., 2011; Enright et al., 2017; Fitzpatrick, 2018; Luguetti & Oliver, 2018; Oliver et al., 2015). It challenges conventional conceptions of learners as subordinate to the expert teacher educator in engaging with what is taught and how

(Bovill et al., 2011). The essence of democratic education is this possibility of re-learning, of exchanging.

In HPETE, there is growing recognition of the complex and multifaceted process that contributes to being and becoming an activist teacher educator through self-study. According to Ovens and Fletcher (2014), self-study requires a willingness to look vulnerably in order to unravel the complex network of thoughts, emotions, assumptions, histories, and aspirations that motivate pedagogic action. Ovens (2014) and Cameron (2014) undertook self-studies to illuminate, provoke, and challenge their practice as activist teacher educators. Specifically, Ovens (2014) aimed to examine how he used peer-teaching to enable an inquiry-oriented approach in PETE in New Zealand. He concluded that the challenge of enacting a critical pedagogy is not about adopting a new approach, but confronting how our own pedagogies anesthetise the students from challenging their own education. Cameron (2014) explored her process of becoming an activist teacher educators in Canada to understand how and why the critical pedagogy approach she was using as a teacher educator was being resisted by some students. She described her struggle to negotiate power relation as an inexperienced activist teacher educator.

While advocacy for critical pedagogy in HPETE has grown exponentially over the years, there is little research that aims to understand the challenges teacher educators face in the process of being and becoming an activist agent.

Methodology

Analyzing the uniquely personal challenges the lead author faced, requires a similarly personal methodological approach that allows the articulation of feelings of vulnerability in an honest but rigorous way (Casey & Fletcher, 2017). For this reason, collaborative self-study guided this study (LaBoskey, 2004). A key aspect of collaborative self-study is that helps teachers describe and analyze their practice, allowing them to draw conclusions about the nature of specific pedagogical situations while developing deeper awareness of future pedagogical possibilities. We used LaBoskey's (2004) five characteristics of self-studies to guide our study: a) they are self-initiated and self-focused; b) they are improvement aimed; c) they are interactive in terms of the process and potential product; d) they use multiple, primarily qualitative methods, and; e) they provide exemplar-based validation couched in trustworthiness. When conducting a collaborative self-study it is also essential to have access to a critical

friend or friends, a trusted person who can ask provocative questions, be asked questions, provide support and encouragement and offer helpful critique (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014).

Setting and participants

This research project took place in a University in Melbourne, Australia. The university was the first Australian university to use a 'block' model of learning, where the students study one unit (subject) at a time every four weeks. Each unit has three, three-hour, face-to-face teaching sessions per week, scheduled over three days. The 'block' model focuses on interactive learning and group work with small size classes (max 35 students).

The lead author (Carla) arrived in Australia in October 2018 and started to design a unit called Adolescent Health. This unit is for second year students from health education and sport science and aimed to investigate the impact of physical, cognitive, psychological and social perspectives on adolescent health and wellbeing. It also analysed the major factors affecting the health of adolescents such as drugs, alcohol abuse, bullying and violence. The lead author designed the unit in October to December 2018. This research draws on the third experience of delivering this unit (April).

Participants included Carla and a critical friend. Carla was a 36-year-old middle class Brazilian teacher educator with 6 years of experience using activist teaching approaches in a variety of physical activity settings in and out of schools. English was also her additional language.

Carla's PhD research was an activist study with boys from socially vulnerable backgrounds in a sport context in a NGO in Brazil (Lugueti et al., 2017). Her second study was in her postdoc in US where she implemented an activist approach in an after school sports club (Lugueti & Oliver, 2019). Her last study took place in a community engagement sport program in a University in Brazil where she implemented an activist approach with young people and pre-service teachers. Carla has taught in two private universities in Brazil for 10 years. Brazil has a mixed system of public and private funded universities. Public universities are federally funded or financed by State governments and private universities are mostly for-profit. In order to enter a university in Brazil, candidates must undergo a public open examination that takes place once a year. Public universities usually offer the best quality education, and therefore competition is fierce. Carla taught diverse students on private universities, mostly on night-only courses. In

her last activist study in a University in Brazil, she worked with pre-service teachers who self-identified as low socioeconomic status and some of them stated that they lived in *favelas*³.

The second author (Fiona) acted as critical friend. She was a 37-year-old middle class white teacher educator, originally from New Zealand. She joined the Australian University in 2012 to teach and research topics regarding discrimination, inequality and social change in and through sport. Recently, she wrote a paper about the process of being and becoming an early career researcher in a neoliberal context (McLachlan, 2017) which inspired Carla to write this paper. Fiona helped Carla to understand the neoliberal Australian context in which she was working as well as and how Carla's identity was challenge in this project. Fiona was contacted regularly for advice on how to progress through the project. Fiona's role in this study was someone who could ask provocative questions, contribute and examine data from another lens and offer a critique of a colleague's work (Casey & Fletcher, 2017).

The activist approach in the Adolescent Health unit

The Adolescent Health unit was designed using an activist approach called Student-Centered Inquiry *as* Curriculum (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013). This activist approach, inspired by years of research with youth; was designed as a means of listening and responding to students in order to better facilitate their interest, motivation and learning in physical activity settings. The approach includes *Building the Foundation* followed by a four-phase cyclical process of *Planning, Responding to Students, Listening to Respond*, and *Analyzing Responses* as the basis of all pedagogical decisions (Figure 1).

Building the Foundation Phase was designed with the intent of identifying what facilitated and hindered the youth's engagement in health and physical activity (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013). In session 3, we interviewed a group of 60 grade 9 students regarding their feelings during PE, physical activity and health barriers they face to be health, changes they want in PE and Sport, and what they want to know more about health. Given what we learned during *Building the Foundation Phase*, Carla and her students co-created and implemented an *Activist Phase*. The students had to study the

³ Favelas is a Brazilian shack or shanty town; a slum. It is a unique, low and middle-income, and unregulated neighborhood that has experienced historical governmental neglect.

topics that emerged on the analyses of the young people's voices and we planned a second field trip on session 11 to respond to them. We prepared a Health expo with interactive information stands to deliver for 150 young people.

The implementation of the activist approach lasted 11 sessions in 2019 (Table 1). The students were enrolled in three three-hour, face-to-face teaching sessions per week (Tuesday, Thursday and Friday).

[Insert Figure 1]

[Insert Table 1]

Data collection sources

Data collection spanned 11 sessions and included:

(a) *Lead researcher observations collected as field notes*. Carla wrote field notes/observations after each class (total of 34 pages). This data was used to inform the meeting with her critical friend.

(b) *Lead researcher reflective diaries*. Carla completed diary entries after every class for the 11 sessions (total of 9 pages). Diary entries were based around the challenges she experienced of the activist approach.

(c) *Meetings between the lead research and the critical friend*: Because self-study requires interaction with others to move beyond reflection, Carla had a critical friend during this study. Fiona, an expert in activist approaches, served as a peer debriefer and assisting with progressive data analysis; contacted regularly for advice on how to progress through the project. All meetings were audio recorded and transcribed (total of 17 pages).

(d) *Material produced in the lead researcher's classes*. All generated artifacts and these were collected, such as lesson plans, summaries of data collected from the youth, and other student productions (total of 57 pages).

Data analysis

Data analysis involved three steps and was approached using an inductive lens (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, Carla read all data sets and engaged in the process of coding aimed at capturing the challenges she experienced in delivering a unit based on

an activist approach. Through this inductive analysis, statements and ideas were developed as data was read and re-read. The second process of analysis involved constant comparison. The third and final process of analysis involved Fiona. Fiona engaged in a process of checking the interpretations. Carla and Fiona discussed the codes she had identified in relation to the research questions. Fiona added credibility to the analysis by challenging the interpretations of the coded data and the construction of themes. In this phase, data was moved between different themes until a level of agreement was reached.

Findings

I [Carla] faced two main challenges in the process of being and becoming an activist teacher educator in a neoliberal Australian context. The first involved my struggles to share power with my students. The second challenge involved my struggles to understand the complexities of teaching in a neoliberal context and the power of an activist approach in this context. In this section I use vignettes to describe how these two challenges emerged and how those challenges were negotiated.

‘OMG, they don’t respect my authority’: my struggles to share power with my students

The first challenge that emerged was my struggles to share power with my students. As an activist teacher educator, I knew I should share power with my students. However, I started to realize that I was giving up all power. Many times, I felt frustrated and annoyed because I was not feeling respected in my class. I understood that the students were considering me a ‘very cool lecturer’ and they were not showing respect or valuing my unit:

In the end of this class I was thinking: ‘OMG they don’t respect my authority’... ‘I have to do something’. In the end of the class it was five students engaged in the third part of the class. Most of the students said to me that they had to work, and they were living one by one. They ruined the task I planned. We should work in groups to explore an interesting resource about drugs that would help them to create the Health Expo to respond to the youth’s voices. I know how this task is important. In the end I asked them if they had suggestions on what I could do to make the other students stay in class as well. Brent said: ‘It’s because you are very cool, Carla’. Suzi said: ‘Actually this is the first unit that the teacher

does not force us to stay in class. In every other class we are required to stay in class'... I understood that the majority of my students saw me and my class as a space of 'we can do whatever we want'. And we can choose not to be in parts of the class we don't want to be. I must do something. I lost my authority and it is not a democratic space (Field note, session 5).

I knew how important was this part of this class for my students. However, I set up the context for it not to work by not requiring all students to participate. I expected my students to understand and value this part of the class before living the experience. By not requiring them to be there for this part of your class, I was doing what they want to do. I realized that my struggle was about learning to be a professor. I was not setting expectation for learning for my students. I became the 'easy unit' where my students could do whatever they want to do. Although I had experience in working with activist approaches before, this class was the first time I was working in tertiary education in a regular unit.

To be honest, as teacher educators we always feel fear. Every class I have taught I'm afraid of something... I was afraid my students will not understand the meaning of what we are doing... I have the fear that they will not care about the class... I am afraid to be sharing power with my students... I reflected how much I am new as an activist teacher in tertiary education. Although I have tried projects in Brazil, I worked with volunteers, a few volunteers. This is the first time I experience being an activist teacher in a regular unit: with students enrolled in my class. It is completely different in terms of power relationships. They are enrolled and not volunteers! I understood that I cannot expect the same commitment (Field note, session 4).

In my previous experience with activist approaches, I also struggled to share power. For example, I was working with youth in my PhD and I remember doing what the kids wanted to do instead of what facilitate their learning (Luguetti & Oliver, 2017). After implementing two activist approaches with young people and teachers/coaches, I imagined I would know how to share power. However, I kept struggling with sharing power in a new context. It is one of the single most difficult pieces about learning to use an activist approach. I had to learn the importance of setting expectations for learning within an activist approach. My colleague Brent helped me to understand it:

A few hours before class I talked to Brent and I believe that it motivated me to make that decision. Brent used the metaphor of the child that faces a colorful plate prepared with love that suddenly says: ‘I do not want to eat this or that.’ Brent explained to me that sometimes we cannot give options when we still have no responsibility in the decisions. Eating the whole plate will be important to the child. I understood Brent's metaphor. My challenge is to share power in my class ensuring that my students have responsibilities in their choices (Field note, session 6).

As Brent described, it would be important to ensure that my students have responsibility in their choices. I could not give the responsibility when the students still have no responsibility in the decisions:

I came back and I emphasized the importance of the second part of the class. I forced them to eat the whole plate’... I changed the activities to make the activities to be more meaningful for them... I also explained why I was doing it. I said that attendance will be mandatory, and I had the best class after it. I saw a different side of myself... I said to them that it was a difference side of me that I don’t like (Field note, session 6).

This vignette described the internal challenge I continued to have negotiating power structures in an educational space. This study helped me to learn more clearly about my role in creating expectations for learning as a university professor. I learned the importance of setting expectations for learning within an activist approach.

‘We passed on your unit! Do we need to present the Health Expo?’: my struggle to understand the complexities of a neoliberal system

The second challenge that emerged was my struggle to understand the complexities of teaching in a neoliberal context and the results in my students’ behaviors. It took me a while to understand that my students’ apparent disbelief in education, the dichotomy between assessment and learning and their resistance to work collectively were consequences of a neoliberal system.

The university I was working is considered a non-selective one. So, the students experienced the neoliberal system in Australian’s schools, but they were not always ‘successful’ in that system. They failed to neoliberal system and they come with this idea that they will fail anyways. The apparent disbelief in education possibly produces

the feeling that education it is not the priority for most of them. I understood the complexity of the value of the assessment in a neoliberal system. For my students, assessment was always more important than learning and not necessarily linked. However, we can't have one without the other in an activist approach. An example of this it was the idea of asking for an extension of an extension. Although I was helping the students in the class to work on assessments, some students didn't want help:

I said to the whole class that we have an extension for the evidence-based report. The dead line now it is Saturday 8am (It was originally 5pm on Friday). It is the end of session 7 and Alfred asked me an extension of an extension to assessment 3 (Evidence Based Report). He explained he is working on Fridays and Saturdays' morning. I said to him that we were working in class in this assessment and I already gave an extension for the whole class. He said he forgot his computer and his USB today. He also forgot his research question. I was so unhappy about his request... I don't think it is fair. He was not working in class and he wants an extension of an extension. I am not sure about what I should do. Most of our students have a difficult reality and I want to understand and respect it. However, I feel that some of them just want to do pass the unit without engaging (Field note, session 8).

I struggle to understand that the feeling of 'what I can do to pass this class' could be a result of their apparent disbelief in their own education. I was continuing remember them that this unit is about meaningful leaning. As discussed with my critical friend, it was different from their previous experience in public education:

Fiona: It is not surprise given their entire education system... the system to get into university in Australia is basically to line up every single student in relation to one another... It was very different to what I grew up with...we can see why through the education system they would be seem themselves as an individual... because it is very competitive... it is a system that compares individuals.

Carla: I get it. They are oppressed by that system and they reproduced that system

Fiona: They don't know how to think in any other way (Meeting with the critical friend 2).

In this system, I struggled to help my students to think collectively. They were always thinking in an individual way. In this class the students had to work in small

groups to create a group presentation and a Health Expo based on topics that emerged from the adolescents' voices. I negotiated conflicts between students in their groups all time. In one of the groups, the three members could not negotiate how to do the work together and therefore one student had to present by himself at the Health Expo. I also received four emails about challenges the students were facing in their groups and I was trying to help them. The emails focused on showing me how some of the students were unhappy with how they were dividing the work in the group. One of the students emailed me to say: 'I was just wanting to discuss my group presentation mark with you as I feel like I have been let down by my group. I know we don't have our final mark yet, but I feel like the workload ended up being divided very unfairly between the members in my group'. The emails focused on showing me that some students should have better grades than others. It was not about solving conflicts with them or creating a sense of togetherness. They were used to competing and valuing grades and scales more than meaningful learning.

It took a while to me to understand the complexities of teaching in a neoliberal context and the results in my students' behaviors. I learned an activist approach working with people from socially vulnerable backgrounds. I always worked with youth, teachers and coaches from disadvantage areas. In my only activist study in a University context in Brazil, I worked with pre-service teachers who self-identified as low socioeconomic status. I could not see that neoliberalism was present in that context. I could see only the oppression of social class.

My lack of understanding of neoliberal contexts initially led me to blame the students for not valuing me or my unit. I had to learn that my students expected the 'banking concept of education' and that these expectations were shaping their responses to the Adolescent Health unit, and consequently some of their behavior. According to Freire, the more the students accepted the passive role imposed on them by a banking concept of education, the more they tend to adapt to the world as it is (Freire 1987). At first, I struggled to appreciate how the workings of neoliberal systems create passive students instead of empowered students.

I learned that an activist approach challenges a neoliberal system by building relationships and co-creating a meaningful environment where the students could feel more responsible for their own education. I was always ways building relationships in my class. I was trying to 'model' in my class, a kind of democratic space they could create with young people in the future. I was always pushing the students to see the

importance of young people's voices. I kept trying to build relationships with my students:

I was grading their evidence-based report and I saw a message from Matt: 'The final report, Sorry was a little drunk last night, read back this morning and some didn't make sense. Fixed it'. I was laughing for 10 minutes. In that moment I reflected how I was building relationship with my students. Matt wrote a HD evidence-based report about the lack of education and mental health. He was working in class last week and I was so proud to see the quality of his report. He was not an outstanding student since the beginning and I am not sure he is an outstanding student, but Matt improved a lot in this unit and I believe our relationship (trust, friendship) may help him to learn... As soon as I arrived on session 10, they came to talk to me: 'we passed on your unit. Do we need to present the Health Expo?'. I smiled and I said 'Congratulations, but the kids are waiting for you guys. Our commitment is with the kids' (Field note, session 10).

In the Health Expo, Matt and Jordan were there and engaging with the kids. They understood the value of co-creating a Health Expo with the kids. However, I faced a lot of challenges to get into this point. I had to struggle to show my students the importance of meaningful learning. I also had to be opened to understand who they were and why they were behaving in the way they were behaving in my class. I believed that my positionality as 'other', regarding my language, might help me to create the democratic space. I think the students felt safer and opened to possible mistakes, because I was different. It is important aspects in an activist approach.

This vignette described the struggles I faced to understand the complexities of teaching in a neoliberal context and the results in my students' behaviors. For them, it seemed that 'passing the class' was the most important thing, and most of the time they were thinking in an individual way. I struggled to help my students to think collectively, building a sense of community and understand the power of activist approach to challenge a neoliberal system.

Discussion and conclusion

This collaborative self-study explored the challenges of being and becoming an activist teacher educator in a neoliberal Australian context and how those challenges were negotiated. The first involved the teacher educator's struggles to share power with

students. The second challenge involved the teacher educator's struggles to understand the complexities of teaching in a neoliberal context. In this section, we discuss: (a) the challenges and enablers of activist approaches in neoliberal times; (b) the challenges and enablers of being an outsider in a neoliberal context; and (c) pedagogical implications and future directions.

The challenges and enablers of activist approaches in neoliberal times

Because I insist on criticizing the authoritarianism of professors, some people conclude that for me teachers and students are the same. No, I never said that because I think that this is a mistake, this is wrong... This relationship is, for me, more beautiful when the teacher tries to teach the object, which we may call the contents of a program, in a democratic way (Freire, Freire, and Oliveira 2014, p.19)

Creating a democratic space with students is a challenge for activist teacher educators as described in the literature (Bovill et al., 2011; Enright et al., 2017; Fitzpatrick, 2018; Luguetti & Oliver, 2018; Oliver et al., 2015). The fact that the teacher supposedly knows and the students supposedly do not know, does not prevent the teachers from learning during the process of teaching, and the student from teaching, in the process of learning (Freire et al., 2014). It is challenge to work with an activist approach, balancing freedom and control and sharing power (Cameron, 2014). In the present study, Carla struggled with sharing power with her students. She learned the importance of setting students' expectations and that sharing power doesn't mean giving it all up. Carla learned that not having students' expectations doesn't make it a democratic space; it makes it a confusing space for everyone involved. Being and becoming an activist teacher educator requires us to understand and negotiate power relations (Muhammad et al. 2015; Cameron 2014).

Activist teacher educators need to be more aware in delivering activist approaches in neoliberal times. According to Sperka and Enright (2019), by considering students as customers it could place students in a central, and even a possibly powerful, role in the educational process, especially if one adopts the business rationale that the customer is 'always right'. This philosophy could potentially translate into an activist way of working that privileges student perceived need, interest, and satisfaction – what students want or like instead of what they need. Carla was perceived by her students as a 'very cool lecturer' teaching an 'easy unit'. The way she created the class didn't

develop the expectations she needed for this to work. By not requiring them to be there for this part of your class, she was doing what they wanted to do. It could be damaging to the learning process because it is highlighting the student as customer metaphor (Sperka & Enright, 2019).

It is important to not overly focus on the individual, and recognise students as democratic citizens first, rather than consumers (Sperka & Enright, 2019). This entails reconceptualising the student as a co-producer, rather than a consumer or customer of learning who is not immune to accountability for their own satisfaction. Carla had to learn that she could not give the responsibility when the students still have no responsibility in the decisions. An activist approach is not about what students want, but what facilitates their interest, motivation and learning (Oliver et al. 2015); and in order to identify it, it is necessary to creating expectations for learning.

The student's lack of responsibility could be attributed to the kind of University Carla was working in. The university is considered a non-selective one and most of the students experienced the neoliberal system in Australian's schools, but they were not always 'successful' in that system. Most of Carla's students didn't do well in schools and they had their own perceptions of education that they brought to Carla's classroom. The apparently disbelief in education possibly produces the feeling that education it is not the priority for most of them. It also could explain the brave public display on the big screen with the name 'easy unit'. We believe that it could have happened in other units because they were educated in a system that taught them that they don't have a lot to lose.

It is important to highlight that activist approaches challenge a neoliberal system. It happens because an activist approach breaks the false consensus of complicity by interrogation and denaturalizing the conditions of oppression (hegemony) (Freire, 1987). In that sense, knowledge and understanding are co-produced where teacher educators follow as well as lead, and students lead as well as follow, and where both learn to resist the imposition of oppressive, disempowering, and commonly accepted practices (Freire, 1987). The intention is for students to feel empowered and motivated to participate constructively in their development because not only are their voices sought, but they are responded to. Activist approaches could be a powerful way to create spaces for students to name, critiquing and transform the oppressing situations they face (Freire, 1987, 2005). Critical pedagogy attempts to understand how power works within particular institutional contexts and seeks to constitute students as social

agents (Freire, 1996, 2005).

Being an outsider in a neoliberal context

Carla struggled to understand that her students' apparent disbelief in education, the dichotomy between assessment and learning and their resistance to work collectively were consequences of the neoliberal context in which they were educated. Carla could not see the complexity of this system. For example, when she was not understanding why the students were trying to ask for an extension of the extension, she was blaming them for their behavior instead of understanding the forces that are shaping their behavior. Carla's critical friend helped her to see it. Carla's experience with pre-service teachers and kids from socially vulnerable backgrounds didn't help her to understand the complexity of a neoliberal machine.

In becoming an activist teacher educator in working with marginalized populations, Carla struggled to understand that neoliberalism reproduces individuals oppressed by the system. It took a while for her to understand that the students were not completely privileged students. She didn't identify the complexity of neoliberalism in the beginning. The system taught the students that productivity is everything (McLachlan, 2017) and that was the reason they were asking ways to pass the unit instead of and valuing meaningful learning experiences. These practices of accountability caused students to become pre-occupied with reporting on what they do rather than doing it. The students had to fit into the system during their education. Indeed, Carla struggled to see how the same system profoundly shifts the students' relationships. Carla struggled to see this shift from a more social to more private responsibility. Her reflection with the students helped them to understand the importance of collaboration sharing, not just individualization. In our teaching, we can build long-term, enduring relationships with people and places (Dowling, 2008). In neoliberal times, relations with students are explicitly understood as performances, involving emotional expressions such as pride and the repression of emotions through acting 'nice' and 'keeping one's cool' (Dowling, 2008).

Carla's positionality in terms of being 'other' was not necessarily a deficit position as described by Varea (2019). In fact, it might help to create the democratic space Carla was looking to create with her students. The space Carla opened up through her pedagogy and her 'otherness' allowed her students to critique her class: it is an 'easy unit'. This might have happened because the students felt more relaxed because Carla

was different. Being vulnerable in front of someone perceived as being other is perceived to be less risky than being vulnerable in front of someone perceived to be the same as you. The critique Carla received about the unit helped her to understand who her students were and the specific oppressions they face. In addition to this, being 'other' might be powerful in delivering critical pedagogy. When Carla understood the oppressed situation her students were facing, she could sympathize and share the struggles with them. It might generate solidarity which means 'share the fight against the oppression of the others is to join this other in achieving social justice' (Freire et al. 2014, p.77).

Pedagogical implications and future directions

In terms of pedagogical implications, we should be conscious of the ways our teaching reinforces, challenge or resist neoliberal logic. We will all be working in universities shaped by neoliberal logic, and this is the place in which we are being and becoming teacher educators. It is a place which is shaping and potentially constraining our identity (McLachlan, 2017). Being and becoming an activist teacher educator requires us to see ourselves as agents of change. The significance of this research lies in its potential to support teacher educators in physical education and sport pedagogy to become conscious of what they might expect as they enter academia in a neoliberal climate. Carla's experience led us to suggest that in the process to becoming an activist teacher educator, scholars will face many challenges. We believe that sharing this kind of reflexive experience of trying to do social justice work in higher education is necessary and should be a professional goal. It might provide a little window in terms of valuing quality teaching in HPETE, in times that academics are encouraged to think less and less about what students think of meaningful learning experiences and more and more about the impact of their research.

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