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Research article

'Dancing the fine line': developing critical agency with transgressive social pedagogy?

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Abstract

We explore bell hooks's perspectives on transgressive learning and discuss the potential for a social pedagogical practice by changing its scope and material context through the concept of the common third. We apply hooks's points on student–educator mutuality and the necessity of dynamically repositioning educator–student relationships. We explore how research findings from different educational contexts can relate to the tension between an individual qualification on society's terms and the development of critical agency. We begin with recent research on youth experiences of transitioning through the Danish lower to upper secondary school system, and unfold analytical findings from the research on pedagogical practices in a youth empowerment programme situated within the American food justice movement. Similarities and differences between the radically different contexts are put into perspective by applying hooks's understanding of transgressive learning, as well as scholarly discussions of pitfalls in the performance of emancipatory education as dialogic and classroom-based. Transgressive potentials

depend on the dynamic organisation of a pedagogical framework around a common third with material, embodied and social dimensions. We suggest a conceptualisation of a transgressive social pedagogy that gradually develops critical agency. The common-third activity enables a kind of mutuality that transforms educators' power positions and opens new ways for youths to develop their agency. We wish to contribute to a rethinking of the common third as a social pedagogical core concept of relevance for Denmark's education system.

Keywords transgressive social pedagogy; common third; societal participation; critical agency; educator positioning, education

Introduction

In this article, we discuss bell hooks's (1994) perspectives on the power dynamics between students and educators in processes of empowerment for the purpose of exploring what the conceptualisation of transgressive social pedagogy could look like. We look at the relevance of the concept of the *common third* in the promotion of critical agency within schooling and youth education. By *critical agency* we refer to Nielsen and Schwartz's (2023) discussion of the importance of organising pedagogical practices around qualifying societal issues or causes that simultaneously facilitate social change and offer participants a multitude of means for participation and the creation of subjective meaning. We draw on this definition of critical agency as 'the individual's contribution to change and the development of common conditions, through which subjects simultaneously develop a personal capacity to act' (Nielsen and Schwartz, 2023, p. 150).

We begin with a reading of hooks that highlights a need to explore more radical perceptions of how to frame pedagogical spaces of possibility in which a mutual and dynamic repositioning of educators and students is made possible. Our aim is to widen the understanding of possibilities and limitations within the potential of hooks's concept of *transgressive learning* that can inform critical and emancipatory education for individual and social change. For this purpose, we suggest material spaces of possibility (Nielsen and Schwartz, 2023) organised around societal issues or causes – a so-called common third – which, depending on special organisations, are valued because they can inform the meaning and mutuality of interaction between educators and learners. In this article we analyse how students can be recognised as social actors and co-creators of societal causes, understood as communal practices in which everybody contributes to the framing of the activities around a common third (Schwartz and Nissen, 2023).

We use empirical examples from recent research on youths' transitioning experiences through the Danish lower primary to upper secondary school system, together with research on pedagogical practices in a youth empowerment programme in the USA. These two very different contexts will not be compared; instead, the analytical findings from the youth-empowerment programme function as inspiration in our theorising how a transgressive social pedagogy might appear and, likewise, how this might be an inspiration for the Danish school system. Our point is that concepts of critical agency and the common third have a limited existence within the education system, which may hinder participant possibilities, well-being and belonging.

In Denmark, education is compulsory from grade 0 (preschool) to grade 9. Primary and lower secondary education cover years 0 to 9 – year 10 is optional. Children begin school in the year that they become six years old, and they complete their lower secondary education between the ages of 14 to 17.

Transgressive learning by hooks

bell hooks studied under Paulo Freire, and Freire's concept of empowerment and emancipatory pedagogy in 'Freire's emphasis on "praxis" – action and reflection upon the world in order to change it' (hooks, 1994, p. 14) constituted a key reference for her work and theoretical engagement. According to

Freire (1970), empowerment can be defined as processes through which people are enabled and given the opportunity to counteract powerlessness and lack of control over their circumstances in life, and to develop the capacity for changing society as well as themselves. hooks's work is developed in a highly racialised society dealing with the consequences of European colonisation and having a wider mission to address the intersectionality of oppressive structures related to race, gender and class. In this article we draw mainly on the area of her work that discusses the role of education. hooks (1994) points out that: 'Early on, it was Freire's insistence that education could be the practice of freedom that encouraged me to create strategies for what he called "conscientization" in the classroom. Translating that term to critical awareness and engagement' (p. 14).

From our perspective, hooks takes a necessary democratic step towards specifying how the processes of reflection and action are dependent on critical awareness. Engagement must begin with focusing on the mutuality and common responsibility of the educator–student relationship. Here she points out that:

There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively, they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community. Often before this process can begin there has to be some deconstruction of the traditional notion that only the professor is responsible for classroom dynamics. (hooks, 1994, p. 8)

hooks considers everyone's contributions to be a resource for launching enhanced mutual collaboration and shared responsibility between the educator and the students. This means that the notion of the educator's positioning as powerful must be challenged and understood as something that can be contextually reorganised and transformed. Thus, the educator's role is to support and create organisations for empowerment processes where the teacher is also enabled to grow and become a learner. hooks (1994) refers to this as engaged pedagogy: 'Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process' (p. 26).

For hooks, the process of the ongoing activities around which both students and educators interact must be mutually engaging – activities that *may* be experienced as empowering. From our viewpoint, this means that the pedagogical intention is not only about strengthening the individual relationship between educator and student; it is also an issue of the pedagogical potential of the process and context within which they collaborate. This means that we must focus on how to organise learning processes around shared societal issues or causes, and proceed to explore the potential of mutual and dynamic student–educator relationships for the purpose of discussing emancipatory and transgressive social pedagogy. We will now introduce research on such youth perspectives within the Danish school system, contributing to a wider understanding of limitations and potentials for developing critical agency within this context.

A risk of mutual alienation in Danish schools

In Denmark, and other Western countries, education policy has focused on solving a societal problem of educating young people more for the purposes of reducing social inequality and increasing global competitiveness (Hämäläinen, 2015; KL, 2014; Pedersen, 2011). The consequence has been political objectives on professional goal management, individual tests and evaluations (Christoffersen, 2017; Mardahl-Hansen, 2018) – a so-called paradigm of school effectiveness (Helms, 2017), with a clear focus on individual assessment (Madsen, 2023; Tybjerg, 2023) and teaching to the test (Katznelson et al., 2017).

At the same time, youth research shows how an increasing inability to thrive among young people is connected to a lack of or an unstable affiliation with communities. This research indicates that some young people struggle with the fear of loneliness and a longing to belong to safe communities (Bruselius-Jensen et al., 2021, 2023; Görlich et al., 2019; Katznelson et al., 2021, 2022). Nielsen (2023) points to a clear connection between well-being and belonging in educational contexts. Other research argues that young people can find themselves trapped in ever-accelerating educational structures that can be experienced as alienating (Endres and Rosa, 2022; Rosa, 2014).

From a youth perspective, Tybjerg (2023) points out that a focus on readiness assessments, tests and exams – understood as a political goal of readiness – may seem counter-productive to meeting the

societal goal of enhancing the level of education. A task of readiness practised in such a way that both students and educators risk finding themselves locked in scholastic positions and experience alienation within these structures. With inspiration from Rosa's (2014) concept of alienation, this study may show how relations between teachers and students in situations of assessments can develop a feeling of mutual alienation as an impact of school effectiveness, such as that which developed in Denmark. Because of their responsibility to teach a fixed and voluminous curriculum, teachers have the power to control the classroom in such situations, and the students must adjust to the expectation of passing exams. Therefore, mutual alienation can be construed as a consequence of recent years' neoliberal governance and an ideological base of education reforms in the Western countries – for example, the Danish school reform of 2014 (KL, 2014) with its focus on individual performance and benchmarking (Madsen, 2023).

Youth perspectives on schooling in Denmark

This section looks into Tybjerg's (2023) research on youth experience transitioning through the Danish lower and upper secondary school system. Among other things, it looks at the way in which educators as well as students may lose meaning when they feel compelled to participate in scholastic arrangements with one-sided aims of passing exams. As three young people, aged 15, attending lower secondary schools in Denmark, in 2022, pointed out:

We learn very specific things at school, only preparing us for the exam and not much beyond that. It doesn't provide us with any personal skills either.

Also, the whole thing about being a good person, I think you should put more focus on it. I know it has nothing to do with education, but just in general.

It's largely about what you can come up with for the exam. It's not about what you can experience in the real world when you leave primary school.

This focus also provides teachers with the means to participate in purposive ways. Observation from the study shows that teachers tell their students that they are not keen on teaching to the test. Nevertheless, teachers inform their students that they must be able to pass the exam on the day. Even though teachers consider being taught to the test an improper way of learning, they find themselves compelled to engage in this way of teaching. In an interview, one teacher, Peter, explains, 'It is impossible to get everyone involved. I have now given up the class and teach those who are present and involve themselves in the tasks'. Because the teacher experiences responsibility and urgency to meet the curricular goals, it is not always possible to reach out to all students, meaning that the teacher feels that they must make a choice, which entails some students being left behind.

In addition, teachers consider the need to prepare all students for exams, assessments and tests within a strict curriculum to be stressful. This sometimes places both teachers and students in locked positions where mutuality between them focuses on passing through and following scholastic orders. Sometimes, the consequences mean that a student gives up (Tybjerg, 2023).

The development of critical agency is difficult within a paradigm of school effectiveness that leaves little space for other forms of meaning beyond the pre-determined goal. Central to this is a pedagogical practice that is more or less fixed and fails to be responsive to co-creating learning that incorporates students' experiences and life perspectives.

Critical agency in the programme Food?!

In our search for inspiration to solve this educational policy impasse, we turn to a society where we recognise many of these trends around neoliberal educational governance – the USA. However, with the absence of a Scandinavian-type welfare state, a wide range of social and educational needs is targeted by a diverse sector of non-profit programmes based mostly on private funding. Furthermore, as a response to a middle-class-oriented alternative food movement, a diverse network of groups and organisations advocating 'food justice'¹ have emerged in recent years, mainly in low-income communities of colour. The food justice movement shares a struggle for a more sustainable food system as deeply connected to a struggle for social justice and democracy (Broad, 2016; Sbicca, 2018). Within this movement, Nielsen (2018) found that there exists a wide and diverse network of non-profit organisations characterised by a shared and connected critical and emancipatory educational practice aimed at youth. A practice

that in many ways was found to be exemplary within the tradition of popular, critical and emancipatory education, as well as the works of Paulo Freire, among others. However, this practice also appears to meet and present solutions to some of the central criticism of this approach. In the following we will introduce analysis of this pedagogical practice network and relate it to central concepts in the work and criticism of hooks.

The youth food justice movement comprises more than 125 organisations based in different rural and urban socio-demographic contexts that use food and farming to create material, embodied and social spaces in which local high school teens can enrol and participate in different paid positions. These organisations are established as independent non-profit organisations, collaborating closely with the local high school systems from where the youth are recruited. On the one hand, these programmes can be understood as providing support structures and alternative educational spaces facilitating youth's transitions into education and work life. On the other, they have an identity as belonging to a wider social movement for social justice and societal change (Broad, 2016; Nielsen, 2018). In an anthropological and longitudinal case study of a specific Californian youth food justice organisation (Nielsen, 2018), the participating youths described several transgressive qualities relative to this experience. The analysis in this study points towards a dialectic between the programme as being about both job training and food justice, and it was found to structure a transgressive pedagogy, critically combining societal reproduction with the promotion of an individual and collective agency. In communities of practice (farming and cooking as job training), the programme gradually establishes a social and safe space (The Roestone Collective, 2014) within which youth and educators jointly find their voices by sharing experiences of challenging life conditions – a point that we will relate to the mutuality described by hooks.

The programme is structured into different phases at which youth can apply, be hired or progress in a sequence of different paid positions. The first phase is a spring internship that begins in March and runs for 10 weeks. Here, youths participate for three hours in one afternoon and are introduced to the core practices of the programme – farming, cooking and different workshops about job training and food justice. If the 10 weeks are completed successfully, each youth will receive a stipend and a letter of recommendation for their next job. The youths can then decide to apply for a seven-week full-time job-training summer programme, at an hourly pay equal to the local minimum wage. Here, the structure and content of the spring internship is intensified, and it is during this period that different transgressive learning experiences are reported by the youths that have participated in the study. Finally, in the autumn, when the youths are back to school, they can apply for various jobs – for instance, management positions in event planning, at food stands or flower businesses.

In the following, Josh (aged 17) reflects on the supporting factors making his participation in the job-training summer programme a transgressive learning experience:

By working so closely together as we do here, you learn completely other sides of people than you do in school. It's nice to see how engaged people are in the work because they want to finish what they are doing. It's life skills you learn here, it's more important than what you learn in school. There's no hierarchy here either, you can say what you want without being judged. School is stressful, and being here is also stressful, it's just a good kind of stress. Here you are challenged on your personality and what you think you are capable of in all the crazy positions you are in when you are weeding or replanting or harvesting. I used to be lazy and never outside. Now I feel it's motivating to work hard because what I do makes a difference in my community. By hiring me the staff showed that they believe in me and that pushes me to do more than I thought myself capable of.

This quotation summarises the central elements in the way that a social and material space is organised to make possible different forms of participation and, likewise, it supports a process of change that can ultimately be considered transgressive. One point is that what makes a difference is not only the reciprocity in the relationship with the educators; it is also the meaning that emerges from the social interaction and relationship based on a shared cause. A shared cause that, on the one hand, is about farming and cooking, but is slowly encompassing societal issues, and, on the other, a cause that is about understanding the wider connections between food, farming, history and society, as well as discovering spaces for action and change in the wider community and society. Josh's statements were recorded in an interview towards the end of the job-training summer programme, and it is interesting to discover how he expresses the opposite of the alienation experienced by Danish youths. He does experience stress from the embodied and challenging work in the fields, but he also acknowledges this as a good kind of

stress. In other words, he is motivated to overcome and value the challenges of physically exhausting labour in the fields, exactly because it is contributing to a wider cause of social justice within the local community. Also interesting is the way that this social and material space is described by Josh as being more important than school because it teaches life skills and is without hierarchy and judgement – in complete contrast to his personal experience of education. To comprehend the wider potentials of the signs of critical agency that Josh is expressing in the middle of the learning process, the following encompasses two examples from a follow-up study undertaken 18 months after the youths' completion of the three programme phases. We will briefly present condensed descriptions of how two youths, Marisol and Mana, both 18 years old, look back on what they gained from their programme participation.

Marisol's story

The story of Marisol is about how programme participation became a turning point for her. She describes it as a move away from feeling depressed to a feeling of being physically and mentally stronger. She also describes being finally able to lose weight, as well as becoming an agent of change in her family, as she was able to support her father in changing his diet after a stroke:

Everything I do in my life now is because of the programme. Since I have lost weight, I feel so much more energised. I used to be depressed and kind of lazy, now I run every night. I also used to diet all the time without losing any weight. I had been taught nutrition in school, but it wasn't until I was shown in the programme how to cook that I learned it. Now I have learned to cook with vegetables, and I cook for my family every day, and it has also changed the way they eat. I brought vegetables back home every week from the programme, and if I hadn't learned all that about cooking healthy food, I wouldn't have been able to help my dad to get well again. He had a stroke last year and was told he wouldn't make it if he didn't change his diet. I just feel so much better, emotionally, physically, and I have gotten closer to my family and my Mexican roots, my culture. It was the hard work of co-working in the field that did it. It ends up making you friends and then you start to share your stories. That was what happened to me, and it will happen to everyone, eventually.

Marisol's story is interesting as it shows how she was able to connect the learning of the programme with central challenges and needs in her personal and family life, while creating meaning and agency that her formal educational experience had not brought about for her. Her understanding of what made this possible is directly in support of the embodied and social practice and the way in which she can link these so that it becomes important to her. She had neither anticipated nor predicted this transgression, which emerged as new meaning through participation in the programme's embodied, social and material frameworks that are seen as drivers of both physical and mental strength.

When youths enter the programme, the common goals are related primarily to the productivity of farming and cooking, and through participation in these activities, new subjective perspectives, meanings and purposes of individual life conditions appear. This implies that, in diverse ways, youths will seize the opportunities within the programme, resulting in developing agency and visualising new paths in their lives.

Mana's story

Mana's story is about how they² uncovered support and inspiration in finding their voice to express their gender and sexual identity, as well as emancipation from their family's Catholicism, identifying with other forms of spirituality, and an emerging identity as social justice activist:

It challenged me, because I was not a social person, I had always felt judged by other people and that I couldn't be myself. But the programme surprised me, it was the social that was exciting. You know that stereotype about us youth as only doing bad things, and the programme really killed that stereotype. Then I started to think about all the injustice in my community and why I don't eat more healthy and why there is no access to healthy food in my community. And then we started sharing our stories, and from feeling lame and without a sense of purpose in life, I found help and courage to find my voice and share what I think,

what I feel. It has been a lot about my identity, and it was in the same period that I started talking with my parents about being queer.

Both me and my family eat more vegetables now and I feel more connected to my Mexican roots and my spirituality. Now I feel happier about my cultural background, coming from a family of farmers because of all the people in the programme and all the things I have tried ... I had never thought I could identify as a social justice activist. I would have thought it was boring, but it's actually a lot of fun.

I thought it was only for smart or powerful people, but it's also something I can do! I think it's the way the programme gives you a platform to speak in front of other people in a safe space. It's really important that it is safe. It was the constant invitations from the staff that made it. It was really captivating, there was no pressure. You don't have to do it, but you can! That whole summer was a turning point for me.

Mana's story points both backwards and forwards. It describes how the major struggles in their life have been addressed and how they have been able to mobilise courage to share their self. This transgressive process is made possible by the participation in and contribution to the productive and social processes within the programme. It is interesting to observe the way in which job training transgresses the goal of preparing for and adapting to the labour market by incorporating the possibility of emancipatory processes that arise precisely in the interaction between educators and youths around a dynamically established shared cause. Mana's story points to understanding the programme as critical job training in the way that it supports the mobilisation of an agency for succeeding in participating in societal institutions, such as the labour market and formal education, while simultaneously establishing an awareness that poses critical questions with respect to the status quo. Thus, owing to the way that the process is organised, another aspect of this agency is evolving. In Mana's case, it is an agency to find their voice in transgressing and expressing social and cultural identities, as well as a gender identity, and, likewise, the recognition of identifying as a social justice activist despite hitherto solely ascribing this to 'smart and powerful people'. Job training without the critical angle in the programme would potentially typecast young people as an underprivileged group. However, the way that the emancipatory potential is conditioned, the programme appears to transgress a well-known contradiction of education as being mainly oriented towards social reproduction or social change. This is constituted as a pedagogical practice that is arranged around a diverse societal cause offering participants a multitude of ways to participate and create subjective meaning (Nielsen and Schwartz, 2023).

Both Marisol's and Mana's stories are unique, albeit representative of the pattern among the personal statements about the development of critical agency among the youths of the study. One might criticise the programme and the supportive community that it establishes for being limited because of its temporality. What stands out, however, is how the different elements in the programme were interpreted as helpful invitations, and how the social space of the programme was experienced as safe – this led to the emergence of an agency to overcome challenges and oppressive conditions and to establish new and different ways for connecting with family, society and one's own future. This contrasts the perspectives relative to youths in Danish schools and leads us to ask how such a programme in a US setting can inspire education in the setting of a Scandinavian welfare society. We shall now look into the analytical implications of the programme's pedagogical organisation.

Mutuality in the social and material space of Food?!

In this specific context, Nielsen (2018) found the social and material space of Food?! to be structured and practised in flexible ways that facilitate a dynamic kind of mutuality between educators and students – between staff and youths. Josh further reflects on his relationship with the staff and the way in which collaboration on a common cause deconstructing the boss–employee inequality:

I love the staff because they worry about you. If you're ... Like, 'do you have enough water?' 'Are you feeling okay?' They ask that regularly because they wanna know if you are doing good. They are all just really kind people and it's just off the back they are so open, they have like a humour, where it's just like, I'm glad I'm working for you! Because you don't necessarily find that in everyone's bosses. Other bosses can be quite mean ... I've heard. But ... I know we work for them, they are the boss but it doesn't even feel like that, it feels like we are just

like workers together. It's not just like they sit in an office and they check on us, they actually work with us. They also share things with us during the workshops. So you get to know the staff more at a personal level, so it's just nice that they've incorporated themselves within the youths because then you get to share things with them, it's just, you are more their friend than you are working for them.

This quote illustrates the interesting power dynamic that takes place within the programme. What catches one's attention is the way that the formal organisation of the programme – as a job with staff that hires youths – gradually leads to the formation of non-hierarchical relationships and, by care and collaborative experience, a high degree of mutuality and personal sharing. In line with hooks, we recognise the significance of the process and collaboration that makes the emancipatory and transgressive potential possible within this specific framework. A framework situated in a real-life and societal context beyond the classroom – with different opportunities for both youths and educators.

This space is experienced as challenging, inviting and transformative. The creative paradox of the programme as being simultaneously a job-training programme and a social justice organisation demonstrates a combination of societal reproduction and social transformation. A paradox that, owing to its sophistication, paves the way for youths to receive societal recognition for their efforts in succeeding as professionals, as well as establishing a basis for the development of belonging and security through communities of practice. These communities evolve through the practice of farming and cooking as job training, in ways that gradually are invited by the staff to be reflected on critically and discussed and interpreted as actions towards community participation and societal change.

This is rendered visible through the ways in which the initial staff–youth relationship is gradually transformed into a mutual co-worker relationship. In this process, staff are gradually transforming their power base as the youths become increasingly skilled and are promoted to management roles and more responsibility. The social space is transformed, and although from a youth perspective it is still considered challenging, it is simultaneously experienced as inviting and safe.

In the daily life of the programme's participants, a wide range of elements contribute to an atmosphere facilitating this. On the one hand, the staff are highly focused on the promotion of productivity and the development of professionalism, and, on the other, the staff invite youths on the basis of the shared cause to transgress the limitations of what they believe themselves capable. This implies that staff are actively setting a framework and formulating explicit expectations of the youths, while being careful not to ask questions that may imply an involuntary sharing of the struggles of life situations. The point here is that when – and if – youths feel it relevant to share something with which they are struggling – as was the case with Mana and Marisol – the social and material framework of the programme enables them to feel increasingly safe and to share their personal perspectives with staff and other youths.

For the educators – the programme's staff – the mutuality is supported by the programme structure and the theory of change that lies behind. A theory that can be described as an increased leadership model, where the increased competences in managing the skills of farming, distribution and cooking are reflected in the level of responsibility, leadership and the positions that youths are invited to take up. For the staff, the central value of this process is described as knowing your craft: 'It's important for all of us on staff to understand the programme's youth empowerment approach, and not just understand it mentally or intellectually, but be able to live it, be able to walk the talk.'

This quotation is key, as it demonstrates how the programme's theory of empowerment is not merely about the staff's specific mind-set, their mental or intellectual skills, but is, in fact, in line with hooks's perspectives on the way that staff participate as co-workers and collaborators with youths within the structure:

It's an absolute deal breaker that our orientation towards youth development work and justice is not intended to fix or save anyone, we don't fix anyone, we don't save anyone, we create spaces and opportunities for youths. This doesn't mean that we don't play a role; it doesn't mean we don't have a heavy hand interfering at times.

This quotation highlights a central point in the role of staff as mutual participants and providers of a social and material space of possibilities. The empowerment processes lay out the structure and the participant conditions, which is a collaboration about a shared cause where no one has to be fixed or empowered by others. In the following, staff members unfold how this mutuality concretely is established:

So part of keeping a safe space is also, erm ... dancing that fine line of authority versus partner and there are definitely moments in the spring more than in the summer where, and it hasn't happened that often, were we would, we would definitely show that there're boundaries not to cross ... it's pretty rare but if somebody were to say something disrespectful or rude or hurtful to somebody else I might, right in the moment, let's say you said something disrespectful to somebody else, I might just stop what I'm doing and say wow Michael, that was super disrespectful. And just by calling it out, by labelling it, that let's folks know that we're watching and that they will be called out on it. But even then, it's like there's a big difference between a real authority figure would be like you know, Michael don't say that, Michael leave the room, Michael go to the principal's office, right. It's more directive. What I would do is just bring attention to that person for themselves that they're doing something that's disrespectful but that also let's everybody else in circle know that I have that awareness, you know.

This description of 'dancing the fine line of authority versus partner' is interesting regarding the way that staff call out a comment as crossing a line, but contrary to a more 'real authority figure' the staff choose not to sanction or exclude the offender from the group. Instead, they invite a collective awareness and the feasibility of mutual negotiation of social norms about collaboration. Dancing the fine line of authority versus partner, as we see in this case, is full of dilemmas and conflicts – and constantly at stake.

What Nielsen's (2018) study also observed was the way that this dance changes character during the programme phases. In the early phase, authority is expressed mainly by the staff. However, as the co-worker aspects intensify, the frequency of conflicts decreases and the balance shifts towards a mutuality between the partners of the dance.

Conceptualising transgressive social pedagogy

In our discussion of what the central pedagogical perspectives of the Food?! programme are theoretically pointing at, we expand hooks's points on transgressive learning by suggesting a transgressive social pedagogy that can inspire the future framework of lower secondary education in Denmark.

Taking our point of departure in the analyses above, we argue that emancipatory theory must focus on conditions for collaborative participation in common societal affairs by developing a critical agency around societal causes and through this facilitate a diversity of individual pathways. To do so, we emphasise an important core element in a transgressive social pedagogy that focuses on the development of critical agency, such as can be seen in the Food!? programme. Here, we encounter a kind of emancipation that is understood as critical agency emerging dynamically in social interactions around a flexibly structured societal cause. This is something that young people are constantly developing together with educators. From this perspective, nobody can empower others in one-sided and deterministic ways, as the emancipatory project is about the collaboration on the establishment of possibility conditions for participation for the purpose of developing critical agency in multiple subjective ways.

Beyond the classroom!

We argue that a transgressive social pedagogy is about a creative paradox of framing pedagogical processes as the dialectic between social reproduction and social change. This can lead to the development of agencies where different options for participation are made available and where a wide range of choices and trajectories can potentially (not predictably) mobilise empowerment in many ways (Nielsen and Schwartz, 2023). On the basis of this approach, we point to an expansion of hooks's invitation to look beyond the classroom – for seeking answers as to how we can facilitate a transgressive social pedagogy where young people – and their educators – can thrive and find agency.

By describing the point of moving beyond the classroom in general to facilitate a transgressive social pedagogy, we draw on Berry's (2010) explanation of hooks's point on mutual vulnerability in safe spaces. The consequence of this is that educators can also learn from students and that 'Engaged pedagogy permits and encourages integration of students' lived experiences in the curriculum' (Berry, 2010, p. 24) in, for example, the importance of storytelling.

At the same time, Berry criticises hooks's approach for focusing overly on dialogue in classrooms without addressing the dilemmas of such mutuality in learning communities. She points out that the educator has a *historical* power that can limit freedom of speech, and that a focus on the intellectual and cognitive dialogue can develop hierarchies in oppressive ways (Berry, 2010).

In addition, Ellsworth (1989) criticises how the educator's differences and privileges contain an asymmetrical relationship that may silence the dialogues in a traditional classroom. Similar to hooks and Berry, she argues that the educator should not be the sole provider of empowerment and suggests that 'by moving critical pedagogy to lived experiences placed into current reality, teachers and teacher-educators can begin to deconstruct the perceived empowerment gained from such a classroom experience' (Ellsworth, 1989; in Berry, 2010, p. 22).

With this approach, one may ask whether, by remaining in classrooms, students will be bound to remain objects who, in the dialogues, will be assigned to agency by the educator. The historical social practice in a traditional classroom is influenced by a multitude of political aims and tasks for both students and educators that can make a hooks's vision of a practice of freedom difficult to obtain – especially when a feeling of mutual alienation is developed, such as in the Danish school described above. This leads to the assumption that the dialogues will privilege some students above others when this appears as the main means of participation at school.

The common third as a core concept in transgressive social pedagogy

To overcome this barrier, we draw on the social pedagogical concept of the common third (Lihme, 2012; Tuft, 2012), specifically with respect to the invitation to rethink the common third as a social pedagogical core concept with relevance for a transgressive pedagogy in the Danish education system. We define the common third according to Schwartz and Nissen (2023) as: 'understanding the common third is about creating good conditions for the participants to (re)create the connection between personal conduct of life and agency, understood as extended joint availability of significant societal participation opportunities' (p. 55).

Schwartz and Nissen (2023) point out that the three aspects – community, agency and common cause – presuppose each other, but that the focus can shift from maintaining one's conduct in daily life to participating actively in political agendas, for example. This parallels what we saw in the case of the Food!? programme – for example, in how Mana's and Marisol's stories unfold. Here, the transgressive moment is that students are not just subjects that need to be heard and involved in dialogues. Students must be recognised as social actors situated in social positions, as co-creators of the common cause understood as a communal practice, where everyone contributes to frame the activities around the common third. The activities around the common third are placed in social and material societal relevant spaces, having a possibility to transgress the classroom and dialogue-based learning processes by creating more participation opportunities. The diversity and complexity of Marisol's and Mana's stories present insights into how this process of making meaning is supported and the degree to which learning can be life transformative. The common third in embodied and social spaces therefore constitutes the central point for creating mutuality between young people and educators, as this facilitates the experience of collaborating on a task, rather than youths undergoing a task that teachers explain and evaluate. It also includes practical and clearly perceivable criteria for when work is finished and whether it is completed properly. Here, many tasks can be handled in different ways, leaving room for youths to find their own way of doing things.

The importance of a counter-hegemonic approach

It seems that the paradigm of school effectiveness (Helms, 2017), with its clear focus on individual assessment and teaching to the test – in what Tybjerg (2023) describes as a one-sided task of readiness in lower secondary education – can hinder the development of critical agency. We can see this task as naturalised in understandings of what youths must learn at school, such as that it is set out in fixed curricula and, connected with this, the role of educators, specifically concerning power, as highlighted by hooks. What we suggest requires expansion is how school can promote participation and more diverse forms of readiness. Our analysis argues that a transgressive social pedagogy can expand our understanding of such readiness as a kind of learning that is mutually established between educators and students in a collaborative educational context. This brings about the question of

how to transfer a transgressive social pedagogy into the Danish education system in a way that may contribute to re-evaluating how youths can be involved in critical thinking and action around societal causes in educational contexts. We suggest looking at Lave's (2023) approach to the counter-hegemonic. Lave's theorisations of situated learning stressed the productive dialectic between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic frameworks of pedagogical practices. If we apply this perspective to the analytical scope of this article, we can understand the educational practice of Food!? as a counter-hegemonic practice within a social movement for food justice that co-exists in a dialectic relationship with the formal and hegemonic education system.

We need the counter-hegemonic system and its apparent success in promoting critical agency for rethinking how to overcome mutual alienation in the formal school system and creating a framework that could promote conditions for participation and belonging in a school setting.

Historically as well as generally, the dialectic relationship between hegemony and counter-hegemony can be interpreted as creative in the way that it has influenced the development of public education in Denmark. In Denmark, mainstream education and the welfare system have benefited historically from inspiration and new thinking developed among a diversity of pedagogical 'renegades' at its margins – for example, the free school and folk high-school movements, as well as the social pedagogical alternatives that emerged in the 1970s (Schwartz and Nissen, 2023). To a significant degree, these movements have been used as a criticism of social injustice and state-sanctioned educational logics, to become partly incorporated – and therefore mainstream – within the economic and political economy and pragmatic logic of welfare-state effectiveness. Maybe with the important point of losing their autonomy and identity as counter-hegemonic. The reductionist demise of the concept of the common third can be seen as proof of the process of a dynamic within this historic dialectic (Schwartz and Nissen, 2023).

This leads to our suggestion that we need counter-hegemonic frameworks to innovate and transform the prevailing project of the welfare society and a transgressive transformation of the education system. Our analysis shows that this will imply a wider understanding of what education is and how it can be organised around societal causes as a common third: 'It's largely about what you can come up with for the exam. It's not about what you can experience in the real world when you get out of primary school' (Louise, aged 15). In the recent Danish debate on education policy, momentum has gathered pace to rethink school organisation around more practice-based didactics. We hope that this will incite a move beyond the classroom where societal causes can be addressed in diverse ways. This could be concretely organised in contexts as diverse as school gardens or cultural projects, by involving the civil society and in collaboration with contemporary social movements and initiatives.

Conclusions

Our analysis and discussion in the article stress the importance of developing community-based practices in lower primary schools both within and outside the school, with young people being co-creators in social, embodied and material spaces. We also found that this implies an understanding of a diverse common third in multiple ways, where teachers and young people can participate mutually. Here, the school is not a parallel institution in society, as the young people explain their experiences of school in Tybjerg (2023). To develop an expansion of hooks's legacy and create such a transgressive social pedagogy in school will require that, as a society, we discuss the coherence between individual qualifications and critical agency in community-based learning processes. To find new ways to develop this in the Danish education system and support youths in the development of new forms of agency, we suggest looking in the direction of the critical perspectives offered and practised in the US case of Food?!. This example shows how important it is to go beyond the classroom and organise pedagogical frameworks in real-life settings around shared causes for the purpose of establishing a common third with diverse possibilities where youths can engage and connect with what they need and with issues that are important to them in their subjective and collective worlds. We detect contours of understanding new social and material spaces that enables learning, such as described by Jean Lave (2023): 'learning as changing the past and the future in the present'.

Notes

- ¹ Food justice can be understood as an element in a wider project of social justice but with special attention to a systemic understanding of the food system and how it can be democratised. The systemic approach elicits a connection between the political, historic, economic, cultural and social implications of the equal sharing of such risks and benefits related to the ways in which food is grown, processed and distributed (Sbicca, 2018).
- ² Mana's personal transformation regarding their gender identity is reflected in a preferred use of they/them pronouns.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was approved by Roskilde University and by the University of California Berkeley's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects.

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. All personal and institutional names are pseudonymised.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with respect to this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during a peer review of this article were made. The authors declare that there are no further conflicts with respect to this article.

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