Curriculum Perspectives
https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-024-00236-z

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Radical imagination and reimagining the space of curriculum for democracy

Tanya Davies[1]

Received: 5 July 2023 / Revised: 15 February 2024 / Accepted: 18 February 2024
© The Author(s) 2024

Abstract
School-level education in Australia, and in other parts of the world, is currently directed by forces of conformity and compliance. These forces are typically characterised by doctrines of standards and standardisation, and metrics of accountability and performance. Yet, education in Australia is simultaneously underwritten by values of democracy, equity and justice. The tension between conformity and compliance, and education for democracy produces an ethical and practical struggle for teachers. Recent research tells us that education driven by conformity and compliance de-democratises the experience of schooling for both teachers and young people, while also undermining efforts to cultivate democracy across generations. Drawing on Lefebvre, this paper offers a spatial account of curriculum that opens new spaces of possibility and imagination for doing curriculum work beyond compliance. Curriculum in this paper is theorised across a triad of conceived, perceived, and lived space. This theorisation offers a way to describe how the administrative and regulatory spaces of official curriculum and policy cut across and entangle with the everyday and lived curriculum spaces of teachers and young people. The situated intersections of these spaces shape the way curriculum is enacted and experienced in local settings. I bring bell hooks' pedagogy of imagination into conversation with this theorisation to propose how the perceived and lived spaces of curriculum might be reimagined as radical spaces of possibility that enable an education that is at its heart democratic, and that works *for* democracy and social justice.

Keywords Curriculum · Democracy · Lived curriculum · Spatial theory · bell hooks · Radical imagination

Introduction

My contribution to this special issue is concerned with the tensions between neoliberal doctrines of conformity and compliance, and social justice agendas in educational policy, curriculum and practice in Australia. In particular, I am interested in the ways these tensions might be productively (re)claimed by teachers in local school spaces to disrupt the hold of what Apple (2005) calls 'conservative modernisation', where the structures and metrics of accounting and management are imposed on education systems. In my work in teacher education, I navigate the ways competing official education priorities (and their associated discourses and material realities) shape how initial teacher education students (ITES) *imagine* what it means *to teach* and *to be* a teacher. Many ITES that I teach are recent graduates of schooling themselves, having experienced the shrinking imagination of educational possibility first hand as a result of school reform agendas framed by 'evidence-based', 'data-led' approaches to improving student and school outcomes, typically in the form of measured 'growth' on high-stakes standardised tests.

In my experience, this educational 'imaginary' has become common-sense in the minds of many of my ITES. In teacher education, my teacher educator colleagues and I attempt to balance the imperative towards socially just education via equitable and accessible curriculum design and practice, with some level of sensitivity to the kinds of school-student improvement pressures ITES will experience when on the ground in schools. What is of growing concern for the longevity and credibility of a profession under pressure (Brandenburg et al., 2023; Longmuir, 2022, 2023; UNESCO, 2023) is the way dominant school reform agendas are noticeably absent of any clear articulation of

✉ Tanya Davies
tadavies@csu.edu.au

[1] School of Education, Charles Sturt University, Wiradjuri Country, Albury, Australia

Published online: 25 March 2024

purpose (Reid, 2019), particularly in relation to the democratic aims of education (Biesta, 2004, 2009), and the State's social contract to provide equitable and accessible education for all (Education Council, 2019; Riddle et al., 2023). Through observation and engagement with my ITES and the work they produce, it appears that the language of conformity and logic of standardisation has infiltrated many of my students' imaginations. For many of my students it seems that *to teach* and *to be* a teacher is reduced to a common-sense model of teacher-as-instrument (Aoki, 1983) in the production of benchmarks and quantifiable learning outcomes. The logic of conformity and compliance at play here de-democratises the experience of education for teachers and young people, and particularly for young people who are already marginalised. Apple (2012) asserts that "the current movement toward conservative modernisation both has altered common sense and has transformed the material and ideological conditions surrounding schooling" (p. 212). I bare witness to such a transformation.

Rather than succumb to what Apple (2012) calls 'romantic possibilitarian rhetoric' empty of "a consistent tactical analysis of what the balance of forces actually is and what is necessary to change it" (p. 212), in this paper, I attempt to disentangle the abstract logic of neoliberal rationalism from the material realities of curriculum making in classrooms. To do this, I employ Lefebvre's (1991) 'production of space' to conceptualise curriculum across the triad of conceived, perceived and lived curriculum spaces. Through this theorisation, I explore ways teachers might engage in resistive acts whereby curriculum work, or curriculum making, as it is lived in local classrooms becomes a space of *autogestion* (Lefebvre, 2009) and radical possibility (hooks, 1994). Imagination, and indeed hooks' call for pedagogic courage is central to this discussion. Here, the lived spaces of curriculum work are reimagined as spaces alive with possibility, whereby democratic educational spaces that work *for* democracy and social justice may be cultivated.

School reform agendas in Australia: reviewing conforming tendencies and compliance regimes

Education in Australia is framed by the aspirational *Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Declaration* (Education Council, 2019). This document is reviewed and revised every ten years and is signed as a memorandum of agreement whereby the State, Territory and Federal education ministers commit to working together towards shared educational goals. That is, the Declaration is an expression of agreed goals that both responds to the local-national context, while also produced within networks of global markets and education policy (Exley et al., 2011). The current Declaration details two core goals and eleven "inter-related areas for action" (Education Council, 2019, p. 9). The Education Goals for Young Australians at the time of writing this paper are:

1. The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity.
2. All young Australians become:
a. Confident and creative individuals.
b. Successful lifelong learners.
c. Active and informed members of the community.

It is worth taking a moment here to unpack how the goals of the Declaration fit within broader educational reform agendas and how it appears to promote democratic ideals for education while simultaneously enabling structures of conformity and compliance to endure.

Every ten years since 1989, a Declaration on the Educational Goals of Young Australians has been written and committed to by the national Education Council. The preamble of the most recent iteration of the Declaration states: "this Declaration sets out our vision for education in Australia and our commitment to improving educational outcomes for young Australians" (Education Council, 2019, p. 2). The preamble goes on, "our vision is for a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face" (p. 2). This vision gestures towards egalitarian principles, however for a vision that lays the groundwork for education in Australia for the next ten years, this statement is notably opaque (Reid, 2019). The rhetorical move in the Declaration seems to be focused on a set of well-intentioned outcomes of educational equity and excellence, yet the Declaration falls short of purposefully addressing the foundational principles from which the goals and actions towards educational equity and excellence can be built, particularly for young people living in rural or remote communities, and for those with diverse learning needs – as illuded to in the primary vision statement.

On first reading, I felt optimistic about this vision for education. However, on closer inspection I find myself wondering how a commitment to the Declaration might actually curb the inequity currently entrenched in the Australian education system. As one example, the preamble states that "to achieve excellence, and for our system to be equitable, every student must develop strong literacy and numeracy skills" (Education Council, 2019, p. 2). There is no doubt that to achieve excellence and indeed to participate fully and freely in civic life strong literacy and numeracy skills are essential. I take issue, however, with the implication that '*for our system to be equitable* every student must develop

strong literacy and numeracy skills'. I may be accused of getting stuck on semantics here, however, if educational equity is hinged on the development of student literacy and numeracy, what does this mean for young people who experience diverse learning challenges or for whom Standard Australian English is not their first language? The premise that the system will be deemed equitable when students develop strong literacy and numeracy skills is counter-intuitive and certainly problematic for the prospects and promise of a democratic and equitable education. In the interest of democratic and social justice aims – to which the goals of the Declaration appear committed – this statement might more sensibly read: 'to develop strong literacy and numeracy skills, our system must be equitable', with perhaps a handful of action-items detailing how government will dismantle existing barriers to education for those young people experiencing learning challenges or for whom education is not currently accessible. On further reflection, I realise that the Declaration's goal is to *promote* excellence and equity, rather than realise it. This slight of phrase evades accountability of governments for the (in)equity of the system itself, and instead places the onus of equity on educators and young people. In doing so, the Declaration enables systems of conformity and compliance to trump democratic goals because, in the Declaration's own words, the equity of the system relies on it. This brings me to the rub: standardised national testing programs such as the National Assessment Program Literacy And Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the era of global competition.

NAPLAN and the era of global competition

The rise in educational managerialism through benchmarks, accountability and performance has become a global phenomenon. In particular, national curricular have been developed in response to global education policy trends and economic ambition, whereby doctrines of compliance and conformity as a product of 'conservative modernization' (Apple, 2005) have colonised common-sense imaginings and enactments of educational policy (Apple, 2012; Biesta, 2004, 2019; McGregor, 2009; Priestley & Philippou, 2018; Reid, 2019; Weis et al., 2006). According to Priestley and Philoppou (2018) "education policy has been utilised to achieve ambitious and often paradoxically competing social and economic goals" (p. 152). In this context, official curricular such as the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2023a) are developed in response to workplace and industry demands, alongside the goal of economic advancement. This can be seen through the focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes pedestalled as the hallmark of educational achievement and success. In Australia, this occurs through the use and broadcasting of NAPLAN data, alongside international metrics such as PISA and PERLS, as evidence of how schools (and teachers) are performing. Such a narrowing of the way educational success is measured – of students, teachers and the system – can be understood as a product of the positivist tendencies of 'conservative modernisation', whereby outputs that can be readily measured become more highly valued (Biesta, 2009; cf. 2011; 2015). I argue, in the echo of Dewey (2018), that the promise of democracy itself is brought to bare on an education that insists equity is achieved through the measurable outputs of student and teachers' work. In this scenario we do not teach young people to "work for the common good" (Education Council, 2019, p. 8), we teach young people to be conforming and compliant servants to the State. In this scenario, where the education system itself undermines the democratic possibilities of curriculum work, democratic aspirations of education stated in Australia's educational roadmap and national curriculum might be cynically rendered as nothing more than political doublespeak.

With this in mind, this paper draws on spatial theory in an attempt to reposition and reclaim teachers' curriculum work as sites of radical possibility. First, a word on spatial theory as a way to think anew the question of curriculum and democratic potential.

Theorising curriculum across abstract, everyday and lived 'space'

According to Gulson and Symes (2007), "drawing on theories of space contributes in critically important ways to subtle and more sophisticated understandings of the competing rationalities underlying educational policy change, social inequality and cultural practices" (p. 98). Comber (2021) goes a step further, claiming spatial theory offers "new possibilities for transforming education" (p. 20), forging ways to explain and understand educational problems in new ways. I employ spatial theory here to tease out the complexity of curriculum work and to offer a counter-conceptualisation to the common-sense production of "curriculum making – amongst policy-makers and widely by teachers and leaders in schools – as implementation 'from' policy 'to' practice" (Priestley & Philippou, 2018, p. 152). By employing Lefebvre's (1991) *production of space*, it becomes possible to explain how abstract spaces of curriculum and policy exert pressure from an always-elsewhere to direct and regulate the work of schools in top-down ways. These abstract spaces of curriculum and policy are necessarily mediated in response to local school conditions and lived in the moment of curriculum enactment in a dialogic relationship between students, teachers, and official curriculum doctrines (Aoki, 1983). This conceptualisation of curriculum as lived is not new, however theorising the lived curriculum through the

triadic production of space enables a discussion of the tensions and opportunities across abstract, everyday, and lived curriculum to reclaim spaces where curriculum is lived as meaningful spaces of imagination and possibility. To facilitate this discussion, I offer a conceptualisation of curriculum across the three domains of conceived, perceived and lived space.

Distant spaces of official curriculum directives

According to Lefebvre (1991), "(social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder" (p. 73). In this sense, the concept of space is less about physical or tangible objects (a curriculum document, a classroom), but rather about relationships and entanglements of interrelationships between the local and elsewhere. Lefebvre asserts that space exists as abstractions that "attain 'real' existence by virtue of networks and pathways, by virtue of bunches of clusters of relationships" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 86). When applied to the space of 'curriculum', official texts such as the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2023a) or Mparntwe Declaration (Education Council, 2019) are subsumed in the mobile productions of teaching and learning experiences in classrooms, encompassing political and practical actions across all levels of education systems. Official curricular is an abstraction that is conceived in the minds and actions of policy makers, curriculum writers and regulators, perhaps considered an 'instrument' and instrumental in education. Yet official curriculum texts are distant from the spaces where curriculum comes into existence materially in schools and experienced in the lives of teachers and young people. It can be productive, then, to consider the abstract production of curriculum and curriculum directives as a space that determines labour and ownership, determines regulatory boundaries, and creates the climate or maps the landscape within which curriculum work is produced locally. In this conceptualisation, curriculum as an abstraction encompasses at once the local and the elsewhere in tension and in motion. Here, official curriculum and local curriculum work coexist simultaneously, shaped by and shaping teachers work with varying rhythms and intensities. Starting with the conceived or abstract spaces of curriculum that exist in the minds of teachers, young people, parents, school leaders, bureaucrats, politicians, curriculum writers, it is possible to recognise 'curriculum' as an abstraction that only comes to exist concretely through social action. Curriculum only comes to exist through encounters and interactions across networks of relations between teacher, student, official text (Aoki, 1983), but also between school systems, regulatory bodies, assessment regimes, student needs, available resources, and local school conditions.

In this way, conceptualising official curriculum directives as abstract spaces enables a recognition of the ways authoritative power and control is exerted from elsewhere: felt and measured in the educational managerialism of compliance and accountability. Indeed, Lefebvre (1991) asserts that abstract space determines the distant structures that direct ownership, responsibility, labour and/or value. There is no doubt that abstract curriculum spaces do this work: official curriculum directs teachers as to what skills and knowledge they are required to teach across the disciplines and levels of schooling; official curriculum determine the benchmarked standards that students are expected to achieve in each strand, for each discipline, for each level; official curriculum identifies additional skills and knowledge that are important – such as the cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities; and through such determinism, the production of curriculum logics from elsewhere 'affect' the experiences of *doing* curriculum work in material spaces. Simultaneously, however, official curriculum cannot exist without the interpretive and agentic acts of teachers and young people *doing* curriculum work in relation to this official text. While abstract productions of curriculum and curriculum work are superimposed onto the imaginations of teachers and young people doing curriculum work in local school settings, it does not have to define the way teachers and young people participate in making and living curriculum.

Abstract curriculum lives in the imaginations of people within and outside of educational systems. The imaginative common-sense space of curriculum is commonly occupied by popular mantras of declining standards whereby 'back to basics' school reform agendas that claim to lift standards through data-driven-evidence-based-practice and combat the (woke) knowledge, culture and identity wars instigated by the 'progressive left' against economic utilitarianism, becomes an ideological battle over what a future focused, internationally competitive education that prepares globally ready students looks like. In this scenario, abstract curriculum spaces appear bounded by powerful dominant discourses of technocratic determinism. Massey (2005) might call this an *aspatial* view of curriculum within which the differences of local and mobile curriculum enactments are occluded in the production of schools and teachers and young people as products and producers of conforming outputs within a system driven by economics and compliance. This is a pretty grim outlook. I want to suggest that there is an alternative.

Curriculum, in actuality, is not bounded to anything. Curriculum, according to Lefebvre's theorisation of space, only exists in the interactional and interrelational spaces that produce affect, so when acted on under the relational space of conformity and compliance – as is the current trend, difference is occluded. When imagined as a space of democratic possibility in the minds and actions of teachers and young people *living* curriculum, the potential for curriculum *making* to be unbounded by imagination and acted on democratically appears possible. Here the aspatial tendencies of abstract productions of curriculum imposed from elsewhere are subsumed by the spatiality and temporality of Others bringing curriculum into existence in actual educational settings. And it is here, in the material spaces of teaching and learning where abstract curriculum directives might be imaginatively disarmed by the potential of radical possibility (hooks, 1994).

Perceived spaces of everyday curriculum making

According to Lefebvre (1991) perceived space "is social space – the common-sense, taken-for-granted physical/embodied world of 'social practice'" (p. 38). Perceived space relates to the particular—the activities and practices of a particular space that produce its rhythms (Lefebvre, 2004). Perceived space accounts for the ways social actors relate to and engage with abstract and material space relationally through social practice. That is, perceived space is the everyday spaces where abstraction meets social action in material and concrete settings. For example, perceived curriculum spaces are where the abstract space of official curriculum is subsumed and encompassed by the interactions of teachers and young people in everyday educational spaces like classrooms and gyms and kitchen gardens. In material educational settings, official curriculum can never simply be implemented or installed because of the myriad other forces at play in the interrelational dynamic that brings official curriculum into existence. The official curriculum entangles with the abstract and material productions of particular educational settings, and the particular trajectories (Massey, 2005) of the teachers and young people interacting with/in them. This can be seen particularly clearly in high schools in the ways different disciplinary spaces are produced differently, shaped by school priorities, geography, community, but also in the way different classrooms of the same discipline may be produced differently, shaped by different teachers' positionality and pedagogic approach (see Davies, 2023). This intersects with individual students, their past experiences with the discipline, with education, with particular teachers, and with cohorts of students and the way individuals in groups produce "(relative) order and/or (relative) disorder" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 73). Teachers know well this mobile complexity of the shifting spaces of their everyday learning spaces because they are balanced and/or disrupted moment to moment based on the dynamics of the social interactions occurring within them under very particular and provisional sets of conditions. And it is within these particular and provisional sets of conditions where curriculum is lived and meaning is made.

Lived spaces of curriculum making: living curriculum

Drawing on Lefebvre's work on the *production of space*, Middleton (2014) describes how 'lived' space "taps into unconscious, imaginary and symbolic dimensions of experience" (p. 11). Lived spaces are embodied in the meanings produced through social action. It is the triadic interrelation between conceived, perceived and lived productions of space that produce particular spaces in particular ways for particular people. This interrelation not only brings abstract spaces into existence, but gives them meaning. In educational settings, official curriculum, student learning needs and contexts, and teacher practice intersect, creating relational spaces that are lived and that determine how learning is experienced. It is here, in the everyday spaces of living curriculum where the common-sense production of curriculum as instrumental action might be resisted. As Aoki (1986/1991) describes, the classroom environment "ceases to be environment, and in its place comes into being a pedagogic situation, a lived situation pregnantly alive in the presence of people" (p. 159). In relation to the *aspatial* (Massey, 2005) conceptualisation of 'globalisation', Fabian (1983) wrote it "takes imagination and courage to picture what would happen to the West (and to anthropology) if its temporal fortress were suddenly invaded by the Time of the Other" (p. 35). The same may be said for the aspatial conceptualisation of curriculum. If the 'temporal fortress' of the abstract curriculum that rhythm teachers' work lives were 'suddenly invaded by the Time of the Other' – in this case, inviting in, responding to and negotiating the space time needs of particular young people in particular settings, classrooms may become spaces of radical and democratic possibility. It is here where spatial theory offers a way to push beyond 'romantic possibilitarian rhetoric' to offer a tactical analysis that forges ways to not simply understand curriculum anew, but to live curriculum unbounded from the reductionist dictates of conformity and compliance.

Grounding the spatial theorisation of curriculum in a Lefebvrian ethic of *autogestion*

In order to realise democratic possibility and the possibilities for democratic praxis in classrooms, it is worth grounding this spatial theorisation of curriculum explicitly within a Lefebvrian (Marxist) ethical and political orientation. Remembering that much of Lefebvre's work was written from the political landscape of Stalin, fascism, and the rise (and eventual fall) of the USSR, it is of little surprise that his work is preoccupied with the violence of totalitarianism, State apparatus, and State power, and with particular relevance for education broadly (and the discussion here), "the State's stranglehold on knowledge" (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 99). Over two decades, his work contributed a theoretical explication of State oppression and marginalisation seen operationalised via aspatial ('always-elsewhere') contradictions (and conflict) between ideology, representation, and practice (cf. Lefebvre, 2009). This work culminated in the theorisation of *autogestion* – a term not easily translated in English, but which is of interest here as a concrete proposition for how Lefebvrian theory might translate for classroom practice.

Autogestion is defined by Lefebvre (1970; cited in Elden, 2004) as "knowledge and control (at the limit) by a group… over the conditions governing its existence and its survival through change. Through *autogestion*, these social groups are able to influence their own reality" (p. 227). That is, *autogestion* is not an outcome or a destination, rather a site of ongoing struggle where groups have agency over the conditions of their everyday existence. As Elden (2004), drawing on Lefebvre puts it, "*autogestion* is an opening toward the possible…[it] 'indicates the road toward the transformation of everyday existence'" (p. 229). To put it another way, *autogestion* might be translated as transforming the everyday experience of teaching and learning through a process of democratic praxis. I want to emphasise here the focus on movement, on the ongoingness of the process of struggle: the struggle to realise freedom from State imposed control. To connect this to education, I propose the everyday spaces of curriculum work described above as the sites of ongoing struggle where teachers and young people can choose to take control of the conditions that govern the way official curricular come into existence and are lived. The opening toward possibility for this kind of struggle is contingent on the notion of freedom. In this way, *autogestion* through curriculum work in everyday spaces is transformed simultaneously by practical and political acts. This idea is taken up below in relation to bell hooks' work on education as the practice of freedom. However, to continue for now with Lefebvre, such an opening toward democratic curricular possibilities is necessitated by active participation in the political processes of teaching and learning by both teachers *and students* whereby the conditions *for* possibility are not static, rather constantly being negotiated.

Central to Lefebvre's concept of *autogestion* is a rethinking of the notion of 'rights', and in particular, the right to be different. Briefly for the sake of the discussion at hand the right to be different can be understood as the right to "not be classified forcibly into categories which have been determined by the necessarily homogenising powers [of the State]" (Lefebvre, 1968; cited in Elden, 2004, p. 229 – 30). This has serious implications for education today, where the 'homogenising powers' of the State forcibly categorise learners through 'proficiency descriptions' such as those used in the NAPLAN assessments (ACARA, 2023b), as EAL/D (English as an Additional Language or Dialect), in terms of ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) or socio-economic background, as First Nations and/or citizenship 'status'. Young people have a right to accessible and equitable education and simultaneously have a right to engage in culturally affirming and sustaining activities that enable self-determination (UNESCO, 1948). Yet, as previously discussed, abstract spaces of curriculum classify and determine teaching and learning functions and outcomes through the homogenising powers of standardisation. If teachers, school leaders and educators take seriously the right to education as described in keystone policy frameworks such as the Mparntwe Declaration, then it is here, where curriculum is lived, that bares the site of struggle between a commitment to social justice, the homogenising powers of the State, and everyday practice. It is in the space of the lived curriculum where *autogestion* as practical and political democratic praxis might emerge.

Living curriculum democratically as spaces of possibility

Despite the common-sense production of curriculum being conceived as 'instrumental action', perceived spaces of everyday curriculum making resemble a more responsive 'situational praxis' (Aoki, 1983). Aoki (1984, p. 128) argues, and it is worth including the full quote here:

> To date in the field of education the dominant social theory has been guided by an instrumental notion of reason which, I believe, impoverishes us by submerging or even denying the meaning of cultural reality. By adopting technocratic strategies and allied decision-making social theories, we are asked to admit the rational necessity of extending centralized management theories to more and more areas of the life of

> teachers, students, and administrators in the classroom and the school. This assumption has been so reinforced by positivistic thought and action, by our intoxication with the technical power of science and technology, and by the unreflective adoption of business management techniques that it has become a mainstream doctrine of educational thought.

In the time since Aoki wrote this assessment of the 'mainstream doctrine' of educational managerialism, education has witnessed a further tightening of technocratic regimes indoctrinating educational thought. In 1984 Aoki called for a "radical re-examination" (p. 128) of what Apple (2012) calls the "material and ideological conditions surrounding schooling" (p. 212) so as to describe and understand educational, and particularly curriculum challenges anew. Taking my cue from Comber (2021), a theoretically spatial examination of curriculum offers just that: an avenue to inquire into, describe and understand curriculum challenges in ways that provoke an ideological shift away from what has become common sense, and towards the kinds of social action necessary to embolden political curriculum work. This provocation is grounded in two beliefs on my part:

1. The Mparntwe Declaration's goal of equity and excellence is achievable, and.
2. Despite the common-sense assumption that abstract spaces of curriculum determine teachers' work, teachers do have freedom to make choices everyday about how they enact and make curriculum with their students. This is the site of struggle, where openings towards interventions into the ideological and material spaces of curriculum work exists, even if latent, in the living spaces of *doing* curriculum work. What is of interest is *how* latent potentialities for democratic curriculum interventions might be realised through a process of *autogestion* or what might be more commonly understood educationally as democratic praxis.

In a time of technocratic determinism, it is productive to deconstruct the space of curriculum across conceived, perceived and lived domains as an avenue for thinking *democratically* and *politically* about the nature of curriculum work. Such theorisations can help educators identify spaces of democratic possibility in their own disciplines and education settings. Aoki (1986/1991) describes the interrelational spaces between, what I have been calling conceived, perceived and lived curriculum spaces, as 'indwelling'. Indwelling between the abstract spaces of official curriculum and policy, perceived spaces of classrooms and learning environments, and lived spaces of interaction and dialogue 'alive in the presence of people'. In understanding that official curriculum come into existence through social action, the reorientation of curriculum spaces towards social justice and democracy requires focusing on the conditions for intervention produced across the interrelated networks of conceived, perceived and lived curriculum spaces, and the kinds of interactions that are dis/enabled to take place in-between. That is, what renditions of curriculum come to exist and under what conditions? And in particular, how might the conditions necessary for an opening toward democratic struggle be cultivated? It is important to note, there is no straightforward answer here. What this theorisation and these questions invite, is a provocation for reflection to assist educators interrogate and identify possibilities for educative justice within the particular locations of power alive in their own settings. That is, the way schools translate official curriculum priorities in local settings is not universal, meaning that opportunities for educative justice and democratic potentiality differs under differing conditions. This is necessarily so. Despite the general orientation of the Mparntwe Declaration towards critical and creative thinking and the incorporation of this into the national curriculum, powerful systems that measure and standardise learning across universal benchmarks reduces young people's capacity for independent thought. These conditions teach young people that compliance is rewarded, while also reduces teachers' capacity for imagination in curriculum making, as is the nature of homogenising powers. While this trend has significant implications for the promise of democratic education and for democracy more broadly, by conceptually disentangling curriculum abstractions from possibilities in living curriculum, spaces toward imagining new and creative ways to bring curriculum into existence open up.

A core challenge in opening new spaces for conceptualising and enacting curriculum is the perceived power that curriculum abstractions, such as benchmarks and mandates, hold. An oppositional tension exists ideologically and materially in the production of curriculum within democracies like Australia governed by neoliberal, capitalist policies and interests. That is, documents such as the Mparntwe Declaration express values of social justice, equity, excellence and democracy, and promote a vision for education where "every student [can] be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face" (Education Council, 2019, p. 2). In practice, however, this aspiration is hindered by networks of administrative regulation, legislation and funding, such as mandatory standardised high stakes testing, or 'the homogenising powers' of the State that continue to facilitate exclusion and disadvantage through hegemonic standards and benchmarks. These conflicts are rendered in high definition in Lefebvre's critique of the State. According to hooks' (2010) "most children are taught early on that thinking is

dangerous" (p. 7–8). hooks is adamant that "teaching for testing reinforces discrimination and exclusion" (p. 15) whereby "competition in the classroom diminishes everyone. It reduces learning to a spectacle" (hooks, 1994, p. 57). In Australia, where schools and students are assessed and ranked against national standards and results of the national testing program (NAPLAN) are published on a website under the guise of transparency and choice, students and teachers are diminished according to performance (Comber, 2023). Yet, as hooks (2010) asserts, "now more than ever before in our nation, we need educators to make schools places where the conditions for democratic consciousness can be established and flourish" (p. 16). Indeed, Dewey (2018) advocates that democracy must be born anew in each generation, where each generation must work to maintain democracy (hooks, 2010). According to Dewey and his contemporaries (cf. Biesta, 2011, 2019; hooks, 1994, 2010), education is the body through which generational rebirthing and lifelong cultivation of democracy occurs. According to hooks (2010) "democracy thrives in an environment where learning is valued, where the ability to think is the mark of responsible citizenship, where free speech and the will to dissent is accepted and encouraged" (p. 17). This relies on the collective freedoms of individuals to enact their right to self-determination alongside the collective responsibilities of individuals to their learning community. For democracy to thrive through education, conditions that enable democratic action in and out of the classroom is foundational. And this requires imagination and reciprocity, coupled with political will and practical action in the process toward *autogestion* as central to the act of living curriculum. In the context of the argument being made in this paper, enabling democratic praxis means that the interrelated spaces of curriculum making must provide the conditions for reciprocity in bringing abstract curriculum spaces into existence, and where learning and thinking is valued. Sadly, the stronghold of compliance and conformity and the imposition of accounting and managerial frameworks for measuring performance and efficiency do not make this work easy and in fact, de-democratise the experience of education for both young people and educators.

Demonstrating processes towards autogestion as a site of (political) struggle

In Australia, the de-democratisation of education and of democratic values may be most starkly seen in the response of conservative politicians to the 2019–2020 Student Strike for Climate. These worldwide gatherings of student activists saw hundreds of thousands of school students in Australia alone, as well as their teachers and parents and carers, take to the streets demanding meaningful action on climate change (cf. Renshaw, 2021). In understanding their right to 'free speech and the will to dissent', young people across Australia – and globally – mobilised, enacting their democratic rights (and responsibilities) as citizens in line with the Mparntwe Declaration's goal for students to "work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments" (Education Council, 2019, p. 8). Conservative politicians condemned the actions of young people and their teachers. Then Prime Minister Scott Morrison asserted "what we want is more learning in schools and less activism in schools" (Morrison, cited in Australian Associated Press, 2018). The implication in the then Prime Minister's statement is that enacting civic rights and responsibilities is not learning, despite civic participation being a core principle of the Mparntwe Declaration and central to sustaining a healthy democracy. At the School Strike for Climate there was evidence of teachers linking their students' and their own political action to the abstract space of the official Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2023a) and Mparntwe Declaration (Education Council, 2019), with teachers creating placards linking their political action directly to outcomes defined in the official curriculum texts (see Renshaw, 2021 for a detailed discussion of this). What this example demonstrates is the ways curriculum making can be (re) claimed for democratic purposes in the everyday spaces where curriculum is lived – on the streets, in the classroom, in the school yard – and serves as an important reminder that despite the common-sense productions of what constitutes teaching and learning (as implied by the PMs comments), teachers have agency to shape the relational spaces of their learning environments and how the official, abstract spaces of curriculum are brought into existence with their students. This requires imagining what is possible under the situated conditions of particular learning environments and turning imagined possibility into what hooks (1994) calls education as the practice of freedom.

Education as the practice of freedom: bringing curriculum into existence through political action and imagination

In a final stand against Apple's (2012) cautionary warning against theorising educational challenges through 'romantic possibilitarianism rhetoric' I lean into the work of hooks (1994; 2010) whose life and work constitutes the practice of "theory as intervention" (1994, p. 60). According to hooks (1994, p. 61)

> When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice.

> Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two – that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other.

When understanding curriculum making through the social action that brings official curriculum doctrines into existence, the bond between theory and practice becomes illuminated. Through the practice of theory, collective liberation (of teachers and young people) may be experienced in the process of *autogestion*, whereby the entangled relationship between the abstract, everyday and lived spaces of curriculum is negotiated. Taking control of how curriculum is brought into existence through a process of practical and political action oriented towards the right to equitable and accessible education is both democratic and a practice of freedom. It's worth noting: exerting agency in how curriculum comes into existence through social action is always a political act, whether choosing to adhere to conformity and compliance, or choosing to resist pressures to comply. However, to choose resistance is to engage imagination and pedagogic courage. In a climate of accountability, this choice comes with risk. In this paper, I have argued that orienting the relational spaces of classrooms towards democratic consciousness and social justice produces the conditions whereby the ideological and material conditions of conformity and compliance may be resisted, cultivating new conditions for collective liberation. Central to teachers' processes of 'self-recovery' and the democratisation of bringing curriculum into existence is imagination. That is, the ability to imagine what kind of teaching and learning might otherwise be possible, and to imagine the classroom as "the most radical space of possibility" (hooks, 1994, p. 12).

Imagination is crucial because, according to hooks (2010), "what we cannot imagine cannot come into being" (p. 59). In order to bring official curriculum into existence through democratic social action, to resist prescriptive curriculum and standardised teaching and learning practices, to de-prioritise mandatory standardised testing, to re-prioritise democratic principles of equity and justice and bring to the fore a democratic consciousness that values reciprocity and mindful dialectic exchange, educators must shift their common-sense thinking of what constitutes learning away from performative metrics and towards intellectual curiosity and liberation. According to hooks (2010) "we need imagination to illuminate those spaces not covered by data, facts, and proven information" (p. 59); we need imagination to transform teaching from 'instrumental action' towards 'situational praxis'; we need imagination to bring 'data, facts and proven information' into dialogic coexistence or ambivalent contestation with the trajectories and differences that constitute the social worlds of the young people in our care. Again, hooks (2010) reminds us that "facts are energised by imagination" (p. 59) and that "without the ability to imagine, people remain stuck, unable to move into a place of power and possibility" (p. 61). In the fight to reclaim education towards democratic goals and to counter the reductive pressures of conformity and compliance, "imagination is one of the most powerful modes of resistance" (hooks, 2010, p. 61). According to hooks (2010), "to think outside the box we have to engage our imaginations in new and different ways" (p. 61). According to Renshaw (2021) this means "students and teachers need to move beyond complacency towards an engaged and activist civic stance" (p. 15). Note the inclusion of students in this assertion. This recognises the reciprocity of living curriculum, where young people and educators work collectively and collaboratively towards democratic goals. Towards collective liberation. In this scenario, living curriculum is oriented towards equity and excellence, rather than performative outcomes. This stance requires much courage and the will to open everyday curriculum spaces towards teaching as a political act. Renshaw (2021, p. 16) argues teachers must "find ways within the system" to resist the "neutral-chair type of education that is compliance driven and oriented to maintaining the status quo" (Renshaw, 2021, p. 17). In his critique of State power, Lefebvre (2009) too advocates for agitation and change from within the system itself. By reclaiming the everyday spaces of learning – the classrooms, the school halls, the school yards, the quiet corridors where curriculum is lived and brought into existence, there is rich possibility for 'collective liberation', to act through and for democracy and to democratise the experience of education for young people and their teachers, but also to rebirth democratic consciousness in the minds and hearts of the next generation. Renshaw (2021) advocates for "a more activist and participatory form of learning and citizenship" but recognises that "this may require taking advantage of the loopholes and generative spaces for action that can be found within the curriculum even as it stands now" (p. 17). Yet, there is much anecdotal evidence that this kind of stance in education is divisive (cf. Renshaw, 2021).

So, in the absence of an impending education revolution, how might teachers and teacher educators be affected and emboldened to move their curriculum work into the realm of democratic praxis and to take a political stance against compliance? There are no easy answers here. The potential for democratic praxis when bringing official curriculum into existence will necessarily differ between the intersections of situated local conditions and the pedagogical standpoint of individual teachers. In relation to the current education climate, a body of emerging work that examines challenges facing the teaching workforce reports that excessive and complex workloads, high levels of performative

accountability, increased experiences of burnout, physical and mental ill-health, and job dissatisfaction rank highly as some of the challenges facing educators, often resulting in their leaving the profession (Heffernan et al., 2022; Longmuir et al., 2022). This does not paint a pretty picture. Yet, it is perhaps these very conditions that serve as an impetus for educators to assert their own professional judgement and resist what Lefebvre (1991) calls the forces from elsewhere to imagine and act on the socio-political possibility of the classroom. How? By critically examining common-sense myths that appear to mandate narrow approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. By interrogating who conformity and compliance, by way of standardised testing and accountability, serves. By engaging in creative communities of curriculum making. By seeking out alliances of teacher-student collectives. By re-evaluating what it means *to teach* and what matters most in teaching and learning *for* the young people we work with. And acting on this with the young people in our classrooms. This does not necessarily mean taking to the streets with placards and a fight against social (and environmental) injustices – although this is no doubt an important space of living curriculum and collective liberation. What it does mean, is recognising teaching as a political act and making deliberate choices about *how*, in the situated relational spaces between abstract, everyday and lived curriculum, teachers and young people can engage in processes of *autogestion* to raise democratic and socially just consciousness.

In this paper, I have argued for 'theory as intervention', and specifically for understanding curriculum across entanglements of conceived, perceived and lived space whereby curriculum comes into existence in concrete ways through social action. It is here, through imagining curriculum making beyond common-sense ideologies and material realities of conservative modernisation, and orienting the lived spaces of curriculum making towards democratic consciousness where new possibilities for political action may open. Theorising curriculum through Lefebvre's *production of space* offers a way to think about curriculum work a new, while also illuminating the spaces of curriculum open to intervention when acted on with imagination and agency. hooks (2010) suggests "when a teacher lets loose an unfettered imagination in the classroom, the space for transformative learning is expanded" (p. 62). I propose that by imagining curriculum beyond "producing compliant students who can be effective operators in the global market economy" (Renshaw, 2021, p. 15), the "parasitic excrescence" (Marx, cited in Lefebvre, 2009, p. 89) of State sanctioned homogenised learning may be resisted, and the democratic goals of education (as detailed in the Mparntwe Declaration) that works towards the common good may be reclaimed.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no conflict of interest to report.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

References

Aoki, T. (1983). Curriculum implementation as instrumental action and as situational praxis. In W. F. Pinar and R. L. Irwin (Eds.) *Curriculum in a New Key: The collected works of Ted T. Aoki* (chapter 2, pp. 111–124). Routledge.

Aoki, T. (1984). Competence in teaching as instrumental and practical action: A critical analysis. In W. F. Pinar and R. L. Irwin (Eds.) *Curriculum in a New Key: The collected works of Ted T. Aoki* (chapter 3, pp. 125–135). Routledge.

Aoki, T. (1986/1991). Teaching as indwelling between two curriculum worlds. In W. F. Pinar and R. L. Irwin (Eds.) *Curriculum in a New Key: The collected works of Ted T. Aoki* (chapter 6, pp. 159–165). Routledge.

Apple, M. (2005). Doing things the 'right' way: Legitimating educational inequalities in conservative times. *Educational Review*, *57*(3), 271–293.

Apple, M. (2012). Producing inequalities: Conservative modernisation in policy and practice. In M Apple (Ed.) *Knowledge, Power, and Education: The selected works of Michael W Apple* (Chap. 12, pp. 212–240).

Australian Associated Press (2018, 26 November). Scott Morrison tells students striking over climate change to be 'less activites'. *The Guardian Australia*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/26/scott-morrison-tells-students-striking-over-climate-change-to-be-less-activist#:~:text=Scott%20Morrison%20has%20been%20labelled,dealt%20with%20outside%20of%20school%E2%80%9D.

Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) (2023a). *The Australian Curriculum, V9.0*. Retrieved from https://v9.australiancurriculum.edu.au/.

Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) (2023b). *National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)*. Retrieved from https://www.nap.edu.au/naplan.

Biesta, G. (2004). Education, accountability and the ethical demand: Can the democratic potential of accountability be regained? *Educational Theory*, *54*(3), 233–250.

Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment Evaluation and Accountability*, *21*, 33–46. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9.

Biesta, G. (2011). *Learning democracy in school and society: Education, lifelong learning, and the politics of citizenship*. Sense Publishers.

Biesta, G. (2015). What is education for? On good education, teacher judgement, and educational professionalism. *European Journal of Education*, *50*(1), 75–87. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12109.

Biesta, G. (2019). What kind of society does the school need? Redefining the democratic work of education in impatient times. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, *38*, 657–668. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-019-09675-y.

Brandenburg, R., Larsen, E., Sallis, R., & Simpson, A. (2023). Teachers now: why I left and where I've gone. *EduResearch Matters: A voice for Australian educational researchers*. https://www.aare.edu.au/blog/?p=16439.

Comber, B. (2021). Thinking spatially: A springboard to new possibilities. *Australian Geographer*, *52*(1), 19–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2020.1862735.

Comber, B. (2023). An interview with Professor Barbara Comber. *Literacy*, *57*(2), 87–205. https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12330.

Council of Australian Governments Education Council (Education Council). (2019). *The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*. Education Council Secretariat.

Davies, T. (2023). But we're not a multicultural school!': Locating intercultural relations and reimagining intercultural education as an act of 'coming-to-terms-with our routes. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, *50*, 991–1005. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00537-0.

Dewey, J. (2018). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Myers Education.

Elden, S. (2004). *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the possible*. Continuum.

Exley, S., Braun, A., & Ball, S. (2011). Global education policy: Networks and flows. *Critical Studies in Education*, *52*(3), 213–218. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2011.604079.

Fabian, J. (1983). *Time and other: How anthropology makes its object*. Columbia University.

Gulson, K. N., & Symes, C. (2007). Knowing one's place: Space, theory, education. *Critical Studies in Education*, *48*(1), 97–110. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508480601123750.

hooks (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

hooks, B. (2010). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*. Routledge.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Translated by D Nicholson-Smith. Blackwell.

Lefebvre, H. (2009). *State, space, world: Selected essays*. University of Minnesota.

Longmuir, F. (2022). *Australian teachers' perceptions of their work in 2022*. Monash University. Retrieved from https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/3061169/Teachers-Perceptions-of-their-Work-2022.pdf.

Longmuir, F. (2023). How we can stop losing teachers. *Monash Lens*, https://lens.monash.edu/@education/2023/02/16/1385452/how-we-can-stop-losing-teachers

Massey, D. (2005). *For Space*. Sage.

Middleton, S. (2014). *Henri Lefebvre and education: Space, history, theory*. Routledge.

Priestley, M., & Philippou, S. (2018). Curriculum making as social practice: Complex webs of enactment. *The Curriculum Journal*, *29*(2), 151–158. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2018.1451096.

Reid, A. (2019). *Changing Australian education: How policy is taking us backwards and what can be done about it*. Allen & Unwin.

Renshaw, P. (2021). Feeling for the Anthropocene: Placestories of living justice. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, *48*(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00433-z.

Riddle, S., Mills, M., & McGregor, G. (2023). Curricular justice and contemporary schooling: Towards a rich, common curriculum for all students. *Curriculum Perspectives, 43*, 137–144. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-023-00186-y.

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2023). *Press release: World Teacher's Day: UNESCO sounds the alarm on the global teacher shortage crisis*https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/world-teachers-day-unesco-sounds-alarm-global-teacher-shortage-crisis.

United Nations (UN) (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights#:~:text=Everyone%20has%20the%20right%20to%20education.,on%20the%20basis%20of%20merit.

Weis, L., McCarthy, C., & Dimitriadis, G. (2006). *Ideology, curriculum, and the new sociology of education: Revisiting the work of Michael Apple*. Routledge.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.