Negotiating Authority in an Undergraduate Teacher Education Course:
A Qualitative Investigation

By Nathan D. Brubaker

Research Problem and Purpose

Negotiating authority, a multifaceted, on-going process of mutual bargaining over the power to determine or the right to control, permeates all facets of teaching experience (Shor, 1996; Winograd, 2002). Considered by many educational theorists to be an outgrowth of collaborative dialogue and decision-making that helps foster active student engagement and investment in learning, different aspects of negotiating authority have been theorized as essential dimensions of democratic education (Barber, 1984; Boomer, Lester, Onore, & Cook, 1992; Shor, 1992). Classrooms in which authority is purposefully negotiated, however, remain more the exception than the rule in educational practice. Traditional conceptions of authoritarianism persist to such an extent that efforts to negotiate authority are commonly perceived as completely abandoning it (Oyler, 1996).

A starting point for teacher educators interested in democratizing classroom practices is to understand how authority is negotiated in the classroom. We know very little, however, about this process. Theoretical claims for how authority is negotiated have been instantiated with little empirical examination, and depictions of

Nathan D. Brubaker is an assistant professor in the Department of Early, Elementary, and Reading Education at James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia.

democratic classrooms have relied more on anecdotal accounts of teaching/learning practices than systematic research (e.g., Apple & Beane, 1995). What we do know is derived more from elementary and high school contexts (Manke, 1997; Oyler, 1996) than college classrooms (Fecho, Commeyras, Bauer, & Font, 2000). If teachers are to gain a deeper understanding of negotiatory practices, empirical support for their implementation, and practical guidance for structuring classroom authority relations, systematic empirical study of negotiating authority is needed. The purpose of this study was to help fill this gap by exploring how authority was negotiated in an undergraduate teacher education course.

Theoretical Perspectives

Three theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant to examining how authority is negotiated in teacher education classrooms. The first is Dewey's vision of democratic education, in which democracy is "more than a form of government" and is, in fact, "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience," requiring the active participation of students in collective deliberation and inquiry (Dewey, 1966, p. 87). Second is Foucault's (1980) conception of power, in which authority is continually negotiated regardless of specific educational practices, since authority is considered a relational construct that is not owned as though a commodity, but is a force that continually flows through experience and is jointly constructed through mutual actions. Third is Freire's (1996) theory of liberatory praxis, which connects theories of democracy and power to reconstruct traditional conceptions of pedagogical authority defined by domination into alternative conceptions characterized by mutuality and dialogue. While these theories of democratic/liberatory pedagogy and power/authority in the classroom provide solid conceptual foundations for examining how authority is negotiated, they require systematic instantiation and investigation to discern implications for teaching practice.

For this study, I broadly defined *authority* as an interrelational act that is exercised rather than owned, involving rights recognized as legitimate by those under its influence to shape or control social circumstances (Amit & Fried, 2005). I defined *negotiation* as an ongoing process of mutual communication and decision-making that is concerned with reconciling differences when some interests are shared and others are opposed (Lens, 2004). In this conception, authority "operates in situations in which a person or group, fulfilling some purpose, project, or need, requires guidance or direction from a source outside himself [sic] or itself" (Benne, 1970, p. 392). This guidance may be in the form of expertise, involving acceptance or endorsement of particular beliefs, bestowing the *right to be believed*; or rules, establishing a system of orderly transactions over peoples' conduct, bestowing a *right to rule* (Steutel & Spiecker, 2000). The triadic relation between a subject, a bearer, and a field constitutes an authority relation, in which a subject with a particular need grants willing obedience to a bearer with a claim to special competence to fulfill

the need, within a field delimited by both the competence of the bearer and the need of the subject (Benne, 1971, p. 48). To the extent that all affected community members help construct this relation under conditions of mutual interdependence, it can be considered democratic authority—an ideal to which principled (as opposed to manipulative or adversarial) negotiation is fundamental.

Review of Relevant Literature

Surprisingly little research has actually been conducted on how authority is negotiated in different classroom contexts. Some studies address how authority is shared (Oyler, 1996). Others focus on the role of the teacher's beliefs in constructing classroom authority relations (Burk & Fry, 1997), programmatic outcomes of democratic practices (Rainer & Guyton, 2001), how authority is conceptualized (Pace, 2003), or psychological concepts such as transference (Baumlin & Weaver, 2000), without considering the negotiatory dimensions of classroom authority. Literature does, however, suggest several dimensions through which authority is manifested in classroom contexts relevant to examining how it is negotiated.

Grading

One important manifestation of classroom authority resides in grading practices. While a considerable body of literature addresses the historical evolution of grading (as distinguished from assessment and evaluation) as an institutional practice in contemporary schooling (e.g., Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971; Kohn, 2004; Placier, 1995), concluding that it has little merit as a defensible educational construct, several authors have documented efforts to reform traditional grading practices. These include such alternatives as self-grading (Fernandez-Balboa, 2007), grading contracts (Boomer et al., 1992; Kirschenbaum et al., 1971; Shor, 1996), learning contracts (Greenwood, 1995), and reading and writing portfolios (Robbins et al., 1995). These proposals provide important insights into different assessment and grading practices, though they do not examine the role that these practices play within broader efforts to negotiate classroom authority relations.

Curriculum

A second important manifestation of classroom authority resides in curriculum. A teacher who assumes control of both curricular content and process can be considered to be both *an* authority and *in* authority (Oyler, 1996). Two texts (Boomer et al., 1992; Shor, 1996) provide exemplary models for negotiating authority through curriculum collaboration. Boomer and his colleagues outline a basic framework of four central questions for negotiating curricular content and process with students at all levels:

(1) What do we know already?
(2) What do we want, and need, to find out?

(3) How will we go about finding out?

(4) How will we know, and show, that we've found out when we've finished? (p. 21)

Shor expands on this model through adding two sets of questions intended to merge democratic process with critical thought on knowledge, power, and society. The first is to be asked *before* embarking on a formal course of study, the second to be asked *after*.

(1) Why are we studying this particular subject matter? Where did it come from? Why must we read and write and talk about this subject matter? Who has required it for what reasons?

(2) How has the study of this subject matter changed us? How can we use what we have learned to continue changing ourselves as well as to change school and society? (p. 74).

While the ways in which teachers and students have discussed such questions to collectively establish classroom curriculum have been examined in varied contexts (See Boomer et al., 1992; Shosh, 2000), these examples are largely anecdotal and could benefit from systematic empirical examination to further illuminate how authority is negotiated in classroom contexts.

Positionality

A third important manifestation of classroom authority resides in social and organizational positionality. Social positionality refers to the different levels of social standing afforded individuals by broader societal inequities and asymmetrical relations of power, while organizational positionality refers to the differing relations of authority embedded in organizational structures. Research demonstrates that teachers' organizational positionality over students can be nullified in part by different dimensions of social positionality (Brown, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2000; C. Drennon, 2002), particularly in facilitative models of teaching (C.E. Drennon & Cervero, 2002; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998), though neutrality is impossible because of the asymmetrical social and organizational relations pervading society. While such research illustrates the importance of including issues of race, class, gender, physical ability, and other forms of social positionality in examinations of classroom authority, it does not illuminate actual pedagogical strategies for negotiating authority between teachers and students.

Overall, the processes by which authority is negotiated in classroom contexts are in need of much greater systematic research. Existing literature on classroom authority focuses more on how authority is manifested in different classroom contexts than how it is actually negotiated, and these studies are primarily from the elementary and high school levels rather than college classrooms. A greater understanding of how authority is negotiated in teacher education is essential not only for fostering democratic teacher education practices, but for preparing future teachers to teach democratically in their own classrooms. The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate how

authority was negotiated in an undergraduate teacher education course in which the instructor was committed to helping future teachers learn to teach democratically through experiencing democratic teacher education practices.

Research Methods

I conducted this qualitative research study during one semester at a large comprehensive state university in the Northeast. The university's teacher education program was regionally and nationally regarded for its commitments to democratic teaching and urban education, and the course in which I conducted the study, *Teaching for Critical Thinking*, was one of several core courses required of all teacher education majors at the institution. All 22 student participants enrolled in the course were junior or senior undergraduate students of diverse disciplinary backgrounds. They represented multiple ethnicities (5% African-American, 9% Latino-American, 86% Caucasian-American), though not the full diversity of the area surrounding the university, while the majority (64%) were female. The instructor (whom I will call James) was a tenured full professor in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching and identified himself as Caucasian. I selected this particular course for two primary reasons: First, the topic of the course seemed particularly conducive to cultivating a questioning classroom environment with prospective teachers, which I thought would help maximize the negotiatory dynamics that would emerge. Second, the teacher openly espoused a critical pedagogical perspective to teaching, which I thought might increase the likelihood of observing explicit attempts to actively negotiate authority during the study.

To derive the findings for the study, I analyzed the following qualitative data: fieldnotes and recordings from observations of four whole-class sessions; transcripts from one-on-one structured in-depth interviews with James and four students; fieldnotes from a focus group interview with eight students; a handful of relevant documents provided by James and students; and personal log reflections. To capture as full a range of perspectives as possible, I purposefully selected the students that I interviewed based on their engagement with negotiatory processes in the class, distributed as evenly as possible across, first, those who embraced and those who rejected negotiatory processes, followed by gender, ethnicity, and academic discipline, in that order. I analyzed the data as inductively as possible using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999), for which I kept detailed records of the research process to enhance the dependability of my findings. Although several themes seemed significant throughout the process of analyzing the data, only those that were directly supported by the data were ultimately incorporated into the findings for the study—a connection I (as well as another researcher) verified through systematically searching the data using the computer software program, QSR Nvivo 2.0. To help readers come to their own conclusions about the extent to which the findings for this study may be transferable to other contexts, I have

used thick description of the context, events, and people that I studied as much as possible (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

While this exploratory study was limited in scope since it was a pilot for a larger study, the credibility of the findings was enhanced by the richness of the data, the triangulation of both data methods and sources, and my use of other strategies like progressive subjectivity, negative case analysis, and persistent observation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 2002). I triangulated both the data methods by deriving insights from documents, interviews, and observations, and data sources by gathering information from the teacher and students, as well as from my own personal reflections. While there were no instances of grossly inconsistent or incompatible perspectives between the different participants, there were variations of perspectives that would not have emerged through only one or two of the selected data sources.

My social positionality as a Caucasian, able-bodied male may have detracted from the study because of my culturally- and socially-imposed blinders to the realities of other peoples' experiences different from my own—which may have been manifested in the classroom to an important extent without my even knowing it. Using the strategy of progressive subjectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) to record my initial and on-going expectations of how I thought authority would be negotiated in the classroom, however, helped assure that I moved beyond my initial preconceptions and effectively derived the findings from the actual words and actions of participants—the accuracy of which was verified by several student participants after completing the study (member checks). Using a combination of negative case analysis and persistent observation—by which I repeatedly reviewed and coded my data in ever-finer detail until my themes accounted for all known cases in the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989)—further enhanced the credibility for this study.

Three major themes emerged from the data: negotiating authority through student choice, negotiating authority through strategic manipulation, and negotiating authority through structured chaos.

Negotiating Authority through Student Choice

No theme was as prominent in the data as student choice. Seemingly everywhere I turned there was evidence of students making choices about some aspect of the class. These choices were not confined to trivial matters, but involved fundamental aspects of the course experience, including choices about attendance, course requirements, learning goals, topics, materials, quality of work, and grades. These choices shifted the very basis of authority from the teacher to students and opened many avenues for actively negotiating authority. In this section, I will highlight the centrality of student choice through course requirements, attendance, student projects, and learning goals and materials.

The course's grading scheme provided an important framework for establish-

ing course requirements. Every participant I interviewed referred to the contract grading system outlined in the course syllabus—in which students were to pick five of eleven suggested criteria for an A, four for a B, and so on—as providing unprecedented levels of choice. Jennifer[1] commented in an interview that this grading scheme essentially left matters up to the students, though if they had any trouble they could talk to James (the teacher) and negotiate changes. Christopher likewise mentioned in an interview that while James wanted them to have five criteria, "you can go to him and say I did four, but I think there was a lot of work in this one and this one, so I think it equals out to five. And he would say let me see. All right." When interviewed, Patrice also remarked: "The teacher is telling you if you do these things, you will get an A….If you don't get these things, you're not going to get an A….A grade is being negotiated between the student and teacher. It's like you sign a written contract." James affirmed these students' perceptions that the course requirements were negotiable. In the syllabus, he wrote: "The students and the instructor will jointly design the course's evaluation criteria." When interviewed, he stated more directly: "[The students] have the authority, and that is ultimately reflected in their own self-evaluation." While the grading schemes determined each student's course obligations, James did not use grades as an instrument of unilateral teacher authority. Rather, they provided an important mechanism for negotiating authority through student choice.

Choices about attendance provided a means for negotiating authority through directing students' focus on their intrinsic motivations for learning rather than extrinsic mandates from James. Helen stated in an interview: "At any time we can walk out of class and give ourselves an A and that's what we give [sic]. [James has] done this before and students leave on the first day of class and that's what they get." When interviewed, James explained:

> I want them to realize that they have to have a reason to be in class, that it's not just a matter of coming by rote or coming automatically just because they signed up….There's got to be some conscious decision to come in and also some mental preparation, maybe emotional preparation, maybe ethical preparation….

Jennifer likened this approach to a "guilt trip." "You want to get an A, but not take the easy way out." Despite not being required by James, virtually all of the students attended each session, and several students articulated individual reasons for their decisions. Patrice declared in an interview: "I come to learn…to take in information and kind of run with it…to analyze and try to understand it." Jennifer came because she paid money for the class, although she also looked forward to being there to hear what everyone else had to say. Other students, she figured, wanted to be there because they wanted to learn and become effective teachers. Marietta explicitly came to class one day to discuss an article she had read in that day's newspaper. In the focus group interview, Oliver shared that he "only came to the second class [of the semester] to see who would show up," though in a small-

group class session that I attended, he articulated his beliefs from the standpoint of a teacher, as follows:

> I don't want you to just come to class, you know; I want you to want to be there. I might not be specific and say what brings you here today, but just be there, and want to be there. Don't just warm the seat, you know, use it.

This view echoed James's stated intention of fostering students' individual reasons for coming to class. Helen likened this choice about attendance to "negotiating with ourselves," since "we have to figure out, make a deal with ourselves." Jennifer stated: "I don't want to give myself a grade that I don't deserve." Since James did not mandate what it meant to deserve any particular grade, however, students had to decide for themselves—an outcome of authority that was negotiated by students' own motivations for learning.

The prevalence of choices in this class enabled students to structure individual projects in ways that maximized personal meaning. Helen noted that James "has the opportunity to control us and mold us how he wants to," but that "he doesn't so that it doesn't interfere with our critical learning....You need to figure out what will work best for you and suit your needs as a student." In this respect, James did not use his authority to coerce students into doing particular activities. Jennifer acknowledged, "We pick what we want to do." For Stephanie, a future music teacher, this created an opportunity to study a topic she had wanted to pursue for a long time but would not have been able to do were it not a part of her contract for this course. She wanted to both learn about how to make reeds for musical instruments and get more practice with her writing. In this course, she was able to create a plan that enabled her to do both—an arrangement for which she was "grateful." Christopher likewise saw this as an opportunity to really "launch" his own inquiry project and assume responsibility for his own learning by doing something completely different from everyone else in the class. James urged students to realize that the success of the experience was up to them, that "the sky is the limit." Students could choose their own books and materials in addition to their overall focus, and James never tried to control what they read or how well they were fulfilling their criteria. According to Helen, he never even reviewed their contracts.

Although James did not actively patrol the students' efforts for the course, he was not a passive bystander. He continually invited students to read additional materials, examine their goals, and consider alternative perspectives. He did this not through imposition and coercion, but through suggestion. One day, he asked the class if they had read a particular article that he had previously asked them to read. Only three people had actually read the article. He said in response:

> If you haven't done it, you're missing out. You're missing out because that article will give you a much broader perspective and certainly will enable you to speak intelligently about the issue that was just brought up here today. Having said that,

and I'm not scolding you or anything, I'm just reminding you of the need to read in order to be informed in order to be a teacher.

In this instance, James delivered a strong message that this was indeed an important article to read. Yet, he supported his assertion with reasons and situated them in the context of the discussion, as well as in the process of professional development more broadly. Through explicitly mentioning that he was not "scolding" the students for not having read the article, he also used his professional experience and expertise rather than simply his institutional power to invite them once again to read the article. Putting the responsibility for making such choices about materials and goals in the hands of students seemed to shift the focus of the class back to the students' internal motivations for learning. Rather than coercing students to comply with standardized and arbitrary requirements through external mechanisms like grades or praise, James provided options. These options fundamentally involved students in sharing responsibility for both the quality and nature of the learning experience. Through a wide variety of choices about aspects traditionally considered the sole domain of the teacher, authority was negotiated in this course.

Negotiating Authority through Strategic Manipulation

The pervasiveness of student choice in this class did not, however, override or short-circuit James's influence as a teacher. To the contrary, he remained influential in many overt and subtle ways, to the extent that his role could best be described as that of a strategic manipulator. This theme emerged from three principal sources: the students' perceptions of James's teaching intentions, James's explanation of his teaching intentions, and the students' perceptions of James's instructional practices, each of which was central to how authority was negotiated in this class.

Students expressed different perceptions of James's teaching intentions when I asked them about different aspects of the course experience during focus group and one-on-one interviews. In the focus group interview, Oliver suggested that James was big into "decomposition." Marietta figured he hoped students would build on his "revelations." Fred declared he wanted them to "think." Helen thought he was trying to get them away from grades, figuring that "you can be a D student and still get a good job." She further presumed that he was asking them to "take the class into their own hands and bring up the issues that needed to be brought up." Patrice conjectured that James wanted them to "take in what's being said" and then "broaden on it," to bring their own questions to the class so that they could express their "opinions" and "talk about" them. Christopher further suggested that James not only wanted them to ask questions like "who, why, and what," but to figure out the strategic aspect of everything he did in the classroom—"to bring it out." He said: "He'll try to point us in a direction" and "put the destination out there for us." Christopher actually took it upon himself to try to figure out this destination and name it when it happened—"which is what he wants, of course…to reflect on it

and to think about the implications, the benefits, as well as if there's any negative sides."

James perceived his teaching intentions in both micro and macro terms. On the level of day-to-day lessons, James expressed in an interview that he wanted his students to learn "that they don't really need a teacher in order to learn. That they have their own experiences and knowledge that they have accumulated over the years" and that "they're quite sufficient to really think at really high levels." He had no intention of personally "winning anything or gaining anything" from the classroom experience, but of being able to come to the classroom "with an authority that is institutional and assumed," only to then "give it away" and "dialogue about what it is that we want to learn." On a grander scale, James considered his teaching approach to be grounded in a quest for "true education," in which:

> I imagine that I am under a tree somewhere with, ah, some experiences, and that the people who are interested in talking to me about those things come…and then if I want to learn from other people, then I go under their tree and I listen…that's the way I want this so-called classroom to be.

The ultimate purpose of his teaching was to "educate people so that they will ultimately be dignified and dignifying." In so doing, he aspired to "create a ripple effect where…these young teachers will go into other communities, and…create islands of decency."

Although James's teaching was clearly purposeful and strategic, as perceived by both his students and himself, the actual implementation of this approach was not so straightforward. His teaching actions often seemed manipulative, as though guiding students to predetermined conclusions, without notice. In the focus group interview, Chloe said: "He takes whatever we start with and tries to get it there," suggesting he had a precise idea where he wanted each class session to end, explicitly or not. Christopher portrayed this process as trying to "engineer, mastermind, and manipulate the dialogue." "And no matter what it is, he gets it done," echoed Oliver, though only after "he'll look around and make eye contact…and just let you sit in it, and let it marinate." In an individual interview, Jennifer offered an example: One time he turned around from writing on the chalkboard and asked "why we're writing [what he wrote] down"—since it was information he simply invented on the spot. Christopher added:

> He acts like it's a free-for-all, but he always has a strategy. It's like a trick up his sleeve….He's the kind of teacher where he's just giving hints the whole time until someone's like "oh, you mean this?" and he's like "yeahhh, and you got there on your own, you know!"

James himself said that "sometimes I would be completely silent and I would *let them, ah, or they would* take over the conversation" (italics added). Christopher characterized James's actions as alternating between passing all responsibility to students and abruptly donning his "teacher hat." While it could be argued that all

teaching is manipulative, James's teaching seemed particularly so. But not just manipulative—*strategically* manipulative, in ways that both exercised his authority as a teacher, relinquished it, shared it, and also sometimes negotiated it.

Negotiating Authority through Structured Chaos

James's strategic manipulation hardly translated into an orderly classroom environment. Class activity resembled structured chaos. Anything could happen on any given day. Class activity frequently involved discussion, though the topics and format of discussion were continually contested. Uncertainty and unpredictability abounded. Decisions spontaneously emerged, and emerging trajectories suddenly shifted. But what remained constant was James's role in structuring a chaotic environment.

In the focus group interview, students illustrated how James consistently opened each class with a single question: "What brings you here today?" This question was a central defining ritual of the class. Stephanie said, "This question is like the only steady thing to this class besides him being our teacher." In an interview, Helen said that nobody had ever asked her why she comes to class, "you just go." It was "weird" to have to respond to such a question, because "you're not used to having to have a response to that." How students responded to the question, however, determined what transpired in each class session. In the focus group interview, Oliver said, "We're the icebreaker….If you don't…it lays stagnant for a while." Christopher acknowledged that the topic of discussion was always up in the air; anyone really could make something happen. Fred suggested, in response to discussion about the lack of predictability in class, that they were used to topics going in order in their other classes—"one, two, three"—but that in this class it could be "six, three, four, one," to which Oliver replied, "It could go in order if we wanted it to." When interviewed, Helen said, "I just shout out," and continued:

> We get into philosophical discussion, with no real right answer….The decision is actually made by us….Someone will say something that bothers them or make a statement about something that's interesting. I came to class today because this really struck me, or we want to learn more about you….It's kind of where it rolls. Someone can bring up a different point and we can roll with that. All of the sudden we're out in left field and we wonder how we got there.

In interviews, Jennifer added that a couple of times the teacher made the decisions, though what was discussed in class usually emerged from the opening question. Christopher concluded:

> When people started to catch on that it was on the students to initiate the dialogue, there were certain students that really took it upon themselves. It was just implied that this was going to be something that we were going to deal with for a while [what somebody brought in one day]….Someone has to step up and make it happen. Whoever steps up and makes it happen has, like I said, like tacitly made the decision of what we're going to talk about for the time being.

Christopher further explored this idea of student initiative in deciding the topic of discussion for the entire class:

> It seems like a student at any time could just decide. You know what, I want the class to talk about this; so I'm going to sway, I'm going to you know influence them to talk about that. Like I could go into a class period and decide that, maybe I could even be in cahoots with another student, and decide we want to talk about the No Child Left Behind Act, and try and make it last the whole class. You could definitely bring it up at the beginning and then any time we digress, pull it back. So a decision like that, really, it's whoever takes the initiative. And everyone else will just go along because they're like, ah, *what's going on* [italics added]. They're not used to that kind of thing going on.

James characterized this decision-making process, when interviewed, as

> conversation…with regards to whatever readings they have done…whatever themes were left over from the previous class sessions, or…a new thought or a new idea that they have had in the last day or two or in the last few years of their lives.

Clearly, he provided a tremendous amount of space for student initiative. It was almost as though he mandated it. During one class session early in the semester, nobody offered a response to his opening question, so he proceeded to go around the room and shake everyone's hand, then left the room.

While this opening ritual contributed to a chaotic classroom environment, in which students had considerable freedom to say what they wanted, the class was not a free-for-all. Helen perceived that "whatever I feel like saying is kind of within the boundaries," and Patrice added that "you're free to share your opinion with the classroom," and that "based on your morals and beliefs you can interact and say freely what you want." Yet, James was clearly in charge in many instances. He often spoke for several minutes at a time without interruption and lectured as though he was trying to inspire the students to come to his point of view. He raised the majority of questions that surfaced during class discussions and conducted classes with only a small cadre of students (never more than half) participating. He often stood up above the students and used the majority of classroom space. Students listened whenever he talked. When people disagreed with or challenged his views, he was usually quick to counter and respond with such questions as: "Who says? Where did you learn it? Who gets to determine? What's the bigger issue? What's the cause?" Christopher noted:

> If there's ever a lot of freedom given to the students, it's because the professor determines that. And despite the fact that a lot of times…there's a lot of freedom given to us, the professor still always and already had the ability to decide to control it….The power will go completely to the students, and then he'll take it completely back. And sometimes it's 50/50 or sometimes it's a little more him, us a little more….It depends to me on how, to what extent the teacher is going to be wearing his teacher hat.

Even though James frequently relinquished his authority by opening the class agenda to whatever students wished to discuss, there were limits to how far he allowed this to go. These limits sometimes appeared arbitrary or unannounced, though a structure was nevertheless in place that reserved a position for him as teacher to influence whatever transpired. He typically used this position to precipitate chaos through mandating student initiative. But when *he* took initiative, it was clear that he was in charge, and students granted him this authority without question.

Discussion and Implications

This study provides preliminary insights into how authority was negotiated in an undergraduate teacher education classroom. By providing students responsibility for making decisions of fundamental importance to the course experience, fostering interaction and critical reflection about teaching, and involving students in shaping the class agenda, the instructor of the course negotiated authority with his students. While these actions fostered alternative possibilities seldom realized in teacher education classrooms—courageous and bold efforts for which the instructor must be commended—the extent to which they fulfilled important aspects of democratic authority was limited. On a continuum of authority relations, interactions in this classroom reflected more the extremes of authoritarian and permissive associations than the middle ground of democratic authority.

Five aspects of democratic authority, derived from my definitions of authority and negotiation presented above, were evident in this study.

1. Authority as an Interrelational Act

Authority in this class belonged to neither the teacher nor students, but was exercised by both as an interrelational act. In this way, both the teacher and students exercised considerable influence over each other through their on-going interactions. This influence was evident through students' choices about such matters as personal goals, projects, materials, and attendance, which significantly shaped their preparation for class and influenced how the teacher responded to the topics they introduced for discussion. The teacher's charismatic and manipulative presence likewise captivated students' attention and influenced the extent to which they took initiative and pursued purposeful projects to further their preparation as teachers.

Despite the jointly constructed and interrelational nature of authority in this classroom, the ways in which the teacher and students exercised authority were limited to the extent that both considered authority a possession derived from the teacher's organizational position. The teacher repeatedly spoke of authority as a possession that he was free to give away, while students likewise considered authority as belonging to the teacher. This assumption that the teacher maintained ultimate control over the course experience regardless of students' actions, and that authority itself was nonnegotiable and belonged solely to the teacher because of

his organizational status, helped construct authority relations that both inhibited and undermined students' initiative while emboldening the teacher's manipulative actions.

2. Mutual Communication and Decision-Making

The teacher and students engaged in on-going processes of mutual communication and decision-making through openly sharing their concerns and interests and jointly deciding the direction of the course. This level of collaboration was evident when students consulted with the teacher for assistance assembling their grading contracts, and was particularly evident during the chaotic moments of responding to the teacher's opening question, "what brings you here today?" As an open forum in which anyone was free to express his or her views or introduce new topics at any time, those who took initiative to contribute reasons for attending class helped decide how class time was spent and what topics were discussed.

Nevertheless, these processes of mutual communication and decision-making were severely limited by the fact that they were haphazard, unsystematic, and teacher-centered. Group decisions about what to discuss were often determined by the individuals who spoke first, and decision-making processes seldom involved more than half of those present. At no time was there an effort to ensure that whatever transpired was in the best interests of everyone involved, and when students failed to initiate action, the teacher often took over. This arrangement prevented the teacher and students from taking part in any coherent process of deliberation explicitly concerned with creating the best possible arrangement for everyone. This undermined mutual communication and fostered both teacher and student manipulation.

3. Need-based Guidance through Expertise and Rules

Students sought guidance and direction in the form of both expertise and rules from the teacher to fulfill particular purposes or needs associated with the course experience. This was particularly evident when devising grading contracts, when students individually sought guidance from the teacher to resolve their confusion or curiosity about what was necessary for earning their desired grade for the course. Such guidance came largely in the form of rules. Guidance in the form of expertise was evident through constructing the daily agenda and engaging in subsequent discussions. At these times, to learn more about the teacher's philosophical views, students either explicitly asked the teacher questions or silently deferred to whatever insights and comments he volunteered.

While both of these forms of guidance helped fulfill students' expressed needs and purposes associated with the course, they were quite limited to the extent that only few students actively sought them. It was significant that the course design did little to encourage students to seek the teacher's guidance, as no assessment or feedback structures required students to share evidence of their growth with the

teacher at any time. Only at the end of the semester did students need to publicly justify their self-assigned grade. Unless students were personally motivated to specifically request feedback or assistance, they could have gone the entire semester without any personalized teacher guidance—limiting the likelihood of benefiting from his expertise.

4. Rights Recognized as Legitimate

When students did seek the teacher's guidance, they recognized as legitimate his right to shape or control the social circumstances of the course. This student-legitimized right was a function of multiple factors: the teacher's organizational positionality as the designated instructor of the course, his many years of experience as an educator, his stated intentions as a teacher, and his persuasive communicative tendencies—each of which students recognized as important to establishing his credibility as a teacher. These qualities provided a basis for voluntarily granting obedience to his varied claims to competence as a teacher educator.

To the extent that the teacher's perceived legitimacy rested largely on traditional assumptions about his organizational and social positionality, however, the underlying basis of his legitimacy was limited. Students did not recognize the teacher's practices as conventional, yet they still assumed he would control the social circumstances of the classroom, due largely to their previous experiences with teachers in schools. His social positionality as a Caucasian able-bodied male was never explicitly named, though also likely figured prominently in his gaining student-recognized rights. This legitimacy would have been stronger had it derived principally from factors other than those associated with the teacher's position.

5. Mutual Interdependence

The students and teacher cooperated to an extent that could be characterized as mutual interdependence. Just as students trusted the teacher to honor their self-assigned grades at the end of the semester, the teacher trusted the students to design a coherent grading scheme and involve themselves in meaningful tasks throughout the semester. Just as the teacher depended on students to reflect on the course experience and take initiative in introducing purposeful topics to the group, students depended on the teacher to lead them in their thinking and prescribe purposes for their professional preparation. This complex interplay of countervailing needs created a sense of mutual interdependence to which the actions of both the students and teacher contributed.

Nevertheless, the students and teacher were only minimally dependent on each other for shaping the most fundamental aspects of the course experience. The grading contracts were one vivid example in which students acted independently in ways that rendered the teacher's presence virtually insignificant. Unless consulted, the teacher had virtually no input into shaping the students' obligations for the course. Similarly, in constructing the daily agenda and leading discussions,

the teacher sometimes acted alone in ways that rendered the students' presence inconsequential. Unless aggressive, students had little way of stopping the teacher from monopolizing class discourse. Such conduct by both the students and teacher severely undermined the possibility of jointly constructing conditions of mutual interdependence.

Based on the limited extent to which these five aspects of democratic authority were fulfilled in this study, I conclude that authority in this course was negotiated in a democratic fashion more by accident than design, and that on a continuum of authority relations, the interactions in this classroom reflected more the extremes of authoritarian and permissive associations than the middle ground of democratic authority. I reach these conclusions on the basis that the central findings of negotiating authority through student choice, strategic manipulation, and structured chaos illustrated two extremes of authority relations—one dominated by the students, the other dominated by the teacher—while largely eluding the middle ground of negotiating democratically.

On one extreme, the abundance of student choices shifted the very basis of authority relations from the teacher to the students, enabling students to do virtually whatever they wanted for the course—including nothing. While this approach fostered independent thinking and intrinsic motivations for learning, it left the course curriculum almost entirely in students' hands. On the other extreme, the prevalence of strategic manipulation and structured chaos shifted the underlying basis of classroom authority away from the students to the teacher, allowing him to act essentially as he wished in the presence of students. While this arrangement fostered interaction and critical reflection about teaching and involved students in shaping the agenda of the course, it left the traditional position of teacher essentially intact, creating tensions between student- and teacher-generated curricula. Through this combination of authoritarian and permissive practices, the teacher's actions in this classroom swung a pendulum of authority relations from one extreme of *abdicating* to the other extreme of *dictating*—while realizing in between only fleeting moments of *negotiating* in a democratic fashion.

While both extremes represent forms of negotiating authority—and indeed could be considered essential starting points for disrupting conventional habits and creating the basis for alternative authority relations—these findings suggest that classroom practices concerned with constructing purposeful pedagogical partnerships (in which authority is negotiated explicitly, collectively, and collaboratively) might be most important for maximizing the democratic potential of authority relations in teacher education classrooms. Like Dewey's (1966) vision of democratic education, the middle ground of negotiating authority characterized by collective deliberation and conjoint communication cannot be sustained by accident alone, but must be deliberately constructed through purposeful association. Such association arguably "circulates" behind the scenes regardless of educational practice (Foucault, 1980, p. 98), though only by recognizing the mechanisms through which

it operates can we consciously shape its mutual construction. "Just as authority cannot exist without freedom, and vice versa," wrote Freire, "authoritarianism cannot exist without denying freedom, nor license without denying authority" (1996, p. 159). Collaborative action is fundamental to democratic authority. Clinging to authoritarianism and permissiveness only negates its democratic essence.

Rather than swing a pendulum of authority relations from one extreme of abdicating to the other extreme of dictating in an effort to disrupt conventional teaching practices and cultivate conditions of democratic authority, teacher educators should strive to realize each dimension of democratic authority more completely than did the teacher presented in this study. Three pedagogical mechanisms are particularly relevant for helping teacher educators actively negotiate authority in a democratic fashion and foster democratic partnership with future teachers. First, jointly-designed grading contracts, resembling those illustrated in this study though including teacher input, could potentially help reconstruct traditionally authoritarian uses of grades (Kirschenbaum et al., 1971). Through sharing responsibility for shaping course obligations, students and teachers could mutually determine rules regulating class conduct and profit from increased insight into each other's goals. Such an arrangement could begin with a fully developed proposal from the teacher that clearly specifies what is negotiable and not negotiable, while outlining specific details for how students will provide evidence of their growth throughout the semester in order to receive personalized feedback and benefit from the teacher's expertise. Students could then be provided the opportunity to modify or amend the teacher's proposal to suit their individual needs, with their contract considered final once the student and teacher mutually agree to its contents. By working together to finalize students' obligations for the course, students and teachers could both be held accountable to the details specified in the contracts while being mutually interdependent for this fundamental aspect of the course experience rather than leaving it to chance.

Second, joint deliberation about the course curriculum could potentially help overcome limitations of both top-down and bottom-up curricular design. Through collaboratively determining course content and process (Boomer et al., 1992; Shor, 1996), students and teachers could clarify collective responsibilities and minimize arbitrary actions. By concertedly deliberating with students about what they already know, would like to learn, and how they would like to go about finding answers to their questions and showing what they have found, teacher educators could more deeply root the course experience in the expressed interests, concerns, and needs of everyone involved. Doing so could make more transparent the purposes of the course, while openly encouraging students to take initiative, influence the course direction, and create the best possible arrangement for everyone involved. Combined with efforts to explicitly identify and work from participants' underlying interests, the process of jointly constructing the course curriculum could help situate the course experience in sources of legitimacy other than the teacher's organizational

position—more fully representing the spectrum of student perspectives about teaching and learning ideals in the class.

Third, jointly constructing a classroom community of inquiry (Lipman, 2003; Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980; Splitter & Sharp, 1995) could potentially help reconstruct the centrality of teacher positionality. Through procedures of inquiry characteristic of philosophical dialogue, teachers and students could interact as coinquirers while skillfully engaging in and facilitating independent thinking. As a deliberate discourse structure with clear procedures for developing and facilitating classroom discussions and collectively determining their underlying agenda, a classroom community of inquiry could help cultivate a class climate that is thoughtfully informed by the voices of everyone involved and grounded in collective input rather than just those who are most influential or forceful. Through valuing diverse perspectives and following the direction and thoughts of those expressed in the collective dialogue, participants could communicate in ways that openly honor and value each other's presence, while fostering relations of mutual interdependence relative to the intellectual and social growth that emerge in class.

Future research on such pedagogical initiatives could reveal what happens when teacher educators deliberately negotiate authority with their students. Rigorous accounts of classroom practices could document different dimensions of classroom authority from decision-making and communication patterns to intersections of assessment practices, institutional structures, and larger social and political factors—of which detailed discourse analysis and examinations of the psychodynamics of classroom interaction could be useful. Analyses of how participants respond to specific conditions of student-teacher collaboration could further illuminate the possibilities and pitfalls of democratic pedagogy. Through self-study of teacher education practices (Loughran, 2007), teacher educators could likewise assess the extent to which their own teaching is congruent with the assumptions and practices of democratic authority—providing the basis for reconstructing their own teaching to reflect the middle ground of negotiating authority in a democratic fashion rather than through demonstrating the extremes of authoritarian and permissive associations. Such insights could more deeply inform efforts to prepare future teachers to teach democratically and foster participation in democracy—increasingly urgent tasks in an era otherwise undeterred by hastening advances towards the death of democracy.

Acknowledgment

Note

[1] All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

References

Amit, M., & Fried, M. N. (2005). Authority and authority relations in mathematics education: A view from an 8th grade classroom. *Educational Studies in Mathematics, 58*, 145-168.

Apple, M. W., & Beane, J. A. (1995). *Democratic schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Baumlin, J. S., & Weaver, M. E. (2000). Teaching, classroom authority, and the psychology of transference. *The Journal of General Education, 49*(2), 75-87.

Benne, K. D. (1970). Authority in education. *Harvard Educational Review, 40*(3), 385-410.

Benne, K. D. (1971). *A conception of authority: An introductory study*. New York: Russell & Russell. (Original work published 1944).

Boomer, G., Lester, N., Onore, C., & Cook, J. (Eds.). (1992). *Negotiating the curriculum: Educating for the 21st century*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Brown, A. H., Cervero, R. M., & Johnson-Bailey, J. (2000). Making the invisible visible: Race, gender, and teaching in adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly, 50*(4), 273-288.

Burk, D. I., & Fry, P. G. (1997). Autonomy for democracy in a primary classroom: A first year teacher's struggle. *Teaching & Teacher Education, 13*(6), 645-658.

Dewey, J. (1966). *Democracy and education*. New York: Free Press. (Original work published 1916).

Drennon, C. (2002). Negotiating power and politics in practitioner inquiry communities. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 95*, 61-71.

Drennon, C. E., & Cervero, R. M. (2002). The politics of facilitation in practitioner inquiry groups. *Adult Education Quarterly, 52*(3), 193-209.

Fecho, B., Commeyras, M., Bauer, E. B., & Font, G. (2000). In rehearsal: Complicating authority in undergraduate critical-inquiry classrooms. *Journal of Literacy Research, 32*(4), 471-504.

Fernandez-Balboa, J. M. (2007). Dignity and democracy in the college classroom: Debunking "authoritarian consciousness" and "poisonous pedagogy" through the practice of student self-evaluation. In R. Goldstein (Ed.), *Useful theory: Making critical education practical*. New York: Peter Lang.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews & other writings 1972-1977* (C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mepham & K. Soper, Trans.). New York: Pantheon Books.

Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans. New Revised 20th Anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1999). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Greenwood, S. C. (1995). Learning contracts and transaction: A natural marriage in the middle. *Language Arts, 72*, 88-96.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Johnson-Bailey, J., & Cervero, R. M. (1998). Power dynamics in teaching and learning practices: An examination of two adult education classrooms. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 17*(6), 389-399.

Kirschenbaum, H., Simon, S. B., & Napier, R. W. (1971). *Wad-ja-get? The grading game in American education*. New York: Hart Publishing Company.

Kohn, A. (2004). *What does it mean to be well educated?* Boston: Beacon Press.

Lens, V. (2004). Principled negotiation: A new tool for case advocacy. *Social Work, 49*(3), 506-513.

Lipman, M. (2003). *Thinking in education* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lipman, M., Sharp, A. M., & Oscanyan, F. S. (1980). *Philosophy in the classroom* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Loughran, J. (2007). Researching teacher education practices: Responding to the challenges, demands, and expectations of self-study. *Journal of Teacher Education, 58*(1), 12-20.

Manke, M. P. (1997). *Classroom power relations: Understanding student-teacher interaction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Oyler, C. (1996). *Making room for students: Sharing teacher authority in room 104*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Pace, J. L. (2003). Revisiting classroom authority: Theory and ideology meet practice. *Teachers College Record, 105*(8), 1559-1585.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Placier, M. (1995). 'But I have to have an A': Probing the cultural meanings and ethical dilemmas of grades in teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 22*(3), 45-63.

Rainer, J. A., & Guyton, E. M. (2001). Structures of community and democratic practices in graduate teacher education, teacher change, and linkages facilitating change. *Action in Teacher Education, 23*(1), 18-29.

Robbins, S., Moss, P., Clark, C. T., Goering, S., Herter, R., Templin, M., et al. (1995). Negotiating authority in portfolio classrooms: Teachers' use of assessment theory to critique practice. *Action in Teacher Education, 17*(1), 40-51.

Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shor, I. (1996). *When students have power: Negotiating authority in a critical pedagogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shosh, J. M. (2000). Much ado about negotiation. *The English Journal, 89*(6), 72-79.

Splitter, L. J., & Sharp, A. M. (1995). *Teaching for better thinking: The classroom community of inquiry*. Melbourne: Australian Center for Educational Research.

Steutel, J., & Spiecker, B. (2000). Authority in educational relationships. *Journal of Moral Education, 29*(3), 323-337.

Winograd, K. (2002). The negotiative dimension of teaching: Teachers sharing power with the less powerful. *Teaching & Teacher Education, 18*, 343-362.