# Beyond Perfection: Reclaiming Death *In* and *For* Education

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## Abstract

In associating death with education, this paper explores how the death register, and in particular the denial of death, is reflected in the treatment of contemporary education, aiming to construct the future as an object of knowledge for providing certainty and authority. Through a reading of Gert Biesta's theoretical considerations, I discuss how educational systems scientifically explained and measured are created to be fixed (or *healed*), in pursuit of a type of education as a social apparatus to enable or reach for a perfect future. I argue however, that such medical-like treatment runs the risk of negating the complex, relational, and fragile qualities of educational life. Into the second part, I offer new perspectives on death and loss to be imagined as occasions for emancipation within pedagogical encounters between subjects; giving space for unpredictability, riskiness, ambiguity, and messiness to occur. My overall contention is that when desires of immortality overpower an appreciation of the finitude and fragility of all things, a part of life is denied. When education is not confronted with important and challenging questions on its purposes, this should be considered dangerous or even lethal for a safe system to thrive; we miss out on what is educational in education, we miss an encounter with reality.

## 1. Introduction

*Educating is dying.*
Baptiste Jacomino (2016, p. 105)

*Why should I be studying for a future that soon may be no more, when no one is doing anything to save that future?*
Greta Thunberg, COP24 2018

While Greta Thunberg's protest continues to resonate (especially in my mind), and like many other educationalists alarmed by the intense acceleration and convergence of current crises, questions surrounding purposes of education – they spin in my head daily. How can one think about education when its role is precisely to educate in the present for a future deemed to be utterly damaged by human hubris and greed? It is through this deceptively simple, and far broader question, that this paper has emerged: an attempt to think *with* death as provocation to think 'differently about education' (Foucault's terminology in Ball, 2019). Specifically,

within this paper, I shall argue that a crisis towards our relationship with mortality may say something about the way modern education is treated. Here I frame education broadly, attending to two different but inseparable aspects: educational institutions and educational experiences, and the experience of what it means to be educated. In the sense of living a life in which we undergo personal and social transformation, this meshes with the way educational institutions are imagined, conceived, and governed.

Calling into question the 'futurability of life itself' (Todd, 2020 p. 2), Thunberg's outrage implicitly underlies the association that I am most interested in: the relationship between death and education – one that is often eschewed, *invisibilised*, or simply unthought of in relation to educational thought and contexts. Associating death with education might be considered odd, provocative, or even unfathomable, especially for those whose views on the purposes of education focus on preparing youth to function and survive in a given world. Yet, living ordinarily 'as if nothing serious was happening', (a naïve representation I had about the world growing up in a rich country), is precisely the issue. Glocal depletions of biodiversity, species extinction, coupled with climate change and ensuing social collapse, these are all confronting us with the idea that our lives may be destroyed within our own lifetimes, let alone those of our children. However, since Becker's (1973) seminal book on societal death-adverse and death-obsessed attitudes, bloated beliefs about human potency and quests for immorality are still well and truly alive in a market regime, and its competency-based systems, which peddle evasive ways of living and building walls of indifference. Indeed modernity, largely sustained by the ongoing western project for the acceleration of growth – to which education in its different modalities both perpetuates and resists – has neglected and disrupted the idea that death is an intrinsic part of life. Thus, in my view, the very idea that death does matter, and is in fact everywhere, is something that needs to be included as part of the ways in which we think about education.

A first notable indication of the awkward rapport that education holds towards death is found in the paucity of educational literature exploring death as an issue of concern. Reporting on this, Bengtsson (2019) writes, 'the handling of death's educative potential within education and educational studies can be stated briefly: death is commonly not dealt with' (p.65), with the exception of three fields of research. The first one being the specialised field of medical research mostly providing death education and training literature intended for health professionals dealing with death, dying, and grief (e.g., Frommelt, 1991; Wass, 2004). Second, a narrower interdisciplinary strand combining health psychology and death education is concerned with mortality saliency and fear of death amongst students aimed at enhancing psychosocial wellbeing (see Testoni & al., 2018, 2019). Third, as death underlies most ecological discourses, the field of environment and sustainable education is responsive to this theme, embracing it with more or less emphasis across programmes (Affifi & Christie 2019). In that regard, two pioneering works have addressed explicitly the educative potential of death: a co-authored book titled '*Dark pedagogy*' (Lysgaard & al., 2019), and a phenomenological study (part of a larger research project) on children's experiences of death as they pertain to their understanding of non-human animals (Russell, 2019).

Much like these three fields of study, the present paper arises out of the commitment to explore how death might inform education without segregating life from it. My intentions are not to advocate for an ontology of death, nor to frame education uniquely in terms of death by suspending the notion of life. Quite the opposite, my aim is to start freeing up the death register illuminating how it might constitute a fruitful approach to reconsider ways of educating that put boundless faith in the future mirroring the 'unity' of the 'invulnerable and autonomous' learner (Bengtsson, 2019, p. 66). In this sense, what I am claiming is that the very concept of education is always already about questions of life and death, though death seems to have been veiled, possibly in part by the Enlightenment inheritance translated educationally into values and ideals of perfection, progress and development.

To work through these ideas, the work of the educational theorist Gert Biesta constitutes my

central perspective because, according to him, education is precisely not about perfectibility nor narrow forms of instrumentalism[1]. Within the first part of the paper, I explore some features of a death-denying society reflected in the treatment of contemporary education ascribed to a current longing for a perfect and risk-free system (Biesta, 2014) akin to a medical model where all efforts are motived by an ambition to prorogue death. I attempt to liberate the death register to discuss education when defined as a 'strong, secure, predictable and risk-free' object (Biesta, 2014, p. 1), and further highlight the current educational ethos locked in a culture of measurement and performance, attesting ongoing efforts to control the future. Into the second half, I briefly discuss the popular paradigm of education as cultivation, advocating for growth leading to further growth (Biesta, 2017), emphasising a life-affirming register at the potential expense of questions of finitude and loss. In my view, understandings of death and loss may be imagined as emancipatory occasions within the pedagogical encounter between subjects of action, giving space for unpredictability, riskiness, jumpiness, ambiguity and messiness to occur, which are all constitutive of pedagogical actions and processes – and of life itself. The overall final contention considers that when education is bent to fit a medical model (until it breaks?) solely interested in achieving *things* for the future – such as social change, economic growth, or increasing a nationalistic sentiment – education runs the risk to become un-educational. Indeed, supporting students to 'face humanity' in all its spectrum (Todd, 2009) is a more vital and delicate educational task than one working towards a perfect system at the horizon, as such system may only exist and thrive when all human beings are removed from it.

A final note, for the purposes of this paper, how I am understanding death and its register is limited to a temporal frame. Honing onto death's relationship to time, and especially to its bond to futurity, allows me to tackle ideas orbiting around the fear of the unknown, and the resistance towards unpredictability, and hence, the desire to control – which have profound bearing for ways in which educational systems are conceived, as I am about to defend. That said, part of my wider research ambition is to think in line with philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2011) about death *as* process, hence, beyond its mere attachment to futurity, enticed to a linear temporal line. Indeed, if death was solely framed within such projective quality, I would implicitly risk falling into what I am myself criticising.

## 2. Education's denial of death

As anthropologists have long researched, the proliferation of beliefs of immortality and permanence have characterised humanity's relationship with death throughout civilisations (e.g., Cave, 2012; Morin, 2002). Contemporary narratives of immortality, historically carried out by the world's greatest religions, have been supplanted by the colossal leap forward in medical science and genetics working against death. Thus, to the ever-growing advances in modern medicine significantly increasing life expectancy, coupled with oppressive beauty standards of youth, longevity, and healthiness, so much of contemporary culture is about staving off death. Indeed, western society bears understandings of death as either *denied* (Becker, 1973), *sequestered* (Mellor & Shilling, 1993), or *taboo* (Gorer, 1955); yet, what is lacking are not representations of death, visually ubiquitous in popular culture and media (Staudt, 2009), but a failure to question our relationship with mortality. What is unknown, uncertain, and at risk of loss are often expressed by desires to control, measure, regulate or fix (may it be a self-image, political ideas, the environment, etc.,) in an attempt to order the world based on certainty, governed by factual or scientific knowledge. These

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[1] In a similar vein, other educational theorists have critiqued the overly limited and instrumental definitions of education across public discourse, policy instances and funding (see for instance, Todd 2016; Masschelein and Simons, 2013).

expressions are not new; Sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman (1989) and philosophers such as Hannah Arendt (1958) have, in different but comparable ways, articulated the potentially devastating consequences of worldviews filtered through the implications of modernity and science; especially when the latter is construed as a value-free practice emancipating reason over ethics. Bauman's articulation is rather telling to contextualise my argument, he wrote: 'Science was seen as, first and foremost, an instrument of awesome power allowing its holder to improve on reality, to re-shape it according to human plans and designs, and to assist it in its drive to self-perfection' (p. 122). Thus, entirely at the service of objective inquiry for everything to be known 'reliably and truly', scientific research followed an (imagined) natural order to better control and correct life (p. 119); one that corresponds to those forces driving western culture with efficiency, rationality, and productivity (Merton, 1964). As such, the latter values, mobilised in the name of achievement and betterment of life (*"whose"* life is to be questioned here) are assumed to be the most effective ways of addressing problems that afflict the human condition – with death and dying being at the core of such concerns.

Thus, in an era of technological control over nature and human life, an appeal to contrive scientific evidence in professional practice becomes the norm, offering a belief – yet un-rational and unproven – in the domestication of uncertainty (Biesta, 2010). Following these views, mechanistic and causal processes are attractive, allowing outcomes to be located, targeted, and controlled. Generating the effect of fixating data from the past to the present, and constructing the future as an object of knowledge to be mastered and its unpredictable risks securely managed. Such a technocratic mindset is consistent with the modern treatment of death: once familiar and accepted, and its organisation collectively shared (Ariès, 1974), the dying person is now concealed from the living ones, cared for in impersonal, and sanitised hospitals, yet associated with technological progress to alleviate pain and suffering (Gawande 2014). The highly technical methods implicated in the process of modern death share a conceptual register to the ones

of educational research and policy that foreground the necessity to measure and explain scientifically 'what works' generally mobilising large scale experimental research schemes, producing tools such as learning outcomes, standardised-tests, and other evidence-based practises (Biesta, 2010). In fact, this way of treating education dominates educational spheres, especially in the last two decades, as education is locked in a culture of measurement, performance, and competition. This medical model relying on interventions based on a set of reductive metrics, operating via the restrictive notion of uni-linear causation is problematic, as it downgrades the inherent complexity and openness of educational systems. Hence, rather than research capturing the complexity of reality, it strives to instrumentalise and sanitise it, and fit the resulting research results in to formalised and decontextualised schemes, which corresponding to a rather *sterilised* approach. A second concern for Biesta (2009) is the prevailing obsession with learning outcomes which operate to turn students and teachers into predictable objects of intervention. To put it differently, a rationale focused on results bypasses the fact that social systems are engaging with the malleable reality of human subjects (ibid., p. 496-497). Indeed, outputs generated and presented as workable truths command educational practices, instead of informing them, and in the process replace educators' judgments, and ethical sensibilities. Both these concerns are echoed in the work of Hammond (2019), writing in the context of Higher Education, who probes in depth these types of 'empiricised and sanitised systems', steered by impositional bureaucracies endorsing 'behaviours of routine and predictability', while constricting and governing academic subjectivities (p. 147). Pathologising the regime of the modern university, he discusses how the production of 'solidified knowledge' fitting into already 'classified, distributed, and conceived prescribed activities', further debilitates spaces for creative experimentation, transgression, and freedom in thinking and practice (p. 142-143).

In a similar spirit of institutional critique, O'Donnell (2018) calls for greater attentiveness to the atmosphere or milieu of educational institutions that

inform students and teachers' everyday sensed and felt experiences. Intangible, specific (and indeed unmeasurable) moments of tension, surprises, confusion, or wonder are intrinsically part of subjectivity formation and the pedagogical experience, which, O'Donnell argues, are divorced from, and hindered by these medical-like prescriptive processes. Thus, to deter or occlude the emergence of these deeply relational events anchored in the pragmatics of education and daily pedagogical practice, might provide – from a research and policy perspective – safe and controlled spaces, yet contribute to undermining the atmosphere of the institution – and in a more extreme way may lead to dehumanising consequences, mirroring the implications of technological improvement in modern dying at the expense of cultural and familial undertakings. Indeed, in high-tech health institutions, disconnected from mainstream human activity, 'the deathbed became a place where suffering rages, one of enormous expense, agonising conflict and moral choice', however, at the same time, these medical sites provide a certain safety and emotional protectiveness in their arrangement (Moller, 2000, p. 9). One may ask if emotionally protective environments are always negative features, or if it is a matter of how they are related to. Visibly, as in educational systems, the picture is not all black and white. Premised in educational encounters, learning outcomes may themselves allow for a disruption of the established order, or not always be unproductive in that regard. Moving beyond an either/or logic, such ends may not be problematic in and of themselves, rather it is how they are being engaged with. Yet it is precisely because such educational/medical vision amputates teachers' value-based judgments in response to specific situations and relationships, that

education is put on an instrumentalist path, expecting teachers to produce results, and thus, eliminating any possible emancipatory quality. What comes forth in these readings, is the centrality of the relational dimension. The highly medicalised and technological means of controlling and regulating the end of life, rendered so individualistic, insulating, and almost cruel, clearly have the power to alienate human relations. In the educational realm, the assumption that improvement has to be done at level of systems (compelled to be greatly reduced to fit causal standards), and not of people, might also rescind or damage the space for relationality,[2] which raises the fundamental question of what the purpose of education *is.*

Furthermore, these outcomes based on past situations are claimed to be applicable for any situation; instead of research uniquely indicating what has been possible in the past without any guarantee that it will repeat, this allows space to remain radically open to future possibilities. It seems that this ostensibly problematic relationship with the future – mired to a deeper fear of mortality – is enacted within education, construed as a means for building an ideal future, and appears to deny present circumstances. As a result, a 'common-sense' view of what matters in education emerges, one that prioritises 'academic achievement in a small number of curricular domains', that are easily quantifiable and comparable (Biesta, 2009, p. 37). Schools end up measuring what is assessable and not what they value, reaching most of the population at arguably shallow levels of knowledge. This 'common-sense' is further sustained by the popular rhetoric whereby students are compelled to be equipped for an unknown, ever-changing, fast-paced and digitised

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[2] A future challenge will be to elaborate on the relationality of death, as some might argue that insofar death is the ultimate form of separation from the world, the relational quality to education would logically be lost within the death register. I aim to counter this view, by expanding my conception of death including a sensitivity to relationality, through considerations on the materiality of death, and via Braidotti's (2011) conceptualisation of death as 'only another phase in the generative process' (p. 333). This might help me capture the vitality, the flesh and blood nature of the world, involving the constant flux and fluidity

between life and death– which then would not annihilate the notion of relationality, but give rise to different forms of relating and becoming, and also complicate the divide between the old and the new. Moreover, the relationality of death might be viewed from another angle, through the spectrum of loss, separation, and grief, and what these experiences generate in terms of our engagement with and in the world.

future; or more pragmatically put, 'for unknowable forms of employment, labour and work' (O'Donnell, 2017, p. 41). The anxiety that transpires from this rhetorical belief might justify such vision of education as it aims to maintain a veneer of certainty and functionality in an uncertain world.

## 3. The ambition of perfectibility in education

Alongside the above considerations within the global educational reform, a language particular to the 21st century student has flourished,[3] whereby young people are urged to acquire skills. O'Donnell (2017) argues that this renders educated bodies as 'disembodied, abstract and generic', and increasingly shaped by 'social, political, economic, and educational imaginaries' (p. 43). Here again, these are not inherently controversial, but rather highlight concerns in how one relates to them. That is to say, the skill and competence discourse when directed at the perfectibility of tomorrow's citizens, highlights the need to always grow (fast), compete, and adapt if one wants to succeed – or perhaps more accurately, if one wants to survive. So, for the modern individual extremely pressured by time – by the precipice of his own death (?) – the notion of predictability becomes a very attractive asset. Indeed, under the siege of the capitalist system, knowledge needs to be ingested quickly and efficiently, and further used productively and flexibly. Hence education becomes the primary vehicle to maximise students' learning quota, turning them as fast as possible into dynamic and employable citizens (Sidorkin, 2012). What is implied in this account is the continued prevalence of ideals associated with progress, and the development of a future *good*, made accessible for all, and secured by the rational functions of modernity. The future in this context – although a rather elusive concept – could be referred to as 'the ultimate destination of the human', construed as an ever-moving upward curve towards perfection (Braidotti, 2011 p. 295); this

favours the erasure of past learnings and constricts deeper attunement to present conditions. Indeed, since the present is always already determined by its pursuit of a perfected version of itself, infinitely lying ahead, how can it be complete, or ever satisfying (Todd, 2009)?

In my view, these expectations and processes implicitly express (perhaps subconsciously) unsustainable desires of immortality and invulnerability, cement atemporal truths about 'what works' in order to achieve *things* in the future, with these things measured against a supposedly good past. However, as Sidorkin (2012) reminds us, even our most ingenious learning methods never seem to be fast enough; as soon as we get good at anything, it is time to "check out". He says, 'one reason we abhor death is that it seems to be a tremendous waste of the most precious commodity: our own memory and skills. To cheat death, we keep inventing new and new forms of learning' (p. 95). Following this, it is not unconceivable to imagine educational systems utilising the complex efficiency of individually tailored algorithms, to subordinate teacher autonomy and eradicate any presumed risks.[4] This in turn, would obscure the likelihood of human relationality emerging as part of the heart of education; rendering it impossible for teachers' to task students to explore and practice learning by utilising aspects of their own subjectivity. Therefore preventing them from experiencing, thinking, caring, and living with human and non-human others.

This also offers further emphasis on why the notion of survival is problematic, as it is associated with discourses of competition, performance, and student satisfaction; positioning young people as opponents or consumers, at a time when collegiality is gravely needed (Gibbs, 2017). This concern appears to be particularly justified for young people absorbed in the challenging phase of adolescence, and the frailties of

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[3] One usually labelled as a self-directed learner that can think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, collaborate, solve problems, innovate, adapt and is computer-literate.

[4] The restrictions imposed by the current Covid-19 pandemic provide a glimpse of an educational reality under the algorithmic turn embedded in new arrangements of online learning and imposed remote teaching.

their formative selves bombarded by signs and slogans from a relentless consumer culture; their identities infused with artificially created needs and desires, that require to be instantly and endlessly fulfilled. These pressures situate them in the centre of '*their*' world, rather than '*in and with*' the world around them (Biesta, 2015; p. 238, my emphasis). In this sense, the instrumentalisation of education as a tool for individual perfectibility, striving towards (economic) success, neatly aligning to modern praised values of entertainment and efficiency of activity and productivity, seems to be a dangerous path for education – indeed for all of us – to follow. Especially in an era characterised by an outrageous lack of responsibility and care towards the planet, which is – unfortunately – considered to be infinitely replete with natural resources to be used for the satiation of all human desires. The banalised and rabid individualism associated with this individualising consumer culture causes estrangement, fear, and also hate of the other.

## 4. The eventual fallibility of a strong, secure and predictable system

In this view, education is predicated on a pathological premise to which its weaknesses ought to be highlighted and diagnosed. As argued, modernity is addicted to, or at least expects far too much from science and technology to answer all ills and demands. The marketisation of new improved products and technological quick fixes relentlessly promise to make one's life more fulfilling and viable; fighting death and numbing pain therefore become public health imperatives. The plethora of fantasies created to decelerate the weakening of the body and the mind are recent proofs of the strength and universality of the belief of immortality.[5] Yet, these so-called 'miracle solutions' might only be attempts to tame the fear of the inevitable, while mitigating individual suffering. This is why death is typically viewed as failure and a source of shame. Gawande

(2014), a health researcher and surgeon, claims that his 'profession has succeeded because of its ability to fix'. He writes, 'If your problem is fixable, we know just what to do. But if it's not? The fact that we have had no adequate answers to this question is troubling' (p. 8-9). Similarly, education plated onto clinical arrangements does offer some comfort, although unrealistically tethered to huge expectations in relation to what it is supposed to achieve and deliver for society. Whether it is used as a political instrument directed towards honourable deeds (such as democracy or social justice), or exposed to populist endeavours (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019), the consequences of this type of education, means that such weighty expectations cannot be met. However, as with the medical profession, the failure to fix or to improve is not an option.

What does not seem to be taken into account, as I have stressed above, is the fact that reality is messy, complex, utterly relational, and driven by a multiplicity of contradicting values. Yet, we desperately aim to paint a glossy picture of education, while concealing the lived and differentiated realities of students and teachers in either schools, colleges, or universities. A rather compelling example at the institutional level of a system that seeks to erase social differences, yet only reinforces those very differences, is the contextless and supposedly neutral measurement of students' achievement displayed in league tables or PISA scores. On a different level, the language of schooling foregrounding a democratically shared vision of 'the ideal educated subject' who embraces a pedagogical experience 'constructed entirely through its adventures and experiences in the world', also fails to recognise those students who do not fit in (Stillwaggon, 2017, p. 53) (this point will be further developed). Accordingly, the reification and idealisation of these educational mindsets, and systems – somewhat exposing a repulsion to change and loss – cannot tolerate failure nor offer space for resistance and criticism considered as potential

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[5] From anti-ageing creams, to cryonics, and other bizarre experiments such as mind uploading (the scientific efforts to replicate human minds to expand our experience into a virtual afterlife).

disruptions. Therefore, possibilities of posing nuanced democratic value-laden questions on its purposes are generally dodged or obliterated (e.g. Biesta, 2014; Ball, 2019; Hammond, 2017); as with the topic of death, it is easier to avoid it than to deal with it. Consequently, in both the medical and educational fields, death remains the last threat to the faith we have placed on values of rationality, and predictability that which even science cannot counter. In this context, death forcefully exposes scientific knowledge and technology's shortcomings stemming from a mechanistic ontology, revealing their limited capacity to fix life problems, and as emphasised here, might be part of the problem themselves.

## 5. The eventual fallibility of a strong, secure and predictable system

Society is not only inimical to death, but also the experience of loss that is intrinsically tied to it. Loss can take various shapes, from the separation of the dark-secure warmth of womb, to a youthful body, or any rigid or essentialist ideas one holds towards their identity. These events chart human existence: some may be painful as they abruptly reveal the passage of time, and unveil no possibility of going back. Broadly speaking, the capitalist construct engenders the belief that existence is valued and relevant when some*thing* is acquired – skills, knowledge, money, a person, a social status, etc.[6] – to the extent that one can identify with their possessions to cope with their insecurities and fear of loss (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000). Thus, insofar as the act of possessing is deified, existential notions of loss also become despised or abhorred – A vicious circle indeed.

This societal aversion to death and loss also says something about the way education is envisaged and the ways in which pedagogical approaches are turned towards the future, movement, perpetual adaptation and growth. Such a perspective captures quite rightfully the popular paradigm of 'education as cultivation' (Biesta, 2015), or the promise of

educational 'growth' presented as something that is incontestably meaningful (Stillwaggon, 2017), involving the perpetual acquisition of lifelong skills, competencies, and other refined or cultured behaviours. Foregrounding and informing the abstract notion of a democratic and 'ideally educated subject' (ibid., p. 51-53), these paradigms are found in many constructivist student-centred learning theories and practices; guided by techniques designed to make learning enjoyable, effortless, and effective. These often embrace a child-friendly language peppered with gardening and ecological metaphors (e.g. growth, flourishing, blossoming), intended to purify an unpopular didactic approach, that yet do not impede its manifestation.[7] In these settings, children are exposed to the broadest range of resources (encompassing everything and anything people make for the next generation), and are encouraged to explore, and experience the environment around them for their natural qualities to take root and grow. In these pedagogical scenarios, teachers are narrowly defined as facilitators (Biesta, 2014), instead of, for instance, as risk-takers, purposefully challenging the pre-given (Ball, 2019). Thus, through the act of *grabbing*, students learn to adapt, to build a sense of identity associated with pre-established knowledge, and to develop the capacity to survive in new situations. Wedded to the modern-colonial desire to know the world to control it, student-learners are similar to explorers expanding their knowledge of a world seemingly at their disposal; turning the object of learning in to *their* construction, *their* understanding, and *their* comprehension; rather than the world addressing them, and de-centering them (Biesta, 2015, p. 237-239, my emphasis). Given these accounts, cultivation and growth as educational imaginaries align quite neatly with 21st century educational goals envisioned to improve education aimed at perfecting individuals. In this context, such paradigm comforts anthropocentric inclinations in perceiving the world

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[6] Fromm's (1997) discussion on the distinction between having and being is particularly relevant here.

[7] Just as the language of death becoming 'more and more unmentionable' around the mid-20th century in a hope to conceal the reality of its occurrence by not naming it directly (Gorer, 1955).

as a dispensable commodity, and further annihilates the conception of the finitude of all things.

## 6. Thinking about education differently: death within the teacher-student relationship

The question of time is presented once more. If 'cultivation' is solely understood as an impetus towards the future with no perspective of an end point, or a rupture, then are students considered – albeit unconsciously and unsystematically – immortal beings in need of being endlessly educated? Or to use a popular term, a 'lifelong learner'?[8]

To imagine an education that involves the notion of death might be counter-intuitive for educators wishing to offer a safe and pleasant environment. Yet, what if these 'stage theories of development that encode the modernist narrative of progress were only a defensive posture that allows us to ward off our deep knowledge of the pervasive and interminable nature of loss?' (Silin, 2013, p. 19). As cultivation happens through acquiring external resources that are out there, students' inner faculty to say *no* to adaptation – the expression of their subject-ness – is occluded; hence, the possibility to stand as a subject in their own right becomes a difficult venture.  These educational 'modernist narrative[s] of progress', are typically understood as 'powerful intervention from the outside to set students free' (Biesta, 2014, p. 7). The problem is that such educational project locates the teacher always ahead of the one who needs to be educated in order to be liberated, and in turn risks being hypocritical in regard to what its original intent is. This narrative of progress aiming to supposedly emancipate the minds is for Jacques Rancière (1991) 'the pedagogical fiction', which is 'the representation of inequality as a *retard* in one's development' (p. 119; emphasis in original text). From this perspective, education is understood as a never-ending endeavour, because it is one in which the docile student will never be able to reach the 'master' and, thus never 'learn to be equal in an unequal society'

(ibid., p.133). In a way, one could say that the closer the gap becomes, the clearer it is infinitely big. However, according to Rancière, emancipation is not some*thing* to be reached in the future, some sort of educational promise or 'a setting free which assumes inequality' (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019; p. 156); Instead, emancipation 'occurs in events of subjectification, when individuals resist existing identities and identity-positions and speak on their own terms' (Biesta 2014, p. 7). And this resistance I argue, could be construed as a *deadly* interruption, simultaneously leading to an experience of loss, yet possibly transforming into an event in which students extract themselves from existing orders, and come into the world as subjects of action and responsibility. This way of thinking about education allows the expression of one vital and existential educational function: the subjectification dimension (Biesta 2014).[9]

Death and loss as occasions for emancipation might be a thought-provoking idea for education, and especially within the teacher-student relation. As briefly articulated, for the subject-ness of the student to come to *life* – with also the potentiality to say *no* – a kind of *death* may be endured. On this view, death and life are not opposed to each other, but are intrinsically linked to one another. To further my argument, I turn to Jacomino's (2016) reading of Michel de Certeau, who bluntly states: 'educating is dying' (p. 106). Jacomino explains that teachers ought not to assure a permanent and rigid position; rather they are called to build the conditions of their withdrawal (which does not equate with the negation of teaching itself). Students upon receiving what teachers have to offer – assuming that they welcome the gift of teaching and let themselves be moved by it (Biesta 2014, p. 57) – have the possibility to create novelty, and to shift outside existing orders of consensus. Therefore, for students to become emancipated, 'to come into the world' on their own

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[8] An assumption that parallels the current pressure to forever remain a student only to respond to economic imperatives, rather than out of a free-willed choice or intellectual curiosity for instance.

[9] Other important contributions on subjectification are those by Ruitenberg (2013), and Ball (2019) who speaks in terms of 'self-formation' as 'production of a subject' (p. 134).

terms, a necessary separation needs to take place.[10] In the context of death, education becomes a lesson of separation, of taking distance, and acquiring autonomy; as death occurs precisely as an event that modifies the normal order of life, a change of condition, which can only happen in the present; and which cannot be contained in any educational techniques, or policy documents.

Embarking on such an educational journey demands courage and willingness as both students and teachers might face deep ambivalence towards the 'new', and the intensity of their commitment to the *old* (Silin, 2013, p. 18). However, letting an idea, a belief, a way of being, or thinking *die*, may be resisted – and often for valuable reasons. Yet, when fuelled by curiosity one has the courage to lose something, they may notice the formation of small cracks piercing through their being (may it be through the cognitive, affective, or relational layer), bestowing new and surprising insights and understandings. They have then the possibility to take a new, unique step in the world, a kind of *re-birth*; and thus, have the opportunity to create spaces for reimagining ways of being and doing.[11] Here, I am thinking of these spaces as they relate to those defined by Ball (2019) whereby 'agonism would be valued and failure would be a constructive opportunity to learn and change –

both of which take time' (p. 137). Although, Ball's register does not comprise death, his views on education liken to such symbolic death, opening up paths to 'start again' towards change and alterity to an otherwise bounded self – curiosity and courage being for him too necessary forces to tentatively step into the unknown to see and imagine differently[12]. As Silin (2013) articulates, 'At the heart of every loss is the possibility of the generative act' (p. 20). Loss then can play a transformative role, with all the messiness, suffering and complexity that comes with being transformed. The interruption, the unsettling, or the reversal of hegemonic and/or habitual thought patterns also come with reactivating the remembrance of those pasts who have been ignored. So, to be educational, loss should not be conflated with forgetting, denying, or romanticising the entanglements of the past.

This transformation, I argue, can be triggered through the encounter between subjects, hence, through the event of teaching. Yet, for such act to be generative, the student's will is crucial. As the emancipatory educator asks: 'Do you want to go on an intellectual adventure?', if a *wilf*ul response is uttered, the student at some point will undeniably be confronted with loss.[13] Valuing the emergence of these unpredictable cracks seems essential in the

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[10] One might ask if such impermanent position is a responsible one for teachers to aspire for, especially in light of the common understanding that teaching *is* the cause of learning, stemming from interventionist educational principles. Accordingly, it could be argued that if teachers are held accountable for students' entire achievements, it would certainly be irresponsible, or counterproductive, for them to *disappear*.

[11] One important point to consider here though, is precisely what concerns Stillwagon (2017): insofar these hoped transformative educational moments brush off, or deny students' past knowledge, identities or attachments for the sake of becoming the 'educated subject' that education promises (as discussed earlier), they negate the subject, and thus, run the risk of becoming entirely un-educational.

[12] To offer a practical example and purely from an anecdotal perspective, it was my experience that the thought experiment 'Education 2048' designed by the Decolonial Futures Collective (2021), activated a deep

reconsideration of my ways of living and thinking and their inherent contradictions, not only as a young educational researcher, but as a white European woman benefiting every single day from the comforts and pleasures of an unsustainable and violent system that I critique in my work and personally. Propelled in 2048, the experiment calls forth a reflection on the role of education at the brink of social and ecological collapse in or beyond our lifetimes. While immersed in the exercise, as I felt affectively overwhelmed by the realisation of my own complicity being part of that system, the limits of meaning-making were viscerally felt. A part of me *died*-with beliefs and modernist certainties unquestioned until this day. A re-orientation to unlearning and unknowing emerged; the drive to writing my doctoral thesis is part of this process, as I gradually understood education (and myself!) to always be dancing on a tight double-edge sword, at once implicated and transformative.

[13] And supposing that their answer is negative, what might the teacher risk? Could we figuratively say that teaching is

educative event, precisely because they work against the current educational ethos of certainty and fixed truths. Furthermore, what is at stake for teachers is the challenging task to invite students to think, and act on their own. Eruptions of confusion, uneasiness, ambiguity, irritation, and inspiration may surface as teachers point into many directions, questioning their students' desires, shaking existing beliefs, opening up new grounds, and breaking others. Besides, for a subject to emerge, ethical educators have the delicate task to articulate their desire to 'alter' students' thinking, hoping to provoke curiosity, and new insights, yet without imposing, as they regard them as free subjects (Todd, 2012, p. 80); Thus, paradoxically, desiring something, and simultaneously letting go of that desire[14]. In other words, the educational concern 'lies in the transformation of what is desired into what is desirable' (Biesta, 2014, p. 3), as what is desir*able* shows that it is not possessed (there is only a potentiality). Therefore, from that particular moment, the student can affirm an alterity that the teacher witnesses, which the latter can neither anticipate, predict, nor produce. Perhaps it is through this volatile and fallible process that teachers might realise their own fate, and begin to trust the unknown and the unpredictability of the educational event, which also involves to surrender to the aspiration of altering students' ways of seeing and being, without waiting anything in return. Indeed, one will never know if an imprint will be left on the side of the student as a result of teaching. This is one of the fundamental reasons why education inevitably entails a risk, will always remain fragile, and in some cases, is totally ineffective. In this light then, death calls for a different sensibility than one usually activated in mainstream educational discourses geared towards the imperious task of securing knowledge. Death in this sense, is a powerful reminder that not everything can be fixed, nor

resolved, and consequently may disrupt blind certainties and a sense of hubris.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper aimed at articulating how a crisis involving our relationship with death prompts questions on how formal education is envisaged: subjected to unrealisable targets for a seamless future, while denying present conditions, and therefore whipping out what is at its heart, its relational quality. I have shown that thinking with the register of death is instrumental for resisting these discourses arguably maintaining unsustainable and insular attitudes towards a world that needs to be urgently cared for. Yet, a more extensive analysis of what the death register can offer to the pedagogical relationship, and to education as a whole, is to be further explored. However, I hope that this early discussion illuminates, via a new angle, an understanding of education that differs from the privileged, technicised, and interventionist ways of managing education.

For one thing, to include death in our educational imaginary sheds light on the concept of time. When the passage of time is negated or messed up with, our very condition of being mortal, remains somewhat of an illusion. We are not eternal, and the more we try to be, the more we continue to harm ourselves, others, the planet, and our social systems. Hence, education solely modelled on medical parameters – aiming to suspend death indefinitely – is not desirable as it denies complexity and relationality. Indeed, as Biesta contends, we miss out what is educational in education. We miss an encounter with reality.

Moreover, in wringing out the usually negative register of death and loss, my hope is to generate a conversation on how these notions, and their implications, may be imagined as powerful educational experiences, as well as their bearing for practice. Indeed, the concept of death might be of

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similar to embarking on a pedagogical *suicide mission*? If I take the metaphor seriously, it is worth thinking on a kind of suicidality informing the teacher's role.

[14] The process of letting go is, according to me, different than the suicidal 'quality' mentioned in footnote #13, as it

is more of a passive process, whereas suicide is generally a premediated act, which entails a sense of control and self-management (of one's own death).

interest when understood as a collapse or a fruitful loss to start considering such emancipatory quality, the moment education is viewed as an imperfect, interdependent, and fragile affair – just like us. Therefore, when education walks away from being an instrument of intervention in the name of everlasting growth and progress, its trajectory may be redirected to follow an emancipatory path, one that refuses to objectify students and teachers, and that might offer new pathways to encounter the world more sustainably, meaningfully and empathically. As a final word, I turn to Affifi & Christie (2019) who write: 'the continuation of a rich and viable biosphere seems to depend on us coming to terms with the imminent ending of all we might wish to remain eternal' (p. 1154).

## 8. Disclosure statement

The author declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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