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# Editorial: Open Issue

*Pontus Larsen, Fredrik Olsson & Paul Resch*

In this 9th issue of *Confero*, our focus centers on critically examining the role of education itself amid current global challenges. This open issue presents four compelling essays that challenge paradigms, scrutinize the importance of social movements, emphazise the classroom as an inclusive space, and explore the role of education within the context of sustainable development – leading to the main guiding questions of whom education is, or really could be, for. Critiquing contemporary learning discourses and impacts of education is vital as we face turbulent times – particularly in relation to questions of ecological distress, social conflicts, and a challenging of democratic values. This point of departure is shared amongst the contributions, although in various, complementary ways.

Each essay invites readers to embark on a critical take through the complexities of the educational landscape, shedding light on its transformative role from within, and in relation to four different, but intersecting contexts. Firstly, Majsa Allelin explores affective relationships imbued by questions of reciprocity as an integral part of the classroom experience. Secondly, Kai Heidemann discusses systemic, influential arrangements between social, grassroots movements and educational change. Thirdly, Ali Erol performs a historically situated critique towards contemporary notions of liberal education and the idea of classrooms as an apolitical space. Fourthly, Simon Wessbo, Hampus Björk and Ebba Mellberg couple the fields of environmental sustainability education and L1 language learning to digital literacies and representations of human-nature interactions.

As an intersecting engagement, these contributions add to a growing body of knowledge that approaches the classroom and educational processes as complex phenomena imbued by power relations and ideologically situated structures. The reader may be surprised, even provoked, by the outspoken connection between education and politics in this issue. But as the authors suggest, we cannot afford to uphold the classroom as an apolitical, culturally isolated and invidualized arena, but instead recognize that education is inherently political. Only when we embrace the fact that power dynamics and societal needs influence every kind of educational space can it become a catalyst for fostering informed and prepared citizens capable of navigating in and through troubled times.

In the first essay, *Lack of understanding and the desire for recognition*, Majsa Allelin argues for creating a supportive, and reciprocal learning environment. Allelin examines the layer of student understanding – and the lack thereof – in educational settings. In this empirical article, the author presents three ontological domains of comprehension and their affective implication towards oneself in relation to educational expectations brought on by individualization, measurability, and marketization. Through interviews with students, Allelin shows the vulnerability associated with admitting “a lack of understanding” in a neoliberal result-driven educational system. The article highlights the importance of the teacher confronting and approaching lack of understanding as a central component rather than only viewing it as a tolerable aspect of learning. In forming a space of trust where students can, and want to, seek help in a manner that allows them to move beyond pure result-driven dynamics. Through this, Allelin contributes methodological insight for educational processes and educators who recursively set out to establish open and inclusive classroom spaces.

In the second essay, *Pathways of Education Reform ‘From Below’: Theorizing Social Movements as Grassroots Agents of Educational Change,* Kai Heidemann delves into the dynamic relationship between social movements and educational systems. He proposes four distinct pathways of actions that social movement actors might undertake to bring about educational change: working from

inside; inwards and along the edges; from the outside and in; and building alternative educational programs that challenge the status quo. With global cases from school systems across the world, Heidemann illustrates the different approaches giving educators, students and activists empowering strategic insights into how schooling systems can be transformed "from below".

In the third essay *Liberal Education? A Critical Reflection on Classroom as Apolitical and Ideologically Ambiguous Spaces*, Ali E. Erol draws on the historical chapter of higher education within the Unites States of America in an effort to reflectively challenge two central claims forwarded by liberal education. Firstly, that *classrooms should be apolitical spaces*, and secondly*, that educators need to occupy an ideologically ambiguous stance in the classroom.* By drawing from Paulo Freire's emancipatory pedagogy Erol shows the unavoidable power dynamics of the liberal classroom in relation to critical pedagogy and its potential to reshape learning experiences into inclusive moments shaped through solidarity. The article offers an exemplification of "pockets of resistance" within higher education, as a way of providing a critical toolset for educators. The essay takes the reader on a journey that unequivocally shows the linkage between institutional historicity, academic structures, and liberal claims; presenting five practical key components for educators wanting to take action and challenge specific conceptions of liberal education in an effort to promote social justice from within education system.

The authors of the fourth essay, Simon Wessbo, Hampus Björk and Ebba Mellberg, highlight the power of stories as an important component of learning for sustainable development. Analyzing the game *Valheim* with an ecolinguistic framework, the authors explore how ideologies underpin unjust and unsustainable societies. In an effort to address environmental sustainability education in the context of L1 language education, the essay underscores the significance of fostering reflection on humanity, the individual, and society, as well as recognizing the active role different entities can play in societal transformation towards a more sustainable world.

This issue sheds light on the nuanced dynamics within educational contexts. Through different analytical lenses, these essays collectively illuminate the profound influence that education wields on the lives of children and youth, underscoring the transformative potential inherent in rethinking and reshaping our educational practices to face a rapidly changing future. As we navigate these educational frontiers, these articles converge to challenge, inspire, and envision the transformative power of education. Join us in redefining the narrative, critiquing established paradigms, and envisioning a sustainable and liberated future through the lens of education.

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# Lack of Understanding and the Desire for Re-Cognition

*Majsa Allelin*

> *An educational process must install a lack in the pupil, a lack that is the condition for identification. Any successful educational praxis must establish a gap between the ideas the pupil has concerning his own abilities and ideas of who the pupil could become if enough effort were put into it; a field of possibilities that the pupil did not know existed has irreversibly been opened.*
>
> Hyldgard (2006, p. 153)

From time to time, whether in a social setting or on our own, we are all confronted with the experience of not understanding. When we are faced with this reality (if we can admit it to ourselves) we tend to feel alienated; a sense of not being part of the situation, as if we were left outside. This experience can cause several emotional reactions, such as feelings of shame, frustration, anger, sadness, or stress. Sometimes, it can even give us a thrill and be approached as a challenge. Similarly, the actions we take can vary between a range of passive and productive responses. Do we give up? Or do we try to overcome the lack of understanding? If so, in what ways? Furthermore, at what point do we give up and, contrastingly, what conditions help stimulate our motivation?

Even though theories of knowledge and practices of learning are at the center of scientific and philosophic reasoning, and have been since the ancient Greek *lógos* and virtues of *epistêmê*, *technê*, and *phronêsis*, and later in the positivism that developed during the Western Enlightenment, systematic examinations related to the negation of understanding (i.e., its lack) are rare. In search of a

conceptualization of this void-like phenomenon, no evident theory was found. Philosophical, psychoanalytical, and some pedagogical theories often depart from an interactionist perspective, leaving organizational and structural conditions behind. Yet, organizational and structural conditions cannot, on their own, be deployed to examine the topic. Thus, this essay has a tentative character in terms of theoretically outlining the state of not understanding.

Due to the absence of discussion around the topic of not understanding, the aim of this essay is twofold, the first of which is to theoretically explore the concept of lack of understanding. Through a theoretical inquiry, I will contribute to a conceptualization related to the formal education setting by applying a tentative approach, one influenced by disciplines such as philosophy, psychoanalysis, pedagogy, and sociology. Furthermore, as some of my guiding questions deal with the bodily and emotional experiences of not understanding, the essay will partly employ a phenomenological approach. Departing from this theoretical exploration, the second aim of this essay is to illustrate with empirical examples how students in elementary school narrate their experience and attempt to overcome situations of not understanding in relation to curricular schoolwork. The guiding questions used here deal mainly with the interactions that take place in the classroom; how is the student–teacher relationship experienced and organized? What are the structural factors surrounding the educational setting? Does the school provide students with a space that is sufficiently safe to allow them to admit (to themselves and in front of others) that they are in need of help, encourage them to ask for it, and thereby help them identify themselves as learning subjects? As the opening quote of Hyldgaard (2006) expresses, lack of understanding is not simply an inevitable element of being a student; it is perhaps the basic condition. As mentioned above, the dual aim being a theoretical exploration and contextual concretization of the study demand a multidisciplinary approach. Through such synergy, a more informed analysis can be demonstrated.

# First Inquiry: Theoretical Investigations

## *Contextualizing knowledge*

According to Cilliers (2000), the conceptual definition of knowledge has traditionally originated from one of two main perspectives: either from positivism/objectivism/rationalism or a personal/culturally specific orientation (see also Kelp, 2015). The ongoing contestations between these perspectives within the field of the theory of science will not be elaborated here. Instead, I will promptly give prominence to what Cilliers calls for, that is, "[a]n understanding of knowledge as constituted within a complex system of interactions." This approach, or model, opposes an atomized view of knowledge as "facts" with objective meaning in and of themselves. Instead, knowledge derives from a dynamic network of interactions, a network that does not have distinctive borders. This perspective also denies that knowledge is something purely subjective, since one cannot conceive of the matter as prior to the network, "but rather as something constituted *within* that network" (pp. 8–9). Furthermore, Cilliers stresses a dialectic understanding between knowledge and the system within which it is constituted as they codetermine each other. Thus, they are both in continual transformation.

> The system is constituted by rich interactions, but since there is an abundance of direct and indirect feedback path, the interactions are constantly changing. Any activity in the system reverberates throughout the system, and can have effects that are very difficult to predict; once again as a result of the large number of nonlinear interactions. (Cilliers, 2000, p. 9)

In this way, knowledge as matter does not exists *a priori* but is ever-evolving due to constant motion.

Applied on a more concrete level in an everyday setting, this relational point of departure can be related to Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural perspective on learning—that relational and environmental impacts interact with children's actual development (cf. Jarvis, 1987). Central to Vygotsky is that understanding is situated in a concrete setting, a "system" within a process of

development. It is within this system that methods of learning—that is, imitations and experimentations—are being made. Like Cilliers, Vygotsky does not only describe environmental impacts but also emphasizes dialectical movement by introducing the concept of *zone of proximal development*—a transcendental state where the potential development of a child can be stimulated by those more capable. Thus, "[c]hildren can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). Combining Vygotsky with Cilliers, "the system" can be understood as the pedagogical surrounding, which includes interactions with peers, teachers, the school organization, etc., all of which exist within the formal education system.

It should be noted that this model can create difficulties when defining the contours of the system as the problem of boundaries "is compounded by the dynamic nature of the interactions" (Cilliers, 2000, p. 9). Here, one could also add the interplay between different subsystems (i.e., different classroom environments within one school). Despite the complexity of the formal schooling situation, as such, it can be defined as a system for itself as there are economic, curricular, and social factors that regulate daily activity therein and, thus, the roles and interactions of students, teachers, and other staff (Lundgren, 1972). It is through concrete interactions and communication within this system that certain experiences and interpretations, as well as certain forms of knowledge and understandings, emerge.

As with all social contexts, some participants have a more favorable prior experience than others, depending on the rigidity involved in acquiring the specific qualifications to be part of the system. Since schooling mainly employs theoretical forms of practicing knowledge processes, middle-class students have historically been privileged within this system (Bourdieu & Passeron, [1970] 1977; Willis, 1977), a social fact upon which I will elaborate in the following sections.

## *Lack as missing links*

The learning process is both preceded by and realized through several methods/experiences, such as imitation, by interpreting verbal and written instructions, improvisation, through intuition, by making mistakes, and accidental actions. However, if these experiences are to become knowledge, that is, subjectively integrated and linked to prior understandings, they must be followed by reflection. Thus, when consciously repeated (which is the first step toward systematization), a process of knowledge acquisition has occurred and laid the grounds for deeper understanding.[1] However, if one is unable to remember systematic connections or construct a relationship with the object—if interpretation has not been subjectively integrated—lack of understanding will remain persistent and, with it, a distance to the object in the world, that is, parts of the world.

If we return to Cilliers (2000), we find a definition of the learning process as cumulatively evolved through the act of interpretation. Thus, understanding is not about the quantity of information but the qualitative ability to integrate and translate information into knowledge and knowledge into understanding. From this perspective, experience becomes an epistemologically necessary steppingstone in the linking process (cf. Bion, 1984). This means that lack can be installed in at least two stages of the process: in the interpretation of information into knowledge and in the interpretation of knowledge into understanding. If we define "information" as unsorted bits of data, "knowledge" as processed and categorized data into systems and schemes, and "understanding" as a state of complex familiarization, such as a multiple and nuanced comprehension of the causality and change of a particular phenomenon, then we reach the conclusion that the character of lack can vary. We then need to ask ourselves whether

[1] Similarly, Lappalainen (2022, p. 13) references John Dewey and exemplifies that "[a] child sticking her fingers into a candle flame does not automatically have an experience. But when the child associates the event with its consequences, i.e. pain, it becomes an actual experience. The pure perception becomes an experience by thinking."

it is a detail or a significant aspect of the phenomenon that one does not grasp. Does one comprehend the overall structure but not some aspects of it, or does one not comprehend the phenomenon at all? Sometimes, understanding significant parts can be enough for us to navigate and find meaning (Rumelhart, 1991). Accordingly, when unsure, prior experience can help us create the most plausible possibility.

However, at other times, we assume that we have relevant prior experience when we do not. Jarvis (1987, p. 28ff) calls this form of non-learning *presumption*, that is, when one thinks that one already knows. Other times, organizational frame factors, such as time pressure, can cause non-learning, what Jarvis calls a *non-consideration*, which happens when one misses out on a learning opportunity because one is overly busy or occupied. Lastly, Jarvis defines non-learning as *rejection*, which occurs when motivation for a certain learning opportunity is lacking and a sense of alienation arises.

How we respond to our lack of understanding is also dependent on how the outside world responds to our lack; what is socially acceptable and what the consequences will be for us. For instance: is it expected by society not to know of a certain phenomenon (which, for instance, is the main premise of a researcher's daily activity)? Alternatively, will there be sanctions if one does not understand (which is a common experience by students in the formal education system where one gets graded)? All this has implications for how we handle the lack, thereby affecting our motivation.

In the formal school setting, lack is mainly defined as difficulty understanding the subject matter—knowledge defined by the curriculum—which is often mediated either by the teacher or materials such as books and the Internet. The confrontation of not understanding can thus be activated either by an inter-personal encounter, which can lead to alienating questions such as "What is s/he saying?" and "What does s/he want from me?" or by an object/artefact that similarly evokes confusion and questions such as "What is this?" and "How do I use this?" In such cases, students

may experience a distance from the space in which they are involved (the educational institution). When lack occurs in relation to another person, for example, the teacher, it is important to remember that non-learning often has social and socio-linguistic explanations as well as driving forces, as illustrated in the works of, for example, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron ([1970] 1977), Paul Willis (1977), and Basil Bernstein (1971). These authors have provided insights into the incapacity of the school system to acknowledge students from working-class environments and, thus, its systematic sorting based on social class. [2] An embedded conclusion that one can draw from these works is the importance of diverse student recognition and how it relates to student rejections (cf. Jarvis 1987).

### *Inability as self-consciousness and the art of transmission*

Whether lack of understanding stems from cognitive or social factors, the results are the same: a distance from the world that surrounds the student. The reason that the lack of understanding makes the world seem unavailable to us is because we become self-conscious of our inability; as the pedagogue Paulo Freire ([1970] 2017, p. 57) has put it, because "people know themselves to be unfinished; they are aware of their incompletion." Through this Hegelian notion of humans being able to understand themselves as not understanding—as "The one who is perceiving is aware of the possibility of illusion" (Hegel, 2018, p. 71)—the process of self-objectification can, in turn, cause several implosive or explosive reactions (e.g., frustration, "Why am I not able to understand?" or "It's the teacher's fault I can't make it!") as well as stimulate driving forces (e.g., "I'm going to find a way!" or "I might as well give up…"). Therefore, lack of understanding is not necessarily the antithesis of

[2] Bourdieu and Passeron ([1970] 1977) describe this process as "symbolic violence." Others have explained the structural sorting in school as a "hidden curriculum" (Jackson, 1968; see also Giroux & Purpel, 1983), a covert way of operating discrimination in the school system that tends to result in working-class students tacitly learning that they are unable to learn, thereby giving up beforehand.

understanding. Rather, lack expresses itself when phenomena reveal themselves as fragmentized, as isolated constituents without a coherent wholeness (Rumelhart, 1991).

When lack occurs among students, the essence of the pedagogical task becomes accentuated (especially in elementary school, given its compulsory character). It could even be stated that the *raison d'être* of the teacher lies in the art of transmission. It is a form of practical knowledge that must take into consideration didactic questions such as *what* is to be transmitted, *to whom* the content is to be transmitted, and *how* this content is to be transmitted. This involves professional judgments about students' present knowledge, their points of departure, language skills, etc. It demands an understanding of the student's zone of proximal development, as mentioned earlier (Vygotsky, 1978). If the teacher does not, or due to external factors cannot, recognize the student, there is an increased likelihood of destructive frustration, rejections, or even self-elimination among students. In a worst-case scenario, Covington's (1985, p. 404) statement becomes accurate: "from a student perspective, 'not knowing something' is often considered wrong, and seeking assistance casts doubt on one's capabilities. (…) In effect, these students have confused ignorance with stupidity, and by remaining ignorant, they are acting contrary to their own interests". According to Covington, achievable goals are important to keeping motivation alive as they give students a feeling of being capable and competent.

Conversely, as instantiated in the introductory quote by Hyldgaard (2006), in a successful scenario, "lack becomes the condition for identification." Here, the teacher becomes a trustworthy authority, a guiding figure and perhaps role model, someone to imitate.[3] In a

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[3] Hyldgaard gives the teacher a central focus in the pedagogical relationship and, in her arguments, accepts the curricular frame. Others have criticized this model from a student's perspective by contrasting it with the process of *Bildung*. One such voice is Sven-Eric Liedman: "In education, typically there is a teacher who puts questions to the students, questions to which the teacher already has the answers. It is a poor

similar way, Willoughby and Demir-Atay (2016, p. 119) stress that "[u]nless teachers are recognized with their capabilities, the foundations of an effective education are undermined. Teachers are 'supposed to know' and sometimes they become ideal figures or role models in the eyes of students." This does not ignore the fact that overcoming lack involves commitment and work on the part of both the teacher and students. While the teacher's pedagogical skills become manifest in the art of transmission, a task that includes obviating students' defenses against learning, the student must—in order to overcome its alienated self-conscious state—be susceptible to the transmission and subjectively integrate the information and knowledge.

However, as many have pointed out before, the process of understanding is inevitably disturbed by our fundamental means of communicating, namely, language.[4] This makes misunderstanding a constant denominator in life (Gadamer, 1989a). One reason could be that language is "the enigmatic nexus between thinking and speaking" (p. 29), an ambivalent and analytical way of approaching the world. Closely tied to this, others have emphasized how fantasies and images of the Other affect the way in which we relate both to ourselves and our surroundings. In a schooling context, "students have fantasies not only about who the teachers are but

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education where the student does not ask any questions him/herself. The student's answers, not his/her questions, are constitutive of such an education. *Bildung*, on the contrary, is impossible without questions asked by the one who is actually undergoing a process of *bildung*. *Bildung* is an active process, where the subject is guided by his/her own curiosity, interest and reflection. The process may be collective or individual; what matters is the student's commitment" (Liedman 2009, p. 145; see also Freire, [1970] 2017).

[4] The aspect of language barriers can be further understood through the socio-linguistic work of Bernstein (1971). Bernstein relates the conditions of social class to the usage of language in the family and class community more generally and in schooling specifically. For a psychoanalytical discussion on how mediation and containment—which are understood as important capabilities when attaining knowledge—are developed via language through the parental relationship, see Willoughby and Demir-Atay's (2016, p. 117) interpretation of Bion's (1984) theory of tolerating frustration.

also about how their teachers perceive them" (Willoughby & Demir-Atay, 2016, p. 119). Furthermore, they have "fantasies about [the] future, which we may call wishes or desires; and the fantasies of educational institutions, which may overlap or conflict with the individual's own fantasies" (p. 124f). These fantasies affect how students perceive themselves as learning subjects as well as their motivation in both positive and negative ways. Here, language can unveil obscure or articulated fantasies, but it can also support them through unconscious misleading or misunderstanding. Therefore, one could, in accordance with Gadamer (1989a, p. 27), ask if linguisticality is "a bridge or a barrier? Is it a bridge built of things that are the same for each self over which one communicates with the other over the flowing stream of otherness? Or is it a barrier that limits our self-abandonment and that cuts us off from the possibility of ever completely expressing ourselves and communicating with others?".[5]

Despite the social, cognitive, emotional, or linguistic obstacles between students and teachers, the hermeneutic tradition, here represented by Gadamer, stresses the ontological capability of human beings to understand one another. "The ability to understand is a fundamental endowment of man, one that sustains his communal life with others and, above all, one that takes place by way of language and the partnership of conversation" (Gadamer, 1989a, p. 21). According to Gadamer, then, there is a universal potential for us to re-integrate the Other's point of view into a new, common understanding—a will to understand and engage in interpretative co-action to reach unification (a "fusion of horizons") of the Self and Other.

[5] Turning to Derrida, who has become the personified opponent in this discussion, we find an emphasis on rifts and obstacles in the process of unity (see Michelfelder et al., 1989; Rasch, 1992). While Gadamer emphasizes a consensus in understanding, Derrida claims that the continual understanding of another person is simply not possible.

*From alien to potential ally: "Self and Other" in the student–teacher relationship*

Whether one focuses on estrangement or return, barriers or bridges, this philosophical reasoning has been questioned because of a common point of departure. As Rasch (1992) points out, the model of "Self and the Other" assumes a dyadic relationship. The potential fusion or inevitable rupture evolves out of a two-part constellation. In contrast, Rasch introduces a triadic model. Here, Self and Other are not understood as two opponents. "Rather, they are united against a common enemy, the parasitical third party called *noise*, in whose interest it is to interfere and promote confusion" (Rasch 1992, p. 63, emphasis added). The triadic model becomes productive as it moves beyond a personification of the Other as unfamiliar and, thus, makes the creation of intersubjective unions possible. In other words, the Other can go from alien to ally.[6]

Furthermore, the third party demands that the previous two be integrated into a symbolic relationship. In the school setting, where this philosophical discussion is to be applied, the question of inter-subjective transmission must be partly related to the overall aim of education, a precondition expressed through the national curriculum, and partly to its inherent roles, that is, students *vis-à-vis* the teacher. In this context, curricular knowledge, which is part of the national education system, that is, the state (Hegel, ([1821] 2008), becomes the third party that mediates the relationship between the teacher and student. As Hyldgaard (2006, p. 151) puts it, "the authority of the pedagogue rests on a knowledge that is not

[6] For psychoanalytical perspectives, see Hyldgaard (2006, p. 147), who provides a similar triadic model to distinguish the teacher from the seducer. The teacher "guides both his own and the pupil's desire away from his own person and towards the object of knowledge." Therefore, "the aim of the teacher, as opposed to the seducer, is to be 'dumped', to loose his power over the pupil. The ritual of exams symbolically marks that 'it's over between us and we must all move on.'" See also the three types of object relations of Bion (1979 [1983]): commensal, symbiotic, and parasitic relations. In particular, commensal relations can be relevant here as it involves a relationship in which two objects share a third to the advantage of all three (p. 95).

his [*sic*] 'own' but the Other's. The teacher's authority depends on the pupil's or students' trust in the fact that the knowledge transmitted could be authorised by reference to relevant sources." In this way, the "system" through which interaction and knowledge evolve has expanded to include the socio-cultural context that is ultimately constituted by the state.

Apart from the trust students must have in their teachers' authority, as Hyldgaard emphasizes, one could also add that the teacher's expectations and the organizational conditions to recognize students as educable subjects are equally pivotal for successful transmission (see, e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; cf. Good, 1980; Nejadmehr, 2020).[7] As Willoughby and Demir-Atay (2016, p. 125) stress, the "teacher needs binocular vision, with an eye on their own and their students' subjectivity and another on shared objective realities." Such sociological approaches requires taking into consideration a more holistic view of students, by including students' social relationships outside school (e.g., their socio-economically conditioned home environments, neighborhoods, and youth cultures), teachers' expectations of different student groups, as well as the political and material conditions that teachers and school organizations are confronted with in everyday life.

In the present Swedish school system, students face increased accountability in relation to their schoolwork (Allelin, 2020; Beach & Dovemark, 2007). Since the early 1990s, the neoliberal governance of education has been characterized by tendencies

[7] Nejadmehr (2020) shows how Kant's educational paradigm, which has affected our present educational systems and views of knowledge, has intrinsically been built around the notion of a local universality, i.e., a Eurocentric perspective of the world. This involves, for instance, a dichotomization between nature and culture and, thus, what is natural and what can and should be subjected to culturalization. Applied to schooling, Nejadmehr shows that marginal groups have been viewed as uneducable, as if they lack the potential to be cultivated and Enlighted. For an explanation of self-fulfilling prophesies between the teacher and students in the classroom, which departs from organizational and social psychological frame factors, see Good (1980, pp. 81–83, 88–89).

toward marketization and individualization, which have resulted in a stronger demand for the measurability of student performance. It has also increased segregation among students and, thus, stronger social reproduction. Needless to say, this has affected students' approaches and strategies aimed at overcoming lack of understanding (Archangelo, 2014).[8] As a result, acquiring curricular knowledge, which is the possession of the teacher, has become increasingly important for students. Moreover, lack of knowledge has become not just a personal insufficiency in our society, it also brings with it material, long-lasting consequences. With so much at stake, such contextual factors must be considered when developing a concrete theory of the learning process (Archangelo, 2010; see also Ames & Archer, 1988, p. 264).

Before I move on to the second inquiry of this essay, I conclude by returning to my first aim, which is to provide a conceptualization of lack of understanding:

> (1) Lack of understanding means that something has not been linked and subjectively integrated—it is outside our ability to relate, hence what I have previously discussed as a distance to the world.
> (2) It is possible to lack understanding of some parts or significant shares of a wholeness.
> (3) As we increase our comprehension of a specific phenomenon, we become more self-conscious about our lack of understanding of certain parts.
> (4) Therefore, the lack of understanding is not necessarily the opposite of understanding.
> (5) Lack of understanding and the resulting self-consciousness can cause emotional reactions and inner fantasies that trigger different actions (such as curiosity, anxiety, rejection), depending on how much or little we understand, what or whom we do not understand, and what is at stake if we do not understand.

[8] Fonseca (2012) has, for instance, explored how students view cheating as an everyday strategy to pass tests and how this relates to viewing grades as the hard currency of today's school results-based management system.

(6) The consequence of a lack of understanding, and the handling of it, is always conditioned by societal/organizational factors and will inevitably be related to a specific context/system.

Departing from these premises, I will proceed by integrating student narratives into my line of argument in order to further illustrate and deepen the conceptualization of lack of understanding.

## Second Inquiry: Empirical Examinations

### *Methodological considerations*

In the previous discussion, I stressed the importance of situating knowledge within a system of interactions (Cilliers, 2000). Applied to schooling, certain forms of interactions take place, such as that of teacher-students. These interactions can stimulate what Vygotsky (1978) calls the zone of proximal development, which in turn can influence the system of interactions (to a certain degree). There are, however, boundaries that condition these interactions: certain frame factors that are specific to the schooling situation, such as curricular demands, grading, and other compulsory activities. There is also a transmission within a triadic formation that includes the teacher, students, and knowledge as symbolic categories (Hyldgaard, 2006). It is within organizational and symbolic conditions, which are tied to structural and social facts and interactional conditions, which are tied to socio-psychological and cultural processes, that learning and lack of understanding take place.

In what follows, I will present excerpts from interviews—chosen and structured through thematic analysis—with ninth-grade students in their final year of compulsory schooling in Sweden in order to illustrate some of the theoretical discussions in the previous chapter. In total, 49 students were interviewed (individually, in pairs, and in groups of three and four). Among other questions, such as those relating to their relationship with

their school and neighborhoods, the students were asked what happens when they are confronted with a lack of understanding in relation to schoolwork, both emotionally and practically. Since lack of understanding has been poorly discussed as a phenomenological phenomenon within a schooling environment surrounded by institutional frame factors, the research question was exploratively investigated. The analysis of the interviews was inductively approached, meaning that recurring codes (patterns) were identified and later theorized and structured into central themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), which are presented below as headings. The numbers allocated to the students were chosen according to their order of appearance in this article.

The interviews were conducted at three schools characterized by poor grade statistics, where many students (around 40%) fail to gain eligibility to advance to upper secondary school. According to the principals and teachers, this is due to the fact that a significant share of the students count as newly arrived (which, according to the definition, means that their stay in the country has been a maximum of four years). Furthermore, all three schools are located in disadvantaged neighborhoods in which a majority of children grow up in families living below the poverty line. These specific statistics of segregation, as well as the overall tendencies that characterize the educational system in general, should be considered important structural conditions that surround students' lack of understanding.

It is worth noting that conducting interviews about lack of understanding in schools located in unprivileged neighborhoods, where many students do not gain eligibility to advance to upper secondary school, demands careful ethical consideration from researchers as there is a risk of reproducing stigmatized images of students as ignorant, cognitively incapable, or "losers." However, my aim is not to discuss the particular conditions of underprivileged students as such. Instead, the research questions deal with lack of understanding as an existential premise and *raison d'être* of the student identity, irrespective of social position. Since my main aim is to contribute to the philosophical and pedagogical research field, the interviews should be considered as cases of more

general claims. In this way, the risk of positioning certain groups as problematic can be avoided.[9]

*Dealing with accountability, fatigue, and stress*

As mentioned earlier, the educational system in Sweden has undergone several major reforms over the last three decades. Overall tendencies include higher expectations for students to be self-responsible in school (Allelin, 2020; Beach & Dovemark, 2007) as well as a refined measurability of knowledge and knowledge progression (Carlgren, 2015). These tendencies have evolved as a result of market reforms that have made Sweden internationally unique with its fairly unregulated voucher system and competition among schools. The students I interviewed highlighted rigid demands by referring to how they perceive their teachers' attitudes.

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| INTERVIEWER: | When you are sitting with a task, or when you are reading something, or when the teacher's speaking, and you feel that you don't really understand, how does that make you feel? What bodily sensations do you experience? |
| STUDENT1: | Difficulty. |
| INTERVIEWER: | Difficulty? |
| STUDENT1: | Yes. |

[9] The study, which was part of a larger research program called Between Resignation and Future Prospects: A Transdisciplinary Research Program on Educational Pathways and Learning Processes Among Young People in Stigmatized Urban Settings in Gothenburg, was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

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| STUDENT2: | Tired. |
| INTERVIEWER: | Tired? |
| STUDENT2: | Yes, one loses motivation, I'll tell you. And focus. |
| INTERVIEWER: | In what way is it difficult? |
| STUDENT1: | Because it's… you want to understand. But then… and it all goes so fast, everything. They have curriculums, and "we have to go through this" and… |
| STUDENT2: | It's difficult. |
| STUDENT1: | Yes. So it happens that one gets all "but I can't take it anymore." |
| INTERVIEWER: | A bit like giving up? |
| STUDENT1: | Yes, exactly. |
| INTERVIEWER: | Yes. And how does one proceed from that state? |
| STUDENT1: | Yes, well then you have to ask the teacher. And I think also… they say to us all the time, "you have to take your own responsibility; in high school, you won't have us" and stuff like that. So yeah, you get… you put a bit of a pressure on yourself and |

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| | think, "maybe I should study at home instead." |
| STUDENT2: | That… yeah, that it's my job to take responsibility. |
| STUDENT1: | Yes, exactly. |
| INTERVIEWER: | Mm. And how does it feel when they say that? |
| STUDENT1: | Well, I mean, I understand them. They are right when they say it, but sometimes, it can feel like, "fine, but we're not in high school *yet*, we're here now." |

In another interview, the students describe lack of understanding as a state of anxiety.

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| INTERVIEWER: | When you read a book or when you listen to the teacher and so on, and you don't follow, don't understand, how does it usually feel in the body? |
| STUDENT3: | When you don't understand, it doesn't feel funny. |
| STUDENT4: | Mental breakdown. |
| STUDENT5: | Shiver. |
| STUDENT3: | Chills. |
| STUDENT5: | Chills, yes. You start to freeze like this in the spine. |

> It just... I freeze, I just think "what have I done, what have I done, what have I forgotten?" continuously. And then the whole lesson goes away and you just think "well, I didn't do anything during the lesson". Even if you've read maybe five pages, you'll forget it. Because of the stress.

Some students described their bodily sensation of not understanding as fatigue. Others described it as a stressfull situation, explained as a "mental breakdown" and feeling ill at ease. In another interview one of the students described the state of not understanding as "irritating", and another one said: "I just get a headache every time". Thus, it is noticeable that lacking understanding, which is a mental state, causes physical stress as well. Furthermore, this negative bodily sensation must be understood in relation to its context, as lacking understanding in the formal educational setting does have implications for future opportunities.

If we accept Gadamer's (1989a) interpretation of Hegel—that it is through work, as in putting in effort in order to witness an intended change, that we reach meaningful self-consciousness—and argue in line with Covington (1985)—that achievable goals are important to keep motivation alive among students, which is what the students communicate above—it becomes clear that, from the students' perspective, this is not always the case. In an educational system where visible performance and results stand in the foreground instead of the actual process and relative progress of each student, there is a risk of instrumentalization in how students relate to work. There is also a risk that they will assess themselves according to how they are ranked. Furthermore, under a strong results-based management, the pace of content transmission tends to increase, leaving less room for systematic reflections or

spontaneous mediations. Instead, a hunt for right answers is prioritized as time becomes scarcer. Scholars have warned that should students enter a process of sublimation rather than a state of depression—that is, if they are to keep their spirits alive—curricular demands would have to be diminished (Högberg et al., 2021; Allelin & Sernhede, 2022).

The strong results-based management in the education system has elsewhere been discussed as the precarization of teachers' work (Attick, 2017; see Lundström, 2018, for the Swedish context), which could explain why some teachers, according to the students, resign from their tasks and hold students responsible for their lack of understanding. In such situations, students experience a distance from their teachers, failing to see them as role models worthy of imitation or from whom to obtain guidance (see Hyldgaard, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). This is most starkly indicated in the statement, "maybe I should study at home instead."

By reducing the curricular criteria and documentation and, instead, reintroducing greater professional autonomy, teachers and students would be able to develop a greater "ally-relationship." In such a scenario, noise—the inevitably disturbing third party (Rasch, 1992)—could become a starting point for students and teachers to enter a safe and meaningful encounter as they push the zone of proximal development, and the risk of students personalizing their teachers as the pressuring and antagonistic Other could be reduced.

### *Breaking the symbolic order and the importance of recognition*

Personalizing the teacher as the pressuring and antagonistic Other was a recurring theme in the interviews. In another interview, a similar transference was expressed. Here, the teacher was described as someone who reminds them of ongoing and repressive assessments and someone who functions as a gatekeeper that regulates hard currency (the grades) and, indirectly, their future prospects. In response, the students

navigate to find a fitting transmission for themselves, even if it means that they turn to their family for help instead of insisting on the symbolic order provided by the school. In such cases, the family becomes a refuge and a place to find recognition.

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| INTERVIEWER: | What do you usually do when you don't understand; how do you handle it? You said that you painted during class. |
| STUDENT6: | Oh well. No, I mean I did that just to get… until time… until time passed. |
| STUDENT7: | I usually ask if I don't understand. |
| INTERVIEWER: | You usually ask? |
| STUDENT7: | Yes, yes, yes. I usually ask "why?" |
| INTERVIEWER: | Who do you ask? |
| STUDENT8: | The teacher. I usually ask the teacher. If I don't understand her, then I try on my own, and if I don't understand on my own, then, actually, I blame the teacher because she should, um… how do you say, she should help me. And when I don't get enough help, I'll go to her [another teacher], she's good at um… I mean, she's good at all of it, if I'm honest. So I'll go to the ones |

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| | that are good in order to understand—let them explain it to me. |
| STUDENT7: | But the thing is, I would've also asked the teacher instead of drawing, but this teacher, I don't know if she's trying to scare us to do all her homework, but she said, "every time you ask for help, I will notice it…" |
| STUDENT8: | "Lower the grade." |
| STUDENT7: | … I will, not deduct marks, but I will notice it, so I'll know that you've asked." |
| STUDENT8: | She'll lower it [the grade] too. |
| INTERVIEWER: | So, if you were to say… what do you usually do when you don't understand? |
| STUDENT9: | To be honest, I listen… When I don't understand, I just hear the teacher out on what I should be reading, and I'll remember that, and I'll do it at home. |
| INTERVIEWER: | I get it… But what happens if you don't understand at home, then? |
| STUDENT9: | The thing is, I have others that I can ask. Like, she [the |

teacher] just talks straight from the book; I don't get any other facts. It is already said in the book, so it won't help me to get it explained—because she doesn't know herself, that's the problem. So, I'll ask my father or mother or my siblings. Because they know so much more than the teacher, if I'm honest. They don't even need the book. But you take the book with you to see… yeah, kind of to have the correct answers, to see if you're right. Sometimes, they can also… one could also be wrong but that's…

INTERVIEWER: So, when you don't understand, you often ask your family?

STUDENT9: Yes, and it feels a lot easier when you listen to the nearest and dearest ones.

If the teacher represents an antagonistic Other, or an alien and not an ally, going in search of a safer environment—another system (see Cilliers, 2000)—to ask questions seems to be a solution. Student 5 stated that it felt easier to understand help provided at home from loved ones. While feeling safe with family is positive, it is an alternative that should be considered a privilege. The escape to the family is but an educational failure and, by extension, a societal failure. The household as a resource is not available to every member of society; it is not guaranteed as a means to attaining what is formally needed to become part of public life. As long as "the family continues to play a key role in the reproduction

of social class and class inequalities," as Pimlott-Wilson (2011, p. 113) states, then public institutions ought to play a vital role in the quest for equity. This is especially so given the compensatory mission of the Swedish compulsory school. Apart from equity, public education is also a question of societal integration, a form of *aufheben* and sublation from private and particular relationships, into a broader community shared through an abstract sense of belonging. To cite Hegel ([1821] 2008, p. 173), "Children have the right to maintenance and education at the expense of the family's common resources."

The poignant message from the students' turning away from the pedagogical relationship in school is the importance of trust and the sharing of references, or life worlds, in the transmission. As the students elaborated on the family's (curricular) knowledge ability, it became obvious that they also make mistakes (otherwise, the student would not rely on the authority of the book). Therefore, the navigation has less to do with the teacher's actual knowledge and skills and more to do with the importance of a pedagogical *relationship* (which arguably explains why the student tries to find another teacher to explain the subject matter). Whether this has to do with a lack of emotional trust, language barriers, or overly large gaps in life-world references, the breach seems overly difficult to bridge in the particular interaction.

Another example of the importance and desire for recognition was formulated by students 10 and 11 as they stressed the importance of having a teacher who is a trustworthy authority:

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| STUDENT10: | I'd wish that the teachers would've helped… or, I mean, it's not something that a teacher can do, but it's something a teacher can help you with, to get a better self-esteem and… or better self-confidence or whatever. Because I like to get confirmation when I do a |

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| | task; I want to know if I'm on the right track or not. Some people here might not need it, and that's why it's important for teachers to know that *you* need it and get it. |
| STUDENT11: | A push. |
| STUDENT10: | Yes, exactly. It can be… |
| STUDENT11: | … "you did a very good job, really" or "yes, you're doing good," or "wow, I can really notice a progression." |

Described as a necessary "push", Vygotsky's zone of proximal development becomes pertinent as the teacher has the ability—according to the students—to push students toward further development. However, what is expressed by the students is not only a transcendental process of understanding that is dependent on more cognitively/intellectually capable adults or peers but a social and emotional push that can stimulate positive self-esteem, enabling movement beyond present limitations. Thus, the students stress the dialectics of social and pedagogical processes, a recognition that goes beyond societal and symbolic interaction to an interaction that is social in nature.

### *Parrying social stigmas of classroom expectations*

Apart from having difficulty understanding the transmission by specific teachers, the students also stressed classroom culture as a potential obstacle. They pointed to the risk of being ridiculed and laughed at if they exposed their lack of understanding. As mentioned in the previous section, little space seems to be available for exposing one's imperfections.

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| INTERVIEWER: | When you're in class and you don't understand something, what do you do? Could it be that you don't get what the teacher says or what is written in the book or whatever? |
| STUDENT12: | I raise my hand; the teacher will come and explain it to me. |
| INTERVIEWER: | You raise your hand? |
| STUDENT12: | Yes. Otherwise, I'll approach her after class and ask her. |
| INTERVIEWER: | Okay, after the class, too? Let's say you raise your hand, and the teacher approaches you, but she explains it in a way that you don't get? |
| STUDENT12: | I would ask the teacher to explain it in a simpler way. |
| STUDENT13: | Sometimes, when… Not when she explains just to me, but sometimes when she explains to everyone in the classroom, it's hard for me to get what she means. So if you want to understand for yourself what it is she wants to say, you can just tell the teacher, "Can you repeat that in a way that will make me understand?" But |

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| | it depends on the people; there are some people who are ashamed of asking in front of the whole class. |
| INTERVIEWER: | Why do you think that one is ashamed of asking? |
| STUDENT12: | Maybe, they don't want other students to laugh at them. |
| INTERVIEWER: | Do you think it could happen? |
| | [collective agreement] |
| INTERVIEWER: | It happens? |
| STUDENT12: | It happens a lot. |
| INTERVIEWER: | Really? |
| STUDENT13: | It happens pretty often, I think. |
| STUDENT12: | It happens often. |

Student 13 elaborated on an interesting distinction: transmission in a general format versus in a particular direction. When the collective method of tutoring results in a lack of comprehension, receiving a personalized explanation can be a solution. According to the student, however, there is a potential hindrance when asking for help, namely, the reaction of classmates. Based on the students' statements, they sometimes contribute to a study culture where one is not supposed to demonstrate one's lack (see also Nyström et al., 2019, especially the concept of "stress-less achievement"). The classroom culture, which can be viewed as a system in itself (Cilliers, 2000) and forms a cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978),

could therefore be understood as a fourth party in the symbolic order as it constitutes an independent relationship that conditions the transmission between teachers and students. Adding this consideration, the triadic model becomes quadratic.

Being a student involves being guided by questions. These questions cannot be answered solely in an inner dialogue. They must be articulated and discussed inter-subjectively, especially in a schooling context where teachers formally fulfill this pedagogical function. This involves overcoming obstacles such as linguisticality, social stigma, and personal vulnerability. For this to become possible, the dialogue must be treated as permissive of examinations.

> What we find happening in speaking is not a mere reification of intended meaning, but an endeavor that continually modifies itself, or better: a continually recurring temptation to engage oneself in something or to become involved with someone. But that means to expose oneself and to risk oneself. (…) it risks our prejudices – it exposes oneself to one's own doubt as well as to the rejoinder of the other. (Gadamer, 1989a, p. 26)

Approaching the world with questions means exposing oneself both existentially (admitting to oneself that one is not the master of life and submit to this fact) and socially (demonstrating one's imperfection). In reality, these premises are sometimes complicated by an intolerant social environment, as expressed by the students in the quote above. Additionally, in a results-based school culture, which is part of an economy that seeks efficiency and progression, this intolerance tends to be structurally sanctioned (Allelin, 2020).

### *Feeling alone and overcoming lack through collective strategies*

The risk of social stigma when exposing one's lack was not the sole response of the fourth party. There were also times when the students practiced solidarity by helping each other. However, when asked how they felt when they did not understand, they stressed

the feeling of alienation. Again, a feeling of distance from the world came up during the interviews.

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| STUDENT14: | Sometimes, there are some students that don't approach teachers after class. So, we'll help each other. |
| INTERVIEWER: | You help each other? |
| STUDENT14: | Yes, if there's someone who's new here in Sweden, who won't understand, someone who speaks the same language as us. Then we like… "come here, I'm gonna help you." I can help with translation and such. |
| STUDENT15: | We do that often. |
| STUDENT14: | But if there are words and stuff, words and concepts that we don't understand ourselves, then we ask and get it explained. |
| STUDENT15: | If there is something we don't understand, then we ask the teacher who… |
| INTERVIEWER: | Like a link between the teacher…? |
| STUDENT14: | Yes, and the student in order to help out. Otherwise, the teacher needs to have a |

translator with them. Or an interpreter.

INTERVIEWER: So, you work as a translator sometimes?

[collective agreement]

STUDENT16: We help out sometimes.

INTERVIEWER: That's cool. And when you read something and it's hard to understand and when the teacher speaks, and you like… What feelings arise when you feel as if you don't understand?

STUDENT16: I always feel like I'm left outside.

INTERVIEWER: You feel left outside? What do you mean?

STUDENT16: As if I'm the only one, the only student who doesn't get anything. I don't admit that the others don't understand, only me.

STUDENT15: Actually, sometimes, I… It feels as if everybody understands.

STUDENT14: Everyone's nodding, you just see "you, you, you are the only one who doesn't understand. What's wrong with you?"

The students expressed a sensible feeling of being left outside, as if there was a distance or barrier between them and the rest of the world. When they could not follow the curricular knowledge being transmitted collectively, a self-conscious reflection arose, including a supposition that others, in contrast, do understand (see Archangelo 2014, p. 33). This lonesome state is perhaps accentuated by a sometimes intolerant classroom culture, as mentioned in the previous section. However, unlike in the previous section, a more empathetic attitude and solidary reaction evolved as the students emphasized a will to help each other.

Their schools can be classified as "multicultural," where Swedish is not the first language of most students. Some students had been in the country and the Swedish school system for only a couple of years (during my fieldwork, we sometimes had to conduct interviews in English), so language obstacles and parents' lack of the Swedish education system were sometimes a palpable issue. As one student put it, "We are like the first generation that has to manage all this on our own, so to say." In light of these conditions, students who were once new to the language could imagine the hardship their classmates were experiencing, hence their reason for volunteering as informal translators. Clearly, these students share a common life world. However, inasmuch as the practices of solidarity among students can be considered admirable behavior, it still depicts a failure in the symbolic order. When students turn to friends and classmates—or the family, as mentioned earlier—the trustful authority becomes absent. If we accept that "[t]he task of the pedagogue is not to produce knowledge" and, rather, that "[t]he task of the pedagogue is to transmit knowledge that is already given" (Hyldgaard, 2006, p. 152), then peer-to-peer transmission risks a situation in which students do not receive the educational provision they are entitled to. As another student pointed out, "I mean, of course I can help someone out, but I don't always know what to do because I'm not an educated Swedish teacher." Insisting on a meaningful student–teacher relationship—one where recognition can take place both collectively and individually—is therefore important.

## Making space for social reflection and re-cognition

Through theoretical and empirical investigations, I have outlined in this essay three ontological domains or "layers" on lack of understanding. First, it should be considered a fundamental existential premise that humankind lacks understanding. Second, lack of understanding can be described as both the essence of a student's identity and part of the symbolic order in an educational setting. This setting was first described as a triadic formation comprising the student, the teacher, and the curricular knowledge. All three are in a mediating relation with one another through their various assignments. In other words, "The starting point is always that the pupil does not know. Therefore, to achieve recognition as someone who is in the know also depends on the recognition of the pedagogue. Additionally, it requires external examinations and assessments" (Hyldgaard, 2006, p. 152). This means that teachers become trustworthy because of the external recognition they get due to their curricular knowledge (which, in its extension, is a recognition from the state). Nevertheless, apart from this logical installation, the teacher is also a *real person* who confronts real students every day. Thus, this confrontation is both societal—in the sense that the teacher and students are part of a symbolic order—*and* social, meaning that they personalize and build concrete relationships with one another inter-subjectively. For this reason, when discussing lack of understanding in a concrete pedagogical setting, a sociological dimension needs to be merged with philosophical reflections.

This brings me to my third domain: the symbolic order is regulated according to organizational, socio-economic, and historical factors that privilege some student groups while excluding others. Historically, lack of understanding and/or lack of will to understand have often been unbearable for students, leading them toward the tendency of giving up (Bourdieu & Passeron, [1970] 1977; Covington, 1985; Willis, 1977). As these tendencies have structural causes, one cannot blame a specific teacher or the specific object/knowledge at hand. However, in a real-life situation, it is a particular teacher that confronts a concrete group of students. From a student perspective, therefore, the teacher risks

becoming either an alienating representative of the excluding mechanisms that characterize the school system or an ally, someone who re-cognizes them. This ambivalence toward the teacher is evident in the student narratives presented in the empirical section.

By using interviews with students to analyze reflections on the state of not understanding, I have also shown how classroom culture can either help or hinder transmission and the process of understanding. Thus, the triadic formation, inspired by Rasch—involving the student, the teacher, and the knowledge that is to be transmitted (which sometimes turns into noise) —which I started with, was transformed into a quadratic model, taking into consideration social and material factors that the symbolic order fails to address. The social world, the "outer system" that is present in the schooling situation, is the third ontological domain when discussing lack of understanding. This "outer system" lies formally outside the symbolic order yet invades it by producing fantasies and putting material pressure on all parties; it reminds the students of what is at stake if they fail and it tends to contribute to reproducing social structures in society.

From a philosophical standpoint, there has sometimes been an idealistic and romantic approach to lack of understanding. An early example is the conceptualization of fifteenth-century thinker Nicolaus Cusanus of "learned ignorance," recently reintroduced by Bornemark (2018). Another is the Italian thinker Giambattista Vico ([1744] 1948, p. 116f) who holds:

> So that, as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them (*homo intelligendo fit omnia*), this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by not understanding them (*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*); and perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understand he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them.

A more modern formulation, inspired by Hegel, is Gadamer's (1989b, p. 57), who states that: "One must lose oneself in order to

find oneself." In this essay, I have materialized such an approach by dovetailing the existential dimension with an analysis of a concrete setting, more specifically, a socio-economically disadvantaged school in the Swedish education system.

Lack of understanding can certainly be a desirable state because it forces one to confront the world in a renewed way and is necessary for personal development. However, in looking at the present neoliberal school situation, this desire appears overly naïve. In an interaction between two equals, for example, the conversation is developed and continued through associations. In such encounters, we often communicate by exploring together and end up in places we would not have if it were not for the Other's presence. However, in a teacher–student encounter enclosed by curricular imperatives, communication is not developed primarily through associations or non-instrumental explorations. The process of understanding is always destined toward a search for correct answers, which explains why student attendance is made compulsory.

The search for correct answers has been accentuated by results-based management and demands for profitability in the education system, which has not only lost its ability to contain students' frustration and fatigue (Archangelo 2014) but has also displaced teacher autonomy, leaving little space to wade into uncertainty, take detours, or engage in personal reflections (Allelin, 2020). Today, many students suffer from anxiety and stress (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016). As Covington (1985) emphasizes, students are, therefore, often unwilling to expose their lack of understanding so as to "try to protect a sense of dignity" (p. 391). In other words, admitting to oneself that one lacks understanding is a vulnerable state; being graded in relation to this is even more so. Scarce institutional resources, both materially and time wise, have inevitable negative effects on participants. As Archangelo (2010) points out, "In social and economic conditions in which access to institutions and possibilities for meeting a person's needs are extremely limited, a lack of response or an inadequate response will tend to dominate the person's experiences." To this, one can add the high stakes that grades play in a student's future prospects (Högberg et al., 2021).

Furthermore, in a school where a great share of the students arrive in Sweden in their teenage years, have no knowledge of Swedish and no previous experience of the Swedish educational system, there will be many references in the life worlds that differ. Language barriers will also be inevitable, adding an extra layer to Gadamer's (1989a) existential question of whether language can be understood as a bridge or barrier. Yet, despite results-based management and the difficulties related to frames of reference, the student interviewees communicated a will to overcome their lack, even when they felt that help from the teacher would not enable them to do so.

To return to one of my initial questions related to the second aim of this essay—whether the school provides students with a space that is sufficiently safe to allow them to admit that they are in need of help and whether it encourages them to ask for help and thereby helps them identify themselves as learning subjects—the answer is yes. The students did not demonstrate any countercultural opposition to schooling, and there was no truancy or resistance to learning. Perhaps the stakes are too high in our so-called "knowledge society" as lacking merits usually means a life characterized by precarity, especially if you live in a disadvantaged neighborhood or have a structurally underprivileged social position. Furthermore, the students were not indifferent to their lack of understanding, and neither did their lack of understanding come from indifference. Indeed, according to them, lack evokes emotions of shame, tiredness, and a state of frustration—inevitable responses in any learning process. What was crucial in this situation, however, was the teacher's ability to make this frustration tolerable for the students and, thus, eliminate any learning resistance (cf. Archangelo, 2010; Willoughby & Demir-Atay, 2016). Results-based management, with its high pace and number of criteria, has not made this beneficial in terms of statistical results (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016). Yet, the students whose responses are presented in this essay, asked teachers for help, helped each other, asked family members for help when the symbolic function of the teacher failed, and tried on their own. Relating their responses to Gadamer (1989a), the

students expressed a will to reach unification through the exposition of lack of understanding.

Lacking understanding has been further described as a state of isolation, a breach between the subject and the world. To overcome this alienating state, the students requested a *re-cognition.* The hyphen indicates that it is not only about being acknowledged but also about wanting to be cognitively moved to a new point of departure, to be meaningfully challenged. Understanding through re-cognition can thus be described as the process wherein knowledge (the external object/the world) is subjectively integrated (which demands work/effort and commitment) through transmission (an inter-subjective meeting)—in other words, gaining understanding through the ongoing effort of an encounter with another subject. For this to be possible, all parties in the quadratic model must be willing to adjust for this purpose, which necessarily includes more lenient curricular demands that make it possible for subjects to acknowledge each other.

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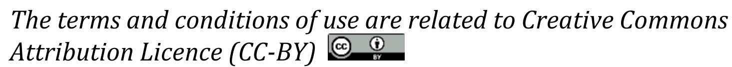

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# Pathways of Education Reform 'From Below': Theorizing Social Movements as Grassroots Agents of Educational Change

*Kai Heidemann*

A long-running line of inquiry in the field of educational studies seeks to understand how formalized systems of education undergo processes of change and transformation. Much of this scholarship has focused on state-based processes of educational governance and policy-making (*e.g.* Arnove and Torres 2007; Ball 1994; Carnoy and Rhoten 2002; Barrenechea, Beech and Rivas 2022; Dale 2005; Ginsburg 1991; Hanson 2001; Mayer, Ramirez and Soysal 1992; Spring 2009). Often situated within the domain of educational policy studies, [1] such work typically aims to foster global comparative understandings of how structural changes in national educational systems are variously stifled or stimulated through processes of diffusion, innovation, coercion and conflict. While some scholars look critically at how educational changes are driven by relations of power and domination (*e.g.* Spring 2009), others focus more on the functional mechanisms through which institutional changes develop (*e.g.* Mayer, Ramirez and Soysal 1992). In either case, the primary agents of education reform are usually identified as networks of elites, experts and authorities working through channels of formal policy-making across the local, national and transnational levels of governance. Education reform

[1] For a concise summary of the field of educational policy studies, see: Delaney, J. (2017) *Education Policy: Bridging the divide between theory and practice* [2nd edition]. Edmonton: Brush Education Inc.

is thus often either implicitly or explicitly construed as a "top-down" affair characterized by "supply-side logics" whereby influential sets of political insiders first develop the plans for (re)structuring schools and then work to garner support from less influential stakeholders on the peripheries of policy-making (Brint 2006: 253). One of the most prolific areas of inquiry in this domain, for instance, has traced out the global diffusion of elite-driven educational reform agendas rooted in the 'neoliberal' logics of decentralization, marketization and privatization (Stromquist and Monkman 2014).

Although many fruitful and invaluable insights have been generated by global comparative research on institutional processes of educational change, the 'top-down' and 'supply-side' orientation of this policy-centric literature has traditionally neglected the ways in which grassroots actors and social movements can act as influential drivers of educational politics and reforms 'from below'. Consequently, the innovative and highly localized forms of subjectivity, agency and collective action that emerge from within civil society and give shape to community-driven movements for education reform are rarely a focus of research and theorization in policy studies.

Fortunately, in recent years increased attention has been awarded to issues of community engagement by looking at the ways in which grassroots actors engage with the politics of educational change 'from below' (*e.g.* Anyon 2009; Binder 2002; Horsford and Vasquez Heilig 2014; Oakes and Lipton 2002; Shirley 1997; Su 2009; Tarlau 2015; Warren and Mapp 2011). This small but growing body of work has shed important light on questions of how, when and why local-level actors participate in organized and enduring forms of collective action so as to critique existing educational practices and challenge prevailing policy regimes. Among the key insights generated by this diverse stream of research, for instance, is how "emancipatory" or "equity-focused" (Oakes and Lipton 2002) education reform initiatives can develop at the grassroots in order to empower historically marginalized and disenfranchised communities, such as ethnic/racial minorities, indigenous peoples,

or the urban and rural poor. While many of the scholars working in this terrain invoke or refer to the term 'social movement', there is limited engagement with the concepts and theories of social movement scholarship (*cf.* Binder 2002; Heidemann 2014; Tarlau 2015). Conversely, within the field of social movement studies, there is scarce attention to the question of how social movement actors seek to influence educational systems and policies (*e.g.* Andrews 2002; Meyer and Boutcher 2007). Rather, most of the work in this domain looks at how universities can act as staging sites for broader-level social protest campaigns, as evidenced by student movements in Chile in 2011 (Guzman-Concha 2012), China in 1989 (Zhao 1998) and the global student protest wave of 1968 (Horn 2017). In addition, while numerous social movement scholars address the theme of education, they tend to focus on the forms of non-formalized learning and knowledge production that transpire outside of educational institutions and which take shape from within activist groups, social movement organizations and protest camps (*e.g.* Choudry 2015; Isaac et al; 2019).

By highlighting the forms of agency through which grassroots actors work to bring the politics of educational change to life 'from below', the tool-kit of social movement theory can help to illuminate the ways in which 'everyday' citizens experience, evaluate and ultimately engage with larger-scale regimes of educational governance and policy-making. Moreover, a social movement perspective is especially beneficial in underlining the ways in which particular collectivities of grassroots actors work to define issues of educational equality and opportunity on their own terms as well as how these locally rooted understandings of educational justice intersect with national and transnational policy trends in more or less contentious ways. Without such insights 'from below' our understandings of the variety of societal forces that shape processes of educational change remain partial and potentially misleading.

*Overview*

In what follows, I merge the field of education reform and educational policy studies with 'neo-institutionalist' strands of social movement theory (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; Fligstein

and McAdam 2012; Meyer 2004; Schneiberg and Lounsbury 2008) in order to explore how grassroots actors approach educational systems as both a *target* of claim making, and a *field* of direct action.[2] Drawing on a range of some representative case studies that are broadly linked to issues of 'social justice',[3] I look at some of the principal pathways of collective action through which grassroots education reform initiatives as well as some of the corresponding dilemmas and problematics associated with these pathways. Ultimately, I argue that social movement actors have the capacity to trigger important processes of educational change 'from below', and that their actions merit more serious and systematic consideration by educational scholars. The overall aim of my discussion is not to provide a fully fledge empirical analysis, but rather to suggest a heuristic that stimulates future avenues for comparative scholarship.

## 1. Looking at education as a terrain of social movement action

What is a social movement? Empirically, of course, there is no single unitary type or form of social movement. However, from a sociological perspective, the term generally refers to relatively organized and enduring networks of contentious collective action that emanate from the grassroots of civil society, and which seek to challenge established relations of power in order to variously realize and/or resist broader-level processes of change. On the one hand, social movements can have a 'progressive' orientation geared toward changing certain aspects of the institutionalized social order, such as by fighting against structural racism and sexism. On

[2] As a quick caveat, I would like to note that my focus in this article is on education linked to primary and secondary schooling, and thus excludes the settings of higher education and adult education.

[3] For the purposes of this discussion, I define 'social justice' as those sets of ideas and actions that are intended to transcend inequitable social arrangements and institutions, and that seek to develop strategies for the empowerment of historically marginalized and exploited populations. This includes a broad spectrum of initiatives variously linked to struggles against racial, gendered, sexual, socioeconomic and ecological forms of oppression (Inspired by Hytten and Bettez 2011).

the other hand, however, social movements can also adopt relatively 'protective' positions by working to prevent the degradation or destruction of certain aspects of the established social order, such as by working to secure the public's access to universal public education or unemployment benefits. While the efforts of social movements often target established governmental policies and state-based agencies, their actions tend to be aimed at a broader transformation of hegemonic relations and ideologies in society.

Many of the fundamental perspectives at play in the field of social movement studies are applications of broader traditions in sociological theory, such as neo-Durkheimian theories of order, neo-Marxian theories of conflict and neo-Weberian theories of action as well as symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, and pragmatism (Snow, Soule and Kriesi 2004). In this article, I focus on 'neo-institutionalism', or what is also more narrowly referred to as 'political process theory' (Meyer 2004). This strand of theorizing emphasizes the embeddedness of social movement actors and their actions within a broader multi-scalar landscape of institutional systems and fields of action, such as those linked to states and markets as well as many other spheres of social life, such as religion, gender, mass media and education (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Schneiberg and Lounsbury 2008). Within this literature, 'institutions' are generally understood as historically enduring structures of social interaction that guide large-scale processes of social reproduction within distinctive spheres of life. Institutions are typically viewed in sociology as very stable and resilient structures. However, they are also understood as ever-shifting and unfinished social projects, infused with a variety of underlying tensions and contradictions (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). This relative instability creates possible openings and opportunities for social movements to re-shape institutions.

Moreover, different institutional domains are generally recognized as being interdependent, overlapping and nested within one another, rather than fully bounded or closed systems of action. While the prevailing logics and relations of power at play in

different institutional domains can operate rather symbiotically and in tandem with one another, they can also exist at cross-purposes and come into conflict with one another, as illustrated by the historical tension between religion and education in the European nation-state system, for example (see, Willaime 2007). Such inter-institutional dynamics have important consequences for social movements because they can allow activists and reformers to channel the influence of one institutional field toward another.

The basic premise at work in neo-institutionalism is that the agency of social movement actors- their capacity to act upon the world and potentially shape it- is profoundly shaped by a larger macro-structural landscape of institutionalized power relations. As surmised by Elisabeth Clemens (1998:109): "Human agency is limited… The potential of collective action to produce significant social change, therefore, is shaped in large part by the character of what may be changed". The institutional contours of a given society at a given point in time thus establish a certain reality for social movement actors which exhibits certain power dynamics that make some forms of action more imaginable, interesting and impactful than others. The forms of power at play within particular institutional fields of action, such as educational systems, have both positive (enabling) and negative (constraining) consequence for the grassroots practices and efforts of social movement actors. While power dynamics can at times be effectively channeled and wielded by social movement actors in impactful ways that allow them to make important gains, they can also restrain the agency of social movements by acting as a source of deterrence, frustration, obstruction or repression. As Meyer (2004:125) writes: "exogenous factors enhance or inhibit a social movement's prospects for (a) mobilizing, (b) advancing particular claims rather than others, (c) cultivating some alliances rather than others, (d) employing particular political strategies and tactics rather than others, and (e) affecting mainstream institutional politics and policy."

From a contemporary sociological perspective, institutional power dynamics are not fully deterministic of people's actions and agency.

Rather, power creates a certain degree of 'path-dependency' for social movement actors as they experience, evaluate and engage with the rules, resources, logics and limits of prevailing institutional orders in society. A goal underlying neo-institutional theorizing is thus to understand the particular kinds of pathways that specific sets of grassroots actors deploy in the process of navigating particular institutional fields in purposeful and more or less strategic ways. Certainly, this kind of project can take on a macro-structuralist approach that primarily seeks to map out the specific contours of the institutional landscape within which a given set of social movement actors is situated. Jennifer Earl's (2003) comparative work on repression, for instance, has provided important insights into the various forms of institutional containment and control that undermine the capacities of social protest movements, that range from seemingly mundane tax laws to the regularized use of police violence. However, in order to avoid the trap of structural determinism, scholars must inevitably address questions of agency by taking up a more actor-centered and practice-based approach that focuses on how social movements confront and interact with institutional orders 'from below'.

## 2. Accounting for institutional power dynamics in education

The institutional setting of formalized education represents a highly significant but relatively under-theorized realm of social movement agency and activity. Much of the neo-institutionalist scholarship in social movement studies tends to fall in the domain of 'political process' theory (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). This work tends to be macroscopic, operates through a so-called 'polity' model and focuses heavily on the embeddedness of social movements within the global nation-state system. The prevailing view of power in this domain is state-centric with research focusing on the contentious interactions between social movements and governmental policies, agencies and authorities (*e.g.* Smith and Wiest 2012; Tarrow 1998). Of considerable importance are the role of electoral cycles, the significance of party-based cleavages, the machinations of state-based repression and levels of democratization. Within this terrain, some social movement

scholars have certainly addressed educational institutions as an extension of state power and thus a context of movement-based claim-making and protest. In his study of the civil-rights and school-desegregation conflicts in Mississippi during 1969-71, for example, Andrews (2002) shows how White resistance to the Black struggle for educational equality and justice led to the creation of new political structures that enabled the continuity of segregation through establishment of private schools for racist Whites. In another example, Binder (2002) showed how a highly decentralized structure of educational governance and policy-making in the United States creates empowering opportunities for both conservative and progressive actors to shape educational curriculum on a very local, rather than national, level. However, in comparison to work on elections and political parties, there has been relatively little effort in the field to craft a unified research agenda that explicitly draws on the tool-kit of social movement theory in order to undertake global comparative studies of how social movement actors work to impact educational systems (*cf.* Heidemann 2015; Isaac et al 2019; Meyer and Boutcher 2007; Niescz, Korora and Walkuski 2018; Tarlau 2015). This relative absence is unfortunate given that educational systems are such an influential nexus of social conflict and power struggles in so many parts of the world.

*Education, socialization and power*

Educational systems are a site of recurring socio-political conflicts because they have a strong link to large-scale processes of collective socialization and enculturation within democratic as well as authoritarian nation-states (Brint 2006). As institutionalized sites of collective identity-formation, meaning-making and knowledge-building, educational systems are highly politicized spaces saturated by an array of competing interests (Apple 2004). Who decides the content of educational curriculum, who controls the certification of schoolteachers, and who determines the levels of funding of schools, for example, are all heated issues that generate a consistent clash of perspectives in countries around the world. Moreover, as prominent terrains of state-based governance and policy-making, educational systems represent a highly coveted

and heavily guarded field of action for societal elites and power-brokers. Indeed, there is considerable power that goes into, and derives from, the capacity to shape educational policies, programs and practices from the local to national and transnational levels. Efforts to reform educational systems and policies by social movements are thus always struggles about institutional power.

In general, educational systems play a rather 'conservative' role in society (Brint 2006). This is to say that, as institutionalized sites of social reproduction, schools and universities tend to enshrine forms of inquiry and knowledge-building that promote the stability of established social orders (Spring 2001). This 'conservative' aspect is palpable from a long-term historical perspective, because educational systems are notoriously resilient to systemic change, and adverse to the introduction of disruptive challenges and reforms 'from below' (Mayer, Ramirez and Soysal 1992). Most educational systems are deeply embedded within the architectures of state-based governance and thus tend to be heavily 'guarded' by a multitude of bureaucratic mechanisms and elite-driven gate-keeping devices that work to preserve institutional homeostasis (Skrentny 2006). These structural traits make educational systems an especially difficult terrain of influence for social movements that emanate from the grassroots of society and seek change on behalf of marginalized and historically disenfranchised peoples.

Despite structural complexities and challenges, however, educational systems are a highly strategic field of action for social movements (Morrow and Torres 2007). Indeed, the reproductive 'function' of education in society is precisely what makes it such a valuable target and terrain of social movement activity. Educational programs and policies are frequently diagnosed by social movement actors as complicit in the reproduction of injustices and inequalities. This is evidenced, for instance, in the ways that systems of higher education have been periodically targeted by successive generations of feminists. By highlighting the overt exclusion and marginalization of women from specific academic positions (professors, chairs, deans, etc.) and specific academic programs (economics, science, engineering, etc.), for example, first, second and third wave feminists have effectively

exposed how systems of higher education play a central role in sustaining institutionalized relations of patriarchal power, masculine privilege and androcentrism (Bannerji et al 1991). However, social movement actors rarely enter into the institutional terrain of educational action in order to merely articulate grievances and expose injustices. Rather, they seek to trigger substantive changes and policy reforms. Hence, when contemporary feminists criticize the marginalization of women within 'STEM' university programs, for instance, their aim is not merely to condemn the absence of women. Rather, the aim is to re-purpose the university and transform the institutional terrain of STEM education into a space capable of yielding broader forms of feminist consciousness and empowerment in society (Morley and Walsh 1996).

*The dynamics of (de)centralization*

As noted earlier, neo-institutionalist theories propose that the ability of social movement actors to impact education generally rests upon their capacity to penetrate institutional boundaries and attain a strategic presence within the arena of educational governance and decision-making. These movement-based dynamics of institutional penetration and presence are heavily dependent on the extent to which the prevailing structures of educational governance and authority work to variously enable or restrain the agency of grassroots actors. In other words, movement-based efforts to reform educational systems are shaped by a predominant 'structure of opportunity' (Meyer 2004).

One key feature of opportunity structures in educational systems is the degree of institutional centralization through which process of educational governance and decision-making occur (Bray 2007; Heidemann and Clothey 2019; McGinn and Walsh 1999). In other words, is the capacity to shape educational policy super concentrated in the hands of just a few or a single agent or agency, or is it spread out among multiple stakeholders? In general, educational systems that demonstrate higher levels of centralization tend to be less 'open' to the influence of social movements because they have a tendency to provide fewer

potential points of access and influence for grassroots actors positioned on the outside of the formal arenas of policy-making. Conversely, while decentralized educational systems can potentially offer more points of access to grassroots reform initiatives, the impact of movement-based reform campaigns can be more easily contained within specific territories. It is vital to keep in mind, of course, that the institutional dynamics of centralization are not a zero-sum situation that exist within one of two dichotomous categories: centralized or not centralized. Rather, centralization operates along a gradation or spectrum of 'openness'.

The relative 'openness' of educational systems varies both within and across national contexts (Bray 2007). For example, a given educational system can demonstrate considerable 'openness' in some areas of pedagogy and instruction, such as by giving teachers a lot of autonomy and independence when it comes to enacting classroom instruction, while simultaneously remaining decisively 'closed' in other domains of instruction, such as by requiring teachers to use standardized curricula and exams. This is relevant because different domains of an educational system can be more or less 'open' to the grassroots challenges of social movement actors. Moreover, from a cross-national perspective, degrees of institutional 'openness' are always relative to the particular geo-political territory under investigation.

The structure of opportunity at work within the Spanish educational system for example, varies considerably within the different autonomous communities of the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia (Bonal et al 2005). These sub-national variations make the Spanish system appear very 'open' when compared to the notoriously centralized or 'Jacobin' context of national education next-door in France, where local and sub-national levels of educational authority are historically quite weak (van Zanten and Robert 2000). These institutional variations have had considerable consequences, for instance, on the historical efforts of grassroots actors seeking to promote minority language policies in education, such as the Basque regions of France and Spain (see, Heidemann 2014). However, casting a wider glance, the

Spanish system appears somewhat less centralized when contrasted with the highly decentralized federal system in place within the United States of America where there are over 13,500 relatively autonomous school districts operating under the legal jurisdictions of 50 different states. Such variation in the U.S. context has enormous consequence for community actors seeking to promote non-English languages, such as Spanish (see, Crawford 2000). Grassroots proponents of bilingual education in the largely Democratic state of California are thus very likely to face different conditions than their counterparts in Republican states such as Kentucky or Missouri where "English Only" policies prevail in public education. Moreover, within different states, minority language activists will likely face a variety of different opportunities and obstacles linked to the prevailing power dynamic at play within individual school districts. Hence, in California, linguistic rights activists working in areas with very large Latino populations such as the Oakland Unified School District, face very different opportunities than their counterparts a few hours away in the predominantly White and politically conservative setting of Shasta County. Furthermore, the relatively high levels of centralization at play in the French context actually look rather 'open' when compared to the structure of educational governance in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian nations such as China and Iran, where educational governance is tightly controlled by state-based agents. In these settings, processes of language planning and policy-making in education are generally not open to community influences and people's grassroots efforts to promote minority languages, such as Uyghur or Armenian face monumental challenges.[4]

In sum, in order to analyze how social movement actors seek to impact in educational systems, it is necessary to understand how they engage with the institutional contours of the 'opportunity structure' that characterizes the particular educational system(s)

[4] For a good overview discussion of language policy issues worldwide, see: May, S. (2012) *Language and minority rights: Ethnicity, nationalism and the politics of language*. New York: Routledge.

within which social movement actors are working, such as the dynamic of (de)centralization.

## 3. Pathways of movement-based action in education

Despite the institutional factors that make education such a challenging terrain of policy reform for social movement actors, it is important to scrutinize the ways in which social movements try to shape educational systems. In what follows, I thus suggest a basic analytical heuristic that is based on four distinctive pathways of movement-based action in education: *infra-institutional, inter-institutional, extra-institutional* and *para-institutional.* These terms build directly on the aforementioned insights of neo-institutionalist theories in social movement theory (Schneiberg and Lounsbury 2008). The use of Latin prefixes (infra, inter, extra and para) in my discussion is not intended to be rigidly literal. Rather, it acts as a simple heuristic that highlights the positionality of different grassroots education reform initiatives vis-a-vis to the education system*, i.e.* 'working from within institutions', 'working inwards from the outside of institutions', 'working largely from the outside of institutions' and 'building new parallel institutions'. As a way to explain and illustrate each pathway below, I draw on some representative cases linked to issues of social justice.

*Infra-Institutional Pathways: Working from the inside*

'Infra-institutional' pathways of action develop when social movement activities emerge from within the existing institutional boundaries of established educational systems. Such processes occur when 'inside' actors, such as teachers or students, purposefully bring social movement agendas to life in their particular spheres of activity within the educational system, most notably via the settings of instruction and learning. The persons who make such pathways possible can be seen as 'brokers' capable of mediating a strategic interaction between the 'external' realm of social movement agendas (environmentalism, anti-racism, feminism, etc) on the one hand, and the 'internal' realm of educational systems on the other (schools, classrooms, lectures, etc). Brokers are able to use their internal position within specific schools or universities to both 'import' and 'activate' a given set of

social movement agendas into the educational system, such as by making issues of environmental justice or anti-racism an explicit theme of inquiry and knowledge-building. Such brokerage can occur in a wide variety of ways, such as through processes of *infusion*, *diffusion* and *staging*.

Through concerted effort and action, brokers can work to systematically infuse educational settings and programs with movement-based discourses and symbols, thus transforming sites of education into vehicles of social movement activity. Infusion can happen in a relatively informal and small-scale manner when individual students and teachers purposefully work to incorporate social movement frames and messages into particular didactic activities. This is illustrated, for instance, in the educational resources developed for students and teachers by the Zinn Education Project (ZEP) in the United States.[5] Inspired by the work of radical social historian Howard Zinn, ZEP is an educational collective that works to incorporate movement-based issues of social justice into the curriculum of history and civics courses in U.S. schools and universities by providing a freely available on-line catalog of hundreds of pedagogical materials. These materials can be used in a variety of ways, such as by students to do classroom projects, or by teachers for building lesson plans. As resources, these materials are intended to challenge the colonialist, nationalist, racist, sexist and elite-oriented narratives of history that are traditionally valorized in U.S. public schools (Loewen 1995). These counter-hegemonic resources are often original historical documents that have been curated by members of ZEP. They work by giving evidence to the influential but often ignored role played by diverse kinds of social movements in the shaping of U.S. culture, politics and society. Moreover, many of the materials in the catalog also include pedagogical resources that have been directly authored by social movement groups and leaders from the past and present. By infusing the classroom with these alternative resources, brokers can thus transform their classrooms into a

[5] For details about the Zinn Education Project, see: https://www.zinnedproject.org/about.

platform for the diffusion of movement-based knowledge, messages and memories. Brokers activate such infusive actions when they utilize an existing educational setting as a bridge that purposefully links social movements to educational systems, thus transforming schools into sites that are capable of bringing social movement agendas to life.

Processes of infusion and diffusion can also occur when students and/or educational practitioners work to create associations and orchestrate events from within schools. Such actions transform educational settings into a 'stage' that is capable of promoting wider social movement agendas. This can be evidenced, for instance, in the wide variety of environmentalist actions that emerged in high schools and universities across Europe and other parts of the world during 2018-19.[6] Eventually unfolding under the moniker of 'Fridays for Future', these educational actions were sparked off by media coverage of the infamous school strike of 15-year old Greta Thurnberg who was protesting political inaction on climate change in Sweden. Her 'school-strike-for-climate-action' was then quickly replicated and re-enacted in a variety of ways by a multitude of students and teachers in other European nations, such as France, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Fueled by the strategic use of digital communication technology and social media, this wave of youth-led protest was complemented by the creation of hundreds of student-run environmentalist clubs and associations from within schools and universities around the world. In this context, students and allied teachers acted as brokers of infra-institutional action who were successful in transforming local educational settings into highly visible and influential 'stages' of action linked up to a broader global movement for climate justice. The founding of many new environmentalist clubs/associations within high schools and universities effectively bolstered the transnational density of social movement networks and communities. Similar kinds of inter-institutional pathways of action on environmental issues were also carried out by students in previous years, as evidenced by the launching of many different

[6] For an up to date account of these global actions, see: https://fridaysforfuture.org/.

types of student-led 'greening' campaigns that successfully pressured school and university officials to adopt more robust recycling and waste reduction programs.[7]

*Inter-Institutional Pathways: Working inwards from along the edges*
'Inter-institutional' pathways of action emerge along the institutional boundaries of established educational system with the ultimate aim of gaining access. This is perhaps the most common pathway of action adopted by social movement actors as it usually entails a strategic targeting of the educational system by actors who lack significant presence within the system. This relative lack of presence is often linked to the stigmatized status or identity of movement actors in society as well as the extent to which their claims are perceived by educational authorities as overly 'radical' or 'threatening' to the institutional homeostasis of the educational system. Inter-institutional pathways are typically launched from within social movement-based organizations that already exist at the grassroots of society and then work to actively 'penetrate' the institutional boundaries of the educational system in order to gain a foothold and wield their influence within the system. The social dynamics of such institutional penetration can unfold in a variety of ways, but there are two basic routes: *direct* and *indirect*.

On the one hand, direct routes of penetration occur when social movement actors work to actively confront and engage with a given set of authorities on specific educational issues. The aim here is to maintain constant interaction with educational decision-makers and authorities by deploying a repertoire of actions that will varyingly convince or coerce these authorities into accepting movement-based reform agendas within the educational system. On the other hand, indirect routes of penetration are somewhat different in that they require social movement actors to take a roundabout path to influencing educational authorities, such as by using the legal system to challenge established education policies,

[7] See, for example, Gough, A. (2005). Sustainable schools: Renovating educational processes. *Applied Environmental Education and Communication*, 4(4), 339-351.

or by using the combined pressures of mass public protest and media coverage to force authorities into a dialogue. While these are separate trajectories of inter-institutional action, they are often intertwined.

Inter-institutional pathways of educational action are nicely illustrated by the historic battle for educational equality and racial desegregation that was led by the Black Civil Rights Movement and its allies in the United States during the 1940-60s.[8] In this context, the structural reality of a deeply entrenched and vociferously guarded legacy of institutionalized racism in American society placed Black Civil Rights activists at a severe disadvantage when it came to penetrating let alone influencing the educational system through 'normal' channels of reform. In order to penetrate the boundaries of a heavily guarded and overtly racist educational system, disruption was needed. Accordingly, direct and indirect routes of action were taken by activists. Indirect routes of inter-institutional educational activism were especially influential during early stages of the Civil Rights Movement as evidenced by a multiplicity of long legal campaigns organized by social movement actors and leaders during the 1940-50s. Key players in this regard were progressive Black lawyers such as Thurgood Marshall, Julian Bond and others who worked with established civil rights organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Although punctuated by many defeats, these actors were able to use their instrumental knowledge of the judicial-legal system as well as their social position as educated lawyers in order to craft serious legal challenges aimed at dismantling the racist logics of public education. Ultimately, these legal efforts paid off in 1954 when the landmark ruling by the U.S. Supreme Course declared racial segregation in education to be harmful and unconstitutional. The Black struggle for educational equality and justice was far from over after this legal victory, however. As a decentralized federal system, the institutional structure of U.S. public schools allowed

[8] My discussion here is predominantly based on Patterson, J. (2001) *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy*. New York: Oxord University Press.

educational authorities in northern as well as southern parts of the nation to largely ignore the court's ruling and thus maintain racially segregated schools. In brief, federal authority on educational matters was limited because local and sub-national authorities were historically positioned as the primary power-brokers. Nonetheless, the relative success of indirect educational actions in the legal realm paved the path for influential forms of direct educational action to be mobilized by civil rights activists after 1954, such as through occupations, sit-ins, and marches. These direct actions effectively turned the educational system into a primary battleground in the broader Black struggle for racial justice and equality in American society. Direct action forced educational authorities in school districts across the country to take up a publicly visible position that was either in compliance or in violation of a newly mandated federal law, thus effectively linking other sets of political actors and allies up to the field of Black struggle in education.

In short, indirect pathways of inter-institutional action via the legal system paved the path for direct forms of contentious action to be wielded because it gave their claims considerable political and legal weight. Effective use of disruptive direct actions eventually allowed social movement actors to gain increased support from broader sectors of society, such as the Democratic Party, progressive Whites and many mainstream news media outlets. When coupled with effective organizing and strategizing by Black activists and their allies, this broad-based public pressure allowed the social movement to more fully penetrate the institutional boundaries of the educational system and attain increased influence. Although problems of institutionalized racism and segregation persist in the U.S. today, the battles fought by the Black Civil Rights Movement during the 1940-60s created important opportunities for future generations of racial justice activists and campaigns to mobilize empowering forms of infra-institutional action from within the educational system.

The main characteristic of this pathway is that reform initiatives originate from within established social movement organizations

with the primary aim of targeting and penetrating educational institutions. It is distinguishable from infra-institutional pathways largely because the agents of reform are structurally positioned as 'outsiders' with little to no legitimate direct leverage on processes of educational governance and decision-making. They must thus use the tools of mobilization and disruption to attempt to attain influence. Celina Su's work (2009) on student activism and organizing in New York City offers further insight into this type of pathway. Through ethnographic investigation, she explores how parents and students from minority and working class neighborhoods worked to improve the quality of education in city schools by linking up with grassroots social movement organizations.

*Extra-Institutional Pathways: Working on the outside*
'Extra-institutional' pathways of action are comprised of movement-based practices that emerge from outside of an existing educational system, and which operate largely on the outside of the schools, but nonetheless exert some degree of indirect influence upon the educational system. This pathway is perhaps best illustrated through the development of various kinds of 'after-school' programs and activities that work directly with students and educators in order to directly engage members of the educational community with social movement agendas, such as combating issues of racism and poverty. Extra-institutional pathways often lead to the creation of organizational entities that have varying degrees of proximity to existing schools, and which may or may not become formally recognized and supported by established educational authorities.

On the one hand, extra-institutional pathways of action can lead to the creation of initiatives that operate as a direct extension of an established school/university and may even rely on direct forms of material support from this institution. These kinds of pathways can often operate in a close relation to existing educational programs, particularly when they are not perceived as too 'radical' or threatening by established educational authorities. This type of initiative can be seen in the kinds of after-school programs developed by social movement activists in urban areas that are

focused on combatting problems of poverty, substance abuse, criminality and gang violence. The actors behind initiatives in places such as New York City or Rio de Janeiro are often community organizers who work to create after-school programs that are designed to 'keep kids safe and off the streets' by providing them with supplemental academic lessons, sports, games or other 'positive' social activities.[9] While such programs seek to provide a form of 'sanctuary' for youths, they also often entail activities that educate minority and disenfranchised youths about issues of structural inequality and which encourage young people to take on a more active role in addressing the problems afflicting in their communities, such as through community gardening programs or collaborative documentary film projects.[10] Because issues of structural inequality may often not be effectively addressed by local schools, the value of such after-school programs is significant. The work of Ginwright and Cammarota (2007), for instance, has shown how some urban youth programs can lead to the creation of solidaristic bonds among groups of adolescents and young adults in ways that stimulate more enduring forms of "critical civic praxis", which then lead to further "engagement with ideas, social networks, and experiences that build individual and collective capacity to struggle for social justice" (2017:693).

Another example of extra-institutional pathways can be seen in various types of evening or weekend workshops that are organized by activists in order to help teachers and educational practitioners to find ways to align their pedagogical activities with social movement agendas, such as LGBTQ+ rights, feminism and anti-

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[9] For examples, see: Bartlett, L. (2007). The comparative ethnography of educational projects: youth and adult literacy programmes in Brazil. *Compare*, 37(2), 151-166; Noam, G. G., Biancarosa, G., & Dechausay, N. (2002). *Afterschool education: Approaches to an emerging field*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

[10] For an overview discussion, see: Akiva, T., Carey, R. Brown Cross, A, Delale-O'Connor and Brown (2017) Reasons youth engage in activism programs: Social justice or sanctuary? *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 53:20-30.

racism.This is nicely illustrated, for instance, by the wide range of workshops, training activities and resources developed by activists and community organizers linked to the Center for Racial Justice in Education in New York City. As noted in a description of one of their actions: “In this flagship training, educators strengthen their analysis of how racism manifests in schools and classrooms, enhance their understanding of how racism affects children, practice utilizing tools to address race and racism with students, and gain strategies to support a school-wide culture of respect, equity, and inclusivity.” [11] Hence, while the work of this organization is based outside of local schools and takes place when school is out of session, by working with students and teachers it nonetheless seeks to have an impact on what happens within schools.

On the other hand, under some conditions, extra-institutional pathways can lead to the development of initiatives that operate at a strategic distance from existing schools/universities, and lack the overt aim to directly influence educational activities within schools. This can be illustrated, for example, in after-school programs developed by women’s rights groups in regions of sub-Saharan Africa where there are strict taboos on issues of teaching about female sexuality or reproductive rights in the educational system. In these settings, activist groups often work to build empowering forms of extra-curricular education that address issues of sexual health and sexualized violence for adolescent girls and young women. [12] By providing information and knowledge on ‘taboo’ issues of sexuality from a feminist perspective, these extra-institutional educational programs help young students to cultivate

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[11] See, https://centerracialjustice.org/trainings/.

[12] See, for instance: James, S., Reddy, P., Ruiter, R. A., McCauley, A., & Borne, B. V. D. (2006). The impact of an HIV and AIDS life skills program on secondary school students in KwaZulu–Natal, South Africa. *AIDS Education & Prevention,* 18(4), 281-294; Kalembo, F. W., Zgambo, M., & Yukai, D. (2013). Effective adolescent sexual and reproductive health education programs in sub-Saharan Africa. *Californian Journal of Health Promotion*, 11(2), 32-42; Kirby, D. B., Laris, B. A., & Rolleri, L. A. (2007). Sex and HIV education programs: Their impact on sexual behaviors of young people throughout the world. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 40(3), 206-217.

an awareness of, as well as a relationship to various kinds of social movement activities and agendas that they might not otherwise be aware of, thus promoting the expansion of movement-based identities and networks.

*Para-Institutional Pathways: Building alternatives*

'Para-institutional' pathways refer to movement-based practices that emerge on the outside of pre-existing educational systems, and which seek to develop alternative educational programs that operate in a parallel but yet distinctively critical relationship to 'mainstream' sites of education. This is to say that para-institutional pathways lead to the creation of comprehensive educational programs that are grounded in an overt critique of the relative 'failings' and 'inadequacies' of established educational programs and policies. Para-institutional pathways are perhaps best illustrated by organized and enduring forms of collective action that lead to the development of alternative 'community-based' schools (Clothey and Heidemann 2019). These kinds of schools often develop and carry out their educational activities in ways that purposefully align with broader-level social movement agendas, such as social justice and environmental sustainability. Community-based schools typically operate in ways that seek to position local citizens and community members as both the architects and benefactors of educational programs. In this light, community-based schools are deeply rooted within, responsive to, and oriented toward the political, economic, cultural and historical realities of the social environmental within which a given school is located.

Para-institutional pathways of action tend to emerge where and when grassroots actors have deemed infra- or inter-institutional pathways to be either impossible or ineffective due to the powers wielded by established educational authorities in denying them access. Para-institutional pathways of action are most likely to surface in educational systems that display some degree of decentralization because in order for alternative 'parallel' schools to formally operate they usually require some form of legal certification by educational authorities. In other words,

decentralized educational systems tend to afford better opportunities for para-institutional pathways of action. Indeed, the increasing forms of decentralization exhibited in educational systems around the world over the past several decades have correlated directly with a global increase in community-based schools (Clothey and Heidemann 2019). Para-institutional pathways of action can frequently utilize the institutional realm of private education as a strategic niche to build alternative schools. However, this is not always or even most frequently the case.

A good example of para-institutional pathways of educational action can be seen in the cooperative schooling movement that emerged in Argentina during the early 2000s (Heidemann 2019). At the turn of the 21st century, a large-scale meltdown of the Argentine economy and corresponding breakdown of the political system reached a threshold when people of many diverse walks of life merged with established social movements and labor unions in a wave of protest so as to voice their grievances and demand solutions. As these protests played out from the grassroots of Argentine society, they quickly spilled over into the educational sector and fostered demands for education reform rooted in the logics of para-institutional activism. Underlying these grassroots actions was a commitment to promote stronger and more systematic forms of community control and participation in local schools. At the center of these actions, were convictions about the importance of building alternative schools based upon principles of 'solidarity', 'cooperativism', 'self-determination' and 'democratization'. Echoing many of the claims and narratives of progressive social movements in Argentina during the 2000s, these transformative principles sought to use schools as weapons in a combat against endemic problems of social inequality, precarity and exclusion. In short, people sought to transform schools into vehicles of progressive change and empowerment.

As many educational services and resources in Argentina began to collapse as a consequence of the economic crisis during the early 2000s, a small but influential network of educators, parents and social movement activists across various rural and urban parts of the country worked to transform a debilitating moment of crisis

into an empowering opportunity for grassroots education reform. Often working in tandem with social movement organizations and civic associations based within poor and working class neighborhoods, these networks of actors engaged in the hard work of transforming dozens of local schools into alternative sites of community-based education. The unique network of community-based schools that would eventually emerge from these concerted grassroots efforts would ultimately gain formal recognition as a new type of school by the Argentine Ministry of National Education in 2006, known as *escuelas de gestion social y escuelas cooperativas*. In the span of just a few short years, the educational landscape in Argentina was transformed by the determined efforts of engaged citizens working in conjunction with broader-level social movements in order to democratize the educational system 'from below'.

Despite the contextual nuances of the Argentine case discussed here, para-institutional pathways of reform linked to community-based schooling initiatives have been documented by scholars in many other parts of the world, including Brazil (Tarlau 2015), El Salvador (Edwards 2019), Hungary (Timmer 2019), Spain (Delgado 2014), the United States (Rofes and Stulberg 2004), and Zambia (Bamattre 2019). Although each setting displays distinctive relations to broader sets of social movements and specific educational visions, they all tell a story that clearly exemplifies a situation of grassroots actors working collectively to build alternative educational institution that exists in a decisively critical but parallel institutional relationship to 'mainstream' schools, *i.e.* a para-institutional pathway.

*Problematics of social movement-driven reforms*

When social movement actors do manage to 'break through' the institutional boundaries of educational systems, and gain a presence within the arena of educational governance, then they face a wide variety challenges and obstacles in the pursuit of movement-based reform agendas. Before concluding, I thus briefly address two such problematics- *stalling* and *cooptation*- in the

hopes that these themes can be explored further in future scholarship.

One common problem faced by social movement-led reform initiatives is that of 'stalling'. This refers to forms of bureaucratic obstruction that are purposefully deployed by educational authorities in order to keep the presence of social movement agendas 'frozen' in a context of political 'limbo' for extended periods of time. While antagonistic educational authorities may rhetorically acknowledge the validity of a movement-based reform initiative and assure grassroots reformers that the issue is 'under discussion', they can easily invoke techniques of stalling in order to persistently delay the implementation of any substantive changes. The bureaucratic complexity and myriad layers of governance that often characterize many state-based educational systems can make stalling a very easy and appealing tactic of obstruction for educational gate-keepers who perceive particular types of movement-based reform agendas as 'threatening' or 'radical'.

Another common obstacle faced by social movement actors in educational settings is 'cooptation'. This basically refers to a situation whereby educational authorities are willing to acknowledge the validity of movement-based claims and agree to carry out relevant reforms, but in the act of implementation key aspects of the reform agenda are effectively neutralized or 'watered down' so as to minimize any majorly disruptive or transformative impact on the educational system.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have merged the study of social movements with educational policy studies in order to theorize social movement actors as agents of educational change and reform. Drawing on neo-institutionalist strands of social movement theory, I offered an analytical heuristic for mapping out four distinctive pathways through which social movement actors seek to impact educational systems 'from below': infra-institutional, inter-institutional, extra-institutional and para-institutional. In each section, I referred to some representative cases in order to illustrate key characteristics

of different pathways. My primary aim in discussing these pathways was to help promote a more cohesive global and comparative research agenda that considers social movement-actors as significant agents of educational reform and change. A neo-institutionalist focus on 'pathways' is useful for analyzing movement-based processes of educational action because it can allow scholars to understand how social movement actors navigate and engage with the institutional contours of educational systems in strategic ways. Only when we understand the practices through which social movement actors try to penetrate the 'thick' institutional boundaries of educational systems in order attain a strategic presence and influence, can we then move on to theorize the actual impacts and outcomes of these actions.

Finally, it should be stressed that the four pathways presented in my discussion should be treated neither as an exhaustive list of possibilities, nor as being mutually exclusive from one another. With more research and exploration, future scholarship is quite likely to show the existence of other kinds of pathways. Moreover, it is not hard to imagine how the four different pathways of education reform presented in my discussion can easily overlap and reinforce one another when different sets of social movement actors collectively target an educational system, albeit from different positions in society. Indeed, it would be fruitful for forthcoming scholarship to examine the intersectionality of diverse pathways and the potentially empowering effects yielded by these intersections for social movements.

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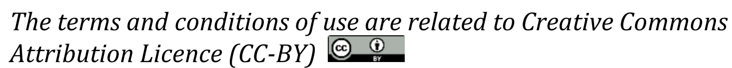

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# Liberal Education?
## A Critical Reflection on Classrooms as Apolitical and Ideologically Ambiguous Spaces

*Ali E. Erol*

*The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.*

hooks (1994, p. 10)

This article challenges the educational space of a growing paradigm within liberal education by critiquing two salient arguments within liberal education today: *i. Classrooms should be apolitical spaces*; and, *ii. educators need to occupy an ideologically ambiguous stance in the classroom*. Drawing inspiration from Paulo Freire's influential work, the article argues that the role of education should transcend the idea of education as a process of mere knowledge acquisition, aiming instead to ignite transformative liberation in both students and educators. By returning to the historically located context of higher education within the United States of America, this article argues for the inherently political nature of educational spaces, emphasizing the historical context that shapes our classrooms and the systemic power imbalances. By arguing for, as well as offering concrete strategies of resistance, the article delves into the significance of a historicized curriculum and syllabus, working towards dismantling oppressive systems and ideologies and centering marginalized voices. This article subsequently emphasizes the need to understand and approach liberation in the context of higher education as a space that requires fostering a sense of solidarity and community with our students.

# Introduction

*Nathaniel Eaton and zeal of Harvard College*

During the harsh winter of 1638, one of the chief complaints of the students who were enrolled in the first college program in North America was that the wife of Nathaniel Eaton, the first Harvard College President, did not serve an adequate amount of beef and beer to satiate the needs of a student population totaled at ten–then there was also the issue of the regular whippings by Eaton himself (Geiger 2014, 1). But, for the mission of promoting and spreading orthodox Puritanism, perhaps it was all worth it. The kind of zeal promoted by Eaton at Harvard College held a special place in the heart of at least one student who enrolled in 1651, Increase Mather. Thankfully, by the time of his enrollment, there was a Brew House to the west of Harvard, and, reportedly, students drank beer in the place of a meal every day (Hall & Hall 1988, 34). One imagines this to have been an important detail for Mather, who ended up becoming the first receiver of a doctorate from Harvard as well as the seventh president until 1688 (Quincy 1840, 60–75). His son, Cotton Mather, despite also being one of the presidents of Harvard during the early 1700s, grew disappointed at the increasing liberalization of Harvard faculty as an emergent consequence of the Enlightenment philosophy in Europe. Prompted by an unsettling sense of defeat, he moved to Connecticut and convinced an English businessman, Elihu Yale, to fund his efforts to open a new college that would do a better job at preserving the orthodox Puritanism that seemed to have gone awry at Harvard (Silverman 2001, 298–300). These brief series of events established the basis of higher education in North America as an adaptation of the model they left behind in England.

However, the model of higher education in North America was not a mere adaptation of religious zeal for the sake of faith or conviction. Puritans occupied a special role in the establishment and advancement of settler colonialism. Perhaps the best example is the way in which Puritan settlements aggravated and agitated the Pequot tribe into Pequot-Puritan conflict (1636–1638) and then completely eliminated the tribe to the extent that John Mason, who

witnessed the war, wrote "Pequots were then bound by the covenant, that none should inhibit their native country, nor should any of them be called Pequots any more" (Mason 1736, 18). Indeed, the Pequot population was already reduced from 13,000 to 3,000 during the early contact period (Freeman, 1995, 286), then following the Pequot war, they were completely eliminated. Another example of how instrumental Puritans were to the mission of settler colonialism was evident in the establishment of *praying towns*. These towns were small settlements made by the Puritans to serve as proto-reservations for Native Americans, where they could be indoctrinated into Christianity–to the extent that they would participate in the massacres of their own tribes in the name of supporting the Puritan mission (Rubin 2013, 20-25). In other words: higher education was a tool and a resource for the preservation, promotion, and reproduction of orthodox Puritan values and of individuals who would enforce those values for the survival and advancement of the settler colonial project.

The intricate weave of historical events that gave rise to North American higher education is strongly entangled with colonial and imperial ambitions as well as other structures of violence. Since the mid-1600s, the commitment of higher education to supporting imperialism has changed in form and became sinisterly embedded in the bureaucratic abyss of grants, projects, promotions, awards, in the abstraction of theory from lived experience, and in teaching political and imperialist orthodoxies in the guise of scientific discourse that admires ideological vagueness as a virtue of a truly mature scholar. While U.S. academia undeniably stands as a testament to intellectual fervor and growth, it's impossible to overlook its deep-seated bonds to colonial pursuits and systems of oppression.

### *Reflecting on liberal education – A point of departure*

This article seeks to navigate these historically located, as well as nuanced waters, highlighting not just the challenges faced but also the pockets of resistance that exist in higher education. To carry this out, I center and scrutinize two important pedagogical

arguments presented by the proponents of liberal education today: *i. Classrooms should be apolitical spaces*; and *ii. educators need to occupy an ideologically ambiguous stance in the classroom*. In other words, the classroom should be a metapolitical and ideologically ambiguous space to foster free exchange within the market of ideas, otherwise, that is not true education. Facing these trends, I argue that critical pedagogy historically has adopted various strategies, and those strategies today need to be revised and revitalized: *i.* starting with the acknowledgment of the fact that educational spaces are political in nature; *ii.* seeping the content and the structure of education in a thorough historical examination, actively acknowledging higher education's participation in colonial and imperialist projects; *iii*. working towards dismantling existing oppressive systems and ideologies through the curriculum and syllabus design, as opposed to maintaining a 'neutral' stance; *iv.* centering the voices and histories of marginalized groups; and, *v.* fostering a sense of solidarity and community with students, as opposed to abstract, detached analysis using the tropes of *scientific* rhetoric.

To make these points, I start the article by scrutinizing the definition of liberal education, from organizations and authors that advocate for it and that establish the basis of what we understand to be liberal education today. Then I present and analyze the two aforementioned arguments that occupy a salient space within the understanding of contemporary liberal education. Following, I present five strategies of critical pedagogy that we can use as critical educators to transform our classrooms into subversive spaces within institutions of liberal education. I demonstrate these points by pointing to the use of HeLa cells, the emergence and critique of women's and gender studies, and the bonds of solidarity forged during the spirited activism of students and faculty.

## A genealogy of liberal education

*"The sustained engagement of a free people"*

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), founded in 1915 and representing over 1,000-member higher education institutions, is one of the oldest and most widely recognized membership organizations in the United States. AAC&U is significant for its self-definition as 'A Voice and a Force for Liberal Education' (aacu.org) and its publication of the journal '*Liberal Education*,' making it a prominent advocate for liberal education. In their 'Vision Statement,' they define liberal education as:

> LIBERAL EDUCATION IS THE FORM OF EDUCATION APPROPRIATE TO DEMOCRACY. Democracy is not self-sustaining; rather, it depends on the sustained engagement of a free people who are united in their commitment to the fundamental principles it is intended to preserve and advance—justice, liberty, human dignity, equality of persons. The task of an education allied to democracy is not simply to help students gain knowledge and skills, but in so doing also to form the habits of heart and mind that liberate them and that equip them for, and dispose them to, civic involvement and the creation of a more just and inclusive society. (AAC&U 2020)

While, at first glance, this paragraph associates education with values that seem to sound good, a closer look might complicate the picture. For example, we can start by asking who the 'free people' are under systemic capitalism, particularly given the demands of full-time wage labor that many students are subjected to, not only during their education but also immediately upon graduation. This raises the question of whether an education process primarily driven by the demands of a labor market can genuinely be considered 'free.' As we examine how students often restrict their educational choices or select specific majors solely based on potential income, or how universities close programs that do not generate revenue, thus limiting access to a broader range of education options, the answer becomes increasingly apparent.

Furthermore, we should question whether Black 'free people' can fully engage in democracy while their voting rights are being systematically restricted state-by-state. Can Queer 'free people' participate in democracy when they face disproportionately high rates of violence compared to other groups (U.S. Department of Justice 2022)? Similarly, can immigrant 'free people' exercise democracy under constant threats of deportation and violence or do they exist solely for labor extraction instead of becoming a part of democracy? Moreover, the construction of abstract and vague notions of democracy, often equating it with institutional processes and 'civic involvement,' conceals the fact that these institutions and the extent to which they allow civic involvement, as well as the definitions and lived experiences of these terms in daily life, are the outcomes of historical processes marked by domination and subjugation.

Compiling vague and idealistic terms that do not, in fact, add up to a meaningful pedagogy and are disconnected from the social processes that formed them is the result of the history of liberalism itself, which emerged as a reaction to the tumbling monarchies of Europe during the Enlightenment. While the history of liberalism is beyond the scope of this work, what is worth revisiting is the ways in which liberal thinkers theorized education and established the basis of liberal education today. Proponents (Axelrod et al. 2001, Caton 2015, Gupta 2013, Hilliard 1955, Schaub 2002) argue that the most fundamental ideas of how we understand liberal education today harken back to “the philosophers and teaching practices of Ancient Greece and, arguably, continue to embrace certain core values from that era” (Axelrod et al, 2001, 50). The authors might be referring to the ways in which a particular form of self-governance in Ancient Greece was idolized by liberals that formed the ideological basis of liberal education. What they keep omitting, however, is the fact that the means of production in Ancient Greece was based on slave labor and those who were able to participate in education and democracy were slave owners–in other words, those who owned the means of production (Sack 1962, Vlassopoulos 2023). AAC&U’s emphasis on “free people” is ironic from this perspective since those who can truly pursue what they desire today are also the ones who are least impacted by the

demands of wage labor. In that sense, indeed, liberal education carries components from Ancient Greece, but those are not the components today's liberals would like to confront.

Ignoring the ways in which institutions and social practices are influenced by dynamics of power and means of production is on par with how liberal education presents itself in its contemporary iteration. In the following section, I analyze the two different but related arguments that liberal education defends today; namely, that *classrooms are apolitical spaces* and *professors should occupy an ideologically ambiguous position* in the classroom under the guise of scientific discourse, impartiality, and to maximize student appeal. Not only these arguments do not hold any substance in the face of actual history, but also they perpetuate the power discrepancies that deny access to education for groups and individuals who are pushed to the margins of society, as well as the imperialist project that spurred higher education in the United States.

### *The apolitical classroom*

The first argument I scrutinize is the assumption that classrooms are apolitical spaces. Propagation of this assumption also perpetuates oppressive as well as violent social structures. Robert P. George, for example, Professor of Jurisprudence and Director of the James Madison Program at Princeton University, published an article in the Atlantic right after the Supreme Court in the US eliminated the constitutional right to abortion in the Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization case. His article is titled "Universities Shouldn't be Ideological Churches" and argues that professors should not take stances on such politically controversial issues and make students feel left out if they do not happen to agree with the expressed opinion (George 2023). Of course, not having to suffer the consequences of such a decision on one's body while having an entire state apparatus supporting one's perspective has its advantages when it comes to arguing who should be able to express their stances in what kinds of spaces.

George is not alone in his failure to grasp how power dynamics favor those who already hold positions of privilege due to his disconnectedness from the lived experiences of many individuals affected by such decisions. There is a strong current of conservative and liberal thought that aligns with the point that taking a stance on social issues in the classroom is wrong and is an obstacle to the true purpose of higher education. This narrative, historically, has been mobilized to serve the interests of the bourgeoisie and the state apparatus. The logic that follows is classrooms only *become* political when those who participate in those spaces acknowledge they have never been devoid of politics. However, delving into the history of the classroom's political implications reveals a more complex and often troubling story.

The political status of the classroom has a long and decorated history in justifying various imperialist and colonialist projects under the guise of different types of research. One example is Saarjita Baartman's capture from South Africa to be displayed in Europe as scientific proof of the inferiority, therefore conquer-ability, of Africans in the early 1800s. The colonial project was given scientific legitimacy through the institutions and rhetorics of higher education and was presented through the guise of scientific objectivism (McKittrick, 2010, 177). Similar studies emerged later on, most famously of Morton, that measured and compared skull sizes to justify the subjugation and outright oppression of Indigenous and African peoples (Weisberg, 2014, 168). During the McCarthyism that followed World War 2, academics who were either member of the communist party or held sympathizing views lost their jobs or were blacklisted or imprisoned (Schrecker, 1999). Even during the Vietnam War, a war that is equally associated with the popular movement that formed against it, antiwar academics who supported the emergent New Left were shunned by their communities, followed by the FBI, fired, denied promotions, and bludgeoned to death (Seager, 1995, 12). Even in the last two decades–especially by mobilizing '*love it or leave it*' rhetoric as an indispensable part of self-righteous comparisons to autocratic regimes–we are pushed and prodded to believe that we live in the freest of all free countries that have the most amount of free speech. However, during the war on terror period, we witnessed a different

reality. Some academics were busy concocting legal arguments to support and justify the war efforts (Margulies & Metcalf, 2010, 436) that sustained the imperialist reflex of finding a group to blame and destroy in a time of crisis. It was also around this time that Dick Cheney declared that criticizing the war was un-American and Ann Coulter suggested anti-war liberals should be exterminated in an open hunting season without a bag limit (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, 2011, xi) and David Horowitz announced in the 2005 Republican National Convention that “Universities are a base of the left. Universities are a base for terrorism” (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, 2011, 93). Today the legacy lives in dangerous professor watchlists (professorwatchlist.org) and calls from the FBI to survey academics (Feng, 2019).

It is important to note that, in addition to sticks, classrooms were kept political also using carrots. According to the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, in 2020 alone, the Department of Defense gave 47 million dollars as higher education grants, especially in the areas of biotechnology (National Defense Education Program, 2021). During the war on terror, Human Terrain Systems, established as a part of the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, trained, and recruited social scientists to study the invaded populations in the Middle East, to report on weak and strong social ties that can be exploited to support US operations (Sims, 2015).

Exclusionary politics, policies, and social mechanisms that affect higher education work in tandem with funneling money to particular disciplines and projects that support the military-industrial complex, the carceral state, and the imperialist foreign policy. Consequently, *the apolitical classroom* is a mere myth that only works to sustain explicit as well as implicit ways in which imperialism has been recruiting classrooms for its own goals. These goals, in turn, determine whose voice gets to occupy academic debates and the spaces of public intellectual discussions and discourses.

*The ideologically ambiguous educator*

The second argument I examine is the professional discourse that advocates for professors to adopt an ideologically ambiguous and vague position within the classroom. This perspective finds support for various reasons. First, there exists a genre of discourse within the profession outlining the ideal conduct of educators in a university setting, often using scientific literature to assert objectivity. Secondly, the discourse of liberal education frequently employs vague and seemingly idealistic language to describe and define itself, which ultimately leads to educators who believe they can disassociate themselves from ideology and politics if they avoid socially controversial issues or if they do not take a stance. They do so by leveraging the scientific discourse, embracing ambiguous and popular terminology, demonstrating enthusiasm for all theories discussed in the classroom, and grounding learning in theories stripped of historical context. This inclination is, in part, a consequence of the pervasive influence of capitalist marketplace logic in our daily experiences. Notably, it's not uncommon to encounter scholarship within the domain of liberal education that adopts market metaphors to refine pedagogical approaches (Garnett, 2009). In essence, what this scholarly support achieves is the widespread diffusion of vague abstractions, echoing the rhetoric associated with liberal education.

There is a genre of academic literature (Giersch 2019, Liebertz & Giersch 2021, Liebertz, et al. 2021, Liebertz 2023, Linvill & Havice 2011) that openly *prescribes* such ambiguity as a strategy to draw the maximum number of students and be a popular professor. Giersch (2019), for example, in his article "Professors' Politics and Their Appeal as Instructors" concludes that "Compared to professor descriptions that were partisan, political neutrality was associated with an increase in participants' interest. Among partisan participants, an ideological match with a professor did not increase interest over the politically neutral control condition, but a mismatch significantly reduced interest" (p. 283). Linvill & Havice (2011), in their studies titled "Political Bias on Campus: Understanding the Student Experience," conclude that the purpose of the educator is to "improve the students' college experience" (p.

496). Notice how the title of the article mobilizes the "objective" rhetoric of merely "understanding" the student experience–as if their conclusions are scientific and free of the taint of ideology. However, their conclusion just so happens to align with the neoliberal logic of education.

Despite being published in professional journals, these articles further reinforce the disciplining power of *professional discourse* juxtaposed with the *discourse of objective research*. By harnessing the authority of scientific discourse, involving terms like "experiments," "control groups," and "statistical analyses," these studies project a facade of reliability. Nevertheless, their outcomes consistently promote the ideological tenets of liberalism and neoliberalism. Essentially, within the realm of academic literature, this genre prescribes ideological ambiguity in the classroom as a form of professional guidance. This advice is presented as a prescription for achieving likability and popularity. If this genre of pedagogical advice is pervasive in the literature, it only implies that such professional advice and guidance has missed the fundamental purpose of education. The pursuit of attracting the maximum number of students and becoming the most favored among peers is a manifestation of market-driven logic deeply ingrained in the pedagogical epistemologies of liberal education.

Moreover, there is the ambiguous rhetoric of liberal education itself. AAC&U's definition of liberal education assembled vague and ideal-sounding concepts that do not have pedagogical substance. This seems to be a trend in the discourse of proponents of liberal education. Michael S. Roth, in his book *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*, writes "[l]iberal education… refers to the combination of the philosophical and rhetorical traditions of how one learns as a whole person. In contemporary higher education, the philosophical tradition has resulted in an emphasis on inquiry and critical thinking—learning to develop as an autonomous person by shedding illusions and acquiring knowledge through research" (Roth, 2014, 4-5). The immediate ambiguity in this definition, the very fact that "traditions of how one person learns as a whole person" is merely a vague assemblage of words that point to neither an actual tradition nor to a grounded

epistemological orientation is, perhaps the best example of how this commitment towards liberal education ends up supporting structural violence. Liberal reflex does not find it troubling to give affirming platforms to neo-fascists under the guise of free speech and civility; to use ideological ambiguity as virtue signaling; and to judge the violence of the oppressed and the violence of the oppressor as *the same thing* (Calabrese, 2015, 542). Furthermore, the focus on individual student learning instead of community building; failing to recognize historical, social, and epistemic power structures that limit which "philosophical and rhetorical traditions'' make it to the classrooms and which ones do not; lack of recognition of the higher education institution itself as a historical and ideological construction, outline some of the main problems that the contemporary commitment to liberal education brings forth today.

The gatekeepers of maturity within the realms of scholarship, the professions, and higher education employ a dual approach, combining scientific and ambiguous discourses. Disregarding ambiguity only serves to perpetuate the existing social inequalities within both higher education and society at large (Cate et al., 2022). Within professional discourse, there is an emphasis on the need to be critical without committing to a specific ideology. This approach posits that individuals should adopt a sufficiently abstract position that allows for questioning from every possible perspective. Simultaneously, they should have the ability to retreat into the shelter of theoretical criticism, divorced from historical realities to the extent that historical relationships become irrelevant. This is seen as a strategy to deflect accusations of depoliticization or perpetuating systems of oppression. It is no wonder, then, in his 2021 book *Let's be Reasonable: Conservative Case for Liberal Education*, Jonathan Marks first argues that existing alignment with the left undermines possibilities of reasoned discourse, while later in the book complains that students, somehow, are against free speech–implying, perhaps unknowingly, that he positions himself as the gatekeeper of what free and reasoned speech should be (Marks, 2021, 114-116). This is a rather recent example of the widespread pitfalls of liberalism and the shadow it casts on pedagogy.

## Pockets of resistance

### *Five key components*

What might be the role of critical pedagogy, today, in the face of such mobilized rhetorics, the power discourse of science on the one hand and weaponized ambiguity on the other? How can we conceptualize our role in the classroom today, when we are faced with the demands that we should, somehow, a-politicize our classrooms under the guise of professional and peer-reviewed advice? In this section, I start by defining critical pedagogy and suggest five ways in which we can approach these trends in liberal education today.

First, however, it is important to note that while liberal education is the dominant ideological discourse in higher education that aligns with the class interests of the bourgeoisie as well as with the state apparatus, there have been and still are *pockets of resistance*. Every system of oppression and structure of violence bears its own seeds of resistance. These pockets range from the organization of the Black Liberation Movement on college campuses and on HBCUs to the establishment of academic programs that consistently challenge and question structures and discourses of power such as the Women and Gender Studies programs, to disciplines such as Environmental Studies that produce vital scholarship on climate change, to attempts of atonement, such as Harvard's recent report on the legacy of slavery and Harvard.

There are pedagogical reasons to revisit these moments in history. Amnesia works for the empire. In Milan Kundera's words, "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (Kundera, 1999). Therefore, remembering as well as documenting the politically charged history of the classroom and the campus, remembering such pockets of resistance constitute a *pedagogy of hope*, if I were to borrow from Freire, for ourselves as well as for our students. Critical pedagogy cannot exist without building historical and political consciousness. For that reason, it is vital to avoid presenting the history of higher education as a monolith with no possible exit or resistance. Talking about Freire,

his approach to critical pedagogy in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, perhaps, is one of the primary theoretical compasses we can use to reorient ourselves in our hope to understand the direction critical pedagogy can take in our current complicated and difficult social and political terrain. In his words, critical pedagogy is:

> A pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle, this pedagogy will be made and remade. (Freire, 2000, 48)

According to Freire, the point of education is not to get the maximum number of students, to be popular among peers, or to make sure the student-customer experiences a comfortable ride across their college experience. Rather, education, both as moments of experience and as spaces of experience, should be transformative of the student as well as of the educator–*a transformation towards restoring humanity in a struggle for liberation*. The direction of this struggle for liberation is simultaneously from the existing systems of epistemological as well as structural violence, as well as from the shadows those systems cast in our collective and individual psyches. Giroux explains this as "technocratic rationality" that stripped away the possibilities of human connection and solidarity that can emerge in the classroom (Giroux, 1988, 12). Against this technocratic rationality and within the process of transformation, the educator cannot remain detached from the student's experience. In fact, when an educator positions themselves as a metapolitical and ideologically ambiguous entity, they eliminate the possibilities of potential bonds of solidarity that can be the basis of processes of transformation.

In the following paragraphs, I propose five key components of critical pedagogy that is informed by Freire's definition as well as from my own experiences teaching courses in topics such as Feminism, Queer Theory, History and Rhetoric of Fascism, Multiculturalism, and Consumerism & Capitalism. These

components are *i.* acknowledging the fact that educational spaces are already political; *ii.* seeping the content and the structure of education in history; *iii*. working towards dismantling existing oppressive systems and ideologies through the curriculum and syllabus design, as opposed to maintaining a 'neutral' stance; *iv.* centering the voices and histories of marginalized groups; and *v.* fostering a sense of solidarity and community with students.

### *i. Classrooms are always already a political space*

As I document throughout the article, classrooms have been established as political spaces and higher education does play an important role in the normalization and advancement of oppressive systems and structures of violence. In other words, classrooms are already political spaces regardless of our perceptions of them, regardless of how we behave in them. As educators who align with critical pedagogy, if we are interested in challenging or scrutinizing systems of power and oppression, we simply cannot ignore this fact. As Howard Zinn (1994) titled his memoir, "You can't be neutral on a moving train." In other words, if we are educators who align with the ideas of critical pedagogy, we do have a pedagogical responsibility to engage with controversial and important issues of our time and take a stand. If we do choose to ignore the sociopolitical context that not only has shaped the classroom so far but also that seeps into the classroom every day, then we are merely aligning ourselves with those oppressive and violent forces.

Written and unwritten rules in academia have directly determined whose voices were heard in educational spaces, who got to be hired, and whose publications were read and disseminated—in other words, whose epistemology has been accepted as knowledge, and whose epistemology got dismissed as "politics." The point is, obviously, every epistemology is political in nature, whether we like it or accept it or not. This has been one of the main points of critique of subaltern studies, especially those scholars who are located in Latin America. As Alcoff (2007) notes, "many Latin American philosophers—from Leopoldo Zea to Enrique Dussel to

Mignolo and others—have pointed out the hierarchical patterns of epistemic judgment under colonial systems" (p. 81). Mignolo, for example, argues that there is no gap between the colonialist project, its current iteration as *modernity*, and the ways in which that project spurred particular epistemologies that we accept as true in academia (Mignolo 1995). In short, we do need to step into the classroom, prepare our lectures, and think about our syllabi and curriculum with this knowledge in mind–that classrooms are political and our presence in a particular room in a particular institution is the result of a historical process that predates our birth and will survive our death as individual educators. Turning away from or suppressing this fact only helps to perpetuate systems of oppression.

### *ii. Historicizing curricula & syllabi*

Stratifying epistemologies on a hierarchical scale has material consequences. There is a long history of exclusion of particular epistemologies from academia on the grounds of *being political*–women, LGBTQ individuals, people of color, disabled people, people who are poor or first-generation college students—of people who otherwise had to overcome difficult material conditions, internalized senses of inferiority, social stigmas, and other difficulties to find themselves a place in higher education. In order to be able to write their own histories, with their own voices, and have the knowledge as well as the epistemic power to define the world as they see fit, these individuals had to overcome all of those obstacles that were not faced by mainstream academics, who had the time, the space, and the power structures to determine what counts as knowledge, success, and who gets to define those concepts.

This history is significant in the light of the current trend in conservative thought that understands itself through a mirror of never-ending victimhood (Frum, 2021) and sees the true lack of diversity in academia as the supposed dwindling of conservative voices (Feulner, 2005, 61-64). To quote Chinua Achebe, "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always

glorify the hunter" (Achebe, 1994). In other words, acknowledging that classrooms and educational institutions are political spaces also necessitates acknowledgment of the tandem history of sociopolitical forces that shaped those spaces. Presenting a topic in a way that is detached from the history of its knowledge production keeps the power dynamics of that knowledge production concealed and, therefore, protected. On the other hand, acknowledging and narrating the history of knowledge production of a topic as we present it highlights and exposes whose voices were heard and whose voices were silenced in the process of that knowledge production. This has immense pedagogical significance because this way students can locate themselves, their institution, the courses they take, and their professors within the history of knowledge production.

*iii. Troubling oppressive systems*

What follows from acknowledging the political nature of the classroom and the history of knowledge production is the critique of those systems that have created and still sustain structures of violence and systems of power. These critiques can range from pointing to the narrative of faux-meritocracy that underlies whose epistemologies are accepted and whose are not to detailed studies of violent social and political structures that are still in place.

What is important, however, is to avoid the trap of content-induced apathy. It is far too convenient to suggest that, somehow, our particular course of study or the classes we teach are not touched or formed by systems of power–especially if we teach in sciences or in engineering. But that is simply not the case. Take, for example, HeLa cells–a line of human cells derived from a tissue sample taken from Henrietta Lacks, a poor Black woman who had cervical cancer treated at Johns Hopkins Hospital. These cells, still in use today for everything from medical research to drug testing, were obtained from Henrietta Lacks without her consent. However, it is ethically impermissible to publish this genomic data without the explicit consent of the Lacks family due to the potential privacy and health implications (Anekwe 2014). If we happen to teach biology or

medicine and either use or talk about HeLa cells in our classrooms, we do, in fact, have an obligation to bring up their origin, how they were obtained, and how we can ensure procedures of informed consent. Sweeping this part of the issue under the rug is merely perpetuating the system of violence that did not acknowledge who she was. These stories exist in every field and in every topic of study and it is our responsibility, as educators, to be cognizant of these histories, to bring them up in our classrooms, and to critique them.

### *iv. Centering marginalized voices*

When we do engage with the content of our courses from a critical lens, we do end up centering those who have been pushed to the margins–at least that is one of the vital outcomes of this process. There is just so much critique a Eurocentric scholar can levy towards Eurocentrism–and that critique will remain ignorant of its own spatiotemporal locality (Mignolo, 2007). As Lorde succinctly put it, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 1984). As she explains in that essay, a white feminist critique of patriarchy will not see its own racial location and forces that formed it. Whatever the topic at hand, its history will necessarily include whose epistemologies were pushed to the margins and cast as mere opinions or *politics*.

The development of Women and Gender Studies programs is an important example of this issue. Borne out of activism, the first Women’s Studies was founded at San Diego State University in 1970 (Boxer 1998; Howe 2000). It is important to note the robust scholarship as well as activism Women’s Studies Programs have produced over the years. The critiques of patriarchy and patriarchal systems that stemmed from these programs could not have been possible without the spaces of engagement and opportunities these programs have provided. However, these programs remained largely white and heteronormative. However, it took almost another twenty years and the scholarship of a Black woman to coin the term intersectionality. In her essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory

and Antiracist Politics" Crenshaw (1989) explained that systems of oppression and violence work in intersections and not paying attention to those intersections make us vulnerable to perpetuating the ones we ignore.

*v. Community and solidarity with students*

Our role as educators is often cast as machines that dump information unto willing–and sometimes unwilling–minds, and if a student is *too lazy* or *too uninterested* in the process, it has nothing to do with us and they receive a bad grade as a consequence. Certainly, the professional advice prescribed in professional journals that cast the aim of the educator as gaining the maximum number of students, being popular, or enhancing students' college experience does not help and cannot lead us to forge bonds of solidarity and community with the students. The rhetoric of liberal education sees the aim of education as similar to a capitalist production process: maximize the output with minimal input while keeping the client as happy as possible–those who cannot keep up are punished or penalized. This approach to education, however, is neither transformative nor critical.

For instance, there is no possible way to measure or adequately evaluate the impact Herbert Marcuse had on the protest movements of 1968. Angela Davis, who was his student in graduate school at UC San Diego writes:

> [W]e all benefited both from his deep knowledge of European philosophical traditions and from the fearless way he manifested his solidarity with movements challenging military aggression, academic repression, and pervasive racism. Marcuse counseled us always to acknowledge the important differences between the realms of philosophy and political activism, as well as the complex relation between theory and radical social transformation… Shortly before the death of his longtime Frankfurt School colleague Theodor W. Adorno, Marcuse urgently debated with him the significance of the student movement. The focal point of their sometimes intense exchange was Adorno's justification of the fact

> that the police were called in response to a student occupation of the Institute for Social Research. In criticizing this reliance on the police, Marcuse insisted that "if the alternative is the police or left-wing students, then I am with the students. . . . I still believe that our cause . . . is better taken up by the rebellious students than by the police. (Davis 2019).

Marcuse's pedagogical approach enabled him to forge such bonds of solidarity with his students, and those bonds were transformative. Because it was not only the knowledge of "European philosophical traditions" that the students took away from those bonds. They learned how to relate to others in such moments, how to use one's own position to rouse a movement, how to apply the critiques one learns in the classroom to the complexities of living and breathing life, how to forge networks and solidarities of their own, and the confidence to challenge and question institutions and systems of oppression and violence that hold so much power over students who live their lives on the margins of the capitalist mode of production.

## Closing discussion

### *On the need for solidarity*

Unlike what liberal education would like us to believe, the classroom is not a marketplace of ideas open for free debate where the teacher assumes the role of a passionate vendor who is arguing to sell each idea to the student–leaving the choice up to the student, as if that choice means liberation or freedom or, indeed, an actual choice. Critiquing the discourses and the impact of liberal education on higher education and in our classrooms is vital as we face various social and global crises: economic and psychological effects of catastrophes such as climate change and COVID-19, the rise of neo-fascism in the US, widespread use of guns and mass shootings, rising hate crimes based on the latest social issue–just to name a few. Not only a reasoned debate that discusses the arguments and counter-arguments in favor as well as in opposition to fascism or colonialism or responses to climate change or sexual harassment is epistemologically oppressive, but it also assumes the

luxury of having the time to conduct a well-rounded and reasoned debate. The epistemological oppression in holding critical theories to abstract scrutiny, instead of understanding the historical context as well as the necessity of the lived experience that brought about such theorizing, in addition to legitimizing oppressive ideas and theories under the guise of *rationally debating valid opinions* should be self-evident.

However, not having time might be less so. Not only do aforementioned problems require urgency on the part of those who want to address them, but also students, as well as faculty and indeed society, are facing an increased frequency of social and natural crises due to the neoliberal reflex of steamrolling through the inherent contradictions of capitalism at the expense of nature, workers, the youth, and indeed any possibilities of democracy under the guise of enlightened centrist politics (Brown, 2017, 17-20). Britney Cooper, in her now-viral Ted Talk, *The Racial Politics of Time*, argues that time, having time is a consequence of racial privilege, where people of color had and still have to deal with the temporal constraints of fulfilling the demands of a system that never stopped harassing them through varied bureaucratic loops of citizenship and of carceral state (Cooper, 2017). In higher education, the demands of deadlines, projects, and indeed, spending class time to consider varied abstract theoretical concerns from an ideologically vague position instead of building solidarity with students and discussing courses of action or different possibilities for the future *is* a matter of sustaining layers of social privileges that exist in society. Consequently, our choices, as educators, in how we align with the existing historical moment and every moment after that is a reflection of how we relate to emergent political and social demands *of* and *with* our time. While an experienced educator can use the rhetoric of *critical thinking* and *self-reflection* to talk about how they scrutinize every theory in the classroom, especially when talking about social issues, if such examination does not lead to solidarity and connection in a common mission to dismantle the systems of oppression, then that approach also suffers from the pitfalls of liberal education.

If the classroom is not a free market of ideas and if the educator is not a cynical idea salesman, then how should we, as educators, orient ourselves to the classroom? The nervous liberal reflex asks if we should start banning books or restricting what can or cannot be said in a classroom. Because the liberal gaze sees the world in terms of commodities and consumption, *not* presenting theories and ideas as abstractions competing in a free market becomes confusing for an educator committed to the ideals of liberal education—and the fear of censorship starts looming while the actual censorship is already taking place against critical education. However, the problem is not what we read or topics we cover in the classroom–indeed, we should definitely read pieces that defend oppression as well as those that are indifferent to it, along with ones that seek to dismantle different systems of oppression. But how we relate to these readings and topics within our classrooms, within ourselves, and with the examples and history we choose to highlight determines where we stand. In *Living a Feminist Life* Sara Ahmed writes that "citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow" (Ahmed, 2017). Therefore, practices such as indexing or pointing to the kind of scholarship and history that openly critiques systems of oppression as more correct than the ones that defend it, purposefully centering the voices of the marginalized, and not abstracting theory away from lived experience and the material conditions that formed it are some of the ways in which we can engage with different and competing ideas. Not that we should *not* read certain authors or *not* debate certain topics–we should just be clear about the ways in which different ideas and scholars stood on what side of history and if or how they caused harm by justifying genocide, colonialism, capitalism, and other forms of oppression. Building better futures does not depend on raising ideologically ambiguous and uncommitted citizens who go into the workforce without having the necessary tools to deconstruct the dynamics in which they find themselves. It does, however, depend on educating in a way that acknowledges our students today are also our comrades in our struggles for liberation to claim the means of knowledge production and definition.

Indeed, this might be the first time that many students end up being exposed to critical ideas and historical examples that run counter to the history and worldview they have been taught thus far in their lives. But that is only because those particular students had the privilege, and perhaps the bliss, of living a life that allowed them to either not recognize or consciously or otherwise turn a blind eye to their own, and others, oppression. For some, however, remaining apolitical was not a choice because the illusion of apoliticality depended on the marginalization of others. If you were a person of color, if you were openly Queer, if you were a woman in a male-dominated discipline, for instance, your body was already politicized and deemed unworthy to occupy that space. Uniting, organizing, and trying to have a voice was a natural consequence of the oppression people faced on a daily basis. Today, this understanding should be the basis of critical pedagogy–the classroom has been and continues to be a political space. How we orient ourselves along with our students to the dynamics of historical moments we live in determines the politics we implicitly or explicitly support in our classrooms.

In other words, the Eurocentrism that used higher education to disseminate colonialism, genocide, and slavery during the 1600s, is the same Eurocentrism that uses the rhetoric of liberal education to impose a pedagogy stripped away from history and consequently from the knowledge that different epistemes do not occupy the same power position due to historical and social forces. That is to say, the institution of higher education, and by extension the classroom, has always been and currently is a space of political contestation that historically leans in support of imperialism and existing social and political orthodoxies as well as structures of oppression and violence. Therefore, the question for critical pedagogy today is not if we should have political or difficult or brave conversations in our classrooms–rather it is about how our conversations build solidarity with students to contest, challenge, scrutinize existing power structures, and ultimately build worlds that transcend the one in which we live today.

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# Human vs Environment – An Ecolinguistic Analysis of the Game *Valheim* from a Didactic Perspective

*Simon Wessbo, Hampus Björk & Ebba Mellberg*

Education has a key role in transforming societies and promoting sustainable development, especially at a time when climate crisis is increasingly urgent (Ripple et al. 2022). As different sectors of society invent methods and strategies to deal with challenges that Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) addresses, education needs to find concrete and specific ways of dealing with these issues, that highlight what higher education can do (Wiek et al., 2015) or what specific challenges and opportunities that exist within particular school subjects. In this essay, the overarching question is: In what way can the school subject of Swedish, or L1, contribute to ESD? The following essay is based on two assumptions about the role of language in school's work for sustainable development. The first assumption is that our way of talking about subjects, objects and matters affects how we think about and understand them, which means that we need to become aware of what representations of the world that are conveyed through language (Stibbe 2021). The second assumption concerns how language includes all types of meaning-making that takes place in communication, which means that we need to have the ability to critically relate to content in different modes, technologies and media (Hall 2013; Kress 2004).

An important part of L1 teaching will thus be training students to have a critical approach on how we think and talk about the world we live in, by understanding how language in all its forms affects us. With this essay, we want to show that even something as non-

traditional (in relation to the teaching of the school subject of Swedish (Thavenius, 1999)) as a digital game carries linguistic structures that influence us, and further, how this is relevant for the teaching of Swedish. In this way the underpinning rationale of this essay is twofolded in that it contributes to a discussion of how the school subject of Swedish can promote ESD and secondly to explore ways in which different representations, such as digital games, can be analyzed in school.

The aim of this study is to analyze the game *Valheim* (2021) from an ecolinguistic perspective in order to find which representations of human relationship with animals and nature are conveyed in the game. Furthermore, these representations are used to draw conclusions about the didactic relevance of such an analysis for the school subject of Swedish. The following questions have been formulated: How is the relationship between human and nature constructed in the game Valheim? What stories can be identified based on these constructions? What didactic relevance does the analysis have for the school subject of Swedish in working with ESD?

## The game: *Valheim*

The digital game *Valheim* was published on 2 February 2021 by the Swedish company *Iron Gate Studios* through the content delivery-system *Steam* where the game already had 4 million new unique players a month upon its release. Since then, the game has rapidly grown in number of users (Steam 2022).

The game is designed for PC and the content is clearly influenced by old Norse mythology and setting (Steam 2022). This can be seen, for example, in the sporadic meetings the avatar has with characters such as Odin and Thor as well as Hugin and Munin. This influence is also evident in the game world, which is described as "Odin's tenth world" and the plot which constantly refers to various places in Norse mythology, including Valhalla, Hel, Yggdrasil and Midgard.

The game can be defined within the genres player-versus-environment (PVE), survival and sandbox. The first two genres generally mean that the style of play is characterized by the player being pitted against the game's artificial intelligence and its associated environment in a struggle for survival. The third genre, sandbox, means that the player can largely influence the game environment, shape the world and infrastructure. Another game that falls under similar categorizations is *Minecraft*, which offers the player a variety of opportunities to construct the world using materials collected during gameplay. The player also encounters several different obstacles in the form of creatures that the player must kill or avoid, while they must have food and construct buildings for safety. Both games include a progression system where the player can create new and better tools, armor and buildings that fulfill different functions to advance in the game.

A difference between *Minecraft* and *Valheim* is the inherent plot, with the former having a more open narrative where the player makes many of the choices. This leans more towards the sandbox genre as it places a greater focus on the creation process. *Valheim*, on the other hand, gives the player a goal to achieve and a narrative to follow in order to complete the game.

The game *Valheim* begins with the player descending from the sky to the center of Odin's tenth world, Valheim. The overall aim of the game is for the player to prove their worth to the gods which is done by progressing through and overcoming different biomes (natural environments) which include forest, sea, tundra and desert. Each biome has different creatures that the player must fight to impress the gods.

## Digital games and the teaching of L1 in a Swedish context

The school subject of Swedish has an important task in teaching students about digital communication. The Swedish National Agency for Education (2022) states that students at the upper secondary level "should be provided with the conditions to develop

their ability to orient themselves, read, listen and communicate in an expanded digital text world". This means that teaching of L1 in a Swedish context should have methods to develop and provide conditions for this type of learning. But what does it look like in practice?

There is research that touches upon the matter of how effective the use of digital games is in promoting learning and teaching. The Swedish National Agency for Education (2020a; 2020b) summarizes a majority of theses and states that there is potential for sense-making in digital resources in Swedish education. Furthermore, they highlight that these teaching methods and contents have the potential to increase students' motivation and interest in the material they learn through. Despite these insights, the Swedish National Agency for Education highlights that there is still a weak use of these practices in school and that students lack the tools and language to relate to the material. Thus there is a lack of methods for both teachers and students to process this content in an adequate way.

This study examines, among other things, how it is possible to "read" digital texts within an expanded view of the concept of text. Magnusson (2014) argues that the teaching of literature would take advantage of an expanded text-view and that it could develop education for the better, but that, again, there is a lack of a clear conceptual apparatus to handle the content. Therefore, there is a need to investigate how multimodal analyses of literature can be developed, performed and assessed in practice.

## Learning for Sustainable Development in School

The Swedish school system also plays a role in educating students about sustainable development and fostering an understanding of themselves in and of the world. The curriculum for upper secondary school calls for the cultivation of respect for our shared environment through education, emphasizing the school's nurturing mission, which includes individual responsibility for the environment (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2011).

This can also be seen in the environmental goal of the upper secondary school's mission: "Education should highlight how the functions of society and our way of living and working can be adapted to create sustainable development" (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2011). This aims to direct teaching towards a type of learning where students understand how their own actions in society can affect the environment. Hence, there is additional evidence warranting an inquiry into how it is possible to use this type of analytic approach and how it can be applied and integrated in relation to an ecolinguistic perspective on learning.

A contemporary focus of the Swedish educational system is teaching that promotes sustainable development. Wessbo and Uhrqvist (2021:8) highlight the problematization of humanity's relationship to the environment. They argue that teaching should go beyond simply teaching the material and instead contribute to the students' own involvement in these issues.

The authors also highlight the power of stories and storytelling and believe that these are important components of learning for sustainable development (ibid:14). Here, they highlight research that suggests that stories can influence the relationship between humans and nature, as well as the importance of teaching an approach to reading that makes students understand that they are active readers.

## Language and Learning for Sustainable Development in School

In the generical sense of the word, theory is here used in two ways, by guiding the study to salient features and concepts that facilitate our fulfilling of the aim of the study, and secondly by making certain aspects of the game relevant and interesting. In the following parts we discuss ecolinguistics, ecosophy and types of stories.

### *Ecolinguistics*

The analysis draws from an ecolinguistic perspective. This theoretical framework is based on Stibbes (2021) argument about "the stories we live by" from an ecolinguistic perspective. Stibbes (2021) purpose is twofold; partly to reveal the ideologies that underpin unjust and unsustainable societies, partly to find new ways to build a more sustainable world. What he calls *stories*, summarize the ideologies that our societies are based on, that permeate our view of the world and are accepted as truth. Stories can be defined as cognitive structures in individuals' minds that influence how they think, talk and act. What Stibbe calls "stories we live by" means stories that are found in many individuals in a certain group or culture. The point of talking about stories is that they say something about one version of the world among several possible versions (Stibbe 2021:20). What is accepted as truth within a culture does not therefore have to be the absolute truth.

In today's industrial societies, Stibbe believes that we live by stories that prioritize economics over ecology. Among other things, he highlights that we live according to assumptions that unlimited economic growth is society's main goal, that the accumulation of unnecessary goods is a path to self-improvement, that progress and success are defined in terms of technological innovation and profit, and that nature is seen as separate from humanity and as a stock of resources to exploit (Stibbe 2021:3). The latter story is largely based on the assumption that man is above nature in a natural hierarchy.

In order to reveal the stories on which society is based, ecolinguistics takes an interest in language. The basic assumption is that language affects how we think about the world (Stibbe 2021:1). The structures within language construct what is possible to understand about the world and in this way create stories that we live by. The stories are embedded within and between the lines of the texts that surround us (Stibbe 2021:3). What ecolinguistics can do is to explore the patterns and structures of language that ultimately affect the understanding and treatment of the world around us. In this way, an ecolinguist can investigate which

linguistic structures form the core of today's ecological challenges. Stibbe does this by exploring the framing, metaphors, evaluations, identities, erasure, salience and narratives of texts.

Based on the fact that critical language analysis is intimately connected to ethical issues, there is a need to clarify the ecosophy that this essay is based on. To a large extent, it is based on the ecosophy that Stibbe (2021:14–15) himself presents. From this perspective, all living species on Earth deserve to be respected and attributed an intrinsic value. All species should both be allowed to live and live well with high well-being, which should apply both now and in the future. Disservices to other animals and species must be addressed through awareness of the impact on others, through minimizing harm, and through the obligation to give back to the systems that sustain us all. This ecosophy also believes that an immediate and large-scale reduction in global consumption is necessary in order not to exceed Earth's limits in terms of natural resources and ecosystems. In summary, this ecosophy starts from a strong ecocentric approach (centered on all earthly life) as opposed to an anthropocentric approach (human-centered). To achieve this transformation from anthropocentric to ecocentric in the educational sphere , this article regards language in all its forms as a key. An aspect to changing how we frame the world comes by recognizing how language has structured the way we perceive ourselves and the natural world around us. Only after understanding these structures, can they be altered.

### *Multimodality*

An approach to language is to look beyond what is communicated through written text and, instead, examine and understand language as a set of different semiotic resources. In the multimodal wheel that Magnusson (2014:40) highlights, in addition to written resources, there are also resources such as oral, auditory, visual and spatial elements. In communication where different ways of creating meaning interact, it becomes important to keep several of these in mind during an analysis. Within, for example, visual analysis, it is emphasized that meaning is created based on aspects

such as size, placement, color and sharpness (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006:210), which is lost in a textual analysis. Stibbe (2021:31) argues that discourses constructed in society can exist within this expanded view of language. Through contents such as Valheim, language is used in a variety of combinations of semiotic resources and therefore a need is created to analyze them together to understand what overall picture is being constructed.

## Method

The digital game analyzed in this study is *Valheim* (2021) and content from the official website of the Valheim Game (https://www.valheimgame.com) and the wiki-fandom page connected to the game (https://valheim.fandom.com/wiki/) The material offers a content-rich narrative and game mechanics that seemingly gives the player free rein to influence the game world where humans are pitted against nature. Thus, the material is well suited to be analyzed from an ecolinguistic perspective that investigates how stories influence our actions.

To narrow down the scope of the study, we focus on completing the game's first mission. The sequence was recorded through the Xbox Game Bar software on the Windows 10 operating system. The study's collected material resulted in a number of excerpts that partly consist of screenshots from both the website and the game, but also recorded sequences. As suggested by Espen Aarseth (2012a) the game researcher should interpret the material in the first place and be well versed in game mechanics to make a good interpretation of it. However, our study adds an additional layer by interpreting the material second-hand through an analysis of the recorded content. This approach was chosen to offer a more comprehensive perspective of the content, as a first-hand interpretation may potentially overlook important details.

Furthermore, the game's paratext was also analyzed. The term paratext was coined by Gérard Genette who describes this as external presentations of the work which are not part of the content but still influence the reader as they are connected to the

work (Genette 1997:2). Genette (ibid:3) divides the paratext into two parts; epitext and peritext. He explains that the peritext is the meaning conveyed about a work through for example interviews, conversations or private communication, while the epitext is all paratextual connections that are not materially attached to the work but that circulate freely in an unlimited physical and social space (ibid:5, 344). This study focuses on part of the epitext (the web page), which supplements the study's material in order to more easily identify the stories conveyed in the game.

This study argues that games can be analyzed based on qualitative methods, in a similar way to literary studies, to highlight which discourses are active in the text. Matthew David & Carole D. Sutton (2016:159) points out that it is possible to decode textual data from "all forms of meaning-laden objects that the researcher can collect in order to analyze them" which, from a multimodal perspective, enables working through many different frameworks.

### *Ludo narrative: world, agents, objects and events*

According to Aarseth (2012b:2), digital games should not be simply referred to as ‘games’, as they are complexly created software that has the ability to recreate a variety of semiotic resources. All of these convey different stories that must be understood in their context. Thus, this study sees that an image does not always convey the whole meaning, but it must be analyzed in its context and all the language that goes with it.

There are challenges in applying literary analysis methods to a work like Valheim where the content goes beyond textual properties. However, Aarseth (2012b:2) has managed to identify four common denominators for narrative in digital games: the game world, objects, agents and events. Aarseth (ibid) suggests that these four elements function as cognitive building blocks that create representations of the outside world.

Aarseth (2012b:2) also raises the concept of ludo-narrative, which can categorize games based on how fixed the narrative is in relation

to the possibility of playing freely and making one's own choices. By examining the ludo narrative, it becomes apparent how the four elements are represented. This can be seen, for example, by how much agency the player appears to have in relation to objects and how much the players can shape their surroundings.

In this study, it is important to note that the implicit narrative in the game does not necessarily reflect an objective reality. Instead, it represents the subjective interpretations of the game's creators. Stories and the interpretation of underlying hierarchies in the game are thus important for understanding how society produces and reproduces perceptions of reality. When the various elements are examined from this point of view, the researcher can see what kind of agency is attributed, which objects are placed in the foreground or background respectively, which events are marginalized and how the world is structured in itself, that is, which reality is perceived to prevail.

## Stories about human versus environment in *Valheim*

By studying different parts of the game through Stibbe's ecolinguistical glasses, we were able to find five stories which are prominent in how the game constructs the relationship between human and nature. Below are the results of our analysis.

### *Humans as the centre of the earth*

An overarching story that pervades the game is the portrayal of humans as the center of the earth. This can, for instance, be seen in *figure 1* where the game's main characters, the human avatars, are put in the center while nature is backgrounded. The visual message conveyed through the image also gives connotations to conquering nature since the avatars are portrayed wielding weapons for hunting and foraging (a spear and an axe) while they gaze upon the vast nature in the background. By centralizing human activity while putting nature in the background combined with the story of a divine goal, a truth about the world is created that humanity can,

and should, conquer nature since it is their right. Consequently, this separates humans from nature by giving them a "top of the chain" hierarchy.

*Figure 1. Picture from the starting page of https://www.valheimgame.com (2022)*

This pattern is not exclusive to the game but is also reflected in society at large. Stibbe (2021:3) believes that the story of man as the center of the earth separate from nature is something that hides behind many common ways of expressing ourselves linguistically in industrial societies. Similarly, Paul Kingsnorth & Dougald Hine (2009) also describe the story of human centrality and the human species as destined to be master of everything as the most dangerous one we live by today.

### *Nature as a collection of resources*

Another story that stands out clearly and pervades the game is that nature is essentially a collection of resources for man to take advantage of for his own purposes. This can be seen, among other things, in that the game's aim and goal presupposes the exploitation of nature carried out by the human character. Without cutting down trees and collecting animal hides and horns, there is no way to advance in the game's core features. It is also seen in the process

when a creature dies; the body and blood disappear and all that remains are a number of interactive objects that fulfill a function for the player. Not only objects such as trees, bushes and mushrooms exist for humans to collect, but also many agents whose sole function is to become material. The fact that the player as an agent is framed as a hunter chasing prey further reinforces this image.

The story is based on the assumption that the way objects and agents are treated by the human character in the game according to its conditions conveys a picture of the purpose and functions of nature and the human relationship to it. That animals must be killed and forests must be razed creates a notion – a truth – that animals and nature exist to be used and serve a purpose for humans, which leads to the narrative of nature as a collection of resources. Similar beliefs reproduced in the game are a thought pattern that already exists in our society. Stibbe (2021:3) believes that today we live according to a story that nature is only a stock of resources for humans to exploit. He also believes that this approach in the long run influences how we act in the world; if nature is seen as a resource, we are more likely to exploit it (ibid:6). This type of thinking is constantly reproduced in language and texts around us, not least in a game like *Valheim*.

### *Nature is hostile*

Another story that can be interpreted based on the analysis is that nature is hostile to man. This can be seen by animals and the environment being represented in a negative or aggressive way through how they are described, how they look and how they act within the game world. One example is that the player's mission is framed with war metaphors where non-human animals are the enemy to be defeated. Another example is that creatures are called "beasts" and portrayed as monstrous, aggressive and dangerous. This does not apply to all animals as there are also, for example, deer that exist passively without attacking the player, but the vast majority of agents are out to harm the player or attack if they get close. The bosses in particular, which are distorted versions of real

animals and things, paint a hostility that connects to the nature of the game.

Within the player-vs-environment genre there is a built-in prerequisite of competing against nature and the environment, which constitute a kind of adversary. The combined negative value patterns shape the player's perception of that nature and the creatures in it are something hostile to be fought. This is an example of when different parts interact to build an image with a negative connotation; through meaning-making resources from Magnusson's multimodal wheel (2014:42) such as textual and visual, but also Aarseth's (2012b) division of the game's world, agents, objects and events. The description and representation of nature as well as its functions and conditions in the game build up a story of hostility in interaction.

*Meat as a vital resource*

This story is about the importance of meat in the human diet; that it is a key to survival and success. This is primarily seen in the function of meat in relation to other dietary options. Thus, we find the largest proportion of evidence for the story in how the game is structured and what alternatives are available to the player. Within the game world, animal meat is presented as more efficient than other types of food in that it generates more "health" than the consumption of, for example, mushrooms or berries. Furthermore, due to the fact that it is not possible to eat as much of the same type of food as you like, the game's conditions lead to a prioritization of meat to maximize efficiency. In order to win the game, it is practically impossible to avoid the meat or to kill animals to get the meat.

This choice made by the creators says something about the view of the human diet, which alludes to a story that exists in our society today. Stibbe (2021:110) describes how the focus on meat as a diet is a story that builds our human identity. This way of life is conveyed through, for example, lifestyle magazines such as Men's Health, which build up stereotypical perceptions of male identity.

The core of the story is based on the assumption that an ideal man should have large muscles, and large muscles are achieved by eating large amounts of red meat. Stibbe (2021:113) highlights how this is a destructive story from an ecological point of view because meat production is harmful both to animals and the environment and that meat consumption is linked to a shorter lifespan. Therefore, meat primarily has a symbolic value for masculinity and male dominance. This approach is reproduced in a structure where meat is portrayed as vital to living and achieving one's goals.

### *Life on Earth is temporary*

A final story that we interpret from the analysis is that life on earth is temporary. This is primarily based on the narrative itself, which frames the game's goals and how the player is expected to behave within the game world. The following text from the website under the heading "Character Lore" describes the background to the player's character and why he is in the fictional game world:

> In order to prove your worth you have been sent to the 10th Norse world – Valheim. Only by surviving and fighting in a harsh environment with many mythical monsters and beasts will you prove your worth to the gods. For those who don't prove their worth though, the only place they will find is Hel - The underworld, where their soul will be tormented for centuries. Or maybe you will be one of the strong warriors who will prove their worth and earn the favor of the gods, then your place will be in Valhalla – a majestic enormous hall located in Asgard, and by your side Odin. ("Character Lore", https://valheim.fandom.com/wiki/Lore, 2020)

Just like the story of man being at the center and guardian of nature, this story alludes to religious beliefs. The purpose of Valheim is to please the gods in order to move on to another life. The idea is to conquer the material world in order to progress to the divine world at Odin's side in Valhalla. A failure leads to the person ending up in Hel – the underworld. Regardless of the afterworld that awaits, the basic idea is that the human character will not remain in the world where the game takes place. For this reason, the player does not

have to strive for any long-term sustenance or worry that their actions will have negative consequences. Such an approach becomes destructive when opposed to our ecosophy because a temporary life on earth does not encourage living sustainably, since it is not necessary. David Korten (2006:248) describes how the biblical narrative focusing on the afterlife rather than the world around us is one of the four major narratives at the core of Western imperial civilization, which has the greatest ecological consequences. Framing human existence as something that will transition into something better does not create an obvious motivation to nurture and protect the outside world or to build for a better earthly future. The world is seen in this process as a temporary place which only has the purpose of allowing man to fulfill his spirituality. Thus, non-human and earthly life becomes less valued. In the thought pattern reproduced in Western Christianity (cf. White 1967), the reward is perceived as coming from the spiritual world, so that is the relationship which should be nurtured. This pattern of thought is also reproduced in Valheim with the metaphysical relationship that is sought.

## Discussion

The purpose of this essay has been to investigate what types of representations of the relationship between man and nature are constructed in the game *Valheim*. This has been done based on an ecolinguistic perspective and in consideration of how it might be didactically useful for L1-learning in ESD. By analyzing content based on its paratext and main text, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how power structures can operate within digital media.

A basis for this study has been that a text can never be neutral (cf. Janks 2014:3). Therefore, all texts need to be understood based on which different perspectives of power dominate the discourses that shaped them. By introducing how critical literacy can be used with multimodal contents in relation to different literary concepts and linguistic theories, the study finds that there are certain common denominators that can be used to illustrate these non-

neutral narratives. When this is put in relation to ESD, the study finds how teaching can meet students' leisure interests and give them tools to act independently both in and outside the school environment. The study thus responds to current needs that are invoked both from GY11 and the Swedish National Agency for Education (2020a; 2020b), as well as needs that are frequently addressed in research (Uhrqvist et al, 2021; Nordén, 2018; Mogensen & Schnack, 2010).

This study has combined three areas of research that are relatively new, at least in an educational context. Multimodal media can certainly be said to have an obvious place within language subjects because it is now established that society has more means of communication beyond the written text. However, games cannot be said to have an equally obvious place anywhere apart from students' free time; teachers do not have sufficient knowledge and the traditional text still has a sacred place within the subject of Swedish. The crux of our study, however, does not advocate for the integration of games into language subjects. Instead, our study underscores the importance of applying a critical lens to all forms of media encountered by students in their everyday life, even those used in their free time. The role of the Swedish subject is to reveal and challenge linguistic structures in texts and stories around us to make visible which "truths" we live by in today's society. Ideas from Janks, and in Swedish context Molloy (2017) supports this claim. As children increasingly engage in digital environments, playing games and participating in social media, these digital spaces are also becoming more significant in educational settings. This prompts a crucial need for research and critical discussions about the convergence of schools and digital culture. Within the realm of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), this intersection gains particular significance. Our examination of *Valheim* has shown the complex interplay and tension between digital culture and the processes through which meaning is constructed within the contexts of primary language (L1) and ESD.

In relation to previous studies on education and ESD and L1this study contributes with the usage of an ecolinguistic perspective and, furthermore, to show how discourses and stories can be

studied even in contents such as games and how this enables the development of critical literacy for students.

An objection could be made that digital games have no place in school as they are seen as a leisure interest and not of importance for education. There are studies that highlight how teachers stand against using digital media in teaching and argue that it should instead be based on traditional text where games belong to a so-called lower culture (cf. Olin-Scheller 2006; Olin-Scheller & Tanner 2018 ). However, this study argues against that claim. As media content has radically changed accordingly with society's digitization, communication and social meaning-making processes have received a major boost. In our time we receive a vast amount of impressions from a multitude of directions through television, film, social media and digital games on a daily basis. Therefore, the need is urgent for society to be able to relate to these media impressions and create a common meta-language for these phenomena. For teaching and education to respond to these challenges, there needs to be a radical change in the outdated view that to some extent seems to dominate the teaching of literature. This change includes the introduction of adequate tools that can be applied for an expanded reading. Björn Sjödén (2018) shares a similar thought and highlights that teachers should develop a metacognitive approach to how digital applications work and to how knowledge can be created in the interaction that occurs. Sjödén argue that the tools should not be the focus, but that they should be means to create independent, critical and socially aware individuals. A common meta-language and a common meta-cognitive approach are thus called for when introducing the tools that further can teach both teachers and students to understand learning in this context.

This study does not aim to address all the needs arising from the expanded text concept within digital media. Instead, it constitutes a proposal for how it is possible to work with these meaning-making processes in an integrated work that includes the school's dual mission; the transmission of knowledge and the education of democratic citizens. Aarseth and Möring (2020) believe that computer games are a complex phenomena that consist of several

dimensions that must be taken into account when creating social meaning. The software has the ability to emulate several different media (for example board and card games as well as books that are in the game and that the player can read). They believe that games are a hermeneutic spiral where it is constantly possible to create and recreate several ideologies and that the interactional possibilities can be so great that the same content creates different meanings at different occasions (2020:7). Therefore, this study is seen as a proposal for an approach among many viable options.

Ecolinguistics has a normative view of what a "good" cause is and can sometimes seem quite judgmental. It can also be perceived that too much attention has been put upon the authors when they created the content and that the study links the creators to the formulation privilege. The study aims to do the opposite. Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle (2004) raise the concept of "authorial intention" and mean that we must understand that creators are part of their contemporary time and that the language that is conveyed is not always controlled by the authors. Instead, the study must start from understanding the structures which language is created by and understanding that language is formed within the framework these structures construct. In this case, the privilege of formulation is seen as something greater than the authors themselves. They are seldomly the ones who produce these discourses. Instead they are often only part of the reproducing hermeneutic circle. Therefore, it is important for the study to show transparency by stating: 1. there is awareness that the perspective includes a lot of subjective interpretations of reality and 2. the study looks beyond intentions and instead examines linguistic power structures that create and reproduce these stories.

Furthermore, this essay highlights the importance of creating reflection on humanity, the individual and society and how different bodies can be active in a societal transformation that several institutions demand and describe as necessary (Wiek, Withycombe & Redman 2011). Learning for sustainable development is central to the environment and democracy. It is therefore not only possible to connect the result to a bound subject, but it must be seen from a societal and global context. Stibbe

(2019:234) believes that the basis for an unsustainable society is created from stories and that language is a key to making these visible and, subsequently, to challenging them. This is knowledge that has the potential to go beyond the confines of school as it is an approach to linguistic structures that constantly govern our everyday life. The result of this study points to a potential that has previously been reasonably overlooked, namely how discourses are produced and reproduced in multimodal sense-making. This study therefore has a high relevance for directing the focus towards linguistic discourses that society encounters outside the world of school and shaping students who themselves can take a stand on contemporary and future global problems.

As teachers, we are part of the system that shapes individuals, discourses and society. We must therefore look at our own role and what we can do to influence the meaning-making processes that are reproduced in the daily discourse. We believe that the approach that a critical literacy entails can form a basis for shaping the self-thinking individuals of the future. It can be seen as a vital part of creating a democratic classroom and shaping students to think democratically while questioning hierarchies that exist in society. The knowledge and principles imparted through this study can be seen as existentially oriented and thus go beyond the confines of school and can contribute to the formation of democratic citizens.

In order for education to be put in relation to society as a whole, it is required, as mentioned above, that the knowledge is not only linked to the subject of L1 language. Instead, it needs to integrate these principles across multiple subjects to reflect how knowledge goes beyond the subject context. This is also the opinion of Wessbo and Uhrqvist (2021:15), who explain that learning for sustainable development can be processed across subjects and that the literature teaching of the Swedish subject can function as a central resource in this work. They find arguments for this in the Swedish National Education Agency (2011:1) in the purpose of the Swedish subject, where it is stated that the Swedish subject should "challenge students to new ways of thinking and open up to new perspectives". Furthermore, they explain that an interdisciplinary teaching of stories based on ecocritical traditions of ideas is fruitful

in the work for sustainable development, but that it needs to be integrated with different traditions of knowledge to create additional relevance. Although interdisciplinary work was not the focus of this study, these insights are touched upon by integrating ecolinguistics, multimodal theory, literary analysis and critical literacy with stories that abound in society and can thus contribute to form a basis for further work with interdisciplinary work in learning for sustainable development that is adapted to our digital age.

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