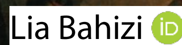
ACCESS: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN EDUCATION
2024, VOL. 44, NO. 2, 35-48
https://doi.org/10.46786/ac24.3041

ACCESS

Teaching as a dance with and towards dignity: Recognizing dignity in educational relationships

Lia Bahizi 

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ABSTRACT
In educational research there is a plethora of propositions on different ways to address the problem of too narrow and merely/mainly extrinsic and future-oriented aims of education such as the one of producing citizens who can contribute to national competitiveness in a global capitalist market system. Several approaches counterbalance such narrow aims by offering more holistic aims such as cosmopolitan, democratic citizenship, flourishing and liberation. However, in addition to broadening the range of possible aims of education, there is also a need to address the underlying ethical and relational problem of how aims in themselves, even though holistic, still always run the risk of becoming stagnant and reified. In this paper, I argue together with Gert Biesta and Sharon Todd that the unavoidable fact of educational aims involving the risk of becoming stagnant can have detrimental effects on relationships in classrooms. However, I re-frame the problem from an ethical viewpoint. I propose dignity-awareness as a practice of ethical relational attunement to educational aims where these are left open for renewal and dynamic co-existence, not merely through a process of strenuous self-reflection and pedagogic dialogue, but through artfulness and playfulness. I suggest dance as a metaphor for an ethical awareness/interaction in which the relative importance of educational aims is acknowledged and appreciated.

KEYWORDS
Dignity; educational relationships; teaching; Biesta; Levinas; Todd

Introduction

Discussions on educational aims often have an emphasis on external and future-oriented goals which, in recent times, have been formulated in terms of acquiring skills to become a productive contributor to the global market. Such goals have been criticized for being too narrow in scope and for their instrumentality (Biesta, 2016; Elfert, 2018; Jerome, 2018; Masschelein & Simons, 2013; Nussbaum 2010). This can be understood as the 'human capital' approach to education (Teixeira, 2020). More holistic and progressive aims of education have been proposed. Examples of such alternative aims are: democratic, cosmopolitan citizenship (Papastephanou, 2013; Rönnström, 2019); flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2021; Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2015); liberation (Freire, 1985) as

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well as critical thinking (Hare, 1999; Steutel & Spiecker, 1999). UN-institutions such as UNESCO have also formulated educational aims for human rights and social justice (UNESCO, n.d.), and human rights education (HRE) scholars have discussed how these can be understood and practiced (Reardon, 1995). Whereas these approaches may have a counterbalancing effect to narrow aims of education by broadening the repertoire of aims, they do not directly address the question of how instrumentalization of education can be connected to the objectification of children through an over-emphasis on extrinsic values over intrinsic ones. Philosophers within the field of education (Biesta, 2013, 2016, 2020; Todd, 1997, 2015, 2022, 2023; von Wright, 2000) offer such problematizations by stressing the open-endedness of education and by claiming that in order for transformational education to take place, we must be open to let go of our preconceived aims, goals and agendas and be receptive in the present moment encounters that education afford to us. Gert Biesta (2013; 2016; 2020) has explored how all aims of education in their actual functioning in schools contain dimensions of what he calls qualification, socialization and subjectification, and how it is important from a social justice perspective, as well as from a democratic perspective, to have continual awareness and dialogue about the dynamics of these dimensions. Sharon Todd (1997, 2015, 2022, 2023) has questioned the need for aims altogether, and instead turns attention to ontological questions of intersubjectivity and relational ethics. For both, their arguments are supported by a move from a subject-object relationship between children and adults, to an intersubjective ontology. This article leans on the work of Biesta and Todd to describe the risk of aims in education becoming stagnant in relationships in education, and reframes this as an *ethical* problem, in addition to being a democratic problem, as Biesta contends, and an ontological problem, as Todd emphasizes.

In my view, the instrumentality of extrinsic aims in education becomes ethically problematic if/when they are acted out without an awareness of their importance, not only in relation to other goals, but especially in relation to the subjectivity of the child/children with whom we as adults have pedagogical interactions, in other words, when the aims become something that we as adults think we need to 'do' to children. The ethical problem as I will formulate it in this article lies not in having aims *per se*, but in perceiving them as predetermined and fixed within a strictly subject-object ontological view. That is, when we perceive aims as having absolute importance, rather than relative importance, and when we find ourselves more or less consciously trying to project aims onto children. This article seeks to discuss the issue of the existential intersubjective condition of educational relationships from an ethical perspective as well as an ontological one. I will seek to show how the perspectives of Biesta and Todd bring focus, not only to the tensions, possible synergies and conflicts *in between* different aims of education, but also to the relational and ethical tensions that inevitably arise from time to time even *within* different emancipatory or holistic pedagogical approaches.

As an alternative response to the abovementioned tensions in educational practices with regards to aims, I have previously suggested dignity as a regulative ideal to be strived for through moral perfectionism (Bahizi, 2024), which can be (imperfectly) realized in education through cultivating capabilities for flourishing (Mollvik, 2021). In these two articles, I build on understandings of dignity found in the European philosophical tradition and reconstruct the concept from being grounded in certain capacities or traits to a more relationally attuned concept. In this article, I will further decouple the concept of dignity from aims, and expand upon my proposed perspective on dignity as an intrinsic *how* of education, rather than an extrinsic *what* (Biesta, 2013; 2016). That is, dignity not only as a regulative ideal and the process of striving for it, but also as a quality of moral awareness in regards to both the ideal and the process. Such a quality of moral awareness can perhaps help teachers perceive and make meaning of the plethora of educational aims and to hopefully move more gracefully in relation to the tensions mentioned above. Thus, I will argue that the concept of dignity can serve as an intrinsic ethical ideal in education, both in its form of a regulative ideal and process, and in its form of a quality of moral attention and awareness. As a regulative ideal, I will suggest that dignity can bring our attention to those moments when we have

narrowed the space for freedom to appear in relationships, for instance when the fostering aspects of education are overly dominant. As a quality of moral awareness, I argue that dignity can nuance the relational ontological views of Biesta and Todd through added emphasis on an appreciation of the beauty of ethical tensions themselves. I thereby call for playful engagement, in addition to the critical self-refection and pedagogic dialogue that Biesta and Todd suggest. This playful engagement is described through the metaphor of *dance*.

The article is divided into four parts, where I first discuss how instrumentalization and objectification of children through unreflective enactment of aims in education can be understood through a dignity-perspective as *attributed dignity*. In the second section, through a discussion of some of Biesta's arguments in *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (2013) and *Good Education in an Age of Measurement* (2016), I argue for the need for an intersubjective ontology as a meta-ethical ground for educational relationships. In the following third section I use Todd's concept of the 'doubling effect' (Todd, 1997, 2022) in education in order to highlight the risk that the 'human capital' approach, but *also* emancipatory, transformative, approaches to education, can have teachers caught in subject-object relationships with children. In dialogue with an empirical example, I suggest that dignity as moral awareness can direct attention to how different aims of education are given meaning and are (re)enacted in the classroom. I will especially pay attention to the kind of moral activity that I will argue is required of the teacher. In the fourth section, I elaborate upon the art of practicing dignity as a quality of awareness in relation to children which I will call *dignity-awareness* or *committed non-attachment*. With this I mean a serious commitment to expand towards the child/children, combined with a playful, non-attached attention to the extrinsic, attributed, educational aims and the desires that we as adults bind to them. The tension between my use of the words 'commitment' and 'non-attachment' intentionally signifies how dignity-awareness in educational relationships requires a seemingly paradoxical embodiment of a *steady* moral commitment to *flexibility*. Dignity-awareness/committed non-attachment is an ability to witness the goals and desires that come and go, and to engage in a dance with them and with children. This dance is one in which I argue that we as teachers can become more reliable and responsive dance-partners when we are willing to loosen up our fixed posturing and desires for predetermined outcomes, and instead adopt a graceful and buoyant stance.

Attributed dignity as a way of understanding the problem with instrumentalization and objectification in education

In an age where most educational systems are narrowly focused on qualification for future employment and competitive advantages on a global market, there is an accompanying focus on assessment, measurement and managing of outcomes (Biesta, 2016; Nussbaum, 2010; Rönnström, 2019). There are several perspectives from which to address the potential risks with such educational practices, for instance the political/social justice-perspective, the ethical perspective, and the ontological perspective. Biesta (2013; 2016; 2020) brings attention to all of these, yet with varying emphasis. First, Biesta (2016) argues from a democratic perspective that 'effectiveness' and 'what works' are not ultimate values but only instrumental ones, and that we need to pay more attention to what the ultimate aims are (pp. 13-14). Furthermore, the values are being set by policymakers, and to a certain degree by teachers, without proper deliberation and discussion with students, parents, or the larger community, which is an even greater problem for democracy, Biesta contends (2016, pp. 44, 59). He also sees it as a social justice problem because a lack of deliberation on educational aims will uphold the status quo where educational systems will continue to benefit certain groups and not others, for instance by not representing the interests of those who lack social capital (p. 16). Second, from an ethical perspective, Biesta (2016) writes how these aims of education also influence the relationships in classrooms. Biesta describes how it can become the path of least resistance for teachers to identify as providers of a 'product' and parents (rather than children themselves) to identify themselves as 'customers' (pp. 56-57). Third, on the ontological level, he

argues for an intersubjective view of moral agency, according to which an inevitable and also ethically desirable consequence for education is that instrumental and societal aims of education must be balanced with an openness to the 'subjectification'-process of children (Biesta, 2016). Although I agree with Biesta that narrow aims in education, or perhaps rather, a lack of discussion on aims, is problematic from a social justice and democratic perspective, I would argue that the second two perspectives are closer to describing the root of the issue, since in the end, lack of inclusion and deliberation on common concerns is a violation of the principles of equality and equity, which are questions of ethics. Therefore, I will focus the remaining part of this section on the second, ethical-relational issue, and move on to the ontological perspective in the following section.

With an ethical-relational perspective on educational aims, it is possible to imagine that a measurable outcome-oriented educational system could affect classroom interactions in ways that are morally damaging. Some examples could be: a heightened risk to reduce educational relationships to their transactional aspects of achieving outcomes and receiving recognition; a heightened risk that labels such as 'troublemaker' (Dolk, 2013; Margonis, 2015) or 'A-student' (Richardson, 2022) are attached to children; and finally, that worthiness and self-worth is experienced as connected to achievements or how one measures up to social standards. A way to describe this through an ethical lens is to use Daniel Sulmasy's term *attributed dignity* (Sulmasy, 2007). Unlike intrinsic dignity, which is value grounded in beingness itself and which is permanent and beyond measure, and *inflorescent* dignity, which is the realization of the intrinsic value of existence through a process of striving to live a flourishing life in accordance with the highest good (Bahizi, 2024; Mollvik, 2021), attributed dignity is value conferred to us by others (Sulmasy, 2007). Sulmasy (2007) defines attributed dignity as:

> [W]orth or value that human beings confer upon others by acts of attribution. The act of conferring this worth or value may be accomplished individually or communally, but it always involves a choice. Attributed dignity is, in a sense, created. It constitutes a conventional form of value. Thus, we attribute worth or value to those we consider to be dignitaries, those we admire, those who carry themselves in a particular way, or those who have certain talents, skills, or powers. We can even attribute worth or value to ourselves using this word. (p. 12)

Three empirical research studies, conducted in South Africa, Sweden and Norway respectively, exemplify how attributed dignity can be enacted in relationships in formal educational settings. All three studies were interested in exploring how dignity as a concept was understood by university teachers and students and found that there is a strong dominance of the kind of interpretations of dignity as associated with social status and achievements. The first study, by Becker et al. (2015), finds that when conducting qualitative and quantitative methods (consisting of a walk-about, a survey, and following focus-group interviews with a rather large group of teacher students at different universities in South Africa) several statements indicate 'understandings that equality, dignity and freedom are only applicable to those who meet certain requirements or norms, be these social or moral; or only amongst those who have power and money' (Becker et al., 2015, p. 9). I understand this as attributed dignity as it is tied to certain requirements and is not given equally. Secondly, Tapola (2011) makes similar conclusions from her qualitative study on how educators of teacher students from different universities and higher education centers in Sweden understand dignity. Tapola finds three different kinds of discourses prevalent in the letters written by the research participants: *The Discourse of Market Worth, the Discourse of Conformity* and lastly, *the Discourse of the Unconditional Human Status*. The first two, which Tapola writes were the most prevalent, I understand as attributed dignity, since they again ground dignity in social and moral status as perceived by others, whereas the last one in my view can be understood in terms of intrinsic dignity. Lastly, in a hermeneutic study on nursing students' experiences of dignity in relationships with academic and vocational training supervisors, similar experiences were expressed by the nursing students:

> Constantly being measured and assessed made them feel vulnerable and the experience of dignity was threatened. The students had to experience harmony between their own abilities, knowledge

> and the demands they had on themselves, or that the supervisors had on them, in order to experience dignity. They experienced an inner ethical dignity if they managed to live up to the standard that was applicable in the culture and the context that the educational institutions and the field of practice represented. The students had to show that they had the necessary qualities to fit in. (Stikholmen et al., 2022, p. 1609)

These examples not only illustrate what attributed dignity in relationships may look like, but also bring attention to the ways that this can become ethically problematic as relationships are reduced to merely their transactional elements, thus diminishing one's sense of self-worth. Although these empirical studies are from teachers and students in higher education, there are strong ethical reasons for teachers in primary education also to be aware of the risk of measurements, achievements, calls for 'effectiveness' and 'what works' to dominate classroom relationships and interactions to the detriment of other values.

The concept of attributed dignity describes how an unreflective focus on measurements and achievement in order to reach narrow, external aims of education can lead to subtle shifts in relational dynamics between teachers and students. When these relationships become overly transactional, intrinsic values are more easily forgotten, and even our perception of self, other, and the world imperceptibly fall into linear, static, subject-object dualities in which teachers are afforded power to confer value to students, or to withhold from conferring it. This, I argue, causes harm to everyone involved in teacher-student relationships, as dignity becomes something that one is constantly seeking to gain more of, and in constant fear of losing. The transactional elements of relationships that are given most focus in the examples mentioned above can be summarized as students being expected to convey certain qualities and behaviors, or sometimes to have certain attributes or social status, that the teachers evaluate and mirror back to the students. The examples above also illustrate how the phenomenological experience of such relationships can be connected to a shift in understanding of the very concept of dignity as solely attributed, rather than also being intrinsic and inflorescent (Mollvik, 2021), thus creating a mutually reinforcing cycle.

To summarize, the concept of attributed dignity brings attention to the ethical/ontological problem of unreflectively narrow and instrumental aims of education making it more difficult for teachers to resist falling into transactional patterns of relating to students, which can cause harm to both teachers' and students' sense of self, other and world. This kind of transactional teaching has been called for instance 'banking education' (Freire, 1985) or 'transferal pedagogy' (von Wright, 2000). However, viewing instrumentality in education from the ethical lens of dignity brings the question of relationality to the forefront of the discussion, rather than leaving it in the background. It also raises ontological questions of how self, other and world are formed. In the following section, I will discuss these more complex ethical dimensions of educational relationships and educational aims through a deepening of Biesta's ontological argument which becomes visible in his discussions on the three functions of education, and especially the function of subjectification, uniqueness and freedom.

The intersubjective ontological basis of educational relationships

Biesta offers three different, yet overlapping, domains of education—qualification, socialization and subjectification—as a framework for being able to discuss educational aims and to begin to describe the main functions that educational systems actually perform (Biesta, 2016, pp. 4, 19). Qualification refers to learning skills that are deemed valuable by society in order for an individual to function well within consisting institutional boundaries. This could in many cases correspond to the 'human capital' approach to education, but need not necessarily do so, if the skills are understood not merely as means for an individual to contribute to the global market system, but if they are also deemed part of what could be a meaningful, flourishing and dignified life for a human being (Nussbaum, 2011). So too with the second function, socialization. Unlike qualification, however, socialization has more to do with children embracing the values of current society, such as inclusion and cooperation,

rather than learning specific skills. These two functions of education could be compared with the concept of inflorescent dignity, where we are all striving to fulfil inner potential in ourselves and others that is thought valuable for a dignified, flourishing life (Mollvik, 2021). The third function, subjectification, has to do with an individual breaking into the community of others, and by doing so, enacting moral and political agency. Subjectification is what Biesta argues is oftentimes undervalued in recent discussions on educational aims (Biesta, 2016, p. 22). Biesta also cautions that subjectification should not be confused with identity-formation, as our subject-ness, as he defines it, comes to be through our desires and intentions meeting others and the world in an open-ended way. For a student, subjectification means 'how I exist as the subject of my own life, not as the object of what other people want from me' (Biesta, 2020, p. 93). I interpret Biesta to mean that an education that is not open to the subjectification of students, and is overly-focused on projecting adult 'wants' onto children, thereby is only dignified in an attributed sense, but fails to be fully dignified in an intrinsic and inflorescent way.

In addition to being an analytical tool however, Biesta also intends for his framework to have a normative function as well. Biesta uses the terms 'functions', 'domains' and 'purposes' somewhat interchangeably and explains this by stating that the functions may turn into three different 'domains of purposes' when they are brought to consciousness (Biesta, 2020, p. 92). This does not mean that any of the functions should always be preferred over another, but rather that they are always mixed in with each other and that his theoretical framework can be helpful in making judgments about the right proportions in different educational contexts (Biesta, 2016, p. 4). He also argues that there are both potential synergies and potential conflicts between the three domains of purposes. The potential conflict lies especially between qualification and socialization on the one hand, and subjectification/uniqueness/freedom on the other (Biesta, 2016, p. 22). Explicitly, and sometimes more implicitly then, Biesta is making several normative claims. The first claim is that there are ethical reasons on a societal level for more deliberative dialogue on the aims of education, and that his theory of the three functions of education could act as a descriptive theoretical model to facilitate such a dialogue. This view is founded on an understanding of democracy as deliberative. The second claim is that there is an ethical reason on the relational level that intensifies the urgency of this dialogue to take place, namely that the most recent turn of educational practices towards value being equated with measurable outcomes, can lead to instrumental, objectifying relationships. Biesta thus implicitly expresses a moral concern about the need not only for deliberative, democratic dialogue, but also for conscious efforts to bring subjectivity into balance with the other two domains. The third claim, that is perhaps the most implicitly expressed of the three, is that there is an underlying ontological problem related to the ethical problem of 'lack of subjectification.' As I shall explain, I interpret Biesta as calling for educators to embrace an intersubjective ontology, which has the potential to create an environment where subjectification is given more weight.

Describing what he means by subjectification, Biesta uses Emmanuel Levinas' and Zygmunt Bauman's understanding of responsibility and uniqueness. Uniqueness is understood not merely as difference but rather as an existential/ethical relation between a subject and the world where the relationship exists prior to any choice by the subject. Uniqueness is not about claiming one's pre-existing individuality in the form of a unique combination of characteristics and traits. Rather, uniqueness is the moral call that arises when we are confronted with otherness in those 'morally charged situations' where we are 'on our own' (Bauman, 1993, as cited in Biesta, 2016, p. 64). This is a move from the subjective/objective view of the world towards an intersubjective one. Much like my argument on the existential nature of intrinsic dignity then (Bahizi, 2024), uniqueness is not grounded in us having different traits, properties or capacities, but comes instead from our unique position in the universal web of relationships. In describing the relationship between subjectification and freedom, Biesta also leans on Hannah Arendt's understanding of 'action,' in which the precondition for a subject to act is that there are others who receive and respond to the action. Through such an understanding, freedom not only ends where others' freedom begins, but

the relationship itself creates a space in which freedom 'can appear' (Arendt, as cited in Biesta, 2013, p. 143). When moral responsibility is ever present in such a way, teachers have the responsibility of both responding to the individual students and to the world by being directed towards the 'maintenance of the space' for freedom to emerge (Biesta, 2013, p. 144).

Biesta argues that this is another kind of freedom than the Marxist liberation from oppression, or the common readings of Immanuel Kant and Enlightenment thinkers in which freedom is interpreted in a narrow sense as rational autonomy and where the goal of education is for teachers to make children become rationally autonomous subjects (Biesta, 2013, Chapter 5; 2016, pp. 77-79). The critique against these conceptualizations of freedom is that there is an inbuilt inequality and dependency where children are perceived as being un-free or 'not yet' fully moral subjects, and thus reliant on teachers to 'liberate' them (Biesta, 2013, p. 82). The kinds of freedom, responsibility, subjectivity and uniqueness that Biesta proposes are ones that emerge in the intersubjective space. My interpretation is that they cannot be conjured up at will and therefore cannot become an 'aim' of education in the sense that they can be measured or achieved in the same way as qualificational and socializational aims perhaps could be. To value freedom in education, Biesta means that we therefore always need to be open primarily to the freedom that is unfolding in the present, and only secondarily to a utopian freedom projected into the future. Biesta also brings attention to the fact that even subjectification as an aim can become instrumental and too future-oriented if it is assumed that the child is 'not yet a subject,' and that the teacher's role is to 'subjectify' a child, who would then be objectified during the process (Biesta, 2020).

The problem of reified, subject-object relationships in education is not overcome simply by a deliberative dialogue on educational aims and a turn towards more holistic, intrinsic aims as opposed to narrow and extrinsic ones. This is because we cannot know beforehand what the aims will become until they are formed in our interactions with children. Biesta therefore suggests subjectification/uniqueness/freedom as a third dimension of education besides qualification and socialization while at the same time admitting that these three cannot be completely separated. Instead, as mentioned, Biesta hopes that awareness of the three dimensions can help us 'determine the right proportions' between them in different contexts (Biesta, 2016, p. 4).

I suggested in the previous section that attributed dignity can be used as an alternative concept to 'lack of subjectification' in order to notice when the proportions are out of balance from an *ethical* perspective, not only from a sociological or democratic perspective. When teachers and students begin to value themselves and each other in a predominantly attributed way, this could be a sign that we have failed properly to pay attention to intrinsic values of uniqueness, interconnectedness and subjectivity—that the spaciousness in which freedom can appear is not spacious enough. However, I believe that one should caution against expressions that make it seem as if the proportions between qualification, socialization and subjectification are something that can be exactly determined or measured. Instead of a balancing act, as Biesta seems to suggest in certain passages, I argue that there is need for a flexible 'living with' the potential discomfort that the tensions between the three dimensions of education often create. In the third section I will argue, together with Todd, that these tensions are unavoidable, and that a shying away from a dialogue about them is not only undemocratic and can lead to disproportionate emphasis on other dimensions than subjectification, as Biesta has pointed out, but also limits the understanding of the intersubjective basis that education rests upon. I will explain how Todd takes the idea of intersubjectivity further than Biesta by putting even more emphasis on the indeterminacy and fluidity of our subject-ness. The ethical implications that follow from Todd's intersubjective understanding of education is that harmful power dynamics, which I have described in terms of attributed dignity, can play out even in educational settings in which the educators have deliberated and agreed to work towards normative educational aims that are more emancipatory/holistic. I will illustrate this with an example from a preschool context.

The 'doubling effect' in education and its ethical implications

Todd builds on Biesta's and David Hansen's critique of the 'strong' instrumentalist view of education which: 'positions education within a mechanistic framework and operates politically through a marrying of national educational policies with economic interests' (Todd, 2022, p. 335). Instead, she favors a 'weak' form of instrumentalism which recognizes that even as we seek to pass on certain values and traditions through education, the nature of the educational encounter also demands an openness to the creation of new, unpredictable, aims. This is what she calls the 'doubleness' of education. As with Biesta, the argument for the double nature of education is built on the ontological premise as formulated by Emmanuel Levinas, that our subjectivity is not pre-formed but comes into being through meeting with the *Other* (Todd, 2003). Todd also describes how a lack of awareness of the doubling effect can lead to unreflectively oppressive practices and othering of students, even within the context of 'transformative pedagogy' in which the expressed aim is to be critical of the processes through which societal values and norms are formed (Todd, 1997, p. 241).

Klara Dolk (2013) gives us, in my view, a telling example of the 'doubling effect' in the beginning of her PhD dissertation, in which a child interrupts a teacher's attempt to teach critical gender consciousness. The dialogue took place in a Swedish preschool which had an explicit aim of teaching for gender-equality. The teacher's purpose with the interview was to assess the 'success' of the pedagogical approach. In this example, it is the child who I believe ends up showing the teacher how to engage playfully with, and question, stereotypical gender biases embedded in the critical gender-pedagogy.

Preschool Teacher: What do you want to become when you grow up?

Child: A Preschool-Miss [Dagisfröken in Swedish].

Preschool Teacher: Okay…Is there anything else you want to be?

Child: Yes, firefighter. [Brandman].

Preschool Teacher: *Okay*!

Child: No, I was just kidding; only boys can become firefighters.

Preschool Teacher: …

Child: I was just kidding; you can become whatever you want! (Dolk, 2013, p. 12, *my translation*)

One of the things that I believe the example illustrates is that all educational aims, however morally excellent, may not only be fueled by desires deemed worth desiring, but also give rise to other desires becoming unwanted, undesirable desires. Within the context of this preschool, the desire of a child identified as a girl to become a firefighter is received with an enthusiastic: 'Okay!' However, the absence of such a desire is met with silence. Expressing it slightly differently than Todd does, the double nature of educational encounters means that any pedagogical approach or aim of education will carry within itself a dualistic relationship between at least two seemingly opposing desires, which will inevitably create tensions. In the example from Dolk's research, the ambition to teach gender-consciousness is conflicting with the subjectification-process. The preschool teacher is seeking to measure freedom in a sense, and is seemingly harboring a desire for a 'right' answer from the child, thus in effect *limiting* the field of possibilities in the interaction.

Todd's approach to the inevitable doubling effect, and the following risk of reified identities and/or the idealizing of certain qualities or properties, is for the teacher to engage in self-reflection on the desires at play, both on a political and institutional level, as well as on an individual level, by reflecting on one's own desires, thus bringing the unconscious to consciousness (Todd, 1997). The child in Dolk's example gives the teacher a wonderful opportunity for this. However, Todd also subscribes to a similar intersubjective ontology as Biesta, in which desires are not seen as chosen by individuals independently but are rather created in a 'third space', in which, as with amniotic fluid in the womb of a pregnant woman, it is difficult to determine whose desires are whose (Todd, 1997,

p. 252). Rather, what makes education educational is that it is an embodied, sensed encounter that creates a field of potentialities (Todd, 2023, p. 60). According to such an ontological view then, the task of the teacher cannot be to bring *all* desires to consciousness, to define perfectly their boundaries and origins, nor to label them once and for all as worthy or unworthy, desirable or undesirable, dignified or undignified. Furthermore, Todd contends that it is not enough (and not even truly possible) to merely reverse the trajectory, so to speak, by viewing children as the active subjects of learning and teachers as passive recipients. This is because transference is not one-directional (Todd, 1997, p. 252). Furthermore, as Max van Manen (1991) writes, children are *more* than our equals. They are not responsible for our development, but we as adults are responsible in serving them. This requires self-reflection and dialogue that is non-judgmental so as not to fall too deeply into yet another dualistic trap of our own making. For Todd, an ethical implication of her relational ontology in education is to constantly ask questions about whether our interrelationships invite 'nonviolent and life-enhancing' potential becomings and a 'living with' different elements of our environment (Todd, 2023, p. 145). Through the ethical perspective that I am arguing for, dignity as a regulative ideal has the potential to enrich such ethical reflection, for instance by articulating the risk of subtle violence that lies in unreflectively projecting our desires onto children as in the example above. If the girl's confidence was to have been negatively affected by the teacher's lack of enthusiasm with some of her answers, this would have meant a lost opportunity for a deeper subjectification-process to take place. Dignity as a regulative ideal would encourage teachers to invite such opportunities for agency and freedom. Dignity as a quality of moral awareness, moreover, encourages teachers to hold the regulative ideal of dignity softly, so that it doesn't become just another attachment.

The pedagogical moral call in each encounter with children, I suggest, is therefore to engage in the ever-changing improvisational dance that tensions between desires and aims create. The metaphor of improvisational dance illuminates how dignity is embodied in educational relationships through an attitude of openness towards the other, and to the forces of aims and desires that are intentionally flexible. As I will explain, the metaphor also highlights the aesthetic aspect of educational relationships. In a text in a special issue on intersections between Western and Eastern philosophical thought on education and contemplation, Todd alludes to a similar thought when she writes that an inter-relational attitude is a 'negative capability' which could be practiced in formal educational settings. Todd suggests that contemplative and embodiment exercises could 'offer students and teachers time for silent reflection, for quietly exploring sensation and offer encouragement to "see" their attachments as part of the necessary matrix of life' (Todd, 2015, p. 252). These 'small breaks with the system' would engage students' 'existential sensibilities, perplexities and wonder' (Todd, 2015, p. 252) and enable them to 'face the unknown with an open spirit, however difficult that might be' (Todd, 2015, p. 252). The difficulty alluded to is the tensions between teachers' and students' different desires. Todd (2022) also advocates for a cultivation of an appreciation of the aesthetic and embodied aspects of education. This is because:

> While art and education are not the same, both are concerned with the ways culture is experienced and lived as they seek to shift the borders of sense, meaning, and subjectivity. Through this, they lend support to each other in ways that move beyond the bounds of a strong instrumentalism. (Todd, 2022, p. 338)

In the following and last section, I will expand on Biesta's and Todd's arguments by elaborating upon how an openness to the subjectification process can be embodied by teachers. I will offer intrinsic dignity as an ethical concept to describe the intersubjective ground for educational relationships as well as being understood as a quality of awareness from which to see the proportions between different educational aims shifting and changing. In other words, I will suggest awareness of intrinsic dignity as an ethical response to the problem with the "doubling effect." To further illustrate the fluidity of the process of creating the spaciousness I will expand upon the metaphor of the improvisational dance. The metaphor can be seen as appropriate because I mean that we are not *statically* holding the space for subjectification/freedom/uniqueness to appear. The

choice is not between an authoritarian transaction of knowledge and a passive openness to the unknown. Rather, as Todd has suggested, teaching is a *dynamic and aesthetic* engagement in the unfolding of aims, desires, subjectivities, freedoms and undesirable desires. Teaching is a commitment to being open to this process and not to overly control it, but actually to seek enjoyment in it. An improvisational dance, although deeply relationally, ethically and aesthetically meaningful, is not always about ending up in a certain place. For in each moment, wherever we end up, is where we are.

Intrinsic dignity and committed non-attachment: Dancing with dignity in education

Much philosophical research on the concept of dignity naturally touches upon the question of the scope of moral consideration or moral status (Formosa & Mackenzie, 2014; Kateb, 2011; Park, 1997; Rosen, 2012), that is, w ho or what should be included in the sphere of moral concern. This makes intrinsic dignity a highly relevant concept when discussing aims of education as it raises the question of whom educational aims should serve. Intrinsic dignity is described by Daniel Sulmasy (2007) in the following way:

> By intrinsic dignity, I mean that worth or value that people have simply because they are human, not by virtue of any social standing, ability to evoke admiration, or any particular set of talents, skills, or powers. Intrinsic value is the value something has by virtue of being the kind of thing that it is. Intrinsic dignity is the value that human beings have by virtue of the fact that they are human beings. This value is thus not conferred or created by human choices, individual or collective, but is prior to human attribution. (p. 13)

As opposed to attributed dignity then, intrinsic dignity is not grounded in or derived from any set of realized nor potential 'talents, skills, or powers' in individuals, nor in a species, but is an infinite value beyond price that is grounded simply in beingness. As it is prior to human attribution, it is not vulnerable to loss or gain. Intrinsic dignity can thus be understood as a field of pure potentiality in which the highest good, to use Kantian terms, could be manifested (Bahizi, 2024). At the same time, arguably, it is also the awareness that what is manifest around us is already good (although far from perfect) solely on the basis of its existing as a particular kind of thing (Sulmasy, 2007), and on us having picked it out as a particular kind of thing carrying ethical meaning (Crary, 2016). I have previously argued (Bahizi, 2024) that it is not because of any particular property of the kind of being that one is, that one 'has' dignity, but merely, that in every relationship there is an ethical charge which has creative potential for dignity, and for which we should strive. Intrinsic dignity can then be described as being in harmonious relationship to ourselves, others and the world (Malpas, 2007). Similarly, Donna Hicks (2011) describes dignity as: 'An internal state of peace that comes with the recognition and acceptance of the value and vulnerability of all living things' (p. 18). If intrinsic dignity is viewed as an 'ultimate aim of education' (Park, 1997) then the question arises whose dignity it is. Paradoxically, dignity is often viewed by many philosophers as an intrinsic property grounded in rationality (Kateb, 2011; Park, 1997; Rosen, 2012), which can lead to exclusion of children as moral agents. Thus, I argue that such interpretations of dignity in practice run the risk of othering those who are considered formal compulsory education's primary subjects. Viewing dignity as a regulative ideal to strive for rather than a property that one possesses and which grounds one's moral value can open up for the possibility of dissolving this tension, as dignity is no longer something one can 'have' (Bahizi, 2024).

Although some ethical tensions in regards to the interpretation of dignity as moral worth in education can be dissolved by a more relationally attuned reconstruction, many tensions still remain, such as that between the ideal of freedom/subjectification in education and the actual embodiment of it. As I have sought to exemplify, tensions exist between educational desires, both conscious and unconscious, spoken and unspoken, deliberated upon, or unreflectively reproduced by global capitalist systems. Tensions also exist in each classroom where they are created anew in each encounter. Since awareness of intrinsic dignity is an *appreciation* of the *value* of plurality and

interconnectivity, it could lead to an ethical approach to education that opens up for the possibility of recognizing the doubling effect of conflicting aims and desires as ontologically necessary, but also to recognize the beauty and goodness *in the tensions themselves*. This is why I would call the awareness of intrinsic dignity an ethical-aesthetical awareness. In aesthetic experiences, I argue that one preferably does not chop up the experience into little pieces of time and label them morally 'good' or 'bad.' Instead, it is an experience in which one may revel in the plurality of appearances. In an aesthetic experience, or for that matter a transcendent experience, in which we may hold our egos and desires with a loosened grip, the self, other and world can exist in a way where we are undivided consciousness experiencing and delighting in the illusion of separate appearances which are only relatively good and bad, never absolutely so. The dance-metaphor serves to illustrate that we needn't always experience separateness as traumatic, but that the pain and hard work of attuning our perceived hearts/bodies/minds to our environment can also be beautiful.

An appreciation for the intrinsic dignity or value of the interconnectedness of beingness shares similar features with the Levinasian intersubjective ontology, which recognizes the inescapability of the responsibility for the Other (Levinas, 1969). However, the approach differs slightly from Levinas, and thus from Biesta, and to a certain extent even Todd, in the same way as certain Buddhist traditions do. Todd (2015) discusses similarities and differences between Levinas and Theravada Buddhism. She concludes that they are similar in that they find that the becoming of the self is inextricably linked to others and to the world and that ethics is grounded in this embodied experience. They are also similar in that they propose a certain 'depositioning of the self (Buddhism) and ego (Levinas)' in order for an 'ethical orientation' to the world to emerge (Todd, 2015, p. 251). The differences, as Todd sees them, is that Theravada Buddhism is slightly more optimistic about the possibility for human beings to be successful in such an endeavor, at least momentarily, and that many Buddhist traditions, unlike Levinas, offer suggestions for practices in order to experience such moments of awareness of the interconnectivity of all things (Todd, 2015). Levinas, on the other hand, places more emphasis on the way that interconnectivity is experienced as 'exposure' because of our simultaneous separation from others (Levinas, 1998). If Todd and Biesta are suggesting that we constantly renew our awareness of the tensions and the Levinasian, almost traumatic, 'exposure' to the each other's otherness through self-contemplation and dialogue, an ethical-aesthetical appreciation of intrinsic dignity would be to find value and beauty in them.

The teacher committed to transformative, emancipatory education that appears in the space between adult and child, learns to practice an openness and a moral awareness which I call *dignity-awareness* or *committed non-attachment*. Dignity as moral awareness is a commitment to honoring the beingness of all of life through attention and discernment, not judgement, and through engagement, not attachment. One reason to liken this quality of moral awareness to a dance is because it does not make moral reflection something which we do in our minds only. Dance is reflective movement and moving reflection. Dance is an aesthetic experience that is inter-relational yet beyond dualisms. As expressed by Arnold Berleant (1991):

> It stands in direct denial of the most pernicious of all dualisms, the division of body and consciousness. In dance, thought is primed at the point of action. This is not the reflection of the contemplative mind but rather intellect poised in the body, not the deliberative consideration of alternative courses, but thought in process, intimately responding to and guiding the actively engaged body. (p. 167)

In dance, as in teaching, I argue that we are morally obligated to be open to what Biesta (2016) calls 'interruptions' in our encounters with plurality and difference. Otherwise, I mean that we as teachers risk violating children's dignity by failing to create an educational-relational environment in which their subjectivity and freedom can appear. As teachers, we do this for instance when we become overly attached to particular outcomes or future aims, or when we tie our desires and attachments too tightly to our identity. Although future-oriented aims of education are important, they are only relatively important, and I argue that they only truly exist as desires and values *in the present*. To return to the dance-metaphor, whether the music and the choreography are planned or

both are improvised in the moment, what makes the movement dance is the intentional playing in the present with the fluidity of form, space, direction, tension and release. The example illustrates an interruption where the teacher's/teachers' desires and expectations on the child were brought to light through the child's playful comments. As previously mentioned, the example thus illustrates the 'doubling effect' in education where desires are negotiated and created/suppressed in pedagogical relationships (Todd, 1997). In Dolk's example, the child teases the teacher through delaying to provide the 'right' answer to the question of what she wants to be when she grows up—'you can become whatever you want.' Through this improvisational and playful act, the girl is exercising truer freedom by being however she wants, being uniquely herself, in *this* moment and not projecting her freedom into an unknown future. The question that the teacher needs to ask in this instance is not, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' but rather, 'What do you think you/we/the world are right now?" and for the loving answer inside the heart/mind/body to be: "Here. That is more than enough." And even more importantly, the child in the example reminds us that adults must ask themselves this question also, lest we begin taking ourselves too seriously and do not see the relative truth of our being 'agents of positive change for the greater good of children,' or other roles we might give ourselves. What I believe the child in the example shows us is that when we have aims of education, which we inevitably must have, and when these conflict, which they inevitably must do, what remains is the ability to say, 'just kidding.' To laugh together in the present moment. To enjoy the play, the dance. To revel and delight in the constant interruptions of our trajectories. The most frustrating thing might be that we can't measure the 'success' of having committed to the disruption of labels, trajectories and desires. However, in rare moments, like in Dolk's example, it might be that we find proof of our success in our ability to share in the child's laughter, to say yes to the invitation to dance.

Notes on contributor

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