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Utopia as method: a response to education in crisis?

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ABSTRACT

Claims of crisis in education are not new though their orientation has changed over time. This paper is concerned with the contemporary discourse surrounding an apparent global learning crisis, examining the dominant logics through which education and its concomitant crises are imagined and operationalized. In this conceptual essay, we take "crisis" as representing both challenges faced by society and as an opportunity to interrupt the current order. We suggest that a key crisis facing education currently is not a learning crisis, but the dominant evidence-based approach and "what works" logic. In response, we argue for utilizing Levitas' utopia as method as a way for educational researchers and practitioners to engage in imagining alternative futures. The method involves excavation of conditions that have resulted in the current moment, critical questioning of being for both humans and the institutions we construct, and imagining alternative ways of being and doing education. We illustrate briefly how the method can be used in applying it to an analysis of the OECD's Global Competency Framework. This method is not presented as a solution, but as a crisis response that is imaginative and attempts to create possibilities and spaces of hope.

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Introduction: crisis as problem and opportunity

If crises represent moments of great difficulty or fundamental problems, they also produce instability and possibility. In this conceptual paper we explore the possibilities of utopia as method (Levitas, 2013) in educational research and practice in an attempt to engage with a world in permanent crisis. This is not only about the field of education offering a response to crisis, but acknowledging that education has also contributed to and is thus partly responsible for the current state of affairs. However, rather than utilizing crisis discourse to legitimate new truth claims, this paper is concerned with the possibilities for alternative modes of doing educational work that may emerge from the instability and fragility produced by crisis. This work also involves looking carefully at how crises are formed and legitimized.

Discourses of crisis in education are not new (Arendt, 1961), yet they continue to abound. Holton (1987) wrote more than 30 years ago that "in the contemporary world we are told that 'crisis' threatens us on all sides. Sociology it seems is dominated by crisis-talk". (p. 502) We would suggest that, in the field of education, Holton's position remains as relevant now as it was then. The most recent crisis in education is framed as a "learning crisis" by the World Bank in its World Development Report of 2018, extending the "Global Learning Crisis" that UNESCO reported on in 2013. In both reports, the learning crisis is described as manifesting itself in decreasing learning outcomes of students, particularly in the areas of literacy and mathematics, critical thinking skills and the capacity for lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2013; World Bank, 2018).

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Given this background to our present state of affairs, it is necessary to pause and consider how we might understand and theorize the notion of "crisis". Unsurprisingly, the discourses mentioned above point to what are deemed to be significant problems in education. This connection between, and perhaps even conflation of, "crisis" and "problem" is also common beyond the field of education, reflecting the popular imaginary animating crisis discourse. Indeed, this paper is being written amidst major disruptions and a sense of individual as well as communal anxiety, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The fallout of this pandemic in relation to economies, mental health, social connection and the concomitant impact on actual human lives is real and devastating. As opposed to the view of some social theorists, such as Agamben, who claims that Covid-19 as crisis is "socially constructed rather than real" (Walby, 2021, p. 34), Walby makes the point that the Covid-19 crisis is indeed real, as "more than a million people have died from COVID and millions more have been sick" (p. 35). Nevertheless, the fact that there can be contestations over the narrative of the origins and remedy of a crisis reveals to us that "a crisis can be both real and socially constructed" (p. 35). Given that crises manifest within social life and thereby entail varying narratives regarding their origins and remedies, it is important that declarations of crisis are not taken as simple matters of fact.

When a crisis is taken as self-evident in its totality, the possibility for accurate diagnosis on the one hand, and imagining creative responses on the other, is foreclosed. The risk of this kind of foreclosure is facilitated by the seeming ubiquity of "crisis talk". When the world is said to be in a perpetual state of crisis, the discourse may become a lazy way of pointing to the seriousness of society's ills "without the need to clarify exactly what is meant" by crisis (Holton, 1987, p. 503).

From an ethico-political perspective, without proper attention to the conditions of crisis, the concept "can serve to justify normative claims of 'critical' opposition to the current state of society, as much as to bolster the 'conservative' desire for social stability" (Cordero, 2014, p. 500). It seems to us that it is easier to utilize crisis in these kinds of decontextualized and politicized ways when it refers to an unwanted problem that needs to be solved. Yet, to equate "crisis" with "problem" is not the only way forward.

When confronted by crisis, Biesta (2020b) suggests, "the interruption of the normal order literally makes us think – whether we want it or not – which, as such, is a good thing" (p. 1). So, while "crisis" carries negative connotations within the popular imaginary, as Biesta goes on to note, "in its original meaning, crisis is not a state of chaos, but a critical moment or turning point that calls for consideration and judgment (in Greek: 'krinein')" (p. 1). Therefore, in this paper we consider this moment of crisis as an opportunity to interrupt, to consider and make judgements about the normal order. We argue that, instead of a learning crisis, there is a crisis of "what works" (Biesta, 2020a) in education research and practice. Education has been reduced to an instrument that *will make things work*. To interrupt the normal order requires us to consider the conditions that have given rise to this "what works" logic, what it says about who we are as humans, educators and students, and how we might be able to imagine things differently.

In an attempt to interrupt the evidence-based, "what works" order of education, we utilize Levitas (2013) "utopia as method" as an alternative to approaching education research and practice. Our interpretation and adaptation of Levitas' three modes of utopia as method – archaeology, ontology and architecture – holds in tension a speculative imagination for the future whilst engaging with educational work in the present. Utopia as archaeology provides a critical investigation of the existing utopias in education, laying the foundation for speculations about radical alternatives. Utopia as ontology focuses on asking questions in relation to who "we" are and, subsequently, who we wish to be as educators, researchers, students, schools and communities. Having considered and critically interrogated the conditions of possibility for the current order and how this shapes us, the mode of utopia as ontology opens the invitation to imagine alternative ways of being. This activates the mode of utopia as architecture whereby educational work functions to construct alternative futures in the present, providing immediate responses to a world in permanent crisis.

We argue that the imagining of alternative futures through ontological and architectural inquiry is often lacking in educational research as well as practice and consider utopia as method as a worthwhile approach to address this lack.

In this paper, then, we look critically at the current crisis discourses in education and use the notion of crisis as a moment calling for imagination and judgment. We begin by providing an account of the rise of the "what works" logic in education, its relation to the learning crisis, and of an historical conceptualization of utopia. After elaborating on our own understanding and use of utopia, we will provide an account of Levitas' utopia as method and our adaptation thereof. Here, we will put the method to work by analysing the OECD's "Global Competency Framework" (2018) as an example of the dominant neoliberal logic shaping the contemporary utopia in education. Finally, we do not seek to offer a solution but. Rather, we suggest a possible intervention in the normal order of education, providing a strategy to imagine and construct not just alternative ways of doing education, but alternative ways of being.

A crisis in education? What works will work and that is worse

The learning crisis that UNESCO (2013) and the World Bank (2018) report on, is presented as irrefutable. The lack of quality education for all (World Bank, 2019) and poor results in standardized literacy and numeracy tests (Sjöberg, 2016) are treated as evidence of an educational crisis. On the one hand, this crisis is framed by concerns connected to questions of justice, the distribution of resources, and the reproducibility of inequality (UNESCO, 2014). On the other hand, an increasingly dominant way of framing the learning crisis is by a context of global competition connected to the imperatives of national productivity (OECD, 2010; World Bank, 2018). The obsession of governments with league tables that compare the achievements of primary and secondary students in numeracy and literacy as well as the annual world rankings of universities, is framed by the need for the nation to be competitive in a global economy (Sjøberg, 2016). When national rankings decline, claims of a crisis in the national education system tend to take hold. Such a scenario has functioned to give life to the "what works" logic of contemporary education, whereby the identification of good education is dependent on that which can be measured.

The learning crisis, according to UNESCO (2013) and the World Bank (2018), can be tackled through the measurement of learning outcomes. Yet, how this crisis came into being and what their own roles might have been in the crisis formation is not addressed. The learning crisis seems to be a "manufactured crisis" (Berliner & Biddle, 1996), serving as a justification for "a proliferation of learning metric tools, assessment programmes, and an industry of research and consulting" (Sriprakash, Tikly, & Walker, 2020, p. 683) as the solution for what is deemed as "a moral and economic crisis that must be addressed immediately" (World Bank, 2018, p. xi).

We argue that the learning crisis mainly seems to be serving the wider "what works" logic in education and fails to address matters of human flourishing and the good society as a result of an obsession with data and metrics. Education does not seem to be offering adequate responses to larger societal crises such as rising nationalisms, environmental destruction and increasing global inequalities, as it is subsumed under a market logic that prioritizes the development of human capital and economic growth over the nurturing of political beings (Brown, 2015; Sriprakash et al., 2020). This governing regime for education is connected to the broad economization of society, reducing all of life – including human beings – into commoditised units of measurement (Brown, 2015).

The evidence-based order is not only prevalent at policy level, but also in the practice of schools, and in education research (Biesta, 2020a; Peters & Freeman-Moir, 2006). Arguably, it has contributed to the shift in education as a field towards a "technical-managerialist dystopia" (Peters & Freeman-Moir, 2006, p. 10). This is also visible at curriculum level with a narrowing of curricula as a consequence of the rising popularity of standardization and high stakes testing. This trend has placed pressure on teachers to design learning to fit the test and to focus on learning outcomes that

can be measured. The work of John Hattie (2008) on effect-sizes, for example, has been influential at a school level as school leaders and teachers have implemented certain strategies and practices based on statistics that ostensibly measure what works in the classroom.

This "what works" logic (Biesta, 2010, 2020a) seems to imply an unquestionable commitment to evidence-based education practices, which are examples of taken for granted assumptions about a utopian society "that can be 'governed by numbers'" (Mills, 2018, p. 573). Eventually, "what works will work and that is worse" (Aldridge, 2020, n.p.). In other words, the purpose of education, and by extension education research and practice, has been reduced to being an instrument that will make things work, leaving little room for contemplation and speculation about what it means to be human in a complex world. However, given the crises facing the planet at this very moment, *what works actually does not seem to work after all*.

This state of affairs not only has implications for education practice, but also for education research, which is increasingly being instrumentalised within the very same environment where the commitment to "evidence-based everything" is beyond question. It is now the norm for academics to demonstrate to university administration and research funding bodies the *impact* that one's research will have or has had. This makes it far more difficult to attract funding, and to justify time for research concerning scholarly engagement that does not seem to have immediate impact. It is out of this very real context that Biesta (2020a) asks: "Why do research at all?" (p. 19). Our argument in this paper is that we ought to contend with crises by going further than merely considering where we are and how we got here, thereby also questioning the legitimacy of a crisis. Instead of simply accepting things the way they are, we do research in an attempt to (re) orient ourselves in relation to the field of education and to society more broadly in order to imagine alternative futures. While educational research is "a particular way to respond to problems and issues" (Biesta, 2020a, p. 19), we suggest that we also need to consider educational research itself and how it might be imagined and practiced beyond existing dominant paradigms. As such, we make an attempt to understand this neoliberal, evidence-based, "what works" logic in education – as an example of a wider global phenomenon affecting society – through the lens of utopian practice. Before we do that, we consider how the term utopia has been understood and used, particularly in its connection to social theory.

A recent historical account of "utopia"

As with any concept, notions of utopia have shifted and taken different forms according to the varying historical and geographical locations. This is also true in relation to the level of interest with which the concept has been taken up. To understand how utopia is imagined and deployed in the current moment first requires a brief historicization of this recent utopian discourse. Utopian studies is not a new field and draws on a rich interdisciplinary body of literature (see Fitting, 2009). According to Sargent (2010), utopianism, as a general notion, can be split into "three faces": literary utopia; utopian social theory and; communitarianism, which we might think of as utopian practice.

While it is perhaps an overstatement to say that Thomas More's 1516 book *Utopia* represents the origin of literary utopia (Levitas, 2016, p. 396), it remains the case that its publication is commonly cited as the critical moment in the development of the field. As a subset of utopian studies, literary utopia includes famous work by H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and Ursula LeGuin, among others. While these works have played an important role in shaping utopian social theory, the second "face" of utopian studies, Davidson (2020) argues that "the literary tradition of utopianising … has been kept at some distance from sociological accounts of utopia … with the outlandish schemes and absurd speculations of utopian authors insufficiently grounded in the world as it exists" (p. 2). While this may be the case, it does not follow that elements of fiction – imagination and its manifestation in fantasy, symbols and dreams – are absent from the conceptualization of utopian social theory. Nevertheless, this statement from Davidson alludes to ongoing debates about "fact" and "fiction" – the real and the imagined – and the value of utopia as

a mechanism for social transformation. For example, while seeing great value in utopian literature for providing imaginative ways of constructing alternative societies, Harvey (2000) argues that "the displacement of utopianism to 'pure' literature (or art) … may mean that we fail to extract the political messages that come through" (p. 190).

Utopian social theory draws these from literary utopias, but is distinct from it. If this is assumed to mean that the former is concerned only with the empirical and the latter the imagined, Sargent (1994) suggests that all forms of utopia "are fictions of a particular type" (p. 22). This rendering of utopian social theory as a fiction of sorts derives from one of the most important contributors to utopian studies, the twentieth-century German sociologist Karl Mannheim. In his influential work *Ideology and Utopia* (1936/1979) Mannheim writes that "a state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs" (p. 173). For Mannheim, though, this is not a comment in support of idealism, but part of his theory that social groups produce thought and that this social thought is connected to the conduct of society.

Mannheim (1936/1979) explains the connection between "fictional" states of mind and the organization of society when he claims that "actual and concrete forms of social life have been built upon the basis of such 'ideological' states of mind which were incongruent with reality" (p. 173). Yet, while Mannheim argues that ideology, like utopia, is incongruent with reality, it is distinct from utopia because it is "effective in the realization and the maintenance of the existing order of things" (p. 173). In contrast to the function of ideological states of mind, Mannheim posits that "such an incongruent orientation became utopian only when in addition it tended to burst the bonds of the existing order" (p. 173). Utopian social theory, then, following Mannheim, is about utilizing a vision outside of reality in order to bring about real social change. For Sargent (1994), Mannheim's argument that "the loss of Utopia would be a disaster since it is essential for social change" is problematic because it is "not oriented to reality but to a vision of a better life. Mannheim wants both the reality and the vision" (pp. 23–24).

This ambivalence is, in part, the result of Mannheim's view that utopian socialism resulted in problematic politics as a result of so-called "utopian blueprints" being constructed for society outside of the reality of social life. This concern emerged from the problems that utopian socialism had bred in the decades preceding Mannheim's work. As historian Russell Jacoby put it, blueprint utopianism "is implicit in the realisation of a government premised on a utopian model" (Greene, 2011, p. 2). With the establishment of nation-states in Europe during the late nineteenth century, contending political ideologies emerged, which provided particular visions for the governing and arrangement of society. From varieties of liberalism to Marxism and nationalisms, these ideologies had varying and distinct future-oriented or "blueprint" visions of an ideal society. Such a scenario is problematic for Mannheim because these utopian visions manifest as ideologies which, by his definition, maintain the status quo. Contrary to blueprint utopianists, "utopian realists" see utopia as a process or a strategy that is malleable (Vieira, 2010), the effects of which are always provisional. More comfortable with the compromises inherent in pragmatism, these scholars are often driven by a hope for a just and fair society that can be established in the present. The work of sociologist and Marxist Erik Olin Wright, for example, is relevant in this context. Wright (2009) developed three practical criteria to make real utopias happen: desirability, achievability and viability, with the latter considered the most important of the three. Sargent (2010), in making a distinction between the "faces" of utopian social theory and utopian practice, suggests that the latter is concerned with "the actual rather than the fictional transformation of the everyday" (p. 7). Utopian practice, then, of which Wrights work is an example, emphasizes the present and the real.

In considering utopia as practice, Sargent (1994) focuses his attention on what he calls intentional communities. These communities he defines as "a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose" (p. 15). There can be many

examples of such communities and the purposes shared within particular intentional communities may be vastly different from, perhaps even fundamentally incommensurate with, other examples of intentional communities (for a taxonomy revealing this diversity see: Sargent, 1994, p. 17).

The diversity of this form of utopianism makes it impossible for us to provide a detailed examination of this third "face". There are, however, a few important comments to make about utopian practice in the context of this paper. The diversity of purpose amongst different examples of utopian practice speaks to an ambivalence regarding the possibility of totalitarianism. On the one hand, the diversity of purpose and expression speaks to an openness and flexibility that works against totalizing notions of society. On the other hand, the lack of specificity in Sargent's definition regarding the purpose of an intentional community means that any one of them could conceivably exhibit totalitarian intent and practice. As such, there are important normative evaluations that need to be made instead of seeing all manifestations of utopian practice as a necessary good. It is also worth noting that while utopian practice draws on ideas and a vison which exist outside reality, these groups turn such dreams into (some kind of) reality. It is in this sense that they do represent real social change. However, history would suggest that these intentional communities usually move through "a period of disintegration and an end point" (Sargent, 1994, p. 16), bringing into question the significance of social change for society at large.

Further still, utopian realism's grassroots and tentacular structure, as opposed to the top-down structures of blueprint utopianism, has its problems. While the resistance it offers to more authoritarian modes of action may be attractive from a liberal perspective, one may argue that this has allowed utopian realism to become more easily articulated to neoliberal, capitalist and globalist discourses. Indeed, Webb describes aptly how utopian realism has become capitalism's driving force:

> Utopian realism is testimony to how deeply ingrained within contemporary common sense capitalist realism has become. No alternatives to the present can be imagined. All the utopian imagination can do is propose modifications to specific techniques of governance. The utopian is collapsed into the present and fixes its gaze on partial amelioristic reforms that anticipate or prefigure nothing beyond themselves. (2016, p. 444)

Webb posits that utopian realisms "are, in fact, signifiers of '*capitalist* realism'" (p. 436) which, as Mark Fisher (2009) has argued, speaks of a condition in which we can no longer imagine any alternative to capitalism.

Taking this into account, our own understanding and application of the concept of utopia within the context of crisis can be considered as an adaptation where utopian social theory and practice meet, inevitably emerging from both the problems and possibilities related to historical notions of utopia as a working concept. In this next section, we explore how social theory and practice, enacted as a dialectical utopianism (Harvey, 2000), helps us to understand the nature and function of the OECD and leads us to Levitas' utopia as method.

Neoliberal utopia and global education reform

One may argue that the utopian realism of capitalism and, by extension, neoliberalism, has now become a "real utopian blueprint" that leaves *no alternative*. This is a problem that Harvey (2000) takes seriously in his analysis of spatial ("blueprint utopianism") and process utopia ("utopian realism"). If the key concern with spatial utopias is that the blueprints they envisage entail a closure, thus foreclosing other possibilities, the problem with process utopia is in its pretence of being "open by virtue of its multiplicity" (Harvey, 2000, p. 185). This conceptualization of process utopia fits with the structure of neoliberalism: it relies on the idea of a genuinely free-market that is not only separate from, but antagonistic towards, institutional structures such as the state. Neoliberalism exists without a centre or an identifiable leader. If one can speak of a structure at all, it may be considered to be headless and tentacular. Or, as Fisher (2009) states: " . . . there are no overall controllers, [that] the closest thing we have to ruling powers now are nebulous, unaccountable interests exercising corporate irresponsibility" (p. 63).

Harvey doesn't have a solution to the problems presented by both utopian blueprints and utopian realism, but he suggests that the challenge is to engage in the dialectical struggle between the two. The task, he posits, is to engage "a dialectical utopianism – that is rooted in our present possibilities at the same time as it points towards different trajectories for human uneven geographical developments" (p. 196). The first step, we suggest, is taking account of the conditions in which we are currently located. This requires an acknowledgement that every neoliberal, capitalist institution instantiates a real utopian blueprint. We thus turn our attention now to the neoliberal instantiation of the global reform movement within education.

In educational institutions the neoliberal utopian blueprint manifests itself in the form of evidence-based practices, the "what works" logic and the growing occurrence of big reform movements led by transnational bodies. The global, capitalist and evidence-based blueprint is rolled out by transnational organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which have their origin in the post-World War II period when a growing pragmatic, economic vision and focus on economic growth across the globe started emerging. This vision was driven by the West and the OECD, together with UNESCO, were playing leading roles in moving this vision forward. Member states would receive financial and other support from UNESCO and OECD "educational planning groups . . ..to provide a model for the technical staff of national agencies seeking to reorient education so as to encompass economic motives" (Resnik, 2006, p. 190). The tone was set for the establishment of a *global* field of education with economic growth as one of its main purposes. During the early 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, the opposition between the global and the local grew and global fields were taking over local contexts faster than ever (Lingard, 2013). This was a fertile climate for the OECD to launch PISA in 1997 and more recently its Global Competency Framework (GCF), our focus in this paper. The GCF and the assessment of global competences has been part of the OECD's PISA since 2018, and is framed as necessary for four reasons: "to live harmoniously in multicultural communities" (OECD, 2018, p. 4); "to thrive in a changing labour market" (OECD, 2018, p. 5); "to use media platforms effectively and responsibly" (OECD, 2018, p. 5); and "to support the Sustainable Development Goals" (OECD, 2018, p. 5). Ostensibly, the GCF is about students developing an understanding of "local, global and intercultural issues", learning to appreciate difference and "interact successfully and respectfully with others" (OECD, 2018, p. 4).

Auld and Morris (2019), however, suggest that the policy is better understood as being "framed by its economic mission" (p. 677). One of the most important goals of the GCF, according to the OECD (2018), is "to support evidence-based decisions on how to improve curricula, teaching, assessments and schools' responses to cultural diversity in order to prepare young people to become global citizens" (p. 6). Unsurprisingly, the launch of the GCF occurred around the same time as the World Bank (2018) publication on the learning crisis and their call for learning metric tools that would support the battle against decreasing learning outcomes worldwide. In other words, the GCF offers an immediate and ideal solution to the learning crisis.

This focus on measurable evidence – however dubious the measurement may be – has taken the role as arbiter of what education should look like, but also serves as a justification for the learning crisis discourse. Under these conditions, the role of imagination is instrumentalised, if not expunged, limiting our ability to present alternatives to the status quo. We will return later to the OECD's GCF as a case study for the application of utopia as method.

Utopia as method

Before we enact our adaptation of Levitas' utopia as method, we briefly explore the importance of imagination in enabling utopian work to function as a creative resistance to the neoliberal blueprint. Aspects of Unger's work, as discussed in Levitas (2013), present important interventions into the kinds of utopian realism that have capitulated to the notion that there is no alternative to capitalism. "We have lost", Unger writes, "confidence in our ability to imagine structural change in society" (cited in Levitas, 2013, p. 139). Thus, in retrieving the imagination from the clutches of those engaged in

long-range blueprint forecasting, Levitas (2013) argues that "we need imagination in the short term and in the long term" (p. 139). Utopian realism in the present may become possible, according to Unger, as "[t]he practical imagination of institutional alternatives enables us to recognise transformative opportunity and act on it" (cited in Levitas, 2013, p. 139). Moreover, his view of the power of imagination is of particular relevance within the context of crisis. "Imagination", he argues, "has a role in preventing social change occurring in a catastrophic or revolutionary manner: it 'does the work of crisis without crisis'. Imagining alternatives helps to counter conformity by contradicting the taken-for-granted character of the real" (Levitas, 2013, p. 139).

With this in mind, we now turn to an elaboration of Levitas' work and attempt to illustrate briefly how utopia as method can be conceptualized and applied. In our adaptation, we follow Levitas (2013) three modes for utopia as method: archaeology, ontology and architecture. In the structure presented here, utopia as archaeology comes first, followed by utopia as ontology and architecture, yet it has to be noted that all three modes are working simultaneously and are only separated for the sake of clarity.

Utopia as archaeology: a genealogical view

In accordance with Levitas (2013), we interpret "utopia as archaeology" as a critical analysis and problematization of all constructions of utopias, which we consider to be the bread and butter of critical scholarship. By developing an understanding of the why and how of the coming into being of utopias and their related views on "the good society", systemic issues can be revealed and ways of overcoming those can be speculated about. Levitas (2013) describes this analytical process as "interpolating the absent but implied elements – filling in, where possible, what is missing, or simply making evident the blank spaces" (p. 154). From a utopian point of view, where the gaze is often directed towards the future, this turn to the past seems contradictory. However, an investigation of the past does not only help to understand the present, but also contributes to the imagining of an alternative present and future, what Fielding and Moss (2011) describe as "making connections, both with other times and other places, by crossing borders, temporal and spatial" (p. 16).

Yet, applying the term "archaeology" can entail the risk of looking for causality and falsely connecting events in a linear fashion. Utopias, of whatever nature, are often the result of a series of events that accidentally and at times randomly, contradictorily even, connected as they happened at the right place, at the right time. Therefore, we prefer using Michel Foucault's concept of "genealogy" to strengthen and complement Levitas' archaeological approach. Foucault (2010) interprets archaeology as a study that

> is always in the plural; it operates in a great number of registers; it crosses interstices and gaps; it has its domain where unities are juxtaposed, separated, fix their crests, confront one another, and accentuate the white spaces between one another (p. 157).

He uses the term "genealogy" in the context of describing archaeological analytical processes to emphasize the non-causal connections between events and fields in an attempt to create a "history of the present" (Foucault, 1991, p. 31). It is this type of archaeological work that we envisage as part of utopia as method.

We now return to the OECD's GCF and draw on the work of Auld and Morris (2019) as well as Engel, Rutkowski, and Thompson (2019) to demonstrate how the archaeological mode of utopia as method is applied in their analyses of the framework. Auld and Morris (2019), through genealogical analysis, describe the connections between PISA and GCF as follows:

> The tests are an exercise in economic internationalisation as their rationale has been based on the claim that future economic growth and survival of nations in the global knowledge economy necessitates improving the quality of human capital, as measured by PISA scores, and through the transfer of international/global 'best practices'. (p. 678)

Furthermore, the OECD, "a new centre of global governance outside that of the traditional nation-state" (Engel et al., 2019, p. 118), to a large degree determines how education worldwide is being reformed to serve the organization's own wants and needs (see Lingard, 2013; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). Under such conditions of dominance, it is difficult to imagine, let alone produce, alternatives that go beyond the OECD's own utopian blueprint.

Utopia as archaeology is a critical investigation of past and present utopias, which entails determining what is absent – "the blank spaces" – and, ultimately, speculating about alternatives that address these blank spaces. Hence, in our archaeological investigation of the GCF, we (also) focus on what is absent. What educational and societal matters does the GCF *not* address? What are some of the disadvantages and side-effects of the implementation of the GCF? How do these relate to some of the crises we have described earlier? The global (knowledge) economy is severely damaged by global crises such as the pandemic. Future economic growth is becoming a less attainable, less realistic and more questionable goal, and yet these matters underpin the GCF's rationale. What kind of response will an education system driven by the OECD's commitment to the development of "human capital" (not) provide to the crises that are part of our present and future? One of the hidden issues and absent conversations when it comes to the broader notion of global citizenship that is one of the cornerstones of the GCF is aptly summarized by Jefferess (2008), 10 years before the GCF was launched:

> The ethical framework of global citizenship seems to mask the material relationships that produce some as privileged, and hence capable of being active global citizens, and some as in need of support, care, 'aid.' Such a framework for conceiving of global inter-relationships and responsibility is ahistorical in that it elides the history of imperial politics that has shaped the current world system. (p. 31)

A different yet equally violent version of imperial politics, this time driven by a "what works" logic in service of economic progress mediated by (the same) education for all, is applied through the global governance of the OECD and frameworks such as the GCF. If we put the analysis of Auld and Morris (2019) and Engel et al. (2019) further to work and focus on the blank spaces that their genealogies reveal, a new kind of imperialism or, real utopian blueprint, that underpins these practices can be detected. A world that is already struggling with crises is now also exposed to hidden imperialist violence and increasing inequality, through global educational governance.

By asking questions and formulating responses about what is hidden, what is not addressed, and, through archaeological analysis, we create the opportunity to start imagining alternative spaces. An archaeological investigation therefore does not end when a critical archaeological analysis has been completed, but requires another step: the step towards imagining alternative spaces. At the centre of this exercise lies a profound ontological inquiry.

Utopia as ontology: an immanent practice

Levitas (2013) makes the connection between the archaeological and ontological mode explicit:

> The archaeological mode of utopia as method properly includes the ontological, in excavating the assumptions about human nature and human flourishing that are embedded in political positions and institutional proposals, as well as in overtly utopian literature. (p. 177)

This excavation of existing ontologies that underpin prevalent educational utopias also make it necessary to ask ontological questions that are not (adequately) addressed and are deemed important as foundations for the imagining/creating of alternatives. We do make one specific distinction between Levitas' interpretation and our own adaptation of utopia as ontology. Levitas (2013) largely argues for an ontology as a process of *becoming*, an "education of desire". For her, ontology is processual and futuristic. She draws on the work of Sayer and states that "Sayer's processual ontology avoids closure but does not evade specificity. This is a needs-based conception of social being, albeit one where needs are explicitly registered in terms of lack, wants and desires" (Levitas,

2013, p. 181). This type of ontology emphasizes the desire drive that motivates human beings and "gives them a future". Taking Levitas' approach in a slightly different direction, we prefer moving away from desire as "futuristic motivation" to desire as an opportunity, a productive tension, an opening that is embedded in the present. Thus, rather than a futuristic-processual view, our interpretation of utopia as ontology is one of an immanent practice connecting past, present and future. Through doing the work that utopia as method requires us to do, we imagine and create alternative spaces here and now.

Ontological questions are not only centred around the why of being human, but also *the why of education*. Biesta (2020a), in his critical analysis of how educational research is approached today, argues that it is absolutely vital for educators to ask those questions:

> . . . while the psychology of education will ask psychological questions about education, the history of education historical ones, the philosophy of education philosophical ones and the sociology of education sociological ones, the question that remains is who will ask *educational* questions about education. (p. 96)

Much educational research does a very good job of critique, but the space of ontological inquiry may be considered an area of relative neglect (Mills, 2018). If, as education scholars, we do not properly attend to critical questions of being (who, what and why "things" are), we risk failing to transgress existing utopian blueprints. If all practices and actions that make up utopia as a method are approached as responses to ontological questions, the ontological mode functions to bring these critical questions to light.

When asking educational questions about education, questions about what it means to be human inevitably emerge: How can we be in this world and respond responsibly to the prevalent crises? How can education research and practice be a guide to our responses? How can ontological questions be embedded in and drive education research and practice to allow for the emergence of alternative spaces? These kinds of ontological questions are, for Levitas (2013), necessary as "any discussion of the good society must contain, at least implicitly, a claim for a way of being that is posited as better than our current experience. It entails both imagining ourselves otherwise and a judgment about what constitutes human flourishing" (p. 177).

When applying the mode of archaeology on the GCF, we already started asking ontological questions about the framework. Auld and Morris (2019) also ask such questions as part of their archaeological investigation of the GCF, with a focus on global competence and global citizenship. For example, they investigate the OECD's ontological views on "being globally competent" and conclude that "a globally competent student who will score highly on the test is one who has experienced other cultures, is bilingual, and has access to social media and a liberal western education; i.e., a member of the global middle class" (Auld & Morris, 2019, p. 689). However, after identifying the ontological assumptions of the GCF, they do not address possible ontological positions that they consider more appropriate and that would enable the imagining of an alternative. It is exactly this next step that allows for the opening up of alternative futures and avoids scholarly work being limited to offering critique. In taking further Auld and Morris' (2019) ontological inquiry about what it means to be globally competent according to the OECD, we suggest questions such as: What kind of notion of global competence will better serve the desire for human flourishing? How could this different approach to global competence potentially reframe the ontological foundations of the GCF?

We have already made the claim that the GCF is underpinned by notions of imperialism, elitism and injustice, under the disguise of the global aspiration for a better world through evidence-based practices in education. To reframe this conceptualization of global citizenship, but also the way transnational organizations operate, a radically different ontology is required. Appiah (2006) has made a persuasive argument for a cosmopolitanism that promotes "conversations" across difference not just in a literal sense but "as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and ideas of others" (p. 84). His is a perspective that seeks a path for living well together without resorting to the erasure of difference to achieve it. Arguably, this is in contrast to modes of governance that rely on

standardized evidence-based measures and practices that are based on an ontology of homogeneity. It does not fall within the scope of this paper to elaborate extensively on what a rethinking of global citizenship and the task of the OECD would mean through the lens of cosmopolitanism. Suffice to say that to reimagine ourselves, and what constitutes human flourishing, from the perspective of embracing difference would challenge the fundamental basis of how the GCF is imagined and administered. These questions are thus not only related to past and present, but also to alternative futures. The final mode of utopia as method, the architectural mode, is therefore concerned with imagining alternative futures that emerge in and from the present.

Utopia as architecture: castles made of mud

While the architectural mode is concerned with activating alternative heterotopias, we acknowledge that any "utopia at its best, is a necessary failure, but will fail us less than its absence" (Levitas, 2007, p. 304). Put another way, following Spivak (1990), we view utopia as inevitably problematic and yet something we "cannot not (wish to) inhabit" (p. 795). Moreover, this architectural work is an immanent practice that, drawing on past, present and future, strategically utilizes the notion of utopia as an " . . . 'activating presence' that allows us to consider how we may create a society that qualitatively differs from the current one" (Aidnik & Jacobsen, 2019, p. 28). Yet, any reimagining of a qualitatively different society is always provisional, contingent, and flawed.

As utopia as architecture is the most accessible of all three modes, there is a risk that it is viewed as the mere imagining of idealistic but unattainable alternative worlds. In Levitas (2013) words:

> Utopia as architecture is its culturally most familiar mode: imagining a reconstructed world and describing its social institutions. This is the terrain of utopian fiction. It is also the mode anti-utopians like best, keeping the possibility of living differently safely bound between book covers. (p. 197)

What we argue for, however, goes beyond book covers and utopian fiction. We consider our approach of utopia as method in itself as architectural work. This work cannot be done in isolation, yet requires collaboration with other *architectural sites* such as schools, educational institutions, transgressive educational initiatives of whatever scale and nature, interdisciplinary engagements etc., all of which share, but also question, alternative ontologies. These architectural sites are situated amidst – and inevitably influenced by – surrounding utopias, with the OECD's GCF as an example of a real utopian blueprint. Bojesen and Suissa (2019) make suggestions for lecturers within the context of higher education to make architectural interventions, which they term as "minimal utopianism":

> What we can do is to help our students imagine new ways of being in the world that acknowledge their needs and desires to negotiate the socio-economic contingencies that have, for most if not all of them, led them to be in the university in the first place, while insisting on the necessity and possibility of recognising these contingencies as exactly that: contingencies, and, as such, malleable and open to radical change through collective human action. (p. 295)

When it comes to tackling the important architectural work that needs doing to reimagine the GCF, a far more radical and larger scale approach is necessary, yet, this work has to start somewhere, by some-*one*: maybe by one lecturer in one classroom or one research project.

Another example involves applying the architectural mode to critical policy scholarship and for scholars to engage in education policy formulation. The space of academic policy work, however, is often tied to funding from governments and transnational organizations such as the OECD. As such, there is a risk that such policy work does not adequately interrupt the status quo, instead engaging in piecemeal engineering of the dominant evidence-based and "what works" logic. Yet, academic policy work that utilizes utopia as method and therefore goes as far as to ask ontological questions, has the potential to transgress the dominant logic and to do the necessary architectural work.

Utopian architects thus have a challenging and bold task: questioning the status quo whilst doing transgressive architectural work that, in turn, also has to be subjected to archaeological and ontological inquiries. They are architects who are not constructing a fortified bunker, but a mud

brick castle that requires ongoing maintenance, that is provisional and permanently "under construction". In fact, the instability and fragility that permanent crises produce, require a provisional instead of a final response.

Utopia as archaeology, ontology and architecture are always working together, simultaneously, and are part of an ongoing cycle whereby every newly imagined utopia has to be subjected to all three modes perpetually. Utopia as method can thus be viewed as more than a method. We consider it, above all, as "an activating presence" that never ceases, a way of *being* that is part of all aspects of life. This requires what Mills (2000) calls "intellectual craftsmanship", which means that "you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually examine and interpret it" (p. 196). Educational researchers and practitioners engage in a whole range of educational activities: teaching, research, attending conferences, putting together course reading lists, conversations with students and colleagues, etc. Utopia as method requires an application in all of those spaces in order to avoid piecemeal engineering. It does not suffice to do critical archaeological work without asking ontological questions about present and future in other professional, even private domains. Creating alternative futures in the present requires architectural work in all areas of life, thereby committing to facing the prevailing crises and "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016).

A provisional conclusion

In this paper, we attempted to interrupt the evidence-based, "what works" order of education, examining its origin and how it functions. We have sought to show how the current learning crisis discourse serves to perpetuate this "what works" logic, and have argued that "what works" does not seem to work when we consider education's failure to address wider societal issues, questions of human flourishing and the common good. We have attempted to create possibilities for alternatives by exploring how utopia as method, inspired by the work of Levitas, can be conceptualized as an alternative to structuring and approaching education research and practice. This orientation towards *possibility* instead of problem puts *imagination* at the centre, seeing it "as a social fact, a practice and a form of work" (Appadurai, 2013, p. 286) that supports the formation of alternative futures. The future, rather than being a singular, "known territory to be mapped and conquered and fought over" (Facer, 2016, p. 70), is now activated as a "site of radical possibility" (Facer, 2016, p. 65).

We see utopia as method as a possible response to the crises in education that allows for the construction of alternative (educational) futures in the present. We consider the method as an "activating presence", as a way of being and doing that enables educators, researchers as well as practitioners, to engage in transgressive, architectural work that goes beyond critiquing past and present, beyond piecemeal engineering and beyond the perpetuation of real utopian blueprints. We illustrated how the method can be put to work by a brief analysis of the OECD's GCF, which we view as an example of a real utopian blueprint that shapes the contemporary neoliberal logic in education and "makes things work". In acknowledging the inevitable challenges associated with an interruption of the status quo, we are in agreement with Ursula LeGuin (2014) when she writes:

> To me the important thing is not to offer any specific hope of betterment but, by offering an imagined but persuasive alternative reality, to dislodge my mind, and so the reader's mind, from the lazy, timorous habit of thinking that the way we live now is the only way people can live. It is that inertia that allows the institutions of injustice to continue unquestioned. (p. 218)

Thus, we are not presenting utopia as method as a solution that will lead us collectively out of a state of permanent crisis. Rather, it is an invitation to think together about who we are as humans, as educators, and how this connects to reimagining education for human flourishing.

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