

# Can the very thought of education break bricks? A Commentary on Biesta and Säfström's 'A Manifesto for Education'

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Detail **Untitled**, linoleography.  
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## Abstract

This text tries to reflect on the very potentiality of education thinking in what refers to there signification of schemes from the reading of "A Manifesto for education". This manifesto can be understood as an adolescent ideality, which not only begins, but also always sends in disappointment—in this evil of ideality. The ideality pursued by every manifesto can lead to immobility and disappointment, without even trying to break down structuring schemes. The article that is presented will try to approach this question from our own thoughts about the critique of ideality and there flections that the manifesto in question invites us to make. In some way it gives us the possibility to think and think educationally. But what does that mean, exactly? To reach the meaning of thinking about education, we need to consider what is implicit in holding "what is" and "what is not" in tension. This will focus on the last section of the work.

**Keywords:** Manifesto for education; education thinking; ideality; temporary tension

**¿Puede el propio pensamiento de educación romper esquemas? Análisis de "Un Manifiesto para la Educación" de Biesta y Säfström**

## Resumen

El presente texto intenta reflexionar sobre la potencialidad misma del pensamiento de educación en lo que refiere a la resignificación de esquemas a partir de la lectura de "Un Manifiesto para la educación". Dicho manifiesto puede ser entendido como una idealidad adolescente, la cual no sólo comienza, sino también siempre finalizará en desilusión—en este mal de la idealidad. La idealidad que persigue todo manifiesto puede conllevar a la inmovilidad y a la decepción, sin siquiera intentar romper esquemas estructurantes. El artículo que se presenta intentará abordar dicha cuestión a partir de nuestros propios pensamientos respecto a la crítica de la idealidad y de las reflexiones que invita a realizar el manifiesto en cuestión. De alguna manera nos otorga la posibilidad pensar y pensarnos educativamente. ¿Pero qué significa eso exactamente? Para alcanzar el significado del pensar lo educativo necesitamos considerar qué está implícito al sostener "lo que es" y "lo que no es" en tensión. De ello se abocará el último apartado del trabajo.

**Palabras clave:** Manifiesto para la educación; pensamiento de educación; idealidad; tensión temporal

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Manifestoes are born from disappointment. They seem to manifest from the simultaneously tantalizing and tormented adolescent realization that the “world sucks” and that we urgently need to find another, better, more perfect, truer ideal that can finally put things right. Thinking with Julia Kristeva’s work on “adolescent ideality” (2001; 2006), we could say that the manifesto as a genre is really an adolescent invention. Enthusiastic tones and romantic proselytizing proclamations urging us to believe that an ideal can break bricks, as it were, is often the defining spirit of the manifesto and the adolescent temperament. According to Kristeva, the adolescent is “starving for ideal models that will allow him to tear himself from his parents” and find that ideal life elsewhere (2006:18). The adolescent is a hopeless believer, a rebellious purist questing for the absolute ideal, always dreaming of tomorrow, utterly despairing and trying desperately to escape today. As Deborah Britzman aptly sums up, “there is, for the adolescent, a terrible beauty in the belief in perfection: in an ideal object that is totally satisfying and therefore must be true and unchanging” (2015: 79). I guess we are all “adolescent believers,” of sorts, when we dream with a manifesto of tomorrow’s ideal solutions, of perfect redistribution, of the ideal pedagogical encounter to come that is the paradisaical variant of educational fulfillment. Dreaming with the manifesto, enamored with an ideal to come, we become perpetual adolescents and susceptible, also, to all their mood swings: that is, we suffer, as “enthusiastic idealists smitten with the absolute but devastated by the first disappointment... eternal believers... potential nihilists” (Kristeva 2006:18).

The manifesto, like adolescent ideality, not only starts with, but also will always end in disappointment – in this *malady* of ideality. Although always speaking in the future perfect, the manifesto, like adolescent ideality, really has the lifespan of the moment and quickly gives way to disillusionment. Kristeva tells us that such an intense *need to believe* can easily turn into its opposite: “disappointment, boredom, depression, or even destructive rage” (2006:18). Although the pining after an ideal speaks of an attempt to construct a meaningful life, the impossibility of ever finding that ideal can torment us (if we don’t work through this inevitable failure of ideality) to the point

of utter resentment and resignation. An overwhelming sense of malaise with ever finding meaning in anything takes over. Suffering the cruelty of the impossibility of the ideal we risk abandoning the world, and the difficult freedom it demands, as we start to feel that there is nothing really left to do or care about because there is really nothing to believe in.

I begin with this perhaps strange resemblance between the genre of the manifesto and “adolescent ideality” to underscore how curious and incongruous the “Manifesto for Education” is in comparison. Biesta and Säfström’s manifesto doesn’t really fit the genre in so many ways. And that is its performative force; for, it allows us to consider the stakes in what it might mean to stand up for what is educational in education. The authors of “A Manifesto for Education” stage a very different type of manifesto because they ask us to be suspicious of wedding education rigidly to ideals or to any cause and effect sequence destined “to come.” Their manifesto probes and problematizes rather than mobilizes our intense *need to believe*. Let’s risk calling it a manifesto for “grown-ups,” a talk directed to those vested squarely with the responsibility of needing to think the educational in what is called education. In what follows I’ll briefly first say a few words about the authors’ peculiar critique of ideality and temporality before getting into what I think is so provocative about this manifesto, what within its affirmations *calls us* to think.

## I.

Unlike the adolescent-like quest to find final sweeping ideas and solutions, in a “strong language” that aspires to satiate our *need to believe* in education, the authors implicitly work with the notion of a “weak education.” The cultural thinker Irit Rogoff (also see: Biesta, 2014) has described “weak education” as “a discourse of education that is not reactive, does not want to engage in everything that we know fully well to be wrong with education,” but rather seeks to “posit education ‘in’ and ‘of’ the world, not as a response to crisis but part of its ongoing complexities, producing realities, not reacting to them” (2010: 38-39). I think the authors of the Manifesto share with Rogoff the worry that our intense need to believe in a strong sense of education saddles us with trying to “forever reactively address the woes of the world” (2010: 38)

through the heroic ideals and supposed superpowers vested in education. Asking so much of education actually ends up making us resentful of the inevitable shortfalls of education, making us fall into those habituated aversions and reactions that arise when our ideals fail us. Believing that education miraculously will correct or offer the answer to problems which society itself has failed to properly remedy (such as ensuring economic prosperity for all, fixing unemployment, creating social justice), we quickly come to feel betrayed and turn away in disgust from education. Our “strong language” of education actually sets us up to judge education according to a language and set of criteria foreign to education, consequently impoverishing our thinking about the educational in education.

Both the authors of the Manifesto and Rogoff thus speak in the name of a “weak education” so that we might *unburden our thinking of education* as having always to take the guise of “a strong, redemptive, missionary education”, which eventually gives way to *ressentiment* – a force that eventually wears our thinking down, and eventually makes us weary of tending to each other and to the world we have between us. Getting away from this mindset affords us the possibility of asking “how education today might be more than,” as Rogoff puts it, “the site of shrinkage and disappointment” (2010: 39), how education actually might be a site for something *other than reaction*: A site for coming together in wonder and for sustaining unexpected possibilities and adventures in thought.

Approaching education as something other than reaction thus affords us with appreciating it as a particular place. That is, temporarily sheltered from the demands of engineering solutions to correct the woes of the world, education can be understood as a place where one is “free” to affirm what is properly educational – the human capacity to “begin anew,” a capacity that ruptures any self-enclosed present-Same. The educational can thus come to the fore as an “interruption” (of “what is”) in the here and now that offers another beginning, another opening for sensing our unique freedom for becoming. At issue here is not simply the appreciation that our own becoming through an education always takes place in what already has begun (in “what is”), but that our “becoming” becomes precisely “singular,” and hence an “educational event,” when my being *senses* its unique charge

(its “subjectivity,” as Biesta and Säfström would say) with tending to its particular coming into and interrupting the “what is” of the world in the here and now.

Alongside this attempt to overcome the “ideality syndrome,” and not unrelated, Biesta and Säfström ask us to give up on understanding education within a self-serving and dangerously evasive temporality, which continually procrastinates and proselytizes of a future-perfect-solution-yet-to-come. They write, “... by conceiving education in terms of what is not yet – that is, by conceiving education as a process that will deliver its promises at some point in the future – the question of freedom disappears from the here and now and runs the risk of being forever deferred.” The concern is that in conceiving of education as an unequivocally futural event we end up effacing the site in which the educational event takes place. We need “to take temporality out of education,” they tell us, lest we forget (for the sake of prioritizing some vague contextless indeterminism) our work and implication in the educational event right here and right now. This a-temporal (or rather non-futural) orientation seems to gesture to an *untimely* (radically unexpected) event that acts on our present precisely by countering, displacing and interrupting what is expected in the here and now. The educational event insofar as it arises amid the interplay between *what is present* and *what is not expected* necessarily implies holding the present open as something unfinished, as something hopeful and inviting of further thinking.

This is a curious manifesto indeed. It troubles and complicates *our need to believe* in education. Without ideality and the futural what could this manifesto possibly be attempting to manifest? The authors are bold here: Theirs is a way to engage the particular *tension* inherent *within education* so that we might, possibly, *think educationally*. But what does this mean exactly? To get to the significance of *thinking* the educational we need to consider what is implied by holding the “what is” and “what is not” in *tension*.

## II.

As Biesta and Säfström recognize, our ability to think educationally suffers when in our attempt to speak of education we disengage

the *tension* between “what is” and “what is not” and prioritize one pole over the other. So, on the one hand, when we make education solely answerable to “what is” we invariably turn education into socialization. What prevails here is an anxious sort of conformism that limits education to worrying about managing the student’s supposed characteristics, behavior and learning outcomes so that they can be adaptable, marketable and exchangeable in today’s currency. On the other hand, when we wed education to “what is not,” education becomes susceptible to the ecstasy and malady of an unattainable future-perfect ideal that will always feel betrayed by the world. Under the spell of “what is not” we come to envision education as an unlimited and indeterminate contextless manifestation. In so doing, we lose *the sense* of how the educational is “in” and “of” the world and how it affords us, possibly, with an orientation to the historicity that we share in common.

Rather than disengaging these poles we ought to hold them in a non-dialect tension. When we do so, according to my reading of the Manifesto, a few things are implicitly at play. Firstly, to stay with this tension is not a solution, reconciliation or even a proposition for amendment. Rather it is an approach, an “Other Heading” for thought to maintain, expand and perform a *constant vigilance*, of sorts, over the prevalent tendency of collapsing the educational into either the stale agony of adaptation (the “what is”) or the ecstatic abstraction of ideality (the “what is not”). In other words, staying with the tension necessitates a certain type of *ongoing attentiveness* to how our very speaking of what we call education is always susceptible to foreclosing the educational.

Secondly, and by extension, staying with the tension implies unleashing the *dynamic self-correcting oscillation* that allows the “what is” to be *untied* by “what is not,” and the “what is not” to be *tied* to the “what is.” More specifically, the



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self-correcting oscillation that the tension puts into play allows (a) “what is” called education to encounter the demands and aspirations to be more than simply what is given, and (b) what calls forth the educational (through “what is not”) to face its possible determination, implication and binding accountability in the here and now. Doubly bound to think “what is” and “what is not” thus motors, in a non-dialectical manner, the necessary *ongoing confrontation* (with something other *called up* in a specific singular instance) that saves each pole from collapsing and self-enclosing on itself.

Thirdly, through the very confrontation, interruption and breaking of the repetition of the Same, the tension testifies to the educational event as *a moment in which the new and unforeseen* can come forth in the present. There is a significant historical implication here. The educational event, as the unforeseen that breaks the repetition of the Same, *exposes us to the contingency* of “what is” and so invites us to think the peculiar and particular present distribution of the sensible that could be otherwise. The educational moment –as moment of interruption that calls up the contingency of our constitution– implicates us in tending to “what is not” or has not been counted and *what can be* counted otherwise in the here and now. “To stay in the tension between ‘what is’ and ‘what is not,’” as the authors write, “thus means to take history seriously and to take education as fundamentally historical –that is, open to events, to the new and the unforeseen– rather than as an endless repetition of what already is or as a march towards a predetermined future that may never arrive.”

Staying with the tension is thus a project that *calls us to think through* the educational in education as a counterpoint to what potentially short-circuits thinking: The raptures of “ideality” and the calculations for “adaptation.” In a sense we could say that staying with the tension offers us a way of metabolizing *our need to believe in* education into the possibilities of thinking, questioning, and symbolizing. But since we are after all dealing with a manifesto there lurks a set of questions that will insistently press us for more, demanding: What can this movement from the “syndrome of ideality” to thinking offer, manifest, or concretely bring forth as a program? Wherein lies the urgency, matter and actuality in what is being

called forth? Can the very thought of education actually break bricks?

The very genre of the manifesto seems destined to always solicit such interrogations about what is to be manifested. However, as I implied earlier, the “Manifesto for Education” in its very performance –as an ironic type of manifesto that troubles our rogations for manifestation– cannot, will not, should not directly answer such programmatic pleas. Rather, its very concerns with prompting us to think educationally depends on *translating* the operative tension between “what is” and “what is not” across multiple possible contexts. The “Manifesto for Education” thus offers us not a method or set of rules to be copied and applied, but gestures us to understand and respond to its significance by performing, translating, reading the operative tension through another “vocabulary” or context, which renders it by essence historical, transformable and therefore educational. It is *as if* this manifesto provokingly cries out to us: “if you want to read me and hear me, you must understand me, know me, interpret me, translate me, and hence, in responding to me and speaking to me, you must begin to speak in my place,” and therefore begin to cite, change and extend me through interpretative multiplication (Derrida 1991: 201-202).

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