Is Failure the Best Option?
An Untimely Reflection on Teaching

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Il fallimento è l'opzione migliore? Una riflessione inattuale sull'insegnare

After outlining the renascent interest in teaching within contemporary educational theory, the present paper engages with a reflection on teaching beyond the predominant learnification and the related emphasis on efficacy as a primary value. In this endeavour, the theme of teachers' demoralization is introduced in a philosophical-educational key, by deploying an existential perspective. Within this horizon, a special focus is on failure construed as intimately linked with the 'essence' of education qua an encounter of free beings and as a possibility inherent to the dignity of teaching. In conclusion, some implications of this recognition of the 'significance' of failure are indicated in regard to teacher education.

Dopo aver delineato il rinascente interesse per l'insegnamento nella contemporanea teorizzazione pedagogica, l'articolo si impegna in una riflessione sull'insegnare oltre l'egemone *learnification* e la connessa enfasi sull'idea di efficacia in quanto valore principe. Si introduce, quindi, il tema della demoralizzazione dei docenti, trattato in una chiave filosofico-educativa, dispiegando una prospettiva esistenziale. In questo orizzonte, si focalizza in particolare la nozione di fallimento, intesa come intimamente legata con l'essenza dell'educazione in quanto incontro di esseri liberi e come una possibilità inerente alla dignità dell'insegnare. In conclusione si indicano alcune implicazioni, per la formazione docenti, di tale riconoscimento del 'significato' del fallimento.

Keywords: Teaching; Teacher demoralization; Gert Biesta; Thing-entred education; Existential view of education.

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1.   Situating the question

In this paper I will tackle the question "What does teaching mean, today?."[1] Before engaging with a possible path to a reply, we need first to consider its very form and content. It asks about the meaning of teaching: evidently, what is at stake is not so much a semantic issue (= what is the referent or the denotation of one specific word) as the sense of the phenomenon to which the term refers. The very topic of the question is the phenomenon of "teaching" addressed, however, from the viewpoint of its significance, viz. of how much weight it carries. Moreover, this needs to be investigated not in general but by contextualizing it within a specific historical horizon, namely "today." The question is, therefore, a *topical* question in that it appeals us to reflect upon the relevance of teaching in the current scenarios. Implicitly in the question there resonates the suggestion that teaching is once again topical, a significant topic of contemporary educational theory.

In this respect, it is a timely question. Indeed, after being on the wane for several decades, over the last few years teaching has returned under the spotlight of educational theorizing. Neither its 'eclipse' nor its reviviscence as a theme has been merely a kind of academic fashion. Rather, they signal important changes in the way we approach educational matters.

The vanishing of teaching (*qua* teaching) from a large part of educational theory (and, most importantly, from those institutional documents which outline policies on an international level) has been fundamentally linked with the predominance of the constructivist metaphor (Roth, 2011; Oliverio, 2022b). This has operated in two directions: on the one hand, it has brought to the foreground the question of the pivotal role of learning and has resulted in what has been defined as "the discourse of learning" (Masschelein, 2001) or "learnification," viz. "the transformation of the vocabulary used to talk about education into one of 'learning' and 'learners' " (Biesta, 2010, p. 18). In this outlook, teaching has often been denounced as an activity essentially doomed not to fully recognize the epistemic agency of learners, or even to engender passivity. On the other hand — this being in many respects an obvious upshot of the aforementioned stance — if one did not want to sidestep completely teaching, the latter had to be re-signified as a "facilitation of learning"; thus, even when it was an object of theoretical reflection, it was addressed from the perspective of learning.

In contrast, over the last few years, there seems to be in the international debate a renascent interest in teaching and an endeavour to engage with the latter *iuxta propria principia* and not, therefore, only from the viewpoint of the "logic of learning" (Bingham 2015, 2016).

In the French philosophy of education this has happened predominantly through an invocation of a classic understanding of teaching and an invitation to rediscover its significance for the transmission and mediation of tradition (see Kambouchner, 2013; Bellamy, 2014; Blais, Gauchet & Ottavi, 2014) or, in a slightly different vocabulary, in the creation of circuits of transindividuation (Stiegler, 2012).

In the English speaking world, we owe to Gert Biesta (2017) and Joris Vlieghe and Piotr Zamojski (2019) the most recent and powerful vindications of teaching on its own principles and not as a simple "add-on" to the logic of learning.[2] At first sight these two approaches share many concerns and their respective 'libraries' partly overlap. They both understand education (and teaching) by starting from the perspective of our relation to the world rather than from the typically constructivist focus on the learner's cognitive processes of meaning-making: if Vlieghe and Zamojski insist on education as being structurally/ontologically animated by a love of the world, the culmination of Biesta's endeavour to think of education "beyond learning" (Biesta, 2006) is what he dubs "world-centred education" (Biesta, 2021). We could probably list a series of further affinities between the two conceptual devices; however, I would like to insinuate that they ultimately represent two distinct (if not alternative) options.

For reasons of brevity and through a wild simplification, I will capture this difference by saying that, while Biesta's world-centredness ultimately relates to *subjectification* as the most educational dimension

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1.   A first and much shorter version of this paper was presented at the conference "Ritrovare il senso dell'educare. I fini dell'istruzione nell'era della *'learnification'*" held at the Institute of Advanced Studies of the University of Bologna on October 15th 2022. The question mentioned in the text refers to the title of the second session of the conference.

2.   It is to note that in the US philosophy of education, even in the heyday of the constructivist hegemony, there was a persistent focus on the ethical dimensions of the profession (see Hansen, 1995, 2001; Higgins, 2011). This strand will become important in § 2 via the work of Doris Santoro (2018).

of education, Vlieghe and Zamojski's "love of the world" is intimately linked with *thing-centredness*. And this difference reverberates on their different takes on teaching, the former wanting to provide an existential-ethical view of it, the latter an ontological account.

I will make my point in an indirect (and possibly circuitous) way, by noting that both Biesta and Vlieghe and Zamojski are strongly influenced by Arendt and her emphasis upon the bringing of the new into the light of the world but they valorize different texts of hers. Central to Biesta is Arendt's notion of "action" — which is originally referred to the *political* sphere — as that domain of *vita activa* in which one takes an initiative, begins something new and exists as a subject in the two and inextricably entwined meanings of being the one who initiates something and the one who is subjected to the way in which the others will take up her/his beginnings (Arendt, 1958). In other words, in Biesta Arendt's conceptuality (integrated with insights from Lévinas) is conducive to a different view of what existing as a subject means and, thereby, to discovering subjectification as the inner core of the educational undertaking and, more specifically, of teaching. Indeed, "the educational task consists in arousing the desire in another human being for wanting to exist in and with the world in a grown-up way, that is *as subject*" (Biesta, 2017, p. 7).

In contrast, Vlieghe and Zamojski seem to be less interested in the discourse of the subject than in prioritizing education as the creation of a common world. In this horizon, the Arendt who is important to them is the one who helps us to sharply distinguish between political and educational spheres; accordingly, they do not indulge in any educational appropriation of the Arendtian discourse of "action" but rather they elaborate on her stress upon education as the task of passing on the world to the new generations so that they can begin something new (Arendt, 2006). This stance should not be conflated with the aforementioned French line to the extent that Vlieghe and Zamojski spotlight less the act of transmitting than what they call — via Heidegger and Latour — thing-centredness, a thing being something around which we gather being attentive to it and not something with "a fixed or established meaning, which is solidified in the course of social interactions" (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019, p. 54. See also Oliverio, 2020). In this view, teaching as thing-centred is "ruled" by what they define as *educational love*: "[W]hen acknowledged, love for a thing involves the necessity of sharing this love with others, and especially with the new generation. Saying 'yes' to one's love for a thing means that one recognizes that one cannot imagine living without studying this thing, and hence, one cannot possibly tolerate that the new generation remains deprived of a chance to study this thing, and that there would be no opportunity for this thing to be renewed by the new generation" (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019, p. 36).

Zamojski (2019) has forcefully pinned down the difference between the two approaches by adopting the German terminology and noting "that, in his conceptualisation of teaching, Biesta speaks of *Erziehung* rather than *Lehre* or *Unterricht*" (p. 566).

In the remainder of the present argumentation, I will cling to an existential and ontological outlook of teaching and the ideas here marshalled would aspire to address not only the *Erziehung*-dimension of it but also teaching as *Unterricht*.

2.   Demoralization, failure and the dignity of teaching

The question from which I have taken my cue (= "What does teaching mean, today") has a distinctly Heideggerian tone and, perhaps, it could be addressed through a Heideggerian move. The German thinker (Heidegger, 1992, p. 102) famously stated that the premise and the medium of our thinking and action are *moods* (*Stimmungen*). In this sense, we need to identify a mood that can operate as an entry to the being of teaching and its meaning today.

I would suggest detecting it in "demoralization" for three reasons: first, on the level of the public discourse in the media, this is one of the most frequently recurring themes when the contemporary condition of teachers is discussed (although it is mostly spelled out in the psychological vocabulary of the burnout, which may be to some degree misleading: see below); secondly, even when not strictly referred to a mood, the notion of "demoralization" allows us, however, to establish a highly significant link with what may be one of the most threatening phenomena of the current understanding of the educational undertaking dominated by learnification, namely the often uncritical celebration of evidence-based approaches culminating in an elision of the importance of professional judgement in decision-making as

a kind of moral activity (= demoralization as de-moralization: see Biesta, 2010, 2014; Caronia, 2022); and, thirdly, much in a Heideggerian vein, demoralization as a mood will grant an access to some of the most significant features of teaching as a way of being in the world.

In this endeavour, I will start with some insights of Doris Santoro (2018), who has thematized precisely the issue of the demoralization of teachers:

> More than mere dissatisfaction, many teachers are in despair. Witnessing the loss of their profession and feeling powerless to stem its disappearance, they mourn and express many facets of grief. The teachers may be angry and desire revenge. They may broker compromises that leave them feeling betrayed. They may feel isolated and alone in their shame. Acceptance of the loss of their profession often concludes with their literal resignations. (Santoro, 2018, p. 36)

Santoro portrays the condition of teachers in the US, in a context particularly plagued by the cult of standards and testing (see the magnificent analysis of Ravitch [2010]). However, her description has a broader scope insofar as the contemporary GERM (Global Educational Reform Movement: see Sahlberg, 2016) has been driving school systems the world over in the direction of a misplaced understanding of accountability (as distinct from and, indeed, opposed to responsibility: see Biesta, 2010, pp. 50–72).

As Santoro annotates, in order to understand the crisis of teachers we cannot elude the fact that they "experience teaching as more than a job. It is a way to live [their] values" (Santoro, 2018, p. 36). This leads us to the very core of Santoro's analysis, viz. the notion of the "moral center" understood as "[t]he distinctive amalgam of [...] each teacher's beliefs about what students, their caregivers, and the community deserve [...] and what good teachers should or should not do" (Ibid., p. 34). Accordingly, "[m]oral centers are internal guides that help teachers gauge their distance from and proximity to the ideals they aim to embody as educators. Therefore, moral centers are revealed most clearly when teachers articulate their purposes as educators and when they fall short of them" (Ibid., p. 35). Against this backdrop,

> [d]emoralization [...] means far more than a state of being dispirited or even very depressed. It signals a state in which individuals can no longer access the sources of satisfaction that made their work worthwhile. [...] Moral sources are any rewards from the job that cannot be explicitly seen but contribute to living a life that these teachers consider worthwhile and good. Moral rewards are also enjoyed when teachers believe that their work contributes to the right treatment of their profession, their students, and communities. (Ibid., p. 49. See also Oliverio, 2022a).

What is at stake in this dynamics is an evaluation of what counts as good work: this is not, however, a standard-driven evaluation but rather a self-assessment in reference to the characteristics of the profession and its mission: "The evaluation is not about outsiders assessing the content of a teacher's moral center. Rather, the assessment entails evaluating how well the values and commitments inherent to the work can be enacted in the work" (Santoro, 2018, p. 49). Demoralization so understood is a consequence of the cult(ure) of measurement and testing that, in the experience of teachers, is conducive to a degradation of the profession to the extent that complying with the diktats of that culture ultimately implies causing harm to the students and being unfaithful to the integrity of teaching, as the teachers interviewed by Santoro repeatedly state: "*Demoralization occurs when teachers cannot enact the values that motivate and sustain their work. Their dilemma is not what should be done, but that they feel as though they cannot do what should be done*" (Ibid., p. 48. Emphasis in the original).

In this respect, we should not confuse burnout and demoralization, the former being a psychological concept concerning the individual teacher's condition, the latter being a philosophical-educational concept "point[ing] to a *normative* problem the teacher sees with the context of the work" (Ibid., p. 44). A protracted state of demoralization can obviously also lead to that exhaustion of one's own psychological energies which results in burnout but it is important to keep the two notions distinct.

I would like to elaborate on these insights of Santoro by inflecting them into a different (but not unrelated) direction. In experiencing the practices dictated by GERM as demoralizing, teachers manifest

a keen notice (if not a fully-fledged awareness) of what characterizes teaching as more than a job. If one has to indicate the meta-value which the GERM practices celebrate, it is fair to say that it is effectiveness and efficacy. One can even venture to state that GERM addresses teachers with a sort of Satanic promise: "You will be like God." To justify this assertion, I will first draw upon Biesta's (2014) ingenious vindication of "the beautiful risk of education" and his appropriation of John Caputo's comments on the two stories of creation present in *Genesis*, one referred to Yahweh, the other to Elohim:

> The two creations stories not only provide us with two very different accounts of what it means to create—a strong, metaphysical account and a weak, existential account. They also provide us with two very different accounts of what it means to educate and, more specifically, what it means to educate with an orientation toward and an interest in the event of subjectivity. The story of Yahweh not only shows us an educator who wants to stay in control and wants to minimize or even eradicate any possible risk involved in the act of creation. The story also shows what the ultimate consequence of such a risk-averse educational attitude is. Because Yahweh is not willing to take a risk, his creatures are being prevented from growing up, are being prevented from becoming subjects in their own right, from realizing their unique and singular subject-ness. Elohim, in comparison, shows us an educator who knows that creation is a risky business and has to be a risky business and that without that risk nothing will happen; the event of subjectivity will not occur. (Biesta, 2014, pp. 23–24)

A charitable interpretation of the promise of GERM is that it wants to turn teachers into a sort of "Yahweh" who have full control over their work and can reduce any risk of failure to the minimum. All the rhetoric discourses on "effective teachers" (OECD, 2005) and on their pivotal role in education are rooted in this fundamental stance. Why are teachers demoralized by the latter? Is it only for contingent reasons, for instance on account of an unsatisfactory implementation of these ideals of effectiveness and efficacy that will be corrected in the future? Or is there something deeper? What if teachers feel that this stance is at variance with an ontological trait of teaching as a way of being? What if the very possibility of failure, which GERM — and, more generally, our technological order — discards as an inconvenience or can at most accept as a glitch to be immediately fixed, is rather an *Existentiale* (referring to the Heideggerian [1993] notion) of the being of teachers and one that makes up its nobility or, to put it more soberly, its significance as something more than the mere facilitation of learning?

This is the position of Otto Friedrich Bollnow (2014), who highlights how far the possibility of failure is "inherent to the essence, indeed to the dignity of education itself" (p. 113) insofar as the latter is not a 'poietic' undertaking or a craft *stricto sensu*. In a craft, failure can derive from the inadequacy of the material or from some mistakes in the procedures; in education, instead, we (should) experience something more and different, namely the encounter with another free being and the demand to recognize her/his own freedom, which can also assume the form of a revolt of the student against the teacher. In this sense, education is a "daring venture" [*Wagnis*], insofar as the teacher "must daily overcome not only the passive resistance of a material but, perhaps, the active resistance of a recalcitrant student" (Ibid., p. 115. My translation). One could wonder whether teaching is not too often addressed, in contemporary scenarios, exclusively in terms of the adequacy of the material to treat and of the right procedures to treat it and whether the rampant psychologization and neurologization of the educational discourse finds therein (one of) its main reason(s). The issue is not to minimize, let alone to dismiss, the important insights that can come from these disciplines but to circumscribe their radius of action, by avoiding the possibility that they colonize our understanding of the educational undertaking and suppress some relevant — and, indeed, most educational — dimensions of it.

Bollnow (2014, pp. 116–117) offers a helpful distinction between experiment, risk and daring venture [*Wagnis*]. The first occurs when some habitual way of proceeding becomes inadequate and, then, as teachers, we need to try something new (a new method, a new didactic technique etc.). If this experiment fails, the subjectivity of the teacher is not intimately struck by this failure and the question is that of identifying, through an experimental attitude, a better solution. We take a risk, instead, when, facing a situation which escapes reliable regularities of behaviour, we have to make a (professional) move which is not "guaranteed" by any "law" and whose outcome is not predictable. In comparison with the previous condition, the subjectivity of the teacher is more significantly involved and, therefore, the failure

may be experienced as partly painful but it does not impact on her/his existence as a whole. The daring venture [*Wagnis*] implies, instead, an authentic and full involvement of subjectivity. As Bollnow insightfully comments, by marshalling the resources of the German language, one risks *something* [*etwas riskieren*] but daringly ventures *oneself* [*sich wagen*] into an act. Thereby, the (possible) failure hits the very core of one's own subjectivity and it may be experienced as professional-existential bankruptcy.[3]

All the three dimensions of the possibility of failure are obviously present in teaching practice and all need to be taken into account. However, one should not pass over in silence the gradient of the increasing involvement of one's own existence that they entail. If the third form has been defined as "authentic," this has not been a concession to any "jargon of authenticity" (Adorno, 1964) and a disparagement of the first two but only a way of highlighting the significance that existential involvement has in teaching *qua* teaching and, accordingly, *qua* the adventure of the encounter with other human freedoms. In particular, the vocabulary of authenticity should not mislead us to the belief that teaching is a daring venture only in specific defining moments, while most of the time is simply a run-of-the-mill activity (of course there is *also* this element but, in a Heideggerian parlance, it regards the ontic and not the ontological characterization of teaching). It is obviously important not to indulge in romanticized views and in a misplaced emphasis on the character of the daring venture; at the same time, we need to understand how it is deeply inscribed in the very being of teaching and, accordingly, it is not a mere eventuality.

To make this point I will refer once again to the ontological account of teaching that Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019) have provided, by identifying its main feature in an Arendtian passing on of the world to the next generation sustained by educational love. When developing this idea, they finely note: "More precisely, the teacher affirms that a particular thing (a subject matter, a discipline) is of worth and puts *her/his devotion for it to the test*, by sharing it with others (the next generation) — so that they can fall in love too, be changed by it, start caring for it, but also begin anew with it" (p. 36. Emphasis added).

We need to remember that Vlieghe and Zamojski do not want to offer an ideal of teaching practice but are endeavouring to outline an ontological description of what teaching is as teaching. Thus, the notion of educational love is not a sentimental picture of teaching but it is a strict concept that captures that love of the world, which they 'Arendtianly' situate at the very core of education and teaching. To put it bluntly: without educational love, there is no genuine passing on of the world to the next generation; and without any passing on, no education/teaching. At the same time, Vlieghe and Zamojski phrase the dynamics of this educational love in such a way that its inherent character of daring venture stands out: the devotion of the teacher in affirming the worth of a particular thing is put to the test of the new generation. There is no guarantee that they will accept it. Our act of devotion could be, if not rejected, taken in without any real engagement. This is the immanent possibility of failure of teaching, suspended between devotion and a constant testing, and therefore an activity into which one daringly ventures oneself.

This does not need to result only in calamitous outcomes: the absent, lukewarm or even (initially?) hostile replies to our acts of devotion certainly hurt, but they may also urge us to find new ways to witness our love of the world, if not to reconsider our relation to the thing that we affirm as worthy. However, the shadow of the possibility of failure cannot be eliminated.

3.   Concluding remarks

In this paper, against the backdrop of some contemporary reflections on teaching I have endeavoured to provide one possible reply to the question "What does teaching mean, today?" In particular, with a quasi-Heideggerian style of interrogation I have taken my cue from a specific *Stimmung* as an entry to a characterization of teaching. In the wake of the inquiries of Doris Santoro, I have suggested identifying it in demoralization but, differently from Santoro, who focuses on the moral centres of teachers in assessing the integrity of their profession, I have inflected that notion towards an existential analysis and I have intimated a connection with the immanent possibility of failure inherent to teaching. This

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3.   The term "bankruptcy" is an attempt to translate the original German, which is *Scheitern*, viz. a complete failure, a ruin or, literally, a shipwreck.

is not so much an external, obvious feature (all practices may fail!) as a characteristic related to the very dignity of teaching as something more than a poietic, craft-like activity but rather as an encounter of free beings.

As argued, the contemporary GERM, on the one hand, engenders the kind of demoralization that Santoro studies and conceptualizes and, on the other, it aspires to delete ultimately the very possibility of failure under the aegis of the ideal of efficacy. In this respect, GERM operates not only as an agent of "de-moralization" (Biesta, 2010; Caronia, 2022) but also of the de-existentialization of teaching, viz. of the cancellation of its constitutive being an existential (ad)venture. While the latter implies an involvement of one's own subjectivity, GERM endeavours to suppress this, while apparently recognizing it. Thomas Popkewitz has provided a powerful description of how this project is implemented through the appropriation of the notion of the "reflective practitioner" and its perversion into forms fundamentally alien to the original horizon of Donald Schön (see Striano, Melacarne & Oliverio, 2018, esp. chapters 1 and 4):

> The teacher is also classified as a lifelong learner. The teacher is self-actualized by remaking his or her biography. The "reflective teacher" researches himself or herself through action research that brings a *form of problem solving into the planning of his or her career*. The teacher assesses professional growth through life histories or portfolios to document and plan for *the self-management of his or her career*. Reflection is not merely about thinking. Reflection entails particular expertise in *calculating and ordering thought as a problem-solving action*. This ordering and mapping is through the communication systems that govern individual self-activity, desire, and personal responsibility for self-actualization. (Popkewitz, 2008, p. 123. Emphasis added)

These practices of self-management are illustrative, on the one hand, of the inescapability of a consideration of subjectivity and, on the other, of the attempt to defuse its existential connotations by morphing existential predicaments into simple problems to solve, radical uncertainties into predictable, ordered and calculated occurrences; in other words, the aim is that of "functionalizing" the subjective-existential dimension of teaching, which constitutes its dignity, turning the vicissitudes of a history into the plan of an ultimately measurable career.

A caveat is appropriate: denouncing these practices does not mean cultivating a romantic, charismatic and quaint view of teaching. The question does not revolve around the possible usefulness of some of these strategies but in the way in which they are deployed, finally colonizing the whole field of the reflection on and practice of teaching and disfiguring its "ontology." And the demoralization that the teachers in the inquiries of Santoro report bear witness to their sensitivity to what is lost when the significance of teaching is so dramatically narrowed down.

Taking seriously the possibility of failure entails a re-thinking of teacher education as (also or, perhaps, primarily) a domain where novice teachers are introduced to this *Existentiale* as a fundamental part of their professional practice and, indeed, their being. In this sense, we can imagine revisiting the tripartite confrontation with the possibility of failure as outlined by Bollnow (= experiment, risk and daring venture) in terms of three dimensions of the practitioner's education: *experiment* refers to the need to educate for reflectivity and for an experimental and inquiring attitude much in the line of Donald Schön, who, far from being a herald of the logic of problem solving, emphasized the indeterminate, unique and conflictual situations which the practitioner needs to face and engage with through a Deweyan logic of inquiry (Striano, Melacarne & Oliverio, 2018); *risk* may be put in connection with the need to educate for "relationality" and for the positioning in a *Spielraum*, a space of manoeuvre and a range of possibilities (Roth, 2002), and for tact as the capability of "knowing how to go on when one does not know how to go on" (Van Manen, 2015); and, finally, *daring venture* [*Wagnis*] is related to the need to overhaul teacher education so that it is not merely a space of professional qualification and socialization but also of *professional subjectification* (Biesta, 2014) in which to explore what GERM wants to suppress.

In contemporary scenarios, vindicating the possibility of failure as inherent to the dignity of teaching and, accordingly, reclaiming it in the designing of teacher education programs could sound like an untimely reply to the timely question from which I have started; however, it could also be one of the ways, if not the only way, to engage respectfully with the hunger of teachers for the meaning of their profession.

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