

Exploring Shadows: Letter Writing as a Pathway to Counter Authoritarianism in Education?

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Abstract

Our society is influenced by neoliberalism and new public management, and the education system is no exception. Students are navigating a system characterized by market fundamentalism, resulting in the prevalence of standards-based educational policies and an intense focus on assessments and quality measures, making higher education more of an assembly line. As a response to the acceleration in society, which can cause alienation, this article is inspired by Rosa's (2022) ideas of resonance and Biestas's (2021) work on subjectification in education. Our response is based on a search for the students' experiences by looking in the shadows for hidden perspectives guided by the following question: *What moves in the shadows of teaching among students, and how can letter writing contribute to counteracting authoritarian structures and conventional discourses in higher education?* We have used letter writing as an approach to uncover tacit thoughts and meanings from the students, aiming to provide an opportunity for developing a context and path for uncovering insights and make room for the students' dialogue with the world, subjectification as well as empowering the students to fight authoritarianism partly by raising awareness of resonance as one way to counter neoliberalism in our education and society.

Keywords

Letter writing, shadows, neoliberalism, early childhood education, subjectification, resonance

Prelude

“Alienation has ended up as a keyword for a world that has become cold and grey, hard and insensitive, experienced by a subject who inside feels deafness, muteness, coldness and emptiness” (Rosa, 2024, p. 121. Our translation).

The philosophy of higher education is a complex field in motion. Higher education and key concepts in this field are not static matters but rather a field that needs approaches that do justice to its dynamics (Barnett, 2022).

“(…) The two concepts of university and higher education, and their contiguous concepts

- knowledge, academic freedom, teaching, research, culture, learning and student and the rest - are all in motion. Like butterflies, they are not easily caught, and if they were caught they would be diminished” (Barnett, 2022, p. 6).

The landscape of higher education is undergoing rapid transformations, influenced by technological advancements, evolving societal expectations, and the imperative for graduates to emerge with deep theoretical knowledge and robust practical skills. Additionally, neoliberalism has made its way into higher education with all it entails (Mintz, 2021). Neoliberalism prioritizes market fundamentalism, resulting in the prevalence of

standards-based educational policies and an intense focus on assessments and quality measures, making higher education more of an assembly line (Jovanovic, 2017; Stalheim, 2022). These developments are particularly crucial for professional education programs such as early childhood (EC) education, which impart academic knowledge and prepare students for the nuanced demands of professional certification and practice.

Our research is situated in EC teacher education. When working in EC teacher education, we are responsible for facilitating students' learning, connecting their education to social issues, and engaging them in public debates to influence politics that benefit society. Our student's voices matter in the battle against authoritarianism, and our pedagogy should be central to any viable conception of politics and collective struggle (Giroux, 2015).

The desire to make students' voices matter inspired us to engage them in letter writing. Letter writing can be a slow process, which we found interesting in relation to Rosa's (2022) attention to the rapid pace of our lives. Rosa (2022) professes that society is characterised by rapidness or "accelerations". The acceleration can cause a feeling of alienation where we are left with a sense of not "keeping up" or "being" in the world without being in touch with it (Rosa, 2022). Therefore, Rosa (2022) proposes that resonance is the answer, meaning that we are being touched by something that gives us meaning. The letters allowed the students to write personal stories about what is important to them. They can think and write something about "(...) who we are, where we are going, what is good and what is not" (Jørgensen et al, 2020, p. 14).

We are curious to explore if new opportunities and concepts can arise with and in

the student's letters and personal stories. Following Barnett (2022), this task requires vigilance,

"It is the task, therefore, of the philosophy of higher education to be vigilant about key concepts, to be on the lookout for shortcomings in their realisation and to be alert to possibilities for new concepts" (p. 6).

Barnett's (2022) encouragement turned our attention to shadows to explore hidden concepts in dark spots. With our interest in what lurks in the shadows, we draw on Dall'Alba and Bengtsen's (2019) perspectives on "dark" and "dark" learning. Dall'Alba and Bengtsen (2019) explore features of the dark in learning and unexpectedly turn to astrophysics. In astrophysics, "dark matter" can be seen as what binds the rest together: "What is known and visible occur and are disclosed against a background of the unknown, invisible, in shadow" (Dall'Alba & Bengtsen, 2019, p. 1481). However, that "dark matter" does not emit light and cannot be seen. Still, its effects are equally significant in astrophysical optics. And then:

"An analogous claim can be made about the shadows, darkness and unknowns in higher education learning and teaching. We sometimes cannot ignore their effects; we know there is more than we comprehend. If we focus only on what is visible to us or under our control, we overlook what we do not comprehend, limiting capacity for learning and teaching" (Dall'Alba & Bengtsen, 2019, p. 1481).

Therefore, we turn our gaze towards the shadows in and from the students' letter narratives with an interest in getting a glimpse of the messy, uncertain, and complexity that is part of students' lives in higher education, however, often thought of as less important (Dall'Alba & Bengtsen, 2019). In this article, we

question: *What moves in the shadows of teaching among students, and how can students' voices through letter writing contribute to counteracting authoritarian structures and conventional discourses in higher education?* The question invites us to explore and develop insight into concepts, or butterflies (Barnett, 2022), that matter in higher education but also allow them to escape, as the shadows are not constant but in motion.

Paths of inquiry

Although, according to Law (2004), methods are constantly changing, it is not as often discussed and debated whether we need these rules and laws to produce knowledge about the world. It is as if knowledge can only be produced and be valid if we follow a set of "(...) fairly specific, determinate, and more or less identifiable processes" (Law, 2004, p. 5).

As Law (2004) suggests, research often follows specific methods to ensure its validity and societal importance. However, what if we adopt a more unconventional approach to include student voices in the search for butterflies (Barnett, 2022)? This text challenges the political frameworks that shape students' identities and potential within their educational journeys. We explore whether expanding methodological boundaries can reveal insights that traditional methods might miss.

However, inspired by Law (2004), it does not mean we do not apply more traditional methods, such as a hermeneutic approach, when dwelling on the students' letters. In our inquiry, we strive to be creative and focus on what is essential and relevant to gain insights into the topic. We aim to bring forth students' voices and stories about higher education without being

constrained by traditional frameworks and rules to counter authoritarianism in education.

The path in our inquiry rests on four intertwined contours. The first contour is letters and stories, the second is shadows, the third is subjectification and freedom, and the last is resonance. These contours guided and supported our inquiry, providing a framework for our discussion on letter writing as a contribution to counteracting authoritarianism in education.

Letters and stories

From a hermeneutic perspective, understanding is based upon stories (Widdershoven, 2001). Narratives from others shape our experiences and are further developed through stories we tell to make sense of and gain insights into the experiences. Further, our lives are shaped by the narratives about them. In such stories, our experiences, which are at first vague and ambiguous, become more prominent. Narratives make explicit the implicit meaning of lived experience. In stories, the pre-narrative structure of life is transformed into a narrative structure (Ricoeur, 1983; Widdershoven, 1993). By telling stories, we shape our world, giving meaning to our experiences and urging one another to perform certain actions (Widdershoven & Sohl, 1999).

We engaged the students in letter writing not only for empirical purposes. Letters allow creative engagement and allow students to reveal issues they might not in a face-to-face interaction. It might also be helpful for better processing events that have happened to them, in this case, the lecture and activities included (Frank et al., 2022; Stamper, 2020). Writing letters may foster a space where students articulate their experiences and perspectives, embodying Biesta's vision of education as

cultivating unique subjectivities. We follow a hermeneutic phenomenological approach when delving into the personal letters from the students. Phenomenology emphasises the informants' understanding of and experiences in the world, and we sought to give justice to the students' voices coming through the letters (Friesen et al., 2012). Experience takes shape through language, especially when that language is rich in figurative or alliterative qualities, and phenomenology advocates for aesthetically sensitized writing during and in the final research product (Friesen et al., 2012). This perspective is particularly relevant when considering letter writing as a method or source of empirical data, as the expressive qualities of language in letters can capture the nuanced experiences and perceptions of the subjects involved.

Moreover, the Hermeneutic approach embodies the dynamic interplay between text and life, past and present, and experience and interpretation, serving as a process for generating meaning. Hermeneutics is inherently oriented toward lived experiences, and the interpretive approach introduces a novel avenue of exploration for research on educational matters. When reading and reflecting upon the students' experiences, we emphasized dialogue, interpretation, and understanding (Moran, 2000) with a sensitive and open attitude and approach (Friesen et al., 2012).

We invited approximately 100 first-year EC teacher students to write letters after our lectures. The prompt we provided was what the teaching set in motion for them without any guidelines for content or format. Additionally, we requested permission to include the letters in our research project, and 45 responded positively, whereas three are included in this article. To select the three letters, we first read all 45 letters and chose two that resonated with

us, keeping our contours in mind. Subsequently, we collaborated on coding and interpreting the six letters using the contours as guidelines before we agreed upon three letters that we thought captured different perspectives related to our contours. The letters were translated by a secure translation program provided by our institution, anonymised, and checked by us for consistency in the original language and, thereby, their original meaning and message, ensuring the content was not "lost in translation".

Rather than conducting thematic and linguistic coding that could end up as a descriptive narrative analysis of the letters, we tried to pursue our aim by searching for a narrative clause that told us more about the student's relationships with and in the world. We came to this understanding after our initial coding, where we carried out a more traditional explorative and inductive coding, which we found to be quite bland and left with a feeling that we did not grasp the bigger picture, the student voices. Our initial coding was too technical as if the traditional coding did not capture the complexity of what we wanted to unravel (MacLure, 2013). Instead, we decided to present the letters as a whole, interpreting them in light of our contours, followed by a new narrative coding, searching for the in-betweens, the shadows, and passages in the letters that resonated with us, inspired by Rosa (2022). Taking an open and sensitive approach to the students' letters follows the hermeneutic phenomenological approach and justifies the students' private and personal encounters with us through the letters. We were looking for the "butterflies" (Barnett, 2022), something not easily caught but interesting, a trace of subjectivity, and create meaning, emphasizing that we do not search for absolutes, but meanings open continuously to new insights and

interpretations (Friesen et al., 2012). Our analytical readings of the letters left us with two overarching themes we convey and discuss as shadows. 1) emotions enter and matter, and 2) uncharted waters.

Shadows

The phenomenon of “Darkness in learning” and the associated term “Shadows” resemble that learning in higher education is far more diverse, uncertain, and manifold than conventional discourses influenced by a neo-liberalistic view of higher education (Dall’Alba & Bengtson, 2019). These elements, darkness and shadows, can be difficult to understand or value, even though we know they are there, affecting learning and teaching in higher education (Dall’Alba & Bengtson, 2019).

By paying attention to darkness and what lurks in the shadows in the students’ letter stories, we seek to shed light on students’ identity and engagement in higher education, which cannot necessarily be captured or integrated into current forms of assessment (Dall’Alba & Bengtson, 2019). Inspired by Dall’Alba and Bengtson (2019), we explored alternative learning and teaching processes that are not immediately obvious, paying attention to the shadows. We aimed to value the “whole” student in their educational journey in higher education. In our experience, and as Dall’Alba and Bengtson (2019) note, students in higher education do not only follow linear ways of learning captured in static, standardized education plans or expected results.

Subjectification and freedom

Following Biesta (2021), we find subjectification an essential term, especially to bring students’ perspectives on their educational processes into the field with the aim that education becomes more than a gateway into a

static and rigid education system. However, Biesta (2021) writes that subjectification is a problematic and misunderstood term.

Nonetheless, we find subjectification suitable as a contour in our discussion of the student’s letter. However, we do not intend to give a comprehensive and “correct” understanding of the term nor provide an exhaustive definition of what the concept of subjectification may hold. We employed the term to explore it in relation to the students’ stories to make their voices matter to counter authoritarian structures and conventional discourses in higher education.

According to Biesta (2021), students’ learning in higher education can be about their unique dialogue with the world, with its limits and possibilities. Biesta (2013) further recognizes that teaching and learning or the educational project “always needs to engage with its own impossibility” (p. 459). One way to identify students’ dialogues with the (higher education) world is to see the stories in students’ letters with Biesta’s (2021) concept of subjectification.

The idea of subjectification connects to freedom, as people in the world in all situations we encounter, to “(...) have an opportunity to say yes or no, stay or go away, go with the flow or resist” (Biesta, 2021, p.45). Following this quote, students’ subjectification can relate to their freedom to make their own choices and assert their voice in matters that affect their education. Whether it is about following the path education has set out, or if the student chooses to move on to unknown paths. This freedom not only affects questions about education and students, but it also should be seen in a larger context linked to, e.g., politics, history, and social structures that can prevent people’s freedom of action in their experiences (Biesta, 2021). As we interpret the

term subjectification, it involves both possessing and exercising the freedom to bring actions and thoughts into the experiences you make without strict frameworks for acting or thinking, which applies to being a student in the education system. In the students' process of subjectification and the freedom it reveals, they encounter other people with the same freedom to bring actions and thoughts into the education system they are a part of (Biesta, 2021). Consequently, as pedagogues and educational institutions, we are responsible for supporting students in finding their way and guiding their freedom (Biesta, 2021).

Resonance

For Rosa, resonance can be the solution if acceleration is the problem (2024). The increased speed in society calls for slowness to avoid alienation in our relationship with ourselves, each other, and the world. Acceleration's serious diagnosis, in Rosa's optic, is thus alienation, a growing feeling of being in the world without having contact with it or not *belonging in the world* (Bostad's, 2021). The idea of resonance, of letting oneself be affected and being moved, can, on the other hand, revolve around feeling and being at home. Rosa conveys:

“Being forced to constantly pick up speed can lead to a state where we are no longer able to take in the world. If you always have too little time, you are unable to connect with other people, things or nature. The problem with acceleration is that it leads to alienation from nature, yourself and others. It has negative consequences for the structure of society: Solidarity is lost, and we also have the negative ecological consequences. I wanted to find the opposite of alienation, and came up with

the term "resonance"” (Rosa, 2022, p. 281).

He further claims, “You cannot become a subject, and we cannot become fully human, if we do not experience resonance” (Rosa, 2022, p. 281), which relates to education. Education has the opportunity and responsibility to create content that enables students to experience resonance with others, culture, and religion, offering profound existential experiences (Rosa, 2022, p. 286). Rosa (2022) underpins that resonance has to do with transformation,

“to be connected to the world in such a way that you yourself are changed, by an idea, an event, a person you meet, music or books you read. This type of transformation differs from optimization of parameters, which is only about improvement. There you basically remain the same, you just strengthen your qualities” (Rosa, 2022, p. 286).

Resonance *moves* and “is not something I myself do or cause to happen, it begins with something I perceive, something that calls to me. It can be an idea, a face, a sound, a book, a landscape, or I can experience it in my work. It starts with something that touches me” (Rosa, 2022, p. 285). Rosa (2022) continues,

“The second element is emotion. I reach out - emot - I respond to the call, I react. It can sometimes be an almost physical movement. If it is a question of strong resonance, one may get tears in the eyes or goosebumps. However, it does not have to be physical. If it's an idea that resonates, you might disagree, even if you think the idea is interesting but wrong. It's still an answer, you're

trying to make a connection. Resonance is thus a two-way relationship” (p. 285).

Rosa`s (2022) underpinning of resonance being a two-way relationship underpins our choice of letter in our inquiry.

Into the letters

With our desire to counter authoritarianism in education through letters and show devotion to students’ voices, we present our readers with three letters we received. We chose to present the letters in their entirety to ensure that none of the messages or stories within the letters were lost in our interpretation process. After each letter, a reflection follows and we discuss how the letters, both in content and form, can shed light on the shadows and contribute to the discussions about authoritarian structures and conventional discourses in higher education.

Letter from a student in a teaching session on play

To Åse

Today’s teaching provided a good insight into how play can look different, and be experienced in different ways. What is play for me, is not necessarily play for everyone else. It has been very interesting to experience such typical activities one often associates with play, and to feel it a bit on the body. I myself felt a lot of discomfort and almost a bit of panic in between, because the situations were unfamiliar and the activities were predetermined. In addition, it became an extra stress factor to HAVE to "let go" together with people one has hardly been with before.

Play can sometimes be adult-led, planned activities that are carried out together with the

children, and the children can sometimes manage to let loose and play in these situations. But it is not always certain that they are playing even though we think they are. I became especially hung up on group division and will reflect more on group divisions in kindergarten. It is such a natural part of being human to find one’s gang that one trusts and is comfortable around. When I, as an adult, feel so much uncertainty about being split from "my flock", one can assume that a child will be able to feel some of the same feelings. I believe that we adults in kindergarten have a job to do here, and we should probably think a bit more before we consciously split up the very best friends and force the children to "play" across the group of children.

I think play can be lots of fun, and I think it can be very rewarding to let loose in play together with the children in kindergarten. But today I felt the importance of all the conditions around play, and that play does not necessarily always manage to take place within all frames. Much of the reason I struggled today was about the people I was with and the context of this happening in a school situation, and not in a kindergarten situation. In the corridors here, other students and teachers from completely different programs wander, who have no idea what we are doing or why. For me, it was very difficult to distance myself from this and let the play take over. Perhaps some of these reflections can be used in the work with children? Maybe we sometimes forget that it’s not as simple as "finding something to play!"? Who the children are with, which room they are in, which people are nearby, which materials they have available, whether the play feels forced or not etc. are just some examples of factors that may play a role in the play, and factors I believe should be reflected more on.

The student wrote this letter immediately after attending a teaching session which focused on play as the subject, and practicing improvisation as a significant part. The letter speaks to us as a narrative of emotional experiences. Discomfort, panic, and stress arise as explicit concepts, and the student seems to experience a sense of lack of control. It is unsurprising that to be told not only to *think* and *write* alone but to *do* so with fellow students they might not know very well can stir up emotions.

The student's story on emotions also links to some struggles, in this case of playing, and the student connects them to the surroundings; the rooms, the hallways, the materials, the (unknown) humans, and the gazes from others. When the student shares that playing did not quite happen, as we read it at least, it is related to the habitat, and the student thus makes us aware of how the habitat affects us. However, the struggle and the habitat preventing playing and playfulness do not seem wasted. The battle may also have awakened this student's voice and connectedness. We read that the student shows a great willingness to change perspective by attempting to play, where the voice is moved between student and kindergarten life, and reflecting from the perspective of an EC teacher and a child. The student appears to be deeply connected to the kindergarten and the children in their struggle. Could this indicate a belonging in and with the world?

It appears that the session produced a lack of control and subsequent discomfort, stress, and panic for the student writing the letter. It contributes to uncomfortable feelings we usually want to avoid. It's not ideal, but did the discomfort also provide a connection? The student's opportunity to feel these unpleasant feelings, and not least – the student's

opportunity and ability to write about them- also seems to have opened a place for resonance.

Letter from student in teaching session on diversity

I am sitting here still thinking about the topic of Pride celebrations in kindergartens. I feel that parents are feeling quite a lot of pressure now because if they speak up and say they don't want to celebrate it, they might be seen as parents who are causing problems and not accepting diversity. While I think that this is completely wrong, because, as was said in the class, one becomes a bit satiated with so much regarding Pride. One should be able to call girls for girls and boys for boys. There are only two genders, even though one has the opportunity to call oneself whatever one wants. Parents, especially those coming from another country, may be more frightened by how early in age we should talk to children about sexuality and everything related to Pride celebrations. If one thinks about the Oslo area and how these celebrations take place, one just has to stop a bit and think, is this really what our children need to see, celebrate, and be inspired by, or is this something that will influence the way children think and what they accept and don't. This is also about care, I think that children should be allowed to be children and not be confused by everything that happens around these Pride celebrations. As a parent myself, I feel that it is not okay to start with this at such an early age as in kindergarten, and that the kindergarten decides this, that the children should participate in this. Can one choose for oneself, and since Norway is a democratic country, I think that everyone should be able to opt out of such celebrations, if they feel that they do not completely agree with this.

In this teaching session, celebrating Pride in kindergarten was discussed among the student group. Pride is a celebration of diversity that creates debate and arouses many value-laden emotions. Values and feelings about Pride appear in the student's letter. The student feels overwhelmed by the extensive focus on Pride and, as a parent, believes that celebrating Pride in kindergarten is not appropriate. The letter further highlights that the student thinks it can be challenging for parents from another country to deal with the Pride celebration in the kindergarten.

Furthermore, a point is made that the celebration of Pride in the capital is questionable. In the letter, it is possible to see the contours of "darkness" and "dark learning" as part of the student's learning process. Several parts of the student's life and experiences come into view in the face of an academic theme. We trace commitment to the theme that can connect to the student's whole life, including elements such as the student as a parent with experiences of Pride from the Oslo area, parents who come from another country find it problematic, and that the student himself is exasperated with Pride. All these moments mix with academic knowledge about diversity and the student's thoughts about the subject as a future professional practitioner.

Letter from a student in a teaching session about learning

In short, the subject is very rewarding and interesting, and I have a lot that I would like to add and convey. The subject arouses great curiosity and interest, and the opportunity to develop professionally, but unfortunately, the timing today is wrong to convey it all.

The above letter stood out to us and caught our interest. Especially striking was the

sentence about the timing. "The timing is wrong", made us think about how different we are, and is an example of how something we expected from the students turned out differently. The letter resonated with us and made us think about how our presuppositions of expecting the students to be able to write a letter might not work for everyone on "an order". The students underscore that there is much to say about the lesson, but it is not just the right time. There might be several reasons for this, but what struck us is that contexts and timing might be essential factors. Writing a letter might feel overwhelming at the end of the lesson, and who knows, maybe the student was in a hurry or felt uncomfortable with the format. It made us wonder about the effort required to delve into a different format that might not be familiar to that student. We mentioned acceleration in today's society, things are going faster, and the hastiness might be a struggle to overcome.

Unveiling Insights: The shadows

As a guiding path of our inquiry, we asked ourselves: *What moves in the shadows of teaching among students, and how can students' voices through letter writing contribute to counteracting authoritarian structures and conventional discourses in higher education?* In the following, we discuss the insight and reflections we gained from the student letters in light of our paths of inquiry structured in two overarching shadows. The thematic discoveries mirror what resonated with us while reading and are named Emotions Enter and Matter, and Uncharted Waters.

Shadow: Emotions Enter and Matter

When reading the letters, we became aware of the underlying aspects of teaching and learning, where some of the invisible sides of our

teaching came forward. On the surface, in regular evaluation and assessment, we tend to pay attention to what is visible (Davis, 2017, in Dall'Alba & Bengtson, 2019). When we opened our minds to what's underneath, in the shadows, we found traces of students' emotions put into play, which can affect their learning and contribute to their freedom (Biesta, 2021), something we need to be aware of as teachers. Through the letters, some students expressed their emotions explicitly, such as discomfort, panic, and uncertainty, whereas in other letters, we interpreted hidden emotions between the lines of their narratives. Between the lines, we interpreted from our perspective in line with the hermeneutic approach that there were emotions such as engagement, excitement, and annoyance. The students' stories and our interpretations show us that the students are affectively and emotionally related to the world and that they have been touched by something (Rosa, 2022). Allowing students to dwell on these reactions through letters will hopefully foster awareness of the world and open up opportunities for resonance in their lives. However, we must consider that these interpretations are ours and be open to the fact that what we interpret in the shadows might not be what the students intend to show through their narratives.

The students provided insights into how their experiences in class made them wonder about how they understand and comprehend the world (Dall'Alba & Bengtson, 2019; Widdershoven & Sohl, 1999). Through the letters, the students opened up to wondering, which might have placed some of them at the point of nothingness where they were allowed to form their thinking and understanding, and perhaps they realized that there is something beyond their own knowledge, a not yet known (Dall'Alba & Bengtson, 2019). Dall'Alba &

Bengtson (2019) underscore the importance of the process of becoming, calling for a broader understanding of teaching and learning that moves beyond ordinary learning activities. The letters and dialogue we established with the students extended the traditional teaching format and allowed them to experience nothingness, offering them a different process of becoming (Dall'Alba & Bengtson, 2019).

What resonated with us in the letters and how we interpreted them implicates the complexity of subjectivity. From a hermeneutic approach, we exchange perspectives and allow ourselves to be enlightened, challenged, and even provoked without necessarily trying to push our sense of knowledge, meaning, or truth forward. Then, the latter brings us to how the letters possibly counter authoritarianism. The letters show us that it is essential to be open, encourage dialogue, and make room for subjectivity. We should, therefore, strive to provide students with educational experiences that can affect them emotionally and let them explore what's in the shadows or experience nothingness (Dall'Alba & Bengtson, 2019).

Interestingly, we questioned whether the short letter might convey indifference upon initial reading. However, what if the student felt uncomfortable or perhaps even loved the task but needed a different context or time to write the letter? In the letters, we see glimpses and traces of subjectification. Biesta (2021) points out the possibility of saying yes or no or even walking away. In the latter, there is a freedom we might see mirrored through the letters, like the student who did not find the context a suitable time for writing, the student walked away, or the letter about Pride-celebration, which resonated with us, albeit in a more problematic way. The letters allowed the students to write without political, historical, or social structures as barriers, which puts the

subject up front and exposes the shadows (Biesta, 2021). What subjective emotions we find in the shadows might surprise and even upset us, but they also enlighten us. They offer a way to open up new perspectives and dialogues about the purpose of higher education.

Shadow: Uncharted Waters

From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, the students experience their world from their point of view. By inviting them to write letters, we were curious about their understanding. We encouraged them to use their freedom to ask questions and be critical of the surrounding structures, boundaries, and theoretical perspectives they encounter throughout their education. Rosa (2022) underscores that exploring and experiencing the world will resonate differently from person to person. What inspires us or gives us meaning is unique for all of us. We see traces of the individuals in the letters, and the letters gave room for reflection, a sort of time out for the students, where there was no manual or correct answer. In the first presented letter, the student reflects upon how maybe both the lecture and the letter writing opened up for thinking differently and uttered, “*What is play for me, is not necessarily play for everyone else.*” Based on the letter’s different format, length, and content, we were drawn to the thought that the format might be somewhat unfamiliar to the students. For most of the letters, we felt that they tried to write what was expected of them; nevertheless, some letters were more personal, which might tell us that it was a welcoming act.

While reading the letters, a notable discovery for us was traces of the students’ opportunities to form their own opinions and make sense of the experience (Widdershoven, 2001). The letters revealed the students’ unique voices, expressing their views and understanding

of educational phenomena and practices. They write about themselves in relation to the children, to us as educators, to their future profession, and to the world. One student wrote: “Perhaps some of these reflections can be used in the work with children? Maybe we sometimes forget that it’s not as simple as ‘finding something to play!’” We interpret such phrases as connections, where students are not isolated but situated within the world. The letters can help the students change and contest their perspectives, and seeing themselves through others can lead to new self-understandings and a revision of opinions (Widdershoven, 2001). We see these attempts as part of their journey to becoming EC teachers, students, and human beings. The letters foster resonance and subjectification, allowing students to express themselves, reflect, and process their experiences at their own pace without guidance or assessment criteria (Frank et al., 2022). In the letters, the students freely expressed themselves and their experiences, highlighting and giving meaning to what impacted them in the teaching session (Widdershoven & Sohl, 1999).

Additionally, when searching in the shadows, we saw the power of letters that uncover the perspective of the other, which, from a hermeneutic perspective, is necessary to dwell upon to make new insights. “What if it is the other way around?” The latter might not be unproblematic since it also challenges our beliefs. Still, we proclaim that viewing letters as an opening for dialogue about central aspects of the profession and what formation means, and even being and becoming is essential for ECE.

Shedding light on the shadows and catching sight of what we as lecturers do not usually glimpse in our meetings with students through work requirements, exams, and lectures also arouses uneasiness. The unrest is about us wanting to bring the whole student into their

education. We know this has value if we take subjectification seriously (Biesta, 2021). Subjectification is about the students' opportunity to bring "themselves" into the education, which can be an essential input in the discussion about what higher education should be. On the other hand, not all opinions and values are necessarily compatible within the EC teacher education profession. An example is the teaching session on diversity, a crucial topic in EC education. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Framework Plan for Kindergarten Content and Tasks (Directorate for Education and Training, 2017) emphasize that kindergartens must promote diversity. In light of our interpretation of how diversity can be understood and handled in these guidelines, some of the statements in the letter may appear to be unfortunate. The student writes, for example, that parents have to choose for themselves, "that you are saturated with so much in your mind with Pride" and that "there are only two genders, although you have the opportunity to call yourself whatever you want." With such statements, the student brings himself into the education as a parent with feelings, attitudes, and opinions that relate to Biesta's thoughts on subjectification (2021). The student is free to say something personal about a topic regarding teaching and learning in higher education (Biesta, 2021).

As educators, we were somewhat provoked by the student's expressions. One of our first spontaneous reactions was not to relate to the letter and its content or contact the student to point out that such statements, values, and attitudes are incompatible with the profession. But will we not then be in danger of being part of the education system we are trying to shift and challenge in this text by bringing students' voices to light? Wouldn't we then be the ones sitting in the driver's seat with a desire

to control students' educational processes? The letter illustrates how we as teachers must navigate unknown waters when we want to give students a voice in the fight against authoritarianism in education through the concepts of darkness and subjectification. There is a problematic duality in that, on the one hand, what the student brings can provoke us as teachers by contesting what we believe to be the "right" opinions, attitudes, and values in the profession. However, what will it do to students' freedom, subjectivity, belonging to the world they are part of, and the struggle with authoritarianism if we, as teachers, pursue the desire to control what the students bring to the table?

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the teacher should sit back and not contribute to the students' educational process or that the student is free to "do what they want" (Biesta, 2021). Freedom as a student and as a person in the world is about qualified freedom, where you exist in complex interactions with other people in different contexts that create some framework for freedom. Freedom where the turning point is about "(...) figuring out what these limits are, which limits should be taken into consideration, which limits are real, so to speak, and which limits are the effect of arbitrary (ab) use of power" (Biesta, 2021, p. 48). In our understanding, we as teachers must determine how much and what kind of freedom we provide the students and where we are responsible for "leading them on the right path". We also have a responsibility to support them in making up their own minds about questions, which boundaries they relate to, and which can be considered as "arbitrary (ab) use of power" (Biesta, 2021, p. 48).

Letter Writing as a Pathway to Counter Authoritarianism in Education?

In this text, we have elucidated the following question: *What moves in the shadows of teaching among students, and how can letter writing contribute to counteracting authoritarian structures and conventional discourses in higher education?*

Dall’Alba & Bengtson (2019) argue that the notion of teaching and learning must consider that teachers can never fully control the outcome or impact of their teaching, and they discuss the unpredictable and uncertain aspects of educational processes. In our meetings with the students’ voices through letter writing, we became aware that we are part of the structures that want to control the impact and results of the teaching. We, as teachers in higher education, are not only the ones who want to bring students’ voices to counteract authoritarian structures and conventional discourses in higher education. We are also the ones who adapt, maintain, and possibly create these authoritarian structures and conventional discourses. We do not have a straight answer to how teachers should manage this duality, but we think it is timely to consider and discuss. Otherwise, we as teachers in higher education may be in danger of being part of a system that wants students to be measured and part of an assembly line system (Jovanovic, 2017; Stalheim, 2022)

The letters provided a place and time for students to dwell and reflect upon their education and provide traces of their thoughts about being in the world. To counter alienation, we find letters and personal narratives to be one move towards a situation or opportunity to become touched or moved by someone or something and thereby experience resonance. We discovered that letters could support our

students in orienting the world and allow them to encourage and reveal experiences of resonance, which can counter acceleration and alienation. The letters serve several purposes in the process. The students are provided with time to reflect on their experiences in class, and they elaborate on something that moved them personally. In addition, we experience the letters to be touching in themselves, bearing the mark of opening up for personal engagement. The letters were also moving for us to read, and even though there were several different approaches and content in the letters, we sensed that students opened up, underpinning the benefit of letter writing. From a phenomenological view, we know that how we live and engage in the world can move and transform us. Therefore, as EC teacher educators, one of our purposes is to lay the foundation for an education that encourages and builds students’ ability to be self-reflective and critical of authoritarianism influencing our society, education, and lives. Nevertheless, our inquiry has shown us that, as educators, we might as well be part of the authoritarianism in education that amplifies certain voices while seeking to control others. Therefore, it is imperative that we, as educators, maintain an awareness of this dynamic and manage it ethically.

For us, letter writing promotes a sense of gratitude and hope. From a global perspective, amidst war, climate change, unrest, and worries, cultivating a sense of gratitude and hope can be central to higher education. Letter writing alone cannot be the solution. Still, in our view, the format of letters and interest in personal matters can create a significant space for thinking and writing, being touched, and being in dialogue with oneself, others, and the world.

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