The 'OECD machine' – Using a negative universality gaze to examine the OECD and its positive universal engineering fantasy

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a greater emphasis, especially inspired by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), on the creation of educational policy that appears to want to control the future. This is evidenced by promoting an engineering fantasy in/for education that embodies positive universalism. We critically examine such positive universalism by drawing on the notion of *negative universality* (Kapoor & Zalloua, 2022ab) along with concepts of fantasy, desire and sublime objects (Žižek, 1989), and Rosa (2020) cultural criticism. We illustrate our concepts through the story of a skiing holiday where the fantasy of the perfect snowscape always fails to deliver what it promises. Here, travellers who desire the experience of skiing on 'perfect snow' are seduced by powerful advertising campaigns. Due to the unpredictability of nature, travellers are often faced with intrusive snow machines that noisily – and in a 'vulgar' way – engineer and man-ufacture the snowscape which spoils and punctures the fantasy of the perfect skiing conditions. Our paper critically examines the OECD's (2019b) Learning Compass 2030 document, discussing the universal engineering fantasy that promises to produce certainty, moral improvement and control in/with education. We also analyse the ac-companying OECD's attitudes and values document (OECD, 2019a) that identifies a list of sublime objects such as respect, justice and *Bildung* to which all countries must aspire if

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they wish to succeed. We conclude that the policy documents of the OECD present a positive universal engineering fantasy that promises a non-antagonistic and harmonious future. However, such a future will be impossible to achieve. Hence, we call for educators to critically engage with negative universality to expose the lacks and contradictions always inherent in global policies. This would provide educators with an opportunity to reflect on and critically confront seductive policy and its engineering fantasy that captures their desires.

Keywords

Introduction

The powerful human desire to create certainty by seeking to control the uncontrollable reality can be fostered and (mis) used politically for all kinds of purposes (Rosa, 2020). In education policy, this can be seen as a quest for "intelligibility, predictability and certainty" (Clarke 2020: 156) which strives to assert an imagined and simplified state of affairs despite the complex and contested nature of social reality (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). In this paper we explore the desire for certainty and control through analysing two policy documents published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD is described as an international forum where a number of nation states collaborate to develop policy and educational standards that promote economic growth. Recently, the OECD published its conceptual learning framework in the Learning Compass 2030 (OECD, 2019b) and its accompanying values and attitudes concept note (OECD, 2019a) as a means of promoting the unceasing call for certainty, control and moral improvement in education (Flint and Peim, 2011; Rosa, 2020).

The OECD uses the metaphor of a compass to chart the journey of the learner towards an individual, societal and environmental goal of wellbeing in 2030 and identifies the key values and attitudes that influence one's choices on the path (OECD, 2019b). We argue that such a representation, positions education policy as a source of "hope and redemption for the individuals and communities concerned" (Clarke, 2021: 12). Additionally, the idea of the compass is founded on a fantasy that includes the notions of control by means of social engineering (Rosa, 2020). Inspired by the concept of negative universality (Kapoor and Zalloua, 2022b; Rüsselbæk Hansen et al., 2024) combined with psychoanalytic concepts of fantasies, desires and sublime objects (Žižek, 1989) and the notion of cultural criticism (Rosa, 2020), we identify inadequacies, contradictions and lacks in the documents. In doing so, we offer the opportunity to consider new understandings of the global OECD policy machine, and the impact its engineering fantasy has on our thinking when negativities are silenced or masked in education (Rüsselbæk Hansen et al., 2024).

When thinking about education's positioning on global uncertainties (Smeyers and Depaepe, 2008), we use the notion of *negative universality* (Kapoor and Zalloua, 2022a; Rüsselbæk Hansen et al., 2024) to deliberately reveal the "internal contradiction and dissenting voices" (Finkelde and McGowan, 2023: 21) that are always present in

educational policy but are often concealed (Gunther and Courtney, 2023). By using a negative universalistic gaze our paper offers educators, researchers and policymakers an alternative to the OECD's overwhelmingly 'positive' universal and engineered fantasy, which sees education heralded as a cure for all social and individual sensed ills (Rosa et al., 2017; Sahlberg, 2023). In psychoanalytical terms, a remedy for the lacks and absences that we are marked by, both socially and individually (Lacan, 1998). We consider the adoption of a *negative universality* lens to be a significant contribution to policy analysis; a psychoanalytical approach that serves as a critical gaze to the engineered universal positivity we suggest can be found in the OECD documents (OECD, 2019a; OECD, 2019b).

Our critique takes several key policy ideas found in the OECD documents such as engineering the future, activating policy and politicians, creating non-contradictory positive universalism and the practice of engineering education. We discuss each in turn but find it useful to begin by exemplifying the key theoretical concepts involved in the fantasy of engineering and how the OECD set the coordinates for what to desire in terms of certainty, control and moral improvement in/with education (Rosa, 2020). To begin this discussion, we use an everyday example of a skiing holiday to outline our psychoanalytical framework of negative universality and cultural criticism. Against this backdrop, we then turn our discussion to the analysis of the OECD documents.

Engineering fantasy – Skiing as an illustrative example

As is well known, the ski industry creates powerful marketing and advertising campaigns that promise the perfect holiday with idyllic snow-covered slopes in a picturesque landscape; a fantasy that temporarily frees us from the minutiae of our ordinary lives into an imagined future. It is useful for our argument to reflect more deeply on what these advertising campaigns are promising and how we might make meaning out of such a fantasy.

The idea of fantasy plays an important part in our thinking and relationship with reality as it offers us the hope of escaping from the present moment of our usual lives by re-organising our desire towards objects that are presented as 'extra-special', i.e. perfect snow-covered ski slopes. As 'sublime objects' these are assumed to possess something *extraordinary* that separates them from ordinary objects (Žižek, 1989). By directing our desire towards such objects, we buy into the fantasy that they can help us to overcome the "constitutively incomplete and fractured nature of social reality" (Clarke, 2014: 595). However, it is crucial to carefully consider the relationship between sublime objects and desire so that we can better understand how fantasy mediates this connection. We start with our example of holiday advertising and marketing campaigns, and then explore the construction and impact of OECD educational policy.

In psycho-analytical terms, fantasy can serve as a way to organise our desire towards the perfect holiday on the perfect ski-slopes. However, by clinging on to such a fantasy, we become caught-up in a belief that the 'perfect holiday and snowscapes' exist and can be achieved. But this is a falsehood, as there will always be something lacking or incomplete about our holiday, which makes it lesser than perfect. In other words, in this case, the idea of perfection represents the *objet petit a*, that which initiates our desire and simultaneously

serves as the unattainable, non-existent object that, we fantasise, will fulfill our fundamental lack (Lacan, 1997). As Žižek (1989) states "[t]he paradox, then, is that the process of searching itself *produces* the object which causes it" (p. 180).

Even though we can never attain what is promised by a given fantasy, sublime objects can function as stand in or substitute for the *objet petit a*. It is this unattainable *objet petit a* that sets:

> our desire in motion, in the sense of the formal frame which confers consistency on our desire: desire is, of course, metonymical; it shifts from one object to another, through all these displacements, however, desire none the less retains a minimum of formal consistency, a set of phantasmic features which, when they are encountered in a positive object, make us desire this object. (Žižek, 2008: 53)

This is one of the reasons why it is so appealing to install something *extra* or see something *more*, in certain objects. These objects provide us with an idea of what we believe we are desiring and simultaneously believe we must desire, so we can feel more whole, both socially and individually.

Of course it is 'unfortunate', that the perfect snowscape and the perfect holiday never existed and never will (McGowan, 2015). In fact, threatened by the unpredictability of climate change, the ski industry finds it more and more difficult to sell the fantasy of the perfect snowscape. Hence, on arrival at their resort, travellers are often faced with large and noisy snow-cannons busy manufacturing artificial snow in an attempt to close the *gap* between the advertised 'perfection' and the experienced reality of 'imperfection'. This attempt to construct the perfect resort is founded on an engineering fantasy where the intrusive machinery of the snow-cannons become a representation of the sublime object needed to realise our fantasy.

Confronted with such sublime objects that intrude into our holiday with the noise and distraction of engineering, it becomes clear that there is nothing sublime about them and they cannot realise this fantasy of perfection. Žižek (1989) makes the point that a sublime object "cannot be approached too closely: if we get too near it, it loses its sublime features and becomes an ordinary vulgar object" (p. 192). The sublime object cannot deliver what it promises and in essence, we see the snow-cannon for what it is – a noisy and intrusive machine. However, such insight – or knowledge – does not diminish our desire for the object. On the contrary, we might disavow the intrusiveness and vulgarness of the noise snow-cannons, yet paradoxically continue to find them desirable. Despite their vulgarity, they remain important for sustaining the fantasy of the 'perfect' (now machine-produced) snowscape – one that allows us to keep skiing into the future.

However, the desire for wholeness is not only orientated towards our quest for the 'perfect' snowscape but is also intertwined with the simultaneous desire to be recognised and upheld by others who also seem to desire to explore 'perfect snowscapes'. By visiting these 'perfect snowscapes', we become the desirable object for their concrete gaze. This allows us to *enjoy* the experience of being 'less lacking' in terms of social recognition and belonging, even though, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the experience of an ontological lack is a basic condition of being a subject (McGowan, 2020).

In exploring the fantasy of *engineering*, we argue that, just like in the example above, policy generated by the OECD seeks to control education in 'noisy' ways that constantly interfere with professional practice through generating positive views. The reason why education is in receipt of such machinery-like forms of control is because it is seen as being "central to deeply held desires for social reconciliation – for overcoming the conflict, antagonisms and exclusions that fracture and fragment" us individually and socially (Clarke, 2021: 2). Moreover, the impact of education is far reaching with its 'gift' and promises of redemption globally being "impossible to refuse" (Peim, 2024: 6). In fact, the more education fails to provide the 'right' solutions, the "more reason for redoubled educational effort" (Bojesen and Allen, 2019: 67). There is always *more* in education to engineer, for example, by means of policy introduced sublime objects like respect, justice and *Bildung* with the aim of filling the gap between the desirable outcome and the real outcome that can "construct an ideologically acceptable [educational] reality" (Clarke, 2014: 587). One reason why we continue to invest our belief in education is the unquestionable promise of goodness that continues to sustain our desire. Education with its promises always appears capable of fulfilling our lacks and overcoming failure, both individually and socially, even though 'failure' is repeated (Carusi, 2024).

Indeed, given this positioning of education, we argue that in OECD educational policy, we often see the claim that the "constitutively incomplete and fractured nature of social reality" (Clarke, 2014: 595) can be overcome if we make certain objects targets for our desire (Rüsselbæk Hansen, 2025). In the following discussion, we critically explore this claim as exemplified in the Learning Compass (OECD, 2019a; OECD, 2019b) and suggest that an engineering fantasy is mirrored in the introduction of sublime objects including respect, justice, and *Bildung* that educators must translate and orient their desires towards without question. We see this as an example of positive universalism complete with its empty promises and hopes (Kapoor and Zalloua, 2022a). With this in mind, our focus now turns to the notion of *negative universality* as an alternative and critical lens through which it is possible to expose the lacks and contradictions that are always inherent in global education policy.

Negative universality – An alternative critical gaze

By adopting the notion of negative universality (Kapoor and Zalloua, 2022a; Rüsselbæk Hansen et al., 2024), we acknowledge that every positive universal statement, formulation and expression is marked by incompleteness without a final meaning. Hence, there is a *negativity* at the core of all social articulations, including universalism, that is not rooted "in a positive element (e.g., identity-based politics) but in a discordant one" (Kapoor and Zalloua, 2022a: 1) that prevents wholeness, unity and harmony. Furthermore, *negativity* can be conceptualised as an inherent deadlock, or antagonism, which makes every attempt to produce a social universal order at odds with itself and reflects its "inability to fully constitute itself" without contradictions (Kapoor and Zalloua, 2022a: 20). Therefore, every social order is defined and marked by inherent conflicts which means that it is *always* in the making and that any promise of completion or final reconciliation is impossible. Consequentially, no form of universalism is either neutral or entirely inclusive, as every form always privileges certain particulars and excludes others.

Analytically, we can distinguish between two positive forms of universalism (Kapoor and Zalloua, 2022a). One form is *abstract* universalism, which "asserts an a priori category (rooted in, say, nature, humanism, or reason) and applies it to all circumstances" (p. 14). In education policy this can be seen in the example of teacher standards where it is deemed that there is an agreed form of knowledge, skills and dispositions that educators should, uphold, know and actually do in their classrooms (Révai, 2018). However, despite its false claims of being neutral, abstract universalism is always stated from a specific position and ends up dominating other particulars. The other form can be named *common* universalism, which "unifies a series of particulars deemed to share common content" (Kapoor and Zalloua, 2022a: 15) in an attempt to be all encompassing. However, in practice, common universalism always favours someone by focusing only on those that fit into the chosen content and therefore excludes others. And so, despite their claims of inclusivity, both forms of universalism are characterised by inherent contradictions, usefully illustrated by an example offered by McGowan (2021) in that if one demands universal "tolerance for all different belief systems [one] inherently refuse [s] to tolerate those belief systems that themselves don't allow for tolerance" (p. 12).

Negative universality focuses on this excluded *other*, or *otherness*, that is, the absence, lack and void that every fantasy of positive universalism produces as its constitutive condition (Rüsselbæk Hansen et al., 2024). In doing this, negative universality engages with how a fantasy purports to come with promises and "visions of harmony and totality" (Clarke, 2014: 588). We suggest that educators should not be insulated from the concept of negativity, even though negativities are often disavowed in much education policy (Rüssselbæk Hansen, 2024) as they seem to be disquieting for educators and "those concerned with the design and development of policy" (Burgos, 2004: 429). Insulation from negativity is often a consequence of the engineering fantasies about moral improvement, certainty, and control that dominate education, which can prevent an engagement with antagonism, absence and lack (Han, 2018).

When thinking about the idea of protecting educators from encountering lacks or contradictions, the fantasy of engineering offers further insight. A global educational policy machine that advocates positive universality, such as the OECD, can be interpreted as reflecting an Enlightenment legacy (Bojesen, 2020) that comes with the belief that reality can be mastered, controlled and formed in certain ways. Not only does this fantasy capture our desires, imaginations and lived experiences in education, but it prevents us from taking up a negative universalistic relation to reality, both collectively and individually. However, this relation is important as "it allows us to transition from [seductive] fantasies that encumber our existence" (Ruti, 2009: 110) and move instead "to the kinds of life-enriching (imaginative) fantasies" (p. 110) that negate the desire of certainty, control and moral improvement in and beyond education. Hence, negative universality combined with psychoanalytic insights provides a means for cultural criticism in education that allow us, as educators, to renew and rethink alternatives in/for education policy.

Engineering the future

The OECD's desire to create stability through positive universal forms of engineering can be seen in their Learning Compass documents (OECD, 2019a; OECD 2019b). Firstly,

through the use of a pathway focusing on moral improvement in the form of societal goals (OECD, 2019b) and secondly through determining the future by means of a compass signalling the direction to 2030 (OECD, 2019a). This cultivates what Rosa (2020) describes as an instrumental attitude towards reality where matters are placed under policy efforts to make them knowable and make the uncertain certain in 'uneasy' ways, just like the creation of the manufactured and engineered snow in our earlier example.

In other words, education is caught up in an OECD engineering fantasy that invokes a desire for making the reality manageable in a detailed way (Bojesen, 2020). Furthermore, Rosa (2020) contends that it is not just a matter of pressing the reality into service and bringing it under our control, but it is "to make it into an instrument for our own purposes" (p. 17). Such thinking brings positive universal ambitions into being and allows them to be acted out in reality. Masschelein and Simons (2013) elaborate on such an attempt in their critique of education policy and describe the insistence on delivering a predetermined outcome (as seen in the OECD's Learning Compass), as a particular way to tame education and bring it under engineered control. Even though such taming efforts may have real effect on educators, it is *impossible* to literally tame and control educational practice as it "cannot be pre-defined, decided externally, or set down in writing, since it defines itself via a process of reflection" (Allen, 2017: 24).

Nonetheless, politicians, and policymakers like those within the OECD, continue to compete in identifying new, better and universalising ways to improve the educational reality (Slater, 2015). Of course, partisan politicians and accompanying policymakers have conflicting and often contradictory definitions of what universal moral improvement means, how it can be achieved and what or who can support or hinder its enactment. That said, no matter how precise anyone is in trying to define moral improvement positively, for example, as " developing core shared values of citizenship (respect, fairness, personal and social responsibility)…" (OECD, 2019a: 1) it will always contain an inherent negativity (a void, limitation or lack) as every positive definition is 'not-all' and is always at odds with itself as something is always missing or left out (Kapoor and Zalloua, 2022a).

At present and exemplified in the OECD's documents analysed in the next section, moral improvement has become a strategic focus for much of contemporary educational policy. This political focus echoes the thinking of Säfström (2022) who stresses that "[s]ocial unrest is growing and thus social stability has become more a question for the ['educational'] police than about schooling democratic citizens who embody a belief in solidarity over difference" (p. 349). This unrest can, if we follow Säfström's argument, be linked to the dominance of neoliberal politics and its engineering fantasy of moral improvement, certainty and control. However, a negative universality lens gives educators a starting point for traversing such a fantasy and engaging with the world, including education differently.

Engineered moral improvement of 'imperfect' education

For education, there is a pervasive call to constantly raise standards and to address all societal ills that "appear to be based on convictions that greatly improved education systems will result from systemic perfection, mastery and control" (Flint and Peim, 2011: 44). These positive universal goals are evident in the Learning Compass 2030 (OECD,

2019a; OECD, 2019b). For example, the documents are described as being a product that is "an evolving learning framework that sets out an aspirational vision for the future of education" (OECD, 2019b: 2) and "supports the wider goals of education and provides points of orientation towards the future we [all] want: individual and collective wellbeing" (OECD, 2019b: 2). Remembering that the moral improvement "rhetoric also proves to be the most seductive of discourses" (Flint and Peim, 2011: 51), it is easy to see how this unending focus on universal improvement is a way of creating a replica of a 'sublime object' which we are all tempted to desire without question.

Adopting a negative universality perspective, provides us with the means to question and critically engage with the limitations and lacks inherent in the false promises offered by positive universalism, including the OECD's focus on the ongoing moral improvement agenda with its promise of certainty and control. It allows us to pause and reflect on statements in the learning framework that on the surface seem encouraging but are problematic. For example, the learning framework is not "an assessment framework nor a curriculum framework (OECD, 2019b: 2) but still has a role in "supporting positive change in education systems" through embracing the "shared destination of societal well-being" that is more than "economic and material prosperity" (OECD, 2019b: 2). Hence, negative universality allows us to question such statements of societal well-being, economic and material prosperity as the universal goal of education.

A further example of positive universalism can be seen in the OECD's assertion that the learning framework is a product generated through "collaboration among government representatives, academics, experts, school leaders, teachers, students and social partners around the world who have a genuine interest in supporting positive change in education systems" (OECD, 2019b: 2). In asserting that the goal of the OECD Learning Compass 2030 is agreed by those who have collaborated in its creation, and thus have readily adopted a positive universal view, gives the illusion of inclusivity (Kapoor and Zalloua, 2022a). Through the lens of negative universality, we can consider those voices who were excluded, what part is played by the undesirable others in this 'shared vision'. In fact, a negative universality lens allows us to take up the challenge of Peim (2024), that is, to deconstruct the idealised form of education and, as educators, to find sites of shared struggle (Kapoor and Zalloua, 2022a). In the following section, our work will explore the impact of activating OECD policy and government in the context of education and schooling.

Activating policy and politicians

As an international body, the OECD is focused on activating governments. The accompanying values and attitudes document (OECD, 2019a) reveals this purpose through statements such as "[t]he importance of developing attitudes and values through education is increasingly discussed in international forums" (OECD, 2019a: 104). It identifies how the importance of attitudes and values has achieved an international, and universal, reach through being escalated across various meetings, events and documents. This creates an urgency within nation-states to *attend directly* to a series of sublime objects in their government policy and thus risk being seduced by the universal promise that the incomplete nature of social reality can be overcome (Clarke, 2014).

Throughout the documents, the presence of sublime objects – supported by a fantasy of engineering – serve as 'tools' to control the future (Rosa, 2020). Nation states must attend to a specific list of sublime objects, which national education policy must then translate into its objects of desire. Educational policy must, for example, orientate its desire towards "shared [universal] values of citizenship" and attitudes linked to "respect, fairness, personal and social responsibility" (OECD, 2019b: 104). What these kind of sublime objects mean and how they can be embodied in educational practices in different nation state contexts is completely *absent* from the document. In other words, they are 'emptied' of meaning, while they, paradoxically, in an *excessive* sense can mean almost anything. In this way, the OECD, (2019ab) documents function as an 'advertisement', just like those marketing the perfect snowscapes of the skiing holiday. By means of sublime objects, supported by an engineering fantasy, the OECD seems to assume that fissures, antagonisms and contradictions in the educational reality can be overcome and that universal positive coordinates for a 'harmonic future', in all its totality, can be given (Clarke, 2021).

In avoiding defining, for example, what respect means, how it can be acted out, and by whom in education, the sublime object of *respect* (see OECD, 2019b) is kept at a distance rather than becoming an ordinary object with a specific meaning. This ambiguity allows us to continue investing belief in this – and similar – object(s) as a way to moral improvement in education. As suggested by McGowan (2013), maintaining such distance is important if the object's sublimity, or extraordinariness, is not to be revealed as the opposite. In other words, by keeping the sublime object at a distance and attaching it to a positive universal engineering fantasy it becomes convincing and desirable. More than that, it becomes a substitute for the *objet petit a*, the non-existing object, that we think can help us overcome all kinds of negativities such as lacks, absences and gaps, both socially and individually.

A further example can be seen in the sublime object of *justice* linked by the OECD to both forms of positive universalism. The *abstract* form is evidenced through examples that include the 'neutral' assertions that "[v]aluing justice has been found to increase tolerance and reduce prejudice" (OECD, 2019a: 105). The *common* form features in statements such as the "development of justice values is critical because values toward justice are considered to be an important bridge between moral judgment and moral action to protect the rights of others … necessary for promoting positive intergroup relations across cultures" (p. 105), and in the idea of a common notion of justice where specific "prosocial behaviours (i.e. helping, co-operating, sharing)" are evidenced (OECD, 2019a: 105).

Nation states perceive the OECD to be an authority and therefore uncritically translate the OECD's desire into their own desire. And yet, the prevailing positive sense of universalism and desire for certainty does not provide space for the negative to emerge. What is missing from this account are the matters of justice that cannot be supported by helping, cooperating and sharing but rather require nation states, including educators, to take a stand, resist or even reject. Consequently, the document is silent on the need to embrace and engage with negativities nor is there an acknowledgement that negativities cannot be overcome and avoided.

Further absences and lacks, can be identified in the discussion around the notion of 'trust'. The OECD document's (2019b) vision for achieving values is to help "countries strengthen and renew *trust* in institutions and among communities" (p. 104). The

existence of distrust in institutions within different countries, results in the OECD seeking to set up a *compass*, as an engineered tool which policy-makers and educators can use in an attempt to control the future. What is completely absent and lacking in the documents is what role the staff in the OECD play regarding institutional distrust through the focus on engineered moral improvement, control and "policy fetish of standardisation" (Heimans et al., 2024: 177). These processes highlight the often unrecognised role education and schooling play in contemporary government (Peim, 2024).

OECD and its creation of non-contradictory universalism

When thinking of a fantasy of engineering, we suggest that the OECD acts like a machine in producing 'noise' around its ambitions of moral improvement, certainty and control. This intrusion is linked to the abstract and common universal phantasmatic *promise* of a harmonic future that seems to be inclusive for all. However, paradoxically a 'silenced' noise is also produced by the OECD machine when sublime objects are used without any consideration of their contradictions. This can be seen in the discussion regarding competency which "involves the mobilisation of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to meet complex demands" of the future (OECD, 2019b: 25). In presenting these competencies, a number of questions remain unanswered and in effect silenced. For example, what skills and knowledge are needed, who decides on what is needed and on what basis is this decision made?

A further example of silenced noise is in the use of the sublime object of *Bildung* which according to OECD, (2019a) implies, "internalised values embedded in the culture; this means both personal and cultural values in relation to others" (p.111). However, what is valued in the culture? And by whom? Once again, the OECD 'speaks' in positive universal terms, when they state: "This kind of [all-inclusive] holistic understanding [between competences and *Bildung*] … resonates with the pedagogical 'trinity' model ('hand-heart-head')" (p.111), which mirrors a fantasy of wholeness without sight of the exceptions and splits.

Significantly, what the OECD with their positive universal formulations *miss* is how *Bildung* is not about internalising pre-given culture values and an orientation towards a predicted and predetermined future. On the contrary, *Bildung* is about opening up the future reality for students in alienated, unpredictable and dissensual ways (McGowan, 2024) based on the 'independent' freedom to disrupt and/or suspend the existing reality (Rüsselbæk Hansen and Toft, 2020). As Willbergh (2015) argues, *Bildung* is built on the "idea of teacher and student *autonomy*", which "is the fundamental bridge between school and real life and school and future" (p. 341). Indeed, *Bildung* based education:

> Is not to try to predict what will be useful and successful in the future, but rather to contribute to the development of independence, so that the younger generations themselves will be able to decide in the future what they consider to be useful, successful and last but not least, ethical. (p. 341)

This typical understanding of *Bildung* (see also Kemp, 2011; Nilsen, 2008); contradicts the 'vulgar notion' with which the OECD operates, resulting in *Bildung* being

instrumentalised (Rytzler and Magnússon, 2025) and *emptied* out of complicated subject matter content that is and has been central to it (Pinar, 2011). Perhaps, one of the reasons is that by avoiding talking about *Bildung* in a pluralistic way, the OECD can maintain its 'instrumental sublimity' that supports the *all-inclusive* positive universal engineering fantasy that pervades the Learning Compass 2030 (OECD, 2019b).

Engineering certainty: Controlling the uncontrollable

Building on our ideas of how educational policy constantly seeks continual moral improvement by *engineering* certainty and control, this part of our analysis explores a potential manifestation of this thinking depicted in the Learning Compass 2030 (OECD, 2019b). We consider how the portrayal of a students' journey, through the *metaphor* of a compass via the positive universal engineering fantasies about certainty and control attached to it, raises several tensions and *conceals* contradiction and antagonism. Underpinning 'journey' are several promising sublime objects, that is, core values and attributes, such as respect, fairness, justice and *Bildung* that should be acquired in education. This will lead, the OECD assumes, to societal harmony and wholeness as they are "the path [s] towards individual, societal and environmental well-being" (OECD, 2019a: 102).

The compass is designed to navigate through an uncertain and rapidly changing reality and can also be thought as a *sublime* object with which, in combination with other sublime objects, the unknown future can be made known and given a clear direction (Ruti, 2009). Notably, the preference for using the metaphorical depiction of a compass has powerful connotations related to educational engineering and manufacture (Rosa, 2020; Saul, 2021). A compass sets a direction, in this case to a collective destination, where the impression is given of a rightful path where we are discouraged from looking right or left or questioning the direction of travel. However, such a perspective discourages the possibility of wandering away from the path on an independent exploration of reality and its inherent negativities such as contingency, unpredictability and antagonism. Described as the opportunity for an unexpected encounter, Rosa (2020) argues that it is through experiences, including those with negativities, that our engagement with reality is sustained and that more pivotal, transformational experiences may happen. In other words, if we imagine our daily commute to school, college or the university along its typical route, we often arrive without any sense of what we have seen along the way – it becomes so predictable that our senses are dulled. But, if we experience *unpredictability*, for example, a road closure and diversion, then the potential for us to take notice and experience something different is heightened (Ingold, 2018).

Bearing this need for unpredictability in mind, the compass metaphor provides a fixed destination that has already been pre-decided for a particular pathway. Therefore, navigation using the compass may permit us, as educators together with our students, to make certain decisions, but it does not allow for agency and freedom to do a radical 'otherwise' or not to do at all (Žižek, 2023). For example, we cannot exercise agency and freedom if the destination in education has already been defined. If this is the case, the paradoxical 'freedom' that will come to exist in education is the freedom to do what one is told to desire. It is also important to note that the pre-determined destination of each pathway

reduces the opportunity for an unexpected encounter with *negativities* that are a vital part of education. That is, to get lost, pay attention and listen to what the incomplete and antagonistic reality has to offer in unpredictable ways (Ingold, 2018). By this, we mean affording ourselves, as educators, the opportunity to move away from a 'controlled pathway' to a more critical space that, by its very nature, is uncertain and cannot be made certain by engineering efforts, noisy interventions or 'misdefined' sublime objects. We argue that our journey is never complete and does not reach a final reconciliation but is always in the making. This argument also supports the significant role of educators in schools to assist students on their journey without seeking to engineer it in a certain direction (Peim, 2024).

Conclusion

In this article, we have problematised the Learning Compass (OECD, 2019b), and the false promises evidenced in the OECD's positive attitudes and values (OECD, 2019a) and the way they create hope for a particular kind of future reality in which contradictions and antagonisms can be overcome. The OECD draws significantly on a positive universal engineering fantasy in combination with sublime objects that are emptied out of meaning and complicated content . Structuring education around this, leaves little room for the exploration of negative forms of universality, that is, a shared struggle and engagement with negativities that confront us both socially and individually. Fundamentally, the OECD approach focuses our gaze on a particular direction, which prevents us from gazing elsewhere. In redirecting this gaze, it is useful to consider Rosa (2020) notion of "resonance with someone or something" (p. 7) as a context for the work of educators and their students. Rosa (2020) suggests we achieve resonance when we "create a context that makes it likely that you will be deeply touched and transformed" (p. 8) that impacts our way to take part in reality. Such resonance may only be possible, if we, as educators, are able and willing to critically reflect on how our desire is structured around the mysterious *objet petit a*, which can be linked to the OECD and their engineering fantasy (Lacan, 1997). In this case, what do we assume we want (and have 'lost') – and what do we imagine we will get (be able to attain) – by incorporating OECD's desire and making it our 'own'? Such questioning is important if we, as educators, want to be able to desire otherwise than what we believe the OECD wants us to do. This leads us to the question: Why do we want to be a desirable object for the OECD's gaze? Is it because we install an authority into the OECD through which we buy into a fantasy that education can be engineered in the right future direction? Does this authority provide the means for the OECD to use education and schooling as part of contemporary global governance?

Our challenge as educators is to consider our role in this process. If we return to the skiing holiday, what makes visiting the snow fields desirable? Or perhaps a better question is how we might consider interrupting this desire through negative universality. For example, by confronting the *objet petit a,* that both gets us to desire and makes us believe that it can satisfy our desire (Kapoor, 2020). By doing this we are given the opportunity to consider the instrumental effect the OECD has on the way in which our desire is produced as well as fixated towards a range of sublime objects namely respect, justice, fairness and

Bildung. Such consideration may give us a chance to release ourselves from internalising and buying into the OECD's positive universal engineering fantasy that has significant impact on our desire.

So, what we suggest is that we, as educators and public intellectuals (Heck, 2022), critically reflect on and discuss what impact the global OECD machinery has on education and how it has changed educational environments in ways that are not educational. Critically we suggest that we must resist the fantasies, including the desires, linked to all kinds of sublime objects and their promises about a shared (common) and non-antagonistic (neutral) future we all want. Albeit, such fantasies may provide us with a perverse kind of excessive enjoyment embodied in the promise that engineering of the social reality is possible (Clarke, 2020).

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Any other identifying information related to the authors and/or their institutions, funders, approval committees, etc, that might compromise anonymity.

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Each of the authors were involved in conceptualisation, analysis and writing of the paper.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in the project is referenced in the paper and publicly available via the OECD website.

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