

PEDAGOGY OF RECLAIMING LIFE :
THAI YOUTH AND DEHUMANIZATION UNDER NEOLIBERALISM

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Abstract

This paper engages in a theoretical discussion of how education should intervene in the contemporary context of the dehumanization of youth under neoliberalism a condition in which young people are compelled to accept a form of existence in which life cannot be lived as it ought to be. Drawing on the narratives of the young people discussed, I argue that education must operate as a project of life one that affirms that life is more than mere survival or being trapped in the present, and that a life is possible only when the future remains open as a horizon of possibility. This approach is conceptualized as what I call a pedagogy of reclaiming life: an educational practice that places the lived experiences of young people their struggles, dreams, and hopes at the center of inquiry and critique. Such a pedagogy seeks to reveal how these lives are shaped and constrained under existing social orders, particularly through mechanisms of governance structured around debt and precarity, while also opening space to imagine forms of life in which the future is no longer imprisoned.

Keywords: Youth , Pedagogy , Dehumanization , Neoliberalism

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Introduction

During my years as a teacher at a public school in a suburban area near Bangkok between 2017 and 2020, several moments have remained in my memory. One of these occurred when I happened to encounter one of my students at a shopping mall near the school after class. He told me that almost every evening he had to travel there to work a part-time job after school. Although he was exhausted and had little time to rest, he explained that he needed to save money to prepare for university entrance. I also recall that toward the end of my time as a teacher, a senior high school student once shared with me her dream of becoming a teacher like me. However, during the period of preparing for university, she later told me that she would no longer be able to apply to study education. This was not because her aspirations had changed, but because of her family's economic conditions. As a result, she decided to enroll in a private university in a different field of study, as the institution offered a scholarship. She described this opportunity as a form of security for her future life. These encounters led me to question whether such conditions should truly be considered a "normal" part of youth life, and why young people are compelled to confront such fates in the first place.

At this point, I initiated my doctoral research project, aiming to understand this phenomenon through in-depth interviews with a number of young people. This study focuses on the lives of young people in the contemporary world youth who are required to work while studying and who carry educational debt and related burdens. During the process of data collection in 2025, the stories shared by young people gradually revealed how their inner psychological worlds are shaped by profound insecurity, both emotionally and in relation to the future. With debt resting heavily on their shoulders, many young people are unable to feel that they can genuinely live-in line with their own desires. They are haunted by the fear of becoming "failures" in the future. As a result, everyday life becomes a continuous negotiation between dreams and survival. In this sense, debt and insecurity have become key mechanisms through which life is governed, pressuring youth to work relentlessly, to live through forms of self-exploitation, and rendering them unable to truly live for themselves under this condition. Fleming (2017) argues, neoliberal ideology has transformed human beings into "economic man," through which existence itself is interpreted through a single frame: economic survival. This operates alongside mechanisms of governance through insecurity, in which life is compelled to persist under standards of security achieved through one's own investment (Lorey, 2015) From my perspective, these experiences represent a concrete manifestation of a new form of oppression in contemporary capitalist society one in which the dreams and desires of young people are reduced to mere struggles for survival. As a result, their humanity is gradually eroded.

In *Daring to Dream: Toward a Pedagogy of the Unfinished*, Freire et al. (2007) argue that under conditions in which humanity is diminished to suffering, educators cannot remain passive observers of the world as it is, nor can they accept such conditions as inevitable fate.

When viewed through Freire's lens, what is happening to young people cannot be understood as a matter of destiny to be endured. Rather, it constitutes an ethical responsibility for educators to seek ways to expose the realities of oppression. Freire emphasizes that phenomena such as living on the streets, homelessness, hunger, inequality, or other forms of suffering do not arise naturally. Instead, they are inseparable from social, economic, and political forces that constrain and produce such conditions. Education, therefore, must function as a form of "political intervention" into reality an ongoing process that enables people to "read the world" they inhabit from alternative perspectives and to act toward transforming that world with hope.

This article is therefore grounded in a critical pedagogical framework that rejects viewing the conditions experienced by young people, as described above, as merely natural phenomena or temporary states. Instead, it understands these conditions as the social reality of a new form of oppression that is eroding the humanity of youth in contemporary society. For this reason, it becomes necessary to reconsider the role of education as a tool of critique and liberation in response to such conditions. Accordingly, this article aims to engage in a conceptual discussion at the level of pedagogy, examining how education can play a critical role in exposing, challenging, and resisting the conditions of oppression that young people currently confront. This discussion is grounded in young people's lived experiences and engages critically with theoretical perspectives.

Main Content

Life Not Born Yet: Stories of Thai Youth and Dehumanization under Neoliberalism

I would like to begin by acknowledging my own positionality. Raised in a family of civil servants, I was not required to work during my studies, nor did I face financial struggles or educational debt. Due to the status of civil servants in Thai society, my education and healthcare were fully subsidized as state welfare. These conditions fostered a life trajectory fundamentally different from those of the young people I encountered during my fieldwork. At times, listening to their life stories brought me to tears. The world they inhabit is different from my own lived experience. Yet it is precisely this difference that compelled me to recognize the deep structural gaps and inequalities embedded within the contemporary education system and society at large. In this article, I draw on the stories of only two young people, selected from my interviews in the field. I consider their accounts to be deeply experiential and emotionally rich narratives that reveal how they have been acted upon and shaped by structures of oppression. Their narratives are not presented as isolated cases, but rather as windows through which the realities of oppression in the existing social order can be made visible. These stories serve as an entry point into a broader conceptual discussion of pedagogy, which follows in the subsequent sections.

During the early stage of data collection in 2025, I was introduced to *Warisa* (a pseudonym) through one of her friends. Our conversation, which lasted for nearly two hours, was an experience that left me with a tightness in my chest, rendering me almost unable to speak. What *Warisa* had been forced to confront was profoundly different from the world in which I had grown up. At the age of 25, *Warisa* was beginning her first year as an undergraduate student at a private university in Bangkok. From the perspective of mainstream social expectations including my own this might be regarded as 'atypical,' as individuals of this age are typically expected to have already completed their higher education. However, *Warisa* emphasized that she had deeply desired to graduate within the socially prescribed timeline, but circumstances had rendered her unable to do so.

Warisa recounted that she grew up in a single-mother household. Her mother was no longer able to maintain full-time employment after her health deteriorated because of working in a factory. This period coincided with the time when *Warisa* was about to enter upper secondary education. To survive, she and her mother opened a small laundry shop in slum. Her daily life after school and during weekends thus revolved almost entirely around work, generating just enough income to cover transportation costs, food, and day-to-day subsistence. Under these precarious conditions, *Warisa* and her mother were compelled to turn to informal lenders to secure funds for their basic survival.

After completing upper secondary education, *Warisa* was able to enroll in a public university. Although she managed to continue her studies through the first semester, she was ultimately unable to secure sufficient funds to pay the remaining tuition fees. As a result, she decided to withdraw from the university and enter the labor market, holding onto the hope that she might one day be able to return to education. She later attempted to re-enter the education system as a student for a second time, but once again was unable to continue. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the university shifted to online learning, and the costs associated with online education particularly digital devices became an additional financial burden that she could not afford. Consequently, she was forced to suspend her studies and return to work once more. Subsequently, *Warisa* obtained a position as an assistant at a school, which provided her with a stable and regular income. This stability eventually enabled her to resume higher education once again, this time at the age of 25. Her decision to enroll in a private university allowed her, as she described it, to “breathe more easily,” as the tuition fees could be paid in installments over the course of four years, rather than requiring a large lump-sum payment as is often the case in public universities.

Warisa told me that these days she feels exhausted. She works from Monday to Friday and on some Saturdays at a school. In the evenings, she continues working by doing laundry, while Sundays are devoted entirely to her studies. Time for rest, and time for living, are almost entirely absent from her life. Nevertheless, she continues to hold on to the belief that one

day she will be able to graduate, secure a decent job, and earn enough income to care for her mother.

Warisa's life reflects the conditions under which she and her mother are forced to exist without access to adequate welfare support or stable income. She must rely on working multiple jobs and enduring excessive labor to sustain everyday life. Standing (2011) describes the status of people living under such conditions as a form of diminished citizenship, or *denizens* individuals who are unable to access basic rights to the extent that they should. As a result, they are exposed to chronic insecurity, the absence of social safety nets, and a profound lack of bargaining power in everyday life. Such conditions do not emerge by accident. Rather, they are the consequences of neoliberal order since the late twentieth century, which have reorganized social life according to market logic and pushed nearly all aspects of existence to become commodified and priced. Education and social rights have been transformed from guaranteed entitlements into burdens that individuals themselves are expected to shoulder to gain access.

Similarly, the story of *Lulu* (a pseudonym), a 23-year-old young woman who has recently graduated from a public university in the northeastern region, clearly reflects life under the same set of conditions. I recall that she described herself directly as "an unemployed new graduate with a student loan debt of 300,000." Hearing this startled me deeply and inevitably led me to ask myself: if I were in the same position as her, how would I be able to go on living? *Lulu* told me that at first, she viewed the loan as a form of "capital" that enabled her to access higher education and a better future. However, this perception began to shift when the outstanding balance displayed in the borrower's application rose to hundreds of thousands of baht while she was still in her second year of study. It was at that moment, she explained, that she began to realize that the loan was not merely a capital for "investing in the future," but rather a burden for which she would be responsible and obligated to repay in the years to come. In other words, her future had already been bound in advance by debt, even before her working life had begun.

Thus, although *Lulu* was able to gain access to university education, the debt she carried compelled her to take on additional work alongside her studies from her second to third year periods during which academic demands were particularly intense. She explained that at first, she took on short-term jobs, such as working as an assistant at concerts or helping senior students with various activities. Later, in her fourth year, when her academic workload began to ease, she devoted herself more seriously to part-time employment. She began working as a storytelling assistant for children at a café, earning 40 baht per hour. However, she did not remain in this job for long, eventually deciding to leave because she felt physically exhausted and that the work was not worth the labor she had invested. After that, she applied for a position at another café, where she worked three days a week, while being required to work full days on weekends. This employment arrangement exerted pressure on her as if she

were a full-time employee, even though her official status remained that of a part-time worker. Ultimately, she decided to resign once again. Lulu added that during this period, there were days when she had to work more than one job in a single day. After finishing a shift at the café, she would continue to work as an assistant at another job. When I asked how she felt about her life during that time, she responded quietly that she “did not dare to rest,” no matter how exhausted she was, because resting meant not having enough money to sustain her daily life.

In a world where access to education comes at a price and where adequate welfare provisions are largely absent, both young people are rendered into what may be described as student-workers laboring subjects who must constantly stretch and recalibrate themselves to survive. They are compelled to learn how to remain perpetually flexible, ready to switch roles, move across spaces, and adapt at any moment under conditions of unstable and unpredictable schedules. This process is sustained through endless self-exploitation, while, at the same time, their bargaining power over their own lives continues to shrink (Berardi, 2009; Foti, 2017; Kittirianglaph, 2017). Such conditions align with what Standing (2011, 2014) conceptualizes as the formation of the *precariat* a new class emerging under the neoliberal order. Members of this class are forced to work under conditions of uncertainty and are compelled to bear life risks individually, in the absence of sufficient social safety nets to provide protection and support.

A special report in *Prachatai* entitled “*Vulnerable, Fractured, and Dreamless: Exploring the Lives of Youth under Neoliberal Society*” by Sirisuttichai (2022) further illustrates that Thai youth who have grown up since the late 1990s are a generation living fully under the regime of neoliberalism. In such a world, social welfare whether in the form of education, healthcare, or housing has been transformed into commodities, with access determined by economic hierarchies. As a result, large segments of the population are left to struggle for survival on their own. Within this structural context, many young people are pressured into continuous competition: to study harder, to move faster, and to race for limited opportunities available only to a select few. The report also points out that the imperative to “succeed quickly” has become a dominant value and mindset embraced by many young people, driven by the hope that it will lead them to their desired future as swiftly as possible. In a world where failure is perceived to have little room, learning becomes primarily governed by economic objectives such as choosing fields of study that promise stability, rapid income generation, and the ability to support one’s family in the future.

In my conversations with both young people, I asked them how they imagined their own futures under the life conditions they are currently struggling to endure. Warisa emphasized that studying while working simultaneously is an intensely exhausting burden. She feels that she has never been able to live her life “as it should be lived.” Nevertheless, she continues to hold onto the hope that one day she will be able to graduate, and that a

university degree may serve as a pathway through which she can care for her mother in the future. This imagined version of her future self is what she clings to as a source of strength. At the same time, Warisa admits that the path she is walking often feels paradoxical: the more she struggles to move forward, the farther she seems to drift from the “light” she hopes to reach. The exhaustion of living a life that requires constant negotiation between work and study repeatedly gives rise to fears of failure that all the effort she has invested may ultimately be in vain. Even so, she continually reminds herself that hard work will not betray her in the end. Her struggle thus unfolds largely within herself, through an ongoing process of self-reassurance to remain “strong” and to believe that, at the very least, her efforts are slowly moving her forward, even if the destination remains invisible. This internal dialogue is condensed in her repeated affirmation to herself: “I’ve already done so well.”

Lulu, by contrast, dreams of working in a field she genuinely loves. Yet the burden of debt she carries traps her between “survival” and “desire.” She explains that she must constantly negotiate with her own dreams. Under such conditions, she describes her life as akin to traveling along an uncertain path one that intensifies her anxiety about the future. She fears that each step forward may lead to the wrong outcome, and that a single mistake could result in a failure from which recovery would be difficult. As a result, Lulu attempts to live her life with the utmost caution, striving to minimize the possibility of “mistakes,” so that if she were to fall, she might still be able to get back up quickly. Even while fully aware that the life path she is navigating is saturated with instability, Lulu shares a form of hope similar to Warisa’s. She envisions a path illuminated only by a faint glimmer of light not bright or clearly defined, but sufficient to allow her to believe that one day she may reach a destination where she can truly do what she loves, without having to live under the constant anxiety of survival. Even if that path is slow and fragile, it remains a path she continues to walk.

Pedagogy of Reclaiming Life

If we turn to the lives of the two young people discussed in the previous section, it becomes clear to me that their stories are not merely individualized misfortunes. Rather, they constitute lived experiences that reflect the social reality of the contemporary moment. These young people do not exist at the margins of society; instead, they are deeply embedded within social, economic, and educational structures that normalize such conditions, rendering them seemingly natural and therefore unquestioned. This section therefore asks how we might develop a critical pedagogy capable of challenging these conditions. It engages in a theoretical discussion of how education can recognize, understand, and confront structures of oppressive power.

Young people’s lives are shaped by a system in which access to educational and social rights is conditional upon one’s ability to pay. Within this context, *debt* has become a central mechanism of control one that compels them to work harder, to exist under conditions of

continuous self-exploitation, and to refrain from imagining a future. Under such conditions, the capacity to envision alternative futures is progressively foreclosed. Therefore, if we are to cultivate awareness, expose, and challenge these conditions, education cannot be an education detached from the lived realities of those who are acted upon by structures of power

Freire (2017) also argues that the human condition throughout history has been shaped by a reality grounded in power relations between the “oppressors” and the “oppressed,” which, in another sense, constitutes a process of dehumanization. This relationship is an objective social reality that not only reveals the structures of oppression but also points to the possibility that the oppressed themselves can become subjects of historical transformation capable of dismantling dehumanization and reclaiming humanity through alternative social relations. Under such conditions, liberation from oppression cannot occur if education remains confined to the mere transmission of knowledge or insists on maintaining a posture of neutrality. On the contrary, education must enable people to recognize and reject exploitation, oppression, and violence, while affirming the possibility of the existence of a different kind of society.

Education, therefore, should not be neutral in the face of oppression, as such neutrality ultimately signifies acceptance and perpetuation of oppressive and dehumanizing conditions. Instead, education must intervene in these realities to assert that existing conditions are not predetermined by fate, but are socially constructed structures that can be questioned, challenged, and transformed. From Freire’s perspective, human beings possess the capacity to act collectively to reclaim their humanity and to co-create a different world. Crucially, the oppressed must be the subject of this struggle, for no one understands the violence of being subjected to existing relations of domination more clearly than those who are oppressed themselves (Freire; 2017).

Yet the crucial question that follows is this: in what position do the oppressed exist within such power relations, and how are they acted upon through the operations of power embedded in society? Freire invites us to consider that understanding the power of the oppressors cannot be limited to an analysis of structural arrangements or overt physical coercion alone. Rather, it requires attention to how the oppressed perceive and understand themselves, and how they position their relationship to the oppressors and to the social world. In other words, power does not operate solely through direct forms of domination or force; it also exists and functions through the production of shared consciousness continuously shaping people’s thoughts, beliefs, and interpretive frameworks through which social reality is understood. It is for this reason that Freire argues that the process of liberating people from oppression must begin with the development of *critical consciousness*, enabling the oppressed to clearly perceive the social conditions and power relations that structure their lives. Understanding this, I argue that it requires revisiting Freire’s insights within the context of

contemporary capitalism, which operates under historically distinct conditions particularly in how subjects are constituted and how consciousness is governed and internalized (Prapasanol, 2025).

In discussing this issue, Lazzarato (2012) argues that debt is not merely an economic mechanism but a form of power that intervenes in and reshapes human existence by reorganizing social and moral relations. In other words, we are governed directly through debt. Under such conditions, individuals' lives are rendered calculable, assessable, and predictable standardized to ensure that obligations are met. Consequently, future time is pulled under regimes of control, while the present becomes saturated with guilt, self-blame, and the pervasive anxiety of potential default. Lazzarato also points out that this condition produces a new form of subjectivity: the '*self-entrepreneur*.' This figure is grounded in the belief that individuals possess full freedom and absolute responsibility for their own lives; thus, every outcome is viewed because of personal decision-making and self-investment. Consequently, education and social welfare are no longer understood as rights, but as investments through which young people must 'entrepreneurialize' their existence by taking on debt. As the cost of access to education continues to rise, indebtedness, default, or failure are reinterpreted as individual shortcomings rather than structural failures.

In *The Burnout Society* (2015), Byung-Chul Han presents this issue that align with Lazzarato's analysis. Han argues that contemporary capitalism likewise produces individuals as self-entrepreneurs. However, Han emphasizes that power in the present era no longer operates primarily as negative power through prohibition or punishment, as described by Foucault. Instead, it functions as a form of positive power that motivates, incites, and encourages. This mode of power makes individuals feel that they *can*, *must*, and *should* do more while relentlessly extracting their potential without limit. Under such conditions, individuals repeatedly discipline themselves through internalized injunctions such as "I am not good enough yet" or "I must try harder," ultimately leading to states of exhaustion and burnout. In this society, the individual becomes a new kind of labor camp simultaneously prisoner and guard, oppressor and oppressed at once. We willingly consent to our own self-exploitation under the belief that this constitutes freedom, without recognizing that this process is itself a form of violence deeply embedded in everyday life.

When examined through the lenses of Lazzarato and Han, it becomes evident that young people, as the oppressed, do not confront an "oppressor" in the form of a concrete individual or identifiable group. Rather, they are subdued by the structural power of neoliberalism a regime that operates subtly yet forcefully in the erosion of their humanity. This form of power does not deprive young people of biological life; instead, it deprives them of the *sense of lived life*. Under mechanisms of debt and precarity, youth are reduced to "empty bodies" lives reduced to mere biological existence and compelled to remain trapped in the struggle for survival in the present. Through relentless labor and self-exploitation, they

endure this condition, sustained only by the fragile hope that life might one day truly begin in the future. However, whenever the body ceases to work, to strive, or to extract further potential from itself, feelings of guilt and self-blame immediately take hold.

In *Form-of-Life, from Means Without End (2000)*, Giorgio Agamben argues that in the modern world, the lives of certain groups are made to exist in a *state of exception* a condition that is no longer a temporary suspension of the norm but has become the rule itself. These lives are excluded from the norms of a “full” or meaningful life. They are allowed to exist only in a biological sense, while being severed from dignity, desire, and the social and political meanings of life. Looking through this lens, the lives of the two young people discussed in this study can be understood as lives permanently situated within a state of exception one that appears as the normalized condition of youth under neoliberalism. Their lives are reduced and normalized to a state in which they remain physically and biologically alive, yet are unable to experience a genuine sense of living. Meanwhile, their dreams, desires, and imaginaries of the future are structurally relegated to the realm of the unnecessary.

It can thus be argued that this is a social condition in which young people are no longer recognized as *lives* as beings with dreams, hopes, and human dignity but are instead rendered visible in what Giroux (2009) terms *disposable populations*: groups deemed insufficiently valuable to warrant protection, care, or sustained policy attention. Consequently, young people are abandoned to bear responsibility for their lives in isolation, while simultaneously being led to believe that such struggle is normal, natural, and simply “the way things are” in contemporary society. In Giroux’s view, this reflects a defining feature of dehumanization under neoliberalism one that does not operate through overt violence, but through subtle processes of selection that determine which lives are worthy of value and protection and which can be allowed to undergo “social death.” In other words, it is a process that determines who is allowed to fully live and who is denied that possibility

For this reason, education must insist on recognizing young people as living human beings, and life itself must entail a future of possibilities rather than being confined to an endlessly recurring present of exploitation, insecurity, and exhaustion. Education should not entrap people within a *culture of silence*; rather, it must open up spaces in which they can articulate their own lives, pose questions, and re-signify reality (Freire, 2017). In this sense, education must be meaningfully connected to the lived experiences of young people, placing their stories, emotions, dream and living conditions at the center of inquiry and critical dialogue. This is essential so that their experiences are not perceived as natural occurrences or individual failures, but are instead recognized as products of social structures specifically, a neoliberal regime that erodes social rights and imposes burdens far beyond what a single life can bear.

Education, therefore, must function as a *practice of freedom* rather than a mechanism of domination, and must refuse to accept assumptions about reality that continuously

reproduce injustice and dehumanization (Freire, 2017). By enabling young people to place their own lives at the center of their understanding of the world, educators play a critical role in helping them see that the lives they are currently living lives marked by exhaustion from relentless labor, self-struggle, guilt, and the inability to imagine a future are neither normal nor the result of personal failure, moral deficiency, or predetermined fate. Rather, these lives are the outcome of oppression, structural violence, and systematic dehumanization. Critical pedagogy, therefore, must resist the normalization of such conditions as the only rational language of reality. At the same time, education must actively cultivate a *language of possibility* a language that affirms young people as living subjects whose desires, dreams, and futures remain possible. This is not a romantic gesture of consolation or endurance, but a political and pedagogical act that seeks to create structural ruptures in order to reclaim life from a permanent state of exception Conclusion

This article argues that the lives of young people constitute a critical starting point for exposing and critically examining how humanity is diminished under neoliberal societies marked by the absence of welfare and social justice. At the same time, youth live can be understood as spaces of hope and as a point of departure for questioning the possibility of alternative futures (Giroux, 2009). Within this context, Thai youth are currently confronting processes of dehumanization in which they are unable to experience a genuine sense of living or to clearly imagine a future. Fear of failure renders forward movement deeply uncertain. Instead, young people are compelled to remain trapped in a “present of self-exploitation,” governed by debt and life insecurity. They are required to work relentlessly while simultaneously soothing themselves with fragile hopes simply to survive each day. Over time, their bodies, emotions, and dreams are gradually exhausted and depleted. These conditions represent forms of oppression and structural violence that operate subtly within society, becoming normalized as the “standard” or realistic way of life. At the same time, the same society permits certain groups to live securely and fully without being forced to struggle or exploit themselves merely to survive.

From this point, the article engages in a theoretical discussion on how education should intervene in such realities. Drawing on the narratives of the young people discussed, I argue that education must operate as a *project of life* one that affirms that life is more than mere survival and being trapped in the present, and that a life is possible only when the future remains open as a horizon of possibility. This approach is conceptualized as *pedagogy of reclaiming life*: an educational practice that places the lived experiences of young people their struggles, dreams, and hopes at the center of inquiry and critique. Such a pedagogy seeks to reveal how these lives are shaped and constrained under existing social orders, while simultaneously learning to reject the assumptions and moral standards that normalize exhaustion, suffering, and the absence of a future. Ultimately, this pedagogical approach aims

to reopen space for a *language of possibility* one through which new ways of imagining and reclaiming life can emerge once again.

Suggestion

The proposal of a pedagogy of reclaiming life advanced in this article may serve as one possible framework for rethinking the central challenges facing critical pedagogy, or pedagogy for liberation, in the present historical moment a moment in which the lives of young people are confronted with dehumanization through the reduction of life to mere survival.

Nevertheless, this article remains primarily theoretical intervention. It does not yet extend into a detailed discussion of how such a pedagogical framework might be translated into concrete classroom practices or broader forms of educational action. This limitation, however, opens up important space for future research to explore how *pedagogy for the reclaiming of life* might be enacted and experimented with within educational practices across different contexts.

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