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# The “pedagogy of personality”: becoming better people in the English language teaching and learning space

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**Abstract:** This paper interrogates how English language teaching and learning spaces become a locus for a “pedagogy of personality”: spaces where ideal forms of personhood can be transmitted, taught and learned. We draw on ethnographic accounts of moments produced in a municipal English language teaching programme in Rionegro, Colombia, and in the English language class of an elite international school near Barcelona, in Catalonia. We explore discourses mobilised by teachers, students, and school administrators that glorify personality traits that should enable students to become “good community members”, “good citizens” and to reflect on the ways in which language learning spaces are imagined to have an effect on learners’ personalities. We claim that it is not necessarily the English competence acquired in these spaces, or the act of speaking English itself, which is imagined as automatically triggering the enactment of ‘better’ forms of personality. Rather, we believe that our ethnographic data point to the fact that language curricula provide the space to construct, spread and normalise moral values which are associated to idealised forms of subjectivity, and desired forms of being. The discourses circulated through landscapes and classroom interactions show how the mere act of being in an English language learning space is expected to raise students’ awareness of the moral duty to become better, more responsible individuals. We make a key contribution to critical sociolinguistic research by placing a focus on how “good personality” is informed by the pedagogic trajectories of each space, beyond neoliberal projects of self. Moralising catholic discourses, values and ideologies, and broader humanist educational discourses inform ideas about personality and personality development in these spaces. Thus, we call for a slower sociolinguistics, that takes pause before reaching for the explanatory power of neoliberalism and makes room for the complex, historically sedimented logics of our research sites.

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## 1 Introduction

Through the 20th Century, English has become established as the preferred foreign language taught in education systems around the world (Phillipson 2009). This paper brings together reflections based on the ethnographic research conducted by the authors in two settings: across sites in which a municipal English language teaching programme was being implemented, in Rionegro, Colombia, and Forum International School, an exclusive private school near Barcelona, in Catalonia. We both focused on how processes of spatial, institutional and individual transformation were discursively achieved, and – generally – the social meanings associated to the intensification of the presence of English in these two sites with educational histories marked by the role of the church in the establishment and democratisation of education systems. We begin this paper by evoking the two very different contexts in which English language teaching and learning (ELTL) takes place:

*“Puede que no aprendan mucho inglés”*

In a class of thirty students, I count three with their heads on the table, at one point Mónica, the class teacher, inquires if they are asleep or feeling unwell – the answer doesn't seem to matter. Four boys in the back corner spend their time passing notes; two usually more well-behaved students make faces and crude gestures to each other every time they are out of Mónica's gaze. A couple of students spend the time with their attention divided between the music pumping through their headphones and what is going on in the classroom. Two girls in the front rows are playing with scissors, deciding whether to cut off their split ends and generally preening themselves. At one point two students decided to settle a debt they have, swapping notes and coins until they are satisfied they are even. A student from a different grade knocks on

*The content of the lesson is always very thin*

The English language class is a breathing space for students doing a double baccalaureate (International Baccalaureate – IB – diploma programme and the national curriculum) at Forum International School, near Barcelona. Activities quickly slip out of the textbook as chatty students talk to each other or engage in discussions with the teacher – winning time off work. Sometimes they stubbornly try to come up with the right translation for that difficult word, or fight with the teacher over that third person singular -s that they may or may not have pronounced. Most of the times, however, pair-work is the perfect excuse to dissect pressing weekend gossip, analyse new romantic affairs from every

the door, she needs to give her friend a book back that she had borrowed.

None of this activity interrupts the flow of this English class; this is the flow of the class. Mónica’s school, San Ignacio High School, in the Colombian municipality of Rionegro and is a good example of a good public school. Mónica is a dynamic English teacher, an active member of the municipal English language teaching programme *Rionegro Bilingüe*. She attends all of the professional development activities and language training provided by the municipality as part of this programme. Located in the urban periphery, San Ignacio High School has the usual problematics of students with difficult home lives, but there’s nothing new there. Teachers in Colombia are used to students who have had family members killed, victims of Colombia’s armed conflict, students whose families have been displaced by the same violence and a somewhat newer phenomenon of students and parents getting caught up in micro-trafficking, consequence of the splintering of the narco-industry, its centres broken up by the recent peace process.

“*Puede que no aprendan mucho ingles<sup>1</sup>*”, Mónica tells me when I ask her about the challenges of teaching English in this space, “*pero que lo que aprendan, se lo aprendan bien. Que lo que sea, que lo hagan bien. Vamos a ver.<sup>2</sup>*”

possible angle, or to get restaurant recommendations for the next family holiday. It’s often very hard to stick to the lesson plan and shut up the talk on glitzy boat trips to Panama or nights out at the vibiest clubs in Ibiza. At Forum International School English is taught through a communicative approach, students’ speaking time should be balanced with the teacher’s. The gossip should be fine, then – as long as it’s in English.

“The content of the lesson is always very thin – it’s always a pretext” read my fieldnotes, reflecting how lesson plans seem to drift away at every English language lesson. The course objectives set by the textbook leave room for this: students should “engage with language while developing own opinions about a wide range of topics”. As many English language textbooks, the units of the IB English B textbook they use (Cambridge University Press) are articulated around topics like (national) identities and personal backgrounds, health, sports, technology, or art, which provide the pretext for students’ discussions. The instructions of what should happen in the foreign language classroom are vague, but in that space the school needs to “ensure that [students] grow as a person”.

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1 It might be that they don’t learn a lot of English.

2 “but, whatever they do learn, they ought to learn it well. That whatever it is, they can do it well; let’s wait and see”.

The two vignettes show an English language lesson at a public school in Colombia where “muddling through” seems to be the way teaching happens, and at an elite internationalising school in Catalonia where gossip and *postureo* (‘posing’) seem to be the order of the day. We observed many moments where the main frontstage activity of the classroom was not the explicit instruction of curricular content, but where other activities that are important in shaping who the students become were taking place. This may arguably be true for any other subject, in any other school in the world. Despite their differences, however, what unifies these two settings and what makes the English lessons unique is a shared set of beliefs about English Language Teaching and Learning (ELTL) as something necessary for individual and collective transformation(s), and achieved through the implementation of Communicative and Task Based approaches (Coyle et al. 2010; Prabhu 1987). Such discourses allow the “down time” in the English language classroom to count as curricular instruction. First, because “chatting” here counts as practice (especially if they do it through English), unlike in other subjects where this behaviour is policed as it is considered *misbehaviour*. Secondly, and importantly, because as we have observed, it is in these informal interactions between the English language teacher and students that the precepts for personality building, which unlike other subjects English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has explicitly folded into the learning objectives, get circulated. By juxtaposing the practices and discourses that emerge from these two educational spaces we seek to explore *how*, and *why* in such contrasting contexts in terms of material resources, similar personality traits emerge, are made salient, and are glorified by different social actors (Jerome and Kisby 2019). And crucially, we seek to reflect on how in these settings, what counts as being a good human, and the motivations for becoming one, are discursively articulated around logics that we identify as catholic-humanist, which is to say, oriented toward the formation of moral subjects in line with catholic doctrine (para la Educación Católica 2018), and that cannot be analysed through the lens of neoliberal governmentality.

With the booming of ELTL, organizations like the British Council, Pearson, etc. take on the role of “centring institutions” (Blommaert 2005: 172) which put into circulation knowledge around the aims and outcomes of teaching; what “good practice” looks like; and increasingly, what the syllabus design of ELTL should be (Shin 2016). Such knowledge circulates through the mechanisms of English the Industry (Gray 2012) – textbooks, testing, teacher training, etc. is formed into pedagogic registers (e.g. Browning 2020; Soto and Pérez-Milans 2018) and entexualised (Silverstein and Urban 1996) across a plurality of contexts through public and private policy and pedagogic practice. Despite their differences then, the two spaces under discussion are unified under the reach of the industry of ELTL and

are, as such, spaces in which the discourses associated with ELTL circulate and are entextualised.

Central to the argument we are putting forward is an additional point of productive contact in that these spaces share a history of being under the colonial dominance of Spain, and a pedagogic history as spaces in which public education has long been under the purview of the Catholic church. In Catalonia, education was almost exclusively implemented by religious orders until 1978,<sup>3</sup> when the Spanish State became aconfessional and a process of secularisation of institutions began (Dietz 2008). However, the Catholic cultural and social legacy is still prevalent in society and education is one of the only remaining public domains with religious presence (Galeote 2004). In Colombia, since the beginning of the country’s struggle for independence from Spain (1810), public education a terrain of struggle between Liberal and Conservative parties – the two hegemonic powers in Colombian political history – the former promoting secular “liberal-democratic” education, and the latter delegating education to the Catholic church (Helg 2001: 161); it is not until 1991 that education became fully secularised in the country (Jiménez Becerra 2018).

A key aspect of Catholic thinking since the beginning of the twentieth century and enshrined in the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) has been around the promotion of a catholic humanism based on the promotion of Catholic values in the individual (Schlag 2016). In light of the focus on virtues, Catholic (or catholicised) education moves away from a proselytising agenda, but rather becomes focused on imparting the foundations of Catholic humanism working under the assumption that:

Virtues are personal qualities of character and cannot simply be transferred like information. Some aspects of virtuous life certainly can and must be taught in their theoretical foundations and implications; however, virtues require formation, which is more than information. Communities of friendship and trust are of paramount importance. Only in communities (families, schools, parishes, neighbourhoods, etc.) can virtues be effectively transmitted

(Schlag 2016: 218)

As such, the catholic-humanist discourse of “formation” has left its imprint on dominant models of pedagogy in both our research sites and which resists a more entrepreneurial or technocratically oriented pedagogical approach that goes hand-in-hand with neoliberal projects (Martín Rojo et al. 2020) that have also taken

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<sup>3</sup> With the exception of Private International schools for expatriate children that were run by the governments of countries like France, or Germany.

root in these places.<sup>4</sup> Of course, we do not claim that these spaces are therefore comparable like for like, indeed the fact that schooling was secularised a good thirty years earlier in Catalonia than in Colombia necessarily affects the residual impact of these catholic-humanist pedagogic discourses (for example the school yard of San Ignacio School still has a statue of the Virgin Mary and some teachers begin classes with prayers; this would be unimaginable at Forum International School). However, we *do* believe (as will become clear throughout this paper) that by attending to both these sites, we are able to draw conclusions about the ways in which the discourses of education for personality development, as circulated by the ELTL industry – the object of this special issue, and often associated with the neoliberalisation of education become “grafted” (Gal 2018) onto and made sense of in light of the pre-existing, sedimented catholic humanist discourses. The result of this is an orientation to personality development that, whilst mobilised by global ELTL discourses, eschews more neoliberalised approaches to personality in favour of orientations that make sense within the catholicised pedagogic rationale of “formation”.

With this paper, we want to add a new perspective to the line of critical sociolinguistic research that has previously focused on the types of personhood or subjectivities and personality shifts that are imagined to be achieved through English. Our field has explored how possessing particular kinds of English in one’s repertoire can act as semiotic indices of class, education, national identity groups, gender or social dispositions in a wide range of contexts. In line with the other contributions to this Special Issue, we too want to think about why it is that contemporary spaces of ELTL (and such different ones) are read by the social actors that inhabit them as a space for individual change, a space in which learners’ personalities become a locus of pedagogic activity. Specifically, we contribute to these discussions from an ethnographic and critical sociolinguistic lens which allows us to understand what forms of personhood are valued, by whom, at which moments and in which spaces. For this, we are interested in two aspects: (a) what is understood by personality, and how this becomes moralised? and (b) what are the underlying discourses that inform, allow and justify the ideals of personhood being promoted in our respective English language teaching and learning spaces?

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<sup>4</sup> We do not claim that these spaces are not permeated by neoliberal logics, but our contention is that these logics are not totalising in either space. For example, Forum is a private school funded through one of the biggest educational hedge funds globally, overtly competes with other schools for students, and implements programmes like the IB, which outline learner attributes that draw heavily on neoliberal ideas of the self, as explored elsewhere. Neoliberalising projects vary in intensity in the two sites, then, and the ways in which coexisting discourses (like catholic-humanist ideas of the self) hold ground or also vary across sites.

## 2 Personality development: a neoliberal desire?

Research in personality psychology defines personality as “the enduring configuration of characteristics and behaviour that comprises an individual’s unique adjustment to life, including major traits, interests, drives, values, self-concept, abilities, and emotional patterns” (APA Dictionary of Psychology 2023). Personality, then, is understood as the multiple traits that coexist in an individual person, and that determine how they act, how they come across – and therefore a key aspect of social identities. Personality development, it follows, does not focus on the “experience of being a subject” (Park 2021b: 8), but on the qualities that form an individual’s character. Educational discourses on personality development presuppose, mostly uncritically, that personality is something that can be disaggregated into traits and that individuals have the potential to pick up and incorporate into their ‘self’, to replace and work on each discrete trait to “develop” and “enhance” their social personas, from a rough to an ideal stage where they can be read as a “good” or even “perfect” person (Singh and Devi 2021).

Educational spaces emerge as spaces for self-transformation where minds and bodies can be moulded into better human beings simply by being exposed to human values, ideas of “good health” and “good behaviour” and acting according to the prescribed (and ideally acquired) ethos. In the past decade, in fact, there has been a resurgence of interest in character education from within critical educational research, looking at political and institutional endeavours of introducing character education into national educational programmes in countries like the UK, as part of neo-conservative political projects (Jerome and Kisby 2019). Based on Foucauldian (1991) ideas of governmentality, critics argue the renewed interest in social-oriented humanist values should be understood as a project of introducing a moralising dimension to individualist, technocratic, educational goals that identify forms of being and behaviours as virtuous or wrong – which, ultimately, benefit the state socially and economically.

An extensive body of work in the fields of social sciences and humanities on schooling, knowledge and subjectification (e.g. Ball 2012, 2013; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Foucault 1988; Robertson and Verger 2012), and critical sociolinguistic ethnographic research on processes of citizen-making through everyday interactions in school settings (Codó and Patiño-Santos 2018; De Mejía 2013; Gao 2017; Heller and Martin-Jones 2001; Martín-Rojo 2010; Pérez-Milans 2013; Rampton 2017; Unamuno 2011) has informed our reflections on how in the English language classrooms, more in than any other school subjects we observed<sup>5</sup> (even

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5 In the context of Rionegro Bilingüe, Peter was embedded in the life of the school, observing Spanish, English and Colombian Sign Language classes as well as extra-curricular activities and

within the areas of social sciences and humanities), there was more explicit frontstage talk on how students should conduct and orient themselves (see also Nyssen, this volume), who should they be – or become. In other subjects, most of this happened when teachers were policing classroom behaviour. This was possibly because part of the language learning was understood to happen through teacher-led reflexive discussions on topics emanating from the textbooks, but with little explicit language teaching. This shift aligns with an increasing focus on ‘competencies’ and the international spread of the CEFR, which informs government policies in both Catalonia and Colombia, and which calls for students to discuss topics related to themselves, their home lives, their families, dreams and hopes (Equals.org).

Communicative and task-based approaches to ELTL, rooted in the CEFR, have shifted the focus away from grammar and vocabulary, loosening ELTL’s attachment to “English” as a structural-linguistic object of study<sup>6</sup> and have subsequently opened up the English as a Foreign Language classroom as a place for what we are calling a “pedagogy of personality”, that is, a space where ideal forms of personhood (Agha 2011), “right” ways of being and acting, are transmitted, taught and learned – that is, “modelled and maintained by mediatized institutions in contemporary societies” (p. 171). A case in point is the IB English B textbook that is used at FIS which has a “Beyond the classroom” section that prompts students’ reflections on how to use the skills and understandings they have developed in each book chapter in practical, everyday contexts. These are framed as suggestions on how to enact the newly learned dispositions which are often imagined as acts of service in the community. In other words, the textbook itself dictates which values and behaviours have to be conveyed through classroom discussion, and how these must be performed by students to be read by others as emblems of good humans (Agha 2011). Whilst these strategies of re-scaling, of realignment are in keeping with trends emanating from the centre of the industry of ELTL, the specific forms this “pedagogy of personality” takes, we argue, is locally negotiated “on the ground” in response to specific situations.

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teachers’ meetings. Andrea attended a wide range of lessons from the primary, secondary and baccalaureate programmes at FIS. These included Catalan, Spanish, English, French, German and Mandarin Chinese language lessons, Catalan, Spanish and Universal literature, and also Maths, Economy, Natural and Social Sciences, Music, Art, Physics and Chemistry, History, Geography and Philosophy.

<sup>6</sup> This contrasts to what we observed in the study of ‘local’ languages like Catalan or Spanish, in which teachers put the focus description of structural features, e. g., students are taught to do syntax trees, or to describe and represent sounds using the phonetic alphabet.



### 3 Parallel ethnographic journeys

This paper is informed by two educational ethnographies of two very different spaces that have been conducted at different moments in space and time, but which have a common link: the implementation of new language policies that intensified the presence of English language teaching and learning in each of our settings. Such processes of transformation have instilled changes in the landscapes, bodies and souls of the educational communities that make up the institutions. Both are spaces where the neoliberal project is not so advanced as in other societies (such as Anglo-American countries, Chile, or Southeast Asian states like South Korea or Hong Kong), and where alternative projects, with longer histories, which we have identified as humanist-catholic discourses are also present. Peter’s ethnographic data comes from research carried out into the implementation of a “bilingual” – Spanish and English – programme in the rapidly-urbanising municipality of Rionegro, Colombia called *Rionegro Bilingüe*. The focus of his research was to explore how this language teaching and learning policy became imbricated in the politics of social and urban “transformation” of the municipality paying particular attention to the ways in which, through policy actions, social actors (teachers, students, members of the public) were socialised into new frameworks through which to make sense of and inhabit the municipality. This multi-sited ethnography encompassed public schools, private language schools, community bilingualism events, municipal council meetings and teacher development sessions.

Andrea began her fieldwork at Forum International School in 2014, 5 years after the school had decided to become “international” and to start implementing International Baccalaureate (IB) Programmes. She attended lessons of all subjects taught at the school, from early years education (3–5) to baccalaureate (16–18 year olds), as well as staff meetings and school events. The focus of her research was to explore how class distinction was imagined to be achieved through the consumption of exclusive educational products, including the trilingual programme that FIS offered and which promised immersion in English since a very early age in a context where the majority (85 %) of the children were from Catalan and Spanish-speaking families. Forum international school is a non-denominational private school that teaches the Catalan curriculum together with the curricula developed by the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) to around 1,600 students. Annual fees range from 3,750€ (primary school) to 11,050€ (secondary education) without extras, which is just below the minimum income in Spain (11,400€) and makes the school an exclusive educational space.

The methodological approach of this paper brings together two distinct ethnographic experiences to establish a dialogue between our respective ethnographic explorations. When discussing our data we could identify common threads in the stories we watched unfold both within *Rionegro Bilingüe* (Peter) and at Forum International School (Andrea). In our conversations we wondered about the shared colonial histories of schooling, but also how globally circulating discourses on ELTL were being circulated and adopted in these particular areas of Colombia and Catalonia. Thinking together about data we realised that we gained breadth to make claims about the circulating discourses, logics, and infrastructures of ELTL.

Both our ethnographic journeys brought us to explore and attend a considerable amount of English language classes. As institutional spaces in the making, we observed how there was an insistence on, and perhaps necessity of, making communal identities, defining a “we”, and establishing the collective values through which institutional and communal life were organised be it on a school level (Andrea) or on a municipal level (Peter). Perhaps that is why it became very apparent to us that in both contexts, there was a clear regimentation of space and behaviour organised around being a “good” community member. For this, specific personal attitudes and qualities (towards the world, towards others) were being drawn attention to through wall decorations, ELT textbooks, or preached through teacher sermons. Going through our data-sets it was perhaps not a coincidence that we had vignettes, or discourses materialised in linguistic landscapes, in which we could see similarities and which departed from the logics we had been exploring thus far.

In the following section we present various data moments from our respective sites which challenge the tendency to assume an all-explanatory power of neoliberalism as a frame of analysis in our disciplines. We have chosen them on the basis that we could observe corresponding dynamics when we did the exercise of mapping out (Heller et al. 2017) our data sets. We traced these as they all showed moments of resistance to the implementation of a neoliberal agenda in our sites, and they allowed us to interrogate the presence and fecundity of these alternative, substrative logics.

## 4 Turning the kaleidoscope

### 4.1 Teaching ways of being

David [deIvId] – for he pronounces his name in the anglicised way – who is leading this session of the videoforo begins by going around the room and trying to remember people’s names. The videoforo is a community bilingualism event held by the municipal English-Spanish bilingualism programme *Rionegro Bilingüe* every two

weeks to teach English to anyone who wants to come. This is a pedagogic event run by teachers from the private welfare-fund, CajaFam (like David) who are official partners of the programme. Having got to the front of the room asking for names, David stops when he gets to me, “hey Peter, how are you? Nice to see you here” he recognises me from having worked together years ago at the Catholic university (whilst my native speaker credentials allowed me to get away with not being Catholic, this was not the case for most employees – David being amongst the most devout that I met), he moves on from me to the young man sitting next to me who I know as Juan:

David: Hey míster, you are?

Juan: Juan

David: Juan ... okay [*David memorises by repeating to himself*] John

Juan: *correcting him*, ‘Juan’

David: yes, ‘Juan’ is ‘John’ in English

David moves on.

The videoforo is a place not only for practising English, it is a place for *being* an English speaker, for transforming yourself, this space for “learning to be John”.

The topic for this session is “Morals and Values” – I now see why David has been chosen to lead(!) – he begins: “define these key terms: love, honesty, respect, gratitude” this last one proves a bit difficult – David explains, “gratitude, for example with your mum, is being obedient”. He continues his list, “generosity, are you generous, do you give money?”. A reply comes from one of the students, “if they can’t work, I maybe give money to an old person”, David is pleased with this answer, “yes, we have to give, but we have to be analytical”, we have to be “good people”, but only to those who deserve it who are themselves “good people”. David concludes this exchange saying, “we need more generosity in society”.

Now the vocabulary has been learnt, the discussion can begin. Once again orchestrated by David who conducts from the front posing questions with a PowerPoint presentation and eliciting answers. “What’s the importance of moral values in society?” The answer, simply “society wouldn’t work”. Felipe, the director of *Rionegro Bilingüe* who is attending the session interjects at this point, he has something to say about the importance of being humble: “there is a gospel teaching about a man who gives a penny and is silent and about a man who gives lots but shows off” to be John, according to the teachings of *Rionegro Bilingüe* it is important to remain humble.

The Final question is to, “Imagine the world without moral values. What can you say about it?” – the answers from the students, positively evaluated by David, would not sound out of place in a pulpit and reflect a preoccupation with crime, violence and safety: “it would be an inhabitable world”; “it would be unsafe”; “crime would increase”; “if we have the problems we have now, I don’t want to imagine the world without values”.

In closing the event and reflecting on what has been learnt Juan speaks up, “moral values are important and we’re missing lots in our society”. David beams, Juan has got the message this space was designed to preach – we are flawed and we must be better people, we must police ourselves, but we must do so against a moral rubric steeped in traditional Catholic ideals of being a “good person”, a “good member of society” and a “good family member”. Or in the words of David with which he closed the session, “we need to change, to try and be self-analytical, to think about how we’re behaving and to think about the family aspect. So thanks for being here with us, with *Rionegro Bilingüe*, God bless!”

In the moments of meta-reflection, as we have just seen, or moments of bought time where students try to hijack the implementation of lesson plans or book-based work, the small talk between students and teachers reveal expectations but also serve to establish particular horizons which shape the hopes and aspirations of young people. We see this also in the English B (English as a foreign language) at FIS, where Judit – the teacher – has become an ally of the small group of IB students through all their self-reflexive discussions throughout the year. “Do you see the light at the end of the tunnel?” Says Judit, as she enters the classroom. The schoolyear is almost over, and students will soon move on to new adventures. Roger asks (once again) if they can watch a film. Why do you keep trying? Gisela asks – one day it will work. Judit ignores his question (once again), and asks the class: “do you see the light at the end of the tunnel? Is it bright? Or is it dark?” “dark, dark” the teenagers mumble in tired voices. Roger adds: “But no one knows!” “I know, that’s why it’s exciting! Think of the future. I see a bright future” The teacher says. Uncertainty is exciting. They should all embrace it. Roger tries to stretch the chat as much as possible, to delay work – and complains: “Judit, you’ve never asked about what we want to do next year”. This is not true! – all his classmates team up with the teacher. Roger dares Judit – see if you know what I want to do. She does know about all of their dreams: they will become aeronautical engineers, UN diplomats, lawyers, policy makers, business managers – and, oh yes, true – a model. And then there is Núria, the brightest student in the class. She will study law, and it’s a bad idea – Judit rushes to say – she should follow secret passion and become a writer. “High power, high income jobs are not as important as your passion”.

Judit’s “anger” at Núria for misusing her intellectual talent by following a career-path that will grant her economic stability, but which is at odds with her passion, is intended as a regulatory practice by which the teacher tries to put forth a

value system that rejects profit. This piece of advice, framed as a pedagogic moment of explicit dispositional teaching, establishes a moralised hierarchical order between the paths of “power and income” (“it’s a bad idea”) and “passion” – the way of virtue. The learning of Judit’s example is that they should be principled young individuals who live their lives prioritising happiness, rather than wealth, living with the heart, rather than reason. These behavioural teachings coexist in stark contrast with the ideal student profiles that the International Baccalaureate sets forth, as we shall see.

## 4.2 Qualities of character in the pedagogic landscape

It is not only over interactions like the ones above where we see the catholic-humanist discursive package emerging. The corridors and classrooms at Forum are decorated with IBO “merchandising” materials, all written in English. The stamp of



Figure 1: In this school.

the IB in every corner helps to explain what the school is, and the “ideals of conduct it believes in”. In order to be IB accredited, schools need to comply with certain regulations in terms of facilities, and also in terms of values: the “mission and vision”, as they call it, drawing from corporate language. These materials are a constant reminder of sought after forms of personhood, and attitude towards the world: “The aim of all IB programmes is to develop internationally-minded people who, recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world. IB learners strive to be: Reflective; Balanced; Open-minded; Risk-takers; Caring; Principled; Knowledgeable; Inquirers; Communicators; and Thinkers”. These ‘Ten commandments’ to become an ideal learner translate into skills that can be traded in further markets of education and work (Sunyol and Codó 2019). The IB learner profile is inoculated to students through their eyes. These ten adjectives became part of the school landscape, to the point of being banalised. They were written throughout the schools’ walls, not only in IB produced “merchandising” materials but also in wallpapers and murals designed by the school or made by students. In these decorations (Figures 1 and 2) they appeared camouflaged among other words, with whole different sets of iconography (like the joined hands, hearts, nature and peace symbols).

Mercè, the IB section coordinator of the school, thought that FIS had been better placed to become an IB school because they already shared most of the IB core values as part of the school’s ethos. When taking a closer look at these constant reminders of what one has to aspire to be, one realises that the skills and human capital based “language” of the IB is enmeshed with other ways of talking about values: respect, helping, friendship, the family, saying sorry, being happy, being important,



Figure 2: Values.

companionship, solidarity, optimism, kindness and a sense of community. The act of crafting these posters is in and of itself a pedagogic tool to shape students views over specific personal dispositions and orientations towards themselves and others. ‘Caring’ here is not about developing work skills, but about “love”, *caritas* (Muehlebach 2013), the togetherness of living, about sharing and tending your hand to others, to strengthen community ties – which evokes the catholic-humanist idea that virtues are acquired through formation of the spirit in communities of friendship.

The banner “we are ... ” (see Figure 3) is in Mónica’s classroom in San Ignacio High School. As an active member of *Rionegro Bilingüe*, Mónica was given a whole stack of pedagogic material from the local government, including banners and posters, which she has tried to display around the school. These banners sit well in San Ignacio whose walls are already home to a rich linguistic landscape - many signs are glossed into Colombian Sign Language to “integrate” the school’s deaf students and to help the hearing students learn some key signs. What makes this banner stand out against the CSL signs, and indeed the other banners from *Rionegro Bilingüe*, is not only it’s colour and size, but importantly that it is not about teaching vocabulary *per se* – there are no glosses here, it seems to be more a statement of aspiration, a statement of desired personality traits.

The personality traits presented as aspirational for the students, in English, via the *Rionegro Bilingüe* programme are: “interesting, fun, brilliant, ambitious, careful, creative, considerate, generous, courageous, compassionate, inventive, courteous, sincere, reliable”. Although there are some adjectives which could sit within the idea of a ‘good neoliberal subject’ the majority resonate more with discourses “formation” of (Catholic)-humanism – a central concern in the pedagogic culture of Colombian high schools as they orient towards *pedagogía social*.<sup>7</sup>

It is also perhaps illuminating to consider the process of production of the banner. Although produced within the framework of *Rionegro Bilingüe*, their production has been outsourced to one of the programme ‘operators’, CajaFam a social welfare fund (one of the private cooperative NGOs created under the constitutional reform of 1957 to implement social security policies on behalf of the State). This welfare fund is well known for English language teaching, and their mission statement claims that, “[t]rabajamos por una transformación social sostenible e incluyente en la que el bienestar sea un bien colectivo que impacte positivamente la vida de nuestros trabajadores, sus familias y la comunidad.”<sup>8</sup> – teaching English within these logics is couched in terms of wellbeing, positive impact, family and community – key pillars in Colombian civil society.

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7 Social pedagogy.

8 We work for a sustainable and inclusive social transformation in which wellbeing is a collective good which impact positively in the life of our workers, their families and the community.



Figure 3: We are.

## 5 Discussion

The data show discursive practices that are pedagogically circulated as shaping and enabling students' personality shifts to become "better humans". The saliency of the personality traits that are identified as "good", "positive", "desirable" even, show



how the changes brought about with the pedagogical apparatus of bilingualism and internationality both through *Rionegro Bilingüe* and at FIS serve as infrastructures that regulate not only the social practices taking place within these spaces, but also the social identities of the individuals who enact them and make up the newly transformed institutions on a daily basis.

Within the recentring of ETL under the logics of English as an important resource to mobilise in both spaces, the English language classroom adopts a key role in the pedagogy of personality – the socialising and valuation of specific personality traits; the negotiating idealised forms of being and paths for becoming (see Shi, this volume). We see how personality traits are conveyed as forms of conduct and “qualities of character” (Schlag 2016) through discursive frames through which students can make sense of themselves. These discursive practices invoke specific semiotic enactments that index “good” personality – giving money, for example, to deserving others.

The frameworks for becoming that we have analysed have what we have termed a catholic-humanist agenda. Being loving, honest, respectful, grateful or generous are all values and personality qualities that serve oneself, but ultimately, the community. The idea of humility that Felipe evokes illustrates this. One should orient to others without expecting any positional or monetary return, simply spiritual satisfaction; the technologies of the self that are operational in such processes, are not at the service of a market, rather, acts of ‘goodness’, or *caritas*, have intrinsic value.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that, similar to what Pérez-Milans and Guo (2020) observe in the context of Chinese returnees, religion (Christianity in general and Catholicism in our case) provides the discursive elements that get co-opted in such processes of becoming, as it enables discursive practices typically associated with the ‘formation’ of affect, emotion, and the moral order, as opposed to discursive practices enabled by the secular, rational, economic logic of neoliberalism. Having ‘a positive impact’ through generosity and kindness towards deserving others, is regarded in the data as a way of nurturing community life whether it be within the family unit, the institutional environment or wider social networks.

The ideological packages that are being mobilised together with – and through – English, and the sets of indexicalities used to convey those do not correspond with traditional neoliberal imaginaries that invoke, at the other end of the transformation, an ideal of individual success which translates to better opportunities for academic development and employability, professional success, and ultimately, greater capacity for accumulating economic capital. Unlike what many colleagues have observed in other contexts (for example, Gao 2018; Highet and Del Percio 2021; Park 2021a), the link between personality development and monetary wealth or competitive advantage of any sort is blurred, if not unclear, uninvoked or even discouraged. As Felipe suggests, we shouldn’t expect something in return for doing something ‘good’.

The access to the catholic-humanist discourse is possible in both contexts given the shared colonial histories. The reasons for moving within such discourses, however, are different. Judit's advice to Núria perhaps makes sense given that they are in privileged enough positions not to be profit-oriented, they can choose to over-look the circulating neo-liberal discursive packages, they need not be 'ambitious', they have no need to improve their material conditions. In Rionegro, where the social fabric is delicate, as the opening vignette framed, the recourse to catholic-humanist logics is conditioned by this brute materiality and the need to repair the holes in the social fabric caused by years of undeclared civil war.

We have brought together discourses which have commonalities but also points of departure. Circulating in spaces that have little in common allows us to see how in the entanglements of religious and secular imaginaries, in spaces where affect and rationality are competing, there are areas (such as the making of the individual, the rationalisation of what it is to be human) which seem not to have become completely dominated by neoliberal logics.

## 6 Final thoughts

Personality development seems to "do things" for students at an individual level, following logics of collective welfare, fellowship and compassion (Muehlebach 2013) rather than self-interest and entrepreneurship. We argue that both our contexts depart from Muehlebach's (2013) idea of catholicised neoliberalism in that catholic and humanist discourses are not co-opted and repurposed to serve the logics of neoliberalism, but rather these discourses exist and are mobilised on their own terms. The attention to personality, as mobilised by the neoliberal ETL industry, is made sense of, at least in certain moments, of in light of pre-existing Catholic, humanist logics that exist in both of these places. What's more, we identify the prevalence of such processes in relation to ETL as it is restructured, not as a place of learning grammar, but rather a space for disposition making, subject forming. Pedagogy in these contexts is no longer (only) a pedagogy of English, it becomes a pedagogy of personality.

The processes of personality development that we observe are not motivated by processes of self-transformation under the auspices of a neoliberal-governmentality (Martín Rojo et al. 2020) or motivated by political economic logics or interests (Park 2021b) as have been the disciplinary focus of recent critical sociolinguistic oriented work. Having purposefully avoided the hegemony of the "neoliberal gaze", we are able to identify a series of governmental processes within an alternative set of logics. The self-governance that is evident in our data is part of a conservative project of moral control of individuals, which also serves to uphold patriarchal, colonial

structures. A focus on personality development allows us to see how the affects, emotions and feelings that regulate ideal forms of being are not linked to competition and market-driven anxieties. In other words, the need for becoming better people is not to develop the homo economicus as Muehlebach (2012) claims, but to facilitate a compliant communal life of the homo relationalis.

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