

THESIS SUMMARY

Learning beyond growth? Exploring degrowth pedagogy within and beyond education for sustainable development

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Abstract

In times of deepening planetary and societal polycrises, accompanied by global uncertainty and a growing sense of hopelessness, education may serve as one of few leverage points capable of enabling meaningful social and ecological transformation. If configured appropriately, it can help address the root causes of current crises, including the persistent belief that endless economic growth is compatible with human-nature flourishing. This paradoxical belief shapes our imaginary of what constitutes a good life, essentially blockading meaningful sustainability transformations. Degrowth radically challenges this narrative, offering a transformative vision of human-nature thriving. Yet how such transformation is supported pedagogically in real-world education remains largely underexplored. This thesis investigates how degrowth-informed pedagogical approaches are reflected, challenged, or refined within nonformal Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Using a qualitative case study of the Austrian initiative WeltTellerFeld, it draws on document analysis, field observations, and semi-structured interviews with educators. Guided by a theoretical framework grounded in critical pedagogy and transformative learning, the findings reveal strong alignment with degrowth-informed pedagogical principles such as problem-based learning, redefined educator-learner roles, and the politicisation of education. Yet the initiative's educational practice also challenges and refines degrowth pedagogy, suggesting its expansion to include learning approaches that incorporate emotional engagement and utopian imagination. Ultimately, the thesis argues that small-scale, nonformal initiatives like WeltTellerFeld can function as 'cracks in the system', 'real utopias' in the here and now, where alternative ways of living and learning beyond growth are cultivated, offering hope and direction toward urgently needed socio-ecological change.

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1. Introduction

“Without significant precautions, education can equip people merely to be more effective vandals of the earth” (Orr, 2004, p. 5), “and of each other” (Orr, 2017, p. x).

I first encountered David Orr’s words in Sofia Getzin’s (2019) dissertation, which introduced me to the fascinating but also potentially destructive world of environmental education. Orr’s dystopian yet timely warning speaks directly to today’s reality of ever-intensifying ‘polycrises’. These cover not only rapidly worsening ecological overshoot, including the breaching of a seventh planetary boundary (Planetary Boundaries Science, 2025), but also ever-escalating social injustices (Chancel et al., 2022; Fraser, 2010; Hickel, 2020). Education plays a pivotal, yet potentially ambiguous role: it can either serve to reproduce and perpetuate socio-ecological vandalisations that Orr warns us about, or it can be reimagined toward human and more-than-human well-being.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a well-known attempt to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary for building a sustainable future (UNESCO, 2014). In practice, however, the quest for such a future by means of ESD crumbles, as its curricula remains tightly tied to the paradoxical belief that endless economic growth is compatible with human-nature flourishing (Berryman & Sauvé, 2016; Selby & Kagawa, 2010; Wals et al., 2017). This idea stems from the global hegemonic ideology of the ‘growth paradigm’ (Daly, 1992), which equates continuous economic growth with economic and political stability, social well-being, and societal progress (Kallis et al., 2018). By failing to confront this pathological paradigm, ESD not only remains gridlocked in charting a path to socio-ecological transformations (Kopnina, 2020a; 2020b; Selby, 2015; Wals et al., 2017). It further tends to fixate our ‘social imaginaries’ of what constitutes a ‘good life’ on competitive individualism, consumerism, and the drive for constant improvement (Feola, 2019; Muraca, 2015a; Petridis et al., 2015).

Degrowth-informed pedagogy offers an alternative pathway. It fundamentally challenges the desirability and feasibility of perpetual economic growth and advances a democratically organised downscaling of material throughput to reduce ecological harm while improving

human and more-than-human well-being (Parrique, 2019; 2025). To achieve such a shift, however, the social imaginary associated with the growth paradigm, the 'growth imaginary' (Schmelzer et al., 2022), or 'mental growth infrastructure' (Welzer, 2011; Willming, 2021), must be 'decolonised' (Latouche, 2014), or in less conflictual terms (Deschner & Hurst, 2018), liberated.

This is because the growth imaginary essentially blocks the urgently needed socio-ecological transformation that is advocated by degrowth (Asara et al., 2015; Muraca, 2015b; Schmelzer et al., 2022). And Serge Latouche (2014) considers education a main lever to achieve growth-emancipated imaginaries. This gives rise to the fundamental question that has guided my thesis: What kind of education can help liberate social imaginaries from the grip of the growth paradigm and support socio-ecological transformation?

To address this question, I reviewed the literature on the intersection of degrowth and education. Despite rising attention (Baldacchino & Saeverot, 2024; Kılıç & Kocabaş, 2025; Prádanos, 2025; Tannock, 2025) after earlier absence in foundational degrowth literature (Barlow et al., 2022; D'Alisa et al., 2014), the concrete forms and practices of degrowth-informed education remain theoretically and empirically underexplored. While Luis Prádanos's work (2015; 2018) on delineating a pedagogy of degrowth kicked-off the conversation, Getzin and Singer-Brodowski (2016) and Kaufmann and colleagues (2019) were among the first to explicitly outline degrowth-informed pedagogical approaches. However, how these pedagogical principles manifest in concrete, real-world educational settings remains underexamined.

This is particularly true for nonformal educational contexts. Formal education is widely critiqued for reproducing the growth paradigm and associated values such as competitiveness, performativity, and individualism, thereby narrowing the space for alternative pedagogy (Getzin, 2019; Rostock & Weller, 2016; Sterling & Huckle, 2014; Stoddard et al., 2021). In contrast, nonformal educational initiatives are typically less bound by curricular and institutional constraints and enjoy greater freedom to experiment with experiential, reflective, and transformative practices (Singer-Brodowski, 2018). Yet, empirical

studies that focus specifically on analysing degrowth-informed pedagogical approaches and their tensions and conditions of possibility in nonformal education remain scarce.

My thesis addressed this gap with an in-depth case of *WeltTellerFeld*. WeltTellerFeld is an Austrian nonformal ESD initiative offering experiential, nature-based workshops for children and adults on food systems, climate, and social justice. My analysis was guided by degrowth-informed pedagogical approaches rooted in critical pedagogy and transformative learning (Getzin & Singer-Brodowski, 2016). Rather than asking whether WeltTellerFeld *does degrowth* or self-identifies as such, it should be noted that the initiative does not explicitly position itself within the degrowth discourse. I therefore employ degrowth pedagogy as an analytical lens to examine how the initiative's pedagogical practices reflect, challenge, or refine degrowth pedagogy. Accordingly, my work was guided by the following research question:

In which aspects and how do WeltTellerFeld's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) practices reflect, challenge, or refine degrowth-informed pedagogical approaches?

2. Theoretical framework: Towards a pedagogy of degrowth?

Working towards liberating imaginaries from growth, Luis Prádanos (2015) merged critical pedagogy with degrowth principles, centring on the need to fundamentally unlearn the ingrained growth paradigm, not only by exposing its social and ecological destructiveness, but also by challenging the perception of human–nature separateness that fundamentally sustains socio-ecological crises (Berryman & Sauvé, 2016; Selby, 2015, 2017). Getzin and Singer-Brodowski (2016) articulated clear didactic approaches in the context of degrowth. According to them, any pedagogy of degrowth must be rooted in critical-emancipatory education and transformative learning, including critical pedagogy.

Applied to the intersection of degrowth and ESD, this means that instead of simply transmitting predefined knowledge and outcomes, critical-emancipatory approaches must centre on developing learners' critical consciousness (Getzin & Singer-Brodowski, 2016). The outcomes are thus not predefined, but rather learners are oriented to interrogate previously

held positions and to identify collective responses. With this shifting of perspectives, learning becomes transformative when the newly gained viewpoint is tested and adopted (Singer-Brodowski et al., 2022).

In the context of degrowth pedagogy, transformative learning may involve inviting learners to recognise the internalisation of the growth imaginary and to explore values such as care, relationality, and conviviality as possible alternative orientations (Schmelzer et al., 2022). During such a transformative learning process, normative guidance can be further supported by drawing on Paulo Freire's (2014) conception of critical pedagogy, which conceives education as a practice of freedom that unveils injustices and foregrounds their redress through socio-political action. Taken together, these strands provide the theoretical grounding for a pedagogy of degrowth: an approach that refuses prescriptive endpoints yet deliberately creates conditions in which growth imaginaries can be interrogated, loosened, and reoriented towards convivial, sufficient, and socio-ecologically just ways of living.

Crucially, this pedagogical approach is neither exclusive nor exhaustive. The degrowth-informed pedagogical approaches discussed here have largely been developed within an ESD context (Getzin & Singer-Brodowski, 2016; Kaufmann et al., 2019), which also provides the empirical setting for the case study of WeltTellerFeld. This, however, does not imply that degrowth pedagogy is inherently rooted in ESD. Related strands of critical educational thought, including ecopedagogy (Kopnina, 2020a, 2020b; Misiaszek, 2020) and education in and for the Anthropocene (Gough, 2021; Sutoris, 2022; Wals, 2015), arrive at similar conclusions from different starting points, positioning degrowth pedagogy in this ESD context as complementary rather than substitutive.

To operationalise such pedagogy, this study builds on five degrowth-informed pedagogical approaches drawing on the works of Getzin and Singer-Brodowski (2016) and Kaufmann and colleagues (2019). First, situated, hands-on, and problem-based learning: it starts from relatable problems and co-creates feasible responses through concrete engagement, cultivating agency, and self-efficacy. Second, structured phases of intense reflection provide "safe-enough spaces" to process the cognitive dissonances that arise when addressing socio-ecological harm, thereby mitigating defensiveness or resignation (Singer-Brodowski et al.,

2022). Third, the redefinition of educator–learner roles moves from hierarchical transmission towards reciprocity, with content shaped by learners’ experiences rather than pre-decided topics. Fourth, critical reflection on formal education problematises how schooling can reproduce growth logics via performativity and competition. Fifth, and finally, the politicisation of education is understood not as the imposition of a particular orientation but as making power asymmetries and injustices visible while showing options for collective engagement beyond individual agency.

Figure 1 synthesises the five degrowth-informed pedagogical approaches into the Degrowth Pedagogical Framework. Importantly, and in line with a critical-emancipatory understanding of education rather than an instrumental one (Getzin & Singer-Brodowski, 2016; Vare & Scott, 2007; Wals et al., 2008), the framework, and degrowth pedagogy more broadly, is not intended to prescriptively serve the realisation of a predefined ‘degrowth future’. This orientation is imperative, as an instrumentalised degrowth pedagogy would risk reproducing the very logics it seeks to challenge by replacing hegemonic growth imaginaries with prescribed alternatives. Accordingly, degrowth pedagogy and the framework presented here remain inherently emancipatory: rather than imposing new imaginaries, they enable conditions in which learners can critically reflect on their positions and develop their own orientation for socio-ecological transformation.

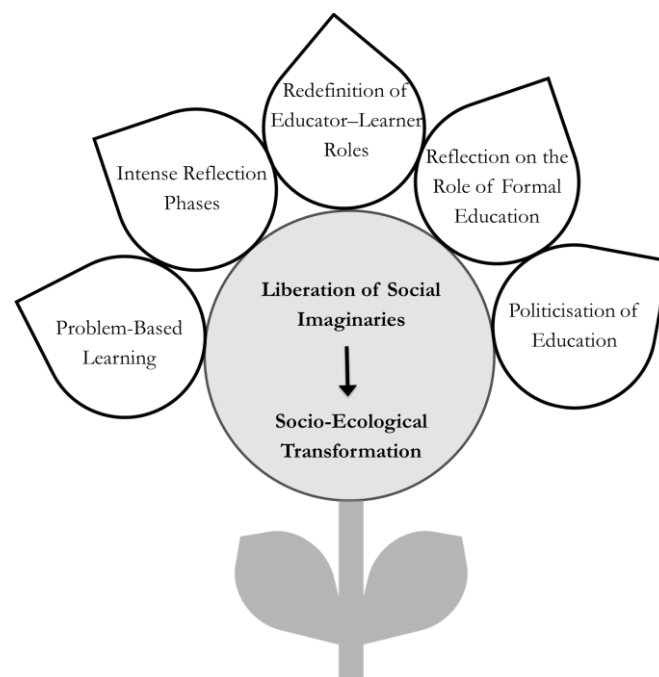


Figure 1. The Degrowth Pedagogical Framework (author’s illustration).

3. Methods: A case of ‘real-existing’ degrowth pedagogy?

To examine how these approaches materialise in practice, I operationalised the framework in an in-depth qualitative study of the nonformal ESD initiative WeltTellerFeld. Located on the outskirts of Vienna, the initiative visualises the land footprint of the average Austrian diet and, through experiential, nature-based workshops, links everyday consumption to its socio-ecological consequences. As such, WeltTellerFeld provides a fertile setting for examining degrowth-compatible pedagogy.

I scrutinised the degree of compatibility, friction, and refinement of WeltTellerFeld’s approaches with, and of, degrowth pedagogy by analysing pedagogical documents through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with educators. The material was then coded using the degrowth pedagogical framework and qualitative content analysis (deductive–inductive). My contributions are far from being statistically generalisable due to the single-case scope, lack of access to workshops with children, and the small interview sample. Rather, they clarify how degrowth pedagogy can be enacted in real-world educational practice while simultaneously indicating how it may support the liberation of social imaginaries and orient learners toward socio-ecological change. In this sense, my study follows the idea of ‘real-existing degrowth’ by Kallis and colleagues (2022), which identifies present examples of initiatives that resist the growth paradigm. Transposed to the educational context, I asked how the educational practices of WeltTellerFeld reflect, challenge, or refine a pedagogy of degrowth?

4. Degrowth pedagogy in practice?

4.1. Welttellerfeld’s integrated understanding of problem-based learning

Problem-based learning, including situated- and action-orientated elements, is the first degrowth-informed pedagogical approach and it lies at the heart of WeltTellerFeld’s educational philosophy. Their workshops usually start with the “living worlds” of learners, problematising issues they can relate to in everyday life, such as dietary choices or food waste. Activities include tracing the origins of the ingredients of one’s last meal or stepping into a

one-square-metre “chicken space,”¹ which translates abstract socio-ecological issues into tangible experiences. Opening these issues is not the end point but a starting point for identifying low-threshold action opportunities that build self-efficacy and counter feelings of helplessness (Getzin & Singer-Brodowski, 2016). These include seasonal food choices, waste reduction, or changes in meat consumption that learners choose for themselves, building a sense of agency in a world that often appears unchangeable. All this unfolds in a nature-based learning environment that counters the ‘nature-deficit disorder’ (Louv, 2013) affecting children and society at large. Since human–nature separateness is identified as a root driver of ecological crises (Berryman & Sauv  , 2016; Selby, 2015; 2017), such experiences help learners revalue and reconnect with life–giving natural systems.

4.2. Phases of intense reflection: From awareness to utopian imagination

Following this hands-on learning, WeltTellerFeld’s educational practice likewise integrates phases of intense reflection. These build on the deliberate thematisation of disorienting topics, such as animal welfare, child labour, or climate injustice, that infiltrate the position and privileges of learners. Instead of moralising these issues, subsequent reflective discussions centre on acknowledging the emergent ‘cognitive dissonance’ (Selby, 2015), and on steering learners towards identifying actionable responses. Accordingly, dissonance becomes a resource for learning rather than a trigger for defensiveness or withdrawal (Getzin & Singer-Brodowski, 2016; M  lkk  , 2019). Learners’ previous positions or imaginaries may shift during this process, giving rise to a pedagogical paradox: while degrowth education aims to liberate the imaginary from growth imperatives, it simultaneously cannot prescribe a new orthodoxy. WeltTellerFeld’s practices themselves suggest a potential solution to this paradox: the centring of utopian imagination. This resonates not only with degrowth, sometimes described as a “utopian project,” but more importantly, invites learners to “draw their own utopia” (Kallis & March, 2015). Guided by core degrowth principles including care, sufficiency, and autonomy (Parrique, 2019), the co-created alternative realities can offer orientation for newly emancipated imaginaries conducive to socio-ecological transformation.

¹ Exercises such as these help learners to understand that a single meal can span continents and carry significant socio-ecological footprints, and to feel how little room farmed chickens may have.

4.3. Allowing emotions for richer learning, and life?

It is within these phases of intense reflection that another pedagogical dimension inductively emerged in the research (and is therefore not included in Figure 1): emotional, motivational, and humorous learning. Affective learning is central to WeltTellerFeld's educational approach, deliberately invoking emotional responses to socio-ecological crises. Shifting from facts to feelings, perspective-taking exercises such as imagining how a pet would feel if it had the same space as a conventionally raised chicken target learners' emotional touchpoints to create durable memory and meaning. Such exercises often produce moments of "pulling back the curtain," in which previously held ideas are challenged, and issues are seen in a new light. To avoid withdrawal or paralysis, emotions such as sadness, discomfort, or anger must be acknowledged, and then channelled into a sense of agency through low-threshold, self-chosen steps (e.g. alternative treatment of animals). Humour likewise plays a central role, making emotionally loaded subjects more digestible while inspiring learners to imagine improved situations and identify steps to realise them. The result is a cultivation of emotional empathy that not only enriches life and learning, as one educator put it, but also supports a renewed harmonisation between nature and us.

4.4. Not a teacher, not a friend? Navigating trainer-learner boundaries

This learning is supported by a redefinition of the relational educator and learner roles, as part of the degrowth-informed pedagogical approach. WeltTellerFeld understands its educators to be in a "dialogical relationship" with learners, in which learners' experiences shape the educational content and its direction. Accordingly, learners do not simply receive information, but also equally contribute to the learning, including the educators' own learning. Such practices resonate with Freire's (2014) concept of "co-intentional education", where both educator and learner engage in the collective construction of meaning. In addition, WeltTellerFeld also refines the degrowth-informed pedagogical approach by cautioning against a romanticisation of flat hierarchies. Educators describe a necessary "balancing act" between eye-level relations and pedagogical authority. In this sense, the case of WeltTellerFeld shows that critical-emancipatory and horizontal education can still harmonise with limited and purpose-oriented authority. This is not to impose outcomes, but rather to provide guidance so learners can orient themselves and find redressive responses in times of socio-ecological crises.

4.5. From iron fists to a pluriverse: Reimagining formal education

On the last degrowth-informed pedagogical approach derived from Getzin and Singer-Brodowski (2016), the critical reflection of the role of formal education, WeltTellerFeld does not position itself as a critic of formalised education per se. Rather, its educational practice questions and challenges mental infrastructures such as performativity and competition that are typically reproduced and reinforced within school settings. These infrastructures repeatedly surface not only in students' behaviour but also in the actions of accompanying schoolteachers, "ruling with an iron fist," as one educator described it. An illustrative example is the primacy placed on reciting factual knowledge, often detached from scrutiny of assumptions and without translation into transformative action. In response, WeltTellerFeld's educators seek to dismantle these infrastructures and instead centre learning inspired by pluriversal knowledges, cultivating critical consciousness, socio-ecological empathy, and the collective identification of feasible actions.

4.6. The (constrained) politicisation of the individual versus the systemic

These potential actions bring us to the final degrowth-informed pedagogical approach: the politicisation of education (Kaufmann et al., 2019). This approach presents a fundamental conundrum for WeltTellerFeld's pedagogy. On the one hand, the initiative foregrounds low-threshold, individual actions, most notably dietary shifts, since they represent motivating entry points to build self-efficacy in addressing socio-ecological crises. On the other hand, WeltTellerFeld seeks not to reproduce ESD's pitfall of the individualisation of responsibility that tends to leave unaddressed the systemic root causes of unsustainability and injustice (Sterling, 2010). The initiative bridges this dialectical tension by linking the limits of individual action to structural conditions, such as corporate power and public policy, stressing that crises are neither caused nor solved by consumers alone. Moving from the individual to the systemic level, educators offer non-partisan remedies such as petitions or local initiatives, letting learners themselves decide where and how their engagement becomes meaningful. Often, however, this politicisation remains necessarily constrained by the time-bound nature of the workshops and the risk of overwhelming learners given the 'wickedness' of sustainability crises. This notwithstanding, WeltTellerFeld also demonstrates that education's politicisation need not always be explicit in content to be real in effect. The initiative itself, its existence, its

methods, and the critical consciousness and habits it promotes, incentivise systemic change without explicitly burdening learners with the responsibility for its implementation.

5. Conclusion: From cracks in the system to radical hope

In my thesis, I asked what kind of education can help liberate social imaginaries from the grip of the growth paradigm, orienting them instead toward socio-ecological change. Seeking answers in a pedagogy of degrowth, I examined how the nonformal ESD practices of WeltTellerFeld reflect, challenge, and refine a degrowth-informed pedagogical framework. The results show that a nonformal, nature-based initiative can meaningfully enact degrowth pedagogy while acting as a ‘crack’ (Wright, 2010) in the dominant educational system: the initiative begins with learners’ living worlds, translating wicked socio-ecological crises into hands-on experiences; critically reflects on privileges and the dissonances that arise therefrom; cultivates dialogical educator–learner relations, problematises the performance logics linked to formal education while advancing alternatives grounded in socio-ecological empathy; and politicises education by linking low-threshold individual action to systemic change, offering non-prescriptive pathways for collective engagement.

At the same time, WeltTellerFeld refines the degrowth pedagogical framework in two important ways. It centres emotional learning as a necessary form of literacy for transformation, and foregrounds utopian imagination as a non-prescriptive compass for envisioning alternative realities and futures. Accordingly, two new petals, emotional and utopian learning, can be added to the sunflower diagram of the degrowth pedagogical framework, underscoring it as a living and expandable framework (see Figure 2).

My thesis research was, of course, not without limitations, among them the single case scope, the unresolved question of whether imaginaries are sustainably liberated, and the absence of students’ and schoolteachers’ perspectives. Due to the lack of these perspectives, the findings cannot speak to the educational effectiveness of the pedagogical approaches but nonetheless provide insight into how degrowth pedagogy can be articulated in practice. Furthermore, as both the literature drawn upon and the case study of WeltTellerFeld are situated within

Western European contexts, the employed and expanded framework of degrowth pedagogy is neither exhaustive nor universally applicable, but rather contextually circumscribed.

This, in turn, underlines the importance of comparing degrowth pedagogy across socio-cultural environments, contributing to a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of degrowth education. Other avenues for further research include in-depth and long-term analyses with clear indicators to trace how and when imaginaries shift and become liberated, as well as fostering collaborations between nonformal and formal education to deepen iterative exposure and impact. Taken together, the case of WeltTellerFeld shows how small initiatives can open cracks in dominant educational systems by loosening the grip of the growth paradigm while simultaneously offering orientation and “radical hope” for urgently needed socio-ecological transformation.

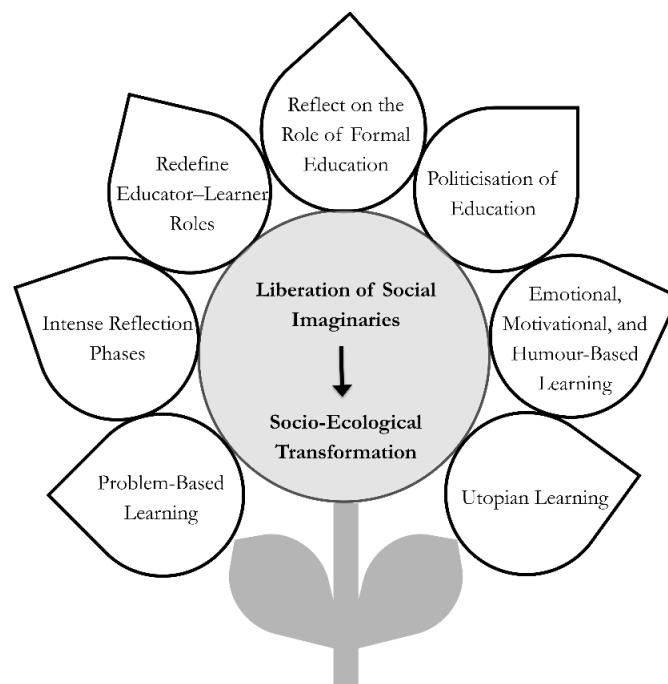


Figure 2. The Expanded Degrowth Pedagogical Framework (author's illustration)

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Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Use of artificial intelligence

Generative AI (including ChatGPT and Claude) was used to check spelling and refine the wording.²

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² The editorial collective wishes to note that since this publication was accepted, the journal has revised its policy on use of artificial intelligence and will no longer accept content prepared using generative AI. The new policy is indicated in the [guide for authors](#) and discussed in an [addendum to the journal's manifesto](#).

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