RISKING OURSELVES IN CLASSROOMS

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The Beautiful Risk of Education
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As a philosopher of education interested in pragmatism's potential for fostering democratic relations, Gert Biesta has concerned himself quite directly with the workings of schools. He has attended, as Dewey did, to articulating the commitments of a distinctively democratic school practice and to considering the ways in which contemporary ideas about learning have shaped school practice. Drawing upon his background in post-war continental philosophy, Biesta has also opened up a number of challenging constructs that can be seen as relevant for educators, interpreting these with pedagogical purposes specifically in mind.

In his most recent book, *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, Biesta engages with figures such as Lévinas, Derrida, Foucault, Rancière, and Arendt in order to reconsider traditional democratic notions such as autonomy and equality and to advance two others he has identified as central, 'uniqueness' and 'coming into the world' (Biesta, 2014).[1] Both of these latter notions speak to the subjective quality of an individual life, to the philosophical purposes and political possibilities of claiming a sense of one's singular subjectivity in relation to others through joint action in the world.

Biesta is interested in multiplying the circumstances within which people matter as individuals and believes that educators are well situated to foster such occasions by creating spaces for thoughtful exchanges regarding the actions and understandings of their students. The 'beautiful risk' he cites in his title refers to the uncertainty that Biesta sees as inevitably pervading all attempts to educate the young: he speaks of pedagogical relations as delicate and contingent systems that can be influenced, but never controlled and that, in turn, can influence, but never reliably constrain or organize students' emerging outlooks and interpretations.

As he has elsewhere, Biesta distinguishes between three dimensions of educational experience, which he sees as interpenetrating in practice: *qualification*, *socialization*, and *subjectification* (Biesta, 2010). In Biesta's words, the dimension of *qualification* "has to do with the ways in which, though education, individuals become qualified to do certain things"; *socialization* "has to do with the ways in which, through education, individuals become part of existing social, political, [and] professional … 'orders'"; and *subjectification* has to do with "how individuals … can be independent—or as some would say, autonomous—subjects of action and responsibility" (2014, p. 64).[1] While Biesta views all three dimensions as appropriate to the work of schools, he is specifically concerned with how relatively little discussion one hears about this third, distinctively democratic dimension, the work of supporting students in becoming intellectually independent and responsible 'subjects of action.'[2] Having treated related themes in two previous books (Biesta 2006, 2010), Biesta focuses entirely on this third dimension here.

A sense of the seriousness Biesta brings to the matter of subjectification can be gleaned in an early discussion of Lévinas and what Biesta terms Lévinas' 'ethics of subjectivity.' Lévinas believes that we are all born into a primal responsibility for others that precedes all individuation and so all choice. In his view, this responsibility constitutes the "essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity," and so it is only in taking up that responsibility that we exist as subjects (Lévinas, 1981, p. 102; cited in Biesta, 2014, p. 20). While a background in the work of Lévinas will serve readers, Biesta successfully establishes two key implications of this construction for his argument: the act of claiming responsibility can never be externally forced, but rather must be personally motivated, and is only ever likely to occur in response to highly sensitive and attuned forms of inter-subjective openings.

Throughout, Biesta can be seen as deepening and complicating Dewey's broader call to pragmatism with his existential interest in each person's ultimate responsibility for the defining expressions of his or her life and a deconstructive attention to all that necessarily goes unremarked and unrepresented. While Dewey can be seen as having focused on building a nation bound by shared commitments rather than shared ancestry, Biesta concerns himself with the nurture of a rare quality of human relationship within schools. While both scholars would recognize the vital connections between these projects, Biesta's shift in emphasis brings with it

something new, something that may provide new openings into pragmatism for some.

In his principal explicit engagement with Dewey in chapter two, Biesta draws on Derrida in calling for a 'deconstructive pragmatism,' which would expose organizing tenets of Dewey's (such as his positioning of communication as the origin of human consciousness) to those same processes of disruption and transformation that Dewey himself identified as the source of all understanding. Whether explicitly or no, however, Biesta remains in conversation throughout with Dewey, the progressive pedagogical tradition, and the role constructivist learning theories can be seen to have played in advancing certain understandings and practices within schools.

While this breadth of engagement is to be welcomed—and certainly these topics represent a natural set—as a philosopher, Biesta seems to lean more heavily on received understandings in his discussions of constructivist theory, positioning Dewey and Piaget (and more surprisingly, Vygotsky) as representatives of a broad constructivist tradition that can be usefully assessed in relation to the ways it has been commonly interpreted by educators and policy makers.[3] Constructivism, in this view, has "given up on the idea that teachers have something to teach and that students have something to learn from their teachers" (Biesta, 2014, p. 46).[4]

It is disappointing, after having grappled with Biesta's nuanced recalibration of Dewey in the prior chapter, to find him uncritically associating Dewey's name with this familiar misappropriation of Dewey's thought, an association that is also inappropriate in the case of Vygotsky and, arguably so, in the case of Piaget. Certainly, constructivism so conceived provides educators with an empty hand (and not in a good way) and, as Biesta argues in subsequent chapters, allows for the naturalization of a process that needs to be seen as not just historically situated, but also as intellectually coherent and morally principled. Fortunately, when considered more closely, the scholarship of all three of these iconic theorists can actually be seen as contributing in important ways to this required conceptual grounding, a topic to which I return below.[5]

In other regards, Biesta marshals an effective case against this global movement toward an unqualified naturalization of learning, which calls on all of us to become "lifelong learners" in the interest of maintaining our status as useful players within a constantly morphing economic order. As Biesta notes, this call can be seen to mirror

the K-12 push to design learning environments that recreate the challenges of contemporary and future work environments and as extending these efforts throughout a citizen's lifetime. The project of designing learning environments with an eye on the workplaces of tomorrow now commonly overruns all consideration of the deeper questions that vibrant democratic societies must also ask themselves regarding, for example, the character and claims of various forms of human knowledge and the defining aspects of distinctively democratic forms of pedagogical authority.

As Biesta has himself pointed out, though, one also needs to reference other dimensions of practice in considering the desired character of democratic schools. Early in this book, Biesta makes a point of eschewing the familiar psychological language of identity, individuality, and development for a language of subjectivity, and no doubt many readers will welcome the release his vocabulary provides from the product orientation that pervades so much else of what gets said about schools. At the same time, when we turn our attention to concerns associated with the dimensions of *qualification* and *socialization*, so present in the minds of so many, might not the terms 'identity' and 'individuality' serve, not only in the obvious ways, but also perhaps as conceptual placeholders for some of what we intend when we talk about *subjectification*? In more general terms, might it not serve educational theorists to be working toward a vocabulary that can speak across all three of the dimensions Biesta frames?

As for the notion of 'development,' and the Piagetian and Vygotskian theoretical lenses specifically, I would not only argue that these constructs can inform thinking about processes of qualification and socialization, but also that they bring needed perspective to issues Biesta raises in regards to subjectification. For example, Biesta recaps Westphal's recent treatment of Kierkegaard on the conditions within which a teacher would be "essential rather than accidental": Kierkegaard concluded that the teacher would need, not simply to share "the truth" with students, but also to share "the condition of recognizing it as truth" (Westphal, 2008, p. 9; cited in Biesta, ibid, p. 50).

Whatever it might mean to provide students with conditions within which they may come to recognize an understanding as subjectively true (and we can hope to see Biesta returning to this question in future work), contemporary understandings regarding developmental differences in the ways in which children see and understand their worlds (Piaget) and the ways in which culturally established

means and modes of thought serve to acculturate us all (Vygotsky) both stand to inform that discussion.[6] More generally, careful consideration of the developmental processes through which individual children learn to reason in culturally respected terms and to observe, interact with, and interpret the world promises to inform our thinking about Biesta's notions of both "uniqueness" and "coming into the world," as, increasingly, contemporary approaches to such study bring both the soul who comes and the world that responds into view.

Democratic educators will, certainly, need to supplement the language of human development with others drawn from philosophy, and specifically political philosophy, when considering the character of democratic pedagogical practice and authority; and Biesta makes many valuable contributions here. In reflecting upon a democratic teacher's fundamental responsibilities, for example, Biesta turns to Rancière's treatment of Joseph Jacotot, the post-revolutionary French schoolmaster who discovered that children could learn without having everything explained to them (Rancière, 1991). Jacotot came to believe that democratically minded schoolmasters owed just two responsibilities to their students: to insist that students speak what they know and to verify that they attend with care to what they claim. He termed this notion *universal education*, and argued that only by adopting such an approach could teachers position the children of the dispossessed as the intellectual equals of children of privilege.[7]

Biesta usefully situates this discussion in relation to the Enlightenment thought that informed Jocotot's insight and to which one can trace, more broadly, the Western world's relatively recent interest in the idea that schools should foster children's intellectual autonomy. This historical perspective suggests a number of the organizing relationships underlying the progressive pedagogical tradition: as a result of their shared Enlightenment inheritance, for example, both Piaget and Rancière looked for democratic educators to position students as respected intellectual agents, rather than as vessels for the understandings of others (see also, Bingham& Biesta, 2010; Rancière, 2004, pp. ix – xxviii; Vidal, 1994).[8]

Given Biesta's larger ambitions, as well as his prior discussion of Kierkegaard, one expects that these two basic responsibilities that Jacotot identified can be seen as relating in some manner to a condition wherein students are able to recognize truth. But then the question of 'whose truth?' naturally arises. Or perhaps the more pedagogically relevant question would be, to what extent—and on what bases—do we expect or hope for this truth to be shared among the various members of a

particular classroom? Here, democratic educators do well to return to the theoretical framework Dewey provides. For as Dewey explicated, authentically democratic forms of pedagogical authority must ultimately rest upon a developed understanding of how different types of knowledge come to be established within the democratic world and the status these different types of knowledge can thereby be seen to hold in relation both to recognized social aims and to personally held beliefs and understandings (Dewey, 1916/1944).

In one of his final chapters, Biesta opposes taking a developmental perspective on this defining democratic tension with taking a political one, drawing specifically on Arendt's notion of 'being-together-in-plurality.' As a post-war political philosopher, Arendt dwelt at length on the contradictions and demands of a world in which people long both to assert their potentially disruptive singularity *and* to cohere within social groupings as one of many. Biesta agrees with Arendt that the challenge of 'being together in plurality' must be seen as political: and who would not agree that this a matter with political dimensions? In addition to "a vocabulary of "development," "preparation," "identity," and "control,"" democratic educators should certainly indeed welcome an active professional engagement with "notions of "action," "plurality," subjectivity," and "freedom"" (Biesta, 2014, pp. 103 – 105).

Although Arendt emphatically rejected the idea that schools should be involved in political matters, seeing the required movement toward individuation as the work of adulthood, Biesta positions her concept of 'being together in plurality' as a guiding framework for the work of democratic schools. As Biesta also explains, Arendt's notion of 'bearing with strangers' is also relevant here. In his words, "no matter how much children learn to be tolerant and respectful, whether they can actually bear with strangers, whether they are actually able to act in plurality, is always an open question … what is unique about schools is the possibility to insert processes of reflection into attempts to exist politically" (2014, p. 117).

As Biesta argues, and as perhaps recent decades have helped to clarify, children's efforts to exist politically begin within schools and therefore need to be heeded in a particular manner within democratic ones. The tensions that exist between the world that has been and the competing worlds that the young enact and imagine play out in both generalizable and distinctive ways throughout every individual's lifetime. In focusing our attention on the political and historical dimensions of these struggles, Biesta reminds us of the altered, yet enduring, strands of emancipatory purposes

that have helped to shape the course of Western pedagogical thought and that might assume greater influence today.

For the work of subjectification orients toward liberation: it will tend to increase what is at stake and so at risk within classrooms. And there are, indeed, no guarantees that the differences that exist between the people who inhabit schools will be reconciled or that cultural barriers will be breached—or even that shared understandings will be established. Teachers engaged in the work of subjectification move rather from first principles, including a belief in the value of the human possibilities that have been seen to emerge in those moments when the members of a classroom achieve a shared sense of intellectual community and freedom.

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Notes

[1] Biesta introduced these notions in his 2006 book, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future,* and continues to elaborate on them throughout this most recent book. See, in particular, the interview at the end of the book for a more focused treatment (Biesta, 2014, pp. 141-148).

[2] See related discussion of late 19th and early 20th century pedagogical movements that did promote the development of student intellectual autonomy in Bingham & Biesta, 2010, pp. 27-32.

[3] Biesta also includes von Glaserfeld for good measure. See my discussion of some of the conceptual confusions such groupings encourage (Mayer, 2006).

[4] While Biesta cites Virginia Richardson as believing that the "elements of effective constructivist education are as yet unknown" (2014, p. 45), considerable classroom work and pedagogical theorizing have, in fact, advanced and multiplied our understandings in this area. See, for example, Duckworth, 2006; Greene, 1988, 1995; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000. As Petra Monroe Hendry has also noted, advances in progressive classroom practice and theory have often remained under-theorized, if not entirely invisible, to academy theorists and researchers (Hendry, 2011), an observation treated in my review of Hendry's text (Mayer, 2014, pp. 8-9).

[5] Although Dewey insisted that the projects of passing along cultural resources and of teaching children to think for themselves were not at odds (Dewey, 1900 & 1902/1990), certainly they have often been viewed in just that way, resulting in curricula that focus, on the one hand, almost entirely on the mastery of established understandings and, on the other, almost entirely on fostering creativity and on inculcating what Dewey called dispositions and what now are conceptualized by some as 'soft skills' (see Mayer, 2010, for a longer discussion).

[6] Piaget experimentally demonstrated that the minds of children work quite differently than people had supposed or imagined. Vygotsky, enthused by Piaget's methods and findings, agreed that educators would now need to learn what it might mean to meet children on their own intellectual terms, but then also argued that educators would also need to learn how to school children in modern cultural forms if they were going to learn how to think together and so become modern citizens. In both cases, the care these researchers brought to the methodological challenges involved in communicating authentically with children has led to the development of dialogical pedagogical approaches, some of which are intended to provide the kinds of inter-subjective openings Biesta seeks.

[7] Biesta takes pains to convey the important distinction Rancière makes between Jacotot's approach, which is designed to inspire his students' intellectual emancipation, and the Socratic method of questioning as seen in Socrates' exchange

with Meno's slave, for example, intended to lead inexorably to a conclusion Socrates already has in mind (Biesta, 2014, pp. 92-95).

[8] Piaget was the first psychologist to theorize the role of intellectual agency and autonomy in generating meaningful conceptual shifts based on extensive empirical study. See Constance Kamii's discussion of Piaget's commitment to fostering children's intellectual autonomy (Kamii, 1982, pp. 73-86).