
BOOK REVIEW

A review of *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* by Gert Biesta, 2010, Paradigm Publishers, 160pp, ISBN: 978-1-59451-791-4 (paperback)

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“There is, *now* and *always, more* to reality than our science is able to dream of” (Rescher, 1998, p. 28; emphasis added)

What is the book about?

In his book about good education, Biesta focuses strongly on the question of purpose in education. His main concern is that a replacement of purpose has taken place in the field of education towards the profession as an evidence-based profession (p. 6). He focuses the discussion primarily on the assumptions one holds in the field about educational practice, between knowledge and action, and the relationship between research and practice, in terms of what he “considers problematic about prevailing ideas about the role of evidence in education” (ibid., p. 6).

In a later chapter he deals with the more specific question about the distinction between socialization and subjectification as the two most important goals to aim at in education, besides qualification as the third goal. In Chapter 5, he addresses the relationship between the principles of democracy and the demands of education. He does so in terms of good education, which he links with the three dimensions of education: socialization, subjectification, and qualification. In Chapter 6 he discusses the rather dominant focus on socialization as regards the role of education in our society. Finally, he formulates a kind of wake-up call for educators, at all levels of the educational system:

“to engage with the question of purpose so that the question of good education can become the central question in our educational endeavors” (p. 8; emphasis added).

At the end of the book, he gives some hints about the question of purpose in education, without giving a kind of blueprint for what “good education” might actually be in practice. But, although being somewhat modest in his aims for education, he takes a strong position against the so-called “learnification” of education. He even titled the epilogue of his book “[T]he end(s) of learning” (p. 127).

In discussing this book, and the aims described above, I will take an open, but critical view. I will do so because Biesta invites the reader to a discussion on the topic and purpose of “good education”. I will try to do so, both as an educational researcher and as a so-called complexivist, which I take to be a thinker in complexity about the complexity of complexity like the complexity of education.

As a social scientist, I felt very much taken by surprise that Biesta has taken a normative position about education. He even does so in a double sense: by talking about “good” education, and by introducing the topic of democracy as a purpose for education. It is my “natural” response as a scientist that you cannot be normative about a subject like education. You place yourself, then, outside the field of science. For education is, first and foremost, a scientific problem, to be treated as such, based on ever-evolving assumptions and intentions of those organizing education in practice. This is what I have learned from “[T]he essential Vygotsky”¹. Of course, from a historical perspective one may know how often things have gone wrong in practice. So, one cannot negate all the fuss and rhetoric around education and be serious about education at the same time (see e.g. MIT mission statements). One cannot negate the discussions in the field about “good education” like those by Martha Nussbaum (2010) and Parker Palmer (1998), with their different purposes for education. I also miss here the contributions of significant others in the discussion, like Jerome Bruner (1996), Edgar Morin (2001, 2008), and Frank Furedi (2009), to name only a few. But also of those educators that have put the topic of complexity and education on the agenda, like William Doll Jr., Brent Davis, and other editors of *COMPLICITY*. It is hard to understand that one can write a book about the topic of education in terms of good education without taking into account the very complexity of education. The book demonstrates a clear ignorance on the topic of the complexity of education. At the same time, it shows that the author has remained ignorant on the promise of complexity for education. He clearly negates the discussion around the very status of education as a topic, a discipline, or a field of (multi-) disciplinary inquiry (see Ranson, 1998, p. 51). Biesta “simply” does not take into account the problem of education as regards the common prejudices, the myopia, the learned incapacities of those involved in the field and the role of outdated and blinding paradigms (Morin, 2001); all of this resulting into a situation, described by Jane Page as being “stubbornly locked into outdated paradigms”, resulting into sources of social rigidity (Page, 199, p. 128), and the domination of thought “in a context rigid with impossibilities” (Serres, 1995, p. 43). My impression is that Biesta discards the need for a new paradigm, so to be able to position

¹ This is the title of the book edited by R. W. Rieber & D. K. Robinson (2004), with a summary of essential texts by Vygotsky.

the field of education differently (see Ranson, 1998, p. 52). He has no open eye for the possibility of reinvention of the field by freedom of thought: that is, by new thinking, such as new thinking in complexity about the topic of the complexity of education; a shift of thinking which is not simply “given” but “has to be reinvented” (Serres, 1995, p. 43). That is, a shift of thinking that enables a shift of contexts, so rigid with impossibilities, towards new contexts. These are contexts that show the hitherto unknown spaces of unlimited possibility of enlargement of human functions in the different domains of human functioning (see Maturana, 1980, p. 51). These domains are the cognitive domain, the affective and the motor domain. The paradigm of complexity, as advocated by Edgar Morin (2008), may not only open up new spaces of possibility, but also a new world of hitherto unknown generative mechanisms and (total) self-enhanced effects. With this new paradigm, we may build a new approach that is possibility-oriented, instead of an ends-oriented approach (Davis & Sumara, 2006). With this approach, a new conceptual framework may be built; a framework which has been lacking for so long². With this new conceptual framework, it might be possible to understand what Davis et al. (2005) have described as the task for education from such a possibility-oriented approach: “an enlargement of the possible around what it means to educate and be educated” (p. 4; emphasis added). Based on this new framework, it might be envisioned how to realize this ambition, and how to get the butterfly finally awake in the field of education (cf. Kauffman, 1995).

Discussion

As a critical social scientist and educational researcher for almost 40 years, I am pretty much aware of the common rhetoric which is so dominant in the field of concern. But I am also aware how difficult it is to discern the rhetoric from the real. This makes that even though I may agree with the aims of the book, and I support the reasons Biesta gives for it, I feel free to disagree with the path he takes in what I call his “mission” on good education³. My main purpose here is to broaden the discussion, because I think that dealing with the topic of “good education” can only be fruitful from such a broad perspective. Special attention will be given to the notions of complexity and thinking in complexity in the field of education. Not because Biesta pays attention to the complexity of education, but for the simple reason that he neglects the very complexity of education in his book. Not for good reasons, as I hope to show. My main objection is that he narrows the discussion on the question “what is education for” to what is “the most desirable direction” (p. 127; emphasis added). This seems to exclude the role of complexity for education. I fully disagree with this stance, and for good reasons, as I hope to show below. Maybe I am more critical than usual just because of this disdain of what I take to be the very building stone for better thinking. I fully agree with Mark

² Cf. Kauffman (1993, 1995) for a similar lack of framework in biology for evolution.

³ I use this term on purpose because people from MIT formulated their critics in terms of three distinct missions: the critical mission, the conceptual mission, and the activist mission (MIT, 2011).

Engel that “the essence of all our problems is bad thinking and the only medicine for that is better thinking” (Engel, 1972, p. viii). This seems especially true for “the problem of education” and what education is for! Henceforth, my argument for better thinking about “good” education would be very different: “what might the reality of education look like, as a potential nonlinear complex reality, to make thinking about “good education” possible?” Biesta seems very much in favor of an ends-oriented approach instead of a possibility-oriented approach: a distinction which is at the core of the complexity approach for education (see e.g. Davis, 2004; Davis & Sumara, 2006; Jörg, 2009, 2010, 2011). By taking an inherently limited view of education from a “restricted-complexity” perspective (Morin, 2002), Biesta is actually limiting the realm of possibility for education. He “simply” takes the reality of education too much for granted. Other thinkers, like Maturana (1980), Serres (1995), and Rescher (1998), reject the notion of a “delivered” or “given” reality, with their contexts, such as contexts in education, which are commonly linked with rather standard thoughts: “unable to see what possibilities today’s society offers for self-description” (Luhmann, 2002, p. 193); standard thoughts, which are so much rigid with impossibilities (Serres, 1995, p. 43). Luhmann’s sense of what is real is more linked to a sense of possibilities (cf. Vygotsky, on this topic, being the essence of his work!) These thinkers make clear that reality is actually a kind of choice that one makes, implicitly or explicitly (see also Prigogine & Stengers, 1984, p. 293; and the quote below). They focus more on the very possibility of new thinking about the unlimited possibility of enlargement of the different domains of human functioning within “the realm of possibility” (Rescher, 1998). This realm is very much about the realms for learning within education: of opening up “new vistas of possibility” (Davis, 2004, p. 23; Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 29). Just because these possibilities for education can be taken as “really” possible within this new realm of possibility, I take a critical view of the topic, as addressed in this book by Gert Biesta on “good education”.

“[W]hatever we *call* reality, it is revealed to us *only* through the active *construction* in which we participate” (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984, p. 293; emphasis added)

Summarizing

To recap my review of Biesta’s book on good education, and to come to general conclusions, I may start to notice that his general, overall view on education is too narrow. This is shown by his taking too many things for granted in his delineation of what good education may stand for. He speaks his own language, which is very different from the language of complexity. I return to this observation below. Speaking his own language, he “realizes” his own “language-effected reality” (Davis, 2004, p. 99). Henceforth, by not speaking the language of complexity, he does not recognize the full complexity of education as a concept. So, he “simply” does not see how a complex conceptual framework is very much needed to face this complexity, being part of a nonlinear complex reality (Mainzer, 2007). Biesta does not see that we need a full re-description of education in more complex terms (Osberg, 2005), with a corresponding new language for complexity. What we actually need is a “hypercomplex description of complexity” (Luhmann, 2002, p. 109; italics in original), which is very much about “the

complexity of the world” (ibid., p. 157). As a consequence, Biesta does not recognize the link between the notion of complexity and that of possibility, i.e. the unlimited openness and possibilities for education, just because of this very complexity of education. Only by taking this fundamental openness seriously for new thinking in complexity within a framework of complexity, one may open up new vistas of possibility. But this demands for a kind of rethinking of all the basic concepts in use in our field of education. Ultimately, to reach such a freedom of thought and of complex thinking, one seriously needs a kind of reinvention of thinking. Not only about the basic concept of education itself, but also of the concepts of learning, of the learner, of interaction, and the unit of study (see Davis, 2004; Davis & Sumara, 2006; Osberg, 2009; and Jörg, 2009, 2010, 2011). Only then one might be able to escape the dangers of linear thought and linear thinking in general. Only then, we become able to take the concept of complexity of education more seriously. Only then, we might open up the unknown hyperspaces of education, to be conceived as high-dimensional and generative “spaces of emergence” (Osberg, 2005). These are the very spaces in which the actual, complex trajectories of human development and human functioning can be conceived and visualized. Only then we may think about education in terms of conditions of possibility; conditions and possibilities which can be recognized as potential nonlinear “explosive possibilities” (Barab & Kirshner, 2002). These are the very possibilities within the high-dimensional hyperspaces of a “nonlinear complex reality” (Mainzer, 2007). Not only are these kinds of possibility available for individual learners, but also and even better for complex units like the ensemble or the cyclical-helical unity (Kauffman, 1993; Valsiner, 1998). These units, with their complex dynamics, thriving on the evolving relationships between partners in learning, have their own laws of development; that is, of bi-directional (causal) effects, such as the Matthew and Comenius effect (Jörg, 2009). These effects are a kind of (causal) bootstrapping effects (Jörg, 2011). They may show the generative power of bootstrapping each other towards higher levels of human functioning within these complex units (cf. Bruner, 1996, p. 21). With these new possibilities, hitherto unknown, we may become able to conceive of an altered account of reality; that is: for education (Kauffman, 2009). This is ultimately opening up a new reality. This reality is very much a kind of nonlinear hypercomplex description of a complex reality (cf. Luhmann, 2002, p. 109). It can be taken as a richer sort of reality. With this new kind of reality, we may show that the butterfly is not asleep (Kauffman, 1995), but can become fully awake in practice: for all those participating in the field of education. By expanding and augmenting reality, and turning reality into a richer, nonlinear complex reality, we can escape the very common danger of a trivialization of the learner in education (see von Foerster, 1993). From this enlarged way of thinking about a larger and more complex reality, we may develop better thinking about “an enlargement of the possible around what it means to educate and be educated” (Davis et al., 2005, p. 4; emphasis added).

Ultimately, by opening up a new kind of nonlinear complex reality, it will be possible to humanize not only our sciences but also the concept of being of the human being as a real, complex human being, with unexpected, unlimited possibilities in the real within an expanded realm of possibilities within the field of education.

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