RESPONSE TO BOOK REVIEW

A brief response to Ton Jörg's review of *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy*, 2010, Paradigm Publishers, 160pp, (paperback)

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I am very grateful to Ton Jörg for his discussion of my book *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics, democracy*. Writing a book is one thing; it being read is quite another – and it is in the dynamic interplay between writing and reading that meaning emerges. While there is a clear gap between the two, a gap that is fundamentally unbridgeable, it does not mean that all readings are of equal standing. This, however, is not an issue that can be "fixed" but one that requires ongoing conversation. Let me, in that spirit, make three observations.

I probably need to start by apologising for the fact that I didn't write the book that Jörg hoped to read. By enlisting all the things I did *not* do in the book, the review makes it perhaps rather difficult for the reader to get a sense of what I *did* try to do. If Jörg had expected my book to be the final word on good education, I can only say that I consider such an ambition not only (scientifically) impossible, but even (politically) dangerous. The book not even aims to express an opinion about what good education is or ought to be, but aims to bring this question back to the attention of educators and educationalists. It aims to provide a way for having a slightly more precise and focused discussion about these questions – which is where the distinction between qualification, socialisation and subjectification as three domains of potential educational purpose needs to be located – aims to give some of the reasons why we seem to have lost connection with the question of educational purpose – which is where the critique of evidence-based education, managerial regimes of accountability, and the hegemony of a language of learning have their place – and makes some modest contributions to the discussion about the parameters of good education through an exploration of the question of the human

subject and the ideas of democracy and inclusion. Although Jörg provides an impressive list of authors I did *not* engage with, the list in itself is only a selection of a much large body of potentially relevant literature. This makes it rather difficult to defend myself, other than to ask why I should have mentioned authors like Bruner, Nussbaum and Furedi, and not, say, Mollenhauer, Benner, and Klafki, or Giroux, Apple, and McLaren, and so on.

There are two more substantive points I would like to respond to. The first concerns Jörg's apparent surprise that in the book I engage with education from a normative angle. His explanation for this comes from his "'natural' response as a scientist that you *cannot be normative* about a subject like education" as this would mean that "[y]ou place yourself, then, outside the field of science." In addition to this Jörg expresses his belief that "education is, first and foremost, a *scientific* problem." My disagreement starts, perhaps, from this latter point, as I would be inclined to say that education is first and foremost a *practical* problem (if it is a problem at all). Education doesn't need science nor scientists in order to exist, although those who call themselves scientists – or academics or researchers for that matter – may have interesting insights to offer to educators (although part of the argument in the book is that some of the pretension that come with the idea of evidence-based education significantly overstep what I would see as a healthy and respectful relationship between educational research and educational practice). The autonomy of educational practice implies, in my view, that we – as educational researchers and theorists – need to start from an understanding of what makes a practice an *educational* practice. It is here that, for me, normativity comes in, as I would argue (and have argued in more detail elsewhere; see Biesta 2010) that educational practices are constituted by ideas about what the activities going on in such practices are supposed to achieve. Educational practices are, in other words, teleological practices. This does not mean that such practices operate, can operate or should operate on the assumption that once the aim has been set it is just a matter of implementation of a programme – educational practices are fundamentally open or, as I have put it elsewhere, they are fundamentally impossible (Biesta 2004). It also doesn't mean that the aims and ends of education can be or should be fixed. If the language of aims, ends and normativity sounds too restrictive, perhaps it helps to say that educational practices are always *interested* – and at this point I can only say that when Jörg argues for a "possibility-oriented approach," one that focuses on "an *enlargement* of the *possible* around what it means to educate and be educated," he seems to be doing the very thing he suggest we should not be doing, that is, articulate a normative interest in education.

If the point of discussion here is about the difference between education and the science of education – where perhaps Jörg would concede that at the level of practice we find normativity but that this doesn't mean that normativity should have a place at the level of the study of practice – I can only refer to a number of other scientific disciplines who do exactly that, i.e., see themselves as normative disciplines that are constituted by a normative interest rather than an objective fact. Two disciplines which, in my view, have the same structure as education are law – with its interest in justice – and medicine – with its interest in health. And within both fields there are ongoing discussions about

how we should understand “justice” and “health” just, as I tried to suggest in my book, there are and should be ongoing discussions about the interests that constitute the discipline of education. To say that I "clearly negate the discussion around the very *status* of education as a topic, a discipline, or a field of (multi-)disciplinary inquiry" is, in my view, therefore too quick a conclusion as the particular construction of the “field” Jörg seems to refer to here – one that assumes that “education” objectively exists in reality and the science of education is the (objective) study of this “thing” – is only one of the ways in which education as an academic field of study has evolved (see Biesta in press).

The other substantive point has to do with complexity. Jörg has strong views about complexity and sometimes even gives me the impression that he believes in complexity and perhaps even believes in the truth of complexity. I do not. I find complexity a very interesting set of ideas and area of scholarship – I even see it as an important set of ideas and area of scholarship – but I cannot accept it as a new paradigm, as a necessary framework, or as the truth about the universe. This is not a matter of epistemology but a matter of politics – or perhaps I should say that this is an existential matter – in that human dignity for me requires that we can live our lives without having to believe in anything (which does not mean that we should not be allowed to have beliefs). Complexity offers options – and perhaps we could say possibilities – but I am not in search of a new paradigm, because I do not think that just replacing one paradigm with another is what we should aim for. I'd rather see that we give up paradigm-thinking altogether and engage with ideas such as complexity in a much more pragmatic way, connected to concrete problems and issues, rather than as a framework or paradigm. Does that mean that, as Jörg puts it, "the author has remained *ignorant* on the promise of complexity *for* education" and also that "the book demonstrates a clear *ignorance* on the topic of the complexity of education"? I don’t think so. As for the first point I would say that any judgement about whether I have remained ignorant about the promise of complexity for education should at least be based on an evaluation of all my work, not just this book, and from that angle I would contest Jörg's statement (see, for example, Osberg & Biesta 2010) – although it may be that what I see as the promise of complexity is not where Jörg would see it. I would assume, though, that that is fine and that there is no dogmatic position complexity scholars are required to subscribe to.

As for the second point: this argument can go in two directions. It is true that there is no chapter on complexity in *Good education in an age of measurement* – or at least no chapter that has a title like “A complexity perspective on good education” or “What has complexity to say about good education?” But, as an author, I find it remarkable that Jörg remains completely silent about what I consider the key chapter in the book – chapter 4 called “A pedagogy of interruption” – a chapter which, although it doesn't quote the authors Jörg suggests I should have quoted, is strongly inspired by my engagement with that very body of work. It is an attempt to say that if as educators we are concerned about the human subject – and I would argue that we ought to be concerned about the human subject – such a concern can not be expressed in terms of a language of substance or essence, but can only be expressed in a language that is entirely

and radically relational and that tries to "capture" – through attitude more than through theory – the ever-emerging "event" of human uniqueness. That with regard to this dimension of education the educator can be nothing more than an "interrupter" – which means that the educator can at most begin something but that what happens in response to such a beginning is entirely beyond her control – is, in my view, one of the really important insights to be drawn from complexity. While, from the perspective of the author, it is unfortunate that Jörg has not recognized the traces of complexity at the heart of the book, this is not something to lament about but rather something to affirm and embrace as the very risk involved in all writing and, for that matter, in all education.

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