

THE BEAUTIFUL RISK OF EDUCATION



GERT J.J. BIESTA

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Interventions: Education, Philosophy, and Culture

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One has to accept that “it” [ça] (the other, or whatever “it” may be) is stronger than I am, for something to happen. I have to lack a certain strength, I have to lack it enough, for something to happen. If I were stronger than the other, or stronger than what happens, nothing would happen. There has to be weakness. . . .

—Jacques Derrida (2001, p. 64)

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Acknowledgments

When my book *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* was published in 2006 it felt like the end of a long journey. *Beyond Learning* contained ideas I had been working on since the late 1990s and was a first attempt to bring them together in a book-length publication. Doing so was first of all helpful for me, as it allowed me to see themes and connections I had not really appreciated before. This is why I suggested, carefully, that the ideas in the book perhaps amounted to a theory of education. Others recognized this too, as became clear in the responses from reviewers, colleagues, students, and, perhaps most notably, from teachers and teacher educators working in a wide range of different contexts and settings around the world. The ideas in the book apparently struck a chord with them. Readers came to appreciate the versatility of the idea of a “pedagogy of interruption” and the joint concepts of “coming into the world” and “uniqueness” with which I aimed to articulate an educational vocabulary that would make it possible to respond to the challenge of thinking and “doing” education without the possession of a truth about what the human subject is or should become. Readers also responded positively to my attempt to explore a more intrinsic connection between education and democracy and to my critique of the impact of a “new language of learning” on education.

In the book that followed in 2010, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*, I added several things to the discussion. Perhaps the most significant one was the introduction of a framework that allowed me to locate the ideas developed in *Beyond Learning* within a wider discussion about the functions and purposes of education. In *Good Education* I suggested that educational processes and practices always operate in three overlapping domains to which I referred as *qualification*, *socialization*, and *subjectification*. On the one hand the distinction between these domains allowed me to argue that questions about

good education always need to be addressed in relation to what one aims to achieve—there is never anything good or desirable about educational processes and practices themselves—also highlighting that education is never one-dimensional in its intentions and ambitions so that there is always the difficult question of how to strike the right balance. On the other hand the framework allowed me to show with more clarity that the main focus of *Beyond Learning* had been on the subjectification dimension of education, that is, on the ways in which education contributes to the ways in which “newcomers” come into the world as unique, singular beings—to put it in the language of *Beyond Learning*. I could thus make clear that subjectification is not the be-all and end-all of education, although I would maintain that without an interest in this dimension education runs the risk of becoming just another instrument of social reproduction. The chapters in *Good Education* were then partly meant to explain why the question of purpose, the question as to what education is *for*, had almost disappeared from the educational discussion—something that I connected to debates about evidence and accountability in education and the wider “learnification” of educational discourses—and partly to provide those who share my concern for good education in the broad sense of the word with a language to (re)engage with questions of purpose in a more explicit and more deliberate manner. This I did by further developing the notion of a “pedagogy of interruption,” the question of democratic education, and the idea of educational inclusion.

The present book in a sense concludes the trajectory I began in *Beyond Learning*. It focuses on a theme that was implicit in the other two books but that, in my view, deserves a more explicit treatment, not in the least because it has important implications for the ways in which one might wish to engage with my ideas in practical settings such as schools, colleges, and universities, or in relation to adult or community education. The aim of the present book is to explore different dimensions of what I will refer to as the *weakness* of education. The weakness of education refers to the fact that educational processes and practices do not work in a machine-like way. The argument I put forward in this book is that the weakness of education should *not* be seen as a problem that needs to be overcome, but should rather be understood as the very “dimension” that makes educational processes and practices *educational*. This is why any attempt to eradicate the weakness of education, any attempt to make education into a perfectly operating machine—something that is not entirely impossible, although I will argue that the price to pay for this is in most if not all cases too high—ultimately turns education against itself. The weakness of education thus signals that any engagement in education—both by educators and by those being educated—always entails a *risk*. The main

premise of this book is that we should embrace this risk and see it as something positive that properly belongs to all education worthy of the name.

Although I did not set out to write a trilogy when I was working on the manuscript of *Beyond Learning*, the three books I eventually wrote do hang together to such an extent that I would now say, with more confidence, that together they constitute a theory of education. (The [Appendix](#) at the end of this book contains an interview that was conducted in 2011. It provides a brief overview of the key ideas of this theory of education.) The ideas in these books are, however, no more than “beginnings” in the Arendtian sense of the word. For them to become real they need to be taken up by others in ways that are necessarily beyond my control and my intentions. For them to become real, in other words, they need to be “risked.” In this sense what is presented in this and the two preceding books should first and foremost be seen as an invitation for further theoretical and practical work. I am less concerned about the extent to which such work will stick to the letter of what I have written, but I do hope that it will be conducted in a similar spirit.

Writing this book has been an interesting experience. The process has been more difficult than I anticipated it to be and has also been more difficult than my previous writing projects. While I had the ambition to create a book with strong unity and consistency and a strong “logic,” I realized, while writing, that the material I was working with—the ideas, the texts, the phrases, and the language—not always allowed me to go where I wanted to go. In this respect the creation of this book taught me the very lesson that this book is about: that any act of creation (including education) is at best a dialogue between one’s intentions and the material one works with, and thus a process in which both have a voice and both have a role to play. The “logic” of the argument presented in this book is therefore, as I put it in the Prologue, more kaleidoscopic than linear. It provides a range of perspectives on the main themes of the book rather than proceeding as one unfolding line of argument. I nevertheless hope that what I have brought together in the pages that follow will provide some useful “beginnings.”

I had the opportunity to experiment with the ideas in this book in a number of different contexts and settings. I would like to thank Herner Saeverot for the opportunity to give the overall argument of this book a first “try out,” and for his encouragement to articulate the existential thrust of my ideas more explicitly. I would also like to acknowledge the work of John D. Caputo as a source of inspiration and encouragement for advancing the argument about the weakness of education. He also provided inspiration for the title of this book. The work I did with Denise Egéa-Kuehne on Derrida and education has had a lasting impact on my thinking. I am also grateful

for the opportunity she provided to reflect on Levinas and pedagogy. I wish to thank Jim Garrison for our conversations about pragmatism, including the ones that helped me to see some of its limits and limitations, and Sam Rocha for important feedback on my reflections on teaching and transcendence. Working with Charles Bingham has substantially deepened my understanding of the educational significance of the work of Jacques Rancière, particularly in relation to questions about emancipation. Chris Higgins provided me with an opportunity to explore the work of Hannah Arendt in more depth. I would like to thank him, Wouter Pols, and Joop Berding for comments that helped me to deepen my ideas about education and political existence. Wouter Pols, Carlo Willman, and Janet Orchard provided opportunities for developing my ideas about teaching and teacher education. Many of the ideas in this book were also discussed with students and colleagues at the University of Stirling and at Örebro University and Mälardalen University. Tomas Englund has been a wonderful host during my visiting professorship at Örebro University, while Carl Anders Säfström has provided me with a very stimulating environment during my visiting professorship at Mälardalen University. Finally, I would like to thank Jason Barry and Dean Birkenkamp at Paradigm Publishers for their confidence in this project and for their ongoing support.

I dedicate this book to those who have taught me.

PROLOGUE

On the Weakness of Education

This book is about what many teachers know but are increasingly being prevented from talking about: that education always involves a *risk*. The risk is not that teachers might fail because they are not sufficiently qualified. The risk is not that education might fail because it is not sufficiently based on scientific evidence. The risk is not that students might fail because they are not working hard enough or are lacking motivation. The risk is there because, as W. B. Yeats has put it, education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire. The risk is there because education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings. The risk is there because students are not to be seen as objects to be molded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility. Yes, we do educate because we want results and because we want our students to learn and achieve. But that does not mean that an educational technology, that is, a situation in which there is a perfect match between “input” and “output,” is either possible or desirable. And the reason for this lies in the simple fact that if we take the risk out of education, there is a real chance that we take out education altogether.

Yet taking the risk out of education is exactly what teachers are increasingly being asked to do. It is what policy makers, politicians, the popular press, “the public,” and organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank increasingly seem to be expecting if not demanding from education. They want education to be strong, secure, and predictable, and want it to be risk-free at all levels. This is why the task of schooling is more and more being constructed as the

effective production of pre-defined “learning outcomes” in a small number of subjects or with regard to a limited set of identities such as that of the good citizen or the effective lifelong learner. It is also why there is a more general push for making education into a safe and risk-free space (see Stengel and Weems 2010). What should have been a matter of degree—the question, after all, is not whether education should achieve something or not, or whether educational spaces should be safe or not, but *what* education should achieve and to what extent this can be pre-specified, and *what kind* of safety is desirable and at which point the desire for safety becomes uneducational—has turned into an “either-or” situation in which the opportunity for teachers to exercise judgment has virtually disappeared.

The risk aversion that pervades contemporary education puts teachers in a very difficult position. While policy makers and politicians look at education in the abstract and from a distance and mainly see it through statistics and performance data that can easily be manipulated and about which one can easily have an opinion, teachers engage with real human beings and realize at once that education cannot be “fixed” that simply—or that it can only be “fixed” at a very high price. The desire to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free is in a sense an attempt to wish this reality away. It is an attempt to deny that education always deals with living “material,” that is, with human subjects, not with inanimate objects. The desire to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free is an attempt to forget that at the end of the day education should aim at making itself dispensable—no teacher wants their students to remain eternal students—which means that education *necessarily* needs to have an orientation toward the freedom and independence of those being educated.

Surely, it is possible to make education work; it is possible to reduce the complexity and openness of human learning—and one could even say that the educational practices and institutions that have been developed over the centuries do precisely that (see Biesta 2010a). But such complexity reduction always comes at a price, and the moral, political, and educational question is, What price are we willing to pay for making education “work”? This is partly a pragmatic question, as it has to be addressed in relation to the question, What do we want education to work *for*? (see Biesta 2010b). But it always also involves careful judgment about the point where complexity reduction turns into unjustifiable and uneducational suppression and where suppression turns into oppression. To simply demand that education become strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free, and to see any deviation from this path as a problem that needs to be “solved,” therefore misses the educational point in a number of ways.

One has to do with the *attitude* expressed in the desire to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free. The French educationalist Philippe Meirieu has characterized this attitude as *infantile* (see Meirieu 2008, p. 12). He argues that to think that education can be put under total control denies the fact that the world is not simply at our disposal. It denies the fact that other human beings have their own ways of being and thinking, their own reasons and motivations that may well be very different from ours. To wish all this away is a denial of the fact that what and who are other to us are precisely that: *other*. It thus exemplifies a form of magical thinking in which the world only exists as a projection of our own mind and our own desires. Education is precisely concerned with the overcoming of this “original egocentrism,” *not* by overriding or eradicating where the child or student is coming from but by establishing opportunities for *dialogue* with what or who is other (see *ibid.*, p. 13). And a dialogue, unlike a contest, is not about winning and losing but about ways of relating in which justice can be done to all who take part.

To demand that education become strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free also misses the educational point in that it seems to assume that there are only two options available for education: either to give in to the desires of the child or to subject the child to the desires of society; either total freedom or total control. Yet the educational concern is not about taking sides with any of these options—which reflect the age-old opposition between educational progressivism and educational conservatism—or about finding a happy medium or compromise between the two. The educational concern rather lies in the *transformation of what is desired into what is desirable* (see Biesta 2010b). It lies in the transformation of what is *de facto* desired into what can *justifiably* be desired—a transformation that can never be driven from the perspective of the self and its desires, but always requires engagement with what or who is other (which makes the educational question also a question about democracy; see Biesta 2011b). It is therefore, again, a dialogical process. This makes the educational way the slow way, the difficult way, the frustrating way, and, so we might say, the weak way, as the outcome of this process can neither be guaranteed nor secured.

Yet we live in impatient times in which we constantly get the message that instant gratification of our desires is possible and that it is good. The call to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free is an expression of this impatience. But it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what education is about and a fundamental misunderstanding of what makes education “work.” It sees the weakness of education—the fact that there will never be a perfect match between educational “input” and “output”—*only* as a defect, *only* as something that needs to be addressed and overcome, and not

also as the very condition that makes education possible (see also Vanderstraeten and Biesta 2006). It is this misguided impatience that pushes education into a direction where teachers' salaries and even their jobs are made dependent upon their alleged ability to increase their students' exam scores. It is this misguided impatience that has resulted in the medicalization of education, where children are being made fit for the educational system, rather than that we ask where the causes of this misfit lie and who, therefore, needs treatment most: the child or society. The educational way, the slow, difficult, frustrating, and weak way, may therefore not be the most popular way in an impatient society. But in the long run it may well turn out to be the only *sustainable* way, since we all know that systems aimed at the total control of what human beings do and think eventually collapse under their own weight, if they have not already been cracked open from the inside before.

The chapters in this book, therefore, come to education from the angle of its weakness. In them I try to show how, for what reasons, and under what circumstances the weakness of education—the acknowledgment that education isn't a mechanism and shouldn't be turned into one—matters. This book is not an unbridled celebration of all things weak, but an attempt to show, on the one hand, that education only works through weak connections of communication and interpretation, of interruption and response, and, on the other hand, that this weakness matters if our educational endeavors are informed by a concern for those we educate to be subjects of their own actions—which is as much about being the author and originator of one's actions as it is about being responsible for what one's actions bring about.

Such an orientation toward the child or student as a subject in its own right is, of course, not all that matters in education. As I have argued elsewhere in more detail (see Biesta 2010b), there are (at least) three domains in which education can function and thus three domains in which educational purposes can be articulated. One is the domain of *qualification*, which has to do with the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions. The second is the domain of *socialization*, which has to do with the ways in which, through education, we become part of existing traditions and ways of doing and being. The third is the domain of *subjectification*, which has to do with the interest of education in the subjectivity or "subject-ness" of those we educate. It has to do with emancipation and freedom and with the responsibility that comes with such freedom. The weakness of education is at stake in all three dimensions, but how much we value this weakness depends crucially on the extent to which we believe that education is not just about the reproduction of what we already know or of what already exists, but is genuinely interested in the ways in which new beginnings and new beginners can come into the world

(see Biesta 2006a; Winter 2011). Such an orientation, therefore, is not just about how we can get the world into our children and students; it is also—and perhaps first of all—about how we can help our children and students to engage with, and thus come into, the world.

In the seven chapters that follow I explore the weakness of educational processes and practices from a range of different angles and in relation to a number of key educational themes. The themes I have chosen are creativity, communication, teaching, learning, emancipation, democracy, and virtuosity. I start, in [Chapter 1](#), with the theme of *creativity*. While much work on creativity focuses on the ways in which education might foster the creativity of students, I approach the question of educational creativity from a different angle. On the one hand I am interested in education as itself a creative process—that is, as a process that creates; on the other hand I am interested in how we might best understand what it means to create, and more specifically, what it means to see education as a process that in some way contributes to the creation of human subjectivity. Taking inspiration from the work of John Caputo, I make a distinction between two understandings of creation: strong metaphysical creation and weak existential creation. While the first has had a dominant influence on Western ideas about what it means to create—both in secular and in religious discourses—Caputo shows, through a reading of the creation stories in the book of Genesis, that the act of creation can be—and in a sense ought to be—understood outside of the domain of omnipotence, strength, and metaphysics. It is the weak understanding of creation that I bring to bear on the question of human subjectivity through an engagement with the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Here subjectivity is not understood as an essence but as an event, and thus as something that can only be captured in existential and, therefore, weak terms. Doing so allows me to show how the weakness of education matters for what, to me, indeed lies at the heart of any educational endeavor, which is the emergence of human subjectivity.

As education is at heart a dialogical process, I focus, in [Chapter 2](#), on the theme of *communication*. In the first part of the chapter I discuss how communication has been understood and theorized in the work of John Dewey, both at a general level and with regard to educational processes and practices. Unlike the sender-receiver model that still seems to inform much commonsense thinking about communication—in education and elsewhere—Dewey provides a conception of communication as a meaning-generating process where things are literally made “in common” through interaction and participation. Such an understanding of communication-as-participation has important implications for education, both at the micro-level of the communication of meaning in classrooms and schools and at the macro-level of the interaction