Book review

The beautiful risk of education

Gert J.J. Biesta
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Considered a third contribution to his wider oeuvre (see also Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future and Good Education in an Age of Measurement) on interrogating education and democracy, in The beautiful risk of education, Biesta presents a compelling critique on the current state of education in the 21st century. Drawing on Deweyan, Derridean, Arendtian and Rancièrean ideas of emancipation and education, the book is organised into seven thematic chapters – creativity, communication, teaching, learning, emancipation, democracy and virtuosity, united with an edifying epilogue: for a pedagogy of the event.

Cent rally, he takes up a theme introduced in his previous works – the ‘we akness of education’. By this, Biesta means to challenge the notion that education can, or should be, a systematic, mechanistic and risk-free, activity. Rather, he argues that risk is, always has been, and certainly should be, at the heart of meaningful education. If acceptance (and god forbid,
embracement) of this inherent risk makes education ‘weak’ in the eyes of policy makers obsessed with predictable metrics and inelastic data analysis, then this represents a denial of education’s very constitution. Biesta thus reasons that to eliminate risk from education is not merely paradoxical but a pursuit based on an inherently faulty premise. Eradicating uncertainty in our education systems, policies, institutes and pedagogies is not only antithetical to meaningful learning but is an ultimately irresolvable objective.

This argument evokes a sense of the Taoist philosophical spirit that resonated with my philosophical leanings. A branch that is hard and stiff is not strong by virtue of its brittleness. Rather, it is the supple sapling with its yielding fibres that is truly strong; it bends easily in the breeze adapting to the vicissitudes of the changing environment. Surely, in today’s unstable political, economic, social and environmental climate, we want our education systems to cultivate learners, educators and policy-makers flourishing in their flexibility.

Central to Biesta’s chief argument is the role that human desire plays in the modern ‘market’ of education. He maintains that what is desired is not always desirable (p. 55). That is, whilst desire is not inherently negative (indeed, it serves numerous useful motivational purposes), when our desire for education and learning becomes conflated with our contemporary obsession with the incessant acquisition of material goods, the ontological foundations of education become vastly misunderstood and misrepresented. Under this kind of commodified and ‘medicalised’ regime of education, ‘... the educational way, the slow, difficult, frustrating, and weak way, may therefore not be the most popular way in an impatient society’ (p. 4). Biesta explains that eschewing the inherent weaknesses in education therefore has massive implications for human emancipation if education is about not just reproducing existing ways of being and knowing in the world but about being free to learn new ways of being and knowing in and about the world.

He takes up this idea in further detail in his chapter on creativity defined as the ‘... act of bringing something new into the world’ (p. 11). Creativity is therefore positioned as somewhat antithetical to certainty. Drawing on Dewey, Biesta cautions us that certainty always begets some form of trouble. It is therefore an education which embraces creativity over certainty that might get us out of such snafus – whether they relate to our identity or broader notions of subjectivity and meaning.
Drawing on the Deweyan link between meaning-making, communication and participation, as relates specifically to individual and group transformation, Biesta makes the case for shared understanding as being the outcome of communication in democratic education rather than the starting point. He argues for a ‘weak communication’ – one informed by openness and risk. To both ‘receive teaching’ and ‘to learn’ (which, he argues are not necessarily mutually inclusive) is to ‘... welcome the unwelcome, to give a place to inconvenient truths and difficult knowledge ...’ (p. 55). This perspective, Biesta argues, has implications for teacher identity and valuation in education systems preoccupied with administering predefined, standardised and ‘objective’ competency criterions. Specifically, a student is conceptualised not as a consumer but as the recipient of the ‘gift of teaching’ which involves teachers asking difficult questions and students confronting the inherent uncomfortability associated with perpetually questioning our desires. This includes problematising the very nature of learning as being itself a somehow ‘natural’, ontogenetic process.

Drawing on both Foucauldian and Rancièreian conceptualisations of knowledge/power links and emancipation, respectively, Biesta argues that learning must itself be problematised within a broader socio-political and economic context. This analysis includes a robust interrogation of the role of language in shaping taken-for-granted discourses of learning. He somewhat audaciously draws on Arendt’s seemingly contradictory view that in addressing crises of education, politics and education ought to be divorced from each other. By critiquing the assumptions underlying the developmental views of education which inform Arendt’s argument for an education–politics divide, he deftly adds rigour to his own analysis. This underscores the assiduousness with which he treats his thesis. Education and politics are inextricably connected when education is viewed as more than a natural evolution.

Biesta’s choice of the word ‘weak’ is an intentional and clever linguistic device. In using it he implores us to dismantle the hoary connotations of ‘strong’ that permeate the hegemonic political rhetoric of education. A new definition of strength must emphasise risk, vulnerability, subjectivity, multiplicity and creativity. An ambitious aim? Perhaps. But as Biesta reminds us, a ‘... philosophy of education must always make place for that which cannot be foreseen as a possibility, that which transcends the realm of the possible’ (p. 52).