



## World-Centred Education: A View for the Present

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## *Book Review:*

# **World-Centred Education: A View for the Present**

By Gert Biesta

Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022

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## **Introduction**

Upon reading the title of this book, it seemed at first glance that the text would provide a pedagogical view of how to deal with global issues in the school system. For environmental educators such as myself, the current tendency is to immediately think of sustainable development, or more specifically the Sustainable Development Goals, as being the themes at stake. However, this book primarily deals with a different issue, specifically the concept of students/pupils being subjects and the subsequent (modest) role of teachers. As the author explains, “Pupils and students are not simply objects of educational ‘interventions,’ effective or otherwise, but ... are subjects in their own right” (p. 2).

The author considers this position to be necessary for students to learn “.....about what crosses their path ... irrespective of whether they were looking for it or not, and irrespective of whether they wanted it or not” and for resisting what he sees as the strong demands of the “impulse society” (p. 9)—a society that privileges immaturity by offering immediate satisfaction of “infantile” desires for *all* of us. It is thus appropriate that he points out, in a quote reminiscent of one of the most popular songs by the Rolling Stones, “You *cannot* always get what you want” (p. 23). And that is exactly why he makes a case for ensuring that the school remains in part an institute where the pupils/students are “protected and shielded off from the demands of society” (p. 19). The school should be a place where they can be a self—a *subject*—and be critical of society when they feel it is necessary to do so. This is why the author makes a strong plea for a “reset” of the balance between “the demand to ‘perform’ and the demand for ‘free play’” (p. 19).

## The Chapters

The author explains that societal demands lead, for instance, to an obsession with measuring the quality of learning processes, which, in his view, is equivalent to maintaining control over everything that happens in school. As he says, “In many places around the world schools are under a relentless pressure to perform, and the standards for such performance are increasingly being set by the global education measurement industry” (p. 14). He explains this problem more extensively in an article (Biesta, 2015). His disdain for a society that does not work on its civilization by schooling leads him to the conclusion that education should not be handed over “to the market or the private sphere” (p. 17).

In addition to disagreeing with this method for setting *standards* for quality, the author also takes issue with society’s *definition* of quality. He identifies three “common misunderstandings” regarding how quality of education is determined (p. 15), which I believe could more aptly be described as systemic societal issues. Quality of education, in his opinion, is currently formulated in such a way that it

1. is measured by the effectiveness and efficiency of the processes in school, but this says nothing about what education is “supposed to bring about” (p. 15);
2. “is a matter of giving customers what they want” (p. 15), meaning students, and their parents, are increasingly being viewed as customers/consumers by the schools; and
3. is no longer meant to measure what is valued about education: “*Indicators* of quality are taken as *definitions* of quality” (p. 15). His problem with this approach is that, as he writes, “organisations begin to define their strategic ambitions in terms of reaching a certain position in a league table and cynically steer their performance towards tin indicators that would result in such a position” (p. 15).

Further, the author’s view on society is that it is so entangled in its immature principles or paradigms that it is not open to receive, let alone incorporate, negative social and/or environmental feedback and to revise its basis. Schools, in his view, seem to be mostly embedded in this system, expected to do a “job” for society. In this book, the author attempts to turn that around by asking *what kind of society* the school needs in order to be a “school” (i.e., “the free, emancipated time that can help in giving the next generation a fair chance at their subject-ness” [p. 9]). This is addressed in Chapter 2 in the book: “What kind of society does the school need?” (p. 13).

Part of turning this around involves making the concept of students being selves—the subjectification of students—central to all education (p. 16). In so doing, he does not deny that qualification (acquiring the knowledge and skills required to act in the world) and socialization (orientation into the traditions, cultures, and practices of past and present) are necessary as well; instead, he suggests that they should not be *the* core of education. According to the author, in order to develop a school that is independent, resistant, maybe even “obstinate” to the impulse society (p. 24), society itself must be different. Rather than performing “a job” for society, the realization of such a school “is therefore not just an educational matter but ultimately a test of the democratic quality of society itself” (p. 23).

Chapter 3 deals with the suggestion that “educational questions are fundamentally existential questions” (p. 9). The author illustrates this view with a few dramatic examples which he calls the “Parks–Eichmann paradox.”

Example one is about Rosa Parks, a Black woman, who, when riding on a bus in 1955, in the “coloured” section, refused to give up her seat to a white passenger (p. 27). The second example

of the paradox refers to Adolf Eichmann who was tried in 1961 for his involvement in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe during World War II. He declared that he was only following orders by managing the logistics of the mass deportation of Jews and others to ghettos and extermination camps.

The author states that Eichmann behaved as an *object* (a will-less instrument of society) and saw other people as objects, too: “His ‘I’ was actually not involved” (p. 29). Parks, on the other hand, acted as a *subject*; she *was* there; “she did step forward as an ‘I’” (p. 29).

The paradox here is that while Eichmann’s education seems to have been a success in terms of learning to follow instruction (he did what was expected from him) and Parks’s would seem to have been a failure (she refused to follow instruction), the opposite is actually true when their respective actions are viewed from a moral perspective.

In the following chapters (4–6), the author explores further the need for subjectification (Chapter 4) and that education is something people did not ask for (and thus that education must be seen as a gift to them), which can be found in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6, he works out the concept of “subjectification” in more detail (what it is and what it is not) and discusses the form and role of teaching as a consequence of that view. The author considers the concept of teaching as essentially “*redirecting someone else’s gaze*” (p. 77) by pointing at something the natural or social world might “ask” from the student (p. 3, 101). The responsibility to react, however, which includes the decision to take no action at all, rests with the students themselves.

In the last chapter (7), the author comes back to his initial question, “What shall we do with the children?” and adds one more: “What shall we do with the infantile desires that continue to haunt us throughout our lives?” (p. 100). Although the author does not provide a definitive answer to these questions, he emphasizes that the position of education is “on the side of subject-ness, that is, as a form of intentional action that has a central interest in the question how human beings can exist as subjects of their own life, not as objects of what other people or forces would want from them” (p. 101).

## Comments On and Use of This Book

This book provides a critical, almost radical, take on the severe shortcomings of present-day educational practices in the (Western) countries where the author works. He formulates these thoughts distinctly throughout the book. Most of the chapters are quite dense, delving rather deeply into a variety of pedagogical theories and educational principles, which impacts the readability of the book. However, this is offset by the author’s pleasant, personal style of writing; he often begins by explaining to the reader what the purpose of the chapter is, then recaps and provides an evaluation of what was done therein at the end of the chapter.

Nevertheless, this complex pedagogical matter may have the repercussion that some readers (specifically teachers) would consider this approach to be too different from their professional values and mandates and may see the recommendations as too far outside of what they are capable of changing. Even if they would support these ideas, the practical applications of these insights may not be easy for them to realize.

Therefore, I would have expected the author to explore the relationship between what he finds to be of primary importance—the main characteristics of subjectification—and its consequences for the teaching profession, in particular the didactics of teaching. “Pointing” at something “in the world” is of a fundamental value, but it is insufficient for pupils/students to find their way in the world. That is why some further explanation about didactics would have

contributed to the book's practical application. My advice to the author is to add at least a didactic paragraph to the text, should a second print be considered.

What, then, could the use of this book be in educational circles, apart from dissemination among educational researchers? Primarily, it may fulfill a role in teacher training colleges and in teachers' refresher courses, in order to enable them better to apply the thoughts of the author in daily practice. But given that a number of essential issues, such as fundamentals of human being, the consequences for pedagogical and didactic acting, and the roles of pupils/students, are explored in this book, other school-related institutions, like school boards, governments, and school-supporting institutes, may take advantage of the insights contained in this book as well.

The author's critical approach to education is not an issue that is very popular currently in a country like mine, the Netherlands. When debated in governmental or educational circles, the direction the discussion takes is either about the basics of what has to be learned (reading, writing, and arithmetic at primary school) or the identity of the subjects taught (at secondary school). Apparently, time seems to not (yet) be ripe for too critical a reflection on the principles and assumptions of contemporary education as a whole. Nevertheless, the hope is that, in the long term, the core of the book's propositions will stimulate societal discussion about (formal) education.

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