

The duty to resist: Redefining the basics for today's schools¹

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ABSTRACT. In contemporary societies there are many expectations about what schools should do. These include equipping children and young people for the world of work, turning them into democratic citizens, or bringing about a cohesive and inclusive society. What unites such expectations is that they all approach the school as a kind of instrument for solving societal problems. In sociological language we could say that the school is treated as a function of society and thus as an institution that should be functional (and useful) for society. The danger with this way of thinking about the school is that other questions — such as 'What is it that the school itself should take care of?' or 'What is it that the school should stand for?' — easily disappear from sight. In this contribution I explore how we might answer the question about the special and unique 'task' of the school. Being able to answer this question makes it possible to argue that the school should not just be a function of society but also has an important duty in resisting what society desires from it.

Keywords: formation; grown-up-ness; basics of education; democracy; ecology; care

Introduction: The 'Double History' of the School

In order to develop an answer to the question of what the role of the school in today's society is, can be, and should be, it may be useful to begin with a look at the history of the school – a history that I would like to characterise as a 'double history.' On the one hand, we can see the school as a function of and a function for society, that is, an institution that emerges when society loses its educative power – when we can no longer assume that the new generation will 'pick up' everything they need just by being part of society (on this history see also Mollenhauer, 1983). Viewed from this perspective, we can say that society has legitimate expectations of schools, because schools were established or came into being precisely in order to 'do' something for society. But this is not the only history of the school.

A second history is that of the school as a place *in between* the home and the street, a transition-place, where we are no longer at home but also not yet in the 'real' world – the world of economic production for example, and of political processes. Here, the school is a place where we are allowed to practice, to try out things, without everything having to be perfect – we could even say that from this angle the school should by definition be concerned with imperfection (see Sidorkin, 2002). The school appears here as a kind of halfway house that to some extent needs to be shielded off from (the demands of) society, *so that* practising is possible (see also Masschelein & Simons, 2012).

1. The notion of the duty to resist comes from the title of a book by the French educationalist Philippe Meirieu (see Meirieu, 2007).

Looking at this double history, we can see that there is a tension in the very 'fabric' of the school – a tension between meeting the demands of society and keeping those demands at bay. We could say, therefore, that the school is a kind of servant of two masters – after Goldoni's well-known theatre play – and whereas this causes particular challenges for teachers, good teachers generally know how to find a good balance between the demands of the two masters. And good teachers also know that a choice 'for society' is not a choice 'against the child' – unlike what some proponents of both old and contemporary forms of child-centred education seem to think (on this see also Oelkers, 2005) – because the ultimate task of education is to help children and young people to be *in* the world (and to be there in a 'grown-up' way; see Biesta, 2015a; 2015b).

The problem we are facing today in many educational settings is that the voice of one of the 'masters' – society – has become far louder and far more dominant than the voice of the other master – the voice that says that the school also has something to do that is not automatically or necessarily useful for society. As a result of testing, measurement, and ongoing interventions in the curriculum from particular societal (and often specifically economic) forces, schools in many countries and settings are seriously out of balance, to such an extent that some wonder whether the school can still be a school, or if it has dissolved or is beginning to be dissolved into something completely different – a place for work rather than a place for 'scholē,' for 'free time' that is not yet determined by external demands (see Masschelein & Simons, 2012; Meirieu, 2007).

The question, then, is how we might be able to restore the balance, and the way in which I would like to take up this question in this paper is by asking what the school itself should stand for, that is, what the particular interest is that the school should claim as uniquely its 'own.' And the question of what the school needs to stand for is important because, as the saying goes, if you stand for nothing, you will fall for anything.

What Should the School Stand for? Learning, Development, Formation?

Interestingly, there is actually no lack of answers to this question. On the contrary, when one asks around – or just looks around – there appears to be quite a lot of clarity about what the school is for and should be for. In what follows, I would like to explore three possible and (more or less) prominent answers in more detail, in order to make a case for one of these three. The three answers I would like to consider are learning, development and formation. Learning, as I have also documented in other work (see, for example, Biesta, 2006; 2013; 2015c), has in recent years become a very popular and very influential option. We can at least see this in the rise of the 'language of learning,' that is, in the frequent appearance of such notions as learning environments, learning communities, personalised learning, collaborative learning, learning to learn, lifelong learning, and so on.

A second notion, development, has also become quite popular and influential. We can not only find this as the general idea that education is about supporting the child's development; the notion of development also plays a role in arguments for education focused on creativity and expression, and arguments for the idea that education should make it possible for children to develop all their talents and realise their 'full potential.' The notion of formation is far less popular – in some countries and languages it is perhaps seen as an old(er) and maybe even old-fashioned or out-dated concept. Nonetheless, there is something I like about the idea of formation, in that it approaches education as an 'encounter' between child and world in and through which the child comes into the world and acquires a 'worldly' form, so to speak. This encounter is not to be understood as one where the world simply stamps its form onto the child – it is an encounter in the real sense of the word, where something happens both to the child and to the world (which suggests that rather than child-centred or curriculum-centred, education appears here as *world-centred*; see Biesta, 2015b).

So is it learning, development or formation that should be seen as the interest the school should stand for? Let's look at each of these in some more detail.

The 'Learnification' of Education

As mentioned, an important line in my work over the past decade has been to document the rise of what in some places I have referred to as the 'new language of learning' and the subsequent 'learnification' of educational discourse and practice. The rise of the language of learning in educational research, policy and practice is visible in a number of 'discursive shifts' which include the tendency to refer to pupils, students, children and adults as 'learners,' to refer to teaching as supporting or facilitating learning, to refer to schools as learning environments, places for learning, or learning communities, and in the redesignation of the field of adult education into that of lifelong learning (for detail see Biesta 2006; 2013; 2015c). The problem is not – or not immediately (but see Biesta, 2015c) – a problem with learning but a problem with the language of 'learning,' where my main concern has to do with the fact that the language of learning is not in itself an educational language and thus runs the risk of pushing what should matter in education out of view.

A quick way to indicate the problem is by saying that the point of education is never that children and young people learn – and it is useful to pause here and consider the many instances in education policy, research and everyday practice where not much more than this is being said – but rather that children and young people learn something, learn it *for a reason*, and learn it *from someone*. Here lies the fundamental difference between the language of learning, which is a process language that is in some sense 'empty' with regard to content and purpose, and the language of education where we always need to engage with questions of *content*, *purpose* and *relationships*.

While I do not want to claim that when learning happens in an educational context, content is absent, relationships play no role, and the whole process is necessarily without aim or direction, I do wish to suggest that if we only have the language of learning to speak about and 'in' education, we have a language that often makes us 'forget' our responsibility as educators to always engage explicitly with content, purpose and relationships – which often means that decisions that should be made by those in the educational setting are already made by others, either in a very clear way or by default. (Think, for example, of the tendency to equate 'learning' with the acquisition of knowledge in a small range of academic subjects – 'forgetting' that even when that is the focus of the educational activity, so many other things happen at the same time as well, often behind the backs of those in the situation.)

Focusing on the Question of Purpose

Of the three – content, purpose and relationships – the question of purpose is central and fundamental because if we do not know what we seek to achieve with our educational endeavours, we have no criterion for judging what kind of content should be brought into play, nor how relationships should be utilised and what kind of educational forms are the most appropriate ones. To say that the question of purpose is central and fundamental is not to make any claims about who should articulate the purpose of the educational endeavour – there are a range of options, although teachers do need to play an important role in this. It is also not to suggest that the purpose of the educational endeavour should be formulated as a clear aim or target that should just be met or achieved – which is the problem with the contemporary idea of 'learning outcomes.' The purpose of an activity gives it meaning and direction, but this can be done in a range of different ways, and with more or less specificity.

Yet the most important point to make about the purpose of education is that education is not orientated towards only one purpose, but that in all instances of education actually three different purposes – or with a better phrase: domains of purpose – are 'in play.' The idea here (developed in more detail in Biesta, 2010) follows from the simple observation that education is always about the presentation and acquisition of something (knowledge, skills, dispositions) and in this regard, education is always orientated towards the qualification of children and young people – that is, giving them access to knowledge, skills and dispositions that allow them to do something, either in the strict sense of becoming qualified for the world of work or a particular job or profession, or in the much wider sense of becoming qualified for life in complex modern societies. Some would argue that this is all there is about education and that this should be all that education

is concerned with – that it should stick to the ‘basics,’ to the ‘facts,’ and leave difficult issues that have to do with values either to the family or to the community. But unfortunately things are not that easily separable.

Even if schools were to stick only to the facts, they would, after all, already be communicating strong messages about a desirable way of life and living together: one that believes in the possibility of keeping facts and values apart. This shows that it is inevitable that all education, when enacted, is also engaged in socialisation, in communicating and providing children and young people with access to traditions, cultures, ways of being and acting. On the one hand, this is what happens as soon as education takes place – and not only through teaching, curriculum and pedagogy, but also through school architecture, the place of the school in society, and so on. On the other hand, we can say that it is part of the task of the school to engage in socialisation. Again, we can think of professional socialisation, that is, presenting the ways of doing and being of a job or profession. But citizenship education, religious education, environmental education, and similar ‘educations’ also are not just about knowledge, skills and dispositions, but about communication of and inclusion in traditions and cultures.

Next to qualification and socialisation, I wish to suggest that education always also impacts the formation of the person – positively or negatively. Rather than arguing that schools should not be allowed to do so, we should acknowledge that this is happening and should, as educators, think about what might be a desirable and justifiable way forward. In addition to qualification and socialisation, education is therefore also always concerned with what I suggest to refer to as subjectification, that is, with the formation of the child and young person towards subject-ness. (More concretely, we can think here of qualities such as criticality, compassion, grown-up-ness and autonomy, though there is more at stake here than just acquiring certain qualities.)

The argument here is that on the one hand, when education takes place it always impacts these three domains – so that we can think of qualification, socialisation and subjectification as three functions of education. Yet if this is so, then as educators we also need to consider what it is we seek to achieve in relation to each of these domains – which means that they also appear as three domains of educational purpose. (The reason for referring to them as domains of purpose and not as purposes is because within each domain quite different, more concrete purposes can be articulated.)

Judgement *in* Teaching

Although the three domains of purpose can be distinguished, they cannot be separated, which means that I tend to depict them as a Venn-diagram with three partly overlapping fields or domains. Such a diagram gives us an image of a broad conception of education, that is, a conception that acknowledges that education always needs to engage with questions of subject-matter, tradition and the person. The picture is also useful in showing what happens – or we might say: what goes wrong – when we reduce our educational endeavours to only one of the domains, because it means that in doing so we ‘forget’ to pay attention to what goes on in the other domains (and again, the point is that this does not mean that nothing is happening, but that it happens beyond our control and beyond what we ought to take responsibility for as educators). Although, as I have indicated in the start of this paper, the main problem many education systems suffer from nowadays is the overemphasis on achievement in the domain of qualification (and often only in a small number of subjects), the argument presented here implies that conceptions of education that focus exclusively on the formation of the person or exclusively on the reproduction of traditions are equally one-sided and equally problematic.

The challenge is not only, therefore, to keep the three domains in balance. The challenge is also to always think and act in a three-dimensional way – not only in educational practice, but also in educational policy and educational research. This means that research that only seeks to find out how certain ‘interventions’ impact ‘academic achievement’ without asking what the impact (or perhaps the better phrase here is ‘collateral damage’) in the other domains is, is utterly useless in education, because we never simply want to know how we might drive up academic achievement, but always also need to know what this implies for the ambitions we have and the impact we have in the domains of socialisation and subjectification. More concretely: if

research tells us that homework does not have a significant impact on academic achievement, this can never be a reason to stop giving children and young people homework, as there may well be important reasons in the domain of, say, subjectification, that justify why homework – the situation where a child is made responsible for a task outside of the ‘gaze’ of the teacher – may be an important educational experience. Research that tells us otherwise is simply misleading, and should not pass the test of good and meaningful educational research.

Three dimensional thinking and doing also begins to reveal the complexities of even the smallest decisions and moments of action and doing in the work of the teacher. A favourite image to indicate the specific complexity of teaching, viewed from the perspective of the three-fold character of educational purpose, is that of three-dimensional chess, where three complete chess games are played on chess boards hanging above each other, and where the pieces not only interact horizontally on each of the chess boards, but also vertically – so that a move in the ‘game’ of qualification not only impacts what happens and can happen there, but at the very same time ‘does’ something in the ‘games’ of socialisation and subjectification, and vice versa.

The reason for going into so much detail here is not only to show the severe limitations of the language of learning as a language for education, but also to highlight the role of and need for judgement *in* education. There is, first of all, ongoing judgement needed about what it is we seek to achieve in relation to each of the three domains – which means that curricula, not understood as lists of content but as framings for the educational ‘endeavour,’ should specify such ambitions in a three dimensional way. Next, there is also judgement needed about the most appropriate ways for achieving what we seek to achieve.

Here, it is important to see that this is not only a matter of the effectiveness of what we do, but also of what I suggest to call the educative quality of what we do. This has to do with another unique aspect of education, which is the fact, to put it quickly, that students not only learn from what we say but also from how we do. This means that with everything we do, we always need to ask what kind of messages we are communicating, and we need to make sure that such messages are congruent with the stated aims and ambitions of our educational endeavours. This again contains an important message for educational research, namely that it cannot confine itself to looking for the most effective (and for that matter: efficient) ways of doing something, but always needs to consider where what is effective is also congruent with what we seek to achieve – across the three domains. While homework may not be effective where it concerns particular achievements in the cognitive domain, it may well be very effective where it concerns matters of responsibility and trust.

That education should not just be effective, but that for everything we do we need to ask three-dimensionally about its educative quality, implies that probably nothing of what we do in education is desirable or undesirable in itself – as long as it is within the boundaries of morality – but that it all depends on what we seek to achieve.

If questions about the what for and the how already reveal the complexity of educational judgement – judgement in education – this is even more so with regard to a third issue that becomes visible when we look at education in this way. This has to do with the question of balance and trade-offs. Although education needs to be concerned about the three domains, we cannot do everything in all domains at the same time, and so we are often – and perhaps always – confronted with the question of what we are willing to ‘give up’ (albeit temporarily) in one or two domains in order to achieve something in one or two of the other domains. This is not only an abstract matter that we can resolve at the level of planning, but also something we need to consider in relation to each individual student.

To highlight the essential role of judgement in teaching not only shows the complexity of teaching as a profession – if, that is, we take our responsibility across the three domains seriously – but also shows that in education, we cannot evade normative questions. Judgements are, after all, not matters of fact but matters of value, and hence the judgements we make in education need to be informed by wider values,

both educational values² and wider values that are concerned with views about good life and good living together. From judgement *in* education I therefore now move to what we might term judgement *about* education.

Judgement *about* Education

The question I wish to raise here is what kind of values and what kind of wider reference points might be meaningful for providing education with an overall sense of direction. I have already mentioned that there is no shortage of views about what education is about, and at this broader ‘level’ of the discussion we tend to find clear ideas more than a lack of them. In the current educational climate, there is one story that is particularly prominent, and it keeps being repeated in the opening paragraphs of policy documents throughout the modern world. The story goes roughly like this.

The first claim is that, unlike what was the case in the past, we now live in a society and even a world that is changing at a very high pace. As evidence, we often find references to globalisation, digitalisation, individualisation and so on. Added to the claim about the high pace of change is the claim that we do not know what the future will look like, so that the knowledge we have today will be quickly out-dated. In some versions of this story, we are also being told that we use a 20th century – or in some cases we are even being told: a 19th century – educational system to prepare children and young people for the 21st century. And all this – which is often expressed with a degree of indignation – then feeds into the conclusion that education needs a radical overhaul, a complete transformation. And in this final step we often hear that we should no longer be bothering children and young people with knowledge, and particularly not with facts, because the knowledge will be out-dated before they have grown up, and the facts will be stored on their personal digital devices rather than that they need to keep them ‘in their head.’ What we rather should do is equip children and young people with a general set of skills – sometimes called 21st century skills – that will allow them to rapidly and flexibly adjust to unknown but rapidly changing circumstances.

The simple question this raises is: is this story true or is it false? The suggestion I would like to make is that what we encounter here are rather half-truths that are accurate in relation to some cases, but not in their totality. They therefore run the risk of functioning as ideologies – accounts that mask as much as they express. And this is problematic where it concerns crucial questions about the future and direction of our educational endeavours.

Half-Truths and Ideology

When we look at the claim that society, modern life and the world is changing at a very high pace, we can indeed think of parts of the world, aspects of our lives, and domains of living where this is the case. In the domains of the economy, financial markets, and access to information, we can point at changes that go indeed at an unprecedented pace (though we must already raise the question whether the pace of change is sustainable; with regard to global capitalism there is quite a lot of evidence that this is not the case, and that we are running behind a system that constantly needs to be propped up in order to keep going for a while). But the point I wish to make here is that whereas for some people, in some parts of the world and with respect to some aspects of their lives, there is indeed change and the change has a high pace, for others, in other parts of the world and with regard to other aspects of their lives, very little has changed and very little will be changing. For a very large number of people there is almost every day the question whether they will be able to find clean drinking water, whether they will be able to feed their families, and whether they will be able to earn an income to make their lives slightly more certain and secure. This is why the suggestion that

2. I use the phrase ‘educational values’ here in order to highlight that the values that inform teaching should not be understood as moral values. Or to put it differently: the ‘normativity’ at stake in education is not a moral normativity but is a more specific educational normativity. I will say a bit more about the specific educational normativity in my discussion of development and formation. One way to indicate what is at stake here is to point out that interaction between a teacher and a student or an adult and a child that is morally ‘correct’ is therefore not automatically educationally valuable or meaningful.

everything is changing fast everywhere for everyone is a lie – but nonetheless a lie that suits some, which may be an important reason why it keeps being repeated.

I wish to make a similar point about the claim that we do not know what the future will look like, and that therefore the knowledge we have today will already be out-dated tomorrow. Again we can think of domains where this is true. The world of work as we know it today is in some domains fundamentally different from how it was in the past, and it is likely that it will again look different in the future. But again, we should not make this into a universal claim about all aspects of life for all people in all concerns of this planet. On the contrary, I wish to argue that there are aspects of our lives where we already know too well what the future will look like, because this is about problems that have to do with the more enduring dimensions of life and living together – dimensions that have not changed that much over the centuries and that may not change much and, in some ways, will just become more urgent.

I wish to remind us of three such challenges where I am absolutely sure that they will still be there 50 or even 100 years from now: the question of democracy, that is, of how to live together given that we are different and value our differences; the question of ecology, that is, how to manage to sustain our collective lives on a planet with limited capacity; and the question of care, that is, how we 'carry' others, particularly those who are not yet, or no longer able to carry themselves.

Redefining the Basics of Education

In many countries, many policy makers, politicians and opinion leaders keep telling each other the story of change and uncertainty and argue that therefore education needs to be approached and steered with reference to competition and survival in the global economy. This way of thinking often leads to a certain definition of the 'basics' of education, where such basics become defined as useful knowledge and skills for economic functioning – the reference to 'the job market' and 'competition' – and for flexible adaptation to ever changing conditions.

I want to argue that we need a broader and to a certain extent different frame of reference, where we include questions of democracy, ecology and care as orientation points for asking what should give direction to our educational endeavours. And democracy, ecology and care are crucial because they all have to do with the existential question of how we will manage to live together in plurality in a humane way on this vulnerable and partly already exhausted planet. These, in my view, are the real basics for contemporary education and the education of the future. This does not mean that economy does not matter, but the challenge is to 'do economy' differently, in ways that are more sustainable, more caring and more democratic. This also means that we need to shift our orientation from competition – which is always fine when you are part of the winning team but becomes more nasty when the tables turn – to co-operation, however difficult this may be. And it means – and for me this is perhaps the most important shift in face of the half-truths that seem to govern a lot of our educational discourse – that we need to make a shift away from survival towards life. After all, survival is always about the question of what we need to do in order to adjust to changing circumstances. The key question we should always ask is whether those circumstances are the ones we should be adapting to, or whether we rather need to 'invest' in altering the circumstances and the conditions that generate them.³

From Learning to Development

All the points made so far were in a sense a response to the suggestion that what education is 'about' is learning. I hope to have shown the reader some of the limitations of the discourse of learning where it concerns matters of education. The point we have now reached allows me to say something about the other two options I have suggested: that education is about development and that education is about formation.

3. The Dutch engineering industry would of course be very happy if they could build dykes everywhere in the world to stop the rising sea-levels from flooding countries, but would be even happier if the causes of rising sea-levels themselves were being addressed.

My critique of the idea of education as survival and my case for orienting education towards life and meaningful living may be read as an argument that rather than making education into a learning machine, we should focus it on the development of the child – particularly the development of the child's talents or, in a slightly different phrase, the development of the child's full potential. After all, if the ambition is no longer survival but meaningful life, we need all these talents to blossom and flourish. Here I wish to point out another mistake in the argument, one that I think is causing some problems in contemporary educational discussions as well, and that is difficult to counter, because why would one not want to give children the opportunity to develop their talents and reach their full potential?

The point I wish to make is a simple one, but it is nonetheless crucial in my view. As soon as we see that we all have talents to do good and to do wrong, as soon as we see that the moral life and the criminal life are both the outcome of developmental trajectories, we can no longer claim that education should just be about supporting the child's development, promoting the flourishing of all their talents so that they can reach their full potential. Education, so I wish to argue, is not concerned with development, talents and potential, but has to deal with the far more difficult question of the right development and the right talents and the right potential (without wanting to suggest that the criterion for what is right is simply 'there' and we would only need to measure each child against it). The educational task is not to let a thousand flowers blossom but to ask of everything that is 'arriving,' of every talent that shows itself, of everything that is potentially there, whether it is desirable for the life of the child, for the life the child lives with others, and for the life we live together on a vulnerable planet with limited capacity.

Rather than thinking of education as a process of support and promotion, this reveals that the key 'modality' of education is that of *interruption* (hence the idea of a 'pedagogy of interruption' suggested in my work; see, for example, Biesta, 2010). The key question that education needs to 'perform' can be phrased as the question whether what we desire – not only in terms of what we want to have but also in terms of what we want to be – is actually desirable, for our own life, the life we live with others, and the life we live collectively on this planet. This question is after a certain 'turning' – and the turning metaphor is an old metaphor in education, going back to Plato and the allegory of the cave. The turning that is at stake here is from what we might term an ego-logical way of being in the world – that is, a way of being in the world that centres around the ego and its desires – towards a non-ego-logical way of being in the world. Such a non-ego-logical way of being in the world is not one in which we overcome our desires, but one where we select and 'rearrange' (Spivak 2004, p. 526) our desires so that they can sustain a non-ego-logical way of being in the world.

Grown-Up-Ness: An Educational Value

The idea of being in the world in a non-ego-logical way is a more contemporary formulation of an old but nonetheless crucial educational idea, that of grown-up-ness. What I am arguing for here is indeed that education should have an orientation towards grown-up-ness, because grown-up-ness denotes a way of being in the world that is not self-centred, not desire-driven, but tries to take account of the fact that we always exist with others and in the world which, concretely, is a planet with its own integrity and limitations. Philippe Meirieu (2007) describes what is at stake here quite nicely when he says that the student-subject is able to be in the world without being in the centre of the world – and such a de-centred or literally eccentric way of being is what characterises grown-up-ness.

By talking about grown-up-ness as a way of being, I seek to take the idea away from developmental thinking that, for a long time, has thought of grown-up-ness as the outcome or result of a developmental process and also, then, as a kind of possession that is supposed to be 'secure' and 'secured' once one has reached a certain state and stage of maturity. I do not think that this is a viable way to think about what grown-up-ness means, and perhaps the main reason for this is that I know many people with big bodies who do not manage to be in the world in a grown-up, non-ego-logical way. I have also encountered and do encounter many people with little bodies – sometimes we call them children – who are perfectly and impressively able to exist in the world with others in non-ego-logical, decentred and eccentric ways. That is why I not only prefer to understand grown-up-ness as a way of being, but also to see it as an ongoing

challenge – we might even call it a lifelong challenge – where we always need to work hard to be in situations, with others, in a grown-up way rather than that we can take this for granted.

The school, seen in this light, should therefore not be seen as the institution that ‘produces’ people who have become grown-up. The school should rather be seen as a place, partly shielded off from society and its demands, where we can practise, in all kind of ways and forms, what it might mean to be in the world in a grown-up way. When the actions of the educator are informed by this perspective, when they are orientated towards this value – the value of being in the world in a grown-up way – I would argue that they are educational, so that in this regard grown-up-ness is a key example, and perhaps even *the* example of what an educational value is.

Education as Formation

To be in the world in a grown-up way, to exist in a grown-up way – in the world without being in the centre of the world – can be said to be a response to what we might call a challenge, but what, previously, I have also described as an interruption. More specifically, it is the interruption that is affected by the question ‘Is what you desire desirable – for your own life and your life with others on this vulnerable planet?’ To encounter this question is not a matter of learning but is more akin to an experience of being taught, of being addressed by something outside of your self. In this regard, the idea of the pedagogy of interruption – which is not just any disturbance but a very specific ‘event’ – has the potential of giving a new meaning to teaching, which is not unimportant in light of the ‘learnification’ of education that has been going on and is still going on in many circles, educational and otherwise.

The interruption here is not one that seeks to destroy the child, but is rather meant to ‘address’ the grown-up-ness of the child, that is, to ‘appeal’ to a different way of being in the world than what is currently ‘there.’ Educational action, if it is aimed at grown-up-ness, is therefore not a matter of adjusting to where the child is, that is, to its ‘needs’. This begins to bring into view the problems with education that thinks that it can only do something if it has full knowledge of the child – where it is, who it is, what its problems and needs are. Rather, educational action aimed at grown-up-ness is about an orientation to what is not there, for which there is no evidence, but what might become. We can think here, for example, of the logic of ‘trust,’ where trust is only an issue in those cases where we do not really know whether the other can be trusted – in those cases, we need trust; if we could predict how the other would act, then it is not a matter of trust but of calculation. To trust someone even against all the present evidence is in this regard an educational gesture, as it provides the child with a choice: either to act in a trustworthy manner or not to do so. What the educator does here is to open up a possibility for a grown-up way of being in the world – the child has the freedom to step into this world and into this way of being, and in precisely this sense the interruption here is not destructive but generative, albeit with a fundamental risk that cannot be taken away or overcome (see Biesta 2014).

What we are finding here is neither a logic of learning – it is closer to a logic of teaching – nor a logic of development – as development is interrupted – but a logic of formation, that is, of ‘finding’ or ‘establishing’ a worldly form of existing: in the world, but not in the centre of the world, so that there remains space for others to be in the world as well.

Conclusion: The Educational Duty to Resist

I started this paper with the question of what the school should stand for. I have slowly worked my way through some of the complexities of education and also some of the complexities and contradictions of contemporary discourses about education. Through this, I have tried to reclaim the school as an educational endeavour – and in order to make clear what this means, I have worked my way through the notions of learning, development and formation. In doing so, I have tried to give answers to three questions.

The first is the question of what good education is. Here, I have suggested that at a very minimum, good education knows – or perhaps we should say good educators know, or educators who are interested in

education that is good know – that qualification is not the only thing that counts, but that socialisation and subjectification are always also ‘there’ as well, and need to be taken care of. This means that the school should stand for such a broad conception of education and should resist ongoing attempts – we might sometimes even call them attacks – to reduce education just to its qualification function (and within that to a small number of so called ‘basic’ subjects).

The second question I have tried to answer is about what should really matter in education – what is its key ‘concern.’ Here, I have indicated problems with regard to the notions of learning and development, and have made a case for the old but nonetheless helpful term “formation”. After all, what education ought to be about is helping children and young people to come into a ‘worldly’ form, a form that makes it possible for them to exist in the world without positioning themselves in the centre of the world. This, as I have suggested, is a matter of grown-up-ness, of a non-ego-logical way of being in the world. I have presented this as an educational value, but wish to highlight that this value, this way of being in the world, precisely responds to the enduring challenges of human life and human living: the questions of democracy, ecology and care that in each case call upon us to respond in a grown-up, non-ego-logical way. In this regard, education’s interest in grown-up-ness is not something ‘particular,’ something ‘only’ relevant for education and educators. It responds to a fundamental and urgent set of questions of contemporary and future life – and again, the school should stand for this and should resist attempts to keep education away from these ‘basics,’ which are basic because they are existential: they concern life, not survival.

Thirdly, then, I have tried to answer the question of what the place of the school in society should be. And rather than to just think of the school as a function of society – although it is this as well – we should always also keep working for the possibility of the school to be a ‘free space,’ not yet (fully) determined by the demands of society, but a place where practising is possible, particularly practising what it means to be in the world in a grown-up way. (And this needs a lot of practicing, because it is not a matter of knowing but ultimately a matter of being and being able to be.) Such a place for practising is particularly important in a world that, not least through the ‘demands’ of capitalist forms of ‘doing’ economy, is actually not really interested in the interruption of desires, but rather in people having more and more desires, so that they want more, and will therefore buy more, so that the economy can keep growing. In a world, therefore, that wants everyone to remain ego-logical, it is crucial to have places of refuge where other ways of being and being together can be practised. Here, then, lies perhaps the ultimate reason for the school’s duty to resist by standing for the value of grown-up-ness in a world that quite often rather wants us to remain children. This is no mean task, but it is at stake if we want schools to be places where education can occur.

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