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The World Asks Something from Us: An Interview With Gert Biesta About Encountering Subjects in Education and Mental Health Work

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ABSTRACT

This interview with Gert Biesta is part of an ongoing research initiative to explore the relationship between reality, social construction, and professional practices within the mental health field. Biesta's work has been a critical source of inspiration for this project. Biesta's work centers on the purpose and aims of education, emphasizing subjectification or the process of engaging with one's own freedom and becoming a subject capable of navigating the world. Biesta argues for a world-centered rather than child-centered or curriculum-centered education. This is not only because education should provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to act effectively in the world, but most importantly, because the world is where our existence as human beings takes place. Biesta thus engages with ethics and the connection between education and broader philosophical themes and challenges instrumental approaches in favor of seeing education as having intrinsic value for human growth and democratic citizenship. Although Biesta's work is primarily concerned with educational questions, his ideas transcend education and can prove productive in other domains. In the interview, we extend the conversation to mental health, seeking areas where Biesta's ideas resonate. In the concluding paragraph, the authors highlight the parallels between education and mental health, particularly their shared emphasis on subjectivity and the challenge of navigating reality. It is suggested that education and mental health intersect in their concern for "subjectness" and how individuals must relate to what the world demands of them.

This interview is part of an ongoing research initiative called (Re)Turn to Reality (Bertelsen, 2021; Bertelsen & Bøe, 2016; Bøe, 2021; Bøe et al., 2018, 2019, 2021; Sundet, 2021). The initiative aims to support the exploration of questions concerning the relationship between reality, social construction, and professional practices in mental health. In this effort, we look outside of the conventional canon of psychotherapy,

mental health work and family therapy (our professional "home turfs") in search of alternative conceptions of professional practice and its relationship to issues of the living of real lives.

In this process, the work of Professor Gert Biesta has been a critical source of inspiration, and our group has been fortunate to have a series of conversations with Biesta. This interview springs from these conversations. Throughout his academic career, dating back to the 1980s, Biesta has persistently explored and written about education as a relationship between teacher, student, and reality. This triangular relationship, we believe, can be seen as a counterpart to the structure of mental health work and therapeutic practices as a triangle of professional, client, and (or *in*) reality. But what about the question of purpose in education and mental health? Can education have something to offer to the field of mental health practice in that respect?

What is at stake in education, Biesta argues, is not only the issues of qualification and socialization (i.e., making sure that students learn well and work well, so that they can ultimately contribute to their community; these are not only educational matters but also included in the definition of mental health provided by the World Health Organization [WHO], [2022]). Notably, apart from qualification and socialization, Biesta stresses that education always has a potential for subjectification, or the emergence of human subjectivity (Biesta, 2009). Thus, subjectification is what is at stake when the student, or human being, is exposed to the demands of the world. And this demand, in turn, brings them into relation with their freedom (Biesta, 2017a). In this event, responsibility for the world comes at us from the outside as an imperative. However, subjectification does not equal taking on this responsibility. "Put simply," Biesta (2020) argues, "subjectification is not about responsibility but about freedom, including the freedom not to be responsible, the freedom to walk away from one's responsibility, so to speak" (p. 101). Thus, subjectification is a radical concept, representing a form of possible resistance to both curriculum (qualification) and social norms (socialization). In dialogue with thinkers like Arendt, Levinas and Bauman, Biesta argues that relating to freedom is at the core of what subject-ness is about and that bringing students into a relationship with their freedom is the central, and unique, educational task. Questions about identity, like "Who have I become?" and "How did I become this?" are superseded by the existential question "What do I do with who I have become?"

In this interview, conducted *via* e-mail between September 2021 and March 2022, we asked Biesta to elaborate on these and other issues that have occupied his work in the recent past. We also invited him to engage with the interface between his take on education, on the one side, and mental health and therapeutic practices on the other.

The interview

> We read in your work a concern that reality is lost from sight in education. Could you say something more about that concern?

This is quite a big discussion, so let me see if I can identify the main components of it. One is the strong influence of constructivist thinking on contemporary education.

There are relatively sophisticated positions, informed by philosophical discussions about knowledge that in some way all go back to Kant. Yet in everyday use of the idea of constructivism it often doesn't mean much more than that students should construct their own knowledge and understanding, give their own meaning, make their own sense, and so on. The observation behind this—that teachers cannot make sense for their students—is, of course, correct. But to suggest that this is all there is and, particularly, that students construct their own knowledge, alone or with other students—the popular but also misguided idea of co-construction—seems to suggest that students (or more generally: human beings) simply construct knowledge, with little or no contribution from reality.

A second component of what is happening here is that, partly as a result of the influence of constructivist ideas, education has become quite textual. A lot of assessment, for example, is based on language: students get questions and need to answer them. And this can easily give the impression that the "point" of education is that students can talk in the right way. Here, by the way, we find the first irony of the idea that students need to construct their own knowledge and understanding, because assessment raises the question whether students are constructing their knowledge in the right way. So, on the one hand, we hear that students have to construct their own knowledge and understanding, but on the other hand we see that not any construction will do. Yet, in most cases, it is the teacher who judges whether the construction is "correct," not reality.

The third component, I think, has to do with what in my work I have referred to as the "learnification" of education, that is, the idea that all that matters in education is what students learn. Learning is seen here as what students take away from education in terms of their knowledge, understanding, and also skills and attitudes. The problem here is that the world is turned into something that students have to learn *about*—so it is an *object* for their learning—but apart from that the world doesn't really "do" anything, so we might say.

So, along these lines I think that reality has really become quite marginal in education, and if reality is present, it is mainly as a learning object. Reality only appears in a very particular relationship, we might say, one where the student is trying to get something from reality. Perhaps the only exception is in the domain of skills because one could argue that skills are always about how we skillfully engage with the world. So, here there is a bit more of reality present, although the discourse about skills is again one where the aim is for the student to acquire skills, so even there it is about what the student takes from the encounter with reality.

I would say that the problem I see is that there is only one rather thin, superficial and one-directional relationship with reality—one in which reality is more or less objectified or, to put it differently, is just treated as a resource for students to get something from (learning, skills). But whether reality may have something to say to us, something to ask from us, puts limits on what we can want from it, is not really part of the picture.

> Recently you have introduced the term "world-centered education" (Biesta, 2022) as an alternative to, on the one side, curriculum-centered education and, on the other side, student-centered education. What are, in your view, the problems with these approaches to education? And what do you think a world-centered education has to offer as an alternative?

I have partly introduced the idea of world-centered education to intervene in the rather unproductive going back and forth between curriculum-centered and student-centered education. These two options appear from time to time as dominant but over time it's a kind of pendulum-swing—which to me already shows a problem with both positions. The simple intervention I make with world-centered education is to say that we actually need both students and a curriculum in order to have education, and that we bring students and curriculum together in order to equip them in some way for their life in (and with) the world. That's already one argument for saying that it makes much more sense to say that education should be world-centered, rather than centering on just the curriculum or just the student.

But there is a second layer to this idea, which connects to what I've said in response to the first question, because my concern with all the learning- and construction-talk in education is that it only seems to acknowledge one kind of relationship between self and world, one where the world is a resource for the self's acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding and so on. The other point I try to make with the idea of world-centered education is to argue that there are many more connections between self and world, and I'm particularly highlighting the one that goes in the exact opposite direction from the gesture of learning, namely the way in which the world "asks" something from us—which, in a brief formulation, is precisely not about the world as object but the world as subject. So this turn is another aspect of the idea of world-centered education and for me this is the really important one.

> In our project (Re)Turn to Reality, we try to articulate a similar concern. We are inspired by your work but also by the work of others more directly related to our field of mental health. One concern we address is the prevailing notion that mental health initiatives should be evidence-based, representing a view that professionals ideally should adjust their actions to standards established under laboratory-like research conditions. This view implies a practice where a strict following of procedures becomes pivotal for achieving the desired outcome. Under this regime, we see a real risk that the participants in a therapeutic relationship, as real persons addressing the reality of the life of the one seeking help, may end up marginalizing the significance of their own participation. In what ways do you think your ideas count for other fields of practice than education? And do you have any thoughts on the field of mental health in particular?

The idea of evidence-based practice is a problem in a number of fields—it's something I've been highly critical of in the field of education, for the same reasons as you mention, namely that it turns students into objects that teachers intervene upon. But this, in my view, has nothing to do with what education is about, because education is not about producing measurable learning outcomes, but about equipping and encouraging human beings for their life. So, in a sense there is something similar going on here as in the disappearance of reality, because one could say that in evidence-based approaches—which basically see education and mental health as technical work—students and clients become objects of interventions, and hence there is again only one particular and rather superficial relationship, one of control and mastery of an object, not the encounter with a subject.

So, in this regard we are encountering the same problem here, but we should be mindful that the solution for such mechanistic, technicist and control-focused approaches is not to put the student or client (and their perceptions, feelings, constructions and

understandings) at the center, because in that way we would in a sense be replacing "curriculum-centered" approaches with "student-centered" approaches. Which means, to put it quickly, that the way out of evidence-based objectification has to be a world-centered approach.

> The subject as a social actor is important in your work. But, perhaps in contrast to many philosophers of subjectivity - Hegel, Nietzsche, Althusser, Freud, Foucault, to name a few, your concern is not an ontology or phenomenology of subjectivity—a theory about what a subject is - but rather an ethical concern with what being a subject takes. Could you say something about the relationship between subjectness and theory, and about how you have gone about deciding what to think and write about, and what not to think and write about, to make your theories educationally workable?

The way you phrase it is very accurate, because my search has indeed not been for the right theory about the subject—and for me ontology and phenomenology are, in a sense, both trying to give an answer to what the subject is. I think that at some point I realized that the question is not what the subject is—that is a discussion without an end—but what it takes to be a subject. So, if there is a turn in my work, it is a turn from theory to existence or, with two other notions, a turn from a third person perspective to a first-person perspective. Now I am aware that within phenomenology there are very helpful approaches that try to make this turn as well, and I think that the same holds for personalist philosophy and, of course, we might say, existentialism. But with all these approaches there is always a danger that they become theories again, that is, that they end up as third person accounts. So it remains a challenge to keep returning to the first person challenge of being a subject and not let theory get in the way of that.

The question how to make this educationally workable is an interesting one. I would say that I have always (perhaps since reading Foucault) had concerns about the idea that education first needs a theory about the child or the individual or the subject before it can start with educating. This is quite a common gesture in educational thought and practice, but I have come to the conclusion (this is one of the main themes in my book *Beyond Learning* (Biesta, 2006)) that it is a profoundly uneducational gesture. The reason for that is that when you start from a theory about what the child is, you immediately close the door for a child to be otherwise. Education can then quickly turn into the management of objects, so to speak, rather than an encounter with subjects for the sake of their subject-ness.

These are of course theoretical considerations, but the inspiration for this critique of what one could call educational humanism, that is, education based on a truth about the human being, has a very practical origin. I have been particularly inspired by educators who work with children with severe mental disabilities—children who can't speak, where communication is very basic, and so on. You could say that such children lack all kind of "qualities" that we often think are characteristic of human beings. We also know that they will never acquire those qualities. But should we therefore give up on them? That, for me, would be utterly inhumane, although there are of course examples from the past and the present of people who would argue that such children shouldn't really exist (and are better aborted before they come into existence).

Here you can see what can go wrong if we start our educational endeavors and more generally our encounter with the new generation on the basis of a theory or truth about what the human being is, because it puts those who can't live up to such a definition or truth in a really difficult position. Educators who nonetheless work with such children do something really impressive by accepting children as they "are" and as they "arrive" and "appear." Such educational work is impressive, also because it is often simply very hard work. But I would also say that this work makes a political point by refusing the suggestion that "we" can define how human beings should be and exist.

The inspiration for this critique of humanism also comes from philosophy, particularly the work of Heidegger and Levinas, who both criticize philosophical humanism—that is, the idea that it is possible to define what the human being is—because they see that all those definitions run the risk of limiting possibilities for human beings to exist. It is, by the way, quite interesting that at this point Levinas agrees with Heidegger, and it is probably one of the few or perhaps the only point where he agrees.

So how is this related to making my work educationally workable? One way to put it is to say that I resist a deductive approach to education, that is, an approach that starts with a theory and then thinks of educational action as some kind of application of such a theory. Rather than making theory workable, I have tried to show that the very gesture of education contains a kind of affirmation that the new-born child or the student arriving in our classroom is a human being in their own right, and not an instance of some kind of general theory or truth about them. So, the whole point of being an educator is not to look for any evidence that a child or student will provide so that we know that they are human. It is not that they should first convince us that they are worthy of our educational efforts. On the contrary, by approaching the new-born child as subject, we actually open the possibility for them to exist as subject for them. And the same gesture is needed when we meet our students. Without such a gesture, nothing educational would ever happen.

> What about the differences between your field, education, and other fields of practice? Are there (fundamental) differences and limits to the relevance of your ideas to other areas, and perhaps mental health in particular, that you want to point out?

That's an interesting question, but also a quite difficult one. At one level I'm always trying to defend the integrity of education, by trying to show in what ways education is distinctive—which particularly means that I don't want to see education as something applied (such as applied psychology or applied philosophy). Now I do think that fields such as education, mental health—if we're happy with that phrase—and the legal domain share an interest, namely an interest in the subject-ness of the ones they work with. They share an interest, in other words, in human freedom, bearing in mind that freedom is never about just doing what you want to do, but about what I sometimes refer to as "grown up" freedom, that is, freedom that acknowledges the reality of the world one lives in—a world that always puts limitations on what I can want and can do.

So, in education, we want to encourage and equip the new generation to come into a relationship with their freedom. In the legal domain, we meet people who may have lost this relationship, and we try to bring them back into a relationship with their

freedom, so to speak. We try to return their freedom to them, so that they can return to their freedom. And this is also how I tend to look at the field of mental health. Another way of putting it is that these three practices are interested in the "I"—which I like a bit more than the word "self," because "I" is really a first person word. Perhaps education is first and foremost interested in how the "I" of a newcomer can arrive in the world, whereas in the legal domain and the field of mental health the focus may be on those situations where people have lost their "I" in some way. And in both cases the ambition is to restore this connection.

It is also interesting to look at the different forms of practice of these three fields. I tend to think that the fundamental form of education is that of pointing or, in slightly more theoretical terms, that of redirecting someone's attention onto something which, because you are trying to redirect someone's attention, is always also to direct the attention onto themselves. Pointing is, in this regard, a double gesture. It is also an open gesture, because in education we do invite our students to pay attention to something, but we don't go so far as to determine what they should do once something has caught their attention. Or, to put it differently: when we want to control that, we no longer speak about education but about indoctrination. The legal domain has other forms—such as punishment—although one could argue that even punishment is meant as a way to focus someone's attention onto their own actions, the consequences of those actions, and their own implication in all that. At one end of the spectrum there is little freedom for the one being punished, but the ambition—or hope—with which this work is conducted is always to make freedom possible, if not now then definitely in the future (although for some that future remains deferred). What the distinctive form of mental health practice is, is not something about which I have firm ideas—but it's an important point to consider, because the form shows a lot about the point of the practice.

> In your writings, you have sometimes referred to the aim of education as that of inviting students to be in the world in a grown-up way. As a formulation of purpose, this is both very precise and, at the same time, quite open. And it escapes the kind of instrumentality that often seeps into statements of intent in professional contexts. In line with that idea, one way to understand what mental health is about could be to think of it as the capacity to engage with, and be in, or stay with, the world. Do you see a link between education and mental health work, or do you think arguing for such a link risks lessening or blurring both education and mental health work as distinct domains of practice and thinking?

You see that this is something I already started to explore in the response to the previous question. So, I can definitely see that there is a shared concern between education and mental health, and that also in terms of the logic of the practices you could say that both practices necessarily have to be weak, non-instrumental, non-objectifying practices, because the self or "I" of another human being can never be produced. The forms of practice may be different, and perhaps what distinguishes education as well is that there is also work to do in equipping the new generation (the work of qualification) and providing them with orientation (socialization). But those are never aims in themselves because it is always about *someone* becoming qualified and gaining an orientation. So ultimately mental health and education do want that people take up their own life, but perhaps mental health comes in when

this becomes a problem for individuals, whereas education works more on the side of where this is not yet a problem, but simply a possibility to work on.

> The branch of mental health work in which we in this project are positioned is family therapy and what is referred to as dialogical practices. Such practices are inspired by social constructionist perspectives. In our project, we want to raise some questions from within such social constructionist and dialogical perspectives. We wish to re-address reality, as perhaps some versions of social constructionism tend to operate (only) in the domain of linguistic representations. What are your thoughts on social constructionism and, also, on dialogical practices?

I would say that the "truth" of constructivism is that the physical world remains silent about how it wants to be spoken about, so if we want to speak about it, that's something for us to do. But beyond this truth, there is the whole question of whether we approach the world as an object for us or as something that comes to us, appeals to us, insists, asks something and so on—or, with another line of thought in my book on *World-Centred Education* (Biesta, 2022)—gives itself to us. And as soon as we begin to get an appetite for this very different relationship with the world (if we can even call it a relationship), we can begin to see that there is less choice for us than we often tend to think, and that perhaps the first challenge is to come to terms with reality.

In my little book *Letting Art Teach* (Biesta, 2017b) I make a comment somewhere about the difference between living in an idea of the world and living in the world, and perhaps that is one of my biggest concerns here, that I see many people who live in an idea about the world—for example an idea about their body, or their identity—and then get frustrated that the world doesn't match that idea. I think there are all kinds of manifestations of this problem in our times. Trump is a rather clear example of someone who lives in an idea about the world and seems to be immune to anything that doesn't match up with that idea. He would blame the world for that rather than adjusting his ideas. But I also think that many young people—and older ones too—are caught up in this problem, for example by trying to figure out what their "real" identity is or by getting stuck in the frustration that their body doesn't match their idea of their body. It is somewhere here that I think that there are big problems with the linguistic turn, constructivism, and so on.

> In your work, resistance is an important word. How could we think of resistance as a vital word also in mental health practice?

Resistance is indeed a crucial term, because each time we encounter or experience resistance we are not simply encountering what is real, but we are actually encountering the difference between our ideas or expectations and the real. So resistance is in that regard a kind of reality check and therefore it is really important—first of all in education—not to see it as a problem that we should try to take out of education, but rather as a really important experience in working toward a grown-up way of being in and with the world. "Grown-up-ness," which of course is a rather awkward term, is not a matter of being of a particular age or having matured for a long enough period of time but is the challenge to come to terms with the frustration that the world is what it is rather than what we like it to be. This is not a matter of

resignation, or simply accepting the world as it is—because that would imply that change would not be possible or desirable. But it is to acknowledge that in the ways in which we try to arrive in the world and try to let our initiatives and ideas arrive in the world, there has to be a role for the world as well. It's about trying to come into a dialogue with the world, rather than subjecting the world to our will or giving up on the world and walking away from the world, so to speak. It's to stay in the "middle ground," as I have put it, between pushing too hard with the risk that we destroy the very world in which we try to arrive and stepping back from the world and giving up on the possibility to exist in—and with—the world.

> In one of the texts in which you introduce the idea of "the difficult middle ground" (Biesta, 2015) you dedicate the text to the memory of those who found it too difficult to stay in the middle ground. Reading that was striking, and we came to think that those who struggle with their lives and in such a way that they seek help in mental health services may perhaps precisely be those who find the difficult middle ground too difficult? Do you see such a possible relevance to mental health here?

You are very perceptive readers (actually the first ones who mention this dedication; I don't know, of course, whether you're the first ones who have noticed it). I do indeed dedicate this chapter to a number of young people, quite close by, who didn't manage to stay in the middle ground and have committed suicide. It is utterly sad when people end their own life, but even more sad when young people are unable to stay in the world, that is, when the world is too much for them, so to speak. My ideas about the middle ground are in a sense a way to grasp what is going on here, to give words to it. And, also to understand that it is quite a complex challenge to stay in this middle and not destroy yourself or destroy the world. Somewhere deep down, I think that as educator I always try to hold my students in this middle ground, if that's the right way to put it. I try to hold them there as much as I can—but that's definitely not easy, also not because students not always are able to perceive what's going on there or how I am trying to hold them—but I think that carrying that burden is part of what it means to try to be an educator. And, of course, as educators we cannot keep holding our students there, so there comes a point where we must let go, which can be tremendously difficult as well.

Concluding remarks—minding the world

For our group, engaging with Biesta's work has profoundly impacted how we think about mental health work. Hence, we are grateful that, for this interview, Biesta was willing to engage with questions coming from the mental health sphere and to join us in our search for articulating why we find his work so invigorating.

As we understand it, at the core of Biesta's theories lie a few simple observations: As humans, we are part of the world we live in. Our actions have real consequences that affect the conditions of life (and the likelihood of life's continuation) for ourselves and others, and everything else on this planet, often in subtle and unpredictable ways. Thus, as people, we matter to each other and to the world. The challenge that this bestows upon us, both on a collective level (as politics) and as subjects (as ethics), is to figure out what to do with this and how to go on. The responsibility that emanates

from this cuts through socially constructed categories like "therapist" or "client"; at a very basic level, responding to what the world asks of us is always at stake, irrespective of social position or other situational characteristics. The world is part of our professional practices, but, more importantly, it also locates practice inside the world. Mental health work is not so much *about* the world (i.e., categorizing conditions and prescribing treatments), as it is a particular kind of relationship within the world.

There are, we think, important parallels between education and mental health work that are seldom articulated fully. These can be articulated in at least two ways, one weak and one strong. The weak claim is that education is inevitably a critical element in mental health work. One obvious indication that this is the case is the observation that the concept of "psychoeducation," referring to the process of educating individuals, families, or groups about psychological concepts and strategies to enhance emotional well-being and coping abilities, currently plays a prominent role in many models of mental health practice. Psychoeducation can certainly be framed as bordering on indoctrination, if seen simply as a means to convince clients to see the nature of their problems in the same way the practitioner does, in order to prepare the client for the logic of the interventions that are to follow. Here, we believe, Biesta's claim that it is not only qualification that is at stake in the educational situation, but also socialization and subjectification, can stimulate the discussion about what psychoeducation is, and what it is for.

The strong claim about the association between education and mental health work is that they are joined by a shared interest in *subjectness*, that is, in the real-life, personal question of what it takes to be a subject. According to Biesta, the basic educational gesture is to direct the attention of the student toward the world, and, thus, also to the student's role in what is going on in the world. The purpose of education, in this view, is to make it possible for the student to figure out how they, as an "I," should relate to their own freedom, and navigate their life in a world that is full of events and conditions that are not of their choosing. (see, e.g., Biesta, 2017a, 2020, 2022). That question is also at the heart of mental health work. With this shared concern as a point of departure, it is possible to see education and mental health work as different points on one and the same continuum. This continuum, one could say, represents different ways of addressing individual freedom by way of directing attention inwards, toward needs and interests, and outwards, toward the world around us and what is at stake there. While education, as Biesta suggests, in many ways presupposes that the different elements of this equation are all within reach in the educational situation itself (at least in principle), for people in the kinds of existential despair that is common to most who seek (or otherwise come into contact with) mental health services, the connection between self and world may be lost. As Jerome Frank (Frank & Frank, 1993) observed, perhaps what is most common to the experience of seeking psychotherapy is not the presence of symptoms, but a sense of demoralization—a loss of a sense of agency, meaning, and hope. Thus, although directing students' attention toward the fact of their freedom and the likely possibility that the world might need them to apply that freedom in some ways and not others, and, on the other hand, leading clients in a search for lost connections to both freedom and the world are not one and the same thing, both fields of practice share a common purpose. As such, education and mental health work are both (albeit different) forms of picking up on what the world asks of us.

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