

Book Review

Good Education in an Age of Measurement.
Gert J.J. Biesta. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2010.
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In *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*, Gert J.J. Biesta argues that analysis about what constitutes a “good” education demands more than the evidence-based, “best practice” paradigm currently offers. Furthermore, the narrow perspective of assessing learning outcomes may prove detrimental for education towards a deeply democratic society. Although not exactly the type of insight assessment researchers might welcome, Biesta’s thoughtful critique can ultimately enhance the ways scholars evaluate the quality of education. Biesta reinvigorates discussions about what constitutes a good education, specifically the purpose of education. Concerned about a lack of attention to purposes in the research literature, Biesta puts this issue front and center. His inquiry includes a normative perspective rather than only a managerial focus on education as a technique. That is, he produces a conceptual framework for why we ought to focus on particular educational goals. To this end, Biesta provides a three-prong framework for education, which should highlight a distinct outcome: producing a deliberative democratic order of increasing equity.

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Although perhaps not intentionally, the argument is usefully split in two parts: the first half of the book shows why employing only the evidence-based paradigm is inadequate for evaluating good education; the second half delves more directly into the philosophy of education to propose a pedagogy of interruption. Assessment researchers may find the first half a bit harsh, even though the material has been fairly well explored by sociologists, anthropologists, and educators grounded in the critical tradition who focus on the politics of curriculum and schooling (e.g. Apple, 1982, 2000). The critique is not, however, an attack on evidence-based practitioners but an analysis of the consequences of overemphasizing the assessment of learning outcomes (“learnification” in Biesta’s words) to determine quality education. In the second half, Biesta turns from the political-economic analysis of education research to philosophy proper, proposing key elements of a good education. The focus turns to educating youth to

promote a deep deliberative democracy—not just joining a democratic order already established, but constantly challenging the arrangement to be more equitable. As I summarize these points below, I pay more attention to the front end since the readers of *Research & Practice in Assessment* may be directly implicated.

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In Chapter One, Biesta argues that quantitative, data-driven measurements require advanced technique, and a fixation on the technical questions of assessment obscures more important normative questions about what exactly we ought to be measuring. As Biesta argues, “This has to do with the question of whether we are indeed measuring what we value, or whether we are just measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure” (Biesta, 2010, p. 13). In other words, it is fairly easy to measure the change in test scores of a school from one year to the next and determine if that school is making adequate progress. Suddenly, the ability to raise students’ test scores in a standardized format, focusing mainly on written and mathematical literacy, determines a quality education. So, in my example, while schools are scrambling to capitalize on tutoring services, cutting “frivolous” classes like the arts and music, and drilling test-taking strategies in classes to capture the coveted title of a “high performing school,” Biesta is merely asking, “Exactly why ought we train youth to ace standardized tests?”

My suspicion, like Biesta’s, is that this question is not asked because evidence-based experts feel it has been answered. “Common sense” is that schooling qualifies children for a job or college. Therefore, educators gather evidence to assess how well students are learning the skills necessary for these paths. However, Biesta reminds, “We shouldn’t forget, of course, that what appears or presents itself as ‘common sense’ often serves the interests of a particular group much better than the interests of other groups” (p. 15; see also Gramsci, 1971). When educators reduce schooling to qualification for the job market, or university in preparation for a higher skilled job market, education serves the interests of the current economic sector of society, in turn neglecting other important educational values such as citizen education or the arts (e.g. Nussbaum, 2011). But, Biesta argues qualification is merely one of three dimensions of education.

Biesta proposes that the three functions education can/ought to perform are qualification, socialization, and subjectification (pp. 19-21). Qualification, for example

job training, is providing youth knowledge and skills to do something. Socialization, whether explicit or implicit, integrates individuals into particular social structures. The last function, subjectification, is a far more slippery concept, but the crux of the purpose of a good education that comes later in the book. In short, subjectification promotes autonomous actors who are critically, creative, independent thinkers. Furthermore, subjectification creates individuals who do not merely fit into the social order as is, but who are capable of altering the status quo to bring about social arrangements of greater equity and deeper democracy. Finally, education is a composite of the three functions, impossible to separate (if effective). According to Biesta, subjectification is receiving less attention in discussions about effective education.

In Chapters Two and Three, Biesta makes his strongest points against the technocratic model of learning assessment. This model concentrates too heavily on the efficiency of education techniques for transmitting knowledge, but without questioning the knowledge that is being efficiently transmitted. In other words, “the question that always needs to be asked is ‘Effective for what?’” (p. 34). Biesta also asks the politically important question of “effective for whom?” Too much time is spent in laboratory settings, randomizing controlled trials to quantify correlating phenomena; too little time is spent connecting these results with the contemporary social context. According to Biesta, “A key problem with the idea of evidence-based practice is that it simply overlooks the cultural option” (p. 45). So, the evidence-based assessment frame focuses on the technical aspect of education without paying equal attention to the moral elements. On the surface, technocratic solutions can mean that teachers become effective at increasing student learning, but rarely are they equipped to question why students are learning. On a deeper level, emphasis on technique means that education takes on a much more reproductive function and loses the potential to be a transformative social institution.

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Research concentrating only on “what works,” Biesta argues, is insufficient to evaluate the quality of education in society—both practically and politically. The phrase “what works” seems to mean that educational techniques have been rigorously tested to discover the ideal practices; teachers can go to clearinghouses to collect these tools for their classroom, and the tools “will work” in each particular context. But, that is not exactly what is happening. Technically, a particular teaching practice shows a statistically significant relation to a specific consequence (controlling for a range of effects), said practice “has worked” under those conditions, thus it is deemed to be the thing that works under all “similar” conditions

in the real world (p. 44). Nothing about the latter process contains the important logical connector “and it will work for your specific context every time.” Politically, without a normative foundation of why teachers ought to use these techniques, emphasizing “what works” stifles critical decision-making by individual teachers. It “denies educational practitioners the right not to act according to evidence about ‘what works’ if they judge such a line of action would be educationally undesirable” (emphasis in original, p. 47). If teachers deem evidence-based practices ill fit to their own circumstances, they risk criticism about ignoring “what works,” potentially deprofessionalizing their roles as creative educators. Thus, both processes, recapitulating what works and closing off the options for individual creativity, increase the tendency of educational institutions to reproduce the status quo rather than interrupt common sense understandings (e.g. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

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Unfortunately, one current understanding of schooling circulating is the educational field as marketplace, and in Chapter Three Biesta shows that assessment and accountability regimes perpetuate this frame. He argues that the “accountability” narrative is becoming an overwhelming logic in which customers (parents and students) can hold service providers (teachers and schools) accountable for an excellent product (education). It should not be surprising, therefore, that parents with money can afford a better education, reproducing economic inequality between generations. When Biesta reminds us that contemporary discourses express neoliberal themes, especially when discussing parental choice, he hints at another influence of assessment and accountability (pp. 55-59). I would argue that if parents (and students) are consumers in a competitive market, they need a clear measurement of quality among (increasingly charter) schools to make their purchasing decisions. So, the State intervenes to mandate a curriculum that is standard across schools, thus comparable (e.g. Common Core). Assessment researchers determine which schools are most effective in getting students to learn that curriculum—making yearly progress adequately—and media publish “league tables.” In this sense, assessment research is the academic version of Consumer Reports for schools in an era of neoliberalism.

After the first half of the book, where Biesta is making a pretty straightforward critique on the consequences of contemporary education research, he sets out his argument of items to consider for a “good education” from the end of Chapter Three to Chapter Six. For readers unfamiliar with the philosophy of education in general, or the work of Zygmunt Bauman, Hanna Arendt, Jürgen

Oelkers, and Jacques Ranciere specifically, the last half of the book might take a bit more effort. For now, I will paraphrase (what I understand as) the main theme of Biesta's argument and leave the longer philosophical explorations to the reader. The work required to unpack the complexity is both rewarding and substantially aided by the crisp conclusions at the end of each chapter; it may be wise to read the conclusions of the final three chapters before the content itself.

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A good education prepares students with the tools to generate a deliberative democracy with the critical capacity to interrupt the status quo order for increased social equity. The focus, to return to the first chapter, is to reinvigorate the subjectification function of education so students are not merely instructed on the techniques of a stagnant democratic order. "The pedagogy of interruption thus has its place in the domain of subjectification" (p. 91) because qualification and socialization are activities that function to prepare individuals to fit into a system as is. Education, through the third element, is responsible "for coming into presence of unique individual beings...for the plurality that is the condition of human action and human freedom" (p. 91). Therefore, a key measure of good education for Biesta is how it increases freedom for all individuals, which requires both the knowledge about how to deliberate towards a deep democracy and the responsibility to make it happen. While qualification and socialization can provide much of the former, subjectification must provide much of the latter. And, assessing learning outcomes is not designed to address the question of subjectification in education. Thus, the evidence-based "what works" paradigm cannot capture all aspects of what makes a good education.

So, why would assessment scholars, readers of RPA, bother to pick up a book by a philosopher of education who specifically criticizes the exact paradigm within which they work? Researchers should read it because it is both provocative and challenging. One cannot engage with the literature that Biesta draws from and simply dismiss his argument as misguided or utopian because he is a philosopher rather than an assessment specialist. Biesta is asking education researchers, qualitative and quantitative alike, to provide the theoretical, empirical, and normative justification for the choice of any quality measure. Furthermore, he is demanding an equally grounded answer to what we ought to be teaching and measuring. The current evidence-based paradigm is not fully equipped to answer these questions; "what works" is best at answering "how"

to teach and measure, not "why." While important, technique is a means not an end; thus, Biesta remains skeptical that assessment alone can evaluate a "good" education.

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