

Book Review

Biesta, Gert J.J. (2014). *The Beautiful Risk of Education*.
Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

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The beautiful risk of education is third in a trilogy written by Gert Biesta. In this text the author brilliantly discusses personal feelings and accounts about contemporary education processes. As the author opposes the risk aversion that characterizes contemporary educational policies and practices, he makes a strong argument for giving the notion of risk a central place in structured educational endeavors. Therefore, at the root of this book is a plea for the risks of education to be foci of teaching and learning.

This is a text about what many teachers already know: real education involves a risk. The author maintains that education today, as designed and promulgated by politicians and educational policymakers, strips education and learning of its inherent risk. Biesta further argues that risk

should not be seen as a weakness to overcome; rather, it should be embraced as an educational tool which is critical to learning outcomes for students. Biesta refers to W. B. Yeats, who contended that education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire. As with Paulo Freire's idea of emancipatory education, Biesta suggests, education should not be an interaction among machines, but an encounter among human beings. Students are human beings with feelings. They possess free will and therefore should not be viewed as objects to be molded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility. The risk in education is grounded in the knowledge that students are agents of their own learning. Pondering this said agency brings to light the idea that students will ultimately choose what and how they learn. Therein lies the risk of education; the possibility that students may or may not learn and that their learning is in their hands. Additionally, students will grasp concepts and ideas to varying degrees.

The author contends that the removal of risk diminishes the role of education and minimizes the potential of "true" learning, and this heightens "the possibility that we take out education altogether" (p. 1). He is convinced that contemporary education is misaligned as "educational processes and practices do not work in a machine-like way" (p. x). For Biesta, risk is anchored in the agency of learners and is a vital ingredient if learning is to occur. The author eloquently argues that the abstraction of contemporary education strips education of its very goal, which is growth in human behavior and, rather, sets "fixed" standards and expectations on students and teachers. Through the inclusion of

philosophical arguments, he contends that teachers are increasingly being forced to take the “risk out of education” (p. 1).

An appealing trait of this book is found in its straightforward and sincere discussions about education, past and present. Notably, concepts are densely presented through philosophical arguments as he compares the modern art of educating to older models with the aim of making his case for educators to embrace the risk in teaching rather than focusing on the predictable and the standardized. The book is presented through seven chapters, which explore “the weakness of educational practices from a range of different angles” (p. 5). He views and positions the weakness of education to be the removal student/teacher agency by making education and its outcomes predictable and accountable to specific standards set out by government and policymakers. The author attempts to explore the issues in education in a mode that is not often attempted:

This book is not an unbridled elaboration of all things weak, but an attempt to show, on the one hand, that education only works through weak connections of communication and interpretation, of interruption and response, and, on the other hand, that this weakness matters if our educational endeavors are informed by a concern for those we educate to be subjects of their own actions—which is as much about being the author and originator of one’s actions as it is about being responsible for what one’s actions bring about. (p. 4)

The book is makes for an interesting read. Biesta cleverly organizes the book around a critical discussion of seven key educational concepts: Creativity, Communication, Teaching, Learning, Emancipation, Democracy, and Virtuosity. These terms form the titles of the seven chapters through which he explores the weaknesses of the educational processes and practices. The deliberations are thought-provoking and offer original perspectives of education. The author acknowledges the challenge of balancing education and maintaining education as a process that contributes to the creation of human subjectivity. Furthermore, he maintains the belief that educators create students belies the nature of education and its creativity, which entails the risk of allowing students to evolve through their negotiations with the pedagogic processes and environment. He argues that the standardization of education where students and teachers work toward meeting/maintaining set goals robs education of its creativity.

A strong feature of the book is Biesta's use of numerous theories to argue his perspectives philosophically. Its strength is manifested in the grounding of ideas in these theories, demonstrating the deep-rooted nature and contradictions within education. The chapters Teaching, Learning and Emancipation are particularly powerful as they force readers to think critically about education's purposes and processes. Through these chapters, Biesta presents thought-provoking arguments and encourages the embrace of the risk of education, highlighting differences between students being taught as opposed to learning from in more active terms. Positioning students as mere subjects that are

changed only by the influence of teachers, he argues, is less useful than the concept of learning from the teacher and peers. He also argues the rhetoric of learning as complex, in that education often refers to learning as “desirable” rather than “desired.” He offers that learning is an individualistic concept and that individuals learn things by and for themselves. Concerned about how learning is viewed by contemporary pedagogues, he criticizes popular constructivist theories as putting an end to teaching and having transformed the process of teaching and learning. He maintains that learning is “something constructed—that when we refer to something as “learning” we are not engaged in a description of a naturally occurring phenomenon but are actually making a judgement about change” (pp. 59-60). This deliberation directly counters the constructivist belief that students create their own learning and teachers are facilitators. He therefore positions teachers as essential in the teaching-learning process. Biesta makes a clear distinction between teaching and learning. For him, the teacher is of absolute significance in the classroom. He views teachers not only as facilitators but as leaders and knowledge-keepers within the classroom because they bring something new and added to the classroom. Essentially, they transcend the knowledge base of their students and can bring new dimensions to the learning process. Learning, then, is an individual activity. Students are agents of their own learning; no one can learn for another.

Biesta makes many valid arguments through his deliberate and intense probing questions about the processes and practices of education.

The book is clearly aimed at educational policy analysts and planners as well as educators. A weakness of this work, however, is the lack of practical recommendations being offered to readers. Aside from its density, it is a worthwhile read for educational practitioners as the author deals with some challenging questions that all educators face.