



## Have we been paying attention? Educational anaesthetics in a time of crises

Gert Biesta

To cite this article: Gert Biesta (2020): Have we been paying attention? Educational anaesthetics in a time of crises, Educational Philosophy and Theory, DOI: [10.1080/00131857.2020.1792612](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1792612)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1792612>



Published online: 12 Jul 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 513



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## Have we been paying attention? Educational anaesthetics in a time of crises

It is remarkable to see how much has already been written about what is alternatively called the 'Corona Crisis' or the 'Covid-19 Crisis' and also about its impact on education. In addition to an increasing number of papers in academic journals, there have been many contributions in professional journals and newspapers, and also numerous posts and blogs on the internet. Funding agencies around the world have been making extra monies available for researching the impact of the virus on education, which partly explains the rather large number of surveys and questionnaires in circulation. In one respect this surge in activity is not surprising. The impact of the virus has been significant, both on our lives in general and on our educational lives, so there is an obvious need to try to make sense of it all. The interruption of the normal order literally *makes* us think—whether we want it or not—which, as such, is a good thing. In this regard, it is actually quite appropriate to refer to the situation as a *crisis*, because in its original meaning, crisis is not a state of chaos, but a critical moment or turning point that calls for consideration and judgement (in Greek: 'krinein').

In the discussion, a number of themes are emerging. One major concern is the impact of the virus on the educational careers of children and young people, particularly as a result of the temporary closure of schools, colleges and universities. In addition to concerns about a 'delay in learning,' to use a popular phrase, there is a legitimate concern about a potential increase in educational inequality. This is particularly so, because those who are well-resourced—those with the most economic, cultural and social capital—will be able to navigate the situation much more easily than those who lack such resources. Whatever else we may want to say about contemporary education, the current crisis has revealed with much clarity how important *public* education—education funded by public means, accessible to everyone, and accountable to the public—is, particularly for those who only have limited resources of their own. We knew this, of course, but it is one of the more inconvenient truths about contemporary education that we tend not talk about, or that becomes hidden in the laudable but ultimately impossible quest for equal educational opportunities for all (on this see predicament see Heid 1988; Labaree, 2008; Biesta, 2020).

That some are concerned about the degree to which the pandemic may cause a 'delay in learning' is in a sense ironic, because it can legitimately be argued that learning didn't stop. On the more romantic end of the spectrum, the case has been made, and rightly so in my view, that children learned all kind of useful things while at home—cooking, gardening, cleaning, and many other things related to daily home life. It does make sense, therefore, that schools connect to all this learning when children return, in order not to send out the message that time has just been wasted. On the more political end of the spectrum important lessons may have been learned as well. Such as that not all lives matter equally; that money still makes the difference that makes a difference; that those who do the most essential work for keeping society going tend to earn the least and often have insecure job contracts; that countries differ hugely in the quality of and investment in public healthcare, if they have such systems in the first place; and that some politicians are populist cowards who are simply incompetent at their job.

Now for those who have been paying attention, all this is not news. But the key question here is how much attention we have been paying and how much attention we have been allowed to pay, if that phrase makes sense. After all, the Covid-19 crisis is not the first crisis we are witnessing and not the only crisis we're in the middle of. We are also, still, in the middle of a climate crisis which actually still requires urgent attention and action. And the climate crisis is itself just the next phase of a huge environmental crisis about which we have been warned at least since Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, and the report from the Club of Rome, *The Limits to Growth*, published in 1972. And then there are homelessness and poverty, a refugee crisis, a global malnutrition crisis, ongoing high rates of infant mortality due to lack of clean water and proper sanitation, and so on.

So for those who have been paying attention and who have managed to continue to pay attention—which is no mean feat—there is little new under the sun. And this does, of course, raise the question how the current pandemic is actually different from the crises surrounding us, or how it has 'managed' to be different. I strongly believe that it is for each of us individually to answer this question, as any quick generalisation is simply out of place. I am sure that the comfortable life I'm managing to lead in the global north—with death at a far distance and an ongoing supply of food, energy and security—has only been marginally disrupted by the pandemic and compares in nothing to, say, the everyday experience of those who live in the poorer areas and slums of cities such as Bangalore or Bhopal. So while the existence of crises—in the plural—is an undeniable fact, the real question is which of them manage to capture our attention. And this brings me (back) to education.

To define education in terms of learning, to reduce education to learning, or to argue that learning is the future of education is, as I have been arguing for almost two decades now, a mistake (see, e.g. Biesta, 2004, 2013, 2015). What is distinctive about education is not learning—which can happen anywhere, with or without education—but teaching. And the basic gesture of teaching is that of trying to catch and direct the attention of another human being—an act of 'turning,' as Plato already describes it in *The Republic*. Authoritarian teaching not just wants to direct the attention of students, but also wants to have total control over what students do with what enters their field of perception. Emancipatory teaching, on the other hand, also wants to direct the attention of students, but leaves it to them to figure out what they do with what they may encounter there. The judgement, and the burden of the judgement is, in other words, on them. The teacherly gesture here tries to say no more than 'look, there is something there that I believe might be good, important, worthwhile for you to pay attention to' (see Biesta, 2017a). And this gesture not just focuses the attention on the world 'out there' but in one and the same 'move' brings the 'I' of the student into play.

It is precisely here that we find the true *aesthetics* of education—which is first of all about the *form* of education, not about its theory (on this see Prange, 2005)—where the whole point of education is to bring something into the student's 'field' of perception, which can be visual, auditory, sensory and perhaps may even include the touching of the student's soul (on this idea see Biesta, 2017b). If the aesthetics of education seeks to awaken students for the world and, through this, awaken them for themselves—which is the question of emancipation—it follows that the *anaesthetics* of education does the exact opposite. Rather than awakening students and trying to keep them awake, it induces a state of slumber. Rather than directing their attention and encouraging them to pay attention, it offers distraction, perhaps first and foremost by encouraging students to stay with themselves, to pursue their own learning trajectories, regulate their own learning, define their own learning needs, but never interrupted, never turned, never stopped in their tracks.

So the Corona crisis is a real crisis as it interrupts our normal ways of doing and asks for attention and judgement. And perhaps its force has to do with the plain fact that it has brought death to the doorstep of the comfortable lives of the global North in a way that other crises have not managed to do, or have not managed to do so far. But it is not the only crisis

surrounding us, so there is a real question about (our) attention, given that attention is not only in short supply in light of an abundance of information (see Lanham, 2006), but also in light of an abundance of crises, if that phrase makes sense. For education all this raises the question whether the school will act on the side of aesthetics or the side of anaesthetics. Whether the school, under the relentless pressure from policy makers and the global measurement industry to be 'excellent,' will produce distraction or will manage to generate attention. This is perhaps one of the more fundamental educational questions that is opening up at this moment in time—let's hope that we spot it before it has passed.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## ORCID

Gert Biesta  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8530-7105>

## References

- Biesta, G. J. J. (2004). Against learning. Reclaiming a language for education in an age of learning. *Nordisk Pedagogik*, 23(1), 70–82.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2013). Interrupting the politics of learning. *Power and Education*, 5(1), 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.2304/power.2013.5.1.4>
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2015). Freeing teaching from learning: Opening up existential possibilities in educational relationships. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 34(3), 229–243.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2017a). *Letting art teach: Art education after Joseph Beuys*. ARTEZ Press.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2017b). Touching the soul? Exploring an alternative outlook for philosophical work with children and young people. *Childhood and Philosophy*, 30(28), 415–452.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2020). Perfect education, but not for everyone: On society's need for inequality and the rise of surrogate education. *Zeitschrift Für Pädagogik*, 66(1), 8–14.
- Prange, K. (2005). *Die Zeigestruktur der Erziehung: Grundriss der operativen Pädagogik*. Ferdinand Schöningh.
- Heid, H. (1988). Zur Paradoxie der bildungspolitischen Forderung nach Chancengleichheit. (On the paradox of the educational ambition for equal opportunities). *Zeitschrift Für Pädagogik*, 34(1), 1–17.
- Labaree, D. (2008). *Someone has to fail. The zero-sum game of public education*. Harvard University Press.
- Lanham, R. A. (2006). *The economics of attention*. The University of Chicago Press.

Gert Biesta 

Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, UK &  
Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy, Maynooth University, Ireland

 [gert.biesta@ed.ac.uk](mailto:gert.biesta@ed.ac.uk)