

THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE 'OTHER' AS THE FIRST DEMOCRATIC INTERRUPTION

Dialogues on Global Citizenship Education: Interview with Gert Biesta

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Abstract

Gert Biesta holds the position of Professor of Public Education at the Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy at Maynooth University, Ireland, and also serves as Professor of Educational Theory and Pedagogy at the Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh. His comprehensive body of work is rooted in democratic education, educational theory, and the philosophical dimensions of education, covering a wide range of fundamental topics such as teaching, teacher education, teacher agency, curriculum, the roles of educators and schools in society, and the idea of world-centred education. In this interview, the discussion delved into these themes and their relation to the conceptualisation of Global Citizenship Education (GCE). Biesta critically examines citizenship within a global context, emphasising the essential principle of plurality and providing experiential examples of societal "interruptions" in the meeting with "others". He argues that citizenship has three definitions: social, moral and political, and he asks how we can use the idea of global citizenship if citizenship requires the nation state for securing the rights of (its) citizens.

Keywords

Democracy in Education, Citizenship Education, Human plurality

TEXT

In *Learning Democracy in School and Society*, you distinguish between 'teaching citizenship' and 'learning democracy'. You argue that citizenship is a practice and stress the importance of listening to the experiences of democracy, particularly those of young people. Could you deepen your thinking about how citizenship is related (if you think it is) to local and global dimensions?

The book "*Learning Democracy*" is quite an old book for me. Over the years, I have become more critical about learning and more positive about teaching, but for democratic citizenship education it does matter how we understand and 'practise' teaching. It will not make a difference, if we merely assume that citizenship can be taught and that teachers' main job is to tell students how to behave. In the work I did with colleagues (see, e.g., Biesta, Lawy & Kelly 2009), we found that if you speak to young people about their lives, they have all kinds of experiences that matter for how they think about the world, themselves, and democracy. Those experiences are crucial, both in understanding what citizenship means and what that means for schools. In that regard the ideas of 'teaching citizenship' and 'learning democracy' still are relevant.

I currently have the pleasure of supervising a PhD student in Belgium focusing on citizenship education in schools, and the fact that schools have both the task of citizenship education and of paying attention to diversity. The student is exploring tensions and possible synergies between the two. This is interesting because a lot of ideas about citizenship again have this gesture of: "Oh, we need to tell young people how they become good citizens of Belgium", but at the same time, these young people experience a lot of diversity and, within the diversity, also a lot of inequality. These two experiences are in tension, and it is not easy for schools to bring them together.

Then there is also your question about the local and the global dimensions of citizenship, which leads us to the notion of global citizenship. In relation to this question, I would say that the experiences that young people have (but that all of us have) are not limited to a single location and instead have multiple layers. We cannot say that this is just local. Also, our experiences with democracy, citizenship, belonging, and feeling as members of specific communities are not limited to the local level. Whether that means that it is global, I am not entirely sure, but I do know that it does not mean that everything is just local.

What is happening in the world and how everything comes to us through different channels and social media raises questions about how we live together 'democratically'. In this sense what is happening further away is definitely more visible nowadays.

How would you then define 'global citizenship'?

It is a good question because my inclination is to say that global citizenship does not really exist. Let me try to explain. What always helps me is that when I look at citizenship or analyse how other people talk about citizenship, I can see three quite different definitions. One is a *social definition* of citizenship, which discusses social cohesion, integration, and belonging. The second definition is a *moral definition*, which focuses on citizenship in terms of the individual and collective responsibilities that citizens have. The moral notion of respect is that to be a good citizen means to have respect for other people. In this understanding, the idea of active citizenship partly has a moral undertone when saying that we need to do good work for others. However, there is also active citizenship more in thinking about social integration and that people should actively participate in keeping society going. For me, the third definition of citizenship is the *democratic or political definition* of citizenship, which has to do with democratic values like liberty, equality, and solidarity. Now, looking at global citizenship with these three definitions in mind, you can, if you take the moral definition, say that this is something global because we should all be respectful and responsible everywhere. If you think about the social definition, you can also say there is a need for our lives to be coherent or integrated, locally and globally. But in terms of democratic or political definition, there is always the question of who can safeguard the status of citizens, and here the nation-state still plays an important role. You can see this in all the issues surrounding refugees, who suddenly don't have the protection of a nation-state, and therefore, there are always problems with their rights and who takes care of and safeguards their rights. I think that is where my hesitation about global citizenship comes from. You may argue that it is nice to think of all human beings as one big happy family, but nation-states are the ones who are responsible for safeguarding rights and therefore the ones who can guarantee people's rights. At the global level, this is quite difficult. You have the United Nations, you have human rights, and they all try to do something that goes beyond the nation-state. But, in our time, you can see how vulnerable that is for the individual, and that is where my

hesitation about global citizenship lies. Therefore, it depends a lot on how you understand citizenship. If you approach it in political terms, then I think the question of what entities can secure people's status as citizens is quite tricky. If global citizenship is about having a global outlook or global mindedness, as is now often argued, then that could be important. However, I am still unsure whether we should use the word citizenship in relation to that, or should just talk about a 'global outlook,' for example.

How do you think educators, not only teachers but also Institutions, NGOs, States, could support youth in practicing democracy in their local and global dimensions?

I will try to respond to it, but I probably need to bring in another idea. If we were to discuss the practice of democracy, I believe I would still argue democracy is a practice: it is something people do, and it is not an abstract idea. Then, there are a couple of ways to think about democracy. One is an *arithmetical understanding*, where you ask people what they want and then go with the majority. This is how democracy often works in voting systems: people vote to express their preferences for a political party or political individuals, and then the majority gains power. There is something important about that because it gives everyone a voice. Still, the problem with only thinking about majorities is as soon as you have a majority, it creates problems for the minorities, the ones who are not in power. As a result, you may already argue that minorities should always be a concern of democracy, but things do not function like that. Quite often, what you see in countries when parties have the power, they forget about the minorities or the ones who are not in power, and they begin to push hard on their own agendas, which is a problem. Problematic examples of this are Poland – although there is not a 'turn' – and Hungary, where the power of the majority was or is being used to undermine the legal and democratic infrastructure of society.

The concept of democracy that I find more relevant, also because there is something educational there, is what is called *deliberative democracy*. Deliberative democracy has a precise meaning, and it is not just to say, "Oh, people should deliberate and have discussions". Deliberative democracy holds that everyone should voice their preferences, but not that we then simply count them to give power to the majority. What deliberative democracy suggests is that everyone should be able to express their preferences, but the democratic process is then about considering all those preferences and seeing which

of those can be 'carried' by society as a whole, and which not. Deliberative democracy thus entails deliberation about the preferences of individuals and groups in order to decide which of those are 'possible' and which are not, for example, because they are too expensive or generate inequality.

From the perspective of deliberative democracy it means, to quote the Rolling Stones, that "you can't always get what you want" because not everything that individuals or groups want can be carried by the whole of society. There are very practical constraints; for example, a limited amount of public money. As you can often see, after elections, the whole question is "Should we raise taxes to provide more people with what they want?" whereas other people say, "No, we need to have low taxes so that people are free to spend their own money". But there are also political reasons for saying that not everything that people want in a society is possible. If there are groups who say, "We want freedom for ourselves but not for other people," you can say that is something that will destroy the democratic foundation society.

There is also an important educational dimension to this, because democracy asks everyone to recognise that we live in a world that places limits and constraints on what you *can* want. Working on this insight is important educational work that can start at a really young age already. So, I believe we are getting close to answering the second question as well and concerns a world that puts limits on what we can want. You see that in the ecological crisis. If we just approach the planet as a shop where we just get what we want, then we realise that we are destroying it because we are not sufficiently aware of the ways in which we should constrain ourselves.

There is something similar happening in what we could call the democratic 'crisis,' One of the manifestations of this crisis is populism, where politicians say if you vote for me, I will give you everything you want. That is a very dangerous message because people think, "If we vote for Trump, we get everything we want", but of course, Trump will not be able to give people everything they want. Getting a sense of limits and limitations is key-educational work, which can happen in all kinds of ways. For instance, crafts and gardening are activities that take you into a world of constraints. You can have an idea of what you want to make with clay, for example. However, the clay simply will not allow you to do everything you have in your head. Similarly, plants also do not really care about what you think, so in a school garden you can meet the world in a completely different way than through thinking and ideas, because the plant needs your care. This is also the

case in social interaction, where we can help each other to remind ourselves that doing things collectively is possible and that not everything that individuals or groups want is possible. I think this is the important educational work at all kinds of levels.

In *World-Centered Education*, you describe education as a call from the world to the 'self' and the consequent free response that can (or not) be given by the subject. Could you please explain the implications of this perspective for democratic education?

What I tried to do in that book, and even with the title of *World Centred Education*, is precisely to raise this question as an important question for education, namely the question "What is the world asking us?". So that we do not just meet the world as an object, as a thing that we can do with what we want, but actually that our lives meet the world and that the world needs us in a sense. I used the word 'world', which is a very big word because it can contain anything, and partly, I use it to address the ecological crisis, to say the world is also this planet. However, the world also refers to how we coexist with other human beings. Some people might think that it would be simpler easier if there were no other people and I was the only person in the world. But you can also say, we live together, and therefore, other human beings also raise questions for me, and it is for each of us to figure out how we manage to live together. You may have seen that one of the authors who inspires me a lot is Hanna Arendt. She has some very beautiful and precise phrases, in particular one sentence that keeps coming back to. She writes: "Plurality is the condition for human action". There is a lot of wisdom in this short sentence. She is saying that plurality, the fact that other human beings are not like you, is not a problem that we need to solve, but it is the condition under which our lives take place. I think it is essential to be aware of that. It can be difficult, of course, if you meet other people who want to do completely different things but to keep that in mind and be aware that the solution is not to get rid of other people, not to eradicate plurality. That is what we are seeing at a global scale. What Putin is doing in Russia is aggressively eradicating plurality, saying there is only one way to think, one way to be, one way to feel, and so on. If you think differently and you live in Russia, you will end up in jail or even worse. Furthermore, one could argue that plurality is essential and, as such, must be protected. We engage in dialogue with one another, fostering an understanding of the world and our roles within it. And what I do in the book is to say that is a fundamental educational

question. If we think education is about knowledge and skills or competencies, we miss the most important educational question.

Do you think that the call of the world is always a personal call made to the self, or do you think the world also makes ‘collective’ calls to the global community or the plurality?

It is a good question because I tend to think in a rather individualistic way. At the end of the day, each of us has to figure out our own life, and we cannot make that decision for others. But I do think there is something also important in the collective. Sometimes, essential changes happen because some individual does something important, and we have these great examples of Mandela in South Africa, Gandhi in India or Rosa Parks, whom I talk about in my book. Collectivity is crucial, as it often catalyses action. People would come together and express “Look, there was an issue we need to take care of”. If we consider how collectives get established, it could happen because, for example, they have the same values, and they want to take care of refugees in their country. However, collectives also come into existence because people find that they are suffering from the same problem. For example, when it comes to ecological issues, it is also evident that individuals connect with one another because they ‘share’ the same issue.

I’m originally from the Netherlands, there is a degree of collectivity there because if you do not together take care of all the dikes and the pumps, then half of the country will disappear underwater very quickly. Consequently, one could claim that there is a common issue, and that brings people together to take care of that. In addition, also in the political domain, you can see those movements that, through a common call, people suddenly identify that there is something to do as a group, not just individually. When you use the phrase global community, this phrase, for me, is huge. I am not sure what the global community is, so I would be careful using this notion.

You talk about *interruptions*¹ as key moments in education. Can you suggest some examples of ‘interruptions’ in the field of democratic education?

¹ they are meant to call the “I” into its *own* existence, bearing in mind that it is entirely up to the “I” to decide how to respond to the call. The work of the “I,” after all, is ultimately and radically the work of the “I” itself. It is the work that no one else can do for the “I.”

I know my examples are always very abstract. I think the most basic example of a democratic interruption is to meet another human being and to begin to realise that the other human being is really ‘other’. They may have a different outlook, different preferences, and different ways of wanting to lead their life. Thinking as an educator, I can say that one of the first democratic interruptions is when children grow up and they come to this point where they suddenly realise: “ok, so other human beings are really other, they think in different ways, they are not the same as me.” That is quite an interruption of your worldview or way of existing. It is an important starting point, but it goes on throughout our lives, and I would again say, as an educator, it is important that children and young people can have those experiences. I am thinking of a concrete example.

I was at a secondary school recently in a big city in the Netherlands, where schools attract different kinds of student population. There were quite a lot of children whose parents were not born in the Netherlands, and that gives the school quite a particular profile. In addition, I think a lot of the children there were not from very wealthy backgrounds. I had a pleasant conversation with six students and there was one boy who stood out from the rest a bit. The boy said many friends always ask him, “Why do you go to that school? Why don't you go to a school where you meet ‘your own kind of people’?”, and he then said very nicely: “I would find that totally uninteresting.” It is much nicer to be in an environment with this kind of diversity, and he said, “also because that will probably prepare me much better for my future for how this society is developing”.

For me, that was a nice example of someone who really valued the interruption of being with other young people from different social circles. We can see a tendency in schools in some countries that ‘like-minded’ people very quickly find each other, and schools become very homogeneous. There, you can say this basic interruption of meeting other people who may look differently, act differently, and then figure out what it means to live together. For me, those are really ‘democratic interruptions. They can be difficult, but what I like about this young boy is that he said, “I am sort of enjoying this – it is a valuable interruption”.

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