Biesta, Gert

Democratic music education between creativity and sensitivity. An interview with Gert Biesta by Philip Winter

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An Interview with Gert Biesta by Philip Winter

In May 2023 Gert Biesta gave one of the invited keynotes at the 30th Conference of the European Association for Music in Schools, which was held together with the 9th European Regional Conference of ISME, the International Society for Music Education in Lyon, France. In this interview with Philip Winter, Gert Biesta discusses the main ideas from his presentation and explains why he took this particular 'angle' for his contribution.

Philip Winter: In your presentation you positioned yourself as a relative outsider to the field of music education. You could of course have declined the invitation by saying that this is not your field of expertise. So I am curious about what made you decide to contribute.

Gert Biesta: That is an interesting opening question! I did indeed highlight my position as an outsider, though I called myself a relative outsider. I have experience with music education, albeit as a receiver, and I also have quite a lot of experience with music, which I consider to be the art in which I am most at home. I play several instruments, I sing, I direct choirs, and have even composed a little, and I have a rather wide taste for music, and am also interested in music recording and music production.

But I think that what intrigued me most about the conference was it's 'framing' in terms of liberty, equality and creativity, which signalled to me that the discussions would not just be about the 'technical' aspects of music education, but also about the societal, political and democratic dimensions. Such a positioning of music education is not very common as far as I know, so on the one hand I was curious about this, but I also felt that with such a 'framing' I might have something

to offer. Nonetheless, I was very much aware of the challenge of talking about big themes – creativity, democracy, music and education and their interconnections.

PW: Is your interest in these themes mainly intellectual, that is, as a scholar or researcher?

GB: Spending most of my time in academic circles, both as a teacher and as an author, I have, of course, an intellectual interest in these themes. But education is also a very practical field, and I see many things happening that I am deeply worried about. One thing that I keep seeing in discussions about the arts and education that people are neither really interested in the arts nor really interested in education. And I think that music suffers disproportionally from this problem. I think that just around the time of the conference an organisation in the Netherlands that works under the heading 'more music in classrooms' had relaunched itself, taking a broader angle on the arts and education. But what keeps irritating me about this organisation and the way it presents its 'case,' is that it keeps saying such things as that there needs to be more music in schools because this allegedly promotes children's brain development. This statement is wrong at so many levels, but is first of all, in my view, an insult to music. Can you every imagine a composer who sets out on composing music with the intention to promote children's brain development?

PW: This has something to do with one of the main points you discussed in your presentation, namely the disappearance of the arts from art education. Can you say a bit more about this?

GB: Yes. In terms of setting the scene for what I wanted to say, I discussed two 'disappearances', if we can use that word in the plural. The first is the disappearance of the arts from art education and the other the disappearance of education. These are of course bold claims, but for me this is a helpful way to describe what is going on. With regard to the disappearance of the arts from art education I refer mainly to the many instrumental justifications for having the arts in education, and the idea that we need music for brain development is one of these, but there are many other suggestions, such as that doing arts will drive up children's test scores in language, mathematics, and science, will promote the development of creativity, morality, pro-social attitudes, empathy, 21st century skills, and so on. When you being to look at it the list is almost endless.

PW: And what would you say is the main problem here?

GB: Put bluntly I would say that if we only have instrumental reasons for having the arts in education, that means only because they are supposedly good or useful for something *else*, then it first of all shows that we don't really care about the arts themselves but only about what the arts will bring about. That is not just a downgrading of the importance of the arts in themselves, but also reveals all kinds of hierarchies at work in education. A friend of mine once made the point brilliantly when another report had been launched about how music apparently makes children better at mathematics. He simply asked where the research was that shows that doing mathematics would make children better musicians! That question is never asked as far as I know, and thus shows exactly what is being valued and what isn't.

PW: You also said that instrumental justifications are vulnerable. What do you mean by that?

GB: If the only reason for having the arts in education is because they are good for bringing about something *else* – and the emphasis is on the 'else' – then it means that if people find other, quicker or cheaper ways to bring about this something 'else,' then actually there would no longer be a reason to have the arts in schools. And of course it is particularly the 'quicker and cheaper' that will appeal here, because the arts tend to be slow and costly.

PW: If instrumental justifications of the arts in education are problematic, what then would the alternative be?

GB: In my presentation I consider a rather old but, in my view, still valued and valuable alternative, namely the non-instrumental justification for engaging with the arts. This is the idea of arts for arts' sake, which highlights that the arts have a value in themselves and don't serve any purpose outside of the arts. The reason for engaging with art, in other words, is because art matters in itself. But there are people who don't really like this kind of justification, because it sounds like we are saying that the arts are actually useless. The point I made in my presentation, however, is that asking about the usefulness of the arts in education is actually what philosophers would call a category mistake.

A category mistake means that we ask a question that actually doesn't make sense in a particular context – you could say that the question is of the wrong category or in the wrong category. Because as long as we ask what the usefulness of the arts in education is, we see education as some kind of production process where everything we do needs to produce some kind of 'outcome' – and I have to

say that I also find the language of 'outcomes' and 'learning outcomes' deeply problematic for this reason. Education, however, is not a production process in which we produce things. Someone who has benefitted from education is not a 'thing' or an 'outcome' but, as the educational philosopher Richard Peters has formulated it somewhere, a human being with an 'altered outlook' – a human being who stands differently in the world.

PW: Does that have to do something with the notion of 'existential possibilities' you mentioned in your presentation?

GB: Indeed. I highlighted that in education we shouldn't be asking what we as educators produce, but we should be asking what education means for our students, and how it alters their horizon of meaning. Similar, we should ask what education 'makes' – the making-metaphor is really problematic; we don't make our students – but we should be asking what kinds of possibilities education makes possible for our students. Education, to put it simply, is a process of opening doors to the world and inviting our students to step through the door, both in order to meet the world and meet themselves there. It is about offering them the opportunity to explore different ways of meeting the world and existing in the world – different existential possibilities. And music is one such existential possibility; one way in which we, as human beings can be in and with the world.

PW: I can see that along the lines you are beginning to connect music and education very differently, not just because you can take music seriously in its own terms, but also because education 'appears' in a different way. 'Opening doors to the world and the self' is a helpful image here, that is indeed very different from the production of learning outcomes. So in what way, then, is there a danger that education disappears from music education?

GB: This is indeed the other line of the argument I presented, and I wanted to highlight this as well, particularly because I wanted to raise some questions about creativity – perhaps the only one of the three words from the conference title (liberty, equality, creativity) that I thought needed challenging, also for democratic reasons. We can talk a bit more about that in a minute. But with regard to the disappearance of education I was particularly thinking of what in the presentation I refer to as extreme curriculum- or knowledge-centred conceptions of education that just focus on training students for taking exams and putting them under huge pressure to get high grades. This trend is raging around the world, 'supported' by a global education measurement industry, and it not just creates a hugely one-sided view of

what education should be about, but also really damages the lives of children and young people – think, for example, about what's happening in South Korea.

Now it is interesting, and in a sense encouraging, that the arts are often brought in to rebalance the curriculum and make it more 'humane', so we might say, because the ongoing pressure on measurable performance really ends up treating children and young people just as objects, rather than as subjects of their own life. But it is important to look carefully at how the arts are being brought in here. In my presentation I mentioned that the arts are often brought in because they allow children and young people to express their own voice, make their own sense, be creative, generate their own meaning, articulate their own identity and, along these lines, put the child or young person more in the centre of education.

PW: This sounds good.

GB: Yes, it sounds good, but there is an important question that is often forgotten. In my presentation I call it the 'what if?' question. The point is that if we only say that we need the arts in education because they allow for the expression of voice, creativity and identity, but forget to ask about the 'quality' of what is expressed, we miss a crucial educational point. After all, what if the voice that speaks is racist? What if the creativity that is expressed is destructive? What if the identity that emerges is only interested in itself? It is here, as I argue in my presentation, that we find the real educational work – and this work is quite difficult.

Of course education should provide opportunities for children and young people to express themselves, to speak, be creative, articulate an identity, but the educational task is always to bring what is expressed and who expresses themselves into a dialogue with the world – the social world, the natural world, the physical world, and so on. And this is because in education we need to raise the question whether what 'emerges' from the child or young person is going to help or hinder with living their lives well, with others, in a world that is real and thus makes some ways of being possible, but also puts limits and limitations onto what we can and how we can be.

In my work I refer to the task of education as arousing the desire in children and young people for wanting to exist, that is, live their lives, in and with the world in a grown-up way. Which for me also means that education should neither be curriculum-centred nor child- or student-centred, but should actually be world-centred. Which is also the title of a book I published in 2021.[1]

[1] Biesta, G. (2021). World-centred education: A view for the present. New York/London: Routledge.

PW: So, is the disappearance of education you spoke about in your presentation about this forgetting to ask the 'what if'-question or, as you put it, the educational question?

GB: Indeed. You could also say that education is forgotten if we just think that art is about expression and that the school should be a place where children and young people can express themselves. If we say that, we forget that not everything that people express is automatically good or desirable, neither for themselves, nor for the world in which their lives take place.

PW: This idea that education is about arousing the desire for wanting to exist in the world in a grown-up way is something you discussed in more detail in your presentation as well. Can you say a bit more, both about existing in the world and this 'grown-up way'?

GB: Sure. Let me begin with the existing in the world. It's easy to say, but not that easy to grasp. The way I think about is, is starting with a beautiful insight from the philosopher Hannah Arendt who highlights that all human beings have the unique capacity to begin something, to take initiative. She actually refers to human beings as both 'beginners' and 'beginnings'. Now it's one thing for someone to begin, but beginning is not the whole picture. We can take initiative – we can do something, try to make something, say something – and sometimes the world in which we begin fits perfectly with what we intend to do or bring about. But often, and maybe more often than not, we encounter resistance. When we work with material – wood or stone or clay – we may have ideas about what we want to do, but not everything that we want is possible with the material. And the same holds in the social sphere. We may have a brilliant plan, but other people might tell us that it's not that brilliant, or not that interesting, or they may even find it problematic what I want to do.

PW: That is a frustrating experience.

GB: It is indeed frustrating from the perspective of the individual who is taking initiative, but it is also a tremendously important experience, because each time we encounter resistance we experience that the world is *real*, and not a phantasy or a construction or some entirely malleable or 'plastic' entity. So when we meet the reality of the world – the social, the physical, the material, the living world – we are stopped in our tracks, and this may feel frustrating. In my presentation I suggested that when we experience this, there are basically three responses. One is that we say that this is frustrating but that we still want to make sure our initiative 'arrives' in the world, so

we begin to push harder. This can be really important, because we sometimes need to push really hard to make something happen. But there is always the risk that if we push too hard, we begin to destroy the very world in which we try to arrive. There is always the risk, in other words, of what I have called world-destruction. Think of hammering on a piece of stone. The stone can take quite a lot, but if we hammer to hard or don't respect the piece of stone enough, the stone will just fall apart.

The other response when we encounter the resistance of the world and experience frustration, is that we say that the world is actually too difficult, not welcoming my initiatives, and that it's all not really worth the effort. So we begin to step back. This can be important as well, particularly in order to leave room for the world, make space for others and their initiatives. But the risk here is that if we withdraw *completely*, then we withdraw ourselves from the world – which is the risk, at the very extreme end of the spectrum, of self-destruction.

And from here a third option emerges, which is to try to stay somewhere in the 'middle ground' between these dangerous extremes of world-destruction and self-destruction. I often say that this is a 'difficult' middle ground, but I have a good friend who keeps reminding me that this is also the beautiful middle ground in which our lives really take place. But it requires work – and sometimes hard work – to try to stay in this middle ground, don't go too hard on the world, don't step away too much, but try to stay in dialogue.

PW: And for you this has a lot to do with art and education?

GB: Yes. I would first of all say that this middle ground is an educational space and, in a sense, *the* educational space, first and foremost because it teaches you something, namely that the world is real and that you are not alone in the world. It teachers you that in order to exist, to live your life in and with the world, you need to stay in dialogue. But I would also say that this dialogue is exactly what artists are constantly doing. They are constantly trying to figure out what it is to exist in this world. They try to explore the limits of this – the possibility of world- and self-destruction – and find all kinds of forms for what it means to exist in this middle ground. For me this is a very meaningful way to understand what all art is doing. It asks 'What is this world?' and 'What does it mean for me, for us, to exist in this world?' Literature and poetry do this. Dance and theatre. Painting and sculpture. And of course music as well. Art, then, is the ongoing attempt to be in dialogue with the world and give form to this dialogue.

PW: You mentioned that education is about arousing the desire for wanting to exist in the world in a grown-up way. What does notion of 'grown-up' mean? How does that fit into this picture?

GB: Grown-up-ness is a rather strange notion, but I think that it is an important one for this discussion. Quite a lot of languages have similar words and they all refer to a certain 'quality' of how people exist. Now what is unfortunate, is this idea of 'growth', because that suggests that children grow and then at some point, they are grown-up and are so for the rest of their lives. That, I think, is not true. I do think that Donald Trump is a horrible person for many reasons, but one of the biggest problems with him is that he doesn't behave in a grown-up way at all. He is only interested in himself and, also in connection with what I have just said, simply denies the reality of the world as what he encounters there conflicts with how he wants the world to be.

Grown-up-ness thus refers to a way in which we as human beings we can try to live our lives, and in the presentation, I used a very helpful phrase from the French educationalist Philippe Meirieu – who actually lives and has taught in Lyon – who says that to exist in a grown up way is to try to be in the world but not in the centre of the world. (And Trump, on the contrary, thinks that he is in the centre of the world and precisely in that way he is not really in the world.) Another way of putting is to say that trying to exist in a grown-up way is not simply running behind your desires, but always considering whether what you desire or what emerges in you as a desire is what you should be desiring. And this is both a question with regard to our own lives, and with regard to a planet that puts limits on our desires, that cannot simply give us all that we desire.

This question of grown-up-ness, trying to exist in a grown-up way, is a question that interrupts. It interrupts our desires, it interrupts our initiatives, and so on. Interruption is important here, because when we are interrupted, we take a moment to consider our desires and initiatives. So interrupting desires is educationally an important thing to encounter. But this is not about suppressing our desires and also not about destroying the desires of the new generation, but rather to help them decide which of all the desires will help with their lives, and which will get in the way. And this is not a question we only need to ask one time in our lives – it is a truly lifelong question. It is a question that is never resolved, but one that keeps returning throughout our lives. An ongoing challenge.

PW: Again, can you say what this means for the arts and for education?

GB: Yes. Again I would say that when I look at the arts – across the whole spectrum – I think that artists are constantly exploring what can be desired, what should be desired, what is desirable, what the limits and danger of desire are. It is, in a sense, an important dimension of what the arts are doing in exploring what it means to exist in the world – both the possibilities and the limitations.

PW: And for education?

GB: What I did in my presentation is to highlight the qualities which I think are important for education that wants to contribute to the grown-up existence of the new generation in and with the world, that wants to contribute to encountering desires and figuring out – almost literally – which desires are worthwhile and which not, also bearing in mind that our desires are important because they give us the energy for existing in the world and for wanting to exist in the world. The 'lust for life', to quote Iggy Pop!

The three qualities I mentioned are interruption, suspension and sustenance, and I think that they are crucial for education. Interruption is an important quality because when we encounter an interruption, particularly in the form of resistance, we don't just meet the reality of the world, but we also encounter our own desires. So it is only when there is interruption in education that there's something to pay attention to, something to work on with regard to the question of our grown-up existence. But this work takes time, which is the idea of suspension, of slowing down. Education needs to make time available, give time, and slow down things so that it becomes possible to come and stay into dialogue with the world, and also so that it becomes possible to figure out which of our desires are the ones that are going to help. And thirdly there is sustenance, which means both support and nourishment. This is an important quality because if in education we want to bring our students to the middle ground, we have to acknowledge that this middle ground is not always easy. That's why support and nourishment for trying to stay there is crucially important as well.

PW: And here you see another connection with the arts?

GB: Yes, because I think that the arts, again across its whole range of forms and modalities does precisely this. Good art interrupts, and does so in meaningful ways. Good art slows down, gives time, focuses attention, provides ways of engaging. And good art also nourishes, helps to stay in the middle ground. So here you can see that the arts have profound educational qualities.

PW: Are these qualities a bit counter-cultural? After all, I don't hear a lot of educational policy makers talk in these terms. They seem to be more interested in student performance, effective instruction, exam results and the like.

GB: Indeed. These qualities do go against the 'grain' of contemporary education, where we are often told that the faster students go through the curriculum the better they are, but also that it should be the task of teachers to develop smooth individualised learning trajectories for students. While that may be useful if your only ambition is to pass an exam, I think that it is profoundly uneducational, because in such smooth, personalised trajectories students will not encounter anything, or at least nothing else than the task they need to perform on. But they will neither encounter the world, nor themselves, nor be given the time to figure out where they really are in relation to all this. So these qualities hugely matter educationally, and precisely in a time where the discourse seems to go in the opposite direction, it is important to highlight the importance of these qualities. And it is important to highlight that the arts are precisely 'here', so to speak.

PW: You did indeed refer to this as the educational work of the arts.

GB: Indeed. This is exactly what the arts have to give to education and in education. And precisely here I made some very modest comments about music – bearing in mind, as I said, that I feel an outsider. But I did say that this provides a very different outlook for music education – you could call it an existential outlook or, of course, an educational outlook. When you look at music from this angle, you can begin to see that music is first of all a particular door towards the world, a particular way in which we can exist in and with the world, so to have music in schools is first of all crucial because it offers a unique existential possibility. While it may not be an existential possibility that every child will want to pursue in the future, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't allow them – and I would also say: demand of them – that they step into this possibility, in order to find out what it is and does, so to speak.

But engaging with music – playing music, making music – is also an encounter with the reality of music. After all, music is not just anything or everything. So when we step into music, music will sometimes go smoothly with us, but will also resist, and precisely in this way music helps us to look for the middle ground and for trying to stay in the middle ground. One thing I find particularly important about music is the temporal dimension. Unlike the visual arts which often are a-temporal – a painting 'is' so you could say – music needs time and music needs its own time. You can't rush through a piece by Beethoven just because you're in a hurry. You need to find the 'right' time, so to speak. So music has this interesting suspending

quality which, again, is hugely important educationally. And music can sustain us, can 'hold' us in spectacular ways, from the soothing to the un-soothing, so to speak. It can hold us in the moment and can thus help us to stay in the middle ground.

PW: I have two more question. The first is about democracy. Where does democracy fit into this picture?

GB: Thanks for raising that point. For me the educational question, the what-if question, is in a sense also the democratic question. Some people think that democracy is just a matter of counting. We ask people for their preferences, we count the preferences, and we go with the majority. But such an 'arithmetical' account of democracy is actually not about democracy at all. It reminds me more of populism, where those who have the loudest voice or the biggest number simply get what they want. But real democracy can never just be about accepting all preferences people have, but is always about the question which of the preferences people have can and should be 'carried' by society as a whole. Democracy, to put it differently, is not about counting preferences, but about collectively examining and weighing preferences. It is, in the terms I have used, about figuring out, collectively, which of the desires individuals and groups have, are desirable for the lives we try to live together.

And the democratic values of liberty, equality and solidarity are there to provide a 'frame' – in my work I also call it an infrastructure – that helps us with this transformation of individual desires to what we can collectively 'carry'. Because in a democracy we value the freedom of all, but this also means that we value the freedom of all in equal measure, which means that the freedom of one individual or group should not undermine the freedom of other individuals or groups – not an easy issue of course, but that is what democracy is about. Here I often quote the Rolling Stones to highlight that democracy is not like a shop where you can just get what you want. In a democracy you can't always get what you want – which, in a sense, is also captured in the idea of solidarity, where sometimes we have to do a step back so that there is also room for others and their desires. This is of course a big discussion, but for me there is a clear 'internal' or 'intrinsic' connection between education and democracy and, as you will understand from what we have discussed so far, the arts are included in this as well, because in each domain we encounter the similar challenges of trying to exist in a grown-up way – in the world but not in the centre of the world.

PW: My final question is about sensitivity – an important word in the title of your presentation, also because you seem to suggest that we need to be or stay somewhere 'between' creativity and sensitivity.

GB: Yes, that's important not to forget. I hope I have already clarified why I think that just arguing that creativity is good and that education and the arts in education should promote creativity, is a problematic idea. And my main argument for that is that I cannot see that every act of creativity is automatically good and beneficial. So I would worry about an unconditional 'celebration' of creativity, and my counter-examples are rather dark, but I do think that being a good criminal requires creativity as well, and I can even think of worse examples that came out of creative thinking and doing. So if we are interested in creativity in education, the arts and in arts education, it has to be a 'qualified' creativity, a 'dialogic' creativity, a creativity that constantly wants to go to the middle ground rather than that it 'forgets' the reality of the world or simply tries to overrule it.

But it has to do with another important theme as well, which I discussed at the end of my presentation. I did this by asking to what extent education is a matter of understanding and should aim for understanding. This, again, is quite a popular idea. We hear a lot in education about the importance of sense-making and understanding and of providing children and young people with opportunities to develop understanding and make their own sense. Here students work with questions such as 'What does this mean?' and 'How can I make sense of this?' There are also people who approach the arts in this way, and would say that art is basically a matter of sense making – you will probably understand why I disagree with such a notion of art – and also that in education we should help students to make sense of art.

Of course there is a place for this, but sometimes art doesn't make sense and, more importantly, sometimes life doesn't make sense. What to do then? In my presentation I turned once more to Hannah Arendt who, somewhere in her work, gives a very strange definition of understanding as an "unending activity by which … we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world." This definition, which I really like, in a sense interrupts, because it's very strange as a definition of understanding if, that is, we see understanding as something 'mental', that is, as grasping, coming to know, and so on. One thing I like about what Arendt does here is that she gives an existential definition of understanding. She is saying: understanding is not something cognitive, is not a matter of meaning making, but is the ongoing challenge of trying to be 'at home in the world'. In my own words I would say: trying to stay in the middle ground.

Here the 'common questions' of sense making and understanding in a sense break down, and other questions become more important. Not 'How can I make sense of this?' or 'How can I learn about this?' or 'How can I master this?' but questions such as 'What is this situation asking of me?', 'What is this trying to tell me?', 'What is this trying to each me?' These questions don't ask for activity or mastery or

sense making or grasping or understanding, but they ask for sensitivity, for opening oneself to the world and pondering what the world may be asking of you.

I am aware that I can be a bit extreme in my thinking, and would be inclined to say that it is this latter set of questions that are the only really relevant ones for education. And I would say that in my own teaching this question 'What is this asking of me?' is the question I keep coming back to and also the question I keep trying to bring to the attention of my students as a question to work with. Maybe it needs a bit of both – a bit of creativity and a bit of sensitivity, but I would say that if the arts cannot help us to remain sensitive, to remain open to the question of the world, then perhaps there is no point for the arts, at least not in education.

PW: Summing up then?

GB: Well, I think that in my presentation, and also in this interview, I have tried to outline an 'approach' that is able to take the arts seriously and that is also able to take education seriously and that, taken together, provides a way to take arts education seriously. It is an argument against the instrumentalisation of the arts in education, but also an argument against 'expressivism', against the unconditional celebration of voice, creativity and identity. I tend to think that this 'approach' can help to have better justifications for why we should have the arts in education, and can also help to have educational rather than 'expressivist' justifications for doing so. And from all that, I also sincerely hope that it can support all of those who work in music education with countering some of the simplistic expectations and pressures they are under. As said, I'm a relative outsider in the field of music education, so the translation of what I have presented needs to be done by those who are more 'at home' in the field, but I hope that I have provided an outlook for this work. And that work is important for the sake of music and the sake of education and, through this, for the future or our attempts at living together democratically, in the world but never in the centre of it.

PW: Thank you very much.

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Philip Winter makes himself available from time to time for discussions with Gert Biesta about his work.

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