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## *Operationalizing Biesta: Bringing Unique Beings Into Existence in Standardized Spaces*

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### **Abstract**

*This essay details the authors' attempts to implement a "Biestian" curriculum in a large, rural high school. Drawing on the work of Gert Biesta's *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future*, the authors discuss a methodology that begins to satisfy Biesta's theoretical underpinnings of what he calls a "humane education." Acknowledging and rejecting Biesta's warnings against turning his ideas into "technique," the authors call for operationalizing democratic educational theorists despite their protestations, as refusing to do so allows neoliberal pedagogical reforms to maintain their hegemonic dominance. We focus on Biesta in particular as he is an established, highly regarded philosopher of educational practice and policy, and we believe theoretical work such as his is exactly the type of theory that must be turned into practice, despite his protestations.*



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## Reflections on Spaces

In *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future*, Biesta argues that the educator in particular and education in general should focus on the task of bringing unique beings into existence. In his words: “The role of the educator...has to be understood in terms of a responsibility for ‘the coming into the world’ of unique, singular beings, and a responsibility for the world as a world of plurality and difference.”<sup>1</sup> Central to this responsibility is the requirement that the educator cultivate “worldly spaces,” the spaces where these unique beings will come into existence.<sup>2</sup> We want to speak for a moment about the “worldly spaces” educators occupy and cultivate, extending our analysis from our classrooms, to our school, to our community, state, nation, world, and with the help of a bizarre and inspiring text, the universe.

We begin our exploration with a question for Biesta: “What are the boundaries of the worldly spaces you would have educators create?” Asked differently, “where do our classrooms end?”

At UA Huntsville in ED 305, the Foundations of Education, in the very narrowest understanding of my (Dr. Kovacs) worldly space, I have a number of African American students who cannot write, almost every one of them in fact is sent to the writing lab for help lest they fail the Praxis exam. Is it a lingering racism in the deeper south, or are my students the victims of an increasingly narrow curriculum where reading not writing is tested and concerns with literacy are a distant memory, more so in darker, poorer schools?<sup>3</sup> I suspect both, and I carry on, sending my students to the lab for mediation, wondering if I should keep potentially great teachers out of classrooms because they haven’t mastered the king’s English, or should I cultivate this worldly space by creating a writing workshop within my Foundations course, helping these students grow and develop?

In a similar vein, Dr. Frost is the administrator of the university’s composition program. Composition on our campus is a two course sequence which includes a remedial, or “basic writing,” course that students place into based on their standardized test scores or, in the case of multilingual students, their tested proficiency with English. Because composition is uniquely charged with preparing students for all subsequent academic tasks (a charge which is increasingly questioned), we have recently implemented a strategy of teaching students the process of academic inquiry, rather than historically popular writing forms (such as those they are asked to produce for tests: narrative, descriptive, expository essays). However, the process of academic inquiry depends on important researcher/students considerations, some of the most important of which are: curiosity, engagement, and persistence. There has been no doubt that when asked our students will persist. What we have been disheartened by is their repeated requests to instructors to help them decide on ideas, by students who go on to other, more prescriptive writing assignments and report

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<sup>1</sup> Gert J. J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>3</sup> For an argument that poor, minority students face greater curricular cuts and a more narrow focus on reading to the exclusion of writing, see Linda Perlstein’s *Tested: One American School Struggles to Make the Grade* (Holt: New York, 2008).

back increased enjoyment *because they don't have to think about their writing topic*—it is assigned to them. Do we extend our worldly space, can we extend our worldly space, into high schools, middle schools, indeed elementary schools that are arguably creating students dependent on others for ideas as they are taught to respond to test prompts rather than generate ideas on their own?

Two years ago, across campus from where we hold court, a faculty member walked into a meeting and killed four of her colleagues, our colleagues. It would turn out that she had broader problems and a troubled history, but gun violence on a campus is not easy to rationalize away. It is more difficult when it happens across town, on a middle school campus, where a seventh grader, the victim of gang-related bullying, shot another student point blank in the head.<sup>4</sup> This happened on a Friday, a week to the day before the attack on our campus, and Monday after Monday our city continues churning out weapons, on track to be the center for laser armament manufacture in America, home to an arsenal that has an annual operating budget of over 27 billion a year.<sup>5</sup> High cost killing permeates our worldly space; do we turn the gaze of future educators towards it? Do we ignore the hundreds of teachers laid off from local schools while the defense industry grows in a seemingly exponential manner? Must these spaces be questioned and cultivated?

In the states surrounding ours, from sea to increasingly polluted sea, there's a symbolic sort of violence ongoing, with testers and the tested dutifully complying as they are drilled into a mind-numbing conformity, and paying for it year after year with billions of dollars.<sup>6</sup> In Dr. Kovacs' hometown of Atlanta, GA, we read news of a massive cheating scandal, and this fraud spreads from the dirty south across the country.<sup>7</sup> We should note here that this metastasizing cancer was something Susan Nichols and David Berliner predicted in 2007 with their publication of *Collateral Damage*.<sup>8</sup> The poorer and darker the school district, it turns out, the worse the disease.<sup>9</sup>

This is a point that needs repeating, as it's a growing number of children coming into existence in poor spaces, children we can afford to test but not to feed, as evidenced by the Obama administration's decision to reduce spending on food stamps in order to pay for its miseducational initiatives.<sup>10</sup> And the debate between which would be funded, the testing or the meals, takes place

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<sup>4</sup> See The Associated Press, "Alabama School Shooting Likely Gang-Related, Attorney for Suspect Says," *Nola.com*, 8 February, 2010. Accessed 9 June 2012 from <http://tinyurl.com/6u6sh3k>.

<sup>5</sup> See Redstone Summary (pdf) <http://tinyurl.com/clqkr4x>. For a number of stories detailing the types of weapons made at Redstone Arsenal, originally tasked with creating chemical weapons, search on "Redstone Arsenal" and "weapons."

<sup>6</sup> See Barbara Miner, "Testing Companies Mine for Gold," *Rethinking Schools*. Accessed 9 June 2012 from <http://tinyurl.com/4hnzhq>.

<sup>7</sup> See Gregg Toppo, "Schools Marred by Testing Scandals in 2011," *USA Today*, 30 December 2011. Accessed 12 June 2012 from <http://tinyurl.com/6vazwda>.

<sup>8</sup> See Sharon Nichols and David Berliner, *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts American's Schools* (Boston: Harvard Education Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> See Perlstein, *Tested*.

<sup>10</sup> See "Democrats, Advocacy Groups Blast Cuts to Food Stamps to Fund \$26B Aid Bill," *FoxNews.com*, 11 August 2010. Accessed 9 June 2012 from <http://tinyurl.com/2d7jttt>.

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during a time of record corporate profits.<sup>11</sup> And record profits amidst growing poverty, but one wouldn't know that listening to the President, who doesn't want to talk about poverty in America.<sup>12</sup> The President's 2011 State of the Union marked only the second time a democratic president didn't mention poverty in the yearly address. And inequality is rising, greater than it's ever been, greater than in Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia, where inequality was one of the main reasons for the "Arab Spring."<sup>13</sup>

Do the spaces we must cultivate extend into the realm of economics, of history, of policy? When we teach classes such as Foundations of Education do we critique a war in Afghanistan that American people have all but forgotten, those wealthy enough to avoid the military anyway? A war that costs the country 100 Billion Dollars a year, with some of that money going directly to the Taliban, which means our country can feed and arm the terrorists, but our country can't feed and teach our children at the same time.<sup>14</sup> Do Foundations teachers teach about the continued occupation of Iraq by a country who espouses democracy but is pro-torture? And we are pro-torture; ask Bradley Manning (well, try anyway).<sup>15</sup> Do we extend our worldly space to the Middle East to China to Korea to corporations that are attempting to trademark words such as "book" (somewhat successfully) and "face"? (success to be determined).<sup>16</sup> Do we extend our worldly space, with all due respect to the Disney Corporation, to the universe and beyond?

According to the Utopians, creatures on a distant planet or in a distant time, the answer is a clear yes, "of course," it is our responsibility not as educators but as Earthlings, as ascendant beings, to see and feel as deeply and as extensively as possible and importantly, to encourage the same from others. We know this makes some readers uncomfortable, but we promised extension to the edges of the universe so allow us a moment to stay on this particular plane, grounded in theory by W.H. Shubert's *Love, Justice, and Education: John Dewey and the Utopians*.<sup>17</sup> This is a remarkable treatment of Dewey's work, explicating every line of an op/ed from 1933 through the eyes of beings who are post-acquisitive, beings who argue they have the workings of solutions to the litany of issues we've brought up as we expanded the worldly space of our classrooms to the far reaches of space-time. The solution, quite simply, and somewhat uncomfortably is love.

Let us rephrase.

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<sup>11</sup> A simple Google search on "Record Corporate Profits" will suffice to sustain this point.

<sup>12</sup> See Charles M. Blow, "Hard-Knock (Hardly Acknowledged) Life," *New York Times*, 28 January 2011. Accessed 9 June 2012 from <http://tinyurl.com/7jhufj3>.

<sup>13</sup> See Center for Research on Globalization, "Inequality in America is Worse Than in Egypt, Tunisia, or Yemen." Accessed 9 June 2012 from <http://tinyurl.com/6zg5x4v>.

<sup>14</sup> See Ralph Lopez, "US Taxpayer Dollars Killing American Troops in Afghanistan," *Truthout.org*, 16 December 2010. Accessed 9 June 2012 from <http://tinyurl.com/78anut3>.

<sup>15</sup> See Glenn Greenwald, "The Inhumane Conditions of Bradley Manning's Detention," *Salon.com*, 15 December 2010. Accessed 9 June 2012 from <http://tinyurl.com/87vell8>.

<sup>16</sup> See Julianne Pepitone, "Facebook is Trying to Trademark 'Face'," *CNNMoney.com*, 27 August 2010. Accessed 9 June 2012 from <http://tinyurl.com/29ybcv4>.

<sup>17</sup> William H. Shubert's *Love, Justice, and Education: John Dewey and the Utopians* (NY: Information Age Publishers, 2009).

Love is a simple idea and a simple answer, but sorting out how to move populations from the possessive love of “I love my new phone” to the post-acquisitive love of the stranger next to you, the planet, the solar system etc., is a sizable and complex challenge, one beyond the scope of this paper, though we will pause here for a moment as we believe love must undergird educational relationships if those relationships are to resemble anything democratic.

Briefly defined so that we don’t confuse it with other four letter words...love is a caring connected pursuit of a more fuller unfolding and engaging. Love is the freedom, support, and encouragement to create, try, frequently fail, and rarely succeed. Love is engendering resiliency, persistence, forgiveness, and togetherness. “Teaching is a devoted and selfless act of love. It is not a property to be acquired. Like love, it creates more in giving than in possession.”<sup>18</sup> Love then is selflessly entering a classroom of any size to give without expectation of compensation and continuing to do despite the obstacles we see, and by see we want to borrow from another offworld species, the Navi, and suggest that love is seeing the totality of a situation and acting despite the knowledge of that totality. And lest we make you too uncomfortable as we address you the reader, lovingly, love is what Freire repeatedly suggested was the answer to realizing a transformative education and love ultimately, makes the cultivation of worldly spaces possible. It is this love that educators must witness, experience, and share if we are to have spaces free from fear, from greed, from a myopic concern with the all too brief I.

Now that we’ve extended the idea of worldly spaces from our provincial classrooms to the frontiers of science fiction, we want to begin approaching Biesta and making a case for the importance of his work, and while we recognize the danger in essentializing or perennializing an author, we reject post-post critiques of upholding a single author as either. Certain authors have more for us, and by us we mean (1) the public created by the readers of this journal and (2) the multiple publics that come together to help children grow and develop. If that weren’t the case we’d be referencing the work of the Education Trust or Education Sector or the Democrats for Education Reform or Bill Gates, leaving philosophers, scientists, and the creative class behind, after all, an extreme logic goes, they’re all equal.

No.

Certain authors hold more for us than others, and we determine the whom through application, argumentation, analysis, action, and reflection, not by imperial dictate or by bankroll. A famous perennialist once argued that a list of great books wasn’t as important as a continued debate over what that list should contain, something we’ve lost site of as we’ve correctly dislocated text after text. That perennialist? Mortimer J. Adler. The publication? *Educational Studies*, THE journal for Foundations Scholars.<sup>19</sup> In this particular article he argues that “while some basic truths are to be found in the great books...many more errors will be found there, because a plurality of errors is always to be found for every single truth.”<sup>20</sup> We turn now to the truth and error in Biesta’s texts.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>19</sup> Mortimer Adler, “Prologue to *Reforming Education*,” *Educational Studies*, 19 (Fall/Winter, 1988): 290-302.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 296.

## Bringing Unique Beings into Being: Grounding Our Work in Biesta

Our utopian-framed discussion of love is not out of line with Biesta's larger argument. And though he does not directly answer our question regarding the limits for worldly space, he hints at it, suggesting, as do the Utopians, that there can be no limits. Arguing that because of our symbiotic relationship with the "other," we must concern ourselves with "the dynamics and complexities of the social fabric in which newcomers begin..."<sup>21</sup> And since the world is not a neutral space, our responsibility isn't only to newcomers, to the unique beings coming into existence, "it is at the very same time a responsibility for the world. It is a responsibility to create and keep in existence a 'worldly space' through which new beginnings can come into presence."<sup>22</sup> Unless we read him incorrectly, in response to our question where does the classroom end, and by extension who/what do our classrooms contain, Biesta answers all space, all comers, all concerned.

It is in the midst of Biesta's discussion of responsibility to all newcomers and the spaces they occupy that we have our second concern with his work, the first being that it's a tall order for the typical college graduate to act as Earthling Gardner minding the plants, the soil, the water, the sun, let alone gardening experts who've never been in a garden yet promise fatter tomatoes. The second is Biesta's repeated contention that on the one hand education must focus on the coming into the world of unique, singular beings, which is a definitive "end." But then he argues that education "is not about the production of particular identities or subjectivities through the application of educational technology, or about the creation of social order through particular educational interventions."<sup>23</sup>

Respectfully, he is calling for particular identities, unique ones, brought into existence through a specific intervention: nurturative space. The worldly spaces for engendering unique beings are NOT going to appear, *deus ex machina*, because of our "wui wei." (Chinese for lack of meddling). Given the actions of supermen such as Bill Gates, we can't understand, embrace, accept, or tolerate, the political position of waiting, patiently, for untended gardens where fruit self pollinates free from pest or pestilence. Quite contrarily we have the responsibility to apply technologies (such as philosophy) in order to create the very social order Biesta implicitly calls for. While we are not arguing for a silver bullet or certain solution, we forward Biesta's work to emphasize that, even though there may not ever be a specific intervention or educational technology that will produce these nurturative spaces, there are, in fact, people, Bill Gates, Eli Broad, Arnie Duncan etc., using technologies to produce something, and, as philosophers of education, we need to do more than merely critique such production, we must also offer strategies and tactics which attempt, however provisionally, to produce spaces, be they nurturative or something else, differently from and possibly antagonistic towards the spaces already being produced *en masse* by Bill, Eli, and other neoliberal reformers.

With respect to Biesta then, but not in utter supplication, we want to discuss a project that we are involved in which honors the individual as a unique, singular being by creating a pseudo-free space for her development while at the same time adhering to Biesta's theory, as outlined in

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<sup>21</sup> Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 107.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

*Beyond Learning*. There are six theoretical underpinnings herein that our program attempts to address or satisfy:

1. A partial rejection of humanism, which Biesta charges “cannot grasp the uniqueness of each individual human being.”<sup>24</sup>
2. An assertion that “the most important question today is how we can respond responsibly to and how we can live peacefully with others.”<sup>25</sup>
3. An argument that educators have a role in “needs definition.” And it’s this claim that is problematic as defining needs for children is both a technique and humanistic.
4. A definition of what constitutes an educational relationship.<sup>26</sup>
5. A vision of uniqueness grounded in Arendt that forwards action as a desirable educative end.<sup>27</sup> And then finally,
6. An Arendtian political conception of the democratic person.<sup>28</sup>

Undoubtedly other readers will identify important elements we’ve neglected in this list. His treatment of physical space for example, which we ignored as we had little control over the physical space where we worked, is one probable target, a point we will address in the conclusion. However, much of our work took place in cyber-space, which may actually be a space that can be used (once accessed) for Biestian cultivation. Others will reject the pedagogy itself arguing we’ve reduced theory to technique, something Biesta repeatedly warns against doing.<sup>29</sup> We believe Biesta could reduce his fear of technique by embracing his own advice regarding the “double, deconstructive duty” of educators: that they constantly create and continually undo.<sup>30</sup> And again, we need help getting our hands around his call for the creation of a certain type of space while at the same time rejecting technique. Is it not technique that creates worldly spaces? The third question for Biesta then, before we turn to the specifics of our program, is how do we generate these spaces without the very technical act of creation?

### **Moving Beyond Learning With Emerging Scholars**

Our program title is problematic, as we’ve branded emerging beings with the term “scholar,” a fixed position that is arguably at the pinnacle of the humanistic hierarchy. In our defense, we had to pitch this idea to a principal, his four administrators, the curriculum director, the testing coordinator, the teacher, the students, and their parents. We therefore needed a phrase

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pgs 24-30.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 69 and 94.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 100.

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and an idea that would not be off-putting from the start. Imagine for a moment walking into a meeting at a rural school in northern Alabama and asking to run a program called “Bringing Unique Beings Into Existence Through Loving Engagement.”

We will give the reader a brief explanation of the program and then explain how we’re attempting to keep it grounded in Biesta’s text via the tenets identified above. Reducing a very long story to a few sentences, Dr. Kovacs penned an op-ed on the outsourcing of assessment and a local curriculum director invited him into her school to explain the idea further. After several meetings, a teacher in the school asked us if we could help her students improve their reading and increase their scores on the mandated STAR 9, without “using the workbook.” Dr. Kovacs partnered with Dr. Frost who at the time was head of the university’s writing center because (1) we operate under the dated belief that when teaching reading, you should also be teaching writing and vice versa and (2) Dr. Frost had recently completed training on using new media technologies to improve literacy and was eager to put theory into practice.

The two of us met with the teacher several times over the summer, created the program and met the students for the first time the second week of school, several days after they all took the state’s mandated reading test. We worked with 15 “at risk” students twice a week for 90 minutes for the duration of the semester, finishing the first week of December for a total of 42 hours of instructional time. Some of that time was spent in a traditional classroom where we discussed research and presentation techniques, but the bulk of the time was spent in a computer lab, where the students were allowed to research any topic of their choice that did not violate school rules. Bomb making, pot growing, porn filming were off the table. Cheerleading, drift racing, and tattooing were on. We did not teach a single reading strategy. We did not teach a single writing strategy. We simply asked the students to read and write about something they loved in their lives.

The only “teaching” we engaged in was (1) asking questions that required students to dig deeper into their chosen topic and (2) asking questions about the best way to present information to others. Our hypothesis, based on readings ranging from early work by John Dewey to the groundbreaking work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to the more recent work of Daniel Pink, was that the autonomy, creativity, sense of purpose, and the mastery required by the project would lead to a genuine desire to read which would in turn require students who wanted to learn more about their chosen topics to become better readers.<sup>31</sup> Every four weeks students were required to give presentations about their topics, developed over that time period on blogs linked together on a social network similar to Facebook but without all the bells and whistles. At the end of the semester, when the students retook the STAR 9, the control group, taught the same way the reading teacher had taught them for the last seven years, increased their scores by an aggregate of 10%. Our group, the experimental group, increased their scores by an aggregate of 60%. It was the first time in seven years that all of the reading teacher’s students improved by at least 2 grade levels. Ostensibly, two students went from a 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading level to the 12<sup>th</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> See John Dewey, *Interest and Effort in Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913); Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (NY: HarperCollins, 1991); and Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (NY: Riverhead Books, 2010).

We recognize there are numerous issues with using test scores to measure student development and growth.<sup>32</sup> However, the national dialogue over school reformation centers on the use of these tests to judge students and teachers. While we do not condone the use of tests for either, we cannot stand idly by while teachers and students endure them. While Dr. Kovacs has taken a very public stance against the use of standardized tests, he cannot wait for the testing regime to end before entering schools to implement more democratic pedagogical practices. The fact that test scores went up was a win for the teacher, who has no choice but to test her students but has a great deal of choice in how she teaches her students. She took the test scores to the principal who then asked us to increase our program from 15 “at risk” students to the entire 9<sup>th</sup> grade class of nearly 400 students. While recognizing the dangers of legitimating testing by abiding by the tests, we cannot help but play the game in order to increase the use of democratic pedagogies in our public schools. To remain on the sidelines would allow unfettered growth of inherently anti-democratic practices such as the now widely adopted Common Core Curricula.

Biesta correctly argues that humanism “cannot grasp the uniqueness of each individual human being. It can only think of each newcomer as an instance of a human essence that has already been specified and is already known in advance.”<sup>33</sup> In typical schools the majority of teachers compare students to the ideal human at grade level X, administering the proper curricula to produce a human prepared to perform well at grade level Y. Truth and beauty have been pre-determined and are not open for debate. In opposition to this line of schooling, our program started with individual interest, validating students’ choices as unique beings. The only time we rejected a student’s work was if it violated school policy, and the closest anyone came to that was the tattooist’s project, which made the art teacher “uncomfortable.”

Biesta warns the reader against equating what he calls for with a child-centered approach, explaining that while educators should focus on bringing unique beings into being, we must remember that they come “into presence in a world populated by others who are not like us” into a world of plurality and difference.<sup>34</sup> Our classroom, at least for two days a week, was a world of plurality and difference, as each student, with the exception of three young ladies who were studying cheerleading, researched their own topics. Students were required to present their research to their classmates, school administrators, and a reporter from the local paper. These research experience and the presentations begin to address Biesta’s second key argument, his contention that “the most important question today is how we can respond responsibly to and how we can live peacefully with others.”<sup>35</sup> Not, as the dominant narrative goes, “how can we master the universe?”

What are the skills and capacities necessary for responding responsibly to and living peacefully with others? To name a few in no particular order they include impulse control, listening to others with understanding and empathy, synthesis, evaluation, appraising, discriminating, critiquing, defending, risk taking, passionate engagement, creative curiosity, meta-

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<sup>32</sup> For a comprehensive list of the problems with relying on testing for determining growth and development see The National Center for Fair and Open Testing at [www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org).

<sup>33</sup> Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

cognition, patience, deconstructive and reconstructive thinking, questioning and problem posing, wonderment, sharing, cooperation, transfer, forgiveness and perseverance.

Some individuals refer to these as soft-skills, and while a test maker somewhere is undoubtedly trying to figure out how to measure them via a, b, c, or d, we contend that reducing complex human behavior to pen and paper or person and machine, removing the entity we refer to as teacher from the equation is a fool's errand likely to produce fools capable of little more than running errands. In an effort then to help our students become individuals who, using Biesta's words, "respond responsibly to and live peacefully with others," the environment we created was a space that fostered the "soft skills" listed above, and we created that space consciously and with a healthy dose of humanism because we considered these behaviors necessary qualities of "good" humans. But our pre-determined ends remain true to the spirit of Biesta's work. To whit, tenet three.

Biesta levels the argument that educators must have a role in determining what the educated should be engaged in doing. While critiquing conceptions of education as economic transactions he writes that "educational professionals have a crucial role to play in the process of needs definition, because a major part of their professional expertise lies precisely there; a role that precisely distinguishes them from shop assistants whose only task it is to deliver the goods to the customer."<sup>36</sup> Arguably one of the biggest problems in our schools today is that educators have no role in needs definition. Needs definition comes from neoliberal crusaders who don't care if their hat says Republican or Democrat. Such reformers tell "teachers" to deliver the common core curriculum. If done correctly, if the teacher can sell the product and students buy it, then she gets a bonus. And ostensibly we were playing right into that game. However, increasing test scores was never our real goal, and the list of soft skills we wanted to engender was produced after lengthy discussions with Mrs. Taylor (the teacher we worked with) and came out of two minds who had spent years thinking about educative ends.

After arguing that educators should have pre-determined ends, Biesta outlines what he considers to be educational relationships. In short these relationships require "risk without ground," "transcendental violence" and "responsibility without knowledge." We want to take a moment to unpack each of these concepts. In Biesta's words, "To engage in learning always entails the risk that learning might have an impact on you, that learning might change you. This means that education only begins when the learner is willing to take a risk."<sup>37</sup> That risk, he continues, is not possible without trust. And that trust must be ungrounded because otherwise there's no need for trust, as one would already know what was coming. Borrowing from Derrida, Biesta uses the term transcendental violence to explain the second requirement for educational relationships, arguing that "education is a form of violence in that it interferes with the sovereignty of the subject by asking difficult questions and creating difficult encounters."<sup>38</sup> Finally, responsibility understood through Biesta is less about quality of teaching or successfully meeting needs and more about a "responsibility for the subjectivity of the student, for that which allows the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>37</sup> Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 29.

student to be a unique, singular being.”<sup>39</sup> It is “responsibility without knowledge” because we cannot know the unique being we take responsibility for.

It took a few days for the students to trust us and justifiably so. We were suggesting to them that our sole purpose was to help them learn more about topics they wanted to explore, something quite foreign to them in a world of predetermined truth and decided ends. Barring cognitive defect, all children have interests and it was telling that we endured several minutes of silence as the students processed a simple question though one unique in most classrooms: what interests you? The silence was indicative of Dr. Frost’s lament at the opening of this essay. The students were so used to being handed truth and beauty, they struggled with identifying it on their own.

As we moved to the computer lab and we suggested students start finding websites for research they began to trust us further. And over time as we kept our promise that there would be no quizzes, no homework, no tests save the one they would retake at semester’s end, the trust continued to build, and we noticed that students were updating their blogs from home, working from home on their own accord. As we asked difficult questions (how can you make your green home more efficient? How can you reduce drag on your tires to increase drift?) and encouraged difficult encounters (presenting before the class or requiring students to ask other teachers for help), as we inflicted a transcendental violence in a manner that respected, indeed nurtured, the subjectivity of each individual by affirming their choices, they trusted us even more. And by semester’s end when students told us they would miss us, it was clear to us that we had established an educational relationship, one that might even warrant the label “loving.”

We turn now to Biesta’s vision of uniqueness that forwards action as a desirable end.<sup>40</sup> Drawing heavily on the work of Hannah Arendt Biesta argues that “the question of who someone is cannot be resolved through introspection but needs an encounter with others.”<sup>41</sup> It is through this particular action that one reveals oneself and this is more than simply “inserting oneself into the world and forcing one’s beginnings upon others.”<sup>42</sup> It also requires that the other have the freedom and support to come into the world at the same time. “It is about beginning in a world full of other beginners in such a way that the opportunities for others to begin are not obstructed.”<sup>43</sup> We mentioned earlier that our project required three presentations. For several of our students, this requirement was the toughest as they struggled speaking in front of their peers and strangers. While Biesta argues that “we cannot make or force our students to expose themselves to what is other and different and strange,”<sup>44</sup> that is exactly what we did when we invited administrators and a reporter to come in for final presentations where students were required to synthesize and present their unique responses to the worlds they encountered. In our early 40s, we find speaking with most administrative types uncomfortable and strange, and we told the class that before their presentations. But if we don’t engage the other, especially those we fear, we have little chance of

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 69.

realizing a world more complex and rewarding than the one we have now. We had one student who was so nervous at the beginning of the semester she trembled and stuttered when speaking. Her final presentation, on the issues of playing a gold flute, was not flawless, but it was not that of a cowered southern girl, one uncertain as to whether or not her voice mattered. Through the nutritive environment created in our classroom, she discovered that she had a voice, that her interests mattered, that she could share those interests and her discoveries with others, and that doing so further integrated her into a community of plurality and difference.

We close with a brief treatment of Biesta's Arendtian political conception of the democratic person.<sup>45</sup> After situating Arendt in opposition to Kant and in extension to Dewey, Biesta argues for a conception of subjectivity that "is not defined by the attributes of an individual but is understood as a quality of human interaction."<sup>46</sup> He continues: "Arendt radically situates our subjectivity in action—neither before, nor after. We are a subject in those situations in which our initiatives are taken up by others in such a way that the opportunities for others to bring their initiatives into the world are not obstructed."<sup>47</sup> Here we would argue that these interactions require certain skills and capacities, those we listed earlier. As we have attempted to explain, the environment we created was one that required research into individual interest—unique to the beings working with us—while at the same time requiring interactions with others both during the research and presentation phases of our work. If asked to reduce our project to a sound byte, we would say Emerging Scholars requires students to become experts through research, eager to answer complex questions in a manner accessible to those posing the question. The act of research and the act of presentation are central to what we're doing. Action is central to what we're doing.

Biesta closes his text with a call that we:

shift our thinking about democratic education away from an approach that puts the burden on individuals to behave democratically and on schools to create democratic individuals toward an approach that conceives of democracy as a situation in which all individuals can be subjects, in which they can all act in the Arendtian sense, in which they can all "come into the world."<sup>48</sup>

This shift is both problematic and liberatory. As we've mentioned throughout this article, we are troubled by the hands off approach that Biesta seems to call for. Children are not born democrats who behave democratically. Without democratic engagements, without some explanations of how the social fabric works and/or does not work, we worry about children becoming adults who can create these situations...or children who are children who can create these situations. Therefore we remain unabashedly wedded to a Deweyan understanding of the term democracy, and we argue that certain skills and capacities must be pursued by child and adult alike if we are to have a society where individuals can be subjects and actors.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 143.

## Concerns

Biesta argues that “...no one comes into presence when the space of coming into presence can only relegate the subject to a certain fixed position, to a point on the map.”<sup>49</sup> But this is precisely what every public school we’ve been in does, and we’ve been in no fewer than 100 over the last decade. Maintaining these fixing machines as presently constructed in the hopes that the cogs inside of them have the chance to emerge uniquely into a democratic social fabric seems to us increasingly dangerous...dangerous because the warehousing makes all sorts of atrocities possible a la No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Towards this point Utopian 46 asks some interesting questions, and they are lengthy but worth repeating here:

Do well-meaning liberals and even radicals, mistakenly hold to an ideal that because schools on some parts of Earth (e.g., America) are supposedly open to all, that they can be a seedbed for democracy? Has this ever been the case? Is this faith in democracy through state sponsored schools warranted? ... Could it be that bastions of power value schools as spaces to exert propaganda to support their imperial quests? Could it be that rulers want to use schools to imprison cultural and social imagination of later generations to secure their regime? Could it be that educators and educational scholars on Earth subconsciously want to keep the idea of schools alive, because it is their bread and butter?<sup>50</sup>

Yes. No. No. Yes. Yes. Maybe.

Three questions that should have been added: Could it be that profiteers see schools as spaces for creating and fixing consumers? Could it be that schools breed a culture of dependency where truth and beauty are explicated and many children stultified in the process?<sup>51</sup> Could it be that corralling children by the thousands makes salvation by educational saviors such as Bill Gates possible?

It is here that we will address and close with Biesta’s treatment of the physical architecture needed for bringing unique beings into existence as his conclusion both problematizes and validates our work. After critiquing the architecture of three schools, Biesta concludes, “that it is not possible for architects to escape functionalism completely. The only way out, of course, is not to build anything at all, but this would mean the end of architecture.”<sup>52</sup> Here we might replace the word architects with educators and rest our case with regards to educational reform efforts in the United States today. It is not possible for educators, educational philosophers, post colonial reformationists or reformed essentialists such as Diane Ravitch to escape functionalism completely. The only way to do so would be to “not teach anything at all,” a proposition many are

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>50</sup> Schubert, *Love, Justice, and Education*, 36.

<sup>51</sup> For more on this see Gert Biesta “Toward a New ‘Logic’ of Emancipation: Foucault and Rancière, in *Philosophy and Education* ed. Ron Glass et al. (2008). Accessed June 3 2012 from <http://tinyurl.com/8224lpg>.

<sup>52</sup> Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 114.

quite comfortable with.<sup>53</sup> For those committed to maintaining some form of public educational enterprise with a more democratic social order in mind, however, steps must be taken, actions engaged in, ends pursued. While we acknowledge the dangers of public education as it currently operates, and we respect Biesta's concerns regarding the technologies of schooling, we nevertheless take a fixed position and encourage educational reformers concerned with the development of more humane forms of schooling to operationalize philosophers, theorists, and others, doing so carefully and with respect to the child and the world she unfolds into. If we do not we leave worldly spaces open to occupation by KIPP, Green Dot, and other corporate reform models.

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<sup>53</sup> This group includes homeschoolers, unschoolers, and deschoolers. Though an argument might be made that it also includes the individuals and organizations behind neoliberal reforms, as a case could be made that test-driven schools generally teach children to hate going to school and therefore less likely to learn when they are there.

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