

Reclaiming Risk: Education as Encounter

In this paper I set out to explore aspects of the existential territory of education, (Biesta 2017). It is an uncommon region with which to engage, quite different from the matters of the 'what' and 'how' of education, both of which tend to dominate professional discourse, (Palmer, 1991). Gather a group of educators and they will gravitate around discussions about the subjects they teach, or students that they work with. Frequently this will break into considerations of methodology, resources and techniques - the how - of their work, which is increasingly peppered with references to packages, products and branded approaches to delivery the 'what' of education. This paper faces in a different direction, turning toward questions of the 'why' of education, the 'who' is educating and the more conceptual task of exploring how education 'exists'. This is the existential terrain of education, an area less travelled and it is, by implication, abstract, or at least initially. My intention is that by critiquing existential questions about education, both its problematic and potential implications might be better understood. Having done so, I suggest that there are ways through which education might be defined and aligned differently, or at least, to offer an alternative narrative to the 'what' and 'how' of educational work.

What I am seeking to do in this paper is to generate a different -possibly new - frame of reference through which teachers can choose to influence how they show up in what they do. My intention is, in turn, to influence the nature of educational discourse by promoting a 'thoughtful' professional sensibility. Thoughtful not in terms of the questions of the what and the how, but toward the existential matters of what educators engage with throughout their careers, whether or not they are intentional. What I suggest later in the discussion is that being an 'educand' - the one who experiences the *being* educated - essentially does so through an *encounter*, with the Other, a teacher. My observation is that little attention in teacher education is given to this matter, and yet it is core to how pupils, students and others are primarily engaged when education occurs. What follows is an analysis of a widespread professional understanding which centres on the existential premise that education is a *process*, an assumption which, I suggest, creates a powerful distraction from how education might be better envisaged, or arguably, needs to be. My contention is that whilst teachers, policy makers and others, seek best intentions for education as a means to changing the world for the better, the limitations of the common existentialist position render education as deeply embedded as part of the problem it is intended to resolve.

Education as Product

To begin, I suggest that the dominant way in which education exists is that it is essentially a *product*. The conceptualisation of education, and its longstanding association with teaching and learning, in relation to work with both children and adults, is commonly understood as directed to bringing about a product of some kind. In this section I want to explore in more detail some of the implications of this existential perspective, which I argue becomes highly problematic. There are three general problems which I describe that are inherent in the product-orientated view of how education exists, all of which have a disconnective dimension. Each of these is presented and described in more detail, but to summarise at this stage, product-driven education is vulnerable to a particularly anti-educational distortional effect when incorporated within an advanced capitalist economic context. Second, it has a tendency to promote the objective of personal autonomy, a concept which I suggest is becoming increasingly problematic in the context of individualising human experience, (as evidenced by rising mental health concerns, diagnosis of individual pathology and general preoccupations with personal 'well-being', alongside notions of consumer choice, personalised

lifestyles and bespoke 'learning' programmes). Finally, and most pressingly, an education-as-product discourse is positioned as if it is an essentially *sociological* activity, and, by doing so, places the educational task outside of any other kind of dynamic. This combination of factors has been the motivation for reviewing the existential basis for the 'what' and 'how' of education. The hope - and the risk - is to invite the reader to encounter the material and to let such ideas exist in their own right, allowing them to be adopted by the reader with a sensibility and judgement that comes from being a teacher and which arises out of an educational experience.

The framing of education as a product has its long history and, certainly in western culture, is rooted in the classical tradition associating education with a shift from the uncivilised to civilised individual. Variations on this general trajectory have emerged over the centuries with ideas shifting to capture the particular character of distinctive educational philosophies and method. Whether it is the movement from incompetence to competency, or the maturation of the child into adulthood, the transformational change associated with personal growth, or the collective emancipation via radical education, the emphasis throughout is a progression, from point A to a destination point B. There is an arc of a trajectory where the assumed virtue is of growth which might be framed as realising potential, the acquisition of skills or knowledge, 'learning to be human' (MacMurray, 1958) or technical achievement each differing ways for expressing the gain to be had from the educative process. The typology of educational philosophies, despite apparent dichotomous positions, share the common feature of being product orientated.

Some approaches, for example those concerned with children and young people, have a 'naturalistic' quality in that education is focused on upbringing, or *Bildung*, through which the individual is learning to be human. This draws attention to what can be the complicating matter of connecting learning with thinking about how education exists. To simplify, in order to emphasise, learning is something which human beings engage in from birth, a propensity to make meaning as a way of existing with increasing effectiveness and efficiency. It involves socialisation into the world and an accumulation of qualification that is necessary to be successfully accomplished in it. Education in this frame of reference can be regarded as a particular activity that contains, re-directs or runs alongside this natural capacity for learning, enabling the 'becoming human' process.

Education as Process: Implications & Limitations

I have outlined different perspectives to illustrate the various ways in which education is treated and understood primarily as product orientated; it is how education commonly 'shows up'. Despite its common-sense assumption, I turn now to how this product-orientated framework is problematic and *counter-productive*. Furthermore, that there are significant limitations if this remains the sole, exclusive educational imaginary for teachers. I suggest that an alternative is not only possible, but essential if education is to have a sustainable integrity, coherence and credibility.

I have organised my critique across three regions of concern. The first problem arising from a product-model of education is an emphasis on the virtue of growth. Invariably the process of teaching and learning is directed at the development of the student in such a way that they are somehow improved at the completion of the educational project. Clearly, when related to the fact of physical maturation, any objection to growth, developmentally, would be regarded as unnatural, or even, an impossibility. However, when used to figuratively explain what is happening in the context of schooling, adult education or professional training,

the notion of growth is less straightforward. Initial questions about whose growth? what kind of growth? and to what end is it designed? begin to highlight how an educational process can be liable to exploitation and manipulation. Furthermore, within a wider context established on capitalist economic structures and relations, an educational process promoting growth - however defined - will be prone to the assumption that all growth is 'good'. Associated with this premise is an assumption that growth is also sustainable, that key indicators of successful growth are accumulation (eg. of knowledge), acquisition (eg. of skills), with the capacity to increase consumption (via increased levels of autonomy). The implications of these features of a growth, product-based educational philosophy is that it is vulnerable to the antithetical influence of marketisation, managerialism and commodification of the educational task. In practical terms this results in seeking to establish education as a 'strong' concept. In other words, by embedding education solely as a process for promoting growth, it is not unreasonable to extend this into ensuring an education that *promises* and *procures* growth. Consequently, policy makers, education leaders and teachers embark on a campaign to establish greater certainty, secure outcomes and minimise inefficiencies, for example by 'removing barriers to learning' and thereby 'raising achievement'.

Typically, alongside the premise of 'growth is good', a product-based education model also assumes that its starting point must necessarily be inferior to the intended destination. The pupil is envisaged as lacking in understanding, the adult learner is unpracticed, the collective are regarded as oppressed, the community as impoverished. Education is heralded as the emancipatory process, whereby a better future can be realised, a kind of heaven attained through an act of salvation on behalf of the student by the educator. This is heady stuff indeed, and may appear quite out of perspective from the day to day matters of classrooms and training workshops. However, my focus here remains at the existential, not the individual professional level, and the point here is that if education is regarded as a product-orientated, through which an individual travels through an arc, which is understood in terms of growth, the role of educator, by implication, is associated with the journey. I suggest that whilst archetypal variants are offered - guide at the side, sage on the stage, seer at the rear - or more prosaic terminology, such as co-learner, change agent or facilitator, the beneficiary of the educational journey is the student. Whilst the reference to 'salvation' may be grandiose, it captures a particular idea of freedom arising out of the educator-student dynamic in the educational process. Importantly, although the educational beneficiary is the student, it is the educator who has the power to choose their position in relation to the student, not the other way around. 'You - the student - may become free, but I - the educator - hold the power to determine how this can be so, and what freedom looks like for you', is the underlying contract.

I will return to the issues of an education that promises freedom from a lesser position later in my discussion of place-ness, but before leaving this first problem of education-as-product in a globalised market culture, I want to emphasise two further implications. Objectification and alienation are both associated with a production-based approach to market-driven arenas, both of which can be recognised within the educational domain. Objectification refers to how an individual, or more precisely attributes of an individual, serve the purpose, or provide benefit to another more powerful individual or system. Whilst much rhetoric might be generated in relation to meeting the needs and ambitions of the individual student, educational success indicators and regulatory priorities remain stubbornly fixated on the collation of data and analysis focused on highly delineated data sets regarding precisely defined outcomes. Students are increasingly referred to as 'clusters' of potential 'outcomes', and interventions are designed to move batched students from one grading level to another. Other groups of students might be abandoned entirely (via terms such as disapplication/exclusion/managed move) due to threatening the overall success of the wider educational

population. Alienation emerges as the impact of objectification on the individual. It is the absence of personal engagement in the educational task on the behalf of students, but also teachers, in the face of systemic objectification. High levels of transition, both amongst students leaving school placements, and teachers seeking new careers, are a consequence of a gradual alienation which feature in other, mass-production sectors typical in capitalist systems.

To summarise my argument at this point, I am proposing that the dominant educational imaginary regards education primarily as product-orientated. That furthermore, such a process assumes a journey, undertaken for the student's benefit, and which leads to a version of growth that has a quality of freedom, or escape, with the educator positioned, powerfully, either through choosing to lead or accompany the student. Where education is undertaken in a wider global capitalist environment, and is unprotected from the dynamics of the marketplace, there is a tendency for education-as-product to become contaminated with the features of technological methodology which, I will argue later, are anti-educational. Furthermore, that in such a context, growth is not a benign concept, but a carefully constructed idea which encourages the features of acquisition, accumulation and consumption, typical of global capitalism.

A second problematic aspect of a product-based existential view of education is the concept of autonomy. Generally regarded as a priority in educational discourse, 'realising personal potential', or more colloquially, becoming the 'best you can be', are signature phrases for those advocating growth-orientated education. Ostensibly such ambition presents as common sense; who would not want to aim for being their very best? My concern, again in the context of a dominant global economic framework, is that individual autonomy can be coupled with the educationally dubious practice of advocating consumer choice and providing customer service. Education, as an exercise in consumption to meet individual need, is problematic. In part this is because it risks engendering a narcissistic tendency on behalf of the student as 'customer', and also because of how it can simultaneously infantilise the student, (Furedi, 2009; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008). Furthermore, in a drive to personalise learning, the student becomes understood as primarily isolated and with such individualisation comes the possibility of atomisation. Disconnection from others, combined with the disconnection with self, through the objectification and alienation described earlier, are unintended consequences of a product-orientated education frame of reference. The irony is that in the context of a technocratic, outcome-focused educational model, the task of becoming human becomes one of de-humanising the people involved. The prevalence of this particular way of understanding how education exists, to the extent that it remains beyond question, can lead to an unthinking, or more precisely, a thoughtless acceptance of process. This in turn counteracts, or undermines the hope and ambition for what education might be.

A final concern with the dominant western existential view of education is that it is regarded essentially as a process that happens between people. It is framed as a sociological activity, to be understood through the lens of social relations, organisational and systemic dynamics and individual psychology. The limitation of this perspective is that it denies, or discounts an ecological relational dimensions of education. All education occurs in a place, an environment which is more than the sum of the individuals involved. The non-human, natural elements, both animate and inanimate, corral the human interplay of educational work. This third problem forms the final disconnect in my critique of an existential view of education that centres solely on product.

The Educational Encounter: an alternative existential possibility

In response to this critique of education-as-process, I want to re-state the three problems which I identify as seriously limiting of education. Collectively my concern can be expressed in terms of disconnections. By preferencing education as product, particularly in a globalised economic system, education is at risk of engendering a separation of the individual from the environment which is needed to sustain life, a disconnect from being in relationship with others and, through objectification, split the individual off from oneself. What I want to propose in this following section is another way of thinking about how education might be imagined. In doing so I emphasise that this is an *additional* perspective, and is not presented as 'an instead of', or alternative position. That a product model exists, and is referred to as an 'education' cannot be denied, my purpose is to expand how we might *also* choose to refer to an education.

I mentioned at the beginning of this paper that I am frequently amongst teachers and school leaders who talk about what they teach and how they do so. It is during such gatherings that the existence of education as a process becomes the more apparent. However, when I have the opportunity I ask them to reflect, with a colleague, on their experience of being at school when they were younger. I structure the reflection by asking what they remember most, the kind of beliefs and decisions that were forming about themselves as learners, the role of teacher and what they imagined education was about. Finally, after sharing relatively personal accounts I ask if they recognise anything of what happened 'way back then' with the 'here and now' of their practice. The exercise often generates strongly held recollections, memories and connections which can be variously negative, positive, shaming, uplifting, mediocre and transformational. However, what most strikes me each time is that none of them talk about education as a product. Occasionally, in retrospect, colleagues might offer a framing of what was happening at the meta-level referring to process, intellectualising the experience in the light of their subsequent training and experience in teaching. However, my substantive point is that when the teachers speak out of the experience of being an *educand*, it is not from the position of being in a 'process'. (I am preferring to use 'educand' here because it is an uncommon term, and means 'that which is to be educated', which will be more precisely aligned with what I present as an alternative existential position. Also, it is a term that is free from the more familiar associations with 'pupil' and 'student', that might prove misleading or distracting).

As teachers share their experiences as educand a new way of knowing how education exists begins to emerge. The recollections take the form of encounters, discrete episodes, or singular events. People report on the sense of the teacher's presence, whether it be their perfume, coffee on the breath, a touch on the shoulder a tapping pen on the desk. They recall the presence felt through the shaming sarcasm, the affirming smile or authoritative eye. The encounter is an engagement with another *person*, in a place with 'I', as the one being educated. I want to stay with the term 'encounter' albeit briefly at this point. Historically, the word was used to describe an adversarial quality in the meeting of people, 'to counter' the other. It also combines the notion of being 'in front of' the individual, and this certainly captures an important aspect of the educational experiences shared by colleagues. Education, in the existential perspective of encounter, is where a person shows up in the life of another. Not simply anyone, but a person to person moment, in which the possibility of being seen, called forth and experienced as Other involves both the teacher and educand - neither becomes replaceable in the encounter.

The significance of education as encounter is that it remains outside the familiar frame of reference teachers hold of their work. An implication is that teachers frequently report on the lack of control they experience in relation to designing and delivery of their work. The over-emphasis on product-focused education, which is

increasingly subject to external regulation and manipulation, renders individual teachers to a status similar to an operative engaged in ensuring that a mechanistic procedural process is running efficiently. The professional preoccupation is to become increasingly competent, to acquire the technical expertise required to increase effectiveness, within the parameters of an externally commissioned educational 'service'. The notion of educational encounter draws attention to an entirely different way of framing teacher impact and educational agency, one in which teachers are re-positioned absolutely *not* as 'being in control' of what happens, but being irreplaceable nevertheless - perhaps briefly - in summoning the life of the student. There is a creative subversion in having regard to educational encounter. My proposal is not to overthrow the convention for product-based education, but to recognise that within such an experience, which is subject to such external control, an entirely different, and arguably more powerful, encounter takes place. That here the teacher can but barely claim to know what they teach, and even less so what the student might learn. And herein lies a distinct sense of freedom for both student and teacher from the confines of product-orientated education.

To 'summon up' is a arguably a peculiar phrase to use in relation to product-education where the emphasis is on creating homogeneity, or a standardisation, in the relationship between student and teacher. To 'summon up', etymologically, refers to the calling of another, and also to 'arouse, and excite to action'. This then, is in the gift of the teacher, not the promise that the student will 'appear', but that such a summons can be made. I suggest that this action falls outside of the convention of product education previously explored. No curriculum can be devised, nor assessment matrix constructed, to measure this kind of education. The nature of encounter is by implication elusive, spontaneous, perhaps random, and it exists in the uncertain, liminal pockets of time and place in the education task. By the planning of each minute of a lesson or workshop, the structuring activity and movement of students concisely, the potential for encounter is diminished and these become key technical competencies in product-orientated education. Nevertheless, how the teacher appears, the nature of their calling up the student's personhood, and the accounting of the time and place of the encounter, are for the teacher to claim as fundamental components of professional judgement.

To regard education as an encounter is intended in part, to re-energise and focus professional attention toward reclaiming vocational purpose, wisdom and collective agency. However, much more is at stake, in my view, and my aim here is not solely to encourage teachers to think again about what they do in relation to their students. It is through encounter that I hope to draw attention to the connections which this type of education can bring about. First, by providing an opportunity whereby the student can encounter themselves as a person, Biesta's notion of *subjectification*, (2015). Second, that it is through encounter that the student is brought into contact with the social world, via the teacher, and is challenged, or called to be part of it, yet not at the centre of it. Third, that the encounter occurs within a *place*, beyond the parameters of social relations. In others words, education has metaphysical and ecological components, in addition to being a sociological activity. Earth is the only place in which education can occur, (whether via process or encounter), and giving attention to the ecological context is increasingly critical if we are to continue to enjoy, endure or engage in education. The limits of product-education are, in my view becoming too significant and that to rely solely on such a model of education to address the contemporary issues of disconnection is evidently neither sustainable nor successful. Introducing the possibilities of encounter, combining the connections with soil, soul and society might provide alternative considerations for the thought-full practitioner.

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