The Re-childed Teacher and the Desirable Curriculum

Stefano Oliverio
Department of Political Sciences
University of Naples Federico II
stefano.oliverio@unina.it

****

This presentation will revolve around three main foci:

- an investigation of the experience of ‘being taught by’ (understood as a way of countering the drift of learnification [Biesta, 2006, 2010]) from a longue durée perspective, which should help us to see how learnification could be considered as a manifestation of the project of modernity (or to be more accurate: of a specific inflection of this project);
- a revisitation and re-signification of the notion of the re-childing of the teacher, which I draw from Erasmus (1966), via the contemporary French philosopher Kambouchner (2013), and to which I will give a specific spin; and
- the significance that the curriculum may take on in the light of the ideas discussed in connection with the previous points.

The paper begins with a discussion of (some tenets of) Gert Biesta’s (2017) most recent volume on teaching and culminates in a dialogue with a classic of 20th century educational thought, John Dewey’s The Child and the Curriculum. There is a sense in which I could say that the paper sketches out a road from Biesta back to Dewey. This phrase could be understood at multiple levels: first, Biesta (2014c) himself has construed his intellectual evolution as a passage from pragmatism to existentialism. While showing the validity of this self-interpretation, I want to argue that some of the categories he marshals in his reflection on teaching consist in an (admittedly substantial) re-elaboration of concepts from Dewey; secondly, while concurring with most (if not all) of the concerns of Biesta and his vindication of the significance of teaching, I would like to explore whether it is possible to complement his analysis and proposal with ideas coming from a re-appropriation of a Deweyan perspective; and, thirdly, passing through Biesta’s ‘existentialist’ approach could help us to reconstruct some aspects of Dewey’s legacy, especially regarding the relationship between the child and the curriculum.
Establishing a dialogue between these two authors is not meant as the focus or the end of the paper but, rather, it is instrumental in trying to develop a panoply of concepts which could hopefully offer some insights into the much needed re(dis)covery of teaching.

I will organize my presentation in four steps:

1. I will outline the main points of Biesta’s understanding of teaching. My illustration will be admittedly sketchy and selective and, in a sense, I will gerrymander only some aspects of his argumentative device. In particular:
   a. I will valorize the need to reclaim the significance of teaching after decades of its marginalization due to the predominance of “the constructivist metaphor” (Roth, 2011). In this context, I will introduce his distinction, which I find extremely insightful, between “learning from” and “being taught by” (Biesta, 2014a, pp. 53 ff.);
   b. I will present two main ideas that Biesta deploys to make sense of teaching, namely “grown-up-ness” and “desirability” (as opposed to mere desire) and I will suggest that they have a Deweyan matrix (although Biesta radically re-signifies them); and
   c. I will mention what seems to me a problematic point in Biesta’s device in relation to teaching, namely the under-estimation of the topic of the curriculum. Significantly, also recently, he has valorized the role of Deweyan pragmatism in the question of the curriculum (Biesta, 2014b). It is as if he sees the curriculum as linked (almost) exclusively with the socialization task of education, while his recent recovery of teaching pivots on the subjectification dimension (I am here referring to Biesta’s three dimensions of the educational task: qualification, socialization and subjectification). This will lead me to raise two interwoven questions: can we imagine a role for the curriculum also within subjectification? Or, to put it differently: if teaching is understood as aiming at “arousing the desire in another human being for wanting to exist in the world in a grown-up way” (Biesta, 2017, pos. 335)
   ”, can there be a role for the curriculum in this? And, secondly, could we imagine a Deweyan understanding of this role?

2. In the second step, I will develop the argumentative trajectory introduced in 1a. In particular, I will show how the predominance of learning is deeply rooted in the project of modernity by illustrating how the shift from “being taught by” to “learning” operates in two seminal texts of the discourse of modernity: Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason and Descartes’ Meditations on First Philosophy. In this context, I will venture a hypothesis: the removal of the experience of ‘being taught by’ is coextensive with a deletion of the cognitive significance of children’s experience.
I will speak, then, of an Adamitic (= de-childed) modernity, by commenting and elaborating on a passage of Descartes. This hermeneutical move aims at problematizing the taken for granted idea that the privileging of learning implies an orientation to the freedom of the child: what if, instead, it builds upon a dismissal of the meaning of childhood? Moreover, I want to raise the question whether we could imagine, instead of the contemporary dismissal of teaching and childhood, their coupling. And this leads to the third step, where

3. I will introduce the idea of re-childing in teaching. This is a notion that comes from Erasmus (1966) but I will read it along different lines (in connection with the contemporary philosophy of childhood). In a sense my emphasis on the re-chiled teacher should be read as additional (but not necessarily alternative) to Biesta’s circuit between teaching and grown-up-ness in at least two respects: first, because it valorizes the ‘childish’ existential modality as essential to teaching; and, secondly, because this dimension, as it will be here interpreted, is intimately connected both to a re-positioning of the teacher in relation with the curriculum and to the role of the ‘transcendence’ of the curriculum as a vehicle of the promotion of the ‘uncoercive rearrangement of desires’ to which teaching amounts, according to Biesta. In the view here proposed, (only?) a re-chiled teacher—that is, a teacher who is able to cultivate a ‘childish’ relation towards her/his subject-matter—could usher the child into the symbolic realm of a subject-matter in an educationally significant way and thus work in favor of the ‘uncoercive rearrangement of desires’.

4. The argumentative line developed from 1 through 3 has an ambivalent relationship with Dewey’s educational legacy. This observation introduces my fourth step. On the one hand, I want to argue that Dewey—contra Kant and Descartes—offers a set of ideas, which enable us to think of a non-Adamitic modernity (what he would call “[t]he genuinely modern [that] has still to be brought into existence” [MW 12, p. 273]). Incidentally, it is to note that Dewey uses the epoch-making Kantian metaphor of “the Copernican revolution” first in The School and Society (MW 1, p. 23) and, then, in chapter 11 of The Quest for Certainty, that is, the volume in which he more radically confronts—at a purely epistemological level—the Cartesian-Kantian understanding of the meaning of modern philosophy. I would like to argue that this is more than a textual curiosity but it hints at a profound revolution in the interpretation of childhood, knowledge and the relationship between them. In this respect, Dewey is a major ally in countering the modern project discussed above (see bullet point 2). On the other hand, the pivotal idea of the psychologization of the curriculum (marshalled in The Child and the Curriculum) seems to be
(at least) partly divergent from the re-childing in teaching introduced above. As a consequence, I would like to venture a reconstruction of the Deweyan discourse of the curriculum by deploying his ideas about the passage from desire to desirability. Through this move, as aforementioned, I hope to offer an additional perspective on the re(dis)covery of teaching by complementing Biesta’s account with two elements (the child—as an existential dimension—and the curriculum) which risk fading into the background in his reflection on teaching. And I aim at doing this not by merely reproposing the tradition of educational pragmatism (Oliverio, 2018) but rather by attempting to reconstruct it along new lines.