

The double intervention of world-centred education: Introduction to a book symposium

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Abstract

In 2022, I published a book with the title *World-Centred Education: A View for the Present*. In the book, a case is made for putting the world in the centre of educational attention. In this paper, I introduce a book symposium which consists of three papers in which the authors reflect on the significance of the idea of world-centred education and develop it further with reference to their own expertise and scholarship.

Keywords

world-centred education, democracy, ecology, teaching

In 2022, I published a book with the title *World-Centred Education: A View for the Present* (Biesta 2022). The book was very much a product of the pandemic. Unlike what I intended to do, which was to develop and fine-tune the chapters in seminars with PhD students at the University of Tokyo, most of the thinking was done at home and most of the writing was done at the kitchen table. For a book that makes a case for putting the world in the centre of our educational endeavours, this was perhaps a bit ironic, although I would say that at a less mundane level this situation chimed quite well with some key ideas from the book. After all, the world is not of our own making and can therefore throw surprises at us.

In the book, I present the idea of world-centred education first of all as a ‘rhetorical intervention’ in a rather old but persistent discussion between those who favour child- or student-centred education and those who argue for curriculum- or knowledge-centred education. Despite the fact that even John Dewey already called child-centred education ‘really stupid’ (see Dewey 1984: p. 59), the

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educational conversation up to the present day keeps swinging back and forth between these two positions (nowadays, for example, in the guise of arguments for discovery learning or whole child development on the one hand and powerful knowledge or direct instruction on the other).

I am not the first to argue for a ‘third’ position. John Dewey, for example, already emphasised that education needs to be concerned with both the child and the curriculum, as the real task of education lies in the ‘co-ordination’ of the two, as Dewey has put it. Despite such arguments, no particular phrase had as yet emerged in the educational conversation to describe this ‘third’ or ‘middle’ position. In this regard, the idea of world-centred education was indeed nothing more than an attempt to add something to the educational vocabulary.

One reason for suggesting that ‘world-centred education’ might be a good candidate has to do with the fact that education not only needs children or students but also needs curriculum, knowledge, or ‘content’ more generally. And the key task of education is to ensure *encounters* between children and curricula in order to encourage and equip them for their own life, which is a life that always takes place in the world. It is, in other words, the (future) life of children and young people *in* the world and *with* the world, as I put it in the book, that should be on the horizon of our educational endeavours. This is one key reason why the world ought to be in the centre of education (see also [Biesta 2023](#)).

There was, however, an additional reason why I made a case for the idea of world-centred education. This has to do with the fact that if it is the task of education to encourage and equip children and young people for their life ‘in and with the world’, then it is also important to acknowledge that the world – the natural world and the social world – is not a shop, as I put it in the book, but that the world is *real*. To emphasise that the world is real, and not a construction or a phantasy, implies that the world puts limits on what we can do in it and with it. The ecological crisis can, to a large extent, be understood as the result of the denial of the limits of the natural world. And along similar lines, it can be argued that the democratic crisis is the result of the denial of the ‘integrity’, as I put it in the book, of the social world.

It is for this reason that the idea of world-centred education is not only a rhetorical intervention into the educational conversation but also entails an intervention at the level of educational practice. Much of contemporary education is focused on the question how children and young people can learn about the world. In this ‘staging’, the world appears first and foremost as an object for learning. The ‘gesture’ here goes from the student to the world in order for the student to grasp, understand, and comprehend the world ‘out there’. But if it is acknowledged that the world is real, has its own integrity, and thus puts limitations on what we can do in it and with it, a different gesture comes into view, which also entails an altogether different guiding question for education. The gesture is not from me to the world but from the world to me, and the question that is at stake is what the world is asking of me (see also [Bertelsen et al., 2023](#)).

To encounter the world as question, as appeal, as imperative, and even as demand, not only means that the world appears differently in education. It also means that the self appears differently, that is, not as the one who asks questions but rather as the one who is ‘in question’. Rather than being in the centre, the child or student ends up in the spotlight, as I put it in the book. And it is by being in the spotlight, by facing a question, that the child or student meets its own freedom, as it is for them – not for the teacher – to figure out what to do in the encounter with the question.

It is along these lines that I try to make case for the significance of world-centred education, on the assumption, of course, that education should always and ultimately be interested in the freedom of each child and young person to lead their own life and lead it well. Unlike the neo-liberal ‘freedom of shopping’ – the freedom just to do what you want to do, without considering

consequences, limits, or limitations – this is a ‘difficult freedom’, as Emmanuel Levinas has put it. It is the freedom to do what only I can do, and what no one can do in my place.

World-centred education thus entails a *double* intervention – both at the rhetorical level and the practical or, if one wishes, existential level. In the book, I provide more detail about both interventions and also try to justify why they are important in an educational climate that still wants to reduce all educational matters to questions of learning (which is the now rather old but still relevant theme of the ‘learnification’ of education). Yet there is not only the question what world-centred education entails and how it can be justified. There is also the question whether the idea of world-centred education can make a difference in educational discourse and educational practice. It is with this in mind that I invited three colleagues to ‘take up’ some of the ideas from the book within their own fields and areas of interest in order to take the idea ‘further’, so to speak, which also means putting the idea of world-centred education to the test.

This symposium is the outcome of this invitation and hopefully provides a richer exploration of the possibilities and limitations of world-centred education than what I have been able to achieve in my book. I am very grateful to Stefano Oliverio, Laura Colucci-Gray, and Elisabet Langmann for accepting my invitation and for generously and generatively going ‘with’ and ‘beyond’ the double intervention I have sought to make.

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