

# Putting the World in the Centre: a Different Future for Scotland's Education

*Gert Biesta* | ORCID: 0000-0001-8530-7105

The Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh,  
Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy, Maynooth University, Maynooth,  
Ireland

*gert.biesta@ed.ac.uk, gert.biesta@mu.ie*

## Abstract

This paper provides a critical discussion of *Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education*, which was published by the Scottish Government in 2022. After reconstructing the case made in the report for putting learners at the centre of Scottish education, I raise critical questions, both about the idea that learners should be at the centre of education and that it is their learning that education should focus on. I also argue why the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is insufficient as a basis for education. I then present the case for an alternative view, which neither puts learners nor the curriculum at the centre, but sees the physical, natural, and social world as that which education should centre on. I show how this may provide a more meaningful and more educational future for education in Scotland and elsewhere.

## Keywords

learners – learning – learnification – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – world-centred education

## 1 Introduction

In June 2021 Professor Kenneth Muir was commissioned by the Scottish Government to provide independent advice on aspects of education reform

in Scotland (see Scottish Government, 2022, p. 1). This eventually led to the publication of a report with the title *Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education* (hereafter: the Muir-report). At about the same time – or to be precise: in June 2021 – I published a book in which I also made a case for what education should centre on. I presented this as a ‘view’ rather than a ‘vision,’ and referred to it as a view for the *present* rather than for the future. The book was called *World-Centred Education* (Biesta, 2021a).

It is perhaps not a co-incidence that both the report and the book make a claim about what should be at the centre of educational attention, not least because there are ongoing discussions in educational scholarship, policy and practice about precisely this issue. The pendulum, however, seems to swing back and forth between the case that the child, the student or, in the case of the Muir report, the learner should be in the centre of education, and the case that the curriculum, subject-matter or knowledge should be in the centre. Such claims come with rather strong evaluations and preferences, in which the case for child- or student-centred education is often presented as the progressive alternative for what are seen as conservative arguments around curriculum- or knowledge-centred approaches.

It is interesting that John Dewey, a key figure in the international progressive education movement whose work has often been labelled as ‘child-centred,’ has consistently argued that education needs both the child and the curriculum (see Dewey, 1902). He even went as far as to say that the idea that education should be entirely child-centred is actually ‘really stupid’ (Dewey, 1984, p. 59). This observation is echoed in the critique of the idea of education ‘vom Kinde aus’ (literally: starting from the child; metaphorically: taken the child as the criterion), which was a key phrase in Continental ‘Reformpädagogik’ (see, for a detailed discussion, Oelkers, 1989).

My suggestion that the actual centre of education ought to be the world, is partly meant as a *rhetorical intervention* in this ongoing debate. It is an attempt to bring a new concept into circulation in order to break through the ongoing ‘back-and-forth’ between child-centred and curriculum-centred arguments and approaches. Yet it is also meant as a *political intervention* in order to argue that putting the child, student or learner in the centre of education is not automatically or necessarily progressive, just as an emphasis on the curriculum, subject-matter or knowledge is not necessarily conservative or retrograde (also because conserving what is of value is important, both educationally and politically).<sup>1</sup>

1 This is how the American progressive educators George Counts put it: “I enjoy surprising my students by telling them that I am a conservative, that I have striven throughout my life to ‘conserve our radical tradition.’” (Counts, 1971, p. 164).

In this paper I will try to argue why it might be important, for education in Scotland and ‘beyond,’ to put the world in the centre of educational attention and activity rather than learners and their learning. I will suggest that the turn towards learners and their learning may look like a progressive escape from the idea of education as top-down, teacher-led control, but runs the risk of missing what, in this paper, I will refer to as the educational question. I will preface my proposal with observations about the language of learners and learning. I will also highlight that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which forms an important reference point for the proposals in the Muir-report, is insufficient as a guiding framework for education.

In all this I am aware that the Muir-report engages with a wider range of questions, including those of the structure and organisation of the educational infrastructure in Scotland, and that it only lays some of the groundwork for the future direction of Scottish education itself. Nonetheless, by making a strong claim about what should be in the centre – learners and their learning – the report does point at a very specific direction for the future of Scottish education; a direction that cannot remain unchallenged. Likewise, why I will try to be as precise as possible in arguing why and where this direction needs to be challenged, I can only outline the contours of a world-centred alternative. I therefore would encourage readers who are interested in the detail of my proposal to have a look at further publications on this topic (particularly Biesta, 2017a; 2017b and 2021a).

## 2 A Future Vision for Scottish Education

In his letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Scottish Government, 2022, pp. 1-2), Muir is very clear about the overarching idea of the report. He writes: “my recommendations place children, young people and those teachers and practitioners who support their learning more firmly at the heart of the education system [and] place them and their interests ahead of those organisations that make up the educational infrastructure” (ibid., p. 2). The recommendations are designed, he explains, “to enhance the quality of learning and teaching and the achievements and outcomes for all learners and to ensure that the rights of the child are respected and honoured across our education system” (ibid.).

Muir’s attempt at being “bold and radical” (ibid.) starts with the suggestion that the Scottish Government should initiate “a national discussion on establishing a compelling and consensual vision for the future of Scottish education that takes account of the points made in this report” (ibid., p. 4). And here he

particularly highlights “the importance of placing the learner at the centre of all decisions” (ibid.). When he suggests that “all learners” should be invited to shaping such a vision, he explains that the phrase ‘all learners’ “encompasses children and young people who speak different languages, who come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, who follow different faiths, [and] who require additional support needs” (ibid.).

Much of what the report wants to say about the future of Scottish education – based upon extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders – can be found in section 5 called ‘Case for Change.’ While Muir does refer to the need to change the organisation of the educational infrastructure in Scotland (replacing SQA and reforming Education Scotland; see ibid., p. 14), he highlights that it was ‘generally agreed’ that this also requires “the establishment of a co-constructed and shared vision” for Scottish education (see ibid.). This entails “a cultural and mindset shift and the need for generating a commonly-held paradigm or set of assumptions,” and such a paradigm, so he argues, “should, first and foremost, place the learner at the centre of all we do” (ibid.). Rather than an argument for incremental change, the case for change can therefore best be understood as a full-blown paradigm shift.

The ‘key principles’ that are at stake in the proposed paradigm-shift include the following (ibid., p. 15): “a reorientation of resource to provide place-based, responsive, bespoke support for teachers and practitioners supporting the learning of children and young people,” “an enhanced focus on ensuring high quality learning and teaching and increased collaboration among practitioners, based on the adoption of a continuous learning mindset,” and “increased recognition of the role and value of early years, including their approaches to learning and teaching and use of outdoor learning, in setting the direction of travel for the lifelong journey of learning for all children.”

Muir also highlights the need for “a review of the role and purposes of assessment” so that it will support “progression in young people’s learning,” and the need for “a redistribution of power, influence and resource within Scottish education to one that reflects the principles of subsidiarity, genuinely empowers teachers and practitioners and where learners’ voices, experiences, perspectives and rights are central to decision making.” This also implies that “greater resourcing and attention [is] placed on ensuring the needs of individual learners are met, including crucially those with additional support needs.”

While it is clear that much of what is said about the desired future for Scottish education is couched in the language of learners and learning, also with repeated reference to the importance of ‘high quality learning,’ it is

more difficult to find the exact arguments for the proposed paradigm shift. At one level, the report itself can be seen as a *rhetorical intervention*, that is, an attempt at changing the language and discourse of education. The slightly repetitive nature of what is being said about learners and learning speaks to this. On closer inspection, however, I think that three reasons for the proposed paradigm shift can be discerned.

In the discussion about the curriculum and, more specifically, Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, the tone that is set in the report, particularly through the inclusion of quotes from children and young people (in the report consistently referred to as 'primary school age learners' and 'secondary school age learners'), is the suggestion that the current curriculum, both in its design and its enactment, is *constraining*. One quote (from a secondary pupil) says: "The curriculum limits us in developing our uniqueness, our own talents and abilities." (ibid., p. 16) Or, in the words of a secondary pupil: "Too much pressure in one exam, one final exam..." (ibid., p. 18) From this angle, the case for putting learners and their learning at the centre can be understood as an attempt to address and counteract such constraints.

A second aspect of the case for a paradigm shift has to do with the idea that education should meet "the needs of the learner," as it is put in the report, for example in the suggestion that what is needed is "increased empowerment and autonomy to schools and practitioners to provide a curriculum that best suits their local context and the needs of all their learners" (ibid., p. 18). The report also mentions findings from an online survey in which 'only' half of secondary pupils and the majority of primary pupils "were in agreement that their education meets their needs as a learner," where only one in three secondary pupils who responded to the survey "agreed that they are having the best possible educational experience," and where only just over half (56%) were of the view "that their education helps them to develop their personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential" (ibid., p. 20).

The third element of the case for a paradigm shift has to do with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In his letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Muir writes that his recommendations "are also based on an understanding that the incorporation into Scots law of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a game changer when it comes to how we view and provide the educational experiences for children and young people" (ibid., p. 2). In relation to this, Muir refers to the report from the Goodison Group as providing further support for the vision he proposes (see ibid., p. 21). The Group highlights that there are "likely to be ongoing challenges to existing power structures and demands for more

transparent and devolved democratic systems” and that “greater empowerment is likely to come from groups, especially children through the adoption into Scots law of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child” (*ibid.*, p. 22).

Muir also includes the following citation from the report: “We still have some way to go to progress towards a truly humanised education system. However, we have the opportunity with the incorporation of the UNCRRC to influence system change that is consistent and sustainable [so that] what the children and young people will experience consistently and sustainably is respect, kindness, trust and respect for their human dignity in whatever environment they are in” (*ibid.*, p. 22). Against this background Muir concludes that the “compelling and consensual vision for the future of Scottish education” which he urges Scotland to develop should take into account “the important of placing the learner at the centre of all decisions and the basis that Article 29 of the UNCRRC offers in terms of the purposes of education” (*ibid.*, pp. 22-23).

While the direction of travel set out in the report is crisp and clear – and the clarity of the report is indeed helpful – the question this raises is whether this direction is desirable and whether it is feasible as a direction for Scottish education. This brings me, first of all, to the theme of learning.

### 3 Putting Learning at the Centre?

Although the report presents the turn to learners and their learning as an innovation and, in a sense, as a break with the past – a “cultural and mindset shift” (*ibid.*, p. 14) – this turn is actually rather old and established in educational thought and practice. In an analysis I conducted about twenty years ago (see Biesta, 2004), I already highlighted the ongoing rise of a ‘new language of learning’ in education. This rise was evident in a number of ‘discursive shifts,’ including referring to pupils and students as ‘learners,’ seeing teachers as ‘facilitators of learning,’ talking about schools as ‘learning communities’ or ‘learning environments,’ and redesignating adult education as ‘lifelong learning.’

In my analysis I argued that the rise of this new language of learning was the outcome of a number of only partly related developments. One is the critique of authoritarian forms of education in which teaching is enacted as a form of control over students (known in Paolo Freire’s work as ‘banking education’; see Freire, 1993). In such a situation the ‘freedom to learn,’ as Carl Rogers put it (Rogers, 1969), is an obvious and in a sense entirely reasonable response. A second development is the influence of constructivist understandings of knowledge which highlight that coming to know is not a matter of (passively,

as some have put) receiving knowledge from a teacher but actually depends on students' own constructive activity.

Thirdly, the rise of the new language of learning is also connected to the influence of neo-liberal forms of governance in which collective responsibilities are offloaded onto individuals. This is particularly visible in the domain of adult education. While such education can be seen as a right for which the state needs to make resources available, lifelong learning turns it into the duty for individuals to 'take responsibility for their own learning,' as the saying goes. In most cases this is seen as important for their employability in an allegedly ever-changing labour market.<sup>2</sup>

While some see the turn towards learners and their learning as a liberating and progressive move – albeit that what has happened in the domain of adult education already suggests something else – I have argued in a number of publications that the 'learnification' of education (for this term see Biesta 2010) is actually a highly problematic development that has undermined rather than enhanced educational thought and educational practice. This is perhaps first and foremost because learning is a rather empty and, in a sense, directionless term. 'Learning,' after all, mainly denotes change or, in a slightly more precise definition, it refers to change in an individual that is not the result of maturation or development but is brought about through interaction with the environment. This change is partly ongoing – it is an aspect of being alive – but can also be actively pursued.

However, to say that the point of education is to make children learn, or to say that the point of the work of the teacher is to facilitate students' learning, is saying no more than that education is interested in change. However, what quickly disappears from view when it is argued that teachers should 'support the learning of children,' or that schools should aim for 'high quality learning,' is the question what this learning is supposed to be *about* and what it is supposed to be *for*. The language of learning hides, in other words, questions of content and questions of purpose, yet these questions are of crucial importance in education. After all, the point of the school is never that children and young people just learn – they can do that anywhere and don't need a school or a teacher for this – but that they learn *something*, learn it *for a reason*, and learn it *from someone*, to put it briefly. Education, in other words, always raises questions of *content, purpose and relationships*, and in the language of learning these questions are absent.

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2 I say allegedly because what happens in labour markets is to a large degree the result of deliberate choices made by employers, industry and the state.

Reading the ‘cultural and mindset shift’ that is proposed in the Muir report with this in mind, begins to show how remarkably empty the references to ‘learning’ actually are, and how unhelpful these references are for setting out a vision for Scottish education, now and in the future. One thing that is urgently lacking in all the talk about learning in the report, is an indication of what the point and purpose of such learning is supposed to be. As I have argued in a range of publications (perhaps beginning with Biesta, 2009a, 2010, and also 2015a) is that in education the question of purpose – which is of course not an easy question – always needs to come first.

After all, it is only when we have a sense of what we seek to achieve with or make possible for our students, that we can begin to make decisions about content – about what should be put ‘on the table’ for our students to engage with – in order to work towards the ambitions we have. This, basically, is the question of curriculum, not as a list of content or ‘learning outcomes’ (itself a hugely problematic term), but as a ‘course of study,’ that is, a trajectory for our students to set out upon. And it is also only when we have a sense of purpose, of what we seek to achieve, that we can think meaningfully about the kind of educational relationships that are conducive for this – which is the question of ‘pedagogy,’ and also the question of instruction and assessment.

The question of purpose is, as said, not an easy question, not least because the modern school is subject to many expectations and desires from all corners of society (on this see also Biesta, 2019 and Biesta, 2022). One suggestion I have made in order to create more focus in the discussion about the purpose of education is the idea that there are at least three purposes (or domains of purpose) that should be considered when thinking about this. Education has important work to do in the domain of *qualification*, that is, providing children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and understandings that equip them to act in the world (both the world of work and the wider world of everyday life). Education also has important work to do in the domain of *socialisation*, that is, providing children and young people with a sense of direction and orientation in the world (which, again, is both an issue for vocational/professional education and for general education). And education should always have an interest in and orientation towards the freedom and agency of children and young people, particularly to encourage them to use their freedom well. Education should, in other words, never treat students as objects, but always approach them as subjects of their own life. In my own work I refer to this as the domain of *subjectification*. It is not that education should choose which of these domains to focus on. Rather the challenge for all education – at least all education in democratic societies in which the freedom of each citizen counts – is to find a meaningful balance between the three.



A final point to make here is that when the educational conversation is dominated by the language of learning, as is increasingly the case in many countries around the world, this doesn't mean that education is directionless or without content. It only means that there is a real risk that there is no ongoing, deliberate discussion about what the purposes of education ought to be and which content is conducive for working towards those purposes. This either means that particular content begins to 'drive' education, on the assumption that the main task of education is to get content 'into' students, or, in slightly 'softer' language, to help students to master particular content.<sup>3</sup> Or it means that the educational endeavour is geared towards the production of measurable learning outcomes, where the outcomes that 'count' are often the outcomes that are being 'counted' by the global measurement industry (see Biesta, 2015b).

#### 4 Putting Learners at the Centre?

The Muir-report is not just full of the language of *learning* but also, and more prominently, of the language of *learners*, not least because its main 'point' appears to be the call to put learners at the centre of education. Perhaps the strongest claim with regard to the central position of learners is Muir's argument for a "redistribution of power, influence and resource within Scottish education to one that reflects the principles of subsidiarity, genuinely empowers teachers and practitioners and where learners' voices, experiences, perspectives and rights are central to decision making" (Scottish Government, 2022, p. 15). This chimes with the suggestion, made several times in the report, that education should meet the 'needs of the learner' or, in less abstract terms, the needs of *all* learners, including those with additional support needs. These learner-centric sentiments can also be read in the complaint from one student that the curriculum "limits us on developing our uniqueness, our own talents and abilities" (ibid., p. 16), and in a statement from a student survey in which it is suggested that education ought to help students (in the language of the report: learners) "to develop their personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential" (ibid., p. 20). Where the report partly gives the impression that this is a desirable approach *per se*, a key-rationale for putting the learner at the centre seems to come from Article 29 of the UNRCR which, according to Muir, also offers a 'basis' "in terms of the purposes of education" (ibid., pp. 22-23).

3 The recent enthusiasm for a curriculum that focuses on 'powerful knowledge' is one example of this risk (see, for a critical discussion, White, 2018).

More strongly, the report argues that “all efforts ... must be directed to the purposes described in Article 29 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child” (ibid., p. 14).

The legal status of the UNCRC cannot be denied, albeit that the incorporation of the UNCRC in Scottish law is currently paused due to a challenge from the UK Supreme Court.<sup>4</sup> This means that what currently matters in legal terms is the ratification of the UNCRC by the UK government in 1991. There is the question, however, whether the UNCRC and, more specifically Article 29, does indeed provide a meaningful basis for all education. Article 29 reads as follows (see Scottish Government 2022, p. 97):

States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

- (a) The development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- (c) The development of respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
- (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
- (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

Do these principles provide a meaningful and workable basis for education? I wish to argue that this is not the case. The main problem can already be found in the first clause, in which it is suggested that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. While this may sound attractive, this is only really so when we can assume that all the talents and abilities that children potentially possess will be *good* talents and abilities. Yet this assumption is simply naïve, because we all know that as human beings, we not just have the potential to do the most marvellous and wonderful things, but we also have the potential to do the most disastrous and destructive things.

4 See UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child implementation: introductory guidance – gov.scot, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/implementing-united-nations-convention-rights-child-introductory-guidance/pages/5/>, accessed on 26 January 2023.

This is the reason why education cannot be about just letting all talents and abilities children are born with develop, and definitely not letting them develop to their fullest potential. Rather, as educators we need to interrupt<sup>5</sup> such development by introducing the question which talents and abilities are going to help children and young people to live their lives well, with others, on a planet that has limited capacity for giving us what we want, and which talents and abilities are going to hinder this. The educational work is not to answer these questions for children and young people, but rather to pose these questions, to expose them to these questions, and give them the time and resources to engage with these questions. To interrupt, doesn't mean to suppress what may emerge in and from children and young people. Rather as educators we should provide them with opportunities for exploring their emerging talents and abilities, precisely in order to come to a judgement about which of these talents and abilities are worth pursuing, and which are not. And this requires at the very least meaningful curriculum design, attuned pedagogy, and thoughtful feedback and assessment.

Clause a is at the same time a prime example of what child- or student-centred education tends to be about – which is why the German phrase of education 'von Kinde aus' is so appropriate to characterise this – and a prime example of what the problem of such an approach actually is. Yet there are similar problems to be found in clause c. After all, to simply say that education shall be directed to development of respect for the child's parents, for the child's cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, or for the country from which he or she may originate, without ever asking whether the child's parents, the child's identity and values or the values of the child country *are worthy of respect or not*, is once more naïve, dangerous, and misses the educational question entirely.

The phrase 'needs of the learner' entails a similar risk, particularly when it is not clear who should define such needs and with reference to what kind of educational purposes and ambitions such needs are to be understood. In the educational literature, but also in discussions about medicine, there is a helpful distinction between *servicing* needs and *defining* needs (see Feinberg, 2001). When we see the work of teachers or doctors entirely in terms of servicing the needs of their students or patients, it means that the student or patient is the one who defines the need, and teachers and doctors simply need to give their student or patient what they are asking for. Such a view, which may seem student- or patient-centred and perhaps even student- or patient-friendly, forgets that quite often students or patients do not really know what they need,

5 On the importance of interruption in education see also Biesta (2009b).

and that it is precisely the expertise of the educational or medical professional to define what the student or patient may actually need.

While the patient may think that they need a painkiller or physiotherapy for their shoulder pain, the doctor may conclude that the patient needs a scan to rule out liver cancer. And while the student may think that they only need knowledge and skills that are immediately useful, the history teacher may conclude that the student needs to gain an insight in what may go wrong when a society only focuses on what is deemed useful. There is, to put it differently, an important distinction between what students want, say they want or think they want, and what they actually need, and the judgement about this belongs first and foremost to the professional competence and expertise of the teacher. This is not to suggest that this should never be a topic for discussion with our students; but it does suggest that the last word is not necessarily or automatically with the student, if, that is, we are interested in their education.

The latter point – that is, the interest in education – is crucial here, because of the fact that education, to put it briefly, is a matter of opening doors, to use a helpful image. Elsewhere I have referred to this as one of the gifts of teaching (see Biesta, 2021b), which has to do with the fact that in education students may be given what they didn't ask for or weren't looking for precisely because they didn't know that they could ask for it or look for it. Education, to put it with a phrase from the tradition of liberal education, has a task of bringing students '*beyond* the present and the particular' (see Bailey, 1984). Precisely for these reasons the right to education, as mentioned in Article 28 of the UNRCR, may be in tension with the desire to ensure that "learners' voices, experiences, perspectives and rights are central to decision making" (Scottish Government, 2022, p. 15), just as the suggestion that Article 29 of the UNRCR can offer a 'basis' "in terms of the purposes of education" (ibid., pp. 22-23) may be debatable.

## 5 The Educational Question and the Need for a Criterion

As I have indicated above, there are not just problems with the suggestion that education should focus on *learning*, first and foremost because learning is an empty and directionless term that can provide no guidance for answering the question what education is supposed to be for and about. The concept of 'learning' is therefore unhelpful as an educational concept, which is why the learnification of education is such a problem. There are, however, also problems with the suggestion that *the learner* should be at the centre of education and, in a sense, these are even bigger problems. This comes particularly to the fore in the UNCRRC suggestion "that the education of the child shall be directed

to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (Article 29, clause a).

What this suggestion overlooks is what, above, I have referred to as the educational question. And maybe the simplest way to pose this question is by asking 'What if?' (see also Biesta 2018). What if the child's personality develops in an entirely egocentric direction? What if the child turns out to have a talent for criminality? What if the child's abilities are oriented towards destruction? As educators we cannot deny that children develop, grow and change, but we also know that this can go in many different directions. The educational question is therefore first of all the question of the *quality and direction* of change, growth and development. In order to come to a judgement about what a desirable direction of growth and a desirable quality of development is, there is the need for a *criterion*.

The criteria that come into play here can be characterised as *social* criteria, in that they tend to consist of ideals people hold about how they hope or expect that children will grow and develop. This means that they are *normative* rather than factual or objective, and thus involve *values*. The four capacities that form the core of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence – the ambition that education should help children and young people to become 'successful learners,' 'confident individuals,' 'responsible citizens' and 'effective contributors' – are a good example of this. They articulate a 'horizon of expectation' for the direction in which all children and young people should grow and develop; a horizon which, at the same time, is also a horizon of expectation for Scotland's schools, colleges and universities.<sup>6</sup>

The work of education, however, entails more than what we might term the 'external cultivation' of children and young people in light of particular ideals and values.<sup>7</sup> And the reason for this is that children and young people are not just – or as I would prefer to say: are not at all – *objects* of external cultivation, but are first and foremost *subjects* of their own life. They are beings with agency and freedom, they are beings with an open or undetermined future, who therefore encounter the ongoing challenge of giving shape and direction to their own life. It is here that we encounter another 'layer' of the educational question or, in a stronger formulation, a more fundamental layer of the educational question. This is not about how we would like children and young people to become, but what we as educators can do to help children and young

6 For an analysis and critical discussion of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence see Priestley & Biesta (2013).

7 On the incompleteness of education as cultivation – an idea which in Continental literature is known as *Bildung* – see particularly Biesta (2020).

people to come into a relationship with their freedom. This is not the work of cultivation, but what the German educational scholar Dietrich Benner refers to as ‘*Aufforderung zur Selbsttätigkeit*’ – a ‘summoning’ to self-action (see Benner, 2015).

This summoning should not be understood as the call to become active and also not as the call to become yourself. It rather should be understood as the call to be *a* self. Being *a* self is not about how we grow and develop but is about how we *exist*, that is, what we will do with how we have grown and developed. It is about how we try to lead our own life, make choices, suffer consequences, say ‘yes’ to some opportunities and ‘no’ to others, get out of bed in the morning or have a lie in, engage with aging and illness, with love and hate, with joy and guilt, and so on. The educational question is therefore not about *who we are* and how we become who we are. This is the question of *identity*. And while this question is important, identity can never be the last word in education, and also not in life. If the educational question is about how we exist, how we try to lead our lives and live our lives, then we could say that the educational question is about *how we are*, which includes the question what we will do with our identity, so to speak. The educational question is therefore about how we try to exist as *subject* of our own life and not as object of forces ‘external’ to us.

When we ask *where* we exist, *where* our lives occur and take place, the obvious answer can only be that our existence takes place in the world – the natural world, the physical world, the social world. It is important to see, however, that the world is not simply a backdrop for our existence, not simply a context within which we exist. The relationship between self, existence and world is rather more intricate and, in a sense, more difficult than that.

When we look at this from the angle of our initiatives, that is from that which we wish to bring into the world, which includes the desire to bring ourselves into the world, we do know that the world often is able to accommodate our initiatives, which literally means that the world is able to give our initiatives a home. But there will come a point, sooner or later, when this is not the case, that is, when the world offers resistance to our initiatives, to the things we want to express and the actions we want to initiate. Experiencing resistance is of crucial importance for our existence, because it reveals that the world is not a construction or phantasy, but is real and exists independently from us, with its own integrity – and this holds for the physical world, for the natural world, and for the social world. Other people are indeed other people, not marionettes; and the physical and the natural world are not simply ‘willing material’ for our actions and initiatives.

The encounter with resistance is a frustrating experience because it interrupts and potentially blocks our intended course of action. One way to handle this frustration is to push harder, to put more energy and effort behind our initiatives. Sometimes this is indeed what is needed in order for our initiatives and for us to 'arrive' in the world and exist 'in' and 'with' the world. But there is always the danger that if we push too hard, if we persist too long, with too much energy and effort, that we destroy the very place where we seek our initiatives to arrive. There is always the risk, in other words, of *world-destruction*.

But the opposite is conceivable as well. That, in response to the frustration of meeting resistance, we withdraw from the situation, we step back, we give up. Again, sometimes this is really important, not just in order to acknowledge the resistance we encounter but also in order for other initiatives – which are both the initiatives of others and others-as-initiative – to enter the scene. But if we go too far, if we withdraw too much, if we step back completely, there is the danger that we destroy our very existence in the world. There is the risk, in other words, of *self-destruction*.

Looking at it in this way, we can see that to exist, to exist in and with the world, is not a matter of simply stepping into a context, but rather has to do with the challenge of trying to stay in the 'middle ground' between the risk of world-destruction and the risk of self-destruction. Existing in the middle ground, trying to exist in this middle ground, can be understood as dialogue, as long as we do not think of dialogue as conversation, but as an existential 'form,' a way of trying to stay with what and who is other than you are. Dialogue, unlike a competition, has no winners, and also has no end. It is an ongoing and truly lifelong challenge, and thus a truly existential challenge.

## 6 Meeting the Integrity of the World

It is along these lines, so we might say, that the world begins to move in the centre and the individual begins to become *decentred*. To exist, as I have tried to argue, is precisely *not* about the "development of one's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential," to quote the UNCRG one more time, but is about the ongoing challenge to stay in (a) dialogue with the world, to stay in (a) dialogue with what and who is other. And this is never about the fullest expression of one's desires, and even less about the fullest satisfaction of one's desires, and also not about the fullest development of one's potential. It rather is about encountering and acknowledging limits and limitations and holding back and transforming our initiatives, ambitions and desires

in response to this, so that we can remain in the ‘middle ground’ or, with the beautiful phrase from Hannah Arendt, so that we can try to be ‘at home in the world’ (see Arendt, 1994).

All this also suggests that for our existence as subjects, in and with the world, it is the world that provides us with the criterion for our human existence. The world *is* the criterion, so we might say. Unlike with regard to ‘external cultivation,’ where the criterion is social – it consists of values and ideals people hold – with regard to the question of our existence in and with the world, the criterion is the reality of the world or, in a slightly different formulation, the *integrity* of the world. Where the integrity of the world – natural, physical, social – exactly lies, is, in a sense, an open question. We need to engage with the world in order to find its ‘point of integrity.’ This is, of course, a precarious endeavour, because there is always the risk that we go beyond the point of integrity of the world and end up in world-destruction. And while sometimes we get quite quickly to such a point with little being at stake – think, for example, of working with clay where we try to shape the clay and begin to find out what the clay ‘allows’ us to do and doesn’t allow us to do – in other cases it takes much longer before the consequences of our actions and initiatives become visible. And then there is often much more at stake; think, for example, of the climate crisis or the slow erosion of democracy.

When we begin to see that our existence as human beings is not a matter of how we want to grow and develop, how we want to pursue our own desires or establish our own identity, but always raises the question how what we intend and desire ‘meets’ the world, natural and social, then we can begin to see that perhaps the first task of education is to make such encounters with the world possible. Education, as I have put it elsewhere (Biesta, 2015c), is about opening up ‘existential possibilities’ for children and young people, that is, ways of meeting the world and meeting themselves in relation to the world – where there is always the question of the integrity of what we encounter that is at stake. This is perhaps the first question for the curriculum – not in terms of what children and young people should ‘learn’ or ‘get’ from the curriculum, but what they can meet and encounter there. The encounter with the world – to emphasise it once more: the natural world, the physical world, the social world, which also includes the world of ideas, the world of artifacts, the world of history, the world of culture, and so on – is always an encounter with something that is real.

While there may be resonance between us and the world we encounter, this cannot be taken for granted, and one could argue that the more significant ‘moments’ of encountering reality is when reality offers resistance and



*interrupts* our initiatives, ambitions and desires. Rather than to think that anything that offers resistance or interrupts is a blockage to 'smooth' education, the world-centred orientation I have presented in this paper highlights the importance of encountering resistance and being interrupted. This is not just because moments of resistance and interruption are where we encounter the world in its integrity; at the very same time it is the moment where we encounter our own ambitions and desires and have a starting point for 'working through' this encounter.

This 'working through' takes time, which suggests that a second important educational quality is that of *suspension*, that is, of slowing down, giving time, but also providing our students with concrete forms to work through this encounter. Again this raises a question for the curriculum, not in terms of the list of what students should master, and also not as an ideal vision of how students should become, but in terms of ways in which they can slowly, experimentally and experientially so we might say, explore which of their ambitions and desires are worth pursuing and which are not. When Gayatri Spivak defines education as the "uncoercive rearrangement of desires" (Spivak, 2004, p. 526), she captures something really important of what is going on here and what ought to be going on here. To highlight that education is a slow endeavour that needs its own time, so to speak, is actually an insight that can be found in the very word 'school,' as the original meaning of the Greek word 'scholē' is precisely 'free time' (see Prange, 2006), that is, time not yet 'claimed' by society and its agendas, but that is set free for the new generation to arrive in the world.

The third quality that matters here is that of *sustenance*. If we begin to see that the task of education is to make encounters with the world possible and provide students with the time and forms to meet the world, meet themselves in relation to the world, and 'work through' the complexities of such encounters, then we ought to provide our students with the support and nourishment so that they can manage to stay in the often difficult 'middle ground.' And this is particularly important because what they will encounter there will often not look very attractive as a short-term option, but may become the more desirable way forward in the longer term.

I am highlighting the importance of interruption, suspension and sustenance as educational qualities, not just because they are part of what it means to put the world at the centre of education, but also because there is a strong tendency in contemporary education to go into the opposite direction. The enthusiasm for fast, personalised learning tends to see resistance and interruption as problems to overcome and keep away from students, rather than

as crucial for education. It tends to think that the faster students go through the curriculum the better students they are – forgetting that if you go fast, you may not encounter very much. And the idea that children and young people should take ownership of their own learning, as the expression goes, quickly forgets the responsibilities educators have in relation to the education of their students.

This, then, brings me to one final observation about learning, which is not about the language of learning but about what I have sometimes referred to as the ‘ontology’ of learning, which is the question how learning positions individuals in relation to the world. I tend to think that when we talk (about) ‘learning’ we put the learner in the centre – as the one who wants or is supposed to learn – and position the world outside the learner as an object for such learning. One could say that the task of the learner here is to learn about the world, to come to knowledge and understanding of the world, and to become skilful in acting ‘on’ the world, so to speak. The ‘gesture’ of learning thus goes from the learner to the world and, from there, back to the learner who ends up with more knowledge, more understanding, more skills, and so on.

While this gesture is real – as human beings we can indeed engage with the world around us as something we want to gain knowledge of and understanding about – the point I wish to make is that learning is only *one* way in which human beings can engage with the world around them (and actually also with themselves), and it is neither the only nor the most important way in which human beings can be ‘in’ and ‘with’ the world. Learning is, in other words, only one ‘existential possibility’ (for this term see Biesta, 2015c), and neither automatically the most important nor the most ‘natural’ one.

To equate education with learning, to equate the educational question with the learning question is, for this reason, a significant narrowing of the existential possibilities that are on offer in education. We could also say that it amounts to a significant limiting of the ways in which human beings can relate to and exist in and with the natural and social world. One particular ‘gesture’ that runs the risk of obliteration if learning becomes hegemonic, is the gesture that goes from the world to me; the gesture that is not about how I can try to make sense and gain knowledge of the world, but where the world is actually ‘after’ me, is asking something of me or, in more familiar educational language: where the world is trying to teach me. The question here is not what I want from the world – natural and social – but what the world wants from me, what the world is asking of me. This question – “What is this asking of me?” – may well be the more important and enduring educational question and is at the very least the more important question for our existence as subjects of our own life.

## 7 In Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to make a case for a different ‘centre’ for education. Against the suggestion that learners and their learning should be at the centre – which, as I have indicated, is often presented as a progressive response to top-down forms of education that see education entirely as a matter of control – I have suggested that the real centre for education is the world, natural, physical and social, as it is there that our existence as human beings takes place. The world is not a shop, where we can simply walk in and get what we want and walk out again, without any consequences; the world is also not a playground where we can simply do with it what we want to do. The world is real and thus puts limits and limitations on what we can want from it and do with it – which is as much as challenge in our engagement with the physical and natural world (see the ecological crisis) as it is in our engagement with the social world (see the democratic crisis).

The important task for education is to give the new generation time to meet the complexities of what it means to exist in and with the world without thinking that one is, can be or ought to be in the centre of the world (a way of thinking which we might refer to as the egological crisis). The suggestion that learners and their learning should be at the centre runs the risk of missing what ought to matter most for our existence as human beings, together on a planet with limited capacity for giving us what we want or desire from it. And this is as much a challenge for any future vision about education, in Scotland and elsewhere, as it is about the challenges we meet as educators in the here and now – which requires first of all a view for the *present* (Biesta, 2021a).

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