

**philosophy for children, learnification, intelligent adaptive systems and racism
- a response to gert biesta**

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abstract

Gert Biesta presented at the 2017 ICPIIC conference in Madrid and published his paper in this Special Issue. In this paper I attempt to bring into conversation his presentation, P4C practice, and work on racism and the Community of Inquiry. I do so by asking two main questions: 1) Is P4C an example of what Biesta terms 'The Learnification of Education'? 2) Does the Community of Inquiry produce 'Intelligent Adaptive Systems'? In so doing, I attempt to open up for further contributions an inquiry into the responsibilities of the teacher, particularly in conditions of continuing racial inequality and the extent to which the Community of Inquiry approach encourages participants to ask 'is this an environment worth adapting to?' I consider this question with reference to Matthew Lipman's notion of 'reasonableness', Nicholas Burbules' phrase 'the hegemony of reasonableness' and Gert Biesta's notion of 'grown-up-ness'. Favours an analysis of the community of inquiry grounded in observable contexts, I reflect on the experience of listening to Biesta's presentation at an international P4C conference where so few people racialised as other than white are present and where racism is given so little attention to ask myself whether this is an environment worth adapting to, and whether my ability to ask this is due to or despite the community of inquiry ethos.

keywords: philosophy for children; learnification; community of inquiry; racism; reasonableness.

**filosofia para crianças, "aprendização", sistemas adaptativos inteligentes e racismo:
uma resposta a gert biesta**

resumo

Gert Biesta apresentou-se na conferência ICPIIC 2017 e publicou seu artigo neste Dossier. Neste artigo pretendo colocar em pauta a sua apresentação, a prática da Filosofia para Crianças, a partir do trabalho sobre racismo e a Comunidade de Investigação. Faço isso indagando duas questões principais: 1) A filosofia para Crianças é um exemplo do que Biesta trata como "uma 'aprendização' da Educação"? 2) A comunidade de questionamento produz "Sistemas Adaptativos Inteligentes"? Deste modo, tento abrir espaço para contribuições adicionais e investigar sobre as responsabilidades do professor, particularmente em condições de perpetuação de desigualdade racial e o grau de extensão com o qual a abordagem da comunidade de investigação encoraja os participantes a perguntar "vale a pena a minha adaptação a este ambiente?". Considero esta questão em referência à noção de "razoabilidade" de Matthew Lipman, à frase "a hegemonia da razoabilidade" de Nicholas Burbules, e à noção de "grown-upness" de Gert Biesta. Favorecendo uma análise de comunidade de investigação baseada em contextos observáveis, reflito sobre a experiência de ouvir a apresentação de Biesta em uma conferência internacional sobre Filosofia para Crianças onde tão poucas pessoas de etnias

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diferentes da branca estavam presentes, e onde à questão do racismo é dada tão pouca atenção, para me perguntar se este seria um meio ao qual valeria a pena adaptar-se, e se minha habilidade em questionar isto está em conformidade ou ela é contrária ao ethos da comunidade de investigação.

palavras-chave: filosofia para crianças; aprendizagem; comunidade de investigação; racismo; razoabilidade.

**filosofía para niños “aprendización”, sistemas adaptativos inteligentes y racismo:
una respuesta a gert biesta**

resumen

Gert Biesta se presentó en la conferencia de ICPIC y publicó su artículo en este dossier. En este artículo pretendo poner en discusión su presentación, la práctica de Filosofía con niños, a partir del trabajo sobre racismo y la Comunidad de indagación. Hago esto indagando dos cuestiones principales: 1) ¿La filosofía con niños es un ejemplo de lo que Biesta trata como una “aprendización” de la Educación? 2) ¿La comunidad de cuestionamiento produce “Sistema Adaptativos Inteligentes”? De esta manera intento abrir espacio para consideraciones adicionales e investigar sobre las responsabilidades del profesor, particularmente, en condiciones de perpetuación de desigualdades raciales y el grado de extensión con el cual el abordaje de la comunidad de indagación da coraje a los participantes a preguntar “¿vale la pena mi adaptación a este ambiente?” Considero esta cuestión en referencia a la noción de “razonabilidad” de Matthew Lipman, a la frase “hegemonía de la razonabilidad” de Nicholas Burbules, y a la noción de “grown-upness” de Gert Biesta. Favoreciendo un análisis de la comunidad de indagación basada en contextos observables, reflexiono sobre la experiencia de oír la presentación de Gert Biesta en una conferencia internacional sobre filosofía para niños donde tan pocas personas de etnias diferentes a la blanca estaban presentes, y donde a la cuestión del racismo se le da tan poca atención, para preguntarme, si este sería el medio al cual valdría la pena adaptarse, y si mi habilidad en cuestionar esto está en conformidad o ella es contraria al ethos de la comunidad de investigación

palabras clave: filosofía para niños; aprendizaje; comunidad de investigación; racismo; racionalidad.

philosophy for children, learnification and intelligent adaptive systems –
a response to gert biesta

In asking me to be one of the P4C practitioners to write in response to Gert Biesta's keynote address² at the International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children (ICPIC) 2017 conference in Madrid, Walter Kohan, co-editor of *Childhood & Philosophy*, noted that Gert did not make any reference to 'race' and racism in his presentation. The ways that P4C theory and practice do and do not take racism into account remains an area of interest for me (see CHETTY, 2014; CHETTY & SUISSA, 2016 for discussion of this).

In this paper, I wish to begin to bring Biesta's presentation, P4C practice and my own work on P4C and the critical philosophy of 'race' into closer conversation. I will do so as an attempt to clarify points in some regards and seek clarification in others. Given the confines of space and the time given for the writing of this response, I have chosen to ask two main questions. Rather than offering definitive answers, I offer some initial thoughts and invite Gert and others to take these questions up.

Before I proceed to my questions, a brief comment regarding what Biesta terms the 'mentalisation' of P4C, which I understand to be a bias toward a particular type of philosophising in the P4C practice he has witnessed (which I take to be drawing on the analytic tradition, though Biesta himself does not name it as such) and a focus on thinking rather than other types of experiencing the world. I suggest that this is traceable to Lipman's original P4C project and his writings. However, it is increasingly difficult to talk of P4C as a unified, coherent, pedagogy or philosophy of education. I wonder whether the work of Natalie Fletcher (<http://brila.org/zines.html>), Grace Lockrobin (formerly Robinson) (<http://thinkingspace.org.uk/services-projects/>) and my own 'Power to the Pupils' project (<http://powertothepupils.tumblr.com/about>) would be viewed by Biesta as examples of P4C projects going beyond thinking. Each of the three makes

² Gert Biesta's keynote at ICPIC 2017 is available on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3RqQPX98Cg>

space for the arts and, I think, space for children's experience. I think such projects are more common than perhaps Biesta is aware, though I accept that they may not be what he has in mind here, and may also be too concerned with 'mentalisation' in his view.

The main questions I wish to consider are:

1. Is P4C an example of what Gert Biesta terms 'The Learnification of Education'?
2. Does the Community of Inquiry produce 'Intelligent Adaptive Systems'?

is p4c an example of what gert biesta terms 'the learnification of education'?

Zooming out to gain perspective on broader contemporary educational trends, Biesta notes with concern that the centering of 'the learner' has moved teachers from "being the 'sage on the stage' to being the 'guide at the side' and according to some, being the 'peer at the rear'." (BIESTA, 2017, p.423) This move, which he relates to both social constructivism and pragmatism, has led to a great emphasis on the learning environment and to what Biesta has termed the 'learnification' of education. In outlining his notion of 'learnification', Biesta acknowledges, "[t]here are definitely empowering dimensions to these shifts, particularly to the extent to which they are a response to authoritarian forms of education that were only interested in the input-side of education or in teaching as an act of control." (BIESTA, 2017, p. 422) However, Biesta notes also that "the language of learning runs the risk of hiding the decision-making going on about content, purpose and relationships... In this regard the rise of the language of learning is a classic example of ideology, in that it both expresses and hides the power relations that are at work (see EAGLETON, 2007)." (BIESTA, 2017, p.422).

I share with Biesta a concern about the 'learnification' of education, though, I suspect, that my emphasis may differ from his. In my experience many P4C practitioners often talk about the benefits of P4C in remarkably similar terms to those offered by Biesta, namely as a response to authoritarian teaching and education. Furthermore I have observed P4C Trainers in the UK describing P4C teachers, or as is more commonly used in the UK, facilitators, as being the 'guide



at the side' and indeed arguing that that they would like to be regarded as co-learners or co-inquirers rather than teachers. I am not claiming that this is a position adopted universally by P4C trainers and practitioners; it is not. However it would be untrue to pretend that this is an uncommon position amongst P4C practitioners particularly in the UK, where I am based.

I think Biesta's footnoted comment, "I'm not denying that teachers might learn from their work, but their responsibility is to be an educator, not a learner." (Biesta 2017:5) is highly relevant to discussions of philosophising with children about racism. In my conversations with P4C trainers in the UK, there has been recognition that some children may well have more knowledge of racism than some teachers. That knowledge is often experiential rather than theoretical, although the former often leads to an interest in the latter. It has been interesting to note how that knowledge gap is understood, however. It has often been argued in P4C-related seminars that this apparent problem can be solved by the conditions of the community of inquiry - that by listening to students and becoming co-inquirers, teachers can avoid the potential dynamic of being in authority whilst being relatively ignorant. Indeed this may well be preferable to the teacher who does not make space for dialogue but rather narrates their own ignorant understanding of history and social relations to the class. (Here I have in mind both Freire's (1976) description of the 'banking method', and a few teachers from my own schooling). However, I think the argument for listening and learning from students can sometimes produce the outcome that teachers racialised as white resist their responsibility to educate themselves about racism and the philosophy of race, instead opting to outsource that intellectual and emotional labour to racially minoritized children.

Perhaps there is a distinction to be made here - between being open in our engagement so that we may be changed by the dialogic encounter and being satisfied with expecting children whom we are paid to teach to compensate for a lack of knowledge that we are unwilling to address in our own time. Whilst I acknowledge that Biesta's concern with the possibility and importance of teaching is a broader one, I am curious to know whether he would agree with me about the

importance of teaching with regard to continuing racial inequalities. It is not easy for me to discern this by watching the presentation and reading the paper that followed it.

Biesta comments that learnification of education discourses hide “the power differential that is always at stake in educational relationships but also, and in my view more importantly, they hide the differing responsibilities of teachers and students in such relationships.” Biesta (2017, p. 5) Is it possible that in the interests of not being oppressive towards the children we teach, some P4Cers run the risk of not meeting our responsibility to the children? What are the ethics of a teacher being paid to be educated by children?

Biesta’s subheading “the educational work, beyond (facilitation of) learning” points to another question relevant to P4Cers and one that I think has thus far received insufficient attention. That question is, what is the relationship between P4C and the rest of what happens in the classroom? There are a number of positions that emerge in response to this question. Here are three of them:

1. P4C as a timetabled lesson that employs the community of inquiry approach and marks a break from (an interruption?) of regular classroom practice.
2. P4C as a means of introducing to the classroom the community of enquiry approach that is then extended to some or all other lessons so that the classroom is converted into a community of inquiry.
3. P4C as a means of cultivating an ethos of (philosophical) inquiry but with recognition that inquiry does not preclude listening to experts and that teachers may well hold relative expertise. Here inquiry is not synonymous with experiential learning and thus education is not reduced to the cultivation of learning environments – perhaps another way of looking at this is that teachers are recognised as significant elements of the learning environment.

does p4c produce intelligent adaptive systems?

In closing, I would like to make some brief comments regarding Biesta’s concern with the notion of children as “intelligent adaptive systems (IAS)” under the conditions of ‘learnification’, and his example of the ‘robot vacuum cleaner’. For Biesta, the problem with IAS and robot vacuum cleaners is that they are



programmed to adapt and survive rather than to live a life. He sums this up as their inability to ask the question “is this an environment worth adapting to?” (BIESTA, 2017, p. 433)

Sitting in the lecture hall in the university in Madrid at the ICPIIC Conference, I find myself asking the same question - “Is this an environment worth adapting to?” The environment I have in mind is the community of inquiry. Rather than viewing community of inquiry as a term for a clearly delineated, procedural, timetabled ‘event’ in schools I take it to mean those adults and children who inquire together philosophically *and* those who think philosophically about such a practice. Common responses that foreclose the possibilities for philosophical enquiry into racism can result, I have argued previously (CHETTY, 2014) in a ‘gated community of inquiry’. Whilst operating as a metaphor, it refers to both the thoughts/perspectives and the bodies that occupy space in the community of inquiry and opens up for closer examination the relationship between thoughts/perspectives and bodies. Finding myself at my fourth ICPIIC conference, where again philosophical inquiry across difference/with the other / for diversity is discussed in abstract terms but reference to the real racially unequal contexts in which we work are rare, where I have previously encountered hostility for breaking with this tradition, and where I am one of only a handful of people racialised as other than white, I ask myself “is this an environment worth adapting to?”

The fact that I am able to ask this question of my environment might be taken as evidence that I am not an IAS. However, it doesn’t follow that I am not an IAS *because* of my immersion in the community of inquiry. The two things may be unrelated. Indeed it may be that I am not an IAS *despite* the community of inquiry.

Biesta’s keynote makes no mention of colonialism and racism in regard to education and I wonder why this is. When talking about how the world offers us resistance to our desires, it would seem to me that racial justice would be one of a number of obvious examples upon which we might focus. Indeed racial injustice may trouble the notion of finding a balance between destroying oneself and destroying the world. Assuming Biesta is using ‘destroying the world’ figuratively

and not literally, we may argue that some worlds or conceptions of the world need to be destroyed as part of a move toward greater racial justice. We might acknowledge that for some, their very existence is met with resistance from the world even before they have any desires beyond those of a newborn baby.

Biesta is careful to point out that his notion of ‘grown-up-ness’, which involves questioning whether our desires are desirable, does not imply something children cannot do and adults can. I think it likely that colleagues will take up this issue nonetheless. I wish only to note here the legacy of the historical use of ‘the childlike races’ referring to those of us racialised as other than white, who were, and in some cases are, deemed incapable of attaining the maturity reserved for those racialised as white. I am interested in exploring further the relationship between Biesta’s “grown-up-ness” and Lipman’s “reasonableness”. A question for Biesta is to what extent is his notion of ‘grown-up-ness’ commensurate with ‘reasonableness’? When we ask to what extent is that which we desire desirable are we asking to what extent is it a reasonable desire? Or is something important lost in this rephrasing? Or, is it the role of the teacher in helping us determine how we might answer these questions that differs in the two examples? Biesta states his desire to reclaim the notion of teaching. Can grown-up-ness be taught? Or phrased another way, what is the role of the teacher with regard to grown-up-ness, assuming it is not merely to design the learning environment, which would presumably bring us back to the notion of ‘learnification’?

Further, is “grown-up-ness free of the problem of consensus and social acceptability so often associated with “reasonableness”? Lipman advocates reasonableness as a way of negotiating diversity and “a world community”. Reasonableness is developed through reasoning together, as a community and is concerned, in the pragmatist tradition, with reaching “an equitable solution, not necessarily one that is right in all details.” (LIPMAN, 1991, p. 16) However, what is reasonable to a community constituted by structural inequality³, such as the one

³ Another keynote speaker at ICPIC 2017, offered as a closing observation that there were no black people present at the conference. (Although this observation was not correct, it is true to say that there were very few and that the lack of people racialised as other than white in the four ICPIC

gathered in the lecture hall listening to Biesta speak, may be rather more conservative than what is reasonable to the population as whole, were we to actively solicit their views. Indeed, is it reasonable for us not to? And should people from racially minoritized groups find their way into the community of inquiry, will they feel coerced by what Burbules (2000) terms “the hegemony of reasonableness”? Indeed Derrick Bell argues that such coercion occurs not only in education;

As the primary gatekeepers of society, whites instigate this situation by giving more privilege to those people of color who assimilate to the white model—only as long as they serve the larger political interests of whites. (BELL, 1992 cited in ALLEN, 2005, p. 61).

I should note here, Biesta’s use of Spivak’s (2004, p. 526) definition of education as the “*uncoercive* rearrangement of desires” (my emphasis). Perhaps one or two examples in addition to those of gardening and keeping animals in school, would help me to understand what Biesta has in mind.

I am suggesting then that the question “is this environment worth adapting to?” is not impossible in the community of inquiry, but is unlikely – and that this is an issue deserving of greater attention. It is not merely that actual communities of inquiry fall short of their ideal, which may be inevitable, it is that they foreclose opportunities to move closer toward the ideal – an ideal that includes encounters with the other, rethinking of ways of philosophising, the development of empathy, a questioning of our deepest assumptions – by the way they function in reality. To put it in stronger terms – philosophising about diversity, equality and difference in ‘gated communities’ needs to be recognised as incongruous – and perhaps even absurd.

If this takes us far away from Biesta’s paper, I can only apologize. Time is running out for my deadline to submit this, and I have had to travel some distance in my attempt to bring into conversation his presentation, common P4C practice and my own concerns with racial justice and philosophising.

conferences I have attended has been observable.) The speaker did not offer any thoughts on the causes or the consequences of this for the community of inquiry.

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