

A Critique of a Child-Centered Curriculum

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Imagine a world full of human beings existing to and for themselves alone, insensitive and removed from the social and natural world. Here we contemplate child-centeredness, a discourse used liberally in the realm of early childhood education and yet rarely considered critically. Drawing from Gert Biesta, we will explore the ways in which the notion of a child-centered curriculum positions the child as an egological being and thus minimizes the child's relationships with others and the world in which they exist. We hope to provoke considerations of how we might reconceptualize curricula to foster children's understanding of their broader existence.

Key words: *child-centered; curriculum; early childhood; egological*

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A critique of a child-centred curriculum

Imagine a world full of human beings existing to and for themselves alone, inconsiderate, insensitive, and removed from the social and natural world around them. The prospect of a world full of selfish and self-centered inhabitants is a frightening one indeed. However, as we critically reflect on the language used in early years curriculum documents, we wonder if the discourses of child-centeredness that pervade our curricula put children at risk of developing into such individuals. What might a discourse of child-centeredness in our curricula be perpetuating in children and how they understand themselves and their place within the world? Further, what does a child-centered curriculum mean for who we are as teachers? Gert Biesta (2017), who is influenced by the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, paraphrases the French philosopher when he explains that “we first of all exist, that we ‘find’ ourselves in existence, and that any answer to the question of who we are comes afterwards” (p. 10).

In other words, understanding ourselves as individuals is only possible once we understand ourselves in relation to our greater existence. We believe it is our responsibility to engage with our students in a way that helps them to understand that their existence within the world is one of pronounced importance and meaning, and that to engage with others openly requires an openness to be affected by those encounters.

In this article we ask: In what ways do early years curriculum documents promote (intentionally or unintentionally) discourses of child-centeredness, and what are the effects of promoting child-centeredness? We will attempt to answer these questions by exploring the following points: 1) What educational task or purpose is implicit in early years curricula? 2) How are children viewed and situated in relation to others in their classrooms and in the world around them? 3) How do child-centered discourses position the teacher and what effects does this have on their relationships? 4) How do mandated assessments (for example, report cards) and data collection and analysis

promote or reinforce child-centeredness?

The purpose of this exploration is to critically consider the discourses of child-centeredness that pervade early years curricula and pedagogy in order to (re)consider our beliefs and practices as teachers, while seeking to foster mindful and thoughtful children who can engage with and respect the world around them. We are writing from the perspective of our shared interest in early years philosophy and practices. We met during a graduate curriculum course, where I (Melanie) was teaching and introduced the graduate students to Gert Biesta's work. I (Rachael) was intrigued by Biesta's critique of child-centered discourses and wanted to explore his ideas more fully. This article is a result of our shared reflections and my (Rachael's) interpretations of them from my own classroom experiences.

I (Rachael) am a kindergarten teacher and I am familiar with the Manitoba kindergarten curriculum because I am expected to use it to guide my teaching practice. However, I do have a degree of freedom to implement the curriculum in a way that best represents my teaching pedagogy, and I am able to incorporate different ideas and topics, and to employ strategies and techniques that best address the needs of my students.

I am thoroughly invested in the education of my early years students. I am their advocate, their supporter, their teacher, and their student, learning from them each and every day. In my everyday work I have the curriculum in mind. It provides direction for my teaching—but more important, it is what I am required to teach. Nonetheless, we as educators must ask ourselves important questions:

- Who are the people currently deciding what is best for the overall well-being of the children in our classrooms?
- Who is responsible for creating the curriculum?
- Whose voices have been heard and whose have been ignored?

There are areas of the curriculum in which I am able to integrate my own ideas about fostering children who are conscious thinkers, aware of the complex world around them. Thus, I actively seek out learning opportunities that will enhance my students' overall well-being and their perception of the world they live in. However, I wonder, is the current document really serving our young students the best it possibly can, preparing our future generation to function successfully into adulthood in the social and physical world?

It is important we ask these questions, because the answers can help point us in the direction of those who have a role to play in intervening in and disrupting child-centeredness. Throughout this article "we" is often referenced. This collective "we"—educators, curriculum makers, superintendents, administrators, parents and/or guardians, provincial government officials, community members, and any other audience reading this article—has a stake in the education system and a role to play in disrupting and intervening in the child-centered curriculum.

Biesta's critique

Biesta's ideas in *The Rediscovery of Teaching* (2017) come from his desire to view teaching in a new light, while simultaneously revaluing and recovering current practices. He sees education as extremely important, but is also willing to address the limitations it presents to supporting young children on their journey to becoming adults. Biesta's work is important to acknowledge and consider because it provides educators and other educational professionals with a new lens through which to view education. This lens helps detect problematic areas in the curriculum that may otherwise go unnoticed because they do not concern the academic skills we teach to our students. His work prompts us to ask critical questions that will make us think about where a student is situated within the curriculum and how teachers advertently or inadvertently situate their students as a result of the

curriculum. Biesta's critique brings to the forefront the possibility that the education young children are receiving establishes for them a world that revolves around them and for them.

At a time when here in Canada there are strides being made toward truth and reconciliation and creating equitable relationships between First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people and settlers and newcomers, we must also acknowledge the state of the world outside the classroom. It is because of this world, a place where violence and public displays of hate and intolerance of others are frequently the subjects of media headlines, that we must not only encourage children to be compassionate, caring, accepting, and empathetic individuals but also make such encouragement a priority of the educational task (see below).

Progress is being made in this respect. It can be observed in classrooms right here in Winnipeg, for example. Teachers are taking responsibility for educating themselves about Indigenous Education, and in turn becoming better equipped to incorporate this knowledge into their curriculum and practice. They are seeking out Elders to speak to their students and teach them about the history of the land they live on, and about cultural and spiritual traditions to preserve and respect nature. Children are learning about our nation's wrongdoings, its efforts and plans to achieve truth and reconciliation now and in the future, and how they can be involved and active in this movement.

In what follows, we will use quotations and language from the kindergarten curriculum in Manitoba in order to illustrate its child-centeredness, and then demonstrate, by drawing on Biesta, the ways in which the curriculum undermines children's ability to live fully with and in the world around them. The goal is to help educators, administrators, and curriculum makers critically consider the language of child-centeredness that resides implicitly and explicitly in curricula and how this influences not only how children are viewed and might view themselves in relation to the world around them, but also what this requires of educators when it comes to implementing curricula in their classrooms. The article will also offer some possibilities for reconsidering perspectives and theories within early childhood research, education, and philosophy.

What is the educational task?

According to Biesta (2017), defining the educational task is not simple. He suggests that:

The educational task consists in making the grown-up existence of another human being in and with the world possible. Or, with an even more precise formulation: the educational task consists in arousing the desire in another human being for wanting to exist in and with the world in a grown-up way, that is *as subject*. (p.7).

Worth noting is that Biesta makes no mention of curricula or learning outcomes of subjects such as mathematics, science, or English language arts when describing the educational task. Rather, his focus is on the child and their existence "in and with the world" around them.

In Manitoba, as in other Canadian provinces with outcomes-based curricula in early years education (kindergarten to grade four), there are six broad subject fields: arts education, mathematics, English language arts, science, physical education/health education, and social studies. Each of these subjects has specific learning outcomes that determine what knowledge every child should acquire. For example, *English Language Arts: A Foundation for Implementation* (Manitoba Education and Training, 2014) states that children should:

- recognize connections between new experiences and prior knowledge (p. 1);
- make connections between oral language, texts, and personal experiences (p. 2);

- share feelings evoked by oral, literary, and media texts (p. 2);
- demonstrate curiosity about and experiment with letters, sounds, words, and word patterns (p. 3);
- share information and ideas about a topic of personal interest (p. 7);
- recognize their own name, uppercase and lowercase, familiar logos and periods (p. 7).

In this brief excerpt we see a heavy emphasis on the child as an isolated individual and on knowledge as a benign object of transmission. This is fairly typical of early years curricula and educational outcomes, in which emphasis is placed on individual achievement and personal experiences, void of context or acknowledgment of the child's social and worldly existence. While we understand the importance of children exploring their feelings, experiences, curiosity, prior knowledge, and own existence in the world, what is even more important, we believe, is that children learn how to exist within and among the social and natural world that surrounds them. As Biesta (2017) argues, "it is actually only in the world that we can really exist" (p. 8), and so to *live egologically* is to deprive oneself of a full existence. The idea of living egologically comes from the work of French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas. Biesta (2017) explains "egological" as:

following the logic of the ego, not the logic of what and who is other. This egological way of being is entirely generated by the desires of the ego without asking—and this is a crucial distinction—whether how, or to what extent such desires are desirable... (p. 16)

With this in mind, we must ask ourselves, how is one to fully exist if they are living in a way that does not acknowledge the world and people around them? Does a curriculum that is child-centered detract from one's full existence in and of the world? Furthermore, is it a desirable world to live in if individuals are living and making decisions driven by their ego?

Biesta (2017) argues that the educational task is to be more attentive to our existence in and with the world, what he terms a "grown-up existence." This grown-upness of being is a "particular 'quality' of way of existing." Biesta explains, "the grown-up way acknowledges the alterity and integrity of what and who is the other" (p. 8). For Biesta, our existence only ever comes to fruition in our relation to and with the world around us:

It is actually only in the world that we can really exist, since when we withdraw ourselves from the world we end up existing only with and for ourselves—which is a rather poor and self-absorbed way of existing, if it is to exist at all. (p. 8)

In light of Biesta's claim, we can see how a child-centered curriculum that focuses on specific outcomes promotes what he would identify as poor and self-absorbed ways of existing: existences premised only on one's isolated experiences and achievements.

Biesta's theorizing is indeed a challenging theory for a teacher to implement given the current curriculum. To enact Biesta's theorizing requires teachers to work against a curriculum that they are expected to implement, a curriculum that fosters behaviours and ways of thinking whereby children are encouraged to consider themselves the center of their world, and teachers are expected to consider children at the center of every curricular and pedagogical experience. With echoes of Sartre, as referenced by Biesta, the early years curriculum asks children to answer questions about who they are and what they can do before confronting the task of finding themselves in existence and in relation to others.

The child as a subject

When the curriculum positions children as objects, rather than subjects, it detracts from children understanding their own subjectivities. For example, the math curriculum (Manitoba Education Curriculum Framework of Outcomes, 2013) specifies that students are required to:

- say the number sequence by 1s starting anywhere from 1 to 30 and from 10 to 1 (p. 20);
- subitize and name familiar arrangements of 1 to 6 dots (or objects) (p. 20);
- represent and describe numbers 2 to 10 in two parts, concretely and pictorially (p. 20);
- compare quantities 1 to 10 using one-to-one correspondence (p. 30).

In reflecting on these outcomes, Biesta might ask questions like: Where is the child, the other, and their world being considered? Why are these outcomes important for kindergarten children? Who decides? Further, how is a teacher expected to accommodate the diversity presented within their classroom when they are forced to think about children through—and compared to—learning outcomes? Are these curriculum outcomes the education we imagined?

According to Biesta (2017), the problem with a curriculum that requires teachers to consider education through a defined set of learning outcomes is that “the depiction of teaching as an act of control is that in such configurations students can only appear as *objects* of the teachers intentions and actions, but not as *subjects* in their own right” (p. 2). Yet, students must view themselves as subjects in order to situate themselves in their existence in the world. These predefined learning outcomes hinder the possibility for students to see themselves as the subjects, resulting in an inability to consider their existence in the natural and social world around them. How can teachers support conceptions of children as subjects existing in and among others when the curriculum positions them as objects, fixed and knowable? When curriculum is focused on learning outcomes it positions—and fosters the development of—children as egological human beings. According to Lévinas (cited in Biesta, 2017), an egological worldview is “the way of thinking that starts from the (assumption of the existence of the) self as self-sufficient ego or consciousness, in order *then* to thematise everything that is ‘outside as the subject’” (p. 43). Being self-sufficient seems like a rather rational and constructive goal for kindergarten-aged children. Of course we want children developing independence and feeling confident in who they are and what they are capable of. The problem arises when seeing yourself as self-sufficient situates the things and people around you as the “outside.” Deciding on learning outcomes in advance therefore comes at a risk: Once children are put at the center, where does that leave others? The curriculum, such as the *English Language Arts: A Foundation for Implementation* (Manitoba Education and Training, 2014), intentionally or not, has a predetermined set of outcomes that situates children at the center of their learning:

- listen to experiences and feelings shared by others (p. 1);
- identify self and others as sources of information (p. 4);
- seek information from others [such as people at school, at home, in the community...]; use multimedia and computers when appropriate (p. 4);
- talk about own and others’ creations and stories (p. 6);
- share information and ideas with a group (p. 7);
- find ways to be helpful to others and use group process (p. 8).

What these learning goals have in common is that, although they acknowledge there is an other, they ignore the interaction between the child and that other. There is a disconnect between how this information from the other relates to how children are able to exist in the world and make meaning of it. When a curriculum positions children in egocentric ways, it fails to provide opportunities for them to understand their own existence in relation to others. This understanding could lead to so much that is positive, such as children who know and demonstrate empathy, compassion, understanding, awareness, acceptance, love, respect, and kindness. In addition, children who understand their relation to and take care of their physical environment will have the capacity to make choices that will benefit the well-being of our world.

The problem with child-centered curricula

Student-centered, child-centered, and learner-centered teaching all reference the pedagogical approach in which students are considered to be at the heart of teachers' decision making, the topics of study emanate from the student, and the student's self-interest is fundamental. For example, Manitoba's kindergarten resource guide for teachers, *A Time for Learning, A Time for Joy* (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015), asserts that it "supports an integrated, child-centred approach to education and learning, recognizing that young children learn through play and through relationships with caring adults and each other" (p. 1). These seem like admirable, even pedagogically sound goals. Yet, the term "child-centered," while used prolifically in educational curriculum and resources, is rarely considered critically.

As Biesta (2017) explains, a focus on child-centeredness "has shifted the attention away from teaching and the teacher towards students and their learning" (p. 1). Unfortunately, focusing on the student as the centre could do them a disservice. As stated by Biesta, "focusing on students and their learning [...] fails, because such acts of interpretation and comprehension have an egological structure that not only emanates from the self but also returns to the self, even if this occurs 'via' the world" (p. 43). A student-centered approach encourages that all of the attention be given to students' thoughts and feelings, with little mention of how these thoughts and feeling exist in relation to others and in the world around them. Further, when thinking about the world, child-centered learning creates a dynamic in which the children are relating everything back to themselves—an egotistical way of being. For Biesta, "the challenge, therefore, is to exist in the world without considering oneself as the centre, origin, or ground of the world" (p. 8). How do we help children understand themselves in relation to others and the world when we put them at the center of it?

Child-centred curricula and the teacher

A child-centered approach to curricula also positions the teacher in a particular way. As explained by Bernadette Baker (1998),

By making a child empty and by viewing children in terms of what they lack—rationality, knowledge, experience, ability, and so forth—adults have been able to occupy the space of the all-knowing, fully rational rescuer of the Othered who, by virtue of being called the Othered, provide the grounds for the existence of the redeemer. (p. 173)

In a child-centered curriculum, the teacher is viewed as the one in control, the one holding the knowledge, and the one determining which knowledge counts. The problem, Biesta contends,

with the depiction of teaching as an act of control, and with the suggestion that teaching ought to be a matter of control, is that in such configurations students can only appear as *objects* of the teacher's intentions and actions, but not as *subjects* in their own right. (2017, p. 2).

Teachers are set up to be concerned with teaching their students the desired learning outcomes, with the result being that they overlook what education is truly about. Referring back to the education task at hand, teaching is about more than achieving the desired learning outcomes. It is about helping a child unfold as a person who is aware of their interrelatedness and knows how to exist within and among the social and natural world that surrounds them.

Reflecting on data collection and means of student assessment in our current educational system, we can see the ways in which child-centeredness is present. Teachers are obliged to follow a generic template, putting numerical values on children and commenting on their development in impersonal, objective, and often quantitative ways, which can involve selecting a generic comment from a drop-down menu and applying it to more than one student. This way of assessing students seems to be a result of politics and pressures from governments and ministries of education to make preschool, kindergarten, and lower elementary grades more “academic” and data driven. Unfortunately, this has created a dynamic whereby children are turned into objects that are expected to meet a specific and often unattainable standard. Standardized testing has become a means to assess the success of a school and then rank the school in terms of that success. Standardized testing focuses on what a student can or cannot do in terms of curricular outcomes, rather than on how they treat others and make meaning in the world, and thus emerge as a subject within the world. Education needs to consider the ways in which we consider the task of education, who children are in relation to the world, and our work with them as teachers. These reconceptualizations need to be reflected in curriculum documents and in our assessment tools and strategies. Curriculum designers should take note of Biesta’s (2017) observation that education needs to address the idea of “opening up existential possibilities for students, that is, possibilities in and through which students can explore what it might mean to exist as subject in and with the world” (p. 3).

Conclusion

We live in a time when the planet’s resources are being wasted by humans, when populist movements are enflaming xenophobia and hatred toward those who present as “other,” and when consumerism is an ideal at the core of nations’ economies and individuals’ social existence. We worry about our current and future world and the ways in which egocentric human beings undermine our collective existence. The early years curriculum has the power to influence how educators understand education and engage pedagogically with children so they see themselves in relation to the world around them. A child-centered approach may put children at risk of becoming human beings consumed predominantly with their own selves and neglectful of the natural and social world around them. Instead of focusing on a small set of desired learning outcomes that put the child at the center, the curriculum should guide teachers in helping their students to make meaning of and with the world and their relationships within it. Curriculum designers must think critically about the ways in which children, pedagogy, and teaching are conceptualized in order to foster children’s development not as egological beings, but rather as existing in relationship to others and to the world around them. We encourage educators to think critically about their own curriculum or any other child-centered curricular resource they work with and ask themselves: Does what we are required to teach align with greater pedagogical values and beliefs? How can we, or do we, disrupt or intervene in child-centeredness in our own practices? How do the children we work with view themselves in relation to the world around them, and how does their view need to be changed in order to support their journey compassionate, caring individuals who are aware of the social and natural world around them? As a kindergarten teacher, I (Rachael) am constantly seeking and learning new ways to teach myself and my students how to exist in this world so that we are constantly considering the feelings, experiences, and ideas of other people. It always seems to come back to four simple, yet highly complex ideas: kindness, respect, love, and empathy. Some techniques that have been effective in my classroom include reading at least one piece of children’s literature daily and strategically selecting this book

based on its content and premise; going outdoors to explore, appreciate, and learn in nature; teaching kindness and respect; and having sharing circles where children learn to listen to each other—but most importantly, I treat my students as people. Despite their being only three, four, or five years old, I do not “baby” them or speak down to them. I am aware of their potential and their capacity as individuals, as human beings who exist on this planet on an equal footing with me. I believe we must teach in a way that encourages children to think critically and ask questions. We believe Biesta helps us to do so by considering education as a way to support children in their grown-up existence so they can be in and with the world that we believe is possible.

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