



## **Hospitality and Subjectification: On Seeing Children and Youth as Respondents**

— Claudia Ruitenberg

One of the common denominators of childhood and youth, at least in more economically developed countries, is schooling. Therefore, if we want to analyze the contemporary conditions of childhood and youth, we will have to include the conditions that schools and other educational settings in more economically developed countries create for children and youth. In this short essay I want to outline briefly a set of perspectives that allow us to understand the different demands that schools make of children and youth as well as the responsibilities schools have toward them. My focus is on reconceptualizing children and youth based on ideas of decentred subjectivity and of reception and response.

### **Decentring Autonomous Rationality, Decentring Adulthood**

Traditionally, schooling has viewed children and youth primarily as not-yet adults. The focus has been on helping children and youth become adults in the sense that schooling allows young people to leave the dependence that characterizes childhood and youth behind and become independent and rational adults. Ylva Bergström, for example, has analyzed how the universal right to education, included in the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights and reiterated in a variety of forms in other Conventions, is based on ideas of the child as not yet rational and autonomous and in need of help in becoming so: the right to education is not

really a right of the child but rather, to borrow from Thomas Marshall, a “right of the adult citizen to have been educated” (qtd. in Bergström 173).

Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the ideal of the rational, autonomous subject has been heavily critiqued. As I explain in my essay “The Empty Chair,” these critiques have revolved around the idea that the subject is not nearly as rational and autonomous as it has been held to be. Critics have charged that the subject’s apparent physical and mental autonomy and self-awareness are predicated on a fundamental dependence on who and what lies outside of it—on the Other, whether in the form of the personal Other, the Unconscious, Death, or some other Other. As a result of these critiques, the subject has been moved from its central position to a decentred one.

The idea of decentred subjectivity opens up new ways of seeing children and youth. If human beings are by definition dependent rather than independent, and remain always susceptible to interruption by the Other (such as in the form of one’s own illness and death, the death of loved ones, or one’s Unconscious), then dependence is no longer the distinctive characteristic of children and youth, but a characteristic of human beings at all ages and stages of life. As Judith Butler remarks in dialogue with Sunaura Taylor, “there’s an idea of self-sufficiency that might be a fantasy and kind of an ideal norm that doesn’t actually suit any

of us” (187). Consequently, if autonomous, rational adulthood is a fiction, and if our responsibility to children and youth is not to turn them as expediently as possible into autonomous, rational adults, this raises the question of how we might conceive of our responsibility to children and youth differently.

### **Hospitality and Subjectification**

In my work I have proposed that our responsibility to children and youth is to receive them into the world *and* to accept that they will change the world into which they are received. In developing this perspective I have made use of the work of several philosophers, including philosophers of education. In particular, I have argued for education to be guided by an “ethic of hospitality” as elaborated by Jacques Derrida and inspired by the work of Emmanuel Levinas. An ethic of hospitality is an ethical framework focused on receiving the Other, in which hospitality is understood as “an unconditional gift given by a host who is aware of her or his indebtedness to the guest. Immediately, this marks a departure from other conceptions of hospitality based on reciprocity or exchange [that is to say, conditionality], in which the guest incurs a debt by accepting hospitality” (Ruitenber, “The Empty Chair”). In other words, from the perspective of Derrida’s work, hospitality is all about giving space to the guest and not about the host controlling that space—but without the host fully surrendering the space to the guest, because



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then he or she would no longer be host, hence no longer in a position to offer hospitality (Ruitenber, "Giving Place"). Thus conceived, hospitality is about operating in the tension between giving space to the Other and knowing that any space one offers imposes constraints. I should note that "space" here can be taken in the literal sense of a territory or built structure, but can also mean a body of knowledge, a discourse, a social identity, or some other figurative "space."

Educational scholar Gert Biesta has argued that education should have an "interest in subjectification," by which he means that education should give space to students' becoming subjects ("On the Weakness" 360)—or, perhaps more precisely as it is inevitable that students become subjects in some form or another, that schools should pay attention to the kinds of spaces they offer and how these allow for or proscribe particular kinds of subjectivities. I agree with this perspective and would like to emphasize that subjectification is becoming subject in the double sense of being subjected to and emerging as a subject with agency (see, for example, Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power*). Biesta distinguishes subjectification from socialization ("the ways in which, through education, individuals become part of existing sociocultural, political, and moral orders") and qualification ("the ways in which education contributes to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that qualify us for doing something"), both of which are also undeniably purposes of schooling ("On the Weakness" 355). As Loren Lerner's essay in this Forum illustrates, children have historically been so deeply invested with adults' "beliefs, desires, fantasies, and expectations" (102), both of the kinds of adults they should become (such as "good wives and mothers") and of the world more generally, that the focus in child-rearing and schooling has been on socialization, with little attention given to subjectification.

To work from an ethic of hospitality means that one operates from the understanding that one must receive the Other into a (metaphorical) home, which means *both* that there must be a home for the Other to be received into *and* that this Other's entrance may change that home. The ethic of hospitality is not about my "right" as host to hold onto the home as it is, but rather about my duty to help the Other grapple with the critical inheritance of that home. Here subjectification in the double sense I have discussed becomes visible: the guest is subjected to the constraints of the home as it is but, at the same time, when the guest takes her place, her subjectivity exceeds the constraints of the home into which she has been received, and she can change it.

### **Seeing Children and Youth as Respondents**

With the subjectification function of education in mind, I agree with Biesta that "it matters how we call those we teach," that is to say, that it matters how we characterize the subjectivity for which education creates space ("Learner"). (Biesta's phrase "how we call those we teach" encompasses both what we call those we teach and how we interpellate them.) In the article in which Biesta makes this argument, he proposes that we should call those whom we teach "speakers." This argument is based on the work of Jacques Rancière, who argues that we should work *from* the presupposition of equal intelligence rather

than working *toward* equality as a distant goal (see, for example, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*). I do not disagree with Biesta's argument but would like to emphasize that all speech is secondary: it responds to an address. Biesta's title, in fact, highlights that very clearly: it matters that those we teach are *addressed* as speakers, that is to say, that they have an opportunity to speak in response to an address. Following the ideas I have outlined briefly here, then, I would characterize the subjectivity for which education creates space as that of a *respondent*.

In an ethic of hospitality, the guest must not only be addressed by the host, but must also have an opportunity to respond to this address, not in the sense of reciprocating the gift of hospitality but in the sense of being able to enter into the world offered by the host and being able to make a place in this world. Another philosopher who has argued that "newcomers" to the world should be able to make a place for themselves and change the world through the introduction of their unique newness is Hannah Arendt, who argues that children should have "the chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us" (196). This introduction of newness depends on others, however, just as others depend on us for the introduction of their newness: as Biesta suggests, "our coming into the world structurally relies on the activities of others to take up our beginnings" (*Beyond Learning* 92). What this means is that I only "come into

the world” if others respond in some way to what I say and write and do; if my words and actions are not even seen or heard by others, I cannot be said to have “come into the world.” The introduction of newness is always a response and in turn provokes response. To put it another way, in the words of an ethic of hospitality, I can only respond because I have been received into a world, and others can only respond if I welcome them in turn—even though the world into which I welcome them will be different from the one into which I was received.

This is how I conceive what Biesta describes as education’s interest in subjectification, and it poses challenging questions for educators. To what extent are schools spaces in which young people have a chance to respond, to enter into the world and make a space there? To what extent do we see children and youth as subjects who have the right to be not merely socialized—that is, adapted to the world—but received into the world and who have the ability to respond to it? The concept of response involves a critical engagement by the guest with the space into which he or she is received, and seeing children and youth as respondents requires that we see them as responsible for and capable of such critical engagement.

Of course, just as it is inevitable that young people become subjects—as I pointed out, the question is what kind of spaces education offers and how these allow for or proscribe particular

kinds of subjectivities—it is inevitable that young people respond. The question is thus not exactly how education can ensure that young people become respondents, but rather how education can see young people’s responses as responses rather than as reactions or as a lack of response altogether. The concept of response is worth a closer look. The word “response” shares its root *spon* with words such as “spouse” and “sponsor”; the root comes from the Latin *spondere*, which means to engage, promise, or bind oneself. This sense of engagement with the world is central to the conception of response that underpins my argument for seeing young people as respondents.

### **Queer Respondents**

Nat Hurley’s essay in this Forum illustrates one of the forms a critical inheritance may take: the deliberately perverse and insubordinate rewriting and resignification of children’s literature and its symbols. Sometimes such critical responses are offered by children, as is the case in the use of the mermaid figure by trans and gender-nonconforming children. More often, however, such as in the queer revisions of children’s stories, the critical response is belated: it is not offered until the child has become an adult. This belatedness may signal a lack of hospitality for queer youth, who either do not feel they can speak back to the (mis)representations of childhood they encounter or whose speaking back is not heard as response.



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Jen Gilbert has used the ethic of hospitality to think through the particular inhospitality faced by queer children and youth. She gives the example of Ludovic, the main character in the 1997 film *Ma vie en rose*, who shows up in a dress at his parents' housewarming party. Gilbert does not discuss it in these terms, but Ludovic's sartorial choice can be seen as a cogent—some might say insubordinate—response to his dislike of “boys' clothes” and his preference for dresses. In the film, Ludovic's response is read as such only by his grandmother; his parents and neighbours read it as a strange and unwelcome form of acting out.

Gilbert is right to point out that the ethic of hospitality “demands that we accept what is not yet intelligible. . . . We are to welcome the stranger before we know who or what he or she is” (27). That includes the determination of an acceptable—or, for that matter, any stable and identifiable—gender and sexuality. When she asks rhetorically, “Is there anything more foreign in education than gayness?” (28), however, I would like to caution against reading hospitality as concerned only or primarily with marginalized social identities; it is concerned with the alterity or fundamental otherness of the Other, and alterity and difference are not the same. As Emmanuel Levinas explains in an interview with Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley, “Alterity is not at all the fact that there is a difference, that facing me there is someone who has a different nose than mine, different colour eyes, another character. It is not difference, but alterity. . . . It is the beginning of transcendence. You are not transcendent by virtue of a different trait” (170). In other words, the Other in Derrida's and Levinas's work is not other as a result of “othering”

or marginalization. Rather, each is fundamentally other to each or, as Derrida would have it, “*tout autre est tout autre*” (87).

### **Singular and Multiple Guests**

One of the challenges of treating children and youth as respondents and of imagining the ethic of hospitality in schools is that the philosophical literature on hospitality works from the model of a singular host and a singular guest, and the typical situation of classrooms and schools is one of a multitude of guests. Both Derrida and Levinas emphasize the primacy of this relation of two even as they acknowledge that, in lived reality, we rarely find ourselves in situations of only two. As Levinas states, “What seems to me very important, is that there are not only two of us in the world. But I think that everything begins as if we were only two” (170). As soon as the host has to respond not to a singular but to multiple guests, one guest’s needs and demands are necessarily weighed against another’s. This does violence to the absolute alterity of each singular Other: “I am led to compare the faces,

to compare the two people. Which is a terrible task. It is entirely different from speaking to the face. To compare them is to place them in the same genre” (174). The singularity of each person is violated as two sets of needs and demands, each incomparable with any other, must now be appraised and prioritized in relation to each other.

Derrida insists that the demand of unconditional hospitality is a pure, ethical demand of responding to a singular stranger who is absolutely Other, but, like Levinas, he understands that “there are not only two of us in the world” and that in most situations, actual decisions will be shaped by practical constraints. He argues, however, that such decisions should not be taken without some reference back to unconditional hospitality. As I have argued elsewhere, while mass schooling as social institution cannot be run based on the principle of unconditional hospitality, schooling that does not maintain a reference to this principle loses its reference to education and to ethical education in particular (“Giving Place” 270).

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