

THINKING EDUCATIONALLY ABOUT PSYCHOLOGY IN EDUCATION:¹ GERT BIESTA'S CRITIQUE RECONSIDERED

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ABSTRACT. *Learning* and *development* are well established as concepts in educational psychology. Gert Biesta has used terms such as “learnification” and “developmentalism” to describe a tendency that, in his view, removes existential qualities from teaching and education. Although important in the right contexts, the concepts do not represent the core of what education should be about, he claims. Jostein Sæther notes that in many ways he shares Biesta’s view on the most fundamental quality of education, i.e., helping young people exist as independent subjects in confrontation with their own will, responsibility, and freedom. In this paper, he addresses the overarching question of whether it is possible and desirable to think *educationally* about psychology in educational theory, specifically through relating Biesta’s critique to selected handbooks, reviews, and metaliterature. Sæther does not propose integrating educational psychology into Biesta’s existential theory but rather hopes to open a dialogue on different points of view that challenge each other in fruitful ways. The process of discussing certain principles, problems, and examples should yield a certain kind of “unclean” *educational* psychology, one that is relevant to “subjectification.” There are problems related to eclecticism and the tension between essence and existence, yet, in this context, Sæther sees a dialogical project as the only way forward.

KEY WORDS. existential education; education as a discipline; learnification; developmentalism; constructivism; education as *Pädagogik*/pedagogic; Gert Biesta

Educational psychology as a discipline or field of study has been discussed by a number of authors, usually from an internal perspective, from within the discipline. However, there are also examples of scholars beyond this background who have commented on its concepts and theories. For instance, Gert Biesta, by referring specifically to learning, development, and constructivism, has voiced a critique against one-sided psychologism, instrumentalism, and naturalism. He claims that although the concepts behind these “isms” and their connected theories may be valuable in their relevant contexts, i.e., to explain and guide processes of socialization and qualification, they do not represent fundamental educational approaches. The problems begin when “isms” take over, i.e., “developmentalism,” “constructivism,” or a one-sided focus on learning (“learnification”).¹ Specifically, he bases his critique on what he calls “existential” education in the context of Continental “general educational theory” (in German: *allgemeine Pädagogik*) as opposed to educational theory understood as “an

1. The title is inspired by the phrase “thinking educationally about philosophy in education and educational research.” See Steven A. Stolz and Gert Biesta, “Gert Biesta on Thinking Philosophically about Education; Thinking Educationally about Philosophy in Education and Educational Research: In Dialogue with Steven A. Stolz,” in *Theory and Philosophy in Education Research*, ed. John Quay, Jennifer Bleazby, Steven A. Stolz, Maurizio Toscano, and R. Scott Webster (London: Routledge, 2018), 53–67.

interdisciplinary field of study," which Biesta claims to be typical in Anglo-American traditions.²

My examples from psychology and educational psychology do not represent the entire breadth of these disciplines. I simply argue that my examples can hardly be overlooked if the intention is to say something general about learning and development. In this context, I do not discuss Biesta's connection to existentialism, and whether he represents a typical example of existential or general educational theory.³ My central claim is that his theory is highly relevant if we wish to establish educational psychology as an educational subdiscipline.

My point of departure is rather "traditional" when it comes to exploring learning, development, and constructivism. However, I want to acknowledge Biesta's criticisms here. As far as I can see, his most fundamental contribution is his perspective on human existence as a social existence that comes "before" our cognition, as studied in philosophy, psychology, and other sciences.⁴ By referring to Jean-Luc Marion in his latest publications, Biesta is explicitly critical of the Kantian philosophy that gives too much weight to "the activities of a knowing consciousness," starting from "a 'transcendental ego' that comes 'before' the world."⁵ In opposition to Kantian philosophy, Biesta highlights the phenomenon of "givenness" as something more fundamental than our knowing, i.e., coming "before any intentional 'act' of knowing ... something [that] must have given itself to the knower."⁶ It is within this context that he explores teaching and learning.

From my "traditional" view, I raise the question of whether qualities such as freedom, independence, and responsibility might be studied from the perspective that the subject has an inherent potential in relation these qualities. In this context, I suggest some examples of contact areas with Biesta's theory, and I intend to come up with criteria and challenges for educational psychology inspired by Biesta's thinking.

2. Stefan T. Siegel and Gert Biesta, "The Problem of Educational Theory," *Policy Futures in Education* 20, no. 5 (2022): 542, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103211032087>. See also chapter 5 in Gert Biesta, *Educational Research* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

3. See Biesta's autobiography in Gert Biesta, *Obstinate Education: Reconnecting School and Society* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill/Sense, 2019), 145–167.

4. That is to say, existence precedes essence. See his reference to Jean-Paul Sartre in Gert J. J. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching* (New York: Routledge), 10.

5. Gert Biesta, *World-Centered Education* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 65. This world-centered approach also includes our confrontation with the physical world.

6. Gert Biesta, "The Three Gifts of Teaching: Towards a Non-egological Future for Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 50, no. 1 (2021): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2020.1763279>.

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First, I introduce a few elements from the broader background of educational psychology. Then, with a particular emphasis on learning and development, I ask what is the core content of the critique that Biesta represents. This is done to introduce his notion of “existential education.” In the third section, I move from summarizing Biesta’s thinking to presenting my own approach. Fourth, by focusing on the conceptions of learning and development, my limited aim is to present examples of how these concepts are used, combined with examples of related debates. My intention is not to provide any general defense of educational psychology. Through this process, I will have supplied the minimum context in which to move toward the possible relevance of Biesta’s criticism: How can his critique challenge educational psychology fruitfully?

EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND BIESTA’S CHALLENGE

There are several contributors to discussions about the status and challenges of educational psychology, e.g., in the introductory, concluding, and future-oriented chapters in educational psychology handbooks, and in special issues of journals in the field. Of particular interest are contributions that discuss psychology or educational psychology not only from an “internal” perspective but also, more or less explicitly, in the context of philosophy or (general) educational theory.⁷ For instance, David Berliner, in his introduction to the *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, discussed the issue of relevance by referring to Joseph Schwab: “[T]he fundamental nature of our enterprise is about using psychological concepts and methods for understanding the four commonplaces of education[:] ... *someone ... teaches something ... to someone else ... in some setting.*”⁸

The challenge is to let this *educational* thinking be the framework of reference and not the “application definition” approach (also called “the piecemeal approach”), which often leads “to selecting for study those educational problems best suited to apply solutions or ideas developed in other contexts,”⁹ that

7. For example, Patricia A. Alexander, “Coming Home: Educational Psychology’s Philosophical Pilgrimage,” *Educational Psychologist* 38, no. 3 (2003): 129–132, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3803_1; Gert Biesta, *Educational Research* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), chapter 5; Eric Bredo, “Philosophical Perspectives on Mind, Nature, and Educational Psychology,” in *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, 3rd ed., ed. Lyn Corno and Eric M. Anderman (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3–15; and Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe, “The Lure of Psychology for Education and Educational Research,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 46, no. 3 (2012): 315–331, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2012.00864.x>. Other examples include David Bridges, ed., “‘Rigour,’ ‘Discipline,’ and the ‘Systematic’ in Educational Research,” special issue, *European Educational Research Journal* 18, no. 5 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904119868558>; and Paul A. Schutz and Krista R. Muis, eds., *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2024).

8. David C. Berliner, “Educational Psychology: Searching for Essence throughout a Century of Influence,” in *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, 2nd ed., ed. Patricia A. Alexander and Philip H. Winne (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2006), 5f.

9. Merlin C. Wittrock, “An Empowering Conception of Educational Psychology,” *Educational Psychologist* 27, no. 2 (1992): 129.

is, the view that “psychological and educational thought do not enter into one another *indifferently* — both are subtly transformed in the process of something new ... called ‘educational psychology.’”¹⁰ Educational psychology should not be developed only as a result of “translation” from psychology into an educational context.¹¹ It claims that educational psychology is situated in the interaction between the educational theory of general character *and* psychology. Therefore, general educational theory and psychology are also influenced by educational psychology.¹² Contemporary educational psychology is not only connected to different traditions and subfields stemming from psychology, but also has contact with other disciplines, such as sociology, neuroscience, philosophy, and cultural studies.¹³

However, it seems that educational psychology does not have much contact with general educational theory, understood as a discipline in its own right based on a normative interest in what education should be about, i.e., to understand “the process of becoming human,” as Biesta says.¹⁴ In this paper, I let Biesta’s thinking exemplify this “general educational theory.” In his view, the broader background is that educational discourse has been psychologized, instrumentalized, and naturalized over the last few decades by a one-sided focus on learning processes and outcomes, test scores, and effectiveness — at the expense of fundamental educational qualities.

In this context, we need to discuss the relation between learning and teaching.¹⁵ A one-sided focus on learning (and development) may, according to Biesta, imply a loss of the fundamental quality in teaching and education, i.e., really seeing how “children and youth can be and become individuals who can act and think for themselves.”¹⁶ To see the teacher first and foremost as a facilitator of learning and of learning outcomes is a misconception of what education should be about. Rather, “the job of education is to open futures for children and young people —

10. Ben Morris, “The Contribution of Psychology to the Study of Education,” in *The Study of Education*, ed. John W. Tibble (London: Routledge, 1966), 142.

11. Herner Saeverot, “How May Education Be Organized to Safeguard Its Autonomy?,” *Educational Theory* 71, no. 1 (2021): 113–128, <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12470>.

12. On the debate regarding how to organize educational theory, see, e.g., Saeverot, “How May Education Be Organized to Safeguard Its Autonomy?”; Biesta, *Educational Research*, chap. 5; Bridges, “‘Rigour,’ ‘Discipline,’ and the ‘Systematic’ in Educational Research.”

13. This view is, according to Saeverot, too optimistic on behalf of educational psychology as an *educational* subdiscipline. He claims that for psychology to be relevant, it must be translated, i.e., by education as an autonomous discipline. See Saeverot, “How May Education Be Organized to Safeguard Its Autonomy?”

14. Biesta, “Disciplines and Theory in the Academic Study of Education.”

15. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching*; Biesta, *World-Centered Education*, chap. 5; and Gert Biesta and Barbara Stengel, “Thinking Philosophically about Teaching,” in *Handbook of Research on Teaching* 5th ed., ed. Drew H. Gitomer and Courtney A. Bell (Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 2016), 7–67.

16. Stolz and Biesta, “Gert Biesta on Thinking Philosophically about Education,” 58.

which is a far more uncertain and risky business."¹⁷ By conducting analyses of contemporary discourses about educational theory, innovations, and politics, Biesta's project is to contribute to a new language of educational theory serving this normative purpose.

ELABORATING ON BIESTA'S CRITIQUE

Biesta's main focus is helping young people exist as human beings by challenging them to confront their own freedom, will, and responsibility. From this fundamental approach, he presents three different but interrelated challenges in education: *subjectification* (how to exist as a subject), *socialization* (how to become part of existing traditions) and *qualification* (how to acquire specific knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions). However, "Although qualification, socialization, and subjectification can be distinguished, it is important to see that they cannot be separated from each other. ... [T]eachers and others involved in education are always faced with finding a *meaningful balance* between the three domains."¹⁸ Yet, the core of education for Biesta is to promote subjectification, to help young people exist as subjects, i.e., not only to lay the foundations for responsibility but also to accept "the freedom *not* to be responsible."¹⁹ Biesta recognizes the breadth of the educational task where promoting learning (i.e., "studenting"²⁰) has its self-evident place, but only if the focus is on subjectification as the center of this process. In other words, he does not wish to give any general critique of psychology and educational psychology. His critical focus is on educational discourse *dominated* by concepts and theories rooted in psychology, naturalism, and instrumentalism.

Biesta has presented these "three *domains* of purpose"²¹ by using two models, either as three overlapping circles or, more recently, as concentric circles with subjectification as either the innermost or the outermost circle.²² In principle, he talks about the synergy *between* the domains, and he gives examples of how qualification can represent a kind of (hidden) socialization. However, his main point is that subjectification is something different from the processes that psychology (and sociology) tries to describe. At the same time, socialization and qualification represent the conditions for subjectification.²³ However, subjectification is

17. *Ibid.*, 62. See also Biesta, *World-Centered Education*, chap. 5.

18. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching*, 29 (emphasis added).

19. Biesta, *World-Centered Education*, 54 (emphasis in original).

20. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching*, 26. Biesta draws the notion of "studenting" from Gary D. Fenstermacher, "Philosophy of Research on Teaching: Three Aspects," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, 3rd ed., ed. Merlin C. Wittrock (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 37–49.

21. Biesta, *World-Centered Education*, 42ff.

22. Gert Biesta, "Risking Ourselves in Education: Qualification, Socialization, and Subjectification Revisited," *Educational Theory* 70, no. 1 (2020): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12411>.

23. A condition for subjectification is "that education also provides children and young people with orientation in the world — which is the work of socialization. And it requires that education

not a process that can be described as learning or development, leading to certain personality or identity traits.²⁴ Biesta has invented the term “learnification” to describe a one-sided emphasis on learning, learning trajectories, and learning outcomes that lacks an overarching focus on helping children to exist as independent persons.

Although there are “many different definitions and conceptions of learning” in contemporary discourses, he concludes,

[O]ne strong tendency ... is to see learning as an action of *comprehension* — that is, as an act of sense-making, of gaining knowledge and understanding about the world “out there” ... [which] puts the self at the centre and makes the world into an object of the self’s comprehension. ... [T]he point I wish to make is that if this is the *only* way in which we conceive our relation with the world and our position in it, we are significantly limiting our existential possibilities, that is, our possibilities for existing in and with the world.²⁵

The root of these terms may help clarify their meaning. The verb *exist* comes from Latin, *existere/existere*, meaning, e.g., “to step out, stand forth, emerge, appear,” etc.,²⁶ or “to stand out,” as Biesta states. To exist as a subject is, therefore, to be “sub-jected,” i.e., “under” (“sub”) the unique challenges that “stand out” to us in the world²⁷ and to respond freely to these challenges: “The challenge, therefore, is to exist in the world without considering oneself as the center, origin or ground of the world.” Thus education should help children to see their life in light of “an interest in the freedom of the *other*.”²⁸

The problem following from “learning-as-comprehension” (Biesta’s term) is the hidden individualism in this idea, namely, *my* understanding-and-choice-perspective (*my* term).²⁹ On the other hand, if children really experience being addressed by the world and are asked to respond as independent and responsible beings (also with the freedom *not* to act morally), then education may lead

provides children and young people with ‘equipment for living’ — the work of qualification” (Biesta, *World-Centered Education*, 51).

24. Still, Biesta does talk about subjectification as “grown-upness” (see *World-Centered Education*, 50) and “subject-ness” (*ibid.*, 52f). However, this “ness”-quality is not any trait in the personality or identity of the person but rather a possibility that appears in each separate event when the person is confronted with the challenges of how to live freely/independently. Biesta says “subjectification should not be understood as a process of becoming, as a development *towards* being a subject. Subjectification is what always interrupts our becoming ... an event that always occurs in the here and now, not in some distant future” (*ibid.*, 53, emphasis in original).

25. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching*, 30f.

26. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “exist,” verb, accessed September 2, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/exist>.

27. However, Biesta says this differently: in this context, the first fact is not the existence of the subject itself, “but rather to be ‘outside’ of oneself, that is, in some way to ‘stand out’ (‘ek-sist’) towards the world and be ‘thrown’ into it” (*The Rediscovery of Teaching*, 10).

28. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching*, 8f (emphasis in original).

29. *Ibid.*, 36.

to “grown-up-ness” or “grown-up subject-ness.”³⁰ In this context, Biesta has sharpened his focus:

[T]he arrival of subject-ness is ... not the outcome of a developmental trajectory, is not the culmination of a learning trajectory, but an event that breaks through all this, irrespective of whether the child — or anyone of any age, for that matter — is ready for it or not.³¹ ... To suggest that education is just about supporting the child’s development, just about letting each student develop their talents and reach their full potential, is ... an educational lie. ...³²

He states that the concepts of learning and development are too tightly connected to a linear understanding of time and change, as a process of progress, which does not correspond to the preconditions required to exist as a subject. To help children exist as subjects requires trusting discontinuity and a nonlinear conception of what might occur, illustrated by appealing to “the unforeseen,” practicing “interruption,” asking “the impossible from the child or student,” and giving trust.³³ Therefore, education is not primarily to lead, promote, or follow development, understood as something that happens within a traditional linear conception of change.³⁴ It is more about an openness to the possibility that something uncertain might happen, which cannot be predicted beforehand.

This unique-nonlinear-and-“impossible”-response represents one dimension in Biesta’s existential education. A second dimension is that education must introduce something new, which represents an opportunity for this response. This combination of introducing something new *and* opening up to a possible, but uncertain and unique, response represents “the beautiful risk of education.”³⁵ To ignore this uncertainty is to withdraw from the freedom and responsibility of existing as a human being and therefore constitutes a rejection of the fundamental quality of education.

Therefore, (quasi-scientific) generalizations, trying to capture learning, developmental processes, and outcomes of interventions in instrumental terms, will fail to describe the relevant conditions of human life and education. In this context, it seems that Biesta does not accept any dialogue between (1) a focus on quasi-lawlike generalizations, and (2) the principles of uniqueness, freedom, etc. Biesta sees the first approach as related to socialization and qualification, and the second to subjectification. Therefore, the fundamental question for him seems to be whether developmental and learning theories, focusing on lawlike causal explanation, can have something to offer in the domain of subjectification.

30. Ibid., 4f.

31. Ibid., 91.

32. Ibid., 17.

33. Ibid., 17, 92. See also Biesta, *World-Centered Education*, 50f.

34. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching*, 86f.

35. Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2014); and Biesta, *World-Centered Education*, 55f. This thinking has been further developed in the idea of “gifts of teaching” (see *World-Centered Education*, chap. 5).

As we have seen, Biesta, in principle, talks about the synergy between his three domains. However, he does not discuss whether learning or developmental processes might serve as a point of departure for acting as free human beings in unique situations. Accordingly, there does not seem to be any bridge between the explanatory language of psychology and the “existential” core of education.³⁶ To summarize and introduce the next part, I will refer to Biesta’s own words.

A key point in Biesta’s existential education is to let the young person be challenged “to stay in ‘the difficult middle ground’ between world-destruction [i.e., not at all giving place to the other] and self-destruction [i.e., not at all giving place to your own needs].”³⁷ This “encounter with responsibility is ... the moment where I encounter my freedom and thus my unique existence as subject.” Although freedom is not without limits, existential education accepts the “freedom to walk away from one’s responsibility.”³⁸ This implies *weak pedagogy*, e.g., “hesitation,” “slowing down,” and the suspension of disturbing factors. In this context, Biesta sees “*sustenance*” (support) as important for staying in the difficult “middle ground” he is talking about.³⁹ Biesta’s concepts might be helpful to understand a kind of paradox in education: to promote freedom through reception of what is given to us, i.e., “everything begins with what is given to us, rather than what is claimed, constructed or interpreted by us.”⁴⁰ At the same time, Biesta refers to Marion, who is aware that before we try to respond to what is given to us (“the call”), “there is the more difficult thing, which is ... to *discover* that there is a call, that is to say, being able to *interpret* what is as what comes to us.”⁴¹ Therefore, Biesta also seems to accept cognition as one dimension in his givenness-receiving-approach, which perhaps might open up the possibility for “traditional” theory to communicate with “existential education.”

A POSSIBLE BRIDGE BETWEEN BIESTA’S “EXISTENTIAL EDUCATION” AND EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY?

Is it possible to find a bridge between Biesta’s first-person “existential education” and a third-person perspective rooted in educational psychology? Do efforts to turn the explanatory language of psychology into “existential education” necessarily lose “the I” and result in self-management based on individualism and instrumentalism?⁴² For example, what happens when I try to understand my thinking about my own behavior and actions via metacognition, i.e., “thinking about

36. As an example, see Biesta, *World-Centered Education*, 57n5.

37. *Ibid.*, 49.

38. *Ibid.*, 54f.

39. *Ibid.*, 50f.

40. Biesta, “The Three Gifts of Teaching,” 39 (in the abstract).

41. Biesta, *World-Centered Education*, 68 (emphasis added).

42. Regarding his views on self-regulation and self-determination theories, see Biesta, *World-Centered Education*, 57n5.

one's thinking"?⁴³ Moreover, by borrowing language from the theory of attribution,⁴⁴ do I see myself as a product of external (or internal) determinants, or do I see myself as a person who can choose and act freely? Is such thinking just another version of instrumentalism (self-management), or do we, in these cases, find opportunities to ask existentially, how can I act?

Biesta claims that, with regard to "the point that our freedom is not unlimited,"⁴⁵ freedom and responsibility are unique possibilities that might "break through," without any reference to psychological (and sociological) factors. This uniqueness-freedom stand is probably one of the fundamental reasons why dialogue between the differing viewpoints is so difficult. According to Biesta's thinking, the core of education is to see actual events as possible "places" for freedom and responsibility, i.e., to help others be independent subjects without referring to any external or internal factors.

Against this background, it seems impossible to argue for interaction between freedom in unique events *and* causal factors influenced by learning, development, and context. Biesta's alternative is to accept the paradox that educational processes are explainable by causal explanation *and* are at the same time free. Solving this paradox is unrealistic. Therefore, I must propose my "impossible" contact or dialogue intention between educational psychology and existential education via a more indirect strategy. My ambition is to see if we can agree on some facts as a platform for this communication. Therefore, I am considering how selected concepts, rooted in learning theory, as well as in educational and developmental psychology, are used not only in traditional theory but also in Biesta's critique. At the same time, I intend to view educational psychology not only as a discipline in psychology but also as an *educational* discipline that might be inspired by Biesta's ideas.

My strategy is, therefore, to raise the question of whether there could be some contact issues regarding uniqueness, freedom, responsibility, and uncertainty in educational events. This is an overwhelmingly large field of discussion. I will only include examples from issues such as linearity versus discontinuity; the idea that the person is an agent in his/her own development; learning as necessarily involving a content input in education; how following development also involves a content "confrontation"; constructivist thinking; the renewed interest in the will in educational psychology; strengthening motivation by using minimal external reward; the dilemma approach in moral development; etc. My key hypothesis is that learning and developmental trajectories, and their connected theories in

43. Gabriele Oettingen, Jana Schrage, and Peter M. Gollwitzer, "Volition," in *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, 3rd ed., ed. Corno and Anderman, 108. On this point, the authors cite John H. Flavell, "Metacognition and Cognitive Monitoring: A New Area of Cognitive-Developmental Inquiry," *American Psychologist* 34 (1979): 906–911.

44. The specific meaning of "attribution" as used in psychology is usually presented in the introductory literature in the areas of educational psychology and psychology.

45. Gert Biesta, "Risking Ourselves in Education," 96.

educational psychology, are more “messy” than Biesta claims, and they might be, more or less, open for confrontation with content, responsibility, and freedom in unique contexts. Three interrelated points of view are decisive: (1) the uniqueness and uncertainty issue in learning and development is not claimed to be solved in educational psychology by referring to nomological-causal explanations to predict linear change and progress; (2) freedom and will is one key dimension in children’s development and learning; and (3) theories of learning (such as constructivism) and development in the context of educational psychology do not exclude all aspects of free confrontation with content. My hypothesis is that, taken together, these three dimensions might open up educational psychology, i.e., making at least part of it relevant for *educational* theory (in the sense of Biesta’s usage). My intention is to give examples that can support this claim.

In summary, I recognize Biesta’s fundamental ideas. However, I highlight what I view as some oversimplifications in his discussion. In the tension between his fundamental ideas and critique, and a relevant understanding of contemporary educational psychology, I see a way forward to improve educational psychology as an *educational* subdiscipline. This is possible, in my view, because Biesta’s critique is not fully justified, and because educational psychology has the potential for improvement.

A general challenge is to be precise about the terms brought into a dialogue, whether the focus is on usage, on the essence of the actual phenomenon, on etymology, on a normative decision, or a more mixed stance, e.g., see details below on development. This issue is not solved here, as my focus will be on the usage of the terms: for example, I intend to comment on the concept of development by referring to chapters from the two last editions of the *Handbook of Child Development*. With this strategy, I only state that these kinds of sources offer examples that can hardly be overlooked if the opponents want to establish a general critique. Similarly, I will introduce the concepts of learning and constructivism by referring to handbooks and other selected sources in the field.⁴⁶ I do not claim to give a complete presentation, necessary for generalization, on the contemporary understanding of learning, development, constructivism, educational psychology, and existential education. My focus is on examples of the usage of these concepts, with their associated theories, in the context of educational psychology.

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

In traditional theory, *learning* is conceived as a process of relatively enduring change of different types based on the person’s experiences in various contexts. A person’s *development* is the change that occurs because of interactions between

46. I also refer to the textbook literature. If the purpose is to give relevant examples from the discourse that generally characterizes the theory, politics, and practice of education, as Biesta attempts to do, widely used textbooks are particularly good sources. If the intention is to go deeper into the background, however, this strategy is inadequate. Therefore, I also provide examples from typical research-based publications.

maturation, learning, and the involvement of the person in various contexts. Such phrases raise many questions and, therefore, much more should be said. However, in this context, I only present a few examples of some different views.

THE CONCEPT OF LEARNING AND BIESTA'S CHALLENGE

To understand Biesta's critique, it is necessary to take a closer look at the concepts of teaching and constructivism. For example, by referring to Wolff-Michael Roth, Biesta criticizes constructivism, but does not criticize or discuss all versions of it. Radical constructivist theory agrees, he argues, with the idea that the "organism 'constructs' itself and its cognitive apparatus," and that "[k]nowledge [and meaning] thus is the self-generated result of an active organism."⁴⁷ Roth's alternative is to highlight that "I am what life and society — through the societal relations ... allow me to be," for example, referring to George Herbert Mead, Lev Vygotsky, and Alexei Leont'ev, and claiming that "social relations are the genetic origins of anything that is specifically *human*."⁴⁸ In various ways, Biesta tries to clarify what it means to know, not only as our own construction, "but also, and perhaps first of all, in terms of reception, that is, as something that is given to us."⁴⁹ The problem of "*my* construction, *my* understanding, and *my* comprehension" is to see "the knower-creator as the center of the world." An alternative account is to be open to "knowing as reception" and "listening to the world," which can lead to "having a concern for the world, of caring for the world," i.e., to come into an existential relationship with the world.⁵⁰ This way of thinking creates the backdrop for Biesta's critique of the "learnification" of educational discourse.

Against this backdrop, I turn to the concept of learning in the context of educational psychology. These discussions are complex.⁵¹ Patricia Alexander and her collaborators emphasize that "[A]n adequate understanding of learning can

47. Wolff-Michael Roth, *Dwelling, Building, Thinking: A Post-Constructivist Perspective on Education, Learning, and Development* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill Sense, 2018), 187.

48. *Ibid.*, 193, 189.

49. Biesta, *Obstinate Education*, 160.

50. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching*, 33. These ideas are further elaborated in Biesta, *World-Centered Education*, see esp. chap. 5.

51. It is probably impossible to agree on a commonly accepted definition of "learning." See, e.g., Patricia A. Alexander, Diane L. Schallert, and Ralph E. Reynolds, "What Is Learning Anyway? A Topographical Perspective Considered," *Educational Psychologist* 44, no. 3 (2009): 176–192, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520903029006>; Phil Hodgkinson, Gert Biesta, and David James, "Understanding Learning Culturally: Overcoming the Dualism Between Social and Individual Views of Learning," *Vocations and Learning* 1, no. 1 (2008): 27–47; P. Karen Murphy and Stephanie L. Knight, "Exploring a Century of Advancements in the Science of Learning," *Review of Research in Education* 40, no. 1 (2016): 402–456; Ralph E. Reynolds, Diane L. Schallert, and Patricia A. Alexander, "An Atlas Has More Than One Map: A Reply to Our Commentators," *Educational Psychologist* 44, no. 3 (2009): 209–214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520903029048>; David Scott and Eleanore Hargreaves, "An Introduction and a Theory of Learning," in *The SAGE Handbook of Learning*, ed. David Scott and Eleanore Hargreaves (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2015), 1–15; and Roger Säljö, "Learning, Theories of Learning, and Units of Analysis in Research," *Educational Psychologist* 44, no. 3 (2009): 202–208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520903029030>.

only occur when ... the *what*, *where*, *who*, and *when* of learning ... and the interactions among them are considered." They also acknowledge that a *why* dimension "might improve our framework" and that their thinking is based on "an essentialist view".⁵²

Learning is a multidimensional process that results in a relatively enduring change in a person or persons, and consequently how that person or persons will perceive the world and reciprocally respond to its affordances physically, psychologically, and socially. The process of learning has as its foundation the systemic, dynamic, and interactive relation between the nature of the learner and the object of the learning as ecologically situated in a given time and place as well as over time.⁵³

The handbooks of educational psychology I am citing here often include a focus on traditional school subjects and skills, as well as chapters on civic, moral, and character education.⁵⁴ It is obvious that for them learning is about interacting with the world and being challenged to respond and change during this process. The general framework from an educational psychological point of view is that "[t]he teaching and learning ... [studied in educational psychology] almost always takes place inside the intersection of *teachers x students x task x setting*."⁵⁵ Terms such as "the world," the setting, "the object of learning," or "task," etc., imply that learning theories must also deal with content and the situatedness of learning (in society). Another example is Knud Illeris's model, which represents the general context for what he calls "transformative learning," during which the person may go through ongoing change as a lifelong process. He asserts that interaction between "the individual and the social and material environment" takes place constantly while we are awake. The acquisition process includes a content side and the "mental energy" (called "incentive") that comes from motivation, emotion, and volition.⁵⁶ From my perspective, Illeris's model is interesting because it illustrates a kind of interactional thinking similar to that described both by Alexander and her colleagues and by Berliner in his references to pragmatism and Joseph Schwab.⁵⁷ This model does not isolate the learner or his/her learning processes from the content (the "what") or the situation/context/society (the "where").

This introduction immediately clarifies a host of issues. I will highlight two of these. First, in theories of learning, traditionally the focus is on processes within the learner, and the purpose and content are taken for granted. On the other hand, in general educational theory and in curriculum theory, the focus is

52. Reynolds et al., "An Atlas Has More Than One Map," 211–213.

53. Alexander et al., "What Is Learning Anyway?," 186.

54. See, e.g., Corno and Anderman, eds., *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, 3rd ed.; and Alexander and Winne, eds., *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, 2nd ed.

55. Berliner, "Educational Psychology," 6.

56. Knud Illeris, *Transformative Learning and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2014), 34f.

57. Berliner, "Educational Psychology," 5f.

directed more toward *what* and *why* we learn and to the fundamental principles of *how* we learn in education. However, the dividing lines are not always as clear as this. For example, not least within “situated” and sociocultural traditions, learning processes are also connected to content, context, dialogues, and the uniqueness of situations in which learning occurs. The different approaches of Berliner, Illeris, Säljö, and Alexander and her colleagues demonstrate that learning theories, in principle, must always relate to content and context, without claiming that learning is the same as teaching.⁵⁸ From the perspective of sociocultural theories, the concepts, strategies, skills, attitudes, and so on, must be introduced “from outside” and be appropriated by the learner in order to be learned; at the same time, they are also more or less transformed (“constructed”) in a situated process of learning. This implies a dialogical process bridging the person and his/her social-cultural context.⁵⁹ Therefore, learning as a purely “internal” process, detached from content and context, does not make sense.

Against this background, how can we understand the critique from Biesta when he claims that a focus on learning generally implies removing existential qualities from education? According to him, when the content dimension appears in the discourses of learning, it seems to be best characterized as “learning about,” as “detached” comprehension in which I am not challenged in my unique context of freedom and responsibility.

To summarize, my first issue is to question whether the clear distinction between comprehension and existential involvement is always a necessary consequence of focusing on learning. For example, comprehension of or learning about anthropogenic climate change might challenge me in terms of how to respond ethically or politically, more or less with freedom. This example illustrates that the alleged existential lack of ethical-moral-social involvement (as a consequence of the focus on learning as comprehension) is not obvious in all cases and should, therefore, be discussed.⁶⁰ Related to this discussion is the view commonly found in the introductory literature that constructivism does not only refer to an isolated learner.

My second issue concerns continuity versus discontinuity in learning (trajectories). Learning cannot always be described as smooth progress; regression is always

58. See, for example, Berliner, “Educational Psychology”; Illeris, *Transformative Learning and Identity*; Säljö, “Learning, Theories of Learning, and Units of Analysis in Research”; and Alexander et al., “What Is Learning Anyway?”

59. We can find many examples of efforts, which combine the focus on learning, constructivism, and development by integrating dialogical and sociocultural perspectives: e.g., Anita Woolfolk, *Educational Psychology in Education*, 14th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2019), 382ff. For more concrete examples on combining constructivist ideas and teaching, see Sieglinde Weyringer, Jean-Luc Patry, Dimitris Pnevmatikos, and Frédérique Brossard Børhaug, eds., *The VaKE Handbook: Theory and Practice of Values and Knowledge Education* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2022).

60. From an existential perspective (and in my view), a paradox in Illeris’s theory on “transformative learning and identity” is his “broad” focus on identity and personality development without any explicit consideration of ethical-political aspects.

a risk.⁶¹ My main point is that transformative learning processes may “produce” more or less (qualitatively) new, unique, and context-related responses, as illustrated by Illeris’s description of the lifelong process of learning as transformation and identity change.⁶²

My very simple preliminary conclusion is that learning theory might also bridge the gap between learning processes and content and, if implemented in practice, this does not prevent one from being challenged existentially in unique situations, leading to unique responses.

THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT IN DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY AND BIESTA’S CHALLENGE

I limit my presentation here to three questions. First, how are the concepts of agency and freedom used? Second, what is the child’s potential for ethical-moral agency? Third, how might children’s development be understood in the context of linear versus nonlinear change (in particular, by referring to moral development)? The uniqueness issue is part of each of these questions.

My overall point is that developmental psychology lends itself to the integration of different perspectives: the growth of freedom and agency is also a developmental task in the moral-ethical domain, connected to an inborn potential to do good (as well as evil), appearing through both linear and nonlinear aspects in development. Obviously, each of these general claims requires in-depth clarification, which is not possible in this context. However, some principles are relatively easy to describe by referring to my sources.

Bryan Sokol and colleagues use the capabilities approach as their point of departure, which “argues for *freedom* as the basis of development both at personal and societal levels.”⁶³ They assert that agency “is embedded in the fabric of sociocultural forms and practices as persons create the conditions to promote and sustain their own agency.”⁶⁴ Moral dimensions are included in this general claim.

Willis Overton tries to develop principles of development that avoid dichotomies. Two examples illustrate this: “freedom must be identified in the context of constraint,” and “[b]iology and culture no longer constitute

61. Illeris, *Transformative Learning and Identity*, 96.

62. Ibid. It should also be noted here that Biesta, together with collaborators, has launched a concept that opens up the understanding of learning by suggesting “learning as becoming” to encompass the ideas of lifelong learning and combining traditions (see Phil Hodkinson, Gert Biesta, and David James, “Understanding Learning Culturally: Overcoming the Dualism Between Social and Individual Views of Learning,” *Vocations and Learning* 1, (2008): 27–47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12186-007-9001-y>). However, in subjectification, *becoming as a process* is not relevant (see Biesta, “Risking Ourselves in Education,” 100).

63. Bryan W. Sokol, Stuart I. Hammond, Janet Kuebli, and Leah Sweetman, “The Development of Agency,” in *Theory and Method*, vol. 1 of *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science*, 7th ed., ed. Willis F. Overton and Peter C. M. Molenaar (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015), 286.

64. Ibid., 313.

competing alternative explanations."⁶⁵ His simple model illustrates development as a transaction among person, biology, and culture. The "synthesis of wholes" can illustrate three instances of multiple possible standpoints through a triangle, with the corners called "person," "biology," and "culture," and three corresponding interaction processes (person-biology, person-culture, and biology-culture).⁶⁶ In other words, the model demonstrates an effort to integrate the different dimensions while also placing "person" at the triangle's apex (so the person is "on top"). One of the fundamental ideas is that the person "transacts" in these processes and does not only interact with isolated elements.⁶⁷ Development can be described within different combinations as unique, personal, and situated *and* by means of general and quasi-lawlike generalizations.

Jochen Brandtstädter's discussion of "action perspectives on human development" is parallel to Overton's model. However, he acknowledges that these perspectives are connected to what he calls "the narrower domain of psychology":⁶⁸

Actions may be conceptualized as behaviors that (a) can be predicted and explained with reference to intentional states (goals, values, beliefs, volitions); (b) are at least partly under personal control, and have been selected from alternative behavioral options; (c) are constituted and constrained by social rules and conventions or by the subject's representation of these contextual constraints; and (d) aim to transform situations in accordance with personal representations of desired future states.⁶⁹

Brandtstädter does not really focus on the ethical implications of this view, but he emphasizes that his break with "a narrow causalist or mechanist stance" is necessary in order to focus on "practical and ethical implications."⁷⁰

Ethically, morally, and socially related development needs further comment. We refer to this field in terms of, for example, "voluntary behavior intended to benefit another."⁷¹ The general background includes the inborn tendencies

65. Willis F. Overton, "Processes, Relations, and Relational-Developmental-Systems," in *Theory and Method*, ed. Overton and Molenaar, 39, 43.

66. *Ibid.*, 43f (see esp. 44, figure 2.9).

67. Willis F. Overton, "Developmental Psychology: Philosophy, Concepts, Methodology," in *Theoretical Models of Human Development*, vol. 1 of *Handbook of Child Psychology*, 6th ed., ed. Richard M. Lerner (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2006), 48. This idea is parallel to Roth's analysis in *Dwelling, Building, Thinking* (see 192). One question in this context is whether Overton's relational model satisfactorily includes the dialogical nature of the human being.

68. Jochen Brandtstädter, "Action Perspectives on Human Development," in *Theoretical Models of Human Development*, 6th ed., ed. Lerner, 517, 521. Brandtstädter displays broad interests and contextualizes his thinking by referring, for example, to Hannah Arendt, Philip M. Davidson, G. W. F. Hegel, John Rawls, Ludwig Wittgenstein, etc. However, his presentation should be discussed in relation to the dialogical-cultural context of development.

69. *Ibid.*, 523f.

70. *Ibid.*, 556.

71. Nancy Eisenberg, Tracy L. Spinrad, and Ariel Knafo-Noam, "Prosocial Development," in *Socioemotional Processes*, vol. 3 of *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science*, 7th ed., ed. Michael E. Lamb (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015), 610.

(potentials) toward morality, empathy, and social behavior (as well as the parallel negative tendencies) that can be strengthened (or weakened) within the transactions between the child and the sociocultural environment.

Educationalists have often based their thinking on moral development and innovation, inspired by a neo-Kohlbergian paradigm and its emphasis on stimulating moral-cognitive growth by introducing moral dilemmas.⁷² However, it is too simplistic to limit the presentation of moral development to a Piaget-Kohlberg tradition.⁷³ I use examples referring to this tradition because of its prominence in moral education discourse, and because of a possible parallel between the principle of “interruption” in existential theory and the introduction of moral dilemmas inspired by Kohlberg’s work.

A very simple presentation of its principles could be as follows: it is possible to promote moral development (i.e., new thinking, which is supposed to be important in moral decision-making and acting) by introducing moral dilemmas that are at the limits of the child’s cognitive-moral competence (understood in terms of developmental level). Discussions about moral dilemmas may provoke cognitive-moral development, “producing” a more advanced and qualitatively new understanding, as demonstrated in Kohlberg’s stage theory. The introduction of dilemmas is what might be called an “interruption” in this tradition. According to John Flavell and colleagues, the general view of cognitive development operating here is that qualitative changes should be regarded as “rough age trends.”⁷⁴ Kohlberg and his collaborators noted this by referring to what they called “the overlapping ‘curves’” of the stages of development, “with earlier stages dropping out as later stages enter, such that the subject seems to be always in transition from one stage to the next.”⁷⁵

A reference to Piaget’s thinking is useful in this context because of Kohlberg’s connection with his fundamental ideas. In a review, Jan Boom presents some of the processes that Piaget discussed in overcoming “the problems of both empiricism and rationalism” necessary for new equilibration.⁷⁶ In this context,

72. Fritz Oser, “Psychologie der Moralerziehung” [Psychology of Moral Education], in *Handbuch der Pädagogischen Psychologie*, ed. Wolfgang Schneider and Marcus Hasselhorn (Göttingen, Germany: Hogrefe, 2008), 256–268.

73. See Eisenberg et al., “Prosocial Development”; and Melanie Killen and Judith G. Smetana, “Origins and Development of Morality,” in *Socioemotional Processes*, ed. Lamb, 701–749.

74. John H. Flavell, Patricia H. Miller, and Scott A. Miller, *Cognitive Development*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 140, quoted in John C. Gibbs, *Moral Development and Reality: Beyond the Theories of Kohlberg, Hoffmann, and Haidt*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 76.

75. Anne Colby, Lawrence Kohlberg, John Gibbs, Marcus Lieberman, Kurt Fischer, and Herbert D. Saltzstein, “A Longitudinal Study of Moral Judgment,” *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 48, no. 1/2 (1983): 49, quoted in Gibbs, *Moral Development and Reality*, 76.

76. Jan Boom, “Piaget on Equilibration,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Piaget*, ed. Ulrich Müller, Jeremy I. M. Carpendale, and Leslie Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 143.

Boom refers to “self-organization [as] ... in nonlinear dynamic systems theory,” and accommodations into “qualitative new level[s]” of schemes, structures, or systems: “When the subject encounters resistance this can, from the point of view of the cognitive structure involved, be described as a perturbation or disturbance of that structure.”⁷⁷ Although Piaget neglected intersubjective interaction, we find parallels here to ideas in existential education. For something nonlinear and qualitatively new to occur in development (i.e., through “transformation” and “novelty”), the child has to experience “disturbance,” “resistance,” “perturbation,” “contradictions,” and “disequilibrium” to obtain “re-equilibrations.” Although the aim is the achievement of a “*progressively* [my emphasis] better equilibrium,” in the process of development, we also find aspects of “reversibility.”⁷⁸ It is important to note that “Piaget never implied development to consist in a sequence with a fixed endpoint, and [he] spoke of provisional stages in that respect.”⁷⁹ It seems obvious that these ideas and concepts might at least serve as a reminder of “interruption” by Biesta.

Although “research suggests that moral development progresses in a universal order” (as confirmed by various longitudinal studies), Cary Roseth claims that research “only partly supports Kohlberg’s assertion that moral development progresses through an invariant and universal sequence of moral stages.” The expression of moral stages “varies across contexts”: on the one hand, “most individuals do not progress beyond Stage 3 and 4”; on the other hand, the theory “underestimates children’s moral capacity.”⁸⁰ We also find anomalies, for example, related to regression.⁸¹

From a sociocultural perspective, Barbara Rogoff has exemplified how to integrate context and culture, biology (maturation), and the “participation” person: “[H]uman biological development works together with the cultural institutions and practices that characterize humanity. Development over the life course takes place within both the course of cultural history and the course of phylogenetic history.”⁸² Participation is a core concept in Rogoff’s thinking. For her, children are subjects in their own development, intrinsically rooted in changing cultural contexts: “Humans develop through their changing participation in the sociocultural activities of their communities, which also change.”⁸³ Rogoff’s

77. Ibid., 136, 138, 139.

78. Ibid., 140, 147.

79. Ibid., 134.

80. Cary J. Roseth, “Character Education, Moral Education, and Moral-Character Education,” in *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, 3rd ed., ed. Corno and Anderman, 216f.

81. Larry P. Nucci, “Social Cognitive Domain Theory and Moral Education,” in *Handbook of Moral and Character Education*, ed. Larry P. Nucci and Darcia Narváez (New York: Routledge, 2008), 292.

82. Barbara Rogoff, *The Cultural Nature of Human Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 65.

83. Ibid., 368.

thinking is an example of what might follow from Overton's model discussed previously (if this can be interpreted within a dialogical-sociocultural frame of reference).

In summary, development is not only about unfolding an inherent "given" potential in interaction with environmental inputs.⁸⁴ From different perspectives, developmental psychology describes the complex relations between the (epi)genetic basis of development, the societal-cultural-dialogical context, and the transacting or acting subject "on the top" of this model with three corners. Various traditions continue to explore what this person *is* in terms of the developing will, autonomy, empathy, morality, continuity-discontinuity, progress and stagnation/regression, etc. All of these "factors and outcomes" can be described as more or less unique and situated versus explainable by quasi-lawlike generalizations.

THE RELEVANCE OF BIESTA'S EXISTENTIAL CRITIQUE OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

As we have seen, the complexity of the field of educational psychology has led to different traditions. However, Biesta does not see "incommensurable paradigms" as necessarily "the end of communication": "different traditions ... might learn about each other and, through this, might also begin to see their own ways of doing and thinking differently."⁸⁵ The background for the contact-strategy I suggest is, as I see it, twofold: First, Biesta has reviewed some uses of the concepts he criticizes without exploring all the alternatives. Biesta merely claims that they are important (i.e., related to qualification and socialization), but he does not discuss whether they can be connected to the core of education (subjectification). Second, he claims, those from the field of educational psychology are to some extent "captured" by psychologism, without relating to general educational theory. Against this background, more should be said.

BIESTA'S CRITIQUE RECONSIDERED — A SUMMARY

My intention is to review certain points in Biesta's critique in order to suggest that educational psychology can have some relevance for subjectification.

According to Biesta's critique, the learning discourse imported into education has a one-sided focus on change as progress in learning trajectories. In the same way, development is understood as progress, as unfolding or growth. However, learning and developmental theories do not only operate in terms of smooth progress. They also study changes, which can be more or less unique, i.e., connected to unique contexts and individuals. This can be illustrated by

84. Biesta seems to think that development is primarily "just letting everything emerge, grow, flow and flourish" (*The Rediscovery of Teaching*, 17). He argues, "Development is perhaps the temporal notion *par excellence* as it carries with it notions of temporal unfolding (in teleological readings of development) or growth-over-time (in non-teleological notions of development)" (ibid, 87).

85. Biesta, "Disciplines and Theory in the Academic Study of Education," 190.

the neo-Kohlbergian tradition,⁸⁶ and by referring to introductions of sociocultural theories and discussions of the problems of transfer of training/learning.⁸⁷

Developmentalism: Biesta is critical about the use of the concept of development as an educational concept. This critique is obviously relevant if development is seen as one-sided, as a mere “temporal unfolding”⁸⁸ of a supposed inner core in the child, i.e., through natural growth processes. This idea is probably best known from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s thinking, based on his radical naturalism.⁸⁹ However, this is a flawed approach compared to the use of the term in contemporary developmental psychology.

Morality is an (inherent) “possibility” that is achieved (more or less) by developmental and learning processes (as discussed in developmental psychology and educational psychology). Again, existential theory, exemplified by Biesta, would view this approach as too closely related to a supposed essence in the human being. Existentialism claims that “existence precedes essence,”⁹⁰ which is probably the most fundamental barrier to communication across the different views.

According to Biesta, the “learnification” of education, based on ideas from constructivism, has removed existential qualities from education; the one-sided emphasis on learning leads to a focus on the isolated learner’s “detached” (my term) comprehension of the world, without challenging any free and independent receiving response. In short, constructivism does not accommodate a social-ethical existence. The focus on stimulating learning by adapting to the student’s developmental stage, motivation, previous knowledge, introduction to learning materials, etc. (the first steps in constructivist learning approaches), places too much of responsibility on the shoulders of the teacher when organizing learning activities. Therefore, we need a “rediscovery” of teaching, as Biesta argues, to place proper responsibility on the student’s shoulders (in the context of their freedom). This is an important point. However, it appears that Biesta does not accept that stimulating learning processes, which also require the introduction of a content dimension, *can* urge students to think for themselves in terms of how to respond in unique contexts of freedom where subjectification is possible.

Various aspects of agency and freedom are studied in educational psychology and developmental psychology by focusing on intentions, volition, attributional processes, metacognition, self-regulation and intrinsic motivation, etc. It seems as though Biesta would question such theories as *educational* theories and

86. Nucci, “Social Cognitive Domain Theory and Moral Education,” 292.

87. See Hodkinson, Biesta, and James, “Understanding Learning Culturally.”

88. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching*, 87.

89. Otto F. Bollnow, *Existenzphilosophie und Pädagogik* [The Philosophy of Existence and Education] (Stuttgart, Germany: W. Kohlhammer, 1959), 11.

90. Biesta refers to Sartre in *The Rediscovery of Teaching*, 10.

would not accept their opening up for unique and free decisions in encounters with the world. The reintroduction of will and volition in psychology and educational psychology over the past two decades merits further clarification as to how these concepts are applied in educational psychology versus existential theory.⁹¹

A closer look at constructivism is necessary. Biesta and Roth emphasize that constructivism generally undermines the teacher's role in giving and transmitting something in education, something that can be freely accepted or denied.⁹² According to Biesta, the latter is necessary to help the child exist as a subject. However, based on Anita Woolfolk's presentation of Vygotsky and constructivism, for example, we see that teaching cultural tools (in social interaction) might also involve a process of "receiving" (by appropriation), which provides a starting point for the idea of social constructivism.⁹³ We thereby identify the first step of a bridge between the teaching of cultural tools and content, *and* the individual's construction.

EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY IN DIALOGUE WITH BIESTA — TEN THESES OR QUESTIONS

Based on the presentation above, I suggest ten theses or questions as a possible starting point for discussions about the future development of educational psychology, inspired by Biesta's thinking on education.

1. The discipline or field of research called educational psychology must be relevant for the purpose, content, and methodology of education. This is an overwhelmingly large field of discussion. However, educational psychology should not be uninformed about such issues. Therefore, educational psychology, to be educationally relevant, must develop its identity not only in interaction with psychology but also with general educational theory. One example, which leads into the challenge exemplified by Biesta, is the learnification/"teachification" issue (my term).

2. Educational psychology should be challenged by discussions about certain "isms" or fallacies, such as psychologism, naturalism, instrumentalism, and cognitivism. A fundamental task is to avoid (hidden) reductionism. In teacher education, isolating educational psychology into separate courses, textbooks, and specialists is sometimes necessary for dealing with the complexity of the subject matter; however, it should not be an aim in itself. Although methodological reductionism is necessary, particularly in research, educational psychology should do more

91. Biesta states that "the education of the will" is a "largely forgotten educational theme" (Gert Biesta, "The Educational Significance of the Experience of Resistance: Schooling and the Dialogue Between Child and World," *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives* 1, no. 1 [2012]: 97). However, he does not refer to the growing interest in recent theories of educational psychology, e.g., Oettingen, Schrage, and Gollwitzer, "Volition."

92. See Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching*, 32f; and Roth, *Dwelling, Building, Thinking*.

93. Woolfolk, *Educational Psychology in Education*, 59, 389.

to contextualize its concepts and theories into fundamental ideas of educational theory, at least in introductions and implication discussions.

3. A consequence of the preceding thesis is that educational psychology should be further developed as a *normative* educational (sub)discipline in the context of general educational theory. Educational psychology should critically serve the purposes, values, and contents of education in the context of a certain culture, of children's right to education, and of parents' right to choose education for their children. However, this loyalty must be developed in dialogue with and taking account of the professional knowledge of teachers, researchers, and teacher educators, a dialogue to which Biesta has contributed.

4. What are the sources of "knowledge about the human being"? Educational psychology should primarily be developed, not only based on "traditional" empirical psychology, but also in contact with philosophy, the humanities, and other disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, neuroscience, etc.).⁹⁴

5. The discipline should contribute critically to the principles of educational methodology, without prescribing in detail what to do in practice. Biesta has suggested a "new" language for what to do in practice (the language of suspension, resistance, sustenance, transcendence, appealing to the impossible and unforeseen, etc.), with little or no contact with psychology and educational psychology and their "traditional" ideas on transformation, situatedness, nonlinearity, dialogue, meta-cognition, will, attribution, and morality, etc. However, Biesta's new language might lead to an isolation of "general educational theory" if the discipline does not enter into a dialogue with other disciplines. At the same time, the isolation of general educational theory that prevents interaction with other disciplines (including psychology) might be that the development of educational psychology, as an educational discipline, as well as the development of general educational theory, will be hindered.

6. Although Biesta's ideas are highly relevant, his critique is not sufficiently nuanced. Moreover, while Biesta, in principle, presents the domains of education as "interconnected" and is searching for "a middle ground," he does not discuss whether dialogue between polarities is possible and desirable. This means, first and foremost, that he does not discuss whether qualification and socialization might have something to say for subjectification or vice versa.⁹⁵ For example, when traditional educational psychology discusses transcending linearity and continuity

94. Stein M. Wivestad, "A Challenge to Self-Education: The Purpose and Potential of a Database Annotating Works of Art for Adults Who Are Existential Exemplars for Children," *Journal of Moral Education*, (2023), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2023.2218587>. See the references in the introduction of this paper.

95. Biesta, "Risking Ourselves in Education," 102. However, in principle Biesta comments on the synergy, tension, compromise, and balance between the three domains. See Gert Biesta, "Teaching, Teacher Education, and the Humanities: Reconsidering Education as a *Geisteswissenschaft*," *Educational Theory* 65, no. 6 (2015): 675, <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12141>.

in learning and development, can this be more than naturalism?⁹⁶ Nevertheless, educational psychology should, from its own perspective, discuss subjectification as the core in education, as well as the overlap of the three different domains in education as Biesta describes them.

7. If educational psychology is to take its existential responsibility seriously in teacher education, i.e., “subjected” under children’s need for education, contact and dialogue between traditions is the only way to go. Therefore, the essence-existence conflict or tension should be turned into something positive for educational psychology, by engaging in the kinds of problems that Biesta describes. This should not be done by claiming that the paradoxes of uniqueness, freedom, and responsibility, etc., can be solved through traditional science (scientism) but by demonstrating how the ideas in educational psychology can represent parts of a dialogue based on Biesta’s thinking.

8. If psychologists, with no contact with general educational theory, are the only scholars representing educational psychology in teacher education, the consequences could be those against which Biesta has warned. To prevent this, I would suggest integrating more educational theory into educational psychology to strengthen educational psychology’s relevance for subjectification. The rejection of all versions of educational psychology as possible *educational* psychology, with relevance for subjectification, is unacceptable and might prevent marginalized children from receiving the educational assistance they need. In other words, the rejection of educational psychology’s potential to clarify aspects of subjectification might in the end hinder the work of practitioners.

9. I do not argue here for any integration of traditions, rather, that more contact is necessary in the struggle to address issues such as freedom and responsibility, learning versus teaching, comprehension and morality, discontinuity and uniqueness, etc. Some specific contact areas should be mentioned from the broad field of theories brought into educational psychology on issues such as intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, internal versus external attribution, metacognition, volition, decision-making, and moral development. Such issues should be addressed in discussions regarding what it means to be an independent, free, and responsible person. One fundamental question is whether or how the third-person language of psychology can be turned into a first-person perspective without self-management-instrumentalism as a consequence. The idea of reducing external rewards when managing behavior might represent an example of a link between Biesta’s “weak pedagogy” and educational psychology.

10. One final point is the discussion on learning, “learnification,” and constructivism. It should be clear that Biesta has an important message about the one-sided, learning-influenced discourse in much of educational practice, politics, and theory, which does not include a focus on the purpose and aims in education. However, the analytic distinction between teaching and learning should

96. Biesta uses the term “naturalization of learning” regarding “the tendency to see learning as an entirely natural phenomenon” (*The Beautiful Risk of Education*, 68).

not exclude educational psychology's interest in content. In his critique, Biesta stresses the emphasis on individualism within constructivism. However, he also clarifies that constructivism has many versions, e.g., socioculturally oriented constructivism, whose ideas about appropriation also include dialogical "receiving" processes. Therefore, socioculturally oriented constructivism is an example of how to build a bridge between content and (abstract) learning processes in educational psychology. Learning as comprehension might also help to illuminate how to respond as free and responsible persons, and teaching for learning ("studenting") does not necessarily exclude openness, uniqueness, and uncertainty. This does not mean that the language of learning (and development) is sufficient as an educational language; however, it does have something to offer, even in the domain of subjectification.