The Subjectification Function of Education: A Proposal for a Cross-Curricular Understanding

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INTRODUCTION

In a 2009 article, Biesta wrote that "education generally performs three different (but related…) functions," which he called "the qualification, socialisation and subjectification function of education."[1] The article has become widely cited and the subjectification function, in particular, has received attention as an important educational lens. However, there are indications that it is challenging for educators to grasp this concept and thus to recognize when their educational practice expands or constrains the subjectification function.

In this paper, I analyze why subjectification is challenging to interpret in relation to traditional curriculum subjects, and propose that Biesta's three functions come into sharper relief when understood through six ways of relating to the world: epistemic, ethical, political, technical, physical, and aesthetic. After providing a description of Biesta's three functions and the framework to which it responds, I give examples from educational research that suggest that the subjectification function has not yet been interpreted as richly and broadly as the concept might suggest. I introduce six ways of relating to the world and how they illuminate the functions of education. Finally, I argue that this way of thinking about the curriculum, which cuts across subject areas, is helpful both to practitioners and scholars for understanding the subjectification function of education.

EDUCATION'S THREE FUNCTIONS

Biesta's framing appears to be in direct response to a 2007 document by the Dutch Education Council, an advisory body of the national

government, in which the Council writes, with reference to earlier Dutch scholarship: "It is common to distinguish a number of main functions of education: qualification, selection and allocation, and socialization. Society expects schools to perform all of these functions."[2] The qualification function, as defined by the Council, refers to the schools' role in equipping students "with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are relevant for the job market and with which graduates can sustain and develop themselves in society."[3] Selection and allocation refer to the familiar "sifting and sorting" role of the school, but include the explicitly meritocratic idea that selection and allocation for further education, jobs, and other social positions ought to happen based on students' abilities and merits.[4] Socialization, finally, refers to the transmission of "generally accepted" social values that "people need in order to function in society."[5]

The Council recognizes that the qualification and selection/allocation functions are tightly connected. Biesta's proposal merges these functions and adds the subjectification function, which the Council does not mention as a separate function. Biesta defines the qualification function as the school's role "in providing [students] with the knowledge, skills and understanding and often also with the dispositions and forms of judgement that allow them to 'do something' – a 'doing' which can range from the very specific … to the much more general."[6] The socialization function involves "the many ways in which, through education, we become members of and part of particular social, cultural and political 'orders.'"[7] Finally, the subjectification function refers to the ways in which education enables students in "ways of being that hint at independence from [existing] orders; ways of being in which the individual is not simply a 'specimen' of a more encompassing order."[8]

Biesta does not explicitly argue for any particular function; rather, he argues that discussions about "good education" should always be understood as a "composite question," that is, a question that must address all three of these functions.[9] However, by putting forward these three functions, and not the three listed by the Dutch Education Coun-

cil, Biesta highlights "subjectification" as a function worth naming separately. As I have argued elsewhere, I believe that subjectification ought to be a function of educational practices for them to be considered education at all.[10] Moreover, subjectification is worthy of separate attention in light of current pressures to focus on qualification and socialization; such pressures include the growing trend of competency- and other outcomes-based education (which serves both the qualification and socialization functions), as well as a focus on emotional self-regulation (socialization).

UNDERSTANDING SUBJECTIFICATION IN RELATION TO CURRICULUM

In teaching Biesta's work in a teacher education program, I observed that student teachers found subjectification a challenging idea. Student teachers who did not already have an understanding of the concept of subjectivity struggled to understand subjectification as an educational function. Some mistook it for the tension students experience if the socializing influence of the home environment (e.g., religious beliefs) and the qualifying influence of the school environment (e.g., emphasis on science) are at odds with each other. This experience has led me to wonder how practicing teachers or student teachers elsewhere understand the concept, and how it has or has not informed their practice.

In a recent study with twelve elementary school teachers in the Netherlands, Van Waveren found that the teachers struggled to make sense of the concept of subjectification, or to recognize the concept in their educational practice.[11] Nakai, Yonezawa, and Biseth, in examining their teacher education classes in Japan and Norway for evidence that the three functions were being served, propose that student teachers' critical reflection on their classes, including suggestions for other teaching materials or methods, were indicators of subjectification.[12] However, the authors did not discuss whether their focus on opportunities for critical reflection was a robust interpretation of the concept of subjectification. Hasslöf and Malmberg, in a study with twenty secondary

teachers in Sweden who were discussing Education for Sustainable Development, found that critical thinking emerged as the strongest theme in the focus groups. However, while "critical thinking invites room for subjectification," an emphasis on critical thinking did not automatically mean that the subjectification function was being served, as some of the study participants interpreted critical thinking in ways more aligned with qualification and socialization.[13]

In order to explain what the socialization, qualification, and subjectification functions look like in education, Biesta gives two examples, namely mathematics education and citizenship education. Subjectification lets itself be explained quite well in citizenship education, namely as "the promotion of a kind of citizenship that is not merely about the reproduction of a predefined template but takes political agency seriously."[14] However, when it comes to mathematics education, the idea of subjectification becomes strained. Biesta writes:

We can also ask what kind of opportunities a field like mathematics might offer our students for subjectification, that is, for becoming a particular kind of person, e.g., a person who, through the power or mathematical reasoning is able to gain a more autonomous or considered position towards tradition and common sense. Or we might explore the moral possibilities of mathematics – e.g., by treating division in relation to sharing or to questions about fairness and justice – and, through this, use the potential of mathematics to contribute to subjectification.[15]

The kind of opportunities for subjectification that mathematics offers appear to be a means to ends outside of mathematics. In other words, mathematics education does not offer opportunities for mathematical subjectification, specifically, but rather for learning analytic and reasoning skills that could transfer to other domains, such as ethics, in which these skills can have subjectifying effects.

Other education scholars who have taken up Biesta's work have

done so mostly in relation to forms of citizenship education or with an explicit focus on political subjectification in sustainability education. For example, Sandahl discusses how the three functions of education can manifest themselves in citizenship education as part of social studies curriculum.[16] Franch examines the three functions in global citizenship education (GCE), concluding that "in much of GCE practice, teachers and educators tend to focus on qualification and socialization, thus merging a discourse centered on global competences with one emphasizing cosmopolitan values and 'good global citizenship.'"[17] Hasslöf and Malmberg analyze how much room for political subjectification is left in education for sustainable development in Sweden.[18] None of these authors discusses the functions in more traditional school subjects such as mathematics, natural sciences, or language and literature.

A PROPOSAL FOR A CROSS-CURRICULAR UNDERSTANDING OF SUBJECTIFICATION

One of the main reasons that the subjectification function does not become clearer when understood in relation to traditional school subjects is that many of these were designed primarily as areas of knowledge and skill. Such areas of knowledge and skill map most clearly onto the qualification function. Biesta acknowledges this when he writes that a subject such as mathematics "clearly is about the acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding."[19] The socialization function can be fulfilled by explicit curricular elements, such as "circle time" in early childhood education or the recent introduction of "self-efficacy" lessons in a Canadian secondary school, but also happens outside or across explicit curriculum, for example through particular pedagogical approaches or a broader school ethos.[20] In addition, there is a socializing aspect to being introduced, via school curriculum, to what a given society considers "common knowledge" for its members (for example, the accepted spelling of the official language(s)). The subjectification function is, by definition, what exceeds the categories of curriculum subjects and pre-designed types of socialization, as "it is precisely not about the

insertion of 'newcomers' into existing orders, but about ways of being that hint at independence from such orders; ways of being in which the individual is not simply a 'specimen' of a more encompassing order."[21] The idea that students can come into the world as unique subjects does not mean that they are somehow no longer affected by the influences of socialization and qualification, but rather that they transcend or resist these influences to emerge as agentic and unique subjects.

I propose that it is helpful to understand subjectification in six basic ways in which people relate to the world.[22] These types of relation to the world sometimes involve particular subject areas but, more typically, cut across multiple subjects. The educational functions of qualification and socialization can also be understood in these types of relation, and in what follows I will give brief examples of all three functions. The six ways of relating to the world are, themselves, interrelated; their separation in the model below serves the purpose of interpreting and clarifying the subjectification function of education.

•Epistemic relations to the world: these involve what people can know about the world, and how they can come to know it. This type of relation receives extensive attention in education and cuts across many knowledge-focused subjects, including natural sciences, social sciences, mathematics, and literature. Schools serve the function of epistemic qualification if students acquire the knowledge that prepares them for further education and the world of work, such as literacy and numeracy. Fricker defines epistemic socialization quite specifically, as "a social training of the interpretative and affective attitudes in play when we are told things by other people."[23] In other words, through epistemic socialization students learn to be more skeptical of some people's claims than of the claims of others, depending on the social location of the knower. I would broaden the idea of epistemic socialization to include the social training not only in what knowers lend most credence to, but

also in ideas of what knowledge is of most worth and what kinds of methods are most respected in arriving at that knowledge. Epistemic subjectification happens when the student can be a knowing subject, reach judgements about the relative importance of the knowledge they have been taught, question why they have not been taught certain knowledge, and critically assess their epistemic socialization.

•Ethical relations to the world: these involve how people ought to treat and respond to the world and others in it. A common form of ethical qualification is the teaching of moral reasoning, whether in general or within a particular professional context. The qualifying function is evident in the expectation that students can demonstrate that they can identify the relevant values or considerations and provide good reasoning for their ethical decisions (think of, for instance, the principles of biomedical ethics for medical students). Socialization in ethical relations involves the teaching of what a given society or community sees as "proper" morality. For example, some students are socialized to approve of eating non-human animals, whereas others are socialized into rejecting this. For ethical subjectification, the student needs to be able to come into the world as a unique moral subject. One way of interpreting this is through Levinas's conception of subjectivity as an "I" who is posited not only "straightaway for-the-other" but also "as the only one who is ready to respond and to bear this responsibility."[24] I will return to this point in the conclusion section.

•Political relations to the world: these involve how we organize society through power and collective decision-making. Political qualification involves the teaching of knowledge and skills that are considered necessary for citizenship and running for office. It includes knowledge of political systems and skills for different political processes ranging from consensus-building to the organization of political protests. Political socialization

is the cultivation of positive attitudes toward particular kinds of political systems, and the skills considered important in these systems. For example, some students are socialized into socialist, one-party regimes, whereas others are socialized into more democratic ones. Proponents of a deliberative conception of democracy may stress the importance of students becoming comfortable in their schools with the kinds of interactions and forms of decision-making they will need as citizens later. Within this deliberative frame, for example, Englund writes:

At the societal level and in a long-term perspective of a living and sustainable democracy, it is fundamental that the socializing institutions of society, such as schools, create dispositions for public deliberation over important moral and political questions, and as far as developing a deliberative attitude and competence is concerned, citizenship literacy may be seen as a predisposition.[25]

Political subjectification happens when students come to conceive of themselves as political beings and actors beyond their political qualification and socialization. Depending on one's conception of politics, political subjectification can be understood more broadly—e.g., in Arendt's sense as the disclosure through speech of one's uniqueness in a space of plurality—or more narrowly—e.g., in Rancière's sense as the coming into being of a political subject who names a disagreement with a form of inequality in society.[26] I will discuss this in more detail in the conclusion section.

•Technical relations to the world: these involve what we can make and build in and of the world. Technical qualification is, of course, easiest to see in designated types of vocational education and further technical education programs. Whether a plumbing apprentice or a chemical engineering student, technical qualification involves ensuring, sometimes via licensure or certification, that the student has the requisite knowledge and skill to carry out a particular (range of) technical task(s).

Students are also socialized into particular socially accepted and expected technical relations to the world. For example, depending on the social context, it might be expected that every child learns, minimally, how to sharpen their own axe, build a shelter, or sew on a button. Technical subjectification refers to students' coming into the world as particular kinds of "making subjects." This means that making certain things in certain ways, as well as a relation to the materials involved in this making (e.g., wood for the carpenter, soil for the farmer), become a part of their subjectivity.

•Physical relations to the world: these involve people's direct, corporeal ways of relating to the world, including how their bodies move and what they eat. Physical qualification is the educational function of teaching knowledge and skills required for physical safety and wellbeing, whether in general or in the context of particular jobs or tasks. For example, students may be taught why they should apply sunscreen to prevent sunburn, or what to do when they cut their finger. In the subject of physical education, students may be taught techniques for running faster or throwing an object further. Physical socialization involves learning how to fit one's body into a given society's expectations, including where it is appropriate to move in certain ways, where it is acceptable to carry out certain bodily functions, and what are considered "normal" food items. Physical subjectification means that the student gains independence in how they move their body and relate physically to the world. It is not a corporeal rebellion for the sake of rebellion, such as when young children take off their clothes in public just to test adults' rules; rather, it is a considered independence, within the constraints of the body's abilities. For example, a young woman who has been socialized into sitting with her legs crossed, speaking quietly, and generally taking up little physical space may decide that is not how she wants to be in the world. A deaf

student who has learned to hide his deafness by perfecting his lip-reading may choose to sign freely.

•Aesthetic relations to the world: these involve people's sensory perceptions of the world, especially as these pertain to experiences of beauty and pleasure. Aesthetic qualification can be understood as students learning both the knowledge and skills of visual art, music, literature, and so forth. Learning to play a musical instrument and learning to distinguish impressionist from expressionist paintings are both examples of aesthetic qualification. Aesthetic socialization refers to the inculcation of "good taste," meaning the aesthetic preferences considered desirable within a given society or, more commonly, within particular social classes or ethnic groups. Coming into the world as an aesthetic subject involves an emancipation from the learned conventions of what is beautiful and an agency in making aesthetic judgements. For some, aesthetic subjectification will happen and manifest itself in their own practice as artists.

Just as qualification, socialization, and subjectification are interrelated functions, the ways of relating to the world are not discrete. Both are models meant to sharpen our thinking about the purposes of education. Through the framework of different ways of relating to the world, it is clearer, for example, why citizenship education provides clear and helpful examples of subjectification, whereas Biesta's examples from mathematics education are less obvious and more removed from mathematics itself. Citizenship education is the main and most explicit subject area that concerns itself with students' political relations to the world. Mathematics education, by contrast, is only one of several subjects that concern themselves primarily with students' epistemic relations to the world. Although we can understand "epistemic subjectification" in this cross-curricular way, it is more challenging, and perhaps even forced, to try to understand "mathematical subjectification" or oth-

er subject-specific forms within this broader epistemic way of relating to the world.

CONCLUSION

The impetus for the argument I have presented is twofold: first, an agreement with Biesta that the subjectification function of education is important; second, an observation that it can be challenging to imagine what subjectification can look like in educational practice if the concept is interpreted within traditional subject areas. I have argued that understanding the functions of education in six ways of relating to the world (epistemic, ethical, political, technical, physical, and aesthetic) allows especially the subjectification function to be understood as providing students with opportunities to come into the world as unique epistemic subjects, ethical subjects, political subjects, and so forth.

While I believe the framework above is helpful to teachers for understanding subjectification, this is an empirical claim yet to be tested in practice. Regardless of the outcome of such empirical study, I believe the six ways of relating to the world contribute to the scholarship on subjectification, because they enable a better understanding of the various conceptual traces that intersect in this concept. What I mean by this is that "subjectification" can be interpreted along multiple philosophical lineages, including the work of Levinas and Rancière, whom I have mentioned, as well as that of Arendt. In his body of work, Biesta has made use of work by all three of these scholars, but he does not mention any of them in the 2009 article in which he introduces the three functions of education. Elsewhere, I have analyzed how Biesta's arguments for or about subjectification variously connect the concept to Levinas's, Arendt's, or Rancière's work. I argue that, while the various conceptions of subjectification cannot be conflated, they are not necessarily incompatible as educational aims.[27]

Looking at the six ways of relating to the world, it becomes clear that "subjectification" in the Rancièrean sense is relevant in political

relations to the world. Rancière defines subjectification as "the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience."[28] What this means is that subjectification happens when a person disidentifies from a role or position in an existing social order, and re-identifies in a way that names a disagreement with that social order. Disidentifying from the role of "woman" and re-identifying as "feminist" is an example of such political subjectification.

By contrast, "subjectification" in the Levinasian sense is relevant in ethical relations to the world. For Levinas, one does not become a subject until one responds to the Other's call or demand. Subjectification in the sense of a unique human subject coming into the world thus takes on a specifically ethical meaning: "Levinas focuses on the characteristics of situations in which it matters that I am I, and not someone else."[29] These are situations in which it matters that I, and not someone else, am responding to the call or demand of the Other.

Finally, Arendt's work can be used to understand both political subjectification, specifically, and subjectification across the ways of relating to the world, more broadly. Biesta writes that Arendt's work is "helpful for developing the idea of 'coming into presence.'"[30] Arendt stresses the idea of natality, which refers to "the new beginning inherent in birth" which "can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting."[31] Biesta comments that the concept of subjectification combines the idea that an agentic subject can take initiative in the world, and the idea that this subject will subsequently be subjected to the world's response to that initiative: "Although it is true that we reveal our 'distinct uniqueness' through what we say and do, everything depends on how others will take up our initiatives."[32]

While Arendt emphasizes action as the range of activities par excellence in which natality manifests itself, she acknowledges that the

reproductive activities of labor and the productive activities of work also offer opportunities for natality to make itself felt in the world. My descriptions of subjectification in the various ways of relating to the world illustrate that, "in this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities."[33] Understood in the sense of natality, subjectification thus has a more general and en-compassing sense and may involve all six ways of relating to the world.

While I agree that education serves, and should serve, the pur-pose of subjectification, the question I will end with is whether educa-tion should fulfil the subjectifying function in all ways for all students. My sense—one that I cannot investigate fully in this paper—is that this would likely be too much to ask. Depending on the educational context and the student's abilities, I imagine it could be acceptable if a student does not experience some form(s) of subjectification as long as they experience others. For example, in K-12 schooling, it may be acceptable that a student does not experience technical subjectification as long as they experience epistemic subjectification. Aesthetic subjectification could be of prime importance at an art academy or music conserva-tory but not in K-12 schooling. All students must have opportunities for subjectification in at least some ways of relating to the world. The interpretive framework I have proposed of ways of relating to the world enables a more focused discussion of what kinds of subjectification matter in different kinds of education and for different kinds of students. I look forward to such focused discussions with teachers to gain further insight into how a better understanding of subjectification might affect their teaching practice.

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1 Gert Biesta, "Good Education in an Age of Measurement: On the Need to Reconnect with the Question of Purpose in Education," Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability 21, no. 1 (2009): 39.

2 Onderwijsraad, Sturen van Vernieuwende Onderwijspraktijken [Direct-
ing Innovative Educational Practices], The Hague: Onderwijsraad (2007),
16. All translations from this document are mine.

3 Onderwijsraad, 16.

4 Onderwijsraad, 16-17.

5 Onderwijsraad, 17.

6 Biesta, "Good Education," 39-40.

7 Biest, 40.

8 Biesta, 40.

9 Biesta, 41.

10 Claudia Ruitenberg, Unlocking the World: Education in an Ethic of
Hospitality (Boulder: Paradigm, 2015), 4. It should be noted that there
is translational slippage between the Dutch onderwijs, which refers to
school-based education, and the English "education."

11 Jeroen van Waveren, Burgerschapsonderwijs en de Leerkracht Binnen
het Speelveld van Pedagogiek en Politiek [Citizenship Education and the
Teacher on the Playing Field of Education and Politics] (doctoral disser-
tation, Utrecht, the Netherlands: University of Humanistic Studies, 2020),
170.

12 Yuka Nakai, Takashi Yonezawa, and Heidi Biseth, "Teacher Educa-
tion as a High-Quality Learning Environment," Bulletin of the Graduate
School of Education, Hiroshima University, Part I, no. 65 (2016): 15-24.

13 Helen Hasslöf and Claes Malmberg, "Critical Thinking as Room for
Subjectification in Education for Sustainable Development," Environ-
mental Education Research 21, no. 2 (2015): 253.

14 Biesta, "Good Education," 42.

15 Biesta, 43.

16 Johan Sandahl, "Social Studies as Socialisation, Qualification and Sub-jectification," (paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research, Montreal, August 2015), http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1163270/FULLTEXT01.pdf.

17 Sara Franch, "Global Citizenship Education Between Qualification, Socialization, and Subjectification," in The Palgrave Handbook of Citizenship and Education, ed. A. Peters (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 12.

18 Hasslöf and Malmberg, "Critical Thinking."

19 Biesta, "Good Education," 43.

20 See, for example, Lena Rubinstein Reich, "Circle Time in Preschool: An Analysis of Educational Praxis," European Early Childhood Education Research Journal 2, no. 1 (1994): 51-59; Shauna Tominey and Megan McClelland, "Red Light, Purple Light: Findings From a Randomized Trial Using Circle Time Games to Improve Behavioral Self-Regulation in Preschool," Early Education and Development 22, no. 3 (2011): 489-519; Jesse Johnston, "Why Mental-Health Teaching Starts in Kindergarten at This B.C. School," CBC News, October 25, 2019, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/north-vancouver-school-district-pro-gram-1.5334828.

21 Biesta, "Good Education," 40.

22 While I believe these six types of relations are important and illustrate subjectification well, I do not claim this list is exhaustive. For example,

some may want to add spiritual or religious ways of relating to the world to the framework.

23 Miranda Fricker, "Epistemic Injustice and a Role for Virtue in the Politics of Knowing," Metaphilosophy 34, no. 1/2 (2003): 161.

24 Emmanuel Levinas, "Being-for-the-Other," in Is It Righteous To Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 117.

25 Tomas Englund, "The Potential of Education for Creating Mutual Trust: Schools as Sites for Deliberation," Educational Philosophy and Theory 43, no. 3 (2011): 241.

26 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1998), 175ff; Jacques Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), e.g., 13.

27 Claudia Ruitenberg, "The Double Subjectification Function of Education: Reconsidering Hospitality and Democracy," in Education and the Political: New Theoretical Articulations, ed. Tomasz Szkudlarek (Rotterdam: Sense, 2013), 102.

28 Rancière, Disagreement, 35.

29 Gert Biesta, "On the Weakness of Education" in Philosophy of Education 2009, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society, 2010), 359.

30 Gert Biesta, Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy (Boulder: Paradigm, 2010), 82.

31 Arendt, The Human Condition, 9.

32 Biesta, Good Education, 83.

33 Arendt, The Human Condition, 9.