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The elementary forms of educational life: understanding the meaning of education from the concept of "social responsivity"

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Abstract This article makes a theoretical contribution to social psychology of education by applying Johan Asplund's social psychological theory to the educational context. More specifically, the article discusses how the question of purpose of education (Biesta in Educ Assess Eval Account 21(1):33–46, 2009; God utbildning i mätningens tidevarv [Good education in the age of measurement]. Liber, Stockholm, 2011) could be conceived from Asplund's (Det sociala livets elementära former. [The elementary forms of social life]. Bokförlaget Korpen, Göteborg, 1992) concept of "social responsivity". Adopting Asplund's concept, I problematize, discuss, and supplement Biesta's model, especially his concept of "subjectification" and from here tentatively examine "existentialisation". Existentialisation is proposed as a tool for understanding the overall meaning of education. To illustrate the theoretical argument, a brief classroom episode is analyzed in detail.

Keywords Asplund · Biesta · Existentialisation · Social psychology of education · Social responsivity · Subjectification

1 Introduction

We are in a Swedish high school class. A teacher and 19 students are present. The subject is public speaking and the lesson has lasted about 17 min. The teacher wants the students to reflect on presentations they gave a couple of months before:

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17.25. Teacher: Do you remember what we had to improve? We brought up plus and minus. Do you remember what, what you weren't so good at? Magnus! Er… Johan!
17.37. Johan: Er… especially when we read: take pauses
17.41. Teacher: Yes! Exactly. You were too fast. So: take pauses. And more? Er… Maria?
17.50. Maria: More body language
17.51. Teacher: Yes! Body language. This time we don't allow anyone to sit. Now, you've got to try thinking about body language because …
17.59. Jakob: We got to …
17.59. Teacher: … now you have things to express
18.00. Jakob: … we got to have a higher such thing [points at the teacher's desk] so that we can stand like this… [pretending to be a lecturer].[1]

I freeze the frame, for now, but will return to it at the end of the article.

One of the most widely recognized ideas in pedagogical theory is that social interaction is a fundamental dimension of educational situations. "Interaction" means action-between and thus implies an idea of differentiation between two or more individuals. In another sense, differentiation is an important, though not often explicitly stated, idea in educational theory. Education implies social influence and some kind of change and improvement of the student. This, in turn, implies differentiation between "reality and potentiality" as Martin Buber (1947/2002, p. 103) puts it, between *who the student is* and *who he/she could become*.

Questions of interaction and differentiation are central in social psychological theory as well. According to the Swedish researcher Johan Asplund (1983), whose theory we will discuss in detail below, social psychology studies "a problematic distinction between individual and society" (p. 53; my translation). Asplund also defines social psychology as "a science *about the slash* between individual and society" (p. 62; my translation). In his magnum opus *The Elementary Forms of Social Life* (in Swedish: *Det sociala livets elementära former*, 1992) Asplund articulates yet another definition of the discipline. Social psychology, he proposes, is the science of a dialectical tension between *sociality* and *responsivity*. *Social responsivity* is probably Asplund's most significant concept; it addresses a basic anthropological question, namely, what it means to be human in relationship with others.

The present article contributes theoretically to social psychology of education by applying Asplund's social psychological theory to the educational context. More specifically, it discusses how the question of purpose of education could be conceived from the viewpoint of Asplund's concept of social responsivity.[2] First, I introduce the question of purpose, on the basis of John Dewey's conception and,

[1] The transcription is based on video documentation of classroom interaction. For an introduction to the study from which the episode is chosen, see Aspelin (2006).

[2] Asplund's works have not been translated into English and are unknown to the non-Scandinavian audience. To my knowledge, Asplund himself has not explicitly and specifically dealt with educational issues. On the whole, educational implications of his theory have hardly been discussed.

especially, Gert Biesta's widely acclaimed model. Next, I introduce and discuss Asplund's concept of social responsivity and apply it to the educational context and the question of educational purpose. Moreover, the question of purpose is reconstructed in terms of "the meaning of education." To provide a tool for that discussion and to supplement Biesta's model, I outline the term "existentialisation." Finally, I interpret the classroom situation described earlier microscopically, i.e., in some detail, in order to illustrate the relevance of the theoretical framework.

2 The purpose of education

In *Democracy and Education* (1916/1966, pp. 7–22) Dewey distinguishes between two basic modes of education. The first one is called informal, indirect, and incidental. Informal education is a temporary and "natural" process in all contexts in which people live together. The second mode, which Dewey describes as formal, direct, and intentional education, is a systematic, organized form of influence. Dewey asserts that transition from the first mode to the second—which virtually all children must undergo—is connected to palpable risks. Schoolwork could easily be separated from the lived experiences of the child and could thus become an abstract, alien activity. Therefore, Dewey emphasizes, it is an urgent task for educational theory to show how a balance could be achieved between the two modes.

Dewey is critical of the idea that the main purpose of education is to prepare children for society, i.e., to treat children as candidates for full citizenship. He indeed admits that education has more than a temporary and indirect form, in that it necessarily involves planned and organized elements—the growth of children does not solely take place at certain moments, but is a continuous, progressive process. However, precisely because education has the aim of preparing for the future and for an ever-changing existence, the current experiences need to be as rich and meaningful as possible. Thus, according to Dewey, good education prepares children and young people for democracy, but it is also—or should be—a democratic activity in itself.

Biesta (2011, p. 12) speaks of the importance of the question "what constitutes good education?" (my translation). Yet, he notes, the issue has almost disappeared from contemporary discourse. To revitalize the discussion, Biesta proposes a framework consisting of three concepts or "parameters". These concepts are analytical constructs of phenomena that overlap in real life (Biesta 2009, p. 41). Generally, education is assumed to fulfill three functions: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. To analyze what signifies good education, we must consider all three dimensions, but Biesta does not specify what the purpose of education is or should be. Instead, he constructs a model that may be used to address and explore the issues (ibid., pp. 39)

Education aims at qualifying children, young people, and adults. For example, school should equip students with competencies—facts, skills, abilities, attitudes, etc.—that they need in society and future work as well as in political life. Qualification is commonly regarded as the main purpose of school. The socialising function is also widely recognized and ideologically rooted; it includes integration of children and young people into existing sociocultural systems and the

development of certain (democratic) norms, values, behavioral patterns, etc. (Biesta 2009, p. 40).[3] The third purpose and function, however, is less well acknowledged or verbalized. Biesta (ibid, p. 29) describes subjectification as the opposite of the socialising function. It is not about incorporating children into existing orders, but rather about creating space for liberation from, and independence of, such orders:

> Education (…) also impacts on what we might refer to as processes of individuation or, as I prefer to call it, processes of subjectification—of becoming a subject. The *subjectification function* might perhaps best be understood as the opposite of the socialization function. 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 (Biesta 2009, p. 40).

Biesta (2011, pp. 80) suggests that subjectification to some extent involves liberation from social orders and has freedom of man in focus. Here, Biesta's argument is largely based on Hannah Arendt's idea of man becoming a unique individual in a world of plurality and difference. According to Biesta's reading of Arendt, what makes man unique is her "potential to do things that have never been done before" (Biesta 2011, p. 87, my translation).

If we follow Biesta (2009, 2011), subjectification is a vital ingredient in all education worthy of its name. Values such as freedom, independence and uniqueness should be at the focal point of activity. Some schools seem to limit themselves to qualification while others complement qualification with socialisation (perhaps with an overemphasis on the latter). We cannot take for granted that subjectification is given the central position it deserves. Thus, it may be regarded as a critical concept, one that challenges the dominant educational discourse. In Biesta's model, the democratic potential of school is closely related to the qualities of subjectification. Only within such a process could the purposes of qualification and socialisation be realized in a genuinely democratic way (Biesta 2011, p. 17).

Biesta deals with the problem of a tense relationship between individuality and sociality, that is, the problem that previously was described as central within both pedagogy and social psychology. I now turn to another theory that addresses this basic relational problem.

3 Social responsivity

Asplund (1992) develops a general social psychological theory about the elementary forms of social life. In other words, he explores the basic conditions of human behavior. Initially, the theory is positioned between two extremes. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim (1915/2001) defines "elementary form" as a collective, sociological phenomenon, placed outside of

[3] The concept of socialisation was developed by Emile Durkheim. In *Education and Sociology* (1956), he defines it as the process in which children and young people adapt to society by incorporating social norms.

individuals. In contrast, for the American sociologist George C. Homans—as in *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (1961)—elementary form is an individual psychological phenomenon, located inside individual consciousness. Asplund (1992), however, finds both positions reductionist, in that they over-emphasize either the societal or the individual aspect of reality. He takes a third position: not to find a compromise between the two extremes, but to transcend them. In elaborating the elementary forms of social life and, thereby, in defining the essence of man (p. 19), Asplund focuses on neither the individual, nor society, but on a dialectical, relational process in which the two poles are indissolubly connected.

At the core of Asplund's theory are two inter-related concepts. The first is *sociality* (in Swedish: *socialitet*), from the Latin *socialis* which could be translated as "being sociable." The second concept is *responsivity* (in Swedish: *responsivitet*), from the Latin *respondere*, meaning "to respond" or "to answer." The human being, Asplund claims, is socially responsive, a being that responds immediately and spontaneously to social stimuli. Such behavior is not a *consequence* of something; it cannot be deduced from either external or internal factors. It is simply the human constitution, our "natural form of existence" (p. 90, my translation). As long as we are not prevented from doing so, we act in a socially responsive way (Asplund 1991, p. 127, 1992, pp. 209–210). Everyday life is based on social responsivity; it is the form in which we meet our fellow beings naively and without reservation. Social responsivity is our elementary behavior. We cannot live without it, at least not without losing our normality (1992, p. 101).

As socially responsive beings, humans are active, open, curious, and interested in their surroundings. They are oriented towards the world in such tangible ways that they sometimes need to restrain themselves. "From the beginning," they are involved in interaction—in rapid, direct shifts between stimuli and responses—and in this process they use a kind of primitive language. Asplund (1992) argues that language presupposes social responsivity and that more sophisticated forms of language develop within a process of social responsivity. Here, Mead's (1934) influence on Asplund's thoughts becomes evident.[4]

Restrained and formal behavior is clearly not socially responsive. Social responsivity means spontaneous, fickle, playful, unreserved, unpremeditated, irregular, and improvised behavior. Furthermore, social responsivity is a *general* tendency. As such, it should not be confused with the specific tendency to *react* which, for example, signifies the human reflex. In the case of reflex, such as a hand on a hot object, there is an automatic link between stimulus and response. In comparison, the relationship between the terms "social" and "responsivity" is always, at least to some degree, ambiguous and uncertain (Asplund 1992, p. 33).

[4] Asplund (1992, p. 20) acknowledges Mead as his major source of influence. Asplund's (1992) reconstruction of Mead's theory—including the concept of "role taking"—is based on the 1934 book *Mind, Self and Society*. This volume is controversial, considering that it is composed of student notes taken at Mead's courses, along with manuscripts that Mead himself left. It is also well known that the book is largely influenced by its editor. Moreover, various researchers—for instance Hans Joas (1985)—has pointed out that there is a huge difference between the book and Mead's earlier work. I would like to thank professor Gert Biesta for reminding me of this problem. However, in this article I choose not to discuss the problem any further. I try to stay close to Asplund's (1992) theory, and, consequently, accept the idea that *Mind, Self and Society* actually contains Mead's thought.

Asplund (1992, p. 16) emphasizes that he is elaborating neither a consensus theory nor a conflict theory. For example, we should not think that social responsivity necessarily implies pro-social actions. Elementary behavior is pre-moral. For instance, it cannot be expressed or explained in terms of egoism or altruism, and it occurs in antagonistic as well as friendly relationships. Thus, the history of social responsivity holds both good and evil themes. Furthermore, we should not think that people live in unbroken streams of social responsivity. According to Asplund (1991, 1992), modern society is structured by different kinds of social orders and games that inevitably leave their marks on elemental sociality.

We are probably tempted to see social responsivity as an individual attribute, trait, tendency, or attitude. However, Asplund does not associate the phenomenon with single, separated individuals and their actions. Instead, he claims that social responsivity takes place in a dynamic, inter-human system. Thus, we should not say that the individual comes first, and then engages in social responsive behavior. Social responsivity exists prior to the individual's "entry"—originally as well as momentarily. So, it seems more adequate to say that individuality is a product of social responsivity than to say that social responsivity is a product of individuals (cf. Asplund 1992, p. 19). To be more precise: self and consciousness *are* social responsivity (ibid., p. 105). Essentially, social life takes place in a joint area. The locus of Asplund's theory is in the slash between the terms in "individual/society", or, if we use Meads (1934/47) concept, between I and Me in "I/Me".[5]

So far, I have tried to account for and interpret central aspects of Asplund's theory, focusing on the concept of social responsivity. Now I need to supplement this line of reasoning by introducing two further concepts: *role taking* and "*asocial irresponsivity*" (Swedish: *asocial responslöshet*).[6] Asplund (1992) does not elaborate these concepts much, but still they are significant parts of his theory.

Asplund's theory (1992) includes Mead's (1934) concept of role taking. If we follow Mead, the process of "taking the role of the other" develops through interaction, first with "significant others," then in relationship to groups, and later in relationship to "society" in a wide, abstract sense. Asplund (1992) says that we cannot speak of role taking on the most elementary level of human behavior; instead, it is gradually learned in processes of interaction.[7] We could assume that the small child participates in a rudimentary form of interaction. Still, social

[5] I will not go into any details regarding the relationship between Asplund's and Mead's theories. However, let me make one comment: from my reading of Asplund, the phases "social" and "responsivity" are counterparts to Mead's concepts of *Me* and *I*. Still, I think that Asplund's concepts, even more distinctly than Mead's, change our focus from the subjective level to a reality that is actually located between subjects.

[6] A third aspect could be the relationship between subject and object. Asplund (1992) primarily applies social responsivity to situations in which people are acting face to face. Yet, he also stresses that the relationship between individuals and objects—for example, when he refers to activities such as flying a kite and driving a car—could be experienced as social activities. In such situations, the individual attributes human qualities to the object, that is, responds to the object as if it were an actual partner in interaction. A prerequisite for counting objects as relevant in terms of social responsivity is that they function in a similar way as living beings do, that is, they express responses (Asplund 1992, p. 52).

[7] As was indicated before, I choose to stick to Asplund's reading of the concept of role taking, based on Mead (1934) and will not discuss alternative interpretations of Mead's concept.

responsivity in its "mature" form implies the process of role taking. Asplund specifies the relationship between social responsivity and role taking in another sense: as part of elementary social behavior, role taking is spontaneous and indiscriminate; that is, one person responds to the mere presence of another. Thus, if someone acts with discretion—structured by categories such as status, position, etc.—the process of role taking is no longer elemental (p. 217).

Furthermore, Asplund's theory should not be regarded as exclusively about social responsivity, but also about its limitations. On the elementary level, the individual is absorbed in interaction with his/her environment. However, Asplund says, "as soon as we turn to something, we turn away from everything else" (1992, p. 13, my translation). To demonstrate the meaning of the "turning-away aspect," Asplund introduces the concept of asocial irresponsivity. Although this phenomenon is not regarded as original—but rather as a type of behavior that is constructed in specific ways, within specific societies and in specific times—Asplund proposes that the elementary forms of social life consist of a dialectical relationship between social responsivity and asocial irresponsivity. Asocial irresponsivity represents the opposite of social responsivity; it means to refrain from answering the elementary call. Society, Asplund (p. 218) remarks, cannot be built on an uncontrolled, kaleidoscopic behavior. From the perspective of an individual, it would not be reasonable or even possible to respond to all kinds of stimuli. We need to draw a demarcation line between ourselves and others, make ourselves unreachable, and exclude parts of the world from our immediate field of attention. Such limited behavior is a result of learning processes. In one way or another we are "*induced* to act as asocially irresponsitive—while social responsivity occurs by itself" (p. 12–13, my translation). As was implied earlier, social responsivity in its original sense is wild and naive. To this we may add that, everyday life in a "primitive" society, from Asplund's point of view, is woven by more or less unbroken flows of sociality and responsivity. In contrast, a human being in modern society is not considered socialised or grown up until his/her social responsivity has been strongly reduced (p. 29, 41). In other words, modern society is based on a more or less sophisticated control of social responsivity. Everyday life, as represented for instance in ethno-methodological research literature, is a disciplined, ritualized form of social responsivity (p. 126). In such a context, there is little room for the original playfulness and irregularity.

Asplund describes the history of modern society as a process of discipline, that is, of systematic attempts "to eliminate a free social responsivity and replace it with clear-cut connections between stimuli and responses, in which the responses are of the kind that benefits those in power" (1992, p. 81, my translation). An overall impression from Asplund's works is that society typically suppresses or neglects social responsivity. For example, the widespread mental problem known as *burnout* could be seen as a sign of a growing restriction of elemental sociality (cf., Asplund, pp. 139–180). Asplund underlines that a vibrant culture requires *redundancy* (p. 64).[8] In a hyper-rationalized social system, where redundancy has almost been wiped out and where social life is transformed into predictable and highly regulated

[8] This concept, Asplund (1992) borrows from information technology.

operations, there seems to be no alternative than to "float out" (p. 64). Nevertheless, even in strictly regulated social institutions, elementary behavior could not be totally eliminated. And even if a specific individual systematically tried to turn himself into a non-human being—which in Asplund's framework means a completely autonomous individual—he would inevitably be reminded of his elementary, socially responsive nature (cf. pp. 93–107).

4 Social responsivity in the educational situation

As we have seen, Asplund (1992) constructs a general social psychological theory of social behavior in all kinds of situations, eras, and places. A fundamental condition for human beings is that we are inclined to respond when someone addresses us. We "come alive" in presence of others. We are open selves, curious about our fellow beings and our environment. Normally, everyday life includes social responsivity; there is at least some room for unpredictable, immediate, and improvisational moments. The elementary form of social life is located neither in the individual nor in the group but in a vibrant slash between the levels. Thus, the basic unit of the social psychological as well as the pedagogical analysis is, to quote from Mead (1934, p. 82), "an ongoing social process of experience and behavior in which any given group of human individuals is involved, and upon which the existence and development of their minds, selves, and self-consciousness depend". Mead's framework as well as Asplund's emphasizes the present moment—what happens here and now in human conduct. The human being is in constant motion, in creation, in the making.

From Asplund's (and Mead's) viewpoint, any social situation is somewhat organized; for the most part, things do not occur randomly (cf. Zygmunt Bauman 1992). Maybe we could say that social situations are characterized by alternation between social responsivity and asocial irresponsivity. *The educational* situation generally includes a highly predictable, ritualized, and routine activity; a statement that, for instance, gets support from contemporary classroom research (see, for example, Aspelin 2006). In other words, we could assume that social responsivity in the educational situation has a comparatively disciplined form. To be able to participate successfully in pedagogical activities, i.e. to some extent realize the purposes of education (Biesta 2009, 2011), elementary behavior needs to be regulated, adapted to explicit as well as implicit rules and patterns of interaction. Now, Asplund's theory reveals that a participant in such a situation, no matter how well disciplined he or she may seem, is basically a socially responsive being. As I interpret this argument, we could say that "good education" (Biesta 2011, p. 12) is built on interaction where connections between stimuli and responses are not programmed. Correspondingly, educational activities in which social responsivity is highly restricted and forced upon the actors could hardly be conceived in this way. The same goes for activities in which the dialectical relationship between social responsivity and asocial irresponsivity has ceased, i.e. where the first aspect has been reduced and replaced by a more or less pure version of the second.

Before I continue with the main argument and reconnect to the question of purpose of education, a minor clarification seems to be in place. One could say that the analysis so far is still not very specific regarding the educational situation. To compensate for this, I will make a small detour and reflect on the concept of role taking. Buber (1947/2002) claims that pedagogical role taking has a specific form. The educational relationship—and primarily the teacher's attitude in this relationship—is structured by *inclusion*. Inclusion, Buber says, is "the elemental experience with which the real process of education begins and on which it is based" (p. 114). Moreover, he asserts that the educational relationship—and other relationships in which one party has the task of influencing another by purposeful action—could not consist of a *total* inclusion (Buber 1947/2002, pp. 118–119; 1923/2000, pp. 122–123). Such a relationship has a structure with specific limits; it is asymmetrical, that is, it could be understood as a figure that has different forms when we look at it from different sides. Accordingly, the attitude of the teacher in the relationship is essentially different from the attitude of the student (cf. Aspelin 2014).

Now we seem to face a dilemma. Buber's concept of inclusion implies that pedagogical role taking is conditional and asymmetrical while, in turn, Asplund's concept of social responsivity implies that role taking, in its elementary sense, is indiscriminate and symmetrical. Could these two positions be combined? I think so. What we are dealing with is two sides of the same coin. For this reason, we could distinguish between two types of role taking in the educational context: firstly, an advanced and conditional type, in which teacher and student approach each other (and others) in radically different ways. Secondly, an elementary and unconditional type, in which teacher and student act spontaneously and unreservedly towards each other (and others).[9] Asplund's work (1992) is especially useful for exploring the second aspect. From my reading of this, we should not conceive elementary behavior, at least not in its purest form, as molded by formal relationships. If we say that a teacher and a student act socially responsive, we imply a relational process that holds certain qualities, such as immediacy—a response is not delayed but follows instantly from a stimulus—and uncertainty—it is not possible to infer what response will follow from a certain stimulus or to observe a specific response and decide what stimulus preceded it. A relationship characterized by immediacy and uncertainty Asplund (1992, p. 52) labels as *responsorium*. In a responsorium, the teacher and the student meet in a symmetrical relational process and take the role of the other as a concrete person, not as an abstract, societal being.[10]

I do not intend to elaborate this distinction any further; it functions as a background to the following discussion. But before I continue, let me just add that Buber, in a public conversation with Carl Rogers (Anderson and Cissna 1997), seemed to admit that his concept of inclusion represented a formal aspect of sociality; he also acknowledged that teachers and students *could* meet in total

[9] The distinction between two essential aspects of social life, implied in the argument here, finds support in several pairs of concepts, developed in more or less classical social theories (see Aspelin 2010).

[10] Asplund (1992) develops the concepts of "concrete sociality" and "abstract sociality". For reasons of space, I do not discuss them here.

reciprocity, inside the frames, so to speak. Seemingly, such arguments are more in line with Asplund's framework.[11]

5 On the question of purpose in education

Biesta (2009, p. 39) empathizes that the concept of education—as opposed to the concept of learning—"always implies a relationship: someone educating someone else and the person educating thus having a certain sense of what the purpose of his or her activities is". "Purpose" is here synonymous with "aim" and "end". When such words appear in educational contexts, they generally imply an idea of intention: that someone (school, teacher) more or less consciously focuses on something (learning content, learning outcome) in relationship with someone (student, students). We could say that "purpose" is considered to exist "outside" of the teacher–student relationship, i.e., in the reflexive activity of the teacher, in the collegial discourse, or in policy documents, etc. However, as implied in Dewey's (1916/1966) distinction between formal and informal education, this is not the only way to conceive the concept. As an alternative, we could ascribe an immanent meaning to the word "purpose" and regard it as synonymous with "meaning" (or "significance").[12] The discussion that follows will focus on this side of the matter.

As we have seen, Biesta (2009) states that education generally fulfills three distinct but related functions: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. Educational institutions are expected to (1) develop knowledge, skills, competencies, etc. that are needed in society; (2) adjust students to societal life, by making them internalize democratic norms, values, etc.; and (3) emancipate students, by encouraging them to be (relatively) free from social influence, i.e. finding "ways of being that hint at independence" from social order (Biesta 2009, p. 40). Biesta's model, I think, is an excellent starting point for discussions on educational purposes. Still, I think that Asplund's conception speaks for supplementation in one important respect.

First, let me elaborate the description of Biesta's (2009, 2011) concept of subjectification. Even if the concept highlights values as freedom and independence, it is surely more refined than that. Biesta (e.g., 2011, pp. 78–93) refers to theorists Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas and Alphonso Lingis and develops relational and situational aspects of the concept. For instance, Biesta argues against the idea that education has the purpose of developing and shaping a kind of subjectivity that is prescribed, i.e., defined in advance. From Biesta's standpoint, this "humanistic" idea is equivalent to (what he calls) the socialising function of school. In contrast, Biesta's (2011) analysis is about the human being becoming a subject in a world of plurality and complexity. Moreover, Biesta argues (ibid., pp. 87–88) that, even if it is true that we reveal our "unique specificity" (my translation) through what we say

[11] It should also be added that Buber's philosophy of dialogue includes several concepts and ideas that make it possible to understand the educational relationship as a personal, symmetrical encounter between *I* and *Thou*.

[12] The Swedish word for purpose is *syfte* and it has "meaning" (*mening*) as one of its synonyms.

and do, everything depends on how others receive and respond to our actions. Since the presence of others means plurality, we cannot know in advance what will follow when the subject "breaks into" the world. Certainly, we could try to wipe out plurality and prescribe responses; but if we do so, the possibilities for freedom will vanish, both for ourselves and other participants. Thus, subjectification is realized by interruption, or, more specifically, when the subject is interrupted "from the outside" and, in the next step, makes a unique contribution to the world of plurality.

Although Biesta's (2011) argument includes such nuanced reflections, I would say that "subjectivity" rather than "subject/subject" is in the foreground of his model. To be more precise: the focal point of education, in Biesta's analysis, is mainly located in the phase where the subject breaks into a world of plurality, rather than to the phase where there is an inter-subjective encounter. As in the case of Arendt's (1958/1970) concept of "action," what appears to be of primary importance in Biesta's concept of subjectification is the moment of distance and interruption. Symptomatically, Biesta's conception (2011) is called "the pedagogy of interruption". Also of significance is that the word "subjectification" is selected to signify the basic function of education.

I propose that Asplund's (1992) concept of social responsivity could help us to shed light on aspects of education that are not very elaborated in Biesta's (2009, 2011) works. In Asplund's theory, such aspects as freedom, independence, interruption, and becoming of the subject are not the focal point; and, important to note, neither is the partner who, so to speak, is on the other side of the relationship. Instead, the focal point is the ongoing, vivid, unpredictable inter-subjective process, the slash between subject/subject. It may be reasonable to lift the term "responsivity" out from Asplund's concept and compare it to Biesta's (2009) idea of subjectivity: responsivity means to "reply" to a previous "call," while the response in itself is a call for meaning in relation to a new response. However, in Asplund's conception, this moment is given equal status as the preceding and subsequent relational moments. Thus, the subject is regarded as an immanent aspect of a relational flow. Or, even more radically speaking: the subject *is* social responsivity. From Asplund's (1992) point of view, social responsivity exists prior to subjectivity, i.e., before the entry of the subject. In this sense, the subject will not find himself/herself until he/she has lost himself/herself:

> The theory of social responsivity does not know any clean or anti-septic "I". "I" is always contaminated by "You"; the self and its environment are interpenetrated, consciousness is always unclean, a shared consciousness. A single organism in the universe cannot develop any consciousness, because consciousness is a cooperative product (Asplund 1992, p. 106, my translation).

I am not inferring that Biesta's conception holds the idealistic notion of man (that Asplund criticizes), that is, as a separate individual or "bounded being," as Gergen (2009) calls it. Biesta has in a number of works (in addition to those already mentioned, see e.g., Biesta 1996, 1999, 2004, 2006) made important contributions to the relational conceptualization of educational life. What I am suggesting is simply that the concept of subjectification (Biesta 2009, 2011) is not a sufficient

complement to the conventional ideas of the purpose of education, i.e., as tantamount to qualification and socialisation.

As has been shown, I interpret subjectification as a concept in which values such as independence, freedom and uniqueness are emphasized. I indeed see an important point in bringing such aspects together in defining one of the three main functions of education. I think it could be fruitful to stress the subjective moment in the dialectical process even more in defining subjectification, e.g. by using the concept of "creativity" (in connection to the concept of "relationship") (Buber 1947/2002). Yet, in order to discuss the question of "the meaning of education" I think we need to emphasize the interhuman dimension, i.e. use concepts such as encounter, relationship (between man and man) and, as in this article, social responsitivity. From Asplund's (1992) standpoint, the subjective moment and the relational moment are equally important aspects. Then, what becomes essential is what takes place in an interpersonal "system", in the vibrant slash between sociality/responsivity.

The preceding analysis motivates an outlining of a concept that holds the relational aspects included in Asplund's concept of social responsivity. For this reason, I now tentatively propose the term "existentialisation".[13] It should not be conceived as a separate parameter in relation to the three that Biesta has introduced. Rather, it is meant as a comprehensive and unifying concept. I propose that the functions of subjectification, socialisation, and qualification are realized in human encounters based on social responsivity, in activities where there is room for individuals to be socially responsive or, if I may use another concept of Asplund's, "concrete persons." In other words, it is in encounters characterized by elementary sociality that the student becomes a unique subject; that the student's relationships to others and to society are vitalized, and, in addition, that the student is engaged in a process of concrete learning. From such a viewpoint, *the explicit purpose* of education may very well be defined in terms of qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. However, if we want to understand *the overall meaning* of the activity, we need a concept that acknowledges the elementary forms of social life. "Existentialisation" aims at filling this gap.

By definition, elementary behavior grows "naturally" (cf. Asplund 1991). Such behavior is spontaneous, unpredictable, and unreserved. Social responsivity stands for pre-moral behavior, and hence cannot in itself define "good education." On the whole, Asplund's theory is about social life "as it is" and not "what we should do about it." Such remarks make it difficult for us to use the concept of social responsivity as an educational benchmark. For instance, Asplund's argument implies that it is not reasonable to construct programs for social responsivity or encourage teachers to use the model strategically. So, if we use Asplund's concept in defining existentialisation, the conclusion cannot be very pragmatic. The elemental meaning of education emerges as an immanent aspect of the activity.

[13] Please note that I give a radically different meaning to this term than, for instance, Theo van Leeuwen (2008) does. In his critical discourse analysis, van Leeuwen distinguishes between three types of "deagentialisation": eventuation, existentialisation, and naturalisation.

Thus, existentialisation is a designation mainly aimed for analyzing and discussing the implicit aspects of education.

6 Conclusion

To conclude: in this article I have argued that Biesta's model for dealing with the question of purpose of education could be supplemented. I proposed that the concept of subjectification is insufficient if we want to discuss and understand the meaning of education over and above qualification and socialisation. The expression "meaning of education" refers to an immanent, implicit—or, in Dewey's words, informal, indirect, and incidental—aspect of the activity. Against the background of an analysis of Asplund's concept of social responsivity the article proposed "existentialisation" as a parameter for dealing with the question of meaning of education. Within this framework, education is conceived as an existential rendezvous; a place for encounters characterized by spontaneity, immediacy and improvisation, i.e. for elementary behavior.

In this final section, I return to the introduction. Unlike relational theories of the more philosophical kind, Asplund's theory is about concrete persons who meet in actual social situations. Thus, the theory should help us to highlight "the ongoing social process of experience and behavior" (Mead 1934, p. 82) in the classroom.

Let us recall the classroom setting and the events so far: we are in high school and the subject is public speaking. The teacher asks questions and the students answer. Suddenly, a student, Jakob, interrupts the teacher's talk and, thereby, violates the established communication structure:

18.00. Jakob: … we got to have a higher such thing [points at the teacher's desk] so that we can stand like this … [pretending to be a lecturer].

To illustrate the theoretical argument, I will now go into some detail and note what happens in the 4 or 5 s that follow Jakob's intrusion:

18.00–18.02. The teacher rapidly moves her hands together and turns her head and shoulders around. Jakob leans forward with head and body in the direction of the teacher and starts to smile. Next, the teacher moves her body forward again, while her lips are shaped into a pure smile. At the end of the sequence, the teacher and Jakob meet in a mutual smile.

18.03–18.04.30. The teacher casts an eye on her desk, right behind her. When she turns around again, she addresses Jakob in a fixed gaze. Her mouth opens in a wide smile. During this sequence, Jakob continues to smile. The teacher says:

18.04.30. Teacher: Yes, let's get ourselves a real rostrum. Yes, we can have that later when we … You know, we will continue with rhetoric, so you could end up holding speeches in the assembly hall!

18.05. Jakob: Er…, no thanks!

I have assumed that Jakob's initial verbal utterances interrupt the expected communication structure and the teacher's ongoing action. If we observe the body movements that follow, the teacher seems to respond with surprise and some fear

(she quickly turns around). At this moment, the meaning of Jakob's action is in no way disclosed. Rather, Jakob's smile as well as his way of moving head and body—in the teacher's direction—indicates that he is searching for an answer to his own action. In this moment, the teacher responds affirmatively, by smiling and physically approaching Jakob. For a fraction of a second, the teacher glances at the desk behind her, as if she wants to confirm the object that Jakob referred to. Right after that, she turns back to Jakob with a smile even wider than before. Then the teacher and Jakob meet in a mutual smile (and both participants continue to smile long after the conversation has ended). As I understand the process at this precise point in time (18.04), the meaning of Jakob's utterance has been revealed; that is, through the nonverbal interaction. The teacher's next verbal utterance confirms what is already known and felt by both participants—that they are, so to speak, on the same channel.

The central incident lasts about four-and-a-half seconds (18.00–18.04.30). This extremely brief event appears to involve a series of lightning-quick shifts between stimuli and responses as well as complex processes of role taking. In this process, the meaning of a single utterance is not predetermined; rather, it is constructed in relationship to the other participant's response.

What could this episode say about the question of purpose of education? First, the concept of qualification is applicable: in this very brief interactional process, rhetoric knowledge as well as rhetoric abilities seem to be stimulated (yet, of course, to a very small extent). Another palpable theme in the episode is a tension between the interaction order and temporary deviations from this order—it is about socialisation. Additionally, from my interpretation, the episode illustrates Biesta's (2009, 2011) concept of subjectification: Jakob initiates something significantly new, he literally "breaks into the world", i.e. into the existing interaction order (cf. Biesta's interpretation of Arendt's theory, in 2011, pp. 86). However, my point is that the micro-sociological analysis also illustrates the thesis that subjectification is an insufficient complement to qualification and socialisation if we want to approach the question of purpose. As I interpret the central meaning of the episode, the student and the teacher meet in an elementary event. This event, we could say, happens in the vibrant slash between Jakob/Teacher. For a brief moment, these two subjects exist in an immediate, inter-subjective, yet unpredictable encounter. The term existentialisation, as outlined above, is meant as a tool for understanding the meaning of such processes and encounters. We may call them redundant, superfluous, and useless; for instance, it is hardly possible to demonstrate their impact on students' academic achievement.[14] Nevertheless, they should not be regarded as some kind of luxury that could or should be accomplished now and then in school. Instead, as I have indicated, they are the basic condition for a vital educational experience and existence.

[14] Cf. Aspelin (2012), in which the connection between social relationships and student achievement is discussed.

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