

Can the prevailing description of educational reality be considered complete? On the Parks-Eichmann paradox, spooky action at a distance and a missing dimension in the theory of education

Policy Futures in Education

2020, Vol. 18(8) 1011–1025

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1478210320910312

journals.sagepub.com/home/pfe**Gert Biesta** 

Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy, Maynooth University, Ireland; Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

Abstract

The question I address in this paper is to what extent the prevailing description of educational reality that can be found in contemporary research, policy and practice can be considered complete. The motivation for asking this question stems from an educational paradox to which I refer as the Parks-Eichmann paradox. This paradox has to do with the fact that what appears as educational success from one perspective is problematic when viewed differently, whereas what appears as educational failure may actually reveal something that is of crucial importance educationally. The paradox thus leads to the suggestion that the prevailing description of educational reality – to which I will refer as the ‘paradigm’ of education as *cultivation* – is insufficient or incomplete. I use the work of John Dewey to highlight key characteristics and key shortcomings of this ‘paradigm’ and argue that it needs to be supplemented by what I will refer to as an *existential* educational ‘paradigm’. I highlight the distinction between the two paradigms through the question whether it is possible to educate ‘directly’ – an option which Dewey explicitly denies. I turn to the German notions of *Bildung* and *Erziehung* in order to explore to what extent they provide us with a set of concepts for articulating the distinction between the two educational paradigms. I will show that this is not as straightforward as it may seem, as there is no agreement about the exact definitions of the terms. However, having two terms rather than

Corresponding author:

Gert Biesta, Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy, Maynooth University, Co. Kildare, Ireland.

Email: gert.biesta@mu.ie

just the word 'education' is important in order to be able to make the distinction I am after, and here the terms *Bildung* and *Erziehung* are helpful. I conclude the paper with a brief sketch of the 'existential work' of education in order to outline what the existential paradigm implies for educational practice.

Keywords

Educational theory, Parks-Eichmann paradox, existential education, education as cultivation, *Bildung*, *Erziehung*

Introduction

On 15 May 1935 the journal *Physical Review* published a paper with the title 'Can the quantum-mechanical description of physical reality be considered complete?', authored by Albert Einstein, Boris Podolsky and Nathan Rosen (Einstein et al., 1935). In the paper the authors argued that the prevailing interpretation of quantum mechanics – the so-called Copenhagen interpretation – contained a paradox and could therefore not be seen as a *complete* description of physical reality. The paradox, which subsequently has become known as the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paradox, has to do with the fact that particles can interact in such a way that it is possible to measure both their position and their momentum more accurately than Heisenberg's uncertainty principle would allow for, unless measuring one particle would *instantaneously* affect the other. The latter, however, would require that information travels faster than the speed of light, and such 'spooky action at a distance', as Einstein called it, was considered to be impossible.¹

The question I address in this paper is, in a sense, similar to the argument put forward by Einstein and his colleagues, in that I wish to explore to what extent the prevailing description of *educational* reality that can be found in contemporary research, policy and practice can be considered complete. The motivation for asking this question stems from an educational paradox to which I will refer as the Parks-Eichmann paradox. This paradox has to do with the fact that what appears as educational success from one perspective, is actually quite problematic when viewed differently, whereas what appears as educational failure may actually reveal something that is of crucial importance educationally. The paradox thus leads to the suggestion that the prevailing description of educational reality – to which I will refer as the 'paradigm' of education as *cultivation* – is insufficient or incomplete.²

I use the work of John Dewey to highlight key characteristics and key shortcomings of this 'paradigm' and argue that it needs to be supplemented by what I will refer to as an *existential* educational 'paradigm'. I highlight the distinction between the two paradigms through the question whether it is possible to educate 'directly' – an option which Dewey explicitly denies. I then turn to the German notions of *Bildung* and *Erziehung* in order to explore to what extent they provide us with a set of concepts for articulating the distinction between the two educational paradigms. I will show that this is not as straightforward as it may seem, as there is no agreement about the exact definitions of the terms. However, having *two* terms rather than just the word 'education' is important in order to be able to make the distinction I am after, and here the terms *Bildung* and *Erziehung* are helpful. I conclude the paper with a very brief sketch of the 'existential work' of education in

order to outline what the existential paradigm implies for educational practice.³ But let me begin, then, with a paradox.

The Parks-Eichmann paradox

On 1 December 1955 in the city of Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks rejected the order from the driver of the bus she had boarded to give up her seat in the ‘colored’ section to a white passenger,⁴ just as Claudette Colvin had done nine months earlier (for the latter, see Hoose, 2009). Although Parks did comply with the message on the sign in the bus which read ‘white forward, colored rear’, she refused to obey the driver’s authority to assign seats, which eventually led to her arrest.⁵ This triggered the so-called Montgomery Bus Boycott which lasted from 5 December 1955 until 20 December 1956, the day on which a federal ruling was implemented that declared that the Alabama and Montgomery laws about passenger segregation on buses were unconstitutional.

On 11 April 1961 a special tribunal of the Jerusalem District Court began the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi SS-*Obersturmbahnführer* who had been tasked with organising and managing the logistics of the mass deportation of Jews and others to ghettos and extermination camps in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe during World War II. After a lengthy process, Eichmann was convicted on 15 counts of crimes against humanity, war crimes, crimes against the Jewish people, and membership of a criminal organisation, although he was not declared guilty of personally killing anyone. On 15 December 1961 Eichmann was sentenced to death by hanging. The appeal against the verdict was eventually denied, as was a request for clemency, and Eichmann was executed on 1 June 1962. What made Eichmann’s case famous (see e.g. Arendt, 1963) is the fact that he *did* admit arranging the mass deportation of Jews and others but denied responsibility for the consequences – their extermination – on the account that he was only following orders.

When looked at from an educational angle, the cases of Rosa Parks and Adolf Eichmann present us with a paradox. If we assume, as is done in a still growing number of research studies and in a still increasing number of schools, colleges and universities, that education is an intervention that is supposed to bring about certain pre-defined effects or outcomes, and if it is also assumed that the more effective the link between intervention and outcome is, the more successful education can be considered to be, then it seems as if we should declare the education of Adolf Eichmann a success and the education of Rosa Parks a failure.⁶ With Eichmann there was, after all, a perfect match between what was expected from him and his own actions. Eichmann had learned to listen well, so we might say. And although Rosa Parks was able to effectively decode the messages that were targeted at her – her functional literacy was in order, as was her ability to understand laws, rules and regulations – she obviously did not act upon this understanding.

The paradox, however, has to do with the fact that what appears as success (Eichmann) or failure (Parks) from the perspective of effective instruction and successful learning – education as qualification and socialisation (see Biesta, 2009) – turns out to be the opposite when viewed from what we might term the ‘humane’ perspective; that is, the perspective of existing-as-subject – education as subjectification (see Biesta, 2009). This then raises the question of the exact ‘status’ of the latter perspective and how it relates to the former. For an answer to this question I turn to an interesting argument in the work of the German educational scholar Dietrich Benner.

Does education make a difference?

In a fascinating passage in his book *Allgemeine Pädagogik (General Theory of Education)*, Benner (2015) asks whether education matters; that is, whether the work of parents, teachers and other educators makes a difference for the one being educated. He approaches this question in the context of the nature-nurture debate, and asks what the relative contribution of nature, nurture and education to the formation of human beings might be. This seems to be an important question for educators, because if it turns out that our genetic make-up (nature) would account for, say, 75%, and the influence from the environment (nurture) for, say, 20%, then there is very little scope left for education to make a difference. This issue is particularly important in our time, partly because there are studies that suggest that the contribution of our genetic-make up is even higher than 75% (see e.g. Harris 2009), and partly because many parents and teachers really struggle to limit the influences from the outside world on their children and students; for example, in relation to what enters the home and the school through social media.

While one might expect that Benner, as an eminent professor of education, would try to make the case for a rather large contribution of education vis-à-vis the influences from nature and nurture, he comes up with the remarkable suggestion that irrespective of what percentage one would claim for nature on the one hand and nurture on the other, together *these always add up to 100%* (see Benner, 2015: 73). Rather than reading this as an argument for giving up on education altogether, Benner pursues a different line by arguing that the educational question⁷ – and hence the orientation of the educational work of parents and teachers – is actually of an entirely *different order*. An order that is not ‘bio-neuro-socio-cultural’, to use my own words, but thoroughly *existential*.

Education, so Benner suggests, is not about the ways individuals are shaped from the inside out, so to speak – that is, as a result of the development of their genetic make-up and biological constitution; nor is it about how individuals are shaped from the outside in, that is, as a result of influences from the environment. This is not because these processes do not happen, but because education is interested in an altogether different question, namely the question of how human beings, as individuals, *exist*; that is, how they try to lead their own life, make choices, say ‘yes’ to some opportunities and ‘no’ to others, get out of bed in the morning or have a lie-in, fall in love, are faced with illness, grow old, feel joy and guilt, and so on.

If the question of nature and nurture is about the way in which the human organism develops and grows, both as a result of internal biological processes and influences from the outside, the educational question, to put it briefly but accurately, is about how an ‘I’ can step forward from all this. And here we can find the *educational* reading of the Parks-Eichmann paradox, because whereas Rosa Parks did step forward as an ‘I’ – an ‘I’ who asserted that she no longer wanted to be part of the particular societal order she found herself in – Adolf Eichmann, when asked, said that his ‘I’ was actually not involved, other, that is, than in following orders. He was, in other words, willing to submit his ‘I’ to an external societal order. Whereas Rosa Parks’ ‘I’ stepped forward, so to speak, Eichmann withdrew his ‘I’.⁸

Viewed in this way – and this is the point Benner is after – we can say that the educational question is not the question of *who* we are and how we (have) become who we are – which is the question of *identity*. Rather, the educational question is the question of *how* we are, how we exist, how we try to lead our own life, what we will do with who we have become, with

what we have learned, with the skills we have acquired, with the competencies we have developed, but also with our incompetence, our blind spots, the things we are not able to do, and so on.⁹ Rather than identity, this is the question of what we might refer to as our ‘*subject-ness*’,¹⁰ our way of and our attempts at existing-as-subject of our own life, not as the object of influences from ‘elsewhere’ (see also Gössling, 1993).

With the help of Benner, I have made a rather strong claim about what education is, arguing that education is concerned with the question of the ‘I’ and, more importantly, with the question of how the ‘I’ *exists* as ‘I’. I wish to emphasise that the point I am trying to make is not semantic – it is not about the definition of the word ‘education’ – but that it is about identifying a dimension of educational reality that runs the risk of disappearing from sight if we only think of education in terms of effective instruction and successful learning. How we ‘name’ this dimension is important as well, and in relation to this question there is a problem with the fact that the English language only seems to have one word – education – to speak about the reality of education. This is why, below, I will have a look at the two concepts, *Bildung* and *Erziehung*, that play a central role in the vocabulary of German educational scholarship. Before I do so, I would like to say more about the two ‘dimensions’ of educational reality that I seek to bring into view in this paper, suggesting that, in addition to a ‘paradigm’ that sees education as *cultivation*, there is also the need for what I will refer to as an *existential* ‘paradigm’ of education.

Paradigm I: education as cultivation

The paradigm of education as cultivation is interested in the way in which human beings become who they are as a result of the interplay of ‘internal’ factors and ‘external’ influences. It focuses, in other words, on the way in which human beings become and continue to become who they are through their engagement with ‘culture’ in the broadest sense of the word. The paradigm of cultivation partly provides an *explanation* of how individuals become who they are as a result of these processes – it, explains, for example, how individuals become speakers of a particular language or adopters of particular attitudes and values. But the paradigm of cultivation is also an *educational programme*; that is, a way of organising education. According to this paradigm, the task of education is making sure that individuals can engage with the widest possible range of culture – or cultural ‘tools’ – in order to allow them to develop the largest number of capacities and capabilities in the fullest way possible.

There are many contemporary examples of the paradigm of cultivation – for example, educational practices that seek to provide children and young people with cultural and social capital; educational practices that seek to make room for the many languages of children, their natural curiosity, their innate capacities, etc.; or educational practices that focus strongly on providing opportunities for children and young people to flourish in the widest sense possible. I wish to suggest that a ‘paradigm case’ of this way of understanding and ‘doing’ education can be found in the work of John Dewey (1859–1952).¹¹ Dewey does see education basically as a process of cultivation as can be seen, for example, in his contention that ‘(t)he ultimate problem of all education is to co-ordinate the psychological and the social factors’ (1895: 224); that is, how individual development can ‘connect’ with social and cultural resources. It is also indicative that out of this, human individuals emerge as what Dewey refers to as ‘acculturated organisms’ (1988: 15); organisms who have ‘acquired’ culture and through this have become ‘encultured’ or ‘acculturated’.

It is also interesting to see that Dewey explicitly rejects the idea that educators should determine the aims of education, suggesting that this puts external and, in a sense, artificial limits on the ways in which children become. Instead, Dewey argues that education should focus on growth and should be understood *as* growth. His argument for this is that 'since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself' (Dewey, 1985: 58). When one reads his views on democracy from this angle it can be argued that the first and perhaps main reason why Dewey is interested in a democratic society as a society with varied interests and free interplay (see Dewey, 1985: 89) is because such a society provides the optimal conditions for the growth of all individuals (for such a reading, see Biesta, 2016). It is, in other words, the optimal situation for human cultivation.

Can we educate directly?

One interesting implication of the paradigm of cultivation that can be found in Dewey's work has to do with his claim that it is *impossible* to educate directly, and that we can only educate 'indirectly, by means of the environment' (1985: 23). The reason Dewey makes this claim stems from the fact that he conceives of human beings as living organisms who are in constant 'transaction' (Dewey's term) with their environment. This is a process of constant 'doing and undergoing' – Dewey compares it with breathing, for example – in which the organism seeks to maintain an interactive balance with its environment. In this process both the organism and the environment change over time; the environment changes as a result of the actions of the organism, but the organism also changes in order to adapt to the (changing) environment. Dewey refers to these changes as habits, which are not actions in themselves but 'predispositions to act'. While much of this goes on naturally, so we might say – in most cases we manage to adjust quickly and easily – Dewey particularly focuses on those situations in which the organism encounters a situation that calls out conflicting habits. In everyday language we might say that in those situations the organism is not sure what to do, which also means that for the organism it is actually not clear what kind of environment it is encountering.

Dewey argues that one way to resolve this predicament is through trial and error. This is how we often are able to restore a smooth transaction, but the problem with trial and error is, of course, that we can also err, and some errors can be lethal. It is therefore important, from the perspective of the survival of the organism, to get our actions 'right'. This is where human organisms have an advantage, because they can come in the possession of symbols which allow them to 'act without acting', as Dewey puts it; that is, first trying out different ways of responding *symbolically*, in imagination or thought, and then, once one has identified the most plausible or least risky way forward, to act in that way. Of course, there is still a risk that the transaction is not restored – the proof of the pudding remains in the eating – but at least the action has become more 'intelligent', as Dewey calls it, and less dependent on 'blind' trial and error. Symbols are not innate, according to Dewey, but emerge from social interaction; that is, from the ways in which human organisms try to co-ordinate their interaction. Dewey refers to such co-ordination as communication, which he defines behaviourally, as 'making something in common in at least two different centres of behaviour' (1958: 178).

Dewey thus provides a very detailed account of the way in which human organisms become cultivated, so to speak, showing that this is an interactive process of organism and environment, not just about development from 'within' or only about influences

from the 'outside'. On the one hand, Dewey's theory can be understood as a theory of reflective or intelligent problem-solving aimed at restoring the transaction of organism and environment, including the transaction of organisms with other organisms. At the same time, Dewey provides us with a theory of (reflective) learning. Such learning first of all takes place at the level of the body, so to speak, through the way in which organisms constantly acquire new habits, new patterns of action that are functional for the environments they are in interaction with. Yet when the human organism makes use of symbols in the process of problem-solving, there is also an outcome at the level of symbols: knowledge, learning and understanding. And the reason why Dewey holds that we can never educate directly, but only by means of the environment, is that, according to Dewey's theory, the only way in which we can promote the acquisition of new habits and knowledge is by putting the human organism in new environments, as it is through interaction with such environments that human organisms acquire new habits and knowledge and hence learn.¹²

What is missing in this picture?

Dewey thus provides an interesting account of how human organisms become enculturated. What is particularly attractive about Dewey's approach is that he does not see this as a purely 'mental' or 'cognitive' process, but as something that is fully embodied. What is also attractive about Dewey's approach is that he does not see it as a purely individual process but as a social or, to be more precise, intersubjective process, in which communication, understood as the coordination of the actions of at least two organisms, plays a central role. For these reasons Dewey's theory has, over the years, become quite popular and is still gaining in popularity.¹³ But although the theory looks quite complete and comprehensive, there is something missing. Dewey's theory – which I have presented as a 'paradigm case' of the paradigm of cultivation – is a theory of intelligent adjustment to always evolving environmental conditions. It is, in other words, a theory of intelligent survival. The problem I wish to highlight here, however, is that survival is not the same as life, to put it briefly. Survival is not the same as human existence or it is at least not the only 'modality' of human existence.

While Dewey thus gives us a sophisticated and detailed account of the ways in which human beings can adjust reflectively and intelligently to the situations they find themselves in, the thing that is remarkable absent in Dewey's account is the possibility for the human organism to *refuse* such adaptation and adjustment. What is remarkably absent in Dewey's theory, so we might say, is the possibility for the human organism to say *no* – and in the two vignettes with which I have opened this paper I have tried to make clear how important this is for our existence as human beings. We could say, therefore, that Dewey provides us with a theory of learning – and there is no doubt that Rosa Parks and Adolf Eichmann both learned – but not with a theory of education in the way in which I have presented this above; that is, as a theory that seeks to foreground the question of the 'I' – the 'I' who stands for the task of leading his or her own life, rather than just the task of securing smooth transactions with its environment. It is the 'I' who will sometimes say 'yes', but in other situations will say 'no' and will have to say 'no'. The paradigm of cultivation is thus able to 'explain' Eichmann, but not Parks. This is perhaps the main blind spot, the main thing that is missing, in the paradigm of cultivation.¹⁴ It thus suggests the need for an altogether different educational paradigm: the paradigm of existence.

Paradigm 2: existential education

In the line of thought presented so far, I have already indicated a number of times what the central focus of this different educational paradigm is. Very briefly, we might say that this paradigm is the paradigm of the ‘I’, where the ‘I’ is not an organism that becomes cultivated but a human individual who exists and stands for the challenge to lead his or her own life. That is why this paradigm can be characterised as an *existential* paradigm. One of the interesting things about this paradigm – which reveals that it is fundamentally different from the paradigm of cultivation – is that the ‘I’ is not the outcome of a process of cultivation and therefore not something that can be produced educationally (or to be more precise: that can be produced through cultivating work upon a ‘thing’). The ‘I’, as Winfried Böhm puts it, is fundamentally the ‘work of the self’ (1997: 199). The ‘I’ has to be its *own* ‘I’, so to speak, and no one can do this for the ‘I’.

This does not mean, however, that education has nothing to do here, but the educational work is not a matter of trying to influence, direct or support the development of the human organism, but rather has to do with encouraging the self to be a self; encouraging the self not to walk away from itself, so to speak. Dietrich Benner, using a phrase from Johann Gottlieb Fichte, calls this work ‘Aufforderung zur Selbsttätigkeit’, which we could translate as ‘summoning to self-action’ (see Benner, 2015; see also Benner, 2003; Langewand, 2003). It is important to see, however, that this summoning is not the injunction to be *yourself* – which would quickly turn everything back to the question of identity – and even less so the summoning just to become active. It rather is the injunction to be *a self*, to be an ‘I’. In very simple terms that go to the heart of the matter, this summoning happens when we say ‘Hey, you there! Where are you?’ – and I have shown that when Eichmann encountered this question, he almost literally said ‘I am not here’, ‘It wasn’t me’, ‘I was only following orders.’¹⁵

This injunction, this ‘Hey, you there, where are you?’, is a very *direct* question. It is, in other words, an example, and perhaps even the prime example, of *direct education*, because it goes from ‘soul’ to ‘soul’, so to speak (on this terminology, see Biesta, 2017a), rather than that it is a matter of organisms trying to adjust their actions to each other to secure ongoing successful transaction. If, from the paradigm of cultivation, such direct education is the kind of action at a distance that is considered impossible and hence can only appear as ‘spooky’, in the existential paradigm of education such direct education, such spooky action at a distance, actually goes to the heart of the matter, perhaps first of all literally.¹⁶

Finding a language: *Bildung*, *Erziehung* and the importance of a distinction

By outlining two different educational paradigms I have tried to make a distinction and, as I have tried to make clear so far, it is the distinction that matters for the theory and practice of education. The distinction is not my invention but can be found in the educational literature, albeit that not everyone makes the distinction, is sufficiently aware of it or – and this is particularly important – has words for making the distinction. It is here that there is a particular difficulty with the English language, which only has the one word ‘education’, and something potentially interesting in the German language, where there are (at least) two words to refer to the reality of education, one being *Bildung* and the other being *Erziehung*.

Whereas in recent years the idea of *Bildung* has become more visible in the English-speaking world (see e.g. Biesta, 2002; Horlacher, 2017; Løvlie & Standish, 2002; Pinar, 2011), the word *Erziehung* has remained remarkably invisible (for a recent exception, see Guilherme, 2019; see also Biesta, 2011). It can be argued, however, that together they are the foundational concepts of German educational thought (see e.g. Benner, 2015). This raises the question whether these two terms and, more importantly, the distinction that they articulate, have something to do with the two educational paradigms I have outlined above: the paradigm of education as cultivation and the existential educational paradigm.

The honest answer to this question has to be that it depends; and, more specifically, that it depends on who you ask. As Benner (forthcoming: 46) makes clear, one of the difficulties with these terms is that even in the German context there is no agreed-upon definition of the two terms, and amongst German scholars there are quite different views and preferences. Some – such as, for example, Peter Petersen (see Benner, forthcoming: 46) – see *Erziehung* as a rather restrictive term that refers to ways in which educators try to tell children what to do and how to think – close, even, to indoctrination – whereas *Bildung* is seen as a rather open process of development and (self-)cultivation. Benner also refers to the views of Heinz-Joachim Heydorn, who saw *Erziehung* as reproduction of the existing social order and *Bildung* as orientated towards emancipation (see Benner, forthcoming: 46–47). Benner himself provides a rather different reading of the two terms and the distinction that can be made with them (see particularly Benner, forthcoming: 46–50).

Going back to Plato, Benner connects *Bildung* to the human ability to direct one's own gaze; that is, to focus one's attention on some aspect of the world. *Erziehung*, then, is the art of directing the gaze of another human being. *Bildung*, in this approach, thus has to do with our own ability to engage with the world outside us and, to put it carefully, learn from this engagement, whereas *Erziehung* has to do with the ways in which educators can encourage children and young people to do so; that is, encouraging them to engage in their 'own' *Bildung*. This makes *Bildung* into a lifelong process that never finishes, and *Erziehung* into a process that ends at some point, namely when the child or young person no longer needs the encouragement from the 'outside'.

Benner's way of making the distinction thus gets closer to how I have outlined the two educational paradigms, although it seems as if in this particular reading the work of *Erziehung* is not so much the summoning to self-action in a general sense – the summoning to be an 'I', as I have called it – as it is the summoning to engage in one's own *Bildung*, which for Benner is mainly understood as the summoning to engage in one's own *learning* (see Benner, forthcoming: 46–50). This is not entirely satisfactory, I wish to suggest, because one could argue that both Parks and Eichmann did learn, but that the way in which their 'I' was 'connected' to or 'involved' in their learning turned out to be very different. To summon someone to be a learner is therefore not enough, and potentially even problematic from the educational point of view I am trying to articulate in this paper (see also Biesta, 2013).

An author who focuses more explicitly on the question of existence – rather than reducing existence to learning – is Winfried Böhm who, in his 'Pädagogik der Person' (educational theory of the person) characterises *Bildung* as the work of the self at being a self, which would then allow for *Erziehung* to be the 'support' of and perhaps encouragement for this work (see Böhm, 1997: 201). Böhm's work is particularly helpful because of his existential reading of the notion of 'person', which is not the same as individual (and even less so as organism), but refers to the way in which the individual *exists* (see Böhm, 2016). In my own work (see particularly Biesta, 2017b) I have suggested that education – which, in German,

I now would describe with the word *Erziehung* – is about arousing the desire in another human being for wanting to exist in the world in a grown-up way, not purely driven by one's own desires, but always asking whether what one desires or encounters in oneself as a desire is what one should desire, in light of living one's life well, with others, on a planet with limited capacity for fulfilling all our desires (see Biesta, 2017b, chapter 1). This question is a radical first-person question: it is a question that ultimately each of us has to engage with for ourselves and where we should be mindful not to try to determine for others how they should answer this question, although we can encourage them not to forget the question.

Conclusion: the existential work of education

In this paper I have asked whether the prevailing description of educational reality – one that focuses on education in terms of effective instruction and successful learning, to put it briefly – can be considered complete, or whether there may be something missing. With the help of the Parks-Eichmann paradox I have tried to show that what appears as success/failure from the perspective of effective instruction and successful learning turns into its opposite when looked at from what, perhaps a little clumsily, I have referred to as the perspective of the 'I'. We might say that whereas Rosa Parks inserted her 'I' in between what she had learned and her actions, Adolf Eichmann withdrew his 'I' and thus coincided with the societal order.

Through a number of steps, I have tried to argue for the importance of the latter perspective, the perspective of the 'I', and have tried to argue that this perspective is absent when we think of education as cultivation – which I have taken as a general 'paradigm' in which notions of effective instruction and successful learning have their place. While cultivation does help human beings to acquire 'culture' in the broadest sense of the world, and while education can be said to have an important role to play in making this acquisition possible, I have tried to show that we need a different 'angle', a different paradigm, to account for the question of the 'I'.

Rather than seeing the 'I' as the outcome of the cultivation of human organisms, I have suggested, with Benner, that the question of the 'I' is of a different *order*: an existential rather than a bio-neuro-socio-cultural order. The 'I', so we might say, breaks through this order and hence the educational work here is not that of cultivation – which will 'only' lead to identity – but of '*Aufforderung*', of 'summoning', of 'calling'. It is the simple but crucial gesture of the 'Hey, you there! Where are you?' which manifests itself as spooky action at a distance rather than an intervention in the acculturation of the organism, particularly through the structuring of the organism's 'learning environment'. And no one can respond to this call but *me*, which means that it is this call that subjectivises, puts the subject-ness of the one being called 'at stake' (although the 'I' may still decide to walk away or keep silent).

This implies, amongst other things, that the existential work of education is first and foremost *interruptive* (see Biesta, 2006a). It interrupts the being-with-oneself, it interrupts identity, it interrupts flourishing, it interrupts growth, it even interrupts learning. Such interruptions are not meant to destroy the self, to deny identity, to stop flourishing or to hinder growth and learning. They are meant to call the 'I' who is trying to be, who is trying to be someone, who is trying to flourish, grow and learn *into the world*, so we might say; they are meant to call the 'I' into existence, bearing in mind that it is entirely up to the 'I' to decide how to respond to the call. The work of the 'I', after all, is ultimately and radically the work of the 'I' itself; work that no one else can do for the 'I'.

I have argued that one of the problems with the English language is that it only has one word for referring to the reality of education, namely the word 'education', and that this makes it difficult to keep awareness of the need for two educational 'paradigms' in view. In this regard, as I have suggested, the German tradition is in a better place since it has two key concepts to articulate the reality of education, *Bildung* and *Erziehung*. As is so often the case, the words themselves cannot do the work for us, as there are differing interpretations of both words available in the literature. But the two words do act as a reminder that the reality of education is 'split', or, to put it differently, that it consists of two different 'orders' – a bio-neuro-socio-cultural order and an existential order. It is this difference that matters.

This brings me to a final observation. I have developed my argument in this paper from the assumption I 'found' in the Parks-Eichmann paradox which claims that Rosa Parks stepped forward as an 'I' whereas Adolf Eichmann withdrew his 'I'. I do think that stating the paradox in this way helped to bring the missing dimension in the paradigm of education as cultivation into view, as it highlighted that what counts as success in terms of that paradigm actually flies in the face of what we would generally see as successful or as problematic when looking at the cases of Parks and Eichmann. However, one could argue that it was not so much that Parks' 'I' was present and Eichmann's 'I' was absent, but that Eichmann – or perhaps Eichmann's 'I' – was as present as the 'I' of Rosa Parks, but simply made a different choice.

Could it be, then, that we have perhaps been blinded by the fact that many (but not all) would consider what Rosa Parks did as morally right, and many (but not all) would consider what Adolf Eichmann did as morally wrong? Does that mean that at this more fundamental level there is actually no paradox at all? Or, more precisely, that the difference between Parks and Eichmann has nothing to do with the alleged presence or absence of their 'I', but with the moral choice they made in the situation? On that reading, which is not impossible, we would quickly end up with moral education; that is, with the attempt at making sure that children and young people acquire the right knowledge, skills and disposition and, moreover, the right moral frameworks and virtues so that the likelihood that they will choose right over wrong increases. On that reading, then, we would very quickly be back to what, in terms of this paper, we can characterise as moral *cultivation*, which is ultimately aimed at 'containing' the risk that children and young people may make wrong decisions.

If moral cultivation makes children and young people into *objects of moral education*, the line I have tried to pursue in this paper is interested in the question how children and young people may be 'called', summoned, and encouraged to become *subjects of moral action*. For the latter even to become possible, their 'I' needs to come into play, and it is this that is at stake in the existential paradigm of education. Without an 'I', there is after all no possibility for moral action and judgement to begin with. From this angle we can see that Eichmann did withdraw his 'I', was happy to exist as object rather than as subject, so that the whole question of his responsibility would never arise or would never 'meet' him. Parks, on the other hand, did bring her 'I' into play, knowing perfectly well that she would be arrested as a result of doing so, and was entirely willing to take on the consequences of her actions.

Existential education is therefore not a form of moral education and definitely not a form of moralising education, but education that seeks to *bring* the 'I' of the student into play, so to speak, and *keep* the 'I' of the student in play.¹⁷ Jacques Rancière captures this dynamic in a very interesting way when he describes the 'call' of the 'emancipatory teacher' as the one

which ‘forbids the supposed ignorant one the satisfaction . . . of admitting that one is incapable of knowing more’ (2010: 6). Refusing students the satisfaction of being an object, of objectifying themselves, of not having to be ‘there’ as an ‘I’, is perhaps indeed the moment where existential education takes off.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Johannes Bellmann for his very helpful insights in the German discussion about *Bildung* and *Erziehung*; and I would like to thank Dietrich Benner for allowing me to read the manuscript of his latest book.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Gert Biesta  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8530-7105>

Notes

1. The phenomenon Einstein and his colleagues referred to is known as ‘entanglement’ – a term coined by Erwin Schrödinger (1935). In contemporary physics it is assumed that this phenomenon exists, though not as action at a distance. ‘Entanglement’ seems to have become a popular term in contemporary social theory, though it must be emphasised that in physics the phenomenon of ‘entanglement’ is located at sub-atomic level and therefore cannot be that easily transposed to the level of social reality, other, that is, than as a metaphor. The argument presented in this paper is entirely different from current usage of ‘entanglement’ in social theory.
2. As I will discuss in more detail later on in this paper, the idea of education as cultivation refers to the suggestion that education is a process in which ‘things’ – in the widest possible sense of the word – are cultivated through influences from the ‘outside’. My focus is on such an understanding of the ‘dynamics’ of education, not on the particular aims or ambitions with which such cultivation takes place – which can cover a whole spectrum from cultivating obedient behaviour, cultivating knowledge and understanding, up to cultivating critical thinking. The point is that education as cultivation sees education as influence from the outside upon the student, and I try to contrast this with a very different ‘reality’ which has to do with the fact that as human beings we lead our own lives from the ‘inside’ out, so to speak. Put differently, I invite the reader to consider the difference between a third-person perspective on education and a first-person perspective (on the latter distinction, see also chapter 1 in Biesta, 2017b).
3. In Biesta (2020) I discuss the implications for educational research.
4. For details, see https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/01/5-myths-about-rosa-parks-the-woman-who-had-almost-a-biblical-quality/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.34441056eb50 (accessed 22 March 2019).

5. Parks has been very clear about her reason for not giving up her seat: 'People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I was at the end of a working day . . . No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in' (Parks with Haskins, 1992: 116).
6. Please note that I am using the notions of 'success' and 'failure' here in order to expose a problem in the idea that successful education occurs when 'interventions' (such as teaching or instruction) generate the intended 'outcomes'. This is the assumption upon which much research on educational effectiveness appears to be based, including the large-scale randomised controlled trials of evidence-based education. What I am seeking to highlight is that this way of approaching and understanding education seems to 'overlook' the 'I' of the student.
7. Where I use 'education' in this context, Benner uses the word 'Erziehung'. I will explain below why and how this matters.
8. One could of course argue – and this is entirely correct in my view – that it was Eichmann's 'I' who withdrew his 'I', to put it briefly; that, in other words, Eichmann made the decision to hand over his 'I' to orders from elsewhere. I hope that the reader will see that this does not invalidate the argument I am trying to pursue in this paper, but rather highlights that the question of the 'existence' or 'arrival' of the 'I' is a thoroughly existential matter – and that again and again in our lives we encounter the possibility of withdrawing our 'I' from the situation or staying with it.
9. Competence-based approaches to education tend to forget that human beings are never 'fully competent', and that this is a fact of our existence we have to acknowledge in our everyday lives.
10. I prefer the rather awkward term 'subject-ness' over the word 'subjectivity', as the latter runs the risk of being read as an epistemological category, not an existential one, and it is the existential 'perspective' that I am after here.
11. I have discussed Dewey's work extensively in a number of publications (see e.g. Biesta, 1995, 2006b, 2014; Biesta and Burbules, 2003). My point in discussing Dewey here is not to engage in a discussion about his work as such, but to present him as a powerful and rather 'precise' example of the idea of education as a process of cultivation. As mentioned above, the idea of education as cultivation concerns the *dynamics* of education – but those dynamics can 'work' for a wide range of educational purposes and ambitions.
12. Educating directly would mean that we would be able to go straight into the mind of our students, so to speak, and this is the possibility Dewey denies. Of course, as educators, we are also in the environment of our students, but it is up to students to adjust themselves and their understandings to such environments which we, as teachers or educators, cannot do for our students. This is the constructivist intuition that permeates Dewey's thought. The point is also made elegantly by Niklas Luhmann when he states that human beings can participate in each other's environments but not in each other's autopoiesis (see Vanderstraeten, 2005, for a more detailed discussion).
13. One reason why this may be the case is that Dewey's ideas seem to fit rather well with the nowadays often repeated idea that the world is changing so rapidly that we do no longer know what the future will look like, and hence the best thing to do in education is equip students with the skills for intelligent adaptation, so to speak. Elsewhere (Biesta, 2015) I have tried to make clear what the problem with such an adaptive 'agenda' for education is.
14. As mentioned, my ambition is not to give a comprehensive discussion of Dewey's educational thought and his underlying philosophy, but to highlight how the idea of education as cultivation is central to his thinking, and what the implications of the cultivation approach are, including whether 'direct' education is possible or not; a point I will return to below.
15. It is, of course, interesting, that Eichmann still had to use the word 'I' in order to withdraw his 'I' from the situation. In this regard we can say that the question of the 'I' is not that easy to escape.
16. By this I mean that 'Hey, you there, where are you?' speaks to the heart.

17. I think that in the history of 20th-century education the ideas and practices of educators such as Homer Lane, Janusz Korczak and AS Neill provide many examples of what it means to bring the 'I' of the student into play. I hope to be able to return to their work in a future publication, but would encourage readers to read their texts with the distinction proposed in this paper in mind. I also refer the reader to Saeverot (2012) for an interesting account of existential education

References

- Arendt H (1963) *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking Press.
- Benner D (2003) Über die Unmöglichkeit Erziehung allein vom Grundbegriff der 'Aufforderung zur Selbsttätigkeit' her zu begreifen [On the impossibility to understand education solely in terms of the idea of 'summoning to self-action']. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 49: 290–304.
- Benner D (2015) *Allgemeine Pädagogik. 8. Auflage* [General Theory of Education. 8th Edition]. Weinheim: Juventa.
- Benner D (Forthcoming) *Umriss einer allgemeinen Wissenschaftsdidaktik* [Outline of a General Didactics of Science]. Weinheim: Beltz.
- Biesta GJJ (1995) Pragmatism as a pedagogy of communicative action. In: Garrison J (ed.) *The New Scholarship on John Dewey*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 105–122.
- Biesta GJJ (2002) *Bildung* and modernity: The future of *Bildung* in a world of difference. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21(4): 343–351
- Biesta GJJ (2006a) *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future*. London: Routledge.
- Biesta GJJ (2006b) 'Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful': Education as communicative praxis. In: Hansen DT (ed.) *John Dewey and our Educational Prospect. A Critical Engagement with Dewey's Democracy and Education*. Albany: SUNY Press, 23–37.
- Biesta GJJ (2009) 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(1): 33–46.
- Biesta GJJ (2011) Disciplines and theory in the academic study of education: A comparative analysis of the Anglo-American and continental construction of the field. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 19(2): 175–192.
- Biesta GJJ (2013) Interrupting the politics of learning. *Power and Education* 5(1): 4–15.
- Biesta GJJ (2014) Pragmatising the curriculum: Bringing knowledge back in, but via pragmatism. *Curriculum Journal* 25(1): 29–49.
- Biesta GJJ (2015) The duty to resist: Redefining the basics for today's schools. *Research on Steiner Education* 6: 1–11.
- Biesta GJJ (2016) Democracy and education revisited: Dewey's democratic deficit. In: Higgins S and Coffield F (eds) *John Dewey's Education and Democracy: A British Tribute*. London: IoE Press, 149–169.
- Biesta GJJ (2017a) Touching the soul? Exploring an alternative outlook for philosophical work with children and young people. *Childhood and Philosophy* 30(28): 415–452.
- Biesta GJJ (2017b) *The Rediscovery of Teaching*. London: Routledge.
- Biesta GJJ (2020) *Educational Research: An Unorthodox Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Biesta GJJ and Burbules N (2003) *Pragmatism and Educational Research*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Böhm W (1997) *Entwürfe zu einer Pädagogik der Person* [Design for an Educational Theory of the Person]. Bad Heilbrunn: Julius Klinkhardt.
- Böhm W (2016) *Die pädagogische Placebo-Effekt. Zur Wirksamkeit der Erziehung [The educational placebo-effect. On the effectiveness of education]*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh.
- Dewey J (1085) *Plan of organization of the university primary school*. In: Boydston JA (ed.) *John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882–1898. Volume 5*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 96–109. 1895.

- Dewey J (1958) *Experience and Nature*. New York: Dover.
- Dewey J (1985) Democracy and education. In: Boydston JA (ed.) *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*. Volume 9: 1916. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. 1916.
- Dewey J (1988) Experience, knowledge and value: A rejoinder. In: Boydston JA (ed.) *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*. Volume 14: 1939–1941. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 3–90. 1939.
- Einstein A, Podolsky B and Rosen N (1935) Can the quantum-mechanical description of physical reality be considered complete? *Physical Review* 47(10): 777–780.
- Gössling HJ (1993) *Subjektwerden: Historisch-systematische Studien zu einer pädagogischen Paradoxie. (Becoming a subject: A historical and systematic exploration of an educational paradox.)* Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag.
- Guilherme A (2019) Considering AI in education: Erziehung but never Bildung. In: Knox J, Wan Y and Gallagher M (eds) *Artificial Intelligence and Inclusive Education. Perspectives on Rethinking and Reforming Education*. Singapore: Springer Nature, pp.165–177.
- Harris J (2009) *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do. Revised and updated*. New York: Free Press.
- Hoose P (2009) *Claudette Colvin: Twice toward Justice*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Horlacher R (2017) *The Educated Subject and the German Concept of Bildung*. London: Routledge.
- Langewand A (2003) Über die Schwierigkeit Erziehung als Aufforderung zur Selbsttätigkeit zu begreifen [On the difficulty to understand education as summoning to self-action]. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 49: 274–289.
- Løvlie L and Standish P (2002) Introduction: *Bildung* and the idea of a liberal education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36(3): 317–340.
- Parks R with Haskins J (1992) *Rosa Parks: My Story*. New York: Dial Books.
- Pinar W (2011) *The Character of Curriculum Studies: Bildung, Carrere, and the Recurring Question of the Subject*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rancière J (2010) On ignorant schoolmasters. In: Bingham C and Biesta GJJ (eds) *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*. London: Continuum, 1–24.
- Saeverot H (2012) *Indirect Pedagogy: Some Lessons in Indirect Education*. Rotterdam: Sense.
- Schrödinger E (1935) Discussion of probability relations between separated systems. *Mathematical Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society* 31: 555–563.
- Vanderstraeten R (2005) System and environment. Notes on the autopoiesis of modern society. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 22: 471–481.

Gert Biesta is professor of public education at the Centre for Public Education, Maynooth University Ireland, and professorial fellow in educational theory and pedagogy at the Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, UK.