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## **Re-framing Early Intervention: from a child to a teacher centred perspective in education**

### **Summary**

This paper offers a theoretical description and discuss alternative approaches to Early Intervention (EI). The theoretical framework is based on the philosophical and educational frameworks of Hans Skjervheim and Gert Biesta. The central part of this discussion is the elaboration of different approaches in education, and how it relates to EI. It is stated that EI is historically rooted in an Anglo-American tradition where the central goal was to reduce the societal consequences of children struggling in schools and life in general. Evaluations, tests and interventions directed towards these children is at the core of this tradition. The alternative presented in this article points at an educational framework based on a European, relational centred, education framework and offers a perspective where EI is re-framed into a strategy where EI is focusing on the adult, responsible, person in the relationship.

**Keywords:** programmes, relations, communication, Skjervheim, Biesta

**Słowa kluczowe:** programy, relacje, komunikacja, Skjervheim, Biesta

### **Introduction**

European strategy documents present EI as a central pedagogical principle that works with children with special needs in schools and kindergartens. The main objectives are to increase learning achievement and competence development for all children from kindergarten to compulsory school, and thereby contribute to social equalization (European Commission 2006). Looking at the body of scientific knowledge on IE, the American based research literature dominates the field. This literature has a clear focus on interventions directed towards families with socio-economic problems more in line of social care than of education (Vik & Hausstätter 2014; Shonkoff & Meisels (eds.) 2000). This strong

focus on social care has led some researchers to claim that there is a lack of vision of how EI is to be understood in education Vik (2015).

The purpose of this article is to frame and establish a theoretical approach to EI that highlights education and the teacher's role in the educative process. As stated, EI should support and increase learning for children and youth that struggles in education. To give this support, the focus will be on the person responsible for education. Hence, the teacher role needs to be in focus for EI to be a success. This change in focus is in essence a different way of approaching education in general. To describe this changing focus, this article will draw on the theoretical work by Gert Biesta and Hans Skjervheim.

### **Early intervention**

Early intervention, in context of the documents presented, has generally two main objectives: (1) EI is supposed to contribute to social equalisation and is claimed to have great potential for reducing social inequality by initiating intervention in early childhood, in addition to the socio-economic benefits of providing effective measures for children who need extra stimulation being high. (2) EI is provided to increase learning achievement and competence development for all children, from kindergarten throughout compulsory school. The main purpose of EI is to ensure every child's opportunities to receive help as early as possible and increase the chances of having a good life. EI can be understood both as a strategy of compensating interventions focusing on identifying children with specific difficulties at an early stage of a child's life, and as preventive strategies aimed at all children (Barnett 1995; Karolyn, Kilburn, Cannon 2005).

Although EI seems to benefit children throughout their lives, EI has also been strongly criticized. Biesta (2013) notices the potential danger that teachers become facilitators of pre-defined learning systems, hence, they lose the ability to define educational strategies and decisions (Biesta 2013). In Pettersvold and Østrem's (2012) opinion, the focus on effectiveness is undermining the fact that pedagogy needs practical and ethical reasons as part of its basis. Pettersvoll and Østrem (2012) also emphasise children's genuine right to be understood as active participants in their everyday contexts, which predefined programs to a minor extent allow. Advocating early years educations, Vik (2014) claims that pre-schools, day care or kindergarten might lose its position and integrity if EI consists of identifying and preventing problems. Focusing on children with special needs, Hausstätter (2009) claims that the international research field on EI is established on an individual-focused approach to difficulties, with distinct borders between normality and disability, and that EI might be contradictive to objectives of inclusive education.

### **The technical and practical relationship between teacher and student**

In the essay *The instrumental fallacy* from 1972 the Norwegian philosopher Hans Skervheim (1926–1999) distinguishes between practical and technical *sciences* on which

educational practice can rely. Skjervheim also distinguishes between technical and practical *approaches in education*. A technical approach is based on natural sciences and is concerned with obtaining objective data about a child through assessment tools that objectively measure what is normal and not for children at a certain age. Educational actions are then based on the objectively gathered knowledge. However, Skjervheim described an opposite approach. Practical approaches do not have an objective technical basis but are established upon ethical considerations and interpersonal standards. Skjervheim suggests that an optimal pedagogical relationship should position children and adults as equal participants. Where educational practice should mirror the child's *intentions and perspectives* more than depending on objective data obtained by standardized test results (Skjervheim 1996a, b, c).

Skjervheim called this situation “the instrumental fallacy”. However, the “fallacy” is not primarily a practical mistake where educators depend solely on the technical approaches. The fallacy lays in absolutising a certain kind of practice without considering that this practice is only legitimate within specific limits and contexts. The technical approaches can contribute with some valuable knowledge, only to a certain extent. That limit is what concerns Skjervheim when he claims that the technical approach has a legitimate role in education, but that it also has its limits.

Skjervheim came up with clear theoretical arguments for an alternative perspective to what he criticised in the technical relation in education. The solution to the instrumental fallacy lies in the *participant* – perspective discussed in the article “Participant and spectator” from 1957 (in: Skjervheim 1996b, c). Skjervheim unveils the distinction between *participant* and *spectator* by presenting the problem of objectification in interpersonal relationships. He describes objectifying and participating positions as two different attitudes that can occur in human communication. The first relation is a subject/object position and the second a subject/subject position. In this description, Skjervheim presents a three-part relationship between me, the other and the subject matter.

In a participant relation (subject/subject position), I, along with the person I relate to, draw attention to the phenomenon and engage myself in the focus of attention of that person; in other words, we are both occupied with the same subject matter. It is based on a symmetrical interpersonal relationship between me and the other. A different approach to the participant relation is the spectator position (subject/object position). In this relation the spectator's attention is directed to the fact that the other expresses something, but without engaging with his or her problem. In the spectator position new insight are derived from observation of the other, not from dialogue where both persons can come forth with their own perspectives. The spectator position will be a relation where I ascertain that the other says something, but without engaging in what the other is referring to. We do not share a common problem. As a spectator I can stick to my own views on the matter, *the other* has become my focus and subject matter and thereby the other becomes my “object” (Skjervheim 1996a). Tests, evaluations and screenings are strategies developed within a spectator approach to human knowledge.

Skjervheim (1996b, c) criticises the Spectator when it is used as means of understanding the persons' intensions and possibilities, because knowledge of a person can only be obtained through establishing an equal relation. In education, there will always be asymmetric relations, but Skjervheim claims that equality can be present although there is asymmetry. The problem with the spectator relationship is that the essential third part is missing. Skjervheim (1996c; Skjervheim, Strandenes, Crips 1996) argues that it is precisely this third part, "subject matter", that makes an equal relation possible. The third part comes about in a joint focus directed towards something outside ourselves, and where both engage; participate, in the other's problem.

Skjervheims descriptions of relations and critique offer important contributions on how we alternatively can approach the concept of EI.

### **Two traditions of educational studies**

Theory-development in the Anglo-American tradition is derived from an interdisciplinary field historically consisting of philosophy, sociology, psychology and history, where each discipline contributes with its own perspectives on solving the challenges of practical education. What is absent in the Anglo-American construction of the field is, in Biesta's (2011) view, "the idea of education as an academic discipline in its own right" (Biesta 2011: 176). This autonomy exists in the Continental tradition of Pädagogik.

### **The Anglo-American construction**

Biesta (2011, 2013) presents his argument based on central texts in the Anglo-American history of educational studies. Historically, studies of education were merely connected to teachers' training in the practical field and were not really regarded as an academic discipline. Tibble (1966b) emphasizes core issues that influenced the development of the study of education in this tradition. The first one suggests that the field of education was merely concerned with schooling and the practice of teaching but had weak connections to educational studies as an academic discipline. Secondly, and probably as a consequence of the first one, the lack of education as an academic subject has affected the educational focus to be dependent on other academic fields in order to develop theory. According to Tibble, education is strongly influenced by philosophy, history, psychology and sociology, where psychology seems to have had the dominant role (Tibble 1966a).

Hirst (1966) also explores the problem with a lack of autonomy, or core. He claims that educational theory cannot be an autonomous discipline (Hirst 1966: 51), because it does not generate "*some unique form of understanding about education*" in addition to what the other four disciplines contribute (Hirst 1966: 51). The study of education is in this sense a multidisciplinary field of studying the *phenomenon* of education, which in turn may be the reason for it lacking a disciplinary status (Biesta 2011). Biesta (2011) further describes this challenge when he states that psychology of education asks psychological

questions about education, and the sociology of education asks sociological questions about education, but who will ask educational questions about education? Tibble sums up this argument in the following way: “It is clear that »education« is a field of subject, not a basic discipline; there is no distinctively »educational« way of thinking; in education one is using psychological or historical or sociological or philosophical ways of thinking to throw light on some problem in the field of human learning” (Tibble 1971: 16).

### **The Continental construction**

According to Biesta (2011), the English term “field of educational studies” does not have a counterpart in the German language, but instead has several terms and concepts that in detail refer to specific parts of the complex term “education”. The German term Pädagogik relates to the German concept Erziehung. Erziehung can refer to institutions, situations and aims, or linked to communication, dialogue or processes. Erziehung is commonly understood as teleological and value-laden as it always involves aims and ends and therefore always requires decisions about which aims and ends are considered desirable (Biesta 2011: 185). Oelkers (in: Biesta 2011) points to three common characteristics of theories on Erziehung; it focuses on morality, refers to interactions between human beings and has to do with asymmetric relationships. Oelkers further claims that theories on ‘Erziehung’ should include “a definition of its aims, an account of its process and a conception of its objects” (Oelkers 2001: 263 in: Biesta 2011: 184). Focusing on Erziehung as part of Pädagogik clearly shows that the Continental construction of the field of educational studies does not have other disciplines as a starting point and is not constructed as an interdisciplinary field of knowledge.

Following this argument, Biesta (2011) points to the fact that Pädagogik is not explicitly or exclusively connected to questions of organised teaching within the school context. Pädagogik has a much wider focus of “Menschwerdung” – the process of becoming human. Pädagogik is driven by a particular *interest* (and not an object of study): an interest in the child’s right to a certain degree of self-determination and protecting the domain of education and through this protecting the domain of childhood in general from claims of societal powers such as the church, the state or the economy. The theoretical framework of Pädagogik is clearly in line with the description and criticism of education offered by Skjervheim in the above description.

### **Early Intervention and the theories of education**

The point made so far is that the history and development of the field of education impact how we understand education both in theory and practice. It influences how the purpose of education is perceived, how we formulate educational goals as well as which pedagogical strategies we use to fulfil these goals. The fact that the history of educational studies has two significantly different cultural and historical pathways leads to fundamentally

different perspectives on education. The case of EI illustrates this point. Based on the historical development of EI, our claim is that EI has emerged within the Anglo-American education tradition. Based on this historical context, we further claim that there is a great potential of conflict when EI-strategies are adopted or converted into educational systems traditionally rooted in the Continental tradition. The critique against program-oriented EI as having instrumental tendencies connects with Biesta's hypothesis that there are two constructions of the field. This is so because this critique only makes sense if one assumes an understanding of pedagogy on the basis of the German *Pädagogik* tradition and its way of understanding and justifying pedagogy. In other words, the critique is proposed from a Continental traditions perspective, with its understanding of aims of pedagogy, against a concept (EI) that has emerged in a different educational tradition. What basically is discussed are thus the conditions for how education should be understood in a given context, and the answer to how education should be perceived depends on which tradition one adheres to: the Anglo-American or the Continental.

Next, we will argue that the concept of EI is based on an Anglo-American tradition of educational studies, and further elaborate this point by going into details on four issues that visualise how EI can be understood differently in the two traditions. To guide the discussion, a model visualises the differences by asking five questions: What is the problem? How is the problem defined in the two traditions? How is EI legitimised in each of the traditions? What methods do they provide? How is the role of the teacher perceived in the Anglo-American education and the Continental tradition?

We will use the term *education* when speaking about the Anglo-American tradition and *Pädagogik* when referring to the Continental tradition.

### **Re-framing early intervention: what is the problem?**

EI is needed if there is a problem that needs to be solved to avoid it escalating in the future. Therefore, it is necessary to make changes in the existing education offered by e.g. adding new strategies, changing social organisations, increasing teachers' competence, making curriculum changes or by removing something in order to minimise the problem at an early stage. EI should then represent a new strategy replacing or adding something to the existing educational strategy. One can agree there is a problem. However, the two traditions have different perspectives on defining, legitimising and solving the problems.

### **How does the problem occur?**

The concept of EI only makes sense, or one might even say exists, in relation to a problem or a potential problem to provide changes (Hausstätter 2014). Regardless of whether EI is perceived within the framework of the *Education* or *Pädagogik* perspective, one needs to define who needs help and with what, which inhere the existence of a problem or

a potential problem. Therefore, the question “How does the problem occur?” needs to be answered in order to understand why EI is required and how it should be provided.

From the *Education* perspective, the problem occurs because of a mismatch between educational demands that are historically, culturally and politically constructed in the institution we call the education system – and the individual child’s ability to meet those demands in a way the educational system accepts and validates (Chaiklin 2003). This in turn means that the child should be able to manage satisfactorily the educational expectations, stated in the national curriculum, based on the general education given to all children in the institution. However, not all children are able to fulfil the expectations faced, and the school is not able to provide sufficient education to make this happen. This creates a gap between the demands and the child’s ability to fulfil them, and this gap creates a problem for the child and for the school. Therefore, the school needs a strategy or tool to close that gap. EI is claimed to be the tool needed as it is always connected to the academic goals that are politically formulated in schools’ strategy documents. Therefore, it will then be a tool that responds to an institution’s expectations and have its legitimacy as an educational strategy through this. EI in the *education* tradition is directed by these academic goals that are historically, culturally and politically constructed through educational institutions. EI is thus an educational strategy which aims at effectuating the institution.

In the *Pädagogik* tradition there exists a normative conception of what is good education because the purpose of education is “*Menschwerdung*” and an interest of the child’s self-determination. Therefore, one must ask the following: What is good education? Do the current academic demands reflect what is agreed upon is a good school, based on normative judgments of what is wished for in schools? This tradition reflects upon issues that in Skjervheim’s opinion are lacking in the technical-empirical approach to education (Skjervheim 1996a, b, c; Skjervheim, Strandenes, Crips 1996). The *Pädagogik* tradition legitimises pedagogical interventions in relation to more broad issues – elements that can be associated with more general normative values of the society of which they are part of. To grow up and become part of a community is an identity-building project and, as pointed out by Biesta (2011), this is an activity that legitimised the child’s right to self-determination. In the *Pädagogik* tradition educational work is essentially constituted through the quality of the relationship between an adult and a child and educational work can only be conducted based on this relationship (Biesta 2013). Therefore, the problem occurs because of a breakdown in the relationship between child and teacher, which in turn makes it impossible for learning and development to happen. This breakdown, which creates the need for EI, is characterised by the fact that the teacher is not able to provide education that the child can make use of, or is not provided in accordance with respect for the child’s dignity. Early intervention in the *Pädagogik* tradition is therefore perceived as educational strategies one implements when previous educational initiatives fail to maintain the quality of the relationship between adult and child. This means that the need for early intervention appears as a result of a problem that is not necessarily located in the child, but instead in the relation between the child and their social environment in school (Hausstätter 2009).

### **How is Early Intervention legitimised in the two constructions?**

In the Anglo-American tradition the institution (school) plays a key role in legitimising working with EI where EI strategies are linked to what degree one is able to close the gap between academic demands and the child's ability to fulfil the institutional objectives in the future. Overarching pedagogical programs often seems to be chosen as an EI strategy. From this point of view, educational practice has its legitimacy in the ability to fulfil the goals of the institution. In other words, the commitment is in favour of the institution.

In the Pädagogik-perspective EI is not legitimised in institutions, but in the relation between the child and the teacher. In line with this tradition Skjervheim (1996c) claims that pedagogy must establish an equal relationship between the child and adult. The legitimacy of EI thereby lies in what extent EI-strategies can develop and maintain this relationship in which is created space for the child's learning and development. As *Pädagogik* tradition emphasis the relation between teacher and child, educational practice has legitimacy in the quality of that relation. And the commitment in this tradition is not towards the institution, but to the child.

### **What methods do the different traditions provide?**

Anglo-American EI strategies that have been carried out for decades are often constructed and informed by other academic disciplines than education. Interventions based on psychology, sociology and economic theoretical frameworks that for example try to solve complex socioeconomic problems. The concept *prevention* is highlighted in the EI literature. Prevention is a concept used in medicine and social work with no specific historical basis in education. This concept has now become a central part of the EI, inherited as part theories based on other traditions. Literature on EI describes goals as being to prevent a possible difficulty occurring in the future.

However, turning to the Pädagogik tradition focus on preventive EI strategies will differ. The concept *prevention* is not central in this tradition at all. Løvlie (2013) elaborates this point by claiming that focusing on preventing a problem is not a *pedagogical* task at all. Pedagogy should be concerned with growth and development, and not on restricting and constraining (Løvlie 2013). In other words, by accepting a concept from a different theoretical and practical field into the area of education the focus is changed and through this also the practice of teachers.

### **What is the role of the teacher?**

Historically the *education* tradition has been oriented towards a practical field focusing on school and the teacher as a professional practitioner. Not until the 1970s did the discipline of education become "academised" (Biesta 2011). However, professionalism is regarded rather differently in the two traditions.

From an *education* perspective "professionalism" can be perceived in terms of how well the teacher can make the institution (school) most effective. The aim of educational



activities in this tradition is to make the institution as efficient as possible to maximise children's learning according to institutional goals. Therefore, the role of the teacher must be understood in relation to how well he is able to fulfil these specific goals. The intervention is being validated according to whether the strategy is effective in maximising children's learning outcome related to standards previously defined through e.g. curriculum or other strategy documents. Specifically, defining what the child can or cannot do is essential to providing the knowledge the teacher needs to provide effective education. Therefore, they need a tool to specifically distinguish pupil's level of knowledge and academic skills. Assessment tools often provide the information and in the *education* tradition EI in terms of assessment tools and programs are a completely legitimate and important component of education. The teacher must be able to choose adequate theories and models that can contribute to fulfil the specific goals of the institution. Professionalism is therefore perceived as a teacher's ability to make use of techniques and programs to maximise learning effects. Making professional judgments is linked to choosing the most suitable program.

From a Pädagogik perspective it looks a bit different. Professionalism may be linked to a teacher's ability to make pedagogical judgments based on cooperation and negotiation with the child according to normative (agreed upon) conceptions of what is good pedagogy/upbringing. According to Skjervheim's theory, making pedagogical judgments is linked to creating space for children's participation. Skjervheim argues that pedagogy has its starting point in the relationship between the child and the adult. It is the responsibility of adults that education is carried out in accordance with the child's dignity and that this is the moral ground – condition in an educational relationship (Skjervheim 1996b, c). The knowledge base for EI must therefore be based on a pedagogy that is based on this relationship, especially in terms of avoiding objectification of the child.

From this point of view, one of the most problematic issues in the *education* tradition is the test-tradition in which EI is carried out based on knowledge obtained through what is perceived as objective data about the child. In Skjervheim's perspective, such data should not fully constitute the knowledge basis for pedagogical interventions but designed according to pedagogical judgments concerning children's self-determination and uniqueness. Therefore, the child's perspective should be given attention. Skjervheim (1996a) would probably initiate that the intervention quality is ensured through the moral endeavour of the adult and that the quality of the relationship between the child and adult legitimises pedagogy. This dimension in the work of early intervention seems forgotten and is rarely questioned in policy documents on this subject (Vik 2014).

A further issue is how professionalism is defined in Education tradition and Pädagogik tradition. As shown earlier, Education tradition emphasis pre-defined programs as legitimate educational practices. Pädagogik differs from Education on the conception of professionalism because it leaves too little space for teachers' pedagogical and professional judgment. Education perspectives legitimize the programs/manuals to validate professional judgements and to ensure the quality of the intervention. The problematic side, from the Pädagogik point of view, is that teachers are not expected to develop their own pedagogical judgements and children's perspectives are unnecessary to carry out peda-

gical interventions (Løvlie 2013). However, from the Education perspective, teachers can, and should, make use of the methods that the program provides, as standardization of a program and tests avoids teachers' subjective judgement.

But from the Pädagogik perspective, engagement in pedagogical activities and professionalism is constituted and legitimised by embracing the fact that children have reasons and intentions that adults do not have easy access to, especially not through standardized tests.

### Concluding remarks

Biesta (2011) emphasises the fact that “the two constructions should themselves be understood as constructed” (Biesta 2011: 176), and possibly the same statement can be directed at the concept of EI. On this basis we have argued that these different perspectives have explanatory powers and might extend our insight on how the educational concept Early Intervention is defined and legitimised today (tab. 1). We argue that EI is mostly understood within the Education-framework today. The question is then whether EI can be carried out in education according to the conditions the Pädagogik tradition demands? To clarify and suggest an alternative and teacher-centred conception of EI from a Pädagogik-perspective we have drew on Skjervheim's concepts.

Table 1. Conceiving EI in the *Education* and *Pädagogik* traditions

Question	Anglo-American	Continental
What is the problem?	EI is connected to an understanding that a problem exists in the present or might in the future	EI is connected to an understanding that a problem exists in the present or might in the future
How is the problem defined? (How does the problem occur?)	The problem occurs because of a mismatch between academic and/or social demands, raised by the institution, and the child's ability to fulfil those demands  Strategies to effectuate institutional goals  Institution – child  Prevention	The problem occurs because of a breakdown in relationship between child and teacher. The teacher is not able to provide education that the child can make use of  Strategies that have an inherent normative conception of what is good pedagogy/upbringing  Adult – child  Development
How is EI legitimised?	EI strategies for solving the problem are legitimised by the degree EI is able to close the gap and thereby fulfil the institutional objectives in the future  Commitment to the Institution	EI strategies are legitimised through a belief that EI can contribute to a better life for the child today (in the present) and in the future in general by empowering it to become a participant in society  Commitment to the person/morality itself (or acting morally)

Question	Anglo-American	Continental
What methods do the different perspectives provide?	Theoretical models developed by different academic disciplines e.g. psychology, sociology, history and philosophy, but also more recent disciplines like child care and economics	Pedagogical theories developed within the German Pädagogik tradition. Erziehung Dialogue Dynamic/context dependent Participation.
What are the roles of the teacher?	The teacher must be able to choose adequate theories and models that can contribute to fulfilling the specific goals of the institution  Professionalism is understood as the teacher's ability to make use of techniques and programs in education  Diagnostic analysis  Spectator	Responsibility for child-adult-relations  Professional judgements  Professionalism is linked to the teacher's ability to make pedagogical judgements on the basis of cooperation and negotiation with the child according to a normative (agreed upon) conception of what is good pedagogy/upbringing  Create space for the child's perspective/participation

Source: own elaboration.

What still is to be encountered is whether our suggestions of constructing the concept of EI in the Pädagogik tradition are at all possible, or if it is incommensurable as it operates on fundamentally different assumptions and ideas than Education tradition.

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