

Understanding Biesta's three purposes of education: A framework proposal

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Abstract

The purpose of 'doing' education is often unconsidered or assumed in educational thinking and practice, despite the diversity of understandings. Gert Biesta's perspective that education has a threefold purpose of qualification, socialisation and subjectification is among the most known. However, the interpretation of Biesta's thinking is challenging, namely, due to intrinsic complexity and contradiction between the domains of purpose and a loose use of the author's theory that tends to conflate and overlook core elements of each purpose. The current work proposes an innovative framework to support the understanding and application of Biesta's three purposes of education and is a contribution in overcoming the theoretical and empirical constraints faced. The framework proposed is composed of two levels: a theoretical level, resulting from the deductive interpretation of Biesta's thinking on purpose, where the core domains and subdomains of education are depicted; and an empirical level, resulting from the application of the framework to research data, in which a potential expansion of the three purposes is presented. Overall, this original work demonstrated the framework's adequacy as an analytical tool for education research on the issue of purpose and the adaptability of Biesta's theory and the framework developed to future studies.

KEYWORDS

education purpose, framework, Gert Biesta, qualification, socialisation, subjectification

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper addresses the importance of keeping the reflection around education purpose at the core of educational thinking, practice and research endeavours. It specifically furthers the debate on education purpose regarding Gert Biesta's three-fold perspective of qualification, socialisation and subjectification.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

This paper offers an original framework aimed at supporting the understanding and application of Biesta's perspective on education purpose, based on theoretical and empirical input. The methodological tool provided tackles common challenges in applying Biesta's thinking to education topics and contributes to unpack meanings and tensions around education purpose.

INTRODUCTION: EDUCATION PURPOSE AS INDISPENSABLE ENDEAVOUR

The discourse around the purpose of education has been at the core of many philosophical debates in education and sociology. Scholars such as Dubet and Martuccelli (1998), Bernard Charlot (2021) and, more recently, Gert Biesta have discussed the multifold nature of education, from more 'individual-oriented' to more 'social-oriented' purposes. Education, in particular school education, has been widely reflected as a space of emergence and negotiation of this 'in-betweenness', with different understandings as to the meanings and roles ascribed to its subjective and social dimensions. While some schools of thought discuss the reproductive aspect of education, connected to its qualification and socialisation role, others stress the productive possibilities that come from creating newness and change stemming from one's subjectivity (Venegas, 2017). The idea of 'becoming a subject' and how one does that is, therefore, a highly disputed one (Rebughini, 2014; Venegas, 2017).

Bernard Charlot (2021, p. 5) refers to education as a combined 'triple process, indissociable, of humanization, socialization and singularization'. *Humanisation* represents a certain location within humanity that is not pre-existent but happens through 'the access to a human position shared with other people and a reflexive consciousness ... the effect of a history' (Charlot, 2021, p. 13). *Socialisation* is related to the process of 'becoming a member of a community, whose values are shared and where one occupies a place' (Charlot, 1997, p. 60; cited in Charlot, 2021, p. 3). Lastly, *singularisation* is the 'construction of oneself as a subject' (Charlot, 2021, p. 13) through education. For Charlot education is, in essence, (a product of) *relation*—with the world, with others and with oneself—that is sustained through this triple anchorage. Dubet and Martuccelli (1998), reflecting on the sociology of school experience, consider that education comprises *socialisation* and *subjectivation*. The *socialisation* function is connected to 'the training of social actors by means of interiorizing norms and models; and, subjectivation, which refers to the training of autonomous subjects through distancing with their socialization' (Venegas, 2017, p. 4, emphasis in original).

Gert Biesta has been one of the most prominent authors contributing to the debate on education purpose for the last two decades (Biesta, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2022, 2024). As the author himself puts it in a recent piece, purpose is not a given or minor element

of education. Quite the contrary, the understanding of purpose 'should always come first, as it is only when we have a meaningful and justifiable answer to the question of what our educational endeavors are supposed to be *for* that we can begin to make decisions about content and relationships' (Biesta, 2024, p. 3, emphasis in original). Despite education purpose being broader, immaterial, immeasurable by nature, it has a cascading effect of organising more concrete aspects of education (e.g., aims, objectives, processes).¹ According to the author, education has the triple purpose of *qualification*, *socialisation* and *subjectification*, that are distinctive enough yet deeply entangled, as discussed in the next section.

Biesta's perspective on education purpose has been used extensively across research in education, covering diverse topics, targets and methods (see, e.g., Duarte, 2023; Franch, 2019; Juvonen et al., 2024; Lomsdal et al., 2023; Makumane, 2023; Ryökkynen et al., 2022; Sandahl, 2020; Smith & Neoh, 2023). Despite being widespread, Biesta's perspective on education purpose has been described as simplistic, difficult to grasp, elusive and contradictory (MacAllister, 2016; Straume, 2016). At the same time, although no systematic reading of Biesta's work on the purpose of education has been found in educational research, our analysis of numerous examples of empirical readings, supporting the background to this paper, suggested an equally diverse and debatable interpretation of Biesta's proposal. These became important drivers of the current work, which proposes an innovative framework aiming to support the understanding and guide the application of Biesta's three purposes of education. We argue that part of the identified challenges in implementing Biesta's theory on education purpose, which we discuss later, stem from a somewhat 'loose' interpretation of each purpose and the lack of a clear view on the structure, content and orientation of qualification, socialisation and subjectification. The current work is a contribution in overcoming these theoretical and empirical challenges.

In the remaining parts of the paper, we briefly outline Biesta's definition of qualification, socialisation and subjectification, and provide an original reading on challenges and interpretations found in work relying on or debating Biesta's thinking on purpose. We then articulate how this formed the basis for developing a framework to understanding and applying Biesta's domains of purpose. We describe the methodology followed in the design, validation and testing of the framework, present and discuss the structure and content of the proposed framework, and end with final remarks with points for future reflection.

BIESTA AND THE TRIPLE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

Over the last decades, Biesta has written extensively about the purpose of education, arguing for its centrality in education thinking, practice and research (Biesta, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2022, 2024). Although Biesta continues to elaborate on qualification and socialisation-related aspects, most updates concern subjectification, the most debatable among the three domains of purpose, and additional insight on how the domains (can) align and conflict, often through pedagogical examples offered by the author.

The domain of *qualification* relates education purpose to the 'transmission and acquisition of knowledge, skills, and understandings' (Biesta, 2022, p. 44). Although the focus on formal education, academic or school preparation and recognition is often the most indicative of this aspect, qualification also relates to knowledge, skills and understandings stemming from non-formal and informal education processes.

Through the domain of *socialisation*, education purpose is related to introducing and supporting newcomers into understanding how they inscribe and relate to 'particular cultures, traditions and practices, either explicitly but also implicitly ... with the invitation that students "locate" themselves in some way in such cultures, traditions, and practices' (Biesta, 2022, pp. 44, 52). Understanding socialisation is crucial, not only from a more immediate and

survival standpoint but also, and perhaps more importantly, to gain awareness that education plays a significant role in reproducing (and challenging) social structures and 'how the world works'.

Subjectification, the third purpose of education, has a less immediate definition, and has been open to wider interpretation since its initial formulation. In a most recent work, subjectification is described as a particular kind of 'madness', one that sits in between acknowledging the responsibility of education in helping students in 'being the subject of their own life' and 'the paradox of wanting to promote the freedom of our students by educational means—that is, by in some way interfering with their lives' (Biesta, 2024, p. 4).

The intersected and conflictual nature of the three, that the author alludes to oftentimes across his writings, is visible in this brief definition of subjectification alone. In fact, as Biesta describes it, despite 'possibilities for synergy between qualification, socialisation and subjectification, the three domains can be in conflict as well' (Biesta, 2015, p. 79). Apart from the fact that domains do not exist in a void and always entangle a certain form of content and action, the domains of purpose can, potentially, link in more specific ways. Links include, for instance, qualification acting as a path to subjectification (e.g., by developing knowledge, skills and understandings that support the sense of 'being a self'), subjectification as indispensable to socialisation (e.g., promoting students' freedom to decide as key for self-locating across social groups), or socialisation being a core aspect of qualification processes (e.g., the sense of social belonging that can happen by mastering a certain skill shared by a given group). Nevertheless, tensions are easily found between domains. One of the most referred to is educational systems favouring qualification over socialisation and subjectification, for example, the excessive focus on tests and academic achievement being paradigmatic of this (Biesta, 2015). Biesta does warn us that 'one-sidedness always comes at a price' (Biesta, 2015, p. 79) and places the domains in broader educational challenges, such as education being more or less open-ended, flexible, structured or personalised (Biesta, 2015). In the next section, we review examples of previous work debating or relying on the author's thinking on purpose.

CHALLENGES AND INTERPRETATIONS OF BIESTA'S THREEFOLD PURPOSE

Biesta's domains of purpose—and the case of subjectification, in particular—have been subject to critique (Guillemin, 2022; MacAllister, 2016; Papastephanou, 2020; Rømer, 2021). Biesta's description of subjectification has been described as 'rather elusive' (MacAllister, 2016, p. 381) and while this statement aligns with Biesta's commentary, some authors signal the lack of explicit examples of teacher and students' practices to develop subjectification. A similar conclusion is drawn by Guillemin (2022), whose analysis of Biesta's subjectification claims that 'the examples used have a rhetorical power which could conceal disputable premises and partial descriptions of reality, which could lead the reader to take the examples as commonsensical and simplify complex realities' (p. 4). Rømer (2021, pp. 39–40) proposes that the often quite different and contradictory interpretations of the domains of purpose made by other users result from Biesta's 'post-structural influences' that appear to purposely leave room for differing interpretations. Other authors focus their critique on the absence of deep nuanced discussion about the relationships between the domains. Papastephanou (2020) highlights the various intersections between the three domains, viewing Biesta's explanation as simplistic, as it focuses largely on subjectification as emancipatory and leaves the relationships with qualification and socialisation unexplored. Earlier critiques of Biesta's work (e.g., Straume, 2016) highlighted the excessive focus of Biesta's work on the 'self' rather than the contribution of the purpose of education for the wider context, however, Biesta's more recent work addresses this criticism.

Despite this, a number of authors have used various versions of Biesta's domains from his work between 2009 and 2020 to examine the purpose of education. Works range from education policies (e.g., Carter, 2019; Franch, 2019) to school curriculum and practices (e.g., Duarte, 2023; Juvonen et al., 2024; Sandahl, 2020; Smith & Neoh, 2023), teacher training and practice (e.g., Lomsdal et al., 2023), digital education (e.g., Makumane, 2023), or vocational education and training (e.g., Ryökkynen et al., 2022). We conducted an examination of these authors' applications of the three domains² to identify trends in their use. Using a systematic approach, papers were identified via the academic database Scopus, through relevant keywords (Gert Biesta AND purpose). In paper selection, we considered works published between 2019 and 2024, given the updates on Biesta's theory, and aimed at a diversity of topics, as illustrated above. Papers identified were analysed regarding topic, theoretical and empirical use of the domains of purpose (definitions adopted, level of detail, type of analysis conducted and methodological choices), and conclusions drawn based on the application of the domains. Initially we conducted this reading in the hope that we would find rigorous examples to inform our methods as we aimed at applying Biesta's work to a dataset of interviews conducted with teacher educators on the purpose of education (Ham, Coelho & Jones, *in preparation*).³ At this point in time, the creation of a framework had not been considered, and only later became necessary, hence this paper.

The works consulted were very informative as to the challenges and interpretations of Biesta's threefold purposes. In many cases, the domains were applied to a topic or content not directly connected to the purpose of education (e.g., effectiveness of education programmes), illustrating the diversity of use of authors' theories. Although most works consulted referred to a combination of Biesta's publications over time, there was a focus on initial works. With few exceptions, publications tended to base their definitions and analysis on Biesta's initial outline of the domains (Biesta, 2006, 2009, 2015), without reference to more recent iterations or discussions, even though Biesta's work published post-2020 provides the most clarity on subjectification. The impact of this is that empirical application was often based on initial ideas that seem to disregard how the domains had been used by others, or where Biesta himself had added clarifications.

Moreover, several examples include very limited and sometimes inaccurate definitions or descriptions of the three domains. Although Biesta takes great pains to highlight the complexity of the domains and discuss the nuances of the three purposes, this was absent in most selected papers. As a consequence, conclusions drawn from the application of the domains tended to be fairly straightforward or even misguided. With few exceptions, the policies, curriculum, practices and pedagogical approaches were discussed in simplistic ways, and recommendations were typically prescriptive and directed towards a specified action, rarely considering the inherent competing tensions in the purposes of education.

Additionally, most works lacked an explanation as to how the coding or application of the three domains of purpose had been conducted with the specific datasets. Usually, a brief definition of each domain was followed by stated examples of policy terms, curriculum descriptors or interviewees' quotes perceived to align or be representative of the domain. However, typically little or no justification or explanation for how the coding was done, or how the alignment process had happened, was included. The reader is left to deduce the coding process—and often we, as readers, were unable to make a clear connection between Biesta's theory and the conclusions stemming from its application. The impact of this, at least for us who were interested in how Biesta's work had been used, was that instead of building on and honing Biesta's original work as examples in practice, such evidence often added to our confusion around the domains. This was particularly evident for the domain of subjectification.

Similarly, the domains of education purpose were used to support a range of conclusions, some of which appeared in direct opposition to Biesta's writing. Almost all cases implied

that according to Biesta, education aims to reach a 'balance' between the three domains, arguing that qualification, socialisation and subjectification should be addressed equally. Another poignant example of contradiction with Biesta's work was that in his 2021 paper, Biesta defines subjectification as specifically *not* being individualism, motivation or responsibility. Yet, in some works, individualism and increased motivation were cited as outcomes of subjectification and used to support the conclusion that the intervention enacted was 'good education' as it aligned with Biesta's thinking. This demonstrates how diverse understandings can be particularly problematic.

However, solid applications of Biesta's purpose theory were also identified (Juvonen et al., 2024; Ryökkynen et al., 2022). Ryökkynen et al. (2022) provided extensive definitions, and more importantly outlined the relationships between the three domains, in applying Biesta's work to a deductive analysis of narratives from vocational education and training (VET) students. Authors included detailed descriptions of the method used for data coding and analysis, and how evidence of the three domains in the data were identified in multiple rounds of data coding. Besides reflecting the contextual nuances of students with special needs accessing VET across all three domains, the recommendations are not prescriptive, but reflected the extent to which Biesta's domains were evident. Juvonen et al. (2024) aimed specifically at furthering Biesta's theorisation in an ethnographic study in Finnish primary schools and curriculum. The authors proposed a 'theoretical model of the interrelations among socialization, qualification, and subjectification, and discuss the dynamics of these domains' (Juvonen et al., 2024, p. 393), which was based on Biesta's theory and on the empirical evidence collected. Juvonen and colleagues argued that, ultimately, purposes need to be considered from a collective standpoint as they are 'primarily a societal matter rather than an issue individual educators must try to solve on their own' (Juvonen et al., 2024). Moreover, the authors argued, the complex, conflictive and uneven nature of the purposes needs to be carefully considered since socialisation set the ground for the other two, yet qualification was often a pervasive element across the domains. Detailed notes on the methodology, the study context and how it related to the domains, inherent challenges and overlaps, areas of alignment and extensive, nuanced definitions of the three domains were provided. Although the authors argued that a balance should exist in the enactment of the domains in education, this was done in a way that identifies the components of the contexts that most influence teachers' decision-making rather than simply outlining a series of steps that should be taken.

The limitations found in previous works, the criticism of Biesta's thinking mentioned early and the challenges experienced in our initial use of its theory led us to search for more 'structure' around the education purpose perspective. We were not able to identify a framework to guide our in-depth reading of the data in literature. This informed our decision to create a framework, designed for the sake of an updated, rigorous and consistent use of Biesta's theory, whilst also adhering to Biesta's reiteration that the domains are not intended to be prescriptive, but to 'give an *educational* language ... to make educational policy and practice more thoughtful' (Biesta, 2024, p. 5, emphasis in original). Equally, the framework created does not intend to be dogmatic but, hopefully, a contribution to this conversation. Among theoretical possibilities for understanding education purpose, our choice of Biesta's perspective is grounded on the connection made between education purpose and education and/as democracy (Biesta, 2006), as well as the author's claim for the need of a 'world-centred education' (Biesta, 2022), core to thinking about education purpose, the teaching mission and the role of schools. These aspects link with global education, a field to which Biesta himself has also contributed (see, e.g., Mannion et al., 2011), and the major topic of the project from which the text was derived, and its key players (teacher educators).

The following section outlines methods, options, a description of the framework design, validation and testing.

METHODOLOGY

In this section we present the methodology followed in the development, validation and testing of our original analytical framework. Besides the theoretical input presented previously, the process for design and testing of the framework is grounded in exploratory content analysis and thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) and online research collaboration scholarship (Crites et al., 2020). In fact, the collaboration occurred largely online as all authors were located in three different countries over the 9 months it took to complete the design and testing phases, being sustained by ‘online research meetings via video calls, emails and a central document repository’ (Crites et al., 2020, p. 10). Dalila Coelho (A1) and Miriam Ham (A2) were the main contributors to the design of the framework and met usually at 2-week intervals. Sarah-Louise Jones (A3) was the lead of the research project from which the empirical data for testing the framework, comprised of interview transcripts, were sourced and acted as a mentor to check the logic of the design at key stages of the process. The design and testing process of the framework was conducted over six phases (see Figure 1).

Phase 1: Independent content analysis of Biesta's domains of purpose

A1 and A2 independently conducted multiple readings of Biesta's previous and current work (specifically from Biesta, 2015, 2020, 2022) regarding the three domains of education purpose. Using a ‘deductive content analysis’ approach (Fife & Gossner, 2024), considering its suitability to ‘use existing theory to examine meanings, processes, and narratives of interpersonal and intrapersonal phenomena ... that is suited to theory application, testing, and refinement’ (p. 1). Despite the deductive emphasis, where a pre-existing theory is used to interpret empirical data, in this approach a combination of deductive and inductive processes ends in ‘supporting, contradicting, refining, and expanding evidence for the theory or conceptual model being examined, resulting in a theory that better fits the present sample and accounts for increased diversity in the phenomenon being studied’ (Fife & Gossner, 2024, p. 1). We applied this logic to the theory that would later constitute the framework. The various components of the domains were identified deductively, with each author compiling quotes perceived as relating to the various facets of each domain. At this point, no prior logic of analysis was defined, as the goal was for each author to suggest a potential framework structure based on theory.

Phase 2: Initial frameworks design and discussion

A1 and A2 presented the resultant draft frameworks to each other, discussing the logics, advantages and challenges that the use of each would present in the process of coding and

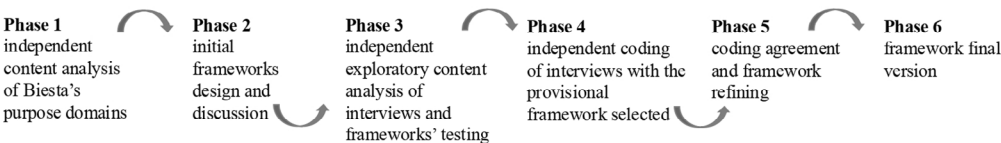


FIGURE 1 Framework design process and testing. Source: Authors' elaboration.

communicating the findings. As the draft frameworks were both deemed viable, the decision was made that the authors would code the dataset separately using both tools.

Phase 3: Independent exploratory content analysis of interviews and testing of frameworks

An independent exploratory content analysis of the dataset was performed by A1 and A2 using the two draft frameworks. The authors discussed iteratively the experience of carrying out the analysis, deciding for the more adequate framework and adjusting the content and labelling of subdomains.

Phase 4: Independent coding of interviews with the provisional framework selected

A second round of independent coding of the interviews' dataset was conducted with the provisional framework, using a 'thematic synthesis' approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Thematic synthesis aims to support decision-making when multiple evaluators are enrolled in qualitative analysis (e.g., literature reviews) and covers 'three stages which overlap(ped) to some degree: the free line-by-line coding of the findings of primary studies; the organisation of these "free codes" into related areas to construct "descriptive" themes; and the development of "analytical" themes' (Thomas & Harden, 2008, s.p.). The framework and provisional results of its empirical application were discussed with A3, confirming its adequacy and relevance.

Phase 5: Coding agreement and framework refining

The completed coding tables were compared and discussed, and the two authors were able to come to full agreement about the coding for *qualification* and *socialisation*. However, significant differences in the coding of *subjectification* arose, concerning frequency, coded data within each subdomain and interpretation of the definitions of the subdomains themselves. Although A1 and A2 had agreed in principle on the definition for each subdomain, the coding process unveiled different conceptualisations. To address this, the differences in coding were discussed and the subcode definitions refined. The differences in coding centred predominantly around different conceptualisations of subjectification's subdomain, termed *action*. The outcome of the discussion, which we discuss further later, suggested that *action* would be better encompassed in the subcodes of other subdomains—*existing*, *existing in and with the world* and *freedom to act or not*, and not as a standalone subdomain. The final framework was updated, and data recoding completed based on the agreed version of the subcodes (see Table 1).

Phase 6: Framework final version

The framework was applied to a dataset (see Figure 1) of a section of interview transcripts about the purpose of education, resulting in further refinements of the subdomains and expansion of the framework into a second level (detailing themes and subthemes). The final framework presented in this paper is composed of two 'levels', which will be discussed further in the results section.

TABLE 1 Framework: Qualification, socialisation and subjectification.

Domains and subdomains of purpose (code and brief description)	
1. Qualification (Qual)	
1.1 Qual_KSU	'... transmission and acquisition of knowledge, skills, and understanding ...' (Biesta, 2022, p. 44).
2. Socialisation (Soc)	
2.1 Soc_Knowledge of	'... the (re)presentation of particular cultures, traditions and practices, either explicitly but also implicitly, as the research on the "hidden curriculum" ...' (Biesta, 2022, p. 44).
2.2 Soc_Location within	'... education seeks to provide students with access to cultures, traditions and practices, with the invitation that students "locate" themselves in some way in such cultures, traditions, and practices ...' (Biesta, 2022, p. 52).
3. Subjectification (Subj)	
3.1 Subj_Existing	'... encouraged and supported to exist as subjects of their own life rather than as objects of cultivating forces and interventions (p. 40); trying to lead one's life (p. 49); how I am, that is to say, the question how I exist, how I try to lead my life, how I try respond to and engage with what I encounter in my life. It therefore includes the question of what I will "do" with my identity ...' (Biesta, 2022, p. 52).
3.2 Subj_Existing in and with the world	'... never an existence just with and for ourselves, but always an existence in and with the world ... figure out what these limits are, which limits should be taken into consideration, which limits are real, so to speak, and which limits are the effect of arbitrary (ab)use of power (p. 48); arousing a desire for wanting to try to live one's life in the world without thinking or putting oneself in the centre of the world (p. 50); when we encounter a real world outside of ourselves, not constructed by us and not necessarily as we would want it to be ...' (Biesta, 2022, p. 53).
3.3 Subj_Freedom to act or not	'... freedom as human beings: our freedom to act or to refrain from action, to say yes or no (p. 45); we want our students to go their own way, we want them to take up their own freedom and "own" it ... which means that they may go in a very different direction from what we envisage for them, up to explicitly refusing the future we may have had in mind for them ...' (Biesta, 2022, p. 56).
3.4 Subj_Interruption	'... education provides them with support and sustenance for staying in this middle ground. Interruption, suspension and sustenance are therefore three important and in a sense very concrete aspects of what is required from education if it takes subjectification seriously ...' (Biesta, 2022, p. 51).

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Trustworthiness in the framework's development and testing was ensured through several actions. First, intercoder *consistency*⁴ (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020, p. 2, emphasis in original), with reflective discussions between evaluators, is part of the 'thematic synthesis' (Thomas & Harden, 2008) approach adopted. Second, the 'critical friend' role of A3 who performed an independent cross-checking of the framework. Finally, the framework and results of the pilot testing with the dataset were submitted for discussion with academic peers in three scientific events in education with relevant audiences (two of which were international), with diverse

levels of familiarity with Biesta's thinking on qualification, socialisation and subjectification (Ham et al., 2024a, 2024b; Jones et al., 2024). Events were selected based on convenience and alignment with the timeframe for the work developed and their adequacy to education and a teaching audience. In the two international events, authors applied regularly to the events' selective calls for presentations, while in the national event the authors were invited to present the work. Discussing the design and testing of the emergent framework with the Delphi study participants (from where the test data were derived) was not possible due to time constraints, and could bring additional input to the current work.

ON THE RELEVANCE OF A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING BIESTA'S THREE PURPOSES OF EDUCATION

This section presents and discusses the framework on education purpose developed, which, to the best of our knowledge, represents an innovative contribution on the use of Biesta's thinking. The framework is composed of two 'levels', which structure this section. Level one is addressed first (Table 1) and explains the definition of domains and subdomains of purpose that were theoretically informed by Biesta's writings on qualification, socialisation and subjectification (Biesta, 2015, 2020, 2022). This part of the framework was defined deductively, according to the method described in the previous section. The second level (Table 2) demonstrates how the framework can be applied empirically, unpacking the subdomains' specificity into themes and subthemes. This second level was defined inductively, from the analysis of data gathered with a group of teacher educators in a Delphi study. The first level of the framework (Table 1), which presents our interpretation of Biesta's writings, is highly transferable to other studies on education purpose. The second level (Table 2) is more specific and relatable to topics around education for citizenship, global competence and social change. Through this example, we hope to demonstrate the framework's potential use and adaptability.

Framework level one: Theoretical structure of the domains and subdomains of purpose

Table 1 illustrates the final version of the theoretical framework developed based on the interpretation of Biesta's theory (level one). This level is constructed around the three domains of purpose—qualification, socialisation and subjectification—numbered and positioned independently, and detailed into subdomains. For each subdomain, representative quotes from the numerous examples of Biesta's writings were identified and are included in the table and description below.

Qualification is often (briefly) defined as the '... transmission and acquisition of knowledge, skills, and understandings' (Biesta, 2022, p. 44). The decision was made to include the three components—*knowledge, skills and understanding* (1.1. *Qual_KSU*)—into a single subdomain (Table 1), given that frequently in Biesta's writings the three components are grouped together with no clear distinctions. Moreover, as we confirmed later in applying the framework to an empirical dataset, quotes containing the idea of qualification as a key purpose of education often articulate the acquisition of a given knowledge for developing a given skill. Globally, qualification relates to the role of education in 'equipping' individuals for their life journey, predominantly but not exclusively through the education system.

Regarding Biesta's explanation of socialisation, we identified two different subdomains that were labelled 2.1 *Soc_Knowledge of* and 2.2 *Soc_Location within* (Table 1). Subdomain

TABLE 2 Framework level two: Qualification, socialisation and subjectification post-application.

Level one		Level two	
Domain	Subdomain	Themes	Subthemes
1. Qualification	1.1 Qual_KSU	Content	a. access knowledge b. promote skills/competencies
		Orientation	a. economic impact b. personal impact c. political impact
2. Socialisation	2.1 Soc_Knowledge of	Content	a. cultural values and norms b. societal organisation
		Orientation	a. individual focus b. societal focus
	2.2 Soc_Location within	Content	a. societal organisation/reality and norms b. individual's role and functioning
		Orientation	a. individual adjustment/fitting b. individual responsibility (for society/country/world) c. individual participation and contribution to the collective
3. Subjectification	3.1 Subj_Existing Existing looks like...	a. coping with life/world forces and events and being prepared for change, including confronting and addressing challenges b. preparing future self's existence c. discovering, nourishing, expanding and accomplishing full human/individual's potential d. making a difference in your life e. valuing one's individuality f. broadening your mind and seeing the world differently g. promoting human/individual's wellbeing	
		a. being responsible and participating b. appreciating and contributing to others' wellbeing and existence c. living well together on the planet d. coping with whatever happens in the world e. engaging and contributing to more socially just, sustainable, peaceful and inclusive societies f. contributing to transformed collectives, communities and public spaces oriented towards positive change g. confronting and addressing (unknown) world issues and challenges	
		No codes identified	
		a. creating experiential opportunities b. provide access to challenging curriculum c. promoting contextualised/critical thinking and problem-solving	

Source: Authors' elaboration.

2.1 is centred around information, understanding or awareness about culture (broadly speaking), focusing on ‘the (re)presentation of particular cultures, traditions and practices, explicitly but also implicitly’ (Biesta, 2022, p. 44). The key tenet of this subdomain is that part of the socialisation role of education is to inform, represent, describe, communicate about social groups, contexts and norms. A common reference in Biesta’s description about the socialisation purpose is that such *knowledge* refers both to the explicit and implicit aspects of societal belonging and ‘functioning’—the told and untold norms and meanings. In teaching, a recurrent example referred to by Biesta is the ‘hidden curriculum’. The other subdomain of socialisation, subdomain 2.2, relates to the ‘what to do’ with such knowledge and seeks to assist learners in understanding their role or *locating within* its context. According to Biesta (2022, p. 52), ‘education seeks to provide students with access to cultures, traditions and practices, with the invitation that students “locate” themselves in some way in such cultures, traditions, and practices’. This subdomain expresses Biesta’s perspective that besides informing, education should, actively, invite and support learners in situating themselves in their context. Thereby education carries an invitation to be intentional in helping learners in identifying the roles they might play or how they might participate in the society, culture or context being represented. Overall, education’s socialisation purpose operates like a ‘social compass, providing the tools for awareness and understanding of how society, and the world more broadly, “function”’ (Ham, Coelho & Jones, *in preparation*).

As outlined in the sections above, subjectification, the third domain of education purpose, was far more complex to define and capture in a logical and tangible way. In and of itself, this domain is tensional (Juvonen et al., 2024) and this is reflected in the resultant four subdomains, labelled using Biesta’s own terms and outlined in Table 1: *existing*; *existing in and with the world*; *freedom to act or not*; and *interruption*.

Subdomain 3.1 *Subj_Existing* encompasses Biesta’s discussion about the purpose of education as providing learners with the opportunity to comprehend and explore the notion of themselves as subjects. Learners should be ‘encouraged and supported to exist as subjects of their own life rather than as objects of cultivating forces and interventions’ (Biesta, 2022, p. 40) and on how to ‘lead one’s life’ (Biesta, 2022, p. 29). This subdomain is specifically about the individual learner and their relationship with themselves, including considerations of how they exist. As the author notes, subjectification is concerned with understanding ‘how I am, that is to say, the question of how I exist, how I try to lead my life, how I try to respond to and engage with what I encounter in my life. It therefore includes the question of what I will “do” with my identity’ (Biesta, 2022, p. 52).

The significant difference between the subdomains of 3.1 *Subj_Existing* and 3.2 *Subj_Existing in and with the world* is the extension of relationship. Both encompass the notion of the learner being the subject of their own life and how they exist, but *existing in and with the world* highlights the interaction or relationship between the self-determined subject and their location in a context. A distinctive aspect between the two subdomains is the ‘encounter [of] a real world outside of ourselves, not constructed by us and not necessarily as we would want it to be’ (Biesta, 2022, p. 53) that the author frequently emphasises and that we include in subdomain 3.2. That is to say, education’s subjectification aspect has to consider and make room for nurturing individuals as such (3.1) while helping them to recognise that their existence is not hermetic but permeated by the context (3.2). In fact, as Biesta puts it, existence is ‘never an existence just with and for ourselves, but always an existence in and with the world ... figure out what these limits are, which limits should be taken into consideration, which limits are real, so to speak, and which limits are the effect of arbitrary (ab)use of power’ (Biesta, 2022, p. 48). Part of doing this seems to be instilling in learners a desire to embrace this existence-in-context, or as the author puts it, ‘arousing a desire for wanting to

try to live one's life in the world without thinking or putting oneself in the centre of the world' (Biesta, 2022, p. 50). The equal value of recognising limits and external forces, as much as the possibility for individuals to change them, makes *existence in and with the world* particularly central to envisioning social change through education. The complexity and number of quotes used to define these two subdomains differ from the remaining two subdomains of subjectification, which was vital in capturing the inherent nuances of *existing* and *existing in and with the world*, for a consistent application of the framework.

The third subdomain of subjectification is 3.3 *Subj_Freedom to act or not*. Biesta's notion of subjectification connected with freedom is another complex facet in his writing around the purpose of education. This subdomain highlights an important—and Biesta would argue essential—aspect of an individual's comprehension as self: that, as the subject of their own life, individuals have the choice to engage *or not* with and in their context. This subdomain encompasses the idea that a learner should be provided with the opportunity to own their decisions and that being cognisant of such is an indispensable part of the learning journey. As the author claims, a core aspect of subjectification is valuing our 'freedom as human beings: our freedom to act or to refrain from action, to say yes or no' (Biesta, 2022, p. 45). This implies accepting that students can 'take up their own freedom and "own" it ... which means that they may go in a very different direction from what we envisage for them, up to explicitly refusing the future we may have had in mind for them' (Biesta, 2022, p. 56). From here, it is not difficult to imagine the potential conflict with other aspects of subjectification and socialisation that outline (and seem to imply) the various ways that a learner *should* act within a given context, notably subdomains 2.2 *Soc_Location within* and 3.2 *Subj_Existing in and with the world*. Without considering the aspect of *freedom to act or not* covered in subdomain 3.3, subjectification could easily fall into a prescriptive repertoire logic of how to be a self—an *acting* self. We will return later to the idea of *action*, as it was one of the most conflictual issues to handle during the framework design and validation, as pointed out earlier.

A final subdomain included in subjectification is 3.4 *Subj_Interruption* (Table 1). This subdomain differs from the others as it signals important aspects of the role of educators in promoting subjectification. If the purpose of education is for learners to be given opportunities to comprehend that they *exist*, *exist in and with the world* and have the *freedom to act or not*, then educators must provide the opportunity for these 'ways of being' to be developed and practiced. Biesta's work suggests that these opportunities may not be part of the normal ways of enacting education, so there must be provisions made. We have tried to capture this by identifying a code we entitled *interruption*,⁵ the label stemming from the idea that 'interruption, suspension and sustenance are therefore three important and in a sense very concrete aspects of what is required from education if it takes subjectification seriously' (Biesta, 2022, p. 51).

As mentioned before, significant differences between the authors occurred around subjectification in the initial stages of this work. An early draft of the framework included a fifth subdomain named *action*, which stemmed from the numerous references that Biesta makes to the purpose of education 'as self-action, [or to] be(come) self-active' (Biesta, 2022, p. 46). However, our initial coding suggested that the concept of action is a function or property inherent within other subdomains (2.2, 3.2 and 3.3). Biesta's excerpts coded to the independent subdomain of *action* were redundant, suggesting that the subdomain of *action* did not exist independently of the others, leading us to remove it. Moreover, including *action* as a standalone subdomain could imply that subjectification requires acting and does not admit the possibility of not acting, which appeared to be in direct opposition to Biesta's core claim on the importance of the *freedom to act or not* (3.3), which highlights the possibility of deciding towards acting and not necessarily action per se.

Framework level two: Domains and subdomains of purpose applied

We applied the framework to a dataset derived from 15 international teacher educator experts with policy responsibilities, from all continents across the globe, who participated in a Delphi study about global education (Ham, Jones & Menzie-Ballantyne, [in preparation](#); Jones & Ham, [in preparation](#)). The aim of this study was to explore how the experts conceptualised and operationalised the range of diverse terms within global education. The dataset used to test the framework was gathered in the first round of the study, through individual participant interviews. The participants were asked a series of questions pertaining to their personal beliefs, including, on education purpose, their contexts and perspectives about global education concepts. The framework was tested with the transcripts from the interview question 'From your perspective, what is the purpose of education?'. Here we reflect on how the framework's structure presented above expanded through this empirical application. The three domains of purpose were developed into what we identify as level two of the framework, composed of themes and subthemes, bringing an interesting development to the initial framework, especially in the domains that had been defined more briefly in the literature—*qualification* and *socialisation* (see [Table 2](#)).

In the *qualification* domain and its one subdomain *1.1 Qual_KSU*, two distinct themes emerged through the empirical application of the framework: *content* and *orientation*, respectively expressing the 'what' and 'what for' of qualification. Regarding *content*, a distinction was found between education as a means to (a) *access knowledge* and (b) *promote skills or competencies*, participants' views often combining both. The analysis suggested the existence of three different *orientations*, expressing potential impacts of education's qualification role, respectively focused on: preparing the workforce (a. *economic impact*); promoting individuals' growth (b. *personal impact*); and equipping them for political change (c. *political impact*). These findings allowed us to understand that although experts included access to knowledge and promotion of skills and competencies, qualification as part of the purpose of education is not a monolith nor an end in itself but has a variety of future orientations to equip students within their lives.

The two subdomains of *socialisation* (*2.1 Soc_Knowledge of* and *2.2 Soc_Location*) followed a similar pattern of outlining diverse *content* and *orientations* connected to the purpose of education, each of which pointed to different subthemes. In subdomain 2.1, two types of content emerged in interviewees' discourses connected to the cultural contribution of education's socialisation role (a. *cultural values and norms*) and how society works (b. *societal organisation*). Moreover, two orientations were visible in experts' discourses, respectively highlighting individual survival, development or wellbeing (a. *individual focus*) and a more collective outlook (b. *societal focus*).

Similarly, regarding subdomain 2.2, our analysis suggested the existence of different *contents* and *orientations* that illustrate how this particular subdomain of socialisation interplays with both the individual and the context. Two main *contents* found pointed to how education, respectively, can help individuals become aware of (a) *societal organisation, reality and norms* and (b) *individuals' role and functioning* as part of that society. The *orientations* of locating within society were threefold: for the individual to be able to 'fit in' (a. *individual adjustment/fitting*); for the individual to take up their responsibility as part of a society (b. *individual responsibility—for society/country/world*); and finally, for the individual to contribute to their society (c. *individual participation and contribution to the collective*).

Testing the applicability of the framework with empirical data allowed us to understand that cultural values and norms and societal organisations form the core content of the two subdomains of socialisation (*2.1 Knowledge of* and *2.2 Location within*), however, these can be channelled towards more individual or societal concerns. Although some overlap can be found between the two subdomains, distinguishing them allowed us to grasp not

only adaptive but also generative traits of the individual's own journey across socialisation aspects of education. Overall, the data in socialisation showed that the teacher experts held clear expectations that the purpose of education was to equip students to understand and act within their context and what that can look like. This expectation towards action and engagement was not surprising given that these are core traits of global education (Coelho, Caramelo & Menezes, 2022).

As discussed earlier, the final domain of *subjectification*, constituted of four subdomains, was the most prolific and complex to code. Faced with the diversity of content initially coded under 3.1 *Subj_Existing*, we identified subthemes by asking the question 'what does "existing" look like?' in participants' views. This was instrumental in translating a subdomain that can be relatively intangible (*existing*) into concrete examples. Seven themes were identified, most of which point to *existing* as a portal for personal growth and impact (b, c, d, e, f, g) and to a lesser extent as a way to cope with change (a). Table 2 shows subthemes connected to, for example, addressing challenges, discovery and expansion, valuing self, having a broad perspective and wellbeing. While most themes do not point to an explicit timeframe, in two cases *existing* as something projected in the future is visible: (a) *coping with life/world forces and events and being prepared for change including confronting and addressing challenges*; and (b) *preparing future self's existence*. On the whole, experts' views about the purpose of education as 'existing' manifests as the individual having a constructive, agentic approach to their future life.

The second subdomain—3.2 *Subj_Existing in and with the world*—gathers participants' views expressing the idea that education's purpose includes promoting a sense of self, considering connection to others and/or the outside world. By asking again 'what existing in and with the world looks like ...?', seven subthemes were identified. As can be seen in Table 2, the subthemes reiterate the concepts of playing a specified social role (a, e, f, g), sometimes for the individual but usually for the benefit of society. A convivial dimension of reaching a prosperous and harmonious collective life (b, c) was also found, with an underlying humanist assumption of the world as a common home, which is prevalent in global education discourses (Coelho, Caramelo, Amorim & Menezes 2022). Although subdomains 2.2 and 3.2 share several commonalities (e.g., participation, responsibility), often the same data being coded in both, subdomain 3.2 allowed for additional detail on how individuals' existence is expected in regard to the social contexts portrayed by subdomain 2.2. Our data also draw attention to the fact that some excerpts that appear to be socialisation and subjectification-related are infused with the idea of responsibility, even though Biesta (2022) implied that subjectification does not equate to responsibility, an aspect to be furthered in future analysis.

An interesting facet of this data was the contradiction between the experts' acknowledgement that future generations have to (unprecedentedly) address current problems, yet they were very prescriptive about how this should be accomplished. There was a clear and consistent expectation that the purpose of education was to ensure that future citizens had to engage and be active in the world, in particular ways, to bring change.

This contradiction is closely related to the absence of the third subdomain—3.3 *Subj_Freedom to act or not*. In experts' discourses, the importance of education in promoting individuals' freedom to make their choices, including about how and if this action would occur, was absent. Although nurturing individuals' uniqueness was an educational task visible in some discourses (see, e.g., c. *discovering, nourishing, expanding and accomplishing full human/individual's potential* and e. *valuing one's individuality* in 3.1 *Subj_Existing*), freedom as a core educational value, trait or condition for such uniqueness was not mentioned. None of the experts indicated or implied that the purpose of education was to teach students that they were free to act as agents in their own lives. Instead, the data suggested the opposite—that the teacher educators working in the field of global education saw the very purpose of

education as to equip students to act and engage in very defined ways, the notion of freedom therefore being absent.

The final subdomain—3.4 *Subj_Interruption*—was found in experts' discourses, although to a lesser extent than previous ones. The idea that interrupting a current state is part of education's mission was expressed mostly in an indirect way, with three subthemes identified. Experts consider that teacher action should include creating opportunities for students to experiment (a. *creating experiential opportunities*), (b) providing access to a challenging curriculum and that education should promote critical thinking skills and problem-solving (c. *promoting contextualised/critical thinking and problem-solving*) (see Table 2). In Ham, Coelho & Jones (*in preparation*), we outline a more comprehensive discussion about these findings.

FINAL REMARKS

The current work proposed an innovative framework to support the understanding and application of Biesta's well-known thinking on three domains of purpose in education—qualification, socialisation and subjectification. This work is a contribution in overcoming theoretical and empirical constraints found around the application of Biesta's thinking in literature, typically, the lack of specificity or clarity and the absence of deep exploration of the inherent contradictions between the domains. Although being designed in the scope of a particular topic and being (partially) informed by one empirical dataset, we believe the framework is of broader significance. The framework offers a possible lens through which education discourses—from policy, practice or research—can be understood and the talk on education purpose(s) kept as central to education endeavours.

The paper set out to explain our journey to design, develop and test a framework to assist us in rigorously and systematically applying Biesta's thinking to analyse the views on education purpose of 15 teacher education experts interviewed in the scope of an international Delphi study on global education (Ham, Coelho & Jones, *in preparation*; Jones & Ham, *in preparation*; Jones, Ham & Menzie-Ballantyne, *in preparation*). Through the process of framework development and testing, we sought to overcome the concerns that emerged as we interrogated relevant literature that used Biesta's theory on education purpose. A wide range of Biesta's writings on the topic for the past decades was consulted, however, Biesta's more recent work clarifying the domain of subjectification was prioritised. The final framework results from the combination of theoretical and empirical input and is composed of two 'levels'.

Level one provides a detailed overview of the definitions of domains and subdomains of purpose, defined deductively through Biesta's theory on qualification, socialisation and subjectification (Biesta, 2015, 2020, 2022). Level two includes possible themes and subthemes, defined inductively, through the application of the framework to research data. While level one is highly transferable to other studies on education purpose, level two is an example of the framework in use, with less potential transferability.

Overall, this original work demonstrated the framework's adequacy as an analytical tool for education research on the issue of purpose. Without Biesta's theory pre-emptively informing the interviews conducted, most theoretical elements of the framework (level one) were identifiable in participants' discourses. At the same time, this process enabled us to expand the suggested framework into more specific aspects of the global education topic under study (level two). This demonstrated the potential use and adaptability of Biesta's theory and the framework developed.

Following a more structured course of analysis of education purpose using Biesta's theory was key in signalling specificities that often went overlooked in the literature (e.g., the

absence of freedom to act or not), to acknowledge inherent contradictions and overlaps in the domains, and to avoid seeking an artificial balance between the domains. Examining a set of empirical data in depth and testing the (provisional) framework as part of its development was also instrumental in that regard. As an iterative process carried by multiple authors in an international collaboration, the framework was also a vital tool for methodological rigour and communication, contributing to more actionable, reflective and transparent processes.

Future developments of this work include the continued testing of the framework with different research data on education purpose and discussing such outcomes and processes with different audiences.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Nothing to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

None.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Participants' permission to participate in the Delphi study informing this paper, the validation of interview transcripts resulting and the use of research outputs for academic publication purposes was obtained. The study was approved by the University of Hull. University of Hull, UK ethics number: 2223STAFF03.

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Endnotes

¹ For a distinction between some of these purpose-related elements, the importance of not conflating them and keeping an ongoing debate around the 'what for' of education (see, e.g., Noddings, 2007).

² Elsewhere (Ham, Coelho & Jones, [in preparation](#)) we discuss other examples of Biesta's use of domains of purpose with a particular focus on its application to citizenship and global education issues, and provide an empirical analysis based on the framework presented in the current paper.

³ This work is part of a larger research project, comprising a Delphi study (Jones & Ham, [in preparation](#); Jones, Ham & Menzie-Ballantyne, [in preparation](#)).

⁴ Intercoder consistency differs from 'intercoder reliability', as reliability entails 'to formally compute a measure of intercoder agreement' (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020, p. 2). Although A1 and A2 quantitatively tracked and negotiated the process of coding agreement, no program was used in this regard. Despite its common use, reliability mea-

asures and terminology remain contested due to its epistemological underpinnings, particularly by critical qualitative analysis scholars. An overview of related terms (e.g., interrater reliability), statistical and alternative measures procedures and divergent understandings (e.g., trustworthiness, dependability) can be found in O'Connor and Joffe (2020).

⁵ This idea of interruption as integral to subjectification illustrates the influence of Levinas's work on Biesta's thinking. According to Biesta, 'Levinas's point is that it is only in "the very crisis of the being of a being" (Levinas, 1981, p. 85), in the *interruption* of its being, that the uniqueness of the subject "first acquires a meaning" (Levinas, 1981, p. 13). This interruption constitutes the relationship of responsibility, which is a "responsibility of being-in-question" (Levinas, 1981, p. 111). And it is this being-in-question "which assigns the self to be a self" (Levinas, 1981, p. 106) and ultimately constitutes me as this unique, singular individual' (Biesta, 2003, p. 63, italics in original). We thank an anonymous reviewer's suggestion of making Levinas's influence on Biesta's thinking on subjectification explicit.

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