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**Chapter 5**



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**How teachers express what they consider to be in their pupils' best interest**

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## Chapter 5

# How teachers express what they consider to be in their pupils' best interest<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This study sheds light on how teachers express their pupils' best interest. A former study concluded that teachers draw upon different legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest. A legitimisation type entails a systematic description of a particular pattern of educational values and ideals. This study focuses on how teachers give expression to these legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions. The results indicate that teachers differed in how they gave expression to the legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of extensiveness, substantiveness, deliberateness and answerableness. Extensiveness relates to the range of legitimisation types that teachers used when interpreting their classroom interactions. Substantiveness relates to the substantive focus teachers had in their way of interpreting their classroom interactions. Thoughtfulness relates to the manner in which teachers weighed and assessed conceivable legitimisation types. Answerableness relates to the grounds on which teachers legitimised their classroom interactions. The results also suggest that the ways in which teachers give expression to the legitimisation types is related to particular institutional contexts. The discussion section suggests an agenda for teachers' professional development to help them recognise what is in their pupils' best interest.

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## 5.1 Introduction

One of the most complex questions in education is what one considers to be in children's best interest. This question refers to one of the most important principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: 'In all aspects of the education system, consideration of the child's best interests must be a primary consideration.' (Unesco & Unicef, 2007, p. 118) What is in the best interest of children is always connected to values and ideals with regard to what is considered to be good education (Biesta, 2007). It seems obvious that teachers will have their own ideas about what constitutes good education and accordingly will express these in their relationships with their pupils.

Some teachers might conceive good education as preparing pupils for a harsh and demanding world and therefore promote their pupils' physical and mental development. Other teachers might conceive good education as helping pupils to become happy and balanced people and want them to collaborate with their classmates as much as possible in order to acquire good social and communicative skills. These kinds of consideration will, to a certain extent, guide the way teachers' interpret their everyday classroom interactions. Teachers' classroom interactions are not only connected to the instrumental aspects of their classroom practices, such as how to prepare pupils for their exams or how to teach pupils particular subject matter, but also touch upon values and ideals with regard to what they consider to be in their pupils' best interest. The question 'what is in the pupils' best interest?' will always be posed against the background of the situation as it is. However, the question 'what is more desirable?' cannot be logically derived from the situation as it is. Empirical information can inform decision-making with regard to what is desirable, but does not provide in itself an answer to this question. This is known in educational philosophy and theory as the 'is-ought problem' (Carr, 1995; Mahony, 2009; Biesta, 2010b). In continental Europe, there has been much educational theorising with regard to the is-ought problem in the field of pedagogy (Benner, 1993; Van Manen, 1994; Smeyers & Levering 2005).

Continental European pedagogy is the science that studies the child's upbringing in different domains, such as education, social work, child welfare and law (e.g. Van Manen, 1991; Biesta, 2011a; Ponte & Ax, 2009). In this article we focus on education as one of the domains of continental European pedagogy. The meaning of the word pedagogy in continental European literature is different from the Anglo-American literature, in which the word 'pedagogy' merely refers to teaching strategies or methods of instruction. The word 'pedagogy' comes from the Greek words 'paidos', which means 'child', and 'ago', which means 'lead'; it literally means 'to lead the child'. Ponte and Ax (2009) described the research object of continental European pedagogy as follows: 'This science seeks answers to questions about what kind of human beings children should become and how they can be raised toward becoming such human beings, taking into account the context in which this process of upbringing takes place' (p. 293). In continental Europe, pedagogy is a discipline in its own right, separate from, for example, philosophy, psychology, sociology and history, often located in separate departments within university faculties (Biesta, 2011a).

For the present study it is significant that the specific relationship between the adult (e.g. the teacher) and the child (e.g. the pupil), forms the very heart of continental European pedagogy (cf. Saevi, 2012). Teachers will always care for their pupils as they are and, at the same time, care for pupils for what they may become (Nohl, 1982). In other words, in continental European pedagogy, interactions between teachers and pupils are always concerned with both the empirical question ‘what is the case?’ and the moral question ‘what ought to be the case?’ (cf. Biesta, 2010a). From this perspective, educating children is an inherent moral practice (cf. Van Manen, 1994; Imelman, 1995; Biesta, 2010b, Ponte, 2009). Inherent, here, indicates that every classroom interaction and its consequences, whether intended or unintended, can be interpreted in terms of its moral impact.

A persistent problem in continental European pedagogy is that debates about what ‘is’ and what ‘ought to be’ have for the most part been played out at the level of ‘grand theories’, such as the positivist, phenomenological and critical theories (cf. Miedema, 1997; König, 1975; Lingard, 2009), and are therefore difficult to connect to day-to-day classroom practice. Continental European pedagogy consists of a diversity of theoretical positions. The three most distinctive positions are, in the European context, commonly perceived as the ‘land of three strands’: the *geisteswissenschaftliche*, the empirical-analytical and the critical strands (Miedema, 1997). In the *geisteswissenschaftliche* strand, which originated in the nineteenth century, the child is seen as a distinct form of human existence (Langeveld, 1969) and is no longer considered to be a little adult. Consequently, the methods of upbringing should connect to the way children experience this distinct stage of life and protect them from adult life (Aries, 1962). The goal of upbringing from a *geisteswissenschaftliche* perspective concerns the becoming of a person, which means that children will have to develop the ability to take responsibility and learn to accept that they can be held accountable for their actions (Beugelsdijk, Souverein & Levering, 1997).

In contrast to the other strands, the empirical-analytical strand does not have a normative orientation. The empirical-analytical strand is primarily concerned with instrumental upbringing questions: questions about the conditions under which different upbringing goals can be achieved by the adult and what kind of interventions they have at their disposal (Meijer, 1999; Ponte & Ax, 2009). The moral justifications of these interventions are seen as normative and therefore not amenable to empirical investigation, which means that these justifications have to come from outside the scientific domain. The *geisteswissenschaftliche* pedagogy is looked upon as being too speculative, philosophical and prescriptive (Ponte, 2007).

The critical strand developed, firstly, in response to the *geisteswissenschaftliche* strand, which gave too little consideration to the social and political context of the relationship between adults and children and, secondly, in response to the empirical-analytical strand, which overtly disregarded normative concepts. In the critical strand, the goal of bringing up children concerns the abolition of societal constraints in order to emancipate children. The method of upbringing is formulated in terms of helping children to develop communicative competencies, by acknowledging them as equal partners in interactive processes and

providing them with opportunities to learn to participate in conversations (Masschelein, 2005).

These debates in European pedagogy are difficult to connect to the practice of teaching. Teachers are not very likely to articulate what they consider to be in their pupils' best interest in abstract philosophical or theoretical terms. This does not mean that philosophical and theoretical debates are futile for teachers. These debates are significant, firstly because they might inform teachers about the existence of fundamentally different perspectives on what is educationally worthwhile. Secondly, these debates could give substance to (student) teachers' reflection in terms of 'why' and 'what for' questions, instead of merely instrumental 'how' and 'what' questions (cf. Mansvelder-Longayroux, Beijaard & Verloop, 2007; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Zeichner & Gore, 1995). The question remains, then, how do teachers connect their daily classroom interactions (what is) to what they think is in the pupil's best interest (what ought to be) in their own terms? This question was explored in a former study, which concluded that teachers draw upon six different *legitimation types* when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest. A legitimation type entails a particular pattern of educational values and ideals that teachers draw upon when they interpret their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest (Van Kan, Ponte & Verloop, 2013a). The current study focused on the research question: '*How do teachers give expression to the legitimation types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest?*' For example, are teachers decisive or doubtful when legitimising their classroom interaction; do teachers draw on different legitimation types or do they draw on one particular legitimation type when legitimising their classroom interactions?

Interestingly, in literature on how teachers reason about or interpret, their teaching practice, several authors have stressed its situational character (Carl-gren & Lindblad, 1991; Graig, 1998; Hansen, 2002; Kennedy, 2010). Gholami and Husu (2010), in their in-depth interpretative study on how teachers reason about their practice, argue that the way teachers legitimise their teaching practice is not about the application of general rules or principles but about what has to be done in a particular situation (cf. Biesta, 2007). Following this line of reasoning, it seems plausible that the way teachers interpret their practice, in our case their classroom interactions, might be strongly connected to the particular teaching situation in a particular context. Therefore the second research question was: '*Do teachers differ from each other in how they give expression to the legitimation types?*'. Prosser and Trigwell (1999) argue that, although different considerations with regard to what is educationally desirable play a role in any act of teaching, a specific context may trigger specific considerations to be more in the foreground and other considerations to be more in the background of the teacher's awareness of a teaching situation. In concurrence with this argument, the third research question was formulated as follows: '*Are differences between teachers in how they give expression to the legitimation types related to the institutional context they work in?*' The following institutional contexts were distinguished in this study: regular primary education, regular secondary education, special primary education and special secondary education.

We explored the three research questions in an in-depth interpretative study, involving interviews with thirty-seven teachers working in regular or special primary and secondary education.

In the next section we present the analytical framework, which helped us to analyse how teachers give expression to the legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest. We then explain the method used to conduct the study. Following the method section, the results and conclusions are presented. Finally, the question of how to understand the pupils' best interest is addressed in the discussion section .

## 5.2 Analytical framework

### 5.2.1 Introduction

As mentioned in the introduction, an earlier interpretative study resulted in the description of legitimisation types that teachers use when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest. The legitimisation types were systematically described in terms of six components. In this study we combined the legitimisation types and components in an analytical framework in order to find themes in the interview data that could help answer our research questions (see Table 5.1 for an overview). In the subsections below we summarise how the framework originated and give a substantive account of its makeup.

*Table 5.1 Analytical framework*

Components	Legitimation types					
	Caring	Personal	Contextual	Critical	Functional	Psychological
Who should be taught						
What should be taught						
When should be taught						
Where should be taught						
How should be taught						
For what purpose should be taught						

## 5.2.2 The legitimisation types

Six legitimisation types are displayed on the horizontal axis in Table 5.1. Each legitimisation type represents a particular pattern of educational values and ideals that teachers draw upon when they interpret their classroom interactions. Before presenting the legitimisation types, it is important to stress that they do not simply represent particular teachers, but reflect possible orientations that guide teachers' interpretations with regard to why particular educational considerations are in their pupils' best interest. Moreover, teachers are not necessarily bound to one particular orientation but could draw on several legitimisation types when interpreting their pupils' best interest. In the following subsections we give a brief account of the legitimisation types.

### 5.2.2.1 A condensed description of the legitimisation types

The *caring* legitimisation type signifies that pupils need to be seen as vulnerable and very dependent on grownups to survive in a demanding world. The *personal* legitimisation type signifies that pupils need to be understood as unique social beings that have a personal relationship with teachers. The *contextual* legitimisation type signifies that pupils' living conditions, life histories and practical lives need to be taken into account in teaching situations. The *critical* legitimisation type signifies that pupils need to be freed from constraining ideas about themselves and living conditions that imprint these ideas. The *functional* legitimisation type signifies that pupils need to be raised towards adulthood along the lines of preconceived favourable outcomes. Finally, the *psychological* legitimisation type signifies that pupils' conduct needs to be labelled in mental or emotional terms in order for adequate teaching and learning to take place. A detailed account of the six legitimisation types is presented in the result section of Chapter 4.

## 5.2.3 Components of the analytical framework

The components of the analytical framework are displayed on the vertical axis in Table 5.1. These components are the result of an iterative process of data analysis in which the interview data and the different aspects of Imelman's central question for continental European pedagogy ('Who should be taught what, how, when, and why?') played a central role. In the process of going back and forth between the interview data and the aspects ('who', 'what', 'when', 'how'), we decided to include the 'where' and 'for what purpose' components too. This enabled a better fitting description of teachers' interpretations of their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest (Van Kan, Ponte, Verloop, 2010b).

The components can be summarised as follows. (1) The 'who' component concerns teachers' statements about what kind of relationship they should form with their pupils in their pupils' best interest. (2) The 'what' component concerns teachers' statements about what kind of teaching content serves their pupils' best interest in terms of acquisition of subject matter, skills and virtues. (3) The 'when'

component concerns teachers' statements about what moment in pupils' development is best suited for them to be initiated into particular teaching content in terms of subject matter, skills and virtues. (4) The 'where' component concerns teachers' statements about what kind of learning and living environment serves their pupils' best interest in terms of internal and external school contexts. (5) The 'how' component concerns teachers' statements about what kind of teaching methods, learning strategies and classroom organisation serve their pupils best interest. (6) The 'for what purpose' component concerns teachers' statements about what kind of teaching goals are in their pupils' best interest in terms of internal and external school goals.

In the next section we will describe the steps in our data analysis that led us to the results.

## 5.3 Method

### 5.3.1 Context and participants

To get a thorough insight into how teachers give expression to the legitimisation types, we tried to create a high degree of variation (Devers & Frankel, 2000) by involving 37 teachers working at both primary and secondary schools and in both regular and special education. All participating teachers had to have a minimum of three years of working experience in order to be able to draw on substantial experience when interpreting their everyday classroom interactions.

### 5.3.2 Data collection

To get a grasp on how teachers give expression to the legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest, we developed a repertory interview procedure (Van Kan, Ponte & Verloop, 2010a). This is described in chapter two. The procedure subjected teachers to recursive 'why questioning'. The why questioning directly touched upon teachers' reasoning with regard to what they considered to be educationally desirable for their pupils. Consequently, the 'why questioning' enabled a connection between the components and the legitimisation types.

### 5.3.3 Analysis

In a first round of data analysis we used the components and in a second round we used the legitimisation types as labels in Atlas-ti, a software program for qualitative analysis (Muh, 1997), to code all 37 fully transcribed interviews. We went through four steps to find four themes within our interview data with regard to how teachers gave expression to the legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom

interactions. The first coding round consisted of two steps (i.e. demarcating the interview fragments and identifying components in the interview fragments) and has already been described in the method section of Chapter 4. Steps 3 and 4 are described below.

### 5.3.3.1 Step 3: Assigning legitimisation types to the fragments

*Table 5.2 Example of the distribution of one quotation over several legitimisation types*

Legitimation type	Component	Specific part of the interview fragment	Attribution rationale
Psychological	Who	...all of our pupils have some kind of behaviour or learning disorder. Consequently our pupils have a slower work pace...	This part of the quotation attributes specific psychological characteristics to the pupils.
Caring	What	First and foremost our pupils need to learn to deal with their complex and at times negative emotions...	This part of the quotation stresses that pupils need to regulate their emotions (to protect themselves).
Caring	Where	We have a more succinct focus on establishing a caring and peaceful environment for our pupils than schools that primarily focus on learning outcomes...	This part of the quotation expresses the idea that the school needs to provide a nurturing and peaceful environment.

In the second coding round we coded the interview fragments (which had already been coded in terms of the components) using the six legitimisation types complemented with compressed definitions and demarcation rules. Table 5.2 demonstrates how we conducted this coding round, re-using the interview fragment in section 4.3.3.1 of Chapter 4. An external researcher was involved during this third step to verify whether a person not familiar with the data could utilise the coding scheme. The external researcher (rater 1) coded a substantial part of the data independently from the author (rater 2). The inter-rater reliability with two raters was 0.75 (Cohen's kappa), which we considered satisfactory.

### 5.3.3.2 Step 4: Finding themes within the data

Assigning the components and the legitimisation types to the text fragments provided insight into their presence in teachers' interpretations of their classroom interactions in terms of percentages. The percentages formed the basis for a subsequent inductive inquiry into the qualitative data. For example, in several teachers' interviews the functional and psychological legitimisation types accounted for more than fifty percent of the coded text fragments. This kind of information

prompted us to inquire further into how these teachers gave expression to the legitimisation types. Following this process of inductive enquiry, four themes were distinguished in the interview data. The percentages also enabled decision rules to be formulated, assigning particular teachers to particular themes. A basic principle tied to the decision rules was that a component or legitimisation type was considered to play a significant role if it accounted for at least fifteen percent of the coded text fragments of a teacher's interview. The details of the decision rules are presented in the results section.

The first theme that directly followed from the analysis concerned the range of components and legitimisation types that teachers involved in their interpretations of their classroom interactions, which we labelled *extensiveness*. Building on this theme, the question arose as to whether the components and legitimisation types that teachers included in their interpretations could be characterised in terms of a particular substantive focus. This question resulted in a second theme, which we labelled *substantiveness*. Both the third and the fourth themes were based on the extent to which teachers involved particular legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest. The third theme concerned how teachers considered different educational perspectives when interpreting their classroom interactions: *thoughtfulness*. The fourth theme addressed the grounds on which teachers legitimised their classroom interactions, which we labelled *answerableness*.

## 5.4 Results

### 5.4.1 Introduction

In this section we present the answers to the research questions in terms of four interconnected themes: (1) How do teachers give expression to the legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest?; (2) Do teachers differ from each other in how they give expression to the legitimisation types?; and (3) Are differences between teachers in how they give expression to the legitimisation types related to the institutional context they work in?

### 5.4.2 Overview of coded text fragments

Table 5.3 shows that the teachers in this study mainly drew upon the 'how', 'who' and 'what' components of the descriptive framework, when interpreting their classroom interactions. Furthermore, they tended to use these components in combination with the personal, functional and caring legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions. Having a closer look at the cells, the one that stands out in particular is the cell that represents the percentage of text fragments coded with both the 'how' component and the functional legitimisation type

(13%). The cell that represents the text fragments coded with both the 'how' component and the personal legitimisation type also has a relatively high percentage score (9%). The 'where', 'for what purpose', and 'when' components were assigned much less frequently. Similarly, relatively few contextual and critical legitimisation types were present in teachers' interpretations of their classroom interactions.

Table 5.3 Overview of all coded text fragments ( $n=1,937$ ) in terms of percentage of assigned components and legitimisation types

		Legitimisation types						Total
		Caring	Personal	Contextual	Critical	Functional	Psychological	
Components	Who	5	8	1	1	5	5	25
	What	3	7	2	2	5	1	20
	When	1	1	0	1	1	0	4
	Where	2	2	2	0	2	1	9
	How	6	9	1	1	13	4	34
	For what purpose	1	2	2	0	2	1	8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100</b>

Note: All values represent percentages of the total coded text fragments.

### 5.4.3 Theme 1: Extensiveness

Extensiveness relates to the range of components and legitimisation types that teachers used when interpreting their classroom interactions. In order to give meaning to the way teachers used the components and the legitimisation types, we distinguished between: (1) a *broad range*, which signifies that four legitimisation types each accounted for at least 15% of the coded text fragments and four components each accounted for at least 15% of the coded text fragments of a teacher's interview; (2) a *combined range*, which signifies that four legitimisation types each accounted for at least 15% of the coded text fragments or four components each accounted for at least 15% of the coded text fragments of a teacher's interview; (3) a *small range*, which signifies that the decision rules connected to a combined range and broad range did not apply; that is, teachers draw predominantly on three components and legitimisation types or less. In the following subsections we will explain what we mean by this distinction.

### 5.4.3.1 Broad range

Only one out of the thirty-seven teachers had a broad way of interpreting her classroom interactions. Although it is difficult to portray all the components and legitimisation types this teacher drew upon when interpreting her classroom interactions in a single interview fragment, the following composite quote gives a good impression:

To be honest, I think pupils should learn social norms and values at home, at the same time children spend a lot of their time at school. As teachers we can't shut ourselves off from this task, especially because some children are living in deprived home situations... All the pupils in my classroom are different, some of them need to be encouraged to learn something new, whereas other pupils need to be treated with great care to take a next step... teaching a pupil with ADHD or an autistic disorder also requires a very different approach.

The quote shows that when this teacher talked about the importance of pupils learning norms and values, she was taking into consideration where the pupils should learn this kind of content. She also related to her pupils in different ways and acknowledged that they have different ways of learning. The quote also illustrates that she took her pupils' psychological make-up into account when considering their best interest.

### 5.4.3.2 Combined range

Combined means that teachers either use a small range of components and a broad range of legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions, or vice versa. Using a broad range of components signifies that teachers not only drew upon the 'who', 'what' and 'how' components, but also took the 'where' component into account to a significant extent. A broad range of legitimisation types signifies that, in addition to the personal, functional and caring legitimisation types, teachers also took the psychological and/or contextual and/or critical legitimisation types into account to a significant extent.

Three teachers took a broad range of components into account and tended to legitimise their classroom conduct from a small number of educational perspectives. The following quotation illustrates this point:

I think it's important that pupils are at ease both in their home situation and in their school environment. I strongly believe that when pupils are happy at home this will have a positive effect on their learning achievements in school.

Including pupils' home situations shows that this teacher took the 'where' component into account when she interpreted her classroom interactions. For this teacher the importance of taking the 'where' component into account was directly

connected to a particular purpose, namely, for her pupils to do well at school.

Seven teachers took a small range of components into account and used a broad range of legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions. The following quotation of a special secondary education teacher contains features that link to these legitimisation types:

Due to their autistic disorders our pupils have trouble handling unpredictable situations in public places. These pupils need to develop coping mechanisms that will help them to really participate in the outside world.

This quotation indicates that this teacher legitimised the importance of what her pupils needed to learn in contextual and psychological terms.

#### 5.4.3.3 Small range

Twenty-six out of thirty-seven teachers in our study drew predominantly on three or fewer components or legitimisation types. These teachers mainly used the 'how', 'who' and 'what' components when interpreting their classroom interactions. This indicates that they were mostly concerned with how to teach particular content to particular pupils. In addition, they primarily drew upon the personal, functional and caring legitimisation types. This indicates that teachers that use a small range of legitimisation seem to take pupils' personal development, and/or learning achievements, and/or vulnerability especially into account when interpreting their classroom interactions.

Evidently when teachers were interpreting their classroom interactions, the 'how', 'who' and 'what' components were to some extent related to particular legitimisation types. For example, when teachers primarily saw their pupils as learners in a formal school system, this was likely to reverberate in the kind of teaching methods and teaching content they considered to be in their pupils' best interest. The following quotation of a regular secondary school teacher who primarily drew on the functional legitimisation type illustrates this point:

One of the main things pupils need to learn for their final exams is to draw upon different sources of information to get a right answer. That's why I repeatedly ask pupils to elaborate on their answers in order to get the message through that they have to think further than their first guess. In my experience pupils are not inclined to do so by themselves.

Another example of the interconnectedness between the 'who', 'how' and 'what' components, in this case directed by the personal legitimisation type, was given by a regular primary school teacher:

I want pupils to develop a positive self concept, because I strongly believe this will make them happier in their later lives. That's why I spent a lot of time on classroom talks about their personal feelings with regard to what happens in their everyday lives.

#### 5.4.3.4 The role of institutional contexts

All the teachers in regular secondary education, seven out of eight teachers in regular primary education, seven out of ten teachers in special primary, and two out of nine teachers in special secondary education were attributed a small range of components and legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions. It is noteworthy that seven out of the nine teachers in special secondary education had a combined range of components and legitimisation types that they involved in their interpretations of their classroom interactions, five of which included a broad range of legitimisation types. Thus, in our study special secondary school teachers tended to include a broader range of components and/or legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions than teachers in the other educational contexts.

#### 5.4.4 Theme 2: Substantiveness

Substantiveness relates to the substantive focus teachers had in their way of interpreting their classroom interactions. Inquiring into the substance of the teachers' interpretations, we found that those who included a small range of legitimisation types (twenty-nine in total) had what we choose to call a technical-local focus. Teachers that used a broad range of legitimisation types (eight in total) were attributed a technical-societal focus. Technical, in this case, refers to the character of the components that teachers took into account when they interpreted their classroom interactions. The terms 'local' and 'societal' relate to the character of the legitimisation types that teachers drew upon. We will elaborate on these different foci in the following subsections.

##### 5.4.4.1 Technical-local focus

A technical-local focus signifies that teachers were particularly concerned with the instrumental question: 'Who to teach what, and how?' in relation to the context of pupils' day-to-day school lives. The majority of the teachers in our study had this particular focus. The teachers with a technical-local focus tended to give less attention to the developmental (i.e. 'when' component) and teleological (i.e. 'for what purpose') aspects of their teaching practice when interpreting their classroom interactions. In other words, these teachers' interpretations seem to indicate that they conceived their teaching mainly as a means to achieve pre-given ends. At the same time, they tended to focus on the locality of their classroom practice, rather than taking the pupils' wider contexts into account when interpreting their classroom interactions. These teachers mostly focused on (1) pupils as individual (often vulnerable) beings, which is the main focus of the caring and personal legitimisation type, and/or (2) pupils' learning capabilities, which are at the heart of the functional legitimisation type.

The combination of the technically oriented components and locally oriented legitimisation types indicates that these teachers perceived their teaching as

being part of a small-scale schooling domain that exists parallel to the outside world. The following quotations of a regular primary school teacher and secondary school teacher respectively illustrate the technical and local focus these teachers tended to have: 'I think it's important that pupils learn to be attentive to each other's learning needs. They should be quiet during work time, in order not to disturb their fellow classmates'; and 'I try to be efficient in my teaching in order to save time for pupils to do their homework during my lessons. This way they can properly prepare for their exams.' The main question in these teachers' interpretations seemed to be how to work towards (pre-given) learning outcomes without questioning the desirability of particular learning outcomes.

In conclusion, we found that these teachers' usage of the components was generally characterised by 'means-to-an-end thinking', whereby the means rather than the ends were subjected to explicit deliberation.

#### 5.4.4.2 Technical-societal focus

A technical-societal focus signifies that teachers were mostly concerned with the technical aspects of their teaching but, unlike the teachers with a local focus, tended to consider pupils' best interest in terms that surpassed their immediate classroom practice. A relatively small group (seven out of thirty-seven) of the teachers had this particular focus in their interpretations. Apart from the personal, functional and caring legitimisation types, these teachers drew to a significant extent on the psychological and/or contextual and/or critical legitimisation type. They were likely to consider aspects in their interpretation of their classroom interactions that touched upon the pupils' psychological makeup, and/or practical living conditions, and/or critical awareness of their social positions.

The following quotations of a special primary school teacher and special secondary school teacher respectively illustrate the characteristics of a technical-societal focus, with an emphasis on a critical perspective:

My pupils are used to getting everything arranged for them at home or when they are at the day-care centre. I think it's important to encourage them to take matters into their own hands and learn to live their own lives.

If pupils learn to be obedient they will probably get a job somewhere but they won't learn to become independent thinkers. Actually I think we are doing pupils injustice if we don't teach them to be critical towards themselves and others.

#### 5.4.4.3 The role of institutional contexts

All the teachers in regular primary and secondary education and most (seven out of ten) teachers in special primary education had a mainly technical-local focus when interpreting their classroom interactions, whereas a substantial number (five out of ten) of the teachers in special secondary education had a technical-societal focus. The local nature of teachers' interpretation in regular and special

primary education was particularly connected to a pupil-centred perspective, meaning that they were mostly concerned with the wellbeing and self-development of their pupils. In regular secondary education the local focus was mostly connected to a curriculum-centred perspective, meaning that they were primarily concerned with their pupils' attainment of the official curriculum content.

The first two themes, extensiveness and substantiveness, were based on teachers' different usage of both the components and legitimisation types. The third and fourth themes were mainly connected to the analyses of teachers' usage of the legitimisation types.

### 5.4.5 Theme 3: Thoughtfulness

Thoughtfulness relates to the manner in which teachers considered different legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest. We found that teachers had: (1) a closed way of considering, which signifies that one legitimisation type accounted for at least 33% of the coded text fragments of a teacher's interview; or (2) an open way of considering, which signifies that the decision rule connected to a closed way of considering did not apply; that is, teachers do not draw predominantly on one particular legitimisation type.

In the following sub sections we explain what we mean by these different ways of considering different legitimisation types.

#### 5.4.5.1 Closed way of considering

Our results indicate that thirty-one out of the thirty-seven teachers had a closed way of considering different legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions. These teachers gave the impression that they had very strong convictions about what was in their pupils' best interest. They had very set ideas about what kind of educational ends were worthwhile pursuing. The following quotations of a regular secondary school teacher and a special secondary school teacher respectively are typical: 'This is the way our school system works; everything is about grades and selection for tertiary education. I hope every pupil will end up in the right place in our school system'; and 'The only chance these pupils have to make something of their lives is by putting an enormous amount of effort into their school careers. That's why I am very demanding when it comes to their work attitude.'

In their interpretations of their classroom interaction these teachers left little room for second-guessing and problematising their educative ends. Judging from their interview transcripts, they were not inclined to consider alternative ways of conceiving their pupils' best interest.

#### 5.4.5.3 Open way of considering

Six out of the thirty-seven teachers in our study had an open way of deliberating when interpreting their classroom interactions. These teachers tended to carefully

weigh different educational perspectives before making their mind up with regard to the question: 'What suits my pupils best interest?' The following quotation of a special secondary education teacher gives an impression of the considerate way in which these teachers tended to deliberate on their pupils' best interest:

Brandon will not accept help, he is very independent but can't do the theoretical subjects on his own; that's a huge struggle for him (and for me). If you see him work with his hands, he totally transforms into this capable and happy person. If I'm honest, the theoretical subject matter is distressing for all my pupils. That's why I think it's important to limit the theoretical subject matter to those aspects that have meaning in their everyday lives.

These teachers showed a multiple and contextual understanding of what served a particular pupil's best interest, when interpreting their classroom interactions.

#### 5.4.5.4 The role of institutional contexts

All six teachers ascribed an open way of considering different legitimisation types were working in special education, four of which worked in special secondary education. All of the teachers working regular education were ascribed a closed way of considering different legitimisation types.

### 5.4.6 Theme 4: Answerableness

Answerableness addressed the grounds on which teachers legitimised their class room interactions. We have indicated that teachers that predominantly drew upon the functional and psychological legitimisation types tended to answer for their teaching conduct in terms of what they were held accountable for. An accountable way of answering signifies that the functional and psychological legitimisation types accounted for at least 50% of the coded text fragments of a teacher's interview. Teachers that made less use of these particular legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions tended to answer for their teaching conduct in terms of what they personally felt responsible for. A responsible way of answering signifies that the decision rule connected to an accountable way of answering did not apply; that is, teachers do not predominantly draw on the functional and psychological legitimisation types. In the following subsection we will explain the difference between these two ways of answering for one's teaching conduct.

#### 5.4.6.1 Accountable way of answering

By an accountable way of answering we mean that teachers primarily perceived their teaching as subscribing to agendas set by others (e.g. teaching politically endorsed subjects) and rule following (e.g. conducting prescribed tests and examinations). A little over a quarter (ten) of the teachers involved in our study answered

for their teaching conduct in an accountable way. We defined the predominant presence of the functional and psychological legitimisation types as an accountable way of answering for one's teaching conduct, because the substance of these legitimisation types relates to meeting external requirements. The functional legitimisation type is connected to using effective teaching methods and meeting formalised curriculum goals, and the psychological legitimisation type is connected to basing teaching conduct on diagnostic tests and subsequent guidelines.

A regular secondary teacher illustrated the foreshadowing effect centralised tests had on his teaching practice:

Pupils need to learn to fulfil their assignments in a particular way, because they will be asked to do so when they have to take their tests. There is no grey area in these tests; pupils can give either a good or a wrong answer.

The following quotation of a special primary school teacher shows that her actions were largely steered by diagnostic tests results:

I think it's important to have a clear picture of a pupil. I want them to have the kind of education that fits them best. In order to realise this we rely on objective tests such as an achievement test and an intelligence test.

Teachers that had an accountable way of answering for their actions seemed to conceive teaching in terms of meeting external requirements, rather than purposeful action.

#### 5.4.6.2 Responsible way of answering

A responsible way of answering for teaching conduct signifies that teachers relied on their own professional judgements when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest rather than external and formal 'authorities'. About three-quarters (twenty-seven) of the teachers involved in our study had a *responsible* way of answering for their teaching conduct when interpreting their classroom interactions. Teachers that had this answering approach drew particularly on the caring, personal, critical and contextual legitimisation types (together these legitimisation types accounted for at least fifty percent of the coded text fragments of a teacher's interview).

Teachers with a responsible way of answering for their teaching conduct displayed a more autonomous disposition towards their teaching conduct than those who had an accountable answering approach. The following quotations of a special primary school teacher and a regular secondary school teacher respectively, illustrate this point:

Our pupils made a lot of progress. Especially, because we decided to take their past experiences and feelings into consideration. We pay much more attention to the general wellbeing of our pupils than schools that are mainly focused on pupils' learning outcomes. I want my pupils to learn

that they can make their own choices in life. These choices may have nothing to do with the curriculum we are offering in our school. They can grow up to be perfectly happy people without passing the exams.

#### 5.4.6.3 The role of educational contexts

Our results indicate that teachers in regular secondary education (six out of ten) tended to answer for their teaching conduct in terms of meeting formalised requirements, more than teachers in other contexts. In the other educational settings, the teachers exhibited more freedom in their interpretations to make decisions with regard to what they considered in their pupils' best interest.

## 5.5 Conclusion

Before revisiting the specific research question, two general conclusions can be drawn. First, the components and legitimisation types were found to be an adequate framework for empirically structuring ways in which teachers give expression to the legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions in terms of their pupils' best interest. Second, this framework allowed us to distinguish four themes on which teachers differed from each other when giving expression to the legitimisation types. Hence, the themes extensiveness, substantiveness, deliberateness and answerableness gave an insightful response to the first and second research questions.

Closing in on the four themes, we concluded that most teachers: (1) drew upon a small range of components and legitimisation types; (2) tended to have a rather instrumental 'here and now' focus; (3) had a closed way of considering different legitimisation types; (4) answered for their teaching conduct in terms of what they felt personally responsible for.

The third research question: '*Are differences between teachers in how they give expression to the legitimisation types related to the institutional context they work in?*', can be answered in the affirmative. More specifically, we concluded that teachers in special education: (1) included a broader range of components and legitimisation types; (2) were more perceptive towards pupils' extended social contexts; and (3) had a more open way of considering different legitimisation types when interpreting their classroom interactions, than teachers in the other institutional contexts involved in this study. Furthermore, the findings indicate that teachers working within the same institutional context tended to have similar ways of expressing the legitimisation types in terms of the presented themes. At least half the teachers within a particular educational context could be assigned to the same position with regard to each of the four themes.

## 5.6 Discussion: understanding pupils' best interest

As stated in the introduction, a central principle behind the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the principle that the best interests of the child must guide any decision taken in connection with the education of children. It seems evident that what serves a pupil's best interest depends to a large extent on how one understands the pupil, what is at stake in a particular situation and what courses of action are possible and desirable. It is of paramount importance that teachers have a rich understanding of what the best interest of pupils might be in all kinds of circumstances. Pendlebury (1990, pp. 176-177) argues: 'A competent practitioner is one who has a rich understanding of the goods of the practice and a realistic, clear-sighted perception of what is possible under different situations. That is, she should consider good ends and possible means.' It seems plausible that teachers that include a broad range of educational perspectives, take in societal aspects of pupils' living conditions when interpreting their pupils' best interest and feel responsible for deliberating about different ways of seeing what is educationally desirable are akin to the competent practitioner Pendlebury describes. However, the results indicate that the majority of the teachers involved in this study did not interpret their classroom interactions in terms of these qualities. This is not to say that these teachers had no regard for their pupils' best interest but it can be considered questionable whether they were capable of articulating rich and sound understandings of what could be educationally desirable for their pupils. Being able to articulate what is educationally desirable or to use language that expresses a multitude of educational perspectives is important, because it opens up new and unanticipated pathways to understanding pupils' best interest and consequently acting upon that interest (cf. Biesta (2010c).

If education for all is about the proactive creation of adaptive education, where differences between children are the norm and not the exception (Ponte & Smit, in press), it could be argued that teachers should seek to understand what is educationally desirable by looking beyond immediate circumstances and interpreting their pupils' best interest in richer terms than those that might immediately present themselves (cf. Kemmis & Smith, 2008). In this regard Hansen (1999) states:

...understanding students involves depending on the aims of teaching for guidance, rather than seeking a standpoint from outside the practice. It means recognizing that understanding students is necessarily an ongoing, open-ended affair. The process has no terminus because students are always changing as persons, even if such changes may be difficult to detect. (p. 173)

One might argue that if teachers have a rather instrumental way of understanding 'the aims of teaching' they are less responsive to what pupils have to offer apart from these objectified teaching aims. Biesta (2006, 2010b) argues, by drawing on Arendt (1958), that teachers should be receptive to the 'unique' and the 'unforeseen' that pupils can bring into world, without discarding their own educational dispositions. This is not to say that teachers should have a child-centred educational outlook, dissociating judgements about what is educationally desirable.

Educating pupils necessarily involves matters of relationships, substance and purpose (Biesta, 2010b).

An interesting finding is that most teachers in this study had a responsible way of answering for their teaching conduct, meaning that they experienced considerable autonomy and freedom to make their own professional decisions with regard to their pupils' interest, within the larger frameworks that are laid down by the government, school boards, management team and so forth. This might present opportunities for teachers to broaden their basis for professional decision-making if they were introduced to and confronted with other ways of appreciating what is educational valuable. A possible way to arrange such an introduction or confrontation would be by providing professional development programs, in which teachers are invited to inquire, articulate and question their educational outlooks. Subsequently, teachers could be encouraged to reflect on their teaching practice and their educational outlooks by drawing on the theoretical debates in the field of education. The three strands mentioned in the introduction to this article could provide an interesting framework for this. Ponte and Ax (2009), for example, argue that debates between theories in continental European pedagogy could offer an integrating framework for examining educational questions in the context of teachers' professional development. This examination could be related to questions about 'what is', and 'what is more desirable' for pupils at a particular moment in a particular situation. From an 'education for all' perspective, it is a perpetual task for teachers to consider the moral impact of their daily classroom interactions and to wonder if possible alternative ways of interacting might be more desirable (from a particular educational perspective). Following this line of reasoning, questions about what 'is' and what 'ought to be' are not bound to philosophical debates but are also significant for teachers' everyday teaching practice.

Enriching one's perspective on what is educationally worthwhile requires substantive dialogue and debate (Ruyter & Kole, 2010; Ponte, 2009). This might support teachers to go beyond the personal and the familiar and give way to new and unanticipated perspectives on their pupils' best interest. After all, teachers have the principal role in schools in deciding the best thing to do for different pupils in a given situation.

