

Beyond Categorisation and Competencies: Reclaiming the Human Person in Education through the Relational Anthropology of Edith Stein

Justin Burwood

Introduction: The Grid and the Person

Contemporary education, and social studies education in particular, tends to present itself as a space in which students are invited to engage critically with plurality, difference, and historical complexity. Yet the frameworks through which such engagement is organised often operate prior to the encounter itself. Thematic structures and categorisational grids do not simply emerge from the material; they frequently precede it, shaping in advance what can be seen and how it may be interpreted. What appears as openness to complexity is therefore already conditioned by assumptions about the intelligibility of the human person. This tension may be described in terms of the relationship between the Grid and the Person, with the Grid referring to the classificatory structures through which individuals become intelligible as members of recognisable types. The Person, by contrast, does not first appear as a category, but as a singular and relational being whose meaning unfolds over time. The difficulty arises when social categorisation is no longer treated as a tool, but begins to function as a substitute for the reality it seeks to organise.

Within contemporary pedagogy, this structure is reinforced rather than displaced. Competence-based frameworks translate categorised understandings of the person into measurable outcomes, aligning educational success with

performance and assessment.¹ Such developments echo Hannah Arendt's decades-old diagnosis of a crisis in education, in which the loss of responsibility for a shared world is accompanied by an overreliance on procedural models of learning.² The result is a double reduction of the person. Existing responses to this condition often oscillate between opposing positions. Constructivist approaches emphasise fluidity and the socially mediated character of identity, while essentialist accounts seek to restore stability through reference to nature or essence.³ Yet both remain structured by the same opposition between fixity and fluidity. One risks dissolving the person into shifting positions, while the other risks fixing them within predetermined frameworks.

It is at this point that Edith Stein's thought becomes relevant. Drawing on phenomenology and Thomistic metaphysics, Stein develops an account of the person as a dynamic unity of body, soul, and spirit, irreducible to both category and function.⁴ Her framework does not eliminate categorisation or competence, but re-situates them within a broader horizon of formation. In this sense, her notion of *Bildung* (formation) emerges as an alternative to such reductions by placing existing structures within a more holistic understanding of the human person.

1 Markus Holti, "Kompetenz- und Persönlichkeitsbildung. Anthropologischer und pädagogischer Zugang nach Edith Stein." Transcript of speech delivered at Edith Stein Gesellschaft Österreich, February 7, 2025; Blaise D. Ringor, "She Will Crush Thy Head': Edith Stein's Emancipative Empathy as a Critical Voice against Neoliberalism in Education." *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Special Issue, June 2022: 50–70.

2 Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis of Education," in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*. New York: Viking Press (1961), 173–196.

3 Katharina Westerhorstmann, "Wesen und Berufung der Frau bei Edith Stein vor dem Hintergrund einer radikal dekonstruktivistischen Position des Postfeminismus." *Brixner Theologisches Forum* 117 no. 3 (2006): 41–62; Travis Lacy, "Alter Christus: Edith Stein on the Liturgical Sources of Bildung." *Cuadernos de pensamiento* 37 (2024): 285–301; Mariusz Kuciński and Paweł Warchoń, "Pedagogical phenomenon in the teaching of Edith Stein." *Rocznik Naukowy Kujawsko-Pomorskiej Szkoły Wyższej w Bydgoszczy. Transdyscyplinarne Studia o Kulturze* 13 (2018): 51–67.

4 Mette Lebech, "Stein's Phenomenological Value Theory." *Yearbook of the Irish Philosophical Society* (2010): 139–150; Sławomir Chrost, "From phenomenon, throughout the fact, to foundation. Outline of the concept of man and its development according to Edith Stein (1891–1942)." *Biuletyn Historii Wychowania* 40 (2019): 85–96; Wojciech Zyzak, "Spiritual Theology: The Contribution of Edith Stein." *The Person and the Challenges* 13 no. 1 (2023): 115–130.

I. The Problem of the Grid: Over-Categorisation and Neoliberal Apathy

Social studies education frequently fragments students into rigid, socially-imposed labels. Recent research into Swiss and Canadian textbooks reveals an upstream machinery of state-sanctioned categorisation where group labels and timelines precede content, making constructed social categories feel like common sense.⁵ Such categories ultimately continue the same classificatory work as censuses and passports, reducing the living person to a data point within a legislative grid, an ‘anthropo-planist’ type of confinement that ignores the singular and unrepeatable originality with which individuals are given to existence.⁶ In this sense, categorisation does not simply describe social realities, but actively participates in shaping them, pre-structuring the horizon within which both teachers and students come to recognise what counts as a person. What is presented as neutral organisation is therefore already normative, delimiting in advance the potential for group belonging. Categorisation is not without function, however. It enables recognition by translating social structures into manageable types, allowing complex realities to be organised and communicated. Yet this same process introduces a structural limitation. What becomes visible is not people in their singularity, but people as members of categories. The individual is not denied, but mediated through general descriptors that prioritise what is common over what is unique. The epistemic economy at work thus privileges efficiency over depth, substituting recognisability for understanding. As a result, what is most particular about individuals often appears only indirectly, if at all.

Attempts to address that failing through more inclusive or intersectional frameworks do not fully resolve the problem. A multiplication of categories may increase representational accuracy, but it does not dismantle the underlying categorisational grid. Instead, it densifies it. Individuals remain intelligible insofar as they can be located within an expanding network of positions. Inclusion, in this sense, redistributes reduction rather than overcoming it. The initial structure remains intact, even as its content becomes more complex, and

5 Justin Burwood, *Social studies textbooks, categorization, and Francophone counterpower: A Swiss-Canadian comparison focusing on Bern & New Brunswick (1960-2020)*, PhD thesis, Université de Fribourg, 2026.

6 Luis Manuel Martínez-Domínguez, “La educación sensible al Origen: marco pedagógico que encuentra fundamento en el pensamiento de Edith Stein.” *Cuadernos de pensamiento* 36 (2023): 343–369.

the person continues to appear primarily as a composite of social positions rather than as a unified subject. Stein's life serves as a counter-narrative to such fixity. Her personhood was "protean, patchy, relational, and contingent," as she moved through roles as a Prussian patriot, a Jewish philosopher, a Red Cross nurse, and a Carmelite nun.⁷ Her trajectory of belonging resists any attempt to fix her within a single social category. It reveals instead the inadequacy of frameworks that seek to capture individuals through fixed social designations. Furthermore, her biographical complexity has been read not merely as incidental, but as illustrative of a fundamentally non-reductive account of belonging, in which personal existence cannot be adequately captured through externally imposed classifications. What emerges is not the absence of belonging, but its irreducibility to any single descriptive axis.

Stein's biographical framework also confirms that justice in education cannot arrive through the mere addition of representational content to existing labels, but requires a fundamental renegotiation of the categorisational scaffolding.⁸ This resistance is essential against neoliberal paradigms that reduce education to profit-making and students to 'clients' or 'assets', neoliberal methods that have been described as inherently "apathetic" because they lose touch with the person's life by over-relying on measurable data and rankings.⁹ In such contexts, the value of students is increasingly aligned with performance indicators, reinforcing the same logic of abstraction already present in categorisation. The issue, then, is not the presence of categorisation, but its dominance. When the categorisational grid becomes the primary means through which individuals are known, it begins to obscure the reality it seeks to organise.

II. The Ontic Structure: Beyond Constructivist and Posthumanist Reductions

To counter the fragmentation of individuals, Stein proposes an anthropology of the "whole human person" (*das ganze Menschsein*), composed of a dynamic unity of body, soul, and spirit.¹⁰ This formulation does not simply add further

7 Joyce Avrech Berkman, "I am myself it": comparative national identity formation in the lives of Vera Brittain and Edith Stein." *Women's History Review* 6 no. 1 (1997): 47–73.

8 Justin Burwood, *Social studies textbooks, categorization*.

9 Blaise D. Ringor, "She Will Crush Thy Head."

10 Sławomir Chrost, "From phenomenon, throughout the fact, to foundation"; Mette Lebech, "Stein's Phenomenological Value Theory"; Wojciech Zyzak, "Spiritual Theology: The Contribution of Edith Stein."

dimensions to an already fragmented subject, but reconfigures the level at which the person is understood. Rather than beginning from external classifications or functional capacities, it situates the person within an ontological horizon in which unity precedes differentiation. Stein defines each person as “a living being bestowed with a soul; a microcosm; a spiritual, historical, social, and cultural creation”,¹¹ a formulation that emphasises both unity and complexity. The person is not reducible to any single dimension, whether biological, social, or psychological. Rather, such dimensions are integrated within a single life. What is at stake is not the enumeration of components, but the recognition that each dimension derives its meaning from its place within the whole, and cannot be understood in isolation without distortion. Against purely constructivist accounts, Stein argues that a self understood as entirely self-produced leads to an infinite regress unless grounded in an objective reference point or inherent essence.¹² Without such grounding, the question of what constitutes the self remains unresolved, and identification becomes a process without origin. In this sense, constructivist fluidity risks undermining the very subject it seeks to liberate, dissolving the person into an indefinite series of social positions without a stable centre from which such positions can be inhabited.

At the same time, Stein resists any reduction of the person to static essence. Individuality, for her, is neither accidental nor externally imposed. Each person possesses an individual form (*individuelles Wesen*) that is unique and unrepeatable, and is the divine image that God carries of each person.¹³ That individuality is not added to a general type, but constitutes the person as such. It follows that individuals cannot be fully grasped through generalisation, since what is most essential about them lies precisely in what cannot be repeated. Stein’s formulation of humanity as a ‘double species’ (*Doppelgattung*) further develops this account. Men and women share a universal humanness while possessing complementary spiritual orientations.¹⁴ As a “foremother of Catholic feminism”,

11 Edith Stein, *Der Aufbau der menschlichen Person: Vorlesung zur philosophischen Anthropologie*. ESGA 14. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder (2004), 29–31; Beate Beckmann-Zöller, “Was war neu an Edith Steins Bildungstheorie – und was davon brauchen wir noch heute?” Transcript of speech delivered at Edith Stein Gesellschaft Österreich, February 24, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlelR1Mvfls>.

12 Markus Holti, “Kompetenz- und Persönlichkeitsbildung.”

13 Sarah Borden Sharkey, *Thine Own Self: Individuality in Edith Stein’s Later Writings*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press (2010).

14 Freda Mary Oben, *Edith Stein: Scholar, Feminist, Saint*. Staten Island, NY: Alba House (1988); Miriam Ramos Gómez, “Methoden und Perspektiven der Frauenforschung: Die bahnbrechenden

Stein argued that a woman's 'natural ethos' can humanise environments prone to mechanisation.¹⁵ As Lopez-McAlister has shown, that position does not revert to a simplistic essentialism, but articulates a phenomenologically grounded account of difference that preserves both equality and specificity without collapsing into either abstraction or determinism.¹⁶ Difference, in this sense, is neither a rigid classification nor purely constructed identification. It is an expression of the person's embodied and relational nature. What is preserved here is a form of differentiation that does not fragment the unity of the person, but unfolds from it. That distinction is further reflected in Stein's formulation that "the woman's soul is fashioned as a shelter in which other souls may unfold", which does not reduce womanhood to fixed roles, but points to a relational openness grounded in vocation.¹⁷

Stein's account of the person has implications that extend beyond questions of difference alone, however, as her anthropology also functions as a bulwark against contemporary posthumanist tendencies. Attempts to 'perfect' human performance through technological means risk reducing the person to measurable functions or modifiable systems.¹⁸ Stein's anthropology resists such reductivism by grounding human dignity in the irreducibility of the person. The human being is not a system to be optimised, but a reality whose value exceeds performance. In this way, her framework establishes a limit to both technological and conceptual interventions, insisting that individuals cannot be fully captured by the categories through which they are described or the functions through which they are evaluated.

Vorschläge von Edith Stein und Johannes Paul II." *Edith Stein Jahrbuch* 29 (2023): 167–198; Katharina Westerhorstmann, "Wesen und Berufung der Frau bei Edith Stein."

15 Grace Marshall, "Edith Stein: Foremother of Catholic Feminism." *Student Scholarship* 26 (2022); Freda Mary Oben, *Edith Stein: Scholar, Feminist, Saint*.

16 Linda Lopez McAlister, "Feminist saint?: Edith Stein's feminism." *Center for Women's and Gender Studies Publications* 13 (1989).

17 Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*. 2nd rev. ed. Translated by Freda Mary Oben. Edited by Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications (1996), 132.

18 Małgorzata Bogaczyk-Vormayr, "Posthumanismus im Lichte der Anthropologie Edith Steins." *Edith Stein Jahrbuch* 24 (2018): 131–149; Beate Beckmann-Zöller, "Was war neu an Edith Steins Bildungstheorie."

III. Empathy as an Act of Perception and Recognition

In the social studies classroom, empathy is often reduced to a ‘soft skill’ or a tool for managerial efficiency.¹⁹ In her early phenomenological work *On the Problem of Empathy*, Stein reframes empathy as a ‘perceptual act sui generis’, a disciplined attentiveness to the other’s interiority.²⁰ By doing so, she distinguishes empathy from both emotional identification and imaginative projection, defining it instead as a disciplined act of perception directed toward the experience of the Other as other. This shift in definition is not merely terminological, but methodological. It repositions empathy from the realm of behavioural competence to that of epistemic access, altering the way in which the Other becomes present within the horizon of understanding. Empathy, in this sense, is not emotional identification or imaginative projection. It is a form of perception through which the experience of the Other is given as belonging to them. That distinction is decisive. Where projection assimilates the other to the self, empathy preserves difference, and the Other is encountered as irreducibly distinct. What is at stake here is not simply accuracy of representation, but the preservation of alterity as such, resisting the tendency to translate the Other into familiar terms. This also has epistemological consequences, as knowledge does not proceed solely through classification, but through encounter. Empathy introduces a limit to categorisation by revealing that individuals cannot be fully contained within conceptual frameworks. It does not replace conceptual knowledge, but interrupts its claim to sufficiency, and by doing so, it reorders the relationship between knowing and being known, situating individuals prior to the categories through which they are interpreted.

Stein further suggests that empathy functions as a correction of deception. It allows another to “judge me more accurately” than I judge myself, thereby disrupting the illusion of self-sufficiency.²¹ In doing so, it challenges institutional ‘monopolies of truth’ that claim to exhaust the reality of the person.²² The presence of the other thus introduces a form of critique that is not external, but relational, emerging from the encounter itself rather than

19 Blaise D. Ringor, “She Will Crush Thy Head.”

20 Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*. Translated by Waltraut Stein. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff (1989), 10–15; Polina Kukar, “The Very Unrecognizability of the Other: Edith Stein, Judith Butler, and the Pedagogical Challenge of Empathy.” *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 24 no. 1 (2016): 1–14.

21 Blaise D. Ringor, “She Will Crush Thy Head.”

22 Ibid.

from an abstract standard. Stein's appeal to Galatians 3:28 provides a theological grounding for that position, for in Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Greek [...] neither male nor female."²³ This does not eliminate difference, but relativises it within a deeper unity. Processes of identification are not denied, but re-situated, and what is foregrounded is not the erasure of distinctions, but their subordination to a more fundamental relational order. At the same time, empathy acknowledges the unrecognisability of the Other. Grounded in phenomenological realism, it affirms that the other can never be fully known.²⁴ This limitation is not a failure, but a condition of genuine relation, as it prevents the reduction of the Other to object or category. The Other thus remains present, but not exhaustible, inviting response without permitting appropriation. Such recognition is also described as a minimal condition for being truly human.²⁵ Without it, encounters with histories of suffering risk becoming either abstract or superficial. Empathy preserves the alterity of the Other, allowing engagement without assimilation. This irreducible alterity has been further emphasised in recent phenomenological interpretations, which stress that the other's interiority remains given without ever becoming fully transparent, thereby safeguarding the relational structure of empathy against both appropriation and abstraction.²⁶ In this way, it establishes a mode of attentiveness that resists both the flattening effects of categorisation and the instrumental logic of competence-based pedagogy.

IV. The Telos of *Bildung*: Vocation and Liturgical Expansion

Unlike John Dewey's view of education as growth without a fixed end,²⁷ Stein's notion of *Bildung* (formation) is explicitly teleological.²⁸ This teleology does not impose a predetermined outcome in a rigid sense, but orients formation toward

23 Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 69; Grace Marshall, "Edith Stein: Foremother of Catholic Feminism."

24 Polina Kukar, "The Very Unrecognizability of the Other."

25 Ibid.; Blaise D. Ringor, "She Will Crush Thy Head."

26 David Oberreiter, "Die Bedeutung struktureller Empathie für Verständnis und Therapie der Ichgrenzenstörung. Psychotherapeutische Implikationen basierend auf Edith Stein, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl und Søren Kierkegaard." *Edith Stein Jahrbuch* 24 (2018): 61–98.

27 John Dewey, "The Democratic Conception in Education", in John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, Hazleton, PA: Penn State Electronic Classics (2001), 85–104.

28 Francesc Torralba Roselló, *La Bildung como teología de la educación. Análisis hermenéutico de la obra de Edith Stein (1891-1942)*. PhD thesis, Universitat Ramon Llull, Barcelona, 2018; Sławomir Chrost, "From phenomenon, throughout the fact, to foundation."

a meaningful fulfilment that is internal to the person's own being. It therefore provides a direction without collapsing development into standardisation. *Bildung* is thus understood as a process of self-formation and interiorisation. It is a dynamic movement through which individuals appropriate meaning and develop toward their given form, as expressed in the principle '*Alle Bildung ist Selbstbildung*' (all formation is self-formation).²⁹ Consequently, education cannot impose form, but can create the conditions under which it unfolds. This redefines the role of pedagogy, shifting it from production to accompaniment, and from external shaping to the cultivation of interior responsiveness. Formation, in this sense, is oriented toward vocation. Stein asserted that "every human being is an individual with a nature all his own, a nature that must be developed if he is to become what he ought to be."³⁰ Such becoming, Stein insisted, should occur according to each individual's unique 'logos.'³¹ It also presupposes that the form of the person, the soul, is not static, but unfolds over time. For Stein, the soul is alive, receptive, and progressive. In *Finite and Eternal Being*, she writes: "The being of the form is life."³² An individual's vocation is thus neither externally assigned nor arbitrarily chosen. It emerges as a response to what is given in the individuality of the person and soul.

The purpose of education, then, is not simply to transmit knowledge or produce socially useful citizens, but to awaken and cultivate the inner readiness of students to respond to their unique calling in truth and love.³³ In contrast to the standardised, skills-focused models that dominate contemporary curricula, Stein articulates formation as a process of interior transformation. She writes: "Every soul is fashioned as an individual and is called to a particular perfection [...] and this call cannot be repeated or exchanged."³⁴ This formulation underscores the singularity of vocation and reinforces the claim that education concerns the unfolding of a life that cannot be generalised or substituted. The accompanying response is not immediate, but unfolds over time, requiring

29 Francesc Torralba Roselló, *La Bildung como teología de la educación*; Mariusz Kuciński and Paweł Warchoł, "Pedagogical phenomenon in the teaching of Edith Stein."

30 Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 117.

31 Francesc Torralba Roselló, *La Bildung como teología de la educación*; Sławomir Chrost, "From phenomenon, throughout the fact, to foundation."

32 Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*. Translated by Kurt F. Reinhardt. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications (2002), 268.

33 Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 146; Sławomir Chrost, "From phenomenon, throughout the fact, to foundation."

34 Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 146.

discernment, freedom, and a capacity to recognise meaning within experience. As a result, Stein insists that education must cultivate a capacity for value-perception. “Only the soul that has learned to live in relation to values can be properly educated.”³⁵ Without this orientation, knowledge remains abstract and disconnected from life. The emphasis here is thus not simply on knowing values, but on being able to perceive and respond to them, indicating that education concerns the formation of attention as much as the transmission of content.

Stein’s account also introduces a theological dimension, as for her, formation is not limited to natural development, but is open to supernatural sources. Stein identifies the Eucharist as the ‘most essential pedagogical act’ because it expands the soul, taking the student out of the ‘narrowness of existence.’³⁶ Such expansion resists the confinement imposed by bureaucratic and performative frameworks, as it situates the person within a horizon that exceeds institutional expectations, thereby relativising the metrics through which educational success is often measured. This liturgical dimension has been further developed as a form of spiritual expansion in which the person is drawn beyond the limits of instrumental rationality, situating formation within a horizon that cannot be reduced to functional or institutional ends.³⁷ In this context, education becomes sensitive to origin, as rather than treating students as cases to be managed, it recognises their originality as a gift.³⁸ *Bildung* thus re-situates categorisation and competence within a broader horizon of holistic formation. What is foregrounded is not the regulation of outcomes, but the unfolding of the person in relation to meaning, value, and vocation.

V. The Role of the Educator: Witness and Spiritual Maternity in Community

According to Stein, the educator should be a moral and spiritual presence whose authority is derived from interior readiness.³⁹ Consequently, the authority of educators does not stem from institutional position alone, but

35 Ibid., 111; Mette Lebech, “Stein’s Phenomenological Value Theory.”

36 Travis Lacy, “*Alter Christus*: Edith Stein on the Liturgical Sources of *Bildung*”; Wojciech Zyzak, “Spiritual Theology: The Contribution of Edith Stein.”

37 Marianne Schlosser, “Edith Stein und die Eucharistie.” *Edith Stein Jahrbuch* 27 (2021): 143–172.

38 Luis Manuel Martínez-Domínguez, “La educación sensible al Origen.”

39 Beate Beckmann-Zöller, “Was war neu an Edith Steins Bildungstheorie”; Blaise D. Ringor, “She Will Crush Thy Head.”

from the coherence between the their own formation and the values they seek to communicate.⁴⁰ In this respect, Stein's account converges with Arendt's insistence that education necessarily involves a form of authority grounded in responsibility for a shared world, rather than in the mere transmission of information.⁴¹ What is at stake is not simply educator credibility, but their capacity to perceive and respond to students as individuals rather than as fulfilling a future function within the system. Accordingly, Stein argues that the educator must be inwardly formed in order to perceive and reverence the soul of the student. "The true educator, she writes, "must be guided by an inner receptivity to the child's individual nature, and by a sense for what God may be calling that child to become."⁴² In this sense, educator authority is not primarily exercised through control or evaluation, but through a form of presence that makes possible a different mode of encounter within the educational space.

Stein also emphasises that authentic formation involves struggle. Souls make no progress if they "no longer find satisfaction in their practices because God is offering them the dry bread of the strong."⁴³ As a result, formation is not always experienced as fulfilment, but may involve difficulty and transformation. This challenges pedagogical models that equate development with continuous affirmation or measurable progress, introducing instead a more complex account in which growth may be marked by resistance, uncertainty, or interior reorientation. What appears, within performative frameworks, as stagnation or failure may in fact correspond to a deeper process of formation that cannot be externally verified. This experience is not arbitrary, but has a definite form within Stein's later thought. In *The Science of the Cross*, she reflects on the Cross as the form of the Christian life, understood as a pattern of self-giving rather than mere belief. "If we want to belong completely to Christ, she writes, "we must live His life all the way through. [...] The Cross is our only boast because through it we are conformed to Him."⁴⁴ At the same time, educators are called to witness, for surrendering to God and bearing witness to the truth makes the soul

40 Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 112; Markus Holti, "Kompetenz- und Persönlichkeitsbildung".

41 Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis of Education."

42 Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 78.

43 Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross: A Study of St. John of the Cross*. Translated by Josephine Koepfel. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications (1986), 100; Blaise D. Ringor, "She Will Crush Thy Head".

44 Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, 85.

“fruitful in the highest sense.⁴⁵ Teaching is thus not merely the transmission of knowledge, but the embodiment of values, and in this sense, the educator functions not only as an instructor, but as a point of reference through which students encounter what it means to live in relation to truth. This introduces an ethical dimension that cannot be reduced to curricular content, but is communicated through the manner in which educators inhabit their role.

The role of educators is further articulated by Stein through the notion of maternal pedagogy. Drawing from the archetype of Mary, Stein advocates for a ‘reverential atmosphere’ in which educators attend to the individuality of students.⁴⁶ The task is not to impose form, but to recognise and accompany it. Such accompaniment requires attentiveness rather than control, and presupposes a form of perception that resists reducing the student to predefined expectations. It also entails a willingness to remain with the student in processes that cannot be accelerated or standardised, acknowledging that formation unfolds according to rhythms that exceed institutional timelines. Consequently, both educators and students are also called to a broader vocation in community. The ‘Little Esther’ model referred to by Stein emphasises a responsibility for the common good, even in times of crisis.⁴⁷ Formation is thus not only personal, but communal. It situates the individual within a network of relationships that extend beyond the classroom, linking education to wider ethical and social responsibilities. In this way, the educational encounter becomes a site in which personal formation and communal responsibility are not opposed, but mutually implicated.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis has argued that contemporary social studies education is shaped by a double reduction of the human person. At the epistemic level, categorisation renders individuals intelligible through generalisable types, privileging what is common over what is singular. At the pedagogical level, competence-based frameworks translate these typologies into measurable

45 Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 136.

46 Freda Mary Oben, *Edith Stein: Scholar, Feminist, Saint*; Travis Lacy, “Alter Christus: Edith Stein on the Liturgical Sources of *Bildung*”; June Marie Verbillion, *A Critical Analysis of the Educational Theories of Edith Stein*. PhD thesis, Loyola University, Chicago, 1960.

47 Wojciech Zyzak, “Spiritual Theology: The Contribution of Edith Stein”; Christoph Heizler, “Betendes Geschehen bei Edith Stein. Raum der Spannungseinheit und Integrationsbewegung von Glaube und Vernunft.” *Edith Stein Jahrbuch* 28 (2022): 90–106.

outcomes, aligning educational success with performance. Taken together, these structures produce a mode of education in which the person appears primarily as something to be classified and optimised. Edith Stein's relational anthropology offers a way beyond this impasse, not by rejecting categorisation or competence outright, but by re-situating them within a more adequate account of the person. By grounding human existence in the dynamic unity of body, soul, and spirit, her pedagogical framework restores the primacy of the individual as irreducible and unrepeatable, while at the same time affirming the relational nature of human life. Difference is neither dissolved into fluidity nor fixed within rigid categories, but understood as unfolding from a deeper unity.

Within this horizon, empathy emerges as a decisive mode of access. No longer reducible to a skill or affective disposition, it becomes a form of perception through which the other is encountered as other. In doing so, it establishes a limit to the reach of social categorisation, interrupting its claim to exhaust the reality of the person. Knowledge is thus reoriented, no longer proceeding solely through classification, but grounded in encounter. This reconfiguration extends to pedagogy itself. *Bildung*, understood as self-formation and interiorisation, shifts the focus of education from performance to vocation. The task of educators is no longer to produce measurable outcomes, but to accompany the unfolding of the person in relation to meaning and value. Such formation cannot be imposed externally, but requires the cultivation of an interior readiness to respond to what is given. In this sense, education becomes sensitive to origin, recognising students not as cases to be managed, but as gifts to be received. As a result, the role of the educator is correspondingly transformed. Educator authority is no longer derived solely from institutional position or technical competence, but from the coherence of a life lived in orientation toward truth. Teaching thus becomes an act of witness, grounded in attentiveness, responsibility, and a willingness to accompany students through processes that may involve uncertainty as much as fulfilment. Accordingly, formation is revealed as both personal and communal, linking the development of the individual to the broader demands of the common good. What emerges from that synthesis is not a rejection of existing educational structures, but a reordering of their significance. Categorisation and competencies remain, but no longer define the horizon within which education takes place. Instead, they are situated within a broader vision in which the person is understood as dynamic, relational, and oriented toward fulfilment. The categorisational grid is thus not dismantled, but decentred.

In this light, the task of social studies education can be reconsidered. Rather than organising knowledge primarily through pre-existing frameworks, it can become a space in which students are invited to encounter the complexity of human existence without reduction. Such an approach does not eliminate the difficulty of growth and identification, but reframes them, allowing tensions between individuality and community, stability and development, to be held in grace rather than prematurely resolved. In summary, Stein's thought thus points toward a pedagogy grounded not in control, but in attentiveness. To educate according to Stein's framework is to see what is: to recognise individuals in their irreducibility, to remain open to what exceeds categorisation, and to accompany the gradual unfolding of lives that cannot be fully anticipated in advance.

Bibliography

Arendt, Hannah. 1961. "The Crisis of Education," in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*. New York: Viking Press, 173–196.

Avrech Berkman, Joyce. 1997. "I am myself it": comparative national identity formation in the lives of Vera Brittain and Edith Stein." *Women's History Review* 6 (1): 47–73.

Beckmann-Zöllner, Beate. 2024. "Was war neu an Edith Steins Bildungstheorie – und was davon brauchen wir noch heute?" Transcript of speech delivered at Edith Stein Gesellschaft Österreich, February 24, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hle1R1MvfIs>.

Borden Sharkey, Sarah. 2010. *Thine Own Self: Individuality in Edith Stein's Later Writings*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press.

Bogaczyk-Vormayr, Małgorzata. 2018. "Posthumanismus im Lichte der Anthropologie Edith Steins." *Edith Stein Jahrbuch* 24: 131–149.

Burwood, Justin. 2026. *Social studies textbooks, categorization, and Francophone counterpower: A Swiss-Canadian comparison focusing on Bern & New Brunswick (1960–2020)*, PhD thesis, Université de Fribourg.

Chrost, Sławomir. 2019. "From phenomenon, throughout the fact, to foundation. Outline of the concept of man and its development according to Edith Stein (1891–1942)." *Biuletyn Historii Wychowania* 40: 85–96.

Dewey, John. 2001. "The Democratic Conception in Education", in John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, Hazleton, PA: Penn State Electronic Classics, 85–104.

Heizler, Christoph. 2022. "Betendes Geschehen bei Edith Stein. Raum der Spannungseinheit und Integrationsbewegung von Glaube und Vernunft." *Edith Stein Jahrbuch* 28: 90–106.

Holti, Markus. 2025. "Kompetenz- und Persönlichkeitsbildung. Anthropologischer und pädagogischer Zugang nach Edith Stein." Transcript of speech delivered at Edith Stein Gesellschaft Österreich, February 7, 2025.

Kuciński, Mariusz, and Warchoń, Paweł. 2018. "Pedagogical phenomenon in the teaching of Edith Stein." *Rocznik Naukowy Kujawsko-Pomorskiej Szkoły Wyższej w Bydgoszczy. Transdyscyplinarne Studia o Kulturze* 13: 51–67.

Kukar, Polina. 2016. "The Very Unrecognizability of the Other: Edith Stein, Judith Butler, and the Pedagogical Challenge of Empathy." *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 24 (1): 1–14.

Lacy, Travis. 2024. "Alter Christus: Edith Stein on the Liturgical Sources of *Bildung*." *Cuadernos de pensamiento* 37: 285–301.

Lebech, Mette. 2010. "Stein's Phenomenological Value Theory." *Yearbook of the Irish Philosophical Society*: 139–150.

Lopez McAlister, Linda. 1989. "Feminist saint?: Edith Stein's feminism. *Center for Women's and Gender Studies Publications* 13.

Marshall, Grace. 2022. "Edith Stein: Foremother of Catholic Feminism *Student Scholarship* 26.

Martínez-Domínguez, Luis Manuel. 2023. "La educación sensible al Origen: marco pedagógico que encuentra fundamento en el pensamiento de Edith Stein. *Cuadernos de pensamiento* 36: 343–369.

Oben, Freda Mary. 1988. *Edith Stein: Scholar, Feminist, Saint*. Staten Island, NY: Alba House.

Oberreiter, David. 2018. Die Bedeutung struktureller Empathie für Verständnis und Therapie der Ichgrenzenstörung. Psychotherapeutische Implikationen basierend auf Edith Stein, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl und Søren Kierkegaard. *Edith Stein Jahrbuch* 24: 61–98.

Ramos Gómez, Miriam. 2023. "Methoden und Perspektiven der Frauenforschung: Die bahnbrechenden Vorschläge von Edith Stein und Johannes Paul II." *Edith Stein Jahrbuch* 29: 167–198.

Ringor, Blaise D. 2022. "'She Will Crush Thy Head': Edith Stein's Emancipative Empathy as a Critical Voice against Neoliberalism in Education." *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Special Issue, June: 50–70.

Schlosser, Marianne. 2021. "Edith Stein und die Eucharistie." *Edith Stein Jahrbuch* 27, 143–172.

Stein, Edith. 1989 (1917). *On the Problem of Empathy*. Translated by Waltraut Stein. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Stein, Edith. 1996. *Essays on Woman*. 2nd rev. ed. Translated by Freda Mary Oben. Edited by Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications.

Stein, Edith. 2002. *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*. Translated by Kurt F. Reinhardt. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications.

Stein, Edith. 1986. *The Science of the Cross: A Study of St. John of the Cross*. Translated by Josephine Koepfel. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications.

Stein, Edith. 2004. *Der Aufbau der menschlichen Person: Vorlesung zur philosophischen Anthropologie*. ESGA 14. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder.

Torralba Roselló, Francesc. 2018. *La Bildung como teología de la educación. Análisis hermenéutico de la obra de Edith Stein (1891-1942)*. PhD thesis, Universitat Ramon Llull, Barcelona.

Verbillion, June Marie. 1960. *A Critical Analysis of the Educational Theories of Edith Stein*. PhD thesis, Loyola University, Chicago.

Westerhorstmann, Katharina. 2006. "Wesen und Berufung der Frau bei Edith Stein vor dem Hintergrund einer radikal dekonstruktivistischen Position des Postfeminismus." *Brixner Theologisches Forum* 117 (3): 41–62.

Zyzak, Wojciech. 2023. "Spiritual Theology: The Contribution of Edith Stein." *The Person and the Challenges* 13 (1): 115–130.