Palliative Medicine & Care International Journal
ISSN: 2688-3821

Juniper Publishers
key to the Researchers

Review Article
Volume 5 Issue 3 : November 2026
DOI: 10.19080/PMCIJ.2026.05.555663

Palliat Med Care Int J
Copyright © All rights are reserved by Anoop Gupta

A Brief History 0f Educational Psychology: Universals or Particulars?

Anoop Gupta*

Faculty of Education and Department of Psychology, University of Windsor ON, N9B 3P4 Canada

Submission: October 30, 2026; **Published:** November 23, 2026

***Corresponding author:** Anoop Gupta, Faculty of Education and Department of Psychology, University of Windsor ON, N9B 3P4 Canada

Abstract

An analysis of how some of the key thinkers in educational psychology can be configured on a spectrum of attending to either the particular experiential aspects of learning, or the universal, biological components was attempted. An analysis is presented in (Table 1), "A Brief History of Educational Psychology: Learning as Rooted in Particular Experiences or a Universal Biology," (henceforth, "Table 1"), from which discussion proceeded. Each figure in the table was commented upon, and finally, it was suggested that neither side the top or bottom-is more desirable than the other. Specifically, looking at what theories are more inclusive, using the intelligence wars for the purpose of illustration, it was argued the best place to be situated is in the middle, represented by bio-ecological models that take into account both the vicissitudes of particular experiences and culture, as well as universal biological structures and needs. Looking at what theories are more inclusive, I argued the best place to be located with where experiential and biological concerns intersect for preservice teacher training programs.

Keywords: Educational Psychology; History of Intelligence Debates; Inclusion

Rationale For This Study

Accounts of the history of psychology are more robust than those of than those about educational psychology; the present study looks at figures in the later field.

Why the New Findings Matter

The current study of figures in the field of educational psychology provide pause to consider the pros and cons of both sides of theoretical debates-about universals and particulars-as well as policy matters related to social justice.

Implications

Progressive policies in education often rely upon work done in psychology [1]. The historical overview provided is analyzed with an eye to how theoretical underpinnings, and changes therein, influence current debates about inclusion and animal rights [2]. A To grasp the difference between Universal and Particular, consider that some dress better to impress a single, specific person than an entire crowd. (Taleb, 2015, p. 71) There are many accounts of the history of psychology, and fewer that focus on the past of educational psychology. What I endeavour here is an analysis of how some of the key thinkers in the field can be configured on a spectrum of attending to either the particular-experiential aspects of learning-or the universal, biological components, and what that may hold for preservice learning education programs [3].

I present my analysis in Table 1, "A Brief History of Educational Psychology: Learning as Rooted in Particular Experiences or a Universal Biology," (henceforth, "Table 1"), from which my analysis proceeds [4]. I comment briefly on each figure in the table, and finally, suggest that neither side-the top or bottom-is more desirable than the other. Rather, looking at what theories are more inclusive, using the intelligence wars for the purpose of illustration-is intelligence the result of biology or experience I argue the best place to be located with where experiential and biological concerns intersect for preservice teacher training programs. My account is chronological [5]. I have added some select philosophical figures to provide orientation, even though they proceed the birth of educational psychology, which is usually pegged to Thorndike (1874-1949). I use historical traditions to create two broad categories: First, "nominalism" whose adherents' pay credence to the reality of particular things, the most famous being Aristotle, and their modern corollary, "empiricists." Second, "Platonism" is used to designate those committed to universal truths, and whose modern adherents are "rationalists."

The metaphysical preoccupations of the ancients what is real was translated into epistemological concerns in the modern period-what can be known to be true unto perhaps psychological matters more recently how do we come to know [6]. Thus, using philosophical categories that were primarily about metaphysical

debates, is designed to capture psychological orientations towards learning as either focusing on particular experiences or universal biological needs and structures. In what follows I shall endeavour to justify each thinker's place in (Table 1) in Column 2, "Remarks." To be sure, each placement is "round about," but the overall picture is intended to show us something about the relationship of thinkers in the history of educational psychology in terms of how they view the nature of learning [7].

Table 1: A Brief History of Educational Psychology: Learning as Rooted in Particular Experiences or a Universal Biology.

Thinker	Remark
Nominalism, Empiricism, and Behaviourism: Individual Experiences (Particulars)	
Aristotle (ca. 348-322 BCE)	The most famous student of Plato, and considered to have reacted against his teacher, Aristotle emphasized that even though there is a universal typology for human beings that are aiming to become *(phronemos)*, we are constrained by our biology and experiences. Thus, his account of learning is more contingent on experiences and situations than Plato's.
David Hume (1711-1776)	Immanuel Kant had said that Hume woke him from his dogmatic slumber. He meant that Hume had showed him that much of knowledge, resting on experience and generalized cannot be easily logically justified. As an empiricist Hume sits well, even if a strange precursor, to behaviorists, where learning is varied and situational.
Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)	Kierkegaard railed against rationalist's idea, like Descartes, that reason or logic could be a vehicle to truth. His account of human nature relied upon individual experience and choice, like Aristotle, and also like him, he emphasized that the human predicament was universal. According to him, we seek security in a temporal world. The only way to be fully developed was to take a leap of faith, believing in divinity. Our particular experiences shape who we are, but since our desires and experiences converge—due to the nature of the human predicament-at a general level, learning has a universalist tenor (Gupta, 2005).
Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936)	Pavlov, a Russian thinker, who predates American behaviourism, was influenced by work on physiology and reflexes. With his grounding in a scientific approach, rooted in biology, his ideas of learning show what allows for conditioning, but some matters seem to be determined.
E. L. Thorndike (1874-1949)	In his work *Animal Intelligence,* Thorndike heralded in the idea that learning is situational; we cannot transfer learning from one domain to the other as easily as was thought. Any task, then, like learning to ride a bike is best learned on the very instrument one is trying to achieve mastery. At the same time, some biological aspects are implicit: a cat that tries to escape a puzzle box wants freedom, which is "instinctual."
John Watson (1878-1958)	In his famous paper, "Psychology as a Behaviourist Views It," Watson claimed that we are a tabula rasa, and as such, can be conditioned into any sort of person. Biology falls by the wayside as a mode of explanation and we are left with a radical view of the role of environment in shaping behaviour.
Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934)	Vygotsky's Russian pedigree, even though a student of literature, would be in good company with Hegel and Marx, all cases where the environment, including the history of the traditions we participate in, figure highly.
B. F. Skinner (1904-1990)	Skinner does not deny that we have minds. He just believes citing mental processes is not useful for scientific explanation. The emphasis falls upon experience and conditioning.
Abraham Maslow (1908-1970)	As the exemplar of the humanist movement, with his focus on universal human needs, he moves closer to a universal account of the nature of learning. He holds that needs could be present and met in various ways in different individuals.
Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005)	Bronfenbrenner introduced a bio-ecological model where five layers, moving from the proximate (e.g., one's family) to the distant (the culture)-specifically, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, as well as chronological system, that is one's place in development, shape human behaviour. Such multidimensional models that take into account the social context have become the received view of psychological development. Namely, we are prompted to approach issues in learning at a systems-levels, that is, the idea that broad macro-level forces and particular experiences, in conjunction with biology, have roles in shaping human behaviour.
Jean Lave (1939-)	Lave, an anthropologist by trade, is associated with the *situated movement* in cognitive psychology. The idea, in short, is that learning happens in a given socio-cultural context, through a process of what she calls legitimate periphery participation. Through practice we enter a community of practice, first as outsiders, and if successful, as insiders (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave's work is part of the *situated movement,* emphasizing that learning is embodied and distributed throughout the nervous system and our socio-cultural relations. Intelligence is not just based on biology and hardware, but more importantly, what we learn, or the software, if you will.
Platonism Rationalism, and Cognitivism: Biological Structures (Universals)	
Lao-Tzu (ca. 500 BCE)	Lao-Tzu is a somewhat mythical figure, said to be the author of the Tao Te Ching. Taoists emphasize the role of nature in all things, hence also the aspect of biology and universal learning though following nature (or the Tao). Yet Lao-Tzu's thought is subtle and difficult to categorize, as he also recognizes the difference among cultures to which we may belong.
Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (ca. 563-483 BCE)	For Buddha, there are four noble truths, the most important being that all life is suffering, and an eight-fold path to salvation from that. Growing out of the Hindu tradition, who we are is partly result of our past actions *(karma)*, and the rest what we do, effecting what is to come. So, who we are is partly determined both biologically and situationally, as the result of our past lives.
Plato (ca. 300 BCE)	According to Plato, there are three parts to the soul, the rational, spirited, and appetitive, and this diversity would account how these types of people learn differently: the administrator, warrior and merchant. However, because the template is universal, learning would be determined, in our terms, by the biology of the soul.

How to cite this article: Anoop G. A Brief History 0f Educational Psychology: Universals or Particulars?. Palliat Med Care Int J. 2026; 5(3): 555663. DOI: 10.19080/PMCIJ.2026.05.555663

Descartes (1596-1650)	Descartes held that there were certain innate ideas, like that of God, and had a universal account of the workings of the mind. As a rationalist, learning for Descartes occurred in the same way across the species, and would have a biological basis. In fact he had conjectured that the body communicated to the mind through the pineal gland.
Sigmund Freud (1856 -1939)	Freud's theory has changed over the course of his writings, but what remained constant is the idea there must be an underlying genetic component, be it archetypes like the Oedipus Complex, or drives, like that for creativity *(Eros)* or destruction *(Thanatos)*. Also, the situation we find ourselves in, according to him, creates an inevitable conflict between civilization and its ensuing discontents. Although psychoanalytic theory is no longer in vogue, he has influenced attachment theorists-emphasizing that early experiences with the primary caregiver, shapes our thinking and behaviour for a lifetime-are important for theorists of child development.
Alfred Binet (1857 – 1911)	Alfred Binet (1857 – 1911) Even though Binet's work on intelligence was to show that agrarian Parisian children could be taught to learn-intelligence was not a matter of class membership-because the likely root of it was biological, learning was determined by a genetic lottery of sorts. It is just that the genetic lottery of intelligence does not dispense prizes based on class membership. Binet's ideas have been updated by Carol (1993, as cited in Kyllonen, 2016) and further expanded by McGrew (2006, as cited in Kyllonen, 2016). How much of any one of their identified abilities are biological or not is difficult to say; however, in the tradition of Binet, one would think some of them are, and hence, some of a measure of intelligence, regardless the version of the test, is so too.
Charles Spearman (1863-1945)	In 1903, Spearman developed the idea of g or general intelligence, which was basically to account for why some people excel at learning, and others do not. His idea of *vanishing tetrad differences* was that for any subset of four tests, the product of the correlation of any two equals the product of any other two, indicating multidimensionality. He proposed the *positive manifold*, that is if one took several tests (e.g., reading, science, and math), that results on two could lead to inferences about the other. For him, general intelligence is a kind of mental energy that some have, which was to account the relationships between one's test results. Intelligence would be, at least theoretically, rooted in biology, both the individual, but also the race; he adhered to views today we would consider as "white supremacist."
Jean Piaget (1896-1980)	Trained as a biologist, Piaget is a pillar of cognitive psychology. Piaget's early work on molluscs paved the way for this thinking about learning. According to him, there are biological aspects to development that are triggered or fulfilled, ideally, by environmental stimulation. The biological component makes "how we are to develop" universal for all human beings, which he laid out in four stages: the sensory-motor, pre-operational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages. The trajectory of development is from moving from concrete ways of thinking to more abstract ones, as well as more social modes. Diversity comes into development based on how it is expressed in our particular case, with his emphasis upon biology and its universal consequences for learning.
Noam Chomsky (1928-)	With his ideas of a universal grammar that underlies all languages, Chomsky would be a ratonalist. Even though his focus was on language, we could extend his line of thinking, whereby certain evolutionary forces have predisposed us to think and act in certain ways-learning language is just the key example.
David Perkins (1942-?) (D. Perkins, personal communication, February 14, 2023).	Perkins' theory of intelligence is composed of three parts: neural efficiency, experience, and reflection. Once again, the brain we are born with determines, to some extent, learning for the individual, but this is in conjunction with our experiences and reflection
Howard Gardner (1943-)	Inspired by work in the neurosciences, the so-called "modular theory of mind," Gardner proposed that some people may be more adapt at certain tasks than others, which he classified into eight intelligences: logico-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalist, interpersonal, intrapersonal, linguistic-verbal, musical-rhythmic harmonic, visual-spatial intelligences. He has also since the original theory added existential intelligence. Rooted in brain science.
Robert Sternberg (1949-)	Developing a tri-archaic theory of intelligence, composed of analytic, synthetic, and practical components, it is reasonable to think that some aspects maybe biologically anchored. Some may just be better with any of the three types of intelligence based on biology; also, one could learn to improve one's analytic, synthetic, or practical skills through training. Improvement of the intelligence is possible through learning. How any one individual learns, however, would be circumscribed by both biology and experience.
Albert Bandura (1925-2021)	Bandura's work grew out of behaviourism, but amended it to include cognitive aspects, hence the name "social cognitive theory." His tri-determinist theory is composed of the personal, environmental, and behavioural components. Within the personal domain one would have biology, as well as family, experiences, and our own will. Thus, he is situated between behaviourists and cognitivists. A key idea that has flowed from his writings is the notion of *self-efficacy*, or one's belief in one's abilities, as a driver of human behaviour, thus identifying a universal need.

The fact that the section of experiential thinkers ends with the situation-oriented Jean Lave (1939-) and the universalist Bandura (1925-2021) tells us a great deal of where we are today [8]. The emphasis upon experience, culture, and technological change looms large in our understanding about the nature of learning, and this is true as much for one side of the spectrum as the other. Both sides of the myriad debates had proponents that were reductive in their own ways: For Aristotle, it was the forms, for empiricist, sense data, for behaviourists stimulus-response events; for Plato it was the one, for rationalist, innate ideas, and for cognitivists,

How to cite this article: Anoop G. A Brief History 0f Educational Psychology: Universals or Particulars?. Palliat Med Care Int J. 2026; 5(3): 555663. DOI: 10.19080/PMCIJ.2026.05.555663

some core set of biological needs or structures [9]. The challenge to reductionism came with ecology, the idea that complex systems had to be understood on their own terms and could not be usefully simplified to some set of more basic principles [10].

Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model and other such multidimensional accounts are indeed reflected in both Lave's and Bandura's work by their proponents' emphasis upon the social context of development, as well as being integrative of a host of factors, running the gamut from the experiential to the biological. Either way, multidimensional accounts, in the tradition of Bronfenbrenner, like those of Lave and Bandura, jettison reductionism as it has been traditionally employed, and seek to understand complex social phenomenon, like learning, on its own terms, merging the particular individual experiences and universal needs or structures in a multitude of ways [11].

Perhaps the difference is in foundations. Nominalists, empiricists and behaviourists see experience and culture as the driving force of learning; whereas Platonists, rationalists and cognitivists view growth as an expression of an organ of reason or, in the contemporary scene, some fundamental proclivity [12].

Some Consequences for Teacher Training Programs

There is nothing deemed harmful (in general) that cannot be beneficial in some particular instances, nothing deemed beneficial that cannot harm you in some circumstances [13]. The more complex the system, the weaker the notion of Universal. (Taleb, 2015, p. 72) In the history of ideas, we often categorize thinkers by what movement they are part of, and who their adversaries were. The cognitivists spurn behaviourism, and before them we are to choose camps, too, those of Aristotelians or Platonists, empiricists or rationalists, and so on. Yet, in the intelligence wars, for example, no one side seems to have the correct account of the smarts more than the other. It is commonplace to think with the advance of epigenetics that there is a confluence of biological and experiential factors interacting in complex ways throughout the lifecycle determining who we are. We can neither say that intelligence is purely a matter of biology or experience. For unique individuals, of course, one factor could way more heavily than another [14].

Further, no one side, nominalism or Platonism, seems more attractive than the other in practice. Consider the implications of both sides for the idea of inclusion, which is the cornerstone of progressive education, the idea that we should try to help everyone reach their potential. On the one hand, those emphasising on the experiential nature of learning should be more inclusive because one is not determined at birth to be "academic" or "non-academic." At the very least behaviourists are free from the weight of the idea that "biology is destiny," since, according to them, what we are is based upon our experiences. Recall, for Watson it does matter what one's race, gender, and so on is, since one can be trained, in principle, to be anything, a soldier or schoolteacher. The hostility towards the role of biology in shaping human behavoiur in the social sciences is captured by Pinker's (2002) convincing rejoinder in The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature, where he argued that indeed there is such a role, looking at studies of twins raised apart [15].

Implications for Inclusion

Historically, the remedy to adhering to a model of universal learning rooted in biology that could not be well-justified was behaviourism, which is likely a pyric victory. Even if behaviourism frees us from the tragic history associated with cognitive-biological accounts of intelligence, being equal before the laws of reinforcement and punishment is inclusive, but at a very high cost because many do not find this an adequate account of learning; it just misses so much of what we experience when we think of our own learning, namely our minds. After all, behaviorism is the very anathema of humanism. In sum, it is not clear that any one side behaviorist or cognitivist at least in the current educational psychological setting brings with it a more attractive inclusive pedagogy than the other [16].

The cognitive theorists are saddled with a tragic history, using biology and eugenics to herald in what their progenitors thought a better, albeit, utopian society. According to their intellectual forefathers, like Galton, and at least inspired by Darwin, many early theorists of intelligence though we could just breed our way to the perfect human. However, inspired by research in the neurosciences, Gardner is more inclusive than at least Spearman, by allowing for a variety of intelligences. So, cognitivists can, in principle, free themselves from a sketchy history associated with racism.

Both extremes, however, Watson or Spearman, do not bode well for inclusion. Watson's account is "ethics' free," since we can make up ourselves anyway, we want there is no way we are intended to be. Spearman because we are condemned by biology at a group level, provided a well-worn justification for racism common in the twentieth century, as well as allowing for individual diversity of general intelligence. For him, no amount of support is necessarily pivotal to help to an individual, because again, when it comes to intelligence, "biology is or could be destiny."

Non-Human Animals

To test implications, we can usefully expand our discussion of inclusion to include non-human animals. On this score, behaviourists are well known to have conducted questionable experiments on animals. On the biological side, Descartes held that animals were just machines and thus engaged in vivisection with few qualms. Even other theorists committed to a biological approach would, or could, be amenable to animal experimentation. There is no logical reason that moderate views would bring with them more considerate approaches. However, one could hope that being aware of the similarities in cognition and biology, especially our shared evolutionary past, between humans and animals, could help expand our circle of ethical inclusion [17].

How to cite this article: Anoop G. A Brief History 0f Educational Psychology: Universals or Particulars?. Palliat Med Care Int J. 2026; 5(3): 555663.
DOI: 10.19080/PMCIJ.2026.05.555663

The Middling Road

Some examples of middle-of-the-road theories are Bandura, whose tri-deterministic theory allows us to capture the biology, environment and habit as factors influencing learning. We can allow that there are some universal aspects to learning, but they are differentiated biologically and experientially in individuals. In addition, Perkin's theory of intelligence has a similar contour; our neural intelligence maybe to some extent given, as well as our learning and experiences. Some amount of plasticity is possible and implicit in his theory. And even Maslow, though providing a general taxonomy of human needs, allows us to consider how they are present and met in various people: making us sensitive to human diversity of individuals, hence, potentially, prompting us to be inclusive in our pedagogical practices. We try to meet individual where they are, recognizing they have different brains, families, experiences, and cultures. Acknowledging that there are biological components that shape behaviour, an idea we can find in thinker as diverse as Plato and Chomsky is valuable. Acknowledging that the human predicament shapes who we are is reflected in thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Kierkegaard and Buddha. Acknowledging that how we learn is shaped by our unique situations in the world, in terms of family, culture, religion, and the time in which we live, is reflected in thinkers as diverse as Lave and Vygotsky. Being inclusive may require having the right theory: one that captures the role of experience has in allowing us to "overcome," to some extent the brains we are born with through processes like experiential dependent neural pruning where what we do, like playing tennis or doing mathematics creates and strengthens certain pathways in our grey matter as well as biological factors such as expectant dependent pruning where when we are provided the correct stimulation, such as exposure to language at the right time, similar processes occur. That is to say, we can indeed shape our brains through learning and experiences, through process like neural plasticity.

In the social sciences, judging theory has an additional burden not found in its natural brethren: we must be concerned with both truth as well as what sort of world we want to live in. Happily, the world we want to live in is based on the past, with its residues in our experience and biology, in cycles that foretell of our future, which will be a blend of the particular and universal.

References

1. Benjafield, JG (2015) A history of psychology (4th ed.) Oxford University Press.
2. Coron L, Anderman EM(Eds.) Handbook of educational psychology (3rd ed.) Routledge.
3. Danziger K (1990) Constructing the subject: Historical origins of psychological research. Cambridge University Press.
4. Ellenberg H (1981) The discovery of the unconscious: The history of dynamic psychiatry. Basic Books.
5. Gardner H (1987) The mind's new science: A history of the cognitive revolution. Basic Books.
6. Gupta A (2005). Kierkegaard's romantic legacy: two theories of the self. University of Ottawa Press.
7. Kyllonen PC (2016) Human cognitive abilities: Their organization development and use In L Coron & E M Anderman (Eds.) Handbook of educational psychology (3rd ed., pp. 121-134). Routledge.
8. Lave J, Wenger E (1991) Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. Cambridge University Press.
9. Lawson RB, Graham JE, Baker KM (2006) A history of psychology: Globalisation, ideas and applications. Routledge.
10. Mandler G (2007) A history of modern experimental psychology: From James and Wundt to cognitive science. MIT Press.
11. Munger M (Ed.) (2003) History of psychology: Fundamental questions. OUP.
12. O'Boyle CG (2006) History of psychology: A cultural perspective. Psychology Press.
13. Pickren W, Rutherford A (2010) A history of modern psychology in context. Wiley.
14. Pinker S (2002) The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature. Viking.
15. Taleb NN (2015) The bed of Procrustes: Philosophical and practical aphorisms. Random House.
16. Woolfolk, AE, Usher EL, Perry NE, Winne PH (2024). Educational psychology (8th ed.) Pearson.
17. Zimmerman BJ, Schunk DH (Eds.) (2003). Educational psychology: A century of contributions. Routledge.

How to cite this article: Anoop G. A Brief History 0f Educational Psychology: Universals or Particulars?. Palliat Med Care Int J. 2026; 5(3): 555663.
DOI: 10.19080/PMCIJ.2026.05.555663

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
DOI: 10.19080/PMCIJ.2026.05.555663

Your next submission with Juniper Publishers will reach you the below assets

- Quality Editorial service
- Swift Peer Review
- Reprints availability
- E-prints Service
- Manuscript Podcast for convenient understanding
- Global attainment for your research
- Manuscript accessibility in different formats
  (Pdf, E-pub, Full Text, Audio)
- Unceasing customer service

Track the below URL for one-step submission
https://juniperpublishers.com/online-submission.php

How to cite this article: Anoop G. A Brief History 0f Educational Psychology: Universals or Particulars?. Palliat Med Care Int J. 2026; 5(3): 555663. DOI: 10.19080/PMCIJ.2026.05.555663