

Essä

Bildung as an updated – not outdated – tradition when becoming a teacher

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This essay emphasizes the essential aspects of becoming a teacher in everyday practice. Currently, neoliberal ideals and evidence-based practices significantly influence teacher education. However, several decades ago, the concept of Bildung was a predominant principle. This paper presents five approaches to Bildung in relation to education, highlighting discernible differences. For instance, critical Bildung addresses issues related to colonial patterns and global ecological thinking, whereas traditional concepts of Bildung largely reflect traditional Western values. In discussions with 22 colleagues, all of whom are university teachers involved in teacher education, it became apparent that most did not explicitly differentiate between their personal experiences as students or teachers, which involve their ingrained personal values from which some mirrors the concept of Bildung. Revisiting Bildung as a core concept in teacher education necessitates a serious discourse on human growth and development. This includes discussions on viewing learning as a lifelong pursuit versus the achievement of specific objectives, and the advantages and disadvantages of short courses versus comprehensive education and training. For example, this approach may allow some teacher educators to accompany a cohort of students throughout their educational journey.

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Introduction

I walk along the corridor as three students approach me. “Hi!”. Their faces light up and they turn their happy eyes on me. “We miss you. We thought we were going to see you again in the next course”, they say with what I perceive as accusatory voices. “I miss you too”, I reply, and suddenly it strikes me too how much I would like to see them again. “There is a system of courses that...” I hear myself trying to explain to them how an intricate pattern of courses divides up their education – and in that very moment, I can see that I have lost them. The light in their happy eyes has gone out. “Anyway, we think it is a pity,” they say as they loaf along the corridor again. I stand still for a while, feeling a bit sad.

They made me stand still and freeze for reflection. In that moment, I remember how it used to be in the past when I really learned to know some students well throughout their education. What was taken-for-granted in those students’ lived university life was an idea of continuity, not only from a subject-matter perspective, but also the people they were going to meet during their education. What I realise in this moment in the corridor is that I when I had taught these students, I had probably approached them with all my being as if we were going to see each other later. But I had given them false hope and now, as I stand here in the corridor, I wonder if I should be less personal – perhaps even less engaged – when I teach in future courses? I can see what I have radiated, in my embodied way of communicating. I approached them as if we were perhaps starting a long and trusting relationship. They trusted me. This trust included that they thought that they were going to see me in the future. I realise that my lived life as a university teacher in short courses, in which I never see my students again, is very different to my former life, in a time of *Bildung* as an ideal. So, what I had taken-for-granted has to do with former experiences; my pre-understanding makes me act in a certain way.

Hermeneutics and phenomenology bring a special understanding to the lifeworld of teacher education (van Manen, 2014, 1988; Berndsson et al., 2007; Bengtsson, 2013; Dall’Alba, 2009; Finlay, 2009; Claesson, 2008, 2011). This understanding has to do with human interpretation; we interpret constantly: objects, subjects, as well as the meaning of life. Also, we exist in a dynamic interaction with the lived room (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nyström, 2008) and each time and place are unique for each human being – as well as being a shared experience. For each teacher involved in teacher education, this entails acting in the everyday practice in the ambiguity between explicit, specified goals and private or tacit interpretations. Heidegger (1981) used hyphens to demonstrate the entangled-ness between things that in writing seem to be neatly separated, but are actually, he stated, not separated in our life. To take-for-granted points to an interlaced mix between body and soul and between life and world, and to take-things-for-granted is a fundamental phenomenological aspect of living our lives. Merleau-Ponty (1962) pointed out that we do not experience lifeworld only as an intellectual enterprise: we are in fact our bodies. This means that in a subtle – tacit – way, by glances and gestures, teaching and learning are experienced by students. To take-for-granted has to do with how to behave in certain situations, what we are supposed to know etc. It also relates to interaction between people

and the understanding of “the other”, which Schütz (2002) has so elegantly pointed out¹. Therefore, what is important in relation to becoming a teacher in everyday practice is that the teacher educators are also embedded in what they have taken-for-granted in their context.

Bildung

New Public Management (NPM) is supposed to influence student teachers and teacher educators on an everyday basis, and is largely in line with what Dall’Alba (2009) calls an epistemology of teaching, where knowledge and skills are central. This, Dall’Alba finds, is not the same as an ontological perspective of being and becoming, where knowledge and skills are primarily regarded as embodied. The idea of evidence-based education (Levinsson, 2013; Bohlin & Sager, 2011) and constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011) are aspects that have appeared to be most significant in everyday teacher education (Biesta, 2002, 2013, 2016; Dyrdal Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2014; Levinsson, 2013; Lundahl et al., 2013; OECD, 2007). A key word here is transparency (Van Damme, 2009), which has to do with the idea that the student can understand her or his own learning progress, and this transparency entails that each teacher must be transparent in relation to what is going to be taught. The result is that university teachers put time and effort into writing meticulous descriptions of learning outcomes, and of lectures, seminars and course literature. The assumption is that students should, by knowing in detail what is going to happen, be able to prepare themselves and to evaluate their own “learning outcome” as a student. Also, in line with the Bologna Agreement, European universities have developed a system where students can choose between many short courses in different European countries.

However, there is no consensus behind the idea that neoliberal ideals should totally dominate teaching and learning (Werler, 2015; Lövlie, 2004; Biesta, 2006; Kristensson Uggla, 2007; Hopmann, 2007). Instead, many of those who have criticised this dominance looked back at the long and strong tradition in central and northern Europe, the tradition of *Bildung*, which had influenced the way of thinking in nearly all areas of society (Liedman, 2010). This means that in the past, the underlying concept of *Bildung* was the dominant idea in teacher education (Hopmann, 2007). There is a huge contrast between, on the one hand, an education with many specified courses and goals, and, on the other hand, an education where teacher educators shape the courses together with their students, and follow students throughout their education in a learning process over many years, fundamentally built on the concept of *Bildung*.

The term *Bildung* is used in somewhat different ways. Although *Bildung* is almost completely unknown in English-speaking countries (Hopmann, 2007; Werler, 2008), there are some terms that may be of some relevance here. The word “education” is sometimes used in a similar way to *Bildung*, but is often more connected to formal education, and “cultivate” is also used but leads the thoughts to culture more than *Bildung* does. Perhaps the

¹ He describes the difference between how we as humans experience the details, nuances and complexity of people who are close to us, for example our own family, as compared to what we just take-for-granted or assume about people we do not know so well, for example people in foreign countries. This means that in a certain culture, there are lots of things which are taken-for-granted and most of them have been developed throughout history.

closest term is “lifelong learning”, which includes daily learning and adult education of different kinds (Kristensson Uggla, 2008). Hopmann asserts that the concept of *Bildung* is so culturally impregnated by a certain tradition that it is impossible to translate and that is why the concept is presented in its original form here.

In relation to education, five different orientations of *Bildung* can be discerned and I will mention them very briefly. First of all, Humboldt, the founder of the University of Berlin, should be brought up. He was deeply inspired by the philosopher Immanuel Kant (Biesta, 2002), and that inspiration can be summarised by saying that every human being is receptive to new insights and impressions, and therefore has an ability to act according to a new pattern. In addition to this, he emphasises that each human being has his or her own unique development. *Bildung* has therefore very little to do with forgotten knowledge of Latin or etiquette; it is instead about the ability to think independently and critically, and simultaneously develop the moral judgement and emotions involved (Burman & Sundgren, 2010; Bohlin, 2014). In order to develop such a process, Humboldt pointed to the importance of dialogue between students and teachers. Therefore, there are no universal solutions to problems, according to Humboldt.

In the Nordic countries, the Danish philosopher Grundtvig can be regarded as a symbol of *Bildung*, with a focus on *Bildung* for the whole population, not only an elite. Grundtvig stands behind the so-called folk-*Bildung* tradition (Gustavsson, 1996; Burman & Sundgren, 2010). At the same time, about 1900, Ellen Key, a Swedish teacher, writer and lecturer, wrote about the right balance between egoism and altruism in the spirit of *Bildung* (Claesson, 2013). The school should, according to Key, mix not only genders but also social classes. The climate of the classroom should be characterised by humanity, and the teacher must learn about each child. Art and history are the most important subjects in school, in her opinion. In this tradition, the **intertwinement** of body and soul can be discerned: “*Bildung* is what is left when you have forgotten what you have learnt”, Ellen Key claimed. This means that the intertwined relation between body and soul that Merleau-Ponty (1989/1962; Bengtsson, 1992) emphasises is supposed to be reached. It means that it is not only the taken-for-granted that guides actions but also what is learned.

Even if *Bildung* as a term does not exist in the English language, there are American philosophers who have developed similar ideas. Liberal education is associated with Martha Nussbaum (1997) and has mainly been developed in American art colleges (Burman, 2013). Nussbaum got much of her inspiration from ancient Western philosophy, primarily from Aristotle and Socrates as important role models, and she emphasises the UN Declaration of Human Rights (Diemann & Sloep, 2016). In liberal arts colleges, students mainly study humanities and social sciences, and stay there for a year or two before they specialise. The students are taught in small groups, which means that the teacher-student ratio is high, that is, the students get a lot of dialogue and teaching. A fourth orientation in the spirit of *Bildung* for education has an emphasis on democracy, with John Dewey as the leading figure (Dewey 1916/1966; Burman & Sundgren, 2010). Dewey and Humboldt share an interest in “know-how”, but both have a weaker interest in “know-that”, according to Liedman (1997). However, they form a contrast to each other when it comes to the school system, where Humboldt was more isolated in relation to the community outside of the University of Berlin, in contrast to Dewey's system, which focuses on practical requirements and thoughts.

Critical *Bildung* has distanced itself from Humbolt and classical educational ideals when it comes to what is the most important knowledge (Burman & Sundgren, 2010). The European classical ideals have a strong individual focus, while critical *Bildung* instead focuses on a collective process, using the concepts of empowerment, feminism etc. (Gustavsson, 2005). Biesta (2016) questions the idea of an underlying universal human nature and humanism, and he quotes Lévinas, who points out that humanism must be imposed because it is not sufficiently human. Instead, we should emphasise that we do not actually know who the other is and focus on the unique. The critical focus is related to and in opposition to the globalisation that makes people become consumers and which affects all of us. However, critical *Bildung* still has its roots in humanistic science and promotes dialogue.

These five approaches of *Bildung* in relation to education have much in common as they all emphasise the idea that learning is a life-long treasure, and a basic element of each individual's right to think for themselves, as well as of human growth and development. They also share an understanding of the way to learn – through dialogue. A focus on society and politics appears in several orientations. However, some differences can be seen, for example, that critical *Bildung* emphasises the problems with colonial patterns and global ecological thinking, while the other four traditional concepts of *Bildung* very much look back at the traditional Western values. These orientations have all emerged in different times, from the ideals of the French Revolution and with a desire to focus on humanistic educational ideals for university students and pupils in school, democratic ideals and an openness to the foreign.

Interacting with teacher educators

At my university, we had a tradition, in the spirit of *Bildung*, where some pedagogical university teachers followed each student throughout their education, but this tradition has changed dramatically. Today not only pedagogical teachers but also many people from other departments and faculties are responsible for the whole of teacher education and this responsibility includes the core of the education². This means that teacher education in this university has gone from being a cohesive education to one that is divided into many short courses³, combined with internships during some periods, and also means that the financial responsibility for each course is situated in different faculties or departments at the university. This leads to many teachers and researchers at the university being involved in the effort to shape good teachers. I talked to 22 colleagues of mine, university teachers (like Michler (1991) has described), which does not mean typical interviews, but a face-to-face conversation in the spirit of phenomenology. The teachers were chosen from a list of those faculties and departments which were involved in the core courses, and each of them was actively involved in teacher education, most of them as teachers or lecturers in courses but some as leaders for a core course.

When the question of what characterises a good teacher was brought up in the conversations, some of my colleagues immediately emphasised that subject knowledge is

² What is meant here by the 'core' of teacher education is the part of teacher education that was traditionally covered by subjects such as pedagogy, special education and teaching methods.

³ Usually those courses are 7.5 hp, which means they go on for nearly five weeks (23 days). During this time, a new topic is introduced, with new teachers and new literature, and examined.

crucial. But as soon as this was said, most of them also pointed out that subject knowledge is insufficient in itself, or not good enough. “A teacher must have well-founded subject knowledge in what they teach. And this must be combined with knowledge on what it means to be a teacher”, one teacher said. Some said that teachers need to be able to transform knowledge into “teaching content”: “The first thing I think about, which is related to my own teaching experience, is about the ability to transform knowledge content into teaching content available for students’ learning”. These teacher educators never spontaneously referred to constructive alignment or explicitly mentioned evidence-based teaching. Instead, the focus was on transforming the knowledge for students at university and pupils in schools, where the idea is that students and pupils develop an ability to think critically and independently and to use their moral judgement as well as the emotions involved, which is stressed in the Humboldtian tradition. Humboldt’s conception of *Bildung*, translated to teacher education, has connections to what Dall’Alba (2009) refers to as an ontological standpoint on becoming a teacher, where body and soul are regarded as intertwined, and this is in line with how the studies at the University of Berlin were conducted.

Several of my colleagues immediately mentioned that a good teacher is “an engaged teacher”. What is also mentioned is that it is important “to inspire, and to guide others”. One variant of this is to be “a person who is sensitive to the situation in which he is” or to be “knowledgeable, committed, responsive, wise”. This means that the students’ interests from this point of view are linked to how committed the teacher is. “Yes, first of all, there must be someone who sees the students”. One teacher, who worked at another university many years ago sighs as she recounts: “During that time each student was distinctly present for me as a teacher educator, and we accompanied them – much more closely. Here it is very much like an industry”. Another teacher educator says: “Honestly, the whole teacher education is made up of special interests and that is very unpleasant when one wants the pupils to be placed first and only after that the teachers’ interests. I believe we must have an in-depth conversation about teacher education. Not conversations about forms, structures and new policy documents”. These teachers are dissatisfied with what they identified as a new era with teacher education as an industry, a focus on forms, structures and policy documents. This contradicts what they see as being important for a teacher. It is possible to see some connections here to the tradition of liberal arts. For example, Hasselberg (2014), who studied in a university inspired by Martha Nussbaum’s ideas, describes the enthusiasm with which he and other students were deeply involved in their studies and how these studies have affected his way of living his life for the future. This is in line with some of the teacher educators’ views about the importance of being engaged.

Other teacher educators commented on holistic versus fragmented knowledge and they pointed to the Bologna process of their own university in relation to teacher education. “There is such an incredibly high reform pace and so many decisions that deal with details”. Another educator who is on the same track points to how the teacher-training courses are structured similarly to those in upper secondary school: “Students come from short courses in school and encounter the same pattern at teacher education, which means that they can go on and confirm a fragmented way of how to study and are hardly ever challenged in the way of thinking and reasoning in relation to education.” Another person I talked to declared: “We have this NPM and measurements and things like this all the time – things we have fought against – but still we live in this paradigm”. This person expressed what it is like to

be in a world where things are taken-for-granted (NPM), but that you do not agree with this yourself. Those educators who explicitly dissociate themselves from today's ideal of transparency and short courses, which they believe leads to a fragmented way of studying and does not challenge what is important in teacher education, i.e. to think and to reason in relation to the student's future career, point out the wholeness in relation to fragments in teacher education as important.

Not uncommon among those I talked to, and in line with a holistic approach, is a regret that teacher education largely seems to neglect fiction and other cultural expressions, as well as a desire to place more emphasis on youth culture as a resource for discussion and reflection. For example, one person said: "This is probably the case with fiction, the form that makes students able to enter other worlds, especially books, but also movies", and another commented: "But a dream, which you almost do not dare to think of – it is to have this critical focus and to take on other cultures and read fiction. I see in the literature lists that some course leaders have previously used fiction. But in the core courses of today, it is only important to examine, to drive hard!". Culture can create new references and in-depth understanding, one educator points out, with focus on understanding "theories of generations". I can easily connect what my colleagues say to the criticism from other researchers and philosophers of today (Biesta, 2002, 2013, 2016; Dyrdal Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2014; Levinsson, 2013; Lundahl et al., 2013; OECD, 2007). I also consider this criticism to be in line with the approach of *Bildung*, with its openness towards different kinds of cultural expressions.

What also emerges is the issue of democracy, where in particular everyday democracy in school is pointed out. Teachers had a greater freedom of choice in the past, but "it's almost like teachers in schools do not dare to do anything before they look at the school's website." In addition, previously, legal matters were not commonly dealt with, but now, together with conflict management, it is the most popular thing to learn in teacher education, one educator claims. The teacher educators connect this anxiety to do the politically correct thing with teachers' lack of confidence in teaching as a profession: "However, a very big challenge for teachers in this time, the past 20 years, is to relate to the fact that actually most people seem to lack confidence in the teaching profession regarded as a profession". In addition, curricula, international comparative tests and political assumptions are considered crucial for understanding student teachers' role as teachers in official documents about teacher education. "What kind of society do we want?", one person asked, and another said that "the outside world moves into the classroom". One teacher educator pointed not only to teachers' anxiety about doing the right thing, but also to the societal role of the school of today. "The school has lost its status. And changed its role from just a knowledge centre to being much more social and caring". When comparing what is said by the teacher educators to *Bildung* and especially to the Dewey orientation, the most obvious parallel is the focus on citizenship. Steadily regarding school as a part of society and giving prominence to democracy are directly in focus for both of them.

My hope for the future

Back to the corridor where I stand, feeling sad. I can recall some moments in that course, moments I had together with the students, questions, answers, laughter. What I recall in this moment is only human encounters. In a time when evidence-based knowledge is pointed

out as important for teaching and learning, it strikes me that just a few of the teacher educators with whom I had a conversation talked about research-based education. With a very few exceptions, in their everyday-education-life, the university teachers did not explicitly distinguish between their personal memories of being pupils or teachers in school, involving their taken-for-granted personal values, and being employed as teachers and researchers in teacher education. So how is it possible to understand their way of talking, more than to simply point out that they, even if they know about theories on teaching and learning, have not explicitly integrated these theories into themselves? The interpretation I make is that the neoliberal ideas most of all seem to have an impact on a policy level, although there were times where the teacher educators mentioned things like Bologna, how to examine, a fragmented education, industry and finance interests. Nevertheless, neoliberal ideas do not seem to influence the everyday lived life of those who teach future teachers at the university, in spite of the fact that my colleagues waste much of their time writing meticulous descriptions of learning outcomes and lectures. In line with this way of understanding my colleagues is the assumption that personal experience and the culturally impregnated implicit concept of *Bildung*, which for more than 100 years has been prominent in the Swedish discourse, are, despite neoliberal ideals, still strong and are therefore in a tacit way included and intertwined in the teacher educators' personal values and in their way of talking about good teaching. Ellen Key, the Swedish teacher mentioned earlier, pointed out that *Bildung* is what is left when you have forgotten what you learnt, which means that *Bildung* is deeply and bodily incorporated (Claesson, 2013).

From a phenomenological point of view, to teach is to be in the classroom, body and soul intertwined, contextually situated, directed towards the students who are there. Things are taken-for-granted in such a situation. You just exist with the students, something that involves many implicit aspects, such as facial expressions and gestures, the atmosphere of the classroom, moral issues, recognition of students' experiences and so on (van Manen, 1997, 1998; Claesson, 2011). It appears that the natural attitude towards teacher education is never discussed among fellow teachers in teacher education at the university. Instead, there seems to be an underlying, or hidden, assumption about a consensus that the focus of teacher education should be on research and evidence-based knowledge. However, the issue of how to deal with this knowledge is rarely discussed. There is also a taken-for-granted and tacit assumption that it is sufficient to rely on one's own private ideals about what it means to be a teacher, without discussing these. The lack of open seminar discussions about what it means to be a good teacher educator, and how to become one, is unfair to the students. One suggestion, from my point of view, is therefore that such a discussion about one's own taken-for-granted assumptions should be focused on in seminars among teacher educators and could be both challenging and a starting point for further discussions.

Teaching methods, as a subject, seems to be looked upon by those who make decisions concerning teacher education as normative and too hands-on to be taken into consideration in an education which takes place at a university. Nevertheless, teaching methods are used all the time in teacher education, as well as by the students when they practise in school. I can recall a time when teaching methods was a core subject in teacher education and different methods were tried out by us as teacher educators and discussed in relation to research findings. In the late 1970s, the predominant pedagogical research focus shifted from teaching to learning, from behaviourism to Piaget and Vygotsky, and in line

with this shift, there was a tendency to favour one method over another. For example, problem-based learning, learning study or cooperative learning were in favour. To favour one teaching method over another makes me think of the very first teaching seminars in the 19th century when teachers were forced by the state to teach in one particular way. In my experience, instead, teacher educators need an abundant set of teaching methods and knowledge of different philosophical ways of regarding teaching and learning, in order to support student teachers in being independent. This, I consider, is in line with the concept of *Bildung* (Claesson, 2021).

Teacher educators are, on an everyday basis, involved in the kind of praxis that they are trying to help their students to become skilled at. This means that there are many opportunities to reflect on different ways of teaching. For example, the teacher educator can stop before the end of the lesson to reflect on what has happened during the lesson. What kind of learning was intended to take place? Did it take place? In what way did the teacher educator plan the lesson? What was important? What was successful? What failed? What about the body language and tacit assumptions? What is taken-for-granted and why? and so on. In such discussions about everyday lived experience, the students will increase their awareness of and interest in issues which have to do with their coming professional lives.

Bildung is still predominantly a normative Western humanistic approach, which includes people's way of thinking about their lives, and in the context of education, has to do with life-long learning, democracy, devoted interest and deep knowledge, as well as the priority of knowing and understanding one's own history. However, perhaps it is time, in line with critical *Bildung*, to rely not only on the Western humanistic tradition as a benchmark for what to learn, but also to take post-human and more recent knowledge into consideration, like intersectionality, environmental threats, the threat of fascism and calls like #metoo. The other question to handle is how to teach, and here is a great consensus in the concept of *Bildung* throughout the decades. Seminars and (face-to-face) discussions are most often preferable and in line with *Bildung*.

I have a hope for the future for a more cohesive teacher education, an education which can return to ideals based on *Bildung*. To return is not to copy our history, but returning to *Bildung* as a concept for teacher education means starting a serious discussion about human growth and development: a discussion about how to regard learning as a life-long treasure versus fulfilment of objectives; a discussion about pros and cons regarding short courses versus coherent education and training, which means that some teacher educators can follow a group of students throughout their education. In such a group, the students will learn to know each other well and find "critical friends" during their education, and even remain critical friends for a long time as qualified teachers. Teacher educators can learn to know and support a particular group of student teachers and each student as well, which means that the educators are able to modify what is taught and how it is taught so that every single student can develop their own skills and knowledge in a way that is optimal for them as a future teacher.

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