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Bildung and competence in an evaluation perspective

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The issue discussed in this paper¹ is the concept of *bildung*, its relation to the concept of competence and the implications of these concepts for evaluating and assessing education and learning. The paper relates to discussions that have been ongoing among Danish educationalists, especially during the last decade (Hermann, 2016; Brinkman, Rømer & Tanggaard, 2021).

Evaluating *bildung* presupposes knowing what *bildung* is. However, this is not so easy to know because the concept of *bildung* is diffuse and is given different meanings, both in the professional literature and in public debate. Two dominant trends are (1) that *bildung* is associated with human qualities such as independence, responsibility, versatile development, broad horizons of understanding and critical sense. And (2) that education is seen as the positive counterpart to narrow, utilitarian representations of education as skills or competences for use in labor markets and for improving economic competitiveness. I first briefly describe the *bildung* tradition in pedagogy and point to some problems in the way that the tradition has shaped educational practices. Then I discuss the relationship between *bildung* and learning objectives and point out both difficulties and opportunities for evaluating *bildung* and competence.

The *bildung* tradition

The concept of *bildung*, as it has historically been present in Denmark, comes primarily from the German tradition in philosophy and educational science. It is associated with names such as Herder, Schiller and Humboldt. A significant inspiration for the concept came from ancient culture, especially qualities that characterized free citizens in Athens and other Greek city-states (Korsgaard, Kristensen & Jensen, 2017, p. 29 ff.). According to the educational ideals of antiquity, the education of citizens should include both physical development and training, including the use of weapons, but also knowledge and skills that should provide the free citizen with the prerequisites for engaging in debate on the governance and development of the city-state. The fields of knowledge that were part of the ancient Greek civic education were handed down via Roman writers as 'the seven free arts': grammar, logic and rhetoric (collectively called *trivium*) as well as geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and theoretical music (the *quadrivium*). During medieval times the seven free arts were continued as university

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curriculum, but the character of pedagogical thinking changed with the spread of Christianity. While the Greek ideals of citizenship represented only the urban elites, Christianity claimed that all people were affiliated with one God and one ecclesiastical authority demanding certain moral standards.

In several later periods, Greek antiquity provided a significant source of inspiration for rethinking education and pedagogy. This was true during the Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries, but especially in the emergence of German idealism and neo-humanism from around the year 1800 (Korsgaard, Kristensen & Jensen, 2017, p. 163 ff.). Today, Wilhelm von Humboldt is most often referred to as the originator of the humanistic concept of *bildung* (Humboldt, 2017), but several of his contemporaries, such as Herder and Schiller, also helped to formulate ideas about knowledge and *bildung*, drawing inspiration from the civic *bildung* of Antiquity as well as from the French Revolution's ideas of human freedom and self-determination. Content areas from the seven free arts were still to be included in school education, but they were seen as part of people's acquisition of a broader cultural foundation and a capacity for knowledge.

The concept of *bildung* found widespread support among decision-makers and intellectuals who came to shape the new European nation-states in the 19th century. States did not just seek to constitute their own geographical space; they also sought to develop their particular political and cultural identities by highlighting especially valuable elements in their cultures. This added a national dimension to the concept of *bildung*, a dimension not least expressed in the worship of national history. In Denmark, the historical novels of B.S. Ingemann, which dramatized Danish history and its actors, provide a good example (Martinsen, 2012). The states also developed school systems in order to strengthen the skills of the inhabitants and socialize them to be included as citizens in public life. Thus, promoting and disseminating *bildung* became a task for the school system. In terms of content, *bildung* was mostly linked to specific subjects, where Latin and Greek represented the ancient and classical culture, while national language, literature and history represented the national dimension. These subjects became 'bildung subjects' with an emphasis on values and culture. The task of *bildung*, however, did not affect all part of school systems in equal measure. In Denmark it was primarily the 'gymnasium' school (general upper secondary schooling) and its historical forerunners, the 'Latin schools' that represented the *bildung* tradition. The primary schooling established for the population as a whole – later called 'Folkeskolen', the people's school – was far more influenced by the tradition of Christian education, (Korsgaard, Kristensen & Jensen, 2017, p. 117 f.), combining Bible knowledge with teaching in reading and writing and gradually also other subjects.

Bildung thus had two dimensions: on one hand, the students had to acquire a fixed set of knowledge and skills, and on the other hand, they had to develop certain abilities for handling life and gaining knowledge. In educational theory, the first dimension has been called material *bildung*, in the second formal *bildung*. Certain teaching content and pedagogies can be understood from both approaches, depending on the context. Learning Latin could be justified as material *bildung* for certain professional groups such as lawyers and physicians because

Latin texts and designations played a significant role in their work materials or language of work. For many outside these groups, it has been justified as formal bildung with the argument that working with Latin grammar can develop abilities for systematics and discipline in language and cognition. This argument was for instance used when Danish neo-humanists in the early 1800s had to justify the continuation of teaching Latin and Greek (Korsgaard, Kristensen & Jensen, 2017, p. 200). The connection between material and formal bildung lies in the fact that the bildung is rooted in a common culture, which prioritises both certain knowledge contents and certain human characteristics and forms of interaction.

In recent times several educational researchers have sought to reformulate the concept of bildung in ways that can re-state the connection between material and formal bildung. A well-known and in many ways successful example is Wolfgang Klafki's concept of categorical bildung. In Klafki's view, bildung implies that a physical and a spiritual reality has opened up to man. This applies to bildung both as a process and as a quality. Reality opens up and people open up to its content. The opening is conveyed through general categories, which can clarify the nature and context of reality. The categories help to structure and generalize people's insights and experiences.

In principle Klafki's concept of bildung connects the material content of bildung - in the form of knowledge and skills linked to real contexts - with its subjective aspects. However, the question is what general categories that can establish this connection. Klafki has argued here that education must confront 'key epochal problems' in today's society, including issues of securing peace, protecting the environment and limiting social inequality. According to Klafki, dealing with such key problems requires four basic attitudes and abilities, including the ability to criticize (including self-criticism), the ability to argue, the ability to empathize and the ability to think coherently (Klafki, 2001, p. 73 ff.). This is a constructive attempt to determine the content of the general bildung, an attempt that also links bildung to the idea of the mature and responsible citizen. But the categories remain very general, and it is an open question how they can be linked to curricula and pedagogy in a school context.

The invisible pedagogy of bildung

"Bildung is what is left when you have forgotten what you have learned," wrote Ellen Key more than 100 years ago (Key, 1900). For her, this understanding of bildung certainly signaled a desire to relieve children of excessive burdens of knowledge and skill acquisition; but the definition simultaneously connects material and formal bildung in an interesting way. The bildung here does not consist of the explicit knowledge and the skills that are conveyed through a given teaching, it is rather of the cultural background knowledge and the implicit cultural norms that characterize the teaching and its institutional context. This approach says a lot about how bildung has been learned and assessed in the general 'bildung subjects' of the school system.

Drawing on Basil Bernstein's conceptualisation of pedagogy, I suggest that bildung in the school system has been conveyed through the 'invisible pedagogy' of the bildung subjects.

Bernstein (1975, 2003) describes different forms of pedagogical practice based on differences in classification (division and demarcation between areas of knowledge) and framing (structuring of the space for pedagogical practice and of students 'and teachers' options for action). Those forms of pedagogical practice that Bernstein categorise as invisible pedagogy are characterized by weak classifications and weak framing. Disciplines and knowledge areas interfere with each other, there are not many unambiguous truths, and there are no clear rules for how to act as a student in the teaching space. This kind of pedagogical practice makes participation in classrooms a difficult task for students who do not already have at least some familiarity with the codes of knowledge, culture and behaviour. Students who, through their family background or other cultural resources, have some familiarity with the codes, can more easily navigate the teaching space and develop their educational knowledge. This has been regularly documented in studies of the learning environment in Danish upper secondary school (see, for example, Rasmussen, 1988 and Ulriksen, Murning & Ebbensgaard, 2009).

Drawing on another theoretical approach, that of Pierre Bourdieu, the invisible pedagogy in the bildung subjects can be called 'symbolic violence'. This is forms of violence that do not involve physical abuse - and therefore are not usually recognized as violence - but which through symbolic structures and actions oppress certain groups in society. Bourdieu (1988, 1990) sees primary and secondary education as an institution that reproduces the given class relations by disseminating a justifying ideology; an ideology that allows the privileged classes to see their success as reflecting their natural, personal aptitudes. Bourdieu points to the language of instruction as a central element in this. Teaching in general and academic education is governed by special language codes that draw on the dominant culture and confirm the authority of the educational institution, the subjects and the teachers. The schools' pedagogical practice is implicitly based on the premise that the students already agree with the prevailing culture, and therefore it favours those who, through their family background, have this agreement.

The practical sense of students from the privileged classes draws on their cultural capital which allows them to navigate the invisible pedagogy of the bildung subjects. The practical sense of students from other parts of society does not hold the same capital, and this makes them vulnerable to the symbolic violence of the subjects of bildung. Thus, the school institution reinforces social divisions and boundaries.

Ellen Key's understanding of bildung thus draws attention to a very significant aspect of general bildung and the way that it has been practiced in the bildung subjects of the school system. However, the more explicitly material element still also plays a significant role. And although there has been a general movement towards openness and pluralism in the choice of content in teaching, there have also been regular initiatives aimed at delimiting and reinforcing the main content of the culture to which education is linked. The Danish canons for culture, history and democracy, which were developed by liberal-conservative governments in the 2000s, are an expression of this (Kryger, 2007).

The European tradition of *bildung* has understood itself as universal, as an expression of ideas and qualities that are parts of the life-world of all people. But in reality, *bildung* has been reserved for the elites and affluent middle classes of societies, and its practical unfolding has been linked to the culture and way of life of these groups (Ringer, 1989). The invisible pedagogy and the symbolic violence of *bildung* reflect the unmediated contradiction between the ideals of *bildung* and its practical forms. It is important to say that this does not discredit the tradition of *bildung*, for it contains essential ideas of freedom, community, and dignity in human life; but in the curricula and pedagogy of institutional education the general validity of these ideas has been undermined by their silent intertwining with the life forms of the elites. Oskar Negt strikingly captured this when he wrote that that bourgeois culture can only be abolished by realizing it (Negt, 1989, p. 156).

In the *bildung* subjects of schooling, the acquisition of *bildung* has been evaluated in two ways. Firstly, through an informal ongoing evaluation, where both teachers and other students respond to the individual student's ability to live up to the cultural background knowledge and the norms that characterize the educational subjects. This is the kind of communication processes that Bourdieu and other educational researchers have analysed, and they are to some extent unconscious for both teachers and for students. Second, the *bildung* (and students' knowledge of its canonical content of texts, concepts, and events) has been evaluated through the formalized assessments of students' performance in written assignments, exams, and more. Where the latter form of evaluation covers the material side of *bildung*, the former (with Keys' formulation) covers that "which is left when you have forgotten what you have learned".

Bildung, educational objectives and competence

In current Danish debate on pedagogy and school policy, the concept of *bildung* is often presented in opposition to describing education through learning objectives. But the relationship between *bildung* and learning objectives is not that simple.

The movement towards describing educational content in learning objectives is an extension of Anglo-Saxon curriculum theory. The specific models for learning objectives that are used in the Danish school and education system are based on the common qualifications framework developed and codified by the EU. The model implies that for a given subject or content area, three types of objectives are described: (1) knowledge objectives, (2) skills objectives and (3) competences. In the Danish national qualifications framework, the concept of competence is defined as follows (Danish Ministry of Education and Research, 2020):

Competence is about responsibility and autonomy and states the ability to apply knowledge and skills in a work situation or in a study-related context. Competence contains the following aspects:

- *The space for action: the type of work and/or study-related contexts in which the knowledge and skills are brought into play, and the degree of unpredictability and changeability in these contexts.*

- *Cooperation and responsibility: the ability to take responsibility for one's own work and the work of others and the complexity of the cooperative situations in which one can engage.*
- *Learning: the ability to take responsibility for one's own learning and that of others.*

Competences are about how knowledge and skills are used - for what purposes, in what situations and with whom. "Taking responsibility" is mentioned several times and signals an ethical dimension in the competence.

An important point of learning objectives is to clarify the intentions and requirements of teaching situations. The objectives give pupils and students access to knowing what the concrete elements of the teaching - such as. texts, lectures, exercises, project work – should serve for and from what criteria the efforts and performance of learners will be assessed. In principle, this makes it easier for pupils and students to orient their learning towards the objectives. Of course, there are many limitations to this. For example, the relationship between objectives and activities can be difficult for students to discern, and the opportunities to realise objectives can be limited by institutional frameworks and resources. But access to knowledge about the objectives of teaching and learning should be seen as a right that pupils and students should have as actors in the school and education system. It represents an ideal of transparency as opposed to the conflation of perspectives and the invisible pedagogy that has traditionally characterized the bildung subjects in schooling.

Knowledge objectives are partly in line with the tradition of material bildung. A specific content and some specific skills that pupils or students must acquire are designated. However, an important difference from the material stream of the bildung tradition is that the knowledge objectives are typically more open. The goals do not specify which texts or which precise operations are to be acquired through the learning processes, but rather which topics and key concepts one must gain knowledge about. This means that schools and teachers themselves can and must assess which topics and materials are to be included in the specific teaching. However, openness can be limited by various factors; for instance if canons, representing a more tangible material bildung, are introduced.

Competence objectives and their connection with knowledge and skills objectives correspond in many ways to Klafki's idea of categorical bildung. Competences are broader forms of understanding and action than knowledge and skills, and competence objectives connect knowledge and skills with their anchoring in culture and society, their application in practical situations and to other people. Competences add, so to speak, a bildung element to knowledge and skills.

A significant advantage of using learning objectives to describe the content of schooling and education is that such objectives do not perpetuate the quasi-natural connection with established educational traditions. But there are also significant risks. If the level of detail in the goals becomes too high, both for the individual educational element and in relation to the overall process of education, the transparency can disappear and the learning spaces can

become locked. The reform of the Danish public school in 2014 has been criticized for precisely this (see, for example, Mårtensson, 2015). Excessive detail in learning objectives will strongly influence the teaching, the focus of pupils and students and not least the practices of evaluation and assessment. The knowledge and skills objectives can easily come to monopolise the focus of teachers, students and other actors, while the less tangible competence objectives will be neglected.

Openness in education and evaluation

When competence objectives risk being overlooked or not followed up in teaching and evaluation, it is because they are really demanding. If competence objectives are to be met, it requires open and inclusive teaching and learning contexts, where there is room for both acquiring knowledge and skills and for working reflectively and innovatively with qualities such as responsibility and autonomy. Competences are best developed and assessed in situations where pupils or students to some extent have to apply them together with knowledge and/or skills. Such situations can for instance be internships or investigations or practice, or situations where the teaching is organized as project work. There are many possibilities.

The teaching and learning of competencies challenge the traditional organization of educational institutions, because the competencies aim to connect students' knowledge and skills with contexts outside the educational institutions, whether in work or professional contexts or in different roles as citizens in society. This requires a relatively open framework, including learning objectives that are not described too narrowly and in too much detail; but it also requires the opportunity to continuously establish connections with arenas and practices outside the educational institutions. In this respect, the concept of competence differs clearly from most bildung pedagogy, which implicitly presupposes that the educational content is present in the school via teachers, texts and other cultural artifacts.

Evaluating competencies involves the same challenge. Evaluating people's ability to understand broader contexts around a given knowledge and some given skills, and evaluating their ability to convey or apply knowledge and skills in a relevant and responsible way - this can rarely be done through traditional forms of examination. Evaluation of competencies requires methods that correspond to both the inclusive teaching and learning situations and the connections to arenas outside the educational institutions. It must include feedback during the education process as well as concluding tests, encompassing both practical tasks and analysis or reflection on the solution of these tasks. There is in fact much experience with the opportunities and challenges of such types of evaluation in adult education, professional education and vocational education (see, for example, Friche, 2013; Tanggaard, 2020). Evaluation of competencies in general school education can draw on these experiences.

Conclusion

I have argued that in a contemporary understanding - which can draw on for instance Klafki's conceptual development - bildung corresponds more or less to competence in the sense of the qualification framework, where competence is linked to given knowledge and skills elements and expresses the broader context of understanding and applying these elements. Interpreting bildung in this way implies a break with previous perceptions, where bildung has been seen either as the acquisition of a fixed curriculum of canonized culture or as the background knowledge and implicit norms that are left when you have 'forgotten what you have learned'. Whether one wants to continue promoting bildung as a central concept for education and learning in today's society is for me to see an open question. But to do so requires an explicit critical stance on the historically dominant tradition of bildung and its role as a hidden curriculum.

The concept of bildung appears frequently in Danish discussions about pedagogy and education in these years, most often as a plus word, a positive counterpart to teaching directed by learning objectives. In this paper I have emphasized contradictions in the tradition of bildung and tried to point out the possibilities in the concept of competence. I am certainly aware of and have drawn attention to the problematic aspects of the concept of competence if it is incorporated into narrow forms of learning objectives and teaching directed by them. But I think that the uncritical and undifferentiated hyping of the concept of bildung risks closing the eyes of educationalists and policymakers to the limitations and pitfalls of the concept.

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