

# *Bildung* (*dannelse*) and Language Education: Reflections on an integrated perspective

A key question to ask about the concept of *Bildung* (or ‘*dannelse*’) is not just: ‘What does it mean?’ but also: ‘Is it helpful?’ These two questions, of course, are not unrelated; if a concept serves a useful purpose, then it will inevitably have meaning. However, by looking at how the concept functions the arbitrary pursuit of definitions in a vacuum can be avoided, because asking about *use* inevitably raises questions about *context*. In this paper, the questions to be addressed will therefore be: ‘Is the concept of *Bildung* helpful in the context of language and intercultural education?’ and the complementary question: ‘To what extent can intercultural education contribute to *Bildung* in the curriculum as a whole?’ They are intended as genuine rather than purely rhetorical questions because there is a view that the concept of *Bildung* is so lacking in clarity and loaded with history that it generally brings confusion rather than being helpful and that it is no longer needed as a concept (Masschelein & Ricken 2003). Some of the reasons for that view will be examined before looking



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specifically at how the term can be usefully employed in the context of intercultural education and language education. The concepts of ‘dannelse’ and ‘Bildung’ arose in different contexts and have different stories: Although the concepts are not identical, some of the general considerations apply to both. The initial discussion of Bildung, therefore, will be conducted in general terms rather than located in the work of specific writers who have done much to formulate the concept (e.g. Humboldt, Hegel, Gadamer).

## The fluidity of the concept of Bildung

It is widely thought that it is not possible to translate Bildung/dannelse into English in any precise way, and that this is an indication of both its specificity to context and its imprecision. Words like ‘education’, ‘formation’, ‘self-cultivation’ are often offered as possibilities, but in any deep discussion of the concept it is invariably asserted that these translations do not capture the full nuance of the term. This is partly because its meaning has shifted and developed over time and grown in complexity. Instead of trying to arrive at one clearly definable meaning it is more appropriate to look at different themes that are associated with the concept.

One important thread is the idea of formation of the individual through exposure to what was seen as high culture with emphasis on the *content* of Bildung. This emphasis on the importance of getting to know an external world may seem self-evident, but many progressive thinkers, partly under the influence of Rousseau, saw education as a process of natural growth, an unfolding of what was within. It was this emphasis on the external culture that brought the criticism that Bildung was characterised by elitist ideas, because it implied that people would be enlightened by a superior cultural heritage, the notion that “other people know what is good for you” (Varkøy 2010: 87).

A second thread of meaning, seemingly in contrast to this view, stresses the cultivation of inner life through the notion of self-formation (Biesta 2002: 378). On this view, Bildung does not only take place in formal educational settings, but is a life-long process. Here emphasis is on the growth of the individual through personal motivation and efforts. This perspective brought criticism of excessive individualism, with insufficient recognition of the social and cultural aspects of education. Another associated theme highlights the importance of ‘transformation’ in the concept of Bildung (Schneider 2012). This also has a subjective, reflective element in interpreting experience, but in its recognition of the importance of criticality has

implications as well for transforming the world. Yet another thread in more contemporary accounts of Bildung is the critical attitude towards instrumentalism in educational thinking; when Bildung is seen as a life-long development or maturation process it does not sit easily with narrow learning outcomes, mechanistic procedures and a means-end approach to education (Varkøy 2010).

## An integrated perspective

Contemporary writers on Bildung often try to capture the integrated complexity of the concept and its composite nature. This is not an easy task, because language tends to push its elements into separate compartments. Schellhammer (2018: 8) refers to Bildung as a “dialogical term that does not merely reflect on the educational process as such, but encourages the person to reflect on him- or herself experiencing this process”. Nordenbo (2002: 350) finds in the concept “the idea that the individual and the general are brought to an inner harmony through Bildung”. Similarly, Deimann and Farrow (2013: 50) suggest that a “state of an inward harmony can never be fulfilled without a connection to the external world” and that “openness is thus important as an unrestricted access to the world constituting the precondition for Bildung to take place.” What these accounts have in common is a resistance to seeing the concept in a narrow way that is easily defined.

This brief account of some of the different meanings associated with the concept of Bildung is enough to illustrate why the concept can be dismissed as unhelpful, not only due to its ambiguity, but because some of its elements actually pull in different directions. However, paradoxically, this fluidity is precisely why the concept can be helpful in the context of language and intercultural education, because using it in the language and intercultural education discourse can help avoid the dichotomous thinking implicit in some of the discourse associated with intercultural education. The different threads need to be seen as different aspects of a complex whole rather than competing interpretations.

## Intercultural learning and language education

The fact that the concept of Bildung embodies both notions of ‘development from within’ and the idea of ‘formation through external influences’ is relevant to a contrast between ‘learning’ and ‘becoming’ in the development of intercultural competence. The idea

that intercultural learning is primarily a matter of acquiring knowledge and skills underlies some approaches to training, often outside the context of general education, and particularly when people are being prepared for specific roles that involve encounters with other cultures, for example in business. It is tempting to adopt this narrow interpretation when devising teaching schemes or approaches to teaching and assessment, for in this context there is a preference for clearly definable ‘learning outcomes’ that are manifest in specific behaviours. However, Schellhammer (2018: 8) has argued that an intercultural training programme that focuses solely on knowledge and skills “underestimates the complexity of human interaction”. A contrasting approach sees the development of interculturalism more as a process of ‘becoming’, of acquiring deep-seated personal, particularly moral, characteristics primarily through experience. Again, there may be something compelling about the view that becoming intercultural happens less in the formal classroom and more through life experience, through exposure to other groups who are different, in school and beyond. This suggests a need for a pedagogy which takes note of diversity in school and society and not just beyond a society’s frontiers, as was the traditional focus of ‘foreign’ language teaching.

When these approaches of ‘learning’ and ‘becoming’ are seen not as alternatives, but complementary perspectives, the implications for pedagogy in intercultural education are significant. It is now widely accepted that developing intercultural competence requires far more than acquiring information about customs and practices and receiving hints on appropriate behaviour. It is also important to recognise however, that seeking to develop in others an open attitude and the ability to see things from other perspectives may not just be a matter of trying to foster the right disposition, but may also require the teaching of specific types of knowledge and understanding.

It is not the intention in this short paper to focus in detail on the application of *Bildung* to language education (see for example Byram 2010), but to look in general terms at the value of an integrated perspective. The same polarities found in relation to intercultural education also need to be avoided in language education. Learning a language is clearly about acquisition of skills, but it is also about values and identity. Learning a second or foreign language will likely bring new perspectives and ways of seeing the world that may challenge existing conceptions. The fluid nature of the concept of *Bildung* is a vivid example of what is true of all languages; because meaning relies on context, learning a language can never be a purely

mechanical procedure attaching words to meanings in a simple representational manner.

This integrated perspective is also important in relation to models or ‘frameworks’ of intercultural competence and related notions, such as ‘competence for democratic culture’. The competence approach as originally conceived in the context of vocational training was criticised for being too formulaic and reductive, focusing on atomised behaviours rather than understanding. The conceptualization of competence in more contemporary educational contexts is broader and more complex, involving the ability to meet complex demands. More sophisticated intercultural competence models therefore go beyond knowledge and skills to embrace attitudes, values and a critical dimension. There is also an implication for the implementation of such models; in practice, the individual competences should not be seen as separate items to be taught and acquired in a mechanistic linear process, but should be interpreted through a holistic vision of human development. According to Gadamer (2004: 10), “the result of *Bildung* is not achieved in the manner of a technical construction, but grows out of an inner process of formation and cultivation”. This criticism of a purely instrumental and technicist approach to education is also relevant to language education. Because language derives meaning through use in cultural contexts, it is important that language teaching is not seen in isolation from the development of intercultural competence, nor that it will become so systematic and regimented that it will lose its dynamism and creativity.

This leaves language teachers with a challenge in that they, like other teachers, will have to respond to demands of measurable learning outcomes while maintaining dynamism and creativity – which is also evident in policy statements and curriculum guidelines. In Denmark, we find a reference to access to knowledge – which is measurable – but also an emphasis on the dynamic and the creative, with reference made to ‘insight’, ‘understanding’ and ‘criticality’, and ‘dannelse’:

Fremmedsprog er grundlaget for at få indsigt i andre landes kulturer, og dette giver samtidig indsigt i vores eget historiske ophav og samfund. Vi kan bruge sproget til at forstå sammenhængen mellem et lands kultur og samfundsforhold, og dermed bliver vi i stand til eksempelvis at se politiske bevægelser og samfundsmæssige begivenheder i et større perspektiv og forholde os kritisk til den information, vi modtager. Den brede forståelse og kritiske stillingtagen er vigtig, når vi eksempelvis søger information på internettet eller skal fordybe

os i andre landes tekster i en uddannelsessammenhæng. Fremmedsprog giver med andre ord adgang til viden og mulighed for refleksion og dannelse i forhold til såvel vores egne som andres livsbetingelser. (Regeringen 2017)

The question ‘to what extent can intercultural and language education contribute to Bildung in the curriculum as a whole?’ can now be addressed in the light of the preceding discussion. What Bildung represents is a rich view of what education should entail, including notions of learning and becoming, self-development, critical reflection and inclusivity. The preparation of young people to live in the modern globalised world requires development of moral virtues and a commitment to intercultural citizenship. Although, as we see in the quotation above, foreign language teaching is considered to have a particular role, intercultural education does not have to be confined to foreign language teaching, nor does it have to focus only on national cultures; it has the potential to be embedded in all aspects of school life, with the integration of knowledge, understanding values and attitudes across all subject areas.

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