

What is *Bildung*? The Everlasting Attractiveness of a Fuzzy Concept in German Educational Theory

¿Qué es *Bildung*? El eterno atractivo de un concepto difuso en la teoría de la educación alemana

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Abstract

Bildung was defined as an educational concept in 18th century Germany and ever since has been framed as a particular cultural expectation of theoretical and curricular ventures in Germany at the level of both education theory and educational policy. However, despite its undeniable idiosyncrasy and the difficulty in its translation, *Bildung* has recently become an internationally advocated glimmer of hope in circles critical about the latest developments in education, such as standardization, teaching to the test, evidence-based policy, high-stakes testing and the like. Evidently, behind this endorsement there are many misunderstandings. This article is intended to contribute to avoiding further misunderstandings by excavating the origins of the educational conception of *Bildung* and by reconstructing its genealogy in the time period between the late 18th century and the present.

Keywords: education, *Bildung*, educational theory, history of ideas

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Resumen

Bildung se definió como concepto educativo en la Alemania del siglo XVIII y desde entonces ha enmarcado los proyectos teóricos y curriculares en Alemania como expectativa cultural particular en dos niveles, la teoría de la educación y la política educativa. Sin embargo, a pesar de su idiosincrasia innegable y de la imposibilidad de traducirlo, recientemente *Bildung* se ha convertido en un rayo de esperanza defendido internacionalmente dentro de círculos críticos con los últimos desarrollos en educación, tales como la estandarización, la enseñanza estructurada para aprobar exámenes, la política basada en la evidencia, exámenes de gran repercusión y otros similares. Evidentemente, detrás de esta defensa existe una gran cantidad de malentendidos. Este artículo pretende contribuir a evitar nuevos malentendidos al ahondar en los orígenes del concepto educativo de *Bildung* y reconstruir su genealogía en el período de tiempo comprendido entre finales del siglo XIX y el presente.

Palabras clave: educación, *Bildung*, teoría de la educación, historia de las ideas

There is no doubt that German education has been internationally influential with regard to the development of both education sciences and institutions of higher education, particularly modern universities. Paradoxically, the central concept behind the two developments, *Bildung*, is nearly untranslatable into any other language: The terms “education,” “instruction,” “training,” “forming,” or “upbringing” do not even come close to the cultural ambition in the semantics of *Bildung*.

Since the early 19th century, educational science in Germany has traditionally seen *Bildung* as one of its core concepts or as one of the “fundamental principles.” These principles are the basic notions that are fundamental for the theoretical underpinning of a discipline and can be said to belong exclusively to that discipline. Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), a German philosopher and the so-called “founder” of pedagogy as an academic discipline in the early 19th century, is usually viewed as having developed the concept of fundamental principles. In his book *Allgemeine Pädagogik*, published in 1806, Herbart’s starting point was that *Pädagogik* (education) had to formulate “its own concepts,” if it was to position itself as an independent academic discipline (Herbart, 1806, p. 8). In another book—*Umriss pädagogischer Vorlesung*—published almost 30 years later, Herbart (1835) defined *Bildsamkeit* (educationability) as one of these fundamental principles, and dictionaries of the educational sciences continue to do so today (Andresen, 2009, p. 76; Benner & Brüggem, 2004, p. 196). Furthermore, all of them point out that the two terms *Bildung* and *Erziehung* (education) are not the same, and that this distinction exists only in the German language, whereby the point made is mainly the uniqueness of the term *Bildung*. *Bildung* is said to be something different from education or instruction, with education seen more as adaptation to given conditions, and *Bildung* said to be much more than knowledge transmission in schools. The relatively famous German educational theorist and former professor at the Humboldt University of Berlin, Dietrich Benner, wrote, for example, that educational theory deals with the “correct manner of pedagogical work,” and the theory of education deals with the “tasks” and “purpose of pedagogical practice” (Benner, 1987, p. 122).

Etymological studies of the word *Bildung*, which often turn to the distinction between *Bildung* and *Erziehung* for help, also point out that the first traces of the term can be found in the mysticism of the Late Middle Ages, traces which subsequently, via the leader of the German reformation, Martin Luther (1483-1546), became an important concept in the discussion of German language. Then, in the late 18th century, and with Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) who formulated the term theoretically, the concept found an institutional form with the university reform at the start of the 19th century. A look at discussions today on and about the concept of *Bildung* shows that it is very frequently used in education policy debates as a “fighting word,” particularly as an argument against notions of the measurability of education or instruction processes (Pongratz & Bünger, 2008, p. 128), especially in criticisms of the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Tröhler, 2011), or it is used in connection with the institution of the university as an independent or autonomous power in the state (Lenzen, 2012).

But what is *Bildung*? How does *Bildung* take place, and where does the notion come from? Who invented *Bildung*, and how did it happen that *Bildung* became so prominent in the German language discussion on education and instruction? How did it become one of the fundamental principles of German

educational sciences, and thus, even today, never fails to be mentioned in any relevant introductory textbook or reference book on education? In recent years, it has even come to be used in research contexts in other languages, such as English and Spanish (Horlacher, 2011, p. 98).

In this paper, I intend to show that the concept of *Bildung* found its way into the educational discussion in the 18th century. It was loaded with the cultural demands, claims, requirements, and expectations dominant at that time, and it still leaves its mark on the educational discussion today. For this reason, I do not aim to explain or systematically describe *Bildung*, but instead want to show how and in what contexts it is used and why. This will reveal the implicit expectations and ideas that are connected with the concept of *Bildung*. I will show that ideas about inwardness and development of self or self-cultivation (*Selbstbildung*) are connected with *Bildung*, that the concept is seen as an aesthetic ideal, and that it is used both apolitically in the sense of reflective distance from society and as a political fighting word.

The basic principles of the concept of *Bildung* in the 18th century

In 1783 Johann Friedrich Zöllner (1753-1804), a pastor in Berlin, raised the question in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, a prominent journal of the German Enlightenment, as to what “Enlightenment” really meant. One year later the journal published various responses, among which was the famous essay by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), *Was ist Aufklärung?* [*An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*] (Kant, 1784). Another response written by Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the German-Jewish philosopher of the Enlightenment, was no less prominent at that time. His essay began: “The words Enlightenment, culture, and *Bildung* are still new arrivals in our language” (Mendelssohn, 1784, p. 193). With these introductory words, Mendelssohn describes the historical situation towards the end of the 18th century with regard to the term *Bildung* in the German language context. This perception of the novelty of the term is connected with the fact that *Bildung* was only used in specific specialist discourses and was only beginning to establish itself as a broad concept with a pedagogical orientation. Mendelssohn’s essay goes on: “So far, they [the words *Enlightenment*, *culture*, and *Bildung*] only belong to the language of books. Common people barely understand them” (Mendelssohn, 1784, p. 194). In addition, Mendelssohn defined *culture* and *Enlightenment* as parts of *Bildung*, with *culture* being skills and crafts and practical abilities, and *Enlightenment* being related more to the theoretical, to rational knowledge. Hence, a nation, a language, or a person that was *gebildet*, or developed, was seen as an amalgamation of culture and Enlightenment.

Mendelssohn’s use of the term is also reflected in the use of the word in the 18th century. It thus denoted both the outward appearance as well as the inner form, which was linked with Pietism, the dominant religious movement in Germany in the 18th century. Pietism, one of the most significant reform movements within European Protestantism between the Reformation and the Enlightenment, pursued the goal of restoring religious and social life through spiritual rebirth of the individual through earnest study of the Bible. Through this, the faithful were attributed their own religious identity, and personal religious belief became the centre of interest.

A legitimation of this focus on inner formation can also be found in the *Cambridge Platonists*— an important direction in English philosophy in the 17th century. The Cambridge Platonists propagated a kind of Platonist philosophy in opposition to atheist and mechanistic philosophy, and formulated an alternative to the Enlightenment as shaped by the natural sciences. This philosophy believed in a God-given order and that science and religion could be brought into agreement. God’s actions were always reasonable, not random and arbitrary. Therefore, reason could discern the world order. In addition, through self-observation the soul could gain insight into nature and divine knowledge. Belief is therefore not opposed to reason (Rogers, 1988).

This concept of the doctrine of the soul, that is, the emphasis on self-observation and self-reflection, through which the world and nature can be discerned, also became important in the grounds for the German concept of *Bildung*. The concept became disseminated throughout German-speaking areas through translations of the works of Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713). Shaftesbury is known as a representative of the “philosophy of politeness,” which became a key concept in the late 17th and early 18th centuries in England. It took on a social selection function, for politeness a distinction allowed to make a distinction between the elite and the masses, but it also allowed

a differentiation within the elite itself, in that it described proper conduct and good taste (Klein, 1994). An important idea was the idea of “pleasing”, because with this idea not only could the feelings of a person for himself be improved, but also the way in which social relationships should be cultivated. Politeness referred to improved sociability that brought aesthetic and ethical concerns into close connection (Horlacher, 2004).

With the connection between ethics and aesthetics, this theory also provided possible connections for one of the main philosophical issues of the 18th century: Is beauty merely subjective, or can it be formulated as aesthetic theory? Is beauty the most exact depiction of reality possible, or is it the realization of individual imagination?¹ An aesthetic theory that became successful saw beauty not as a pure depiction of reality, but as the product of creative imagination. The theory was also oriented towards the ancient Platonic tradition, which assumed that beauty and goodness are the same. As a result, the ability to recognize beauty, which was ascribed to taste, must be developed, or *gebildet*. This task should be performed by literary and aesthetic experiences, which gave literature—and thus also writers and authors—a wholly new function.

What it was that made the English discussion attractive to the German intellectuals of the late 18th century, and thus contributed to the educationalization of the concept of *Bildung*, can be shown using the example of a work by Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury’s essay, *Soliloquy: Or, Advice to an Author*, written in 1710, deals only marginally with education, for it first and foremost describes that whereas most people feel called upon to give advice, only few are willing to follow advice received. In Shaftesbury’s opinion, writers are especially capable of giving advice, but they have to fulfill certain criteria to have the desired success as advisors. The most important means of becoming an advisor dispensing sound advice—and this is the crucial point for reception in Germany—is self-knowledge. With self-knowledge, Shaftesbury gives authors a way to “examine and purify” themselves and thus a way to be able to offer meaningful and useful advice not based on erroneous ideas or selfish motives (Shaftesbury, 1981, p. 58). Shaftesbury describes this self-examination and purification process at length, describing it using the words “to form” and “formation.” In the German translation of 1738, these words were translated as *bilden* and *Bildung*; and they were the subject of intense discussion in the second half of the 18th century. These discussions were also based on another work by Shaftesbury, *The Judgment of Hercules* (1712), which was translated and then published in German in 1748. This is a treatise on aesthetics based on a painting; Shaftesbury uses the painting to examine how emotions may be expressed in art. Here it is important to Shaftesbury that the outward form also reveals the “inward form”, or precisely *Bildung*.

The acceptance of Shaftesbury gained a foothold in literary criticism, theological, aesthetic or philosophical, and pedagogical debates. The concept of self-formation and its functionalization for writers developed into a successful model. This gave literature and art an important task and role within society; they were not merely entertainment and as such morally endangering or even superfluous. If we also consider the origin of Shaftesbury’s philosophy in English non-empirical philosophy, it becomes clear that this concept of *Bildung* focuses primarily on inner processes and cannot be described as education in the sense of rearing or training. *Bildung* is also not knowledge, but instead describes an aesthetic self-understanding with a claim to truth and goodness.

***Bildung* as a national construct**

These developments within intellectual history cannot be understood independently of real historical events. The rise of *Bildung* to become a central concept in German thought is closely connected with the fact that Germany judged itself to be backward in comparison with France, which saw itself as a *nation of civilization* (*nation de la civilization*). By recourse to the concept of *Bildung*, Germany saw a way to distance itself from the concept of courtly civilization, which it judged to be “external” and morally suspect. At the same time, the concept of *Bildung* as something persons themselves acquire made it possible for the bourgeoisie that was becoming established in Germany to hold their own against the inherited “achievements” of the aristocracy. *Bildung* became the core of the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie

¹ Settling this issue gave rise to the famous “literature controversy” between Johann Jakob Bodmer (1698-1783) and Johann Jakob Breitinger (1701-1776) of Zurich on the one side and Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700-1766) of Leipzig on the other. Bodmer and Breitinger prevailed and had great influence on German literary theory; they are considered to have paved the way to the cult of genius and German Romanticism.

(Schäfer, 2009, p. 92). Whereas in French-speaking and English-speaking areas *civilisation* and *civilization*, or the counterpart to *société civile* and *civil society*, encompassed all life conditions, including technology, business, political constitution, trade, sciences, and the arts (Bollenbeck, 1996, p. 99), the “new humanism” understanding of *Bildung* focused on “Academies... these holy temples of all of the more noble muse arts,” as described by Ernst August Evers (1779-1823), one of the most prominent champions of the ideal of *Bildung* (Evers, 2002, p. 31). What this understanding of *Bildung* does is to devalue economics and technology and anything that is “useful.” In the 19th century this led to debates on what contents or school subjects the German *Gymnasium* should focus on, such as discussion of the issue of whether the natural sciences should be considered equivalent to the classics and philology. This discussion was particularly significant because the *Gymnasium* school-leaving examination and diploma, the *Abitur*, not only qualified students for university entry, but also allowed entry to officer careers and the higher civil and administrative service. However, over the course of the 19th century, it became obvious that the aims of *Bildung* as formulated by new humanism were not fitting for a broad class of society, whereby “realistic” schooling remained disadvantaged compared to the *Abitur* diploma in the classics until into the 20th century. Only after a long struggle were the different types of *Abitur* given the same rights (Kraus, 2008, p. 44). Even so, the non-classical *Abitur* types did not find cultural acceptance for several decades thereafter.

It is thus not by chance that the first fuller formulation of a pedagogical concept of *Bildung* came from Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), a Lutheran pastor with Pietist leanings. He studied theology in Königsberg and moved to Riga in 1764, where he was teacher at the Cathedral School (*Domschule*) and maintained correspondence with famous figures of the German enlightenment such as Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim (1719-1803) or Friedrich Nicolai (1733-1811). Intellectual disputes in his close environment led him to the decision to move to Central Europe, so he left Riga and Eastern Europe in 1769 and traveled to France. As Herder describes in *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769* [*Journal of my Voyage in the Year 1769*], his aim was to further his own education and development, and he also hoped to be able to use all his newly acquired knowledge and skills in the future for the improvement of his homeland, in particular for school reform plans. He criticized the school system, which he considered to be obsolete and static, and he demanded reform that would teach the students “living” knowledge, meaning that school instruction should focus more on school subjects that deal with “real” things. Herder wanted to show “what man should be... the enlightened, learned, fine, reasonable, cultured, virtuous, enjoying man whom God demands at the level of our culture” (Herder, 1992, p. 31). He thus formulated a program that Shaftesbury had envisaged for advisors. Herder planned to document his newly acquired knowledge in the *Journal*, which would serve the youth of the future as a guidebook to self-formation.

Standing in the foreground here is Herder’s understanding of *Bildung* as something that is not based primarily on knowledge, but that which equates sensation and *Bildung*. In *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* [*Another Philosophy of History Concerning the Development of Mankind*] (Herder, 1990), he wrote that as head and heart are not separate, *Bildung* cannot take place at all via knowledge, and for this reason, people do not act according to what they know, but rather following their leanings (p. 66). Herder therefore did not see the solution of social problems in strong institutions, but rather in the awakening of sensations that then have the desired consequences.

Like Shaftesbury, Herder assumed that people are guided by a *feeling* of virtue. In contrast to Shaftesbury, Herder examined this feeling within the framework concept of a history of philosophy. The assumption was that we were developing towards the great ultimate goal of the *Bildung* of humankind (p. 110). With this, at the start of the 19th century Herder was bringing together important discussions of the 18th century relating to *Bildung* and formulating them into a concept that was attractive to pedagogical debate. The concept of *Bildung* was linked back to the organic conceptions of nature of the 16th and 17th centuries, or the concept of a *Bildungstrieb* (formative force), a vitality steering all organic functions (Blumenbach, 1781). According to Herder, this organic development of nature was not organized rationally. This molded the concept of *Bildung*, and the theory connected with it established an apolitical

² This does not mean, of course, that Herder’s theory of *Bildung* could not be used politically, or that what is “apolitical” cannot also be political. By apolitical, here I mean the separation between a political and private sphere, whereas in Shaftesbury’s works, for example, social and political life form a unity, a whole, and are not conceivable as separate from one another. This reveals a typical phenomenon of the German discussion, which usually sees pedagogy (education) and politics as two, strictly separate fields of practice. This is also the reason for the different receptions of Shaftesbury in Switzerland and Germany.

reading of that concept.² This also fits in with the ideology of inwardness of the *Bildung* concept, which, in this understanding, is aimed at the development of the soul, is seen in a moral sense, and assumes that the human soul is individually unique and can be perfected almost infinitely. Connected with this is the notion of harmonious development of humankind's natural abilities (head, heart, and hand) by means of art and literature, because here ethical and aesthetic factors merge together.

These expectations of *Bildung* are formulated in an exemplary fashion in Goethe's famous novel (1795/96), *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* [*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*], in which the protagonist experiences exactly that progression of *Bildung*.³ The novel describes the path of a young man who, driven by his initial desire for self-development, fails to achieve his ideal of a universal, harmonious education through a long process of disillusionment, but then finds his goal in a utopian and enlightened community.

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), who was a Prussian government official directing the education section in the ministry of culture, not only formulated the idea of *Bildung* in a theory, but also created an institution for it, the university. The reform of the higher schools and the university at the start of the 19th century, for which Humboldt was responsible, was oriented towards an ideal of *Bildung* that centered on studies of Latin, Greek, mathematics, literature, and history. The starting point of Humboldt's ideas on *Bildung* was the relationship between the individual and the world: People strive to strengthen and increase their natural powers to secure value and continuance for their being (Humboldt, 1960, p. 235). Humboldt supposed that this strengthening of powers takes place without intention. However, because mere power requires an object towards which it is exercised, and because mere form, pure thought, needs a material in which it can find a shaping continuance, people need the external world. Increasing one's personal knowledge—the acquisition of the outside world, or world 'without'—therefore has a significantly deeper importance than multiplying one's store of information. Humboldt saw suitable means for this endeavour, the *Bildung* of the inner being of man, or the world 'within,' in Antiquity, because the works of art of Antiquity were seen as exemplary in realizing the striven-for unity of ethics and aesthetics. *Bildung*, then, is inward self-cultivation, dependent from the outside, but much nobler than the outward world, aiming at harmonious fulfillment and inward totality. Both Herder and Humboldt were key figures in the context of the construction of a German nation-state. While Herder was focused on the role of (German) language as the unifying element of society, Humboldt implemented his idea of university as the core of the new nation-state.

Bildung as social differentiation

Although the original idea of *Bildung* definitely supposed that it was accessible to everyone by means of education (Vierhaus, 1972, p. 532), social selection through the education institutions became more and more apparent over the course of the 19th century. In society, an "educated" class and an "uneducated" class could be distinguished, and this could not be avoided even through national education efforts such as those in Prussia. A scientific education—the institutional equivalent of *Bildung*—became a prerequisite for an increasing number of vocations, functions, and civil liberties. Although a possible route to emancipation opened up through this education in the sense of surmounting the obstacle of class privilege, at the same time a new social difference was created in that education was raised to the level of a status element.

Parallel to this, a world view also became established that looked down on education as a means of achieving political and economic goals and pejoratively called it modern education (*zeitgemässe Bildung*). This was connected, for example by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), with a critique of educational institutions that served short-term and modern needs. Education had become a material good that had to

³ Wilhelm Meister is the son of a merchant who breaks out of his family milieu. He has an enthusiasm for the theater. After a relationship with an actress fails, he focuses on business matters and burns his own attempts at poetry. On a business trip, however, he encounters a troupe of actors and helps them out financially, which rekindles his old love for the theater. Meister feels that he is at the crossroads; the death of his father makes him financially independent and makes it possible for him to return to the theater to "sich selbst, ganz wie ich da bin, auszubilden" ["to develop myself just as I am"] (Goethe, 1950, p. 300). During a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a fire destroys the theater, forcing the troupe to disband and putting Meister into a momentous situation. He is given the task of delivering a letter that contains the educational autobiography of an aristocrat, which is marked by religious inward examination. Reading this letter and also his contacts to Masonic communities leads Meister to the realization that his education is actually only beginning and consists in daily service for the community.

follow economic interests: “As much knowledge and education as possible; therefore the greatest possible supply and demand—hence as much happiness as possible:—that is the formula” (Nietzsche, 1980, p. 667). Nietzsche therefore made a plea to distinguish *Bildung* from education as training (*Ausbildung*), whereby *Bildung* is stated as something elite and privileged. It is oriented towards critical thinking and artistic creative activity and is intended to produce cultural works that survive over time. This was accompanied by sweeping confidence in the possibilities of educated people to improve the world, which led to scholars and writers being viewed as important guardians of *Bildung*, whereas (political) organizations and structures were seen as secondary or even as hindering improvement of the social reality. *Bildung* was thus ascribed a role that had to remain unfulfilled in a modern world oriented towards technology, functionality, efficiency, and utility. However, *Bildung* could thus become established as a place of unfulfilled ideals and illusions.

Over the course of the 19th century, the ideal of liberal education became crystallized into a kind of *Bildung* mythology, culminating in a debate on education that contrasted the liberally educated and educational philistinism (Lichtenstein, 1971, p. 927). This can be seen, for instance, in an encyclopedia entry on *Bildung* by Friedrich Paulsen (1903), written in *the* encyclopedia of that time (Wilhelm Rein’s *Encyklopädisches Handbuch der Pädagogik*). In his analysis, Paulsen states that the differentiation between “educated” and “uneducated” had replaced earlier class differences, whereby the distinction was usually made based on external characteristics (Paulsen, 1903, p. 658). *Bildung* denoted a certain form of inner life and natural development of the inner dispositions as opposed to a mechanical kind of training: “A person is educated in that through teaching and instruction the human dispositions are developed into an individual form that represents the human and mental/spiritual being purely and fully” (Paulsen, 1903, p. 661). In contrast, “halfway education” was “unfinished inner *Bildung*” that made people conceited and imperious (Paulsen, 1903, p. 669).

***Bildung* as emancipation**

After World War II, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School then emphasized, somewhat surprisingly—the political dimension of the concept of *Bildung*: *Bildung* is understood as emancipation, the liberation of human beings from dependencies, and as the gaining of autonomy. Therefore, in the view of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, the task of *Bildung* is to realize expectations concerning the social function of *Bildung* that were originally formulated at the end of the 18th century. *Bildung* makes insight and understanding possible and, through this, liberation from illegitimate power structures. It also enables individuals to release themselves from the entanglements of social background and upbringing, which in turn has positive consequences for society as a whole (Adorno, 1972, p. 97). Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) calls *Bildung* the striving for freedom: “But in the desire for education there is the will to become knowledgeable of oneself, to be not dependent on blind powers, semblances of ideas, obsolete concepts, outworn opinions, and illusions” (Horkheimer, 1981, p. 160). One’s own lack of freedom is the result of a lack of insight, and knowledge cannot compensate for this. Instead, one must develop one’s own cultural form (Horkheimer, 1981, p. 105). Derived from this, education policy demands were support for the comprehensive school and to make access to higher education as unlimited as possible, but also as a defense of Humboldt’s concept of the university, primarily meaning an institution that is free of social, societal, political, and economic constraints.

After the empirical turn in German educational science in the 1960s, the concept of *Bildung* and the associated general claim to explain everything disappeared somewhat from the educational sciences discourse (Biesta, 2002, p. 379). With the concept of liberal education regaining strength in the 1980s, the discussion on *Bildung* also gained new impetus (Tenorth, 1986). This development was supported by the fact that in the general understanding the heterogeneity of society was increasing and the consequences of globalization were seen as more threatening and more noticeable. Parallel to that, there was a search for unity and a common basis, for which the concept of *Bildung* was an option in the sense of self-assurance of cultural and intellectual roots.

Discussion

The revival of *Bildung* as salvation from PISA

At the end of the 20th century, several publications concerning *Bildung* can be read as a response to counter the increasingly insistent demand for measurability in education (Hentig, 1996; Schlüter & Strohschneider, 2009). These publications can also be placed within a larger connection in which the concept of *Bildung* is used as a fighting word or a strong argument for pushing through various political and educational interests. *Bildung* can be a way to fight against the measurement of the world by empirical education research, but it can also be used to put forward conservative and structure-preserving concerns without these immediately being seen as reactionary.

A look at one of the more recent publications on *Bildung* shows, moreover, that the range of issues, hopes, and demands that are connected with the concept of *Bildung* has not decreased in any way. However, it also becomes clear that another concept has become established in the discussion on *Bildung*: the concept of “competency” or “skills”. In contrast to *Bildung*, competencies and skills are described as measurable and, in addition, they can be learned (Klieme et al., 2003; Weinert, 2001), which opens up many connections for the pedagogical discussion. However, here it is also assumed that acquisition of competencies and skills—like the acquisition of *Bildung*—is an ability that exists independently of the object and comprises a personal reservoir of possibilities for action. For this reason, it is not surprising that the question is also discussed as to whether the concept of “competency”, “basic competency”, or “skills” could replace the concept of *Bildung*, which not least would make it possible for German education debate to find a connection to the international debate on this topic (Tenorth, 2008).

But independently of whether or not *Bildung* can or should be replaced by competency or skills, pedagogy seems to find concepts attractive, or even requires concepts that are fuzzy and which unite demands and visions, and which can be relatively easily adapted to changing historical, societal, and social conditions. The other discernible tendency of the educational sciences, which is to establish terms and concepts independently of historical and empirical realities, has surely promoted the longevity of such terms. The attempt to overcome these concepts based on historical knowledge is probably rather futile, but it seems to me that it is a task for historical research—particularly for international theory development—to make sure of and recall these traditions and connections so that the world, and also the world of education, does not have to be reinvented over and over again.

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