The Concept of Education (*Bildung*) as a Cultural Heritage: Transcultural Traditions and Perspectives

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Abstract

This article is based on a theoretical study about the concept of *Bildung* in world society. The concept of *Bildung* (in German) refers to a special dimension of education. It focuses on personal development and self-education and is not utilitarian. The study, which investigated different traditions of thinking about education in the sense of *Bildung*, begins with German and European educational theories from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Next, older Christian traditions in Europe, pre-Christian concepts in the European ancient world, and educational thinking in Judaism and the Islamic world were analyzed. Confucius was also examined as an educational thinker. Finally, the study investigated educational traditions in Buddhism and Hinduism. Findings clearly show that the ideas connected with this concept of *Bildung* are represented in different cultural traditions within and beyond Europe. The concept of *Bildung* seems to constitute a common cultural heritage of humankind since at least the Axial Age. This concept can therefore contribute to an overlapping consensus in world society as defined by John Rawls: a consensus endorsed by conflicting religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines—each from its own point of view.

Introduction: Education and the Concept of *Bildung*

It is an old and well-known problem of translations that the semantic range of terms differs between languages, which is why words often cannot be translated one-to-one. For example, in English there are three terms for political phenomena—politics, policy, and polity—but the German language knows just one: *Politik*, which covers all three aspects. Conversely, there are two terms in German for education: *Erziehung* and *Bildung*. *Erziehung* describes intentional, pedagogical influence on young people (for example, by imparting knowledge, norms, values, or abilities). *Bildung*, in contrast, aims at the independence of pedagogical support and is connected to aspects such as maturity, the development of personality, the ability to make judgements, and reflective understanding of experiences of the

world. Whereas *Erziehung* is usually focused on concrete ideas of what should be achieved in its recipients, *Bildung* is not aimed at defined goals in a utilitarian sense, even though it may be useful for personal development as well as for professional success. *Erziehung* normally ends at a certain point in a person's life, while processes of *Bildung* continue throughout life.

Therefore, the German concept of *Bildung* describes a specific dimension of education. Andrew Abbott talks about education in this sense, for example, in a welcome speech to incoming students at the University of Chicago:

> The reason for getting an education here – or anywhere else – is that it is better to be educated than not to be. It is better in and of itself. Not because it gets you something. Not because it is a means to some other end. It is better because it is better. [...] Education is not about content. It is not even about skills. It is a habit or a stance of

mind. It is not something that you have. It is something that you are (Abbott 2002).

The modern conceptualization of *Bildung* was influenced especially by the theoretical work of Wilhelm von Humboldt and his ideas for designing the advanced school and university system in the early nineteenth century (neo-humanism). It was met with considerable interest, first in Germany, but also in much of Europe and the United States. Humboldt's ideas have been disputed or declared as outdated time and again, but even today they represent an important point of reference for theories of education (e.g. Fuhrmann 2004; Koller 2012). Ultimately, this is because "the concept of *Bildung* extends to areas of human activity that the candidates for equivalency fail to grasp" (Siljander 2014, p. 328) – e.g. candidates such as learning, qualifications, or competencies. Therefore, *Bildung* is also used as a foreign word in the English-language literature on the education sciences and philosophy (e.g. *Bildung* 2002; Bauer 2003; Siljander, Kivelä, & Sutinen 2012; Siljander 2014).

The following sections will discuss the question of whether and in what sense the idea of *Bildung* is anchored in different cultural traditions. In other words, the article will ask whether the concept of education is transculturally justifiable. First, the context and methodological approach of the study on which this article is based are explained and central theoretical frameworks of the concept of a world society introduced. Thereafter, the main findings of the study are outlined. They lead to the thesis that the concept of *Bildung* can be understood as a cultural heritage of Humankind. As such, it can become an element of an overlapping consensus in the world society and thus a central conceptual reference for global education policy. The article concludes with some remarks and open questions for further research.

Context, Research Question, and Methodological Approach

This article presents some key findings from a larger study recently published as a monograph currently available only in German (Sander 2018). This monograph addresses the question whether, and how, under today's conditions of globalization and world society, *Bildung* is an appropriate guiding idea for education and schools. The publication consists of a theoretical study that is methodologically conceived as a synthesis. Syntheses, as a method in the humanities, interlink relevant findings from a broad landscape of research, often from heterogeneous disciplines, starting with a complex set of questions. In this case, the study refers to research and theories primarily from education science (e.g. Reagan 2018), philosophy (e.g. Rawls 2005), social sciences (e.g. Meyer 2002), psychology (e.g. Murphy 2004), theology (e.g. Söding 2016), and more specific fields in cultural and religious studies, such as Islamic studies (e.g. Günther 2016).

The findings presented here essentially refer to one of the book's six chapters, though it is one that is central to the overall concept of the synthesis. Chapter 4 of the book is concerned with the tradition of *Bildung*. This partial study examines whether, and in what sense, ideas and practices that could be categorized under the concept of *Bildung* can be identified in the history of education in non-European and non-Western cultures. The study is based on analyses of relevant primary and secondary literature available in German or English. This includes literature on neo-humanism and its Christian roots in Europe, on Greco-Roman antiquity, Judaism, Islam, the Confucian tradition, and on Hinduism and Buddhism. That is to say, the cultural traditions selected extend back to what the German philosopher Karl Jaspers called the Axial Age, while at the same time continuing

into the present and influencing large cultural spheres in the world society.

The methodological approach of this part of the study is based on the hermeneutic circle (Grondin 2016): It requires, first, a previous understanding of *Bildung*. Without such prior understanding, those elements of theories and practices of education in different cultural contexts that can be assigned to the concept of education cannot be identified. In our study, this previous understanding is based on a critical reconstruction of central elements of the neo-humanist understanding of *Bildung*. Setting out from there, we search for comparable elements of *Bildung* in other historical epochs and other cultural contexts. In accordance with the hermeneutic circle, the reconstruction of these elements is connected to an extension and revision of the previous understanding that was the starting point of the study.

Before summarizing the findings of this study, it is necessary to briefly outline several references to social theory. These are the foundation for the understanding of world society that this study is based on and resulted in a more precise formulation of the research question.

World Society: The Framework in Social Theory

How can we understand the concept of world society? This question has preoccupied social scientists since the 1970s. More than thirty years ago, Niklas Luhmann already formulated his famous dictum: "Society today is clearly a world society" (Luhmann 1995, p. 430). Luhmann was arguing from the perspective of systems theory. Systems theories understand modern societies as divided into functional systems, such as economy, media, religion, education, and politics. Society as a whole is understood as the most comprehensive social system and as the whole of the communications

that can be reached for one another. Since all functional systems globalize and, at least in principle, lead to the mutual accessibility of all people for all, we live in a world society according to Luhmann (Werron 2011, pp. 24-26).

From this, it is already clear that world society is not a normative concept, but rather an analytical one. It is about understanding and explaining what society is today. It is about chains of actions such as the following one: A group of young men from Egypt and Saudi Arabia were studying in Hamburg in the 1990s; in the USA they carried out the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001; the German Army was involved in the war in Afghanistan that followed; as a consequence of conflicts in Afghanistan, Afghani refugees were arriving in Germany even fifteen years later. Further illustrative examples for the linking of communications in a world society include worldwide trade relationships and the global division of labor, cinema and tourism, the Internet and satellite televisions, global payment systems, and financial crises.

Whereas the understanding of world society from the perspective of systems theory rather describes a state, theories of globalization instead refer to dynamic processes of intensifying, condensing, and expanding transactions and co-operations. Globalization introduces the world society and condenses it. Thus, these two concepts can be seen as related.

Another family of theories, neo-institutionalism, understands world society to be a global level of order (e.g. Meyer 2002). Such neo-institutionalist theories are concerned with global institutions and actors, such as the United Nations and its numerous programs and special organizations, NATO, or the G7 and G20, and with international treaty-based regimes, such as the non-proliferation of atomic weapons. Political scientists often speak of global governance in this context. The dynamics of the

development on this level can be illustrated by two examples of statistics: From 1909 to 2015, the number of international NGOs increased from 179 to 8,976 (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* 2017). During roughly the same time period, from 1900 to 2015, the number of nation-states in Europe increased from 22 to 50 and worldwide from 50 to 195 (Jahn 2014, p. 2). The latter is a counter-trend to globalization only at first glance. In neo-institutionalist theories of world society, this increase in the number of nation-states is an example of the global proliferation and prevalence of isomorphic models and organizational patterns. This proliferation did not, however, result solely from actors operating globally, but also took place through mutual observation. One example of this is the international proliferation of a very similar model for schools over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, schools are easy to recognize as such almost worldwide, because features such as fixed groups for learning, full-time teachers, a certain canon of subjects, and often similarities in architecture have spread globally. The area of school policy has also shifted to the realm of global governance in recent decades by actors such as the OECD, UNESCO, the World Bank, and NGOs (Adick 2011). The PISA Studies are an apt example for how the development into a world society is revealed from a neo-institutionalist perspective.

Neo-institutionalist theories do, however, run the risk of all too quickly interpreting the global level of order as a worldwide spread of European or Western norms and institutions. This has been contradicted by, among others, Shmuel Eisenstadt and his theory of multiple modernities (2017), which has been met with great response. In this view, different variations of modernity evolve in the world society, and the roots of their differences ultimately lie in the different cultural circles influenced by the great

world religions. According to Eisenstadt, there is not just one modernity influenced by European thought, but a diversity in modernity that is founded in religious and cultural differences that reach far back into history. World society, he argues, is anything but homogeneous; it is an economically, socially, and culturally diverse society – with all problems and conflicts associated with that.

One central problem resulting from this can be well explained by arguments advanced by John Rawls from the perspective of political liberalism concerning stable coexistence in modern societies. One of modern societies' features, Rawls writes, is that "citizens are deeply divided by conflicting and even incommensurable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines" (2005, p. 133). That is clearly the case in the world society. A basic consensus is, according to Rawls, indispensable for coexistence in such diverse societies. Rawls distinguishes two levels of such consensus: a constitutional consensus and an overlapping consensus. A constitutional consensus does not go very deep; it is merely a simple recognition of certain principles. On the level of world society, these might be, for example, the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its subsequent conventions. An overlapping consensus goes beyond the mere acceptance of such constitutional principles in breadth, depth, and determination. Such levels of consensus can never be completely attained, but it reduces the margin within which doctrines can differ from one another. For the effectiveness of such an overlapping consensus, Rawls argues, it is crucial that the members of the society who support the different doctrines can agree to its principles "each from its own point of view" (2005, p. 134).

What does that mean for *Bildung* in the world society? Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights postulates a "right

to education" for all and succinctly refers to normative relationships, such as a "full development of the human personality," tolerance, and peace. However, basing a meaningful understanding of *Bildung* as a guiding idea for education and schools on this alone would be difficult. We should, rather, following Rawls, ask whether, in a more profound understanding, *Bildung* could be seen as part of an overlapping consensus in world society. Therefore, we need to examine whether in the world society with its multiple modernities (Eisenstadt), there are different and influential traditions that make it possible for supporters to agree to a meaningful understanding of *Bildung* each from his or her own point of view. This study and its findings, which are outlined below, provide a first insight into this question.

Findings: *Bildung* as a Cultural Heritage of Humankind

As mentioned above, a critical reconstruction of Humboldt's theory of *Bildung* constitutes the point of departure for the study under discussion. Humboldt himself summed up the core of his understanding of *Bildung* in just a few words in a brief essay written in 1793:

> It is the ultimate task of our existence to achieve as much substance as possible for the concept of humanity in our person, both during the span of our life and beyond it, through the traces we leave by means of our vital activity. This can be fulfilled only by the linking of the self to the world to achieve the most general, most animated, and most unrestrained interplay (Humboldt 2000, p. 58).

According to Humboldt, *Bildung* is the process, in which the self is linked to the world in the sense of an interaction. *Bildung* is thus not a simple adaption of the individual to a predetermined order of the world. According to Humboldt, human beings by nature strive to deal with objects outside of them in the world,

working away at them, so to speak, because it is the only way they can develop their strengths ("*Kräfte*"). Today we would most likely not speak of strengths but of potentials inherent in a person, which he or she can develop through experiences of the world. In this process of *Bildung* "he must bring the mass of objects closer to himself, impress his mind upon this matter, and create more of a resemblance between the two" (Humboldt 2000, p. 59). The livelier and more diverse the individual's grappling with aspects of the world outside him is, the more likely it will result in a development of the mind and of human abilities that is as comprehensive as possible—and that is precisely what his or her *Bildung* is. *Bildung* for Humboldt is thus not primarily related to the acquisition of specific stores of knowledge; it is not primarily a material *Bildung*, but rather a formal one. By developing an individual's various potential—which can differ in every case—*Bildung* also achieves the "elevation of his personality" (Humboldt 2000, p. 60). But a person's *Bildung* is revealed not only in their inner experience, but also in their activity in the world:

> What do we demand of a nation, of an age, of entire mankind, if it is to occasion respect and admiration? We demand that *Bildung*, wisdom, and virtue, as powerfully and universally propagated as possible, should prevail under its aegis, that it augments its inner worth to such an extent that the concept of humanity, if taken from its example alone, would be of a rich and worthy substance (Humboldt 2000, p. 59).

Humboldt's theory of *Bildung* is formulated in a purely secular language. But in formulations such as "ultimate task of our existence" and "elevation," we hear echoes of the long European tradition of Christian thought about *Bildung* (Sander 2018, pp. 103–106). Three individuals can serve as representatives of this tradition: In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Christian mystic Master Eckart developed an

idea of *Bildung* in which every human being bears in his or her soul the image of God, which can be found by developing one's cognitive abilities in different steps. In the sixteenth century, in the course of the Reformation, Martin Luther first called for schools for all children, regardless of class or sex. Roughly a century later, Johann Amos Comenius substantiated this requirement with a sophisticated didactic theory in his *Didactica Magna*. On the title page of his *Didactica Magna* (1627–1657), he described this didactic as "the whole art of teaching all things to all men", referring to "the entire youth of both sexes, none being excepted" (Comenius 1907).

Like modern Western pedagogics in general, a neo-humanist theory of *Bildung* cannot be understood without considering its Christian roots. But does this mean that everything connected with a meaningful understanding of *Bildung* is solely a product of European Christian culture? That is by no means the case, as will be shown below and illustrated by a few examples.

Already in pre-Christian antiquity, the concept of *paideia* contains aspects that were later repeatedly taken up in today's discourses on *Bildung* (Sander 2018, pp. 107–110). This Greek concept combines ancient ideals for a successful way of living life, which included both successful education, as well as virtues and the willingness to accept responsibility publicly. Admittedly, *paideia* was essentially an aristocratic concept related to the well-being of the polis in question rather than, like *Bildung* in Christendom later, a universalist one. Nevertheless, there are two main pedagogical and philosophical approaches from the context of *paideia* that have repeatedly been the subject of the discourse on *Bildung* into the present: the maieutic practice of the *Bildung* of Socrates and Plato's parable of the cave. In his dialogues, Socrates affected his conversational partners,

not by imparting secure knowledge, but, on the contrary, by persistent questioning that revealed seemingly secure knowledge as mere opinion. This philosophical practice of Socrates influenced the concept of *Bildung* in terms of the productive effect of doubt, as well as the importance of the art of using targeted questioning in order to bring the students to a relationship to reality marked by independent thinking and critical scrutiny. The parable of the cave on the other hand, when read as a tale of *Bildung*, emphasizes the character of *Bildung* as a process, a path and a development. This path is not easy to follow; it is full of obstacles and characterized by vexation, troubles, and risks. But in the end, it liberates thinking.

The Jewish tradition of *Bildung* is marked by two central features: literacy and discursiveness. The Jewish people were the first that attained widespread literacy (Aberbach 2009; Botticini & Eckstein 2012). At least since the codification of the Mishnah, the writing of Jewish religious laws around 200 A.D., a movement to make the entire male population literate gained acceptance among Jews. Of course, reading and writing alone cannot be understood as sufficient for *Bildung*. These served, above all, the study of religious texts. However, a special quality of these texts, especially of the Mishnah and the Talmud, is their discursiveness. These writings represent a great breadth of different, indeed contradictory, understandings of the subject in question. They thus encourage their readers to grapple with controversial views and make their own judgments.

It is almost astonishing, for example, how the Talmud relates this discursiveness to God in the story of Akhnai's Oven. The story is about a debate between rabbis concerning the liturgical purity of an oven according to the Halakha, the body of Jewish religious laws. Rabbi Eliezer raised all possible objections, but they were not

accepted. Then he adopted a more extreme way to dominate the other rabbis: "'If the Halakha agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!' Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place – others affirm, four hundred cubits. 'No proof can be brought from a carob-tree.'" Then he tried something similar with a stream of water and the walls of a schoolhouse, but neither convinced the other rabbis. Finally, Rabbi Eliezer brought God himself into play:

> "If the Halakha agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!" Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: "Why do ye dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halakha agrees with him!" But Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed [quoting Deuteronomy]: "It is not in the heavens!" […] What did he mean by this? – Said Rabbi Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou has long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, [quoting Exodus], "After the majority must one incline" (Oz & Oz-Salzberger 2012, pp. 18–19).

Here the Talmud goes so far as to rank majority opinion in a scholarly debate on the interpretation of the Torah higher than an immediate intervention by God. And what did God say about this incident, according to the Talmud? The prophet Elijah provides the following information: "Rabbi Nathan met [the immortal prophet] Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? – He laughed [with joy], he replied, saying, 'My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated me'" (Oz & Oz-Salzberger 2012, p. 20).

In the sense of the Talmud-Torah schools, *Bildung* means "learning to interpret" (Jouhy 1986, p. 269). Learnedness, as its results, consists of wise participation in an endless exchange of position and contradiction, interpretation, and re-interpretation of texts. Or, as Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger put it: "In

Jewish tradition every reader is a proof-reader, every student a critic, and every writer, including the Author of the universe, begs a great many questions" (Oz & Oz-Salzberger 2012, p. x).

In the context of the third monotheistic world religion, Islam, there are instructive traditions of thinking about *Bildung* mainly in the Islamic classical period, dating roughly from the eighth to the fourteenth century (Sander 2018, pp. 115–120). During this period, in the tenth century, the first madrassas were established (advanced schools dedicated to religious education and also associated with legal education). Madrassas had permanent positions for teachers, which contributed to the promotion of the concept of the full-time teacher. It is also notable that disputation and debate were considered important methods for learning in this context.

During the age of Islamic classicism, an Islamic philosophy evolved among Muslim scholars. This philosophy was concerned with a rational understanding of the world and a life based on reason. It was not thought of as an opposition to religion; quite the contrary, knowledge of God was sought by means of reason, but it was also an effort to purge religion of narrow-minded ideas. An impressive example of this is an allegorical novel written by Ibn Tufail in the twelfth century: *Hayy ibn Yaqdhan* ("Alive, Son of the Awake"). In this book, the life story of the main character is told as an education novel, or more precisely, as the story of self-education through experience, reflection on it, and independent further thinking. The main figure grows up alone among animals on an isolated island and experiences a growth in his reasoning that gradually leads him to observe his surroundings in detail, to formulate theories, and, finally, around the age of fifty, to know God. All this happens without outside direction; there is no educator. Only then does he come into contact with people on a neighboring island, but

their ritualized, formalized form of religion, which is literally faithful to traditional doctrines, repels him. Tufail's novel was widely read by Islamic scholars, but also by Jewish and Christian scholars, and has a long history of translations that continues into the present.

Among the Islamic theorists of education of the classical period, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali is exceptionally significant. For al-Ghazali, reason and spirituality are two paths on which young people can be led to knowledge and insight. The two paths need to be connected, since mere knowledge for the sake of knowledge is fruitless and does not bring the soul peace. However, according to al-Ghazali, knowledge should certainly have practical value, and ultimately it should serve personal spiritual and ethical development. In al-Ghazali's code of conduct for students and teachers (Günther 2006, pp. 383–384), there is, to use modern terminology, an attempt to combine dialectically apparent opposites that even today play a large role in didactics: specialist depth and general education, imparting knowledge and shaping personality, planning lessons, and orienting the learning processes around its addressees.

Such theories from Islamic classicism have many points of contact with European concepts of *Bildung* in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods, including translations of relevant works. However, these connecting lines were almost entirely broken off after the fifteenth century, when conservative orthodoxy prevailed in the Islamic world and largely broke with the modern era that was beginning in the West (Diner 2009).

Around 1,500 years before al-Ghazali, and 2,000 years before Comenius, Confucius was living and working in China. He had enduring influence, not only as a political philosopher, but also as a theorist of education, including *Bildung*. Confucius is considered the first freelance teacher in China (Gu 1999, p. 32). Over the course of his life, he is said to have taught around three thousand students from different social backgrounds. According to Confucius, everyone should get the opportunity to develop through *Bildung* and individual effort. To that end, however, it is necessary to invest the willingness to learn and engagement with learning: "I never instruct those who aren't full of passion, and I never enlighten those who aren't struggling to explain themselves. If I show you one corner and you can't show me the other three, I'll say nothing more" (Confucius 2014, p. 58). Confucius is therefore considered an earlier proponent of the meritocratic principle in *Bildung*.

The guiding idea for *Bildung* in Confucius is *junzi*, or the noble-minded man. One becomes noble-minded through learning and inner cultivation—that is to say, through *Bildung*. The noble-minded man is a morally highly developed, well-balanced, artistically interested, and has a principled and harmony-oriented personality. This model certainly has features of an aristocratic ideal, but it is not identical with striving for external power and wealth: "While the noble-minded cherish Integrity, little people cherish territory. And while the noble-minded cherish laws, little people cherish privilege" (Confucius 2014, p. 39). For that very reason, the noble-minded man is in a position to take responsibility in public life, and because he is in that position, according to Confucius, he is also obliged to do so: "A thinker who cherishes the comforts of home isn't much of a thinker" (Confucius 2014, p. 108).

The noble-minded man has the task of employing his talents for the common good. This is not, however, associated with a utilitarian understanding of teaching and *Bildung*. The process of *Bildung* by which the human being becomes noble-minded does not serve immediately external goals. It does not refer to craft or other professional skills, and it keeps its

distance from specializations. Confucius understood *Bildung* as purposeless: "The Master said: 'A noble-minded man is not an implement'" (Confucius 2014, p. 27).

In Hinduism and Buddhism, too, we find traditions of thinking about *Bildung* that extend far back (Sander 2018, 125–128). Even before Confucius, in the seventh century B.C., a Hinduist networked study center was established in Taxila (in present-day Pakistan), where in addition to the foci on religion and philosophy studies, offerings were also made in medicine, astronomy, agriculture and the arts. Substantially later, but still around 500 years before the founding of the first European university in Bologna, in Bihar, which is now a federal state of India, the Buddhist Nalanda University was established. It had a complex of buildings that included housing for students, several monasteries, three libraries, and an astronomical observatory. As many as 8,500 students studied at this early university, taught by as many as 1,500 teachers (Reagan 2018, pp. 219–220).

These data point to a considerable affinity to *Bildung* in the Indian religions as well. Even today, some Buddhist monasteries offer the possibility of a temporary membership in their order, which is used especially for educational purposes.

The ideas of the content of *Bildung* in Indian religions are strongly based on the human being's cosmological integration into the cycle of birth and death. In that sense, they are critical of knowledge, since they regard experienceable and fleeting reality as a hindrance to understanding and as shackles on personal growth. Because this is also true of our biological and social self, individuation through increasing self-realization appears to be a false path. Personal growth, which the path of *Bildung* in this understanding serves, is supposed to lead to the individual growing out of – in the literal sense – his or her

ego and ultimately learning to regard it as a fiction, even if it is one necessary in this life. The path of *Bildung* is supposed to enable individuals to discover their inner core, their true self. The Japanese Buddhist scholar Daisaku Ikeda distinguishes between a Greater Self and a Lesser Self that make up all of us (Ikeda 2010, p. 87). The Lesser Self clings to the ephemeral, which repeatedly becomes the source of suffering. Human beings cannot simply suppress it, but they can control it. In that spirit, Ikeda speaks of being a master of oneself as a task of personal development.

This ends our brief walk through European and non-European traditions of thinking about education in the sense of *Bildung*. Although the scope of this article only allowed some selected examples and brief mentions of a few aspects and references that could be outlined much further, it should at least be clear that for millennia in human cultural history, there has been an understanding of what the German concept of *Bildung* stands for: A dimension of growth, of learning and teaching, that goes beyond merely adapting young people to an existing reality and the adoption of its relevant norms, rules, and stores of knowledge.

In processes of *Bildung*, aspects of reality or of cultural tradition are not simply adopted but questioned, that is, made the subject of scrutiny and reflection. That which exists empirically is not understood to be the final say in human relationships to the world and reality, however important it without doubt is for the lives of young people. Not coincidentally, discursive methods, such as dialogue and disputation, often play a central role in the theories and practices of *Bildung*. *Bildung* always also means to not blindly trust what we encounter as reality – *Bildung* cannot be gained without at least a certain degree of skepticism.

Bildung continues to aim at the individual's human development. This can be understood

spiritually, as a development of reason or as both. Often the metaphor of growth is also used here: *Bildung* helps people to grow, to develop their potentials. But – and also this aspect of *Bildung* is almost a constant – this growth should not be understood as a purely inner process, but should also lead to responsible action in social practice. It should become fruitful for others and the community as well. *Bildung* is therefore not normatively neutral – not every conceivable development of the individual, every potential that people have, should be seen as equally desirable and acceptable from the perspective of *Bildung*.

    Bildung is supposed to help the individual lead a successful life. At the same time, however, *Bildung* is not instrumental. The acquisition of elements of knowledge, or of skills solely for a specific purpose, is in itself not yet *Bildung*. It can only become so by contextualizing it in a broader development of understanding reality. For, in that sense, *Bildung* is indeed about connecting the individual to the world: *Bildung* takes place in the context of experienceable reality, but it also leads to questions about the reasons for our action, about conceivable alternatives, about the limits of our possibilities, and, indeed, about the relationship of our reality to the world as a whole. It is inevitable that *Bildung* also leads to questions of meaning and to grappling with questions of belief. For that reason alone, *Bildung* cannot be regarded as completed at some defined point in the course of a life, nor can it be produced according to a plan by means of social and educational technologies.

    Finally, it is striking that from a historical and transcultural perspective, *Bildung* is usually linked with appreciation and high regard. The type of the educated, learned, noble-minded man (Confucius) is regarded as exemplary and worth striving for, but in some cases also structured as a critical benchmark for the actions of elites.

Summary and Additional Research Questions

    This study presented in this article has shown that *Bildung* can be reconstructed as a universal, transcultural concept. *Bildung* is not a concept limited to the European or Western cultural realm. The ideas associated with this concept can be identified in different cultural traditions going far back in history. The concept of *Bildung* can thus be understood as a shared cultural heritage of humanity since at least the Axial Age.

    Following John Rawls, this concept can therefore be understood as an element of an overlapping consensus in the world society. However, from perspectives of different comprehensive doctrines, different interpretations of this concept may also result as it is made more specific in the local context. For example, differences between Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and Confucian cultural spheres may arise in regards to the idea of personal growth, the relationship of individuality and responsibility to the community, or determining which individual processes of learning and change are considered unacceptable.

    This raises further questions for research to follow from the study presented in this article. They arise in very different fields of research:

- Concerning the history of thinking about *Bildung*, the question arises whether ideas about education that could be categorized under the concept of *Bildung* can perhaps already be found in pre-literate cultures, or at least prior to the Axial Age. The point of departure for such research could be the corresponding chapters in Reagan (2018). However, given the lack of written original sources, it seems obvious that the methodological difficulties of such a study would be considerable.

- The theory of *Bildung* raises the

complex question of how a transcultural overlapping consensus could be made more precise in this field, how far and how deep it could ultimately go, and how precisely one could determine the different cultural points of view from which actors in diverse cultural realms could agree on such a consensus. For a possible European perspective, the monograph this article is based on includes a relevant discussion (Sander 2018, pp.133–169).

•   In the field of empirical research, it would be desirable to have studies that examine whether and which ideas of *Bildung* can be found among the global actors in school and educational policy, that is to say, among the relevant international organizations, such as the OECD or UNESCO, as well as the NGOs active in this field. Such studies would also be desirable because these actors play important roles in the practical effectiveness of an overlapping consensus on *Bildung*.

Finally, it is important to clarify that *Bildung* will not lead to a uniform culture in the world society. However, as an element of an overlapping consensus, the concept of *Bildung* is significant for a mutual understanding in global education policy and for conceptualizing the role of the school in the world society.

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