

Bildung and Transformative Learning Theory: Two Peas in a Pod?

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Abstract

Both *Bildung* and transformative learning theory focus on the transformative nature of education. Even though they have been developed in different continents and fairly independently of each other, they intersect, and at face value, they might appear to be very similar to each other. Both notions, though are perceived differently by diverse individuals, and even though these numerous perceptions do overlap at times, they also contrast on various points. This article gives a critical review of literature to help understand the similarities and differences between these two notions and outlines their importance in discourses surrounding education.

Keywords

transformative education, social change, critical reflection

Education can serve many purposes, but it is often reduced to its instrumental function of enabling learners to gain the required qualifications for desired future employment. This article highlights how education should address other outcomes such as achieving rationality and personal autonomy to make informed choices without being influenced by others and the shaping of beliefs and values to develop responsible citizens. *Bildung* and transformative learning theory are two views that

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go beyond the utilitarian notion of education and focus on the transformative aspect of learning.

The article engages in a review of literature surrounding both *Bildung* and transformative learning theory to offer readers a background and develop an understanding of the two notions. The review of the literature is not systematic but somewhat exploratory based on a personal journey of sense-making. *Bildung* has a very rich history, and therefore, classical texts such as works by Humboldt (2000) were primarily considered, whilst for transformative learning theory, key texts such as those by Mezirow were considered first. Databases such as SpringerLink, ERIC, and EBSCO were used to find papers related to the two theories. In the initial stages, the search for literature was generic. Some literature was also discovered in other journal articles or books such that the exploration deepened. Through engagement with literature surrounding these two notions, themes started to emerge. At this point, literature was sought more specifically surrounding these themes.

This article not only introduces *Bildung* and transformative learning theory but also offers a comparison between the two. This comparison revolves around various themes namely, transformation, the role of a disorienting dilemma, universality, particularity, rationality, reflection, autonomy, nonrational dimensions of learning, the social aspect of learning, social change, occurrence in the lifetime of an individual, and the tension between theory and research.

Through bringing together literature from two traditions, both claiming a process of transformation, this article attempts to find a shared space that could inform a pedagogy of possibility for transformative learning to occur. Fuhr et al. (2017a, 2017b) recognised the relationship between transformative learning theory and *Bildung* in adult education and set the groundwork for a dialogue between the two whilst also calling for further discussion. This article tries to answer that call by transposing the two theories on each other, widening the debate, and showing how the two can be used to inform each other towards further development of both theories. Bringing these two theories together also provides an opportunity to supplement the debate on the pedagogy of learning that transforms praxis at different educational levels. Through this meeting of the two theories, the authors attempt to promote educational outcomes that go beyond utilitarianism and address a vision of education that sees the process of learning as a journey of becoming a subjective individual in an inclusive society.

Bildung

Bildung is a German term with no real accurate English translation since it is embedded in not only the German language but also culture. It refers to processes of learner transformation through interpretation and appropriation of knowledge (Fuhr, 2017). In the German-speaking world, the concept of *Bildung* is commonly employed in educational discourse (Horlacher, 2016).

In his *Theory of the Bildung of Man*, originally written in 1794, Humboldt (2000) describes *Bildung* as a profoundly personal, self-reflective process. According to Biesta (2002a), “*Bildung* refers, rather, to the cultivation of the inner life, that is, of the human soul, the human mind” (p. 345). Education thus becomes about inner change and development rather than the gain of knowledge and instrumentalism. *Bildung* is a personal, lifelong process that is open to everyone irrespective of personal and social contexts. According to Bleicher (2006), such a process eventually leads to the expression of a person’s full potentials.

Bildung is a voluntary, perpetual self-development and can never be really finalised but can be increased through the type of education received. So even though self-activity is the starting point for *Bildung* or growth (Siljander & Sutinen, 2012), formal education is proposed by many German classical texts as a requisite for full maturity. According to Biesta (2007), though the education that leads to *Bildung* “is not just about the transmission of knowledge, skills, and values, but is concerned with the individuality, subjectivity, or personhood of the student, with their ‘coming into the world’ as unique, singular beings” (p. 27).

It is not an easy task to find a single definition of *Bildung* as the term has been moulded for different purposes in many different contexts, whilst also been criticised as being too vague as a concept. According to Horlacher (2012), *Bildung* is often seen as an aesthetic ideal, which is connected to ideas of inwardness and self-cultivation. She also outlines its use as both an apolitical concept, promoting distance from social ongoings, and a political one, encouraging social change. Winch and Gingell (2008) propose three main important aspects of *Bildung*. First, education serves as preparation for adult life, including participation in society, involving important skills such as autonomy, collaboration, and critical thinking. Second, education is a lifelong form of self-discovery and development. Finally, education should promote the development of the uniqueness of the learner rather than mould her to become more similar to some ideal form.

Since *Bildung* and its outcomes are unquantifiable, it is currently often thus used as a fighting word against the extreme measurability in the educational sphere and in criticism of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Tröhler, 2011). *Bildung* had, in fact, lost its popularity, as empiricism became the dominant discourse in the 1960s (Biesta, 2002b), but it has since been more than regained.

***Bildung* as Transformation**

Learning can proceed on the surface without involving deeper underlying structures, or otherwise include fundamental changes in the frameworks of understanding, and this is what can be referred to as *Bildung* (Ludwig, 2017). For gained knowledge to become transformational, it has to be so internalised, that it leaves an impact on the person’s life (Reindal, 2013). Marotzki (1990) distinguishes *Bildung* from learning as a transformation process in thinking and processing of new information. Learning, on the other hand, merely involves receiving further information, and this is

categorised on a lower level thinking process than *Bildung*. For Marotzki, transformative *Bildung* becomes the ability to transform old perspectives and attitudes towards the self and the world through reflective higher levels of thinking. Thus, for learning to enable *Bildung*, the gained knowledge, skills, and competences must not only be for the scope of getting a certificate to enter into gainful employment but also to transform the student. This transformation can be viewed as a personal emancipatory process as the former self-world perspectives turn into new ones, and the individual makes a further step towards maturity (Neubauer & Lehmann, 2017).

Similarly, Rosenberg (2011) sees *Bildung* as habitus transformation, which is distinct from learning or otherwise gaining knowledge and skills. The concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) refers to a system of acquired cognitive and normative dispositions, which vary between individuals due to their different social experiences. These dispositions, amongst other things, influence performance at school since they determine how schools behave towards the learner and shape the learner's attitudes towards curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Glaesser & Cooper, 2014). Learners whose habitus does not align well with the educational system's assumptions, requirements, and values are less likely to succeed. The multidimensional nature of the habitus, though, causes internal conflicts and makes it open for transformation as it adapts to new experiences throughout one's life (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Entering new fields (areas of social interactions with a set of positions and practices) nearly always requires a form of habitus transformation (Rosenberg, 2016).

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory is a recent theory when compared to theories of *Bildung*. It evolved in the United States under the influence of three significant philosophies—Kuhn's philosophical conception of paradigm, Habermas's domains of knowledge and the discussion of language as communicative action, and finally Freire's conception of "conscientisation." Transformative learning theory is quite similar to *Bildung*, at least in certain key notions, with also some differences. The various ways the two ideas can be conceptualized, though, tend to blend these differences as will be shown later on.

Transformative learning theory argues that in adulthood, learning is through a critical reflection and reinterpretation of concepts acquired through childhood, leading to personal and eventually social change (Mezirow, 2009). Transformative learning theory is grounded on the human need to seek meaning in life and also to try and understand one's experiences. Mezirow (2000) in fact states that "A defining condition of being human is our urgent need to understand and assign meaning to our experience, to integrate it with what we know in order to avoid the threat of chaos" (p. 3). Transformative learning thus requires transformative experiences (Taylor & Cranton, 2013), events that push the individual to confront any current meanings and find new ones.

Adults view the world through lenses (frames of reference) which help them form a perspective with which to make sense of encountered situations. These culturally defined frames of reference can also be termed meaning structures, composed of meaning perspectives and meaning schemes or habits of mind. Meaning perspectives are “the structure of assumptions within which one’s past experience assimilates and transforms new experience” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 42). The individual expresses these as a particular point of view. A point of view originates from clusters of meaning schemes/habits of mind or “sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments—that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects, and attribute causality” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18). According to Cranton (2006), “a habit of mind is a way of seeing the world based on our background, experience, culture, and personality” (p. 25). Habits of mind are constructed socially through social, political, and educational contexts and thus they can be deconstructed, allowing transformative learning to occur.

Mezirow (2000) argues that frames of reference are often acquired uncritically in childhood through learning experiences with parents and teachers, and they reflect the dominant culture that we have been socialised into. In transformative learning, “learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). Under appropriate circumstances, “transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5).

According to Eschenbacher (2019), though, Mezirow’s adoption of Habermas’s concepts in his theory poses limits which give rise to some tensions within the theory. One such tension arising from the use of the ideas of Habermas is manifested according to E. W. Taylor (1998), as Mezirow “wants to situate transformative learning within an emancipatory framework, but at the same time his model seems to emphasise personal transformation to a greater extent than social transformation” (p. 25). Similarly, Freire (1970) depicts conscientisation as a joint activity in the context of common issues, in which reflection and action fuse together for collective liberation, whilst Mezirow’s perspective transformation is seen as an individual experience resulting in changes in the person of the learner.

The Disorienting Dilemma

According to Mezirow (1991), processes of transformative learning are caused by an experience that highlights “that our specific points of view or beliefs have become dysfunctional” (p. 94). This causes us to

attempt to justify our beliefs, either by rationally examining assumptions, often in response to intuitively becoming aware that something is wrong with the result of our

thought, or challenging its validity through discourse with others of differing viewpoints and arriving at the best informed judgement. (Mezirow, 1995, p. 46)

The first stage in transformative learning is thus “a disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168), which is often stressful, painful, and can push the individual to question not only assumptions but the very core of her existence (Mezirow, 1997). The process of transformation of meaning schemes, though, can then only proceed “by our becoming critically reflective of the assumptions supporting the content or process (or both) of problem solving” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22).

More recently, negative experience has become more commonly featured in the *Bildung* discourse as “the starting point for searching, researching, questioning and trying new ways of perception, reflection and acting” (Brinkmann, 2017, p. 78). Similar to Mezirow, Koller (2011) views the processes of transformative *Bildung* as being triggered off by an event that generates crisis: problems for which the previous thinking frameworks are not suitable anymore. This is quite a laborious view of *Bildung*, which is not at all in line with the more harmonious nature of classical concepts on *Bildung* but a “radical questioning of previous and the creating of new figures of world- and self-relation” (Koller, 2011, p. 377).

The role of a disorienting dilemma in transformative learning and the phases that follow have been somewhat challenged. According to Nohl (2015), no crises or initial dilemmas need to be actually involved in the transformative learning process, but it “may begin unnoticed, incidentally, and sometimes even casually, when a new practice is added to old habits” (p. 45). Similarly, according to Daloz (2000), the “change or shift was long in coming and its possibility prepared for in myriad ways, generally across years” (p. 106). Brinkmann (2017) argues that learning from experience and reflection are enabled only through repetition, which is quite a productive endeavour, even though it is often seen as monotonous. He suggests that the failure and irritation experienced during repetitive practising serve as a negative experience that leads to transformation.

According to Howie and Bagnall (2013), researchers have attributed the label of disorienting dilemma to any life event that triggers change. Calleja (2013) defines the trigger as “a realisation moment that causes a shift in values, beliefs, and identity” (p. 194). Calleja (2013) also agrees with Torosyan (2007) who notes that a trigger is not necessarily a dramatic predicament but can result from a realisation of certain realities surrounding the situation of the agent. We do not think that the process of transformation is set in stone, but the process of learning is opportunist in nature and will make use of any opportunity. In some instances, a disorienting dilemma may be the trigger, and in others, transformation will occur as an accumulation of smaller encounters with the different and other. This is a similar stance to that taken by Howie and Bagnall (2013) who acknowledge that an event can trigger a sudden transformation, whilst such transformation can also be incremental.

Universality or Particularity

Mezirow (1978) identified ten phases in the process of transformative learning. Clark and Wilson (1991) critically remarked that even though Mezirow developed his model in a very context-specific study of women who reentered education, he extrapolated it to all adults in any context. Nohl (2015) voiced a similar criticism for most empirical studies conducted after this and came up with a more general phase model. Apart from the disorienting dilemma, which is the starting point of the whole process, these phases are thus rather fluid, and in different situations, different phases are emphasised or marginalised. A perspective transformation does not necessarily go through all of the ten phases, and since it is not a linear process, the phases are not necessarily sequential (Calleja, 2014). From a *Bildung* perspective, the point of education is not to arrive at a destination, but the journey itself, a journey that transforms the individual through the widening of perceptions (Entwistle, 2013). *Bildung* can be seen as an identity-shaping activity (Mortensen, 2002) that requires the individual to imagine the ideal self and work through limits that block the attainment of that image (Schneider, 2012). It is thus a very personal process of self-realisation and therefore does not presume a universal route but is an open process and considered as a particular and unique experience or journey for each learner (Koller, 2003).

Rationality, Reflection, and Autonomy

According to Callan and Arena (2009), indoctrination in the classroom, even if unintended, is a form of moral negligence since one of the responsibilities of teachers is to ensure that social influence that leads to close-mindedness is avoided. Only open-mindedness enables us to make the best use of new arguments and evidence to identify errors in our knowledge base and improve our understanding of the world. Research on cognitive development shows that young children are rational agents and rationality continues to develop for many years. An important aspect of education is thus to assist in this development towards autonomy in thought and critical thinking. The independent, critical thinker is not someone who works everything out for herself but the one who exercises a controlling intelligence over the knowledge claims she receives from the traditional sources of information (Coady, 1994). She can evaluate the information received through awareness of the social and political conditions involved in the production of that knowledge (Robertson, 2009).

Rationality most likely develops through reflective processes in the context of social interaction and can, therefore, be promoted by encouraging and facilitating such a process (Moshman, 2009). Kolb (1984) places reflection as one of the steps within the learning cycle. Reflection is thus considered as being part of learning rather than outside or parallel to it. Critical reflection is the form of reflection that is more associated with the development of rationality, but it is not easy to actually define it. Wilson (2002) considers it as the practice of examining one's own

subjective thoughts regarding identity, beliefs, and so on. A social theory perspective is that critical reflection allows us to examine the uniqueness of our individual “positionality” within social systems (Foucault, 1982).

Mezirow (1985) gives reflection a central role in his identification of the three functions of learning: (1) instrumental—acquiring new information and skills for a particular job or problem, (2) dialogic—learning to understand what others mean in their communication with us, and (3) self-reflective—learning to understand oneself and becoming critically aware of assumptions underlying one’s values and behaviour. These are based on Habermas’s (1968/1971) three domains of learning: (1) the technical—rote and task-specific with explicit rules; (2) the practical—involving social norms; and (3) the emancipatory—self-reflective, leading to self-knowledge.

Mezirow thus places humongous importance on reflection and autonomy in the process of transformative learning. He states that “by far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical [reflection]—reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling and acting” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 13) and that “self-reflection can lead to significant personal transformations” (Mezirow, 1997 p. 7). For Mezirow (1997), “thinking as an autonomous and responsible agent is essential for full citizenship in democracy and for moral decision making in situations of rapid change” (p. 7). Autonomous thinking “involves becoming critically reflective of assumptions and participating in discourse to validate beliefs, intentions, values and feelings” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 197). Different depths of reflection lead to different depths of transformative learning:

- Content Reflection—leads to learning through meaning schemes: learning takes place within the existing frame of reference, which is further expanded, differentiated and refined.
- Process reflection—leads to learning new meaning schemes that are compatible with existing schemes within the present meaning perspectives.
- Premise reflection (considering the broader view and becoming aware of why we perceive, think, feel and act as we do)—leads to a more profound transformation (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 2000, 2009).

According to Schugurensky (2002), even if not sufficient, critical reflection is essential for transformative learning, and since it does not revolve solely around the individual but also targets social dynamics, it is thus emancipatory in nature and leads to social change. Brookfield (2000, 2009) believes that central to critical reflection is the ideology critique which “describes the process by which people learn to recognise how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices” (2009, p. 293).

The self-reflection promoted by *Bildung* is always reflection with others and in context. In his *Foundations of Natural Right*, Fichte (1797/2000) criticised individualism, and he emphasised that consciousness or rationality is a collective

endeavour and humans become humans, that is rational, self-conscious, individual, autonomous beings, only among other humans, where personal freedom is mutually strengthened. *Bildung* is thus a collective emancipatory process of self-formation with the realisation of human autonomy as one of its main ideals.

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus can lead to a deterministic perspective on human potential and agency. Rather than limiting people to the influences of their social context, critical thinking enables engagement with the notion of change and the realm of possibilities. For Mezirow (2012), transformative learning also leads to personal emancipation through autonomy since its goal is "to help adults realise their potential for becoming more liberated, socially responsible and autonomous learners" (p. 92). The autonomy argument revolves around the idea that people should be free to determine their own lives, including intellectual self-determination (Callan & Arena, 2009). Being autonomous, though, is not to act without any constraint but rather to constrain oneself based on the recognition of, and respect for, the autonomy of others (Moshman, 2009).

Autonomy can be seen as a prerequisite of human agency. We are at an age of unprecedented environmental degradation and excessive human suffering and yet we blindly form part of the system, whatever that might be. The call to autonomy is thus especially urgent in the current global context, a world overwhelmed by global consumerism, fundamentalism, and other ideologies that reduce the human being to only behave (Arendt, 1998).

Nonrational Dimensions of Learning

Even from its earliest inception as a pedagogical concept by Herder in 1769, *Bildung* emphasised feelings and sentiments as opposed to knowledge and rationality (Horlacher, 2016). As the concept was moulded along the years, *Bildung* came to recognise that reason and emotion have an indissoluble relationship (Karlsohn, 2018). *Bildung* nurtures and cultivates the whole person, especially the inner life or human soul. Biesta (2002a) acknowledges that in an era where diversity is recognised, the rational life becomes the only tradition or pathway towards leading a meaningful life, and thus, it is not an "uncontestable aim of all *Bildung*" (p. 348).

Mezirow's rational and cognitive view of transformative learning is considered as the dominant view, but it is not the only conception of transformative learning. Such a view has been criticised for being too narrow (Cranton, 2006). Emotions, for example, are seen as an important component of transformative learning, especially in reflection, since "purely objective reasoning cannot determine what to notice, attend to, and what to inquire about" (van Woerkom, 2010, p. 248), and yet they are not given much importance in Mezirow's theory. E. W. Taylor (2017a) states that even though it is feelings and emotions that guide or distort rationality and that eventually determine what will and won't be reflected upon, the affective component of critical reflection remains emarginated. Emotional intelligence was considered by Mezirow (2003), especially in discourse participation and where he refers to

the importance of “learning to listen empathetically, ‘bracketing’ prejudgment and seeking common ground” (p. 60). It was never given too much importance, though, even if it is empathy that provides the motivation to listen to others and try to understand their perspective (Taylor & Cranton, 2013).

There are many different and sometimes even conflicting alternative conceptions that include factors such as the role of neurobiology, spirituality, and emancipatory learning that have largely been overlooked in this dominant transformative learning discourse (E. W. Taylor, 2017b). Boyd’s (1991) conception of transformative learning is a process of consciously participating in an inner, lifelong journey of individuation for a deeper understanding of the emotional and spiritual self. Janik (2005) uses findings from brain-imaging techniques to offer a neurobiological view of transformative learning, which is “volitional, curiosity-based, discovery-driven, and mentor-assisted” (p. 144) and requires discomfort prior to discovery and appreciation of previous experiences. For E. W. Taylor (2009) also, previous personal experiences are “the primary medium of transformative learning” (p. 5). Illeris (2014) tries to come up with a definition that is inclusive of different conceptions of transformative learning and states that it “comprises all learning which implies changes in the identity of the learner” (Illeris, 2014, p. 40). Such a definition takes into account not only the cognitive, rational dimension of learning but also the emotional and social dimensions (Illeris, 2017).

Social Aspect of Learning

Bildung is often critiqued as being too individualistic and atomistic, but this is quite an unfair criticism. Humboldt (2000) states that individual humanity can only be developed through free interactions with others. Social relationships and interactions are essential to forming one’s identity whilst appreciating the richness of others. For Humboldt’s notion of *Bildung* to be achieved, freedom of exploration through a myriad of different intimate social encounters is required (Vick, 2007). Therefore, even though this emancipatory process of self-formation is ultimately the development of one’s autonomy, it can only occur with and through others. This highly personal journey needs to take place in a community of learners, with the establishment of personal relationships and an exchange of ideas (Fuhr, 2017).

In 1981, Habermas (1981/1984) stressed the importance of socialisation and communication with others to reach collective rationality, that is “the intersubjective relation that speaking and acting subjects take up when they come to an understanding with one another about something” (p. 392). This is communicative learning (Habermas, 1981/1984), in which at least two persons learn together by striving to reach a common understanding of an interpretation or belief, that holds until a new situation arises, which requires a new understanding. Even though for Mezirow learning remained primarily a personal rational endeavour, he was eventually convinced “that personal meanings that we attribute to our experience are acquired and validated through human interaction and communication” (Mezirow, 1991, p. xiv).

The original 10-phase model of perspective transformation was thus expanded to include “renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships” (Mezirow, 1994, p. 224). Regardless of this expansion, Brookfield (2000) and Illeris (2014) criticise Mezirow’s concept as not giving sufficient importance to the inclusion of social interactions.

Social Change

The neoliberal agenda has shifted education with an orientation towards economic needs and overshadowed the agenda for social justice towards humanity, solidarity, and sociality. According to Adorno (1959/2006), *Halbbildung* is what remains when autonomy is discarded and produces compliance and assimilation into current social and cultural norms rather than questioning them. Individuals find it difficult to think beyond the neoliberal mindset and adapt thoughtlessly to the existing social structures, which are deemed obvious and natural (Gaitanidis, 2012).

The transformed individual also has the capacity to change in relation to herself and external situations, shaping her surroundings (Bauer, 2003). Herder believed that an education that was mostly concerned with the processes occurring inside rather than simply the gain of knowledge would serve to alleviate social issues (Horlacher, 2016). In 1794, Schiller (1794/2004) published a series of letters, where *Bildung* was equated with an aesthetic education aimed to form the soul and awaken sentiments. He hoped that educated individuals become agents of change, and this would lead to an improved society and politics. These early notions and the enlightenment period, with its aspirations, such as self and social improvement through education, are the basis of *Bildung* as used later on (Taylor, 2017). The evolution of personal humanity in one individual is an essential part of the evolution towards a perfect ethical human community (Kivelä, 2012). In this community, rationality and autonomy take a social dimension, where each individual has a personal and social responsibility to strive towards the ideal and perfect collective.

Even though *Bildung* has individuality at the core, Klafki (1975) sees it as “*dem Gedanken des wechselseitigen Aufeinanderbezogenseins von Welt und Individuum*—the idea of the reciprocal interrelationship of world and individual” (p. 45). This means that the person does not live within herself but can also participate in a changing society and culture. Klafki (1998) has reapplied the original social aspect of *Bildung* in his new understanding of a “critical-constructive” education: “I have condensed the many facets of the concept into three elements (or three abilities) which *Bildung* is to promote: self-determination—co-determination—solidarity” (p. 313). Self-determination is the independence of the individual in decision making, codetermination refers to the contribution to the development of society, whilst solidarity implies recognising and respecting the autonomy of the other and aiding those whose rights are being impinged upon. In his theory of transformative *Bildung*, Marotzki (1990) claims that due to the current complexity of society, the higher levels of thinking involved in *Bildung* are becoming

increasingly important, adding that educational processes include social problem perception and problem-solving. Society is, therefore, transformed through individuals who are willing to use their potential and reason to reach betterment. Thus, according to Horlacher (2004), *Bildung* is about “the holistic development of the individual, as well as about broader hopes for a better society” (p. 409). According to Biesta (2002a), contemporary views of *Bildung* should recognise the interdependence of humans in the shaping of the person not just as an individual but also as a global citizen and thus including social, political, and ethical dimensions. Education that strives towards *Bildung* hence tries to give students not only the capacity to become autonomous but also the aptitude to engage with moral and social issues throughout their lives.

Mezirow (2000) reckons that individuals ultimately need to determine their own meanings in relation to the world and thus education aims “to help the learner develop the requisite learning processes to think and choose with more reliable insight, to become a more autonomous learner” (p. 348). Collard and Law (1989) criticised Mezirow for the lack of emphasis on social action by transformed individuals. Mezirow (1989) replied to this criticism by noting that he considers the role of the educator as that of supporter through the learner’s process of transformation, not an activist. It is then up to the learner to act and bring about social change. Whereas *Bildung* seems to have developed in such a way as to include social action, Mezirow’s justification remains on the level of a vague hope that the transformed individual will act in such a way as to bring about social change where this is needed. Ludwig (2017) proposes that learning results from problems of action that are limited by social structures and distinguishes between defensive and expansive learning. Defensive learning is a means of coping with social constraints, whilst expansive learning challenges the social conditions and expands the possibilities of action. The social, emancipatory view of transformative learning is quite different from any previous views discussed, as the ultimate goal is not only individual transformation but also social transformation through the development of self-agency (Freire & Macedo, 1995). O’Sullivan (1999) takes this even further by suggesting a more planetary view that recognises the interconnectedness not only between the personal world and the human social community but also the natural environment. Transformation is not only about how one views the self and other humans but also the human relationship with the physical world, giving the human an ecological and planetary dimension, in addition to a sociopolitical dimension.

Taylor (2017) proposes a similar posthumanist, postmodernist stance on *Bildung* that enables educational practices based on recognition of differences and diversity. She also argues that an individual’s development occurs only through complex relationships and interactive events with “others” (human, nonhuman organisms, and materials) such that *Bildung* in the current era needs to involve diverse forms of knowledge-making and more ideals of social justice and citizenship.

When Does It Happen?

Bildung is a perpetual process that starts in childhood as a preparation for higher levels of education, adult life, and participation in society and its processes keep on occurring throughout one's life span as the learner always becomes more mature and intellectually autonomous. Transformative learning theory though considers adult learning as different from that of children and young people and provides an understanding of how adults revise deeply held assumptions about their world. Mezirow (1997) justifies transformative learning theory as an adult learning theory since it is during adulthood that individuals can understand their "purposes, values, beliefs and feelings" (p. 6), whilst also being able to reflect and raise questions about their perspectives critically. Benjamin and Crymble (2017) challenge the presumption that young people are unable to undergo transformative learning and illustrate how they, in fact, can partake in personal reflection, critically examine societies' assumptions, and undergo perspective transformation as they transition into adulthood. Rosenberg (2016) outlines a study by Helsper et al. (2013) which actually sees adolescence as a crisis point where the individual questions the dispositions acquired from their family and schooling and generates her adult habitus. The habitus changes and develops over time as the individual seeks strategies that will allow her to enter novel social fields and redeem economic capital from all the capital (cultural, social, etc.) accumulated throughout her life (Rosenberg, 2016).

Theory and Research

Over the years, *Bildung* has changed in its meaning so many times and has been used and abused by so many that some may even denounce it. For example, Masschelein and Ricken (2003) bring up many reasons in their argument for the abandonment of the concept of *Bildung*. According to Biesta (2002a), "it is important to acknowledge that there is no such "thing" as *Bildung*, that it is not a "thing" on its own" (p. 344). Even though transformative learning theory is much younger than *Bildung*, it has similarly developed in different directions, maybe to its detriment. Brookfield (2000) complains that transformative learning does not currently have a definite meaning, and similarly, Newman (2012) argues that transformative learning has come to mean so many things, that it stopped being a useful construct. Using this criticism, Howie and Bagnall (2013) question whether transformative learning exists only in theory, with little basis in actual educational practice.

Despite this criticism and its recentness, transformative learning theory is backed up by many empirical research endeavours, even if not so much by theoretical ones due to a "lack of ongoing theoretical analysis" (Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p. 42). Taylor and Cranton (2013), though, show their concern regarding research surrounding transformative learning since it appears stagnant, continuously tackling the same themes. They bring the example of the role of experience, empathy, and desire to change, which are important aspects of transformative learning but are rarely explored.

Bildung, on the other hand, has a very rich philosophical history and philosophical inquiries are ongoing, but empirical research is unfavoured. Since *Bildung* and its outcomes are complex, nonempirical concepts, they can never be really measured or reduced to a test. Empirical research also focuses mostly on general short-term results, whereas *Bildung* is an individual lifelong endeavour. “For many decades, *Bildung* theorists believed that empirical research on *Bildung* was neither possible nor valuable . . .” (Fuhr et al., 2017a, p. xi). Such a rejection has softened in the last years, though, with some methodologies being obviously more suitable than others for such research.

Conclusion

Even though both theories have been developed in different continents and reasonably independently of each other, one can easily pinpoint similar attitudes towards education. Although not all views of *Bildung* have transformation at their core, through creative and critical processes, *Bildung*-inspired education has the potential to be transformative. Both *Bildung* and transformative learning theory are rooted in humanism that assumes that humans are intrinsically good, creative beings who create meaning through their experiences and emphasises the agency of human beings. They do not merely see humans as functional beings but also subjective with a developing consciousness regarding the self, others, and the world and intersubjective through relationships with others (living or nonliving). Schmidt-Lauff (2017) argues that both notions share the rather optimistic belief that rational thinking directs individual and social progress, whilst according to Fuhr et al. (2017a), they share the recognition of difference as a major driving force for learning. Both notions are also perceived to be a higher form of learning than passive knowledge acquisition, as they enable people to move further along the path of reaching their potential. Three common constructs emerge as being fundamental for learning that is transformational: experience, reflection, and dialogue.

At the same time, there are also quite sharp differences between the two in the way they perceive the roles of childhood and adolescent learning, the community of learners and the learner as an agent of social change. Despite these differences, *Bildung* and transformative learning theory can contribute to the development of each other, with transformative learning nudging practice in the classroom and *Bildung* urging engagement with theory (Fuhr et al., 2017b).

The ability to transform is essential in the current unpredictability of globalisation and economies and “this is precisely what may be learned through the kind of processes that are termed transformative learning” (Illeris, 2014, p. 31). *Bildung* and transformative learning theory enable individuals to not only adapt to changes in their environment but actively participate in processes of change. These notions offer an alternative educational paradigm for the improvement of society, and the need for such perceptions has never been higher than today. There is thus a sense of urgency for educators in trying to understand and come to terms with such notions so

that they can be translated into pedagogical practices that can help learners reach autonomy and agency.


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