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## Non-affirmative theory of education: problems, positionings and possibilities

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# 1. Non-affirmative theory of education: problems, positionings and possibilities

**Abstract** Non-affirmative education theory represents a contemporary interpretation of the longstanding European tradition of *Bildung* and Bildung-related theory of education. This introductory chapter begins with a broad view of non-affirmative theory of education and Bildung, as well as the motives for engaging in such a dialogue. Second, as this way of theorising education and Bildung starts from education as an academic discipline of its own, this introduction describes some of the typical questions raised within the German and Nordic traditions of general education (*Allgemeine Pädagogik*). Third, this chapter includes a short overview of the volume, describing its structure and the separate chapters.

**Key words** Non-affirmative education theory, general education, Bildung

Michael Uljens

This edited volume contributes to the international dialogue on non-affirmative education theory. Non-affirmative education theory represents a contemporary interpretation of the longstanding European tradition of *Bildung* and Bildung-related theory of education. The number of scholars around the world interested in this approach is steadily growing. Non-affirmative education theory is today not a limited German–Nordic research issue but a global one, reaching from the Americas to Asia and the Global South. The approach draws systematically on the modern tradition of Bildung and Bildung-related education theory, since, for example, Rousseau, Humboldt, Herbart and Schleiermacher. In analysing features of this tradition, this volume critically reviews and develops it in relation to both subsequent theory and contemporary societal challenges, such as democracy, sustainable development, technology, transnational aggregations and globally operating educational policies. There is reason to believe that a non-affirmative approach to educative teaching and Bildung offers us a pedagogically more distinguished language of education and human growth. Such a language enables us to reflect on and put words to what it means to become and develop as persons, human and cultural beings, and political citizens, as we search for a way beyond

contemporary educational policies that reduce education and schools to a shadow of what they can be.

This introductory chapter begins with a broad view of non-affirmative theory of education and *Bildung*, as well as the motives for engaging in such a dialogue. Second, as this way of theorising education and *Bildung* starts from education as an academic discipline of its own, this introduction describes some of the typical questions raised within the German and Nordic traditions of general education (*Allgemeine Pädagogik*). Third, this chapter includes a short overview of the volume, describing its structure and the separate chapters.

### **Non-affirmative education: A long tradition and recent developments**

The non-affirmative education theory promoted by Professor Dietrich Benner, which takes its starting point in the 1960s, forms an important reference point for all the chapters in this book. It formulates a position beyond seeing education as either conservative socialisation or radical societal transformation. In this respect, non-affirmative education theory connects to the broad and long tradition of *Bildung*, where the pedagogical selection and treatment of the cultural content of teaching holds a key position. It is this cultural content and its pedagogical treatment, including the learner's own engagement with it that supports the individual's development into a unique person who, at the same time, shares the world with others.

The idea of non-affirmative education reaches back to Plato in that the teacher is not considered able to transfer knowledge or insights from outside; instead, the teacher can only turn the learner's attention and gaze, which requires the learner herself to be active in finding her way to knowledge. In its modern aspect, this tradition developed from the 1760s onwards.

From the individual's perspective, *Bildung* is a life-long process, while pedagogical interventions in this process, moulding the process itself, have many beginnings and ends. Non-affirmative theory reminds us that a *pedagogical* take on *Bildung* aims at inviting the learner to conduct self-reflexive activities aiming at reaching beyond existing ways of understanding, interpreting, valuing and acting in the world, but also to develop a morally reflected will directing a responsible way of living together others (Whistler, 2010).

From the perspective of humanity, or from a generational perspective, education is an unending task. As modern education views the future as an unwritten book, education aims at working pedagogically with the child as an unknown subject to prepare her for a future that we do not know. Both theological and teleological explanations of both individuals and culture were abandoned with the move to modern education. Modern education thus abandoned anything reminiscent of the Socratic solution to the paradox of learning – that

learning should be about reaching something innate. In Plato's dialogue between Socrates and Meno, a young man aspiring to become a general, Meno asks how he can reach knowledge if he does not know what to look for. Yet if he knew what he was looking for, he would not need to search, as he would already know it. The Socratic solution to the paradox of learning in Plato's dialogue is that while *teaching virtue* by bringing such insight from outside is impossible, as the teacher (Socrates) does not know what it is, *learning virtue* is possible, as it is about recalling something that we have access to within us. The position states that teaching, instead of bringing knowledge to the learner from outside, instead bring the learner into a state of perplexity (aporia), making others doubt and aware of their ignorance (Westacott, 2019). This reminds us that teaching is capable of supporting the learner to be active herself in trying to reach *in-sight* into what she already bears within herself. While the modern view of teaching denies the nativist view of the origins of knowledge, it shares the view of teaching as a support for the learner's engagement in trying to reach beyond her present insights.

Rousseau, Herder, Humboldt, Fichte, Schleiermacher and Herbart, as well as education philosophers such as Johan Vilhelm Snellman in Finland (1806–1881), contributed to reformulating the dilemma of *Bildung* and education by introducing a set of principles and concepts making up the conceptual architecture of modern education. Much of our present-day educational theorising accepts the foundational assumptions developed by these and other early modern European educational theorists. For example, it is widely accepted that the individual *is* both anthropologically free and undetermined, yet humans are necessarily in need of education to *become* culturally free and able to act accordingly. In addition, most accept the modern idea that teaching only influences learning indirectly: teaching is mediated by the student's own activity, working with selected cultural content. Did these developments eliminate the paradox of learning, as it existed in the Socratic nativist theory of *learning as recollection (anamnesis)*, which considers that certain concepts exist in the human mind from before birth? Further, did the *Bildung* tradition also eliminated the paradox of learning as explained by Christianity, where the human, on the one hand, is an image of God and, on the other, without knowing what this image is like, must strive for reunification with the creator? The modern *Bildung* tradition obviously denies both ways of *explaining* the paradox of what it means to both *be* human and *become* human. Differently expressed, the modern *Bildung* tradition assumes that humans *are* originally able to reflect while also in need of *becoming* able to reflect. The same holds true of intersubjectivity. It is true that we *already* share the world with others from the very beginning of life, but it is also true that we *come* to share the

world by growing into it. In the same vein, we *are* originally capable of reflecting. This capability makes education possible. At the same time, we need to *become* culturally reflecting, which makes education necessary.

With the establishment of the modern view of Bildung, the paradox of learning fundamentally changed, but it did not disappear as a paradox. Modern European education theory rewrote the paradox of learning. What made education possible was from then on the assumption that the subject *is* initially reflective, undetermined and self-active, but to *become* culturally reflecting and self-determined, education was indispensable and necessary. In this respect, education as *Erziehung* (educative teaching) is about the cultivation or civilisation of the subject, morally and intellectually. Yet, as, Snellman (1861) reminds us, how the learner receives culture, is not a mere reflection of how it was passed on to her. Rather, the reception involves interpretation of its meaning and value, while the way the subject herself actively passes on culture is not an imitation of how she herself valued and interpreted it, when receiving it.

In educative teaching, the learner is invited into a kind of reflexive engagement with cultural content selected with pedagogical motives (i.e., content making sense to and through the learner). The selected knowledge is powerful both in terms of being exemplary with respect to what it represents and by allowing the learner to engage productively with it to transcend her experiences. In this process, the learner is *summoned* to self-reflexivity and self-activity (*Selbsttätigkeit*) under the assumption that the learner herself is actively doing the learning. In other words, she studies. While learning is a process, studying is an activity. However, this does not mean that the learner beforehand was passive, only becoming active due to the teaching, as if the subject's capability to act was a gift from the educator. Rather, the subject, sharing the everyday world with others and addressed by the educator, *is* already active and already a reflective being, as indicated by the concept of *Bildsamkeit*. What is then *Bildsamkeit*?

In this tradition of Bildung, Herbart saw *Bildsamkeit* as a core concept. It includes the *experiencing* subject's active *orientation* towards the world as a kind of noetico-noematic correlation. Here the act of experiencing is parallel with the object or content of experiencing. Only analytically, the act can be separated from the contents. This epistemological position assumes that the phenomenological subject and object are not separate but instead intertwined or interdependent. We can thus speak meaningfully only about the world as experienced by us. As the world *in itself* is unreachable, the idea of the human mind as such, is an empty concept, yet displays itself as a capacity. In this interpretation of Bildung, it is argued that

human thought can only be determined in relation to what it is not (i.e., content that is not produced by itself), although the meaning of an object is co-constituted by an experiencing subject.

For the emergence of the individual as a social and cultural being, social interaction is constitutive, as the subject identifies herself (i.e., becomes an object for herself) only by first being addressed by the Other. The origin of this line of thought goes back to Fichte's critique of the Kantian transcendental subject, a view further developed by Hegel. Today, this school of thought is best known as the contributions of early American pragmatists such as George Herbert Mead and John Dewey.

Following this line of thought, personalisation and socialisation are parallel processes. A subject may recognise herself as unique in relation to others only by coming to share the world with others. In this tradition, *Bildung* sees human existence as involving an unending process of becoming. It is a processual and relational position regarding the Self.

Education *as summoning* (*Erziehung*) thus intervenes in the subject's active relation to herself, others and the world. *Turning* the learner's attention to these relations may help the learner transcend her existing lifeworld. This occurs by facilitating or inviting the learner into an active engagement with and rethinking her relation to the world. Such rethinking is of a sort that the learner would not otherwise have become engaged in. To make the learner's original experience an object of reflection in relation to something new, contributes to the creation of a *pedagogical space* that allows the learner to change her gaze. In this sense, the self-activity that the learner is summoned to refers to a specific class of activities that we, for the sake of convenience, call *studying* – that is, those learner activities that relate to educative interventions.

Non-affirmative education theory emphasises moral freedom as a central aim of education. As the idea is that the learner learns to follow her self-reflexive will, rather than acting upon impulse or following conventions, educative teaching does not pass on culture affirmatively. Instead, educative teaching invites the learner into reflexive engagement regarding the meaning and value of the presented content. This meaning and value is created in a process by inviting the learner to actively engage with the content. Only such education that does not affirm circumstances as given may challenge the learner to turn her attention away from the self-evident and taken for granted. The pedagogical tasks presented by the teacher, help the learner create a distance from her everyday experiences. In this sense, the modern notion of *Bildung* accepts *negative freedom* as liberating the subject by creating a reflective distance from conventions and the student's own everyday experiences. It means

engaging the learner in reconnecting to the previously familiar, not only to connect new knowledge to something known but also to experience how new principled insights help her reach beyond her particularities. In this sense, education is elevating. Education differs from mere socialisation, which does not make a difference in terms of whether the learner develops her ideas of the world passively or through an independent, self-reflective and evaluative process of studying.

The conceptual challenges of the non-affirmative school of thought remind us of some of the assumptions of Plato. However, in its way of solving the paradox of learning, the position primarily draws upon *modern theory education* as developed from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. With Kant, we came to understand that humans are not just abiding laws given to us; instead, humans are also the creators of laws. Given the idea of humanity as creating, preserving and changing moral conventions, learning in terms of socialisation into habits, conventions and traditions turned out to be inadequate. Understanding that norms are things that we can change and that conceptual knowledge is something that we can develop further is not something that we can learn without turning our attention to this and reflecting on specific occasions of it. Learning in terms of *Bildung* takes us beyond socialisation to conventions. *Bildung* represents reaching a meta-perspective on conventional experience and knowledge. It is a sort of second-order learning, preparing for a collaborative discursive capacity to renegotiate knowledge, values and conventions.

From a broad perspective, a main movement in early modern European education theory was the change from a teleological to a non-teleological view of the individual and society. A significant contribution to this end was John Locke's idea of *tabula rasa*, opposing the idea of *original sin* as something planted in the individual. For Locke, humans are neither bad nor good from birth. In addition, modernist reasoning around education left the idea of *imago Dei*, which saw humans as an image of God who yet faced the task of reunification with the creator (*imitatio Christi*), which was assumed to make true human growth meaningful (Koselleck, 2002). Enlightenment *Bildung* replaced the creation myth that for so long had explained why humans were endowed with the capacities of rational understanding, deliberation, self-actualisation and self-transcendence.

With, for example, Humboldt and Herder, the modern idea of *Bildung* came to see human growth as something unending or as a life-long task. As individuals, we have to learn to live with a *good life* as an open question, as F. D. E. Schleiermacher expressed it. Non-affirmative theory connects the question of a good life (ethics) with the knowledge learned in schools. School teaching thus always points beyond learning content as such, with its meaning and

value. The idea is to support the learner's growth as an intellectual, moral, social, historical and political subject and her development as a person and citizen. Therefore, educative teaching summons the learner to personal engagement with selected cultural content in order to determine its meaning and value.

As knowledge is always an answer to questions, the task of teaching is to help the learner understand not only the answers but also the questions to which the knowledge is the answer. It is crucial that the learner becomes familiar with the ways in which we have answered questions thus far, but this must be accompanied by understanding that we may answer them differently in the future. In this sense, in challenging the learner's previous experiences and ways of explaining phenomena, existing knowledge possesses emancipatory power. The assumption is that knowledge helps us overcome the ways in which the world constrains us. Acquiring such insights emancipates the learner from her previous socialisation. In this, historical reflection is valuable. With the help of what knowledge were the given questions earlier answered? How should we answer them today?

Teaching that *points* at similarities and differences, to direct the learner's attention, may help the learner reach critical insights, that is, insights with a wide explanatory value. In such a process, the learner reaches so-called *productive freedom* and learns how to act in the world with her already existing resources. Yet, this is never done by uncritically passing on knowledge. On the contrary, while we use structured knowledge to problematise everyday experiences, the knowledge used for these purposes is also viewed critically. Differently expressed, while non-affirmative education theory takes the questions and answers of historical positions seriously, in no way does it remain with the answers provided. In particular, university teaching aims at developing meta-theoretical insights in terms of epistemology, ontology and methodology. Meta-theoretical reflection allows us to make existing conceptual and empirical knowledge an object of reflection to determine in what respects it must be transcended.

Applying the above reasoning to education theory itself reminds us – and ensures that – progress in theorising education is possible, but in order to reach beyond what is, theorising necessarily requires insights into disciplinary history. Thus, one of the aims of this volume is to point to the disciplinary history and reveal how non-affirmative theory relates to that history, thereby offering us the possibility to critically evaluate to what extent such a theory is valid given today's problems.

**Education operates indirectly – by not affirming**



Non-affirmative education assumes that teaching operates indirectly, with learning mediated by the student's own activities. As learning cannot occur without the individual's own activity, teaching can only organise study opportunities. As teaching in this sense is an indirect activity with respect to learning, it is about *recognising* the learner as a unique subject with specific experiences, intentions and hopes. At the same time, teaching challenges the learner, provoking her experiences, reflective capacity and patterns of thought and questioning her knowledge by inviting her to engage with selected topics, tasks and learning content. Thus, while teaching *tactfully recognises* the subject in a broad sense of the word, non-affirmative teaching does not aim at affirming the student's previous experiences. It is, in other words, useful to keep up a difference between the concept of recognition (*Anerkennung*) and the pedagogical activity of summoning (*Aufforderung*).

However, to practise such summoning of the Other to self-activity, education must be tactful. For example, to listen to the learner can mean many things, but at the very least, it means *being there with* the learner. To listen thus means recognising and being open to the learner's experiences. Pedagogical listening means recognising the Other's right to her voice. Recognising the learner's right to reach and raise her own voice makes teachers and educators obliged to listen. In non-affirmative education theory, teaching is viewed as *summoning the Other to self-actively work on her own previous experiences with the help of the content of teaching*. Such summoning can occur in a number of ways. Most typically, summoning occurs by addressing the Other verbally. Summoning can also occur by being silent, thereby creating and upholding a space for the learner. The *act* of active listening offers the learner an empirical possibility to both realise and actualise her right to her own voice – the right that was recognised. Pedagogical listening is, as an interventional act, a *pedagogical provocation*. As a pedagogical provocation, we can, for example, ask the student about what something said means. We can ask the student to compare her own views/ideas with somebody else's. In doing so, we recognise, without affirming, the learner's experiences. We try to open up a *pedagogical space* where we can, together, reflect, test, discuss and problematise things.

Finally, learning to listen is not only a capacity of the teacher but also something that teaching intends to promote among learners. To listen to a pupil means moving the attention away from our own perspective and taking our fellow human's ways of experiencing seriously. Developing such a sensitivity lies at the core of any moral education, as it includes the insight that the learner herself is a part of the world surrounding the other. To learn to view ourselves through the eyes of others and compare this vision with what we ourselves experience ourselves to be – or with what we ourselves want to be for the other – is a self-

directed process of *Bildung*. To conclude, non-affirmative pedagogical practice consists of problematising interests external to school, including the learner's subjective life-world. Education is then mediating, in a non-affirmative sense, between these.

In claiming the right to question existing knowledge, and through the obligation to involve the student in activities of meaning making, non-affirmative education theory accepts *emancipation* as a task for public education. Thus, school teaching often aims at breaking with primary socialisation with the help of structured knowledge. In this respect, the idea is that school knowledge emancipates the learner from practices and ideas that she acquired in primary socialisation. In general, modern education theory shares the idea of *negative liberty*, which means liberating the learner from external restraints. Thus, while primary socialisation occurs by participating in everyday life, *educative teaching* turns this taken-for-granted experience of the world into an object of critical reflection. In this respect, non-affirmative education, in addition to accepting negative liberty, aims at *productive liberty*, where productive liberty or freedom refers to self-realisation and self-determination.

However, although non-affirmative education theory is value-laden in defending *productive freedom* as something worth striving for, non-affirmative theory does *not* promote *positive emancipation*. From an educational perspective, the dilemma of positive emancipation is that such a practice does not limit itself to questioning one set of knowledge, principles and values or one specific view of the world, as is the case with negative emancipation. Instead, positive emancipation in addition aims at *replacing* these insights with another set of pre-determined ways of viewing the world. Non-affirmative education thus avoids the risk of indoctrination or authoritarianism that may follow from positive emancipation, as it requires the learner herself to work out what she thinks about the presented knowledge (Benner, 2015; Berlin, 1969, p. 132).

Yet, while it defends positive and productive freedom and takes a distance from positive emancipation, non-affirmative theory is not value-neutral or devoid of values. The pedagogical norm advocated by non-affirmative education theory considers that educative teaching should not affirm existing knowledge by passing it on in an unproblematised way to the learner. It does not deny that passing on a cultural heritage is a task for the school; but directs the attention to how this passing on occurs. This means that while school teaching in a political democracy recognises the legitimate aims and content formulated and selected in the curriculum, educative teaching has not only the right but also the pedagogical obligation to problematise this knowledge and its very worth. Only when teachers have the right to problematise given knowledge, teachers can help learners reach beyond learning certain

specific pieces of knowledge and instead develop principled insights regarding the topic at hand. These educational aims, which promote the development of the individual's autonomy and include the teaching of critical and analytical thinking, presuppose a curriculum and evaluation system that is open enough for knowledge not to be affirmed. However, curricula in many countries around the world require affirmative teaching from teachers.

### **Beyond societal and cultural reproduction and transformation**

Non-affirmative education theory is located beyond traditional ideologically and politically driven critical theories, but it also stands in stark contrast to politically and culturally conservative reproduction-oriented pedagogies and related instrumentalist views of learning aiming at developing instrumental competencies. Non-affirmative theory thereby avoids reducing education to an instrument for external interests whether these interests promote either societal transformation or societal reproduction. Such positions not only downplay the role of the subject in the pedagogical process itself, but also disregard the school's role in educating rational, ethical, politically autonomous and self-directed subjects and citizens who are able to live, together with their fellow human beings, with the meaning of a good life as an open question.

Indeed, the value of non-affirmative education greatly lies in how this theoretical tradition manages in a coherent way to clarify conceptually two rather straightforward, yet complicated questions. The first question deals with how we conceptually explain how human activity, identified as pedagogical activity, relates to human growth, learning and *Bildung*, particularly how the learner's own activities mediate pedagogical influences. The second question is how the relationally connected practices, pedagogical influences and *Bildung* conceptually relate to societal development at large, including politics, culture and the economy.

These two questions form the point of departure for any conceptual system worth calling an educational theory: (a) how do we explain the dynamics of the teaching–studying–learning process (*Erziehung* and *Bildung*; Uljens, 1997), and (b) how does education as a *societal* practice relate to other societal practices, such as politics and the economy? Although the questions appear simple, these questions point at a number of foundational philosophical issues: What makes pedagogical influence *possible* in the first place? What, if anything, makes such influence a *necessary* activity? What exactly, then, do we mean by *pedagogical* interventions in relation to all other kinds of influences occurring in human interaction that may also give rise to learning? Are there any specific kinds of learning that pedagogical

activity aims at? Is pedagogical influence necessary for certain learning to occur? How do we engage with the dilemma that neither politics nor education can be subordinate or dominant in relation to the other? How do we educate for a future that is, in principle, unknown?

Other questions that non-affirmative theory seeks to answer are those related to normativity. The normative dilemma includes the question of how we think education *theory* should support practitioners. Should education theory, in addition to making the phenomenon of education and Bildung conceptually visible by providing an analytical language with which we can talk about private education experiences, also promote the aims and methods of teaching? Thanks to Herbart and Schleiermacher, we have been familiar for more than 200 years with the idea that education theory should offer professionals a language enabling us to talk about education more precisely. Does this mean that the theory must limit its task of functioning as an analytical tool to sharpen practitioners' reflection and offer them a language enabling communication? If education theory *is* by definition value-laden, does this mean that a theory should promote and prescribe only certain educational norms and practices, while not prescribing others? Is it really possible that a theory is, at some level, bound to certain values but still open enough not to replace the role of a democratically agreed curriculum?

This volume accepts that theories in human, social and educational sciences are not completely devoid of values. In such a morally loaded field of knowledge as education, value-neutrality is not a possibility. So, what exactly does being *value-laden* mean in educational theory? Does it mean that a theory of education should start from and build upon certain ethical theories? Perhaps value-laden instead means that we expect a *theory* of education to *explain* what norms and goals schools should promote. Perhaps normativity in education refers to promoting and developing the *learner's capability* in moral reasoning – that is, her will.

Non-affirmative theory first suggests that there is a difference between, for example, politics and education as societal practices. As these societal practices (politics and education) perform different things, they cannot conceptually derive from each other. We see them as standing in a non-hierarchical relation to each other, neither of them being subordinate or superordinate in relation to the other. Following such a view, political practice in a democracy would naturally influence what schools should aim at, but in doing so, politics would act in a self-restricted way. Consequently, while education would prepare students for future autonomous participation in economic, cultural and political practices, it would carry out this task in a self-restricted way. Here, education would not perceive itself as superior to politics and imagine that it is the task of education alone to determine the future shape of society.

Instead, education would prepare future citizens to act according to their own will, reflected in relation to others' ideas and views.

### **Non-affirmative education as a general, but not universal, theory**

Non-affirmative theory of education and *Bildung* represent general or what was earlier named *systematic* education. What then is meant by *general education* or *systematic education*? General theory of education<sup>1</sup> has traditionally covered what in the Anglo–American world refers to both the theory of education and the philosophy of education (e.g., Uljens, 2002; Benner, 2015). More specifically, *general education* typically represents the ontological level of analysing the nature of education, aiming at foundational theory characterising cultural human growth in relation to pedagogical efforts (Herbart and Schleiermacher). The analysis of the central concepts in German general education, *Erziehung* and *Bildung*, reflects this intention. The German–Nordic tradition still owes very much to J. F. Herbart's way of approaching the problem, first explicated in 1806 in his *Allgemeine Pädagogik*. Herbart builds upon Rousseau, Kant and others, but his way of structuring the field in many respects set the stage for 200 years. In this tradition, education is not seen as a *field* of research, but as a *discipline* of its own.

The following questions comprise some of the main issues in general education and general educational theory:

1. What *are* human growth (*Bildung*) and education?
2. What makes education *possible*?
3. What makes education *necessary*?
4. What are the *limits* of education?
5. Is a *universal* theory of education possible?
6. How does education relate to *other disciplines*?
7. How does education relate to *other forms of societal and cultural practices*?
8. Can, and should, a general theory of education be *normative* regarding its aims and methods?

This list of questions is not exhaustive, but it fairly well reflects the orientation within general education, which draws, as the questions above clearly indicate, on philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the German *Allgemeine Pädagogik* or *Allgemeine Erziehungswissenschaft*, the Swedish *allmän pedagogik* and the Finnish *yleinen kasvatustiede*. The first European chair in education operating without any interruption until this day was established in 1852 in Finland to serve the need for secondary school teacher education.

reflection. Yet, even if general education is a theoretical exercise, the discipline of education is not limited to theory alone. It includes empirical research.

Traditionally, general education (*Allgemeine Pädagogik*) has taken its point of departure in a certain understanding of the relation between *generations*. The view of general education as dealing with the generational problem falls back on the modern interpretation of cultural change as ateleological, which means that there is no inherent aim (*telos*) that societal change is developing to. The indeterminate subject in an indeterminate world is to be educated, although both the educated subject and the future are, by definition, unknown. Philosophical anthropology alone cannot explain education. Instead, education explores what *becoming* human means, rather than limiting itself to establishing what *being* human means. A different way of expressing this point of departure is to recall that to be human is to be in a constant state of becoming. The shape of the future is also dependent on how existing and future generations act, so educative measures cannot be inferred from a world that we are determined to develop. In this respect, modern education is antiutopian. Instead, what kind of humanity we are striving for is constantly under negotiation.

General education investigates generational changes from both the individual's and the culture's perspective. The individual is to be educated so that she will become a mature member of society as well as an individual who is capable of contributing to the further development of the culture, as Schleiermacher formulates the position in his 1826 lectures (Schleiermacher, 1994, p. 38). The autonomous, mature individual, expressed by the German word *Mündigkeit*, operating on the basis of a reflected will, has thus become the ultimate aim of modern education. This aim is of no less importance in a political democracy and from a global perspective.

As a discipline, education is differentiated through a number of subfields and subdisciplines. With this expansion and differentiation of the field, there is reason to ask what role, if any, general education has for curriculum theory, didactics (*Didaktik*), subject matter didactics and other more limited initiatives in education. Today, general education (*Allgemeine Pädagogik*) exists in the tension between being a foundational discipline for all pedagogical subdisciplines and fields of research and, at the same time, being a specialised subdiscipline itself, primarily focused on an ontological, but not metaphysical, level of analysis. This means that positions regarding the ontological question of *what something essentially is* are cultural–historical, thus accepting the historicity of these ontological answers (Uljens, 2002). Thus, general education is indeed a specialisation, but it is a specialisation regarding foundational issues. The specialised subfields (adult education, special education,

preschool education, vocational education, etc.) are then *fields of research* within education as a discipline. The subfields aim at developing *regional theories*. The relation between general education theories and various pedagogical subfield theories is reminiscent of the relation between philosophy and the social sciences: philosophy cannot answer the problems of the more specialised fields, while the subfields cannot manage without a philosophical level of reasoning. In this respect, pedagogical subfields may have a relatively, but not completely, autonomous life. The specific fields of research reflect the general issues from their respective positions. Neither can replace the other.

### **The hermeneutical character of education theory**

Educational policy and practice always reflect the current time and respond to identified needs. This is also true for education as an academic discipline and its theory. Studies in the history of ideas clearly demonstrate how educational theories change over time. Not only do they change over time; there also exist profound contemporary variations between, for example, the Anglo–American curriculum tradition and the German–Nordic tradition (*Bildung* and *Didaktik/didactics*). Therefore, we cannot understand theoretical outlines correctly, or evaluate their relevance, without reference to the culture and societies that they serve, explain and criticise. Accepting the historicity of education theory reflects a hermeneutical epistemology in human, social and educational sciences.

From this, two things follows. First, when we want to evaluate theoretical proposals, it is necessary and valuable to describe some of the educational *tasks* and *challenges* that we experience in our world of today. After all, as it is such questions that we expect theory to explain, we need to compare how different positions provide answers to a given set of questions. Second, even if we deny the possibility of temporally and culturally universal education theories in principle, we may still claim that more or less *generally valid* explanatory conceptual systems are both possible and meaningful. To defend the meaningfulness of general approaches does not mean that we claim that they have ontological superiority over other general systems. Contemporary conceptual plurality thus requires researchers to be *theoretically multi-lingual*. This volume argues that a global dialogue on education theory, carried out by representatives from different cultural traditions and political realities, is supported by a non-affirmative mindset. This means that participants in such an international dialogue duly *recognise* Others' voices but do *not affirm* them as such. Rather, we each interpret these ideas based on our own tradition, but with an open mind, allowing strong arguments to play their role.

What does not follow from an *epistemological* stance, such as hermeneutics, is that the question of *what* education in itself is or should be, cannot receive any answer. From a general theory of knowledge (epistemology), we cannot deduce education theory. Rather, we must turn to *regional ontological* analysis to define the object or the phenomenon in question. This is exactly the strategy applied by non-affirmative theory: the position explores the essential character of education, teaching, studying and learning in its own terms. It does not find the basis of such theory in ethics, psychology or sociology, nor in epistemology or a general philosophical anthropology. Yet, there has always existed a temptation to apply reductionist ways of conceptualising education and its aims and methods as a societal practice. This volume, however, refutes the view that education theory can develop out of such fields of knowledge. Rather, education is a cultural and societal practice requiring theory of its own.

This volume thus argues that, as an academic enterprise, one task of educational research is to contribute through the development of theory within education as a discipline of its own. In this respect, education is like jurisprudence/law, political science, economics, religion and medicine. Education is not just another field of empirical research or field of knowledge. The danger of developing education starting from other disciplines, such as ethics or psychology, is that such a strategy can only result in normative or prescriptive propositions and principles. No *theory* of education can come out of such research.

Another way to explain the present position is to observe that just because we are able to identify pedagogical dimensions in health care practice, politics or economics, we do not imagine that it is possible to explain these practices with a theory of education. Consequently, just because there is a psychological or ethical dimension present in pedagogical practice, we do not reduce education to ethics or psychology. While we may think that education theory is necessary for understanding education, this does not mean that we are blind to the value of applying organisational, institutional, psychological, ethical and other perspectives to complete our understanding of education as a societal phenomenon.

### **This volume**

This volume comprises five themes. In addition to this introductory chapter, the main contribution in Part I is Dietrich Benner's chapter laying out significant features of affirmativity and non-affirmativity in education and Bildung. Reminding us that the discipline of general education requires *both* theory of Bildung and theory of education, the non-affirmative position represents a unique way of relating these theories to each other. Besides



clarifying how non-affirmative pedagogy builds upon the idea that all education operates indirectly via the student's own activity, the chapter explains the implications of an ateleological view of the future. If education is seen, not only in terms of individuals' growth towards moral, rational, cultural and political self-determination, but also in terms of cultural development from an intergenerational perspective, where the future is what it will be constructed to become, reproduction and transformative theories of education are inappropriate. The non-affirmative approach offers a third position taking us beyond traditional traps in theorising education. The chapter reminds us that non-affirmative thinking in education is not a revolutionary position but rather a contemporary interpretation of the modern tradition, which, in many places, has been lost as a point of reference.

After an introduction to the main features of the approach, Part II continues with a close reading of how this approach appears from the perspective of teaching or Didaktik. First, in Chapter 2, *Thomas Rucker* locates how non-affirmative thinking is represented more broadly among German education theorists, working his way towards opening up the notion of *educative teaching*. In Chapter 3, *Ling Lin* analyses in detail Herbart's classical theory of *educative teaching* and uses this as a critical point of reference for reflecting on contemporary education policies and practices. Ling Lin successfully demonstrates the validity of Herbart's view in today's world. In the last chapter of this section on Didaktik, *Michael Uljens* carries out a non-affirmative reading of *reflexive school didactics*. Here, Benner's constitutive and regulative principles in non-affirmative education theory are utilised to revisit and rethink a previously developed position in *school didactics*.

Part III highlights how non-affirmative theory differs from and demonstrates similarities to four globally recognised approaches to education and Bildung, which partly share the same roots. On the one hand, these chapters are constructive contributions in further theorising education and Bildung, along with the ideas of non-affirmative education. On the other hand, readers who are already familiar with these four approaches may find this section to be the key for approaching and understanding the unique features of the non-affirmative approach.

In the first chapter of this section, *Andrea English* highlights the connections between Deweyan pragmatism and non-affirmative education theory. Andrea English exemplifies these connections by discussing how listening as a pedagogical act reflects both recognising and summoning the subject. The second chapter in this section starts by observing that both the learner's activity (*Bildsamkeit*) and pedagogical activity (summoning) feature a hermeneutic moment. *Michael Uljens* and *Mari Mielityinen* show how education, as summoning to self-activity and *Bildsamkeit*, mediates between, on the one hand, subjectivity

and intersubjectivity as foundational assumptions regarding human existence and, on the other, experiential notions describing what it means to be and develop as an encultured human being.

In the next chapter, *Juan José Sosa Alonso* analyses the relation between justice and education. He sees the value of a distributive approach to, for example, social justice but reminds us of the limitations of such an approach in education. By returning to Plato's way of dealing with justice as virtue, Juan José Sosa Alonso, via a detour to Gadamer and Foucault, demonstrates that the non-affirmative approach is fruitful for dealing with justice as a pedagogical virtue. In the final chapter of this third section, discussing non-affirmative theory and related approaches, *Johannes Tüerstig* and *Malte Brinkmann* explore the possibilities of a position that bridges the subject-centred phenomenological tradition and the sociological tradition of Bourdieu, which emphasises tradition and the role of the collective.

Part IV turns the attention to how non-affirmative education can support empirical research. Three contributions highlight how the validity of non-affirmative theory is not limited to an ontological or systematic analysis of the essential characteristics of *Bildung* and pedagogical work. In the first chapter of this section, *Hanno Su* and *Johannes Bellman* apply non-affirmative education methodologically, considering the approach as valid and meaningful for developmental research in education. They demonstrate that non-affirmative education theory and *Bildung* feature a certain kind of pedagogical experimentalism due to the relational nature of summoning and *Bildsamkeit*. This interpretation, they argue, is strengthened by the principle of verification: how did the pedagogical process turn out, given the intentions? The point made is that this experimental and non-determinate nature of education in fact corresponds with open-ended intervention research supporting school development.

In the next chapter, *Alex Mäkiharju*, *Petra Autio* and *Michael Uljens* continue with the same issue but from a different angle. They carve out a new field of comparative dialogue between non-affirmative education theory and cultural–historical activity theory. While the latter is globally well known and utilised as a point of departure for intervention-oriented research and research-supported developmental work, the position share surprisingly many foundational assumptions with non-affirmative theory. The strength of the non-affirmative approach is its capacity to provide a language of education, while-cultural–historical activity theory is considered equally valid for developmental processes occurring in any context. In the third and final chapter of this section, *Ann-Sofie Smeds-Nylund* directs our attention to educational leadership, typically overlooked in the literature on education theory and

Didaktik, despite recent developments that demonstrate how central this activity is. While it is typical to ground leadership research in organisation theory, such an approach is educationally mute or blind. By contrast, Ann-Sofie Smeds-Nylund demonstrates how discursive institutionalism may add fruitful aspects for understanding leadership, if only there is a language of education at the bottom.

Finally, Part V concludes the volume by broadening the critical focus. This part reflects the possibility of viewing non-affirmative theory of education and Bildung as a critical voice challenging contemporary educational policy making, governance and leadership of schools. *Bangping Ding* demonstrates how the non-affirmative approach helps us characterise the developments in Didaktik and curriculum in China over the past 100 years. The argument is that while China throughout its more recent history has adopted foreign policies and positions, thereby affirming these, the present way of relating to various positions reflects a more non-affirmative stance. The chapter represents a voice opening up non-affirmative theory of education as a relevant alternative for future developments in China.

Continuing a sort of reflective dialectical reasoning between various positions, *Armend Tahirslay* raises the provocative question of whether there is a need for mutual recognition between the non-affirmative Bildung discourse and the prevailing competency discourse. The discussion points at certain similarities, thus helping to sharpen the argumentation relating the notion of competence in the prevailing competency discourse to the notion of content-transcending abilities in the Bildung-centred discourse. Next, *Andreas Nordin* points at the normativity built into data-driven curriculum policies. He sees the non-affirmative approach as an alternative, albeit combined with discursive institutionalism, as a language for researching vertical policy transfer.

This section concludes with *Lejf Moos*'s characterisation of an outcomes-based discourse and a democratic Bildung discourse. Through this chapter, we return to the perspectives pointed out in the introduction. As the world stands now, with our shared challenges, the chapter identifies the limitations of the outcomes-based discourse and the possibilities of the democratic Bildung discourse that is advanced in and by non-affirmative education theory.

In the final section of this volume, *Michael Uljens* returns to and summarises the aim of the volume, as well as some of the main arguments. The chapter brings together the core themes developed throughout the chapters. The points made show in what ways a Bildung-centred non-affirmative theory of education provides for a theoretically elaborate and convincing foundation for understanding and practising education and Bildung in today's world.

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