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## Why engage in non-affirmative education theory? A preface.

Uljens, Michael

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Michael Uljens  
Editor

# Non-affirmative Theory of Education and Bildung

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*Editor*

Michael Uljens 

Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies

Åbo Akademi University

Vaasa, Finland



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# Why Engage in Non-affirmative Theory of Education and Bildung? A Preface

When nations are working through arduous and challenging times, during which major economic, social, cultural, technological, ecological or political developments are present, education receives our attention. Historically, we find many examples of how rethinking educational theory, philosophy, policy and practice has operated as crisis management. In Europe, a well-known historical example is the Prussian reform movement after the 1807 Treatise of Tilsit, concluded by the Russian Tsar Alexander I with Napoleon. As the other Prussian reforms relied on creating a new type of citizen, education received a central role. Wilhelm von Humboldt and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, with their ideas on *Bildung* at an individual and collective level, were influential in the reform of the whole school system, including the establishment of a new university in Berlin in 1810. In the aftermath of the treatise 1807, Russia occupied the eastern half of Sweden, making Finland a semi-independent Grand Duchy of Russia in 1809. As a result of this crisis, Finland was no longer part of Sweden but did not want to become Russian. Instead, a new nation was built from the inside out, explicitly with the help of *Bildung*. In 1852, Finland established one of the world's first and still continuing professorial chairs in education and Didactics to take care of secondary and upper-secondary teacher education. Other well-known crisis-driven developments of education systems occurred in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century and in the USA after the Sputnik shock in 1957.

Today, challenges that result in education reforms are often similar across nations. The Bologna process in the European Union and the OECD's PISA programme are good examples of this. Ecological sustainability issues and rapid technological developments obviously challenge us globally to rethink what it means to be an educated person and a responsible citizen. Moreover, challenges to democracy in the USA, Europe and other parts of the world requires us to rethink citizenship education. Do we see a stronger global division between authoritarian and democratic polities developing? The policy effects of the Russian war in Ukraine beginning on February 24, 2022, remains to be seen. In any case, after the demolition of the Iron Curtain in Europe at the end of the Cold War in 1991, a new one appears to

be under construction. Reflecting on Bildung in the twenty-first century requires both a nation-state and a globopolitan gaze.

While political initiatives often promote prescriptive or ideologically loaded education policies, we expect educational research not only to provide accurate empirical descriptions but also to develop conceptual languages, models and theories for critical analysis, offering starting points for empirical research and for cultural reflection of what it means to become, be and develop as humans. In the end, it is by educational theory and philosophy that we make sense of both practice and policy. It provides us with a language for communication within and across cultures, and it helps us develop our pedagogical thinking.

So, what kind of language enables teachers, policy makers, leaders and the public to identify, make sense of, express and talk about the complexity of education? What kind of educational theorising is capable of living up to such ambitions in today's world? What conceptual vocabularies do we need to provide?

This volume finds it worrying that even though we generally are content with the idea of living with parallel competing theories, there is a limit to how far it is meaningful to differentiate educational research. Given the increasing complexity of teaching, studying and learning in multiple contexts, education as a discipline runs the risk of dissolving into a conglomerate of disparate contributions, separate from and unable to relate to one another. Too disparate terminologies are not necessarily helpful in creating a shared language. However, we also witness an opposite tendency when approaching education with a very generalist terminology. This is typical, for example, when we reduce education from a discipline to *field of research* where educational research applies insights from other academic disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, economy, organisation theory, subject matter theory and politics. Although useful, initiatives that lack a genuine pedagogical language of education make us blind to the phenomenon itself.

For the critical reader, I want to emphasise that in no way is the above an argument against research specialisations. Yet, these specialisations need to be framed by or grounded in a genuine idea of what *education* is and must be, especially in a non-teleological cosmology where the future is dependent on individuals' and societies' own actions. To this end, this volume argues in favour of a stronger and broader *education* theory that helps us capture the complexity and paradoxical character of what it means to become a cultural human being and grow into and as a person. Instead of inventing a new language, this volume seeks to revisit and rehabilitate such a core approach that already exists in our own tradition: the non-affirmative tradition of theorising education and Bildung. In doing so, we must, however, start by taking a closer look at the challenges ahead and some frequently occurring answers.

For the time being, the COVID-19 global pandemic and the Russian unprovoked war in Ukraine that started on February 24, 2022, naturally appear as dramatic occurrences with consequences that we are perhaps not fully able to anticipate. However, other challenges have been more enduring. Our present-day globalised post-industrial economy and working life have become increasingly knowledge- and development-intensive, which has contributed to strengthening the role of

research and education as innovative vehicles for serving economic ends. This development has been increasingly visible for a large part of the past century. However, the revolutions of 1989, the fall of communism and the Soviet Union in 1991, the end of the Cold War, the unification of East and West Germany and the expansion of the European Union strongly contributed to the great faith and hopes that were placed in a market-driven view of how society would best work. The meteoric rise of the Chinese economy over the past four decades has strongly supported a new neoliberal order, although this was organised within a formally communist state. This neoliberal regime has had significant consequences for education worldwide. In particular, it has led to the increasing commodification of education, including privatisation and school fees, a focus on vocations and employability skills, school choice, and the transformation of curriculum policy work into a transnational issue emphasising outcomes, while neglecting to explore educational ideals more broadly worth striving for. These trends, or combinations of them, are visible in education policy and curriculum development.

On the one hand, we see many versions of applied neoliberal policies, one of the most radical of which is allowing the profit-making privatisation of public education in Sweden. The OECD's governance of schooling, which emphasises transnationally valid generic competencies, also exemplifies the movement towards a certain functional *performativism*. *Competency-oriented* curricula frequently deal with either *functionalist* societal needs or the needs of the learner by supporting the growth of her individuality and sociality, including her abilities. Often, these coincide, at least on a rhetorical level. Curricula following the needs of working life, including socially, culturally and politically relevant generic competencies, coincide with curricula starting from the needs of the individual and her personal growth. A crucial feature of such performativism or the instrumental competency view, is, first, that knowledge and values are considered possible to acquire as such. Second, acquiring them is a question of rather receptive learning behaviour. Psychological theories of learning typically meet the needs of such a view of school learning.

On the other hand, we see curriculum developments emphasising the value of distinct subjects, with a strong belief in the value of brute core knowledge. This sometimes occurs as conservative socialisation into the existing culture through the acquisition of given knowledge content and values. It may also appear as conservative socialisation into understanding the logic of different fields of knowledge: learning to reason historically, geographically or mathematically or learning to understand genres in literature, as a kind of *powerful knowledge*. In both of these cases, knowledge appear as external to the individual. Here, learning is primarily about acquiring this knowledge and not a process where knowledge is utilised to develop the learner's abilities.

The competency-oriented and the conservative content-oriented curricular approaches, and different combinations thereof, are visible in many countries around the world. From a historical perspective, the instrumental competency-oriented approach remind of what we historically know as a *formal theory of Bildung*, while the conservative content approach represents a so-called *material theory of Bildung*. The non-affirmative view on Bildung opposes both these approaches. In



the non-affirmative pedagogical Bildung paradigm, the contents also play a major role but reduce their role to serve as one of the elements of the pedagogical process. Here the contents is the medium for learning. Here, teaching aims at learning principled insight beyond the contents as such. The idea is to develop the learner's capacity to reflect on the logics of the field and to evaluate the meaningfulness of the contents, given the questions it aims to answer. In this view, the attainment of reflective ability never completely disconnects from the contents. Critical thinking is always being critical of something. A pedagogical treatment of the contents creates a reflective distance to the very contents itself allowing the learner to rethink their relation to the world, others and themselves. As the non-affirmative approach to Bildung values these latter aspects, pedagogical work aims at developing the student themselves, their will, their critical thinking and them as a person, but with the help of a reflective engagement with selected cultural contents. While the contents are a necessary key, they never remain as the only main point. Similarly, while curricula typically describe educational aims in general terminology, what these general aims mean and how they run across the knowledge contents must always be explored with the student, in terms of the selected contents. In the most recent national curriculum in Finland, the notion of *transversal competencies* refers to how general aims appear and what they mean in teaching different subjects to different age groups.

## The Idea of This Volume

In order to meet the challenges and problems described above, this edited volume aims at advancing research on education with the help of critical, Bildung-centred, non-affirmative education theory, adopting professor emeritus Dietrich Benner's way of structuring the field as a shared point of reference. As Benner himself points out, in this volume, the constitutive principles of education (*Bildsamkeit* and *summoning* to self-activity) indeed represent the core of education theory since the modern classics and beyond. In Benner's treatment, these constitutive principles are explored in relation to the so-called regulative principles. Together, they make this approach fruitful as a general framework for understanding the dynamics of the relational teaching-studying-learning process and how this, in turn, relate to the dynamics between different societal practices. Such an approach is useful for a theoretical grounding of empirical research in education.

The intention of this volume is to explore how non-affirmative education theory, as a general theory of pedagogics or education (*Allgemeine Pädagogik*), enables us to rethink the contemporary approaches in education. As has been pointed out, this volume argues that we need to revisit core ideas that have eroded, especially during the recent decades of neoliberal performative functionalism and cultural reproduction-oriented conservatism. We need to move beyond a language that under-estimates knowledge-impregnated critical thinking, moral self-reflexivity and preparation for political citizenship. We need a language that is fruitful, not

counterproductive, for understanding how curricular and evaluative practices support education for democracy as well as cultural identity and political autonomy, yet without explaining what these are and should be upfront. We need a language that preserves the relative independence of schools and teachers, without subordinating teachers and schools to various political and economic interests by making teaching an instrumental competence and thereby de-professionalising teaching. We need a language that enables us to talk systematically and in a precise manner about teaching, studying and learning as the relational phenomena that they are.

Like other disciplines, education must simplify in order to identify and signify phenomena. But, how far can this be taken? Contemporary technological developments such as robotics and AI may come to overemphasise the communicative *methods* aspect of teaching. The same holds true for realist-oriented cultural conservatism emphasising the *contents* of teaching while forgetting about the more general educative tasks of schooling. In fact, the ideologically driven ambitions of education for social justice may fall into the same trap. If schools become sites for uncritically implementing predefined views of social justice, this may occur without pedagogically opening up the topic with and for the learner. Such teaching may turn out to be anti-pedagogical and counterproductive for the aim of developing the student's moral responsibility and will, political awareness and critical eye regarding knowledge interests and global ecological challenges.

The many reductionist approaches dominating educational research often accept education as a multi-level social phenomenon, but they are not always able to treat education as such a phenomenon. It is thus crucial to establish and promote a language of education that is able to identify the pedagogical dimensions of educational leadership activities at and between different levels. This book aims at offering a reasonable alternative, showing how non-affirmative theory of education can be utilised as a frame of reference for exploring teaching that supports the individual's growth, educational leadership and curriculum reform work. The expectation is that given the character of *General Pedagogy* (Allgemeine Pädagogik), the approach will offer a more comprehensive language of education. This position theorises *pedagogical* activity and how it influences human growth, without returning this relational process on ethical, psychological or sociological theory. It aims at exploring those unique pedagogically relevant core concepts of education and Bildung in a foundational sense.

While the world needs considerate subjects and citizens with a sound personal and cultural self-concept, critical disciplinary knowledge, the ability to recognise and respect differences, the capacity for self-reflexive moral action and a belief in the value of shared political action and participation, today's policies overemphasise the development of instrumental competencies. While performative policies frame education through instrumental economism, the Bildung-centred notion of citizenship, embraced by non-affirmative education theory, sees personal and collaborative autonomy as central. This non-affirmative approach to Bildung avoids focusing on generic competencies as such, as it avoids focusing teaching and learning the content as disconnected from developing the personality of the learner and from societal needs or the cultural content of teaching. While the performativist

agenda dominating economism emphasises learning content-neutral and instrumental generic competencies *or* content as such, the Bildung approach aims at general competencies that exceed specific content, while arguing that these competencies or abilities transcending content may be reached only *through* specific content. Specific content and principled insights are thus complementary or interdependent. What is general can be learned only through an example, while the *value* of an example is always dependent on the principle that it exemplifies, and what this principled insight may mean for the learner. Therefore, the idea of so-called *educative teaching* is violated if examples are learned without understanding what principle the content exemplifies. Thus, the selected examples need to be exemplary. In this way, non-affirmative Bildung-oriented teaching operates by connecting three levels: the content as such, the general principles that the selected content exemplifies given the epistemic field it represents and the learner's ability. Differently expressed, only by growing into the culture in a reflexive way, that is by own engagement, the individual may identify himself as a unique individual among others, and still share the world with others.

In addition to the previously mentioned character of general education or general pedagogy as a foundational discipline theorising institutional education in a more comprehensive way, there are also more pragmatic reasons for the volume in question. One such motive is that recently published volumes introducing and developing these ideas in German, English, Chinese, Spanish, Japanese, Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian and Danish have experienced an increasingly inspired response during the past decade. In addition to this expansion, there is a need to bring authors from different parts of the world together within this field, which this volume does.

The constitutive principles of non-affirmative theory represent the backbone of European or Western education theorising. With modernity, education classics like Herbart and Schleiermacher introduced these core principles in relation to a new societal order. Yet, non-affirmative theory of education and a related idea of Bildung, as a school of thought, has not achieved a widely recognised international position, for example in terms of framing empirical research in education. One reason may be that Anglophone research approaches have come to dominate education research globally. We see this as a missed opportunity.

Third, the core principles of non-affirmative theory, rooted in modern or classical education theory, building upon the ideas of Humboldt, Herder, Fichte, Hegel, Schleiermacher and Herbart, has inspired many subsequent developments. With their recognition of and preoccupation with the idea of education as an intervention in the learner's life-world (the summoning to self-activity), necessary for reaching cultural, moral and political autonomy, this tradition always emphasises that Bildung and education are phenomena that need to be conceptualised not one by one, but in relation to each other. Pedagogical theory thus embraces both theory of education and theory of Bildung.

Traces of the early modern ideas of pedagogy appear in very different positions, such as those developed by Vygotsky, Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer and Foucault, as well as other relationally oriented positions. Yet, an awareness of how these approaches relate to and draw on the tradition of non-affirmative theory of

education and Bildung is lacking on a broader scale. This volume intends to open up a global dialogue in this direction.

Fourth, today, a large number of initiatives in multi-level modelling of education explore the networked character of curriculum work and education. Among the approaches attempting to connect levels from the transnational to the local, we find Europeanisation research, actor–network theory, discursive institutionalism, refraction and curriculum theory and complexity theory. Only seldom do these approaches theorise the crucial normativity question in education. In fact, many of them were not even developed for the purpose of understanding education.

Non-affirmative theory of education (NAT) argues in favour of a third position beyond revolutionary activism and conservative socialisation. It reminds us that education and politics do not have to be either superior or subordinate to each other; instead, they can be non-hierarchically related. Consequently, NAT identifies curricular ideals in a political democracy as something resulting from a public dialogue involving politics, cultural reflection and professionals' opinions. NAT reminds us that while the education system as a whole must *recognise* and pay attention to existing interests, policies, ideologies, utopias and cultural practices, we do not expect education to *affirm* these interests. Not affirming various predefined interests that are external to educational practice means not passing these interests, knowledge, values and practices on to the next generation without making these phenomena objects of critical reflection in a pedagogical practice with students. According to NAT, citizenship education for democracy cannot only be about the socialisation of youth into a given form of democracy; instead, it must be accompanied by critical reflection of historical, present and possible future versions of democracy.

NAT sees that educational practice is mediational and thereby partly hermeneutic in character, especially in terms of being aware of and acknowledging the subject's own agency, experiences and life history. From a *normative* perspective, NAT therefore argues that in translating and enacting policy initiatives, administrators, leaders and teachers must *recognise* curricular aims and content; however, ideally, educators are not allowed to *affirm* these values, as affirming them would mean *not* educationally problematising their aims and content with students, thereby reducing education to transmitting the given values and content. While non-affirmative education does recognise the learner's life-world, this life-world is not pedagogically affirmed but instead challenged. Such a challenge however, can take many forms. It may occur by addressing the subject with questions, but also by the teacher taking a step back creating space for the students voices. This is how NAT explains the creation of pedagogical spaces allowing transgression. These spaces involve a critical reflection of what is, what is not and what might be. These pedagogical spaces are created by inviting learners to engage self-actively in discerning thought and experimental practice, involving the critical contemplation of content advocated by the curriculum as a policy.

As an analytical concept, NAT offers us tools for studying to what extent and how educators are expected to and do affirm ideals or how they position themselves as non-affirming educators. Educational justice would thus include recognising the

student's right to develop their reflected will, requiring the abilities of autonomous thinking, decision making and action, but in relation to others' interests.

A final word on democracy. Neoconservative and neonationalist movements in many countries around the world, not the least in Europe, clearly demonstrate a threat to the ideals of political democracy. For its part, the performative competency paradigm is not of much help in reflecting democratic political and ethical citizenship education. The competency paradigm bows easily towards policies reducing education to serve economist interests, leaving a broader view of citizenship or human dignity aside. While these two major education policies around the world dominate, it is unlikely we can expect them capable of contributing to dealing with some of the most urgent economic, ecological, political and cultural challenges at hand. It is in this connection, we see a possibility for a non-affirmative take on education and Bildung for rational, political, ethical and global citizenship. It offers us a language of education for becoming and being human, connecting the individual and the collective, the personal and social, the history and the future, ethics and knowledge.

Vaasa, Finland  
September 2nd, 2022

Michael Uljens

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