

The problems of 'competence' as a sustainable educational concept for the 21st century. Critique and alternatives from the Scandinavian perspective of *Bildung*

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Abstract

The paper's primary objectives are to show how competence as an educational concept for the 21st century is struggling with theoretical problems on which the concept of *Bildung* in the European tradition can offer alternatives, and to discuss the possibility of developing a sustainable educational concept from the perspectives of competence and *Bildung*. The method of the study is theoretical analysis of competence and *Bildung* as educational concepts. The paper concludes that (1) to construct a sustainable educational concept for the 21st century the concept of competence and must be abandoned, as its problems as an educational concept cannot be solved due to the lack of a theory of educational content. In the perspective of competence, the content-aspect of education is obscured and hidden from public debate and human autonomy is threatened. (2) *Bildung* can be revised as an educational concept for the 21st century by reinventing educational content as subject to interpretation and open debate of autonomous individuals on all levels from the transnational to the classroom. (3) A revised 'mimetic' concept of *Bildung* can prepare students for the knowledge society, as

imagining is a higher order thinking essential to innovation and creativity. Instructional content in school is meaningful to students if they are able to imagine the representational object ‘as if’ it is both subject matter and real to them.

Keywords

Competence, *Bildung*, 21st century competences, instruction, schooling

1. Introduction

Contemporary society is often referred to as the ‘knowledge society’. This metaphor primarily refers to the economic systems where ideas and knowledge function as commodities (Anderson, 2008; Voogt, 2012). The global electronic networks have enabled an explosion in the production and sharing of knowledge. Another characteristic of the knowledge society is the faster pace of change as a consequence of the faster pace of communication. It is necessary for individuals to be highly mobile occupationally, to switch jobs, to learn fast, to cope with complex problems and to think critically and innovatively. Around the turn of the millennium, policymakers around the world began adopting the rhetoric of the knowledge society, requiring new skills and competences for the 21st century (G8, 2000; OECD, 2005; UNESCO, 1999). In the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU), most countries had adopted 21st century competences in their curriculum by 2009 (Voogt, 2012). The 21st century skills and competences movement involves all levels of education, including life-long learning and adult education (European Commission, 2008; European Parliament, 2007; OECD, 2007, 2012). In the US competency standards was implemented by the No Child Left Behind Act and followed by the Common Core Curriculum (US Department of Education, 2001, 1010; National Governors Association & Council of Chief State School Officers and Achieve, 2008). Assessment of learning outcomes is the key tool for policymakers when implementing competences into curricula (Werquin 2012). ‘Competence-based education’ is currently one of the most central

areas of educational research. A search of peer-reviewed articles on ‘competence-based education’ in ERIC in June 2013 resulted in 2,558 hits. A similar search on ‘competence-based assessment’ resulted in 706 hits.

Researchers have pointed to severe problems in classrooms caused by competence based education and assessment, such as increased teaching to the test, a narrowed curriculum, a fragmentation of educational content, reproduction of knowledge (opposed to the intent of fostering innovative thinking), increased inequality in education, increased individualization damaging democratic education, disempowered teachers and poorer teacher-student relationships (Au 2011; Biesta, 2010; Diamond, 2012; Edelstein 2011; Elstad & Sivesind, 2010; Hopmann, 2007, 2008, 2013; Hopmann, Brinek, & Retzl, 2007; Hörmann, 2011; Langfeldt, Elstad, & Hopmann, 2008; Mausethagen, 2013; Tanner, 2013; Westera, 2001; Young, 2013). The implementation of competence-based education and assessment in different national contexts, as well as across the European Union, also poses a challenge (Antunes, 2012; Hillen, Sturm & Willbergh, 2011; Leat, Thomas, & Reid, 2012; Méhaut & Winch, 2012; Nieveen, 2012; Papanastasiou, 2012; Scholl, 2012; Seikkula-Leino, 2012; Sivesind, 2013; Sundberg, 2012).

A conceptual critique of ‘competence’ as an educational concept was under way in the 1980s and 90s (Bull, 1985; Hyland, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1996; Standish, 1995). There are however very few recent critical conceptual analyses of competence as an educational concept. Moreover, Hodge (2007) and Tchibozo (2010) have contributed work on the origins of competence-based education and the emergence of it in European educational systems. There is however currently no analysis that confronts competence as an educational concept with traditional educational concepts. The purpose of this paper is to make such a contribution to the field of education.

2. Aims of the study

The aim of this study is twofold: (1) Show how competence as an educational concept for the 21st century is struggling with theoretical problems on which the concept of *Bildung* in the European tradition can offer alternatives. (2) Discuss the possibility of developing a sustainable educational concept from the perspectives of competence and *Bildung*. The method of the study is theoretical analysis of competence and *Bildung* as educational concepts. The sources of the study are close reading and review of conceptual analyses of competence as an educational concept and contemporary understandings of *Bildung* and Allgemeine Didaktik drawing from early modern sources. From the perspective of Allgemeine Didaktik, the concept of *Bildung* concerns how schooling can contribute to preparing students for responsible public life, within the context of democratic states. This paper argues that the ‘mimetic’ aspects of schooling and instruction are the most relevant if *Bildung* is to be revised.

Section 3 of the paper discusses the problems of ‘competence’ as an educational concept. The theoretical problems facing competence as an educational concept and the succeeding consequences for implementation are: (1) That people do not have competence independent of context and (2) as a consequence of the first problem, the term loses its meaning when implemented into practice, as it turns into performance and skills (Bull, 1985; Hyland, 1991, 1992; Standish, 2012; Weinert, 2001; Westera, 2001). The first theoretical problem refers to the challenge of bridging the gap between school and reality, between education and future employment, factors which are quite important in the knowledge society. However, due to the complexity and the fast pace of change in contemporary society, education is preparing young people for jobs that do not yet exist (Voogt, 2012). Irrespective of the educational perspective applied, educators cannot see into the future. This educational dream (Wulf, 2003) of bridging the gap between education and work causes problems for

competence as an educational concept, whilst theory of *Bildung* can address workplace-issues as part of a broad concept of education (discussion to follow). As will be shown, the second problem appears as a response to the first problem: When it turns out that assessing competences is very difficult, the concept is reduced to mere student performance in problem solving and skills, and the theoretical meaning of competence is lost.

Section 4 of the paper argues that *Bildung* in the European pedagogical tradition of general didactics, has educational alternatives to the challenges of context and implementation. These alternatives are made visible in the paper by perspectives from classical texts such as those of Wolfgang Klafki (1927-) (Klafki, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b) and recent developments on the concept since its revitalization after the turn of the millennium, mainly the Scandinavian perspectives (Gustavsson, 2003; Hillen, Sturm & Willbergh, 2011; Hopmann, 2007; Kim, 2013; Krüger, 2008; Menck, 2010; Meyer, 2007; Midtsundstad, 2010; Midtsundstad & Hopmann 2010; Midtsundstad & Werler, 2011; Midtsundstad & Willbergh, 2010; Pikkarainen, 2011; Vásquez-Levy, 2002; Westbury, Hopmann, & Riquarts, 2000; Willbergh, 2008). However, the main theoretical perspective on how educational alternatives to the challenges of context and implementation can be constructed from *Bildung*-theory is the ‘mimetic’ perspectives on schooling (discussion to follow) (Willbergh, 2008, 2010b, 2011b).

Based on these two analyses section 5 of the paper discusses the possibility of constructing a sustainable educational concept for the 21st century before the paper arrives at a conclusion.

3. Problems of ‘competence’ as an educational concept

The concept of competence is originally not an educational concept. There are many different theoretical approaches, but no single common conceptual framework. The term has been used in philosophy, psychology, sociology, political science and economics. According to

Weinert's work in the DeSeCo-project (2001: 45) competence may be interpreted as 'a roughly specialized system of abilities, proficiencies, or skills that are necessary or sufficient to reach a specific goal. This can be applied to individual dispositions or to the distribution of such dispositions within a social group or an institution (eg. a firm)'. Defining competencies as cognitive abilities and skills is essential in the conceptual development of the term. The concept of competence as an educational concept originated in the United States and Canada from the 1960s onward (Hodge, 2007; Tchibozo, 2011). The societal background was the Soviet launch and success of the satellite 'Sputnik I' into orbit around the earth in 1957, triggering educational reform in the United States and emphasizing accountability and the expression of competences in behavioural terms (Hodge, 2007).

The idea of 'educational systems' made the concept of competence relevant to industry, economy and the corporate sector (Hodge, 2007; Tchibozo, 2011). The competence-based rationale became a corporate imperative in the 1980s and 1990s, stressing the usefulness of educational content in future employment. Companies at the time were dealing with economic and technological change and global competition. Individuals increasingly had to manage change and complexity with the advent of the knowledge society. Competence-based education in this period moved towards a constructivist vision of the learner developing his or her own abilities in action situations (Tchibozo, 2011). In Britain the rise of competence-based learning was pioneered by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications in the 1986, where competence was understood in terms of performance criteria laid down by employers, leading to increasing vocationally-based assessment in curricula informed by a behaviourist model of learning (Hyland, 1991). Education was influenced by a political rhetoric of enterprise culture and economic exchange (Hyland, 1991; Smith, 2012; Standish, 2005), an issue also addressed by researchers in Scandinavia (Langfeldt, Elstad, & Hopmann, 2008; Elstad & Sivesind, 2010). Competence as an

educational concept emerged as an educational dream (Wulf, 2003) of equipping young generations with the ability to manage an increasingly complex society. Bearing in mind that educational dreams can turn into nightmares (Wulf, 2003), the paper will now show that even from the perspective of the corporate sector, the concept of competence cannot “deliver the goods”, due to the difficulty of constructing valid and legitimate theoretical responses to the demands of the economic-political rhetorics.

3.1. The challenge of context

The educational concept of competence works well in the workplace, as in this case the content is learned in the same context as it is used (Willbergh, Midtsundstad, Kristiansen, Langfeldt, & Skagen, 2012). In the context of schooling, the importance of the relevance and use of competences in out-of-school real life problems is a major theoretical challenge. The problem of context is accounted for in Weinert's (2001: 52) conceptual analysis in DeSeCo: ‘It is a well-founded assumption that competencies acquired in school and vocational settings are learned and used in context-specific ways and that most activities over the life course take place in a variety of social and vocational contexts’.

The question of context in the case of competence as an educational term has led to a search for different ways to bridge the gap between school and future employment. The question of the future can be seen as a first attempt: Bridging the gap by prediction. The question of the future is however a challenge for the concept of competence as defined above. The problem of competence is that it assumes that what we judge to be criteria for success today will be stable and valid in the future. The validity of this assumption is very questionable, since no competences will carry the value tomorrow that they have today (Westera, 2001). This line of thought represents a passive acceptance of ‘status quo’ (Hyland, 1992). This assumption is invalid from a psychological point of view, because there does not exist any comprehensive theory of human abilities (Weinert, 2001). Further, in terms of

general pedagogical responsibilities, this assumption is illegitimate, as it turns a blind eye to the importance of preparing future generations to take responsibility. Autonomy is threatened, and so are democracy and solidarity.

The second attempt to bridge the gap this paper will explore is the search for context-independent key-competences, relevant and useful across different tasks, institutions and conditions. The main problem with key competences is that they are general and abstract and not useful in practice when individuals are to manage complex problems and situations (Weinert, 2001). In the summary of the DeSeCo project, key competences are summarized under three broad categories: To use tools interactively, to interact in heterogeneous groups and to act autonomously (OECD, 2005). In this case key competences have turned into humanistic ideals and are far from the level of individual problem-solving. The generality of key competences has created a need to construct sub-competences. From a psychological point of view, it is however not possible to validate such sub-competences. The multilevel model of key-competences and underlying sub-competences has not succeeded in being empirically researchable. It is therefore doubtful whether they can be modified by learning, or to what degree (Weinert, 2001).

Consequently, a third attempt to bridge the gap between school and real life is selecting content-specific competences to supplement key-competences (Weinert, 2001). When using content-specific competencies, it is easier to see the relevance to real life situations. However, the more pragmatic the definition of competence is, the less it is theoretically satisfying. Content-specific competences are difficult to separate from 'knowledge' or 'content'. So what remains of 'competence' in this context? The competence concept dissolves when it is turned into content. The discussion comes down to the question of what should be learned in school, a question recently neglected in curriculum theory (Young, 2013), perhaps due to the dominance of the competence concept over the last

decade? The question of what should be learned in school is a key educational question, a normative question of selection. In this process of selection, it is difficult to see that the concept of competence has added value over curriculum studies and general didactics.

The fourth and last attempt to bridge the gap to be discussed in this paper is the assumption that the quality of instruction is defined by its resemblance to real life.

Authenticity makes the situation significant for the learner (Tchibozo, 2011). As contexts in real life are complex, the learner's ability to reformulate a problem, be innovative and transfer resources acquired in specific situations to a new context is crucial, and this ability can be helped by authenticity. The question of transfer is also a key educational question, as the task of education is to prepare young people for the future. As will be shown in the second part of the paper, there are alternative responses to the transfer-challenge in the field of general didactics. It is further doubtful whether the authenticity-alternative is a realistic one. The problem with authenticity is that it clashes with assessment, as assessment requires a controlled environment due to its need for reproduction of pre-specified learning outcomes (Hyland, 1991; Westera, 2001). On account of the amount of research on assessment and accountability mentioned in the introduction, it is evident that assessment is implemented currently, not the authenticity-alternative.

Hence, when attempting to surmount the difficulties in closing the gap between school, real life and future life from the perspective of the concept of competence, researchers and policymakers turn to the performative aspects of the concept for an alternative.

3.2. The challenge of implementation into practice

Westera (2001: 81) claims that the problem of competence as a theoretical entity starts with the idea that competence is linked with effective performance: 'Competent performance presumes competence'. Such a causal law is tautological because neither its truth nor its untruth can be determined. Is competence a synonym for competent behaviour? (Hyland,

1992) This is not the case originally, but as a consequence of the problems of validation mentioned above, what is required according to Weinert (2001: 57) is ‘a prototypical, typical, and/or specific characterization of classes of performance demands, performance criteria, and indicators of competencies’. In this way, researchers and policymakers move away from their ambition to measure psychological abilities and turn toward an emphasis on what may be observed as manifestations of how learners perform a given task.

However, on task-performance, the psychological conceptual framework on human skills is more sophisticated than the concept of competence (Westera, 2001). Perhaps this is why OECD in 2012 uses the term ‘skills’ and not ‘competences’? (OECD, 2012) Skills are higher order mental processes, for instance problem solving, reasoning and thinking, producing a re-ordering or extension of the existing cognitive structure (Bloom, Engelhardt, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). Learning objectives for cognitive skills are usually described in behavioural terms, in terms of learning outcomes. The idea that there are ‘hidden’ processes in the human mind, and that they can be made manifest, explicit and accountable beyond our daily language-use and reactions to the world, can be understood in light of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1889-1951) and Gilbert Ryle’s (1900-1976) critique of Western dualism (Standish, 2012). According to Paul Standish (2012), in the case of education there is a drive to ‘see’ learning, laid open to view, resulting in the construction of tests to verify that the intended learning outcomes are reached. The concept of skills is such a construct. Hence, two educational problems occur as a result of implementing skills into education, when competence turns into performance, learning outcomes and skills: Firstly, our ordinary confidence in the practice of instruction is devalued, as instruments and technical language presumed to be more ‘true’ are favoured in the discourse, replacing the systems of inspection that rely on accumulated experience and professional teacher-judgement (Standish, 2012). Secondly, in a skills-training process, substantial repetition and automation is needed

(Westera, 2001). It may even be claimed that as handling complex situations demands conscious thinking, skills training is useless because automation means less thinking, and the question of indoctrination becomes relevant (Bull, 1985; Westera, 2001). It seems that the competences and skills strategy does not equip students with the autonomy that they will need to take future responsibility. This is highly troublesome, as the need for younger generations to think critically is of unique importance in the first decades of the 21st century in light of the current economic and ecological crisis.

4. Educational alternatives from the perspective of *Bildung*

The concept of *Bildung* was conceived in Europe in early modern times in close connection to the ideas of humanism and democracy (Westbury et al., 2000). An educational motivation for the development of humankind began to replace the religious one: The core question was no longer how to develop oneself in the image of God, but how to develop one's full potential as a human being (Humboldt, 2000; Korsgaard & Løvlie, 2003). Essential to the pedagogical idea of *Bildung* is the idea of human autonomy (Westbury et al., 2000; Wulf, 2003).

Allgemeine Didaktik, a general didactics tradition having a strong influence on the implementation of mass schooling in Germany and Scandinavia in the nineteenth century, had *Bildung* ('*dannelse*' in Danish and Norwegian, '*bildning*' in Swedish) as its core concept (Gundem, 1995; Hillen, Sturm & Willbergh, 2011; Hopmann, 2007; Midtsundstad & Hopmann 2010; Midtsundstad & Werler, 2011; Midtsundstad & Willbergh, 2010). Schooling was a tool used in the process of building democratic nation-states. The idea of human autonomy is a prerequisite for the advent of democracy, as all human beings must be equipped to be self-responsible, responsible for others and for society as a whole (Klafki, 2001a; Korsgaard & Løvlie, 2003; Westbury et al., 2000).

However, this leads to what is known as the educational paradox: How can I cultivate freedom by limiting it? (Kant, 1992). This is the challenge of the modern idea of education,

which has consequences for ideas with respect to instruction in general didactics (Allgemeine Didaktik): While instruction can contribute to the pupils' development and socialisation into responsible human beings, it cannot ensure this result. Neither can it be measured. Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) was one of the first individuals to theorize on the connection between institutionalized instruction and learning with regard to *Bildung*. Of central concern was Wilhelm von Humboldt's (1767-1835) idea that *Bildung* is an intentional activity in the individual (Humboldt, 2000). Hence, in general didactics, instruction is conceived as a meeting between an autonomous teacher, autonomous pupils and content (Hillen, Sturm & Willbergh, 2011; Hopmann, 2007). The idea of teacher work as professional interpretive work on how to construct interpretations of content perceived as meaningful by students, makes visible the humanistic and hermeneutic heritage inherent in *Bildung* theory (Künzli, 2002). The predominance of content over other aspects of instruction in *Bildung*-centered didactics does, however, not mean that the concept of *Bildung* is a material or objective theory of education. Educational content has an objective and subjective side to it (Krüger, 2008), as will be accounted for below.

4.1. The challenge of context

In *Bildung* as an educational concept, the idea of teacher and student autonomy is the fundamental bridge between school and real life and school and future. What motivates education from this theoretical perspective is that we need to educate in a way that makes young generations able to take responsibility for future society (Humboldt, 2000; Nohl, 1949; Weniger, 1958). The purpose of education is not to try to predict what will be useful and successful in the future, but rather to contribute to their development of independence, so that they themselves in the future will be able to decide what they consider to be useful, successful and, last but not least, ethical. Recently, the most central thinker in *Bildung*-centred didactics is Wolfgang Klafki (1927-). According to Klafki, the purpose of education must be the

cultivation of self-determination, co-determination and solidarity for all (Klafki, 2000b, 2001a). These general goals can easily be misunderstood as being equivalent to key competences (as accounted for earlier in this paper). The difference between *Bildung*-centered didactics and the idea of key competences or competences per se is, however, the focus on the content in the theory of *Bildung*: Subject matter is to give students the opportunity to discuss and make up their minds about contemporary key issues. By working with contemporary issues challenging humankind, students' self-determination, co-determination and solidarity will be given the opportunity to grow. Klafki suggests the ecological crisis, war, human inequality and so on as key questions, but stresses the fact that such questions must constantly be negotiated, updated and revised (Klafki, 2001a). Through *Bildung* the intentionality of education is made visible. The concept is 'openly' normative and based on the recognition that education per se is normative and a question of values (Schwab, 1971). What makes this work when considering the idea of democracy is that the question of what is to be taught in school must be a matter of public debate. Schooling is to prepare the students for responsible public life (Mahrtdt, 2012). The content of the concept of *Bildung* is constructed to be 'variable': People of every epoch and every state or community must themselves decide to fill it with their educational intentions. What makes this work with the idea of autonomy is that individuals are able to think critically, understanding that school knowledge is a result of normative selection and not a dogma, or unconditional truth.

Next, the fact that selection of curriculum content is normative has consequences for the second bridge between school and reality: The general content in the curriculum has no inherent meaning, but are to be interpreted by teacher and students (Hopmann, 2007). This critical deliberation is a matter of working with the subjective and objective aspects of educational content, explored theoretically by the pair concepts of *Bildungsinhalt*-*Bildungsgehalt* and *elemental-fundamental* (Comenius & Keatinge, 2005; Hopmann, 2000;

Klafki, 2000a; Krüger, 2008; Wagenschein, 2000), recently revived in English as matter-meaning and innhold-betydning in Norwegian (Hopmann, 2007; Willbergh, 2008; Midtsundstad, 2010; Midtsundstad & Willbergh, 2010; Hörmann, 2011; Willbergh, 2011). The notion that an educational concept must cater to both the objective (matter) and the subjective (meaning) aspects of educational content is made evident in Klafki's concept of categorical *Bildung*: The content must be opened, and the student must be opened (Klafki, 1959). Curriculum content must be transformed into significant content conceived as meaningful by the students themselves (Klafki, 2000a). Instruction is a question of semantics, a question of working with the meaning of curriculum content. The central issue is to bring together the stories of curriculum content and the students' life worlds (Menck, 2010). For knowledge to become meaningful, it must be internalized and part of each individual student's life (Reindal, 2013), but instruction cannot ensure this result (Humboldt, 2000). In the concept of skills discussed above, there is an intention to manifest what is 'hidden' in the human mind (Standish, 2012). The concepts of matter-meaning in general didactics expresses just the importance of leaving what is 'hidden', each individual's inner life, alone: Whether instructional content (matter) is conceived as meaningful by the individual student is beyond reach of others, and should remain so, or else autonomy would be threatened. Instead the focus is on how the teacher as professional can interpret the content, based on experience with what the students have previously expressed as interesting and important in life. Hence, instruction is a matter of teachers' professional 'guessing' on how subject matter can be interpreted as meaningful to their students (Willbergh, 2008).

This meaning of curriculum content as relevant to students' life worlds is dependent on unique contexts and unique individuals (Saeverot, 2013). Teachers should see both the uniqueness of their students and the uniqueness of each class environment (Klafki, 2000a, p. 148): 'The value of education can only be ascertained with reference to the students who are

to be educated and with a particular human context in mind, with its attendant past and its anticipated future'. From the perspective of *Bildung*, the teacher's knowledge of each class's uniqueness is what makes instruction possible, constituting the third bridge between school and reality. It is only by interacting with the students over a considerable time period, by listening and being sensitive and respectful of what is important to them, that the teacher can interpret subject matter in a way that will hopefully connect to their life world (Meyer, 2007). This ability of the teacher can be referred back to Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) and the concept of 'tact' (Hopmann, 2009). Hence, taking the uniqueness of different contexts into consideration, a serious problem for competence as an educational term, is suggested as an alternative to bridge the gap between school and real life from the *Bildung* perspective.

Further, as mentioned earlier, *Bildung* evolved as an educational concept with the advent of mass schooling and the construction of nation-states. The concept was developed to work for instruction in institutionalised settings (Hopmann, 2007). The idea of an institution is that it is separated from the rest of society. In the case of schools, their institutionalisation is part of the way their meaning construction works: The separation from the real world is what makes it possible for students to see the world in new ways (Willbergh, 2008, 2011b). Contrary to what is suggested by Tchibozo's contribution to the concept of competence (that instructional situations should be authentic (Tchibozo, 2011)), it may be claimed from the *Bildung* perspective that instruction should be in-authentic to make possible an authentic meeting between student and content. Mimetic in-authenticity can be claimed to be the fourth bridge. The idea of the mimetic is inherent in the Western cultural institutions of modernity (Aristotle & Halliwell, 1995; Auerbach & Said, 2003; Walton, 1990; Willbergh, 2008): The object is taken out of its ordinary context and placed into a new institutionalized context. This re-contextualization of the object opens the possibility of experiencing something new, something that we would not otherwise have seen (Bollnow, 1992). The world is not present

in the classroom, it represented by s textbooks, pictures, media and so on (Menck, 2000; Willbergh, 2008, 2011b). Instruction makes meaning through interpretive work with representations of content (Green 2010; Menck, 2000; Willbergh, 2008, 2010b, 2011b). Meaningful instruction from the perspective of *Bildung* expands the students' own experiences through presenting the subject matter 'as if' it is both real world and school knowledge (Willbergh, 2008, 2010b, 2011b). The idea of the mimetic aspects of instruction also has a practical pedagogical side to it, made visible in the process of implementation as described below.

4.2. The challenge of implementation into practice

As accounted for earlier, competence as an educational concept turns into observation of student behavior when it is implemented into practice. *Bildung* as an educational concept becomes mimetic when implemented, turning into teacher and students' joint interpretation of representations of content (Willbergh, 2008, 2010b, 2011b). Teacher and students' work with perceivable objects representing content can be regarded as aesthetic objects, continuing the tradition of Herbart and Pestalozzi (Herbart & Stern, 2002; Pestalozzi, 1977). In the history of philosophy, the aesthetic dimensions of *Bildung* may be traced back to Aristotle's assumption in his theory of mimesis. The faculty of imagination is linked with perceptions (Aristotle & Halliwell, 1995). The role of imagination in education is developed in different modern theories regarding the phenomenon of the human ability to play (Goldman, 1998; Hohn, 2002; Mead, 1934; Schiller, 1991), and in educational and hermeneutic philosophy (Kemp, 2006; Ricoeur, 1984).

In practice, this joint interpretation of representations of content may be explained as follows (Willbergh, 2008, 2010b, 2011b): The institution of schooling shapes the preconception of students from their first day at school. Instruction is cumulative, and students are expected to build their new knowledge upon the memory and experience of what

they have previously learned in school (Willbergh, 2011b). The teacher's efforts must thus be directed at trying to cultivate students' imaginations, for example by asking them to recall their prior memories of subject matter (Willbergh, 2011b).

The second aspect of the meaning construction of instruction is to direct students' attention to the aesthetic object chosen, making it clear that here and now it is 'as if' this flower means 'biology'. The flower is a result of the choice, the framing or pointing out done by the teacher, an instructional principle dating back to the etymological origin of didactics: 'didaktike techne' as the action of showing or indicating (Künzli, 2000). In theory of imagination, this designation of the object of imagining is essentially self-referential (Walton, 1990), making it possible to cater to the subjective side of educational content. Imagining something is to experience it 'as if' it is happening to me (Aristotle, et. al, 1995). Imagining is also a central form of higher order thinking essential to innovation and creativity (Tchiboza, 2011).

It is, however, not sufficient to make students imagine the object as a representation of subject matter. In order to contribute to students' *Bildung*, the object must also be perceived as being relevant to their prior experiences (Herbart & Stern, 2002; Klafki, 2000a). In the example of the flower, it is worthwhile making students imagine the flower 'as if' it means 'local flora' for them in real life, as a supplement to imagining it 'as if' it means 'biology'. Schooling is dependent on keeping this double meaning of subject matter alive. Focusing too much on subject matter (the material or objective aspects of curriculum content) can instigate boredom in students due to a failed experience of relevance to the real world. Focusing too much on students' prior experiences (the formal or subjective aspects of curriculum content) lowers possibilities for students' to reinterpret the world through knowledge accumulation. From the perspective of *Bildung*, instruction must operate in the middle, between the subjective and objective aspects of curriculum content (Willbergh, 2011b): The object chosen

represents both the real world and school knowledge, and it does so by being perceived in this unique classroom, at this moment in time, by unique individuals, sharing an aesthetic experience and being able to imagine it ‘as if’ it is both real world and school knowledge. The concepts matter-meaning becomes mimetic in practice: Matter is replaced by the concrete representational objects chosen (things, words, sounds, pictures). Meaning is a present potential in teacher and students’ joint interpretation of matter, and this paper argues that if the students are given opportunities to imagine the matter’s meaning as a duality of real world-school knowledge, the meaning-potential in instruction is strengthened. Ultimately, if the subject matter is experienced as meaningful to the students, they will have gained a new perspective on the world, and their ‘local flora’ will thus never be the same again. Human imagination is what makes us able to alternate between the two readings of the representational object, making *Bildung* a possibility. This requirement for imaginary work is part of the institutionalization of instruction: The alternation between readings is made possible by school providing students with both a connection to the world and a separation from it (Willbergh, 2008, 2011b). Thus, within the imaginary work required by the mimetic in-authenticity of instruction, lie also the opportunities to bridge the gap between schooling and work-issues: Future employment can be imagined and dreamt by students through the ‘as if’ duality of real world-school knowledge. When imagining, the subject is free (Schiller, 1991). When the future can be imagined, there is no need for prediction, as being attempted by implementing competences into education.

4.3. Summary

Bildung as an educational concept may be assumed to address the needs of young generations of the 21st century to think critically, constantly evolve and be creative and imaginative. The idea of *Bildung* was conceived alongside modernity, and its meaning construction was designed to serve institutionalized schooling in the context of democratic nation-states. The

concept's long history has fostered theoretical ways to answer to the challenges that the 'younger' concept of competence is facing, as the importance of teacher and student autonomy, the pair concepts of matter-meaning, adaption of content meaning to unique contexts, the mimetic in-authenticity of institutionalized schooling and instructional practice as interpretative and imaginative work. Consequently, *Bildung* is a sustainable educational concept for the 21st century.

5. Discussion

The analyses have shown how competence as an educational concept for the 21st century is struggling with theoretical problems on which the concept of *Bildung* in the European tradition can offer alternatives. Based on these lines of argument, what are the possibilities of constructing a sustainable educational concept for the 21st century? In the case of competence, the question becomes: Can the problems of competence be solved? In the case of *Bildung*, the question becomes: How can it be revised in the face of 'knowledge society' and international educational policies? These two questions are discussed in the following.

What becomes visible by comparing the two concepts' alternatives to the challenges of context and implementation into practice is that it is doubtful whether competence is an educational concept at all: it appears as a political rhetoric. As accounted for earlier, competence lacks a concept of educational content. The concept of competence is dissolved when it turns into content-specific competences. Without a concept of content or knowledge *Bildung* cannot be realized as an educational notion (Hopmann, 2013; Young, 2013). *Bildung* cannot be considered without theorizing about the meeting between content and student, between the subject and something new and unknown. Humans are seen as meaning making beings, constantly in a process of re-interpretation of the world (Kemp, 2006; Willbergh, 2008). The purpose of schooling is to contribute to this process. The teacher's task is to interpret content in a context-specific way that gives each student the opportunity to

experience meaning, by revealing the objective and subjective sides of educational content. The mimetic aspect of instruction do not work without a concept of content, as it is the content that can be interpreted, that can appeal to the persons inner imaginative life (Willbergh, 2011). In contrast to competence, which lacks a concept of content, *Bildung* is designed to leave the concept of content ‘variable’, so that each nation and local community (as is common in Denmark and Norway) (Midtsundstad & Hopmann 2010; Midtsundstad & Werler, 2011) can fill it with what they believe is important to learn in school. The concept is ‘openly’ normative, intentional and a question of values (Klafki, 2001a), driven by the ‘interest’ of the freedom of the students (Saeverot, 2013). From the perspective of *Bildung* school knowledge should be subject to constant reinterpretation and open debate, on national, local and classroom level. The reason for this is a democratic one: Klafki’s article on categorical *Bildung*, published for the first time in 1958 (Klafki, 2001b), shows the danger of ‘material *Bildung*’ carving curriculum content in stone: Putting too much weight on the material sides of curriculum content, as in the case of ‘Classical *Bildung*’, failed because its highbrow cultural content was experienced as irrelevant and outdated by the population. ‘Scientism as *Bildung*’ failed because it made science into dogma. The material theories of proved unsustainable due to the way they exercise power: What is of high quality (‘Classical *Bildung*’) or true (‘Scientism as *Bildung*’) is decided by elites resulting in suppression.

So, if competence neglects the content-aspects of education, can this be solved by making the subjective-oriented aspects more sophisticated? This is also doubtful. As Klaki also pointed out in 1958 (Klafki, 2001b): Prioritizing subject over object in education is an equally large problem as doing the opposite. Such formal educational theories putting their faith in the growth of human abilities and powers (‘Organic *Bildung*’) or specific learning methods or tools (‘methods-based *Bildung*’, for example ‘learning to learn’, ‘project-method’) are weak regarding validity and legitimacy. The reason for invalidity in the case of organic

theories is, as pointed out by Weinert in 2001, a comprehensive psychological theory of human abilities does not exist (Weinert, 2001). Through the lens of Klafki's concepts from 1958, it seems that competence striving to be an educational concept starts out as an organic educational theory but gives up due to the theoretical problems discussed in this paper, ending up with skills as a methods-based form of education (OECD, 2012). The problem of methods-based education is that there is no such thing as 'universal methods', tools and skills usable to solve all complex problems from now on and hereafter. This assumption is neither valid nor legitimate from an educational point of view. As mentioned earlier, education is not, and should not, be prediction. Another problem with methods-based educational theories is that they tend to turn into dogma (Klafki, 2001b): Skills-automation obscures the content-aspect of education and hides it from open debate, 'hidden' mental processes becomes the focus of attention (Standish, 2012). On the level of educational goals as key competences, they seem self-evident and evade discussion. On the level of instruction, they turn into increased automation of skills. Consequently, with competence as educational concept, democracy is threatened.

So, how can *Bildung* be revised in the face of 'knowledge society' and international educational policies? Klafki's alternative is to choose school content related to important societal questions about which all humankind should be able to make up their minds and for which it should take responsibility (Klafki, 2001a, 2001b). There are theoretically no evident obstacles to reinventing transnational global citizenship from the perspective of *Bildung*, provided that policy makers and researchers learn from past mistakes (Adorno, 1998) and that *Bildung* is reconstructed as a concept of pedagogy, not a purely philosophical concept. In Scandinavia such efforts are currently made (Gustavsson, 2002; Hillen, Sturm & Willbergh, 2011; Midtsundstad & Hopmann 2010; Midtsundstad & Willbergh, 2010; Midtsundstad & Werler, 2011; Willbergh, 2006, 2008, 2010a, 2011a; Willbergh et al., 2012). The most severe

challenge to *Bildung* in schooling is, however, that it does not work with assessment, as assessment demands reproducibility, which contradicts the idea of autonomy: A valuable student achievement from a *Bildung*-centered perspective would be the result of unique independent thinking, critical reflection and creativity. Student evaluation in this tradition was implemented as individual student understanding of instructional content and left to teachers' autonomous professional judgement (Hopmann, 2003; Sivesind & Bachmann, 2008). Consequently, the current challenge to *Bildung* as an educational concept is that it would have to be implemented independently of international comparative assessment in order to serve the knowledge society of the 21st century.

The comparison between the two concepts in this paper, however, contributes to the revision of *Bildung* as a pedagogical concept, making it clearer and preparing it for empirical research: The concept of *Bildung* has been criticized as being imprecise and theoretic (Klette, 2007). The confrontation with competence can make visible the democratic reasoning behind designing the educational concept with a 'variable' concept of content. This is a question of practical pedagogy and a democratic necessity. According to this paper, *Bildung* can cater to the needs of critical and innovative thinking in the knowledge society. Even though the concept of competence does not work, the need it reflects to adapt to a changing world is of educational relevance. To put it bluntly: Is competence the question and a revised concept of *Bildung* the answer? The concept of *Bildung* can contribute to understanding how to construct bridges between schooling and the real world. The abovementioned bridge-building will have consequences for classroom practice, instigating the need for empirical research using these perspectives. And finally, this paper argues that the value of instruction as a mimetic interpretive practice, encouraging students to actively use their imagination, is a fruitful way of developing *Bildung* as an educational concept preparing for innovative thinking. The mimetic perspective could have practical consequences for instruction, for example on how

teachers value imaginative work and students' participation in their content interpretation. European schools are currently suffering from high dropout rates (European Commission, 2012). If some of the reason for this is boredom, this problem will hardly be solved by continuing to implement reproductive skills-automation. Perhaps a new dream of education is appropriate (Wulf, 2003), a dream that includes more creative and imaginative generations to come?

6. Conclusion

Critical and comparative studies of educational concepts are needed to disclose political rhetorics that claim to be educational, and to reinterpret valuable educational concepts. Education is not a question of evidence, but a question of legitimacy and ethical responsibility (Biesta, 2006; Herbart & Stern, 2002; Saeverot, 2013; Standish, 1995).

The current situation reveals a paradox: Innovation, flexibility, sociability, creativity and problem solving are more important than ever before. In this situation the trend in international educational policies and research is to implement competence as a behavioral term from the 1930s, which cannot cater to the desired abilities. Educational researchers cannot be innovative without looking back at the history of education. This paper has made such a contribution by confronting competence with *Bildung* and the conclusions are: (1) To construct a sustainable educational concept for the 21st century the concept of competence must be abandoned, as its problems as an educational concept cannot be solved. The concept cannot be valid and legitimate as the content-aspect of education is obscured and hidden from public debate, threatening human autonomy and raising ethical questions. (2) *Bildung* can be revised as an educational concept for the 21st century by reinventing educational content as subject to interpretation and open debate of autonomous individuals on all levels from the transnational to the classroom. (3) A revised mimetic concept of *Bildung* can prepare students for the knowledge society, as imagining is a higher order thinking essential to innovation and

creativity. Instructional content in school is meaningful to students if they are able to imagine the representational object ‘as if’ it is both subject matter and real to them. It is time for educators to advocate for students to experience meaning in schools, because without meaning there can be no learning, only boredom, as stated by Comenius in 1657 (Comenius & Keatinge, 2005).

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