

Bildung and the significance of place: an overview

Morten Timmermann Korsgaard^{1,*}, Line Hilt², Merete Wiberg³
and Mariann Solberg⁴

¹Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, Sweden

²Department of education, University of Bergen

³Danish school of education, Aarhus University

⁴Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, UiT The Arctic University of Norway

*Corresponding author. E-mail: morten.korsgaard@mau.se

ABSTRACT

This introduction attempts to map out the educational and philosophical landscape in which the individual papers move. The movement from the familiar to the unknown, from alienation to homeliness, has been central to theories of *Bildung* since their emergence, while the role of the specific materiality of places in which *Bildung* takes place has remained somewhat unexplored. This special issue engages the perennial tensions and questions emerging with the notion of *Bildung* as these appear in literature and philosophy from the vantage point of place.

KEYWORDS: *Bildung*, place

Men hvorhen søgte da egentlig hans Ønske og hans Trang? Hvor hørte han hjemme? ...

(But where was he to seek his true desire and his need? Where was he at home? ...)

(Pontoppidan 1967: 312)

In 2002, a special issue was published in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* enquiring into theories and conceptions of *Bildung* in the encounter with contemporary conditions of postmodernity and globalization (*Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36/3). The overall idea of the special issue was to rewrite the concept of *Bildung* in the context of postmodern conditions, without falling into totalizing conceptions (Løvlie and Standish 2002: 320). In their critique of modern culture, poststructuralists like Jean-François Lyotard had argued that the grand narratives of

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humanity were no longer viable. This critique foreshadowed an attention towards the micro-narratives of human beings, such as the significance of localized and place-bound human self-understanding, as well as the stories of marginalized peoples. Other thinkers (e.g. Alasdair MacIntyre) understood the postmodern condition from a more pessimistic angle, however, lamenting the loss of a teleology of processes of *Bildung* and thus the possibility of human perfection. Franz Kafka's modernist novels, such as *The Process* and *The Castle*, are compelling stories of how individuals get lost in bureaucratic systems and ideologies, highlighting alienating processes and human beings' struggle for identity and belonging in modern societies. Nevertheless, the Norwegian educational philosopher Lars Løvlie reminds us that pedagogy is per se earthbound, territorial, situational, and local. Pedagogy takes place in situated interactions between persons and is not merely about individuals in abstract formal management systems (Løvlie 2007: 32).

This special issue focuses on the significance of place in and for theories of *Bildung*, a focus that is relevant considering the many crises concerning places around the globe. Conflicts regarding places often arise in connection with minorities with a long-standing belonging to a particular territory that does not map on neatly to nation-state borders, such as the Sámi population in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, and Native Americans in the USA (see especially the article in this special issue by Ole Andreas Kvamme). The great influx of migrants and refugees worldwide, travelling from a homeland to a foreign place, also urges a discussion of what it means to feel at home in a place, and the particular experience of being a newcomer in a country. 'In the United States, for the majority of its black population, the troubled history of their country has created feelings of conflict and alienation' (see in particular the article by Noemi Bartolucci). At the same time, nationalism and the exclusion of foreigners are emerging forcefully across Europe, as well as in other parts of the world, risking a new emphasis on blood and belonging and a rise in totalitarian regimes. Furthermore, the climate crisis and biodiversity loss are causing concern for places, as well as struggles over their ownership, thus actualizing questions of the reasons and grounds for possessing and exploiting common ground, the earth, territory, and homeland (Purdy 2006). Such concerns are manifestly present in the debates around the impact of the digital world, with education increasingly moving its place 'online' (see the discussion of 'digital *Bildung*' by Neal Thomas). This goes hand in hand with an increase in standardization across boundaries and borders. In an educational context, children and young people may suffer from isolation, loneliness, and feelings of anxiety in the encounter with an increasingly abstract digital performance and output-oriented educational system. This is a great cause for concern, given that feeling at home is for some 'the key idea of any kind of education (*Erziehung*) or cultivation (*Bildung*)' (Gadamer 2001: 531).

To be place-bound may in fact be seen as being an essential part of the human condition. In his work *Being and Time*, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger analysed the ontological characteristics of the human being as 'thrown into' and positioned somewhere in the world. Human beings can certainly feel at home or

not, but according to Heidegger, *not* feeling at home reminds us of the human condition, and this is the basis of our constant striving to become authentic beings (Heidegger 1962: 234). In this sense, not feeling at home is a key element in processes of *Bildung* (for a discussion of *Bildung* in light of the ideas of Gadamer and Heidegger, see the article by Milena Cuccurullo).

THE ORIGIN OF *BILDUNG* AND THE EMERGENCE OF PLACE

Traditionally, *Bildung* highlighted the transformative path of becoming for the individual human being, as well as the cultural influence this person encounters. (On transformative becoming and alienation, see especially the article by Karsten Kenkies.) The concept has been influential in continental pedagogy and is not easily translated into English. *Bildung* means something akin to *formation in culture*, as the concept marks the individual's transformative journey and encounters with the world. Thus, theories of *Bildung* often refer to the classical *Bildungs-journey* as an instantiation of the process of *Bildung*, highlighting the movement between familiar and unknown in the *Bildungsroman*. Starting off in the familiar landscape of the place where they grow up, the young person travels out into the world to meet and deal with the unknown, before returning home more enlightened and mature than before. This archetypal image thus implies that both familiarity with what is *known* as well as openness to the *unknown* are crucial elements of the process of *Bildung*. However, the image of the *Bildungs-journey* is, as illuminated in this special issue, not strictly confined to the German or European context, as comparable images have emerged in other parts of the globe.

The Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller recently reminded us that 'humans are not just in the world but are born *somewhere* in the world. We learn a language and acquire cultural habits, and the places we grow up in are therefore extremely significant for our becoming as human beings—indeed, for our becoming human beings' (Heller 2019). This somewhere eventually becomes a home, at least temporarily, and for some it becomes a place in relation to which they remain nostalgic and connected throughout life. For others, their home becomes a place from which they cannot escape quickly enough, indicating that the significances we ascribe to places can equally be a source of alienation. Hence, it is not surprising that the classical *Bildungsroman* oftentimes revolves around escape, exile, or nostalgia for the place one calls home. Thus, we emphasize that the significance of place for *Bildung* is not a new theme for educational theory—it has been addressed in several classical theoretical works on *Bildung*. Today, however, we might disagree over whether and how place should be seen as a relevant concept for educational theory, or over whether the relationship between *Bildung* and place should be understood differently today. One might also ask if there are blind spots in classical theories of *Bildung*, that could prove significant for fully understanding processes of *Bildung* and the complex, sometimes conflicted relationship we have with the material, social, and cultural world. This question is highlighted in the special issue by contributions that take the material and bodily dimension of *Bildung* into account, and that treat these aspects of our becoming as enabling rather than restricting for processes of *Bildung*.

Although places certainly have a material dimension, they are created by acts of meaning making, constituting something more than territories, mountains, rivers, houses, buildings, parks, and so on. The German philosopher J. G. Herder, was concerned with the significance of place for human perfection, arguing that place should play a significant role in educational theory. However, the significance of place for Herder (2004), lay first and foremost in our linguistic abilities, grounded in his expressivist language philosophy. Humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) pointed out that what separates a concrete site or space from a *place* is exactly the linguistic, moral, and aesthetic significance human beings ascribe to it. Interestingly, the etymological meaning of words such as ‘politics’ and ‘ethics’ is found in the Greek language in words that exactly signify place, namely *polis* (city state) and *èthea* (habitats) (Casey 2013). A version of this understanding of place is the ontological primacy given to the *communitas* in the communitarian tradition. The individual is not given, but always already interwoven with social and cultural relationships and structures of meaning. Although this line of thought has been present in continental educational thinking, the special issue also turns its attention to the Japanese thinker Tetsuro Watsuji’s idea of education as ‘learning one’s place’ (see the article by Anton Sevilla-Liu).

A central question for many of the articles in this special issue is thus how theories of *Bildung* can engage the social and cultural embeddedness of human becoming in the world. One contribution discusses similarities and differences between the Aristotelean concept of human flourishing and *Bildung* and relates these concepts to the significance of place (see the article by Kjersti Lea). Other articles discuss how our relationships with places have *existential* meaning for us. Although the cosmopolitan ideal may favour a person who does not belong anywhere or who belongs just as much everywhere, human beings are in this perspective deeply immersed in concrete places. It may even be argued that human beings have certain propensities and existential orientations that have made it possible for us to make spaces into places: ‘the place-making propensities of humanity ... must be seen from the outset as having been inseparable from formulating and answering questions about our place in the world: the place of “humanity”, of “my people”, and of “me personally”’ (Hershock and Ames 2019: 3). However, the three modes of place-making referred to here—‘humanity’, ‘my people’, and ‘me personally’—are in our view not to be seen as perfectly and harmoniously aligned. There are, for instance, deep-seated conflicts between finding the place of ‘my people’ and the place of ‘humanity’ in general. This is exemplified, for instance, by Agnes Heller’s *Paradox Europa* (2019), in the conflict between anthropological foundations and the universalism of values. As human beings, we are born somewhere in the world, with a certain mother tongue and identity that provides us with roots and belonging, but at the same time we are—from a certain vantage point—born free and equal, with universal rights. This conflict is in this special issue investigated in a *Bildung*-theoretical context as a clash between nostalgic and universal values (see in particular the article by Merete Wiberg for a view on this debate). While nostalgia typically concerns a longing to feel at home somewhere (that is, in a

specific place, nationality, language, culture, or tradition), universal values such as equal rights and tolerance transcend the specific human being and local group and deal with humanity and the world as a shared home.

Although most of us grow up and feel we belong to a certain place, Barbara Cassin (2016) reminds us that this is not fixed. Our feeling of being at home can change. This is brought out in the famous Danish *Bildungsroman* *Lykke-Per* (*Happy Per*), in which the protagonist feels most at home simply when he is lonely in a remote and desolate place. Yet this is to deny the feeling of homeliness he gets when he is with his family. Torn between these places he must decide; yet he is never able to grasp fully which is truly his home and how his formative journey has led to one preference over another. There are things, such as our mother tongue and the place of our upbringing, that never leave us, yet they often fail to hold sway entirely over who we become. Feeling at home is not simply a connection with one's homeland and the place where one grew up. It changes over time, rendering places that were once homely, foreign, and eerie. In the introduction to her collection of articles called *Nostalgia*, Cassin details how she has come to feel most at home on an island to which she had no previous connection. The island has grown into her, and she into it, through the shared practices and experiences she has had there. It formed her, and she formed a small corner of it into a place she could call home.

The relationship between finding one's own place in the world and the place of one's people—the individual and cultural dimension of finding one's place in the world—can also be seen as essentially conflicted. In *The New Religious Intolerance* Martha Nussbaum (2012) points out how different constructs of place, such as common culture (history and values), blood ties, ethnicity, earth-boundedness, linguistic belonging, and religion, have all been central elements in building national sentiments in Europe. This way of manifesting national belonging has led to the fact that newcomers are seldom considered as belonging to the nation. However, as Benedict Anderson reminds us, the nation can be seen as an imagined community, rather than an ontological entity (Anderson 2006). If we follow Anderson's analysis, we may be able to develop a different perspective on the nation-state, one that does not necessarily require feelings of belonging. In a world of transcultural exchange, extensive displacement, and a growing tourist industry, it is pertinent to ask if it is even possible to give renewed significance to the notion of place in theories of *Bildung* without falling into traditional conservatism—or even worse—into nostalgic nationalism.

In some areas of the world, the marginalization and silencing of indigenous peoples and minorities have been prominent. This has been present even in classrooms across the globe, and it has had detrimental effects on both pupils and teachers. The marginalization of specific groups of people tends to create a dynamic where identification and belonging to the group, the desire for group members, are taken to be integral to processes of liberation: they come to be interpreted as matters of moral and political duty, by those with the power of definition within the group. Absolutizing the connection between specific groups and specific places (land) can thus, paradoxically, be an opening towards individual freedom for members

of marginalized groups, as well as a hinderance for personal freedom. Turning to a search for oneself and one's own way of life in the grammar of one's native languages is an alternative way to enter the places where we grew up and to make them relevant for *Bildung*. This may be of particular importance for recognition of 'the storied landscapes' of indigenous grammars, and it may be a promising way forward for noncolonial place-aware theories of *Bildung* (for a reflection on this issue, see the article by Jeff Stickney).

Place thus appears to be a concept presenting possibilities as well as dangers for educational thinking, rendering the relationship between place and *Bildung* essentially conflicted. This ambivalence in the relationship between *Bildung* and place is also addressed by a discussion of the concepts of authenticity and alienation for theories of *Bildung*. The ideal of authenticity that developed in the Romantic era emphasized that both individuals and places would find their own authentic processes of cultivation towards humanity. However, the relationship between personhood and places in modernity is far from being a straightforward issue, and we are therefore in need of a theory of authenticity and *Bildung* that takes the complex relationship between personhood and places into account. Furthermore, in modernity, the relationship between personhood and places is not only mutually enriching, but also a potential source of alienation (see the article by Line Hilt and Øyvind Halvorsen).

Alienation or estrangement from one's environment is often seen as part of the modern condition with its abstract systems devoid of *personal* connection and meaning. The connectivity such systems install is abstracted from the kinds of qualities we tend to ascribe to places. The French anthropologist Augé (2020) has introduced the telling concept of 'non-places' to describe the spaces of transition that we typically inhabit in our modern daily lives. Train stations, airports, shopping malls, and refugee camps are places for the exchange of people and goods, but they lack the necessary character of places, such as human connection. In this special issue, the concept of non-places is discussed and rearticulated in light of new developments in university structures and contrasted with Ronald Barnett's view of the university as a site for care and curation (for an elaboration on this, see the article by Christiane Thompson).

Our paths through places—and non-places—often take on a narrative form and, given the importance of the *Bildungsroman* for the first theories of *Bildung*, it is no surprise that many of the articles in this special issue examine works of literature in their analyses. Shared by all these analyses is the emphasis on the movement implied in any process of *Bildung*, from place to place and from feelings of belonging to feelings of alienation, in a fluctuation that often does not seem to end. (Indeed, it is movement that goes down to the physical movement of our bodies in relation to gravity—a factor crucial to the earliest stages of our education, as is shown in the article by Birgit Schaffer and Camilla Kronqvist.) In this way, we hope to have contributed to opening anew the discussion of *Bildung*, by bringing into focus the role of the places in which these processes take place and, in the process, to have brought into view again some of the perennial tensions inherent to education. These are tensions that perhaps are not meant to be resolved or dissolved, but perhaps to be lived in the places we inhabit.

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