



Signifiers of Bildung, the Curriculum and the Democratisation of Public Education

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Abstract

This article argues that curriculum work can benefit from signifiers of Bildung to promote democracy in public education. The argument is built on the premise that cultural and intellectual traditions that value Bildung presume a link between the inner cultivation of the individual and the development of better societies (Horlacher 2017). I start by presenting Mouffe's (2000) democratic paradox and how pluralism is the defining feature of liberal democracies. Based on how curriculum work is a standard of public education (Hopmann 1999), I state that the curriculum must formalise pluralism in education and convey the democratic paradox in educational terms. With reference to Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, I then argue that such a laborious task can be achieved in the curriculum with the aid of signifiers of Bildung. Signifiers of Bildung are discursively empty and cannot acquire a definite meaning. Because of this, they make it possible to speak of the student and the society of liberal democracies while impeding a too narrow comprehension of what they are and ought to be. Therefore, to implement signifiers of Bildung in the curriculum can help establish both a standard of public education and limits to popular sovereignty. However, their use must undergo careful scrutiny, and teachers must remain free to interpret them.

Keywords Bildung · Curriculum · Democracy · Education Policy · Laclau · Mouffe

Introduction

Most cultural and intellectual traditions that value Bildung suppose that there is a link between the inner cultivation of individuals and the development of better societies (Horlacher 2017, p.2). Yet, the concept of Bildung has constantly provoked new and conflicting answers to what Bildung is and how to promote it (Horlacher 2017; Koselleck 2002; Sjöström et al. 2017; Slagstad et al. 2011). This is also true for our time. In often contradic-

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tory ways, there are those who present specific comprehensions of what Bildung for democracy is (e.g., Bellmann and Su 2016; Deng 2022; Hansen and Phelan 2019; Miyamoto 2021; Willbergh 2015), who encourage change in given comprehensions of it (e.g., Gustavsson 2014; Hilt and Riese 2021; Hogstad 2021; Løvlie 2011; Miller 2021; Taylor 2017; Varpanen et al. 2022), and even those who wonder whether Bildung for democracy can be thought of at all (e.g., Biesta 2002a, b; Masschelein and Ricken 2003, 2010). Given that there are no signs of consensus being reached on these matters any time soon, how may the concept of Bildung benefit curriculum work?

In this article I propose that the general lack of consensus on the nature of Bildung is what makes the concept particularly valuable for curriculum work in liberal democracies. For while I do support the use of the concept of Bildung in curriculum work to both produce and make explicit ethical guidelines in education (Horlacher 2017, 125), I argue that the dangers of the curriculum attempting to say too much about the content of Bildung are just as great, if not greater, than the dangers of saying too little. As an alternative, I want to suggest that part of the reason why the concept of Bildung is beneficial for curriculum work in liberal democracies is that its signifiers are empty and that definite agreement cannot be reached about its content.

The article is divided into three main sections. First, I present Mouffe's democratic paradox and Hopmann's research on curriculum work. Acknowledgment of pluralism is the defining feature of liberal democracies, and the curriculum relies on conceptions of the student and society to fulfil its role as a standard of public education. To illustrate, I offer two examples from curriculum work in Norway. Second, I combine Mouffe's and Hopmann's insights to expose a challenge unique to curriculum work in liberal democracies. Namely, that the curriculum must simultaneously grant the politically represented majority influence over public education and safeguard the autonomy of students. Third, I draw on Horlacher's comparative study of Bildung and Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory to argue that the concept can convey the democratic paradox in the curriculum. I conclude that signifiers of Bildung are beneficial for the curriculum in liberal democracies, as long as their use is carefully scrutinised and teachers remain free to interpret them.

The Democratic Paradox

Liberal democracies are often referred to as constitutional democracies, representative democracies, parliamentary democracies, or simply as modern democracies. According to Mouffe (2000), they are all political regimes that organise human coexistence in accordance with two distinct traditions. The first tradition is the democratic one. It stands for the principle that "power should be exercised by the people" (the prefix 'demo-' in 'democracy' stemming from *dēmos*, 'people' in Greek) and nourishes the ideas of "equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty" (Mouffe 2000, p. 2–3).

The second tradition is political liberalism. It represents the ideas of the rule of law, the separation of powers, human rights, and respect for individual freedom (Mouffe 2000, p. 2–3, p.18). Mouffe points out that, when combined, the two traditions create a tension, intrinsic to all liberal democracies, between democratic and liberal values, and which she often refers to in terms of the principles of equality and liberty. This tension is ultimately expressed by what she calls the *democratic paradox*, namely "that it is legitimate to estab-

lish limits to popular sovereignty in the name of liberty” (Mouffe 2000, p.4). What the paradox reveals is the defining feature of liberal democracies as the acceptance of *pluralism* defined as “the end of a substantive idea of the good life” (Mouffe 2000, p.18–19). There is a diversity of comprehensions of the good life in liberal democracies, but none of them are to have the last say on what it is and how it is to be reached. Pluralism implies political differences, and political differences imply relationships of power and antagonism (Mouffe 2000, p. 20–21).

Mouffe’s readers are thus invited to see liberal democracies in the light of ‘agonistic pluralism’, where ‘agonism’ expresses a relationship between adversaries, and differs from ‘antagonism’, which expresses a relationship between enemies (2000, p. 80–107). Whereas antagonistic relationships involve social actors who see each other as an immediate threat to their forms of life, agonistic relationships involve social actors who see each other as having different visions of the organisation of their shared form of life. Accordingly, a sign of liberal democratic politics is the establishment of institutions that acknowledge the relationships of power in society, only to limit and contest them. By doing so, the formation of antagonistic relationships is avoided, and the required space for agonistic pluralism is created. In Mouffe’s words, “what is at stake [in liberal democracies] is the legitimation of conflict and division, the emergence of individual liberty and the assertion of equal liberty for all” (2000, p. 19). While popular sovereignty ensures that a common political identity is formed, thus enabling the establishment and exercise of common rights, the liberal principle safeguards the possibility of democratic contestation. The paradoxical criterion for a pluralist form of human coexistence is that neither equality nor liberty can reach their complete realisation. So, what are the implications of the democratic paradox for public education? While Mouffe does not offer any answer to this policy question, educational researchers have attempted to outline one. However, most of these attempts primarily focus on the relevance of Mouffe’s political theory for the theorising and teaching of citizenship education (see Biesta 2011; Mamlok 2023; Ruitenbergh 2009; Sant 2021b, Sant et al. 2021 and Stitzlein 2022). In this article, I will address the democratic paradox from a broader curricular perspective, where citizenship education is regarded as one of several pedagogical concerns in education.

Assuming that the state is to guarantee the political stability of the public sector and that public education is concerned with the organisation of public schools – then public schools are to nourish the values that ensures political stability. A liberal democratic society should thus have public schools that reflect liberal democratic principles. These principles are the ones of liberty and equality, as expressed by the democratic paradox and crystallised in the political acknowledgement and appreciation of pluralism. Thus, a reason for state schools to support and foster pluralism as an integral part of the educational process is that pluralism is a fundamental requirement for liberal democracies.

From this perspective, there is a symmetrical relationship between Mouffe’s claim that democracies must recognise both the vital role of citizenship and “make room for competing conceptions of our identities as citizens” (2020, p.7) and the need in public education to educate students to a common social identity and make room for competing conceptions of personal identity. Moreover, Mouffe further states that relationships between social actors can become more democratic only insofar as they recognise that their social demands are political, and thus unrepresentative of the whole of society (2000, p. 21). Accordingly, I want to claim that students can only become more democratic insofar as they are allowed to form their own identities as social actors and are exposed to and acknowledge that there are

different ways of becoming such. In other words, for public education to be *for* democracy it must, above all, be thought of in terms of public education *in* democracy and embrace pluralism. In the next section, I will present Hopmann's research on curriculum work. By combining it with Mouffe's democratic theory, I will then elaborate on what I consider to be a fundamental challenge for curriculum work in liberal democracies.

The Three Premises of Curriculum Work

For Hopmann the curriculum serves as a standard for public education, where 'public education' has the double meaning of "what is happening in public schools" and "the sum total of education" accessible to the public (1999, p. 89). The need for a curriculum appears where there is a loss of certainty on the matter of the content of teaching. It prescribes conditions for public education and develops, through its written form, patterns of control to supervise and hold schools accountable for their societal task (Hopmann 1999, p. 93, p. 97, p.103). Three premises serve as a precondition for curriculum work, namely a *planning*, *learning* and *effect* premise. The planning premise assumes that "teaching can and must be planned publicly", the learning premise that "what is known can be taught, and what is taught can be learnt", and the effect premise that "what is learnt through teaching also corresponds in its effects to what was intended with the teaching" (Hopmann 1999, p. 91). If any of the three assumptions were to be wrong, curriculum work would be futile.

The first and third assumption reveal that the intent of just about any curriculum is to increase the correspondence between representations of what public education *ought* to be and what public education *is*. They indicate that the curriculum has an intention and that this intention is realised through a planning process that is of public concern. Students that undergo public education are to be educated by and for society at large, meaning that the curriculum must contain an idea of what this society is, what it aspires to and what the student must become for this to happen. The second assumption reveals the curriculum's presumed impact on students. To assume that what is known can be taught, and what is taught can be learnt, is to assume that there is uncontested knowledge about the learning process of students and, thus, about the students themselves. It can therefore be said that, for the curriculum as a standard of public education to be possible at all, it necessarily carries within it a conception of society and the student, their interrelationship and intended future. Whether the curriculum makes explicit mention of these conceptions or not is solely a matter of transparency. Before I can elaborate on the challenge that this presents for democracies, insight into the three levels of curriculum work is required.

The Three Levels of Curriculum Work

In curriculum studies, it is common practice to make use of typologies to illustrate the levels of social activities that partake in curriculum work (Priestley et al. 2021). For this paper, I will use Hopmann's typology (1999). Hopmann's three levels of curriculum work are the political, programmatic and practical level (p.94–97).

The political level establishes a framework for the curriculum work through public documents and "sums up the educational political common sense" in a given society (Hopmann 1999, p.95). In democracies, Hopmann states, it is the politically represented majority that

Table 1 Levels of curriculum work (Hopmann 1999)

Political level	Framework for the curriculum work. Sums up the educational political common sense and illustrates through public documents what the public expects from or feels is lacking in education. In democracies, the success of the political level is guaranteed by winning a majority.
Programmatic level	Where the actual curriculum is written. Develops the concrete curriculum in the interaction between the administration and the teaching staff. Reconciles the political with the school practical common sense.
Practical level	Responsible for the local forming of the lessons. Offers a frame that binds the pedagogically possible to the curriculum by means of a school practical common sense.

embodies the common sense and serves as the standard of public education, thus legitimising the curriculum work. The success of curriculum work on a political level is therefore determined by the public documents' ability to depict what the politically represented majority expects from or feels is lacking in education and propose potential solutions.

Meanwhile, the programmatic level aims at reconciling the political with the school practical common sense and is where the written curriculum is formed (Hopmann 1999, p. 96). On this level, curriculum decisions are taken by educational administrators and school experts, often with limited insight into the practicalities of everyday school life. The school experts may be teachers, school leader, researchers, or other actors with the technical expertise to certify that the written curriculum provides educationally sound teaching content, regardless of any political agenda. If the written curriculum conveys the expectations established on a political level through means that are perceived as pedagogically reasonable to the average teacher, it is a sign of good decision-making on the programmatic level.

On a practical level, curriculum work is "responsible for the local forming of the lesson" (Hopmann 1999, p.94). Here, the written curriculum is approached less as a standard for teaching practices and outcomes and more as something to be tested and worked with (Hopmann 1999, p.96). The question asked is whether the frame set by the written curriculum can legitimise the reality of school life as perceived by the school practical common sense (i.e., the average teacher). An important aspect of the practical level of curriculum work is therefore to assess the distance between social expectations for schooling and "what is usual and possible in a school practical sense" (Hopmann 1999, p.96).

The Principle of Negative Co-Ordination

Furthermore, the three levels of curriculum work follow a *principle of negative co-ordination*. Each level of curriculum work establishes limits for the other two without determining positively what occurs within them (Hopmann 1999, p.94). The political level delineates the structure and goals of schooling through general principles, such as school laws. On the programmatic level, curriculum makers are charged with developing curriculum guidelines that are pedagogically justifiable and compatible with the political principles (Hopmann 1999, p.93–94). Finally, school practitioners have to plan teaching under the guidelines provided by the written curriculum developed on a programmatic level. What this means is that the society and the student that the written curriculum either explicitly or implicitly describes (due to the planning, learning and effect premise) set boundaries for teachers' interpretative

freedom as to what the society and the student may be. Two cases of curriculum work in Norway can exemplify this setting of boundaries.

One reason why the Norwegian national curriculum reforms of 1993 and 1997 were deemed necessary by the minister of education at the time was the supposed dissolution of Norwegian values (Trippestad 2011; Volckmar 2008). As a countermeasure, a curriculum was developed with the intention to, among other things, bolster the national identity by prescribing teaching content that emphasised the particularities of Norwegian society (Telhaug 2011; Trippestad 2011; Volckmar 2008). In the reform's aftermath, research suggested that the curriculum could have been more inclusive of both students and teachers on a practical level (Dykesteen and Nilsen 2011; Hovednak 2004).

The second example is from today's competence-oriented curriculum. During its development, the prescription of teaching content that would strengthen the national identity was not of immediate concern. With a foothold in the notion of 21st century competences, the curriculum instead prescribes a narrow understanding of student identity and how it is to be formed (Hilt et al. 2019; Søreide 2022). However, because the ideal student described in the policy documents relies on representations of the most needed skills in future societies, the documents unavoidably preach a conception of Norwegian society just as narrow as the one of students.

What the two examples illustrate is how the concepts of society and student in the written curriculum are interrelated, and that whatever boundaries are established for the comprehension of one also determine the boundaries for the comprehension of the other. Either way, and in accordance with the three premises of curriculum work, these comprehensions determine what teaching practices can be justified by teachers with reference to the written curriculum, ultimately influencing the educational process of students.

Hopmann (1999) is clear about the limited impact of the written curriculum on teaching practices and the impossible task of measuring it. Yet, if the three premises of curriculum work are to be taken seriously, the written curriculum's influence on teaching practices cannot be downplayed. In the next section, I will combine Mouffe's democratic theory and Hopmann's curriculum research to show how curriculum work in liberal democracies is a challenge on its own.

The Democratic Challenge of Curriculum Work

As I previously argued with the help of Mouffe's democratic theory (2000), public schools are to be regulated in liberal democracies by the principles of liberty and equality, as expressed by the democratic paradox. Because pluralism is the defining feature of these societies, for social actors to become more democratic, they need to become aware of and acknowledge pluralism. Consequently, that state schools welcome and encourage pluralism is a criterion both for public education to be more democratic and for the thinking of education for democracy. If the democratic paradox affirms that "it is legitimate to establish limits to popular sovereignty in the name of liberty" (Mouffe 2000, p. 4), it seems to me that it is also legitimate to establish limits to popular sovereignty in curriculum work for the sake of liberty in public education. This makes curriculum work in democracies particularly delicate, as the very purpose of the curriculum is to serve as a standard for public education, and this standard is legitimised by the politically represented majority (Hopmann 1999, p.

95–96), that is, by popular sovereignty. Where Hopmann states that the programmatic level of curriculum work must realise the double task of developing a curriculum that is compatible with the goals delineated on a political level, as well as pedagogically justifiable on a practical level (1999, p.93–94), I would like to add a third task specific to curriculum work in liberal democracies. Namely, the task of establishing limits to how far the politically represented majority can go in determining the content of the concepts of ‘society’ and ‘student’ in the written curriculum. The reason is that if the meaning of either of the two concepts in the curriculum were to become too narrow, it would be a denial of pluralism as the Alpha and Omega of the democratic project in education. Keeping the concepts of ‘society’ and ‘student’ sufficiently open for interpretation in the written curriculum is both politically and educationally important, just as pluralism is of societal and individual importance.

Since the three premises of curriculum work imply conceptions of what the student and society are and ought to be, for the programmatic level to attempt to evade any mention of the two concepts in the written curriculum would be an act of bad faith. The result of such attempts would still be to reinforce given conceptions of the student and the society of the curriculum, only in a less transparent and, to that extent, more deceitful way. As an alternative, I suggest that curriculum work must convey the democratic paradox on the programmatic level. By doing so, Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism may serve as the (political) horizon for the written curriculum. Where Biesta (2011) sees Mouffe’s principles of liberty and equality as valuable reference points for citizenship education, I see their value in the shaping of the actual curriculum. The third task of the programmatic level of curriculum work would then be to strike a balance. It would have to grant the politically represented majority the right to influence the standard of public education and simultaneously safeguard the liberty of students to form their personal identities and conceptions of society. Yet, the curriculum is a political and an educational endeavour. Mouffe’s political theory can address the challenges unique to the democratic project in education, but it alone is not sufficient for a curriculum intended to encompass the richness and complexity of pedagogy. I argue that this goal can be better achieved through the pedagogical concept of Bildung.

Bildung as the Intersection of ‘Student’ and ‘Society’

If we choose to follow the principle of liberty in our democracies (thus making them pluralist) and believe that there is value in cherishing the uniqueness of citizens as free individuals, it means that the written curriculum should make room for a certain indeterminacy of the individual that undergoes the educational process and of the society that the individual is to be inaugurated into. The interest of the concept of Bildung lies in its presumption of a connection between the inner cultivation of the individual and the development of better societies (Horlacher 2017, p.2). The presumption makes it explicit that the concepts of student and society are correlated, and that narrowing or widening the curriculum’s conception of society leads to the same effect in its conception of the student, and vice-versa. To further discuss this relationship, I will provide a brief presentation of three essential features of Bildung, as identified by Koselleck (2002) in his study of the concept’s anthropological and semantical structure.

The first feature is *religiosity*, which can be traced back to the concept’s theological origins (Koselleck 2002, p.184–187). The religious content of Bildung turned the inner cultiva-

tion of the individual into an overarching educational goal. There exists a fundamental facet of human existence that cannot be grasped nor determined by political discourse. Although no longer as religious as before, *Bildung* remains a “secular faith” that fosters a pedagogical openness to diverse worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*) (Koselleck 2002, p.187). The second feature of *Bildung* is its connection to *work* (Koselleck 2002, p.192–194) as any activity that “satisfies the needs that it generates” – that is – as a “duty toward oneself” (2002, p.193). *Bildung* is a process that generates and is generated by labour. It transcends therefore material and cultural boundaries, serving as an ideal across vastly different educational contexts. The third essential feature of *Bildung* is its *political and social openness* (Koselleck 2002, p.187–192). Politically, *Bildung* can be adapted to suit various policies, including liberal democratic ones. Socially, *Bildung* “presupposes and makes possible freedom and equality” for individuals undergoing the educational process (Koselleck 2002, p.188).

All three features are of significant interest for pedagogy in liberal democracies. The political and social openness of *Bildung* makes it a particularly well-suited educational concept for conveying the liberal democratic belief that liberty and equality among individuals are complementary poles of society. Because public education is public and should include all students, to incorporate the concept of *Bildung* into the written curriculum would thus be a way of officialising the democratic paradox in public education. Meanwhile, the religiosity of *Bildung* reminds us that curriculum work must strive for the inner cultivation of students independently of political agendas, and the connection between *Bildung* and *work* as “duty toward oneself” suggests that the heterogeneity of society and a fulfilling education for all are compatible goals. Thereby, the concept of *Bildung* may simultaneously provide curriculum work with the pedagogical depth that Mouffe’s political theory lacks and strengthen pluralism as the political task of schooling.

In the following section I will argue, with reference to Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, that the concept of *Bildung* is discursively empty. If correct, it means that the emptiness of the concept in the written curriculum can formalise the principle of liberty in curriculum work, consequently establishing a limit to popular sovereignty and safeguarding pluralism in public education. The question to be asked is not whether the concept of *Bildung* should be employed in the written curriculum, but *how* it is to be employed.

The Empty Dimensions of *Bildung*

Laclau and Mouffe’s political philosophy is poststructuralist and referred to as a discourse theory. In agreement with discourse approaches to education policy analysis (e.g., Hilt et al. 2019; Pinar 1999, 2014; Uljens & Ylikmaki 2015; Wahlström and Sundberg 2017), I therefore propose to conceive of curriculum work as an ensemble of discursive practices. Discourses can be understood as “socially produced forms of knowledge that set limits upon what it is possible to think, write or speak about a ‘given social object or practice’” (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, p.35). They are the way through which we represent and understand the world, as much as the way through which we engage in and identify with social relationships and practices (Howarth 2009, p.311–312). Thereby, curriculum work produces forms of knowledge about public education and sets limits to what it is possible to think, write or speak about it. As also assessed by Hopmann (1999), the written curriculum can thus be seen as a policy text that introduces a “programme of conduct” that serves as a framework for everyday practices (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, p.34), in this case, in public education.

Based on the above, we may say that the written curriculum's programme of conduct should reinforce discursive practices in curriculum work on a practical level that promotes pluralism, and that this can be done through the concept of Bildung. The reason, I would argue, is that signifiers of Bildung are per definition empty. If a signifier is "the concretely perceptible component of a sign, as distinct from its conceptual meaning (the signified)" (Baldick 2015), an empty signifier is "a signifier without a signified" (Laclau 2007, p.36). Because of this absence of a signified, empty signifiers do not have a clear meaning and can assemble otherwise distinct discourses (Laclau 2005, p.133). Empty signifiers show themselves when what they denote is considered a matter of common sense, as a matter that stresses similarities among otherwise distinct ways of representing the world. Some examples of empty signifiers are 'justice', 'equality' and 'freedom' (Laclau 2005, p.96), 'knowledge society' (Szkudlarek 2007), 'demand management' and 'social justice' (Griggs and Howarth 2004) and national myths (Sant 2021a). For instance, different individuals may have distinct understandings of how justice should be served in a particular situation, but most, if not all individuals share a common appreciation for the idea of 'justice' in broader terms, that is, as an empty signifier.

The next question is how a signifier can possibly be empty and have no distinct meaning. The reason is that empty signifiers denote something that discourses cannot apprehend. Somewhat schematically, a fundamental difference between the signifiers 'justice' and 'whiteboard' is that if someone asks what 'justice' is, one cannot point at it to determine its meaning (i.e., the signified). Similarly, what makes signifiers of Bildung empty is the supposed link between the inner cultivation of the individual and the development of a better society. Because discourses are social practices, discursive attempts to give meaning to individuality will always be socially determined (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p.114–122). Individuality is always *in between* discursive practices and can only be conceived of metaphorically (Szkudlarek 2007, p.239–240). As the other side of the relation presumed by Bildung, 'society' is as illusory as it is unachievable. The 'impossibility of society', Laclau and Mouffe explain, is due to the everchanging comprehension of what society is and of what it should include and exclude (2001, p.122–127). Liberal democracies acknowledge the diversity of their citizens by attempting to include everyone, thereby institutionalising the impossibility of society through its systematic renewal. In curriculum studies, Carr (1998) makes an analogous statement when writing that a curriculum for liberal democracy is "a curriculum which acknowledges that 'democracy' has to be continuously transformed by continually transcending the limitations and inadequacies of its contemporary meaning" (p.338). Thus, signifiers of Bildung refer to a process that can only be described with reference to two other concepts ('individual' and 'society') that cannot acquire a definite meaning. Indeed, an empty signifier expresses a 'constitutive lack' in discourse as an 'impossible object' that "shows itself through the impossibility of its adequate representation" (Laclau 2007, p.39–40). In this regard, the emptiness of Bildung echoes back to customary references such as Ellen Key's (2018) negative definition of it as "what is left over after we have forgotten all we have learnt" (p.231), and – perhaps more profoundly – to the concept's roots in the negative theology of the German *Imago Dei* doctrine (Horlacher 2017, p.8; Koselleck 2002, p.176–177). Bildung can be experienced but never fully understood. To assert that signifiers of Bildung are empty is not to assert that Bildung does not exist in experience, but that, *if* it exists, discourse cannot determine what it is. How is this useful for the written curriculum in liberal democracies?

The emptiness of *Bildung* allows the politically represented majority to determine a standard for public education through the written curriculum without the written curriculum becoming a threat to pluralism. This is because signifiers of *Bildung* add a necessary fuzziness to the written curriculum, thus making official the indeterminacy of the individual and society of liberal democracies in educational terms. Szkudlarek and Zamojski (2020) have argued that the term ‘knowledge society’ is an empty signifier that provides a common ground for heterogeneous social demands. What I propose is the use of *Bildung* as an empty signifier in curriculum work to provide a common ground for heterogeneous pedagogical demands. To emphasise the emptiness of *Bildung* on a programmatic level means to increase teachers’ interpretative freedom of the written curriculum on a practical level. This makes it easier for teachers to justify teaching practices based on their encounters with unpredictable and diverse groups of students. However, and because *Bildung* is an educational ideal, this interpretative freedom may also backfire as a justification for teaching practices that challenge the principle of liberty in public education. For while all discourses on *Bildung* postulate a link between the inner cultivation of the individual and the development of better societies, they do not necessarily stand for the pluralism forwarded by the democratic paradox. Far from it, *Bildung* was largely conceived by and for an unburdened bourgeoisie up to the 18th century (Horlacher 2017), and scepticism towards liberal democracy has not impeded educationalists from developing sophisticated theories of *Bildung* in the past (e.g., Thröhler 2011). That some teachers may stand for anti-democratic ideas is a possibility, and it would be unfortunate if the written curriculum allowed for such ideas to guide teaching practices under the excuse that they promote *Bildung*.

How, then, can curriculum work on a programmatic level make use of *Bildung* as an empty signifier and remain faithful to the principles of equality and liberty? Or, to put it differently, how can signifiers of *Bildung* be used in a manner that acknowledge both individual rights and popular sovereignty? This is where *Bildung* as a floating signifier becomes of interest.

The Floating Dimension of *Bildung*

Whether a signifier is floating or empty is a matter of perspective. That is, whether we lay emphasis on the signifier’s empty or floating dimension (Laclau 2005, p. 133). If empty signifiers are signifiers that lack meaning, floating signifiers are signifiers that are “‘overdetermined’ by a plurality of meanings” (Howarth 2004, p.261). These ‘meanings’ are formed by discursive attempts to determine empty signifiers that, as previously seen, are indeterminate (Laclau 2005, p.129–131). Different discourses generate different comprehensions of the same signifier. Consequently, floating signifiers appear where there is a lack of consensus on the supposed content of an empty signifier. Floating signifiers highlight the intersections of society and reveal the ambiguities in social practices, where discourses confront each other and reveal their differences. To emphasise the floating dimension of a signifier is thereby to attempt to determine the meaning of empty signifiers. The key point here is that the floating and empty dimensions of signifiers interdependent, though one dimension may be emphasised more than the other. While this paper advocates a greater appreciation for the empty dimension of signifiers of *Bildung*, it still relies on the floating dimension of the signifier to convey any meaning at all. Hence the need to provide an understanding of the concept which, although comprehensive, establishes certain limits to what *Bildung* can signify.

As sketched in the introduction of this article, few would disagree with the importance of Bildung in general terms, but there is a tendency to disagree on what 'Bildung' more specifically implies. In the first case, the empty dimension of Bildung is emphasised, in the second case, its floating dimension.

Finding the Balance

That disagreements on the nature of Bildung is a natural consequence of signifiers of Bildung being empty may sound discouraging at first, but I would argue that this is why Bildung is useful for distinguishing education in liberal democracies. That the concept has a floating dimension to it means that its signifiers can be employed on the programmatic level of curriculum work to draw the line between teaching practices that are compatible with pluralism and teaching practices that are not. By saying something about how Bildung is to be interpreted in the written curriculum, something is also said about how it cannot be interpreted, thus emphasising its floating dimension. Meanwhile, the empty dimension of Bildung ensures that the individual and the society represented in the curriculum cannot be fully determined, leaving the question of what they are partially open. With such leeway, the question to be asked is how far the written curriculum can go in describing what Bildung is in liberal democracies without becoming unnecessarily narrow and, as a result, exclusionary towards the pluralism it should acknowledge. If the curriculum is to promote Bildung in and for liberal democracies, the programmatic level of curriculum work must find a balance between the signifiers' floating and empty dimensions. By means of the principle of negative co-ordination (Hopmann 1999), the floating dimension can impede curriculum work on a practical level that defies the principles of liberty and equality. Conversely, the empty dimension can limit the impact of the principle by ensuring that the society and the student described in the written curriculum are left open to interpretation.

The ideal would be for the emptiness of Bildung to be maintained *within* the boundaries of the principles of liberty and equality and as outlined by the signifier's floating dimension in the written curriculum. To preserve the emptiness of Bildung within these boundaries would officialise that which Hopmann (2007) defines as a premise for Bildung-promoting teaching. Namely, the autonomy of teachers and students. This is because the empty dimension of signifiers of Bildung increases teachers' interpretative freedom of Bildung-promoting teaching practices on a practical level, while simultaneously acknowledging the indeterminacy, and thus the freedom, of students. As a result, the written curriculum would encourage the comprehension of Bildung as "never given" and as dependent on a 'necessary ambiguity' that is part "of the teaching process itself" (Hopmann 2007, p.117). Szkudlarek and Zamojski (2020) argue for how thinking is an interplay between knowledge and ignorance. They attribute a positive connotation to ignorance in teaching as a prerequisite for creating a room in thinking for "the new to appear" (Szkudlarek and Zamojski 2020, p.586). Building on their insights, to say that teaching relies on a necessary ambiguity means that teachers must be given room to think the interplay between their technical expertise as educators and their ignorance of their students. In this sense, to emphasise the emptiness of Bildung in the written curriculum is favourable to students' (un)planned attainment of the process. The attainment is unplanned because it is impossible to foresee and regulate the autonomy implied in learning and teaching activities that promote Bildung (Hopmann

2007). What makes the attainment nonetheless planned is that the curriculum can allow for such autonomy and teachers can act as ‘creative mediators’ (Osborn et al. 1997) to adapt teaching in ways that facilitate Bildung in their own classrooms. Therefore, it can be said that the emptiness of Bildung is a condition for Bildung-promoting teaching and that Bildung-promoting teaching is intimately connected to a ‘permissive’ kind of curriculum work that promotes “the ethical or social or child-centred ‘mission’ of the teaching profession” (Priestley et al. 2016, p.7). This has significant implications for teachers. Based on poststructuralist theory, Zembylas (2010) stresses the importance of teachers’ agency and dialogic interaction with students, parents and colleagues in shaping their professional identity. In my view, the curriculum is a stark reminder that teacher identity is an “ongoing *becoming* in a context embedded in power relations, ideology and culture” (Zembylas 2010, p.233), and Bildung may help alleviate its constraining nature as an educational standard.

The empty and floating dimensions of the signifiers of Bildung are what enable their use both to distinguish public education in liberal democracies from incompatible comprehensions of what public education is to be, and to officialise the autonomy of students and teachers as professed by the principle of liberty. Therefore, by using signifiers of Bildung in the programmatic level of curriculum work, it should be possible to extend the democratic paradox from the political to the practical level. To accomplish this task in curriculum work is to simultaneously acknowledge popular sovereignty and individual rights in public education.

Concluding Remarks

By drawing upon Mouffe’s political theory, I have examined the challenge of mediating between education policy in liberal democracies and teaching practices. The paper shares therefore similarities with research on the implications of the democratic paradox for citizenship education (see Biesta 2011; Mamlok 2023; Ruitenberg 2009; Sant 2021b, Sant et al. 2021 and Stitzlein 2022). However, there are some important differences. Most of these studies focus on practical curriculum work, offering theoretical tools to support teachers in implementing citizenship education. In contrast, this paper concentrates on the benefits of signifiers of Bildung for democratising the curriculum, addressing curriculum work at a programmatic level. Unlike research aimed at strengthening citizenship education, the role of signifiers of Bildung in the written curriculum is broader in scope and more formal in nature. Signifiers of Bildung can mediate the relationship between policy and teaching, acting as a conduit for liberal democratic values in education while also preserving the pedagogical depth in the curriculum that political theory lacks. Paradoxically, without a pedagogical side of curriculum work that can operate independently of overarching political goals, the curriculum may be democratic, but not liberal democratic. While Bildung legitimises citizenship education within the confines established by the signifier’s floating dimension, it treats citizenship education as one component among several pedagogical concerns of equal significance.

Per definition, curriculum work in liberal democracies establishes a standard for public education based on the criteria of the politically represented majority (Hopmann 1999). To include the concept of Bildung in the curriculum could thus be interpreted as a threat to pluralism. Since the concept of Bildung relies on the concepts ‘individual’ and ‘society’, it could be exploited by the politically represented majority to further determine what type of

individual the student is to become. As suggested by Masschelein and Ricken (2003, 2010), the concept of Bildung in the curriculum would then be part of a power mechanism meant to create and control the process of becoming an individual. If they are right, to employ signifiers of Bildung in the written curriculum would, contrary to establishing limits to popular sovereignty, only serve the purpose of further standardizing the hegemonic conception of what the student and society ought to be. Considering the principle of negative co-ordination (Hopmann 1999), this could lead to a dangerously limited comprehension of what students are and must become on a practical level, consequently challenging the principle of liberty and a pluralist approach to public education. However, what the two authors do not consider is that the concept of Bildung is – above all – empty. Its signifiers can therefore also be used to reduce prescriptiveness in education and safeguard the autonomy of the individuals being regulated. Therefore, to make use of signifiers of Bildung in the written curriculum to promote education for democracy has two important consequences.

First, it invites curriculum researchers to scrutinise discourses on Bildung in the written curriculum. Insofar as finding a balance between too little or too much emphasis on the emptiness of Bildung is merely speculative, chances are that there will always be room for improvements in future curriculum reforms. As Sant and Brown (2021) argue, “in seeking to escape the structures of existing governance, we unavoidably propose alternative governmental arrangements” (2021, p.422). Ideally, the written curriculum should not open up for interpretations of Bildung that challenge liberal democratic values, nor for exclusionary comprehensions of what the individual and society of Bildung ought to be. It requires therefore a type of reflexivity capable of critiquing “discursive platitudes that have locked our resolutions into overly familiar pathways” (Sant and Brown 2021, p.423). As observed by Endicott (2001), when it comes to legal theory, the law must be purposefully unclear to allow for interpretative freedom and, yet, clear enough not to be misinterpreted. The same thing could be said for the ‘law’ of Bildung. This leads to the second consequence. Namely that teachers must be granted autonomy to interpret the signifiers of Bildung in the written curriculum. This might be seen as counterproductive, insofar as the permissiveness in teachers’ interpretative freedom of Bildung might serve as an excuse for the preservation of unchallenged and even reactionary teaching habits (Horlacher 2012, p.143; Priestley et al. 2016, p.13–16). However, there is really no alternative than to rely on teachers’ professional ethics – for education in liberal democracies and for the development of a curriculum that promotes Bildung. Both cases require a recognition and appreciation of the autonomy of students, which in turn requires the recognition and appreciation of the autonomy of teachers. In other words, if curriculum work is ever to be both liberal and democratic, it must standardise that not everything can be standardised, and that this is as necessary as it is desirable. Bildung as an empty and floating signifier in the written curriculum might be able to do just that.

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Declarations

Competing interests The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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