

Citizenship-as-knowledge: How perspectives from Bildung-centred Didaktik can contribute to European Citizenship Education beyond competence

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journals.sagepub.com/home/eer**Erik Ryen**  and **Evy Jøsok**

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Abstract

How can the teaching of knowledge in schools contribute to the development of students as individual human beings, with the capacity not only for problem solving within the existing structures of society but also for developing ideas and solutions that go *beyond the existing structures*? The purpose of this article is to bring this question to the forefront within the context of citizenship education (CE) through a theoretical analysis of the epistemology underpinning two dominant conceptualisations of teaching CE. The analysis shows that both the model of teaching *about, through* and *for* democracy that underpins the understanding of CE in competence frameworks and the conceptualisation of CE as teaching directed towards *qualification, socialisation* and *subjectification* that is used to criticise citizenship-as-competence fall short in accounting for how knowledge can play a part in taking us beyond the existing. Turning to Bildung-centred Didaktik, which has dealt extensively with questions of knowledge in relation to the formation of the individual subject, the article explores how a renewed focus on knowledge can contribute to answering the question that Joris et al. pose in the title of their article ‘Citizenship -as-competence, *what else?*’

Keywords

Citizenship education, competence, knowledge, Bildung, Didaktik

Introduction

Since the end of the 1990s, a renewed interest in the field of citizenship education (CE) has developed, spurring a process of comprehensive policy development in Europe, both nationally and on

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the supranational level. Because polarisation, alienation and the decreased acceptance of political authority seem to represent persistent challenges to the political order, the hopes are that education can increase political participation and strengthen social integration (Abs, 2021). Following policy initiatives by the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CoE), CE is now placed 'at the top of educational agendas' (Joris et al. 2021: 2). One important impetus for this was the terrorist attacks in France and Denmark in 2015; the CoE's action plan adopted that year concluded that 'democracy needs to be strengthened, not weakened, when it is under attack' (Lenz, 2019). Since 2015, the development of a 'Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture' (RFCDC) has 'had the status of a flagship project within the educational work of the CoE' (Lenz, 2019: 21).

At the same time, questions continue to be asked about the degree to which CE can contribute to the strengthening of democracy in the context of increasing inequality, pressures on the welfare state and the persistence of neo-liberal policies (Biesta and Lawy, 2006; Pais and Costa, 2020). Regardless of the current state of affairs, the deeper question seems to be whether CE has the potential to take the students *beyond the existing* (Joris et al., 2021) or, put differently, whether the teaching of citizenship can achieve more than *qualifying* students to take part in the existing order and *socialising* them into this order (Biesta, 2009). If we acknowledge that democracy is not something that can be achieved once and for all and that there is always a need to question the existing, develop alternative solutions and take collective action, then qualification and socialisation into the existing are hardly enough to sustain a thriving democracy. If CE is to contribute to increased levels of engagement, participation and social cohesion, it must also attend to the way the students can appear as individuals in relation to society, which Biesta (2009) refers to as *subjectification*.

The increased focus on the part of governments and supranational organisations on CE has, however, not been accompanied by a rising interest in the role of *knowledge* in the development of citizenship. Rather, policy development in this area has taken place within the context of a broader turn towards the development of measures of educational *output* in terms of qualification and competence attainment. Here, 'the question of knowledge, or what it is that it is important that students learn [. . .] has been neglected both by educational policy makers and by those working in educational studies' (Young, 2008: xv). When applied to the field of CE through the development of competence frameworks, Joris et al. (2021: 17) argue that the competence-based language of CE falls short in terms of 'allowing room for both citizenship and education to be and achieve *more than the existing*'. However, in the analytical model that Joris et al. (2021) develop in order to analyse the policy documents on CE, the connection between knowledge and subjectification is not emphasised.

One branch of educational research that has dealt extensively with the issue of knowledge in education is the German/Scandinavian tradition of Bildung-centred Didaktik (Hopmann, 2007; Klafki, 2001; Willbergh, 2021). Within this tradition, the emphasis is placed on the exploration of the possibilities of knowledge, conceptualised as educational content, contributing to the formation of students as autonomous human beings. Questions concerning teaching methods and lesson planning become secondary because they are only addressed after and on the basis of the educational potential of the content that has been uncovered by the teacher through 'didactic analysis' (Klafki, 1995). Because of the comprehensive theorisation of knowledge as educational content, the theories developed within this tradition have recently become a source of inspiration for scholars (Deng, 2015, 2018a, 2018b, 2021a, 2021b; Ryen, 2020; Willbergh, 2015, 2016) who are looking for ways to bring knowledge back into the educational discourse, as called for by Michael Young (2008, 2013) and others.

The purpose of this article is to (1) provide a theoretical analysis of the role of knowledge within existing conceptualisations of CE and (2) discuss the possibilities of Bildung-centred Didaktik

improving the understanding of how CE as subjectification can occur through the teaching and learning of knowledge.

We start from the assumption that an account of how CE can contribute to the subjectification of students must be based, first, on an epistemology that can account for how knowledge can play a role in the formation of the subject and, second, on a theory of content that can account for how knowledge ‘is selected and translated into curriculum content and how content can be analysed and unpacked in ways that open up manifold opportunities for cultivating human powers’ (Deng, 2018a: 345). It is important to emphasise that this starting point is not neutral, because alternative approaches exist that do not place knowledge at the centre of educational processes related to the development of autonomy.¹ It should therefore be acknowledged that our contribution comes from a specific space (Wermke et al., 2015). Thus, when we engage with the question of how CE should be conceptualised and, in doing so, bring the centrality of knowledge and epistemology to the forefront, this should, at the same time, be seen as an effort to bring the intellectual tradition of Bildung-centred Didaktik into the international conversation within this field. As such, it is part of a wider exchange that has been going on since the 1990s (Gundem and Hopmann, 1998; Hopmann, 2015; Westbury, 1998) and continues to generate research across a broad range of educational topics (Krogh et al., 2021; Willbergh, 2021).

We start by providing an account of how CE has come to be framed within the language of competence. Then, we proceed to analyse in more detail the epistemological foundations of the model of learning *about, through and for democracy*, which is frequently used in competency models and frameworks (Arthur and Wright, 2001; Council of Europe, 2018; Joris et al., 2021) and those of education as *qualification, socialisation and subjectification* (Biesta, 2009, 2020), which has been put forward in an attempt to provide a conceptualisation of the purposes of education that can overcome the instrumental and individualist tendencies that are associated with ‘learnification’ (Biesta, 2006, 2009). Arguing that both of these approaches fall short of providing an epistemology that can account for the role of knowledge in the process of subjectification through CE, we proceed by exploring the possibilities of Bildung-centred Didaktik in linking knowledge to subjectification as an aim of CE.

Citizenship as competence

Since the establishment of compulsory public schooling in the 19th century, preparing students for participation in democratic processes and civil society more broadly has remained a central aim of education in democratic societies. What should be expected by a citizen in terms of participation in democratic processes – and, indeed, the very definitions of the terms ‘citizenship’ and ‘democracy’ – is, however, a deeply contested question. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) distinguish between three ideal types of citizen: the personally responsible, the participatory and the justice-oriented. Whereas the first two types are associated with becoming ‘law-abiding members of community’ and participating ‘within established systems and community structures’, the justice-oriented citizen is concerned with the critical assessment of ‘social, political and economic structures to see beyond surface causes’ and seeks to ‘change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time’ (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004: 240). Obviously, the different types of citizenship place different demands on educational systems in general and CE in particular. Importantly, if students are to become justice-oriented citizens, with the capacity to criticise, challenge and change the *existing* institutionalisation of democracy, there must be a degree of autonomy for students within schools and for schools within society at large (Hopmann, 2007).

However, during the last 20 years or so, this autonomy has come under pressure because educational output has, to a great extent, become a question of delivering on performance indicators that

are developed outside the sphere of education (Deng, 2018b; Hopmann, 2015). Considering the development of the European ‘competence strategy’, Telling and Serapioni (2019: 399) note that ‘The realm of education has lost much of its autonomy in determining short-term actions and longer-term strategies to a distinct sphere of labour economists, corporate researchers and social statisticians.’ Part of the reason behind this development is connected to the economic imperative of remaining competitive in the increasingly globalised world economy. This was expressed in the EU’s Lisbon Agenda of 2000, which highlighted ‘the increased economic salience of education’ and led to the result that ‘competence-based learning enjoyed a significant lift in status and profile’ (Telling and Serapioni, 2019: 389).

The development of the EU’s competence strategy is part of a broader development through which the expression of educational aims has converged around the concept of ‘competence’ (Deng, 2021b; Rasmussen et al., 2021; Tchibozo, 2011; Willbergh, 2015). An elusive concept that is not easy to operationalise in the setting of general education, the basic idea underlying the ‘competence-turn’ is that education should lead to measurable outcomes that can validate whether a student has achieved the necessary knowledge and skills (and sometimes values and dispositions) to cope with challenges in real-life situations. To achieve this, competences must be defined and associated with precise indicators of competence attainment (Barrett, 2020). Projects that seek to identify the necessary competences for the 21st century have been undertaken in many European countries, and adopting a competence-based system of education has become part and parcel of educational reform in many parts of the world (Anderson-Levitt, 2017). Apart from the initiatives created by the EU and other European institutions, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has played an important role as a provider of reference frameworks designed to be applicable across national borders. These include *The Definition and Selection of Key Competences* (OECD, 2005) and *The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030* (OECD, 2018).

One pronounced feature of the competence-turn is that it now appears as *all-encompassing* to the extent that the development of competence is often not seen as one among several educational aims but, rather, as a valid expression of *all* aims.² In the context of CE, this is crucial because it means that the aims associated with citizenship are also seen as expressible through the language of competence. In line with this, the OECD 2030 competence strategy highlights social issues as one of three main challenges – in addition to environmental and economic challenges – that societies must deal with. Thus, the need for broader goals for ‘individual and collective well-being’ is emphasized in the organisation’s latest competence strategy (OECD, 2018: 3).

An even stronger expression of the intertwining of competence-based education and CE is the development of competence frameworks that are explicitly directed at the development of citizenship competences, such as the CoE’s RFCDC (Council of Europe, 2018). According to Lenz (2019: 17), ‘The framework offers a systematic approach to designing the teaching, learning and assessment of competences needed for active participation in complex and diverse democratic societies’, and its aims are not limited to ‘preparing learners to be active citizens’ but also include the need ‘to ventilate democratic citizenship on the educational policy agenda’ and give it the ‘highest priority within educational systems’. Encouraging and supporting the implementation of the RFCDC within the member states is now a prioritised task of the CoE. In 2019, just one year after the framework had been published, it was being implemented in 17 countries (Barrett, 2020).

What we have, then, is a situation in which two major educational movements have converged, one concerned with increasing the efficiency of the schools in the delivery of educational output and one concerned with raising the status and quality of CE. Returning to the three ideal types of citizens (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004), the question that begs to be answered is what the marrying of the two initiatives means in terms of the type of citizenship that can be pursued by the schools

and teachers. Put differently, is there enough autonomy left for a conception of citizenship that goes *beyond* personal responsibility and participating in the established system?

A recent analysis by Joris et al. (2021) of some of the key policy documents of the EU and CoE provides us with some answers. Applying Biesta's (2009) typology of educational purposes – qualification, socialisation and subjectification – as part of their analytical model, they find that all three are indeed present in these organisations' conceptualisations of CE. The commitment to *subjectification*, that is, the development of autonomy and independence, is, however, rather shallow, which the authors attribute to the fact that the frameworks are competence-based and a lack of reference to the 'educational processes or practices of young people developing their own ways of *relating* to others, the world or otherness in general; to *questioning* existing orders; or to *open-ended* education or classroom practices such as projects' (Joris et al., 2021: 15, emphasis in original). However, they do see traces of subjectification in the CoE's most recent texts, which indicate 'a shift in tone' because it is acknowledged that the relationship between the individual and the broader societal and institutional contexts and openness for change matter 'in order for young people to truly be able to become independent, active and engaged citizens' (Joris et al., 2021: 17). The question of how the still-limited realisation of the aspirations of CE regarding subjectification can be improved upon is left open by the authors, but they suggest further empirical studies of the translation, interpretation and enactment of the supranational CE agenda in national and local contexts, as well as further analyses of the concept of democracy used in conceptions of CE (Joris et al., 2021). We agree that these are important avenues for further research, but in light of the problems connected to the conceptualisation of citizenship-as-competence, an even more fundamental question to be addressed concerns the epistemic foundation of the dominant conceptualisations of CE.

Two conceptualisations of CE

Education about, through and for democracy

In their analysis of European policy documents related to CE, Joris et al. (2021) find that all texts seem to support the idea of learning *about, through and for* democracy. Indeed, this conceptualisation can be traced all the way back to a book written to support English teachers in the teaching of citizenship as this was made a statutory subject in English schools in 2002 (Arthur and Wright, 2001). In Volume 1 of the RFCDC, called 'Context, concepts and model', this way of conceptualising CE is presented as the foundation for the entire framework: 'all three kinds of learning are needed to prepare and empower learners for life as active citizens in democratic societies' (Council of Europe, 2018: 16). Furthermore, the importance of establishing a common conceptual ground is stressed:

The Framework provides a shared language, including shared terminology, which enables all concerned to teach, learn or assess comprehensively, that is in full awareness of the different kinds of competences – values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding – and the relations between them. (Council of Europe, 2018: 19)

Because shared language and terminology is seen as a prerequisite for successful teaching and learning, getting the framework right can be regarded as critical. The core element of the framework is a competence model, often referred to as 'the butterfly', in which 20 competences are presented and grouped under four labels: 'values', 'attitudes', 'skills' and 'knowledge and critical understanding' (Lenz, 2019: 21).

In the description of the model of teaching about, through and for democracy, the development of competence is connected to various types of learning. The development of self-efficacy and ‘the affective dimension of the learning process’ are connected to learning *through* democracy, ‘knowledge and critical understanding’ is connected to learning *about* democracy, and ‘the ability to use one’s capabilities in a given context or situation’ is connected to learning *for* democracy (Council of Europe, 2018: 16).

Considering the understanding of knowledge in this model, two problems arise that make it difficult to use the model to account for how knowledge can contribute to the subjectification of students. The first is related to the theoretical position of knowledge in frameworks that use the concept of competence in the formulation of educational aims. According to the CoE:

‘democratic competence’ is the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant psychological resources (namely values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding) in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities presented by democratic situations. (Council of Europe, 2018: 32)

The idea that knowledge does not only have intrinsic value but is important in order to be able to accomplish certain tasks or develop certain abilities or dispositions has a long history, within both the German/Scandinavian tradition of *Bildung* and the American tradition of liberal education (Deng, 2018a). However, within these traditions, theoretical foundations have been developed regarding how classroom teaching can be ‘construed as an encounter of students with the essence of content’ (Deng, 2018a: 343). With regard to competence-based teaching and learning, such a theoretical foundation has not yet been developed. As Willbergh’s (2015: 346) analysis shows, the challenges facing ‘competence’ with regard to taking account of context and implementation into practice are so immense that ‘it is doubtful whether competence is an educational concept at all’. Perhaps the lack of reference to processes of students developing ‘their own ways’ and questioning existing orders within the European policy documents (Joris et al., 2021) is not merely due to a lack of willingness on the part of the policymakers to facilitate such development but also has to do with the problems of offering a satisfying account of how this can take place within a competence framework. The democratic competences in the RFCDC, including ‘knowledge and critical understanding’, are presented as ‘psychological resources’ to be mobilised to meet the demands of different situations, but it is not easy to see how the different resources are connected to one another on a theoretical level, because this is not discussed.

The lack of a theoretical account of the status and role of knowledge vis-à-vis the other psychological resources – values, attitudes and skills – leads to conceptual confusion and a lack of clarity regarding what role knowledge has in achieving competent, democratic behaviour. According to the CoE, ‘in real life situations, competences are rarely mobilized and deployed individually. Instead, competent behaviour invariably involves the activation and application of an entire cluster of competences’ (Council of Europe, 2018: 33).

To illustrate this, several examples of real-life situations that require the mobilisation of democratic competences are presented. One example is called ‘Interacting during an intercultural encounter’. In this example, two people with different ethnic backgrounds find themselves talking about their respective ‘ethnic and religious practices’. To behave competently, they must first ‘adopt an attitude of openness to each other’. They must also regulate their emotions to overcome the anxiety and insecurity associated with meeting someone from a different background. As the conversation goes on, they must deploy listening skills and linguistic and communicative skills, and they must also make use of analytical thinking skills and empathy, which is also defined as a skill. In the event that irreconcilable differences appear, the attitudes ‘respect’ (for difference) and

‘tolerance of ambiguity’ must be employed (Council of Europe, 2018: 33). In this example, the ‘cluster’ of competences needed include a total of five skills and three attitudes but not a single competence connected to either ‘values’ or ‘knowledge and critical understanding’. No explanation is given as to why these types of competence are omitted. In another example, which is called ‘taking a stand against hate speech’, both a value competence, ‘valuing human dignity as a fundamental value’, and two knowledge competences, ‘knowledge of human rights’ and ‘knowledge and understanding of digital media’, are included along with a number of attitudes and skills.

What is clear is that the clusters of competences vary with the situation and that the different competences must be ‘mobilised and applied in a dynamic manner’ (Council of Europe, 2018: 33). However, what the role of knowledge is in relation to the other types of competence remains unclear, and it is not easy to see which situations require the use of knowledge and which do not. In the absence of an explanation or discussion, the choices in the examples appear to be rather random.

This lack of clarity with regard to the status and role of knowledge within the competence framework transcends the concepts of learning *about*, *through* and *for* democracy. As noted previously, the competences under the label ‘knowledge and critical understanding’ are connected to learning *about* democracy. Because the connection between knowledge and competence remains unclear, knowledge and learning about democracy run the risk of being left as an aim in and of themselves, not as a necessary prerequisite for the development of competent behaviour. This leads to the second problematic aspect of the model, which is of more practical significance: knowledge acquisition risks being understood as a process that is not dynamic, lacks ambition and is related to rote learning and less than inspiring pedagogical methods, while learning *through* and *for* democracy become processes in which student-active and innovative learning processes may take place but the role of knowledge is unclear.

One example of this is the adaptation of the model in Norway, in which learning *about*, *through* and *for* democracy has been embraced in the national policy documents related to the most recent curriculum reform (Meld. Stort. 28, 2015–2016).³ To Stray (2011, 2012), who is the source that is used in the government White Paper, learning *about* democracy is connected to a ‘thin’ conception of citizenship built on a liberal understanding of democracy, in which the aim is limited to making students aware of their rights and duties so that they can become ‘informed citizens’ (Stray 2011: 107–108). Relevant sources for the students include ‘books and teaching’, and the outcome is conceived as the ‘accumulation of knowledge that can be tested’ (Stray, 2012: 22, authors’ translation).

Learning *for* democracy is understood as the development of critical thinking and communication skills, while learning *through* democracy is about the students experiencing ‘genuine participation’. The aim of learning *through* democracy is to ‘develop skills that enable the student to take part in democratic processes and act responsibly’ (Stray 2011: 109, authors’ translation), which is a far more ambitious aim than the ‘thin’ participation that is the aim of the knowledge acquisition when learning *about* democracy. To be sure, in this conceptualisation the knowledge that is developed about democracy also has a role to play in the other types of learning but is then seen as merely a basis for the *training* of generic skills and competences (Biesta, 2020; Stray, 2011), and knowledge thus remains an objective unit that is subject to instrumental rationality (Ryen, 2020).

Furthermore, as Børhaug (2017, 2018) shows in his analysis of the conception of citizenship in Norwegian policy documents, the emphasis on participation and the lack of connection between CE and the institutions in which participation takes place outside the school leads to a rather individual and ‘de-politicized’ understanding of CE. He worries that a feeling of powerlessness and alienation from politics will follow if ‘young people as adults approach these institutions without an understanding of how they function and why they are as they are’ (Børhaug, 2017: 8, authors’

translation). The type of knowledge that Børhaug emphasises may very well be brought into teaching that is modelled on ‘real’ democratic participation, but the crucial point is that it may also very well be omitted. Learning *through* democracy can be seen as socialisation into a community in which important democratic values are transmitted and skills can be developed. However, as discussed previously, the status of knowledge in learning *through* and *for* democracy is unclear, as is the role it plays in relation to these forms of learning.

To conclude this section, far from providing ‘full awareness of the different kinds of competence [. . .] and the relations between them (Council of Europe, 2018: 19), the language of competence construes knowledge as a ‘psychological resource’ whose role in the achievement of ‘competent’ behaviour is highly unclear. As a consequence, this way of conceptualising CE appears rather formalistic and it remains questionable whether such a conception of CE can account for how students can engage critically with knowledge in a way that contributes to their formation as independent subjects.

CE as qualification, socialisation and subjectification

In his critique of what he sees as a dominant conception of education as a matter of ‘producing’ or ‘creating’ a certain type of individuals, that is, those ‘capable of making their own free and independent judgments’, Biesta (2006: 119) argues that this way of thinking builds on an instrumentalist and individualistic conception of democratic education. What he sets out to do is to

advance a different understanding of democratic education, one that is *not* centered around the idea that democratic education is about the ‘production’ of the democratic person, one that does *not* conceive of the democratic person as an isolated individual with a predefined set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and one in which it is acknowledged that democracy is about plurality and difference, not identity and sameness. (Biesta, 2006: 120, emphasis in original)

To enable us to re-engage with the question of purpose in education and go beyond the dominant ‘language of learning’ that Biesta (2009) sees as upholding the individualism and instrumentalism of contemporary educational discourse, he differentiates between three distinct purposes of education: qualification, socialisation and subjectification. *Qualification* is about acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills and understanding to be able to function and meet the demands that an individual is likely to face in the various spheres of life. *Socialisation* is about the internalisation of norms and the insertion of the individual into the social fabric or ‘into existing ways of doing and being’ (Biesta, 2009: 40). The third aim, *subjectification*, is understood as the opposite of socialisation; it is not about socialisation into an existing society but the possibility of the subject appearing as something unique in relation to the pre-existing orders – ‘about ways of being that hint at independence from such orders’ (Biesta, 2009: 40). Biesta (2009) sees the question of purpose in education as a ‘composite question’, and while the three are presented as separate aims, they are also related to one other and, sometimes, overlapping. Thus, he uses a Venn diagram of partly overlapping circles to illustrate their relationship.

What Biesta does by introducing this model is to provide a powerful tool for use in the critical analysis of existing educational practices. It is a general model that can be applied to all school subjects, but by way of example, Biesta (2009) connects the model explicitly to CE. It has also been applied by several other authors working within the field of CE (Brodie-McKenzie, 2020; Franch, 2019; Lawy, 2014; Mitra et al., 2016; Sandahl, 2020, to name but a few). The task of applying the model in a critical analysis of existing policy documents related to CE is taken up by Joris et al. (2021), who analyse European policy documents from 2010 to 2018 that concern

the development of CE. They find that, while all three purposes are present, subjectification – or emancipation, which is the term they prefer to use in describing this purpose – is only superficially addressed. Furthermore, a tension is identified: ‘societal, emancipatory and change oriented purposes are attributed to education at first glance, while at the same time reducing it to individual, conservative and continuity aims’ (Joris et al, 2021: 15).

This is an interesting observation because it demonstrates the discrepancy between the ambitious aims that are put forward, especially by the CoE, regarding the strengthening of the capacity for critical thinking and action that goes beyond the confines of the existing societal institutions and the description of *competences* that, by their very definition, describe a *certain* type of behaviour aimed at solving a *certain* task or problem. However, being an analysis of a *competence* framework, it is, at the same time, not a very surprising finding, because the authors, in their analytical model, follow Biesta (2009) and connect the purpose of qualification to ‘the discourse of *knowledge, skills and competence(s)*’ (Joris et al., 2021: 7, emphasis in original). In their analytical model, knowledge is grouped with competence and explicitly connected to this aim of education, and at the same time, they also connect it to certain teaching methods, specifically ‘*training modules or teaching and learning trajectories*: instructional units that cover both content or knowledge and specific training activities, aimed at gradually mastering a certain topic and consisting of concrete steps, goals, and points of assessment’ (Joris et al., 2021: 7, emphasis in original). Regarding giving an account of how subjectification/emancipation can take place, the answer to the question they ask in the title of their article ‘Citizenship-as-competence, *what else?*’ can therefore, for them, hardly be ‘knowledge’.

The aim of subjectification/emancipation is connected to ‘educational practices where aspects of the world and society become topics for study and exploration’, such as ‘open-ended *project work* in schools, introducing a certain theme, topic or problem to students, which they can explore, question and learn to relate to in their own, new way’ (Joris et al., 2021: 9, emphasis in original). This type of inquiry-based learning does not fit well with competence-based curricula, in which learning outcomes should be defined in advance, and these practices can indeed lead to a great deal of creative and independent thinking (Bjørkvold and Ryen, 2021). However, the what-else-than-competence question cannot be satisfactorily answered by merely stating what methods should be used by the teachers to achieve the stated aims. This would lead to an instrumental view of teaching, which is exactly what subjectification/emancipation should *not* be about. As with the model of teaching *about, through* and *for* democracy, which underpins the competency models of CE, *knowledge*, in the analytical model of Joris et al. (2021), gets ‘trapped’ in a corner of the model, where it is removed from the most ambitious educational aims, and no theoretical foundation is given regarding how it can come into play and affect these aims in a constructive way. To better understand why this happens, we must take a closer look at the status of knowledge in Biesta’s conceptualisation of education, on which Joris et al. (2021) base their analysis.

Biesta (2006), in his discussions of education and its relationship to democracy, brings up the need to put ‘the question of democratic education back where it actually belongs, namely in society at large’, acknowledging that the ‘production’ of democratic individuals is a task that schools cannot possibly undertake. The positive contribution of the schools should be ‘helping children and students reflect upon the fragile conditions under which all people can act, under which all people can be a subject’ (Biesta, 2006: 144–145). He stresses the need to connect what happens in the classroom to society at large but not in what he sees as the ‘instrumental’ way of education *through* and *for* democracy (Biesta, 2006: 126). Rather than transferring content or socialising students into the existing social fabric, the educational question he suggests we should ask is ‘*What kind of society do we need so that people can act?*’ (Biesta, 2006: 141, emphasis in original). While answering this question requires more than factual knowledge, it is also obvious that it cannot be answered

without knowledge about how today's societies are organised and the historical experiences of societies of the past. In the article in which Biesta (2009) outlines the three purposes of education, there is a particularly interesting passage in which he explains how, in the context of CE, there is likely to be considerable overlap among them:

Political knowledge and understanding (qualification) can be an important element for the development of political ways of being and doing (subjectification), just as a strong focus on socialisation into a particular citizenship order can actually lead to resistance which, in itself, can be taken as a sign of subjectification. (Biesta, 2009: 42)

Here, we see how education that is intended to achieve one purpose – for example, political knowledge for qualification – can take the process in a different direction, transmogrifying into education that has another, very different purpose than the one originally intended. While this highlights the interplay between the different purposes of education, the teacher who believes that his primary task is to help his students acquire knowledge about and an understanding of the world while *at the same time* contributing to their subjectification is likely to be left puzzled and ask for an elaboration of when and how working with knowledge turns into subjectification and, importantly, *what knowledge* has the potential to promote the subjectification of his students. To be sure, the placing of the three purposes in a Venn diagram leaves open the possibility of interpreting what goes on in the intersection between them, and according to Biesta (2009: 41), 'the more interesting and important questions are actually about the intersections between the areas rather than the individual areas per se'. However, he does not discuss further how the knowledge and understanding of the qualification dimension can come into play in the intersection with either socialisation or subjectification or in the intersection of all three.

Rømer (2021), in his reading of Biesta, points to an alternative interpretation of the relationship between the three purposes, in which subjectification is understood as the 'defining character of education' and 'we can only talk about educational processes when subjectification as an ontological process comes into contact with, touches and animates the shallow depths of content and culture' (Rømer, 2021: 39). In a recent article, Biesta (2020) himself seems to follow this line of reasoning further:

I also tend to think that [subjectification] is the most important of the three domains, not because knowledge, skills, and traditions are not important, but because it is only when subjectification enters the scene that we are in the domain of education, whereas when there is no a place for subjectification, we are in the domain of training that, as John Dewey already noted, is something we do to others, thus approaching them as things or objects, not with them, which would be approaching them as subjects. (Biesta, 2020: 102)

Establishing subjectification as the exclusive domain of education leads to a different type of model than the Venn diagram because processes of education that do not involve subjectification become an impossibility. Thus, Biesta (2020) suggests considering the relationship, instead, as three concentric circles, in which subjectification is either the innermost 'core' or the outer ring that encompasses all three domains. According to Rømer (2021), establishing subjectification as a defining characteristic of education in relation to the other two brings Biesta's model closer to a concept of *Bildung* because it entails a stronger focus on the appearance of the subject. However, the connection between knowledge and subjectification is not further explored; qualification and socialisation do not 'explode into processes of plurality and culture. [. . .] they remain steady as structural units' (Rømer, 2021: 39). What is lacking is a further exploration of knowledge in relation to subjectification, which is a path Biesta does not follow.

The result is that the process of subjectification is ‘terminologically isolated’ from subject matter (Rømer, 2021: 39). It is exactly this terminological isolation that serves to exclude knowledge as a relevant factor and, in doing so, makes the epistemological problem associated with the connection between knowledge and competence quite invisible in the critical analysis of Joris et al. (2021). A model of CE built on Biesta’s conceptualisation of education is likely to struggle with the same theoretical and practical problems as one built on competence and education *about, through and for* democracy; in both cases, the relationship between knowledge and the achievement of the most ambitious educational aims becomes a blind spot.

In the following, we will present a perspective on knowledge taken from the tradition of Bildung-centred Didaktik and then discuss how this can contribute to our understanding of the role that knowledge can play in relation to the process of subjectification on both theoretical and practical levels.

Bildung-centred Didaktik

Knowledge and the formation of the subject in relation to the world

Within the German and Scandinavian traditions of teaching and learning, the concepts of *Bildung* and *Didaktik* occupy central positions. Didaktik denotes the activity of teaching, while Bildung refers to the ultimate aim of education – and of human development more generally – which can be defined as ‘the linking of the self to the world to achieve the most general, most animated, and most unrestrained interplay’ (Von Humboldt, 2000: 58). Bildung itself is understood as a process that is lifelong and takes place in all spheres of life, but when connected to teaching through Didaktik, it is conceptualised as a common effort to interpret and make sense of educational content (Hopmann, 2007; Gudem, 1992).

Wolfgang Klafki (1927–2016) was the dominant figure of Bildung-centred Didaktik in the latter part of the 20th century. His starting point was the classical theories of Bildung, which were developed during the Enlightenment and elaborated through a hermeneutic epistemology and method by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and others towards the end of the 19th century. In hermeneutic theory, the relationship between the person who understands and who or what is being understood is central. This is conceived of as a dynamic relationship, in which the individual always interprets the world from a specific position. Often referred to as a ‘horizon of understanding’, this position changes in a dialectical process as the individual interprets and incorporates new understandings (Gadamer, 2004). Following from this, Bildung – understood as the appearance of the subject in relation to society – becomes something that cannot be externally imposed but is still a process that begins with the encounter with something that, in the first instance, does not emanate from the subject itself. The tension between the ‘objective’ – that is, external to the student – and the ‘subjective’ – understood as the student’s own creation of meaning in the encounter with the objective, is the crux of Klafki’s didactic theory. He describes Bildung as a ‘double unlocking’, in which the world opens to the student while, at the same time, the student opens to the world. Understood in this way, Bildung is about becoming part of a society that already exists but doing so in a way that opens the possibility of the person thinking critically, taking a stand and being able to act in relation to the existing.

Klafki (1998) further anchors his understanding of Bildung in democratic theory and incorporates elements of critical theory, emphasising solidarity and the need to address mechanisms of power and exclusion. On this basis, he construes Bildung as a process of developing three closely related abilities: *self-determination*, *co-determination* and *solidarity*. For these abilities to be developed, Klafki believes that the content of teaching should be focused on ‘epoch-typical key

issues', that is, contemporary issues representing problems that can prevent Bildung from taking place in the widest possible sense. Klafki (2001) suggests several examples, such as environmental problems, war, inequality and issues connected to technological development. However, the questions being epoch-typical contain the premise that they must be posed and answered over and over, as society changes and new constellations of power or suppression emerge that can obstruct the process of Bildung (Klafki, 1998).

However, such problems can only be a starting point: they are far too complex to be approached in the classroom in their full complexity. Thus, a central notion within Bildung-centred Didaktik is that of *complexity reduction* in order to make the content manageable for the students (Pestalozzi, 1977). This is not a technical process in which the teacher simply looks for material related to a topic that is not too difficult for his students. Rather, it is about finding content that is *exemplary*, which means that it can be used to convey an understanding of the essential aspects of a subject. To see how the process of Bildung can unfold through the engagement with content, we need to look at two concepts that Klafki uses to describe exemplary content: the *elemental* and the *fundamental*.

The elemental and the fundamental

To Klafki (2001), the *elemental* refers to the aspects of the world that can become accessible to students through working with certain content. With regard to the 'double unlocking', it can be understood as the first phase of this process, in which the world 'opens' to the student. Krüger (2008: 241) compares the elemental to 'the way a magnifying glass concentrates light in one spot to create such heat that a fire can be started'. The task of the teacher, in this respect, is to interpret the curriculum so as to find teaching materials and examples that can give students access to the 'core' of a subject. While the curriculum may provide a list of content that the teacher is mandated to teach, the task of selecting content cannot be finalised by looking at the curriculum alone. It must always be done with a specific group of students in mind, because the local context, age, interests and abilities of students will affect what materials and examples are appropriate for any given lesson (Klafki, 1995). For example, if the knowledge that the students should acquire concerns what can cause refugees to flee their countries, one teacher could proceed by presenting a selection of theories or models that reduce the complexity of the real-world phenomenon but let the students approach the issue from various angles. However, another teacher, working with a different group of students, could choose to present his students with the accounts of one or more refugees that encountered different experiences leading up to their decisions to leave. Importantly, the pedagogical choices of the teachers cannot be understood in isolation from society, because the question of what inhibits the development of self-determination, co-determination and solidarity begs a critical analysis that will invariably affect how the teacher interprets the curriculum and translates it through teaching.

While the *elemental* concerns the content that the teacher selects with the aim of gradually leading the students into the core of the school subject, the mastery of subject content is not the final goal of the educative process. Rather, it is a prerequisite for the 'opening' of the student to the world through engaging with the content. This is the *fundamental* side of the 'double unlocking', which turns our attention to the formative processes that take place as the student attributes meaning to the content. In the case of CE, this could be possibilities for personal engagement in democratic processes – both as a cognitive understanding and as an emotional experience – which can be gained through learning about various historical experiences in the development of democracy or the principles of modern representative democracy. Alternately, it could be the feeling of responsibility and readiness to take action that a student feels when she understands the mechanisms that maintain the unequal distribution of wealth and influence in the globalised world community.

Because *Bildung* takes place inside the individual, the teacher cannot perfectly predict what meaning a student will create in the meeting with specific content. Thus, one important difference is established between the educational *matter* that the student is presented with during instruction and the educational *meaning* that she derives from this matter (Hopmann, 2007). For instance, a teacher who has chosen to focus on the European ‘migrant crisis’ that erupted in 2015 to teach his students about the mechanisms making people leave their homes and the consequences of the EU’s migration policies may see that the students derive different meanings and take a range of stances on the political questions that become relevant when facing these issues. For some, it could engender a feeling of solidarity with the refugees and an impetus to act to improve their lives. For others, it could lead to a feeling that international co-operation has failed and sufficient solidarity cannot be created for such problems to be handled effectively by a supranational organisation, leading to political engagement for the re-nationalisation of immigration and asylum policy. For yet others, the theme of the lesson could appear rather boring – as academic knowledge that they are supposed to acquire but not something that concerns them or requires them to act. The autonomy that is a prerequisite for teaching and for individual students’ meaning-making means that a standardised assessment would only be able to measure part of what the students learn from their encounter with the content (and often not the most important part of this learning). Thus, *Bildung*-centred Didaktik rests uneasily with the ideas of competence and outcome-based education (Spady, 1988; Wiggins and McTighe, 2005), in which educational aims should be specified prior to and measured after instruction (Bjørkvold and Ryen, 2021; Hopmann, 2015; Willbergh, 2015).

To sum up this section, *Bildung*-centred Didaktik provides us with a conceptualisation of education that can help us account for the development of autonomy through the teaching of knowledge as educational content on both theoretical and practical levels. This is an understanding of knowledge not as something that can be passively ‘transferred’ to students or as something that is exclusively or even primarily related to the ability to perform certain tasks. Rather, in *Bildung*-centred Didaktik, character development, conceptualised as *Bildung*, is at stake when the teacher looks for knowledge that can lead students towards a deeper understanding of the world and also help them interpret this world critically.

Discussion

Having presented some central aspects of *Bildung*-centred Didaktik, the question is what this way of thinking about education can add to a critical analysis of CE, as conceptualised in policy documents, competence frameworks and curricula.

As we have seen, the conceptualisation of CE as teaching *about*, *through* and *for* democracy is problematic because it fails to account for how knowledge can play a part in the formation of students as subjects with a degree of independence from the society in which they are to be qualified to take part. While the critical analysis of Joris et al. (2021) points to the shortcomings of the language of competence in relation to CE, their reliance on Biesta’s (2009) typology of educational purposes means that important epistemological issues are not accentuated, which means that the possibilities of subjectification/emancipation that a different account of knowledge could facilitate cannot easily be elaborated on.

The first contribution *Bildung*-centred Didaktik can make to the conceptualisation of CE is therefore to show how the separation of knowledge from the aim of subjectification can be broken. By positioning the subject in relation to a world that is ‘objective’ – not in the sense of being fixed and inaccessible to the subject but as something that does not emanate from the student but can be brought to bear on the subjective world of the student through the act of teaching – it becomes possible to conceive of the teaching of knowledge as an activity that is intimately connected to the

appearance of the subject in relation to the world. As the educational matter that is presented, processed and turned into meaning by the student, knowledge is not seen as something that can be ‘transmitted’ in a mechanical way but as something that fuels a process of reflection as it meets – and interacts with – her ‘horizon of understanding’. Thus, the acts of teaching and learning can be construed as a common meaning-making process that is focused on making sense of – or giving meaning to – a certain matter. Understood in this way, knowledge plays a key role in the process of education, not as an aim in its own right but neither as an asset or ‘psychological resource’ that allows the students to ‘do something’ (Biesta, 2009: 39). It is not something that an individual can simply acquire and put into use but, rather, something that sets in motion a dialectical process of reflection that also plays a part in the formation of the subject.

We begin to see the second contribution that Bildung-centred Didaktik can make to the understanding of the role of knowledge in CE. As well as providing a theoretical account of how knowledge can be connected to subjectification, this way of thinking about teaching and learning brings the task of selecting content, that is, deciding what from the huge knowledge bases of the school subjects has the potential to become *exemplary content*, to the forefront in *all* aspects of teaching. Thus, whether the teacher focuses his teaching on skills needed to take part in democratic processes or lets his students learn through democratic practices at school, the question of what content they should work with and its potential to ‘unlock’ the world for the student and the student for the world (Klafki, 2001) is always important. The consequence is that teaching *about* democracy cannot be construed as an independent activity with its own (often unambitious) aims, or as a matter of simply providing the students with raw material that can be used for the training of generic skills (Ryen, 2020). Importantly, the selection and framing of content is not a neutral enterprise but something the teacher does with a view to further the Bildung of the student, understood as *self-determination, co-determination and solidarity* (Klafki, 1998).

This is an approach to teaching that *does not see it as an act of control*, which has been the image promoted both by those who criticise teaching for being an ‘authoritarian’ practice and those who support teaching in the pursuit of a restorative agenda (Biesta, 2016). Rather, it is closer to an understanding of teaching as an ‘interruption’ of the individual ‘by introducing the question whether what we desire is actually desirable, both for ourselves and for the life we live with what and who is other’ (Biesta, 2016: 388). In his effort to conceptualise education and teaching, Biesta (2012, 2020) has indeed described the educative task as helping students remain in the ‘difficult middle ground’, avoiding the dangers of either ‘self-destruction’ or ‘world-destruction’. This is a description that resonates strongly with Klafki’s ‘double unlocking’, with both being powerful arguments that education is about neither passively adopting to or absorbing information about the world nor maximising the possibility of students to express themselves purely on their own terms.

However, while the two authors both make the case for an approach that is not attempting to do away with the paradoxes and tensions of education but rather see them as important existential challenges that must be faced by both teachers and students, they construct their arguments along very different lines of reasoning. To Biesta (2016), the ‘hermeneutical world view’ is a key part of the strand of education that has become absorbed within constructivist learning theory and, thus, the wider process of ‘learnification’. While he does not argue that this mode of conceptualising learning fails to capture important elements of what goes on in schools, he makes it clear this is *not* how subjectification occurs: ‘*knowledge is not the “way” of emancipation*’ (Biesta, 2017: 66, emphasis in original). Klafki (1998), on the other hand, constructs his theory through a critical reading of classical Bildung theory, in which hermeneutics has an important place, seeking to show how it can be re-framed as a contemporary theory of critical and democratic education. In doing so, he retains an important role for knowledge as educational content but seeks to account for how teaching can avoid becoming either indoctrination or taking on what Biesta (2016: 376) calls an

‘egological structure that emanates from the self and returns to the self’. He does this by making space for the unique voices of students and teachers as they interpret content.

Thus, in relation to the wider critical discourse on CE, the main contribution of Bildung-centred Didaktik is to show that knowledge also has a part to play in teaching directed towards the subjectification of students because it enables us to see the teacher both as a conveyer of knowledge *and at the same time* an agent for subjectification.

Conclusion and implications

The starting point of this article was that a conception of CE that is to account for how the individual can appear as a subject in relation to society must be based on a theory of knowledge and, at the same time, provide the teachers with concepts they can use to reflect on – and make decisions with regard to – the question of content selection. This is a theoretical and practical issue regarding how we approach teaching as an activity. While the concepts of Biesta (2009) are very useful in showing how a competence-based approach is not compatible with a progressive vision of CE, they are not as helpful in providing an alternative notion when applied in a critical analysis of existing competence frameworks (Joris et al., 2021). The main problem seems to be that, in placing knowledge in the domain of *qualification*, it becomes difficult to address systematically how it can have a positive impact on *subjectification*.

We have argued that Bildung-centred Didaktik provides a useful way of approaching this issue because it highlights the role that knowledge can play in the formation of the subject in relation to – but with a degree of autonomy from – society. Bringing knowledge into the discussion of CE in a more systematic manner enables us to highlight and criticise aspects of how this type of education is construed that can escape the attention when an analytical model is used that separates the domains of qualification, socialisation and subjectification. This makes it possible not only to criticise the competence frameworks for not allowing enough space for the subjectification of students but also to conceive of alternative ways to proceed. On the basis of the analysis and discussion in this article, we can conclude that the ‘freeing up’ of knowledge from the status of a ‘psychological resource’ that can be mobilised by individuals to solve certain tasks to a rich cultural resource essential for the development of character can provide an alternative to the blind alley that the language of competence seems to enter regarding achieving ‘more than the existing’ (Joris et al., 2021). This is significant not only in a theoretical sense but also in a practical and political one because it allows a conception of citizenship that goes beyond the personally responsible or participatory, with their limited scope for action (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Rather, the fact that autonomy is a prerequisite for teaching when understood through the lens of Bildung-centred Didaktik means that, instead of working towards pre-defined learning goals, teaching can be focused on making sense of the subject matter that is brought into the lesson. This leaves room for questions such as what this content demands of ‘me’ as an individual and a member of local, national and global communities. Thus, a space for the development of a *justice-oriented citizenship* that includes a critical assessment of existing social, political and economic structures (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004) is left open.

Exploring the possibilities that a realignment of the international discourse on CE away from the definition of competences and towards questions related to knowledge reveals an interesting avenue for further research. One limitation of this article is that it has not discussed the potential of specific areas of knowledge within CE to contribute to the subjectification of students. Empirical studies of actual teaching and learning, both within and across countries, could be useful in addressing this. Furthermore, a renewed focus on the knowledge on which CE should be based has the potential to bring curriculum research within this field to bear on the practical task of curriculum development,

which has increasingly become the domain of ‘assessment specialists, learning scientists and educational technologists who are tasked with developing academic standards, competency frameworks and high-stakes tests’ (Deng, 2018b: 697). As it becomes clear that the language of competence has its limitations in providing a pedagogical framework that can account for how teaching can contribute to the realisation of aims beyond the preservation of the existing order, teachers, researchers and policymakers must look in different directions if they are to take the issue of democracy, social justice and reform seriously. We believe that the concepts of Bildung-centred Didaktik may lend weight to this argument as well as provide a direction for the work ahead, because they can show us how central knowledge is to the educational process within the field of CE.

Regarding wider efforts to promote CE as a priority in the development of transnational educational politics in Europe (Abs, 2021), we believe that it is essential that these efforts are built on a theory of knowledge that can sustain them as they are translated into teaching and learning. Otherwise, it is not easy to see how they can have an impact beyond the qualification and socialisation of young people into the existing social fabric. To underline what is at stake, we can paraphrase Biesta (2017: 69), who warns us not to ‘be fooled by the figure of the ignorant schoolmaster by assuming that schoolmasters who have no knowledge to give also have no teaching to do’. We would reply that it is equally dangerous to be fooled into assuming that teachers who seek to contribute to the formation of their students as autonomous and justice-oriented citizens have no knowledge to give.

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Notes

1. Perhaps most notable is Biesta’s account of teaching, in which he argues, based on Rancière’s (1991) image of the ‘Ignorant Schoolmaster’, that the question of emancipation is not connected to knowledge and truth but should, rather, be understood as a ‘relationship at the level of will’ (Biesta, 2017: 63).
2. One notable exception is the Norwegian government’s decision not to include values and dispositions or social and emotional skills in the definition of competence in the curriculum that came into effect in 2020 (Meld. Stort. 28. (2015–2016)). The main reason for this was the ethical issues connected to assessing these aspects of student learning (see Bjørkvold and Ryen, 2021; Restad and Mølstad, 2021).
3. In Norway, CE is not a separate subject but is an important part of social studies. In the curriculum that came into force in 2020, ‘democracy and citizenship’ is also given the status of an interdisciplinary topic, drawing on the knowledge bases of a broad range of subjects (Udir, 2020).

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