

Retrieving and recontextualising VET theory

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Exploring Norwegian Vocational Education and Training and Students Bildung in the Light of the Capability Approach: A projective anticipation of freedom, self-creation, and ‘the good life’?

Online:

https://www.bwpat.de/spezial19/berg-brekkhus_spezial19.pdf

seit 21.01.2025

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Abstract

This paper aims to use qualitative secondary data analysis to explore how the capabilities approach elaborates and contains a conception of human development that comes close to the German notion of Bildung. The study offers insights into a broader research project on Norwegian students pursuing vocational education and training (VET) in upper secondary school. It delves into the students’ experienced and expressed capabilities and analyses how these capabilities align with different aspects of Bildung. First, the paper elucidates various aspects of Bildung. Then, it gives an insight into the capability approach. Further, the paper demonstrates and analyses how the students’ capabilities compare with Bildung and discuss how the two concepts can complement and contribute to each other in contemporary discussions on VET. The paper suggests a need for new insight into vocational education that prioritises humanistic approaches like Bildung and the capability approach as essential to prevent the negative consequences of the current emphasis on neoliberalism, human capital, and a one-sided focus on instrumental VET skills and training for economic gains and competition.

Keywords: *Bildung, capability approach, vocational education and training, freedom, self-creation*

“I wish to be the instrument of my own, not other men’s, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer—deciding, not being decided for, self-directed, and not acted on by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role.”
(Isaiah Berlin, 1969)

1 Introduction: challenges and crises in the global landscape of vocational education and training

The ideas of Bildungⁱ have profoundly influenced the philosophy of education in German-speaking countries and cultures. However, the idea encompasses complex and multifaceted factories that are challenging to transfer into English. Still, equivalent words that revolve around human development, growth formation, and self-cultivation can be found in educational-philosophical thought, vocabularies, and discussions in different languages and contexts (Løvlie/Standish 2002; Siljander/Sutinen 2012, 1).

Vocational education and training (VET) and the theories of Bildung are often seen as the opposite in educational discussions (Gonon 2009, 39). Where academic Bildung is seen as absolute and universal, VET is considered relatively instrumental, limited to specific concerns, and particular with utilitarianism and materialistic purposes. Nevertheless, the relationship between Bildung and VET has been studied among others in Germany (Gonon 2009; Sanderse 2021; Tyson 2016). This paper analyses Bildung using the more international capability approach. It suggests this understanding can contribute to contemporary global discourses and theories on implementing Bildung and forefront human development into VET.

Theories of VET and their respective historical, cultural, and national traditions have appeared relatively differently in different parts of the world (Billett 2011; Brockmann/Clarke/Winch 2011; Pilz 2012; Wollschläger/Guggenheim 2004). However, during the last decades, common challenges have emerged. Globalisation, migration, political, economic and social transformations have changed the world and the field of VET (Guile/Unwin 2019; Pilz/Li 2020; Li/Pilz 2023). Neoliberal policies and human capital theory have been applied to the international education systems. The human capital theory seems to prioritise educational efficiency with characteristics such as commercial interests' measurable knowledge and instrumental skills aimed to maintain competitiveness, productivity, economic growth and employability (Bonvin/Galster 2010; Otto et al. 2015; Giroux 2005). These challenges have coursed a widespread educational crisis that might have influenced students' opportunities to achieve holistic human development (Nussbaum 2010). Such an agenda is profoundly alien to the spirit of Bildung and liberal humanism and can potentially displace the development of theories that give VET students' freedom and opportunities to live good, dignified lives (McGrath 2012a, 2012b; McGrath et al. 2019; Otto et al. 2015; Walker 2010).

The challenges mentioned in the previous sections have created an increasing need for new VET theories that do not focus solely on enhancing students' vocational skills, but also their overall human development and Bildung. This paper's research questions will ask and elaborate on how Norwegian VET students' experiences and expressed capabilities align with the ideas of Bildung and how the theories of Bildung and the capability approach might complement each other in contributing to contemporary discussions on VET. The paper uses qualitative secondary data analysis and offers insights into a broader research project on Norwegian students' pursuing VET in upper secondary school. It delves into the students' experienced and expressed capabilities and analyses how these capabilities align with different aspects of

Bildung. To answer the research questions, the paper will briefly elucidate the ideas of Bildung and then outline the capability approach. It will provide insight into the study's methodological assumptions. Then, it fleshes out the study's results and analysis, presenting how the students' experienced capabilities align with Bildung and complement each other. Finally, the paper will discuss the study's findings and make some concluding remarks.

2 The German concept of Bildung

Bildung is a German term understood as the fundamental principle that led to the neo-humanities movement in the 1800s and created a new cultural aesthetic and moral standard. Bildung has significantly impacted the education system in German-speaking countries and Northern Europe (Sjøstrøm/Eilks 2020). The concept of Bildung emphasizes the integration of various subjects and skills, including classical language, and more practical interpretations. Bildung shaped Germany's education system by integrating diverse subjects with knowledge and expertise, expressing good taste, a sense of community, an openness to difference, and a willingness to self-correct. Bildung "thus also contains a projective anticipation of 'the good life,' of human freedom enacted with responsibility for self and others in the open-ended project of self-creation" (Bleicher 2006, 365).

2.1 The history of the concept of Bildung

The concept of Bildung can trace its origin to Greek philosophy and the word Paideia, which refers to the education of an ideal citizen in the Greek polis (Jaeger 1976). Later, from the 1300s, Bildung took a religious and spiritual form, related to the word 'image', used in the Bible and Middle Age mysticism where the man was believed to have been created in the image of God, or 'Imago Dei', which means something like the image of God (German: *Bild*). As a result, Bildung was explored as personal, religious, spiritual, and moral growth in the image of God (Pikkarainen 2012, 20). The 1700s to 1800s gave rise to a more modern and anthropocentric understanding of Bildung, with classical thinkers such as W. v. Humboldt, J.G. Herder, and F. Schiller. They explored Bildung as sciences, intellectual human development, emotional, and moral education, and enculturation. The classical neo-humanistic ideas of Bildung hold a place in German liberalism in opposition to utility, functionality, and efficiency. Bildung was meant to contribute to peoples' development as a canonization of idealized purity of virtue, harmony of self-formation and self-cultivation, and scholarly for elitist intellectualism studying Latin, mathematics, literature, history, and arts. Consequently, a separation of VET and academic education arose (Sanderse 2021)

2.2 Progressive and pragmatic approaches of Bildung

The reform of progressive education emerged alongside the Enlightenment era and the neo-humanist and classical Bildung theories in the 1700s to 1890s. It brought a more child-centred, non-idealistic, philanthropic, and practical view of Bildung. European progressive thinkers like J.J. Rousseau, J.H. Pestalozzi, and F.W. Froebel emphasized the importance of Bildung in the practical sense of human development. They protested the academic formalism and elitism of

traditional schooling. The fundamental idea of progressivism is that everyone, regardless of standing and position, has the same human dignity and a demand for education for all, rich or poor. For example, Pestalozzi developed a holistic understanding of children's learning and stated that they should develop by both the head – as academic and cognitive skills, the hand – as vocational skills and practical skills in everyday life, and the heart – as emotional well-being and the desire to help others (Blühlmeier 2010; Gonon 2009; Nussbaum 2010).

The ideas of progressive education spread to other parts of the world. They evolved among others within American pragmatism like J. Dewey (1916, 1977a, 1977b, 1997), who believed in bridging the gap between VET and liberal education. Dewey viewed vocation and work as a means of developing one's overall capacities and serving others and society. He criticized pure trade education and encouraged a humanistic and democratic education for a better society, while he insisted that VET had a moral and intellectual core. He intended that VET students should have equal opportunities as their academic peers to develop as entirely social participants and democratic citizens (Labaree 2010).

Dewey inspired the German educator G. Kerschensteiner to see VET and general education as a gateway to *Bildung* and full human development (Gonon 2009). As a result, Kerschensteiner founded a new VET system that combined civic and general education with vocational skills training, often referred to as *Berufsbildung* in Germany. Due to his contributions, Kerschensteiner is widely recognised as the father of modern VET and the dual apprenticeship model (Gonon 2009; Winch 2006).

2.3 Nordic 'folk- Bildung', liberal education, democratic Bildung, and critical approaches

The German understanding of *Bildung*, as an extensive range of meanings and nearly untranslatable concept it may be, nevertheless has spread to and inspired many other approaches and ideas of similarity (Sjøstrøm et al. 2017; Sjøstrøm/Eilks 2020). Still, most ideas of *Bildung* can be traced back to the antics of philosophy and classical thinkers in the Enlightenment (Løvliid/Standich 2002).

The Nordic concept of *Bildung* (Norwegian: *danning*), is strongly connected to German-speaking countries by traditions that have prevailed in the ground for today's Nordic education system (Slagstad/Korsgaard/Løvlie et al. 2003). Folk-Bildung (Danish: *folkedanning*), ideas were introduced in the 1800s in Denmark by, for example, N.F.S. Grundtvig. Folk-Bildung was not limited to the bourgeoisie elite but extended to all people focusing on nation-building subjects, democracy, and social growth. Grundtvig believed that if the *Bildung* was to be genuine, it also had to entail mastering practical skills, a profession, or a vocation. Thus, he opened a course for a holistic and humanistic view of VET in the Nordic states (Walstad 2006).

The concept of liberal education, developed by philosophers and educators in English-speaking countries, contains ideas that align with the German concept of *Bildung*. Although Anglophone education is often considered instrumental, liberal education should not be centred on extrinsic,

utilitarian goals. In the United Kingdom, the dominant tradition of liberal education is associated with the London School, specifically the work of R.S. Peters, P. Hirst, and R. Dearden. They thought that education should develop the mind to function according to its nature, not as organic growth, but as an initiation into forms of knowledge that are crucial parts of our heritage as human beings (Løvlie/Standish 2002, 324). Liberal education has developed worldwide in English-speaking countries. It has broadened to include critical aspects such as P. Freire's (1996, 1998) theories on liberation from suppression, power relations in society, and emancipatory ideas inspired by Marxism. The ideas of liberation and emancipation have also given rise to various theories that focus on democratic education, including the pragmatism by Dewey, and the capability approach (Nussbaum 2000, 2011).

2.4 Bildung in vocational education and training – towards a re-conceptualisation?

The meaning of the term *Bildung* can be interpreted differently. Some might view it as a product and process that describes a higher level of human ideals distinct from VET. Alternatively, it can be seen as a normative purpose that applies to all people in all educational and training contexts. R. Tyson (2016) has explored the concept of *Bildung* and VET. He suggests that we can identify *Bildung* as overlapping processes and content, allowing us to draw on previous knowledge to imagine new ways to approach the current state of education. Tyson questions whether providing VET for specific aims is becoming outdated in the case of *Bildung*. From this perspective, “*Bildung* provides us with content for our pedagogical imagination when we aim at understanding how vocational *Bildung* as theory can be enacted in practice and how this enactment contributes to the enrichment of theory and the development of curricula (as a pattern or template)” (Tyson 2016, 233).

L. Løvlie and P. Standish (2002, 343) also warn against a narrow and limited view of *Bildung*. They argue that different scholars have used the concept of *Bildung* to ask critical questions to illuminate aspects and characteristics that prevail in the times. Thus, rather than forcing a particular idea of education on the reader, they encourage us to take responsibility for our humanity and participate in the ongoing conversation of mankind for the future.

The capability approach can be seen as an ongoing conversation that has the potential to enrich our understanding of human development and enhance new global and international VET discourses. The concept of *Bildung* can play a crucial role in this conversation and contribute to the future of mankind. The following section will briefly explain the capability approach and its relation to *Bildung* and VET.

3 The capability approach

The capability approach is a relatively new, multi-dimensional, and interdisciplinary framework that has evolved from humanistic, philosophical, social, and economic traditions. The approach takes its roots in, amongst others, Aristotle, K. Marx, A. Smith, I. Kant, and J. Rawls (Robeyns 2017). The Indian philosopher, economist, and Nobel prize lecturer A. Sen (born in 1933) and the American political philosopher M. Nussbaum (born in 1947) are the pioneers

and founders of the approach. While Sen's approach emerged as an alternative to traditional economic distribution models such as utilitarianism, "resourceism", and "welfareism" (Sen 1980, 1999 a/b, 2009), Nussbaum's approach has grown out of her encounter with Sen and evolved further with her political philosophy, feminism, and quality of life perspectives (Nussbaum 2000, 2011; Nussbaum/Sen et al. 1993).

The capability approach could be defined as "an intellectual discipline that gives a central role to the evaluation of a person's achievement and freedoms in terms of his or her actual ability to do things a person has reason to value doing and being" (Sen 2009, 16). To clarify, the capability approach simply asks: "What are people really able to do and what kind of person are they able to be?" (Robeyns 2017, 9). Thus, the capability approach sets a normative and ethically grounded spotlight on human development potential and how to create fair opportunities for individuals to live good lives. Unlike purely utilitarian or GPD perspectives as an instrument of human development and welfare, the capability approach takes a humanistic starting point in some fundamental, intuitive Marxian resp. Aristotelian ideas from which all human life originates: "a conception of the dignity of the human being, and of a life worthy of dignity – a life that has available in it 'truly human functionings'" (Nussbaum 2006b, 74).

The capability approach clarifies that every society and state must ensure that resources and material goods are distributed to citizens. The approach considers economic conditions necessary for "capability input" (Sen 1992). However, this input is insufficient to secure individuals' freedom and opportunities to live good lives. An individual must be able to convert those resources and goods into well-being and quality of life. Thus, they must have practical reason, exercise critical thinking, and have self-awareness and a conception of 'the good life' to consider what they value and have reason to value to live well (Nussbaum 2000, 2011; Sen 1999, 2009).

3.1 Capabilities and functionings

The capability approach entails two central normative claims. First, an individual's freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance. Second, well-being should be understood in terms of an individual's capabilities and functions.

While capabilities refer to the extent of a person's opportunities and freedom for choosing a life one has reason to value, functionings refer to the actual life the person has chosen to live (Sen 1992, 28). Examples of capabilities are freedom and opportunities to become well-nourished, sheltered and housed, participate in democracy, be affiliated with social networks, or be able to do skilled work. Capabilities can also include the freedom to participate in a criminal network or be at a loss of empowerment, employment, or skipping school. Conversely, functionings point to the person's actual well-nourishing, sheltering, and housing, participation in democracy, education, having an affiliation to a social network or doing skilled work. Alternatively, taking part in a criminal network, being unempowered, unemployed, and skipping school. Thus, capabilities are a person's actual freedoms or opportunities to achieve function-

ings. For example, “[W]hile traveling is a functioning, the real opportunity to travel is the corresponding capability. A person who does not travel may or may not be free and able to travel; the notion of capability seeks to precisely capture the fact of whether the person could travel if she wanted to” (Robeyns 2017, 39). Capability and functioning thus form a “space” of freedom and opportunities for the person to choose, and therefore also must include the education of a person’s *Bildung* (Anderson/Otto/Ziegler 2010).

Sen applies a person's agency to the process of choice. Agency refers to “someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her values and objectives” (Sen 1999, 19). Individuals’ free choice to realize their capabilities and choosing different functions leads to circumstances relating to their active vigour; the exercise of empowerment, critical thinking, and autonomy “to pursue and realize goals that she values and has reason to value” (Alkire/Deneulin 2009, 37).

According to Sen (1999, 291; 2009, 228), freedom is the crucial aspect of capability, which can be divided into two parts: the ‘opportunity aspect’ and the ‘process aspect’. For example, in education, freedom of opportunity refers to the actual opportunities students have to choose between different educational programs. In contrast, the freedom of process deals with the decision-making processes involved in choosing a program. For students to have the freedom to choose education, genuine educational alternatives must be available. However, the student must also be able to make autonomous, empowering decisions and actively choose one program over another (Sen 2009, 230). Thus, there is a connection between a student's development of capabilities to make empowering decision-making processes, their critical thinking, and their exercise of agency. Therefore, educators must focus on freedom, liberation, responsibility, and empowerment in their students’ education. This is because “liberals tend to only prioritize freedom of choice without caring to empower people, thereby risking the danger of falling into Marx’s objection to formal freedom [...]” (Kjeldsen/Bonvin 2015, 22).

3.2 The capability approach: *Bildung*, and vocational education and training

Sen (1992, 44) and Nussbaum (2011, 152) argue that education is the most crucial capability because it is of fundamental importance for students to enhance all other capabilities, and “the ability to exercise freedom may, to a considerable extent, directly depend on the education we have received” (Sen 2005, 12). It has even been suggested that the capability approach basically can be considered as an educational approach, and “[...] particular when formulated in terms of *Bildung*, it seems to be appropriate to consider education as a capability, and human capabilities as consequences of educational processes” (Andersen/Otto/Ziegler 2010, 166).

The capability approach strives to achieve justice in education by promoting economic and cultural equality for students. It focuses on recognizing and appreciating different identities and ensures emancipation and equal participation. Thus, it can be seen as a framework for justice, equality, and well-being in education (Walker/Unterhalter 2007). Expanding capabilities gives

VET students the freedom to choose the life or work they have reason to value (Bonvin/Farvaque 2006). The aims of policymakers and VET should be to make a student capable and not employable (Bonvin/Galster 2010).

Sen argues that educational equality should not be considered as only instrumental resources, such as a strict ratio of teachers to students, a certain amount of expenditure per capita, or an assessment of school outcomes in the form of grades. He suggests that we should evaluate the quality and equality of education regarding human capabilities and just ask what students actually are free to do or be. The process for students to decide what they value and have reason to value in and from VET is crucial to this argument (Walker/Unterhalter 2007, 3). Capabilities for education thus might align with *Bildung* as students must achieve adequate empowerment and critical thinking to make choices and do processes of practical reasoning (Bifulco et al. 2015, 332, Ley/Drüker 2012).

However, it is important to stress that the capability approach does not reject the importance of economic factors and employment (Otto et al. 2015). The approach instead specifies the difference between means and ends in human development. Economic growth and material resources are just means, contrasted to capabilities, freedom, and opportunities to develop one's potential for well-being as a critical thinker and a self-aware individual, which are the fundamental ends. Sen refers to Aristoteles' quote: "Wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking for its merely useful for the sake of something else" (referred in Sen 1999a, 289). Thus, Walker (2005, 42) stresses the following: "The capability approach foregrounds human development, agency, well-being, and freedom. It offers a compelling counterweight to neo-liberal, human capital interpretations and practices [...] as only for economic productivity."

The capability approach to education thus has a close affiliation to critical theories of education that, in a Marxian sense, aim not only to understand and analyse education but also change it. Both critical pedagogy and the capability approach share a common concern with amplifying the voices of those who struggle to be heard and included. They both aim to promote human flourishing and advocate for changes in social arrangements that can facilitate greater equality. Moreover, like critical pedagogy, the capability approach emphasizes individual and collective agency, linking individual critical thinking to the broader goal of increasing social critique (Boni/Walker 2013, 6). The critical aspects of the capability approach state that education and training must be in a direct context of social criticism and political actions and reject the idea that training and knowledge can be linked to neutral activities (Walker 2010; Walker et al. 2007). It insists that social justice and democracy are central, normative, and ethical concerns of all human development processes and that all educational activities must be based on this idea.

The following sections present the study's method and methodological considerations. Then, it gives the reader a small taste of the rich body of empirical data collected in the primary study, in which students express their experienced capabilities, including the presentation of results and analysis of secondary analysis showing how the students' capabilities might align with their *Bildung*.

4 Methods and methodology

The study applies qualitative, secondary data analysis (Largan/Morris 2019; Ruggiano/Perry 2019). The existing data are collected from a primary qualitative case study exploring how students enrolled in Norwegian VET programs experience and express their expansion of capabilities (Berg-Brekhus 2020). The study's philosophical and methodological approach is inspired by critical realism (Bhaskar/Norrie 1998; Danmark et al. 2002) and relational ontology (Martins 2007; Smith/Seward 2007). Furthermore, it relies on practical judgment or reason (Robeyns 2005).

The primary study adopted a deductive, conceptual-driven method (Mayring 2014a; Schreier 2012) based on the capability approach and four pre-defined selected capability dimensions. These were systematically operationalized by describing the meaning content and defining indicators for classifying the coding frames and main categories for analysis (Berg-Brekhus 2020; Berg-Brekhus/Werler 2018; Werler/Berg-Brekhus 2019).

The operationalization was inspired by Burchard and Vizard (2011), combining a “top-down” strategy as Nussbaum (2011, 34) and Alkire (2002, 2007) do, with a “bottom-up” perspective (Sen 1993, 47). To select and operationalize relevant capabilities, the study relied on Robeyns' (2003, 70f.) five criteria method, and Alkire's (2007, 56ff.) two-step process. To relate the study's selections and operationalization of capability dimensions and categories to education and pedagogy, the study took inspiration from Walker's (2006, 169ff.) five-step approach.

The design of the primary study is a qualitative, two-case design (Yin 2014), comprising data from semi-structured interviews with 28 students, 12 males and 16 females, from 15 to 21 years of age. The students were enrolled in the two selected upper secondary school VET programs, Health, Childhood, and Youth Development (HCYD), and Technical and Industrial Production (TIP), from five upper secondary schools in Western Norway. The data were collected through interviews of the students' conducted in a semi-structured interview guide (Kvale/Brinkmann 2015; Merriam 2009). The data was analysed using deductive qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2014a) and the digital software tool QCAmap (Mayring 2014b).

The qualitative secondary data analysis involves exploring and interpreting the existing qualitative data collected in the primary study (Berg-Brekhus 2020). The secondary analysis is used as a process valuable for gaining deeper insight into the empirical material and seeking to answer the new research questions (Laran/Morris 2019; Ruggiano/Perry 2019). The new research question evolves around how the Norwegian VET students' experiences and expressed capabilities align with the ideas of Bildung, how the theories of Bildung and the capability approach align, and how the theories of Bildung and the capability approach complement each other and contribute to contemporary discussions on VET.

The qualitative datasets used in the analyses are available from the authors of this paper's firmer extended study (Berg-Brekhus 2020). The secondary study relies on the same method and methodological assumption as the primary study.

5 Results

The secondary data analyses elaborated in this study have focused on four capability dimensions. The dimensions were selected from the primary study's concept-driven and operationalized capability dimensions, and the empery was achieved through interviews in the semi-structured interview guide. The existing empirical data were categorized and further analysed. The main categories of four dimensions used in the secondary analysis in this study are: (1) Students' Bildung as capabilities for democracy and citizenship. The deductive and predefined operationalized indicator categories and the abductive finding of subcategories revolve around students' expressed capabilities to participate in democratic processes and deliberative debates, exercise critical thinking, express autonomy, responsibility, and empowerment, and express capabilities for self-awareness, empathy, and narrative imagination. (2) Students' Bildung as capabilities for education and training. Indicator categories and the abductive finding of subcategories revolve around students' expressed capabilities to be motivated and flourish, exercise agency, experience meaning and mastery, and capabilities to understand their own knowledge and skills. (3) Students' Bildung as capabilities for work and vocation. The deductive and predefined operationalized indicator categories and the abductive finding of subcategories on this dimension revolve around students' expressed capabilities of the values they associate with work and reflections on their future working life, their actual opportunities to choose a work they value, and work-specific experiences, of knowledge and skills. (4) Students' Bildung as capabilities for affiliation and social relationships. The deductive and predefined operationalized indicator categories and the abductive finding of subcategories on this dimension revolve around students' expressed capabilities to make friendships, be aware of social inclusion, respect and recognition of other people, well-being experiences, security, and quality of life.

The following four sections will demonstrate and analyze how students from the VET programs of Health, Childhood, and Youth Development (HCYD) and the program for Technical and Industrial Production (TIP) experienced and expressed capabilities within these four dimensions related to human development and align with the idea of Bildung.

5.1 Bildung as capabilities for democracy and citizenship

VET students in this study show relatively poor capabilities for democracy and citizenship. They express little or no interest in participating in democratic elections and do not believe their peers have this interest. They express little trust in politicians and the press. However, their statements could point to experiences of positive freedom and the ability to express their will and desires.

“So, I have had the opportunity to participate in elections. However, I do not feel I have anything I should have said. True, I am just a young girl. I have the right to vote, but I do not feel it does much to improve anything.” (HCYD, p. 168, l. 5635–5637)ⁱⁱ

“I do not feel there is any point because they [politicians] lie during the election anyway. Almost nothing they say gets done.” (HCYD, p. 15, l. 475–476)

“No, my mum says I must vote for the Labour Party, so I am sure I will vote for it.” (TIP, p. 68, l. 2284–2285)

The secondary data analysis shows that the students’ experience and express relatively weak capabilities for democracy and citizenship regarding formal public debates and political elections. However, they show understanding, demonstrate a democratic mindset, and have discussions and public reasoning with their peers during breaks at school. One of the students’ in the VET program for TIP states:

“It happens during breaks if we choose to sit in the classrooms, many of us go to the internet and read some newspapers. Moreover, if you start reading about the fact that there has been a new terrorist threat, or now it has happened this and that, then you can sit and discuss with peers. And we preferably also discuss with our head teacher or several peers from other grade levels.” (p. 48, l. 1606–1610)

This statement might indicate that the students’ have the capabilities for critical thinking and deliberate participation if the school facilitates for it to happen. Given the students’ freedom and opportunities to get time and space for it, they may achieve autonomy and empowerment. Students reflect critically on their capabilities to actively participate in deliberative processes and make autonomous choices in school and learning activities. They also negotiate with their teachers and exchange their opinions in ways that show how they do and are critical, engaging, and analytical people.

“I remember discussing it with that English teacher. I said we have such monotonous teaching and arguing about why we cannot do anything else. He [the teacher] asked what then, and I listed suggestion after suggestion ... He just said, ‘Yes, but make suggestions, you do not make suggestions’ while I had sat counting on my fingers how many suggestions I had come up with. He did not take it to his heart.” (TIP, p. 128, l. 4313–4317)

This statement and other similar expressions might be interpreted as the students’ capabilities that align with the concepts of *Bildung* in terms of both responsibilities and narrative imagination. The student’s statement here shows the ability to imagine what it might have been like if the teaching had been more engaging and points to the capability to be a person who raises a voice. The statement also points to empowerment and self-awareness when the student argues and suggests alternative teaching methods.

Another student demonstrated other experiences that show students have a democratic mindset and awareness of their autonomy.

“I like the workshop- learning. Those are probably the ones I like best, as well as gymnastics. There, I get to do what I like and be able to choose. However, I do not like social studies. In general, I am not very fond of general subjects. It is probably primarily because of the teachers. They are very much control freaks. There is little pity and few chances to choose there.” (TIP, p. 27, l. 893–895)

“I feel like we do not get to be independent at school. We do not get to try anything ... There is a machine here that you are allowed to try and stuff in all other schools, but here, you do not even get to try to press the start button.” (TIP p. 75, l. 2497–2499)

This expression indicates a demonstration of Bildung. Thus, the students know their autonomy and need for control over their learning processes. They aspire and desire empowerment to participate and choose for themselves.

5.2 Bildung as capabilities for education and training

The primary study shows a rich and varied content of empirical reflections on students’ capabilities for education and training. The secondary analysis also indicates that they experienced expressions of their capabilities can be analysed in terms of their Bildung, both in process and product. Many of the students’ expressed dissatisfaction with the teaching methods and reflects critically on the teaching- provision.

“As a rule, we sit and watch a film, which lasts for approx. 40 minutes or so, there is a Power-Point where she [the teacher] just points and tells us we also must do tasks afterward [...] So, sometimes I feel that part of [the teacher’s] teaching is to make it easy for herself. That is why it always gets so monotonous. Because it is easy to copy from the web and paste onto a presentation, read from it, read a whole chapter of 20-30 pages, and do tasks. It is a method I feel is not very meaningful. At least, it stops my motivation for learning after the third sentence.” (HCYD, p. 86, l. 2867–2868)

This statement indicates that the student can critically reflect and is self-aware of her lack of power and control over the situation. She indirectly expresses her need for empowerment and how difficult it is to overcome the teacher’s power. Such statements are mainly shown in the primary empirical data on students’ capabilities for education in general subjects, where students often express the teaching methods as dull and monotonous and that they do not have the opportunity to use their creative abilities and flourish. The statement also shows how the opportunities to achieve holistic human development and flourishing are constricted in the education of today, as well as how the focus on human capital seems to prioritise educational efficiency, measurable knowledge, and instrumental skills.

Students express abilities for self-examination, reflection, and practical judgment. They express empathy and reflect critically on what it would be like “to be in the teachers’ shoes”.

“I think they [teachers] are working hard and doing what they can. So, I do not think that it is something they could have done better. Instead, it is the will and effort of those [students] who are not quite at their peak that makes them [the students] frustrated. So, if I had been a teacher, I would not have known what else I could have done.” (TIP, p. 63, l. 2091–2094)

The students reflect on their efforts and express doubt and shame over their achievements in learning outcomes and grades. They are capable of self-examination and take responsibility for their own lives, development, and well-being.

“I am disappointed in myself, that I am like that. I do not know why I am like that. I do not know why I let it happen in a way... The teachers say there is a significant difference between me in writing and orally and I know that my knowledge, expressed orally, corresponds to relatively high grades. Nevertheless, once it is in writing, I fall behind and ‘give a damn’ for some strange reason. So, my effort can be very much worked on.” (HCYD, p. 128, l. 4289–4292)

This statement shows how the student reflects on and understands her capacity. It demonstrates critical thinking, her awareness of her lack of effort with schoolwork aligns, and she shows the willingness for change to self-correction, which indicates *Bildung*. Thus, the student’s reflection indicates that she is aware of what she is not able or free to do and be. In other words, the student’s statement reflects their lack of capabilities. However, the statement that she is aware of what she lacks might indicate her *Bildung*. Other students reflect on the skills and knowledge they have achieved in education and training. This indicates that they are in the process of empowerment and are developing agency. One of the students expresses it like this:

“I am delighted that I have chosen VET, and I believe that the training has enabled me to perform at my best and demonstrate that I can handle different skills. I can now confidently point out engine parts, such as the ‘camshaft’, located in the engine compartment, and so on. For the first time in my schooling, I can show myself and others that I can do and know something.” (TIP, p. 41, l. 1374–1376)

This expression indicates that the student has become a skilled worker and a well-informed and self-aware agent. The expression might point to the concept of *Bildung*, and the strong emphasis on learning as an intrinsic value that enables the individual to transform the self in human growth and self-formation. The students’ expressed experiences might be interpreted as how they are able to project an anticipation of ‘the good life’ while they are employed in VET, and point to a discussion on how VET can overcome and be a counterweight to neoliberal approaches in the future education landscape.

The students reflect on how their experience in VET gives them opportunities to anticipate and gain hope for their future lives.

“I have always struggled in school and have felt very unconfident. However, now I feel good about myself. The only time I struggled was when I dropped out last year. Then I wondered what I would do in life and what I wanted ... But things are going better now, ... Now things are running smoothly.” (HCYD, p. 93, l. 3124–3125)

These students’ capabilities indicate their *Bildung* through reflection and critical thinking on their motivation, flourishing, and exercising agency. Their experiences of their capabilities also point to *Bildung* regarding establishing meaning, mastery, and understanding of their knowledge and skills.

5.3 Bildung as capabilities for work and vocation

The section above shows that the students have capabilities for education and training that indicate anticipation and narrative imagination for their future working lives. The secondary

study has analysed empirical content that, in more detail, shows the students' capabilities in their future work and vocation. The students express their capabilities for work, how they, in various ways, see their future exercise of their skilled vocation, and how their attitudes reflect their aspiration for further education and lifelong learning. The analysis shows that students aspire and experience freedom and opportunities to pursue higher education, and this also shows abilities for self-examination, reflection, and practical judgment.

"I have been offered three apprenticeships and decided on one, and there are two different types of vocational skills needed for the one I have chosen. However, I could still think of many other professional skills I want to master. However, you must have a higher education, and I am not willing to take that education yet. Nevertheless, I like practical work, so working in a vocational occupation is ok." (TIP, p. 76, l. 2544–2547)

"No, I am going to be a healthcare worker [HCYD]. I am not interested in going to school anymore now... However, in a few years ... maybe ten years ... I might go on to be trained in higher education in the nursing sciences." (HCYD, p. 163, l. 5469–5470)

The students express their capabilities for work and what they value in their future working life. Their reflection indicates both capabilities and Bildung as they know their opportunities to choose further education and future work, including flexibility and adaptability to learn and apply new knowledge and technologies.

The students also reflect on how their workplace apprentice practices during upper secondary education have given them a "reality orientation" towards their capabilities for future working life. They show experience and express empathy and humanity. One of the students' in the VET program for HCYD reflects on empathy with the elderly at the nursery home, concluding that she is not suited to have such a job:

"I could not imagine working there because I felt so sorry for the patients who sat there day in and day out doing nothing. It was too sad for me, so I could not bear it." (HCYD, p. 150, l. 5056–5059)

Their reflections on the required responsibilities and obligations point to Bildung. Among others, the students emphasize developing social skills, such as teamwork skills necessary for success in the workplace, and express co-responsibility for work/vocation, society, and education.

"Now I know what the world of work will say, to some extent. In school, I only thought of myself and what I wanted to do. However, now, that I have nearly finished school and am going into working life, I think I must meet up with others there. Moreover, it is not as easy to skip work as at school." (HCYD, p. 162, l. 5446–5449)

The students reflect on what they consider crucial for their future work and show that they have constructed values for their lives and what they have reason to value. Thus, they express empowerment, autonomy, and having a "voice".

"If I want a good life, I must have a job I enjoy. No matter how much money I make, whether 10,000 a month or 40,000, it does not matter as long as I am happy with it... Moreover, I can

be sure to share my life with someone I am happy with... I think that is a good life.” (p. 49, l. 1647–1650)

At the same time, students also express concerns about their future working lives and reflect on how their knowledge and skills will be enough to cope with the tasks they will be responsible for. At the same time, they reflect towards inherited attitudes:

“The demands are very high, and I feel much pressure. Now, I may have also pushed myself a lot these two years. Having a good education and getting a job is becoming increasingly important. You need a certificate of apprenticeship, and courses and the whole package to get a job. And then in school, you must have those high grades to get into higher education. So, I think the pressure is high.” (p. 177, l. 5956–5962)

This statement could indicate the students’ indirect reflection on the neoliberal conditions elaborated in the school system. The student’s expression could mean that she concentrates on instrumental human capital and the importance of formal knowledge. Therefore, the statement could indicate how performance pressure affects students. However, at the same time, these expressions show the students’ *Bildung* as they reflect on what they value and have reason to value. They indirectly have narrative imagination to think about how things could have been differently.

5.4 Bildung as capabilities for affiliation and social relationships

The secondary data analyses show that the students reflect on how critical the condition of affiliation and social recognition is for their anticipations of a good life. One of the boys within the VET program for TIP reflects on how pressure for good grades affects his social relationships:

“Moreover, it [the pressure at school] also ruins the social stuff. I guess I have been inside my room more than with friends this year. Just sat inside, practiced, and maybe been with friends a bit, but then we have been rehearsed together... and memorized. Because there is a lot, you will do to get that and that cut to move forward. Yes, I know not... At least I feel the pressure.” (TIP, p. 178, l. 5969–5971)

The students’ express that they do not take affiliation and social relationships toward family for granted. They demonstrate an understanding of the value of societies and see their own position toward others and the world, which indicates the product of *Bildung*.

“I think my family and those around me are doing well regarding my well-being and health. That I have made to manage school and have a sense of affiliation there, somewhere is a good life for me.” (HCYD, p. 155, l. 5189–5190)

To sum up, the students’ expressions of their capabilities indicate alignment with *Bildung*, as they seem to reflect and show awareness of themselves towards the world and others. On the other hand, the students also reflect on how hard it can be to gain friendship in youth and recognize difficulties that could hinder their capabilities for friendship.

“You are supposed to be looking for a good friend at this age. Nevertheless, I have had the wrong choices of friends in my time, and a lot has happened. However, seeing how people behave towards each other is hard and sad. It is just plain ugly ... That is how it can be.” (TIP, p. 160, l. 5381–5384)

However, the students are aware of obstacles to social recognition that could hinder their capabilities to live a good life and be proud of their work and what their education and skills offer to society. A girl in the VET program for HCYD expressed how she feels ashamed of herself and feels a lack of recognition and consider their place in the world.

“We are looked down upon [VET]: It is like they think; ‘Oh, you are going health and childcare, yes fine with you ...’ I feel like we live in a ‘business world’, where if you are sitting in an office then you have a lot important going on ... But if you choose to work with caring for people and only have education from upper secondary education, then it is like, ‘yes, that is fair enough, we need those too.’ That is what it looks like.” (p. 151f., l. 5082–5086)

This statement shows that the students see them see themselves and consider their place in the world of work. The students seem to have a reflected view of which capabilities they value and have reason to value when it comes to work, affiliation, and social recognition. Nevertheless, they also express their disappointment with how society does not recognise students’ in the VET programs. However, a student in the VET program for TIP states what his parents think about his choice of work.

“They are very concerned about my well-being... they sort of want me to... What should I say then... They shit a little bit about how much I am going to earn and stuff like that as long as I am doing something I want to do and enjoy. That I do something that makes me happy.” (TIP, p. 18, l. 601–604)

The secondary data analysis indicates that students’ capabilities align with the concept of Bildung regarding reflection and critical thinking on what matters in life. The students also reflect on their overall capabilities to live a good life and connect this with a good job. One of the students in the VET program for HCYD expresses a statement that sums up these conditions when she was asked if she had a conception of what it means to live a good life, answering:

“Having a good life? It is having people you love and care about you. Have a good job that one enjoys and have the finances to have a place of residence and do what one wants. And then obstacles can arise, but one is not stuck in it, but always sees a light in the tunnel.” (p. 96, l. 3213–3215)

This expression deals with students’ development of their capabilities to live and function in belonging to others and their experiences of life and social communities. It demonstrates how the capability approach aligns with the open-ended project of human growth, freedom, and the self-creation of Bildung.

6 Discussion

The capability approach proposed by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2006b) emphasizes the importance of individuals' freedom to develop their critical thinking, democratic participation, and citizenship skills. These skills are essential for people to participate fully in society. In line with this, education is considered a fundamental aspect of the approach (Sen 1992, 33; Nussbaum 2011, 152).

The relationship between the capability approach and Bildung has also been discussed and demonstrated (Andersen/Otto/Ziegler 2010; Bifulco et al. 2015). The capability approach highlights the importance of individuals having opportunities to work in jobs they value and find meaningful (Bonvin/Galster 2010; Otto et al. 2015). Building good social relationships and affiliation with others is crucial to the capability approach. These capability dimensions correspond to the ideas of Bildung shown in this study's analyses and results. They are essential to the well-being and freedom of the individual and are prerequisites for just societies and promoting the public good (Nussbaum 2011, 33).

Analysing students' capabilities in this study imply the methodological assumption that views capabilities as a combination of various interconnected dimensions instead of analysing them separately. It emphasizes the interrelatedness of capabilities and their connection with an individual's abilities and social position in society. "In this perspective, an individual's capabilities emerge from the combination and interaction of individual-level capacities and the individual's relative position *vis-à-vis* social structures that provide reasons and resources for particular behaviors" (Smith/Seward 2009, 213). These assumptions are critical when analysing students' capabilities and linking them to Bildung. From a critical realist perspective, Bildung is epistemologically derived by retroductive theorizing of the capabilities that arise from deep ontological structures (Danermark et al. 2002). In other words, rather than considering democracy, education, work, and affiliation as separate entities, the capability approach combines them dialectically to produce a holistic understanding that contains a conception of human development that comes close to the notion of Bildung (Anderson/Otto/Ziegler 2010; Bifulco et al. 2015, 265).

The various dimensions of capabilities and Bildung in the empirical presentation thus are in an internal relation to each other and will, therefore, partially overlap each other heuristically. Therefore, the study must be considered a story in which the reader must discover an understanding and truth. "The case story is itself the result. It is a 'virtual reality', so to speak" (Flyvbjerg 2006, 23).

Nussbaum and Sen pull their ideas from centuries of Western and non-Western philosophical inquiry deeply rooted in humanities. They suggest establishing a desirable education quality by referring to thinkers inspired by the classical ideas of Bildung, like the Stoics, the importance of Socrates' dialogue, Aristotle's virtue ethics, and social democracy (Nussbaum 1990; 1993; 1997). They take up ideas from thinkers like I. Kant, and the early K. Marx, and apply references to romanticism and progressive thinkers like Rousseau, J. Dewey, and Pestalozzi (Nussbaum 2000; 2010; 2011; Sen 1999; 2009). When using the capability approach to education,

critical approaches become highly relevant with thinkers from P. Freire, and more contemporary critical education theories within his tradition (Hart/Biggeri/Babic 2014; Walker 2005; Walker/Unterhalter 2007).

Thus, the capability approach aligns with the theories of Bildung in a classical, progressive, liberal, and critical sense. As Tyson (2016) suggested, we can identify Bildung as overlapping processes and content, allowing us to draw on previous knowledge to imagine new ways to approach the current state of education in contemporary discussions on VET. Therefore, there is no need to think that VET students are less able to achieve Bildung than their more academic peers. In future discussions on VET, it might be time to delete such prejudice and work for a more just and fair opinion on large cohorts of youths enrolled in VET.

The capability approach strongly emphasizes the abilities students might learn in the lived democracy in schools (Berg-Brekhus/Werler 2021; Dewey 2016; Werler/Berg-Brekhus 2022). Results and analysis from the primary study, used in this secondary analysis, show that the student expresses a weak degree of capabilities to participate in democracy and citizenship. They experience and express little interest in participating in formal social debates or political elections. Instead, the students express themselves in the direction of linking democratic knowledge and deliberative participation to academic or scholastic learning forms, in which they express highly negative experiences.

The secondary analyses, however, reveal that the students' express capabilities for critical thinking and reflect on their capacity to participate democratically in their learning processes that align with the ideas of Bildung. Students strongly desire autonomy, emancipation, and the freedom to choose the learning formats they value. This includes workshops and alternative learning methods that may differ from their teachers. In other words, the study suggests that students can express their opinions, identify what they value, and demonstrate self-awareness and practical reasoning (Bleicher 2006, 365; Nussbaum 2011, 33). However, this study shows that the school and teachers are only, to a limited extent, able to meet the students' needs to create their capabilities and thus achieve Bildung.

According to the capability approach, students' aspirations and desires are of importance (Hart 2012). With references to Socrates, Nussbaum points out strongly that education should focus on promoting critical thinking and encouraging examination of social systems that have long been upheld. This means living a life that does not blindly accept beliefs passed down by tradition or habit. Instead, it requires questioning all beliefs, statements, and arguments, and accepting only those that can withstand the demands of reason, consistency, and justification (Nussbaum 2006a, 388). In Sanderse's (2021) view, critical reflection is thinking about how things could differ from their current state. The students in this study exhibit such reflection. They express their gratitude for the knowledge and skills they have acquired through VET but also express shame due to the societal stigmatization of VET and how it could be different. This finding could indicate the potential impact of societal pressure to pursue higher education, as many of these students' desire to continue their education.

It is crucial to determine whether the neoliberal education agenda and the demands of the knowledge society are valuable and of reason to value to students or whether they need to demand justification for the future of VET and training based on human development and emancipation from hegemonic academic structures. This question is significant because it delves into how modern theories of Bildung can complement the capability approach and contribute to ongoing discussions about the future of VET. By doing so, students can be protected from the adverse effects of the neoliberal education regime and be provided with freedom and opportunities to lead good, dignified lives (McGrath 2012a; 2012b; McGrath et al. 2019).

The study found that students possess a strong narrative imagination, essential in the capability approach (Nussbaum 2006b; 2011). They aspire to succeed in life, not in a monetaristic sense, but by obtaining a job they value by anticipating ‘the good life’ with responsibility for themselves and affiliation to others. The study’s findings indicate that the students experience both freedom of opportunity and the process of choosing one life and working life over another (Sen 1999, 291; 2009, 228). They talk about coping in life and education, their perceived meaning, and how they experience control over their lives and future work.

The analysis also shows that students are more inclined towards learning through creative activities, aligning with Dewey's emphasis on meaningful learning instead of relying solely on textbooks (Nussbaum 2006a, 391). This aligns with the capability approach, which is not solely focused on formal education, external pressures, or measurable outcomes like grades, knowledge, skills, and competencies. Instead, it considers the ability of students to understand and reflect on their abilities, competencies, and values in life, and most of all, the Aristotelian “eudaimonia” which appeals to a good life as an active life (Nussbaum 1990, 1993).

The capability approach emphasizes the importance of education in developing ethical awareness and social responsibility (Sen 1999, 282). This study has shown that students reflect on their responsibilities, educational efforts, and concerns about how academic pressures may impact their future. They express fear about unemployment and the possibility of societal changes. However, they are also grateful for the VET they receive, which instils a sense of responsibility for others when they enter the workforce. These experiences show that VET should not just be about acquiring instrumental skills or employability for the workforce aimed to maintain competitiveness, productivity, and economic growth. Rather than employability for work, VET needs to educate students to expand empowerment and capabilities for work (Berg-Brekhus/Werler 2017). VET, thus, we should stress that students have the freedom and opportunities to participate in Bildung processes, which include developing self-confidence, inner vocation, and a sense of calling, originating from the Latin word *vocatio* (Gonon 2022; Spranger 1965, cited in Sanderse 2021, 8).

Moreover, the results and analysis of this study raise questions about how the ideas of Bildung and the capability approach can complement each other in contributing to contemporary discussions on the future VET. As a starting point, there might be the question of whether students are experiencing positive freedom, being motivated to make well-founded choices, and achieving meaning and well-being through their learning processes. These arguments suggest that the

capability approach advocates for humanities-based VET- didactics (In German: *Didaktik der schulischen Berufsbildung*) to promote the development and maintenance of well-being practices through individual self-awareness, autonomy, and critical thinking, which aligns with the ideas of Bildung (Störtländer 2011).

Wilhelm von Humboldt described Bildung as connecting oneself with the world. He believed the interaction between a student's inner powers and capabilities and the external world is crucial. The students should reflect on their inner being the clarifying light and comforting warmth of everything they undertake outside themselves. Although the VET students in this study may not have reverberated through literature and Latin, it can be suggested that they are still linked to the world they engage with outside. They reflect on the skills they have acquired and how they appreciate and experience human growth through their newfound knowledge in VET. This knowledge may not be academic or hegemonic, but the capability approach shows that human growth, authenticity, and the ideas of Bildung should be achievable by all human beings.

Applying the ideas of Bildung to the capability approach might contribute to contemporary discussions on VET. It can help re-examine the purpose of VET beyond the conventional orthodoxy of employability and productivity. It can bring social justice to the forefront and provide VET- students with opportunities to lead flourishing lives, while also bridging the gap between policy and practice to create a new way of engaging with global messengers and sustainable human development. This might offer a significant contribution to balance out the narrow focus on the economic benefits of VET, such as increased productivity and higher wages, that come with the neo-liberal human capital approach. To do so, we must explore the possibilities of emergence for new theories and generate fresh ideas that spark global discussions. This will help us preserve the intangible aspects of education like culture, identity, and democracy, while also adapting to the global economy's shifting needs that require new competencies and vocational skills.

7 Conclusion

As VET becomes more international, understanding similarities between Bildung and the capability approach may renew VET in new and innovative ways. New openings may produce new vocabularies that help to overcome diversity and appear to act on attempts to integrate the relationship and connections between continental-European Bildung-theoretical discourses, liberal educational theories within Anglo-American languages, and more contemporary critical education theories in a global perspective.

The theories of Bildung and the capability approach can complement each other in contributing to VET students as fully engaged, social, and democratic participants. It encourages a teaching provision to secure their freedom, opportunities to aspire, and hope for their future lives and work. By projecting an anticipation for freedom, self-creation, and pursuing 'the good life,' students can achieve their full potential.

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ⁱ The term "Bildung" is written with a capital letter in this paper, which is common when referring to the distinct German term. However, note that concepts are often written in small letters, i. e. "bildung", in English literature, often with a slightly broader meaning (Løvlie/ Standish 2002). The use of the term "Bildung" in the paper, does not exclude the term "bildung" in a slightly broader sense.

ⁱⁱ The numbers indicate the page and line number in the transcribed data material from the primary study.

Citation

Berg-Brekhus, Å. (2025): Exploring Norwegian Vocational Education and Training and Students Bildung in the Light of the Capability Approach: A projective anticipation of freedom, self-creation, and 'the good life'? In: *bwp@ Spezial 19: Retrieving and recontextualising VET theory*. Edited by Esmond, B./Ketschau, T. J./Schmees, J. K./Steib, C./ Wedekind, V., 1-26. Online: https://www.bwpat.de/spezial19/berg-brekhus_spezial19.pdf (21.01.2025).

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