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Learning to question the status quo. Critical thinking, citizenship education and *Bildung* in vocational education

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ABSTRACT

Educational policies in the Netherlands reveal that the current mainstream participatory approach to citizenship education jeopardises students' autonomy. Especially in Dutch post-secondary vocational education, citizenship education has been shown to be mainly aimed at socialization: initiating students into tradition, internalising rules, societal norms and values. This article reports on the findings of a research project, which is grounded in the assumption that integrating *Bildung*, citizenship education and critical thinking is a promising way to grapple with the perceived overemphasis on socialization strategies. We justify the interrelationship of critical thinking, *Bildung*, citizenship education, and professional training from two perspectives – historical and contemporary. It is only by combining these concepts, we contend, that educational professionals can create teaching materials more geared to developing autonomy, and prepare students in vocational training to navigate the political and societal dilemma's on the work floor. Furthermore, we also clarify our perspective by offering three educational principles, used in our project to guide the design of teaching materials, that form a context for integrating citizenship, critical thinking, and *Bildung* in vocational education. A practical illustration is subsequently discussed.

1. Introduction

Students pursuing vocational training encounter complex dilemmas in their professions – as, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic shows. Health care workers need to navigate between limited medical devices and strictly professional standards, professionals in schools must find their way in online education and issues of privacy and safety, and security officers might not only be

confronted with a range of extra tasks and responsibilities but also with growing tensions in their interaction with the public. The unique circumstances of 2020–2022 illustrate that independent thinking and an awareness of ethical dilemmas are exactly what we need in professionals. Vocational education is therefore crucial to teach students these capacities by promoting their autonomy – especially in citizenship education (Brighouse 1998). Ideally, it provides students with 'the capacities involved in critical reflection [that] help us to live autonomously. We can be taught methods for evaluating the truth and falsehood, or relative probability, of various claims about the world' (p. 728).

However, educational policies in the Netherlands reveal that the current mainstream participatory approach to citizenship education jeopardises students' autonomy; not only due to its tendency to focus on bringing about behavioural change, but also because current approaches embrace just one conception of good citizenship, even though it is clear that citizenship is a highly contested subject (Guérin 2018). Especially in Dutch post-secondary vocational education (MBO), citizenship education has shown to be mainly aimed at socialization, i.e. at initiating students into tradition and at internalising rules, societal norms and values (Guérin 2019).

These findings were the starting point of our funded research project on citizenship education, that is carried out by two research-oriented universities, a university of applied sciences, and two institutes for post-secondary vocational education.[1] The members of this broad consortium, with their respective fields of expertise, ranging from educational sciences to philosophy of education, share a common concern for the perceived marginalisation of autonomy in current interpretations of and policies on citizenship education in vocational institutes. Tapping into a long tradition in the field of educational philosophy that argues that the main aim of education is to stimulate students' autonomy (Benner 2005; Hirst and Peters 2012; Imelman 2002), we propose to re-conceptualise citizenship education from the perspective of autonomy. Autonomy is defined here as: 'self-governance in accordance with one's own values and truths' (van der Ploeg 1995, 136). Promoting autonomy, as a pedagogical task of education, entails furnishing students with adequate knowledge and skills and giving them ample scope to actively contribute ideas, make balanced judgements on how to act, and what to believe or not to believe (van der Ploeg and Guérin 2016).

This consortium believes that integrating *Bildung*, citizenship education and critical thinking in vocational education is a promising way to grapple with the perceived overemphasis on socialization strategies and to provide an opportunity to increase the role of autonomy – especially in vocational education. In the course of our research, project members have therefore developed a theoretical vision that incorporates *Bildung*, critical thinking, and citizenship education; furthermore, Teacher Design Teams have simultaneously created teaching materials to use as part of the vocational training curriculum.

In this article, we aim to justify the interrelationship of critical thinking, *Bildung*, citizenship education, and professional training from two perspectives – historical and contemporary. Firstly, by arguing that this combination ties in with a historical tradition. In the following section of this article, we will provide a historical perspective in which we propose to show how the concepts of *Bildung*, critical thinking, citizenship education and professional training have historically been conceptualised as interdependent. Secondly, we take a contemporary perspective; this part of our article contains an analysis of Dutch policy documents and legal texts on citizenship education, *Bildung*, and critical thinking. Our analysis reveals how these policy documents provide an interpretation of these different concepts that is strongly focused on socialization as an educational goal. It is only by combining these concepts, we contend, that educational professionals can create teaching materials more geared to developing autonomy, and preparing students in vocational training to navigate the political and societal dilemma's on the work floor.

Besides this twofold justification, we also aim to clarify our perspective on critical thinking, citizenship education, and *Bildung* in vocational education by providing three principles that support a vocational context for integrating citizenship, critical thinking, and *Bildung*. These are used in our project to guide the design of teaching materials. A practical illustration is subsequently discussed.

2. A historical perspective

This section deals with a historical perspective on the concepts of critical thinking, *Bildung*, citizenship education, and professional training, to substantiate our claim that it is important to interrelate these concepts in vocational education.

Already in the early days, around 1920, the pedagogical quality of vocational education was under discussion in Europe and the United States. Notably, the educational philosophers Georg Kerschensteiner (1854–1932), John Dewey (1859–1952) and Eduard Spranger (1882–1963) call for vocational education of a more critical nature than was customary at the time.

Kerschensteiner can be perceived as one of the pioneers of modern education in Germany. He asserted that education is concerned with the moral, intellectual and technical training of students. However, one should always acknowledge the fact that the average adolescent is not interested in academics but in himself and his newly acquired position of worker, argued Kerschensteiner (Simons 1966, 42)—and this means that moral, intellectual and technical training should be accomplished via vocational training. This way, students are encouraged to think themselves instead of being taught – to understand theoretical concepts and develop morally through their own experience. As Kerschensteiner states: 'To test independently, to think

independently: that is the most important thing that a school can give to the future citizen of the modern state' (Kerschensteiner 2022, 402). Kerschensteiner's ideas resulted in specific proposals for 'activity schools', where general subjects no longer dominated the curriculum; instead, vocational training formed the basis for education – history, science and maths could be tied to vocational-specific issues and problems for students to discuss and reflect upon.

Important to notice here is that the goal of this type of education is not to create ideal workmen and -women: Kerschensteiner's aim of a vocational-inspired curriculum was the development of skills, knowledge, and virtues for citizenship. The purpose of the school is thus 'to nurture useful community members and citizens' (Kerschensteiner 2022, 400). Hinchliffe (2022) argues that even though the strong emphasis on the community might seem 'rather forbidding' in the work of Kerschensteiner, this still leaves room for the importance of individual thinking at the same time:

> So although the aims of education do indeed involve the development of individuals who can be of service to the state, this service is best given by individuals who are knowledgeable and can think for themselves, who are unafraid of failure and setbacks and have the self-confidence to speak out when needed (p. 2).

Diane Simons (1966) observes that Kerschensteiner's ideas on citizenship formed a complete break with traditional thinking on education and the important concept of *Bildung* in Germany – generally understood as the development and cultivation of an individual through the arts and philosophy – because:

> … the object of the educational process, was to become neither the nineteenth-century intellectual, nor the German classicists' perfect individual … for Kerschensteiner's conception of the individual was that of a man who was essentially a social being, a member of a community, whose education would be such that it would aim at equipping him to play his part as a member of society (Simons 1966, pp. 28–29).

Eduard Spranger, who had published extensively on upbringing, paying homage to Kerschensteiner, had similar critique on the classic concept of *Bildung* as the moral and intellectual development of the individual, because the societal dimension is overlooked in such an understanding. Even though Spranger leans on a more nationalist idea of the goal of education – born ten years after the uniting of states in the German Empire, he identified with a national-conservative tradition that aimed to utilise *Bildung* to create a shared German identity (Sanderse 2021)—he concurred with the idea of *Berufsbildung* ('vocational *Bildung*') defended by the more left-wing liberal, social-reform minded Kerschensteiner (Sweeney 2006). Spranger characterised *Bildung* in vocational education as follows:

> Vocational education is *Bildung* insofar as the pupil comes to stand in a relation of freedom towards all individual tasks; when he learns to understand these tasks as part of a broader social and cultural context and learns to rise above them morally and intellectually, instead of being overpowered by them. The opposite of *Bildung* is when you are turned into a specialist who blindly and routinely carries out your work, always in the same way.[2]

His emphasis on freedom reminds one of Kerschensteiner's aim to produce citizens and professionals with an 'independence of mind'. Both of them argue the importance of a certain critical distance towards existing professional norms and practices; in the next section of this article, we argue that it is precisely in advocating this independence of mind that these educational philosophers could counter the emphasis in current discourse and policies on socialization strategies in vocational education, geared as they are towards acceptance of and adapting to current professional standards.

Despite the emphasis on independent thinking and acting in professional settings, the ideas that Kerschensteiner and Spranger formulated were later criticised for maintaining the existing class order. Sloane (2022) explains that it is important to understand the historical context of their ideas: 'At the time of the German Empire, civic education, which was the aim of the advanced training schools, was interpreted in the sense of the existing state order. This had a system-stabilising function'(p. 3). Societal unrest and the emergence of social democratic movements formed the background of the writings of Kerschensteiner and Spranger, that also aimed at countering tendencies of young men to fall victim to 'subversive parties' (Kuhlee, Steib, and Winch 2022, 6). This is why, according to the critics of later generations, the

> ... concept of combining vocational and civic education ... is also one of maintaining the existing class order and preserving the power of the upper classes. ... (T)he development of this dual structure was strongly linked to the rather problematic and critical perception that VET in the German Empire was seen as a Trojan horse of the ruling class for the civic education of young people from the working class so that they could be made more malleable and less susceptible to radical agitation (Kuhlee, Steib, and Winch 2022, 10).

This critique on the German ideas for vocational education was also formulated by the American educational philosopher John Dewey, with whose work Kerschensteiner was familiar and felt inspired by (Sloane 2022). Dewey's worry was that the combination of vocational and civic education could be utilised as a cover to serve the interests of the ruling class. Knoll (2017) has juxtaposed the ideas of Dewey and Kerscheinsteiner and formulates the main point of contention as follows: 'Was Kerschensteiner und seine amerikanischen Freunde mit der Einführung der beruflichen Fortbildungsschule letztlich jedoch erreichten, sei die Anpassung des Schülers an die kapitalistische Wirtschafts- und Gesellschaftsordnung. Die Aufrechterhaltung des politischen status quo war

für Dewey indes unakzeptabel' (p. 11). Kerschensteiner is critiqued by Dewey, according to Knoll, when he argues:

> The kind of vocational education in which I am interested is not the one which will 'adapt' workers to the existing industrial régime. I am not sufficiently in love with that régime for that. It seems to me that the business of all . . . is to resist every move in that direction, and to strive for a kind of vocational education which will first alter the existing industrial system, and ultimately transform it (in: Knoll 2017, 11).

However, Dewey also applauded Kerschensteiner for his proposal to use history, art and science in light of vocational preparation. Dewey observed that the one thing that Kerschensteiner stood for 'has been that industrial shall be primarily not for the sake of industries, but for the sake citizenship, and that it be conducted therefore on a purely educational basis and not on behalf of interested manufacturers' (in: Knoll 2017, 11).

Despite their different positions on the structure of vocational education in the German school system, the visions of Kerschensteiner and Spranger on vocational *Bildung* are very similar to those of Dewey – albeit, that Dewey called it 'education' (van der Ploeg et al. 2019). Indeed, on his travels to the United States, Kerschensteiner 'was surprised to see how similar some of Dewey's ideas were to his own' (Simons 1966, 82). It is through activity and experience, Dewey also argued, that thinking is stimulated; the educational process should therefore be grounded on acting, and not on abstract knowledge communicated to pupils, as was often the case in schools: 'Only in education, never in the life of farmer, sailor, merchant, physician, or laboratory experimenter, does knowledge mean primarily a store of information aloof from doing' (Dewey 1966, 185). Therefore, the educational principle that Dewey defends in his famous work from 1916, *Democracy and Education*, is maintained

> . . . when the young begin with active occupations having a social origin and use, and proceed to a scientific insight in the materials and laws involved, through assimilating into their more direct experience the ideas and facts communicated by others who have had a larger experience (Dewey 1966, 193).

Dewey, Spranger and Kerschensteiner thus all disputed that vocational education and *Bildung* are mutually exclusive, because vocational education can also be *Bildung*. In addition, the same three educational philosophers not only saw an intrinsic relationship between vocational education and *Bildung* but also between work and *Bildung*, and between *Bildung* and citizenship education. They argued that *Bildung* makes students more articulate and empowered, and also more *socially* and *politically* critical. As Dewey states: 'A curriculum which acknowledges the social responsibilities of education must present situations where problems are relevant to the problems of living together, and where observation and information are calculated to develop social insight and interest' (Dewey 1966, 192). Vocational education prepares the student to carry out their professional duties in such a way as to not passively submit to them, but to

view them freely and critically, from a distance, as it were, and be able to understand the relations between professional practice and the social and cultural context. Similarly, Kerschensteiner defended his ideas on education and citizenship by arguing that only by means of vocational education, qualities of character are formed. Societal engagement is stimulated by research into the legal aspects connected to the work of a student, or by study of the history of factory workers. Kerschensteiner's citizen was an independently thinking, morally, and socially committed person, not subservient to the state or blindly following instructions as a worker (Simons 1966). Such an education practises critical citizenship in an organic way (van der Ploeg 2016). And so, *Bildung* in vocational education is, by definition, citizenship education.

In practice, vocational education failed to develop as the philosophers Dewey, Spranger and Kerschensteiner had envisaged and hoped. It did not become a pioneering area for educational reform and remained heavily oriented towards vocational proficiency: the acquisition of vocation-specific knowledge and skills. However, towards the end of the twentieth century, the playing field changes drastically. *Bildung* becomes more attractive to vocational education, precisely *due to* the strong focus on certain vocational competencies. Developments within society mean that, for more and more professions, there is an increased need for flexibility, initiative and creativity, an open attitude to change, an ability to effectively deal with uncertainties, and also for social and cultural responsiveness. However, it is still not *Bildung* as envisaged by Dewey, Spranger and Kerschensteiner, not as long as heterogeneous demands (specifically demands imposed by the vocation itself and demands relating to social circumstances) continue to be decisive. It is destined to remain a kind of 'half-*Bildung*'—as will be clarified in the following paragraph on Dutch policy documents related to *Bildung*.

3. *Bildung*, citizenship and critical thinking in current educational policies in the Netherlands

The previous section provided a historical justification for the interrelating of *Bildung*, critical thinking and citizenship education in the context of vocational education. In this section, we would like to turn to contemporary documents for an additional justification to interrelate these concepts. It features an analysis of Dutch policy documents and legal texts and aims to reveal and understand their underlying conceptualisations of *Bildung*, citizenship education and critical thinking – whilst each of these concepts is gaining importance in current educational policies and practices in the Netherlands. As argued below, the policy documents and legal texts analysed here, view each of these concepts independently and from the perspective of 'socialization', understood here as

> ... a conserving process. It transmits traditions and values that are common place in the experiences of the community and the larger society. ... With the emphasis on tradition, the practices related to socialization foster conformity to existing cultural values, behaviors and practices. In and of itself, socialization seeks to strengthen social cohesion ... (Ochoa-Becker 2006, 66).

Each subparagraph will zoom in on one of these three concepts, providing an overview of the policies and giving a critique on this perspective. The final subparagraph 3.4 contends that we can only steer away from a perspective geared towards consensus and adaptation to existing (professional) norms and values by interrelating the domains of critical thinking, citizenship education and *Bildung*. Ochoa-Becker (2006) argues: 'While socialization entails the means by which children learn to fit into the existing social order, it is not concerned with developing individuals on their own terms by emphasizing their intellect, their creativity, their uniqueness or their independence' (p. 67). It is precisely in combining critical thinking, citizenship education and *Bildung* that the autonomy of students is fostered and that true critical, vocational *Bildung*, as Dewey, Spranger and Kerschensteiner envisaged, can come about.

3.1 Bildung

The Netherlands has witnessed a revival of *Bildung* in education in the last decade, instigated by, among other institutes, the University of Applied Sciences Utrecht and the International School for Philosophy (e.g. an Stralen and Gude 2012). [3]*Bildung* is understood here as a concept that unites two seemingly contradictory educational aims, namely disciplining students within a specific tradition, on the one hand, and offering students an opportunity for individual development and liberation, on the other (van Stralen and Gude 2012; Zuurmond, Montessori, and Lengkeek 2020). Generally referring to attempts in education to provide students with opportunities to develop moral awareness, to be introduced to the arts, cultivate a personal identity and make progress in social skills, *Bildung* has frequently been hailed by educational professionals and politicians to address a range of problematic societal issues. *Bildung* has, for example, been perceived as a means to address social polarisation, or to counter the 'age of measurement' (Biesta 2013)—which has led some educational philosophers to conclude that '*Bildung* has become a large field covering nearly everything in pedagogical discourse' (Masschelein and Ricken 2003, 141). Recent policy documents emphasising the importance of *Bildung* in educational practice contain many interpretations of *Bildung*, ranging from a process aimed towards attaining individual autonomy (emphasising the importance of personality development, or the art of living, by focusing, for example, on self-knowledge, self-restraint, and authenticity) to a socialization perspective (*Bildung* as a necessary means to become socialised, or acquainted with societal and professional norms). In this paragraph we argue how these

documents, although emphasising the importance of the notion of *Bildung* in education, are at times rather one-sided, with the socialization perspective often prevailing in the end.

An important impetus for the revival of the idea of *Bildung* in the Netherlands was a publication by the Dutch Education Council, of which the English version is entitled *Bildung* (Onderwijsraad 2011). This report explicitly conceives this concept as uniting two opposing perspectives: an individual and a communal, traditional perspective. The Education Council, however, recommends that educators should form their students' personalities and address their behaviour from a communal perspective established by a 'broad cultural transfer' (Onderwijsraad 2011), providing them with a compass for their lives. This metaphor seems to suggest that, as long as teachers pay attention to traditions, societal norms, and cultural heritage, students might at some point be able to find their own way as individuals in society. Leaving aside the matter of *whose* cultural traditions should be conveyed, the question arises as to *how* the individual student will be given the opportunity to critically engage with these traditions. The report remains unclear at this point.

A second impulse for *Bildung* was provided by a highly contested report published in 2016. This report, entitled *Ons onderwijs2032* [Our education2032] (Platform Onderwijs 2016), was the result of an extensive consultation with educational professionals, initiated by the Dutch Minister of Education in 2015. The report emphasises the importance of what is referred to in Dutch as 'persoonsvorming'. This Dutch concept approximates 'personal development' or 'self-formation', but explicitly integrates both an individual process of personal development and a social process of cultural education and professionalisation. Despite the observation of the relevance of the individual process of personal development, the socialization perspective seems once more to prevail, as the report states that 'persoonsvorming' is on a par with citizenship education, as both aim at bringing about social cohesion: 'Persoonsvorming and citizenship education, as tasks of education, should contribute to the creation of social and cultural cohesion in an increasingly pluriform society' (Platform Onderwijs 2016, 15).[4] However, if 'persoonsvorming' is also conceived from an individual perspective, one might just as well argue that this process only adds to plurality and may even complicate social cohesion. Follow-up documents to Platform Onderwijs2032, published in 2018 and 2019, and entitled 'Curriculum. nu', do address the tension between the two perspectives more explicitly, stating that: 'The tension that comes to the fore here, between individual freedom and social norms, cannot be resolved: both autonomy and shaping inclusion and social cohesion based on shared values, are simultaneously goals of (citizenship) education' (Curriculum 2019, 10).[5] However, for educational professionals it is still not clear how to deal with this fundamental problem, or how to navigate between both perspectives in daily practice (van der Ploeg n.d.).

These examples indicate that the social aspect of *Bildung* is given more emphasis than the individual, although both perspectives on *Bildung* are acknowledged in the policy documents analysed. A similar socialising approach can be discerned in documents on citizenship education, as will be argued in the next section.

3.2 Citizenship education

The concept of 'citizenship' is considered to be an intrinsically contested concept (van der Ploeg 2019), which means that the concept necessarily engenders different and opposing views.[6] These controversies should also be addressed in the way citizenship education is taught in school curricula: it should familiarise students with a range of views on citizenship so they may form their own opinions (van der Ploeg and Guérin 2016).

Vocational education in the Netherlands has a threefold purpose: preparation for a vocation, access to higher education, and citizenship formation. Citizenship education in Dutch post-secondary vocational education is legally regulated in the Examen- en kwalificatiebesluit beroepsopleidingen WEB ('Vocational Education Act') and is further specified in annexe 1 of article 17a, paragraph 3. With this legislation, publicly funded vocational education has mainly been provided by the regional training centres (ROCs) with a high level of autonomy in organising their programmes (Cedefop 2022). In the legislative text, citizenship is divided into four domains: societal, economic, political-juridical, and health. The elaboration of the law provides a detailed specification of what students have to learn in these domains; these learning goals have subsequently been used by publishers as guidelines for teaching methods on citizenship education. As a result the problems arising from the legal texts, which will be outlined below, are reflected in the educational methods. Even though the learning goals have been specified for vocational programmes, there are no central examinations for citizenship education. The training centres themselves have the freedom to decide how their students will achieve these goals. This means that institutes often offer different curricula in citizenship education, ranging from intensive separate courses on Citizenship education using general textbooks (which are frequently not related to vocation-specific issues) to only a few sessions on democracy, diversity and health as part of workplace preparations.

The goals in the various domains of the law are not only phrased in terms of knowledge and skills, but also in terms of the attitude and even the behaviour students should preferably display. Attitude is, for instance, described as 'a willingness to', whereas behavioural goals are more specific, such as: 'displaying collegial behaviour' and 'following a healthy lifestyle'. The more specifically this willingness is worded, the more student autonomy is curtailed. This means that both the letter and spirit of the law make it difficult for students to get

acquainted with critical thinking, reflecting on matters and making their *own* choices. Goals phrased in behavioural terms, leave even less scope for critical reflection.

By prescribing guidelines on how students should learn to reflect, judge and act, the law rather discourages than promotes autonomy. Starting from the definition of socialization, given in paragraph 3–'the practices related to socialization foster conformity to existing cultural values, behaviors and practices' (Ochoa-Becker 2006, 66)-one can argue that this juridical framework is more geared towards a vocational form of socialization: the focus of these legal guidelines is strongly on consensus and adaptation to existing *professional* norms and values. This is precisely in the field of citizenship education problematic, as educational philosopher Harry Brighouse explains, since this domain needs to facilitate autonomy in students: 'civic education is permissible only if it includes elements that direct the critical scrutiny of children to the very values they are taught' (Brighouse 1998, 720).

3.3 Critical thinking

Critical thinking is a much-discussed topic in vocational education and is in the Netherlands mainly understood in the context of citizenship education. We understand critical thinking here as a concept open to many interpretations: it can, for example, be conceived as group problem solving, asking questions, and developing democratic virtues. Practicing critical thinking in a range of different contexts and applying various teaching strategies produces the best results (Abrami et al. 2015; Guérin, van der Ploeg, and Sins 2013). To understand the issue of critical thinking in current vocational education, an analysis of documents forming the legal framework for educational institutes to develop their curriculum for citizenship education and critical thinking is undertaken below.

Despite the fact that 'critical thinking' is a complex concept, Dutch law defines it as follows (Examen n.d, article 17a, third paragraph): i) being able to evaluate information (sources) and distinguish arguments, claims, facts and assumptions; ii) being able to take the perspective of others and iii) being able to reflect on how one's own views, decisions and actions are formed. Although the legal framework imposes minimal requirements and, therefore, does not really exclude anything, it can be inferred from this quote how a choice has been made to conceive and teach critical thinking in a certain way: critical thinking is primarily aimed at evaluating arguments and reflecting on one's own actions.

Since 2016, institutes for vocational education have been required by law to teach students to think critically in relation to the four dimensions of citizenship education, mentioned in paragraph 3.2. The legal framework poses a problematic issue, comparable to our findings on *Bildung* and citizenship education: the highly instrumental, socialising interpretation of the concept of

'critical thinking' present in the policy documents. An example can be found in the formal exam regulations for Dutch vocational education, in which a guideline for the interrelation of critical thinking and citizenship education is phrased as follows: 'Students need to be prepared for shaping their own careers and for participation in society. In this context, it is important that participants develop critical thinking skills' ('Examen n.d, article 17a, third paragraph). However, these critical thinking skills should not infringe upon the students' employability. Questioning the status quo of a company, or critically reflecting upon existing norms and standards in a profession is clearly not the intended aim of developing critical thinking skills, as can be gathered from another quote in the same legal guideline: 'To function adequately on the labour market and within a company, it is necessary that a participant adopts and adheres to generally accepted rules and standard (company) procedures'. How much scope is there to critically question widely accepted values or to devise alternative values? Are widely accepted social conventions always the best? Hasn't history taught us that broadly accepted social norms sometimes shift, conceivably at the expense of minority groups?

These two quotes reveal a crucial feature of how critical thinking is envisaged in vocational education: as an instrument for enhancing student employability, even though this is difficult to reconcile with independent thinking. This means that, although vocational educational policy recognises critical thinking as an essential goal, the law explicitly puts critical thinking in service of vocational efficiency.

3.4 Interrelating *Bildung*, citizenship, and critical thinking in vocational training

Our brief analysis of critical thinking, citizenship education, and *Bildung* in the previous sections reveals how each of these different concepts is often interpreted in Dutch legal texts and policy documents from the perspective of socialization as an education ideal – even though each of these multi-faceted concepts also allow for a more counter-socialising, individual understanding. The strong emphasis on conformity and communality might be understood from the context of diminishing cohesion within Dutch society and rising polarisation, as argued, for example, by Lozano Parra, Bakker, and Van Liere (2021) and Blaauwendraad, Bakker, and Montessori (2016). The specific focus on socialization for future professionals as 'employability' can furthermore be understood from the shifting working conditions and changes to the labour market. Critical thinking, in relation to citizenship, closely fits the government's neoliberal communitarian citizenship policy since the beginning of the twentieth century (van der Ploeg 2019).

These legal interpretations from the perspective of socialization are problematic, firstly because they are difficult to reconcile with student autonomy.

Students are not being addressed as future *critical* professionals. Students learn to feel responsibility for acquiring and keeping employment, becoming self-reliant in relation to employers, companies, organisations and the labour market, responding flexibly and effectively to the nature of work and working conditions and to levels of employment, particularly to changes thereto. We thus merely train our students to be 'employable' which, in a way, reduces students to a product in service of the labour market and current standards.

Secondly, the prevailing discourse of socialization and employability with regard to citizenship, critical thinking and *Bildung* in vocational training is problematic because it fails to address the inherent *political* nature of professional work. From a liberal point of view, it is often professed that the economic domain should be seen as something different from the public sphere in which citizens can participate. As a result, a distinction between being a citizen and being a professional is made too easily and incorrectly: 'We have become accustomed to thinking of work as a domain of economic relations – of market forces, supply and demand – rather than a domain of politics' (Estlund and Urban 2013, 166). However, in the course of the twentieth century it has become more common to talk about the social function and responsibility of the business community, NGOs and other organisations. This merging of the domain of politics and business takes place on another level as well, as Estlund (2000) argues. The workplace itself can indeed be perceived as a political arena, in which workers can join unions to protect their rights or organise themselves in other ways to improve working conditions, claim profit sharing, or have a say. Professionals themselves can also take more or less responsibility in their actions (Sennett 2008; van der Ploeg and Guérin 2016). The societal function of a profession, which responsibility the professionals take and how they practice their profession are therefore crucial.

We suggest that the integration of *Bildung*, critical thinking and citizenship education provides a crucial perspective on the formation of the autonomous professional, who is aware of the inherent political nature of her vocational practices. Revisiting the German tradition of *Berufsbildung*, we contend that the ideas of Kerschensteiner, Spranger and Dewey provide us with key insights into the interrelatedness of *Bildung*, professional training and societal engagement. Kerschensteiner argued that it is only through work that the moral development of students can be achieved, aimed at becoming a citizen, whilst Dewey emphasised how these activities should have a societal dimension, i.e. relevant to the 'problems of living together' (Dewey 1966, 192). Spranger underlined how *Berufsbildung* leads to 'a relation of freedom towards all individual tasks . . . instead of being overpowered by them': a critical distance, in other words, to professional norms and procedures. Whereas *Bildung* and critical thinking are sometimes perceived as personal cultivation intended only for students in higher education, our point in returning to the notion of *Berufsbildung* is that precisely professional dilemmas bring up challenging issues that are

simultaneously about individual values (*Bildung*), the norms of a vocational practice (vocational training), and the societal impact of one's professional actions (citizenship education). Critical thinking should thus be an outcome of education instead of an instrument to train students to comply with the demands of the current system. A good professional reflects critically on improving standards and policy, not being content with merely confirming the status quo. In our project, we aimed to clarify the interrelatedness of the key concepts *Bildung*, citizenship, critical thinking, and vocational education in the tradition of *Berufsbildung* by understanding these as aspects of 'responsibility' a student has as an individual, as a professional, and as a citizen. We defined citizenship as a form of 'shared responsibility', *Bildung* as 'individual responsibility', vocational training as 'task responsibility', and critical thinking as a precondition of all these forms of responsibility. *Bildung* as 'individual responsibility', is thus understood here as finding your own values, and from this position engaging with existing societal norms and practices (van der Ploeg 2020), in which the previously discussed opposing perspectives of the individual and the communal in *Bildung* resonate.

Student autonomy can thus be attained by doing justice to the relations between critical thinking, citizenship education and *Bildung*, and to integrate these domains within the professional preparatory components of vocational education. In terms of the historical perspective outlined in the first section, this connection genuinely yields vocational *Bildung*, as proposed by Dewey, Kerschensteiner and Spranger. Below, we illustrate how this approach might work out in the educational practice.

4. Educational principles

We now turn to define three principles for using vocation as a context for citizenship, critical thinking, and *Bildung*. These educational principles below resulted from the design activities in our research project; most curricula for citizenship education were, at the start of the project, separated from courses in professional training. This resulted in students undertaking discussion and research into societal topics that did not have a bearing on their future profession; a practice that is often seen in curricula for citizenship education in vocational training in the Netherlands. However, having established how the political and the professional domain are closely interrelated, and how the merging of critical thinking, citizenship education and *Bildung* provides a fruitful context in vocational training to facilitate student autonomy – necessary for navigating the political and societal dilemma's on the work floor – we propose the following guidelines to provide a vocational context for developing teaching materials (in place of, or in addition to textbooks) in citizenship education. These principles are followed by an example from teaching materials that have been developed during the course of our research project.

(1) Have students researching the societal functions of their profession and those of potential workplaces, such as companies and institutions. Tourism students might study the problem of shop closures in towns; students of installation technology might focus on issues related to energy transition; and ICT students could research smart cities and their implications. The roles and responsibilities of businesses, authorities and branch organisations are mapped out. From the perspective of their profession, students are asked to relate to the issue in question and consider their responsibility as a professional and a citizen.

(2) Have students discovering in which social force field their chosen profession is situated. How do political decision making, and social, cultural and technological changes impact the development of their profession? In the case of smart cities, for example, technological developments influence how towns and cities are organised, have an impact on the data used and hence on ICT professionals.

(3) Introducing students to professional ethics and related issues, such as dealing with moral problems and dilemmas in the workplace, assessing situations and taking appropriate action concerning, for instance, discrimination on the work floor, image-campaigning relating to sustainability policy ('greenwashing'), and privacy as the shared responsibility of companies and authorities.

To illustrate these three principles, we will now discuss an example from the teaching materials that have been developed during the course of this project. The example consists of a series of lessons, devised for future motor vehicle mechanics, in which a cross-fertilisation of profession, citizenship, critical thinking, and *Bildung* was carried out, focusing on the electric car.[7] The students had already followed a number of technical lessons, covering the electric motor and electric car and were thus equipped with good basic technical knowledge. To increase the relevance of politics in general and democracy (how are such decisions made?), students were introduced to policy and politics relating to electric motors, revealing how political decisions impact their profession and the role branch organisations play. The students also studied the electric motor from a sustainability perspective: is an electric car more sustainable than a regular car and what does sustainability actually entail, how does city pollution affect people's health, what are the economic interests involved? This also offered an opportunity to reflect on changes to the profession over time and how these changes may influence professional identity. It appeared that students of this cohort were under the impression that rough and tough car mechanics were not suited to work with electric vehicles, and that women could do this better. Subsequently, the debating format was used to stimulate the students to argue their positions.

Cross-fertilisation thus requires the connection of subject contents (citizenship, vocational subjects) in such a way as to spark the students' curiosity, allowing them to exercise their critical thinking skills and to provide ample room for students to form their own opinion. *Berufsbildung* also requires that learning activities are organised in such a way that the different layers of responsibility are addressed: task responsibility (what are the existing professional standards and norms), self-responsibility (*Bildung*—examining what the personal values involved are, and from this position engaging with existing standards) and shared responsibility (citizenship education – an analysis of what the shared responsibility is of professionals, authorities, companies and institutions).

5. Conclusion and discussion

As indicated in the introduction, this article presents the theoretical underpinnings of a research project in which a broad consortium of participants is involved. Our group consists of teachers, teacher trainers, and researchers, each with their different background, ranging from more theoretically oriented educational philosophers to more empirically oriented participants from the field of the educational sciences, and practice-informed educational professionals. The diversity of this consortium proved to be fruitful: whereas key concepts in philosophy of education, such as 'autonomy' or '*Bildung*', tend to be discussed in a rather abstract manner, our research yielded didactical tools to translate these notions into the educational practice. Thus, we agree with educational philosophers such as Ilan Gur-Ze'ev (2002), who observed the critical potential in the concept of *Bildung*, and Martin Fellenz, who argued that the formation of a 'professional self' navigates between autonomous reflective self-formation and interaction with societal norms, professional values and external normative elements. Fellenz (2016) maintains that *Bildung*

> . . . can help to consider how the formed professional self can retain enough autonomy to challenge professional orthodoxy, for example, in situations where unique circumstances contribute to the failure of standard practice to deliver intended outcomes; . . . or in the context of ethical dilemmas that require unorthodox responses (pp. 278-279).

However, to enable students in vocational education to challenge professional orthodoxy, as Fellenz states, teachers need to be equipped with didactical tools to increase students' autonomy. The educational principles in the previous section of this contribution aim to provide teachers with practical suggestions to design their lesson plans with this educational goal in mind. We intend to further investigate student autonomy in a future project, which will focus not only on how teachers in a classroom, but also an educational institution as a whole can be geared towards increasing student autonomy. An important

step in that process is to enhance student participation and to strengthen the student voice in issues of institutional politics and policies.

In the spring of 2018, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) conducted a survey among almost 1500 stakeholders and experts in Europe concerning the past, present and future of vocational education. In their findings, it is stated that

> 'enhancing responsiveness to the labour market needs' was rated among the top three trends for the future alongside the current trend towards increasing workbased elements and growth of VET at higher levels. Another result from this survey was that the role of VET in preparing students to participate fully in society and to become active citizens was seen as becoming more important for the future (Cedefop 2020, 17).

This report is, however, not indicative of some of the current policies in vocational education. Geoffrey Hinchliffe concludes, after reading the White Paper from 2021 by the UK government entitled *Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth*:

> What, it seems, the report wants to produce are good employees, rather than good occupational workers, still less the good citizen signalled by Kerschensteiner and his colleagues. ... There is no mention whatsoever of the broader claims of citizenship or the notion of 'serving' one's community. What the apprentice is to serve is all too obvious: it is the employer (Hinchliffe 2022, 10).

The challenge for the future is thus to understand vocational proficiency and citizenship education as necessarily interrelated, and to balance the needs of the labour market with the educational goals of stimulating autonomous thinking and creating an awareness of professional ethical dilemmas.

Notes

1. A project lead by Laurence Guérin.
2. This translation is roughly from the original German: 'Wer für seinen Beruf "gebildet" wird, der wird zugleich zur Freiheit gegenüber allen Einzelleistungen in ihm erzogen, der lernt ihn in einem größeren Kulturzusammenhang auffassen und geistig über ihm stehen, statt von ihm verschlungen zu werden. ... Es gibt nur einen entschiedenen Gegensatz zum gebildeten Menschen: das ist ... der bloße Spezialist, der mit uneröffneten Augen an seiner Scholle haftet und sich ewig im Kreise seiner engen Routine dreht' (Spranger, E. (1965 [1918]). *Grundlegende Bildung, Berufsbildung, Allgemeinbildung*. Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer Verlag, pp. 14, 19). The translation takes changing meanings of 'Kultur' and 'Geist' into consideration.
3. This text is an abbreviated version of the chapter by Zuurmond in Montessori & Lengkeek (2020).
4. In Dutch: 'Persoonsvorming en burgerschapsvorming moeten als taken van het onderwijs bijdragen aan het ontstaan van sociale en culturele samenhang in een steeds pluriformer wordende samenleving'.
5. In Dutch: 'De spanning die zich hier aandient tussen individuele vrijheid en sociale normen is niet op te heffen: zowel autonomie als het vormgeven aan inclusie en

> sociale cohesie vanuit gedeelde waarden zijn tegelijkertijd doelen van het (burgerschaps)onderwijs'.
> 6. Part of this text has been previously published in Dutch as a 'practorale rede'(the equivalent of a lectorate speech for Dutch post-secondary vocational education in the Netherlands) by Guérin (2019).
> 7. Developed by Kübra Gögen en Mark Tijhuis.

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