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Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

Mitglied der


Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Claudia Bergmüller-Hauptmann, Gregor Lang-Wojtasik, Frederik Kowalik & Lucy Bell

Cultural Complexity and the Limits of National Educational Discourses. Findings of a Cross-cultural Assessment within BAGSKOL

Abstract

After general considerations on the complexity of culture in the context of a world society, international discourses on the connection between culture and education from the BAGSKOL project are described in terms of their differences and similarities. Examples from master's theses produced within this project underscore the powerful impact of cultural boundaries, which prove to be only partially effective in addressing global educational challenges.

Keywords: *Culture, Complexity, World society, World Community, De-Nationalisation*

Zusammenfassung

Nach generellen Überlegungen zur Komplexität von Kultur im weltgesellschaftlichen Horizont, werden internationale Diskursangebote zum Zusammenhang von Kultur und Bildung aus dem BAGSKOL-Projekt in ihren Unterschieden und Gemeinsamkeiten rahmend beschrieben. Mithilfe von Beispielen aus in diesem Projekt entstandenen Masterarbeiten wird unterstrichen, wie wirkmächtig kulturelle Abgrenzungen sind, die im Horizont globaler Fragen als nur bedingt funktional betrachtet werden können.

Schlüsselwörter: *Kultur, Komplexität, Weltgesellschaft, Weltgemeinschaft, De-Nationalisierung*

Introduction

How can we grasp the complexity of culture, when it already exceeds the semantic horizon of a nation-state? What challenges arise when considering culture from multiple perspectives in the context of a world society? What consequences does this have for education and educational institutions, as well as for the framing discourses of education policy? This article addresses these questions by combining theoretical considerations with first empirical findings from the EU project BAGSKOL (<https://bagskol.hypotheses.org/>)¹. It focuses particularly on outlining how cultural complexity is dealt with in the educational context in specific countries (Germany, France, Spain, Sweden,

Ukraine). Selected findings from master's theses serve to illustrate both the challenges and the potential of aligned educational discourses against the backdrop of curriculum and textbook analysis.

Theoretical Concepts

Culture and Cultural Complexity...

Culture is a highly complex term that is understood differently depending on the disciplinary or discursive context and its historical and systematic quality. In all of this, the danger of “culturalization” (Römhild, 2018, p. 17; own translation) remains ever present, especially when it comes to the significance of culture and diversity in state contexts that are shaped by migration. The term often appears in compounds (Lang-Wojtasik & Conrad-Grüner, 2018) indicating its flexibility and the multiple ways it is mobilized in discourse. Culture is inextricably linked to the ultimate concept of the world, which is perceived differently by all and to which people can contribute to varying extents due to their differing circumstances and characteristics.

In consideration of the connection between cultural education and global learning, five central understandings of culture are systematically distinguished in terms of their interdependence:

1. *anthropological*: Culture as the human sphere of life, contrasting artificial and natural elements and generalizing human existence (cf. Timm, 2022, p. 96),
2. *individual*: Cultural subjectification as the result of education and socialization,
3. *collective*: The context of collective values and norms, where “internal unity, cohesion, and external distinction” create hierarchies (ibid, p. 97; own translation with DeepL),
4. *constructivist*: Culture as a construct in social relations, transcending ethnological and national boundaries, highlighting generalizable meanings through linguistic expressions, everyday cultural actions, artistic traditions or religious practices,

5. *aesthetic*: Culture linked to artistic practices, from sub-cultural (e.g., graffiti, breakdancing) to high culture (e.g., classical music, visual arts), visible in both products and processes (cf. *ibid*, p. 95–98).

Many debates about culture, especially in the context of interculturalism, are rooted in notions of ethno-national distinctiveness within the framework of nation-state contexts. This is somehow understandable because it creates a certain security and “a lasting potential for orientation and action that connects all members of a society or community, i.e., across all social differences” (Römhild, 2018; p.18 own translation with DeepL). Therefore, this dualism of “us” and “them” provides orientation. However, it also fosters boundaries that can lead to both conflict and understanding.

The “inter” in interculturality or internationality emphatically underscores this. It is based on the assumption that intercultural learning processes are also possible in international exchange processes. At the same time, it is always about people who bring with them a specific cultural experience, national orientation, and national identity, and who need to be able to share the world with others from this perspective.

... in view of World Society

This raises the question of whether the nation-state, and the notion of national society as a “container” concept, remains viable in the 21st century. After all, people live in the context of a world society that encompasses all available communication (Luhmann, 1982). In a functionally differentiated society, orientations and identities increasingly transcend national boundaries. It is becoming increasingly apparent that questions of identity can be described along multi perspective lines of difference in the field of tension between people and society (Lang-Wojtasik, 2014, p. 7).

Today's world society is characterized by variation manifoldness/diversity, risk, and uncertainty. From four perspectives, this involves

- the *spatial* dissolution of boundaries (of the nation-state), globalization (as the interdependence of local and global processes), and networking (beyond artificial boundaries,
- the *temporal* phenomenon of de-temporalization, which involves communication processes beyond globally relevant time zones and individually manageable time expectations; added to this is the perception of accelerated processes of change, which are perceptible in abstract terms,
- the *factual* perspective, as all people are objectively confronted with a constantly increasing amount of information which makes it difficult to legitimize decisions and creates experiences of contingency, since the current selection always stands in contrast to other possibilities, and
- *socially* speaking, it is the phenomenon of individualization as a promise of the European Enlightenment that can, on the one hand, represent an overwhelming freedom for the individual and, at the same time, enable an opportunity for

pluralization in the sense of equal diversity as the norm (Scheunpflug, 2011; Trembl, 2000, p. 250ff.).

These four perspectives – spatial, temporal, factual, and social – interact in shaping experiences of culture and identity. While national cultural references provide orientation security and a sense of manageability, they are increasingly insufficient for addressing the challenges of a complex, interconnected world. Instead, a dynamic, world-societal understanding of culture is needed – one that enables reflexive positioning and “de-dramatized exchange about culture” (Lang-Wojtasik & Conrad-Grüner, 2018; Conrad-Grüner, 2021).

Thus, from the perspective of global learning, culture has two logics of understanding in this context: culture as a structuring, orienting character in the horizon of a world society and – at the same time – culture as a medium for learning processes in the global context.

How can an educational mandate of world society, understood in this way be related to national contexts of education policy? This is outlined below using the country reports on dealing with culture and education from the BAGSKOL project.

Education and Culture in international Comparison: the BAGSKOL project

Project Idea, Research Design and Questions

Dealing with cultural complexity in the classroom is a challenge for many teachers. Research shows that teachers often feel uncertain and overwhelmed when confronted with diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives (cf. a. o. Gay, 2018). Effective handling of such situations requires a high degree of self-reflection and openness to diversity. However, studies indicate that teachers frequently orient their practices towards national curricula and legal frameworks, which can limit their ability to address global and interconnected issues (Banks, 2016).

Teacher training programs therefore face the task of equipping educators with practical strategies for managing cultural complexity. This includes fostering intercultural competence, encouraging critical reflection on one's own cultural assumptions, and providing tools for navigating tensions between national guidelines and global realities. Empirical findings suggest that targeted professional development and collaborative learning environments can significantly enhance teachers' confidence and skills in this area (OECD, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the BAGSKOL project (Erasmus+ KA2) aims to deeper understand culturally complex teaching in schools and develop teacher training concepts that profoundly prepare teacher students to deal with cultural complexity in their future classrooms.

In order to understand the relationship between culture and education within the context of the respective national educational semantics, a comparative study was initiated. The participating project partners in Germany, France, Sweden, Spain and Ukraine were asked to prepare short country reports, distinguishing between four main

areas: culture as a general concept; culture as a specific task; culture as a teaching topic; and culture as a context relevant to teachers and their training.

The following questions were posed to the project partners:

1. Is there an *explicit discourse* about “cultural education” / “cultural pedagogy” (*Kulturpädagogik*) in your country's context? If so, please give a short overview of the central pedagogical principles.
2. If you focus on “culture” as *topic* of teaching in schools: a) What thematic aspects of “culture” come into view in your schools as teaching focus? b) Is there a normative discourse on how culture should be addressed as a teaching topic (cf. e.g. for the German discourse aspects like preventing othering, pedagogy of diversity etc.)?
3. Concerning the perspective of “culture” as *context* of education: What aspects of “culture” do predominantly come into view in the scientific (and if appropriate political) educational discourse of your country in this regard?
4. Is there an explicit official institutional discourse about how *teachers* should deal with cultural diversity in their classrooms (i.e. led by the ministry of education or other official institutions of education policy, teacher education etc.)? If so, what are the preliminary topics that are dealt with in this discourse?

All respective country reports served as basis for the essays from Weingarten, Nantes, Kyiv, Kalmar and Zaragoza together with Murcia documented in this issue of ZEP.

Selected results of the country comparison

There are three main results in the nation-specific context, presented as an overview:

- across all countries, the link between culture and education is embedded in values, socialization processes, and heritage, as well as in subjects such as the arts and languages,
- the cultural context of education is closely tied to migration (including refugees and internally displaced persons) and various concepts that focus on sensitivity towards diversity, empowerment, critical thinking, equality, non-discrimination, belonging, and the prevention of “othering.” This supports a broad understanding of inclusion, including pedagogies of diversity, difference, and multi-/inter-/polycultural approaches,
- an explicit ‘Cultural Education’ (*Kulturpädagogik*) is a very German-based discourse and plays a minor role in other countries. Nevertheless, it may offer valuable insights when re-evaluating nation-state educational discourses from a world society perspective.

Considering the overarching issues in an increasingly integrated Europe, several aspects must be taken into account in the discourse on education and culture. These include the tension between European multiculturalism

and a common European identity (“leading culture”), the differentiation of nation-states as democratic frames of diversity versus common European values anchored in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the normativity of political will as described in various declarations versus the challenges of practical implementation.

Culture and education – especially cultural education in Germany – are viewed both as explicit and implicit tasks for fostering national identity (including the risk of “othering”) and as possible stimuli for approaches based on European values that transcend nation-state semantics. Cultural artefacts present both opportunities and challenges for cultural diversity. Schools and other educational institutions are increasingly tasked with addressing culture as both a topic and a context for future learning.

It becomes evident that cultural concepts within educational discourse are initially shaped by strong national references, providing orientation and security. However, engaging with cultural topics, contexts, and expressions also opens opportunities for universal connections – grounded in European values such as diversity, plurality, respect, and dialogue.

Empirical Examples: Three Master's Theses of Teacher Students in Germany/Baden-Württemberg

Within the BAGSKOL project, several master's theses were developed. This section highlights three examples from Baden-Württemberg, one of the sixteen federal states in Germany and the location of the University of Education, Weingarten, to give examples, how student teachers approach cultural complexity and illustrate different curricular approaches to cultural complexity within the Baden-Württemberg education system. Thus, the three studies are embedded in the context of the state's six cross-cutting guiding perspectives and the guidelines for democracy education.²

Discrimination and racism in Primary Education

One of the studies presents an analysis of the curriculum for primary school subjects in Baden-Württemberg. The focus is on finding ways to deal with *discrimination and racism as a complex subject matter* in the context of the cultural discourse (Höß, 2025). It is about the need for intercultural encounters in the face of social diversity, which can and should take place in schools that are attended by an increasing number of “multicultural children with different native languages” (ibid., p. 9; own translation with DeepL). This sentence alone clearly shows how culture can be both unifying and divisive, especially when considered in terms such as “inter” and “multi”.

The study examines curricula for physical education, games and sports, German, English, Protestant and Catholic religious education, art/crafts, mathematics, music, and general studies, along with seven textbooks from the years 2016 to 2021. Two central questions are addressed:

1. What thematic discussions of discrimination and racism in the context of culture can be identified in the curricula for primary schools in Baden-Württemberg?
2. To what extent are discrimination and racism in the context of culture implemented in school textbooks as complex subjects of instruction?

The analysis reveals that discrimination and racism are of comprehensive significance in the curricula but do not play an explicit role as separate topics in the textbooks examined. Instead, there are implicit references, mainly in illustrations and clip art depicting people with different nationalities, religious affiliations, skin colours, or disabilities. Occasionally, topics relevant to discrimination and racism are addressed, primarily concerning protection against discrimination and with the promotion of tolerance, acceptance, and values education in line with the guiding perspective mentioned above. This analysis reveals both the strengths and limitations of the current curriculum in addressing issues of discrimination and diversity.

Cultural education in primary school textbooks

Another study explores how *cultural content is taught and presented* in primary school textbooks (Holder, 2025). It posits that the way culture is taught influences how children perceive culture, and that the depiction of cultural aspects contributes to their general visibility. There is always the danger of a one-sided, stereotypical representations that promote the deepening of prejudices. To analyse the cultural images conveyed in school textbooks and describe missing perspectives, culture is broadly classified in relation to traditions, values, and norms, human coexistence, and their changing nature. Media as a vehicle of culture, the significance of art, literature, and music, connections to identity, belonging, and differentiation, as well as culture in (foreign) language teaching are all considered.

Examining categories of everyday life, literature, language, art, music and film, rules, values and norms, traditions and customs, the past, and other countries, it becomes clear that culture is primarily conveyed implicitly and its treatment changes over time. Older textbooks tend to reference national culture, while newer books also make universal references. Notably, none of the textbooks analysed contain critical reflection on their own culture; there is no discussion focusing on the influence of their own perspective. This highlights the challenge of moving beyond national perspectives toward a more reflective, pluralistic approach in educational resources.

Cultural Complexity in subject teaching (textile)

In the third example, *cultural complexity* is addressed as a didactic challenge using teaching materials on the subject of textiles in lower secondary education (Oßwald, 2025). The topic area “Consumption and Clothing” is used to promote awareness of global interrelationships (consumption and production patterns), that are fundamental to Global Citizenship Education (GCED) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Clothing is understood as more than just an everyday commodity; it is closely linked to

identity formation, the communication of cultural meanings, and assignment to specific social groups. To this end, the curriculum for the subject everyday culture, nutrition, and social studies (AES)³ and selected teaching materials were systematically analysed. Key categories included cultural diversity (clothing in other countries, intercultural comparison, global fashion influences), tradition and cultural identity (traditional crafts, clothing as a symbol of identity, regional or national symbolism), sustainability and global responsibility (ecological textiles, fair working conditions, consumer criticism), stereotypes & representations (gender roles, media portrayals, cultural attributions), learning objectives of cultural education (self-reflection, perspective taking, discussion tasks).

In the AES curriculum, everyday culture is explicitly understood as the culturally diverse reality of children's and young people's lives. Cultural complexity is designed as a cross-cutting objective, represented in process-related competencies, and operationalized in the competency field of consumption in global contexts. The analysis of teaching materials shows that cultural diversity and global contexts in the subject area of textiles are generally addressed in all textbooks examined; however, this is predominantly done in a superficial, descriptive, and comparative manner. For example, items of clothing are examined in images or short text passages along the lines of the difference between traditional and modern or traditional and European everyday clothing. An intersectional perspective – gender, origin, social situation – is almost completely absent. Global value creation and consumption contexts play a central role, although there is a clear focus on deficit-oriented representations, especially in the case of textiles from the Global South. Here, the national educational context provides only a limited framework for addressing global and intersectional complexities, reinforcing the need for broader perspectives in curriculum development.

Discussion

The results show that educational discourses on culture are predominantly shaped by national frameworks, offering stability and orientation. Nonetheless, engagement with cultural issues enables references to universal values, particularly those promoted by the European Union, such as diversity, pluralism, respect, and dialogue. This duality highlights both the potential and the limitations of national educational systems in a globalized world.

The empirical examples from Baden-Württemberg illustrate how culture is often addressed implicitly in curricula and textbooks, with little critical reflection or explicit reference to global challenges. While national frameworks remain dominant, there is a need for education systems to open up to more dynamic, multi-perspective, and inclusive approaches – beyond the nation-state paradigm. This is especially important in light of growing cultural diversity and the challenges posed by global interdependence.

Summary and Perspectives

This essay situates cultural complexity within the educational context, balancing national semantics and global multiperspectivity. Drawing on theoretical foundations, comparative findings from the BAGSKOL project, and from three master's theses, the following key insights emerge:

1. Understanding of culture is diverse and has significance on many different levels – human, interpersonal, in relation to our shared world, and as part of a specific statehood – as well as in relation to the associated challenges of national and universal identity.
2. Most arguments within education discourses remain within the realm of national semantics, which emphasizes the close connection between culture and country-specific interpretations that offer clear guidance.
3. References to universal principles at the level of the United Nations – such as tolerance, acceptance of diversity, and overcoming discrimination – offer important points of reference for education beyond national understandings of culture.
4. In general, culture has both an orienting and at the same time demarcating function in view of a world society, which runs both along and beyond national borders. This also has consequences in the field of education, which continues to be organized on a national basis worldwide and thus institutionally reproduces the associated national cultural requirements.

Further research and policy development should focus on integrating global perspectives and fostering critical cultural awareness in curricula and teacher education, enabling students to navigate and contribute to a complex world society.

Notes

- 1 Dealing with Cultural complexity in school, racism and heteronormativity, body prejudices and education, justice and inclusion, the Erasmus+-project takes place from October 2024 till September 2027. The consortium consists of Nantes University (France), University of Education, Weingarten (Germany), Murcia University (Spain), Zaragoza University (Spain), Linnaeus University (Sweden), Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv (Ukraine). It consists of various work packages – besides project management and Dissemination and networking for change – mainly state of the art and identification of crucial challenges, didactics and ethnography in the classroom: conception of lessons and common knowledge through the experimentation of student twinning, propositions for teacher training, teaching curricula and how to address the positionality of the teachers.
- 2 Education for sustainable development/Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung (BNE), education for tolerance and acceptance of diversity/Bildung für Toleranz und Akzeptanz von Vielfalt (BTv), prevention and health promotion/Prävention und Gesundheitsförderung (PG), career guidance/Berufliche Orientierung (BO), media education/Medienbildung (MB), consumer education/Verbraucherbildung (VB), (<https://www.bildungsplaene-bw.de/Lde/LS/BP2016BW/ALLG/LP>).
- 3 AES (Alltagskultur, Ernährung und Soziales/everyday culture, nutrition, and social studies) is the taught subject in secondary schools, where textiles are part of the university subject Everyday Culture and Health.

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Dr. Claudia Bergmüller-Hauptmann

Professor for educational science/school theory and historical educational research at the University of Education in Weingarten; main areas of work: qualitative reconstructive school and teaching research, evaluation and evaluation research, school theory, teacher professionalisation, education for sustainable development/global learning/development education.

Dr. Gregor Lang-Wojtasik

Professor of educational science/pedagogy of difference at the University of Education in Weingarten, member of the ZEP editorial board since 1998, main areas of work: International and intercultural comparative educational science (especially global learning, schools in globalization, intercultural pedagogy, pedagogy of difference), school development research (especially basic education and school theory).

Frederik Kowalik (M.A.)

Educational manager at a vocational institute in Tuttlingen and academic staff member of the BAGSKOL-Project at the University of Education in Weingarten. Main areas of work: education management, teacher training, intercultural education and various aspects of civic education.

Dr. Lucy Bell

Junior professor of educational sciences at the University Rennes 2 in Brittany, France, main area of work: comparative studies on social inequalities in higher education in Europe.