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Culture as a construct in the educational discourse from a German perspective

Abstract

This article examines the influential role of culture as a construct within German educational discourse. It analyses conceptual foundations, the role of the nation-state, and the evolution from “pedagogy for foreigners” to contemporary migration and difference-sensitive pedagogy. The aim is to outline the professionalisation of teacher training within an increasingly pluralistic society.

Keywords: *Culture as a construct, teacher training, interculturality, migration*

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Wirkmächtigkeit von Kultur als Konstrukt im deutschsprachigen Bildungsdiskurs. Analysiert werden begriffliche Grundlagen, die Rolle des Nationalstaats sowie die Entwicklung von der Ausländerpädagogik hin zur Migrations- und Differenzpädagogik. Ziel ist es, die Professionalisierung in der Lehrkräftebildung vor dem Hintergrund einer pluralen Gesellschaft zu konturieren.

Schlüsselwörter: *Kultur als Konstrukt, Lehrkräftebildung, Interkulturalität, Migration*

Introduction

Culture is omnipresent in the public discourse in Germany – especially in relation to political debates in the context of migration – as well as in almost all scientific disciplines that are interdisciplinary and relevant for educational science considerations, especially anthropology, ethnology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, etc. (Hammel, 2007, p. 1; Gogolin et al., 2018).

According to the debates on cultural complex teaching within the BAGSKOL project (cf. Bergmüller-Hauptmann et al. in ZEP-issue), we'll have a look at the following discourse-lines that were agreed upon in a participative process within the project: culture as an educational contextualised construct, culture in relation to the nation state, culture as part of the discourse on cultural education/pedagogy, culture as a topic in schools, culture in the context of migration and underlying norms as well as in intercultural settings, and the perspectives for teachers to deal with cultural diversity.

Culture as a discursive construct within education debates

Thinking about culture in the context of education, pedagogy and schools however is highly complex. In almost all publications on the topic, reference is made to the diversity and multiperspectivity inherent in the term culture itself, as well as in the associated discourse. To exemplify this, a query in the central German database FIS-Bildung¹ using the combined search terms “culture + education” yields more than 10,000 entries (05.02.2026). Against this background, the variety of possible definitions appears almost unmanageable (Hammel, 2007, p. 5).

In terms of conceptual history, *culture* can be distinguished from *nature*. Accordingly, everything that is artificially created on the basis of culturally given things is a manifestation of culture. Based on agriculture (Latin *cultura/colere* = to cultivate, till, cultivate), everything cultural has to do with an activity-based approach (Hammel, 2007, p. 1f.), which describes the *product* as something created (what) as well as the *process* of creation (how) (Lang-Wojtasik & Conrad-Grüner, 2018, p. 5).

Against this backdrop, culture is latterly an orientation framework for individuals and collectives, in which everyday life and discursive experiences on various levels contribute to the formation of a cultural identity (Auernheimer, 2002b), which is dependent on the contemporary world of others (Nieke, 2008, pp. 50–65; Plessner, 1928/2003, p. 366f.).

Here, culture often occurs in compounds – e.g. reading culture, eating culture, playing culture, debating culture (Lang-Wojtasik & Conrad-Grüner, 2018, p. 5). Glancing at the content structure of a relevant educational encyclopaedia reveals these terms: cultivation, cultural and leisure centres, cultural anthropology, cultural sovereignty of the states, cultural criticism, cultural policy, cultural relativism, cultural sensitivity (Horn et al., 2012, pp. 253–263).

Culture and the German nation state

The discourse on culture, society, and identity in post-1945 Germany is inextricably linked to the historical trauma of the Shoah. Consequently, the contemporary debate is firmly anchored in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This commitment is institutionalised in the Grundgesetz

(GG), the German constitution. Notably, the first 20 articles are protected by the so-called "eternity clause" (Art. 79, Para. 3), rendering the core principles of human dignity (Art. 1), personal freedom (Art. 2), and equality (Art. 3) unalterable by any constitutional amendment.

Within this framework, the German school system (Art. 7) occupies a unique position. Unlike strictly secular systems (such as *laïcité* in France), the German constitution defines religious education as a standard curricular subject. This grants religious communities the right to provide instruction according to their specific tenets, reflecting a historically grown cooperation between State and Church. However, the cultural self-image of the state remains a subject of intense debate:

- *Religious Identity*: While the preamble of the constitution refers to a "responsibility before God", the Judeo-Christian tradition increasingly intersects with a pluralistic reality. Debates frequently arise over whether specific faith groups – particularly Muslims – "belong" to Germany. These discussions often rely on a blurred distinction between the "Orient" and the "Occident", ignoring the shared Middle Eastern origins of all three major monotheistic religions (Röhlig, 2018; own translation).
- *The Leitkultur Debate*: Since the early 2000s, the concept of a "*Leitkultur*" (leading or guiding culture) has surfaced in political discourse (Tibi, 2002). Initially framed as a set of enlightened European values, it was later repositioned by various stakeholders as a more nationalist "German *Leitkultur*". Critics argue that this concept is often used as a tool to oppose multiculturalism and enforce assimilation rather than integration (Schneider & Tyoka-Seid, 2025).

Ultimately, these tensions illustrate a fundamental challenge within the German educational landscape: balancing the "German" cultural framework of a nation-state with the diverse backgrounds of its population within a united, transparent Europe.

Culture and education – cultural education/ pedagogy

Culture and education are traditionally closely linked in literary studies and philosophy as frame: In this context, education is also understood as the "subjective side" (Oelkers, 2013/2012; own translation) of culture.

From a historical perspective, cultural education in the first third of the 20th century was a humanities-based pedagogical approach "that opposed the utilisation of education for socially partial or party-political purposes and instead focused on the subjective appropriation of objective cultural assets of overarching value" (Müller, 2011, p. 259; own translation via deepL).

Today, cultural education (*Kulturelle Bildung*) is an independent pedagogical discipline focusing on the mediation of aesthetic practices and products (ibid.). These include, above all, museum education (Comman-

deur et al., 2016), drama education (Anklam, et al., 2014), extracurricular educational work in the field of aesthetics – music, visual arts, dance. Literature – with references to adult education and extracurricular youth work – including work with disadvantaged young people (Braune-Krickau et al., 2013), political education and social work (Müller, 2011, p. 260). It is also a growing field of empirical research (Timm et al., 2022). There are further links between cultural education and global learning (Timm, 2022).

Culture as a topic of teaching in schools

In a general sense, culture represents the social framework of schools. In this respect, all contexts of everyday life have a cultural significance. "Culture" as topic however is particularly evident in the different languages, aesthetic subjects such as music, art, handicrafts and textile design, which offer special opportunities for cooperation with extracurricular partners, including the area of all-day education – e.g. in the areas of music-making, painting, drawing, film, photography and video art, sculpturing, dancing, theatre, circus arts, and media design (BMBF, 2025).

There are further opportunities in religion (inter-religious aspects as intercultural learning spaces), ethics (values and norms of a democratic culture), languages and related literature, as well as in all other subjects such as maths or physics, when historical-systematic questions about knowledge are the focus (e.g. Arabic numerals or algebra), sport (the Olympic idea or sporting activities as universal events, football with its origins in China and further developments in England and Latin America).

The "Curriculum Framework Education for Sustainable Development" (KMK & BMZ, 2016; 2025), in which subject-specific and interdisciplinary suggestions are formulated, provides important impetus in the context of global cultural issues as cross-cutting school topics.

In all of this, it is striking that the German school system is still struggling to overcome its focus on its "monolingual habitus" (Gogolin, 2008; own translation) and to strengthen debates on multilingualism (Sarter, 2013); especially in connection with adolescent refugees (McElvany et al., 2016).

Culture, Migration, and Education as Normative Discourse

From a historical perspective (see e.g. Niekrawitz, 1991), the focus on culture as educational context is deeply intertwined with the perception of migration as a social challenge. Although migration has always been a historical fact in the territory that is now called Germany (Krüger-Potratz, 2005), pedagogically relevant debates became particularly significant in the 1960s with the recruitment of "guest workers", initially mainly from Italy, Spain, Portugal and former Yugoslavia, later also from Turkey. These people should help to rebuild Germany after the Second World War. Some of these people settled in Germany as families joined these workers and also settled permanently, schools faced the challenge of balancing repatriation (native langu-

age instruction) with integration. In retrospect, the concepts developed in this context are referred to as “Ausländerpädagogik” (education for foreigners), which later developed – especially in the context of scientific findings from other countries – into anti-racist education and intercultural education for all (Niekrawitz, 1991; Krüger-Potratz, 2005). Against this backdrop, the conceptual evolution in German pedagogy can be categorized into three major phases:

1. *“Ausländerpädagogik” (Pedagogy for Foreigners)*: Initially, concepts were deficit-oriented, viewing migrant children as a “problem” to be managed through assimilation or temporary support.
2. *Intercultural Education*: Influenced by international shifts, this phase moved toward anti-racist education and “intercultural learning for all” (Krüger-Potratz, 2005). It emphasizes equality, mutual respect, and intercultural dialogue (Auernheimer, 2005). However, critics note that this approach often risks “culturalisation”—assuming fixed cultural differences that may reinforce a “Us vs. Them” dichotomy (Othering).
3. *Migration Pedagogy and Transculturality*: Recent discourses, such as “migration pedagogy” (Mecheril, 2004; own translation), shift the focus from “cultural essence” to “social belonging” and power structures. It analyses how “migration others” are constructed through discourse and discrimination. Similarly, “transculturality” (Welsch, 2021; own translation) and “hyperculturality” (Han, 2005; own translation) reflect the dissolution of cultural boundaries in a globalized world, moving beyond national-cultural silos.

In all educational concepts mentioned above, it is noticeable that cultural differences are assumed to exist, which can lead to an intensification of a divisive *They* and *Us*. In educational terms, it is ultimately about emphasizing what unites and dealing sensitively and appreciatively with otherness, whose possible enrichment is accepted as potential.

Transcultural education and pedagogy take greater account of an increasingly confusing and unstable globalisation on the horizon and sets accents beyond national-cultural differences (Datta, 2005; Göhlich et al., 2006; Welsch, 2021). The term “hyperculturality” (Han, 2005) refers to the de-localisation and dissolution of boundaries of cultural forms of expression in the face of increasing globalisation from the perspective of cultural theory and postmodernism. The hope is to overcome nationalism and colonialism and to differentiate from normatively underpinned understandings of interculturality and transculturality. This concept is still awaiting its pedagogical elaboration, in which the perceived heterogeneity and plurality of lifestyles could be a starting point.

With the concept of migration pedagogy (Mecheril, 2004), “ethno-natio-cultural others” (ibid., p. 80 ff.; own translation) are characterised as “migration others” (ibid., p. 101; own translation). Analytical considerations then focus on lines of difference in cultural identity and discrimination as well as questions of deficit and resources (ibid.).

This is taken up in the latest major reference work

on intercultural education. It states: “International migration movements and diverse processes of global economic and cultural networking have fundamentally changed societies around the world. Cultural, linguistic and social diversity are also more present in German society than ever before in history” (Gogolin et al., 2018, p. 11).

In response to the fact that schools, education and upbringing around the world are becoming increasingly shaped by migration, the subdivision of the German Educational Research Association (GERA/DGfE) has renamed itself. In order to overcome the concept of interculturality, which is seen as problematic, it is now called KEBiM – Kommission Erziehung und Bildung in der Migrationsgesellschaft (Commission on Upbringing and Education within Migration society) (<https://www.dgfe.de/sektionen-kommissionen-ag/sektion-3-interkulturelle-und-international-vergleichende-erziehungswissenschaft/kommission-interkulturelle-bildung>; former title “intercultural education”).

Further developments in a broader sense are the “pedagogy of diversity” (Prenzel, 2006; own translation), in which the discourses of intercultural, feminist and integrative pedagogy are systematised and reconceptualised in terms of recognition theory. Furthermore, the “pedagogy of difference” (Lang-Wojtasik, 2021; own translation) offers another approach to dealing with differences. These are described as a normal and a theory-based engagement with heterogeneity and understood as a challenge for pedagogy in the global society with difference-sensitive approaches. There are also links to debates on intersectionality and diversity (Walgenbach, 2014).

Political context of teaching culture in the context of intercultural settings

Germany is federally organised and has 16 federal states, all of which have their own school systems and administrations. To do justice to this complexity, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) exists as an association of all school ministries of the federal states. The KMK regularly issues recommendations, such as those on “Intercultural education and upbringing at school” (KMK, 2013).

Based on the premises of “equal participation” and the qualified schooling of adolescents “regardless of their socio-cultural background”, enabling the development of potential and the acquisition of “intercultural competences”, a “school of diversity is assumed that is free from overt and covert discrimination and consciously orientates itself towards the social, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of the student body” (ibid., p. 3; own translation).

The KMK paper defines four guidelines, which are outlined for educational administrations, school practice (school development and specific measures), support systems, cooperation with non-school partners and further developments:

1. "Schools recognise diversity both as normality and as potential for everyone."
2. "School contributes to the acquisition of intercultural competences in all subjects and through extracurricular activities."
3. "School is the central place for acquiring educational language skills."
4. "Schools actively organise educational partnerships with parents" (KMK, 2013, pp. 3; own translation).

However, a significant gap remains between these normative policy recommendations and their practical implementation in everyday school life, what is also reflected within the scientific discourse. After all, when culture and school are discussed in educational science discourse, it is usually about questions of school in the "migration society" (Leiprecht & Steinbach, 2015; own translation). This goes hand in hand with the challenges of institutional discrimination in the school organisation (Gomalla & Radtke, 2007; Fereidooni, 2015).

Tension between normative policy recommendations and their feasibility remains a challenge for future generations. Building "intercultural schools" (Holzbrecher, 2011) linger a highly complex development task, whereby fundamental academic discourses, teaching and school development as well as a comprehensive professional competence of teachers must be established and constantly innovated, which must also endeavour to develop self-reflective didactics in a critical examination of world and self-images as well as images of the foreign (Holzbrecher, 2024).

Teacher Professionalism and School Culture in the Migration Society

The practical implementation of these theoretical concepts requires a fundamental shift in teacher professionalisation and school organisation. Within the German context, this is increasingly discussed as "difference-sensitive professionalism" (Lang-Wojtasik, 2014; own translation).

Professionalisation of Teachers

Teacher education must address the tensions inherent in a pluralistic society. This involves more than just acquiring "intercultural competences"; it requires a deep, self-reflective engagement with:

- Awareness of Power Dynamics: Developing a critical stance toward ethnocentrism, culturalisation, and structural racism.
- Language Diversity: Moving beyond a monolingual habitus toward proficiency in German as a Second Language (DaZ) and an appreciation for multilingualism.
- Conflict Resolution: Equipping teachers with skills to navigate dialogue and understanding in potentially conflict-laden, diverse settings (Nestvogel, 2021).

A significant academic contribution to this field is made by scholars with their own histories of migration, who

bring unique perspectives to difference-oriented professionalisation (Akbaba et al., 2022).

From Individual Competence to Organisational Culture

Ultimately, the goal is to transform the school as an institution. This involves a shift in organisational culture and the "school climate" (Ackeren et al., 2011; own translation). Key elements of a modern, inclusive school culture include:

- The School as a Living Space: Designing schools as democratic learning environments that value social learning and diversity.
- Intercultural School Development: Establishing "intercultural schools" (Holzbrecher, 2011) that constantly innovate their didactics through a critical examination of self-images and images of the "foreign" (Holzbrecher, 2024).
- Collaborative Partnerships: Strengthening cooperation with parents and extracurricular partners to ensure successful public relations and social integration.

In summary, building a school of diversity remains a complex developmental task. It requires a synergy between academic discourse, practical school development, and a highly reflective teacher professionalism that views heterogeneity not as a deficit, but as a normative starting point for education in a global society.

Notes

- 1 The FIS Bildung literature database offers literature references on all areas of education and educational research and currently contains 1,114,151 data records. The database lists monographs, anthologies and articles from respective journals.

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