

Living and Learning in Summer Camps – On the Importance of Children Summer Camps in Today’s “Bildungs Landscape”

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Abstract

Bildung is still the mainstay concept of German pedagogy. Nevertheless, not only the term “education” itself but also the ideals and goals associated with it are very diverse. These are shaped, influenced and changed by respective societal values, but on the other hand, Bildung can also influence them. Changes do not necessarily have to mean innovations, but it is also possible to fall back on the tried and tested, which perhaps only needs to be seen in a new light and strained. Summer camps, an “invention” of progressive pedagogy, can be such a pedagogical concept. Already carried out more than a hundred years ago, summer camps still endure. The significance and possibilities of summer camps will be reflected and discussed in this paper.

With reference to Humboldt’s bildungs ideals, the concept of education will first be examined more closely and discussed in terms of its actuality. Finally, the special possibilities of summer camps with their specific bildungs moments will be discussed, including Pestalozzi’s elementary bildung and his concept of visual pedagogy (Anschauungspädagogik).

Bildung in the sense of self-development and self-realisation can certainly be approached with the concept of “head, hand and heart” (Pestalozzi) as it is aimed at in summer camps.

The reflections and orientations in this article are initial considerations and approaches for a project in which former participants of Soviet and Russian summer camps are asked in qualitative interviews about their experiences, “bildungs moments” and lasting impressions.

Finally, the aim of the project is to create a contemporary “bildungs concept” for summer camps after a pedagogical analysis of the descriptions received.

Keywords

bildung, summer camps, learning with “head, hand and heart”, self-realisation

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1 Introduction

Bildung has always been a rich concept that can be discussed ambiguously. However, its fundamental importance is never questioned. Social changes lead to new demands on bildung and bildungs-systems, but it is always about the individual's development in and with society. Basically, this is not a sole task of the school, but of life. The focus is always on the individual itself. This is how 'humanistic bildung' is still understood today in the sense of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835).

In the search for current learning and bildungs offers adapted to today's demands, which take into account globalisation, digitalisation as well as changes in the natural space of movement, it may also make sense to look back. Once before, at the beginning of the industrial age, society and the education sector were confronted with similar questions. At that time, one answer has been: summer camps. The purpose of this article is to examine the tradition of children's summer camps and to discuss their possible significance for humanistic or general bildung. The idea of such events often referred to as holiday camps or holiday colonies, goes back to the philanthropic ideas of Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724–1790), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) or Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), and spread throughout Europe. Progressive pedagogues such as Walter Bion (1830–1909) in Switzerland, Kurt Hahn (1886–1974) in Germany or Stanislav Shatsky (1878–1934) in Russia and the Soviet Union, to name just a few, were inspired by these ideas and tried to implement them concretely in summer camps.

In today's Russia, summer camps for children are still popular, but in Western Europe they have more or less disappeared as a mass movement since the 1970s. The same is true for Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, in modern form and with reference to alternative pedagogical concepts – such as experiential education – summer camps are increasingly being offered again in work with youth under the direction of youth, welfare or church associations with different and diverse objectives and activities.

When we talk about children summer camps or holiday camps, we do not mean leisure activities, but rather learning and bildungs activities in the broadest sense, which are offered during the holiday period, i. e. the time when school is not in session. The significance of summer camps is therefore not to be discussed from the perspective of leisure activities but whether and in what way they can contribute to the education of the individual in particular and to that of society in general.

Summer camps have received little academic attention so far. This gap will be addressed by retrospectively interviewing former participants in Soviet and Russian summer camps regarding their experiences and "bildung moments". The discussion of the concept of bildung in this article should be understood as the theoretical introduction and framing of the planned project.

2 Reflections on the concept of *bildung*

Bildung is a specifically German word whose equivalent interpretation and meaning in other languages cannot be easily transferred. This is also a problem of this article written in English. Therefore, in order to avoid misunderstandings or misinterpretations, the German term “*bildung*” is used throughout.

2.1 *Wilhelm von Humboldt and humanistic bildung*

As early as Goethe (1749–1832), we can read that *bildung* is not a predetermined form that one strives to fulfil but a processual state that changes permanently through reflexivity. *Bildung* is thus both the process of bringing forth and the result of bringing forth (von Goethe, 1987). While the young Wilhelm von Humboldt was initially guided by Christian Neoplatonic ideals when describing the humanist ideal of *bildung* – “for all *bildung* originates solely in the soul’s inner being, and can only be induced, never brought about, by external events” (cited in Lichtenstein, 1966, p. 41; own translation) – he later argued for a more enlightened pedagogical understanding of a (new) humanistic *bildung*. *Bildung* means here taking enlightenment into one’s own hands. Not from the top down or from the outside in, but rather the other way around, from the inside out. Self-active *bildung* at the same time also establishes the conditions in which the self can realise itself in society. This modern concept of *bildung* proves to be open and offers a variety of individual human possibilities. The formation of the personality is an individual project that each individual must tackle for him- or herself and keep going throughout life.

The question of what exactly constitutes *bildung*, or what the “right” methods and objects of *bildung* are, continues to provoke debate. With the advent of the digital age, this question takes on a new timeliness and relevance. If more than two centuries ago the prevailing utilitarianism of the Age of Reason and a century later the emerging Technological Age were countered by the concept of *bildung* and filled with appropriate content, it remains to be seen what kind and what appropriation of *bildung* are important in today’s more and more digitally oriented world of living and learning and will determine educational thinking.

The humanistic grammar school (humanistisches Gymnasium), a creation of Wilhelm von Humboldt, had the task of passing on classical humanistic content, ideals and values. Seen in this light, the German “humanistisches Gymnasium” may be regarded as the birthplace of the humanistic concept of *bildung*, and thus primarily beneficial to the educated middle classes. Fundamentally, however – and this was true for Humboldt from the very beginning – the concept of *bildung* is related to each individual human being. Everyone can and must educate themselves, regardless of which society, community or age group they belong to. And: *bildung* is first and foremost self-*bildung*. From the very beginning, personal freedom was regarded as an important element of the self-*bildung*. As

early as 1834, the political scientist and liberal politician Carl von Rotteck (1775–1840) defined the bildungs mandate of the state as “the guarantee of personal freedom, i. e. the free self-bildung of all” (von Rotteck, 1834, p. 577; own translation). The reform impulses of the Prussian school system initiated by Humboldt were consequently directed at all learning and bildungs institutions at the time, from elementary schools to universities. Irrespective of class and religion, the aim was to open up a certain general bildung to everyone, which at the same time would also be the basis of a special qualification, and which would thus be able to assign everyone his or her place in the world of work and life. Thus, in the early 19th century, the guiding idea of a “general bildung” emerged, which can be seen as a variant or even the basis of the classical humanistic idea of bildung.

The three-tiered education system developed by Humboldt and designed in Prussia, with elementary-, school- and university education, is based precisely on this idea of bildung and the liberal reform ideas. The young person is regarded as an independent learner and thinker whose individual development is to be promoted in the various forms of school. In the Königsberg School Plan (1809), he describes the core objectives of the three stages of bildung as follows:

The purpose of school instruction is the exercise of abilities, and the acquisition of knowledge, without which scientific insight and skill are impossible. Both are to be prepared by it; the young person is to be put in a position to be able to collect the material, to which all his own work must always be connected, partly now really, partly in the future as he pleases, and to train the intellectual-mechanical powers. He is thus occupied in a double way, once with learning itself, then with learning to learn (von Humboldt, 1809, as cited in Flitner & Giel, 1982, p. 169; own translation).

And further on:

There is definitely certain knowledge that must be general, and even more so a certain bildung of attitudes and character that no one should lack. Everyone is obviously only a good craftsman, merchant, soldier and businessman if he is in himself and without regard to his particular profession a good, decent person and citizen, enlightened according to his status. If schooling gives him what is necessary for this, he will later acquire the special skills of his profession very easily and will always retain the freedom, as so often happens in life, to pass from one to the other (von Humboldt, 1809, as cited in Flitner & Giel, 1982, p. 218; own translation).

Humboldt had in mind a school that was geared towards understanding and comprehension. A school with a friendly atmosphere, with great seriousness in its demands and with great freedom for the children to fulfil these demands. Only what one has really grasped – in both senses of the word – is not forgotten; what is merely learned, on the other hand, is quickly forgotten again.

When Humboldt describes bildung as “the connection of our ego with the world to the most general, active and free interaction” (von Humboldt, as cited in Hastedt, 2012, p. 94; own translation), he also draws attention to the fact that bildung is the constant forming – and here again in the double sense of the German word bildung: formation and

education – of the individual in society. However, the results of this multifaceted (self-) bildungs process are never concrete and especially not completely predictable. Different contexts or social conditions influence in different ways each unique personality as well as unique cultural patterns. Not only people as such, but also their words, values and ideas are shaped by these patterns.

2.2 *Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and general bildung (Allgemeinbildung)*

If academic freedom is an important core element for the humanistic ideal of bildung in the school and especially in the university period (Paulsen, 1906), Humboldt himself referred to and recommended Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi when it comes to the practical introduction and implementation of the humanist understanding of bildung in the primary school. The principles of Pestalozzi's "elementary method", based on his pedagogical credo "learning with head, heart and hand" became the programme of school bildung in the elementary sector of both the Humboldtian school reform and the progressive education movement that followed about a hundred years later. Pestalozzi was a follower of Rousseau's ideas on education and worked throughout his life to translate his mastermind's idealistic theories into practical teaching. Like Rousseau, he believed in the educational value of direct experience and learning in context.

The view resulting from the sensory impression is the keystone of Pestalozzi's whole theory, a knowledge gained directly from a specific object (Green, 1969). Pestalozzi believed that society in general had a rather corrupting influence on the inherently good nature of young, innocent minds. Unlike Rousseau, however, he saw a positive effect and great benefit in learning through social interaction.

With his concept of visual instruction, Pestalozzi can be seen as a decisive forerunner of the progressive education (Reformpädagogik) of the late 19th and early 20th century. On his Neuhof estate in rural Switzerland, Pestalozzi established an "educational institution for poor children" which was both a boarding school and a self-supporting farm. Here he and his wife Anna Schulthess took in poor and orphaned children as home schoolers, who were taught according to his concept of elementary bildung with "head, heart and hand", following an educational plan that was both academic and experiential. In summer, the children were expected to work in the fields; in winter, they were expected to spin and weave. During breaks and even during manual labour, they were to be taught the elements of reading, writing and arithmetic (Green, 1969).

With regard to his bildungs concept and the orientation and alignment of learning and bildungs situations, Pestalozzi can thus definitely also be regarded as an important pioneer of summer camps. He tried to apply the concept of "visual or object pedagogy" (Anschauungspädagogik) throughout the year in his school institutions. His basic elementary ideas were later followed up and implemented in different ways, for example in summer camps. According to Pestalozzi, concretely formulated learning contents are relatively

unimportant. What is more important for him is what happens in the child through engagement with a (learning) material. The content should not simply be absorbed, but the person should be changed, strengthened and educated by dealing with the content. It is about the development of one's own strengths and talents. The mental, physical and emotional powers – head, hand and heart – must be developed in a holistic way. How this can be achieved seems immediately obvious to Pestalozzi: “Each of these individual powers is essentially developed naturally only through the simple means of its use” (PSW, 1927, vol. 28, p. 60; own translation).

3 The use of “head, heart and hand” in children summer camps

What kind of *bildung* can now be expected or aimed for in summer camps? Since the usual specifications and requirements of state institutions do not standardise summer camps, they give all participants (teachers, guardians and children) a wide field for their own initiative, for pedagogical experiments and for trying out alternative teaching and learning methods. For the guardians, who are usually young teachers still in training, summer camps also provide invaluable opportunities for experience in dealing with children and their development. They do not have to follow predefined standards, but on the other hand they have to develop important premises for community life and individual development together with the camp participants. The direct experience of life and community becomes clear as the core and starting point of an individual *bildung*. Education in a children summer camp can be seen as an education as close to life as possible, in which the children acquire knowledge, skills and abilities in a self-determined way through communication and interaction with peers and teachers, through playing together in nature and through teamwork in the field. The *bildungs* incentive as well as the *bildungs* value of this kind of education consists of everyday play, physical work in the garden, in the field or in the forest and simply spending time together in experience-stimulating natural areas.

4 Specific “*bildung* moments” in summer camps

If one tries to look at summer camps from the perspective of special *bildungs* incentives and *bildungs* values, some specific “*bildung* moments” can be worked out, which can be further developed into an alternative summer camp pedagogy. The media-centricity, which is often seen as problematic nowadays, the overabundance of entertainment possibilities, the overstimulation in many directions or even a deeper breakdown of values in the society poses many problems for the education and *bildung* of today's generation that have not yet been solved.

To be quite precise, we must first state that the school is, first and foremost, a teaching institution, not a *bildungs* institution. Everybody is responsible for his or her own *bildung*,

once the school has provided the basics, i. e. the skills and abilities for it. Bildung as a learning task of life could then be tackled in the concrete, common and free life situation of the summer camp. The bildung effects of these moments mentioned seem to meet today's requirements just as they did in the founding years of the summer camp movement.

4.1 Rules, rituals and community forms

In the development and establishment of certain rituals and rules, work is done consciously to achieve a psychosocial attitude as well as a sense of community. In particular, living and experiencing nature addresses social and, to a certain extent, nature-spiritual behaviour, as is also expressed, for example, in the Scandinavian and especially Norwegian outdoor tradition, the Friluftsliv (Hofmann et al., 2018). The jointly organised activities that serve to organise daily life or the structure of the day, such as camp construction and maintenance, campfires, harvesting natural fruits and stockpiling supplies, which develop and order community and a sense of community, form important building blocks of the individual practical bildung of each individual.

In this context, the absence of parents and school as well as the usual circle of social friends proves to be a way to temporarily mitigate the subjectivity experienced so far. In other words, the children do not have to find themselves, but can simply play a role without expectations being placed upon them. According to the American sociologist Richard Sennett, role-playing was already the predominant form of public life in earlier times. Organised activities, common clothing or signs of recognition emphasise the collective character. By exposing everyone to the same conditions, a sense of "all being in the same boat" is created that overrides subjectivity in favour of a greater sense of community. "In a ceremony, people are relieved of portraying the kind of person they are, of speaking on behalf of themselves; the participants enter a larger, shared, expressive domain" (Sennett, 2013, p. 92). In this understanding, summer camps today can also be seen as the opposite of social media platforms like Facebook or others. Instead of showing their subjectivity in a virtual space and being bound by expectations, camp is a physical space that allows people to play a role and avoid what Sennett calls the "tyranny of intimacy" (Pfaller, 2008, p. 304).

Participation in rituals, as Pfaller explains, allows an emotional closeness to emerge. This, as well as the aforementioned suspended subjectivity of rituals, creates a spiritual dimension, which, however, is not to be understood in religious terms, but, referred to as "sacred quotidian", denotes a sacredness that

is not that of institutionalised religions, but rather grasps the small and also large forms with which people interrupt their profane everyday life and give it a festive as well as socially bonding dimension [...] [Sacredness] encompasses all practices that generate social commitment and solidarity (Pfaller, 2011, pp. 222–223; own translation).

The social component of camps, the ritualisation of shared activities, as well as the suspension of subjectivity and the spiritual dimension of the “sacre quotidien” provide interesting angles of entry and conceptual tools for thinking about the intended bildungs ideal in a broader sense.

4.2 Role play and free play

The importance and meaningfulness of role play have already been briefly touched upon. Certain rules and rituals are adopted by the children in role play or, even better, developed by them. They re-enact the environment they have experienced, or they playfully try out their own new ways of solving problems or creating new forms and adopt them if they succeed or if they like them.

According to the “game theory” developed by the Dutch sociologist Johann Huizinga, teaching and learning need games and rituals. Huizinga (2016) points out that play is something superfluous. Games are interludes of our everyday life, but they have an important meaning for being together and living together. Human bonds are formed in play, similar to rituals. In a certain way, games are thus also connected to the “sphere of the sacred”.

In contrast to curriculum-prescribed play activities, which tend to be instrumental-methodical, free or open play activities represent non-instrumental learning. This usually takes place in extracurricular and voluntary activities. Open tasks give the pupils a great deal of creative freedom both in the selection and setting of objectives as well as in the implementation and design of the play activities. The absence of instrumentality in the activities in the summer camps is something essential. Free from any short-term instrumentality, summer camps open up a space for experimentation for both the guardians and the children and enable a form of sociability. At the same time, fellow players are also important “mirrors” and feedback for their own learning development and thus also for their own bildungs process. However, such play and experimentation spaces are not to be seen as replacing alternatives to traditional schooling, but as an important meaningful addition, much like the dacha does not replace the apartment block, but is an addition that allows for a temporary escape, for example.

4.3 Nature as an arena for living and learning

Summer camps usually take place outside, in nature. This is no coincidence but is rooted in the fact that special qualities are ascribed to nature itself. Experiencing nature is considered to be particularly conducive to development and learning because it is based on direct, unmediated experience. The relationship of humans – as biological and cultural living beings – to nature is not only given because humans belong to nature, but it is also the result of a culturally mediated relationship. This relationship encompasses differ-

ent dimensions of mental, affective, and action-related engagement with nature (Mayer, 2005).

The importance of nature for human development is addressed, among other things, in the “biophilia hypothesis” (Kellert & Wilson, 1993) as well as in the psycho-pedagogical approach of Erich Fromm (1999a), where personality development and personal development are to be understood in connection with the relationship to nature. Summer camps open up diverse experiences of nature and nature-related social experiences, which can be reflected and discussed especially within the framework of Fromm’s concept of “productive character orientation” (Fromm, 1999b). Our relationship to nature and our understanding of it, and thus of ourselves, is influenced by nature-related concepts that we ourselves have experienced, learned or adopted.

To illustrate this point, let’s look a little closer at the characteristics of Russian nature with regard to summer camps. Russia is characterised by its vast and relatively flat landscape, which creates a strong contrast between summer and the rest of the year due to its special climate. While nature is perceived as an obstacle and a challenge in winter, summer with its white nights is a great contrast to the rest of the year. With the successes of industrial development, a large proportion of people were also given the opportunity to change their place of residence and life in the summer. Workers went on holiday or moved out of their apartment blocks to their dachas, students worked in student brigades far away from home, and children were sent to summer camps. Summer camps do not only mean an interruption of the normal everyday life, but also a different way of gaining experience and developing oneself (Kharabaeva & Bigell, 2021). Learning does not take place according to predefined learning and development plans, but through natural stimuli and experiences. Ultimately, these cannot be planned at all, but arise from the situations in life in the community and the activities in and with nature.

Seeking out and living in nature is therefore also not to be understood as a kind of escape from culture, but rather as a contrasting experience, especially in today’s modern society. The American nature writer Edward Abbey speaks of a “different mode” in this context.

What makes life in our cities at once still tolerable, exciting and stimulating is the existence of an alternative option, whether exercised or not, [...] of a radically different mode of being out there, in the forests, on the lakes and rivers, in the deserts, up in the mountains (Abbey, 1991, p. 29).

While in the common sense, a stay in nature is merely for recreation or to temporarily switch off, a summer camp in nature is to be understood in a different context. For example, there is the aspect of work. All those involved in the summer camp experience work activities in various forms, such as order duty, kitchen duty or fire duty. Or there is also direct work in agriculture. The general meaning of work, the educational aspect, is that one learns to change the world through common work, to experience a different sociability and to work ideally on a (new) society.

4.4 Personality, character, identity

It has been pointed out elsewhere that, according to Humboldt, *bildung* is understood as personality formation in the sense of human development through the connection between self and world. In contrast to learning as a process of knowing and being able, *bildung* is thus understood as a process of becoming. This idea is also expressed by Fromm (1999a) in his psycho-pedagogical concept of “productive character orientation”. This concept refers to biophilia, i. e. the importance of nature for human development. In this understanding, personality development and self-realisation are seen in close connection with our relationship to nature.

Biophilia is the passionate love of life and all living things; it is the desire to promote growth, whether it is a person, a plant, an idea or a social group. The biophilic person prefers to build something new rather than preserve the old. He wants to be more rather than have more. He has the capacity to wonder, and he prefers to experience something new rather than find the old confirmed. He prefers to live the adventure rather than security. He has more of the whole in mind than just the parts, more structures than summations (Fromm, 1999b, p. 331; own translation).

The environment and the pedagogical implications of summer camps have the potential to realise these aspects. Summer camps open up diverse experiences of nature and nature-related social experiences. The philosopher Peter Bieri points out that *bildung* in the sense of instruction or formation has the aim of *being able to do something*, to master skills and to perform tasks, while *bildung* in the sense of self-realisation means *to become somebody* (Bieri, 2012). This process of becoming, growing up and growing into the world is an individual process, but it is highly dependent on the environment and circumstances in which someone lives and grows up. People and the world around us can provide decisive impulses and help, but ultimately each person is responsible for how they interact, i. e. what they make of these situations. Summer camps make it possible to participate in activities in nature that have a given framework but whose approach and outcome are open.

5 Outlook

In view of today’s demands on schools and *bildung* systems, which are primarily determined by an economic dimension, it is important to discuss and shape the educational policy goal of “employability” in a diverse and controversial way. In the question of employability and competitiveness of future generations, vocational education and training and general human education should not become two contradictory or opposing directions. What can *bildung* look like in the global knowledge society? As the vocational future becomes less and less predictable, there are calls for a different kind of general *bildung*. However, does this contemporary general *bildung* need to be redefined, or can we still rely on the original, timeless understanding: autonomy and personal development? Humboldt’s basic definition – the connection of the ego with the world to the most general, active and free interaction – should certainly still hold. A humane general *bildung*

is achieved through an educational, i. e. liberal, cognitive-reflexive, value- and sense-oriented as well as holistic and future-oriented learning. Bildung is a comprehensive process that shapes both the personality and society. Summer camps in the form discussed here can contribute to this in many ways.

It has been shown that summer camps are not merely a relic of the past, but that their playful and experimental character can still be groundbreaking. Some moments relevant to general bildung have been examined in more detail. How and to what extent these have a bildungs effect needs to be examined more closely. In order to understand the common mechanisms of summer camps and the underlying values, it is also necessary to analyse the spatial and temporal structures of the camps. The descriptions of ritual, play orientation and nature as a learning arena already suggest some possibilities. The orientation of traditional summer camps in the great outdoors facilitates interaction with the material world and learning about and in nature. As an important aspect, the renunciation of almost any form of direct instrumentalisation should be emphasised in particular, which is extremely conducive to the creative work of both the students and their teachers.

A conceptual framework and a possible set of tools for a deeper understanding of summer camps have been presented, thus also drawing academic attention to this bildungs alternative. Summer camps should not only be seen as reminiscences of past times. We think, they still have great potential to contribute to the bildung of present and future generations.

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