

# Truth and Scepticism: Developing Bildung and Phronesis through Socratic Questioning

Garry Nicholson

Volume 29, Number 3, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094136ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094136ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Nicholson, G. (2022). Truth and Scepticism: Developing Bildung and Phronesis through Socratic Questioning. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 29(3), 197–208. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094136ar>

Article abstract

*This research paper considers the place of the European lifelong-learning philosophical concept of Bildung (self-formation) and how Socratic questioning activities might be used to facilitate its development. Originating with the great philosophical thinkers of the German Renaissance, it is a concept that is again attracting attention because of its focus on developing the “whole” person and its potential for developing phronesis “practical wisdom.” The primary source of research data is a podcast in which a diverse group of BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) learners discuss COVID-19 vaccinations from their own cultural perspectives through a Socratic dialogue. During this process, Bildung was developed by participants recognizing mutual concerns during this process, and Gadamer’s (1960/1989) hermeneutic dialectical concept known as the “Fusion of Horizons” was played out. The dialogue identifies “trust” as an essential moral value and one that is needed in any just and stable society. This research suggests an alternative educational paradigm should be realised that lends itself better to developing Bildung and phronesis. The implications of this for teacher training are discussed and why it is important to develop “phronetic” educators. Reference is made to what this might look like in reality by highlighting the use of Socratic questioning in Danish folk high schools and how they have made the philosophical concept of Bildung central to their mission.*

# Truth and Scepticism: Developing Bildung and Phronesis through Socratic Questioning

---

GARRY NICHOLSON  
University of Sunderland

*This research paper considers the place of the European lifelong-learning philosophical concept of Bildung (self-formation) and how Socratic questioning activities might be used to facilitate its development. Originating with the great philosophical thinkers of the German Renaissance, it is a concept that is again attracting attention because of its focus on developing the “whole” person and its potential for developing phronesis “practical wisdom.” The primary source of research data is a podcast in which a diverse group of BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) learners discuss COVID-19 vaccinations from their own cultural perspectives through a Socratic dialogue. During this process, Bildung was developed by participants recognizing mutual concerns during this process, and Gadamer’s (1960/1989) hermeneutic dialectical concept known as the “Fusion of Horizons” was played out. The dialogue identifies “trust” as an essential moral value and one that is needed in any just and stable society. This research suggests an alternative educational paradigm should be realised that lends itself better to developing Bildung and phronesis. The implications of this for teacher training are discussed and why it is important to develop “phronetic” educators. Reference is made to what this might look like in reality by highlighting the use of Socratic questioning in Danish folk high schools and how they have made the philosophical concept of Bildung central to their mission.*

## Creating Sparks

The word “conversation” is derived from the Latin noun *conversare*, “to turn about with,” formed from the prefix *con*, “with, together,” and the suffix *versare*, “to turn.” Methodologically, the idea that participants in a conversation “turn” is an interesting one. The suggestion is that conversations should change the direction of our thinking, which fits well with Theodore Zeldin’s claim that conversations “transform” and “reshape” minds:

Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don’t just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn’t just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards. That’s the part that interests me. That’s where I find the excitement. It’s like a spark that two minds create. And what I really care about is what new conversational banquets one can create from those sparks. (1998, p. 98)

This idea of “turning” is one that Dennis Rader (cited in Hooks, 2009, p. 46) also highlights when writing that conversations “can turn us toward different definitions and different pathways. They help us look at complicated matters from different perspectives as we turn them this way and that while striving to construct a new understanding.” In his essay “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” written in 1959, the English philosopher and political theorist Michael Oakeshott similarly described

conversation in terms of motion when he wrote, “Thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other’s movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions” (1981, p. 198).

With this in mind, it is surprising that “talk” in the classroom is still considered by some to be underused (Alexander, 2008). The truth of this is of course subjective, but if John Hattie’s (2012) synthesis of studies which found that teachers talk for on average 70 to 80% of class time is correct, there may well be a case for less teacher talk, and more of the dialogic talk that this paper describes, and which values the views of the learners whilst helping them to share and build meaning collaboratively (Bakhtin, 1935/1981).

The focus of this paper is a simple Socratic questioning activity in which a diverse group of learners shared different perspectives on the question, “Who benefits from COVID vaccinations?,” and in doing so the conversation turned towards “trust” as a universal value needed in a fair and just society. This power of conversation to achieve such ends is echoed by the American author Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, who wrote that “When we converse, we act together toward a common end, and we act upon one another. Indeed, conversation is a form of activism – a political enterprise in the largest and oldest sense – a way of building sustaining community” (2000, p. 89).

My choice of the word “focus” is no accident, as it is derived from the Latin word of the same spelling, meaning “fireplace,” providing us with an apt metaphor for learning as a place in which conversational sparks can fly. The premise of this viewpoint is that whilst teacher training should necessarily give new teachers the tools to “function” as educators, it should also develop them as philosopher craftsmen who can make sparks fly in the fireplace that is learning. I will also argue that *Bildung* and *phronesis*, rather than being abstract philosophical concepts, are both dynamic processes that are integral to learning and evident in the pedagogy of the Danish folk high schools.

### ***Bildung* is Openness to Otherness**

Literally translated, the Germanic word *Bildung* means “self-cultivation” or “self-formation,” even though this definition hardly does the word justice. A more comprehensive definition is given by Lene Anderson and Tomas Björkman in their book *The Nordic Secret* (2017):

*Bildung* is the way that the individual matures and takes upon him- or herself ever bigger personal responsibility towards family, friends, fellow citizens, society, humanity, our globe and the global heritage of our species, while enjoying ever bigger personal, moral and existential freedoms. It is the enculturation and life-long learning that forces us to grow and change, it is existential and emotional depth, it is life-long interaction and struggles with new knowledge, culture, art, science, new perspectives, new people and new truths and it is being an active citizen in adulthood. *Bildung* is a constant process that never ends. (p. 5)

The basic principle of *Bildung* is that if a person continually self-cultivates and self-forms, they will begin to fully understand themselves, and in turn have a better understanding of their role within society and the contribution they can make to it. Little has been written in the English language about the concept of *Bildung* other than texts that attempt to explain the historical evolution of the concept (Horlacher, 2004; Nordenbo, 2002) or those that discuss the concept philosophically (Biesta, 2002). One exception is a whole issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* being devoted to the theme in 2022. Within this issue the suggestion that education should be orientated towards “transformational praxis in crisis-prone situations” (Peukert, 2002, p. 115) is particularly compelling in light of the Socratic dialogue conducted for this research. Also of interest is the argument that the transcendental nature of *Bildung* is “at the very heart of literary fiction” (Mortensen, 2002, p. 140). Certainly, in comparison with those texts written for academic journals, there are very few written in the English language that discuss its pedagogical

application and have been written specifically for education practitioners. To add to the challenges of understanding the concept of *Bildung*, it is also considered to be one of the most ambiguous and vague concepts of German pedagogy (Dohmen, 1965). There is, however, something enticing for the educator when the concept is presented as one that “allows us to say something different about education, or at least it allows us to explore the ways in which education might be about something more than simply the transmission of our facts and values to the next generation” (Biesta, 2002, p. 344).

Such opinions allude to a belief, held by some, that our current educational paradigm is too often reductive and utilitarian in its aims. Notably, Oakeshott (1989) feared that education would become a manipulative instrument of social engineering designed to realize the ambitions of the state. This positivist culture of state control, which has subsequently gone on to be a pillar of educational policy since the 1980s, was part of what he called “rationalism” when writing in the late 1940s and 1950s (Williams and Hogan, 2018). Opinions that support this view have also been put forward by Israel Scheffler (1973, p. 134) when writing, “The notion that education is an instrument for the realisation of social ends, no matter how worthy they are thought to be, harbors the greatest conceivable danger to the ideal of a free and rational society.” And a quarter of a century later, the same point was being argued by Pring (1999, p. 112): “The development of the mind, in accordance with developed forms of thinking and of feeling, is a value in its own right. The value in no way depends on usefulness; and education is quite distinct from being trained for a job.” More recently it has also been argued that government policies are too narrowly focused on utilitarianism and auditable, short-term outcomes (Unwin and Fuller, 2003).

Gadamer (1960/1989, p. 7) dedicated nine pages of his classic book *Truth and Method* to the importance of *Bildung* in hermeneutic philosophy and described it as being the “greatest idea of the eighteenth century” and “the atmosphere breathed by the human sciences.” Although most researchers are familiar with key Gadamer phrases such as “fusion of horizons” and “the hermeneutic circle,” their centrality to *Bildung* is little mentioned in research literature, even though Gadamer considered it as one of the guiding concepts of humanism and fundamental to both the “fusion of horizons” and “the hermeneutic circle” because they are activities that require and develop *Bildung*. From a methodological point of view, perhaps one of his clearest statements on the importance of *Bildung* to understanding is when he explains its role in understanding “otherness”: “Theoretical *Bildung* leads beyond what man knows and experiences immediately. It consists in learning to affirm what is different from oneself and to find universal viewpoints from which one can grasp the thing, the objective thing and its freedom, without selfish interest” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 12). For Gadamer, this appreciation of “otherness” and the importance of “openness” to it are central to understanding. As explained by Joel Weinsheimer (1985, p. 70), in developing *Bildung*, one “leaves the all-too-familiar and learns to allow for what is different from oneself, and that means not only to tolerate it but to live in it.” Gadamer (1960/1989) explains further that *Bildung* is about keeping oneself open to what is “other” and embracing more universal points of view. This openness to meaning is essential to understanding the phenomenon being explored, because “Working our appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed ‘by the things’ themselves, is the constant task of understanding” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 267).

Gadamer also briefly explored another idea that is particularly relevant to this research which relates directly to the role of *Bildung* in developing professional epistemologies. Gadamer (1960/1989, p. 12) describes this as a form of “practical” *Bildung* that “is seen in one’s fulfilling one’s profession wholly, in all its aspects. But this includes overcoming the element in it that is alien to the particularity, which is oneself, and making it wholly one’s own.”

## Phronetic Praxis

An essential part of developing *Bildung* is the acquisition of *phronesis* and becoming part of what Aristotle called the *phronemoi*, or “practically wise.” Aristotle discussed the idea of practical wisdom in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, explaining it as less of an abstract discourse on what is “good” or “right,” and more

the wisdom to “perform a particular social practice well” and “what we need to learn in order to succeed at our practice” (Schwartz, 2010, p. 118). Essentially, if *praxis* is the “act” then *phronesis* is carrying out that act “well” and with wisdom. For Gadamer, *phronesis* constituted a mode of self-knowledge and, along with dialogue, provided the starting point for the development of his philosophical hermeneutics (Malpas, 2018).

The act of “doing” *phronesis* is *praxis*. Or put another way, *praxis* is *phronesis* in action. *Praxis* that aims to deliver “externally imposed ends” is unlikely to develop professional *phronesis* because, ideally, “doing,” as an aspect of wisdom, suggests a belief that it is an act for the benefit of the common social good (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). What is crucial is that educators “believe” that they are educating for the “common social good” and that those beliefs are based on ethical values, judgements, and a sense of purpose.

Another important aspect of developing *phronesis* is the ability not just to adopt values but to make judgements about what is “good” for people so that they can flourish in society, part of which, in education, is to teach in a way that overcomes injustice, irrationality, and unsustainability (Mahon et al., 2018).

This need for making wise teaching judgements has seldom been as necessary as during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As Kristjánsson et al. (2021, p. 239) highlight, “Wise decision-making is not only necessary in extreme life-and-death situations, however. It is vital in ubiquitous and prosaic settings as well, such as education, child-rearing, business, and government.” A good example of this is highlighted in the implementation of short-term government solutions to address inequality, such as extending the school day and adding booster classes, which may well present some educators with an ethical dilemma concerning the impact of such interventions on well-being, or if indeed they are effective implementations for tackling inequality at all.

This is what Jürgen Habermas (1972) named as critical emancipatory knowledge. A requirement of making wise judgements when teaching, and in doing so developing *phronesis*, is to think critically and “pursue global responsibility and support the well-being of others rather than focusing on pure epistemic, technical or economic aspects in ... work” (Tynjälä et al., 2020, p. 20).

Furthermore, Tynjälä et al.’s (2020) integrative model of wisdom in professional practice and expertise suggests that, along with integrative thinking and problem solving, a core process is “socially responsible action and interaction for the common good” (p. 19). Following this line of thinking it is reasonable to argue that in the context of education, ethical decisions are just as much political ones and that taking a political stance and applying it to your *praxis* is part of developing *phronesis*.<sup>1</sup>

A good example of this can be seen in the role of education in anarchist theory, which links the development of free and critical minds with emancipation through the cultivation of the values of liberty, equality, and solidarity (Kropotkin, 2020; Mueller, 2012; Stirner, 2017).

According to Sanford Schram (2012), “Phronetic social science is ultimately about producing knowledge that can challenge power, not in theory, but in ways that inform real efforts to produce change” (p. 20). Phronetic social science, therefore, combines an Aristotelian concern for *phronesis*<sup>2</sup> with a Marxist concern for *praxis*<sup>3</sup> (Schram, 2012, p. 20). Through this approach, my aim with this research activity has been to help participants explore their “own society and social practices and debate the goals and values that are important in their lives” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 49).

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle regarded ethics and politics as related. Ethics examines the good of the individual, whereas politics examines the good of society.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle believed that having *phronesis* is necessary for being virtuous.

<sup>3</sup> In Marxist theory, *praxis* is the transformation of subjectivity through the process of human action or labour.

## Grundtvig and the Danish Folk High Schools

The Danish educator, theologian, historian, and writer N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) is for many educators an unfamiliar figure, yet his vision for education has had a profound effect on many adult education systems, and to this day the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) has an annual award bearing his name that aims to celebrate innovation and excellence (EAEA, 2020). It is only when one becomes familiar with his ideas that it becomes apparent that if Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and Eduard Lindeman represent an educational philosophical tradition that falls squarely into the radical liberal school (Liechtenstein, 1985), then Grundtvig may well be considered one of the original radical liberal educational philosophers, along with his predecessors Johann Pestalozzi and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *Education for the State* (1834) and later works, he introduced ideas that appear in the thinking of all three (Westerman, 2005).

Before explaining how the key tenets of Grundtvig's philosophy were applied in practical terms, it is necessary to understand what he considered to be the main aims of education. Firstly, that he believed that "Truly to understand oneself is the great goal of human reason, the apex of human education" (Grundtvig, as cited in Korsgaard, 2012, p. 20). He further believed that we must take as its starting point the fact that as individuals we only exist by virtue of our community and by extension the entire world (Lawson, 1993). He praises "such an enlightenment – which by extending itself to the whole of human life and showing the deep connection between the life of the individual, the nation, and the whole human race, develops a way of thinking that is desirable for all social relations" (Grundtvig, as cited in Korsgaard, 2012, p. 13). Connecting these aims, he believed that a true and deep understanding of oneself and life leads to a more connected and effective community, both national and global (Kulich, 1963). From this thinking, three clear aims emerged that are now written into Danish folk high school law, which is that 50% of what they teach must cover what they now call life-enlightenment, popular-enlightenment, and democracy (Danish Folk High Schools, 2020). Grundtvig believed that all three should be delivered in what he called "Schools for Life" through the "Living Word" (Warren, 1989). In his 1836 essay of the same name, he wrote that a school should "set as its chief educational goal the task of helping to solve life's problems" (Knudsen, 1976, p. 153). Whilst later still, the following quotation, from a speech given at the opening of a school bearing his name, explains his thinking in simple terms for an audience of school students:

I saw life, real human life, as it is lived in this world, and saw at once that to be enlightened, to live a useful and enjoyable human life, most people did not need books at all, but only a genuinely kind heart, sound common sense, a kind good ear, a kind good mouth, and then liveliness to talk with really enlightened people, who would be able to arouse their interest and show them how human life appears when the light shines upon it. (Grundtvig, as quoted in Borish, 1991, p. 18)

Almost every book written by and about the folk high schools mentions the importance of the spoken word. A report written by one of the early folk school educators, Christian Flor, about life at the first folk high school in Rødning stresses that formal education deals "not at all with speech," as if it were an "irrelevance." Much of the early folk high school pedagogy relied upon the historical storytelling abilities of the teachers (Rordam, 1980), as their belief was that young people could learn with ease through narrative and dialogue (Skrubbeltrang, 1947). Although some schools would go on to have libraries, many believed that books should be used sparingly, and others, such as the school in Askov, were adamant that they should not be used at all (Foght, 1914; Rordam, 1980). Although the curriculum offered has largely moved away from history and literature, storytelling is still considered an important pedagogical tool, as can be seen in the words of Lindsø (2016, p. 113): "Find 25 good stories, accounts of life, learn them – by heart – and tell the stories. After that your students will revolutionize the world! If a teacher can tell such stories he can act in a folk high school." Throughout their history the schools have stayed close to Grundtvig's belief in the importance of the "Living Word," and many writers have

highlighted the importance of oral narration, discussion, and lecturing as pedagogical tools to realise this belief that dialogue should be pre-eminent in learning (Davies, 1931; Davis, 1970; Rasmussen, 2013). Segerstrom (1936, p. 20) went as far as describing speech as “the highest expression of the human personality.” The importance of free discussion and dialogue also plays an important part in school life away from lessons, and many anthropological researchers have commented on how important a role they play at mealtimes and during recreational time, with an expectation that teachers and pupils will engage in conversation and discussion at every opportunity to discuss life’s big issues (Borish, 1991; Davis, 1970; Borsch et al., 2019).

A widely adopted pedagogical tool is that of Socratic *maieutic*, from the Greek for midwifery, *maieutikos*, and philosophical discussion in general. Foght (1914) wrote admiringly about the Socratic questioning skills of one of the early folk high school teaching pioneers, Christen Kold (1816–1870), and more recently Weiss and Ohrem (2016) have written extensively on the folk high schools’ use of these techniques. The philosophical theme even extends to simple phrases that the schools have adopted to explain their purpose, such as learners being “rapt in wonder” and developing “wonderstanding.” To talk about education in such terms is less common than it perhaps should be. However, what may seem to be an overly romantic way to describe our purpose as educators – midwives of wondering – appears less so in light of the famous phrase attributed to Socrates: “Wisdom begins in wonder.”

A second consistent pedagogical theme in the folk high schools is the importance of having all learning be focused on real-life experience and the problems life poses (Rordam, 1980; Skrubbeltrang, 1947; Warren, 1989). This situated approach to education is inspired by Grundtvig’s view that “life always comes before the light with human beings” (Grundtvig, as cited in Davies, 1931, p. 89). This was a view shared by many nineteenth-century humanist writers, such as Tolstoy (1862): “Every instruction ought to be only an answer to the questions put by life” (pp. 14–15), whilst also being fundamental to twentieth-century thinking on andragogy, “as the person matures, the orientation towards learning becomes less subject-centred and increasingly problem-centred” (Knowles, 1970, p. 39). Flor (1846, p. 14) writes about the “circle of phenomena which the farmer is familiar with,” when detailing the experiments carried out when planting 45 varieties of potato. Although the schools have evolved a long way from their original mission to educate rural communities, the importance of staying grounded in real life has stayed the same. Schools such as Tvind and Kolding were among the first in the world to offer ecology and wind power as course options, and Krogerup currently has a course called “The World Is Burning,” on the opportunities and challenges posed by globalisation. The impact of the folk high schools’ early experimentation with wind power can be seen today in the fact that Denmark is the world leader in wind energy, from which it sources 47% of its energy needs (Ng, 2020).

Much of the folk high schools’ approach to education goes against the fundamental principles of many state education systems. Certainly, it would be hard to imagine the current British government accepting that examinations are not the best way to assess competence, which can be seen in their insistence that examinations for GCSEs and A Levels would go ahead regardless of any disruption caused by the current global pandemic (Sleigh, 2020). Perhaps because they are seen as so anti-establishment, the folk high school concept has never gained a foothold in the British education system. Norbeck (1991, p. 14) observes that it is this perception of anti-establishment “which almost by definition makes them, in a way, independent from, not to say opposed to, anything official: the educational system, the ruling political class, etc. This certainly provokes distrust among the decision-makers.”

All Scandinavian countries now have folk high schools and Denmark has 70 that are attended by more than 40,000 people each year (Danish Folk High Schools, 2020). Danes from the age of 17 and a half can attend folk high schools for on average two terms, and the central aim of the schools, according to the Association of Folk High Schools in Denmark website, is that:

Courses should be of a broad, general nature. This means that, while students of course should acquire knowledge and skills in certain subjects, the main purpose of the teaching is not to acquire a particular skill set, but to open the eyes, minds and hearts of students and teachers alike to

aspects of the human existence and to shed light on the lives they are living, both individually and collectively. (Danish Folk High Schools, 2020, p.6)

## The Steps of a Socratic Dialogue

This research activity followed the characteristic steps of a Socratic dialogue in the tradition of Leonard Nelson (1882–1927) and Gustav Heckmann (1898–1996).<sup>4</sup> First, a topic or question is chosen, preferably a philosophical term (for example, an ethical value such as honesty), but it can also be, as in the case of this dialogue, an open question which allows the participants an opportunity to reflect on life. Next, the dialogue participants are invited to relate a personal narrative, about a time when they experienced something relating to the topic. In the next phase they reflect on and investigate these narratives in order to come up with definitions about what the topic means according to each narrative. Finally, the group tries to come up with a more general, mutually agreed upon definition from the different narratives that have been shared (Krohn, 2004, pp. 17–20).

## The Socratic Dialogue

The main research activity was a 45-minute Socratic dialogue using the question, “Should people get COVID-19 vaccinations?” This is a particular type of Socratic question that challenges viewpoints and perspectives. Most arguments are made with a particular opinion, and so attack the opposing position, whereas this type of question can reveal to the participants that there are other, equally valid viewpoints. The overall goal of this Socratic dialogue was to hear, share, and philosophize about views on vaccinations. The question was chosen in order to explore the idea that vaccinations are a civic and moral duty. The objective was, however, to go deeper into this assumption by exploring culturally diverse viewpoints.

The four learners participating in the dialogue were from Iran, Pakistan, and Ukraine. The purpose of the dialogue was explained and discussed with the learners prior to beginning the activity. Names have been replaced by pseudonyms, chosen by the participants because they considered them common in their respective cultures. The dialogue transcript was broken down into 80 verbatim quotations, and a simple participant-quotation-trust reference coding system was used. Prior to giving permission to use the transcript for research purposes, each participant was sent recordings and transcripts of the dialogue. All the participants gave permission without any requests for omissions from either the recording or the transcript.

My role as the *maientic* of the dialogue meant that I could not act as a completely impartial researcher and had to remain mindful that my role was also to lead an exploration of diverse perspectives and facilitate the construction of new meaning (Seeskin, 1987). Rather than observing a “fusion of horizons,” I was an active participant in the fusion. With this thought in mind my role became threefold, in being the *maientic*, the researcher, and the spokesperson of the dialogue.

Reflexivity is generally understood as the “awareness of the influence the researcher has on the people or topic being studied, while simultaneously recognizing how the research experience is affecting the researcher” (Gilgun, 2008, p. 181). The complexity of needing to adopt multiple roles is one of the key challenges for any practitioner-researcher, and it heightened the need for reflexivity as I questioned my own research integrity. I was fortunate in this respect, as I was accompanied by two colleagues who acted as an observer and a sound engineer, affording me the opportunity to validate my interpretation of the dialogue. With these ethical and methodological thoughts in mind, the intention of the following

---

<sup>4</sup> The Socratic method was first formally outlined by Leonard Nelson in a 1922 lecture entitled “The Socratic Method” (Nelson, 1949, pp. 1–43).



account is to offer my interpretations as “candidates for others to entertain, not necessarily as truth, let alone Truth, but as positions about the nature and meaning of a phenomenon that may fit their sensibility and shape their thinking about their own inquiries” (Peshkin, 1985, p. 280).

The dialogue took place in an upstairs classroom of a high-ceilinged Victorian school that now has a new purpose as an adult learning centre. There was some nervousness amongst the participants because the dialogue was being recorded for a podcast and there was the challenge that English was their second language. After brief introductions, nerves were quickly dispelled, and it was noticeable that confidence grew as each participant gave their first contribution. This was, after all, the type of philosophical discussion that occurs in everyday life without people even realizing that they are philosophizing. The intention of this section is not to give a full transcript of the dialogue but to identify the key contributions that led to the identification of “trust” as a universal value of importance in the COVID-19 vaccination debate.

Olena was a young Ukrainian woman who spoke precisely and assuredly, and who first explained why she thought vaccinations were so important and then, with some indignation, reflected that in Ukraine, “Nobody trusts the government, because the government doesn’t care about people and the government doesn’t have money to buy vaccines.” I asked her why she thought this, and she replied, “It is because the politicians are bad and want all the money. You can ask anybody in my country, and they will say this is true. Nobody ever believes them because they lie.” As the “midwife” of the dialogue I recognized that “trust” had emerged as a key value, and further contributions from the group showed that they had recognized this also.

Uzma, a young Pakistani woman, was next to speak. Her contribution revealed further the importance of trust. She started by simply saying, “I think my people really don’t care about it.” I asked why this was the case and she elaborated that, “My mother is scared of the vaccinations because false propaganda and videos are everywhere on TikTok, on Facebook, on WhatsApp. She is confused about that.” I asked her if this meant that she did not care about vaccinations. After some thought she added that, “She does not care what the government and news say because we are used to corruption in our country. We always think they have bad reasons and not good.”

Next to speak was Ervin, a middle-aged Iranian man. He had listened attentively to both contributions and after confirming that he believed everyone should be vaccinated he earnestly explained that, “In my country the government say that lots of people are my enemy in the world. We are told the enemy want to put something strange in your body and control your body like a robot.” This brought nods of agreement from his fellow Iranian, Kamran, a quieter participant who spoke in a considered way, who explained that, “Because my country doesn’t have enough money to buy European vaccinations, everyone says that the Chinese vaccination is to control us, and it is better to have the Russian one.”

I asked the group if they thought that people in the United Kingdom trusted the government, and amongst the nods of agreement, Olena explained that, “The difference here is that everything is open. I watch the news and I feel that they tell me everything and nothing is hidden.” This statement was greeted with more nods of agreement from the group. I asked the group if being open was the most important part of building trust. Kamran responded to this, in his considered way, by explaining that, “to trust someone they have to not be bad or greedy and not hide the truth.” I asked if telling the truth makes people trust. At this point the dialogue returned to Uzma, who added, “It isn’t the same, but joined. I trust people who tell me things that are good and bad. Things can’t always be good.”

Continuing in this way, the dialogue came to a conclusion and I summarized trust as “believing what someone says to you whilst knowing that they will tell you good and bad things without having greedy or corrupt reasons.” The idea that trust is interlinked with believing is an interesting one, considering that the Old English root of the word “trust” is *treowian*, “to believe.”

The group was happy with this definition, and we moved on to talk about how they had found the activity. Their response to the activity was positive, with general agreement that not only did it challenge them to use their language skills in what they called a “real” conversation but it did so without making them feel as if it was formal learning. Ervin explained this well by commenting that, “I would like to do

this again because it is good to talk without thinking about lessons and tests. It is good to talk with new people.” Olena added to this with an interesting comment about the dynamism of learning in semi-structured dialogue activities: “I had planned what I would say, but talking like this made me really think because I had to talk about things I was not expecting ... Also it is interesting to hear about other people’s lives because normally there is no time.”

## Conclusions

Besides the benefits of using language in a dynamic situation, a further benefit was that by sharing experiences the participants became more familiar with each other, as well as with differing cultural attitudes to vaccinations and government. The outcome of this dialogue was not only a general belief that COVID vaccinations are a civic responsibility but also that an inhibitor to this belief is “trust,” or lack of trust in governmental motives. Rather than coming to an agreement and “fusing” contrasting views, it was revealed that despite coming from diverse cultures they had similar views. This research activity shows that the Socratic dialogue method is a simple and effective approach that can be used to encourage people to philosophize together and to share experiences and viewpoints with each other.

How then does Socratic dialogue contribute to the development of *Bildung* and *phronesis*, whilst promoting the ethos of the Danish folk high schools? Certainly, within the context of this one dialogue it is possible to see how each participant had to have “openness” to the views of others, and in listening to the “otherness” of each narrative they developed their *Bildung*. Viewed in this way, *Bildung* becomes not an archaic philosophical concept but a dynamic and naturally occurring process of learning and personal development. In terms of the development of *phronesis*, then, there is clear evidence that the dialogue enabled the participants to explore their “own society and social practices and debate the goals and values that are important in their lives” (Frank, 2012, p. 49). The ethos of the Danish folk high schools is also apparent in that as a philosophical thinking activity it allowed the participants to “open their eyes, minds and hearts to aspects of the human existence and to shed light on the lives they are living, both individually and collectively.”

## Recommendations

What then of the implications for educational *praxis* and the development of phronetic educators? The following are three tentative suggestions based on the findings of this research paper, my wider research into what constitutes a “good” education, and my own 30-year career in education.

Educators need to be encouraged to turn away from curriculum when educational “sparks” become apparent. Curriculum changes slowly in a world of dynamic change. COVID-19 will appear in curriculums of the future but the educational opportunities it presents can be capitalized on now. When life presents “big questions,” educators should be trained to do just this and be bold enough to know that they transcend lists of knowledge and skills criteria, and to believe in their importance.

Brian Simon (1915–2002), the English educationalist and historian, believed that education should help pupils think, question, and be sceptical.<sup>5</sup> He saw philosophy as a central plank of education (Simon, 1998). As ethical beings we constantly philosophize, and new learning constantly offers up ethical questions to philosophize about, whether this be in the history lesson discussing colonization or the geography lesson considering the impact of global warming. Therefore, educators should be taught to use philosophical questioning techniques and activities as an essential part of their craft.

---

<sup>5</sup> This is “sceptical” in the original Greek sense of the word, *skeptikos*, meaning “inquiring, reflective.”

Simon (1998) wrote that, “When minds meet, they don’t just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought” (p. 98). This is why talk, discussion, dialogue, conversation – whichever word is chosen – is so important in learning. Phronetic educators are able to use “talk” as a key teaching and learning activity and have the skills and strategies to do so. The participants in this research activity called it “real” talk. “Talk” training should be integral to teacher education programs so that educators can become “midwives” of the learning that it delivers.

## References

- Alexander, R. (2008). Culture, dialogue and learning: Notes on an emerging pedagogy. In N. Mercer and S. Hodgkinson (Eds.), *Exploring talk in school*. Sage Publications.
- Anderson, L., & Björkman, T. (2017). *The Nordic secret: A European story of beauty and freedom*. Fri Tanke.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. (M. Holquist, Ed., & C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). University of Texas Press. (Original work published 1935)
- Biesta, G. (2002). Bildung and modernity: The future of Bildung in a world of difference. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 21, 343–51.
- Borish, S. (1991). *The land of the living*. Blue Dolphin Publishing.
- Borsch, A., Jervelund, S., & Skovdal, M. (2019). How a school setting can generate social capital for young refugees: Qualitative insights from a folk high school in Denmark. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. <https://academic.oup.com/jrs/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jrs/fez003/5310336>
- Danish Folk High Schools (2020). *Danish Folke High School*. <https://danishfolkhighschools.com/media/11348/19-danishfolkhighschool-haefte-web.pdf>
- Davies, N. (1931). *Education for life*. Williams & Norgate.
- Davis, D. (1970). *Model for humanistic education: The Danish folk highschool*. Merrill.
- Dohmen, G. (1965). *Bildung und Schule: Die Entstehung des deutschen Bildungsbegriffs und die Entwicklung seines Verhältnisses zur Schule. Bd. 2: Die Entstehung des pädagogischen Bildungsbegriffs und seines Bezugs zum Schulunterricht*. Beltz.
- European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) (2020). *EAEA Grundtvig Award*. <https://eaea.org/our-work/capacity-building/eaea-grundtvig-award>
- Flor, C. (1846). *Report on Folke-Høiskolen in Rødding*. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/34272>
- Frank, A. W. (2012). The feel for power games: Everyday phronesis and social theory. In B. Flyvbjerg, T. Lander & S. Schram (Eds.), *Real social science: Applied phronesis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Foght, H. (1914). *The Danish folk high school*. United States Bureau of Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED541675.pdf>
- Gadamer, H. G. (1989). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). Sheed & Ward. (Original work published 1960)
- Gilgun, J. F. (2008). Lived experience, reflexivity, and research on perpetrators of interpersonal violence. *Qualitative Social Work*, 7(2), 181–97.
- Habermas, J. (1972). *Knowledge and human interests*. Beacon Press.
- Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximizing impact on learning*. Taylor and Francis.
- hooks, b. (2009). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*. Routledge.
- Horlacher, R. (2004). Bildung: A construction of a history of philosophy of education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 23, 409–26.
- Knowles, M. S. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy versus pedagogy*. New York Association Press.
- Knudsen, J. (1976). *Selected writings: NFS Grundtvig*. Fortress Press.
- Korsgaard, O. (2012). *The school for life: N. F. S. Grundtvig on education for the people*. Aarhus University Press.

- Kristjánsson, K., Fowers, F., Darnell, C. & Pollard, D. (2021). Phronesis (practical wisdom) as a type of contextual integrative thinking. *Review of General Psychology*, 25(3), 239–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10892680211023063>
- Krohn, D. (2004). Theory and practice of socratic dialogue. In B. Neisser & R. Saran (Eds.), *Enquiring minds: Socratic dialogue in education* (pp. 15–24). Institute of Education Press
- Kropotkin, P. (2020). *The conquest of bread*. Digireads.com.
- Kulich, J. (1963). N. F. S. Grundtvig and the folk high schools. *Dalhousie Review*, 43(1), 67–73.
- Lawson, M. (1993). N. F. S. Grundtvig. *Prospects: UNESCO'S Quarterly Review of Comparative Education*, 23(3/4), 613–23.
- Liechtenstein, P. (1985). Radical liberalism and radical education. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 44(1), 39–53.
- Lindsø, E. (2016). A folk high school teacher's 10 commandments. In T. Maliszewski (Ed.) *School for life* (pp. 113–19). Erasmus.
- Mahon, K., Heikkinen, H. L. T., & Huttunen, R. (2018). Critical educational praxis in university ecosystems: Enablers and constraints. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 27(3), 463–80.
- Malpas, J. (2018). Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Stanford encyclopaedia of philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/gadamer>
- McEntyre, M. C. (2000). *Caring for words in a culture of lies: Stewardship of language in a culture of lies*. Eerdmans.
- Mortensen, K. (2002). The double call: On Bildung in a literary and reflective perspective. In L. Løvlie, K. P. Mortensen, & S. E. Nordenbo (Eds.), *Educating humanity: Bildung in postmodernity* (pp. 121–40). Blackwell Publishing.
- Mueller, J. (2012) Anarchism, the state, and the role of education. In R. H. Haworth (Ed.), *Anarchist pedagogies: Collective actions, theories, and critical reflections on education* (pp. 332–467). PM Press.
- Nelson, L. (1949) *Socratic method and critical philosophy*. Yale University Press.
- Ng, K. (2020, January 3). Denmark sets record by sourcing nearly half its power from wind energy. *Independent*.
- Norbeck J. (1991). From ideas to everyday practice. *Journal of the Folk Education Association of America*, 15(1).
- Nordenbo, S. (2002). Bildung and the thinking of Bildung. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 36(3), 341–52.
- Oakeshott, M. (1981). The voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind. In *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (p. 198). Methuen.
- Oakeshott, M. (1989). Education: The engagement and its frustration. In T. Fuller (Ed.), *The voice of liberal learning: Michael Oakeshott on education* (pp. 63–94). Yale University Press.
- Peshkin, A. (1985). Virtuous subjectivity: In the participant-observer's eyes. In D. Berg & K. Smith (Eds.), *Exploring clinical methods for social research*. Sage.
- Peukert, H. (2003). Beyond the present state of affairs: Bildung and the search for orientation in rapidly transforming societies. In L. Løvlie, K. P. Mortensen, & S. E. Nordenbos (Eds.), *Educating humanity: Bildung in postmodernity* (pp. 105–20). Blackwell Publishing.
- Pring, R. (1999). *Closing the gap: Liberal education and vocational preparation*. Holder & Stoughton.
- Rasmussen, P. (2013). The folk high school: Denmark's contribution to adult education. In P. Mayo (Ed.), *Learning with adults: A reader* (pp. 219–29). Sense Publishers.
- Rordam, T. (1980). *The Danish folk high schools*. Det Danske Selskab.
- Scheffler, I. (1973). *Reason and teaching*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Schram, S. (2012). Phronetic social science: An idea whose time has come. In B. Flyvberg, T. Lander, & S. Schram (Eds.), *Real social science: Applied phronesis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schwartz, B., Sharpe, K. E. (2010). *Practical wisdom: The right way to do the right thing*. Riverhead Books.
- Scottish Communists (2018). *A Marxist approach to education*. <https://www.scottish-communists.org.uk/marxism/political-theory/full-marx-library-series/153-marxism-and-education>
- Seeskin, K. (1987). *Dialogue and discovery: A study in Socratic method*. State University of New York Press.

- Segerstrom, D. (1936). *The Danish folk high school* (unpublished MA thesis). Boston University.  
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/142051962.pdf>
- Simon, B. (1998). *A life in education*. Lawrence & Wishart.
- Skrubbeltrang, F. (1947). *The Danish folk high schools*. Det Danske Selskab.
- Sleigh, S. (2020, December 3). Gavin Williamson says exams will ‘absolutely’ go ahead in 2021. *Evening Standard*.
- Staudinger, U. M., & Glück, J. (2011). Psychological wisdom research: Commonalities and differences in a growing field. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62, 215–41.
- Stirner, M. (2017). *The ego and its own*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Tolstoy, L. (1862). On popular education. In L. Weiner (Ed.), *Tolstoy on education*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tynjälä, P., Kallio, E. K. & Heikkinen, H. L. T. (2020). Professional expertise, integrative thinking, wisdom and phronēsis. In E. K. Kallio (Ed.), *Development of adult thinking: Interdisciplinary perspectives on cognitive development and adult learning* (pp. 156–74). Routledge.
- Unwin, L. & Fuller, A. (2003). *Expanding learning in the workplace*. NIACE.
- Warren, C. (1989). Andragogy and N. F. S. Grundtvig: A critical link. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 39(4), 211–23.
- Weinsheimer, J. (1985). *Gadamer’s hermeneutics: A reading of truth and method*. Yale University Press.
- Weiss, M. N., & Ohrem, S. (2016). Philosophical practice as action research: The Socratic method at Norwegian folk high schools. *HASER International Journal of Philosophical Practice*, 12(3), 2,005–27.
- Westerman, W. (2005). Folk schools, popular education, and a pedagogy of community action. In E. T. Ewing (Ed.), *Revolution and pedagogy* (pp. 107–32). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Williams, K., & Hogan, P. (2018). The educational legacy of Michael Oakeshott. In P. Smeyers (Ed), *International handbook of philosophy of education*. Springer International Handbooks of Education. Springer.
- Zeldin, T. (1998). *Conversation: How talk can change our lives*. Harvill Press.

## About the Author

**Garry Nicholson** is an adult learning and skills manager for Newcastle City Council’s adult learning service and a PhD research student and academic tutor with the Faculty of Education and Society at the University of Sunderland. Previously he has taught in the school sector in the United Kingdom and the Middle East. His research focuses on educators’ practical wisdom, folk schools, Socratic dialogues, and the philosophical concept of *Bildung* (self-formation).