

Introduction

1 Thematic Introduction

The concept of “*Mündigkeit/Myndighed*”¹ occupies a central place in educational theory and holds particular significance especially within the German educational discourse, and in recent years, attention to it has also begun to emerge within the Danish education system. The origins of that discourse lie in Enlightenment thought, most notably in the works of Immanuel Kant, who, in his famous essay *Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (1784), emphasized the human capacity to use one’s own understanding without guidance from others. For Kant, enlightenment constituted the condition under which individuals could act independently and critically. He understood education as a process that not only imparts knowledge but also cultivates the capacity for autonomous judgment. At the same time, Kant saw a fundamental pedagogical paradox in the need to ‘lead’ individuals toward ‘self-determination’ and ‘autonomy’. His seminal question considering education is: *How is man to bring about his own maturity under the yoke of external authority?* Kant’s foundational reflections on maturity, and the underlying tension that it should be the goal of ‘education,’ remain central to debates today, continuing to serve as a lasting reference framework for reflecting on the meta-goals of teacher training and school education.

Critical Theory, particularly the work of Theodor W. Adorno, extended Kant’s ideas in the mid-20th century, situating them within broader societal realities. In *Education for Maturity*, Adorno intertwines the ideal of self-determination with a trenchant critique of authoritarian structures and ideological distortion. For him, maturity entails more than mere intellectual autonomy; it opposes conformity, adjustment, and authoritarian constraints. Adorno advocates for an education that fosters resilience against manipulative influences, viewing critical thinking as an active stance. In this sense, maturity is inherently political, aiming to empower individuals to recognize societal mechanisms and resist blind subordination and uncritical affirmation.

¹ In the following, ‘Maturity’ is used as a translation for ‘Mündigkeit’ resp. ‘Myndighed’. For the limitations of this choice, see the notes on translating the term in Section 2 of this introduction.

Postwar educational discourse continued to elaborate on maturity as a guiding principle of education. Wolfgang Klafki, for instance, in his critical pedagogy, emphasized that education should not be limited to knowledge transmission but must also cultivate self-determination, responsibility, and solidarity. Contemporary debates on competency-based education in schools and teacher training build upon this perspective: maturity is understood as an integrative educational goal encompassing professional, personal, and social aspects.

Regarding institutional structures, maturity manifests across multiple dimensions, which have to be taken into account. At a *macro level* societal structures, educational policies, and normative frameworks define the conditions for school learning. Maturity is posited as an educational aim in curricula, school legislation, and international standards. Yet structural tensions, such as exam-oriented systems, standardization, and performance pressure, often conflict with the aim of fostering independence. At a *meso level*, schools as organizations shape learning cultures, values, and the implementation of pedagogical approaches. Teaching cultures, school programs, and institutional frameworks determine how maturity is experienced, strengthened, or inhibited in practice. And finally, considering a *micro level*, the interactions between teachers and learners constitute the space in which maturity becomes personally concrete. Here, it is evident whether students are afforded the freedom to think independently, reflect critically, and act in solidarity. Teachers are responsible for creating such spaces while exercising their own pedagogical authority constructively and reflecting critically on its use.

The relevance of maturity is heightened today in the context of profound societal transformations. Political polarization, social inequality, ecological change, geopolitical shifts, and gender issues, for example, demand that teachers mediate complex value conflicts. Simultaneously, technological advancements and digital media are reshaping learning environments. Algorithms, social networks, and digital platforms influence information reception as well as young people's capacity for judgment. Education for maturity must address these dimensions, equipping students to critically assess information, question media and political biases, and navigate digital spaces responsibly. In this way, technological literacy becomes an integral component of the educational vision of maturity.

Teacher education faces the dual challenge of imparting both professional expertise and reflective, ethical, and political competencies. Teachers are expected not only to transmit knowledge but also to serve as role models for critical thinking, responsible action, and solidarity. This requires ongoing engagement with one's pedagogical stance, particularly when normative expectations and neutrality are in tension, whether addressing controversial topics or navigating political conflicts.

2 About this Volume

The contributions in this volume emerge from a two-year German-Scandinavian research dialogue² coordinated by the Heidelberg School of Education, which explored the role of maturity in schools and teacher education from an interdisciplinary perspective. This volume brings together essays by participants in this dialogue, as well as contributions from other invited researchers. The essays approach the question of how maturity can be conceptualized, conveyed, and experienced in schools and teacher education from diverse perspectives, at different levels of analysis, and drawing on a variety of theoretical backgrounds. They are united, however, by the idea that maturity, particularly in educational contexts, should not be understood solely as a cognitive or individual attribute but as relational, social, and political. It encompasses critical reflection, responsibility, solidarity, and the capacity to perceive societal interrelations. Together, the contributions form a panorama that integrates historical foundations, theoretical perspectives, and practical experiences, aiming to illuminate maturity as a guiding principle of (teacher) education.

A particular challenge in compiling this volume and in preceding discussions among the contributors was the translation of ‘*Mündigkeit*’. In German, as in Danish, the term is highly nuanced and historically resonant. No single English term captures all its dimensions. *Maturity* is frequently used, yet it only represents a part of what *Mündigkeit* (resp. *Myndighed*) entails, pointing to developmental progress or life experience while largely omitting key dimensions such as autonomous thinking, judgment, and responsibility. Consequently, contributors were free to choose translations that best conveyed the specific aspects they emphasized in their essays.

The title *Shift Towards Maturity* intentionally references the theoretical impulses of Theodor W. Adorno³, who played a key role in shaping the discussions preceding this volume. At the same time, it signals a transition: from dependence to self-directed action, from passive reception to reflective judgment. This transition carries a pedagogical dimension: here, maturity is not merely individual growth but a learning process encompassing responsibil-

² More information on this collaborative research project – entitled “Permanently normative? Value communication in education and care” – can be found on the HSE-blog *Fokus Lehrerbildung* at DOI <https://doi.org/10.58079/ppp3> (last accessed in July, 2026).

³ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno in *Education for Maturity and Responsibility*: “Not only does society, as it is presently structured, keep people immature but every serious attempt to shift it – I’m avoiding the word ‘educate’ deliberately – to shift it towards maturity is immediately met with indescribable resistances, . . . who will prove to you that the very thing you are attempting to achieve has either long been overtaken or is utopian or is no longer relevant”, transl. by Robert French, Jem Thomas, and Dorothee Weymann, cited from *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1999).

ity, critical thinking, and autonomy. The title thus frames maturity as a dynamic development rather than a fixed state, integrating education, reflection, and civic engagement.

3 Overview of the Contributions

Educating Teachers for Maturity: Nine Theses opens the volume by taking some of Adorno's reflections on maturity as starting points for considering teacher education. In this essay, *Matthias Heil* presents preliminary theses that collectively call for a refocusing of teacher education toward critique, self-reflection, and re-politicization. He highlights how education for maturity counters conformity and adjustment and outlines the competencies teachers need to foster students' independent and responsible action.

In "Mündigkeit" – Central Concept of Pedagogical Reflection or "Pathos Formula"?, *Gabriel Zellmer* explores maturity as a contested but central concept in educational theory. Tracing historical lines from Kant through Adorno to Freire, the text emphasizes the foundational role of bodily and sensory experience in judgment, critical thinking, and emancipation. Zellmer argues that maturity is an ongoing process of perception, self-reflection, and critical engagement with social conditions, functioning in teacher education as a reflexive framework for navigating pedagogical contradictions and moving beyond narrow competence orientations.

The danger of authoritarian pseudomaturity is the focus of *Veronika Schmid's* contribution, "They're Scared of What You Represent to 'Em': Pseudomaturity in Teaching and Teacher Education. Drawing on Adorno's concept of overvalued realism, she shows how external conformity mechanisms can undermine genuine autonomy and render the idea of autonomy threatening. Schmid highlights the need for teacher education that fosters resilience against conformity while creating space for authentic, critical judgment.

In *Mature Autonomy and Solidarity: Theological Reflections on the Links Between Freedom, Critical Thinking, and Authority as Elements of Teacher Training*, *Dennis Dietz* examines maturity from a theological perspective. Drawing on Luther, Moltmann, and Bonhoeffer, he emphasizes that freedom is always freedom for others, critical thinking requires identity and self-relativization, and authority in education must remain self-limiting to promote learner autonomy. Dietz frames maturity not only as an educational goal but as an integral aspect of the teacher's professional identity, guided by responsible solidarity.

The role of teachers in addressing bullying is analyzed by *Stine Kaplan Jørgensen* in *Teachers, Bullying and Maturity: Strategic Use of Ethically Informed Power of Definition*. She introduces the concept of "strategic use of ethically informed power of definition," demonstrating how mature teachers can – and

are obliged to – actively shape moral orders. Through a case study, Jørgensen illustrates how thoughtful teacher engagement fosters inclusive, supportive classroom cultures.

In *Technological Literacy and the Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Peter Jespersen highlights the importance of critically reflecting on the entanglement of technology in society and its influence on the education of future generations. Drawing on Adorno's dialectic of enlightenment, he shows how students can cultivate maturity through technological literacy, either as a dedicated subject or via general faculties that enable them to interpret technological phenomena. Jespersen stresses the need for teacher education to integrate these reflections, preparing future teachers to understand both students' and their own relationships to technology.

Finally, Henning Hupe, in *Maturity and Responsibility in Adolescents through Autonomous Solidary Action*, presents a German secondary school project in which students independently organized fundraising for a food bank. The project creates social encouragement in the "in-between spaces" of possibility. Interpreting the project through Adorno and Foucault, Hupe illustrates an educational approach that emphasizes transformation, disruption, and relational responsibility, showing that maturity entails both autonomy and solidarity realized through action for others.

4 Acknowledgments

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