

THE POWER OF NORDIC BILDUNG

Panel Discussion Report

Nordiskt Sivistys Vika | Helsinki and Microsoft Teams | 8 October 2026

Event	Main event of Nordiskt Sivistys Vika
Format	Participatory hybrid panel and dialogue
Themes	Bildung today, active citizenship, resilience, and lifelong and long-life learning
Basis of the report	Panel script and Teams transcript of the meeting

The report organises the discussion under the questions in the panel script. Contributions have been condensed and the language clarified without changing their core meaning.

1. The panel as part of Nordic Bildung Week

The Power of Nordic Bildung was the main event of Nordiskt Sivistys Vika, held from 5 to 11 October 2026. The panel brought together perspectives from Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. Its aim was to highlight the roots, contemporary relevance and future of Nordic Bildung and to compare experiences across the Nordic countries. The event also served as a practical pilot for a new joint Nordic Bildung Week and opened a discussion on future cooperation.

The hybrid panel was held at the Soppi Science Centre in Helsinki and on Microsoft Teams. The discussion was conducted in English, and the online audience could participate through the chat. The moderators were Lauri Tuomi and Heidi Kinnunen from the Kvs Foundation. The panelists were Ludvig Claeson from Norway, Lene Rachel Andersen from Denmark, Gustav Fridolin from Sweden, Helgi Þorbjörn Svavarsson from Iceland and Olli-Pekka Heinonen from Finland. Björn Wallén concluded by synthesising the main observations from the discussion.

Starting point of the panel

The discussion began from a situation in which the Nordic countries face polarisation, democratic uncertainty, loneliness and wellbeing challenges, ageing populations, digitalisation, artificial intelligence and continuous changes in working life. The panel asked what sivistys, folkbildning, bildning and Bildung mean today, and how they can be translated into agency and capacity for individuals, communities and democracy.

2. Opening round: what does Bildung mean today?

What does Bildung mean to you today, and has its meaning changed over the past decade?

Lene Rachel Andersen: The content of Bildung changes as the world changes. Professional and societal knowledge must be continuously updated, but the personal core of Bildung remains: emotional maturity, a moral compass and the capacity to act responsibly. Bildung is growth into humanity and adulthood, not merely the accumulation of knowledge.

Gustav Fridolin: Bildung is resistance to polarisation, oversimplification, the categorisation of people, the crisis of concentration and the devaluation of knowledge. It enables people to build a better society together and to embody in everyday life the values they want society to strengthen.

Olli-Pekka Heinonen: Bildung is a continuous process of human and community development in relation to a changing world. It encompasses motivation, purpose, agency and identity. For young people, knowledge and competence are not enough; what matters is the willingness to use them for the common good and for human and planetary flourishing.

Ludvig Claeson: Bildung is something we do and build throughout life. It has no final examination or fixed endpoint. Its value is difficult to measure because it emerges through an open process in which the outcome of learning is not predetermined.

Helgi Þorbjörn Svavarsson: Bildung is continuous self-development in interaction with other people and the world. It strengthens personal and collective agency: the capacity to shape one's own life and influence the structures of communities.

Discussion summary: Across the opening round, *Bildung* was described as a lifelong and open-ended process of becoming human in relation to others and a changing world. The panel emphasised emotional maturity, moral judgement, identity, purpose and agency, and saw *Bildung* as an essential counterforce to polarisation, simplification and the passive accumulation of knowledge.

3. Theme 1: Bildung in the Nordic countries today

How is Bildung understood in the Nordic countries? What distinguishes Nordic Bildung from skills training and formal education?

Ludvig Claesson: In formal education, curricula and assessment often determine in advance what will be learned and what counts as an acceptable result. In a *Bildung* process, the learner and the community have more influence over the direction. Openness allows unexpected outcomes and gives society the possibility to surprise itself.

Lene Rachel Andersen: A strength of Nordic education is its emphasis on understanding, not merely remembering individual facts. A person with *Bildung* recognises connections, knows how to use knowledge and can assess information critically. This is essential in an age of disinformation, conspiracy theories and artificial intelligence. Young people's participation in society also requires cultural rootedness and a sense of shared history.

Helgi Þorbjörn Svavarsson: *Bildung*-oriented thinking is visible in Nordic curricula and teachers' work, but it is challenged by the instrumentalisation of education. In public debate, for example, early childhood education may be discussed mainly as a means of enabling parents to work, although its educational and *Bildung*-related purpose is much broader. Alongside stated aims, we must assess whether they are realised in practice.

Is Bildung still relevant to younger generations?

Olli-Pekka Heinonen: Young people are looking for meaning, connection and ways of making a difference together. Alongside extreme individualism, a need for collective action has emerged. Young people have energy and also anxiety, but they need the experience of older generations to understand how things can be advanced in practice. What is needed is intergenerational dialogue, not simply telling young people to be resilient.

Discussion summary: The discussion distinguished *Bildung* from narrowly defined skills training through its openness, emphasis on understanding and critical judgement, and capacity to connect knowledge with meaning and participation. Nordic strengths remain visible in education and teaching, but instrumental pressures can narrow their purpose. For younger generations, *Bildung* is especially relevant when it enables collective action and intergenerational dialogue.

4. Theme 2: Active citizenship - Bildung as a driver for action

How can participation be strengthened among people who feel disconnected from public life?

Gustav Fridolin: Swedish folk high schools connect formal and non-formal learning. They can provide an upper-secondary qualification while also offering a relational pedagogy oriented towards societal change. This enables young adults who have struggled in the education system to join communities in which personal growth, practical qualifications and societal agency are strengthened together.

How can learning inspire people not only to understand society but also to shape it?

Olli-Pekka Heinonen: The educational ideal of the information society has emphasised knowledge transfer and cognitive capacity. *Bildung*, however, invites us to ask what we do with knowledge and how we use it in society. Young people should have opportunities to create value for their own communities. Experiential

learning, embodiment and genuine engagement with the world are distinctively human capacities that cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence.

Do digital environments strengthen or weaken active citizenship?

Lene Rachel Andersen: Artificial intelligence can facilitate the handling of information, but it does not provide the same social resistance and accountability as interaction with other people. Human beings must live with the consequences of their actions, learn from mistakes and adapt to shared norms. Genuine learning and the building of trust require teachers, peers and communities. At the same time, people of all ages need a fundamental understanding of the digital world and how artificial intelligence works.

How can Bildung strengthen democratic participation?

Helgi Þorbjörn Svavarsson: Bildung develops agency, moral judgement and a critical relationship with the surrounding social and political structures. When people learn to question, evaluate and recognize their own responsibility, knowledge can be transformed into action and political participation.

What is the role of civil society organisations, liberal adult education and cultural organisations?

Ludvig Claeson: In Norwegian civil society, even a small local group, can become part of a wider democratic structure. A shared interest, for instance choir or music group gives people the experience that their interests and knowledge are valuable. Open organisational structures turn people from passive consumers into active creators of their everyday lives and society. An ordinary Tuesday evening can be an important learning environment for democracy and participation.

Discussion summary: *The panel linked active citizenship to learning environments where people experience belonging, responsibility and the ability to shape their communities. Folk high schools, civil society organisations and cultural groups can combine personal growth, qualifications and democratic agency. Digital tools and artificial intelligence can support access to information, but trust, accountability and democratic learning still depend on human interaction and shared practice.*

5. Theme 3: Resilience and lifelong learning

How do Bildung and lifelong learning strengthen individual and societal resilience?

Helgi Þorbjörn Svavarsson: Resilience is not built only through the questions of what and how, but especially through the question of why. Bildung helps people seek purpose, assess their aims and create new meanings in their lives. In a changing society, this reconstruction of meaning continues throughout life.

What capabilities will citizens and young people need in the coming decades?

Olli-Pekka Heinonen: A central capability for the future is the ability to shape one's own path in a world where previous generations cannot foresee all the challenges and opportunities ahead. Young people need curiosity, the capacity to admit that they do not know, the courage to enter unfamiliar territory and the ability to learn together. Young people also need spaces in which to reflect on identity, roots, community and the purpose of life.

How are history, culture and inner discipline connected with Bildung in the age of artificial intelligence?

Lene Rachel Andersen: History, literature and the humanities convey a sense of belonging to a continuum of generations. They must not be reduced to technical analysis; they should help people identify, wonder and reflect on their own choices. Bildung requires a balance between discipline and freedom: complete control is oppressive, while unlimited choice without shared structures creates chaos. Shared narratives and rituals can help embody values without becoming authoritarian.

What structures are needed for learning later in life and for encounters between generations?

Ludvig Claeson: Civil society learning environments are naturally intergenerational. In music associations, choirs and other communities, children, adults and older people learn from each other through a shared interest. These environments should not be seen merely as pleasant hobbies, but as essential structures for wellbeing, connection and even a sense of direction in life.

Discussion summary: *Resilience was understood not only as adaptation, but as the lifelong capacity to reconstruct meaning, face uncertainty and create a future together with others. Curiosity, humility, courage and collaborative learning are therefore central capabilities. History, culture, shared structures and intergenerational communities provide continuity, belonging and practical settings for learning throughout life.*

6. Closing round: what can the Nordic countries learn from one another?

Gustav Fridolin: The Nordic countries should increase practical exchanges among learners, teachers and Bildung organisations. Encountering another country and another way of working helps people see their own practice with new eyes. Exchanges should also reach those who would not normally seek international opportunities.

Helgi Þorbjörn Svavarsson: Cooperation provides an opportunity to compare challenges, solutions and working processes. Comparison helps identify practices that could be adapted in one's own country, while also providing hope, energy and inspiration at a time when many people find the future difficult.

Ludvig Claeson: The Nordic countries need to connect the realities of local everyday life with a wider vision of Bildung. Norway can learn from both Swedish pragmatism and Danish idealistic courage. Mutual learning helps explain why ordinary grassroots activities have profound societal importance.

Olli-Pekka Heinonen: Institutions of enlightenment and Bildung, including universities, science, the media, education and civil society, are under pressure in many ways. The Nordic countries should give one another strength and courage. Alongside defending these institutions, they must renew themselves as the world changes. The Nordic countries share enough history and societal foundations to act as one team.

Lene Rachel Andersen: The Nordic region should be viewed as one large Bildung region. Cooperation should involve not only liberal adult education, but also early childhood education, schools, universities, youth work and other learning sectors. Bildung is a lifelong journey, and the boundaries between formal and non-formal learning should not be made unnecessarily rigid. Nordiskt Sivistys Vika and the Nordic Bildung Network can provide a permanent platform for this dialogue.

Discussion summary: *The closing round called for stronger practical Nordic cooperation through exchanges, peer learning and dialogue across countries and educational sectors. Shared work can renew institutions, connect grassroots experience with a wider vision of Bildung, and extend international opportunities to people who do not usually take part. The Nordic region was presented as a potential common Bildung region with permanent platforms for cooperation.*

7. Björn Wallén's concluding remarks

Björn Wallén placed the discussion in its geopolitical context. In his view, security cannot be built through military arrangements alone; it also requires grassroots Bildung, shared values and trust between people. Agency depends on values, which must also be reassessed in a changing world.

Wallén stressed that institutions must open themselves to cooperation and create ecosystems of hope. The ability to ask why, acknowledge not knowing and remain capable of wonder is essential. In Bildung, as in science, new knowledge often emerges beyond the boundaries of what is already known. Human encounters cannot be replaced by frameworks or technology: the foundation of Bildung remains person-to-person interaction.

Discussion summary: *The concluding remarks placed Bildung at the heart of democratic and societal security. Trust, shared values, agency and human encounters were presented as foundations that technology or institutional frameworks alone cannot provide. Institutions should cooperate across boundaries, nurture hope and preserve the capacity to question, wonder and learn beyond what is already known.*

8. Summary: the state of Nordic bildung and hopes for future cooperation

The panel suggested that Nordic bildung remains vibrant but is under pressure. Its strengths include learning oriented towards understanding, social trust, dense civil society networks, collective agency, relatively low barriers between formal and non-formal learning, and the idea of learning as a lifelong process. Bildung is not limited to knowledge and skills; it includes moral judgement, identity, the construction of meaning, the capacity to live with others and the courage to act for the common good.

At the same time, Bildung is narrowed by the instrumentalisation of education, the emphasis on measurable outcomes, resource pressures affecting civil society and Bildung institutions, weakening intergenerational ties, and a crisis of concentration, information reliability and social learning created by digital environments. Artificial intelligence increases the need for broad general knowledge, source criticism and an understanding of how technology works. Above all, it reminds us that human interaction, experience and responsibility are irreplaceable.

Future cooperation should create permanent Nordic structures that bring together all sectors of Bildung and learning. Nordiskt Sivistys Vika and the Nordic Bildung Network can serve as a common platform, but they should be complemented by concrete exchanges among teachers, learners, organisations and institutions, peer learning across countries, shared discussions on artificial intelligence and democracy, and new intergenerational learning environments. The common goal is to build the Nordic region as a Bildung region that not only defends its heritage but renews it openly and turns it into a source of agency, participation, resilience and hope.

Source material and editorial note

The report is based on the panel script NORDISK SIVISTYS VIKA_final.docx and the Microsoft Teams transcript of the Power of Nordic bildung panel held on 8 October 2026. In the automatic transcript by copilot AI, the names of speakers in the physical venue were occasionally recorded incorrectly. Speakers were identified from the order of questions in the script, the moderators' forms of address and the content of the contributions. **This report is not a verbatim record, but an edited thematic summary made by copilot together with Heidi Kinnunen and Lauri Tuomi with the support of Nina Hjelt from Kvs.**