

What crisis are we in actually? The (Nordic) Bildung Hype in Adult Education

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1 Bildung as a salvation to multiple crises

Crisis is an old topos of social sciences and the discipline of adult education, as shown by Willy Strzelewicz (1985), but it is only recently that crises-discourses have become dominant in the general public and among policymakers. They refer to multiple crises, such as global warming, forced migration, the Covid-19 pandemic, the state of democracy and working society, technologisation without social progress, and the crisis of the welfare state. It is no wonder, then, that the quest for possible solutions has expanded among the adult population and practitioners and policymakers of adult education. Responses are mainly advertised on the internet, instead of in traditional and institutionalised structures, and critical reflective dimensions of adult education.

In our paper, we focus on influential crisis-discourses, which have recently emerged as a renaissance of the concept of Bildung. This gradual expansion has remained largely unnoticed in the academic adult education community, but the concept has become vital for diverse networks of adult education influencers and organisations in formulating their crisis solutions (Lassnigg 2022). Interpretations about European traditions of adult education and the philosophy of education, which the protagonists of the Bildung hype are effectively disseminating, are biased and selective rather than systematic and analytical. Therefore, we find it essential to explore this hype more deeply and reflect its meaning for adult education as an academic discipline, practice and policy.

Our aim is to suggest steps towards a more profound analysis of the Bildung hype in the current crisis-discourse in adult education. The study builds on some initial cartographic observations and cross-cultural reflection by authors with backgrounds in Austria, Finland and Germany, who discussed the hype about Bildung in a pre-seminar at Tampere University in February 2022 (Heikkinen et al., 2022), as well as in the “Re-Konstruktionen. Krisenthematisierungen in der

Erwachsenenbildung” conference at the University of Flensburg in September 2022.

In the first section, we locate the Bildung hype in a wider landscape of manifestos, which have become increasingly popular for all kinds of influencers in promoting their agendas. While manifestos typically appear in times of crisis and societal transformation, we show how they respond to current crises, offering a descriptive analysis of selected manifestos that refer to general developments of society or have a specific appeal to (adult) education.

In the second section, we analyse the conceptual plausibility of the promise of the Bildung hype as a universal solution to multiple crises. Our analysis suggests that concepts of Bildung, especially connected to Nordic traditions of adult education, are utilised for branding and marketing narratives and belief systems, offering remedies for any wicked problems. While Nordic countries have been admired for their welfare states, in the third section, we question whether the Bildung hype provides false hopes when it comes to responding to the welfare state crisis. Our analysis problematises the connection between a prosperous welfare state and certain types of adult education, as well as the appropriateness of this role model to adult education practices and policy in recovering from global crises.

In the concluding section, we question what the Bildung hype as a response to the crisis reveals about the relations between adult education policies, practices and research. How far do the crises addressed and experienced in adult education policies and practices relate to academic adult education and its entanglement in the global education industry? Where and by whom are the agendas of adult education currently set, and what is the role, position and responsibility of the university in interaction with various non-university actors?

2 The many crises and the articulation of manifestos by new societal actors

In our times of uncertainty, social upheaval, and the search for orientation, it may not be surprising that manifestos (theses, proclamations, and invocations) as a certain type of articulation have become a common phenomenon. Manifestos have an affinity with other sorts of texts, such as credos, declarations, pamphlets, proclamations, open letters or memorandums.¹ Manifestos declare principles or intentions and follow a persuasive, apodictic, pathetic or imperative style. Historically, their appearance is linked to the development of modern society and the rise of the public sphere. Moreover, they often seek popular outrage and

1 The interest in manifestos as a text type arose in a Master’s seminar held by Gabriele Molzberger and Lorian Metzger, whom we wish to thank for her comments as well as other colleagues who provided us with additional hints to published manifestos after the Flensburg conference and which will be sources of further analysis in the future.

function as ‘seismographs’ and ‘alarm systems’ (Klatt & Lorenz, 2010, p. 436). Manifestos share an aspiration for collective empowerment and signal political and social power.

Manifestos call for public incitement; they call for action. However, because of their persuasive character, they use scientific language and arguments to do so. In the descriptive analysis of selected manifestos that follows, we consider the recent methodological variations on context-sensitive approaches to historical educational research (Landwehr 2008, 2019), which have been further developed across other disciplines.

We refer to a selection of manifestos that have gained public attention, including some that generally address current and future crises and developments and some more specifically concern (adult) education. Our selection showcases the plenitude of crises and points to the wicked problems education is confronted with. In contrast to postmodern diagnosis, we do not see these manifestos as a sign of the ‘end of history’ but as references and indicators to the loss of certainties in contemporary societies. To recollect the history of manifestos, we mention two classics: the “Kommunistisches Manifest” (1848) by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and the “Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo” (1909) by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. As the former called for the unification of all proletarians and the latter for violence and destruction to promote a machine-driven future, they make clear that manifestos can promote both right- and left-wing movements.

From manifestos operating at the general political level, we mention three recent ones, which are grounded in social sciences and have support in the academic world. One is the “Convivialist Manifesto” (2014), published by a group around the French sociologist Alain Caillé. It is directly linked to a critique of neoliberalism and seeks new collective, convivialist forms of living together on the planet in local initiatives. A second edition – “Convivialist international” – was published in 2020. While the former stresses the fact of interdependencies in human living, the latter calls for convivialism as an international movement towards a post-neoliberal world. Another example from social theory is Bruno Latour’s “The Terrestrial Manifesto”, published in 2018. In Latour’s view, the struggle of social classes has become the struggle of geo-social places. Climate issues, geopolitical disputes, social injustices and inequalities are intertwined. Therefore, the question “How do we find a habitable ground?” represents the wicked *conditio humana* of our times (Latour, 2018, pp 17ff.). As a third example, most of the multiple crises have been addressed by the work of more than 250 researchers in the International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP) who have attempted to appraise the potential contributions of the social sciences to solutions towards a just and sustainable society. As an interim result, “A Manifesto for Social Progress” (Fleurbay, 2018) was published; it provides ideas for new paths to resolve the crisis of the welfare state.

Among manifestos grounded in educational sciences, an invocation was published online in 2015 under the title “For solidarity in education in the global

migration society". This appeal reacted to forceful displacement and migration, described by Wolfgang Klafki as "'epochal-typical key problems of our present and possible future'" (Aufruf 2015). The invocation intervened when debates about the "Flüchtlingskrise" turned xenophobic in Germany. According to the authors and subscribers, "pedagogic and social organisations and institutions of education have a central role to respond to current global conditions" (Aufruf 2015).

In 2019, a network of members of the Austrian adult education community formulated a brief "Manifesto for Critical Adult Education 2019" consisting of eleven theses addressed "to all those who take seriously the mission and the possibility of adult education to contribute to a society that enables a good life for all".

The COVID-19 pandemic led to some additional manifestos. The manifesto "Work: Democratize, Decommodify, Remediate" was published in 2020 and signed by more than 3,000 researchers from universities and academic institutions around the world. The clear appeal was to "stop treating human beings as resources so that we can focus together on sustaining life on this planet".² Another, the "The Hagen Manifesto on New learning"³ (2021), reacted to the transformations towards digital teaching that were promoted due to the pandemic. It associated new teaching methods with new working methods and the transformations in the economy. Like the previous manifestos, it called for (adult) educators to contribute to a better life.

The two last manifestos come from outside the academy and directly address adult education. The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) published a manifesto in 2015/2019 as an invocation to politics to support adult education. This manifesto, "Manifesto for Adult Learning in the 21st Century", outlines the "transformative possibilities and the power and joy of learning". The aim of this manifesto is "to develop a knowledge society that can deal with the challenges of our time", and it argues for "sustainable investments" in adult education on different levels. The reference to sustainable development is linked to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. In 2019, the launching of an annual 'European Bildung Day' led to the publishing of "Better Bildung, Better Future. A Bildung Manifesto for a Global Renaissance 2.0" (2021)⁴ by the European/Global Bildung Network. Its mission for global reach is as follows: "Better Bildung. Better Future. We honestly believe in that: The world would be a wiser, safer, more friendly, sustainable, and meaningful place with more bildung. It would also allow us to create a metamodern future that unites the best from the past and the present" (Global Bildung).⁵ It explicitly offers "Bildung" as the key to solve the multiple crises.

2 <https://democratizingwork.org>

3 <https://www.fernuni-hagen.de/english/university/hagen-manifesto.shtml>

4 <https://www.globalbildung.net/manifesto/>

5 [Accessed February 2022]. Since then, the website of the European Bildung network has disappeared, and the network is only mentioned in the Global Bildung network-site: <https://www.globalbildung.net/>.

The selected manifestos are distinct in their ambitions and messages. Generated in the academic community, the manifestos try to grasp causes for crises in order to give basic orientation and to find guidelines for action. Some initiatives amalgamate with relevant think tanks, associations and other organisations. Manifestos related to educational sciences analyse certain societal problems and call for the educators to search for solutions to crises, but they do not promise salvation. Others, such as the EAEA manifesto, follow a traditional narrative of political lobbying, trying to show the benefits of more support of adult education. In line with the mentioned manifestos and distinct at the same time is the *Bildung* Manifesto from Nordic/European/Global *Bildung*, which promises global salvation of multiple crises through a new understanding of *Bildung*. This will be discussed in the sections below.

3 Decontextualised slogans and fake promises

In adult education, the Nordic *Bildung* organisation, with its projects ‘European *Bildung*’ – and the ‘Global *Bildung*’ network projects and its links to parallel organisations and networks, is a representative case of sloganisation (Pavlenko, 2019) and concept production (Narotzky, 2007). It disseminates conceptual slogans through websites, social media platforms, podcasts, videos, e-publications, training and events.⁶ This article is not the place to provide explanations or truths about the phenomenon but to show some conceptual inconsistencies and false promises of ‘Nordic *bildung*’, as one of the gospels offered to (popular) adult education at the attraction markets, when it strives for justification and a distinctive mission (Andersen, 2021). The launching of the neologism ‘*bildung*’ is exemplary of concept sloganisation in product competition, as well as creating a positive impression, shaping public opinion, and creating desire for products through project campaigns.

The attraction that ‘Nordic *bildung*’ has achieved among European adult education organisations seems to lie in the appropriation of figures and interpretations of ‘*Bildung*’ in Denmark or Nordic and German-speaking countries, and in showcasing Nordic countries as most advanced in the world, paving the way towards universal peace, prosperity, democracy and human rights. The organisation promises that “based on the very best from the cultural evolution around the globe, we will break away from the kind of thinking that has created the major problems facing humanity... develop models and understandings that people around the globe can use in order to create a meaningful and sustainable future”.⁷

In the selective appropriation of *Bildung* theory in German-speaking traditions in ‘Nordic *bildung*’, most notable is the association of Friedrich

6 <https://www.nordicbildung.org/>

7 <https://www.nordicbildung.org/>

Schiller's hierarchisation of humans according to their level of 'Bildung' with Robert Kegan's hierarchical model of psychological (moral) development of individuals. According to Andersen et al. (2017), "What emerged was the understanding that people must be able to control their emotions, internalize the norms of society and take individual moral responsibility. In German, this kind of personal ego-development goes under the name Bildung". The narrative of German Bildung thinkers smartly justifies the actual detachment of 'Nordic bildung' from the conceptual intertwining of Bildung with spirit, humanness and culture, which is fundamental for German Bildung-theories (Busche, 2014). At the same time, it neglects to recognise their inherent nationalist agendas (Wischmann, 2018). The conceptual separation allows psychological translations of Bildung theories: Bildung is reduced to individual empowerment towards metamodernity, spirit to hierarchies of inner awareness, humanness to types of people, and culture to adoption of cultural codes and memes. Such reduction of Bildung concepts may be attractive to the adult education community, but it may also be caused by the historical neutralisation of Bildung into a taken-for-granted generic term, which can be addressed to any educational or training measures.

Yet, the production of the 'Nordic bildung' concept primarily relies on the decontextualised and calculating appropriation of Nordic folk edification traditions, with Danish Folk High School depicted as their emblem: "Strange as it may sound, the hopes of the American and French Revolutions, the Romantic nationalism of the German Idealists and the industrious pragmatism from the UK all came together in a farmhouse on the small Danish island of Funen in 1851... What they had just invented was deliberate ego-development and it came to be known as folk-Bildung" (Andersen et al 2017). The narrative about folk edification as the basis for superiority of Nordic countries builds on several conceptual and historical misinterpretations, but here we can only make few superficial remarks.

Instead of being a translation from German Bildung, the concepts used in Nordic folk edification have their own idea- and political-historical meanings. Already, the translation of the Danish concept 'folkeoplysning' (~folk enlightenment) into 'folk bildung' is misleading since it was deliberately introduced as an alternative to the elitist and foreign 'dannelse' (~Bildung) (Grundtvig, 1836; Lyby, 2004; Korsgaard 2022). Furthermore, despite historical connections and mutual influences between Nordic countries, it can barely be claimed that the model of Danish Folk High School was transferred to other Nordic countries, and even less that it represents the diverse forms of Nordic folk edification (Heikkinen, 2019).

The Finnish vocabulary exemplifies differences between German and Nordic interpretations of folk edification. In Finland, the concept of 'kanssa' (~folk) has been essential, traditionally referring to inhabitants, mighty beings or a majority in some existential sphere (forest, lake, sky, territory), with humans among other creatures. It is used for most societal and political phenomena, whereas German

and Scandinavian concepts related to ‘Nation’, ‘national’, ‘Bürger’, ‘citizen’, do not refer to folk or Volk. ‘Kansansivistys’ (~folk edification) has connected to diverse and competing projects to transform from separate communities, estates and classes into an ethnic and social collective, towards a political and economic entity that is eventually governed and developed by folk members. Therefore, it does not directly translate into concepts like Volksbildung, popular or liberal adult education (Apo, 1995; Hyvärinen et al., 2004, Kettunen, 2006; Kokko, 2016; Heikkinen, 2019).

The meanings and diverse institutions of ‘kansansivistys’ in Finland cannot be understood without their connection to continuous political and conceptual rivalries about ‘kansa’. The hegemonic Fennoman movement (since the 1830s-1840s) aimed at defending the status of the Finnish-speaking political and economic elites by introducing edification as a nationalist version of German neo-humanist Bildung. While the majority of ‘kansa’ comprised rural peasants, tenants and workers, an alternative interpretation of rural/peasant edification emerged (since the 1870s-1880s), building on earth-mindedness, ‘folklikeness’ of education, economy and governance. It emphasised power and ownership of land by ‘kansa’. Nevertheless, it was challenged by the inequalities among the rural populations; thus, the solution was searched through the slogan ‘land to the landless’ (Liakka, 1918/1991; Heikkinen, 2016). During the integration of Finland into global capitalism (at the turn of the 20th century), industrial workers became part of the folk, ‘työkansa’ (~working folk). The general suffrage of 1906 and independence from Russia in 1917 accelerated the separation between rural and workers’ edification. The hegemonic social democratic workers’ edification emphasised the inclusion of worker-mindedness of ‘nation state society’ and ‘citizenship’, which required scientification and rationalisation of education, economy and governance. Because of its focus on worker aristocracy and on class compromise (since the 1940s–1950s), the challenge of mixed workers, land and forest labourers, and the unemployed was addressed with the slogan ‘work to the workless’. Both left- and right-wing interpretations of edification have been marginalised as folk incitement, agitation and propaganda (Heikkinen, 2019; Aaltonen et al., 1991). The example from Finnish history shows the implausibility of claims about a unanimous tradition of ‘Nordic bildung’. It alerts about the anachronistic exploitation of conceptions of ‘folk edification’, which have gone through major transformations in Nordic countries.

However, in order to sell the product ‘Nordic bildung’, it had to resonate with the pedagogical and strategic needs of adult education practitioners, providers and policymakers, and their concerns for current crises. For this purpose, it is wrapped up in tools that are universally attractive and applicable. The most popular tool is the ‘Bildung Rose’⁸. Without a logical link to the narratives of

8 <https://www.nordicbildung.org/the-bildung-rose/>. It has been widely disseminated and applied, for example, in the EAEA Bildung-project, <https://eaea.org/project/bildung/>.

‘Nordic bildung’, it presents a universal model of any societal entity according to seven ontological domains: production and technology, forming what is physically possible; aesthetics, science and power, representing what might be possible; and narrative and ethics, representing what ought to be. It allows practitioners and policymakers to map ‘the relationship between self and society in a way that orients us toward the well-being and flourishing of both’.

4 Bildung hype and the crisis of the welfare state

There are more serious reasons for practitioners, policymakers and researchers of adult education should be concerned about the Bildung hype. Especially as ‘Nordic bildung’, it provides a distinctive response to one of the crises mentioned above – namely, the crisis of the welfare state. The crisis has multiple facets and may be understood from different perspectives, including the new conditions for national states in the “risk society” (Beck, 1986), the worlds of welfare capitalism (Esping-Andersen, 1990) or the varieties of capitalism (Hall & Soskice, 2001). The crisis has become part of the European political discourse after the economic stagflation crisis of the late 1970s, in parallel to the advent of neo-conservatism and neoliberalism. Two aspects were dominantly affecting education: first, the problems of mobilising financial resources for the welfare services combined with the more general accusation of state expenditure as being inefficient, and second, the conservative rhetoric of producing “organised irresponsibility” by providing too much social security through the state welfare services. The provision of good and just public education services had been a main part of the welfare state expenditure but came under pressure by financial austerity and the neoliberal call to dismantle the “state monopoly” by providing private services on the market. As the population’s main resource is “human capital”, the principal purpose of education services was defined to contribute to the stocks and flows of human capital.

While education for increasing human capital became an important political priority across political camps, education markets were pushed forward on a global scale in order to provide the services in a more efficient way. Reflecting the faith in schooling for workplace preparation as a remedy for all problems in the United States and beyond that has been evident over decades, Grubb and Lazerson (2004) coined the term ‘Education Gospel’ to refer to this belief system. They have already pointed to the need to expand the purpose of education beyond skills and credentials to civic goals and learning for its own sake. Marvin Lazerson (2005) has formulated their message as follows:

“The central dilemma of the belief system we call the Education Gospel is that it wants to use education as a substitute for other social policies to reduce unemployment, to alleviate poverty, to narrow the distribution of

earnings, and to end racial differences. This substitution is self-defeating. We cannot moderate the enormous inequalities in our society simply by improving education (...) The fact is that we cannot fix schools without fixing inequality, and we cannot fix inequality without fixing schools (...) The Education Gospel then is a trap, because it turns us into believers that schools can accomplish everything, and therefore we have to do little else (...) To believe that education is our way to salvation is to live a terrible lie.”

Even before the term “education gospel” was coined, Colin Crouch and his colleagues attempted to address the question of “Are skills the answer?”. Their comparative project covered France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden, the UK and the United States (Crouch et al., 1999), and it came up with similar results to those of Grubb and Lazerson (2004). The political focus on skills has crowded out all other attempts of employment creation without solving the problem, and the provision of skills has broadly shifted into the realm of private enterprises.

According to the Nordic Bildung narrative, Bildung and Nordic folk edification have contributed to economic, social and moral superiority of German-speaking and Nordic countries.⁹ They repeat established criticisms about the narrow focus of education on economic purposes and deliberately criticise the previous orientation towards human capital (production and technology) include educational dimensions in their purposes (democracy, digitalisation, sustainability). The salvation agenda is attractive for adult education in that it integrates education and developmental psychological and as socio-cultural-evolutionary concepts of ‘Bildung’. It goes beyond previous education gospels by promising that by adopting ‘Folk-bildung 3.0’, other countries could follow the Nordics to metamodernity, and humankind would be saved from its multiple crises. The website of Nordic Bildung states that “As a cultural code, metamodernity contains both indigenous, premodern, modern, and postmodern cultural elements and thus provides social norms and a moral fabric for intimacy, spirituality, individuality, and complex thinking. It has the potential to protect our cultures and cultural heritage as the economy, the internet and exponential technologies are going global and disrupting our current modes of societal organization and governance”.¹⁰

Through retroactive explanations of ‘Nordic success’ by individual ‘bildung’, the narrative ignores the political essence of the welfare state and the historical emergence of Nordic welfare systems that had been exemplary to the capitalist world (e.g., Katzenstein, 1984, 1985). However, there is broad evidence that the reasons for Nordic success lie elsewhere than in the tradition of (Danish) folk-edification, such as democratic advancement of comprehensive, vocational and

9 <https://nordicbildung.org>, also Andersen 2021, 2022.

10 <https://nordicbildung.org/metamodernity-paper>

higher education or social and economic policies (e.g., Koivunen et al., 2021). The explanation offered by ‘Nordic bildung’ completely sets aside the massive amount of research in various disciplines which shows education rather as an outcome than an explanatory factor in the emergence and functioning of Nordic welfare states.

Nordic Bildung, with its networks, is one of the new “think tanks” and philanthropic organisations/networks that are trying to put aside the public democratic institutions in political and societal practices. Social welfare and education should no longer be provided by ‘state monopolies’ but by actors, funded by companies and philanthropic donations from winners in the global financial capitalist markets (Lassnigg, 2022).

Although the crisis of the welfare state has not been resolved, there are plenty of ongoing discourses on how its achievements can be sustained and how to avert other crises that must be resolved in parallel. Adult education, among other forms of education, may only play a minor role, and in this context the ‘Nordic bildung’-gospel most surely damages more than it helps.

5 The crisis of (academic) adult education?

An important question remains: among the diverse manifestos and their protagonists, why has the ‘Nordic bildung’ gospel, with its considerable flaws, gained so much response from the adult education community in the face of multiple crises? For example, numerous umbrella organisations of popular adult education have adopted it in their projects and strategies. We assume that there is a bundle of integrated factors behind the attraction of manifestos and salvation agendas: the controversial status of academic adult education, the challenge of nation states in front of globalisation and multiple crises, the conquest of the public sphere by private and philanthropic actors and networks, and finally the lack of critical historical scanning of Bildung concepts and theories.

Adult education has always been highly contested as a field of practice and semi-professionalisation, as an academic discipline and as a complex policy field. The institutionalisation of adult education has been closely related to the political, social and economic formation of different types of welfare states. Historically, in 18th- and 19th-century Europe, nation states and schooling systems were formed in close connection. In many contexts, folk education (Volksbildung) has subsequently transformed into adult education (Erwachsenenbildung). Despite its roots in social movements, such as the workers’ movement, adult education started to institutionalise not only as a compensation or complement to schooling but also as continuing vocational education, staff development, and the provision of higher education qualifications for adults. Adult education has become highly diverse and the most flexibly transforming field of education.

While the multiple crises reach beyond nation states, the traditional institutions of welfare states have been challenged. The established institutions and patterns of adult education as a field of practice and academic discipline are in danger of losing their justification as national representatives of adult education. In the era of global attention and attraction markets, academics lose their position in conceptualising what is and what goes on in the world. When the stage is open to new actors without entanglement in established frameworks of adult education, the salvation agendas with nostalgic narratives are attractive for actors in the field who are searching for justification, a mission and strategies for their existence.

We assume that the attraction of the Bildung hype in adult education indicates a more fundamental crisis of academic adult education because of its parasitic relationship to practice and policy and their subservient role in dominant social, economic and educational policies.¹¹ The protagonists of the Bildung hype and their collaborators gain their market niche using seemingly academic narratives and tools, applying recent developmental psychology for visioning cultural and societal meta-modernity via individual spiritual development. However, adult educators could ask whether Eurocentric Bildung and folk edification have in fact contributed to the colonialist and capitalogenic process, leading to the Anthropocene and planetary crises. From outside the Global North and from the perspective of nonhuman entities, the Bildung process may expose a much uglier 'Bild' of ideal humanness.

The concept of Bildung, its historical foundations and transformations are not only widely discussed in German-speaking countries but are also considered in general education research and science. Numerous articles related to 'Bildung' have been published in the last decade in such sources as the Journal of Philosophy of Education, Educational Philosophy and Theory, the Journal of Curriculum Studies, *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* (e.g., special issue in 2015). However, so far, these awakening and reflective discourses have taken place largely unnoticed by academic adult education research. Does the lack of critical, historicising conceptualisation and theorisation of adult education leave the forum open to digital networks and private companies that appropriate random figures and traditions of education to produce their business concept? There have been many renaissances of Bildung, but the current one is new in that it combines the local and the global by neglecting their concrete historical interdependency.

11 Examples <https://www.debildungacademie.nl>, <https://fetzer.org>, <https://www.metamoderna.org>, <https://systems-souls-society.com>, <http://www.whatisemerging.com/>, <https://integrallife.com/>, <https://www.innerdevelopmentgoals.org/>, <https://www.u-school.org/hub>.

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