

ERD 2016: Education, Reflection, Development, Fourth Edition

Historical Perspective in Educational Research

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Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.12.2>

Within the scientific research, the new findings start, in a great extent, from elements that were already stated. The appeal to history as a form of acquiring knowledge is often integrated with the complex process of designing, developing and interpreting new educational theories. The historical perspective on educational research is relevant to dealing with and solving problems that scientific knowledge in the field of education is facing nowadays. The history of science of education is closely linked to its timeliness. Integrating the historical perspective on educational research into the current approach to scientific knowledge is a major factor determining important innovations, developments and improvements introduced in the theory and practice of education. This statement is based on the fact that the historical perspective is not just a simple "chronicle of events", but a significant contribution relevant to the advancement of knowledge. In the content of this article we emphasized the importance of relating the history of educational sciences to its present, underlining the contribution of the conceptual heritage acquired over time to actual and future developments.

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Keywords: Educational Research; Education; Historical Perspective in Research.

1. Introduction

Education research is going through a complex process of evolution, generated by major changes affecting both its extrinsic aspects, particularly the role it plays in everyday educational practice, and its intrinsic, immanent features defining its epistemological profile. There is a strong correlation between the changes that occurred in the status of knowledge and research in the field of education, their



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increasing influence on school life and beyond, and the process of internal evolution, marked by a significant conceptual and methodological progress.

It is often stated that there are actually two main pathways to progress in education science: 1) conducting experimental research; 2) critically capitalize and harness the intellectual acquisitions acquired through reading, reflection, intuition and generalization of practical education experience. These two means are complementary, all the more since not everything can be subjected to rigorous testing and experimenting.

2. The Appeal to History in Education Science

The education research cannot be reduced to the mere acts of observation and empirical investigation based on which we acquire knowledge about, improve or innovate the education phenomenon. We also have to take into account the fact that many epistemological theories should be validated by historical and scientific data, and that the history of science, as Thomas Kuhn (1977) uttered, can be both a source of problems and an originator of insights or inspiration, contributing to the development of new approaches and interpretations in this domain.

Acquiring education knowledge cannot be separated from the major themes brought about by the history of this subject of specialization. Thus, history is faithful to its etymology: it actually is a form of research¹. Historical knowledge has a certain element that experimental and practical, direct knowledge is lacking: in human history one cannot only draw conclusions and interpolate based on ideas, facts and events that once happened; moreover, one can trace and follow the silver thread and evolution of past ideas and deeds due to our capacity of reviving those past interests, plans, programs and projects.

In the modern development of education science there is a clear trend towards amplification, towards methodological expansion. The appeal to historical research is sometimes justified by the methodological and theoretical pluralism theory, which, as stated by Karl Popper (1981), is needed to ensure the progress of scientific knowledge. In order to enrich the content of these theories, we need to invent new alternatives, then multiply and further develop them. We must avoid any form of methodological reductionism and above all, monopoly. Nonetheless, recourse to a range of methods, techniques and research tools is beneficial to the researcher.

Gaston Bachelard (1969) believes that science must be regarded as having a central position in history. Historicity of science lies in the fact that any scientific discovery represents a moment in the evolution of scientific thinking. In Bachelard's opinion, the history of science is not an absolute deterministic process. The discovery and acquiring of new knowledge involves the continuation of old knowledge and intellectual acquisition, but also their denial. This perspective leads to the development of science as a whole.

One of the most important features of the current evolution of scientific knowledge in the domain of education is the integration of historical and evolutionary perspective. The distinguished professor G. G. Antonescu (1937) pointed out the fact that progress in education science was made through

¹ In ancient Greek, the word *ιστορία* meant "learning through research".

evolution and not by revolution. Many elements of pedagogical principles, methods and ideas about education are rooted in theoretical and practical experiences of the past. An old idea or principle may be required for current and future decisions. The history of science is strongly attached to its timeliness, whether intentionally or unintentionally. In fact, any further research development in the field of history of science is closely linked to the development of science itself.

No doubt, acquiring knowledge about the past is what illuminates the course and evolution of science. Moreover, in contemporary science, knowledge is increasingly assuming its historical perspective as an internal dimension. The appeal to history also seems to be a particular expression of an evolutionary way of thinking, of an investigative activity focused on education and information, with objectives and cognitive structures that are designed in such a way as to reflect evolution in science (Pârvu, 1981). From this perspective, Jean Piaget (1970) is making reference to the specific of research in social sciences and humanities in general and talks about combining historical knowledge which analyses the "genetics of concepts" with the knowledge that is centred on the epistemological legitimacy of concepts that are specific to a certain field of study. These concepts are examined in the context of the existing principles, judgments and arguments already validated at the level of the whole system of reference, which in the case of pedagogy is education.

The appeal to history can enlighten us on some conceptual pathways in the evolution of science, ensuring a solid foundation for new theoretical approaches. The aim of historical research is to systematically recover and restore ideas and meanings of the past that can influence and shape the present. Therefore, we can safely imply that a critical history of education is actually a pragmatic history, with consequences on the present and future. Without such historical journeys at least at a conceptual level, neither the present, nor the future of science can be determined. As Noam Chomsky (1968) pointed out, the history of science can contribute effectively to the advancement of existing fields of research, since it allows the maintaining of a broader pool of ideas that can subsequently contribute to the extracting of valuable hypotheses and principles, especially when current theoretical structures cease to be operational.

3. Historical Thinking

Significant changes in current pedagogy and practical education experience reflected the need of rethinking and redefining fundamental objectives, methods, rules and standards. On the other hand, determining the epistemic profiling of current pedagogy implies, at the same time, the use of statistical and non-statistical data, of informational, structural and functional elements that are simultaneously open to genesis and evolution. This type of complexity of theories is associated with a new methodological consciousness, a new understanding of these ideas as evolutionary entities, from a historical point of view. Many elements comprised in teaching principles, in methods and ideas about education are rooted in theoretical and practical experiences of the past. The appeal to past concepts, rules, opinions or theories that are still valid, can be useful, even necessary, in making present and future decisions.

Historical thinking is not an isolated characteristic of contemporary pedagogy, but an element that is in close interrelation with other features, since they are influencing and affecting each other, as a cluster of inseparable traits. The presence of a historical dimension in the current education knowledge and research is reflected in the direct and increased interest of educators in the history of the discipline they are teaching. This raises the following question: does current pedagogy, as a distinct discipline, really need its history? In other words, what relevance can the research of history of pedagogy have in overcoming challenges that are now before scientific knowledge?

Constantin Cucos offers us a pertinent answer: "...education, as it is today, is not our discovery, it has been the discovery of others before us, often applied to the existing conditions specific to certain times and places. Our merit simply consists in our ability to select, retrieve and apply the ideas that prove to be more fertile in a given situation. Ideally, we should be able to move forward and add new, innovative ideas to the existing knowledge... We cannot think and rethink everything relating to education, even if it would be very tempting to do so. The education thinking system has stratified in time; it made a cumulative journey having as a result the further gathering of information and ideas that continued to collect, complement and contradict each other, at times. To advance a new idea, one is bound to first be familiar and comprehend those discovered by ones' predecessors and contemporaries" (Cucos, 2001, p. 7). For a conscience aspiring to systematically articulate its beliefs, it is clear that the mobilizing of historical experience in order to justify and support any new approach is required.

4. Epistemological Value and Significance of History of Pedagogy

Gaining insight into the history of pedagogical thinking is not only an act of reconstructing the past of paideutics, but also a valuable opportunity to reveal the valuable dimensions of a tradition that can inspire and foster present and future efforts. The historical method of research in education helps us understand change and continuity over time, in placing events, ideas and people in the context of their social, political, cultural and economic function. The study of history tends to comprise the ultimate narrative, one that explains and interprets through different theoretical and methodological lenses, ideas and events of the past. William Weirisma describes historical research as "a systematic search of facts and subsequently using the information acquired to describe, analyse and interpret the past" (Weirisma, 2000, p. 218).

Historians use the interpretation of the past to offer a perspective on the present. Regardless of the field of knowledge or research that interests us, regardless of social practices in which we engage, we cannot discover the truth and build up any structure by being indifferent to what our ancestors have achieved. We discover truths and erect new edifices based on what our ancestors have learned and built generations ago, on what has been preserved as valuable of their work. In the field of education, as well as in other areas, one cannot take innovation and reformation efforts by denying and tearing down everything that has been done up to that point, stating, at the same time, that we want a new structure, built of completely different materials than those used before.

Any innovative approach also entails capitalisation, making whole and increasing of a fund of ideas acquired in time: "... we can use the past in a fruitful manner only if we understand that inheriting also

implies transformation (...). History can never be the cause of death of the past, since every action we take and every plan we make involves the reassessment, reviewing and the recreation of the past, in a more or less conscious manner" (Lowenthal, 2002, p. 451). Naturally, any pedagogical conception is specific to its own time. Some think it even envisages its time, caught in education principles and ideas. In other words, a pedagogical conception should be considered and understood in relation to the historical circumstances in which it was created and whose expression is. The appeal to history can serve not only to the creation of new theories but also to their critical analysis and selection. In current methodology, there is an increasingly admitted idea of the historicity or temporality of scientific theories, as well as of their outlining as historical evolutionary entities.

Many of the thoughts and principles of the past now appear to us as obsolete, irrelevant or susceptible to critics and it is only natural for this to happen. But we do not relate to the past with the aim of rendering it absolute and preserve it in its established forms, but to reconsider, transform and overcome it. At the same time, we must be aware that of the fact that we cannot build anything new and stronger than what has been achieved so far without looking back and learn from the experience of the past, from its successes and failures. The appeal to past experience can give more consistency to our prospective vision, allowing us to identify the elements that can be further capitalized and helping us to guard ourselves against committing potential errors or reactivating principles or solutions that proved to be dysfunctional.

Many contemporary researchers have a dual attitude towards the epistemological value and significance of the history of pedagogy. On the one hand, they admit to this reality, but on the other hand, they are inclined not to grant an equally important role to the history of pedagogy in relation to the actual science in its broad sense. More frequently than not, the historical perspective on the domain is summarily or implicitly valued, since it is considered that we are prone to preserve only what is strictly necessary of the history of current pedagogical knowledge, in a modified form, therewith. In addition, it is acknowledged that the appeal to history provides a good guidance for a thorough epistemological analysis of a given collection of information and applications. From this perspective, a complex process occurs, in which the history of pedagogy is transformed from a descriptive discipline in a conceptual, explanatory and interpretative subject of research, able to contribute to the creation and establishment of a series of evolution laws that can serve as foundation of future research strategies and projections.

In order to understand the heuristic role of the history of pedagogy, its actual contribution to the creation, interpretation and selection of new hypotheses and theories (which is possible in so far as history can reveal viable alternatives to current theories, in the sense that history uncovers a very diverse range of perspectives) a special approach is warranted in the evolution of knowledge. From the perspective of the theory of pedagogy, understanding the role of its history as a decisive element in the emergence of historical orientation in current research, occurred in several ways: 1) educators became more interested in the history of the discipline they are teaching, as a source of reliable data they use in formulating, justifying and looking with a critical eye at their own theories and their epistemological analysis; 2) educators also became more sensitive to the idea that the attitude of researchers towards a

certain theory also depends, in fact, on its origin, its prior development and its anticipated further development.

The active role of the history of pedagogy increasingly manifests itself in moments of founding new directions in the scientific research of fundamental problems. At that moment, when principles and basic concepts are being discussed, one can no longer argue in favour of an innovative theory only by turning to the methodological standards already established and accepted nowadays. In fact, we need to make use of the entire historical experience of science in order to justify the new approach. Serge Tomamichel (2016, p. 151) speaks about a "subordination of historical research in the field of education, to the current issues specific to the discipline". In other words, knowing and acknowledging the past has plays an essential function of clarifying contemporary key issues.

Far from being isolated from other manners of approach to education, the history of pedagogy becomes a part of a complex study, specifically interacting with other perspectives on the discipline. In this process, the history of pedagogy went beyond being a mere chronicle of events, of stories about the life and work of great artists and their achievements, and of the circumstances in which they were acquired. In fact, the history of pedagogy evolved towards a conceptual explanation of the historical development of education. It aims at explaining the establishment and perpetuation of research traditions, of the factors involved in changes of paradigm, of the methods and "thinking style" that are specific to certain periods of time, of underlying norms and values. History can thus contribute to the understanding of education science both as a social phenomenon and a manner of acquiring knowledge.

The history of pedagogy must overcome its status of mere provider of examples or counterexamples by becoming an explanatory undertaking which explicitly uses explicit generalizations, as well as schemes and conceptual models. Research must be directed toward the revealing of laws of development of education systems, of conditions and factors that favour this approach. From a general perspective, researches in the history of pedagogy have a cultural importance. We consider that in order to be a competent teacher or educator, with a wide horizon of knowledge in one's area of interest, acquiring theoretical guidelines and functional skills required by the daily working practices that are sometimes narrow and routine-based, is not sufficient. Knowledge of past achievements in the field of education, of interpretations they were given, gives consistency to professional training and opens new horizons in acquiring general knowledge. We will thus be able to understand the lifestyle specific to different eras, as well as those historical periods as such, since they are summarized in such theories and such institutions. The history of pedagogy, seen both from the perspective of concepts about education, and through the mirror of the institutions responsible for achieving and applying education into practice, is an important part of history of culture. In fact, it appears to be the very essence of it, since education gathers and reflects the needs, ideologies, tendencies and aspirations of each society.

5. Conclusions

In a rather narrow sense falling within the area of pedagogy that is of high interests to us, researching the past holds a definite formative value. We can have knowledge about and understand a certain science through the study of its history. Such an approach may, in fact, be an excellent

introduction to pedagogy as a discipline, because, when we know the manner in which different educators thought and organized education as a system, when we understand the close relationship between the educational requirements specific to different historical periods, and the principles, norms and methods applied, we gain extra training for current and potential theoretical and practical approaches.

A thorough insight in the history of pedagogy is necessary to properly know the origin of challenges and problems education is faced with, the conditions and contexts in which those problems were caused, from ancient times until nowadays. It is also interesting how ideas with regard to education and the institutions responsible for putting education into practice evolved. In other words, how was education theoretically understood and actually practiced, in function and in relation with other aspects such as social, cultural, political and economic life of human society.

Historical research is useful to us in addressing the issue of education, for it is hard to imagine that such a problem could be clarified now or some other times without knowing its past. But studying the history of pedagogy is necessary not only to ensure an extra share of formative training, i.e. to provide us with the abilities and skills necessary for detecting, understanding and deciphering the problems of contemporary pedagogy in order to contribute to its progress. It is also necessary because of the fact that in the content of past pedagogy we can find ideas that, in a more or less transformed manner, and based on new scientific foundations, prove to be valid and functional even today.

On the other hand, the investigation of experiences of the past forms the critical spirit of educators, protecting them from mistakes, exaggeration and routine. At the same time, this kind of inquiry can lead to the exploring of different currents and doctrines, from where educators can receive valuable suggestions for finding new and more appropriate solutions to the problems they have to deal with.

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