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HOFSTETTER, Rita, SCHNEUWLY, Bernard


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Sciences of education between disciplinary and professional field

An analysis of the tensions and pitfalls of the process of disciplinarisation

Rita Hofstetter & Bernard Schneuwly, University of Geneva

International exchanges are developing in the community of researchers in education and are favouring the adoption of different viewpoints, which are most beneficial for advancing the study of the future of sciences of education. The EERA symposium "Changing conditions of governance of educational research in Europe", in which researchers from different countries shared the same state of educational research at different places, is an important step in this direction. The participants were confronted with a surprising heterogeneity of configurations of the disciplinary field and its functions in national cultural contexts – a heterogeneity that is also noted in Gertler's preparatory paper to the symposium (1999). This heterogeneity appears first on the level of the institutional and disciplinary anchoring of educational research: strong (Lindblad, 1999) or weak (Hofstetter & Schneuwly, 1999) integration in universities; narrow (Fernandes, 1999) or distance (Callot, 1999) to teacher education and/or to political and administrative instances (Edwards, 1999); homogeneous field or composite area of sister disciplines (Callot, 1999). There is almost no proportion of researchers in function of the population in a country's national educational system. The heterogeneity also appears from the point of view of the internal evolution of the disciplinary field in what concerns the problems studied, the methodologies used, the privileged reference to other disciplines which differ from one country to another, from one institution to another, from one researcher to another and even from one research to another. This impression of heterogeneity is certainly amplified by the fact that the criteria of analysis, the object and problems to be presented and the points of view to be privileged are not clearly defined and by the fact that even in each national community, the disciplinary field is fragmented and difficult to describe as one entity. Besides observing heterogeneity - which by the way is as much a treasure as a weakness - the participants at the symposium could also note elements of convergence in the field. The best example is the parallels of the principal periods of the global evolution of educational research during the last hundred years. In many countries, pedagogy is installed in universities at the end and the very beginning of the century, generally in the same faculty as philosophy from which it emerged, and nearby the teachers who were to be educated. In the first decades of the century, the disciplinary field, though not really developing from a quantitative point of view, tended to become an empirical science at several places – sciences of the education or Erziehungswissenschaft, a science aimed at describing and analysing the educational reality in using methodologies of empirical research. In the context of the reform of school systems in the sixties, sciences of education have had their most important phase of growth, marked by the creation of many research institutions, working places and academic courses. This phase of growth resulted also in the creation of research associations in the field of education. In this way, sciences of education have progressively got a stronger institutional and social legitimacy, particularly in the academic world. Today, they have to face new challenges, due to the fact that social sciences are reconfigured, school systems and professional education are reformed and demands for more efficiency become more and more important. Higher scientific requirements appear at the same time as social demands become more consistent.

In this text, we will use the term "sciences of education" to speak about the disciplinary field, we know that this is the French term, but also the Portuguese (ciências da educação), the Spanish (ciencias de la educación) and the Italian (scienze di educazione); in using it in English, we want to contribute to the circulation of ideas and cultural notions. Note that the Germans would call it Erziehungswissenschaft, the singular of the same name. The Anglophone and Nordic countries speak about "educational research". Eastern countries seem to continue to use the traditional "pedagogy".

In this contribution, we will generally use the term "disciplinary field," "Disciplina" to be narrow to design sciences of education as academic institution. A more thorough discussion of this question would be interesting.

In their oral communications in the symposium, Rita mentions 120 professors for 5 million persons in Finland and Callot the same number for 50 million in France.
field. We have borrowed such concepts and tools in the rich conceptual and empirical arsenal of history and sociology of social sciences (among others Barnes et al 1970, 1978, 1979; 1995; Stichweh, 1991; Usages sociaux, ... 1996; Wagner & Wittrock, 1993) to try, together with many others who work on this still very new task in our domain (more particularly Beiler, 1987; Stichweh, 1993; Drewek & Lütth, 1998; Gasheter, 1991; Schrizerw, 1994; Tenor, 1994; Vigarello, 1994), to describe, analyse and theorise the active forces which act in the complex process of transformation of the disciplinary field.

We will treat the following aspects in this paper:

- Definition of our approach: the point of view of disciplinisation.
- Three constitutive tensions of the development of sciences of education and their pitfalls.
- Discussion: are these tensions specific to sciences of education?
- Illustration: forces and weaknesses of the field seen through national reports on sciences of education.
- Perspectives.

Definition of our approach: the point of view of disciplinisation

The point of view we adopt here — borrowed, as we said, to certain currents of history and sociology of sciences of education and already tested in our empirical investigations on the evolution of sciences of education in Switzerland and more particularly in Geneva (Hoffstetter & Schnurwein, 1997, 1998) — is focused on the field "educational research" or "sciences of education" as it exists really, concretely, in the course of time. It describes, analyses, questions the evolution of the institutional forms of the disciplinary field, of its human and financial resources, of its privileged domains of investigation, proper to it or shared with other disciplines, its networks and associations, of its capacities to educate new members of the community and thus to auto-reproduce itself. A disciplinary field is itself still in constant transformation, renews its objects, methods and approaches, its relationships to other fields as well as its social and institutional integration. This uninterrupted process — precisely depicted by the concept of "disciplinisation" — takes the form of a progressive differentiation from other constituting disciplines by fusion and fusion, — both being sometimes combined —, and by extension into spaces which are not yet explored by research (Becher, 1989). In order to define and analyse the forces of this process of disciplinisation (Rey, 1994; Schrizerw, Keiter & Charle, 1993; Stichweh, 1991; Zedler & König, 1989) one has to look at the emergence and the disapparition of domains and at the evolution of the socio-scientific relations and disciplinary anchoring and their incidence on the studied problems.

To adopt the point of view of disciplinisation means also to link the internal history of the intellectual results and the functioning of the disciplinary field to its external history and therefore to social demands, social integration and social reproduction which interest the field and allows to understand also how scientific practices are articulated with socio-professional practices and how scientific advances can transform these practices, and vice versa. The field of sciences of education is, therefore, viewed as the result of a construction of a great number of actors, whose professional and academic anchoring, whose disciplinary filiations, whose theoretical references, whose privileged interlocutors, whose forms of action and intervention, whose pedagogical and scientific issues have to be described and understood.

Thus this point of view does not refer to any ideal state of a discipline which should be attended to; it does not take into account any European Educational Researcher (Volume 5, Number 3, 2023) ideal definition of what should or could be a discipline, in reference to idealised disciplines which function as abstract models by their methods, their supposed homogeneity or their mode of capitalization of knowledge and results. It departs also radically from an a priori definition or classification of disciplines and domains on the basis of an ideal division of the real world. In contrast, attention is given to the effective practices of scientific production, to the progressive professionalization and academic institutionalisation, and to their cognitive but also socioprofessional transformations and controversies.

In the general process of disciplinisation, two contrasted types of claims can be schematized in the knowledge field on the fact that the constitution of established professional fields follows or precedes the process of disciplinisation. In the first case, a process of secondary professionalisation, in the second place one of secondary disciplinisation takes place. Like medicine, sciences of education belong to the second category which groups disciplines or disciplinary fields where strongly organised professional fields pre-existed whose professional knowledge was one basis on which the disciplinary field was established. This implies a particular relationship between discipline and profession and, like for medicine, a fundamentally pluridisciplinary constitution.

The two constitutive tensions of the development of sciences of education and their pitfalls

Our empirical investigations as well as the analysis of studies of other researchers on the sciences of education in Europe and North America, have confirmed that social sciences which analyse the process of disciplinisation, lead us to defend the following thesis which has of course to be proven in more detail, and which is given here for discussion: the disciplinary field of sciences of education is the result of two dynamic tensions which, at the same time, are the conditions of existence of the field and condition its concrete evolution. The tensions are the result of the necessity of any field with the professional fields where the disciplinary field originates on one hand, and with the other already existing or emerging disciplines on the other hand. They are the forces which propel, orient and condition the process of disciplinisation of sciences of education. They act with particularity against the domination of disciplinary field since it is the result of a process of secondary disciplinisation.

Let us look more precisely at the dynamic action of these two tensions, which act not only on the field as a whole but also on each researcher who is active in it.

1. Tension between adaptation to social demands linked to educational fields and quest of scientific recognition involving the management of disciplinary action, i.e. of the prismatic dimension. This tension concerns the relationship of nearness and distance each researcher or the disciplinary field as a whole has with socio-professional, political and/or administrative or economic demands, i.e. with the needs linked to educational action. The field of sciences of education emerges in response to strong and diverse social demands aiming at capitalising and theorising existing pragmatic knowledge in order to guarantee the efficiency of educational actions and systems. The emerging disciplinary field has thus to intervene in the education of teachers, of school administrators and of other educational professionals, in the definition of school politics and reforms, in the definition of school systems and programs, in the management of student flows, and so on. Inversely, the possibility itself to exist as a disciplinary field implies the construction of stable research objects, of commonly accepted research methods, of networks of communicating and discussing the results of research, of academic institutions which recognise the field. To sum up, it implies a social practice supposing that educational action is (partially) warranted.

In other words: the relationship — adaptation or distance — to the social demands linked to educational fields questions more generally the relationship between the discipline "sciences of education" and its object "educational action". This relationship has to do with the inevitable tension of scientific and professional requirements. The whole disciplinary field as much as any researcher working in the field is confronted to this tension: when she defines the research objects, the methodological instruments, the aims of the research, every researcher takes a position on the line of the tension; this implies also that the position is not definitive but acts as a dynamic tension to conceive objects, methods, interpretations.

In its extreme points, which act as forces of attraction, the tension can also provoke pitfalls.

a) The first pitfall relies on the fact that the adaptation to social demands becomes submission with the risk that the researchers confound their role with the one of the expert or the practician, the special social practice of knowledge construction with educational action, and the discipline with its object.

This first pitfall has as its possible consequence to appreciate the research in function of the only criterion of practical incidence and of efficiency of intervention.

Questions and problems are essentially defined in function of the demands of professional fields (in the large sense defined above) and not in function of questions and theoretical needs defined from inside the disciplinary field.

b) The second pitfall relies on the fact that the distance to the object, i.e. the educational action, becomes negation of the specificities of educational action, in other words: professional fields are treated only as fields for applying scientific theories.

The second pitfall has as its possible consequence to negate the specificities of educational phenomena because the necessary modalisation of the object of knowledge is neglected; the model in a certain sense is confounded with the application of the object. This risk becomes particularly evident when scientific knowledge and results, which are so to say constructed in laboratory situations, are invoked to define, by direct application of a number of references of a reform or scenarios of action in highly complex situations.

2. Tension between the autonomisation from the disciplines of reference and the necessarily pluridisciplinary constitution of sciences of education. This tension concerns the relationship the disciplinary field of sciences of education and each of its actors have with other social sciences and has also to do with the scientific attitudes and the disciplinary anchoring which are considered as being legitimate.

From their origin on — with important variations following the national traditions and political situations — sciences of education have to a certain degree become autonomous as a more or less unified disciplinary field in an academic context, in negotiating continuously the limits of its domain with the disciplines of reference: philosophy, psychology and sociology. The development of the field is thus very much embedded in the evolution of other social sciences whose contributions are integrated and at the same time remain independent in the definition of knowledge which is the point of departure for the emerging of new domains of investigation in sciences of education. In this subtle and complex process of disciplinisation, distances and links between sciences are sometimes claimed, sometimes hidden; the relationship to other disciplines appears thus as much as difference as reference to sister disciplines.

In other words, what we have to do with here is the relationship of distance and reference to already constituted disciplinary knowledge, which is considered as being legitimate from a scientific point of view. Again, the field as a whole as much as every single researcher is under this tension and inevitably based on philosophy.
centred on limited dimension of the research object, treated by methods which are (at least mentally) reproducible, is negated with reference to the specificity of the object "education" and in global, complex and singular character.

b) The second pitfall relies on the fact that the reference to constituted disciplinary knowledge
becomes an attitude of deference and dependence, so that only "pure" disciplinary approaches – the sister disciplines considered as mother disciplines – would have the authority to scientifically treat the object "education".

Thus, although being dynamic forces, each of the two tendencies contain in themselves at their extreme points pitfalls which will transform the disciplinary field as much as the characteristics of its object "education".

Are the tendencies specific to sciences of education?

There is no reason to think that the two tendencies described are specific for sciences of education. All disciplinary fields, and particularly those which are the result of a European Educational Researcher Volume 5, number 3 27 process of secondary disciplinarisation, are continuously forced to clarify their relationship to social demands and other constituted disciplines. But the tendencies act perhaps with a particularly von (Edwards in 1999; Lindblad, 1999)

process of secondary disciplinarisation, are continuously forced to clarify their relationship to social demands and other constituted disciplines. But the tendencies act perhaps with a particularly von (Edwards in 1999; Lindblad, 1999)

One could therefore ask the question: do sciences of education really exist as a disciplinary field? An idle question of course, because they exist without doubt on the institutional level, for they have, like other fields, their networks and scientific structures, they have their chairs, their study courses and their academic degrees, and so forth. Would their form be a form of non-existence because they appear to be so different? This conclusion could only be drawn on the basis of an abstract and normative definition of a disciplinary field. It seems to us to be more interesting and stimulating to approach sciences of education as a disciplinary field in constant evolution, in quest of an equilibrium to be permanently redefined and reconquered in function of the evolution of the professional fields and the disciplinary knowledge which act as poles of attraction and in regard to which any researcher has always to position himself or herself. In spite of the pitfalls they risk to produce, the tension forces as dynamic forces and offer the possibility for renewing the disciplinary field on the level of objects as much as on the level of its institutional, socio-professional and disciplinary anchoring.

Strengths and weaknesses of the field seen through national reports on sciences of education.

Illustrations

Sciences of education – as any disciplinary field – analyse regularly the state of research. Numerous reports are published which describe the situation of the discipline in different countries, the "European Educational Research Association" (EERA) has just initiated an inquiry concerning "Structure and organisation of educational R&D in European countries" whose results are synthesised by Grettler (1999). One can also mention the regular evaluation by the OICD. In accordance with the diversity of the national situations, the evaluation of the situations is divergent. In reading the reports edited in the last 5 years and the papers given in the EERA symposium "Changings conditions of Governance of educational research in Europe", one can note that sciences of education are being profoundly reorganised and that in many countries an important development at the same time can be observed in many weak points on which the participants at the seminar have also insisted (see also Calderhead, 1996, who makes a similar analysis). We will summarise briefly some points, which seem to be crucial to us.

a) Everywhere, one notes an important fragmentation of the research which is structured in a great number of projects of little scope, particularly in what concerns human resources engaged. The field is not structured by central questions. (Cailloit, 1999; Hoferterre & Schenewly, 1999; Klopogropol, 1995; Krüger & Rauschenbach, 1994; Rosengren & Öhman, 1994)

b) Research is not really based on an autonomous theorising and does not accumulate and synthesise produced results (Charlot, 1995; Nisbeth, 1995; OCDE, 1995; Tenorour, 1994).

c) The quality of research in education does not correspond to usual standards in social sciences – be they qualitative or quantitative. Educational interventions and expertise activities overcome empirical work (Cribler, 1998; Klopogropol, 1995; OCDE, 1995). (see European Educational Researcher Volume 5, number 3)

d) The financing of educational research is very poor; 0.27% of the total expenditure on education in average in Europe (McGraw, Kogan, & Tujiman, 1996). Funding becomes more dependent on local authorities and pragmatic criteria used to evaluate projects, in accordance with the diversity of the national systems (Cribler, 1998; Krüger & Rauschenbach, 1994).

e) International networking is poorly developed; more than in other disciplinary fields, research questions are strongly embedded in nationally determined pragmatical and theoretical contexts, defined by the history and the demands of the different educational systems (Cribler, 1998; Krüger & Rauschenbach, 1994).

f) The internal recruitment of the discipline is limited; sister disciplines furnish most persons taking the relief in sciences of education (Charles, 1993; Krüger & Rauschenbach, 1994; Popla, Grossenbacq & Vögel, 1993).

In what concerns the relationship to social demands, two contradictory positions appear. One defines research in education essentially through its contribution to the resolution of practical problems in education and thinks that a better articulation between research, practice and politics of education is the best guarantee for a harmonious development of the field (Bassey, 1995; Calderhead, 1996). The other one utilizes the risk of an "epistemic drift" (Rosengren & Öhman, 1997), linked to a dependence of the research from social demands considered as being too strong, resulting in the fact that research questions are not sufficiently defined in function of the logic of knowledge production and theorising (see also Tenorour, 1994).

The results of the reports of course do not give a unitary picture at all. They are the direct expression of contradictory tendencies, which structure and cross the field with its tensions and pitfalls. They represents themselves as are of course situated in this contradictory movement, even if they cannot adopt a position which would result in the abandoning of the disciplinary field itself (although in some countries, the notion of discipline or disciplinary field is absent).

In most reports, some options are nevertheless clearly present: definition of structuring questions for the field; necessity of an autonomous theorising and of scientifically founded expertise and of interinstitutional networks; more empirical research controlled by high quality standards; a higher percentage of expenditure for an independent educational research; development of academic centres as the disciplinary field for the education of a high level scientific relief. The fact itself that these options have to be defined and defended shows, so to say like a negative of a photograph, that even minimal requirements for a structured disciplinary field are still difficult to realise and that the pitfalls are strongly present in the real functioning of the disciplinary field.

Perspectives

We agree with the options defined in the reports. Although the development of sciences of education depends strongly on their capacity to adjust themselves to social, political, administrative and economic demands, the capacity to respond in an appropriate way to these demands depends in our view on the existence of a high quality scientific research which precisely is not subordinated to external needs of other fields or to particular localities. And this scientific research can exist and develop only if sciences of education are fully institutionalised as a disciplinary field in between the social sciences and if they are considered as such by their privileged interlocutors.

The analysis of the institutional situation of sciences of education in Europe and in North America encourages us to act in this sense. The movement of institutionalisation engaged forty years ago seems to enter into a new dynamic phase which is contradictory. On one hand, one can note a clear tendency towards financial support for educational research and to control more thoroughly the development of the disciplinary field by any different mechanisms like decentralisation and competition (Lindberg, 1999; Edwards, 1999). At the same time, evolution seems to contain the possibility for the disciplinary field to strengthen its base, of research education, others are transformed (Fernandes, 1999); new courses are proposed and their academic level raised. The raising of the qualification in education of teachers and of other professionals is one of the many factors which are making many countries favour deep reorganisations and contributes to develop the field (Cailloit, 1999b).
objects, domains and fields of investigation appear and research methodologies become more technical and more precise. One can also note an intensification of international co-operation through a growing number of international research projects and an increase of scientific supports and through the extension of networks of researchers in sciences of education. As shown by the EERA-inquiry (Gretler 1999), the nineties are also the decade a new vague of foundation of associations of researchers, most of them being associated to the EERA or to other international associations. These evolutions will probably allow sciences of education to educate finally its proper relief. The process of disciplinarianism goes on ...

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