Changing conditions and governance of educational research in Europe. Switzerland

HOFSTETTER, Rita, SCHNEUWLY, Bernard

Reference

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One of the aims of the European Educational Research Association is to foster the European dimension of educational research. One of the characteristics of educational research in Europe, however, is its diversity. Different national, cultural, demographic and economic factors have developed widely different educational systems. Suprisingly, during international conferences and colloquia, many educational researchers of different countries seem to meet comparable educational problems and challenges for research. One of the critical challenges for educational researchers across Europe is the change of conditions and governance of educational research. What are the common constraints that come along with the changes educational researchers face to face? What can educational researchers learn from one another in this respect? These questions were the reason for organizing a symposium during ECR 1999. More specifically, representatives from the educational research associations that are members of EERA were asked to address the following questions:

1. What are the conditions for educational research in the Dutch context?
2. What are current changes in conditions and what arguments have been used for such eventual changes?
3. How is educational research governed?
4. Have there been any recent changes in governance or debate about changes, and what arguments have been put forward for such changes?
5. Have there been any major reforms or reconstructions of educational research and if so, what role has educational research played?
6. Do such changes have implications for educational research?
7. What are our missions in international cooperation and what is needed to improve this cooperation?
8. Can cooperation lead to improvements in educational research? If so, in what ways?

In the following contribution, various authors from different countries tried to describe and analyze the past and current developments as to the changing conditions and governance of educational research. The article that follows (from Rita Hofstetter and Bernard Schneuwly) is a reflection on this overview of developments in educational research in the respective countries.

A follow-up symposium about this theme will be organised during the ECR 2000 conference. Interested authors should address queries on this symposium to the President of EER.

England and Wales

Anne Edwards (BERA)

The context of educational research in England and Wales

1. The New Labour Government was elected May 1997 on a platform of "Education, Education, Education!" and there has been a consequent rapid national implementation of pedagogic reforms e.g. a literacy hour in elementary schools. Several tensions have emerged as a result. Reforms have taken place without much attention to educational research, while educational research is desired by some policy makers as irrelevant and of poor quality and by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) for being inapplicable to practitioners.

Europe

European Educational Researcher

(Eds) Education governance and social integration and exclusion: National cases of educational systems and recent reforms. Uppsala reports on education no 34.


Switzerland

Rita Hofstetter and Bernard Schneuwly

State of sciences of education

Sciences of education in Switzerland have been analysed in several studies (see list of reference). The main results of these studies are the following.

On the institutional level, the studies show that sciences of education have undergone a very important development. Their integration into university has progressed since new research departments appeared and the possibilities to study sciences of education as an own subject expanded. Numerous regional institutions for educational research were created (in 1989 there were 77 institutions of research in education) at many places in Switzerland (about 200 full-time jobs; there are of course much more persons involved). The researchers have created the necessary instruments for doing scientific research like for instance a scientific society (about 400 members; several special interest groups for instance on history of education or intercultural education annual congresses), the Swiss Journal of sciences of education and more recently, the Swiss conference of coordination of educational research (CORECHIED).

Nonetheless, the development of educational research has taken place mainly outside universities, near the administrative and political authorities on the canton level. These authorities are eager to have efficient and rational means at their disposal to respond to problems of pedagogical and institutional governance. Thus, the studies in education develop very differently in function of the domains, the ones responding to the social needs of governing systems, practices and politics being clearly dominant. And they are split up in the different cantons of Switzerland.

The research projects in the sciences of education are not only isolated from each other, but also very limited in scope and persons involved and last generally for quite short time periods (no more than three years). Few institutions have a critical mass to do real high level research. There are only few people engaged on long-line jobs (about 100 persons), and many on short-time jobs in a zone of peripheral instability. This means that sciences of education are like a heterogeneous mosaic, which makes it very difficult to gain an international reputation. In what concerns finally research done in the context of teacher education, it remains very isolated because there is no infrastructure and not enough personal resources which could guarantee continuity. This reinforces the general tendencies observed.

From the point of view of content, the studies at disposal are less precise. On the basis of studies signalized in the Swiss centre of co-ordination of educational research (in 1993 571 information about different projects), these latter show nonetheless that projects devoted to compulsory school are largely dominant compared for instance to the domains of early childhood education, higher secondary school, university or adult education. Psychopedagogical and didactical studies are much more frequent than studies on macro-sociological dimensions or on the regulation of systems; studies with a more analytical or explicative function are dominant in
comparison with prospective, evaluative, synthetic and theoretical studies. Educational research develops mainly investigations, which are well articulated to social and political-administrative demands in the domain of education.

In what concerns finally the training in educational research and the question of a generational change, which begins in sciences of education after 30 years of existence, no study is specially devoted to this question. One can say that there is almost no institutionalized postgraduate training for young researchers and that the continued education of researcher is only done occasionally. There are more PhD those than ten years before, but the conditions for producing them are very difficult and the possibilities to find a job in the domain of scientific research is very limited for doctors in sciences of education. This means that the question of scientific work in sciences of education as a discipline is still very open.

Perspectives and challenges

The sciences of education in Switzerland have in fact two challenges, which result in the numerous reorganizations occurring or planned in the institutions of educational research. On can describe these challenges as follows, many of them being probably common with other countries.

- The numerous educational reforms, which are on the way on all levels of the school systems in Switzerland, from pre-school to higher education, ask for concepts, which allow regulating the reforms, and for methodological means for observing and evaluating their realisation.
- The new organization of the system for training professionals in different domain of education, namely teacher education, leads to the creation of higher education institutions (Häme de l'École spécialisée, Haute école pédagogiques) which have also the function to promote scientific research. These leads to the existence of new partners in the domain of educational research and its reorganization and, at least theoretically, to a development of educational research.
- The necessity of being efficient, to equalize chances in education and to guarantee the quality of the systems of education imply the development of important research projects which define indicators for evaluating regularly the educational systems as well as the competencies of students at different moments of their life.
- The research institutions are more and more integrated in international networks, which grow enormously, due to important grants on national and European level. But the same institutions have at the same time still to respond to local and regional demands aiming at a better management of the systems of education, at the evaluation of school reforms or at the education and training of the different actors in the educational field.
- The new technologies open new possibilities for training and instruction, from the points of view of access to knowledge, methods of teaching and learning and functioning of institutions of education. This creates new perspectives of research.
- Several national programmes, proposed by the FNPSS (Fond national suisse de recherche scientifique) transform fundamentally the whole domain of educational research, for instance programmes on the efficiency of educational systems or on the relationship between work and education. Furthermore, one or two poles of excellence in educational research will be created in the next few years. Many researchers participate or will participate at these programmes, but generally, this participation lasts only the duration of a program and the question how to capitalise of competencies created has to be treated.
- An important generational change will take place in the next few years. Researchers coming not only, on the last generation, mainly from sociology, economics or psychology, but trained in sciences of education will enter into the domain. Scientists of education can and have to train their own relief and offer it efficient academic training.

References


Gretler, A. (sous presse). La recherche en éducation en Europe: Perspectives.


