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CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES CHALLENGED BY THE ETHNOCENTRIC PEDAGOGIC HERITAGE AND CONTEMPORARY EPISTEMOLOGICAL-METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Abstract

We discuss here the problems of contemporary educational sciences, which are generated by the pedagogic tradition sustained by ethnocentrism, and by the issues coming from the epistemological-methodological domain. An open question of the common traits in the development of educational sciences, the separated proto-typical configurations of the development of pedagogics in various national communities, and a vibrant discussion about the character of educational research and its influence on politics and praxis of education are the issues discussed these days. Summing up some aspects of these discussions we pose further questions on the likelihoods to overcome ethnocentrism, and on the philosophical-historical grounds of the research in education. We consider detrimental for any educational science, and for the well-organized ones even more so, to neglect foreign experience and comparative results of educational research. We plead for strengthening the ethical principle in scientific research in education not only as the necessary condition of research validity but also as a way to respond to the challenges coming from different scientific paradigms and from various professional roles of researchers in education.

Keywords: educational sciences, scientific and educational ethnocentrism, epistemology and methodology of educational research

The Heritage of Ethnocentrism in Education and Educational Research

The epoch of the Enlightenment is characterized by the awareness of the importance of education for the constitution of national states and cultures. Even during the XIX century, the national pedagogic traditions have been competing, guided by the conviction that wars are won "not by guns but rather by schools and teachers" – frequently quoted after the Prussian-Austrian war in 1866, and the Prussian-French war in 1871. During the Cold War period (1945-1990) the race in armaments was accompanied by a specific "educational competition". It would suffice just to remember the "Sputnik-shock" and the resulting changes in the American schools. Even our epoch of globalization is characterized by the "glorification and demonization" strategy (Derida, 2002, p. 123) instead by a careful exploration of the background interests, which is necessary for the "new or recurrent agreement on education".

The historical aspect of this problem Marc Depaepe (2002) was expressed in the question if it is possible at all to talk about comparability of the development of educational sciences. Of course, there always were minds willing to overcome national constrains in education. One of the most important, the architect of the creation of educational system grounded on the results of scientific research, Torsten Húsen (1916-2009), writes about the experience of generations of international

researchers in education: “We have conceived the world as an enormous pedagogical laboratory for testing various school structures” (Húsen, 1975, pp. 20-21). He strongly emphasized the positive influence of the interest to advance national politics of education. During his career he encountered a phenomenon marked as “provintialism”, which we nowadays rather name as ethnocentrism. During one UNESCO conference in the 1950s, a French representative presented a statement that for the French people, general education is grounded on general culture and acquired through the study of the clasics; for a Soviet representative the professional education and general education are the two sides of the same coin, while for the Americans, general education meant acquisition of skills and competences necessary for present life (Húsen, 1983, p. 26). A strong interest in the relationship of the system and the process of education and the scientific-technological development resulted in gradual overcoming of the quoted national exclusivities. It has become clear that the neglect of the experience and knowledge of the others costs dearly the creators of national educational politics.

There is another factor leading to the ethnocentric standpoint. Namely, the pedagogues, who used to promote international knowledge have claimed that their aims are national. On the other side, the communist pedagogy was characterized by the stress on the own specific traits different from the bourgeois ones, while the post-communist period was marked by a kind of the “imported ethnocentrism”, where the Anglo-Saxon model of pedagogic education and research was pomoted as “the only rescuing one”. Even in the countries of the Western Europeone could note the trends of the dominance of international evaluation studies of education systems. In such conditions it is difficult to talk about the transition of educational politics from the charismatic to the rational level. That problem is even more protuberant in the East European countries, where the differentiation among the roles of researchers and experts in the domain of education is still lagging behind.

Let us go back to the Húsen's experience in internalization of educational research. In principle, the scientific research is guided by the demand for universal results, while for a long while the research in education was constrained by the national frameworks, branded even by some specific prejudices. Húsen had an extremely utilitarian attitude toward the character of educational sciences. Such an attitude has enabled him to notice the national characteristics of pedagogic theory and research practice (Húsen, 1979a, p. 333). In Sweden, to become a professor of pedagogy it was necessary to know developmental psychology (expeimentally oriented) and the history of pedagogics. In Germany, spiritually-scientifically and philosophically opriented pedagogues have rejected psychometry, while the biheivioristically oriented pedagogues have emigrated to the USA during the 1930s. Only Helmut Becer, who established the Maks-Planc institute for educational research, has introduced empirical methods in the study of the school system. In Great Britain, the pragmatism was dominant and the use of psychometry was frequent and uncritical. In the USA, with the work od Ralph Tyler, the first evaluative studies of education and curriculum have appeared, but the academic level of research in education was not acknowledged enough. Húsen (1979b, p. 382) has recognized the following benefits resulting fom the cross-national evaluation studies of the school systems: (1) the idea that it is necessary to state the international indicators of the educational outcomes, which contributed later to the

creation of modern educational politics, and (2) the enormous experience was accumulated about the techniques of data collection, the sampling procedure, and the training of the researchers. However, the methodology and the discussion of the results were dubious, still. First, highly sophisticated methods of multivariate statistical analysis could not replace the longitudinal approach: "We have been oriented to collect the data from numerous schools and students as much as possible, and never thought about an alternative strategy – to select few schools and classes and conduct an intensive qualitative research" (Ibid). That trait of international studies of students' achievements has remained unchanged until today, as well as their results – that the differences between the developed and the underdeveloped countries in educational achievements of students could be explained by the socio-economic variables rather than by the vatiables related to the school systems.

That is why in order to objectively assess the potentials for change of the whole system of education it is very important to know well the process of university transformation of educational sciences. The pedagogy historians differentiate "two waves" of its academic institutionalization (Gratler, 1999). The "first wave" starts in the 1880s with the establishment of the seminars for teachers education. That process was intensified during the first decades of the XX century, with the advances of the experimental pedagogy and its fight for academic afirmation. Comparative studies of the development of pedagogics as university discipline in Europe of the second half of the XX century show that the "second wave" started with the establishment of independent pedagogics department, during the 1950s, and had its peak in the 1990s, with the inclusion of the elementary school teachers' education in the university studies, and with unexpected multiplication of the communication networks within the educational sciences.

The massive scale and diversification of pedagogics education, and the "hybridization" of scientific disciplines under the influence of critical, feministic, post-structuralistic and other theories on the research in education plea that along with the change of the epistemological approach it is necessary to adopt the Bourdie-like "social approach to social studies", when the past, the present, or the future of educational sciences is the issue. While talking about a narrow epistemological approach, it is necessary to point out the importance of the articles published in 2006 by the representatives of the leading Anglo-Saxon and continental theory of education. David Bridges (2006) and Jan Bengson (2006) advocate first of all the introduction of the "discipline of the disciplines" in the philosophy and history of education, which serves as the landmark of quality of education research, and looking for the ways of emancipation of educational sciences from psychological and sociological influences, based on the authentic identity of pedagogics practice and consequential scientific reflection.

Social approach to the development of educational sciences was especially advanced by Swiss researchers Rita Hofstetter and Bernard Schneuwly (2001). Based on the historical-comparative study of academic institutionalization of educational sciences in the Switzerland, they point to the close relationships of the profession and the scientific discipline in the process of specialization and differentiation of pedagogics. The evolution of the educational sciences takes place between the contradictory demands coming from socio-professional domain on one hand, and from the endeavouring the scientific authonomy from the other related

sciences and from multidisciplinary tendencies within the very pedagogics domain. It frequently leads to the suspension of practical objectives out of the striving to secure a pure scientific status of the discipline. The negation of practical needs leads further on to the loss of a feeling for the specifics of the pedagogics practice, or to the treatment of the professional as something that has to reflect the strict application of scientific theories and discoveries. On the other hand, pedagogics has progressively mastered its autonomy as a unique academic field, getting emancipated from the so called stem disciplines: philosophy, psychology and sociology, and keeping to the referral frameworks at the same time. It has dynamically integrated the achievements of other social sciences, opening the new research areas and developing the new disciplines. In other words, "to keep the distance and to have a reference in relation to the other scientific disciplines was accepted as a legitimate position of one scientific area; it is not the reason to blame the pedagogics as not being autonomous" (Ibid., 2001, p. 130).

The Transmission of Scientific Knowledge into the Politics and Practice of Education – Epistemological-Methodological Challenges

Discussing the relationship between pedagogic theory and profession in German tradition, Edvin Keiner (2002) writes that the pedagogic theory was determined by practically oriented self-conceptions. Most pedagogues consider the results of their research as convenient for the transmission into the politics and practice of education, but at the same time, they are unsatisfied with the reception of their results by schools and teachers.

There was a time when it looked as if the action research and qualitative methodology represent the "royal way" to scientific approach to various issues in education. However, the critique of educational research as unreliable in planning the changes in education, which had its peak in the USA law, the *No Child Left Behind Act* from 2001, resulted in the evidence-based research in education. It promoted experiments based movementon and random samples as the "golden standard" in investigation of pedagogic practice (Vujisic Zivkovic, 2013). This come back to the experimentalism had a strong support in OECD countries and in the scientific and political circles. The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) from Washington, has established a special committee working on the issues of the advancement of educational research, which explicitely rejecting the post-structuralistic thesis that social phenomena could not be explained by scientific objectivity. At the same time, the USA Congress has adopted the law favouring rigorous systematic research in education, and established the Institute of Educational Sciences at the Federal Departmant of Education, which had invested enormous resources within the program, *What Works Clearing House* – WWCH, in order to accumulate evidence-based research and to disseminate the results in educational practice. Similar examples could be seen in the other OECD countries (CERI, 2007).

What missions and the achieved outcomes claim the representatives of the evidence-based movement in the educational research? They, like Robert Slavin (2002, p. 18), claim that the changes in education have been beyond the rigorous evaluation for a long while, although such evaluation resulted in a genuine scientific revolution in other areas of economic development. For example, the relations

between the research and practice in medicine is so firm that today's medical doctors dont even think to ignore the results of scientific research, as their educational counterparts usually do. According to Slavin (Ibid.), it is necessary to have a big number of experimental studies which can prove the causal relations in education and thus lead to rigorous evaluation od educational programs and the outcomes of learning, and contribute to the accumulation of scientific knowledge and its dissemination through out the school system, which would result in a genuine scientific revolution in education. Such epistemological approach has resulted in accumulation of methodological knowledge in evidence-based research. First of all, it was evident in the focus on the large random samples, in the control of numeous variables in experimental and control groups. As relevant, considered were the studies with more than 250 students in a sample, or more than 10 schools (classes), while it was recommended to follow-up the innovations in education for at least 12 weeks. The researchers were not supposed to gather the data from the convenient samples, or to construct the knowledge tests themselves. What is essential is that the experimental and the control group are selected in advance (prospective studies), not afterwords (posthoc/retrospective studies); according to the meta-analyses the retrospective studies show higher efficacy of a program/textbook/educational software under study. (Slavin, 2008, p. 7).

However, these findings did not convince the oponents of the randomized sampling. The promoters of qualitative methodology acuse their oponents as remnants of the "neo-positivistic restauration". David Berlinner (2002) and other experienced researchers warn that no research option should be neglected since the issues under the study are the most sensitive, as the education issues are; there are many deviations from the adopted regularities, and these deviations are the important issues for educational research. That's why one should not be afraid of the "softer" methodological approaches in an effort to resolve the complexes with "hard" methodology. One should rather consider that educational science is the most difficult one. It seems that Bridges (Bridges, Smeyers & Smith, 2008) is right when he points out that the studies which inform the politics and practice in education are much more diverse than those exclusively experimental. There are idiographic and nomothetic studies, or quantitative and qualitative studies, and they should supply answers not only on what is functional in education but also why and in which context something is functional. Also, pedagogic knowledge is not related only to the instrumental knowledge and to the solutions of practical problems. The researchers are the critics of educational politics, too; they are obliged to discover its ideological base even where, supposedly, there is none.

Conclusion

We live at times of intensive penetration of various academic traditions in organization of educational sciences, and of intensive infiltration of scientific paradigms in educational research. The historians have long since pointed out the duality of the conceptions of educational sciences: (a) as a "big sciences", like medicine or engineering, and (b) as an anthropologically oriented science. The researchers are obliged to accept such dual character of their science. But, they should not, under any condition, accept isolationism and ethnocentrism in its development because it is not only against the character of scientific work but it is

politically and ethically wrong as well. The codex of the research ethics does not cover only the issues of validity of a research but the issues related to the professional role of the researcher, being one between a politician and a practitioner in education, too. The time has yet to come for deeper ethical review, which is a necessary condition for overcoming national and paradigmatic boundaries and for profiling the research communities able effectively to transmit scientific knowledge into the politics and practice of education.

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