

**Book Review**

# Knowledge, Politics and the History of Education

Jesper Ekhardt Larsen, editor  
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Educational policymakers often plan utilitarian education systems, functionally linking them with economic development. This political will has become increasingly clear since the second half of the 19th century, as highlighted by Carlo M. Cipolla (1969). Education systems must also meet the criteria of economic efficiency, which demands results from investments. That being the case, can the history of education be useful for the work of policymakers and can it be a constituent part of education systems that are defined in this way? The anthology *Knowledge, Politics and the History of Education* addresses this issue.

The book begins with essays sharing opposite points of view, by Gary McCulloch and Marc Depaepe respectively. McCulloch argues that the study of the past allows us to understand how education has played its role across the ages with respect to interests of different social groups and changing political institutions. Past examples can provide useful educational information to meet today's challenges but our complex society requires that the rationale of the history of education is interdisciplinary. History, pedagogy, and social sciences have to interact in order to develop appropriate tools for teacher training and planning of educational policies. The scholarly work of Emile Durkheim and Brian Simon, two of the most important scholars in sociology and education, demonstrate that it is possible to successfully build a bridge among history, pedagogy, and social sciences. Moreover, McCulloch thinks that to successfully support the *raison d'être* of the history of education, scholars should avoid *balkanization* in various specializations, which are often developed in isolation from the whole and are likely to provide an incoherent image of the discipline.

On the contrary, Depaepe thinks that discussion of the role of the history of education is irrelevant, especially in teacher education. The search for educational, theoretical, and methodological foundations in the past are likely to have two negative consequences. On the one hand, there is the mystification of history and its decline to a hagiographic presentation of the great figures of educators of the past and, on the other hand, an interpretation of the past, which would respond to political, religious, academic, social, and economic goals of the institutional actors who may have an interest in influencing reform of education. Depaepe says that well-defined pedagogical thinking can hardly be taken out of the historical context within which it takes shape. As a consequence, past educational examples can hardly be used for the improvement of today's educational systems.

With respect to these positions, the other essays move toward in different ways. Jukka

Rantala states that today's educational sciences in Finland are pragmatically addressed, following a 40-year evolutionary process that wiped out the autonomy of the history of education. At the moment, in fact, the discipline is included within curriculum along with philosophy, pedagogy, and sociology. The numeric data related to courses that Rantala identifies show that the hours spent on the history of education are less than those spent on the other disciplines, both in undergraduate courses and in training of teachers. The number of history of education doctoral dissertations has decreased and junior historians of education are declining, such that the discipline can only survive thanks to collaboration with other educational disciplines. Carola Groppe writes that in Germany, the history of education research is conducted using the historical sciences, pedagogy, and sociology to highlight the evolution of the relationship between the individual and society through the educational and socializing processes. This method provides the foundation for educational research. Now, however, this is not enough to ensure the *raison d'être* of the discipline. Education does not enjoy the same consideration as the humanities or social sciences, and does not get the same research funding with respect to utilitarian disciplines, such as engineering, natural sciences, and medical sciences. According to Groppe, the history of education has to update its socio-cultural function and scholars need to study and propose practical solutions to the problems of a current multi-ethnic society.

Knowledge of the history of education can influence educational reforms and Harry Haue makes this argument. He reminds us that during the 19th century the teaching of history was to support the rising nation state. Historians praised *special qualities*, that is, moral and practical virtues of citizens. In Denmark, since 1850, educational reforms separated national history from world history but, in 2005, a new reform by the Ministry of Education established that each Danish historical event should be viewed in the global perspective and each world event should be related to contemporary Denmark. The reformers, Haue believes, were led by knowledge of Enlightenment thought, which considered the history of each people as history of the whole of humanity.

Barry M. Franklin and Patricio R. Ortiz write that American scholars still regard the history of education as a *liberal study*, which does not correspond with *social efficiency thinking*, and as such it cannot usefully be applied in teacher training and educational practice. Historians of education should connect their research programs more closely with the practical needs of educators and educational policy makers. They should first establish a stronger interaction with historians working in sociology, anthropology, political science, and other areas because then they might link the methods of history and ethnology to form an *ethnohistorical lens* for examining the cultural practices of schooling. Franklin and Ortiz's proposal follows a wide-ranging debate, developed in Europe since the early-1990s, when scholars of education pointed to the *school culture* as the ethno-methodological key that was used to revive the history of education field (Escolano Benito, 2005; Julia, 1995; Sociedad Española de Historia de la Educación, 2003; Viñao, 2005).

Pierre Caspard and Rebecca Rogers argue that educational research developed a lot in France between the 18th and 20th centuries. Scholars mainly worked to know improvement of learning among students. They go on to address how one should change the system of education. At present, the historical focus of education has declined for the reason that the study of the past can say little to nothing regarding specific problems, such as early school leavers who may have different reasons for leaving school than they did in the past. In France, today's weakness in the history of education is reflected in the difficulties experienced by the research

unit Service d'Histoire de l'Éducation (SHE). SHE aims to create basic research tools for historians, such as bibliographies, guides for sources, and databases on educational institutions. It also works to improve scientific cooperation within networks of scholars. Despite the high quality of its work, which has been recognized by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, a public organization under the Ministry of Education and Research that evaluates and carries out research for society's social, cultural, and economic benefit, in the last years SHE has received declining attention from the Ministry of Education and in 2010 it faced closure.

Esbjörn Larsson analyzes the historical narrative of the Swedish educational system, from the School Act (1842) that mandated elementary schooling, in light of the definition of the Nietzschean historical methods *monumental*, *antiquarian*, and *critical*. He finds that the historical development of the system is commonly described according to the monumental perspective, which sees progress as the orderly succession of big events that lead to the situation in which we live today. The problem with the monumental perspective lies in the fact that the evolution of the education system is described in light of the current situation, which a priori is presented as the best possible system. With equivalent results, the antiquarian method glorifies past examples to validate the choices of the present. Thus, if the history of education is to investigate the past and highlight the present without distortion, the discipline must rely on the critical method. Alfred Oftedal Telhaug agrees with Larsson. Looking at developments in the field of education in Norway, he can testify that historical research has greatly expanded its investigation. It has been able to leave the descriptive and uncritical approach to embrace the theoretically oriented method.

Research by Else Hansen on politics and university life in Denmark from 1945-75 shows that historiography is often influenced by contemporary political events. When this happens, events are not narrated on the basis of documentary sources but on subjective interpretations of memorial yearbooks and anniversary publications, which are published by the same university governing bodies. These publications do not place the history of the universities in the context of social and cultural changes or within wider academic issues. Thus, each university writes its own history, which ends up being a hagiographic history. The relationship between historiography and political interest is also the subject of Marcelo Caruso's contribution. In Latin America, the historiography of education began in the 19th century, along with the development of liberal states after independence. Politically engaged scholars wrote the history to show the willingness of the new political leadership to break the thread with the colonial period. They connected independence with social progress but progress was tied to the idea of eliminating primitive social organizations and socialistic ideologies existing among blacks, Indigenous peoples, and poor whites. In this way, the liberal ruling class tried to mask racist and discriminatory feelings present among the upper classes, which effectively prevented the achievement of social progress. This approach was partially overcome in the 1950s and 1960s when the concept of progress was linked to the more moderate idea of the fight against underdevelopment.

Finally, Christian Larsen and Jesper Eckhardt Larsen consider the influence of different ideologies and political movements on the evolution of Danish historiographical currents between the 19th and 21st centuries. The national historiography of education was influenced by the political and cultural ties that bound Denmark to Germany and the other Nordic countries. Their analysis traces the long journey from modern to postmodern society and they conclude that the legitimacy of the history of education must be achieved through specific national culture. They set their theory against the prevalent line of cultural and educational globalization.

*Knowledge, Politics and the History of Education* makes its contribution to a debate that

has been going on for many years. The debate began in 1993 when K. Salimova and E. V. Johanninger published the edited volume, *Why Should we Teach the History of Education?* The story of the educational problems within national experiences is able to provide specific and interesting information. However, the connection among knowledge, politics, and the history of education, as the title of this book suggests, might read better with an international perspective. In fact, the description of a historical phenomenon with an international impact needs the support of a representative range of case studies. For example, the view offered by the volume on small European Universities *Le università minori in Europa (secoli XV-XIX)* (1998), edited by G. P. Brizzi and J. Verger, includes university experiences in Austria, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greenland, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russia, Spain, Scotland, and Sweden. If we consider the essays on European experiences in Larsen's book, we find that three of them relate to Denmark and six of them focus on the Nordic countries, which creates a detailed historical overview of the educational reality of a well-defined geographical-cultural area. Overall, the book can be a valuable starting point to encourage further studies that provide a broader view of cultural experiences that represent the overall production of European historiography on education.

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