



## Role of Philosophy in Education

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### Abstract

The study of philosophy helps students to develop both their capacity and their inclination to do critical thinking. Other disciplines also help in fulfilling this function, but philosophy contributes distinctively, intensively, and extensively to a student's ability to think critically. Disciplinary structures of education across Europe are rather different mainly due to the fact that education as an anthropological phenomenon is deeply rooted in specific cultural and national contexts. For this reason the role philosophy of education plays within the given national educational sciences is somewhat divergent and not easy to compare. In face of these difficulties the article argues for a cross-national attempt using theorems deriving from modern systems theory. From such a perspective philosophy of education can be regarded as a special 'knowledge system' and its function consists in re-including what has been excluded in the process of rationalisation of education; it serves, so to speak, as a special type of reflection knowledge which is as timeless as it is necessary and therefore of meta-national relevance and indispensable for the process of Europeanization of education.

**Key words:** Education, Cross-national, knowledge system, Europeanization, Anthropological,

### Introduction

The study of philosophy enhances a person's problem-solving capacities. It helps us to analyze concepts, definitions, arguments, and problems. It contributes to our capacity to organize ideas and issues, to deal with questions of value, and to extract what is essential from large quantities of information. I would like to start my contribution with a short episode deriving from my experience as a research fellow at the University of Cambridge last year: As you can imagine, I was fascinated by the many libraries the colleges of Cambridge provide in such a wonderful way. And as you can imagine, too, I was mainly interested in the libraries of the Faculty of Education. Wandering along the bookshelves, I had a rather strange experience: whenever passing by the

philosophy, psychology or sociology section, I found a lot of books I knew or had even read, but passing by the education section, I came across not a single book I knew or had ever heard about. Then I went into the Cambridge University Library, the central one and one of the biggest in the world, looking for books dealing with educational science in Germany. The result was more than poor. What does this mean? I think the answer should be the following: Disciplinary structures of educational science across Europe seem to be extremely different from each other, or, more precisely speaking, the forms of knowledge educational science is fundamentally based on are embedded in disciplinary structures that are nearly incomparable. The main reason for this limiting fact derives from education itself because, as an anthropological phenomenon, it is deeply rooted in specific cultural and national contexts which are to a very large degree dependent on language. This problem even increases if we take educational sub-disciplines into consideration: 'Philosophy of Education', 'La Philosophie de l' Education' and 'Buildings- und Erziehungsphilosophie', to mention only a few, are embedded in different national disciplinary structures with different historical backgrounds (Depaepe, 1993). And the role they actually play within their given contexts (in research as well as in training) certainly is different too (Schriewer, 2000, pp. 72-95).

Philosophy of education in this respect undoubtedly is what can be called an 'umbrella term': The main function of an umbrella is to give us shelter from rain when the weather changes in order to keep our clothes dry as well as to protect our sensitive skin when the sun is hot and burning. And second, this protection can be given to more than one person: in face of a sudden shower, sometimes very different people (and sometimes whether they want to or not) find themselves crowded together under the same umbrella. In other words: as a term, philosophy of education primarily takes care of a kind of necessary demarcation to the outer scientific world around. And in doing so, it does not at all define what should be within: philosophy of education is by no means a precise scientific registered trademark, and there is no trademark protection whatsoever. Thinking internationally, and faced with an educational science across Europe which seems to be struck with a mighty 'evidence-based blindness', I think it is worthwhile to reflect upon possible theoretical ways to bundle up the efforts of philosophy of education mainly by clarifying the role and function it plays in cooperation with other educational sub-disciplines. My question, therefore, is: how can we cope with this problem, thinking internationally (or, more precisely, speaking: 'meta-nationally')? Far away from dogmatic aspirations of any kind, I would like to suggest and put up for discussion two different theoretical pathways in this essay. In order to 'de-nationalize' our topic, I will start with a short paragraph presenting a 'two-frame-model' of philosophy of education; my next step will refer to the language-problem; then I try to focus on 'forms of knowledge' in a disciplinary perspective, ending up with my suggestion to understand philosophy of education as a certain kind of 'reflection knowledge' which, for systematic reasons, plays an indispensable role in modern educational science.

## Philosophy of Education

In spite of all historical and national differences (which, due to time and space, are not to be discussed here), philosophy of education is situated between ‘philosophy’ on the one side and ‘education’ on the other. Following Audi’s definition, it is a discipline which is considered as being ‘concerned with virtually every aspect of the educational enterprise’ (Audi, 1995, p. 583). And that means it is far away from giving a coherent picture. For some people, this field is only a series of footnotes to Plato’s Memo, and for others it is one of the weakest subfields of both philosophy and education, disconnected from philosophy and from the broader study and practice of education – to put it briefly: neglected and of fundamental importance at the same time.

To disentangle the widespread category-related problems, I would suggest making use of two different frames of reference in order to simplify the matter. The first frame of reference can be called ‘philosophical’. Inside this frame we have the great number of philosophical theories and concepts, and we may ask for the status which is ascribed to education to be treated as an anthropological phenomenon within them. In this field we will find, for example, studies such as ‘the role of education in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger’. The second frame of reference can be labeled as ‘educational’. Inside that frame we will find the whole mass of educational theories and empirical research concerning the manifold aspects of education (see Figure 1). Then, we could here ask for those questions (and I assume that there will be many fewer than expected) which exclusively demand for a philosophical process of reflection, problems that only can be treated philosophically. As you probably will have noticed at once, this way of differentiating between a philosophical and an educational frame of reference reflects the outcome of a long historical development. It can be described as a process of differentiation of knowledge. The emancipation of educational science and its efforts to become an accepted discipline must again be regarded in terms of dependence on the cultural and national conditions. In this respect, the development in France, for example, was rather different from that in Germany. Nevertheless, the scientific treatment of education requires – in whichever disciplinary form – different types of knowledge. But before dealing with this aspect, let us have a look at the language problem first.

## Dialects of Education

Being interested in the potential for a comparative mode for the problems of educational research in a European dimension, the basic problem is ‘language’, since this is the bridge over the troubled waters of educational research linking phenomenological perspectives on one side with the types and forms of knowledge leading to specific disciplinary and professional structures on the other. On an everyday level we are able to cope with this difficulty (with varying degrees of success) in trying to speak a more or less sophisticated ‘pidgin English’. In doing so, we all can experience a certain feeling of estrangement from our national contexts, and that means from the technical language and the specialist terminology we are used to use at home: ‘something’ is getting lost. This ‘something’ is as

strange as it is wondrous because it indicates a loss as well as a possible profit or improvement. And it underlines the difference between an everyday life experience and the greater demands which are required at the level of science and research. To put it differently: educational sciences across Europe are all different, but they are all equal at the same time. To shed light on the ways in which they can be regarded as 'equal', we need a special theoretical pathway and/or to have to switch the level of argumentation. The relation between things and words (or 'names', as Plato put it) is the basic problem of each science dealing with language-based phenomena – and education undoubtedly is one of them. In comparison with natural sciences, for example, educational science doesn't have a formalized technical language, though, following Heinz von Foerster, we can be proud of this fact because the natural sciences, called the 'hard' ones, are dealing with soft problems, whereas educational science, undoubtedly a soft one, has to deal with really 'hard' problems deriving from the communicative nature of its subject (Wagner, Wittrock & Whitley, 1991). Nevertheless, the problem of the relation between things and words has, as we all know, a broad, huge and mighty tradition of research of its own. It is clearly to be seen that education is not only embedded within languages and, furthermore, that it does not have a language of its own, but education, I would risk saying, is a language! 'Grammar', as we know right from the beginning of our early schooldays, is a system of rules stratifying a language. Traditionally the term has often been used synonymously with 'syntax', that is, the principles governing the construction of sentences from words. And it is from there that its 'prescriptive' character derives. In modern linguistics, however, 'grammar' aims to be 'descriptive' and even 'explanatory', and therefore it deals not only with syntax, phonology and phonetics, but also – and mainly – with semantics. Since the well-known pioneering studies of Chomsky we could say that the grammar of a language has the character of a theory of a language. In other words: the 'grammar of education' aims at a theory of education. Then the grammatical structure plays the role of its theorems. The intention and aim of such kind of theory construction is to model the system of knowledge possessed by those who speak educationally. On a level of reflection, the task would then be to determine exactly of what this knowledge consists (or better, of what these forms of knowledge consist), of analyzing its typical forms and of clarifying how they are linked together and applied.

This might sound rather theoretical and far away from any practical purposes, but in fact, at least in my opinion, just the contrary is the case! If education is a language in the above-mentioned sense, there must be a 'grammar' and, metaphorically speaking, words and rules determining the ways to combine these elements. To put it another way: the question of a grammar of education is the question of its logic of forms! Education, at least in my perspective, is the unity of the difference of two incompatible processes: learning and pointing. These two are more or less sophisticated and more or less successful and linked together by forms of articulation. From this standpoint, the logic of educational forms consists in the 'mechanisms' (to use a Kantian expression) of articulation. And these 'mechanisms' require certain forms of knowledge. At least three can easily be differentiated: first we need a so-called operational factual knowledge (mostly in our days won by empirical research) informing us about 'how things are'; second, there is a special need for what could be called 'educational reflection knowledge' which applies a selection of factual knowledge to the special



educational needs; and third, a kind of ‘communicative action knowledge’ is needed in order to behave professionally in the context of concrete situations.

It should be evident that these forms of knowledge can be regarded as ‘inter-national’ or even ‘supra-national’ because they are necessary in whatever national context. We could say that the language of education realizes itself in certain dialects; these dialects are the national languages. Therefore each national language will give us a special view of what education *is*. Thinking on a European level, this has as a consequence that we should use our different national languages, those ‘dialects of education’, as productive and potential tools of research and means to enlarge our scientific knowledge. In which way, for example, does the Portuguese ‘dialect’ encode semantically basic forms of education in comparison with, let’s say, the Danish one? One way to ‘de-nationalize’ the role and function of philosophy of education consists, as can be seen, in using the ‘language perspective’ which, in the end, may lead to phenomenological grounded forms of educational knowledge. The second pathway will end up as well with the term ‘knowledge’, though contextualized in a totally different way.

## Types of Knowledge

In an evolutionary perspective – this is my starting point here – the main function of education is social reproduction which has at least two dimensions: conservation and change. Therefore, education can be seen as a form of social action – that is so to say, it is characterized by a strong ‘action component’ which, for structural reasons, again is primarily orientated to the future. I think this outstanding peculiarity of education itself has a tremendous influence on the forms and profiles it obtains at the level of science. At the same time, this is what causes the differences between the educational disciplines in the cultural and national contexts that are dependent on the given status of historical developments. To preserve what has been proved to be good and functioning, to prepare for a future which we only can know to a rather limited extent, and to be confronted with the basic incommensurability between educating and learning presents us with, to put it cautiously, a really hard task to fulfill. In a narrower sense, and closer to the problems of education as an academic discipline, we could say that this task seems to be a paradoxical one. Anyhow, this perspective allows us to put the question in a different way. From that point of view we are able to ask how educational science used to and does handle this paradoxicality and try to observe which strategies of de-paradoxicalization have been and are employed.

One common way to handle paradoxical ties consists of dissecting the problem into single parts and/or treating them on different levels. I would suggest regarding the differentiation between profession and discipline, professional knowledge and scientific knowledge, as the predominant strategy of educational de-paradoxicalisation. Educational science, on the other hand, can be understood as the uniting of that differentiation. And the many relations, tensions and contradictions which can be observed between those different forms of knowledge can be traced back to one of the basic characteristics of education itself. In the professional context, education is conceived as a task to fulfill,

whereas in a scientific context it appears in a different light, being conceived as a problem to be solved in a way which hopes to find truth. Professions are embedded in and supported by political, legal, institutional, organizational and administrative contexts and conditions, whereas sciences exclusively refer to sciences. To analyze the development of an educational science in a given national context along this basic differentiation between profession and discipline, professional knowledge and scientific knowledge, seems, at least to me, quite productive.

## **Philosophy of Education as ‘Reflection Knowledge’**

It should now be possible to come back to the problems of philosophy of education and the special role it plays within this concert of different forms of knowledge. In the above-mentioned second frame of reference called ‘educational’ we will find at first glance a lot of rather different types of knowledge. However, they can be reduced to a common denominator, as all of them are exclusively orientated to education both as a task and as a problem. Those who try to treat education as a problem can be designated as ‘scientific’. But as we all know from our daily work, ‘scientific knowledge’ is far from being homogeneous. There are empirical studies as well as theoretical ones, and within them we find a big variety as far as the methods applied or the basic theoretical assumptions made are concerned. Nevertheless, all of them have in common the fact that they are forced to exclude certain aspects in order to bring to light others as clearly and precisely as possible. But ‘excluded’ does not at all mean ‘of no importance’. Often just the contrary is the case. The question is what happens with those ‘excluded’ aspects, topics or problems? My answer is that they simply come back to the scientific discourse. For this reason, I would suggest reserving the term philosophy of education exclusively for the disciplinary form of that form of ‘comeback’. As the historical continuity of philosophy of education (in whatsoever form of academic discipline) clearly demonstrates, a type of knowledge which (re-)includes the excluded seems to be as important as it is necessary. Obviously, there must be a basic need for the generation and discussion of the various aspects of values, aims and norms of education, for the formation of educational attitudes and convictions, for finding sense and interpretations of the world, for the inspiration of reforms as well as a neutralization of science. In other words: in the same way in which educational science develops into a ‘normal’ social science, philosophy of education seems to become necessarily a certain kind of an intra-disciplinary strategy of de-paradoxicalisation which allows unsolvable problems to be temporized in a special form of knowledge. From my point of view, philosophy of education should be regarded and described as a type of ‘reflection knowledge’, which is to say, it should be located in a certain way at the back side of scientific progress. Perhaps one could call this type of reflection ‘classical’ or ‘timeless’ because of its principally ambivalent status: at the level of social action (e.g. education policy), it can be used both for progressive and for conservative goals.

As you certainly will have noticed already, this kind of disciplinary approach to the problems of philosophy of education has a hidden or latent theoretical orientation behind it. It derives from modern systems theory. From here, we can regard science and the forms of knowledge as

‘knowledge systems’. Systems tend to optimize their functionality first by demarcating themselves as sharply as possible from the outer world around them (from the other knowledge systems); and, second, by a continually increasing degree of internal differentiation. This process can be described as a form of gradual exclusion. At the end of it we can observe a tendency or even a pressure to re-include (at a different level) what has been excluded before. This phenomenon is called ‘re-entry’. I think that philosophy of education can be understood as such a kind of ‘re-entry’: what has been excluded from educational research in its effort to produce ‘truth’ or ‘sure knowledge’ comes back into science, and it comes back in the form of science. To sum up, philosophy of education seems to be a traditionally approved pillar of wisdom and nowadays, in the guise of a sub-discipline, it helps the knowledge system of educational science accommodate to the complexity of the world around.

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