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The Historical Method in Educational Research

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ABSTRACT: Historical research has become increasingly relevant from the perspective of nowadays education sciences. Many outstanding scholars in the domain often considered that the main path to progress in the science of education is through carrying out experimental research. Nonetheless, research in education cannot be reduced to mere empirical observation and investigation based on which innovations are brought about in education. We cannot afford ignoring, dismissing or placing the critical-reflective capitalization of acquisitions acquired through the study of past works on a lower level in the field of research. On the contrary, integrating the results of historical research into the existing, constantly growing scientific knowledge, is a determinant factor in innovations, developments and improvements in the theory and practice of education. Through the enhancement of historical research, one of our main goals is to recover ideas and meanings of the past, which can influence and shape our present and future. Investigating the history of pedagogical thinking is not just an act of reconstructing the past, but also an opportunity to reveal the valuable dimensions of a tradition that can inspire and motivate us in all present and future endeavours. Innovative approaches also imply capitalizing overall past experiences and research to enhance the valuable notions and concepts acquired over time.

***KEYWORDS**: Education, Educational Research, Research Methodology, Historical Method.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Many scholars in the field of education science consider historical investigation as a means of defining and setting the limits of traditions in their domain of interest. Their main objective is to clarify and deepen the understanding of fundamental concepts and contemporary scientific methods by presenting their evolution. For teaching purposes, in many treatises and monographs, the introductory chapter on the history of a discipline is meant to illustrate the various stages of development and constant evolution throughout centuries of scientific knowledge.

Research in education is based to a large extent on experimentation, surveys and statistics. Research seems now to be marked by the "monopoly of experimental science" (Eymard-Simonian, 2000). Historical-educational research and even history of education as an academic discipline seem to have been marginalized (McCulloch, 2002, 2008; Kudláčová, 2016). Furthermore, the need for such academic discipline has been questioned (Lowe, 2002). We can ask ourselves, however, what are the risks for the research community to recognize and capitalize on a single research paradigm? The methodology of educational research should combine the scientific rigor provided by experimental investigations and statistics, with documentary richness gained through systematically studying the works of the past.

Most sciences are not limited to using a single type of methodological approach. On the contrary, they naturally take into consideration a multitude of various methods that may be either their own or borrowed from associated disciplines. In general, educational research must value an "epistemological eclecticism" (Husen, 1989) by using different quantitative or qualitative methods, depending on the issues addressed. Any form of methodological reductionism and, above all, any monopoly must be avoided. It is often necessary for researchers to leave the restrictive field of empirical experimental science, viewed as a systematically established body of knowledge, as a universal and verifiable reference to those interested in it, and to relate to any other form of thoroughly organized knowledge that contributes to the discovery, explaining and understanding of educational phenomena. Such an openness is even more necessary as research in education sciences also relates to other areas of research such as anthropology, biology, psychology, sociology or philosophy. As a result, educational research inevitably relates to concepts, laws and theories that have already been validated in these disciplines.

Mouly (1978) argues that historical research cannot fulfil some of the rigors and challenges of the scientific method used in physical sciences (since for instance, the latter is not based on direct observation or experimentation, but instead must use reports which cannot be repeated). According to the same scholar, historical research qualifies, however, as a scientific effort based on the same principles characterizing all scientific research. It is hard to imagine that researchers in the field of education only support one of the methods of investigation as the only way and possibility of acquiring appropriate knowledge and practices. All researchers should resort to a variety of methods, techniques and research tools they have at their disposal, as a beneficial diversification of the existing possibilities in their area of expertise. They may tend to use a certain method as a priority, but applied research will eventually convince them that it is necessary to expand their methodological spectrum.

II. THE VALUE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION

The historical research method serves to scientifically determine the ideas and historical facts to group them into an explanatory scientific system. The heritage thus places the researcher in a filiation. Nonetheless, the loss of continuity causes problems in the further development of the field of science (Kudláčová, 2016). Data from the past are systematically collected and evaluated to describe, explain and understand the ideas, actions or events that have taken place. It is not a manipulation or control of variables, as in experimental research, but an attempt to reconstruct and restore, as accurately as possible, events that happened in a certain period.

Refusing to consider old pedagogical concepts or past practices as being outdated and obsolete may affect the understanding of the present. Tact and sensitivity in the analysis of contemporary educational realities depends to a large extent on "historical keys". The loss of these keys keeps us isolated from a rich network of meaningful content (Chalmel, 2009). An important outcome of this type of investigation is the proper understanding of the meaning of history, through its narration and evaluation, as well as through the renewal of dialogue with significant events and personalities from the past (Villaverde, Kincheloe and Helyar, 2006). Historical research has often been defined as systematic localization, evaluation and systematic synthesis of evidence in order to establish ideas, facts, past events, and subsequently reach useful conclusions about them (Borg, 1963; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). Historical research is also an act of reconstruction performed in a spirit of critical-reflective investigation, for the purpose of achieving an accurate representation of the reality of past times, based on physical evidence, corpora of documents, observations and written accounts of other people.

Reconstruction implies a holistic view, in the sense that historical research attempts to include comprehensively and explain the whole domain that is being studied, from a perspective that captures the social, cultural, economic and intellectual dimensions of its development (Hill and Kerber, 1967). All these aspects help our contemporaries grasp the events that happened in the past, their impact, but also the causes of failures and successes of past times, as useful knowledge for solving current problems, making predictions, testing hypotheses about relations, correlations or trends, but also for a better understanding of current educational practices and policies, etc.

Speaking of the value of historical research, Hill and Kerber (1967) identify the following major contributions:

1. Historical research allows the investigating, identifying and extracting optimal solutions to contemporary problems, from past times.
2. It contributes to clarifying current and future global trends;
3. Historical research highlights the relative importance and effects of different interactions that can be found as a common thread, in all cultures;
4. It allows the reassessment of data in relation to hypotheses, theories and generalisations in circulation at present.

As the two authors assert in their writings, a historian's ability to use the past in order to be able to predict the future and use the present to explain the past, makes his work and effort particularly useful in supporting a large variety of scientific studies and research**.** Historical research involves the identification and differentiation of a problem or a field of study, sometimes the generating of a hypothesis (or set of questions), the collection, selection, organization, verification, validation and analysis of data. It also requires testing hypotheses (or answering questions) and, where appropriate, writing research reports. Such an approach leads to a new understanding of the past and to the need of highlighting its relevance in shaping our present and future (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

We might as well ask ourselves about the purpose of historical research in education. How can it assist us in understanding the past, but also the present with all its challenges and difficulties? The temporal dimension is important in current debates on issues in education. Education addresses and involves the dissemination of a cultural, cognitive and practical heritage, of knowledge, know-how and skills acquired and developed by many

generations over time (Le Cam, 2013). This might be one of the main reasons why the discourses and debates about education are always connected with time. We use the past to understand the present and to prepare for the future. The past is often projected and discussed in contemporary debates on education and school systems. Hence the history of education could again be a source of inspiration for decision-makers and reformers of contemporary and future education, thus contributing to the advancement of education sciences.

History is a necessary introduction in the science of education, it's the preparation for understanding the concepts of the science itself. In the work of education providers and teachers who once lived and taught, there are truths that must be brought back to light. Historical research in education may concern an individual, a group, an ideological movement, an idea, an educational practice, or event an institution (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). On the one hand, the study of ancient ideas, practices, or institutions can help us understand how our current educational system was created and evolved and on the other hand, this kind of knowledge can provide us with a solid foundation for further progress or change in the domain.

III. ARGUMENTUM AD VERECUNDIAM

If we try to draw fixed boundaries between the historical science of past human deeds and a science of present human endeavours, we realise that such a limit cannot be established, since in reality, there are no facts that are historical by nature (Seignobos, 2014), but they can be considered as such only by their positioning in time. A historical fact is something that can no longer be noticed directly because it ceased to exist. Nonetheless, the facts, deeds or events that can no longer be observed directly have often left traces, sometimes in the form of material objects, but most often in an indirect manner, in the form of scripts written by people who experienced them. These traces are most often documents, and one of the most prevailing aspects in using the historical method is examining them in order to identify and explain old ideas and facts one can find in these forms of historical evidence.

Given the above considerations, by using a series of judgments, we return to the old fact or event we want to explore. History is essentially a science of reasoning, since it uses an indirect method of investigation which operates through reasoning and logic. Extremely important for any approach based on knowledge and communication is the issues of the foundation of assertions. The logical principle of sufficient reason requires that no idea be admitted or rejected without a logical (rational) basis and investigation, without a valid argument justifying its acceptance or non-acceptance. Presenting the rational foundations of an idea and supporting them in an appropriate manner determines the conviction that the idea is correct and valid. Founding and idea or principle requires arguments capable of determining the recognition of truth or adapting that conviction to reality**.** The development of an educational theory is based on arguments and in the course of the argumentation, one can often appeal to the authority (or prestige) of a person or group of people to give credibility to a stated idea. The judgments or actions of a person who is granted authority by virtue of their competencies and contributions to the development of a given area of knowledge, are submitted in order to obtain a greater degree of persuasion over the ideas expressed, from readers interested in their contents.

We systematically use the opinions and arguments of people we consider more entitled than us to judge and evaluate the evidence produced in favour of those theories or arguments. Researchers in education sciences find the arguments they need in the scientific literature of the domain, in the writings and works of classics or contemporary outstanding experts in their field, as well as in the new investigations of the most representative members of their profession. The appeal to authority is relevant in relation to the idea that one is supporting but saying that a person's opinion must be accepted and assumed without any critical analysis and careful weighing of the arguments brought, only by virtue of the fact that such a person is more entitled than ourselves to comment upon them, is obviously a wrong approach. Even specialists in a certain domain are not infallible. They often disagree (over particular issues, terminology, research directions, etc.), especially in areas of research where evidence are not entirely convincing.

IV. AN EXERCISE IN HERMENEUTICS

We can easily observe how the technique of hermeneutical analysis can be used in historical research. One of its uses could be, for instance, the analysis and interpretation of texts written by previous authors. Apart from clarifying the content of these texts, this type of exercise may bring additional light to the profile of its author. Hill and Kerber (1967) show that when evaluating and formulating a problem, in association with the historical research process, the personality of the researcher is often involved to a greater extent than other fundamental research. The investigator's subjective factors, such as interest, motivation, historical curiosity and the educational background engaged in the interpretation of historical facts and events tend to greatly influence the selection of the problem and the way in which it is dealt with. Moreover, such analysis would disclose much more about the social, political, economic or cultural context in which a certain idea, theory or system is developed. Such analyses can provide the basis of comparative or intercultural studies.

We should not overlook an essential aspect: the fundamental conceptual transformation the historian must undertake in order to understand the past, or the other way around, when the past is transformed into present. Today, historians regard their investigative approach as being interpretative and fluid because they accept the challenge to recognizing and investigating the relationships between past and the present. Hence, today's "histories" reflect multiple perspectives (Bodin, Blandy and Congdon, 2000). What Kuhn (1982) considers essential in the experience of an authentic historian of science is the fact that there are multiple ways to read a text, and that these readings lead us to make different assessments. The researcher endowed with a sense of history will have to choose the interpretation that gives maximum coherence and consistency to the text, removing the superficial impression, which is especially favoured by a reading made in light of the concepts and criteria that are valid in modern and contemporary science.

A historian must come as close as possible to the manner of perceiving and practicing science of researchers in the past. Historians often apply the hermeneutical method, striving to reconstitute the manner of discerning the object of research, and the conditions of scientific description and explanation that give the text a coherence, intelligibility, transparency and fluidity which is largely lacking, as long as it is examined from the perspective of current scientific practices and processes.

Such an approach, in Kuhn's opinion, is essential to reconstitute the scientific reality of the past in a faithful manner. The success of any science historian is, therefore, decisively conditioned by this way of working. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, p. 48) define historical research as the "systematic and objective localization, evaluation and synthesis of evidence in order to establish facts and draw conclusions about past events." Thus, historical research is seen as an act of reconstruction performed in a critical spirit aimed at achieving a faithful representation of a previous age. Any text can enlighten us on the way of thinking of people who once lived, on their emotional investments or their time-spending routines (White, 1990). Hermeneutics makes sense whenever it comes to textual analysis, conceptual analysis or discourse analysis (Villaverde, Kincheloe and Helyar, 2006).

V. HISTORICAL STUDIES AS A SOURCE AND CONTROL FRAMEWORK FOR THE THEORY OF SCIENCE

Historical studies become a source of reference and a control authority for the theory of education science, primarily because it indicates that values and methodological criteria determining the profile of scientific thinking have undergone radical changes throughout history. Explaining the variety of reactions, choices and behaviours of scholars in the past allow a faithful reconstitution of the history of science and, at the same time, a more realistic understanding of the nature of scientific knowledge and of the mechanisms that contribute to its changing and evolving over time.

The evolution of a scientific discipline is a succession of stages characterized by a continuous and cumulative development of knowledge occurring in given frameworks. Nonetheless, it is marked by profound changes in the conceptual and theoretical fundamentals of the field, at certain historical moments. The cognitive content of a discipline that reached the stage of theoretical maturity is expressed primarily through its basic concepts and theories. Current scientific research is based on the theory according to which the value of knowledge can be appreciated by examining its internal logical consistency, its agreement with accepted fundamental theories, the correlation between the practical results of the theory and the data resulting from observation and experiment. In our opinion, empirical data can confirm or invalidate a theory.

The competition between theories explaining the same area of knowledge is regulated by empirical and formal criteria. The new results obtained in a field of research encompass and justify, as particular cases, the theories on which research was based up to that moment. Current scientific practice shows that researchers are usually confronting the facts in order to bring them into line with expectations derived from premises that they consider, at least in the moment, as indisputable, in ways they are not willing to question. This approach indicates, however, that the theoretician gets ahead the experimenter, that the data supporting a particular theory are often the result of a long process of elaboration in the light of prior structures that make experimental research possible, they fixe its objectives, and guide it.

The path from scientific law to scientific measurement can only rarely be inversed (Kuhn, 1982). In order to discover quantitative laws, we usually need to know what laws we are looking for, and the instruments we are using in this process must be properly designed. One of the typical activities of researchers is improving the quantitative correspondence between predictions derived from theoretical procedures and the data resulting from measurements. Most historical research has a qualitative nature, since the object of historical research consists, to a large extent, of texts and other symbolic materials originating from the past of a society or culture. Among the basic competencies required by the researcher for the purpose of analysing this type of qualitative or symbolic material, one can mention identifying, collecting, classifying, ordering, synthesizing, evaluating and interpreting.

The basis for all these endeavours is personal judgment. However, attempts have also been made to apply quantitative methods for solving historical problems (Travers, 1969). Among these methods, content analysis is of great relevance to historical research; its purpose is to convert the content of a document into quantitative data (Bailey, 1978). Content analysis was defined as "a multifunctional research method specifically developed to investigate a wide range of issues where communication content serves as a basis for inference," from word counting to categorisation (Travers, 1969). Content analysis aims at identifying the appropriate categories and analysis units that will reflect the nature of the document under consideration and the purpose of research.

The product of most historical research is a narration, a story about past events. It is partly a description of what has happened. The researcher in the history of education examines texts, extracts relevant ideas and facts from them and subsequently gives an account in a relatively chronological order, based on the data resulted. The historical narrative must make the events that it describes plausible and comprehensible.

As T. S. Kuhn clearly emphasized, history is an explanatory undertaking: "I think nobody thinks any longer that history is a mere chronicle, a collection of facts arranged in the chronological order in which they happened. Many will admit that history is an explanatory endeavour that creates comprehension, and therefore it must expose both the facts and the connections between them " (Kuhn, 1982, p. 64). However, its explanatory function is fulfilled without resorting to explicit generalisations. Some other times, the work of the researcher is not limited to telling true or false stories, its purpose being the discovering and expressing the universal truth valid throughout all times and places rather than sharing a manner of understanding the events that have taken place at a given time and space.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

There is nowadays a certain reluctance to the past and to history in general. There are plenty people who believe that the past is dead and that it has no importance in the evolution of the present and, especially, the future. One may be tempted to think that people should only have to deal with what will be, not what once was (the past). The repudiation of this historical component from contemporary societies is an increasingly visible feature in all areas of science and research. However, the past comprises a long chain of lives of so many generations that preceded us, therefore we cannot ignore it. An essential role of the historical method used in educational research, which also provides its well-deserved place in the vast array of feasible methods, is to help researchers understand the inevitable relation between past and present in all products of knowledge. Separating the present from the past is not possible, and for this reason, critical historians massively reject such segregation tendencies and strive to understand the complexity of such a relation.

All social sciences refer to phenomena that evolve and change constantly, they do not remain the same; to understand them, we need to know how they evolved. Evolution is an essential element of scientific knowledge. Therefore, a historical study of previous phenomena is necessary, and such a study is possible by using the historical method of research. In relation to the objectives established and pursued by contemporary researchers, systematic historical studies may prove to be indispensable. Generalizations on the scientific knowledge in the field of education can be justified satisfactorily when researchers start examining the stages of development of this scientific discipline.

It goes without saying that the notions, ideas and methods used within a discipline have their own history, so that the scientific achievements of the past, in as far as they are important and still currently applicable, are retained and exposed in contemporary works of a certain discipline, sometimes in a clearer formulation than in primary scientific sources. Studies on the history of any discipline can essentially enrich our knowledge of the ideas and methods used in science and research. These studies also reveal the various obstacles that have been overcome in order to ensure the prevailing of ideas and methods of contemporary science.

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