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To cite this article: Gert Biesta (2011) Disciplines and theory in the academic study of education: a comparative analysis of the Anglo-American and Continental construction of the field, *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 19:2, 175-192, DOI: [10.1080/14681366.2011.582255](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2011.582255)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2011.582255>



Published online: 28 Jul 2011.



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Disciplines and theory in the academic study of education: a comparative analysis of the Anglo-American and Continental construction of the field

Gert Biesta*

School of Education, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

In the English-speaking world educational research is often conceived as the interdisciplinary study of educational processes and practices. Hence research in education strongly relies on theoretical input from a range of different academic disciplines. What is virtually absent in this construction of the field is the idea of education as an academic discipline in its own right. The latter idea does however play a prominent role in the way in which the field of educational studies has developed on the Continent, particularly in the German-speaking world. In this paper I compare these two constructions of the field in order to understand why the field has developed so differently in different contexts. Comparing the different traditions raises some important questions about the theoretical resources available for the study of education; questions that are still important for the study of education today.

Keywords: educational studies; educational theory; interdisciplinarity; curriculum theory; history of education

Introduction

In the English-speaking world educational research is commonly conceived as the interdisciplinary study of educational processes and practices. Hence research in education strongly relies on theoretical input from a range of different academic disciplines. Historically the four most prominent ones have been philosophy, history, psychology and sociology, albeit that their respective influence has fluctuated over time (see McCulloch 2002). While some have argued that the influence of this particular configuration has decreased in recent years (see, for example, Bridges 2006), it not only still provides an important frame of reference for discussions about the present and future of educational research (see, for example, Lawn and Furlong 2009; Pollard and Oancea 2010), but also still exerts an important influence on the social organisation of the field (see Lawn and Furlong 2007). What is virtually absent

*Email: gert.biesta@stir.ac.uk

in what, in this paper, I will refer to as the Anglo-American construction of the field is the idea of education as an academic discipline in its own right. In this regard this construction differs significantly from the way in which the study of education has developed in Continental Europe, particularly in the German-speaking world.¹ Here the study of education has developed more explicitly as a separate academic discipline with its own forms and traditions of theorising.

The fact that the academic study of education has developed so differently within various contexts not only raises important historical questions about the events that have brought about these different configurations (see, for example, Keiner 2002). From a contemporary perspective there is also the question of what can be learned from a dialogue between the different constructions of the field. Here I take inspiration from a project conducted by Bjørg Gundem, Stefan Hopmann and colleagues, who aimed to compare the Continental tradition of 'Didaktik' with the American tradition of curriculum studies (see Gundem & Hopmann 1998). Within the confines of this paper I am particularly interested in the question of whether there are forms of theory and theorising that are distinctively *educational* rather than that they are generated through 'other' disciplines. The reason for approaching this question in terms of disciplinarity is not because I am searching for some kind of 'essence' of the field of education – disciplinary boundaries are, after all, socio-historical constructions (see Gieryn 1983; Gieryn 1999; Van Hilvoorde 2002) – but because it is a useful way for characterising the different constructions of the academic study of education. More importantly, it allows us to focus more directly on the different ways in which theoretical resources are being deployed in the study of education.

In what follows I provide a comparative reconstruction of what I will refer to as the Anglo-American and the Continental construction of the field of educational studies. These two constructions should themselves be understood as constructed. They are, in a sense, ideal types meant to make sense of differences between the ways in which the study of education has developed in Britain and Germany (and in both cases these developments have impacted on the organisation of the academic study of education in other countries and contexts). As I will argue, the two traditions are, to a certain degree, incommensurable as they operate on the basis of fundamentally different assumptions and ideas. This is neither to suggest that communication between the two is impossible, nor to suggest that the two traditions have developed independently from each other. There is ample evidence of interplay, interaction and connection between the two configurations of the field, for example the popularity of Herbartianism in late nineteenth-century Britain and North America, the appropriation of Piagetian psychology in the USA, or the influence of Wundt on pragmatism. From this angle it is perhaps even more remarkable that the study of education has developed in such diverging ways.

In this paper I discuss aspects of the particular histories of these constructions and engage with the reasons that have been given for conceiving and constructing the study of education in these particular ways. This will not only allow me to highlight where and how these two constructions differ, but will also make it possible to show what is specific about each of these constructions and how and why these specificities might matter for contemporary discussions about the study of education and the role theory may play in it. Given this, the approach taken in this paper can be characterised as ‘presentistic’, albeit in a strategic rather than a rationalistic way (for the distinction see Fendler 2008). The main ambition of this paper is to show that the study of education *can* be constructed differently and *has* been constructed differently. This means that the analysis presented in what follows should not be seen as the conclusion of detailed historical and empirical research, but rather as a starting point for more detailed comparative investigations into the different constructions of the academic study of education.

The Anglo-American construction

As McCulloch (2002) has shown in his overview of the development of educational studies in Britain since the 1950s, the idea that the study of education cannot proceed without contributions from (other) disciplines has been the dominant view throughout the second half of the twentieth century even if, as he argues, this period has been characterised by a rise and a subsequent decline of the dominance of the disciplines (see also Lawn & Furlong 2009). In order to understand the history of this particular construction, the reasons given for it, and some of the social and sociological dimensions I will in this section focus on one exemplary case, which is a book published in 1966 under the editorship of J.W. Tibble called *The Study of Education* (Tibble 1966a). McCulloch (2002, 106) has called the book ‘probably the best known published work of the period to promote a disciplinary approach to educational studies’. His reconstruction shows that the particular conception of educational studies presented in this book can be found in almost identical form in a number of key publications preceding and following its publication.

Tibble’s book is first of all interesting because it is indeed a ‘paradigm case’ of the construction of the field of educational studies as an interdisciplinary field based on theoretical input from four ‘contributing’ (Tibble 1966b, vii) or ‘fundamental’ (Hirst 1966, 57) disciplines: philosophy, history, psychology and sociology. The book is also interesting because it provides an explicit rationale for this particular construction, arguing that the principles of educational theory ‘stand or fall entirely on the validity of the knowledge contributed by [the fundamental disciplines]’ (Hirst 1996, 50). Thirdly, the book is interesting because it was intended as a deliberate

intervention in the field of educational studies in the UK in order to give it more structure and status (see also McCulloch 2002). *The study of education* was the ‘central volume’ of *The Students Library of Education*, a series consisting of at least 17 further volumes (as announced on the paper cover of *The Study of Education*) with Tibble as main editor and with an editorial board consisting of Ben Morris, Richard Peters, Brian Simon and William Taylor who also were the respective authors of the chapters on the psychology, philosophy, history and sociology of education in the book. Tibble’s own chapter, ‘The development of the study of education’ (Tibble 1966c) is particularly helpful as it provides his reconstruction of the situation in which the book series was supposed to intervene.

Tibble locates the study of education firmly within the context of ‘the professional preparation of teachers’ (Tibble 1966c, 1). Although the connection with teacher education provides the study of education with an institutional context and a clear *raison d’être*, he emphasises that because of the historically peripheral status of teacher education within the university – the main institutional setting for teacher education being non-university colleges of education – the development of education ‘as a subject of study in its own right’ has been limited (Tibble 1966b, viii). Tibble notes that ‘with a few exceptions (e.g. Wales and Sheffield) it has no place as a subject in undergraduate courses’ (Tibble 1966c, 1), which also explains why it has not been easy ‘to develop close links between the study of education and the basic disciplines which contribute to it’ (1966c, 1). This problem is replicated at the level of higher degree courses ‘mainly because of the non-existence of education as a first degree subject, thus denying a basis for higher education’ (Tibble 1966c, 2). For universities this has created the situation where they either have to accept ‘non-graduates who are well qualified in education’ – and Tibble adds that most universities do not admit non-graduates to higher degrees – or ‘graduates in other subjects with no study of education beyond the initial training stage’ (1966c, 2). This is also one of the main causes of ‘a very serious shortage of adequately qualified lecturers in education’ (1966c, 2). Tibble identifies the expansion of Higher Education in the UK following the Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education 1963) as the main reason for ‘the present ferment of discussion about the study of education’ (Tibble 1966c, 2) and credits the colleges of education with providing the main impetus for this discussion. It was particularly the development of four-year BEd degrees in education instead of one-year professional training for teachers that provided the context for the attention to the structure and form of and rationale for the study of education. This is not to suggest, of course, that education had not been studied before, and the majority of Tibble’s chapter provides an overview ‘of the historical development of this study over the 120 years since the training of teachers was inaugurated in this country’ (1966c, 3).

The picture that emerges from this is one where, until the first decades of the twentieth century, teacher education was mainly practice based –

Tibble specifically mentions the so-called ‘pupil teacher system developed in Holland’ (1966c, 3) – which some saw as a good thing and others not. While Andrew Bell early in the nineteenth century would argue that it is ‘by attending the school, seeing what is going on there, and taking a share in the office of tuition, that teachers are to be formed, and not by lectures and abstract instructions’ (Bell, quoted in Tibble 1966c, 4), C.H. Judd in his *The Training of Teachers in England, Scotland and Germany* (1914) laments ‘the relative neglect of education theory’ in teacher education, writing that ‘one is tempted to say that the teachers in English training colleges have not realised the possibility of dealing in a scientific way with the practical problems of school organisation and the practical problems which come up in the conduct of recitations’ (Judd, quoted in Tibble 1966c, 5)

Tibble notes, however, that around the turn of the century some more theoretical strands were beginning to creep into ‘the embryonic study of education’ (1966c, 6). These were the study of method, of the history of education and, increasingly, of educational psychology, a field which became more firmly established as a subject of study in the 1920s (see Tibble 1966c, 10), although a first edition of the *Teacher’s Handbook of Psychology* had already appeared in 1886 (see 1966c, 8).

The Herbartian theory of learning ‘with its “scientific” prescription for the organisation of the lesson’ is listed as ‘a dominant influence’ during this period (Tibble 1966c, 9), also because of the influence of *The Herbartian Psychology Applied to Education*, published in 1897 by John Adams, first principal of the London Day Training College (see 1966c, 11). Another influential book was Percy Nunn’s *Education, its Data and First Principles* (first published in 1920, with a second edition in 1930 and a third in 1945), which heavily relied on William McDougall’s ‘hormic’ psychology (see Tibble 1966c, 11–12). There was also an emerging interest in child study, partly as a result of the rise of progressive education and further developed through the work of Jean Piaget, which became available in English translation in 1926. Psychology remained an important pillar of teacher education during this period.

The second main strand Tibble identifies in the development of the study of education is that of the history of education, which includes comparative education and the study of great educators (1966c, 19). Tibble documents a substantial amount of activity in this field from the late nineteenth century onwards, both in terms of book publications and with regard to the inclusion of history of education in the curriculum of teacher education programmes. He also notes that ‘history provides the largest number of intending teachers who have a first degree qualification in the field of study’ so that, also compared to the psychology, philosophy and the sociology of education, there is ‘no lack of historians who are prepared to apply their skills to the study of the history of education’ (Tibble 1966c, 20–21). Nonetheless, ‘under the intense pressure of the two year course, and with the main emphasis on

educational psychology ... historical studies were relatively meagre' within the programmes of teacher education colleges (1966c, 21). Tibble was also not very optimistic about the future role of history of education in four-year BEd courses because of the fact 'that college students in general prefer educational studies where the short term application from theory to practice is most evident' and many of them 'do not readily "see the point" of historical studies' (Tibble 1966c, 21).

For Tibble the sociology and philosophy of education 'barely come within the scope of a historical survey' because their history is 'too recent' (1966c, 21). This is not to suggest that no attention has been paid within teacher education curricula and programmes to social and philosophical questions, but Tibble's reconstruction gives the impression that the development of sociology and philosophy of education as separate fields of study has only been of a recent date (a point confirmed by McCulloch 2002). This, together with the very prominent position of the psychology and, to a lesser extent, the history of education explains the absence of *systematic* attention to the sociology and philosophy of education within the education of teachers, although Tibble does mention the presence of works by philosophers such as Dewey, Whitehead, Russell, Campagnac and Nunn on the booklists of department and college courses (see 1966c, 24).

Three things stand out in Tibble's account of the development of the study of education. One is the fact that the context for the study of education is teacher education. This suggests that the field of education is mainly understood in terms of schooling and school education. Secondly, Tibble provides a number of reasons why the institutional 'reproduction' of the study of education is relatively weak. One reason is the absence of education as an undergraduate subject. This has not only affected the educational focus of higher degree work other than fed through the contributing disciplines, but has also impacted upon the availability of academic staff with experience and expertise in the study of education. Thirdly, Tibble's discussion is strongly framed in terms of four contributing disciplines. Of these, psychology seems to have had the strongest hold on the education of teachers, with history at a distance in second place. At the time of writing, philosophy and sociology are only emerging as contributing disciplines for the study of education.

The case for educational theory

While Tibble provides a historical and, to a certain extent, sociological account of the development of the study of education, Paul Hirst's contribution to the book takes a more systematic approach, as he aims to provide a rationale for a particular configuration of the study of education. Hirst does this under the heading of 'educational theory', arguing that such questions as 'What is educational theory, as a theoretical pursuit, trying to achieve?

How does this theory relate to educational practice? What kind of theoretical structure has it got and how in fact do the various elements that are obviously a part of it fit in it?' have received 'far too little sustained attention' (Hirst 1966, 30). As a result 'educational studies have tended to become either a series of unrelated or even competing theoretical pursuits, or a confused discussion of educational problems where philosophical, psychological, sociological or historical and other issues jostle against one another, none being adequately dealt with' (Hirst 1966, 30). This echoes Richard Peters' characterisation of the field in 1963 as an 'undifferentiated mush' (1963, 273). This is why Hirst aims to move towards 'a more adequate framework within which research and teaching in this area can develop' (1966, 30).

Hirst puts forward a very specific and very precise notion of educational theory. Starting from O'Connor's (1957) distinction between theory as 'a set or system of rules or a collection of precepts which guide or control actions of various kinds' and theory as 'a single hypothesis or a logically interconnected set of hypotheses that have been confirmed by observation' (Hirst 1966, 38) he, unlike O'Connor, opts for the former rather than the latter as the most appropriate notion of theory for education. 'Educational theory is in the first place to be understood as the essential background to rational educational practice not as a limited would-be scientific pursuit' (Hirst 1966, 40). The reason for this has to do with his view about the function of theory in practical activities. Whereas '(i)n the case of the empirical sciences, a theory is a body of statements that have been subjected to empirical tests and which express our understanding of certain aspects of the physical world', in the case of 'a practical activity like education' theory 'is not the end product of the pursuit, but rather it is constructed to determine and guide the activity' (Hirst 1966, 40). Hirst thus makes a distinction between educational theory in a narrow and a wider sense. The first concerns 'the body of scientific knowledge on which rational educational judgments rest' while the second refers to 'the whole enterprise of building a body of rational principles for educational practice' (Hirst 1966, 41).

Hirst is not arguing that one of these notions of theory is the correct one, but rather emphasises that we neither should reduce educational theory to the former conception (as O'Connor prefers), nor that we should conflate the two types of theory. Hirst also believes that it is 'on the development of the theory in its larger sense that educational practice depends, not simply on the development of scientific study' (1966, 41), although the latter is an important component of the former. Educational theory in the wider sense is therefore 'not concerned simply with producing explanations on the scientific model *but with forming rationally justified principles for what ought to be done in an area of practical activity*' (Hirst 1966, 42, emphasis added). This is why the difference between 'scientific theory' and 'educational theory' is not a difference of degree or scale but expresses a *logical* difference

between judgements about ‘what is the case’ and ‘what ought to be the case’ (Hirst 1966, 42) – or, to be more precise, about ‘what ought to be done in educational activities’ (1966, 53). This is why Hirst suggests that there is ‘a great deal to be said for characterising these theories under moral knowledge’ because he sees it as a fundamental task of theory to make ‘value judgements about what exactly is to be aimed at in education’ (1966, 52), not in a general sense but at a practical level and in ‘here-and-now’ terms.

Hirst thus articulates a conception of educational theory as a form of practical theory the purpose of which is *not* the generation of scientific truth but the development of ‘rationally justified principles’ for educational action. In this guise educational theory *mediates* between the contributions of ‘[philosophy], history, social theory, psychological theory and so on’ (1966, 33) and educational practice. This view has several important implications. One is that educational theory is not simply derivative of factual knowledge because factual knowledge in itself can never provide a sufficient justification for what ought to be done. In this sense the resources for educational theory are ‘composite’ as they consist of reasons for educational principles that are ‘of an empirical, philosophical, moral or other logical kind’ (Hirst 1966, 51). This also means that educational theory is *not* ‘in the last analysis philosophical in character’ (1966, 30) because philosophy in itself cannot provide all that is needed to generate and justify principles for educational action. It can only provide one sort of reason to inform such principles. The most important point for the discussion, however, follows from Hirst’s claim that the validity of the principles for educational action ‘turns on nothing “educational” beyond these [reasons]’ (1966, 51). He argues that the reasons that inform educational principles must be judged solely according to the standards of the particular disciplines they stem from. ‘The psychological reasons must be shown to stand to the strict canons of that science. Equally the historical, philosophical or other truths that are appealed to must be judged according to the criteria of the relevant discipline in each case’ (Hirst 1966, 51). This lies at the very heart of Hirst’s claim that educational theory is not and cannot be ‘an autonomous discipline’ (1966, 51) because it does not generate ‘some unique form of understanding about education’ in addition to what is generated through the ‘fundamental’ disciplines (for this term see 1966, 57). The principles of educational theory ‘stand or fall entirely on the validity of the knowledge contributed by [the fundamental disciplines]’ (1966, 50). Hirst summarises his views by arguing, on the one hand, that educational theory ‘is not itself an autonomous “form” of knowledge or an autonomous discipline. It involves no conceptual structure unique in its logical features and no unique tests for validity, while on the other hand, educational principles ‘are justified entirely by direct appeal to knowledge from a variety of forms, scientific, philosophical, historical, etc. Beyond these forms of knowledge it requires no theoretical synthesis’ (1966, 55).

Hirst's conception of educational theory provides a strong rationale for the Anglo-American construction of the field of educational studies, not only because it denies any autonomous disciplinary status to educational theory but also – and for this very reason – because it locates all the 'rigorous work' within the fundamental disciplines 'according to their own critical canons' (1966, 55). It thus necessarily makes the study of education into the *inter- or multidisciplinary* study of the 'phenomenon' of education to which educational theory itself has no cognitive contribution to make. This, in turn, is the reason for it lacking a disciplinary status *amongst* other disciplines. Tibble, in a book from 1971 called *An Introduction to the Study of Education* (Tibble 1971a), summarises this point of view in the following way.

It is clear that 'education' is a field subject, not a basic discipline; there is no distinctively 'educational' way of thinking; in studying education one is using psychological or historical or sociological or philosophical ways of thinking to throw light on some problem in the field of human learning. (Tibble 1971b, 16)

When from here we turn our attention to the development of the field in Continental Europe, a significantly different picture emerges.

The Continental construction

The first thing to mention with regard to the Continental construction of the field of educational studies is that of language – and to assume that within the Continental construction there is such a thing as 'the field of educational studies' is in a sense already a misrepresentation. Whereas in the English language the word 'education' suggests a certain conceptual unity, the German language has (at least) two different words to refer to the *object* of study – 'Erziehung' and 'Bildung' – and (at least) two different concepts to refer to the study of Erziehung and Bildung – namely 'Pädagogik' and 'Didaktik'.² Although Erziehung and Bildung are not entirely separate concepts, they do represent different aspects of and approaches to educational processes and practices. The literature on 'Bildung' is vast (Hopmann 2007). For reasons of space I will, in what follows, focus on Erziehung and Pädagogik.

The concept of Erziehung is of a younger date than that of Bildung. Oelkers (2001) explains that Erziehung only became used as a noun in the German language from the Reformation onwards. With Luther, Erziehung came to refer to influences that in some way impact on the soul of the human being in order to bring about a virtuous personality, initially understood in terms of Christian virtues but later expanded so as to include secular virtues as well (see Oelkers 2001, 31). Although this is a central idea in the conceptual history of the notion of Erziehung, Oelkers emphasises that the word does not refer to one single reality. Erziehung can, for example, be used in

relation to processes, institutions, situations or aims (Oelkers 2001, 24), and can be characterised as dialogue or action, as communication, influence or development, as process or product, as restriction or as expansion of possibilities, and so on (Oelkers 2001, 33). What unites different usages of *Erziehung* is the idea that certain influences bring about certain effects. However, there is a wide range of different views about the extent to which the effects that are supposed to be brought about by *Erziehung* can be contained and controlled (see Oelkers 2001, chap. 1). This is why Oelkers suggests that *Erziehung* always entails a certain hope or expectation about its efficacy, despite the fact that it often fails to achieve what it sets out to achieve (2001, 32; see also Oelkers 1993).

Within the plurality of views about the meaning, content and scope of it, Oelkers identifies three common characteristics of *theories* of *Erziehung* (see 2001, 255). The first is that all theories focus on morality; the second is that they refer to interactions between human beings ('*Personen erziehen andere Personen*' – persons educate other persons); and the third is that it has to do with asymmetrical relationships, most notably between adults and children. Following on from this, Oelkers argues that all theories of *Erziehung* should include the following three aspects: a definition of its *aims*, an account of its *processes* and a conception of its *object* (2001, 263).

This brief account already shows an important difference between the Anglo-American and the Continental construction of the field of educational studies as in the latter educational theorising does not start from 'other' disciplines and their perspectives *on* education, but is depicted as a field in its own right, a field which both involves an engagement with the question of the definition(s) of *Erziehung* and with theorising it through a focus on aims, processes and object. Oelkers' reconstruction is, of course, not unique. Groothoff (1973), for example, provides a similar definition of *Erziehung* as encompassing, on the one hand, any help towards the process of becoming a human being ('*Menschwerdung*'), and, on the other hand, any help towards becoming part of the life of society. Whereas *Erziehung* can thus be understood as a function of society – this is, for example, the way in which Wilhelm Dilthey saw *Erziehung* (see Groothoff 1973) – Groothoff emphasises that in contemporary society it cannot be confined to adaptation to the existing socio-cultural order. It also needs to anticipate the independence of thought and action of the ones who are being educated. It must include, in other words, an orientation towards maturity, or, with the much more specific German term which resonates with the English notion of 'autonomy', it must anticipate the '*Mündigkeit*' of the ones to be educated.

Against this background, which Groothoff characterises as a conception of *Erziehung* that has its roots in the Enlightenment (see also Biesta 2006), he argues that a *theory* of education needs to encompass the following elements: (1) a theory of becoming a human being; (2) a theory of interpersonal interaction; (3) a theory of emancipatory learning; (4) a theory of

contemporary social life and its perspectives on the future; (5) a theory of the ends and means of education and their interrelationships; and (6) an account of the specific ends and means in the context of the different domains and institutions of *Erziehung* (1973, 74). Groothoff argues that such a theory can be found in the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher and, to a lesser extent, Wilhelm Dilthey (1973, 74). Groothoff, writing in 1973, believes that such an encompassing theory of education is no longer possible in our time, not only because the field of *Erziehung* has become much more complex, but also because society has lost confidence in itself. Groothoff therefore presents the field of *Pädagogik* as a more fragmented field where individual theorists work on aspects of educational theorising, rather than that they all engage with all aspects of what is considered to be part of the theory of *Erziehung*.

The discipline of *Pädagogik*

Erziehung is understood as teleological and value-laden as it always involves aims and ends and therefore always requires decisions about which aims and ends are considered to be desirable. Questions about the right way to educate, both in terms of the means and the ends of education, are therefore of central concern for the practice of education. König (1975) argues that at least up to the beginning of the twentieth century this was also the guiding question for the scientific study of education. Here it is important to note that in German the notion of ‘scientific’ – *wissenschaftlich* – is not confined to the natural sciences. The theorists of *Erziehung* thus explicitly conceived of *Pädagogik* as a *normative* discipline and saw it as their task to articulate aims for education and develop guidelines for educational practice (see König 1975, 34). What characterises work within this tradition is the ambition to articulate *ultimate* educational aims and, more importantly, educational aims that were considered to be universally valid. König discusses a range of different attempts to articulate such universal aims, for example based on theology, on the philosophy of value (the work of Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann), on general moral conventions, or on practical philosophy (Herbart). This reveals that *Pädagogik* is not confined to the formulation of educational aims but also encompasses the justification of such aims.

This particular conception of *Pädagogik* – known in the literature as the normative conception of *Pädagogik* – is often presented as the first phase in the development of the field. Some would even characterise it as a pre-phase, arguing that *Pädagogik* only came to maturity as a scientific discipline once it had overcome its connection to particular normative systems and schools of thought. This was the central idea in a tradition which became known as ‘*geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*’. The idea of *Pädagogik* as a *Geisteswissenschaft* – a hermeneutic science – was initiated by

Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey argued that there was a fundamental distinction between the study of natural phenomena and the study of social and historical phenomena. While the world of natural phenomena is a world of cause and effect which for that reason is amenable to *explanation*, the socio-historical world is a world in which human beings pursue aims and plan actions in order to achieve these aims. The main objective of the study of the socio-historical world should therefore be to clarify the aims people pursue. This is not a question of explanation but requires *understanding*. Moreover, such understanding cannot be generated through observation from the ‘outside’ but needs interpretation and an insider perspective. As education is a thoroughly socio-historical phenomenon, so Dilthey argued, Pädagogik thus has to be conceived as a Geisteswissenschaft. The main task of such an approach is the *interpretation* of the practice of education. Dilthey’s design for a geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik entailed an explicit rejection of normative Pädagogik – or to be more precise: it entailed a rejection of the ambition of normative Pädagogik to articulate *universal* or *external* educational aims (see König 1975, 99). For Dilthey the aims of education are always relative to and internal to particular socio-historical configurations. This meant that for Dilthey Pädagogik remained a normative discipline, but one with a hermeneutical structure, aimed at the *clarification* of the aims and ends implicit in particular educational practices.

Dilthey’s ideas provided the main frame of reference for the development of geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik in Germany in the first decades of the twentieth century. Through the efforts of educationalists such as Max Frischeisen-Kohler, Hermann Nohl, Eduard Spranger, Otto-Friedrich Bollnow, Wilhelm Flitner, Erich Weniger, and Theodor Litt, it became the main ‘paradigm’ for the scientific study of education, not only in Germany – where its influence lasted well into the 1960s (see Wulf 1978) – but also in countries directly influenced by the German tradition. Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik retained the idea of Pädagogik as a normative discipline, but whereas normative Pädagogik aimed to articulate *universal* aims for education, the former focused on the articulation of aims that were *relative* to particular educational situations and practices.

Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik did not see itself as a theoretical discipline but first and foremost as a practical one: a discipline *of* and *for* educational practice. The relationship between Pädagogik and practice was itself understood in hermeneutical terms: its main task was that of the *clarification* of educational practice with the intention to contribute to the *improvement* of educational practice (see König 1975; Wulf 1978). The task of clarification not only involved analysis and understanding to identify the aims of those acting within a particular educational practice – Dilthey’s ‘programme’ – but also led to the development of normative guidelines for educational practice, that is, ideas about the ‘right’ way to act in the particular situation (see König 1975). It is along these lines that geisteswissenschaftli-

che Pädagogik aimed to contribute to the improvement of educational practices.

Although its theorists rejected the idea of universal educational aims, they did see Pädagogik as inherently normative, aimed at the development of ideas about *right* ways to act in particular educational settings and situations. The normativity of geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik was closely connected to what may well be one of its most interesting aspects, namely the idea of the *relative* autonomy of the practice of education and of Pädagogik as the science of and for education.

The idea of the relative autonomy of Pädagogik first of all had to do with the intention to liberate it from its dependence on ethics (which served as the foundation for normative Pädagogik) and psychology (which played an important role in Herbart's version of normative Pädagogik) so as to be able to establish it as a scientific discipline in its own right (see Wulf 1978). To do so, the theorists of geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik connected the relative autonomy of Pädagogik to the relative autonomy of educational practice. The key idea here was that Pädagogik had a role to play in protecting the domain of education – and through this, the domain of childhood more generally – from claims from societal powers such as the church, the state or the economy (see Wulf 1978). The autonomy of Pädagogik as an academic discipline was thus articulated in terms of a particular 'educational' interest which the theorists understood as an interest in the right of the child to a certain degree of self-determination (see Wulf 1978, 36). The fact that the disciplinary identity of geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik was articulated in terms of a particular educational *interest* is a further reason why Pädagogik, at least according to the theorists of geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik, is a normative discipline, albeit one that is open to a plurality of views about what it exactly means to be committed to the autonomy of educational practice and the self-determination of children.

What makes geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik interesting for the discussion in this paper is that it presents a well-defined set of ideas about how and why Pädagogik can be understood as an academic discipline in its own right. This is not to suggest that geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik has been the only way in which the field has been organised and conceived, although within the German tradition it still stands out as the first attempt to make Pädagogik into an independent academic discipline rather than one dependent upon other disciplines (such as psychology) or value systems (such as theology or ethics). Although the heydays of geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik are over, partly as a result of the emergence of forms of empirical research and partly as a result of the influence of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, the particular questions that it put on the agenda still play an important role in contemporary discussions (see, e.g., Oelkers 2001; Benner 2005).

Discussion: education, an objective or an interested discipline

The foregoing exploration reveals some interesting differences between the two constructions of the field. It also shows that the questions about disciplines and disciplinarity play an important role in the different ways in which the academic study of education has been conceived and constructed. Whereas in the Anglo-American construction, educational studies is conceived as an interdisciplinary field, the key ambition of geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik was to develop a case for Pädagogik as a discipline in its own right. Whereas Hirst explicitly denied that educational theory can be an autonomous discipline – the reason being that educational theory does not generate any unique understanding about education but relies entirely on the knowledge generated through the fundamental disciplines – the theorists of geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik make a strong case for the autonomy of Pädagogik. Interestingly they did not argue for the disciplinary autonomy of Pädagogik on the basis of a particular object of study but rather on the basis of a particular *interest*. Whereas the identity of Anglo-American educational studies can therefore be characterised as *objective* as it is based on a particular object of study (education), the identity of Pädagogik might be characterised as *interested* as it is based on a particular value-laden interest.

It is important to note in this context that the idea that the identity of a discipline is based on a normative interest rather than an object of study is not specific for Continental Pädagogik. Although academic disciplines often present themselves in terms of their particular objects of study, it should not be forgotten that a substantial amount of effort is often invested in the processes through which academic disciplines become connected to them. It should also not be forgotten that there are at least a number of established academic disciplines that derive their identity more from their interest than their object of study, such as, for example, the interest in health that characterises the discipline of medicine or an interest in justice that characterises the discipline of law.

Although there is, therefore, an important difference between the two constructions of the field – also exemplified in a different social organisation of educational studies and Pädagogik – there is at least one remarkable similarity between the two constructions – at least as presented in this paper – in that both Hirst's notion of educational theory and the conception of Pädagogik in the tradition of geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik are in agreement with regard to the idea that the central questions for the science of education are normative questions. In the latter the ambition is to generate guidelines about the right way of action in educational practice, just as for Hirst the key idea is that educational theory should generate ideas about 'what ought to be done in educational activities' (Hirst 1966, 53).

Another significant difference between the two constructions has to do with the context in which the study of education is presented and developed. The field of educational studies has primarily been developed in the context

of teacher education and thus has had a strong connecting with school education. This is quite different from the history of Pädagogik, which is not explicitly or exclusively connected to questions of teaching and school education but has a much wider remit which focuses first and foremost on questions of Menschwerdung – the process of becoming human. Whereas this does not in itself explain the difference between the two constructions, it does highlight the fact that the guiding interests in developing the study of education in these different contexts have been different ones.

Although the main aim of this paper has been to provide an insight into two significantly different constructions of the academic study of education, comparing the two constructions also makes it possible to see what is specific about each construction – which is, of course, far more difficult without a point of comparison. The most striking difference, I wish to suggest, has to do with the role and status of what we might call educational theory. From a Continental perspective it is remarkable that the idea of education as a discipline in its own right with its own forms of theory and theorising is almost entirely absent in the Anglo-American construction of the field. This is not merely a historical fact but a situation that continues up to the present day. A remarkable example of this – remarkable, of course, from a Continental perspective – is a recent special issue of the *Oxford Review of Education* (vol. 35, no. 5, 2009), edited by Martin Lawn and John Furlong, called ‘The disciplines of education in the UK: confronting the crisis’. While the issue documents the rise and fall of the disciplines in education and, from that angle, paints a rather worrying picture of their status in contemporary educational research in the UK, it still frames the discussion entirely in terms of the Anglo-American construction. Although it adds a number of disciplines to the mix – alongside contributions from the psychology, sociology, history and philosophy of education, there are also papers on economy, geography and comparative education – it does not raise any questions about the construction in itself, neither when looking at the past, nor when envisaging the future. While the focus of the issue is on the situation in the UK, it is remarkable, particularly in an age of internationalisation, that the idea of educational theory as something in addition to or alongside contributions from other disciplines and of education as a discipline in itself, is never really considered as a possible response to an alleged crisis.

The comparison does, of course, also work in the opposite direction. From this angle we might say that it is remarkable that the Continental construction is based on the idea of education as an autonomous discipline with its own forms of theory and theorising. That this idea is perceived as remarkable and, to a certain extent even impossible, from an Anglo-American perspective became clear in a recent exchange that has to do with one of the key arguments provided by the proponents of geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik for the idea of Pädagogik as a discipline in its own right. The argument here is that, while other disciplines can study educational processes and practices from their own angles,

they do not have the devices to capture the reality of education as an *educational* reality. One way to put this predicament is to say that while the psychology of education will ask psychological questions about education, the history of education historical ones, the philosophy of education philosophical ones and the sociology of education sociological ones, the question that remains is who will ask *educational* questions about education (see also Biesta 2009). While the idea that there are educational questions to be asked about education that are different from psychological, sociological, historical or philosophical questions about education, is a perfectly meaningful idea from within the Continental construction, a reviewer of an earlier version of this paper characterised it as totally nonsensical, arguing that it was of the same order as the suggestion that one could ask ‘cookery questions about cooking’. While the point I am making here is about the way in which one construction is perceived from the standpoint of the other construction, I do think that the idea of asking educational questions about education has some plausibility. The argument for this has to do with the question how, as educational researchers, we are able to identify processes and practices of education – which is, of course, something we need to do before we can start studying them. How, to put it differently, can we select the education going on in a building that has the word ‘school’ on it? From the perspective of the Continental construction the answer to this question is that we need to have a conception of education in order to do so. Thus we need a theory of education that is neither psychological, sociological, historical nor philosophical, in order to identify our object of study.

This *almost* suggests that the two constructions operate as incommensurable paradigms in the Kuhnian sense and that the shift from one construction to the other is a question of conversion rather than translation. Yet even if the two constructions are to a certain degree incommensurable as there is no common measure that would allow for the simple conversation of the one into the other, I do not see such incommensurability as the end of communication. After all, the incommensurability of the metric and the imperial system does not make it impossible for drivers from the UK to drive in New Zealand. Incommensurability rather indicates a situation in which different traditions might become curious about each other, might learn about each other and, through this, might also begin to see their own ways of doing and thinking differently.

Acknowledgement

I am indebted to the reviewer who has provided me with helpful questions and insightful suggestions.

Notes

1. The influence of this way of approaching the study of education is not confined to countries where German is the main or one of the main languages, but has also impacted on countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Poland.

2. A third concept is that of 'Erziehungswissenschaft', which is sometimes used instead of 'Pädagogik' and sometimes to refer to the encompassing academic field, such as in *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft* – the German Society for Educational Research.

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