

BELGIUM – A National Case Study

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When I speak about Belgium, undoubtedly some international trends will appear too, because being a small country, open to more-linguality especially in the north, Belgium is more susceptible to international influences, also in the field of scientific development.

In my syllabus A have proposed 5 points open to discussion :

1. The concepts of Educational Sciences in Belgium
2. The institutional place of Educational Sciences as an academic discipline
3. The function and the influence of Educational Sciences.
4. The place and function of Comparative Education in the Educational Sciences and in Training- and Researchprogramms.
5. The future of Educational Sciences and of Comparative Education in Belgium.

1. The evolution of the concepts of Educational Sciences in Belgium

As in most countries, the evolution of social sciences — the so-called aimed-at-man sciences — have assumed enormous proportions in Belgium too.

To use an image, we could say that this development was performed in a delta-shaped form.

At the beginning each science followed its own path and maintained little collegiality with other human sciences.

Educational sciences, above all coming from the roots of philosophical and moral sciences and partly also from the furcated occupations of the medical sciences, for several years went hand in hand with psychology. The domination of psychology was sometimes so large that in certain Belgian universities pedagogy was only able to develop into an applied psychology.

For a long time the scientific interests of psychology have strongly determined the direction of the educational sciences. The self-image of the educational sciences was highly determined by the definition that the psychology attributed to herself.

Undoubtedly also influenced by the scientific evolution in foreign countries on the one hand and by certain philosophical trends on the other (e.g. personalism) the after-war Belgian psychology was a personality psychology, aimed at psychical aspects of the individual. Heredity, environment and own conative forces played a role to be studied.

The educational sciences, highly influenced by this, were at first strongly concerned with the individual and on the basis of these micro-interests, the then pedagogy could be defined as a science that was aimed at the systematical knowledge and influence of the personality-aspects susceptible to improvement

The approach of these personality aspects was above all carried out on a formal level and little or not at all on the level of the content.

E.g. the memory-function could be improved and for this learning processes in the school as well as better didactical methods were studied and were object of educational research.

Also the subjects in schools were mainly perceived as personality-forming activities, where the attention for the content of these subjects remained faint.

At change in the relation of dependance between psychology and pedagogy came about during the second half of the sixties. Up to us this was because of three important developments :

- a) The evolution of the human sciences in the direction of a mutual exploration and revelation of their scientific interests and results.
- b) The evolution of an after-war production- and consumption society in the direction of a self-criticism stimulated by the human sciences. Through this a lot of social meso- and macroproblems impressed for the first time the interest of those sciences. Then certain tendencies in the womb of those sciences started to carry out strongly engaged research.
- c) The increasing institutionalization and professionalization of the educational sub-system of the society, by which meso- and later on also macro-aspects became new studyfields of the educational sciences.

Let us study those three developments more in detail and see what new concept of educational sciences they delivered.

a) The evolution of human sciences. The initial delta, caused by a number of converging currents developed into a field of inundations, by which the interests and results of the up till then separately developing human sciences were mutually melted.

Psychology was dethroned as head-influencer of the educational sciences. Sociology, economy, anthropology, politics, legislation, school-organisation and -management, ...opened new fields of research and application for the educational sciences.

The initial micro-interests were completed by the study of a.o. socio-econo-

mical influences, important for the improvement of the young or mature human being. The concept of the educational sciences, as well in the Netherlands as in Belgium, was clearly determined as a multi-disciplinary and if possible inter-disciplinary approach of educational difficulties (*Colloquium on Education* – Nijmegen 1971). This openness can be enriching but can also be offending when the typical specificity is insufficiently clear.

Up to our view the process of legitimation of the enlarged conception of educational sciences still greatly goes on, and the educational sciences – especially the instructional sciences (*seen as a multidisciplinary approach of sciences on education in the school*) – are continuously placed in front of the mostly unfree choices of, on the one hand fusing with the interests and study-projects of the so-called nearby sciences (e.g. the psychology and the sociology), or on the other hand manifest a specificity in theory, research and practice.

b) The influence of the social on the educational sciences during the sixties (with a high in the contestation of 1968). At that time and at the beginning of the seventies, most of the human sciences contributed to and experienced the influence of the contestingly self-criticism of society.

Now and then, sciences and social engagement were being reconciled in a not seldom intimidating way. Also in the educational sciences a concept-evolution then became clear, n.l. an evolution from the traditional accent on "pais" to an accent on "agogy" (*to be understood as a general term for a systematic emancipatory planned change*). For some pedagogists educational sciences became an "agogy". This means the practice of and the theory on acting toward human development and liberation.

The human person was seen as situated in a wide influencing social power-game (political, economical, sub-cultural ...) and this way of approach evolved gradually to a criticism on the classical (rather isolated micro-)concept of the personality, on which up till then the educational theory was based.

During those years some new factions were created in a few Belgian universities (ex. social pedagogy), developing educational interests in the direction of a broader social influence (free youth-education, adult education, community organization, political conscientization, etc...).

c) Up to our view, a third reason for an enlargement of the definition of the educational sciences, must be found in the increasing institutionalization of the educational subsystem in the society.

To invest in education and more specific, education in the school, was very important to an after-war society aimed at democracy and increasing economical growth.

The educational economy was developed as an answer to the demand for efficiency of the increasing investment in the human being. The educational sociology became important a.o. because of her studies on equality of educational chances. Schools and educational institutions became bigger; efficient

organisations of personal and material objects in function of educational aims became more and more important. In consequence, the so-called meso- and macro-problems grew out to new field for the practice and the research of educational sciences. In Belgium (at least in one university) this evolution in educational sciences became perceptible from about 1973-74 on. As we will demonstrate further on, this trend is already extremely institutionalized in certain universities.

To conclude with this concept-evolution, we could at this moment propose the following enlargement of the definition of educational sciences :

- It is the systematic knowledge on the optimum of the human being (in groups as well as in a social context) in a way that he himself can be integrated in a critical-creative way in the existing dynamic society and culture.

The enlargement of the last twenty years can be situated in this idea. We regret not to have time to go further into the matter, and we deliberately restrain ourselves to a more suggesting presentation in the form of this scheme.

2. The institutional place of Educational Sciences as an academic discipline

The concept-forming mentioned in my preceding point coupled with a consolidated institutionalization of the educational sciences as an academic discipline. Unexpected high numbers of students populated the educational institutes of our Belgian universities and during the last twenty years this growth has increased about six-folded. This student explosion brought as a consequence that increasingly more professors and assistants (in most of the cases still relatively young) could be nominated. They developed a diversity of interests, and in research and theory they accomplished little by little an increasing internal ramification of the enlarged concept, as outlined above. In Belgium, after the second world war, there exclusively existed the section didactic – teacher education, related to the then importance of the micro-problems. Thereupon, the centers for selection and vocational guidance asked for a somewhat changed profile through which a second field of interest was created indeed in close relation with the first field but more aggravated on a.o. psychodiagnostics.

In the middle of the sixties, the section orthopedagogy started as a specific graduate section and social pedagogy had her own institutionalization as graduate study a few years later.

From 1974 on, the evolution of the interdisciplinarity and the influences of the meso- and macroproblems started to become clear. In the section “instructional sciences”, this developed into a new differentiation. Next to the traditional care for the teacher-training, this differentiation developed into an own graduate section for “instructional scientists”, willing to be active

in the meso- and macrofields of the education : organisation, management, planning, accompaniment of innovations on national, regional and local level, organisational development, etc.

Educational Sciences in Belgium are studied in seven different universities, three dutchspeaking and four frenchspeaking.

No doubt that we could pose the question : seven faculties for psychology and educational sciences, isn't that too much for a small country like Belgium with about 10 million inhabitants and with a low birth-return? But, probably as in other European countries, the outbuilding of an educational system is a product of the after-war period where there was no questioning about economic crisis and demographic decline.

However impressive this institutionalization of educational sciences might be, we nevertheless have to conclude that there are only few coordinating contacts between those various institutions.

This is probably the consequence of the fact that in Belgium there is liberty of education and also of research. But this continuously leads to overlaps.

The study duration at the universities for a graduate in educational sciences (master) actually takes five years (with the exception of one university) where after four years an identical diploma is delivered. At the Belgian universities there still is a lot of "teaching" in the traditional sense of the word, and the students have an in advance heavy programmed schedule. This probably still has a lot of advantages, but for the academic staff, this means that their time of occupation is highly dedicated to teaching and to immediate guidance of the students. As a consequence, little time remains for original research.

A revision of this time-investment is for the Belgian universities and especially for the development of the research in educational sciences a priority of the first order.

3. The function and the influence of Educational Sciences in Belgium

The influence on education – and the educational practice – of the mentioned double expansion, nl. on the one hand an enlargement of the concept and on the other an increasing institutionalization, is ut to our view certainly visible, but still very limited. For the majority the graduate are products of the recent expansion and in most of the cases belong to the younger generation. During their university training, students (especially dutchspeaking ones) are being required to be fluent in two or three foreign languages, this besides their mothertongue, they also have to be able to read foreign literature. One could expect that by this openness and the influence-radius would increase, as well in an absorbing as in an actively radiating way. It is difficult to say in exact numbers if the degree of influence of the graduated students increase in Belgium as well as abroad. But by a lot we can ascertain that their impact on the nowadays inland-educational innovation is not small, and that – because of their more-linguality – they are oriented toward

abroad, and sometimes even prosecute educational functions there (E.E.C., UNESCO, developing countries ...). The (most of the time) uni-lingual frenchspeaking Belgians seemed to have less difficulties in penetrating influentially abroad.

The history from DECROLY till now proves this thesis. Flanders especially looked for cooperation with the Netherlands. This cooperation is visible in the redaction of educational encyclopedies, dictionaires and magazines. Important books, edited by Flemings and Netherlanders together appeared. Different educational study- and workgroups are composed of Flemings and Netherlanders and vice versa. On the international forum, the educational research or the theories of the Flemish pedagogists are not very well known, this in comparison with those of the frenchspeaking Belgians who, because of their mothertongue, are more easily diffused. The active more-lingual attendance of Flemings on international congresses increases. Certain periodicals, edited in the Flanders (e.g. *Scientia Paedagogica Experimentalis*, and *Pedagogia Historica*) have international fame. In Germany, a lot of publications of Belgian pedagogists are increasingly being translated and edited, even more than for example publications of Scandinavian origin.

During the last ten years, some university centers in Wallonia, as well as in the Flanders, have exerted a lot of influence on the recent Belgian educational innovation. No doubt that this is through research and publications too, but, up to our view it is more because of the fact that certain members of the academic staff have integrated themselves into teacher-work-group founded after order by the Ministry of Education, etc... Lately, this rather active influence seems to be very notable and efficient.

The influence of the Belgian educational teaching and research is also being undermined by some general Belgian characteristics.

- There is a language discord, bringing about a geographical separation between the Flanders and Wallonia.
- There is an ideological discordance between to so-called "catholic net" and the "official net", especially on the field of education.

The universities do not escape from this form of exclusive thinking. For the nomination of the academic staff "in-breeding" is an implicate rule. Unspoken mutual distrust between the Belgian universities is sometimes a deplorable reality through which mutual cooperation, impregnation, management and cooperation on the field of education and research, cannot or only hardly be realized.

4. The place and function of Comparative Education in the Educational Sciences and in training- and researchprogramms

Not only out of a quantitative approach, but also out of a qualitative approach and given the outline of the evolution and the actual situation of the Educational Sciences in Belgium, can result a certain degree of justified optimism.

However, when we would like to describe the place and the function of the comparative education in Belgium, we are incited to a lot of modesty. Concerning the university educational centres, we mostly found a reserved place for teaching and research. This is different from university indeed, but of some universities we could say that, especially concerning teaching, they spend ideally enough hours to aspects of comparative education. Still we strongly must differentiate this by putting that these teaching interests in most of the cases are not a priority, neither for the students, nor for the professors and the assistants. The academic staff appointed to this task still has lots of other (more important) occupations, so that real comparative research is rather scarce or does not exist at all.

Some separate descriptions of countries are made, but they seldom are compared with one another in a justified way. The research — if it exists — remains reduced to the level of dissertations or at best to some rare doctoral dissertations, who excel more in their large framework than in their methodological depth. Few or no attention is paid to the optimization of the methodology of the comparative research. Group-forming in research does not exist at all. If some form of cooperation on that field exists, at best it is realized between some Flemish and Netherlands researchers. Because of this situation, there hardly is any reflection on an adapted concept or on an actualization of the content of these, to our view, important aspects of educational sciences. As to the university, the only positive aspect is the institutionalization of the place of the comparative education. The qualitative filling up of it unfortunately remains an ambition for the (near?) future.

In the frame of the outlined enlargement of the definition of educational sciences, this certainly should be realized, as well concerning macro- and mesoproblems as concerning the more traditional microaspects.

In the centres for teacher-training on the level of higher not-university education, comparative education is at the utmost a vague notion. On the basis of free initiatives, some teachers will refer to foreign educational systems and educational realities. Concerning the institutionalization, no or only occasionally a place is reserved to teaching on the subject of comparative education and research as to that.

Teacher-training on an university level pays more attention to international currents. However, this attention is mostly reduced to the juxtaposed information on what exists in other countries, without any attention for the methodologically justified comparisons. As such, the role of comparative education in the Belgian educational innovation should be seen a rather modest. In the discussion on educational innovation comparisons with abroad are used in careless way; on the one hand in order to undermine the arguments of the persons in favor or on the other hand in order to convince the opponents of the fact that the innovation succeeded somewhere else. The role of the universities in the scientifically justified information supply was up till now humiliatingly reduced and the university voices were often abused in a fight affected with affective prejudices between the supporters and the

opponents of the proposed change.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, we would like to repeat what we already said, nl. that – because of the more linguality of Belgium – there is no lack of information from abroad and this on nearly all the aspects of the educational sciences. But this richness of many-sided knowledge of the discipline named comparative education, has not yet led to a methodologically justified and systematic comparison. As such, a lot of work remains for an audacious researcher willing to call himself in Belgium an educational comparatist.

5. The future of Educational Sciences and of Comparative Education in Belgium

We all know the image of a Belgian in the jokes on characteristics of countries and people sees to it that no-Belgian remain delivered from an inferiority complex.

If Belgians exist (and I am a Fleming!) than it is also thanks to the image of them that you believe yourself not belonging to the less intelligent category of people.

The Belgians have the great mission to keep up this positive image of you and to save you from a possibly more realistic self-image that might render you unhappy. Out of this modest task and position in the great concert of the European countries, Belgium (as well Wallonia as the Flanders – objective comparisons between both parts fail) dares to be optimistic and predict a fruthfull future as to the evolution of the educational sciences. The above outlined scheme illustrated this.

But concerning the comparative education, the image of the future is and remains sober and difficult to predict. On a recent inquiry set up by 72 members of the Dutch-speaking Society of Comparative Education (N.G.V.O.) this is the Netherlands and the Dutchspeaking part of Belgium together, we only received 25 answers and only 18 members opted for the continuation of the society. May be that such self-destructing questions in an inquiry never should be posed. But it gives an image of the actual low degree of vitality of the comparative education in Belgium and, up to our view, also in the Netherlands. Nethertheless there still is a future for the comparative education in Belgium and in the Netherlands.