

**General theory of education –
an impossible but necessary project?**

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990's general theory education has been under discussion both in the Nordic countries and very much so in Germany. The vivid discussion may partly be seen in relation to the postmodern criticism concerning the possibility of general theories: are general theories really possible anymore and if they were, then what status should have or what role should they play? With respect to the history of the discipline such a discussion is not new, rather such a discussion belongs to the discourse. As an example the finnish educational philosopher Hollo was in 1928 worried about how it would be possible to present any general theory of education after Nietzsche. For many *Allgemeine Pädagogik* is still the graveyard where all the dead horses are berried, or should be. If we count the books published on this theme this really seem to be the case. From that perspective I ask myself if I really have morbid features in my personality in being interested in that, but sometimes archeology may turn out as rewarding.

It should also be said that we in different countries relate very differently to this *Allgemeine Pädagogik* tradition nad how it has dealt with the concept of Bildung. In Finland for example one could say that we stand with our feet deeply rooted in this tradition but since the second world war our eyes were turned very much towards anglo-american tradition. Education also turned empirical. Therefore I was not born into this tradition of *Systematische* or *Allgemeine Pädagogik* but the reason why I became interested in it was the postmodern litterature in the 80's. In -89 I wrote an article epistemology, empirical research and postmodernism but I was not able to relate me to what postmodernism could mean for me as an educationalist. The core problem was that I could not answer what modernist education was. So when I started to work on my reflective theory on school didactics I got to know german didacticians 92. It was helpful. But it was not until my stay at the Humboldt university 96-97 at Dietrich Benners department that I started to get a grasp of what this german variant of the enlightenment tradition in education was about.

My original intention was to limit myself to the question in the subtitle of this lecture: is general theory of education an impossible but yet a necessary project? As it still is the bottom line of the paper I would like to say that he subtitle may be read as including an expectation that general educational theory is not possible but that it still would be necessary. A solution to the contradiction indicated in the subtitle could be that even though a general educational theory is an impossible project in the sense that it cannot be a theory valid irrespective of culture, even if it cannot convincingly offer universal normative proposals, and even if it cannot claim to describe or reflect a reality as such, it may in fact still be considered a necessary project. The simple reason is that man is, today as before, in

need of fundamental conceptualisations explicating what it means to become a cultural being and theory explaining changes in this being. The position I defend is that there is room for educational theory that is aimed as general or fundamental. Obviously "general" must mean something else than was referred to above.

The approach

In trying to answer the question put in the title three issues related to the generality of educational theory are identified. These are:

1. The cultural dependency of theory (theory – culture)
2. The disciplinary development (theory – discipline)
3. The problem of normativity (theory – praxis relation)
4. The epistemological and ontological problem (theory – external reality relation)
5. The cultural dependency of educational theory (theory-culture)

Education as a discipline is gradually established on the basis of renaissance thinking, and especially through enlightenment philosophy. This development is closely connected with a turn from a theocentric to a anthropocentric view of the world. The whole enlightenment tradition of modern educational theory starting from Rousseaus works from the 1760's to Herbart's later works in 1830's belong to the liberal tradition where man is seen as born free, responsible for his own life, yet being a historical subject. Her historicity, reason, language and (political) freedom are seen as constitutive for her existence (Benner, 1991).

The french revolution 1789 is naturally of utmost importance in this respect. It signifies a change from an aristocratic to a democratic constitution. The period is interpreted as the radical change in the mode of thinking about the individual and society, history and future. Man is no longer culturally determined by birth nor socially or genetically. The future is an unwritten book. Education becomes the means through which man becomes man as well as vehicle through which cultural preservation and development occurs (Kant, 1960). Nor should we forget the relation between the autonomous nationstate and Bildung. The establishment of education as a discipline is very closely related to the construction of the nation state.

No longer is God seen as the creator of man – man has become the creator of herself and this so through education. The idea of developing knowledge independent of authorities as well as deliberating man to an independent moral reasoner and intellectual grows. This view is however also connected with the concept of progress as Condorcet explains. Progress is thus expected to occur both with respect to knowledge and moral reasoning. Politically the ideas of equality and democracy are viewed as the means to achieve this. This progressivistic aspect of the enlightenment view is today very much disputed (vonWright, 1993), if not completely refused. The world wars of the 20th century, the holocaust and Stalins Gulag-archipelago learned us this mistrust. After having rebuilt the countries destroyed in the war and sat down to rest there was time for reflection. What kind of world view was it that had taken us where we ended? Was this an example of cultural progress? No, the deconstruction of enlightenment philosophy had to start. And so it did. From the most radical anti-foundationalist positions that were formulated the situation has seemed to calm down. The debate has created distance. We are more ready to ask about what parts of the fundamentals of enlightenment thinking are still relevant? Maybe we are not any more prepared to abandon that position totally? And, when it comes to a general theory it must not necessarily be build upon the concept of cultural progress.

Before the tradition of enlightenment is totally thrown overboard, we should ask if the idea of democracy, which is so closely connected to enlightenment, is an uncomfortable state of

affairs. This is obviously not the case, on the contrary, but the concept of democracy has been redefined in various ways as the discussion between communitarians and libertarians that followed on Rawls theory on justice three decades ago. I think it is of fundamental importance that educationalists participate in this debate. By the way one could ask how long Denmark have had free elections for men and women? 93 years this has been the case in Finland. We should also ask whether the relation between the educational system and labour market has changed so fundamentally during the past century that the concept of *Mündigkeit* is no more accurate. Or maybe it is so that this self-reflecting, culturally autonomous individual is an even more central than earlier. Maybe the postmodern condition is a fresh wind, although not a new sunrise or maybe even that, having forced us to redefine parts of the enlightenment tradition?

Enlightenment in terms of a belief in a true, one and only nature of man and the world, enlightenment in terms of a belief in a collective Hegelian spirit existing and developing for itself, a belief in a Kantian transcendental subject, enlightenment in terms of mans superiority in relation to nature or some cultures superiority over others are all most difficult to support. It appears however, as we would have difficulties in carrying the responsibility that resulted from the freedom which we have been striving for so long (freedom of will, freedom of speech, freedom from nature and religion).

Hope was mentioned yesterday. The question is what we do dare to hope from tomorrow, without running the risk of fundamental dissappointment. Is there hope? The political system has by definition a role in the society to reflect upon how the future should look like. If we take a look in the political programs, almost irrespective of what the party is, the lines devoted to the future are more or less totally absent. In the 60's this was not so, and at that time no educationalist had problems to be explicitly normative. However, if there is no hope formulated in the political programs there can be not future either. If there is no hope, there is no risks, why then are so many talking about a risksociety? If the life has turned risky it must mean that not everybody is connected to a pleasuremachine. And there is still a world outside the living room of western societies. They are not connected to any machine at all. So, maybe they have a future and hope, while we don't.

What I want to say is that it is difficult to imagine what a temporally and culturally transcending theory of education would be like. A general theory of education makes fundamental assumptions but it does so related to the culture for which it aims to be valid for. Nor can the postmodern condition and orientation in thinking be understood as separate or disconnected from cultural changes in western societies. Also postmodern philosophy is a regional and historical phenomenon. Thus, the only way a general theory of education may be considered general is *within* some culture.

If a theory universally true over time and space is not possible, we have to live with several parallel outlines. Accepting theoretical pluralism changes the nature of the dialogue – it requires that representatives for specific traditions are more ready than earlier to move between "language games". Naturally this is difficult. We know this from our efforts to communicate between traditions *within* one and the same culture - the difficulties to communicate *between* cultures are even more demanding. For example Wolfgang Klafki, so honoured and wellknown in Denmark, is totally unknown in England. But the demand is there. Accepting theoretical pluralism requires a change in our way of thinking or attitude: I believe we must construct theories *as if* they would be fundamental even though we know that these theories are connected to specific cultural traditions. A *self-ironical foundationalism* is perhaps most close to the attitude I am thinking of here. Irony connected to commitment. Not simultaneously but included in the same person.

2. The disciplinary development

General education and the expansion of education as a discipline

One motive to raising the question of the possibility and necessity of general education as discipline is related to the expansion of education as scientific discipline in many European countries during the last three decades. This quantitative expansion of academic positions is coupled with a clear differentiation of education as a discipline. The process of differentiation has thus multiplied the problem of theory development within education.

But is plurality a problem? From the perspective of general education it may be seen as dilemma: if several educational disciplines are accepted in addition to general education as *the* discipline we may ask if this is not also to question the necessity of a general *theory* of education. If there is a discipline that aims at developing general and foundational theories, should not these theories automatically then also be valid for all educational subdisciplines?

However, it is useful to recognise *why* the discipline of education has differentiated. It has, in fact, little to do with the internal debate within education. The differentiation has not resulted from pressures within the discipline expressed by a critical analysis in academic journals but rather been regulated by factors external to the scientific discourse. It is the practical needs of the contemporary society that have led to the differentiation. In this light the differentiation of the discipline cannot be seen as a critique against the *possibility* of a general theory of education. What has been questioned is its *validity* for various fields of practice.

However, is the situation really so heterogeneous as it may seem? When we scrutinize fields like special education and adult education it is not evident that there exist distinct theories within these fields that concur each other. Second, they seem to have very much in common (similar ideas of learning, teaching, selection of content, student activity, etc). In this light the problem of specialized disciplines is that they appear too *broad* and not specific enough. Third, theories within these subdisciplines seem to be dependent on views already developed within general education. Fourth, and finally, theories within educational subdisciplines seldom argue against positions developed within general education and they do not claim to have solved previously unsolved problems in general education. A preliminary conclusion would then be that the game is far from over for general education, at least when analysed from these perspectives.

The specialized subdisciplines may be seen as *fields of research* within general education as a discipline. They would aim at developing *regional theories*. In conclusion, then, general education may be said to exist in the tension of being a foundational discipline for all pedagogical subdisciplines and fields of research and, at the same time, being a specialized subdiscipline itself, primarily focused on an ontological level of analysis. Thus, general education is a specialisation on the fundamental issues.

3. The problem of normativity (theory-praxis relation)

Pedagogical theory relate to practice in at least following two ways. First there is the traditional relation between theory and practice as an empirical reality normally dealt with on an ontological and epistemological level. This aspect is common to any other disciplines. Second there is the question whether and to what extent pedagogical theory should contain values (norms) guiding practice, i.e. can educational theory contain values, does it contain values, should it contain values and can it avoid containing values? This is the normativity problem.

A consequence of normative theories is also that teachers are transformed into technicians who are expected to internalize given values and thus letting them regulate their teaching practices. Normative theories also tend to view the educated individual from an instrumentalist perspective. A final problem with normative theories is that the difference between ideology and theory becomes blurred. A multicultural society characterised by parallel valuesystems rather seem to require reflective practitioners as teachers. Thus, it may be asked if not an acceptance of a normative general *theory* of education by definition is outruled? It seems so.

Normative theories can thus be used only by those who share the values of the theory. However, if these values already are accepted then one may ask of what use the theory in question is? Most likely theory functions as a kind of ideological and quasi-intellectual legitimation of one's pedagogical efforts. But this use of theory is of very limited value in relation to reflection on valuequestions. Normative theory is unable to offer a logic according to which the teacher may reflect on the values as such.

The alternative then is to argue for a non-affirmative position, i.e for a theory that does not require the teacher to accept certain norms in order to carry out good teaching. Such a 'reflective' view on the problem of normativity rather asks the teacher about what values are guiding the actual teaching-studying-learning process. It stimulates teachers' reflection concerning these values. It represents a view of theory as something that challenges thought. The strength of a reflective or non-affirmative position thus seems to be that we are able to keep up the difference between political ideology and pedagogical theory. This idea of the role of theory is not new. In his lectures from 1826 Schleiermacher explicates exactly this view concerning what role theory may have for the practitioner.

However, even though a theory claims to be non-affirmative we may ask if it is really possible that theory is value neutral? I believe that no theories within human, social and cultural sciences can never manage to be completely neutral to values. Even though a pedagogical theory would not include explicit norms for pedagogical action it still is valueladen. And as this is the case then we seem to be back where we started but on another, more fundamental, level. There is, in other words, a difference between being normative on the first level (i.e. that of giving explicit advice for teaching practice) and the second level (i.e. that of accepting some fundamental ideas of e.g. role of education or the human nature). This second and more fundamental level may be more open with respect to values to be realized in and by the teaching-studying-learning process and may accept different solutions to one and the same practical problem. In conclusion then it makes sense to speak about reflective theories as long as we remember that they are reflective only on the first level of value problems discussed above. On the more fundamental level no theory can be neutral with respect to values. But more open theories offers more degrees of freedom for the teachers decisions. This means that even though a reflective theory provokes teachers to take a stand on values and aims of education it does not allow for whatever values to be realized.

The view according to which the individual through his own activity becomes encultured and according to which the subject must be provoked in order to reach maturity (*Mündigkeit*) is, therefore, in the end, an example of normative educational theory. It says that the pedagogical process must be arranged so that the individual's own decision making and activity is not violated. It says how we should educate. This position does not accept that interests external to the pedagogical relation (cultural interests) are directly transformed into pedagogical processes. The requirement is that these external interests must accept or respect the principle of *Bildsamkeit*. Otherwise the individual is viewed from an instrumentalist perspective, she would become an object for somebody else's interests. According to the principle of *Bildsamkeit* she (the learner) must be an object for herself.

Are there reflective theories?

A problem concerning pure analytic or descriptive theories is that their openness may allow teachers to make use of the theory in question in order to carry out such teaching that the creator of the theory personally conceives of as violating fundamental human values. We can see that the price that has to be paid in order to keep the difference between political ideologies guiding the school democratically decided upon and the intellectual endeavour of creating and criticizing theories may be high. But the alternative – to subordinate educational theory to ideology – is not a real alternative.

It appears as if a reflective theory is of more general value than confessional theories. In a pluralist society a reflective or non-affirmative approach also is easier to defend compared to normative positions as it may offer a grammar for the dialogue concerning pedagogical aims.

4. The epistemological and ontological problem

(theory-external reality relation)

The idea of one fundamental theory in education

The ambition of many theories proposed within education is that they are to be seen as more or less universal ones. Often this ambition is connected with the idea that we sometimes would be able to find a fundamental and unifying theory (Nohl, 1948). The existing plurality of theories has thus been conceived of as a fundamental dilemma to be solved. Consequently, as any such theory has not been accepted as *the* theory, the status of education as science has been considered critical. The science of education has therefore, it is argued, been in a continuous state of crisis (Schäfer, 1990). It is however more than usual that several theories on the same problem exist parallel to each other. Further, if education fundamentally is a *philosophical dilemma* then it is natural that a plurality of educational theories exist.

Essence (epistemology) and existence (ontology)

When leaving the hope of finding the ultimate theory the question is, however, if it really is necessary to abandon a realist ontological position? Does an abandoning of representational epistemology (correspondance theory) and a replacement of it with some version of conceptual relativism force us to leave ontological realism? If we don't have access to the meaning of the world then theory constitute the *essence* of reality i.e. the meaning of some part of reality has for us. *Theory is thus constitutive with respect to the essence of reality, but not with respect to its existence.*

Given this, we must accept that there is no ultimate pedagogical reality as such which could be pictured by a theory. Yes, there is *something* but the meaning of this something does not exist by itself. I thus support Searles (1995) argumentation concerning "external realism" when he writes that: "Realism is an ontological theory: it says that there exists a reality totally independent of our representations... It presupposes that there is a way things are that is independent of how we represent how things are." (pp. 155-156). To make ontological claims is one thing, to make epistemological is another. Epistemologically there is no way to decide about a description that would be true without taking into consideration the tradition and interests and the like. A realist ontological stance does not lead to that we must accept a correspondance theory of truth. It is only through our theories that some part of our experienced world will be experienced as pedagogical. There is no reason to think that the world contains limits for how it may be described, nor does it contain limits for how our experiences should be described.

The conclusion is that even though we deny the view according to which theories represent a world outside us, this does not mean that we have departed from the idea of a general theory of education. Conceptual relativism does not logically lead us to abandon the idea of general theory of education. What is different is the attitude: we do not pretend to describe the existence of something as such, even though we believe in the existence in a world independent of our descriptions of it. Accepting the idea of ontological or external realism does not mean that a theory reflects this external reality as it is. Out there is something but this something does not have any such features that would constrain our ways (possibilities) to describe it. Accepting ontological (external) realism does, consequently, not offer any support for the possibility of a general theory of education. We cannot refute or defend a theory by using external realism as an argument. Observe therefore that an anti-realist ontological position does not necessarily lead to a refusal of a general theory of education.

(And even if we do think that external reality has some specific structure we cannot claim that a theory can map that reality as the relation between the content of our awareness and the reality is not a straightforward relation.)

Personally I sympathize very much with Ricourian hermeneutics and I do not see why this form of realism would be in contradiction with this form of hermeneutics.

Conclusion

The reason to why an aspect of reality is called pedagogical is because of our conceptual system and theories offers us the possibility to view the reality in this light and that it fits into our view of the world to make such a description.

Even though our world may be described in many different "true" ways this does not mean that general theories in terms of being interpreted as fundamental theories are senseless, on the contrary. We are still forced to develop general conceptual systems with the ambition of being fundamental because of the functional values these theories have. But the development of general theories does not have to be governed by the idea of depicting the ultimate truth of education in order to be legitimate. We must avoid both epistemological dogmatism and relativism. Silence is no alternative nor is a myriad of loosely connected microtheories an option.

One of the conclusions from the reasoning above is also that educational theory must proceed from the question of the individuals *becoming* cultural subjects, and not so much from the anthropological question of what a *man is*. But does not this sound familiar? Has not the problem of becoming always been the dilemma of education?