

## Mapping the discipline history of education

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## Mapping the discipline history of education, *PH* 50/6, 2014.

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*Inaugurated in 2013, this collective research programme aims to construct an international mapping of the history of education that accounts for recent developments in the field. Our goal is to create a current and retrospective assessment of the discipline's institutional grounding and of the knowledge produced by its practitioners, stretching across national and cultural borders. Ultimately, the programme will help to increase interactions among scholars and facilitate the creation of collaborative research agendas, thereby augmenting the standing and visibility of the discipline.*

*This text will briefly introduce the programme's conceptual basis, explaining the methodological steps taken to ensure the comparability of data gathered and the transnational and transcontinental character of the study's design. In the second section, we will zoom in on doctoral students' dissertations, which are the optimal way to study a discipline's development and potential. Doctoral students and recent graduates are part of a tradition, a school of thought, and yet they constitute that tradition's replacement and renewal. Therefore, as graduate students carry forth the disciplinary torch, they hold the future of the field in their hands.*

*Keywords: mapping the discipline; history of education; dissertations; cultural transfer*

### **1. A programmatic conception**

The history of education is experiencing a tremendous revival. An impressive number of studies take up rich topics and original subject matter, and several conferences organised by those in the field have developed into well-established associations and tight-knit communities. As this issue of *Paedagogica Historica* attests, the moment for a historiographic assessment has clearly come<sup>2</sup>. We of course draw on the literature to date, which skilfully problematises the challenges currently facing the history of education.

Transcending internal debates and defying boundaries of all types, our research programme seeks to further the self-reflexive study of the discipline through the creation

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<sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup>Numerous existing reports (position papers, analytical records and guides, in particular The International Guide to the History of Education edited by P. Caspard since 1990 for the International Standing Conference on the History of Education, etc.) have been compiled into a systematic bibliography on the discipline's historiography. Our programme will catalogue and disseminate this list. See <http://kartografy.wordpress.com/bibliography-1980-2014/> (accessed June 30, 2014). As this bibliography demonstrates, a number of historians of education have been long-time, substantial contributors to these assessments – first and foremost the successive presidents of ISCHE, who are also participants in this programme – M. Depaepe, J. Dekker, A. Nóvoa, F. Simon, and E. Fuchs.

of collectively built databases. Via a shared virtual platform, such databases will provide common access to a catalogue of researchers and institutions, media outlets and studies on the history of education, irrespective of their institutional and geographic moorings. The methodological precautions presented below ensure that the history of education is fully and accurately represented as a field. These precautions are especially necessary as this study concerns a field with fluid contours. The field is subject to significant social demands, situated at the meeting point of other disciplines and peopled by actors with divergent backgrounds. This is certainly not peculiar to the history of education; historians and social scientists have made similar observations on scientific practice by using a social and contextual approach. The boundaries between fields of research or disciplines are moveable and dynamic; internal reconfigurations do not take place in a vacuum, in an autopoietic manner, but are subject to strong external pressures tied to the sociocultural, economic and political context. Referencing this work, we draw from it the multidimensional characterisation of how a field of study – the history of education like any other – emerges and expands, differentiates itself and gradually professionalises, acquiring the institutional emblems that define a discipline today.

.(1) A discipline forms and develops through the achievement of an institutional status that permits the professionalisation of research, resulting in the creation of positions, chairs, laboratories and centres that guarantee the formation of a professional body completely or in part specialised in the field.

.(2) This institutional status promotes the construction of networks, such as research collectives (associations, scientific organisations), professional events (conferences, symposia, etc.) and above all printed media (especially journals) that allow for the creation of a community of researchers working on and discussing common issues.

.(3) This configuration permits a professionalisation of the field, which is all the more important as the discipline grows into a tightly bound unit of teaching and research (programmes of study and academic degrees, especially dissertations and accreditations). At stake is the ability of a discipline to define its own credentials and to form future practitioners.

.(4) This institutional and communicative infrastructure influences the transmission of knowledge, shaping the field as a collective research enterprise. In accordance with the criteria of scientific authority on which the social and scientific legitimacy of the discipline depend, the production of knowledge occurs through a continual development and refinement of concepts, theoretical models and methods for collecting and analysing data.

Thus, we focus on these four components. While we are aware that they are closely interrelated, at the stage of building a database we believe it is worthwhile to differentiate between them in order to conduct rigorous systematic studies and to ensure a deep and

exhaustive analysis.

The first three categories can be discussed in terms of their material and institutional dimensions. This constitutes the first stage of our work. This institutional mapping is the basis, in our view, for exploring the production of knowledge (the fourth component), giving simultaneous consideration to prevailing, shifting and revived concerns in content (subjects, issues), methods (approaches, viewpoints), references (theoretical frameworks), ties to other disciplines and historical contexts and geographic scopes. It is important to identify local, regional, national and inter-national developments, in order to test theories of regional particularism as well as to isolate overall trends and the movement of ideas across disciplinary and national borders.

One way to become familiar with a discipline is to paint the most precise and complete portrait of it possible. This search for exhaustiveness is not mere intellectual posturing, but rather is necessary to ensure that the part is not taken for the whole. Too often, the history and sociology of disciplines accentuate innovative trends, the most well-known scholars or the most frequently cited works. If these are identifying markers of a discipline, they do not represent the field alone. The pitfall of these surveys is that they ignore the less visible but nonetheless constructive work that, by virtue of its quantity or by highlighting tensions in an arena of research, better constitute an overall vision of a field. Hence the decision to turn to a systematic study based on the triad outlined and justified above: institutions/networks/ professionalisation.

(1) Institutions:

- positions, that is, employment at institutions of higher education and centres for research;
- organisations, groups and centres for research;
- museums and archives dedicated to the history of education.

(2) Networks:

- journals;
- associations;
- conferences.

(3) Socialisation:

- dissertations and credentials;
- curricula and degrees (part of a subsequent agenda).

This index is used to characterise each term in the triad. Keeping in mind the goal of constructing a database, carefully laying out such an index permits us to see a complete and complex landscape. It likewise allows for both an examination of the state of the field within a national context and for international comparisons, permitting the discovery of specificities, convergent phenomena and kinetic movements (loans, acquisitions, reinterpretations). This, however, cannot be accomplished unless the criteria for the database are conceived of in terms likely to fit into different contexts (historic and geographic).

The data collected must be as precise as possible, permitting snapshots of different periods (presupposing the registry of exact dates). Essentially, the goal is to be able to measure the specific configuration of a given moment and its dynamics (the hierarchy and fluctuation of positions, in order to trace a career path; filiation and modulation, to locate continuity and rupture, or even paradigm shifts). Denominations of chairs and positions as well as journals, associations and conferences are of great value, as the formulations used allow us to grasp the boundaries of the objects in question. Sites are also significant, permitting a mapping that is not only intellectual, but also geographic. Lastly, it is worth reflecting on a common language and harmonising key terms in order to synchronise different national contexts, a form of codification that will nicely complete the detailed list of chairs, journal titles, associations and institutions.

The intensifying internationalisation of academic research has not brought about the homogenisation of higher education systems. While journals, associations and conferences increasingly subscribe to convergent norms, the structure of curricula and academic career paths continues to exhibit strong national particularities. The challenge therefore centres on producing data usable on at least two levels: the national and the international.

Drawing up a list of position holders, and chairs in those countries where they exist, allows for the creation of significant mappings of each national space studied. However, without the aforementioned methodological safeguards, this data proves unsuitable for comparison. In fact, there are no organic equivalencies among academic positions in different countries, whether we are thinking about Europe or beyond. A work of translation must be done, which permits each position to be located in a more general hierarchy: we can highlight, for example, the similarities between a *Maître de conférence*'s position in France and that of an assistant professor in other places. We can roughly distinguish three levels: generally non-permanent entry-level positions, followed by two grades of professorship. While this model may not be relevant in the French case, it is for a number of other contexts studied. In addition to the semantic question, this part of the inquiry is the most difficult for other reasons as well. Currently, we cover the past twenty-five years, and putting them into perspective requires the reconstruction of careers and configurations that have evolved and are not always easy to document. The sources are not necessarily accessible and often contain gaps; they also vary depending on the country. For those countries with directories for each university that lists the titles of chairs, the inquiry is feasible (if laborious). The task is more arduous in France where, despite intense centralisation, no such tools exist. In order to complete the overview of the history of education's institutional standing, this data on position holders will be complemented by a systematic catalogue of organisations, groups, centres, museums and archives dedicated to the history of education.

At first glance, the identification of journals, national and international associations and conferences on the history of education seems to be the least complicated step. Yet

the analysis of texts generated and disseminated through these networks remains the most difficult. In the long-term, a study of the entirety of intellectual production in the history of education also necessitates taking into account work edited or debated within networks that are interdisciplinary or fall under the jurisdiction of other disciplines.

For authenticating research in a highly specialised framework, journals are among the scientific community's most powerful means of disciplinary transmission. Therefore, they constitute a privileged space in the effort to assess research on the history of education, which requires multiple levels of delineation. This first involves inventorying journals dedicated to the discipline. Several inquiries can be conducted using this data. A panorama of the major works that have nourished the field over the course of the last twenty-five years will be sketched out, permitting a more detailed analysis of the field's content and its evolution over time. This approach will allow for an assessment of the distribution of studies on the local/ national level and an evaluation of transnational dynamics. We are also interested in methodological innovations that circulate via journals, all the while noting epistemological debts to other domains (sociology, anthropology, political, economic and social history, etc.). Finally, we consider the conditions of production and dissemination (review processes; editorial and scientific committees; frequency; headings and materiality, subscriptions, etc.) and the background of the authors published in order to outline the contours, challenges and potential of these vehicles for scientific debate in the history of education. A parallel study on journals not specifically dedicated to the discipline will be conducted, so that the same approach can encompass additional work devoted to the history of education.

Associations and conferences are spaces where we can pay special attention to the collective appropriation of the discipline. The emergence and promotion of professional groups and communal activities point to moments that structure national and international spaces, embodying crucial elements that affirm the discipline and its vitality. An exhaustive survey of such meetings will permit an understanding of national and international structuring methods: which associations act autonomously, and which groups are local branches of larger organisations. This provides an opportunity to understand better the strategies of disciplinary affiliation/affirmation in play. Employing findings from an initial experimental study, our discussion continues with the third part of our triad on dissertations and credentials.

## 2. Dissertations: filiations and the potential of a discipline

Doctoral dissertations are an ideal source for the analysis of a discipline's recent dynamics and potential. While doctoral students and recent graduates often create bridges to new fields of research, they generally belong to an intellectual legacy which they use as a starting point to position, or even define, their affiliations. By surveying their temporal distribution, dissertations are also a means of examining how a discipline defines itself over time. Moreover, dissertations are the internationally recognised standard qualification to pursue an academic career. Even if they differ nationally (due to

dissimilar regulatory frameworks concerning the type and volume of writing, committees and defences), they are subject to a de facto equivalence, providing candidates with the opportunity to circulate among different countries.

The task is to understand how the discipline of the history of education can serve as an organising principle in doctoral studies, especially as graduate training constitutes an important period in academic professionalisation. Furthermore, it may be revealing to consider the role of dissertation advisors in the discipline's engineering at the national or institutional level. Thus, a comparative approach will not only allow for the study of disciplinary affiliations but will also highlight the collective construction of the history of education. In this sense, studying dissertations will address how the history of education's boundaries are defined in different cultural contexts and in relation to other disciplines.

In addition to titles and abstracts, which served as a basis for this preliminary study, we considered the content of dissertations. An analysis of research questions and methodological tendencies reveals the periods, places, and scales covered in the existing research and points to the most promising and innovative subjects and approaches in the field. Again, the terminology adopted, as well as the notions and concepts used, needed to be analysed, in order to enable the identification of their meaning in a given linguistic context and their modulations across cultural borders as they became the objects of translations and appropriations.

Our research objective required the adoption of a framework large enough to include dissertations related to the history of education, but defended in any field in the humanities and social sciences. At this stage in our study – exploratory yet tightly contextualised (France and francophone Switzerland, or Romandie) – we have decided that dissertations must satisfy three criteria to be included in our work:

- (1) the dissertation was defended or drafted after 1990 (including dissertations in progress);
- (2) the subject of the dissertation clearly has a historical component; (3) the dissertation's research question has an educational theme.

This framework has permitted us to identify 471 French dissertations (124 of which are in progress) and 47 French-Swiss dissertations (nine of which are in progress).

While the set-up of the database offers a glimpse of dissertations in particular cultural contexts, it also allows us to assess what steps need to be taken to further this study and to enlarge the comparative nature of the analysis by encouraging similar work in other national contexts. The information used to describe the dissertations – title and abstract, institutional affiliation, research committee chair (members of the dissertation committee also deserve attention), field and defence date – stand out as avenues of research and allow us to highlight differences and similarities between France and

francophone Switzerland.

Three cursory conclusions can be made from this comparison, which took into account and contextualised the particularities of each cultural space. In terms of institutional anchorage, the distribution of dissertations defended indicates certain research hubs, in French-speaking Switzerland as in France, where the history of education enjoys a special standing (Geneva in Switzerland; Paris in France, notably the University of Paris IV, V and I). However, this observation needs to be qualified: if the notion of major centres seems polarising, the discipline is represented in numerous other establishments, demonstrating the diversity of its institutional foundation (to the point that the field risks fragmentation) and a widespread interest in the history of education.

Next, geographic and chronological indexation demonstrates that dissertations on the history of education conform to general trends in the humanities and social sciences. The majority of research questions examine contemporary local and European issues. The geographical coverage of francophone Swiss dissertations deserves a few additional remarks. Over a third (34%) of them have a non-European focus. This can be explained first and foremost by the University of Geneva's tradition of intercultural, international and comparative history. Moreover, while the impressive production of doctoral dissertations in France results in a corpus that can stand on its own, doctoral productions in francophone Switzerland, because of the country's small size, remain tied to trends in neighbouring countries and fields. Since the mid- 1990s, furthermore, we see a tendency to limit research to Europe, as the majority of dissertations have been devoted to countries bordering Switzerland (France above all) and to research on the cantons and the French-speaking Swiss. This can be explained by the preference given to a resolutely historical approach favouring local and regional archives which, through microhistory, tackle broader questions. Thus, during the last ten years, 80% of dissertations have concerned European topics. Three quarters of these deal with francophone Switzerland. These general trends can also be found on the French side of the border, where there is no doubt about France's preponderance (80% of dissertations). Half of the remainder of dissertations examine francophone countries: although 51 countries are represented in total, ratios of cultural proximity or the existence of a body of local archives are decisive factors. This Eurocentrism can be legitimised by the proximity between educational systems: neighbouring models are more likely to appear as potential transpositions. This likewise explains the number of dissertations on the former colonies. Of the historical periods under investigation, almost 95% of Romandie and 80% of French dissertations explore the modern era. In addition to these, it should be noted that a consistent number of dissertations bridge chronological periods in order to privilege the *longue durée*. These largely deal with classroom practices and pedagogical issues in order to question contemporary institutions and systems that might otherwise seem intractable.

The institutional anchorage of graduate students constitutes the principal difference



between the Swiss and French contexts. The majority of dissertations in francophone Switzerland were defended in educational sciences departments (34 out of 38), a characteristic equally true of germanophone Switzerland. In France, dissertations were largely defended in history departments (half of the dissertations are the work of historians who became progressively involved with educational subjects), compared with a third in educational sciences departments. Academic recruitment strategies may create a circular logic of enrolment: few positions are allocated to the history of education in France and, as in Switzerland, historians can be hired in educational sciences departments where they continue to pursue historical research. We filtered the French data entries by discipline to analyse change over time. While the ratio of history to educational sciences is constant, we nonetheless noted the disappearance of dissertations directed by researchers at the *École nationale des Chartes*. Along with this change, especially from 2000 on, there was a corresponding increase of dissertations in sociology and political science. The history of education thus became a subject seized upon by methodologically dynamic and innovative disciplines.

Finally, the study of themes broached in dissertations gives us a look at how research questions have developed and evolved over the course of the last twenty-five years. In the framework of this exploratory study, it is important to underline that the proposed categories are flexible and have been constructed from the Franco-Romand data (overarching themes that allow for later entries by methods/ approaches). At this stage in the process, we have established five categories to create a transnational pool; we have classed dissertations according to their major subject of study (as indicated in the title and the abstract), while bearing in mind that some dissertations might also deal with subjects from another category.

The first category concerns the history of scholastic institutions. It includes dissertations on educational policies, the construction of the teaching state and the educational profession. In the French case, this (admittedly vast) category encompasses a substantial number of dissertations (almost half). It corresponds to a perennial line of research linked to the well-established history of the state and its institutions. In francophone Switzerland, we found similar themes during the 1990s. At that time many educational professionals undertook dissertations that studied the history of the (often public) scholastic institutions where they practised. Although in Switzerland we see a decrease over time, this subject experienced a renaissance in France and seems to hold a certain appeal for doctoral students – half of all the dissertations in progress centre on these themes.

Studies problematising teaching practices and methods and questions of discipline – subject matter taught, the history of the disciplines – comprise a second group. This research makes up a third of Romandie dissertations. We noted a resurgence of the didactic aspect over the last few years. Seven out of nine dissertations in progress include a historical-didactic dimension, exploring the transformation of scholastic knowledge

through an analysis of plans and programmes of study. The current trend in this research examines the history of textbooks and teaching methods, which has evolved from a simple critical catalogue of underlying ideologies to a well-used method for measuring the circulation of knowledge. In France, 20% of dissertations focus on this subject, and we found similar thematic accents in francophone Switzerland. These dissertations are also the most evenly distributed among disciplines, although in terms of the total number of dissertations defended, these studies predominate in educational sciences. Historiographical developments concerning daily practices and the structure of academia (for example as is the case in the history of science) might account for this.

Dissertations dealing with the philosophy and history of pedagogical ideas, and the figures that represent them, make up a smaller group. In francophone Switzerland, this is clearly the subject addressed least often (5%). While the careers of numerous actors and groups have been examined, they generally serve as case studies for more complex analyses. Consequently they tend to be treated as social biographies (*Gesellschaftsbiographie*). Representing 16% of French dissertations, studies on pedagogical questions are generally conducted in the field of educational sciences; this can perhaps be linked to differences during the first years of study between programmes in this domain and history. It appears that these subjects facilitate comparative and trans-periodic approaches, a hypothesis that a future study of methodologies might confirm.

A fourth, similarly vast, group of dissertations focuses on the relationship between education and society (activism, syndicalism, women's and minority history). This research on the interactions and issues that arise between schools and society is well represented in francophone Switzerland, where 40% of dissertations are devoted to this dialectic. Foreign graduate students (from Algeria, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Iran and Quebec) largely fleshed out this research direction in the 1990s in order to question the introduction and competitiveness of professional educational structures in their own countries. We should also note that the majority of these dissertations look at questions of gender, which explains the precedence of dissertations by women in this field (13 out of 17). In France, 15% of dissertations discuss educational/social relations: while this constitutes a group numerically comparable to that of the third category, it appears to be a bit more stable over time. There is also a lively interest in studies on groups of different ages and more recently on groups with diverse social origins, which corresponds to general tendencies in the historiography. The distribution by discipline reveals, moreover, that more than 75% of these dissertations are in the field of history.

Finally, the fifth category groups together dissertations on the circulation of knowledge, educational transfers and internationalisation. The circulation of models and pedagogical practices is a recurrent theme in francophone Switzerland, in the history of education and in educational sciences more generally. It often covers the political and social dimension, focusing on working-class literacy movements in the so-called developing countries. First approached in the 1990s by researchers interested in analysing

the “modernisation” of Africa and Latin America along western lines, this subject has grown popular over the last decade, particularly due to the methodological developments emerging from the pluralist field of transnational history. Studies of cultural transfer, including borrowings by one or more (scholastic) culture(s), also make up part of this group. These studies emphasise the acculturation of knowledge and semantic transformations. Among the French dissertations this category is the poorest: only 3% of studies are dedicated to it. The themes that it incorporates do not appear in the data until 2000 and of the thirteen dissertations in question, seven are in progress. This suggests that this is a recent approach in the history of education in France. It will be interesting to chart its progress (which may be linked to the significant number of studies in neighbouring countries and/or subjects treated in educational sciences more generally).

At the conclusion of this exploratory study, we can signal that a landscape strongly influenced by the academic structure of the disciplines emerges from the analysis of French dissertations, while the data on Romandic dissertations offers a more transdisciplinary panorama. In view of the thematic differences between the two datasets studied, we can likewise pose questions about the degree to which the field is partitioned at the national level. In France, although doctoral students consult research undertaken in neighbouring countries on precise questions, they use the French literature above all to position themselves in their field. This brings up the delicate definition of shared categories of analysis. To encompass Romandic and French dissertations, the categories here are inherently imperfect but permit a glimpse of existing work (and thus, of dynamics and gaps in the literature on the history of education). This underlines the importance of the comparison of dissertations for our research programme: the comparison makes both the correlation of concepts used in each country and an effort of translation-definition desirable and possible. In addition to building a methodological tool for future comparative studies, this work incites dialogue across borders. Accordingly, a more detailed examination of subjects studied and doctoral students’ career paths will be necessary to outline clearly the paradigmatic borders between the two cultural zones. Finally, enlarging the dataset to include other countries will require a definition of categories that at least minimally permits comparisons.

## Outlook

This research programme will not be nearly as pertinent if it is not approached through a collective dynamic, defying the conventions of genre. First and foremost, the programme will be conducted in close cooperation with the International Standing Conference on the History of Education (ISCHE), which over the past two years has taken major steps to support the programme activities, under the presidency of Eckhardt Fuchs. First, ISCHE has secured and sustainably located all its records and the records of *Paedagogica Historica*. These records will be inventoried and eventually made available for research. Second, ISCHE has started a project on the Global History of History of

Education as a Research Field: ISCHE and the National Societies which aims at researching the institutional history of education and the collaboration between ISCHE and national organisations since the second half of the twentieth century. This ISCHE project and the research programme on Mapping the Discipline will profit from each other by using their networks and other resources, by collecting and compiling data, by creating synergies, and by exchanging and combining their research findings. Both projects will be conducted under the auspices of ISCHE which will also provide the institutional framework for workshops and a standing working group entitled Mapping the Discipline.

Thus, we conclude by simply inviting any researcher who is interested to join our network and ISCHE's standing working group Mapping the Discipline, newly constituted in 2014, and to enrich, through their own inquiries, the database, bibliographical review, and collective studies in progress. In the end, the collective discussion of data and analyses produced in this manner ought to reinforce synergies among historians of education and facilitate the establishment of research agendas and collectives furthering the discipline's standing and recognition.

#### Notes on contributors

Rita Hofstetter is a full professor in the history of education at the University of Geneva. Her research focuses on the history of educational sciences, the construction of the teaching state and the teaching professions, and international networks in education, among them the history of the International Bureau of Education. She is currently President of the Department of Educational Sciences at the University of Geneva, Director of the Archives Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau and co-leader of ERHISE (social history of education research group).

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