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Dyskusje / polemiki / recenzje

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Why Do Teachers Dislike Educational Theory?

Abstract

Scientific theory holds a dual significance in education: substantive, as it provides learning content, and instrumental, as it explains the process of mastering it. In this second role, it becomes the subject of ongoing doubts, debates, trials, and fascinations. Educational theorists spare no effort in attempting to match the methodological rigor of the natural sciences, yet their achievements in this regard are often heavily questioned by practitioners. The author of the article examines these controversies within the unique context of Poland, a Central Eastern European country still affected by authoritarianism. In an increasingly globalized world, cultural differences between social functions and their executors are, in the author's view, becoming more pronounced.

Keywords: pedagogical theories, teacher, didactics.

Dlaczego nauczyciele nie lubią teorii pedagogicznej?

Abstrakt

Teoria naukowa ma w edukacji podwójną doniosłość: treściową, gdyż wytwarza materiał uczenia się, i instrumentalną, gdyż objaśnia przebieg jego opanowywania. W tej drugiej roli jest obiektem nieustannych wątpliwości i sporów, prób i zauroczeń. Teoretycy edukacji nie szczędzą wysiłku, by dorównać metodologicznie naukom ścisłym, ale ich osiągnięcia w tym zakresie są mocno kwestionowane przez praktyków. Autor artykułu analizuje te kontrowersje w szczególnej sytuacji Polski, kraju Europy Środkowowschodniej wciąż doświadczanego autorytaryzmem. Jego zdaniem, w coraz bardziej zglobalizowanym świecie nabierają wyrazu różnice kulturowe pomiędzy funkcjami społecznymi i pomiędzy ich wykonawcami.

Słowa kluczowe: teorie pedagogiczne, nauczyciel, dydaktyka.

Article received: 18.11.2024; accepted: 14.12.2024.

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https://doi.org/10.18778/2450-4491.20.11

Three didactics

Let us start the analysis with the differences in the understanding of didactics as a fundamental discipline of school pedagogy focused on guiding the learning of groups of students. Schools use educational systems that are purposeful arrangements of didactic situations, and in each situation students, teacher, educational content, didactic equipment and educational organization interact (Okoń 1971). The three initial factors form the central group of components of a teaching situation – simplifying, we can say that in education, "someone is always teaching someone something." The other two factors form a subsidiary, technological group.

For many centuries, educational systems have used the didactics of the teacher, emphasizing the teacher's competence, commitment and methodology for the transmission of knowledge, skills and behavioral patterns. We call such systems traditional today, although they are still alive and present in the beliefs of many educators. The foundation of the teacher's didactics was the eighteenth-century views of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1806), imbued with Prussian pro-state thought (Nawroczyński 1967). The authoritarian inclinations of the teacher's didactics, making him an obedient functionary of the educational authorities, ensured its political validity.

The twentieth-century surge of scientific knowledge impacting the functioning of developed world societies resulted in a shift of focus from the figure of the educator to the content of school education, leading to the establishment of content didactics (Kruszewski 1987: 206). Above progressivism, drawing energy from the pedagogical talents of teachers, essentialism prevailed, as a careful study of the structures of scientific disciplines. An attempt was made to substitute the teacher with a programmed text, wherein each segment of information was accompanied by an assessment task designed to evaluate comprehension, and, in the case of an incorrect response, to prompt the student to revisit the material. These were big demands. Hopes of motivating students with programmed teaching failed, but essentialism raised the position of subject didactics and increased the participation of scientists in their development, which influenced the expansion of educational content. The student must acquire it by their own means, and programmed texts remained useful in acquiring passive, reproductive knowledge (Kupisiewicz 1970).

We are currently experiencing a period of secondary personalism in education in the form of the psychologization of education, brought about by the digital revolution in information and communication technologies and the maturation of societies into democracies (Niemierko 2024a). Psychology offers us models of learning that replace behaviorism, which justified school routines by perpetuating the relationship between stimulus and response. Habits are no longer the crown of learning. Positive psychology (Seligman 1975), oriented to what is good in the nature and situation of people, rather than to combat errors and deficits, is gaining importance. The permanence orientation has given way a development orientation (Dweck 2013). The didactics of the student, supported by the diagnosis of their

innate and acquired characteristics, enters the field of teacher didactics and didactics of educational content. However, these three didactics must coexist, and distinguishing between them will help us understand the controversy over the role of pedagogical theory.

Pedagogical theory and practice

European culture has Hellenistic roots and strong Enlightenment traditions in the form of the dominant role of theories as systems of scientific knowledge about particular areas of phenomena. In Oriental and Anglo-Saxon countries, on the contrary, practice, activity that transforms natural and social reality, is valued most highly. These two tendencies compete in education not only in diverse national cultures (Nisbett 2003), but also in workshop activities. When we hear "it's a theory!" in the teachers' room, our interlocutors usually want to point out the unreality of a given proposal in the material and environmental situation of the school, rather than the scientific maturity of the statement. The reality in which a teacher operates is always more complicated than the assumptions made in pedagogical theories.

This disconnect is undesirable, so building a link between theory and practice has long been addressed in education. This was initiated by John Dewey in the United States (1916, 1963), and continued in Poland by Konstanty Lech (1969). However, there were characteristic differences between the two approaches. In American education, the slogan of "implementing theory into practice" and thus improving practice was put forward, while in Polish education the slogan of "combining theory with practice" was put forward, proving the usefulness of theory. In the former case, the theory was designed to strengthen free-market capitalism, and in the latter – to revive socialist dogma. Each approach advocated a plurality of educational activities.

The worldwide body of didactic thought was put together by Wincenty Okoń (1967) into four ways of learning: through assimilation, discovery, experience and action. From theory to practice leads the assimilation and discovery of the laws that govern our reality. The assimilation of ready-made knowledge is sometimes quantitatively efficient, but it is the discovery that makes it emotionally vivid and operative. On both paths, applying theory to analyze, interpret and transform reality requires a great deal of intellectual effort on the part of the student. From practice to theory leads the experiencing and action triggered by the student's needs. Through theory, their emotions can gain clarification and actions can be improved. These paths are longer, but more strongly individualized than the previous two. In order to increase the effectiveness of school education, Okoń recommended multilateral education, parallel by four ways. Today, we are inclined to support each of the established types of learning and encourage its representatives to try additional ways (Niemierko 2021: 21–27).

Teacher learning

The four ways of learning differentiate not only students, but also teachers, who have certain innate dispositions, for example, when it comes to temperament, as well as experience acquired in the course of pedagogical studies and professional work (Niemierko 2021: 53-56). Assimilation of knowledge results in a proceduralist type, ready to reproduce the patterns encountered and stick to the rules set by authorities. Discovery multiplies personal knowledge and shapes the personality of the theorist, verifying this knowledge carefully. Experiencing provides insight into the emotions of the pupils, which gives the teacher the characteristics of an intuitionist. Action is the lifestyle of a risk-taker who is not afraid of challenges, values experimentation and treats their work as an adventure.

A teacher's learning type is their educational mental resource (Niemierko 2024b). How they respond to the difficulties of their work, the novelties of the academic discipline and the original ideas of their students affect their students in two ways:

- by consciously or unknowingly imitating teachers with a type of learning similar to their own,
- by treating teachers who manifest a different cognitive style as a developmental challenge to themselves.

The proceduralist teaches young people respect for systematic effort and for the achievements of previous generations. It is not only the implementation of tasks, but also submission to the educational system. In previous centuries, a student's inability to follow the curricular trail ended in repeating a year, dropout or sifting out a student, but nowadays we try to help them through extra classes. This help requires work from both sides.

The theorist teaches young people to build theories: formulate assumptions, conduct reasoning, systematize claims, and test conclusions. This requires students to restrain their impetuosity and focus on the content of their chosen concepts. Precision of thought must be achieved by the combined efforts of student and teacher, and no expression of thought should be considered final. Theorists are indispensable in leading science circles and preparing candidates for subject Olympiads.

An intuitionist is able to transform students' current interests into a motivation to learn their subject. To do this, they must have a good knowledge of the students' social environment and daily life, as well as empathy, the ability to empathize with the emotions and ways of reasoning of young people. They must refrain from judging their attitudes and become a natural leader, a person with a strong influence on the group's activities. Intuitionists focus on its members, on their value systems, rather than on their own goals and inclinations.

The risk-taker teaches young people to seek truth and efficiency. They find errors in their students' reasoning – and their own, which constitutes an attractive intellectual experience. They have many ideas for making their classes more interest-

ing and constantly check to see if they enliven their interaction with students. When they run out of ideas, they feel fatigue and, years later, professional burnout.

The typology of teachers allows us to appreciate the humanistic component of educational processes. Humanism is a preference for the value of human beings treated subjectively, and in education – respecting the feelings and views of all stakeholders in these processes. Social sciences interpret group regularities, which is not enough to understand pedagogical theories imbued with humanism. We need interdisciplinary empirical research on the perceptions of these theories.

Research design

Many school teachers of various levels – including the author of this article – and educational activists have offered their insights into the role of pedagogical theories in the activities of educational institutions, but the problem is far from solved. A wide-ranging study of these phenomena would probably have political overtones that educational authorities may fear. However, as the democratization of societies progresses, it becomes feasible to verify the hypotheses presented here, with a brief justification.

Politicians treat education as a tool for social change. To consolidate their influence, they invoke selected economic, social and pedagogical theories. This was the case with Marxism-Leninism and Pavlov's physiology, the foundations of socialist pedagogy (Kairov 1950) in force for several decades in Poland. Contemporary attempts have also been made to use schools to promote certain religious and anti-European ideas. Geopolitics treats science instrumentally, including especially its social and humanistic disciplines, without regard to the damage done to nations and these disciplines.

Educational authorities prefer the uniform school model. This model (uniform school system) is based on the assumption that all students in the psychological norm can achieve similar achievements, accurately predicted by the program of successive grades and levels of the education system, and that educational and didactic failures have specific causes, which, when detected in time, can be removed by pedagogical means. Such a view facilitates the management of the system, transfers responsibility to subordinate units, and allows education to be used for political purposes.

The psychological education of most teachers is marginal. It accounts for only a few percent of the content of the courses they take, and only early childhood education specialists have more. In the course of their apprenticeship, teacher candidates mainly practice the presentation of material, and there is not enough time for psychological interpretations of students' situations. Psychologists are too few in schools to participate in lessons and improve educators' competence in diagnosing and supporting students' mental resources. Only a born theorist-discoverer uses professional situations to learn the psychology of education.

Teachers recognize the methodological weakness of pedagogy. Its subject matter is complicated because it is difficult to identify student populations

that are homogeneous in terms of emotional and cognitive achievement. Psychometric estimates of these achievements are inaccurate and unreliable. It would be useful to see how their low accuracy is experienced by teachers in different school subjects and stages of education. The sciences, solidly studied as part of professional preparation (pre-service education), can contrast with the knowledge gained through in-service education of teachers.

Developers of pedagogical theories underestimate the labor-intensive nature of implementations. This refers to didactics personalization projects. Tutoring schools and tutorials require the multiplication of teaching staff several times over (Czekierda et al. 2018; Sarnat-Ciastko 2015). When such flamboyant ideas as formative assessment, for example, which provides data for individualizing learning and teaching, are implemented as statutory obligations of the school, they turn into detailed electronic recording of progress. The bureaucratization of pedagogical theory implementations is the bane of education.

Education thrives on allowing diversity. The personalities of stakeholders, students and teachers, as well as their out-of-school situations, are diverse, but attempts to apply learning typologies more widely, to go beyond the rituals of knowledge acquisition and the proceduralist teacher (Lewowicki 1977), have been abandoned in Poland as a result of the needs of political transformation. Our teachers associate pedagogical theories with the political stance prescribed by the authorities, and do not feel empowered to create theories of their own and to experiment with their implementation. National pedagogical journals are attempting to overcome this sense of powerlessness.

Democratization provides an opportunity for pedagogical theory. Democracy means taking care of the livelihood of citizens and acting for the common good. In such a system, the danger of misusing pedagogical theory to subjugate subordinates diminishes. It is unfortunately developed slowly and inconsistently, hampered by the selfishness of individuals and social groups (Mohaddam 2016), because we are not born with a readiness for collective decisions or respect for the weak. Schools can teach students and teachers such attitudes, but it is still exceptional heroism (Staroń 2020).

The tensions between theory and practice inherent in pedagogical processes may have counterparts in other social sciences and humanities. It seems worth addressing.

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About the Author

Bolesław Niemierko – a pedagogue specializing in general didactics, educational measurement issues, and the methodology of pedagogical research. His primary interests focus on the psychological and pedagogical principles of the learning process and the methods for assessing and evaluating students' achievements. He is the author of numerous publications, including textbooks on educational diagnostics, achievement assessment systems, and test theory. A pioneer in the application of student achievement tests, he is also a critic of the misuse of these tests and their results. He served as both organizer and scientific patron of national studies on school achievements conducted as part of the project of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), with results published in multiple volumes in Poland and abroad. He has been a Fulbright Scholar at the University of California, Los Angeles, and has received grants from IREX and the

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Bolesław Niemierko – pedagog specjalizujący się w dydaktyce ogólnej, problematyce pomiaru dydaktycznego oraz metodologii badań pedagogicznych. Jego główne zainteresowania dotyczą prawidłowości psychologicznych i pedagogicznych procesu uczenia się oraz metod sprawdzania i oceniania osiągnięć uczniów. Autor licznych publikacji, w tym podręczników poświęconych diagnostyce edukacyjnej, systemom oceniania osiągnięć uczniów i teorii testów. Jest pionierem zastosowań testów osiągnięć uczniów, a zarazem krytykiem nadużyć związanych z wykorzystywaniem tych testów i ich wyników. Organizator i patron naukowy ogólnopolskich badań osiągnięć szkolnych realizowanych według projektu International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), których wyniki zostały opublikowane w kilkunastu tomach w kraju i za granicą. Stypendysta Fulbrighta na Uniwersytecie Kalifornijskim w Los Angeles, organizacji IREX i Fundacji Kościuszkowskiej. Dwukrotny laureat nagrody naukowej Wydziału I Nauk Społecznych PAN w zakresie pedagogiki i psychologii. Wieloletni przewodniczący komitetów naukowych krajowych konferencji Polskiego Towarzystwa Diagnostyki Edukacyjnej.

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