

## Education's Relative Autonomy A Closer Look at the Discipline's Past, Present, and Future

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### ABSTRACT

The relative autonomy of *Pädagogik* (education) as an academic field has always been in jeopardy. Consequently, we take a closer look at its past, present, and future. We begin by retracing the historical development of this field of study in the German-speaking context. In the second part, we look at the current state of the discipline and spotlight current developments threatening education's autonomy, first and foremost the steep rise and dominance of *Empirische Bildungsforschung* (empirical educational research). In the last part, we argue for education as an independent discipline and outline how educationalists can strengthen its autonomy and disciplinary identity.

**Keywords:** education, empirical educational research, relative autonomy, academic disciplines, educational theory

### 1. Introduction

Although thinking about educational questions has presumably always been part of human interests and goes back at least to Greek antiquity, the academic study of education was institutionalized in Germany as late as at the beginning of the 20th century (Matthes, 2021): A transatlantic perspective on theorizing education shows that the academic study of educational phenomena has developed differently within various contexts (Biesta, 2011): Especially in the Anglo-American tradition (United Kingdom and North America), education is conceived as an interdisciplinary field of study which draws its theories from contributing or fundamental disciplines such as

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psychology or sociology (Biesta, 2011). In some non-English-speaking countries (e.g., Germany, Norway), however, the academic study of educational processes and practices is assigned to a scientific discipline in its own right: *Pädagogik*<sup>1</sup> (education; often synonymously referred to as *Erziehungswissenschaft(en)*, *Bildungswissenschaft(en)* or *Empirische Bildungsforschung*) (Biesta, 2013; Glaser & Keiner, 2015).

Although disciplines such as psychology or philosophy are conceived in this continental construction as adjacent disciplines and education as an independent discipline that (should) have distinctive interests, questions, and genuine theories (Biesta, 2013; Siegel & Biesta, 2021; Siegel & Biesta, 2022), the *relative autonomy of education* has always been in jeopardy (Matthes, 2020; Saeverot, 2013). Particularly today, several developments (e.g., the rise of empirical educational research) seem to threaten the disciplinary “heart” (Saeverot, 2013, p. 180) of education or at least fundamentally transform its appearance/identity. Likewise, this seems to hold true for Germany (Bellmann, 2017). With this in mind, we argue that it is valuable to reconsider the principle of the *relative autonomy of education*, which must not be misunderstood as *absolute autonomy* (see 4.). The relative autonomy of education was a central topic of the paradigm *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* (Matthes, 2020), which, in turn, seems to be misunderstood occasionally and at times even forgotten.

Therefore, in the first part of this article we retrace the historical development of this field of study in Germany and delineate when the idea of education as a discipline with relative autonomy was introduced and what it essentially means. In the second part of the article, we look at the current state of the discipline and spotlight developments threatening education’s autonomy. In the last part, we argue for education as an independent discipline that advances its own questions, interests, and perspectives and outline how educationalists can strengthen education’s autonomy and disciplinary identity.

## 2. Education as an academic discipline in its own right: A historical perspective

The claim for education as an independent discipline was first raised by the *Aufklärungspädagogen*<sup>2</sup> in the 18th century. Their rationale was that the task of education as an enabler of responsible participation in society required thorough scientific research, which could not be done incidentally by other fields of study. Ernst Christian

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1 The Norwegian tradition of *pedagogikk* and the Dutch tradition of *pedagogiek* are for instance connected to the German concept of *Pädagogik* (Saeverot, 2013). Since certain educational terms and concepts are not arbitrarily translatable and transferable (e.g., the English term *education* can refer to various concepts in the German-speaking context such as *Erziehung* or *Bildung*), we have chosen to use the terms in the respective language (e.g., *Erziehungswissenschaft*).

2 These include for instance Ernst Christian Trapp, Joachim Heinrich Campe or Christian Gotthilf Salzmann who were influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant who are considered important forces during the *Age of Enlightenment*.

Trapp impressively and clearly summarized these considerations in his inaugural lecture *Von der Nothwendigkeit, Erziehen und Unterrichten als eine eigne Kunst zu studiren* (On the Necessity of Studying Education as an Art) when he took over the *Lehrstuhl für Philosophie und besonders der Pädagogik* (Chair of Philosophy and Especially of Education) at the University of Halle in 1779 (Trapp, 1977).

However, the resistance of theology against education as an independent discipline and the associated loss of influence and interpretative sovereignty was so considerable that Trapp felt compelled to resign from office as early as 1783. With Trapp, *Pädagogik* disappeared as an independent discipline at German universities for more than a century. The goal of establishing it as a professional science for prospective teachers had failed; instead, with the rise of New Humanism, classical philology began its triumphant march as the central basic science for aspiring teachers (and replaced theology). Education was relegated to the status of mere technology (Matthes, 2021). Johann Friedrich Herbart and the Herbartians continued the systematic reflection on educational questions and fought for the establishment of *Pädagogik* as an independent discipline throughout the 19th century (Herbart, 1982; Matthes, 2021). The theologian and philosopher Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher played a crucial role in the redefinition of education as a complex *Kulturwissenschaft* (cultural science). He explained educational practice within the framework of generational relations as constitutive for the preservation and productive further development of culture and placed it in the overall cultural context. What is particularly noteworthy about Schleiermacher's conception is that he described education as a complex system that has to deal with questions of goals, content, and methods. In other words, he included both the external structures and the internal structures of educational practice in their manifold interconnections in his reflective and systematizing view (Schleiermacher, 1957).

At the beginning of the 20th century, these considerations appeared again in the works of Eduard Spranger and Theodor Litt. Spranger's contribution *Die Bedeutung der wissenschaftlichen Pädagogik für das Volksleben* (The Significance of Scientific Pedagogy for Popular Life) from the year 1920 is particularly informative about this concept. Here, Spranger pleaded for a *Pädagogik des Verstehens* (A Pedagogy of Understanding) (Spranger, 2002) and defines the task of *Pädagogik* as follows: It is a matter of "grasping an already given cultural reality [of pedagogy as the concrete transmission of the non-genetic heritage] to bring it under ordering terms and finally to shape it by setting values and norms" (p. 17). Description, understanding classification, systematization, and synthesizing norm-setting are thus, according to Spranger, the central tasks of *Pädagogik* (Spranger, 2002). This expresses a basic scientific understanding of humanistic pedagogy (as cultural pedagogy has been called since the 1920s), to which Theodor Litt and Herman Nohl as well as his students Erich Weniger and Wilhelm Flitner also felt committed. Nohl and his students still focused to a particular extent on the justification of *Pädagogik* as an independent discipline, although the basic structure of the argumentation remains the same: The cultural practice of education exists

as an independent form of action with specific needs and challenges – to preserve the autonomy of this practice against the covetous and instrumentalization desires of other cultural practices (of religion, politics, economy, etc.), an independent discipline should support, strengthen, and encourage the practice, such as by helping it to develop its educational goals independently. In this context, independence does not mean autonomy in the sense of ignoring other cultural fields and their justified claims, but rather critically questioning the suitability of these claims for the development of mature cultural citizens; with respect to (other) scientific disciplines, independence implies having one's own standpoint and the possibility to question from within the scientific system that arises from pedagogical practice (e.g., Weniger, 1990).

The Nazi regime radically rejected the idea of *Pädagogik* as a discipline with relative autonomy. Educational practice was made subservient to Nazi ideology and politics.

In the 1950s, *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* experienced its peak with its claim to independence in the Federal Republic of Germany, although still as a numerically very small discipline. Its (exclusively) historical-hermeneutic orientation, however, led to increasing criticism. The appointment of the psychologist and educationist Heinrich Roth to a chair of pedagogy at the University of Göttingen at the instigation of Erich Weniger (who died in 1961) shows that some of the representatives of the *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* did open up to empirical methods at the end of the 1950s. Roth had become familiar with the empirical-social scientific approach to educational issues during a seven-month research stay in the USA in 1950, and from 1956 to 1961 he contributed his expertise to the American-founded School of International Educational Research (Matthes, 2021).

In his inaugural lecture at the University of Göttingen, entitled *Die realistische Wendung in der pädagogischen Forschung* (The Realistic Turn in Educational Research) (1962), Roth promoted an integrative approach between historical-hermeneutic and empirical-social science research to contribute to the improvement of pedagogical practice in the sense of democratization and the reduction of inequalities of opportunity (Roth, 1962). With the death of leading representatives of *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* and the development of social, educational, and scientific policy in the 1960s, the criticism of this paradigm became sharper and more fundamental than in the above-mentioned inaugural lecture. However, two types of criticism have to be distinguished: one of these epistemological and the other, political. The epistemological critique was carried out by followers of critical rationalism, prominently represented in the German *Erziehungswissenschaft* (Educational Science) by Wolfgang Brezinka. He denied the scientific character of pedagogy in the humanities, defined science as a hypothesis-testing empirical procedure, and posited its freedom from value judgments (Brezinka, 1971). *Erziehungswissenschaft* had to be descriptive, causal-analytical, prognostic, and technologically oriented; it received its scientific legitimacy based on the fact that it could provide the means to achieve the educational goals that were to be justified ideologically through the methodically controlled discovery of regularities (Brezinka, 1971).

A completely different direction of criticism came from the so-called *gesellschaftskritischen Erziehungswissenschaft* (socio-critical educational science), whose representatives were not influenced by critical rationalism, but by the critical theory of the *Frankfurt School*. Within this school there were again different camps: On the one hand, the Marxist-materialist camp (e.g., Hans-Jochen Gamm or Freerk Huisken), which saw no chance for an independent education practice and theory in the *late bourgeois capitalist* society of the Federal Republic, since the economy over-arched and determined all other cultural practices (Gamm, 1972). On the other hand, there was the left or left-liberal camp, which largely consisted of students of the *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*, who explicitly adhered to the possibility of relative pedagogical autonomy/the autonomy of educational practice and theory. They accused the *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* of not having sufficiently advocated relative pedagogical autonomy, in particular during the Nazi period. In their opinion, they had also not sufficiently recognized the threats to the autonomy of pedagogical practice through unjustified claims to power and veiled political interests but had accepted them affirmatively or at least in a politically naive manner and thus had not integrated the central socio-critical perspective into their understanding of an independent pedagogical science (Klafki, 2020).

Wolfgang Klafki, a student of Weniger and Litt, attempted a *suspension* of the *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* in a double sense and therefore developed his epistemological and methodological concept of an integration of hermeneutics, empiricism, and ideology critique for his *Kritisch-konstruktive Erziehungswissenschaft* (critical-constructive educational science) (Klafki, 1971, 1976).

However, this integrative approach was only able to establish itself in *Erziehungswissenschaft* for a short time and not across the board. Due to the expansion and differentiation of the discipline in the context of the educational expansion and the introduction of the diploma course at the end of the 1960s, many new professorships were created for which there were not enough young academics; so, young academics primarily from sociology, but also from psychology, who could not find a place in their own field, filled the new positions. This led to a *Versozialwissenschaftlichung* (turning more and more into a social science) and, to some extent, a psychologization of pedagogical science, a neglect of hermeneutics, and an immense reevaluation of primarily qualitative-empirical methods. The questions of many research and qualification projects were now more sociological in nature (Matthes, 2021).

### **3. Education's relative autonomy: Current developments, threats, and potential losses**

As shown in the previous section, *Pädagogik* could eventually establish itself as a relatively autonomous discipline in the 1920s – after several failed constitutional attempts. Except for the Nazi era, the discipline subsequently underwent profound processes of expansion, differentiation, and specialization. Nevertheless, it had to fight for its autonomy as an academic discipline (Matthes, 2021).

What is the current state of the discipline *Pädagogik*<sup>3</sup>? The data reports of the *German Educational Research Association (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft; DGfE)*<sup>4</sup> that are published every few years (e.g., Abs et al., 2020; Koller et al., 2016) provide some indications: Currently, the subject is one of the largest fields of study at German universities with over 50,000 students enrolled in educational study programs (bachelor/master) and over 230,000 students in teacher education (Abs et al., 2020; Koller et al., 2016). Furthermore, the discipline has a large number of renowned journals (e.g., *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*), encyclopedias and handbooks, monographs, and conference proceedings. Additionally, *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* is also a research-intensive discipline that acquires a substantial amount of third-party funding (Abs et al., 2020; Koller et al., 2016). Without going into detail, the data reports show in a nutshell that *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* appears to be a “very normal” (Siegel & Biesta, 2021, p. 10) and even successful discipline – especially concerning its secondary characteristics, such as the stated institutional manifestations (Prange, 2005; Vogel, 2016).

A closer look at the discipline’s primary characteristics, such as distinctive objects of research and genuine theories and concepts (Vogel, 2016), which could be considered the disciplinary “heart” (Saeverot, 2013, p. 180), reveal, however, “the problem of educational theory” (Siegel & Biesta, 2021, p. 6): While educationists are neglecting their terms and concepts as well as the development of distinctively educational theories, there is an enormous willingness to uncritically import and use concepts and theories from adjacent fields of research (Prange, 2012; Saeverot, 2021). All in all, this problem makes it easier for other disciplines to “invade” (Saeverot, 2021, p. 115) *Pädagogik* and thereby threaten its relative autonomy. Currently, various developments put pressure on the discipline (Bellmann, 2017). As we cannot address all of these in detail within the scope of this article, we will focus on those we hold to be crucial and describe them briefly.<sup>5</sup>

Although *Erziehung* (education) is (or should be) a central (if not the most important) research object of the eponymous academic field, there is currently a tendency to marginalize this concept and even to completely replace it with other terms such as “socialization” or “learning” (Loch, 2019; Siegel & Biesta, 2021, 2022). Currently, only a few educationists seem to be interested in finding an answer to the questions of what education is and how it can and should be theorized.

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- 3 Although the terms *Pädagogik* and *Erziehungswissenschaft* are associated with different understandings that can be justified from an epistemological and historical perspective (e.g., Brezinka, 1971; Glaser & Keiner, 2015), they are often used synonymously in current German discourses. The term *Erziehungswissenschaft* is used more frequently to refer to the academic discipline (e.g., Krüger, 2019, Vogel, 2019).
  - 4 The DGfE was founded in 1964, counts currently approx. 4,000 members and comprises 14 divisions and 18 subdivisions (DGfE, 2021).
  - 5 For a more detailed rendition see for instance Bellmann (2017), Saeverot (2021), or Siegel and Biesta (2021).



Likewise, only a limited number of educationists currently seem to be dedicated to developing genuinely educational theories (e.g., Benner, 2015; Biesta, 2022; Prange, 2012; Sünkel; 2011). Besides, there does not seem to be a consensus definition of what *Erziehungswissenschaftliche Theorien* (educational theories) are (Siegel & Daumiller, 2021). This, however, complicates distinguishing distinctively educational theories from theories that are borrowed or imported from adjacent disciplines (Siegel & Daumiller, 2021).

We argue that this *theoretical* deficit weakens the disciplinary identity of *Pädagogik*, threatens its relative autonomy, and further promotes the steep rise and dominance of *Empirische Bildungsforschung*<sup>6</sup> (empirical educational research)<sup>7</sup> in favor of (educational) psychology: Several indicators show this transformation of the field of education in the German-speaking context in recent decades (Bellmann, 2017; Schriewer, 2017): A considerable number of professorships, chairs, and study programs for general pedagogy and school pedagogy, have been renamed and replaced (Abs et al., 2020; Casale, 2021; Koller et al., 2016). Especially educational psychology that is strongly influenced by the natural sciences profoundly benefits from the expansion of empirical educational research: Psychologists increasingly occupy (former) educational professorships and chairs with the new denomination of empirical educational research (Matthes, 2021). This is accompanied by the dominance of quantitative empirical methods and a change in the understanding of *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* as a discipline in its own right to an understanding of *learning sciences* or *educational sciences* as an interdisciplinary field of study (Abs et al., 2020; Bellmann, 2017).

Since academic disciplines are socio-historical constructs, they evolve. Why is the observed transformation of the field of education problematic? What losses are associated with the constriction of *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* to *Empirische Bildungsforschung*, which is primarily dominated by quantitative approaches and corresponding questions and perspectives? Although there are several losses, we will focus on two essential ones: With the methodological or the so-called realistic turn in education in the 1960s, many educationists started using empirical methods, which initially enriched educational research and still do today. Especially since the year 2000 and the subsequent roll-out and triumph of large-scale assessments such as PISA<sup>8</sup> (*Programme for International Student Assessment*), quantitative research has gained importance. *Empirische Bildungsforschung* in the meantime is dominated by

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6 The *Gesellschaft für Empirische Bildungsforschung* (GEBF; German Society for Empirical Educational Research) was founded as a split-off of the DGfE in 2012 in Frankfurt/M., comprises approximately 550 active members from various disciplines of empirical educational research and aims to strengthen cooperation between the disciplines that research educational issues using primarily quantitative empirical methods (GEBF 2021).

7 This trend can also be observed in other countries, e.g., the rise of *uddannelsesforskning* (educational (policy) research) in Denmark.

8 PISA is funded and coordinated by the supra-national Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

quantitative research, whereas, for instance, hermeneutic and historical approaches and reflection on fundamental normative questions, which would be very important for educational practice, are often neglected (Siegel & Biesta, 2021). In his article “The Lure of Statistics for Educational Researchers” Labaree (2010) offers a potential explanation:

Educational researchers have come to the altar of quantification out of weakness, in the hope that their declarations of faith in the power of numbers will grant them newfound respect, gain them the trust of practitioners and policymakers, and enable them to exert due influence in the educational domain. But this twentieth century conversion has not come without cost.

(Labaree, 2010, p. 625)

Although statistics, measurement, and quantification are crucial for the advancement of modern societies, Labaree argues that a too-narrow focus on what is measurable deflects attention away from many crucial issues in the field of education which are not easily reduced to standardized quanta (Labaree 2010, pp. 625–628; see also Biesta, 2015; Saeverot, 2021). This form of research often relies on quasi-causal premises about educational processes and tends to strongly reduce complexity and generate technical knowledge that “works” (Biesta, 2022; see also Reichenbach, 2010), which makes it attractive for education policy and practice. Instead of asking what good education is, the focus often lies on what makes it effective or efficient. Although the latter questions are legitimate in themselves, any discussion about the effectiveness or efficiency of educational practice always needs to be connected to considerations about the contents and purposes of education and the relationships in educational processes (Biesta, 2022).

However, there is a second, even more problematic loss associated with the transformation of *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* as a discipline independent of *Empirische Bildungsforschung*, which today represents an interdisciplinary field of research (under the leadership of psychology). What might get lost is an educational perspective on education. Disciplines such as psychology and sociology ask, for instance, psychological or sociological questions about education; however, they do not ask educational questions about education and, accordingly, cannot generate distinctively educational knowledge (Biesta, 2013; Saeverot, 2021). We argue with Saeverot (2013) that there is a “need to ask educational questions about education” (pp. 183f.), namely questions about the nature of education and its purpose(s) (Biesta, 2022). Educational theory ought to theorize the research object *education* (Saeverot, 2021).

#### **4. The future of *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* as a field of study in its own right**

In the previous sections of this article, we retraced the historic development of the continental configuration of the field of education and highlighted current trends threatening its relative autonomy. As education has always been a contested discipline



within academia, the question arises: “*Quo vadis, Erziehungswissenschaft?*” (“Where are you going, education?”) (Matthes & Meilhammer, 2016, p. 396).

Already in 1929, John Dewey claimed in his volume *The Sources of a Science of Education* that “Education is autonomous and should be free to determine its own ends, its own objectives” (Dewey, 1929, p. 8). Supporting his statement, in the last section of this paper, we briefly outline how educationists might be able to strengthen the disciplinary identity of *Pädagogik* and safeguard its relative autonomy in the long term.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, we will elaborate on four (to a certain extent interrelated) propositions we do not consider innovative, however essential.

*Proposition 1: To maintain and strengthen the relative autonomy of Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft, educationists, first of all, need to ask educational questions and dedicate themselves more to understanding and theorizing the phenomenon of Erziehung (education).*

What constitutes an academic discipline? In science studies, there are different answers to this question. In many cases, theorists propose that a field of study has to fulfill particular criteria to be recognized as a discipline in its own right. According to the German sociologist Rudolf Stichweh, a discipline must, for instance, have genuine questions, an accepted body of knowledge, and a scientific community (Stichweh, 2013). In line with Biesta (2013), we argue that the existence of distinctive questions, interests, and perspectives is the *raison d'être* for *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* as a discipline in its own right. In addition, other disciplines have their own interests and questions and accordingly will not ask and cannot answer genuinely educational questions:

Whereas psychology asks psychological questions about education [...] and philosophy asks philosophical questions, we need the perspective from education – and thus forms of educational theory – in order to generate *educational* questions about education, that is, questions that articulate an educational interest, that is an interest in what education is *for*.

(Biesta 2013, p. 13)

The purpose and definition of *Erziehung* (education), in all its variants, constitute two central questions that educationists must ask and try to answer (Biesta, 2022). According to the German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, everybody seems to know what *Erziehung* is (Schleiermacher, 1957). However, he argues that an everyday understanding of this term differs from an academic understanding. As we pointed out in the previous section, *Erziehung* currently is neglected by many educationists. Prange states this clearly:

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9 See for a current and detailed rendition on this, for instance, Yosef-Hassidim and Baldacchino (2021) or Saeverot (2021).

It occasionally seems to me that we educators are embarrassed to speak clearly, directly, and emphatically of education, as if it were something for which we had to apologize and which, at best, we were still allowed to do to young children, but otherwise have to conceal, rewrite, and semantically circumvent.

(Prange, 2005, p. 19)

However, this is troubling as education is a (for society) vital cultural practice and is or (at least) should be one of the main concepts of *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* – as it is the eponymous term for the discipline. That being said, educationists should cultivate their basic concepts (Herbart, 1806/1982) such as *Erziehung*, *Bildung*, and *Unterricht* instead of marginalizing them and uncritically replacing them with terms from other disciplines (Loch, 2019; Prange, 2012).

*Proposition 2: To maintain and strengthen the relative autonomy of Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft, educationists, secondly, need to increasingly (further) develop (already existing) distinctively educational theories.*

There is no doubt that educational theories, which are a type of abstract or generalized thinking about educational phenomena, due to their various functions, are relevant for both educational research and practice (Biesta, 2013). Nevertheless, as we pointed out in the previous section, only a few educationists currently seem to be interested in advancing distinctively educational theories (e.g., Benner, 2015; Biesta, 2022; Prange, 2012; Sünkel; 2011). If *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* wants to remain an independent discipline, educationists should increasingly further develop distinctively educational theories and refer more frequently to existing ones. In other words: they should deal with the history and the grown knowledge of their discipline. In that way, educationists could address the problem of educational theory, advance the discipline's primary characteristics (Vogel, 2016), and reduce the risk of being undermined and occupied by other disciplines (Matthes, 2020; Siegel & Biesta, 2021).

Although the term *erziehungswissenschaftliche Theorie* (educational theory) is (or least should be) a basic concept in education, it is a scarcely and rather ill-defined term which is currently neglected in literature and educational discourses in the German-speaking context. So far, no consensus definition exists (Siegel & Biesta, 2021; Siegel & Daumiller 2021). Therefore, educationists should strive to clearly define the term, although defining this term is challenging for a plethora of reasons, such as the different understandings of the terms that feed into the term educational theories. It is, nevertheless, a crucial task for educationists. The following should be kept in mind:

While I do agree that there is always a danger in trying to pin things down, and even more so in claiming triumphantly that one has been able to pin something down definitively, there is also a danger in the opposite gesture, that is, in the refusal to say anything at all, other than that the 'thing' (but then, why a thing?) is a mystery. Here, Derrida's notion of 'transcendental violence' [...]

remains helpful [...] that is, the observation that each time we name something we never get it completely right and therefore do violence to the very 'thing' we seek to name, but at the very same time this naming is a condition of possibility for the thing to be in (shared) existence at all—even, so I wish to add, if 'only' as a phenomenon.

(Biesta, 2016, p. 2)

A (working) definition of the term could help sharpen this native concept (Herbart, 1806/1982) which, in turn, would allow *Pädagogik* to better observe, describe, and advance its disciplinary theory formation and, for example, to recognize theory imports from neighboring disciplines. Biesta (2013) and, for instance, Siegel and Daumiller (2021) argue that there is a decisive criterion for deciding whether a system of well-substantiated assertions of educational phenomena can be considered an educational theory. And this criterion is whether the assertions are based on a genuinely educational perspective or interest. Here, the question of what characterizes an educational perspective arises. Comparing several traditional and contemporary genuinely educational theories provides an answer to this question (Benner, 2015; Herbart 1806/1982; Prange, 2012; Sünkel, 2011): The educational perspective manifests itself in the question of bridging the so-called *Pädagogische Differenz* (pedagogical difference) between educating and learning (Benner 2015: *Erziehung* and *Bildung*; Prange, 2012: *Zeigen* and *Lernen*; Sünkel, 2011: *Vermitteln* and *Aneignen*) through *Artikulation* (articulation) on the basis of certain objectives and in the context of economic, political, social, and cultural frameworks. We argue that this is where educational theories differ from educationally relevant theories, for instance, psychological learning theories. Here, the complexity of educational questions becomes visible. Educationists require profound historical and intercultural knowledge about education, knowledge of previous attempts to systematize education, reflected methodological awareness, and a broad repertoire of methods (qualitative and quantitative). Researchers who no longer ask these complex questions deprive the phenomenon of education of comprehensive rational investigation and thus surrender educational practice into the hands of non-genuine educational interests and technological constrictions.

*Proposition 3: To maintain and strengthen the relative autonomy of Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft, educationists need to engage in better border control.*

Advances concerning the first two propositions help to theoretically sharpen the primary characteristics of *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft*, contribute to strengthening its identity, and accordingly can be considered a form of disciplinary “boundary-work” (Grunert & Ludwig, 2016, p. 898). In comparison to, for instance, its adjacent disciplines such as psychology or sociology, *Pädagogik's/Erziehungswissenschaft's* border control has always been weakly developed (Prange, 2005).

Accordingly, educationists should adhere to the notion of the *relative autonomy of education* which is the central reference point of this article and a central topic of

*Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*. To avoid misunderstandings: Absolute autonomy is impossible and also not desirable (Klafki 1976; Matthes, 2020). Arguing for *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* to be a “self-governing [...] discipline” (Saeverot, 2021, p. 115) must not be misunderstood as advocating for an academic field of study that operates in “splendid isolation” (Prange, 2005, p. 14). Contributions from other disciplines can be highly valuable if educationists approach them using an educational perspective or filter, instead of uncritically integrating them as the latter blurs the boundaries of *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* (Prange, 2012).

*Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* has a “particular set of questions and interests and needs to work hard and focused on those questions and interests” (Saeverot, 2013, p. 179). In other words: Educationalist should ask genuinely educational questions instead of sociological or psychological questions (Saeverot, 2013). By focusing on the disciplinary core topics and the further development of the basic concepts and theories (Prange, 2012), educationists can generate distinctively educational knowledge that might also be of interest to adjacent disciplines. This would allow for successful interdisciplinary cooperation where *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* can act with relative independence and on equal terms with other disciplines as well as other socio-cultural areas such as politics. In sum, it could be stated: “Interdisciplinarity rather needs strong and well-developed disciplines. Otherwise, there is no point for disciplines to meet and benefit from each other’s strengths and insights” (Siegel & Biesta, 2021, p. 9).

This idea has already been voiced by Johann Friedrich Herbart in his introduction to his “*Allgemeine Pädagogik* (General Pedagogy) in 1806 and has been repeatedly echoed (e.g., Ruhloff, 2006).

*Proposition 4: To maintain and strengthen the relative autonomy of Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft, educationists need to use empirical and non-empirical methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of Erziehung.*

Spearheaded by the steep rise of *Empirische Bildungsforschung*, the academic study of education is currently dominated by quantitative research, whereas, for instance, hermeneutic, dialectical and phenomenological approaches are largely absent. This is accompanied by a marginalization of research projects dealing with normative questions about, for instance, the contents and purposes of education and the relationships in educational processes (Biesta, 2022; Matthes, 2020).

The label *Empirische Bildungsforschung* has more of an obscuring function since it implies a requirement for theoretical and methodological pluralism or openness that is not met (Bellmann 2017). Therefore, we argue for dropping the term empirical educational research and calling it what it is: educational psychology with a strong focus on empirical-quantitative research.

Depending on the subject matter, epistemic interest, and the research question, educationists, however, should be able to choose and (ideally, also competently) use research methods that are appropriate for adequately answering their research

questions. Therefore, we argue for an epistemological and methodological openness and advocate for reconsidering integrative approaches that allow for both historical-systematic as well as empirical research (Benner, 2018; Klafki, 1971; Roth, 1962). An integrative perspective might end the futile, and in many cases not promising, discussions of *qualitative vs. quantitative* research methods (Büttemeyer & Möller, 1979) and the battle of the schools of thought (Rombach, 1967). The prerequisite for this is that the epistemological limitations of the respective methods are recognized and made transparent. Complex phenomena such as education require researchers who are aware of the need to supplement the selective perspectives of their methodological approaches.

## 5. Conclusion

The relative autonomy of education has always been in jeopardy. To show why this is the case, we took a closer look at *Pädagogik's/Erziehungswissenschaft's* past, present, and future. By retracing the historical development of this field of study in the German-speaking context, we could show how and when the idea of the relatively independent discipline of *education* was born and what it originally meant. We then shed light on current developments threatening its autonomy and on the question of what might get lost if *Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft* as a discipline in its own right disappeared. Finally, we briefly outlined how educationists might be able to safeguard the discipline's autonomy. Within this article, we focused on education (*Pädagogik/Erziehungswissenschaft*) in the German-speaking context. Although the continental construction might offer impulses for theorizing education as a discipline in its own right, more (international) research in and on this field of study and its diverse configurations is needed. This rather descriptive mapping of this field should be accompanied by discourses on the (normative) question of what the discipline of *education* should look like and what it will stand for in the future.

Currently, only a few educational theorists seem to be interested in education as a relatively autonomous discipline that advances its questions, interests, and perspectives (e.g., Matthes, 2021, Siegel & Biesta 2021, 2022; Yosef-Hassidim & Baldacchino, 2021). It would, however, be desirable for the idea of education as a field of study in its own right to gain more prominence, as this might prevent us from losing sight of distinctively educational questions. Accordingly, we encourage all those interested in education as a relatively autonomous discipline to take responsibility and internationally network and collaborate to stand up and speak up for education (Biesta 2018; Biesta & Säfström, 2011). Regular talks, joint symposia at international and national conferences, and publications on this topic may stimulate contemporary educational discourses. However, a “structural interest in and activism for education's autonomy” (Yosef-Hassidim & Baldacchino, 2021, p. 51) on the part of a strong academic community of educationists is needed to persistently work on this crucial cause.

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