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Metatheoretical Foundations of Educational Theory. Selected Aspects

Metateoretyczne podstawy teorii wychowania. Wybrane aspekty

Abstract: This article presents metatheoretical analyses. Their subject is educational theory, while the aim is to formulate descriptive metatheoretical remarks on selected aspects of the functioning of educational theory as a sub-discipline of pedagogical science. To that end, the article provides terminological, definitional, historical and functional considerations regarding the metatheory and theory of education. In particular, it addresses the difficulties in defining educational theory, its normative and descriptive character and its dependence on worldview and ideological factors.

Keywords: metatheory, educational theory, meta-scientific research, ideological aspects of educational theory.

Introduction

The article's subject is educational theory, defined as a pedagogical sub-discipline. It formulates elementary, descriptive metatheoretical considerations relating to the theory's scientific, theoretical and methodological foundations. Achieving a goal so formulated requires addressing the following questions: What is metatheoretical research? How has it developed historically? What are its functions in science? What is educational theory? What characterises educational theory from a metatheoretical standpoint? The article reports on research findings which, in terms of the methods involved, were derived from a meaning-based analysis of scientific tests.

The adopted research procedure refers to the methodological principles of analytical philosophy and hermeneutics.

This paper is meta-scientific and refers to and expands upon my earlier research (Magier 2019; 2020), further profiling it in terms of aspect at the same time. It does not contain information directly concerning educational phenomena and processes. Instead, it introduces metatheoretical and methodological information. Such information is vital for understanding the essence of education, reliable cognition (description) of educational reality and, consequently, its creation.

> It must be noted that the metatheoretical aspects of the practice of pedagogy (including educational theory) have been the focus of one of the most important intellectual debates of the last twenty years, all the more so because of the advanced differentiation of theoretical perspectives, which make the information gathered meaningful, i.e. provide the basis for diverse interpretations (Wróbel, 2021, p. 54).

In line with the research questions adopted, the considerations below are divided into two parts. They concern (1) defining metatheory, its historical genesis and the function of metatheoretical research (knowledge) in science; and (2) defining the essence of educational theory, its elementary properties as a pedagogical sub-discipline and scientific knowledge.

Metatheory Concept and Genesis of Meta-Scientific Research

There is no single, universally accepted definition of „metatheory". Clarifying the meaning of this name is further complicated by the fact that (academic) literature features several terms that are used interchangeably with it, or as its equivalents, or are closely related in meaning. These include such names as „metatheoretical research", „metatheoretical discourse", „meta-science", „meta-scientific research", „meta-subject research", „meta-science", as well as the terms „science studies" and „methodology" (Stępień, 1961; Ajdukiewicz, 2006). Moreover, it is challenging to unambiguously identify the terms associated with the above names because their explanation does not consist of a simple account of the meanings attributed to them. Neither dictionaries nor the source compilation provide consistent definitions of these names. Instead, they are defined in various ways, as their meanings are conditioned by multiple contextual circumstances. Each term is grounded in a different theoretical background, separate research traditions of a particular scientific community, and distinct methodological determinations (Kamiński, 1992).

Since, etymologically speaking, the name „metatheory" is a compound of the prefix „meta" and the noun „theory", explaining each of its components brings us closer to its initial content. Thus, the prefix „meta", derived from Greek, means an element's position in relation to another, being in a secondary (not primary) relation to something, being behind, above, beyond, beside something (Jurewicz, 2001; Foulquié and Saint-Jean, 1969; Quirk and Briggs, 1991). Through Latin, this prefix became established in the language of European philosophy as early as the Middle Ages. Its spread was due to the neo-Thomistic scholastic tradition. Namely, it was used in the name „metaphysics", a term derived from Andronicus of Rhodes (first century BC) and referring to philosophical reflection on being (Herbut and Stępień, 1997).

Unfortunately, „theory" does not have a single meaning either. It is sometimes used in colloquial and technical applications (i.e. colloquial and scientific language), accompanied by various definitions and ascribed to different scopes. Etymologically, it also derives from Greek and can translated as „looking at" or „considering" something. In Greek culture, the term became widespread through philosophy as early as its conception, around the 7th to 5th centuries BC. In seeking to define the distinctiveness of philosophical knowledge from other types of knowledge, especially religion and common and customary knowledge, some pointed out such constitutive properties of theory as generality, criticality and rationality (Kamiński 1992).

For this article, I consider „theory" to mean a generalised, ordered, coherent, rationally justified and non-contradictory system of knowledge (claims) about a certain subject. In this sense, a theory is the final result of research work, compiling the results obtained. It is the culmination of scientific research. A theory's functions are cognitive (as it describes and explains a certain reality), as well as interpretative and predictive (Podsiad, 2000).

The beginnings of meta-scientific and metatheoretical reflection can be traced back to the dawn of science, i.e. the birth of philosophy. In parallel to the reflection on the essence of the world, ancient scholars formulated questions on the validity of accepted views and the specificity of knowledge cultivated by Heraclitus (535–465 BC), Zeno of Elea (495–425 BC), Socrates (469–399 BC), Plato (427–347 BC) and Aristotle (384–322 BC). Such reflection accompanied philosophy throughout its development, absorbing the attention of philosophers to a greater or lesser extent at different times. Some typical problems that emerged within its scope were the specificity of philosophical knowledge, the relation of science to faith and other types of knowledge, the methodological and theoretical specificity of the humanities and the specificity of natural sciences (Kamiński, 1992).

Although in the history of European culture, reflection on the essence of the cognitive process has always accompanied scientists (philosophers for centuries), the intensification of interest in science occurred at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. This was thanks to positivism, which generated dynamic discussions concerning science's nature, the scientific status of philosophy and the distinguished cognitive value of mathematical natural science. At that time, critical, anti-philosophical reflection was accompanied by new scopes of research devoted to science, practised in the spirit of methodological naturalism. The classic (and at the same time important from the point of view of this analyses) meta-scientific achievements of this period include: the definition of the cognitive specificity of the humanities, their key properties such as idiographicity, normativity, the typological character of the divisions used, and understanding as the goal of research, developed by W. Dilthey (1833-1911), W. Windelband (1848-1915), H. Rickert (1863-1936), G. Simmel (1858-1918), M. Weber (1864-1921); constructivism and the theory of research programmes of Imre Lakatos (1922-1974), the distinction between two orders of procedure in scientific research by Hans Reichenbach (1891-1953): the context of discovery and the context of justification; Paul Feyerabend's (1924-1994) principle of tolerance towards different theories, their incomparability of theory and the recognition of non-scientific factors in the choice of theory; an indication of the historical and theoretical contextuality and variability of models of science expressed by Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996) in the category of paradigm; and above all, the key concept for the contemporary understanding of science of Karl Popper (1902-1994) with the categories of: falibilism, anti-inductivism and hypothetism (Kamiński 1992). The development of meta-scientific research inspired by positivism had a positive impact on the popularization of the term „meta" in scientific language.

The development of meta-scientific research inspired by positivism had a positive influence on the popularization of the term „meta" in scientific language. The names of the sciences created at that time took into account the original meaning of the prefix „meta", pointing to the stratified, secondary (to the subject reality) nature of the research conducted. These were expressed by terms such as: „metaphilosophy" (Jacques Maritain, Morris Lazerowitz), „metalogic" (John of Salisbury, Eduard von Hartmann, Heinrich Rickert), „metaethics" (George E. Moore), „metamathematics" (David Hilbert, Alfred Tarski) and „meta-science" (Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, Gerard Radnitzky). Thanks to these scholars, using the „meta" prefix in the names of the meta-sciences became established in such a way that they came to refer to the

specific subject of scientific research, i.e. science itself. That is, knowledge and research unrelated to natural or cultural reality, but rather concerning the sciences investigating the subject reality (Jakiel, 2015; Woleński, 2011).

Notably, Polish philosophy has significantly contributed to the development of meta-scientific research. The key centre for such research was the Lwów–Warsaw School. Thanks to its output, a meta-position reflection became widespread across many Polish universities, including those in Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań and Lublin (Bronk and Majdański, 2010). Yet, this research was by no means limited to philosophy alone. The metatheoretical and science studies analyses also concerned particular groups of sciences or even individual scientific disciplines, including pedagogy.

The difficulties in explaining the essence of metatheory are not limited to etymological and semantic analyses. This is because metatheoretical research may be carried out in multiple ways and applied to different aspects of the given theory (Kamiński, 1992). In simpler terms, it can be reduced to two types: research on the methodological aspects of a certain theory, as noted above, and that relating to the theoretical foundations of a certain theory.

In the first case, the subjects of inquiry are issues relating to things like research subject and objectives; research procedures, strategies and methods; the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic correctness of the language used; the ways of defining; the disjunction and criteria of the divisions used and content structuring (Kamiński, 1992).

In the second case, the subjects of metatheoretical inquiry are a theory's content sources, categories (concepts), theorems, axioms, assumptions and basic questions, as well as scientific communities and schools, their evolution over time and the manner and validity of the argumentation used (Jakiel, 2015).

Summarising the above considerations, it seems reasonable to assume that „metatheory" means a theory whose subject is another theory, whereas „metatheoretical research" denotes research on a specific theory. They are the theory of a certain theory and the research of a certain theory, respectively. Similarly, when using the terms „meta-science" and „meta-scientific research" we refer to the science(s) relating to science(s) or the research on a certain science(s) (Stępień, 1989; Kamiński, 1992).

Metatheoretical Research in Pedagogy

Although metatheoretical research originated and developed over the centuries within the field of philosophy, it is in no way unfamiliar to pedagogy either. Although pedagogy is a subject-oriented science, the self-reflection of

teachers on the methodological and theoretical bases of the knowledge they represent was already present in the earliest days of pedagogy's emergence as a university discipline. Its origins can be found in the writings of John Amos Comenius (1592-1670) who is regarded as a precursor of scientific reflection on education. In creating his education system, he addressed such typically metatheoretical problems as defining education, indicating the rationale for its possibility and necessity and defining the fields of religious, moral and school education (Kot, 1996).

Importantly, metatheoretical reflection was present in the writings of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), the father of scientific pedagogy. It provided the basis for the scientific and institutional self-determination of pedagogy. In particular, it concerned defining pedagogy's autonomy in relation to philosophy and modelling its structure as an independent discipline of knowledge (Herbart, 2007).

The founders of Polish pedagogy took up metatheoretical issues as well. Such considerations are present, for example, in the writings of Antoni Danysz (1853–1925), Kazimierz Sośnicki (1883–1976), Zygmunt Mysłakowski (1890–1971), Zygmunt Kukulski (1890–1944), Sergiusz Hessen (1887–1950), Bogdan Nawroczyński (1882–1974), Bogdan Suchodolski (1903–1992), Stefan Kunowski (1909–1977), Andrzej Niesiołowski (1899–1945) and Wincenty Okoń (1914–2011). Meta-level research is of particular interest to general pedagogues, methodologists and education theorists. Due to the multitude and multi-aspect nature of publications in this field, it is difficult to characterize and organize them exhaustively and unambiguously. For this reason, creating a list of Polish pedagogues dealing with this subject is at the starting point exposed to gaps and incompleteness. However, it can be noticed that metatheoretical research concerns both the issues of the scientific and theoretical status of pedagogy, as well as the narrowly understood methodology of pedagogical research. In the first scope, definitional and ordering tasks for pedagogy are discussed. This concerns issues like the ontological, ethical and axiological foundations of pedagogy, analyses of contemporary pedagogical systems and concepts, analyses of the achievements of individual authors (pedagogues) and pedagogical schools, as well as analyses of selected pedagogical categories (Magier, 2019). This type of metatheoretical analyses in Polish pedagogy include research conducted by: Władysława Szulakiewicz, Bogusław Śliwerski, Marian Nowak, Zbigniewa Kwiecińskiego, Lecha Witkowskiego, Tomasza Szkudlarka, Teresa Hejnicka-Bewińska, Zbyszko Melosik, Roman Leppert, Mirosława Nowak-Dziemianowicz, Henryk Mizerek, Maria Boużyk, Dariusz Stępkowski, Marek Jeziorański, Alina Wróbel,

Jarosław Horowski, Jarosław Gara, Marek Rembierz, Mirosław Kowalski, Krzysztofa J. Szmidt (Baza „Ludzie Nauki"). However, a special place among them is occupied by the works of B. Śliwerski, who systematically characterizes and organizes the achievements of Polish pedagogy (Śliwerski, 2007, 2020a, 2020b, 2023).

The second, distinguished scope of metatheoretical research concerns methodology. Indeed, it seems it is experiencing a renaissance in Polish pedagogy. Polish pedagogues eagerly refer to the global achievements of the methodology of pedagogy and that of related sciences (Wróbel, 2022). This is evidenced by works devoted to both the strategy of pedagogical research and the detailed problems of research techniques. In this context, analyses are undertaken concerning both the conceptualization of research and individual research methods and techniques. Typical publications in this field include the works of Stanisław Palka, Danuta Urbaniak-Zając; Krzysztof Rubacha, Dariusz Kubinowski, Magdalena Szpunar, Halina Monika Wróblewska, Teresa Bauman. Scientific conferences are systematically devoted to the issues of research methodology in pedagogy, among which a special place is occupied by the Seminar of Pedagogical Methodology of the Polish Pedagogical Society, organized since 2004 (Polskie Towarzystwo Pedagogiczne; Uniwersytet w Białymstoku Wydział Nauk o Edukacji).

At the same time, the domestic achievements in this area seem to remain on the sidelines of the mainstream. This is especially true of the already mentioned achievements of the Lwów-Warsaw School, which are constantly cited in philosophy but do not have a broader appeal among pedagogues (Bronk and Majadański, 2010).

Functions of Metatheoretical Research

The need for metatheoretical research is by no means universally accepted. Characterised by a high level of abstraction, metatheoretical knowledge does not attract interest, let alone appreciation, in all researchers. Yet, one can hardly imagine doing science without this type of reflection. The need to indicate its cognitive and practical value is particularly evident among representatives of empirically oriented exact sciences — humanists (Jeziorański, 2022) and natural scientists (McGrath, 2008) alike. Indeed, subject-oriented researchers may fail to see the need to reflect on the essence of the cognitive activity they practice. They do not see the need to discover the assumptions and determinations on which they rely. Focusing on the cognitive effects of their research, often garnished with spectacular practical

(application) results, they perceive the mode of research they represent as the sole unquestionable, unchangeable and correct one (Jakiel, 2015).

Meanwhile, metatheoretical research (metatheory) has important cognitive and practical functions in science. These include describing and explaining key elements and regularities in science, as well as their evaluative interpretation. In cognitive terms, metatheoretical research characterises and clarifies science with regard to its first assumptions. Using an analogy, it can be said that it is the „primary science" for science, the knowledge that defines its principles. Metatheoretical research shows that every theory is based on certain premises. It makes it evident that theories are generated not only based on factual, protocol-based empirical knowledge but are also shaped by philosophical, worldview and ideological assumptions made beforehand. Further, it points to the content-related diversity of concepts and claims proposed in science. Metatheoretical research shows that there are no simple, self-explanatory and universally accepted solutions to specific problems, but rather many interpretations and explanations are generated concerning each of them (Kamiński, 1992; Palka, 1987; Śliwerski, 2020b).

The terminological and linguistic aspects remain the elementary starting level of metatheoretical analyses. At this level of analysis, it is the linguistic expressions (names, theses) that determine the scope of further exploration. These focus on clarifying the definitions (concepts) used and how their interrelationships are designed. Importantly, the names used in the humanities and social sciences do not usually have precise definitions. They also have different definitions (concepts) and are thus sometimes used in varying ways. Hence, one cannot proceed to further, detailed research without identifying their determinations. For this reason, metatheoretical research focuses on defining and ordering analyses, initiating and defining them (Tabora-Marcjan, 1987; Stonert, 1964).

It is also impossible not to see the practical functions of metatheoretical research. Its cognitive effects result in numerous and important determinations relating to the non-cognitive functioning of science. In this respect, one can point to its identity, critical and evaluative and propaedeutic functions. In terms of the identity function, it is as much about defining the essence of a certain science as it is about indicating the differences between sciences, especially those closely related theoretically and methodologically. Thanks to metatheory, it is possible to assess the coherence of knowledge within a discipline, to determine the place of individual sub-disciplines in the structure of the parent science and the specificity of terminology, as well as to frame its achievements in the context of the theoretical and

methodological background. Although the determination of disciplinary identity is made primarily in terms of theoretical and methodological content, it is impossible to underestimate the identity-related significance of historical research on science(s). Knowledge of the continuity and changes that science has undergone over time is irreplaceable in this respect. Not only does it form a system of interrelated information, but above all it gives an understanding of its essence, perpetuated in the course of historical developments (Kamiński, 1992).

In the exercise of the critical and evaluative function, metatheoretical research enables, among other things, determining the correctness of the research procedures, the argumentation used, the ways of deriving conclusions, and the precision of terminology. The critical and evaluative function seems particularly important in the humanities. The partial impossibility of empirically verifying the claims of the humanities makes metatheory particularly important in estimating the methodological and theoretical reliability of the humanities and social sciences (Bronk, 2003).

Sometimes the critical function is accompanied by doubts about its purposefulness. Pointing out weaknesses in practised science or research is sometimes construed as questioning their validity and necessity, negating them. Yet, methodological doubt is not tantamount to abnegation. Conversely, it provides a starting point for a precise understanding of specific phenomena, claims, concepts and theories (Jakiel, 2015).

Finally, metatheory has a propaedeutic and educational function. Describing the historical, theoretical and methodological principles of science naturally gives it the rank of entry-level knowledge, a scientific primer. Knowledge, without which it is impossible to carry out many detailed research and education activities in these areas (Bronk and Majdański, 2010).

Metatheoretical Aspects of Educational Theory

Much like in the case of metatheory, defining the essence of educational theory is also fraught with cognitive difficulties. These concern its name, definition, genesis and methodological specificity.

Name and Concept of „Educational Theory"

The name „educational theory" is not unambiguous — it does not have a single definition while also having many closely related terms. Polish pedagogical texts often refer to it using related terms: „pedagogical theory" and „pedagogical theories", as well as such names as „educational concept(s)", „educational vision(s)" or „educational model(s)". One can also encounter its

plural version: „educational theories" (Nowak, 2008). Notably, the literature contains some modifications of this name, indicating the type (kind) of educational theories. These are created by adding an adjective or a similar word to the main name: „common educational theories", „scientific educational theories"; „general, intermediate, detailed educational theories", „moral education theory", „aesthetic education theory", „intellectual education theory", „Christian education theory", „liberal education theory" etc. (Nowak, 2008; Wróbel, 2021).

The use of equivalents of this name in other (non-Polish) languages is also unclear. While pedagogical dictionaries and source texts provide its foreign counterparts: „théorie de l'éducation", „educational theory", „teoria dell'educazione" (Nowak, 2008), it is also claimed that „educational theory" does not have its semantic equivalents in all foreign languages and that the research problems belonging to this discipline fall within the scope of research of other pedagogical disciplines: general pedagogy or educational philosophy (Łobocki, 1993; Nowak, 2008).

Simplifying the discrepancies between the definitions used, it is possible to indicate the non-scientific (broad) and scientific (narrow) understanding of the name „educational theory". In the broad sense, „educational theory" is identified with any education-related knowledge. This can take the form of commonly held, customary information about education and subjective beliefs about it. The broad concept of „educational theory" is non-specific, colloquial and common-sense-based. What is important in this sense is that „educational theory" has a related term that is sometimes used interchangeably (synonymously), i.e. „common educational theory" (Nowak, 200; Wróbel, 2021). Whilst its use has become accepted in Polish pedagogical literature, it should be noted that the term „common theory" is, in the strict sense, an oxymoron, an antilogy. The intention behind this expression — indicating the common-sense, customary sources of education-related knowledge — is understandable. However, in the strict sense, „theory" denotes scientific knowledge (!) and is thus contrasted with common knowledge.

In a scientific (narrow, technical) sense, „educational theory" is defined as (1) a sub-discipline of pedagogy; or (2) the scientific knowledge of education. Although the two concepts exist at the academic level, they are not identical. In the first sense, it is a pedagogical discipline whose subject is education. Its structure, as a scientific discipline, includes both scientific research, its results (theories, concepts, models), a specific language, but also elements of its administrative embeddedness: faculties, scientists,

achievements, the socio-cultural and political context in which it functions (Bronk, 2003; Wróbel, 2021).

In the second sense, „educational theory" is defined as a coherent and rationally justified system of claims (knowledge) about education. It is part of a pedagogical sub-discipline called „educational theory", falling within its scope and constituting its central element. It seems that only in this sense (as scientific knowledge about education) can it legitimately be used in the plural, i.e. „educational theories". Indeed, no different scientific disciplines are defined as „educational theories", but there is a variety of humanistic knowledge about education. Also in this sense alone can „educational theory" be linked to such synonymous terms as „educational concepts", „educational models" and „educational visions". Explaining these terms and their scope relations requires discussing how the following categories are construed: theory, concept, model and vision (Nowak, 2008). However, there is no doubt that they denote scientific (humanistic, social) knowledge about education in each case, though differing in precision, scope, cognitive assertion and degree of coherence.

To conclude the terminological analyses, one may formulate the claim that the use of „educational theory" to designate a pedagogical sub-discipline is secondary to its use to denote scientific knowledge of education. The sub-discipline's name is generated through a *pars pro toto* transfer. This consists of using the name of one element of a scientific discipline — knowledge of education — to identify a broader category, i.e. the whole discipline. The term „theory" does not usually refer to scientific research or disciplines but to scientific knowledge — the output of such research. This dependence is evidenced not only by the semantic analysis but also by the genesis and history of educational theory.

It seems that the basic problem concerning the content definition of the theory of education lies in the ambiguity of defining the very name „theory". In order to define what the theory of education is, or theory in pedagogy, it is necessary to indicate how the name „theory" is understood and what it is for. The definitions of theory depend on many elements (the subject of research, the purpose of research, the strategies and research tools used), but their generation is primarily related to the concept of science. They (concepts) determine both the understanding of the essence of theory, as well as its functions. Classical distinctions in this area indicate the existence of: objectivist (Platonic-Aristotelian), subjectivizing (Kantian) and sensualistic (A. Comte's) concept of science (Krąpiec, 2002). The foundations of the objectivist concept of science go back to the views of Plato and

Aristotle. Within its framework, the assumption of the existence of objective knowledge is taken as the starting point. Scientific knowledge is treated as a continuation of common-sense knowledge. The key to science is the answer to the question „why?". The result of scientific research are general concepts, which as an element of reasoning, create a theory. Theory describes reality, aims to explain it causally and qualitatively. Scientific knowledge is defined by: genetic empiricism, intellectualism and methodological rationalism (Krąpiec, 2002).

The subjective concept of science is related to the development of mathematical natural science, and its beginnings date back to the Middle Ages (University of Oxford). Its essence is the belief that science should fulfill practical goals. Learning about nature and its laws should lead to changing the world into a world friendly to humans. The rationality of science is based not on the reality of the world (reality), but on reason, its properties. Human knowledge does not reach the essence of things, but its phenomena, which are the subject of scientific research (Krąpiec, 2002).

Auguste Comte is considered to be the creator of the sensualist concept of science. The basic goal and feature of science is to abandon questions about causes (why? thanks to what?) and focus on describing static or dynamic relationships and the laws that govern them (answering the questions: how?). The subject of science is facts. A scientific theory is the result of accumulating descriptions of facts and the relationships that occur between facts (induction). The goal of science is not theoretical knowledge, but prediction and action: savoir pour prevoir, prevoir pour agir (Krąpiec, 2002). Consequently, there is no single way of organizing theories in pedagogy. Its classic approach, referring to inspiration from models of science, indicates the existence of: hermeneutic, empirical, normative, critical, structuralist, constructivist and reflective theories of education (Nowak, 2008). Bogusław Śliwerski, taking into account the genetic and historical criteria, also indicates the existence of: psychological, sociological, normative, eclectic research orientations in the theory of education (Śliwerski, 2007).

Generally speaking, the key question remains: what is the theory of education and what is its purpose? Is it the element of scientific research that crowns, summarizes and collects it? Does it provide a general overview of the studied reality, regardless of its theological approaches in the categories of: description, explanation or understanding?; or, perhaps, the theory is a creative, freely generated assumption about the reality of education. Is it a collection of scientifically justified knowledge or creative hypotheses serving social and cultural change.

Simplifying, it seems that the divisions of the theory of education existing in the field of pedagogy can be reduced to two groups, two orientations: objectivist and subjectivist (Kiereś, 2015). Despite the fact that at such a high level of generality of the division, each group must be treated as internally diverse, non-uniform, at the same time, within each of them there function common, axial beliefs that provide a basis for introducing the proposed division.

Objectifying positions are united by the belief in the truthful, cognitive function of theory in pedagogy. It is treated as the final effect of research on educational reality, the final effect of the cognitive process. Regardless of whether its claims are the effect of empirical cognition (inductive research or as a result of phenomenological or hermeneutic reflection) or the result of deductive reasoning, they always aim to learn (describe, explain, understand) the subject of research. This group includes neo-Thomistic (personalist) pedagogy, positivist pedagogy, phenomenological pedagogy, hermeneutic pedagogy (Krüger, 2005; Gutek, 2007; Kunowski 2001, Nowak, 2008).

In the second group, we can find those pedagogical trends that, at the expense of the cognitive function, emphasize practical, action-oriented tasks of the theory of education. The task of the theory of education is therefore to formulate assessments and norms, postulates and tasks concerning the change of educational reality. The following are proposed as the superior categories of the theory of education understood in this way: engagement, evolution, change, revolution, action. This group includes such pedagogical trends as: critical and emancipatory pedagogy, Marxist pedagogy, pedagogical constructivism, postmodern pedagogy, anti-pedagogy (Krüger, 2005; Gutek, 2007; Kunowski, 2001; Nowak, 2008). Changing the order of the classically accepted structure of reflection in pedagogy: first one must know in order to be able to act, seems to expose such a defined theory of education to idealistic thinking and even ideologization (Kiereś, 2015).

Genetic and Normative Aspects of Educational Theory

Educational theory, construed as a systematised and rationally justified set of statements (knowledge) about education, was developed as early as the onset of humanism in philosophy. This refers to the activities of the sophists and Socrates (5th century BC), who, in formulating theses on education, generalised and rationalised the individual experiences and common beliefs functioning in this regard in the Hellenic communities (Kot, 1996). Despite the rich tradition of reflection on education in philosophy, educational theory, as a scientific discipline (pedagogical sub-discipline), was established

relatively late, in the 20th century. Until that time, the research problems we now attribute to educational theory were investigated by general pedagogy and philosophy of education, or philosophy in general. According to Marian Nowak, the fundamental moment for the emergence of this pedagogical sub-discipline was the dissemination of Lucien Laberthonniére's „Theory of Education", published in 1901 (Nowak, 2008).

In Poland, the separation of the educational theory from general pedagogy took place after the Second World War, in the context of the ideologisation of pedagogy (Łobocki, 1993). Aiming to eliminate the philosophically and critically oriented general pedagogy, Marxist pedagogues and representatives of the authorities of the time promoted educational theory as a discipline based on Marxism in the theoretical aspect, and referring to methodological naturalism (Urbaniak-Zając and Kos, 2013) in the research aspect. During the communist period, educational theory in Poland was subordinated to the ideologised Soviet pedagogy. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw changes in its practice, which were associated with Poland's political transition. The ensuing criticism of the positivist-Marxist paradigm was accompanied by openness to international pedagogical discourse. Consequently, the dominance of any one model for practising educational theory was rejected, whilst accepting a poly-paradigmatic approach in this respect (Śliwerski, 2020a; Śliwerski, 2020b).

While the claim that educational theory is a tool for the systematic and deliberate ideologisation of pedagogy and education can hardly be upheld today, the question of its susceptibility to ideological motives (not necessarily Marxist) remains open. It seems naïve to believe that contemporary educational theory and pedagogy itself are free from worldview and ideological influences. The problem of educational theory's susceptibility to non-theoretical and non-scientific influences constantly recurs in metatheoretical research and debates in pedagogy (Bronk, 2003; Śliwerski, 2023). While some pedagogues explicitly recognise the dependence of the knowledge of education on worldview and ideological content, others believe that educational theory can be practised as a worldview-neutral discipline. It seems that the reason for the resistance to accepting the relationship between the educational theory and worldview is a concern regarding the scientific status of pedagogy. Theorists of education, genetically referring to the achievements of positivism and naturalism, find it difficult to accept the possibility of scientific content being conditioned by non-scientific sources: worldview or ideology (Bronk, 2003; Papież, 2011).

Yet, the call for a worldview-neutral educational theory appears to be illusory. As a scientific discipline, pedagogy — and educational theory along with it — contain elements subject to non-scientific influences. First, there is the issue of valuation. As a theoretical and practical science, pedagogy, and educational theory along with it, require reference to a system of values justified theoretically (normative sciences, mainly philosophical), as well as culturally, worldview-wise and ideologically. It seems that explicitly declaring the normative background adopted in educational theory is more transparent compared to a situation in which this background is concealed or unrecognised and educational theory operates behind the slogans of neutrality or independence (Salamucha and Magier, 2013).

Perhaps the most striking example of the theoretical and practical relevance of metatheoretical research in educational theory is its reference to the category of education (Wróbel, 2021). Metatheoretical analyses indicate that no single, universally accepted definition of education exists. Depending on the criteria used, definitions of education may vary, being generated and grouped in different ways. Moreover, the metatheoretical research perspective indicates that they are not merely the result of a simple generalisation of empirical data, but are also based on theoretical, worldview and ideological assumptions (Śliwerski, 2020b).

One cannot overlook their practical implications either. Although theory, and even more so metatheory, is considered abstracted knowledge, far removed from the real needs and practice of education, relating it to the process of defining education makes it clear that educational activity, as well as the content conveyed and goals and ideals formulated, are dependent on previously accepted views and theoretical determinations. This is by no means an assumption-free activity and its actual course is determined by the views and knowledge of those planning and implementing it (Jeziorański, 2022).

Conclusion

Today, educational theory is a central area of pedagogical knowledge and a key field of research in pedagogy. Research in educational theory is gaining recognition as such that unites and unifies the increasingly dispersed pedagogical reflection. Nevertheless, its undeniably distinguished position does not eliminate doubts about its definition and the preferred way of practising it. On the contrary, it intensifies and inspires the discussions on these issues. Further, it would seem that educational theory, like general pedagogy,

is also a focal point of debates about the scientific status of pedagogy, its normativity and neutrality.

This paper is merely an introduction to the essence of educational theory and its role in pedagogy and educational practice. It highlights some selected and perhaps the most elementary problems and proprieties of this pedagogical sub-discipline and educational knowledge system. Despite the significant achievements of Polish pedagogy in this area, many of these issues require constant reflection and research. This includes, for example, the development of contemporary pedagogical trends or changes in how the essence of education is construed. Moreover, the dynamically changing reality generates new phenomena and processes.

> For it is not true that science has already discovered everything and young researchers are left only to continue their work in strictly defined fields. The changing social and educational reality brings ever-new phenomena and related challenges (E. Domagała-Zyśk, 2015, p. 177).

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