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Obsah

Contents

- Úvodník** 7 — Tomáš Kasper & Markéta Pánková
Editorial
- Studie** 13 Jenseits der pädagogischen Illusion? Historisch-
Studies vergleichende Überlegungen zur Wirkungsgeschichte
der moralischen Bildung von Kindern und Jugendlichen
*Beyond the Pedagogical Illusion? Historical-Comparative
Reflections on the Impact History of Moral Education of Children
and Adolescents*
— Marc Depaepe
- 61 Manipulation of Time Continuity in Shared Narratives.
On the Construction of Collective “Truths” and
Its Ambivalent Function in the Social World
and in Education
— Magda Nišponská
- 89 Bewährung und Anerkennung als zentrale Elemente
in der Biografie eines reformpädagogisch bewegten
Lehrers: Willy Steiger (1894–1976), eine Fallstudie
*Proving Oneself and Being Recognised as Central Elements in
the Biography of a Reformist Teacher: Willy Steiger (1894–1976),
a Case Study*
— Wilfried Göttlicher
- 113 There’s No Riot Going on – Social Changes from Inside
Out. Discourses Surrounding Pop Culture, Authenticity,
and Forms of Life in the School Context in the German-
speaking Part of Switzerland around 1968
— Tomas Bascio
- 143 Reflection on Classroom Practice and Professional
Identity Building: Video Recordings from the Academy
of Educational Sciences in the GDR in the 1980s
— May Jehle

**Studie
Studies**

- 159 Educationalists in 1950s, 1960s Hungary: Identity and Profession through Retrospective Life (Hi)Stories
— Lajos Somogyvári
- 177 The Supervision of Schools and the Language of the Czechoslovak Administration. On the Example of School Committees in the Bilingual Moravia
— Ivan Puš
- 197 The Academic Reception of Austrian, German and Swiss Reform Pedagogy Representatives in Hungarian Educational Science in the Interwar Period. Quantitative Content Analysis of the Magyar Paedagogia (1918–1939)
— Zoltán András Szabó
- 213 Pedagogical Discourse on the Reform of General Secondary Education in Soviet Ukraine through the Prism of Child Protection in the 1920s: the Struggle against Unification
— Larysa Berezivska
- 237 Looking for the Personal and Professional-pedagogical Identification of Middle School Teachers during the Communist Period (1949–1989) in Hungary
— Beatrix Vincze
- 257 Pädagogisierung der Verletzlichkeit – Historiografische Perspektiven
Pedagogising Vulnerability – Historical Perspectives
— Carsten Heinze
- 277 Počátky studia předškolní výchovy na Pedagogické fakultě Univerzity Palackého v Olomouci v letech 1946–1950
The Beginnings of the Study of Preschool Education at the Faculty of Education of Palacký University Olomouc during 1946–1950
— Karel Konečný

Studie
Studies

- 301 K významu humanitního vzdělávání. Pohled středoškolských učitelů v meziválečném Československu

The Importance of Humanities Education. The Perspective of Secondary School Teachers in Interwar Czechoslovakia

— Dana Kasperová & Tomáš Kasper

Recenze
Book review

- 321 Ambiguities and Contradictions Surrounding the Body and Education: Thoughts inspired by S. Polenghi, A. Németh, T. Kasper (eds.). Education and the Body in Europe (1900–1950). Movements, Public Health, Pedagogical Rules and Cultural Ideas

— Gabriella Seveso



Reflection on Classroom Practice and Professional Identity Building: Video Recordings from the Academy of Educational Sciences in the GDR in the 1980s

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Abstract The paper introduces video recordings from an archive of a research school of the Academy of Educational Sciences in the GDR as a relatively new source in the history of education. Based on selected video recordings, it presents a case study which focuses the practice of classroom research and reflection within this institution. The video recordings were part of a research study on the enhancement of students' cognitive activity through the implementation of problem-based instruction. While this new approach can be seen as a part of a broader educational reform in the context of the scientific-technological

revolution, this case study addresses, in particular, the implementation and reflection of this new approach in practice. Doing so, it interprets the video recordings as a document of the strained relation between political expectations and the inherent logic of educational research in the GDR.

Keywords GDR, Academy of Educational Sciences, video recordings, problem-based instruction

1 Historical Research on the Educational Sciences in the GDR

After intense scientific and political debates about the education system of the GDR in the first half of the 1990s, research on this topic came almost to standstill (Tenorth & Wiegmann, 2022, p. 11). Apparently, there seemed to be no need to examine the dominating judgment

about the practice of educational sciences that mainly focused on the ideological differences between education in the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany that had already been made (ibid.). Against this backdrop, recent research, which addresses the historical development of the discipline in general, focuses on the structural conditions within specific institutions and the communicative conditions of the production of knowledge within the practice of science (ibid., pp. 19–20). Following this perspective, one can consider the educational sciences in the GDR as a “co-existence of different forms of knowledge” (ibid., p. 23).¹ The examination of this diversity of distinct systems of knowledge requires the consideration of a broad variety of sources. Against this backdrop, this paper introduces video recordings from an archive of the Academy of Educational Sciences in the GDR (Akademie der Pädagogischen Wissenschaften der DDR, APW) as the main source for a case study about the practice of research within a study on fostering students’ cognitive activity that was conducted by the Institute for Didactics at the APW in the 1980s. On the one hand, one can consider this research in the broader context of educational reform that was focusing the students’ creativity (*Schöpfertum*) and cognitive activity against the backdrop of the scientific-technological revolution and the requirement of increase of labor productivity (Neuner, 1970; Honecker, 1978). On the other hand, one can examine the conduction of empirical studies concerning the implementation of individual reform projects in the research schools of the APW (Malycha, 2008, pp. 302–316). The latter will be the central focus of the following case study.

2 Research on Problem-based Instruction within the Academy of Educational Sciences in the GDR (APW)

The APW was the central guiding institution for pedagogical sciences in the GDR during the 1970s and 1980s. Founded in 1970 as the successor to the Central German Pedagogical Institute (Deutsches Pädagogisches Zentralinstitut, DPZI), which was founded in 1949, the

1 All quotes of German references are translated by author unless otherwise noted.

APW was directly subordinate to the GDR's Ministry of People's Education (Ministerium für Volksbildung). The structure and research profile of the institute conformed to the needs of the Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei, SED) and their policies for education (Häder & Wiegmann, 2007; Malycha, 2007). Based on a "narrow practice orientation" (Malycha, 2009, p. 172) and a "specification on school education research" (ibid.), the focus of the APW's work was the development, elaboration and revision of the curricula, teaching media and teaching aids (ibid., p. 173). The institutes responsible for the work "were directly subordinate to the corresponding department of the ministry" (ibid., p. 179) and had the "least freedom" (ibid.) of all the institutes within the APW. That has particularly applied to those in charge of the social science subjects, as will be discussed in the following case study.

The case study concerns the Institute for Didactics (Institut für Didaktik), which was mainly responsible for "empirical studies on modified teaching designs [...], which foster the creative competencies of the students in the context of school education" (Malycha, 2008, p. 138). For such studies and educational experiments, the institute had special research schools. Based on research programs which were authorized by the Ministry, researchers were allowed to depart from the official guidelines like curricula and teaching aids (ibid., p. 302). The presented case study was part of the study on the "enhancement of the cognitive activity of all students in class by the systematic perfection of the teachers' methodical skills" (Akademie, 1987). The study was conducted from 1981 to 1985 at eight of the APW's research schools (Fuhrmann, 1987; Malycha, 2008). At a colloquium in 1982, Helmut Weck, the head of the Institute for Didactics from 1973 to 1984, formulated the question of how "one could implement a significantly higher proportion of problem-based instruction² in teaching practice" (Weck,

2 Actually, they used the term *problemhaft* which is very specific to GDR pedagogy and quite difficult to translate. A literal translation would be "problematic", but this term does not correspond to the program's intention, which should rather be translated as "problem-based".

1982, p. 20). Elisabeth Fuhrmann, the head researcher of the study, and Volker Mirschel, the head of the so-called Pedagogical Laboratory³ at one of the research schools involved, returned to that question in their contribution and described “problem-based instruction” (Fuhrmann & Mirschel, 1982, p. 67) as “the basic means to enhance the cognitive activity of all students in class” (ibid.).

The discussion on the enhancement of cognitive activity can be considered in the broader context of educational reform since the 1970s. One core element concerned curriculum reform as a consequence of the scientific-technological revolution (Neuner, 1970). Education was supposed to foster students’ creativity (*Schöpfungstum*) and cognitive activity through the implementation of problem-based instruction (Honecker, 1969, pp. 607–608, 1978, pp. 537–538; Kurze & Lechner, 1980). Moreover, the political guideline, which required an exploration of the possibilities of communist education, led to an intensification of empirical research (Tenorth & Wiegmann, 2022, p. 31).

In 1986, the series *Advice for Teachers (Ratschläge für Lehrer)*, which was edited by the APW in the context of the aforementioned study with the intention of offering “practical didactic aids” (Malycha, 2008, p. 96), addressed the issue in *Problem-solving in class (Problemlösen im Unterricht)*. The author, Elisabeth Fuhrmann, describes “problem-based instruction [...] as a way of teaching [...] that is consciously orientated towards the substantial laws of cognitive processes, follows the phases of problem-solving and refers to the identification and solution of problems in a didactical sense” (Fuhrmann, 1986, p. 10). With regard to these “substantial laws of cognitive processes” (ibid.) and “the phases of problem-solving” (ibid.), we can consider Helmut Weck’s work since the mid-1960s as basic preliminary studies (Weck, 1966, 1983). With this work, Weck specifically accentuated contradictions between knowing and not-knowing (e.g., Weck, 1966, pp. 30–31). Among other things, Fuhrmann added the contradiction between “essence and material

3 The core part of this Pedagogical Laboratory was to have a classroom fully equipped for classroom videography where a range of lessons were recorded for distinct research purposes (Mirschel, 2013).

appearance, ideal and reality” (Fuhrmann, 1986, p. 10). Weck had already emphasized the meaning of teachers’ leadership and their ability to find appropriate problems (Weck, 1973, p. 3). With its study, the APW returned to that and formulated the development and implementation of “specific orientation materials for teachers to develop their methodological skills” (Malycha, 2008, p. 313) as a central aim (see also Akademie, 1981). At the colloquium in 1982, Fuhrmann and Mirschel concretized the characteristics of such problem-based instruction and named students getting into “a problem situation which is subjectively meaningful for them and didactically refined by the teacher” (Fuhrmann & Mirschel, 1982, p. 67) as the most important. Such a situation can then stimulate them “to search independently for possible solutions (ideas, approaches, procedures)” (ibid.). Through “this productive activity – which is carefully supervised by the teacher – they rediscover widely independently the insights which are necessary for generality” (ibid.).

3 A Case Study Based on Video Recordings

Up to now, historical research on this study has mainly relied on these written sources. Beyond that, we can draw on selected video recordings from an archive of one of the APW research schools that was involved in the study for a number of years. These video recordings are part of a larger collection which was retro-digitalized within a series of research projects headed by Henning Schluß and which are available now for research purposes in an online databank.⁴ By using these relatively newly available sources, this paper presents a case study based on an almost exceptional combination of sources. It includes a recording of a lesson in a civics course that was planned in the context of the study in the 1980s. Additionally, two more recordings of classroom evaluation talks were found that involved scholars and teachers who refer to this lesson. Following an analysis of the recorded classroom and evaluation practices is a discussion on if and how this practice of

4 URL: <https://www.fdz-bildung.de/studiendetails.php?id=55> (26. 2. 2023).

research and reflection on classroom practices can be interpreted as a contribution to professional identity building in the APW.

3.1 The Lesson “Why Are We Doing Socialism?”

The recorded lesson documents the introductory lesson of the second teaching unit in a 10th grade civics course on the “Fundamental Issues of Economic Development in the German Democratic Republic”. The exact date of the lesson is unknown, but the analysis of the lesson’s content, the recorded evaluation and the following comparison with curricula and teaching aids allows for the time period to be defined as between 1979 and 1984 (Jehle, 2022, pp. 186–188).

Besides the two recordings of the related evaluation talks, no other documents with more information on the context of the recording were found. Based on these recordings of the evaluation talks, the teacher developed the teaching concept in collaboration with some scholars from the APW. Moreover, the recordings provide some indications that the classroom recording and its evaluation took place during the so-called “Pedagogical Week”. The “Pedagogical Week” was a joint event of the Institute for Didactics and the related research school. Scholars and teachers shared their experiences based on a program with lectures, discussions and a group sitting in on classes. As can be seen in the recording (Fig. 1), there is such a group sitting in the back of the classroom. Moreover, most of the students are wearing the uniform of the socialist youth organization: the blue shirts of the Free German Youth (Freie Deutsche Jugend, FDJ). This also indicates that



Fig. 1. Screenshot
(Aufzeichnungseinheit, n.d.a,
00:08:22).

it was a special occasion because that was not the everyday practice in this school.

According to the curricula, the students were to learn in this teaching unit that the process of shaping a socialist society takes place in accordance with economic and societal laws which are ultimately for the good for all. Moreover, they should come to understand that these laws – as opposed to laws of nature – needed to correspond to the conscious activity of human beings in order to be realized. In consequence, civics courses should foster the students' willingness to actively contribute to the development of a socialist society (Ministerrat, [1974] 1979, pp. 16–18).

As the teacher explained in the recorded evaluation of the lesson, she changed the instructional concept, which was proposed in the teaching aids, with regard to the program of problem-based instruction. The teaching aids proposed that the teacher pose the question of whether, in a socialist society, humans are an appendix of the economy or if the economy answers to human needs (Autorenkollektiv, 1979, p. 72). Instead of doing this, the teacher began the lesson with the question “Why are we doing socialism?”, which she writes on the chalkboard. As she explained in the recorded evaluation, she wanted to avoid that the students just contribute fixed phrases out of the textbook. For that reason, she was looking for wording that was closer to the students' everyday language. She intended the students to realize that the laws of social development not only need conscious activity from human beings in general, but they also need the students' acting itself.

To achieve this, it was necessary, at first, that the students understand the actual problem included in the question: Why does socialism need human activity when it is following a set pattern? One condition for that is that the students had to refer to the laws of social development in the discussion. It was observable in the recording of the lesson that this first step succeeded without any problems:

Tf: “Here is one word striking me. It is in contradiction to my question. [...]”

Sf4: “Well, the law-governed process. If it's a law,

we don't need to act.”

Tf: “Yes, that's exactly right. (8) Now we have a contradiction. What's the trouble with it? Was my question wrong or were your answers wrong?” [...]

Sf18: “Well, that's not a natural law, it's rather a law of social development. And these laws, they need humans to be realized, because only humans can assert these laws of social development they've created themselves.”

(Aufzeichnungseinheit, n.d.a, # 00:05:37)

The students referred to the laws of social development, and the teacher brought up the potential contradiction. In response, the students related the answer – in line with the expectation of the lesson plan – to the laws of social development which need conscious human activity.

Thereafter, the teacher wanted to direct the students' attention to the subject of this activity and drew a frame around the “we” within the question on the chalkboard (Fig. 2).

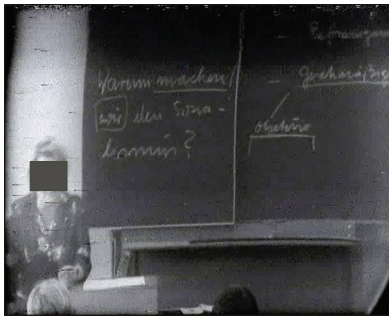


Fig. 2. Screenshot
(Aufzeichnungseinheit, n.d.a,
00:08:02).

At this moment, one student (Sm2) intervened, doubting the question as such and the need for conscious activity by human beings. He insisted that socialism emerges by itself when it is following a set pattern. In the recorded evaluation, the teacher described this situation as a moment that threw her into a state of panic. That indicates that it was not her intention for a student to take the potential contradiction

in the question seriously as a problem. She handled the situation by letting the students discuss this contribution:

Sm10: It is up to humans if a revolution takes place or not. [...]

Sw3: It has to be realized by humans. [...] They have to develop.

Sm11: Socialism is not a natural law. If humans don't act, it won't come by itself, humans have to make a decisive contribution.

Sw18: I wanted to say the same, [...], to realize socialism, that needs the existence of human beings.

(Aufzeichnungseinheit, n.d.a, # 00:17:02)

As apparent in these short sequences, this discussion does not result in a sound analysis of the problem raised by the student (see more detailed Jehle, 2022, pp. 201–204). Rather, the other students just variate phrases which were already said before. The teacher also does not explain the difference between natural laws and laws of social development. Thus, the need for conscious activity by human beings is not explained by a sound analysis of the problem. Instead, the problem formulated by the teacher produces mainly reproductions of already known phrases.

Taken as a whole, the analysis of the lesson suggests that the teacher did not intend to formulate a contradiction within her question that would need a longer discussion. Actually, the difference between natural laws and the laws of social development was already the subject of civics courses in the year before (Autorenkollektiv, [1977] 1981, pp. 9–10). As expected, the students were able to resolve the indicated contradiction by a repetition of this knowledge. Yet, the teacher had wanted to emphasize the central educational message which was indicated by the “we”. It was her intention to foster the students’ conscious and personal commitment to shaping a socialist society. However, instead of focusing on that, she had to deal with this unexpected friction because one student thought seriously about the contradiction and doubted her question as such. Her strategy of a students’ discussion about that doubt led once again merely to a reproduction of already familiar knowledge. There was no approach to stimulate a more in-depth understanding

of the difference between natural laws and the laws of social development. Finally, this suggests that the teacher tried to create socialist consciousness by repeating phrases instead of by enabling them to understand the ideology behind it. In this way, she undermined the standards of a problem-based instruction approach that was supposed to address contradictions between knowing and not-knowing (Weck, 1966, pp. 30–31) as well as contradictions between “essence and material appearance, ideal and reality” (Fuhrmann, 1986, p. 10).

The Collective Classroom Evaluations

Proceeding from this result, it becomes interesting how the scholars and teachers in the recorded evaluations discussed the problem formulated by the teacher and the process of problem-solving in class. In general, those in the evaluation considered the lesson a paradigmatic example of the successful implementation of the concept of problem-based instruction.

At first, there was a discussion of possible alternative approaches to formulating the problem. Another teacher asked, for example, if one could use Erich Honecker’s (who was the head of state at that time) speech at the party conference. The teacher from the course answered that this had been an option, but they had scrapped it. Then she addressed the questions formulated in the teaching aids. She labeled them as “not bad” (Aufzeichnungseinheit, n.d.b, # 00:00:18) even if she wanted “to formulate it in another way” (ibid., # 00:00:30). Without any further explanation, she commented that “one can break his ears doing that” (Aufzeichnungseinheit, n.d.a, # 00:51:17) and “one can seriously hit the canvas” (ibid., # 00:51:29).

The teacher from the course also named the unexpected intervention of the one student as a possible “starting point for the lesson” (ibid., # 00:01:47). However, that option did not come to mind when planning the lesson. The moderator of the discussion supported that approach and characterized the situation that occurred as “excellent” (ibid., # 00:27:56) because “everyone became aware of the problem” (ibid., # 00:27:58).

Furthermore, there were also proposals on how to involve the students in a sound analysis of the problem and how to explain the differentiation between natural laws and laws of social development. One teacher colleague even criticized that they did not think the problem through to the end in the class. The responsible civics teacher agreed, and they proceeded to the next comment. Taken as whole, it is notable that, on the one hand, the teachers and scholars talked about possible difficulties and limits with remarkable frankness. On the other hand, they restricted themselves to vague suggestions without any discussion about the possible reasons for these difficulties.

Maybe they avoided discussing these difficulties since they already knew that they usually struggle in their teaching practice with the dialectical differentiation between essence and material appearance (Grammes, Schluß & Vogler, 2006, p. 490). Based on that differentiation, civics teachers had to impart the essence of law-governed processes of societal development in line with the materialist conception of history. Though within their contemporary society, it was not possible to observe these laws because – as material appearance – they only existed as a prospective promise. At least the civics teacher who taught in this recorded lesson reported once that she was aware of this practical difficulty (Gespräch, 2012; Jehle, 2022, p. 193). However, neither she nor her colleagues mentioned this aspect in the classroom evaluation. It is probable that everyone knew that this established dialectical differentiation was taken for granted and not up for discussion.

Altogether, the participants in these evaluative discussions considered the recorded lesson as a paradigmatic example for the successful implementation of problem-based instruction into civics courses. That might indicate that among scholars and teachers there was a silent consensus about the possibilities and limits of teaching civics.

Practice of Research, Reflection on Classroom Practice and Professional Identity Building

For a final discussion of these results, it should be taken into account that the whole study was conducted between the conflicting priorities and different aims of the Ministry of People's Education on the

one hand and of the Institute for Didactics of the APW on the other (Malycha, 2008, p. 314). The Institute for Didactics intended to develop and to implement teaching concepts which would be based on the results of their research. Yet that was not in the ministry's interest (*ibid.*). Rather, it can be assumed that the ideological control and political governance of research conflicted with the claim of practice-oriented research and theory building (Malycha, 2008, pp. 370–371). Even so, the Institute for Didactics considered the experiment to be a success. The head researcher of the study, Elisabeth Fuhrmann, found that the results would provide a good starting point for new teachings concepts. Actually, the ministry was not interested in results which could lastingly change the school and teaching practices (Malycha, 2009, p. 315).

Against this broader political and ideological backdrop, one can observe the development of a “diversity of languages” (Tenorth, 2017, p. 250) within the APW. Depending on the concrete setting, it was appropriate to use a specific political, educational or scientific language as well as relevant references. Thus, the specific context of written or oral recorded statements has to be taken into account. The differentiation of such a contextualization might finally enable a discussion on “specific patterns of the construction of pedagogical knowledge in the tension field between policy and science” (Tenorth, 2017, p. 209).

With regard to the case study presented here, the leaders of the APW followed the negative valuation of the results by the ministry. One can understand this as an act of self-disciplining in the broader context of a “general self-restriction within the accepted and performed political function” (Malycha, 2009, p. 187). Remarkably, this mechanism can be observed on different levels in the case study when a kind of self-restriction within the collective classroom evaluations is also assumed. Thus, these collective classroom evaluations have constituted a practice of research and reflection of practice which contributed in particular to professional identity building. For the participants, these events offered the opportunity to practice the context-sensitive use of the diverse languages, which supported the direction of pedagogical practices according to the political requirement without questioning their reasons. In the broader context of the practice of educational science, we

can interpret the video recordings as documents of the “strained symbiosis of different forms of knowledge” (Tenorth & Wiegmann, 2022, p. 32) within the discipline with its specific dynamics between the confirmation of political expectations and the inherent logic of educational research (ibid., p. 566).⁵

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