

Thematic Article

## The State of Educational Research: Central European Silence and Controversies<sup>1</sup>

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The idea of this special issue is to present a selection of essays about Central European Educational Research. It describes different positions in relation to how the autonomy and independence of educational research as a strategic field has been built and shaped by internal and foreign policies in the last three decades (Boltanski, 2011; Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). The ambition and the scope of this issue is to give an impression of the on-going development and debates of educational research in the region. Through a temporally reflected lens of the last thirty years the issue develops a discourse about challenges and constraints that face educational research within Central Europe.

It attempts to portray what have been the educational achievements of the so called “transition” in the former Soviet countries in Central Europe and what are the barriers to success. Transition is rather complex matter, and there is no generally accepted definition of the concept. On the contrary, the great number of approaches is being constantly developed, some of which referring back to the “turn” and scrutinize it from multiple perspectives, others trying to explore new possibilities and way of thinking. Transition as such emphasizes continuities from one phase to an other and at the same time highlights discontinuities, ruptures, particularities. Conflicts and controversies arisen soon after the transition may seem potentially contra-productive for development but in many cases set a ground in new

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<sup>1</sup>This issue develops ideas presented at the “Views from Central Europe: Education and Transition” panel discussion at ECER 2015, Budapest conference. <http://www.eera-ecer.de/ecer-2015-budapest/programme-central-events/eera-sessions/views-from-central-europe-education-transition/>

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possibilities. Transition, the change of educational systems and research achievements are three interacting phenomena having a uniquely differentiated impact on our comprehension of reforms in each country presented in this volume. Seen in this light, the issue highlights the possible reasons lying behind the fact that educational research in Central Europe is reluctant to open up its discourses into a rather unstructured and diverse European and global space.

Papers selected intends to go beyond the structure of the traditional East-West division and address the current unequal distribution of the means of power as well as the reaction of educational researchers and research institutions on the strong centralizing effect of the international organization and NGOs (World Bank, European Commission, OECD, Open Society Foundation)

Predominantly focusing on national struggles of identity and legitimacy of the emerging institutions, the need of the European Commission to unify and compare national institutions reached the central European educational systems unprepared. As a result, it contributed to an on-going “institutional revolution”, to borrow a term from Kozma and Tózsér.

Expressing some concerns about the inappropriateness of the EU policies Kozma and Tózsér underlines that despite increasing unification the European accession paradoxically led to unforeseen nationalization. Reframing and reshaping administrative vocabularies in countries with ineffective and uncertain administration in several cases strengthened national power debates in educational research adding legitimacy to otherwise questionable issues. Under the pretext of decisions made on transnational scales the incapability of covering performance gaps, legitimising internal decisions and overcoming certain forms of fragmentation at national level seemed less problematic. Vlatka Domović and Vlasta Vizek Vidović nicely frames and locates this perspective in Croatian context by analysing the unification, standardization and professionalization of teacher education.

The selected authors took rather different positions to analyse how educational research as an autonomous research field is being built and maintained. After a brief outline of the history of education and educational research in a given country the authors illustrate from different angles the autonomous spaces of freedom and interest in established systems of educational research, in which scholars can delineate and rationally design. There is an overall concern among the contributors of the issue that the development of educational research in most countries studied was not formed based on its own principles. Educational research cannot be regarded as an autonomous, self regulated field with homogenous set of discursive practices, research topics and institutions. Expressing some concerns Hatos underlines that the subordinate position of educational research with several paternalistic circles above entails overt controversies and incoherence in the field (Archer, 1984). It unquestionably weakens the Central European positions in strategic design. Relying on recent advances in the study of research governance, it is possible to foresee that power which selectively resources research

environments increasingly more and more discursively and contextually mediated (Ball, 2008; Ozga, 2012; Maroy, 2012).

. Hence, we should not forget that the richness of its contextual variety, the multidisciplinary and in-between character of educational research in Central Europe might seem as the lack of capacity from one perspective, from an other, however, it can be regarded as possible resource.

There is an intended critical approach towards education and educational research throughout the issue. Firstly, papers can be considered critical in sense that they explore the critical capacity of educational research in the process of democratization of systems having undergone rapid political, economic and societal change between 1986-1994. Secondly the issue critically explores how the interplay of knowledge and research practices is anchored in diverse forms of political and academic narrativity.

In starting to think about the contribution of educational research to the democratization process of post-soviet countries it is worth considering the power of academic discourses. Zgaga brilliantly describes in his account how a single public debate organized to support the realization of the socialist ideological objectives contributed to the political and social reorganization of the country. A single colloquium held in the newly founded independent research institution in Ljubljana to clarify the nonsense of a fashionable concept in arts and humanities – “all-round-developed-personality” – generated an academic discourse leading to a political turmoil. By the same token, Kozma and Tőzsér introduce the reader into the Hungarian history of educational research where not a conceptual clarification but the introduction of a new concept “cultural city centre” opened up debates of basic significance about social mobility and education leading to the renewal of local communities. This initiative turned out to be the endorsement of grass-root level citizen activities eroding the system from inside.

The analysis of the role of educational research in the institutional democratisation shed light on the prevailing power of discourses (academic or political) in a region where institutions can only temporarily be stabilized. In an attempt to further elaborate how the interplay of knowledge and research practices is anchored in academic and political narrativity the authors reflect on the critical power of research communities. Zgaga argues that as opposed to times when kings disregard philosophers, as it was the case in most of post-soviet era, now we live in the period of disorientation, when knowledge, research and discourse is unquestionably relative. Emphasizing the relativity of research he underlines the never ending debates on quality criteria in the region in the light of the current neo-liberal agenda. In line with Simon, Zgaga problematizes assumptions about modern universities, and research communities highlighting that governmental and spiritual technologies are both involved in current higher

educational settings. Therefore the world of universities can be considered as “Republic of scholars” with critical capabilities and responsibilities.

Tomusk set forth even stronger provocative position on the interplay of knowledge and research practices. In modern states Science, he speculates is practiced in various spaces (universities, research institutions, third sector organizations, think-tanks). Science, additionally, can build close relation to policies and can position its own interest as evidence based. Hence, as Tomusk suggests, scientific and political discourse becomes indistinguishable. Politics under the disguise of science enters academic spheres, whereas science resolves political issues. Tomusk stresses the critical capacities of scholarly circles in Central Europe to distinguish between voices speaking from different positions in the representation of bodiless institutions. Public engagement is, in his view, far more complex than popularizing science and research outcomes. It is portrayed as the responsibility and critical capacity of intellectuals exercised in a hope to navigate among discourses with the aim to open up prospects of social space.

Although public engagement, in the light of the studies, is of basic importance, grass-root activities, participation and public engagement experienced in the civil euphoria of the “transition” is forgotten and not in priority anymore in the light of the transformation of the modern state confronting with neo-liberal agenda and global financial crisis.

Focusing critical questions beyond national frameworks these studies draw attention to the fact that apart from the institutionalization process of research areas at national scenes relatively little attention is given to the current transformation of the educational research governance taken place at the European level. The authors has prevaillingly addressed struggles of communities of scholars navigating among the fast altering vocabularies, perspectives and institutional settings of educational research at national scenes, with far less attention has been given to the ‘European Educational Research Space (Lawn & Lindgard, 2002; Novóa & Lawn, 2002; Popkewitz, 2000; Gretler, 2007). The emerging “networks of knowledge spaces” and mechanisms by which transnational spaces operate remain systematically lacking attention (Sheddon, 1993, 2014). While many of the countries studied are member of European associations (EERA, EARLI etc.) the hybrid character of these association with their capacity of knowledge exchange is mainly ignored. The essays selected offer limited insight into the dilemma educational researchers are now confronted with: the transformation of the modern state. It is insightful to understand the movement from government to governance in modern states that are increasingly embedded in convolving, conflating, interacting transnational policies and policy discourses. Following trajectories and layers of meaning at national and transnational scales is crucial to identify agents or institutions that are capable of critically opening up dialogues and offering opportunities of public engagement.

This indicates a need for more precise understanding of novel forms of research governance that can shape and reframe nation-centred hierarchical structures and the all-empowering EU policies.

It is our hope that we succeeded in producing a volume that can provide an overview of the state, conditions, challenges and visions of educational research in a region facing rather similar conditions and challenges in the last 30 years. The core part of this reflection is to go beyond the unhelpful dichotomies – contribution to status quo versus endorsement of change, self-governance versus integration into transnational structures and open up a discussion towards new possibilities of thinking.

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