

# BETWEEN “ACTS-AND-FACTS HISTORY” AND “EDUTAINMENT” IN THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION STUDY COURSES: THE CASE OF UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA

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## ABSTRACT

At present, the history of education is experiencing a paradox: research in the history of education is flourishing, but the history of education as a study subject is losing its relevance in university curricula. The present research aims at examining the potential of education history in student-centred and research-based study process while addressing the experience in teaching education history in master's study programmes at the University of Latvia from 1920 to 2020. The article comprises three sections: the first section offers an overview of the evolvement of the history of education as a study subject in Europe and Latvia; the second section, based on the experience of teaching the history of education and research in history didactics, reveals three possible approaches to the study course in the history of education; the third section foregrounds the integration of digitized historical sources in the delivery of student-centred and research-based education history courses. The research demonstrates that each of the three approaches (“acts-and-facts history,” “problem-oriented history of education,” and “edutainment”) has student-centred potential in shaping historical thinking. The student-centred study process in a modern university is closely related to research-based studies, which in the study course of education history means independent research of history aligned with students' individual interests in the field of education.

**Keywords:** *curriculum, history didactics, history of education, student-centred study process, research-based studies, university.*

## Introduction

The history of education today is experiencing the paradox repeatedly mentioned by studies in the field: research in the history of education is flourishing, numerous national and international academic journals are published, conferences and summer schools are held, but the history of education as a study subject has been marginalized at universities over

recent decades (Fuchs, 2012, 7; Reyniers et al., 2018, 845). The University of Latvia is no exception in this respect: in the syllabus of year 1992, 72 academic hours were allocated for the history of education (Anspaks, 1992), in 2001, the history of education was reduced to 32-48 academic hours in both bachelor's and master's programmes (Kaļķe, 2001, Ķestere & Krūze, 2001) but in 2020/2021, the history of education subjects vanished from bachelor's programmes, and in master's programmes are taught alongside the philosophy of education in the course 'History and philosophy of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective', securing only 24 academic hours to the history of education (Rubene et al., 2020). This modest share of hours is a compromise achieved by overcoming the scepticism of students and colleagues regarding the need for the history of education, which is mainly based on two arguments:

- 1) the history of education has no use in teachers' daily practice;
- 2) each professor provides a historical outline of the respective study subject in the introductory lecture(s) of their study courses.

The education historians themselves, who enthusiastically develop academic research, but rarely turn to the history of education as a study subject, including didactics, could be accountable for the lack of awareness of the need for the education history in the field of education sciences. Nowadays, following the research by Tyack (1976), Beales (1989), Salimova and Johanningmeier (1993), Campbell and Scherington (2002) and Depaepe (2001, 2012), tertiary studies in the history of education are examined by Reyniers et al. (2018) in one of the few studies which puts teaching of education history in an international context.

Our research aims at discussing the potential of the history of education in the student-centred and research-based study process, as backed up by the experience in teaching the history of education in master's study programmes at the University of Latvia in the time span from 1920 to 2020.

Our study comprises three sections: the first section offers an overview of the evolvement of the history of education as a study subject in Europe and Latvia, with the reference to relevant previous research; the second section, based on the review of teaching the history of education, research in history didactics and the author's 20 years of experience in teaching history of education, reveals three possible approaches to the study course in the history of education; the third section, while resorting to quantitative research, foregrounds the integration of digitized historical sources in the delivery of student-centred and research-based education history courses.

## History of Education at Universities: The Background

The history of education entered European universities with the establishment of chairs or professorships in pedagogy in 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany. The study courses in pedagogy or education sciences were rooted in three theories: philosophy of education, educational psychology, and history of education from Plato onwards (Beales, 1989, 131). The acquisition of theoretical concepts distinguished study courses at university from practical training in teachers' seminaries and colleges, established *en masse* in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, including the territory of Latvia. The colleges curriculum contained the studies of schooling (*Die Schulkunde*), which included also "the history of folk schools from Luther to the present day" (Bach et al., 1898, 87). However, the teachers' training colleges mainly focused on practical skills. Prospective teachers, beside the knowledge of the school subject, also mastered its teaching methodology, which they further reproduced in their teaching practice. Teachers' training colleges were practice-oriented, while universities put emphasis on theoretical knowledge.

In comparison with other European countries, the subjects in education sciences or pedagogy were introduced at tertiary level rather late in Latvia, because the first humanities-type higher education institutions (including the University of Latvia) were founded only after the establishment of the Latvia nation-state in 1918. Yet, it should be noted, that the University of Latvia, started delivering the history of pedagogy as a separate study course from its very beginnings (Latvijas Universitāte..., 1939, 253–255, 262–263), while the University of London, for example, did not offer the special history of education subject from 1910 to 1932 (Beales, 1989, 133).

Since the academic year 1920/1921, the history of education at the University of Latvia was taught by professors with a degree in philology and philosophy from the University of Tartu (Latvijas Universitāte..., 1939, 253-255, 262-263) which determined the course content by spotlighting the history of ideas. This general European trend of the interwar period is described by Richardson (1999) as follows: the history of education comprised the history of pedagogical thought (ideas, theories), which methodologically was closely related to philosophy and philology, and the history of educational institutions (schools, universities, teachers' training colleges, etc.), which chronologically described facts (Richardson, 1999). Campbell and Scherington (2002) also showcase philosophy as "a natural partner of the history of education" (46–47).

After World War II, when Latvia was incorporated into the Soviet Union, all curricula, from primary schools to universities, were streamlined

with the guidelines of the Soviet education system (Raudys et al., 2013). Undeniably, these changes affected the courses in the history of education too. Both, the history of ideas and the history of educational institutions remained in the curriculum, but now they were taught from the perspective of trivialized Marxism: when teaching the history of education, the social class aspect was emphasized (Kestere, 2014a). For example, the social origin of the "great" educator, his attitude towards public education and the limited educational opportunities of the lower social strata.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Western world took a "realistic turn" (Bracke et al., 2019, 24) in education sciences, history and education history, characterized by a conceptual shift from the analysis of ideas in the spirit of classical philosophy to the social science paradigm: "(..) we may well assume that a 'paradigm shift' took place under the inspiration of cultural revisionism: the history of ideas was replaced by the postulate of the social history of education" (Depaepe, 2001, 632).

The influence of social sciences expanded the boundaries of the field of education sciences and the history of education; interdisciplinary research became topical, and empirical research borrowed from the social sciences was taken up as a field of interest (Campbell & Scherington, 2002, 50; Bracke et al., 2019, 25). The history of various social groups (e. g. children, women, immigrants, people with special needs) gained popularity. The time of various "turns" began (e. g., the visual turn, the linguistic turn, the transnational turn, etc.), namely, the time of the search for new concepts and sources, which attracted history researchers and was called by Osterhammel (2019) the time of "carefully orchestrated 'turns' in global history" (22). Education reality studies became topical, while educational ideas about how "it should be" were moved to the background.

The "new" history of education made its way into in study courses at universities. Describing the history of education in Belgium, Professor De Vroede at the University of Leuven in 1970s saw the future of the history of education in discovering the correlation between, on the one hand, the development of society and, on the other, upbringing and education, which develops the relevant social history of education (De Vroede, 1979, 30).

The paradigm shift in the history of education so topical in the West went unnoticed in Soviet Latvia. Firstly, the "Iron Curtain" meant intellectual isolation from the Western world, and secondly, educational research within the social paradigm did not seem to be new in the Soviet Union. As mentioned earlier, Soviet historians already viewed education in a strict (ideologically dictated) social "framework" (Kestere & Ozola, 2014).

After the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991, information banned and hidden in the Soviet Union came to the forefront in the history of education and was enthusiastically studied by the faculty and gladly

mastered by students (Nobik et al., 2019). The research mainly focused on a certain chronological period, namely, the silenced time of Latvia's independence in the 1920s and 30s, the educational institutions of that time and the pedagogical ideas. However, history as chronologically listed facts, without concept, interpretation, explanation, soon became uninteresting to the public, including the student audience, and therefore, seemingly irrelevant (Depaepe, 1993, 5–6). As a result, the history of education began to lose its place in the study programmes of Latvian higher education, giving space to study courses that were supposedly more hands-on and beneficial for practice (Ķestere, 2015, 219–220).

A new turn in the research in the history of education in Latvia began with the development of international networking, where the International Standing Conference for the History of Education, attended by professors and doctoral students of the University of Latvia from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, played an important role (Ķestere, 2014b). International experience inspired changes in the history of education in Latvia, namely, a conceptual turn towards social sciences, which took place in the West already in the 1960s and 70s. The revision of the content and approaches to teaching of the history of education has started.

### Three Approaches to Studying the History of Education

The analysis of teaching of education history at universities and research on the history didactics, as well as the author's 20-year experience in teaching education history at the University of Latvia reveal three approaches to the study course in education history:

1. The history of education as “acts-and-facts history” (Reyniers et al., 2018, 840) i.e, the traditional combination of pedagogical ideas and the history of educational institutions in chronological order, or “memorizing and reproductive learning” (Bracke et al., 2019, 34). This approach showcases the importance of chronologically sequential depiction of the history of education and acquisition of facts in the study process. However, the formation of historical thinking, focusing on factual knowledge, is considered old-fashioned (Köster et al., 2019, 10). Such study process is “dominantly cognitive and simple” (Bracke et al., 2019, 34), but the students find it tedious and start questioning the relevance of history. In addition, the reciting of facts is no longer relevant in the digital age, when information for different levels of knowledge and preferences is offered by Internet also at a good academic level.

At the same time, it must be admitted that students lack systematic knowledge of history, which is not an exclusively Latvian problem: Bracke et al. (2019), summarizing the research surveying the students in Germany,

admit that young people mix “naïve everyday knowledge” with “systematic scientific or scholarly knowledge,” and lack “narrative competence” (50–53) i.e, students struggle to produce coherent historical narratives. The University of Latvia students’ skills to deliver a source-based, logical, contextualized historical narrative are also quite modest, as evidenced by essays in the history of education. For example, it is a regular mistake to define the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the chronological boundary of the study, ignoring two different political contexts of this period that play an important role in understanding and explaining educational (as well as social and cultural) processes: Latvia’s independence in the interwar period and drastic changes in education under Soviet and Nazi occupations in the 1940s and 1950s.

2. Problem-oriented, conceptual history of education in the paradigm of social sciences. This approach requires extracting a certain educational discourse (or range of problems) and discussing it with students in different contexts of political, social and cultural history, going beyond the nation-centred history, and accordingly interpreting different historical sources (Sandwell, 2019, xvi). Using this approach, for example, childhood history, education reforms and innovations, gender education, classroom culture, educational technologies are analysed. The choice of the range of problems can be flexibly applied to the interests of a certain student group. However, as Campbell and Scherington (2002) note in describing the “new” history of education in the 1960s and 1970s, the problem-oriented approach has contributed much to the development of education history as an academic discipline, but has become less useful in teacher education programmes (56). Indeed, this approach is difficult, first of all, because the search for generalizations, conceptualizations, free operation with various facts and theories is attractive, but requires prior knowledge – a wide horizon in politics, history, culture and education. Second, the “understanding and explorative learning” (Bracke et al., 2019, 34), which prop this approach, is time consuming, as it involves comparing different sources and interpretations, devoting a significant time to discussions.

Consequently, professors have to choose between teaching the “boring and unnecessary” facts of education history and discussing current education issues in a historical perspective, at the risk of students without prior knowledge failing to adequately participate in the study process and contribute to discussions.

3. The third approach is revealed by Reyniers et al. (2018) in the article with the telling title ‘Let us entertain you (..).’ The history of education can also be a study course that provides a “relief” in an intensive study process, offering students to expand their cultural horizons by taking a popular science stance and, thus, getting an “edutainment” (Reyniers et al., 2018, 842).

This approach is characterized to a large extent by the presentation of the education as a part of nations' cultural and intellectual development. This approach does not focus on students' academic achievements, but attractively reveals the most significant and/or, in the lecturer's view, the most interesting events in the history of education. This approach is characterized by a variety of pedagogical tools, such as excursions, museum visits, historical commemorations and film screenings without burdening students with intellectual pressure and time-consuming independent tasks: "historical evidence and narrative is sacrificed in the name of entertainment" (Donnelly, 2019, 222), thus turning academic studies into a glittering and glamorous "show" (Reyniers et al., 2018, 843).

Nonetheless, like the two previous approaches, this approach offers certain benefits: learning the history of education is not imposed, its acquisition (or non-acquisition) is the personal choice of each student. However, replacing learning with "edutainment" leads to "student consumerism" in university education that today affects teaching in a much broader sense, not limited to teaching history (Reyniers et al., 2018, 843).

Here we come to the question of the need for the history of education in pedagogues training programmes. The acquisition of theoretical knowledge has always been considered one of the indicators of the quality of education ("good education") in the history of mankind (Beales, 1989). Without theoretical knowledge, the worker is only a craftsman. Competence in history, including education history, allows to contextualise our present and make it meaningful and comprehensible (Reyniers et al., 2018, 840; Clark, 2019, 49). As Beales (1989) admits, "Only when the Victorian public ceased to regard its elementary school teachers as primarily craftsmen, as artisans with a veneer of culture, could the training of these teachers take on a new dimension, and their vocation be appreciated as that not only of teacher but of educator" (131). In other words, a teacher equipped with theoretical knowledge is not only a skilled craftsman, but also an intellectually established individual. The National Development Plan of Latvia for 2021–2027 (2020) mentions the word 'smart' 127 times, for example, "Latvia creates and attracts a smart (..) workforce" (9). Undoubtedly, smart teachers, in the broadest sense of the word 'teacher', is an essential precondition for the creation of demanded "smart" specialists.

A more pragmatic argument can be added to what has been said about the importance of intelligence in pedagogical work: the history of education provides a critical look at "canonical knowledge" (Bracke et al., 2019, 45), the creation and assessment of innovations. The history of education is a repository of ideas that helps to find new pedagogical solutions and contextualise existing educational reality. The history of education helps to find answers to the most challenging question in research: why? For example,

why radical education reforms often fail and teachers, after the reform culmination, try to return to their comfort zone, to traditional educational practices (e. g., Labaree, 2012).

With respect to the subject of three approaches in the study of education history, the conclusion is obvious: studies must lead to historical thinking with structured factual knowledge, to historical thinking which includes a set of skills and competencies to reflect on historical experience, generalizing it and explaining it in a logical narrative (Bracke et al., 2019, 23, 53; Goulding, 2019; Köster et al., 2019, 9, 11).

### **Research Sources in the History of Education Study Course**

If a problem-oriented approach to teaching education history is chosen, the starting point is personalization of history research, which is recognized as permanently important for the history studies (Bracke et al., 2019, 23) and is widely used teaching education history in Western universities (Reyniers et al., 2018, 841).

Early on, in the education history course at the University of Latvia, students identify a personally topical education issue and 3 to 5 keywords related to it. The chosen issue is studied from a historical perspective, resulting in the submission of an essay of about 1800 words. Having formulated the research problem and defined the research question and/or goal, students determine the chronological boundaries and decide on research sources.

In 2020, the choice of historical sources was limited due to the quarantine imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it has to be taken into account that also during regular classes students' research in the history of education, if it is not intended for a bachelor's or master's thesis, is only one of many tasks that must be performed within their study time. Therefore, when offering students body of historical sources, their availability must be considered.

The Latvian National Digital Library, which contains Latvian press publications from the first editions to the present day (including 2021) is one of the highly useful repositories of the written sources. The most important education policy documents published in the press are available there, as well as textbook resources, including primers. If the chronological boundaries of the study allow it, interviews with eyewitnesses are conducted. Published autobiographies, previous empirical studies, websites and family archives can also be academically applicable (Golledge, 2019, 154–155).

The group of sources that we will focus on are materialities, stored in the museum collections. This group of sources, which has long been on the periphery of historical research, has now entered the field of education history, as evidenced by numerous publications, projects and conferences



(e. g., Lawn, 2009; Allender et al., 2021). As it is hardly possible to visit museums during a pandemic, the question of how to “bring” museum collections into the university auditorium for both research and pedagogical purposes becomes relevant. One of the options described by Daniela (2020), is to use virtual museums as “learning agents,” the offer of which is constantly expanding and experiencing a new impetus due to pandemic quarantine. In addition to virtual museum tours, several digitized museum collections have been created, where it is possible to search for sources with the help of a browser (e. g., Joint Catalogue of the Collections of Latvian National Museums and *Europeana*).

Both, virtual museums and digitized repositories of museum objects are certainly an aid in the education history studies, but none of these resources is purposefully designed for research in education sciences. Therefore, the researchers from the University of Latvia, in cooperation with museums, creating a digitized collection of museum objects in e-environment based on the following principles: 1) objects are classified according to students’ research interests, which were identified on the basis of the defended master’s theses in education sciences; 2) the digital collection includes items that are valid for multiple interpretations and help to reveal “the complex, problematic and often contested nature of historical inquiry” (Goulding, 2019, 239) and whose research requires the application of competencies learned in the course of education history, such as source critique, source comparison, source contextualisation, connotation and denotation of visual sources (e. g., photographs, films, posters, drawings, games, textbooks, letters, learning technologies); 3) the collection can be used in workshops both in the history of education and in other education sciences study courses; 4) the collection can be supplemented by the students themselves, including digitized objects from museum collections and personal archives described in accordance with the specific guidelines, elaborated by museums’ employees.

As mentioned earlier, one of the principles in creating a collection of digital sources is its application to students’ research interests. Therefore, in order to identify students’ areas of interest, we compiled 883 keywords that are included in the master’s theses defended in the education sciences programmes of the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art of the University of Latvia. The University of Latvia database contains 223 master’s theses in education sciences, which were defended from 2015 to 2018. As 29 theses did not contain indicated keywords, the research body narrowed to 194 master’s papers. Coding was done by moving keywords from the context of education sciences to the context of history. This means that the concepts of education are considered in the discourse of childhood social history, including education, in which childhood is viewed and analysed as

the application of pedagogical conditions for achieving adult status in the context of a certain society (Prout & James, 2005, 7; Ali Norozi & Moen, 2016, 75–80). Based on this approach, 883 keywords were divided into the following five thematic groups:

Child and political power. The research on this topic reveals the impact of political power on childhood, including supervision and control of education. Examples of keywords: education policy, education law, education quality (education quality control, education quality assessment), education standards.

Child and society. The research on this topic exposes the education of the child for social life and society as an educator. Examples of keywords: cultural education (cultural learning), non-formal education, intercultural education (promotion of intercultural competence, international learning), career education, diaspora education, attractiveness of education.

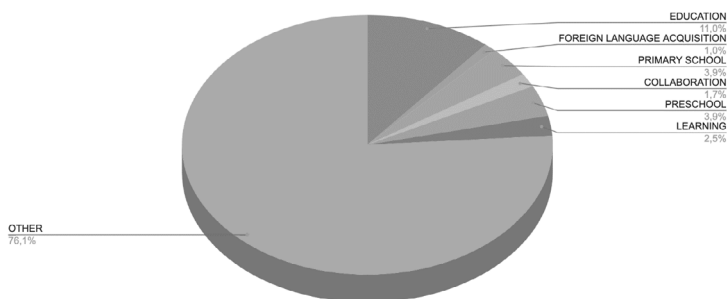
Child and institutions. The research on this topic reveals the institutionalization of childhood and the child's life in educational institutions. Examples of keywords: pre-school (pre-school educational institution), primary school, national minority educational institution, inclusive education, special education, interest-related education institutions, sports schools, vocational education institutions, religious education, child-friendly school, classroom culture, educational environment, school management strategy.

Actors or personalities. The research on this topic reveals the child and the adult in the educational environment: personality activities, professionalism, value orientation and mutual communication. Examples of keywords: 1st grade students, 2–3 (4–5, 5–6, 5–7) years old children, immigrant children (re-immigrants), gender differentiation in education, value education, children with hearing impairments, peculiarities of language development, learning abilities, teacher (pre-school teacher), teacher's personality, school principal, new teachers, professional competence, teacher's professional identity, teacher as a leader, cooperation (challenges in cooperation, types of cooperation), parenting sense of competence.

Pedagogy (didactics). The research on this topic exposes the teaching and learning process, teaching tools, analyses teaching materials and learning outcomes. Examples of keywords: learning (learning culture, learning skills, learning motivation, learning outcomes, self-regulated learning, independent learning), competences (competence approach, natural science competence), teaching methods, educational technologies, group working method, cooperative learning, methodological materials, extracurricular reading, foreign language acquisition.

The variability of the keywords is extremely wide, but we singled out the six words that are most commonly used in different combinations.

As Fig. 1 demonstrates, the most commonly used word with various collocates is 'education' (11.0%), mainly meaning different educational institutions. The words 'primary school' and 'pre-school' are also common (both 3.9%) and are also associated with the word 'education', such as 'primary education'. A relatively large number of students' research is also devoted to 'learning' (2.5%), to which 'foreign language acquisition' (1.0%) can be added. An important place is given to the keyword 'collaboration' (1.7%), using it in various word combinations mentioned above.



**Figure 1.** Typical keywords in the master's theses of the University of Latvia Education sciences programmes from 2015 to 2018

The research of master's theses keywords provides a basis for further work on the selection of educational sources for digitization and inclusion in the database. Thus, attention should be paid to the sources of the history of institutions, especially pre-school and primary schools (thematic group 3), which are widely represented in museum collections. The same can be said about learning (thematic group 5), including foreign language acquisition, where there is no shortage of sources in museum collections, but it is necessary to pay more attention to didactic materials for foreign language acquisition. In turn, the identification of sources for research on collaboration (thematic group 4) is an interesting challenge, which encourages the authors of this study to look at museum collections from a new perspective.

## Conclusions

The experience in the history of education studies at universities allowed to construct three approaches to teaching the course, none of which is ideal or completely discardable. Both, the "acts-and-facts history," and the problem-oriented history of education within the social sciences paradigm, and the history of education as "edutainment," are in a sense tailored to

students' interests and needs, hence are student-centred, although not quite obviously: passionate motivation of students as consumers to study the history of education by staging “shows” can only have a short-term effect, while “difficult” and “boring” fact-learning can become a long-term contribution to a teacher's intellectual and professional competence, including the skills to create and evaluate pedagogical innovations in practice.

Undeniably, the ideal is a combination of all three approaches to shaping students' historical thinking, which includes a set of knowledge and skills for reflecting on historical experience, generalizing it and explaining it in a logical narrative thus forming a narrative competence. The “big problems” of education should be discussed with students, without losing, but rather emphasizing the chronological framework, the political, social and cultural context, as well as with the purposeful and meaningful use of various pedagogical tools.

The student-centred study process in a modern university is closely related to research-based academic teaching (Reyniers et al., 2018, 838), which in the history of education study course would mean independent research in history, in accordance with the individual interests of students in the field of education. The basis of this research is work with sources, the methodology for the selection, comparison and interpretation of which is learned in the history of education study course. History research has its own rules, its own methodology, which is not taught in other education sciences study courses. Therefore, a purposefully created digitized database of historical sources for education studies is an important objective for further research and teaching/learning practice.

## Acknowledgement

The study is part of the project ‘Representation of Childhood at the Museums of Latvia, Integrated in the E-Learning Environment of Higher Education’ (lzp-2020/2-0282).

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