EDUCATIONAL AND SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN?

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Summary

The specific nature of educational psychology is discussed, with special attention given to the new challenges that the application of the new media technology represents for this discipline. The various fields of application and future developments in research are also discussed.

1. Introduction

"In the house of educational psychology there are many rooms," wrote Samuel Ball in a 1984 editorial in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, illustrating how the many themes in this discipline contribute to defining it.

It is no easy task to define the field of educational psychology, considering that it refers to almost all of human reality, and that it investigates the dynamics and processes of modification and growth that accompany human evolution, beginning with the characteristics of human nature itself. Thorndike wrote in 1913 that: "It is the province of educational psychology to give such knowledge of the original nature of man and of the laws of modifiability or learning, in the case of intellect, character and skill." This means that many rooms in the house of educational psychology are occupied by subjects for study that conjoin the psychophysical and psychosocial characteristics of humans in order to examine such themes as perception and memory; cognitive processes such as strategies and techniques of learning; development and measurement of skills; and motivation towards success as a method of instruction, to cite only some of those most frequently dealt with. An enumeration of the scientific and applied

interests of educational psychology would be much longer, and still would not exhaust all the possible themes connected with the evolution of human society and culture. In fact, many themes subject to investigation derive from the importance that scholars ascribe to aspects generated by socio-historical events, which shift attention in one direction rather than in another.

One question that often emerges during academic discussions as purely within the sphere of practical applications refers to the scientific status of the discipline, in other words, to its autonomy and specificity with regard to general psychological theory. In European culture in particular there is still a tendency to consider educational psychology nothing more than the application of knowledge derived from basic psychological research, and educational psychologists as nothing but professionals and/or researchers who utilize psychological knowledge to provide answers to educational problems. Hence, the familiar diatribes about theoretical and practical knowledge, basic and applied research, and experimental and empirical approaches that erupt in the study of human behavior also present themselves in educational psychology.
I consider this a false problem.

It is entirely evident that educational psychology, as will be shown, has not remained outside the developments and assertions of the great psychological theories. It should also be evident, however, that this neither has implied nor does imply a total scientific and epistemological dependence of the discipline upon them. The very nature of the problems educational psychology investigates guarantees their autonomy, enclosed as they are in a framework in which more general explanatory models are used as conceptual instruments that lead to problem solving. A solution ought to be satisfactory not only on a theoretical level but, more importantly, also on a practical level, considering that the task of educational psychology is to come up with *useful* responses when we need answers to practical problems connected with group or individual education, and not just to provide abstract theories.

In this respect, I concur with the 1998 position taken by the American Task Force on Defining Scholarship in Psychology, the acting head of the American Society for the Teaching of Psychology, relative to the individuation of what it would take to construct a unifying doctrinaire body of psychology, especially with regard to the interconnection between original research and the integration and application of knowledge. "By original research we mean the creation of new knowledge . . . an advancement of methods of inquiry, theory generation or testing . . . New knowledge, represented in the category of original research, is of limited usefulness if it is not integrated into a larger body of concepts and facts. For this reason, the integration or synthesis of knowledge is as valuable and as difficult as the generation of original data . . .." Application can take many forms from which a global society can profit.

In the field of education, this can be verified in an even more evident way with respect to other sectors of psychological research. Although educational psychologists are usually busy elaborating correct interpretations of educational reality (or of some of its aspects), their contributions to the definition of general theoretical outlines should not be overlooked. Only a researcher or professional who assumes a normative type

position can limit the actual activity to the simple application of general principles. But we know that science in general, and psychology in particular, develops and affirms a constructivist perspective instead. Many elements of analysis and of in-depth theoretical study of psychology originate from observation of behavior, and from the need not only to comprehend the causes of it but also to intervene and modify certain characteristics of it and/or reinforce others.

The subject matter for study and the aims of educational psychology are oriented towards a methodology centered predominantly on the action-research model. Its results, as noted, can be articulated in four phases: identification of the problem(s); analysis of the problem(s); formulation of explicative hypotheses and/or intervention; and evaluation of the hypotheses and/or intervention.

Identification of problems presupposes an articulate knowledge of the contexts and organizational systems specific to the educational dimension, including the virtual reality of multimedia in a multidisciplinary framework, in which educational psychology plays a role in defining the variables present in those problems. To identify a problem by evaluating the adequacy or inadequacy of its context, we have to know not only the purpose of the educational process (philosophy of education) but also the conditions in which the teachers and directors of the school operate. In particular, we need to know their motivation and willingness to change; that is, the socio-affective consistency of the family or social group to which they belong.

The analysis of problems implies a good knowledge of the more general interpretive models, with the aim of isolating the aspects of the problem that diverge from the accepted standard of "normality" and linking them to an interpretive framework prepared with internal coherence (i.e. a set of characteristics or symptoms) and with external coherence (i.e. epistemological correspondence to the theories of reference). The more this is carried out from a critical viewpoint the more reliable it is, emphasizing empirical facts independent of their immediate correspondence to the general theoretical framework. Thus, we avoid reducing reality to facts within the schemes of a predefined theoretical model.

The formulation of explanatory hypotheses also as interventions aimed at resolving a given problem calls for both the knowledge of general models (necessary to produce a meaningful interpretation of the problem) and knowledge of the procedures and techniques of intervention. This is the better phase in which to draw attention to the scientific and professional competence of educational psychologists, whose hypotheses must a) design an adequate response to the nature of the problem; b) take into consideration the knowledge already obtained from preceding research; and c) have the character of inter-subjective verifiability.

Finally, this last phase allows for checking that the response given to the problem is adequate, as well as for evaluating its usefulness both to the development of a preexisting theoretical framework, and to the individuation of new research horizons.

During the course of the twentieth century, educational psychology was definitely influenced by general theoretical models, as has been demonstrated both by its research

subject matter and by its practical applications. In this respect, it is possible to declare that educational psychology has been functionalist (hence behaviorist), then constructivist, and finally cognitive, in the sense that time after time the contents and methodologies of study/intervention have reflected prevailing interests within diverse theoretical orientations. It is sufficient to examine the most prestigious journals in the field to document that influence. This fact does not imply, however, that educational psychology has not produced original contributions in the field of integration of knowledge and applied research, opening new prospects for study and integrating known theoretical frameworks. In this connection, it is worth quoting Bernard Weiner on motivational research in education:

. . . there have been major upheavals in the field, metaphors replaced, important new areas uncovered, and essential new concepts introduced. We now have a broad array of cognition and emotion to work with, the self to consider, thoughts about goals, and so forth. In addition, we still have many uncharted areas to incorporate. In sum, we are in a fine position.

2. School and Educational Psychology

Is there a definition of the field and of the objects of study of educational psychology that is shared by all researchers? The answer to this question is, without a doubt, in the negative. The application of psychological knowledge to the field of education has had diverse destinies within diverse cultural, national, and continental realities. Is school psychology something different from educational psychology, or can it be considered a specific sector of it? Does the tradition of pedagogic psychology in Germany have anything in common with that of *psicopedagogia* in Italy? Do they both differentiate themselves from school psychology and educational psychology?

Considering the worldwide panorama of the discipline, it is important to remember that the diverse denominations are referable, from a methodological and epistemological point of view, to a coherent framework in which we find the diverse approaches of study and intervention. These diverse approaches, from a historical perspective, have been conferred on educational psychology by its diverse national and international realities.

As it is an applied discipline, educational psychology is clearly oriented in one direction rather than another by the nature of the problems it addresses. It is enough to examine the scientific production in this sphere to realize that there is a range of investigation and intervention reentering the field, from aspects connected to scholastic instruction (reading comprehension, reading disability, effectiveness strategies, meta-cognitive strategies training, math problems, etc.) to other aspects related to the development of personality (motivation, self-concept, cognitive-social intelligence, values, attributional styles, etc.) and to yet others related to social behavior (drug use, violence, bullying, etc.).

These diverse disciplinary denominators really seem ascribable to the forms of organization that psychologists give their professional activity rather than to the differences in methodology and research or intervention themes. In the United States, Division 15 (Educational Psychology) of the American Psychological Association

(APA) "provides a collegial environment for psychologists with interest in research, teaching or practice in educational settings at all levels to present and publish papers about their work. Division members' work is concerned with theory, methodology and applications to a broad spectrum of teaching, training and learning issues." The prestigious *Journal of Educational Psychology* declares as its principal scope "to publish original, primary psychological research pertaining to education at every educational level, from interventions during early childhood to educational efforts directed at elderly adults." The objectives declared by the division refer to the entire sphere of educational psychology, and include many aspects of school psychology:

- Expand psychological knowledge and theory relevant in education
- Extend the application of psychological knowledge and services to all aspects of education
- Develop professional opportunities in educational psychology
- Further the development of psychological theory through the study of educational process

On the other hand, Division 16 (School Psychology) of the APA embraces psychologists "engaged in the delivery of comprehensive psychological services to children, adolescents, and families in schools and other applied settings," with the aim of "facilitating the professional practice of school psychology and actively advocates in domains, such as education and health care reform, which have significant implications for the practice of psychology with children."

The application of psychological knowledge and services to all aspects of education, claimed by educational psychology, is also of interest in the field of applied school psychology, in which intervention is not limited to the classroom but also considers the organizational forms by which both the instructional and educational processes are realized. In fact, during the last decade of the twentieth century, especially in parts of the United States interested in processes of change and rapid development, the role of school psychology was not limited to "teach children the three R's" but also pertained to "the problems of students in general rather than just those of special education children." If a difference exists between educational psychologists and school psychologists, it won't be found in their respective themes and methods; rather, it must be sought in the aims of each of the two groups. Psychologists in the first group seem more oriented towards basic research, but do not disdain occupying themselves with intervention settings; those in the second seem, for the most part, oriented towards applied research, but also pay attention to theory and methodology.

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Biographical Sketch

Franco Marini is full professor of psychology at the University of Cagliari (Italy). Nowadays he is involved in teaching and research on processes of self-regulation and on the development of meta-cognitive skills for academic and professional training.