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# Educational Psychology Practice

A New Theoretical Framework

# Cultural Psychology of Education

## Volume 4

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# Educational Psychology Practice

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# Preface of the Series Editor

## Practice Encapsulates Theory, While Theory Illuminates Practice

Educational psychology is one of the cruellest frontline in contemporary psychology. It is a scientific arena overwhelmed by different social demands in our globalized society. It has been asked to provide ready-made solutions to many different problems: from the inclusive education to the disruptive behaviour and lack of school discipline, from the increased competition between national educational systems to the reduced student learning outcome in the progressively outcome-based school system (Szulevicz and Tanggaard 2014), from the socially disadvantaged children to the new highly complex tasks in the modern workplaces, from the standardized testing to the need of cultivating creativity (Tanggaard 2014).

Very often, these social demands are formulated in terms of individual problems: something is wrong/strange/weird with the student's traits, characteristics and abilities. As a consequence, the pathologization of the school experience is the new tendency in the educational debates both among professionals, teachers and academics and in the ordinary discourse.

The usual and pressing request from the school is of a resolute and decontextualized intervention on the single problematic case minimizing, as much as possible, the interference with the regular school activity. Yet the educational psychologist does not have a magic wand, and this request of solving the educational problems of this or that student magically is inevitably and miserably doomed to fail. When this happens (and at a certain point in time, it surely happens), it produces a "boomerang effect": the magic wand initially attributed to educational psychology suddenly turns into a stick to beat it for not having succeeded.

Educational psychologists do not have any magic powers, and even if it is apparently alluring and caresses our professional or academic narcissism, the side effect of these requests is too risky and ends up flattening or, even worse, collapsing educational psychology in a patchwork of small interventions.

Educational psychology is not a *patchwork* of practices but, instead, is an *art-work* where theoretical knowledge, methodological instances and culturally situated meaningful interventions (in a specific educational context) are indissolubly interwoven (Marsico et al. 2015).

Thus, educational psychology deals with both practice and theory where practices not only are just a matter of actions but also encapsulate theory (even in a non-reflective way), while theory illuminates the course of the actions and provides the general framework for understanding human conduct.

The practical usability of the different trends in educational psychology is only one side of the coin. What we need is a solid theoretically based, though still empirical, cultural approach to education that this book series is trying to promote (Marsico 2015b; Roth and Jornet 2016).

The *pragmatic consultation approach* proposed by Thomas Szulevicz and Lene Tanggaard in this book seems to answer this double-bonded issue. It is inspired by cultural psychology, social practice theory and John Dewey's pragmatism. According to the authors, it can be considered as a general conceptual framework on which educational psychology practice can be built. Based on a solid research tradition in Denmark, the volume offers a new perspective of educational psychology that combines creativity and innovation, theory and practice.

By analysing the concrete and situated educational intervention in a specific setting, we can learn a lot of what is the value-driven "philosophy" behind, what the established power relation between social actors is and, even, what ultimate idea of growing people, education and citizenship is promoted.

That's why learning about educational practices settled in different sociocultural contexts has been always fascinating to me. They are a great source for understanding some "theatrical aspects" of what we call culture. It happens to me that while reading the manuscript of Szulevicz and Tanggaard, I have had some passionate discussions with a Chinese colleague about the work of schooling in her country. How do we understand, for instance, the weekend home visit by the teacher at the beginning of the first grade of primary school in China? Is it an assessment? Is it a form of consulting? Is it a strategy for promoting parents' engagement in the child's school trajectory? How would the current mainstream psychology in the field of educational psychology (namely, the outcome-based school approach) interpret this kind of educational practice? Likely, it would even exclude this "non-school event" from its analysis, but what I have heard from my Chinese colleague convinced me that it would be a terrible mistake.

The premises for a positive or negative child's experience at school (and even his/her academic achievement) have much to do with this short time meeting outside the school.

A 6-year-old child, after being visited by his new teacher at home, commented to his mother: "She is OK, but she is strict". From that moment on, the stage of any school "drama", in Vygotskian terms (Vygotsky 1929/1989), has been settled. Could any assessment system (batteries of tests, standardized measurements, objective index, etc.) grasp the complexity of this dramatic interaction between social

actors? What kind of abstract model can we elaborate by looking at the contextual set of practices?

Educational psychology is in crisis. No doubt! It loses its own “horizon” that is ultimately about the way in which we *become human* (Dazzani 2016) turning into a variety of small interventions subservient of this or that new trend, new request, new emerging problem. What we need is a new utopia instead of the current myopia of the educational practices. Cultural psychology of education calls for both the situatedness of the human experience and the theoretical generalizations of the teleogenetic nature of the *psyche* (Marsico 2015a; Valsiner 2014). The book *Educational Psychology Practice: A New Theoretical Framework* helps to move a step further in this direction.

Aalborg, Denmark  
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Giuseppina Marsico

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# Introduction

Educational psychologists play an important role in promoting inclusion and many school heads and PPC (Pedagogical-Psychological Counselling) managers have expressed the opinion that there seems to be a definite need for staff to use skills that go beyond those associated with traditional psychology. Schools are looking for people who can provide counselling from a didactic point of view. (Baviskar et al. 2013, 8).

The above quotation comes from a recently published report analysing the adjustments being made in Danish schools to achieve increased inclusion. The report argues that current challenges in relation to inclusion make completely new demands of educational psychologists with respect to their practices and work methods. But do these new demands mean that the role of the educational psychologist should be phased out, or greatly reduced, as part of schools' and day-care institutions' efforts towards more inclusive education? Or does it mean that forms of practice should be developed that differ from the existing and traditional professional practices of educational psychologists?

In several respects educational psychology practice seems to be in a transition phase or is even perhaps suffering an identity crisis: both educational establishments and education policy are looking for different skills than the profession of psychology traditionally provides, and people are generally questioning the relevance and applicability of pedagogical-psychological counselling. Internationally, educational psychology research literature confirms these tendencies and frequently stresses that educational psychologists are being criticised for an approach that concentrates too much on the individual and for being insufficiently equipped to discuss pedagogical practice with educational scientists and teachers (Ahtola and Niemi 2014).

In this book, we will set out a proposal for how psychological and pedagogical-psychology knowledge might be implemented to benefit the work with children and young people and how some of the criticism aimed at pedagogical-psychology practice might be answered.

The book is intended primarily for students of psychology, school psychologists and other professional groups that provide counselling in schools, but it may also

serve as a general resource for the various groups that use pedagogical-psychology tools and insights when working with children and young people.

The book has a fundamental premise that good professional work is contingent upon circumstances that allow the practitioner to apply his or her knowledge, experience and skills in the specific encounter with a specific task. For this reason, the capability to act pragmatically and creatively is, and will increasingly be, an important skill – here with specific reference to educational psychologists of the future but naturally of course in general, too. In other words, psychologists must be able to contribute to tasks in new ways and new contexts when required. It is not enough to have mastered certain methods for certain batteries of tests. Most of all, it is important to be able to help the people one is employed to help. When the above report states that there is a demand for didactic skills among educational psychologists, it is first and foremost a question of needing professional staff who are capable of working formatively using their knowledge and skills. Such staff should be able to address the task they face without feeling bound to normative fixed methods that dictate standard solutions. Such a formative, pragmatic and creative approach to the work requires training, domain-specific knowledge and courage. As Jan Lindhardt wrote in 1987 in his book on rhetoric, it is only when someone knows the script inside out that they can improvise. Thus, the above approach requires considerable experience of academic practice, training and a solid anchoring in psychological and pedagogical-psychology expertise.

This book has been written on the basis of empirical studies undertaken in Denmark by educational psychologists over the last 10 years; it is also grounded in other Danish as well as international research in the field. As professors of educational psychology, we are both profoundly interested in the field of practice and believe that this arena, as one of the main employment areas for psychologists, deserves more attention from researchers. We have taken the liberty of talking about a ‘formative approach’ to psychology – though fully aware that this is not a definite method but rather an understanding of what it means to help others. We follow threads through the developments and movements in the field over recent years and show how, to a great extent, psychology has been portrayed in two opposing ways: from the point of view of testing and from the point of view of counselling. Our aim in this book is in many ways to overcome this ‘either-or’ thinking and show that the decisive criterion for good psychological work is being able to contribute and to help others in specific situations and that the question of which methods or approaches one uses is therefore secondary. We affix to this approach the general label of *pragmatic counselling*, whereby the core element of effective psychological work will be the ability to identify problems and opportunities from a psychological perspective. Sometimes, this necessitates the use of tests and at other times the use of different, more context-sensitive methods. In promoting a formative, pragmatic approach, we were inspired by, amongst others, Dewey and especially the way in which Dewey is interpreted by Svend Brinkmann (2013) and also the so-called impure pedagogy as developed by Rømer et al. (2011, 2014). In general, our thinking is closely linked to recent cultural psychology theory (Valsiner 2014), which emphasises a fundamental understanding of man as a creature that consumes and

creates culture. Here we should stress that the psychologist should be in a position to represent a skilled, creative force in meetings with children, parents, teachers and educational scientists where problems have arisen, and to use methods that are relevant to the specific context.

Over the years, we have had many instances of feedback from psychology students to the effect that the general field of work of educational psychology is diffuse, complex and thus hard to capture in overview. Here we will attempt to address this complexity and to sketch the past, present and future of educational psychology practice. We examine *past* practice through a brief summary of historical tendencies of development within educational psychology practice. This will include various approaches to educational psychology. The *present* will be described through various analyses of current conditions, in which, for example, inclusion, an increased pressure for diagnosis, user orientation and neo-liberal control techniques characterise educational psychology practice. We will discuss and analyse *future* contours of educational psychology and outline several ways of addressing challenges in the future. We hope this book will reflect the complexity of educational psychology practice, but we would also hope to identify several threads that help to provide an overview and that might suggest pointers for the future.

## Chapters

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part, consisting of Chaps. 1, 2, 3, and 4, we present the field of practice of educational psychology. In Chap. 1, we outline the field of practice of educational psychology by means of the historical application of psychology in schools. In Chap. 2, we describe two superordinate approaches to educational psychology practice: (1) from the point of view of providing a service and (2) from the point of view of counselling. We conclude the chapter with a critical discussion of the use of the counselling approach and demonstrate by means of various empirical investigations that counselling has achieved relatively little purchase.

In Chap. 3, we describe how a concern to promote inclusion in day-care institutions and schools has in many ways changed the work of the educational psychologist. Today, educational psychologists are expected to be sparring partners and facilitators in connection with developing inclusive teaching environments. This means that educational psychology practice must to a greater degree address the development of general pedagogical learning environments rather than building on specialist pedagogical thinking and practice. This process of transformation has proven difficult in many areas and aspersions have also been cast to the effect that educational psychologists have insufficient knowledge about pedagogy and didactics to be able to act as advisers and sparring partners in the work on inclusion.

In Chap. 4, we analyse ways in which the implementation of the counselling approach has been made difficult by a series of diverse background factors such as for example the general pathologisation of behaviour and general tendencies of