

PhD Studies in Education in Italy within the European Research Framework and the Bologna Process: an Overview

Maura Striano

A partire da una analisi delle sfide e degli orientamenti che caratterizzano la ricerca educativa a livello internazionale, l'articolo presenta una panoramica dell'offerta formativa dottorale nell'ambito delle scienze dell'educazione in Italia evidenziandone limiti e potenzialità.

Starting from an analysis of the international framework for educational research as well as of the doctoral education system within the Bologna process, the article presents an overview of the educational offer for doctoral training in educational research in Italy, highlighting its limits and potentialities.

Parole chiave: sistemi di istruzione superiore, formazione dottorale, ricerca educativa europea
Keywords: higher education systems, doctoral education, european educational research

Articolo ricevuto: 11 dicembre 2013

Versione finale: 23 gennaio 2014

1. DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH WITHIN THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH AREA. THE CHALLENGES FOR PHD STUDIES TODAY

In the last twenty years, a number of different factors have served to expand significantly the field of educational research but also to impose a re-definition of its identity and scope. These factors include: the need to enhance and empower the educational capability of agencies, communities, and institutions at a local and broader level; the acknowledgment of different and diverse educational needs emerging from the new cultural and social scenarios within the globalization processes; the dissemination of educational challenges, opportunities and possibilities outside institutional and formal contexts and spaces; and the identification of the educational and pedagogical implication of a variety of social and professional practices (such as for example in care and medicine).

From this point of view, educational research has changed its objectives and its range of interventions, becoming more and more embedded into the context and the practices explored and proposing itself as a reflective device at an empirical level but also as a meta-reflective device at a theoretical level insofar as it comes to analyze and use concepts and constructs which often belong to other epistemological and disciplinary frameworks but which have proved to be useful within educational discourse.

On these bases, we have been confronted with a total re-framing of educational research, articulated and developed in multiple theoretical and empirical perspectives, which pose new epistemological and methodological challenges.

This has determined a re-positioning of educational research within the general framework of scientific research, determining the possibility of establishing new connections and synergies with other, apparently very distant, domains (as happens, for example, in the field of educational technologies, in that of special needs education, in some areas of research in adult education for empirical research or in that of the philosophy of education insofar as it concerns theoretical research).

The above mentioned repositioning has also required a re-definition of educational research methodologies and tools both at the empirical and theoretical level, focusing not only on the methodologies used within the human and social sciences, but also on those traditionally used within research fields such as economics, engineering, and the medical sciences.

Within this framework, the international debate regarding the new challenges that educational research has to face in a complex and changing world is extremely interesting. This issue was discussed in a symposium organized by the World Educational Research Association on 30th April 2013 hosted by the AERA International Relations Committee within the 2013 AERA Annual Meeting in San Francisco, California.

Representatives of WERA member associations, such as the European Educational Research Association which involves all the European Educational Research Associations (including ours), presented key studies, methods, or data being undertaken or used in their country or region that reflect exemplary scholarship related to education and learning in a changing world. Great attention was focused, in particular, on the development of higher education systems, on lifelong learning, on diversity and inclusion issues in education, and on the relevance, role and quality of educational research.

A relevant role in the enhancement of the quality and scope of educational research at an international level is played by the European Educational Research Association (EERA) which has been collaborating with a number of partners, including the ISE and EASSH, in order to highlight the importance of SSH research for European research in general and for Horizon 2020, the EC's new Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. In its "Agenda for Horizon 2020", EERA Board Members and Network Representatives call for a broader and more inclusive strategy to address Europe's societal and economic challenges acknowledging that : "[T]he challenges described in H2020 are not only challenges for societies at large; they arise at the level of community, family and personal life. [...] Education can help bridge the gap". In particular, the agenda indicates eleven educational research areas that meet the objectives of Horizon 2020, namely: 1. Education for Innovation, 2. Participation, assessment and digital literacy, 3. Sustainable communities, 4. Globalized curriculum, 5. Migration and multiculturalism 6. Shifting boundaries and challenges for professionals in Education, 7. Education for health and well being, 8. Standardization in

Education, 9 Education and the production and circulation of knowledge, 10. Complex transformations in educational systems and policies, and 11. Effects of non academic learning activities.

This agenda requires two important shifts in educational research programmes at a local and national level: a) a redefinition of the quality indicators of educational research in terms of dissemination, effectiveness, and impact, with reference to shared standards at an international level; and b) a re-articulating of educational research formative curricula.

Regarding the first issue an interesting contribution has been provided by EERA's support of a three year research project aimed at the definition and standardization of European Educational Research Quality Indicators with the aim of: a) reinforcing and enhancing the worldwide visibility and competitiveness of European educational research by developing new tools and methodologies; and b) determining the quality of educational research publications which represent an important reference for educational scholars within the European Research Area.

Regarding the second issue, we refer to the so called "Salzburg Principles" of doctoral education established in 2005 within the Bologna Process (which has determined a re-alignment of higher education systems on the basis of shared educational objectives and standards) as the basis of the reform of doctoral studies.

According to these principles Europe's universities have been asked to carry out wide-ranging reforms in this area by establishing doctoral schools, aggregating a critical mass for teaching and research.

Doctoral education has, indeed, a crucial place in the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area since it rests on the practice of research, an aspect which makes it fundamentally different from the first and second cycles.

Institutions which are in charge of doctoral education need flexible regulations to create special structures and instruments and to continue advancing European doctoral education, considering that the development of a knowledge society requires the creativity and flexibility of the research mindset for a number of different functions and careers, also those not directly related to research.

For this reason, the reform of doctoral education has been central to both the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area during the past seven years and is determining a profound change in the European landscape of doctoral education driven by Europe's universities themselves through the adaptation and implementation of the Salzburg Principles.

The institution of the EUA Council for Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE), the largest and most comprehensive organization concerning doctoral education in Europe, has represented a further step in this process. After a consultation whose outcomes were discussed by the delegates representing 165 institutions

from 36 countries, the EUA published in 2010 a list of recommendations for the development of doctoral studies in Europe indicating the specific educational goals addressed by PhD education in terms of the cultivation of a research mindset, the nurturing of a flexibility of thought, and the development of creativity and intellectual autonomy within challenging diverse and inclusive research environments where doctoral candidates are involved as fellow researchers, making a key contribution to the creation of new knowledge.

This means providing doctoral candidates with high quality research training opportunities (such as ERC projects or competitive projects supported by institutional and public funding) and supervision as well as the possibility of participating in research programmes designed to meet new economic and societal challenges, thereby developing transferable skills and competences that can be exercised also outside academia.

In this perspective the rich diversity of doctoral programmes in Europe – including joint doctorates – is acknowledged as a strength which has to be underpinned by quality and sound practice in order to develop a critical mass, drawing on the cross fertilization of the different types of innovative practice being introduced in universities across Europe. In order to achieve these goals, It is necessary to develop specific systems for quality assurance using specific indicators and quality standards.

2. PHD PROFILES IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN ITALY

Within the above described framework, our country has to face a great challenge in order to design PhD pathways consistent with the emerging educational research trends at an international level, competitive for the critical mass of research projects and researchers, in order to provide a stimulating learning environment for PhD students, responding to widely acknowledged quality standards.

At the same time, the new governance trends that are profoundly reshaping the general higher education system have imposed a very fast re-definition of previous organizational assets, that have determined a response to the above mentioned challenge which has not always been effective.

As a consequence, we can say that there has been a profound re-framing of PhD studies in education according to four leading (and sometimes competing) forces which have shaped the design and profile of the PhD courses offered for the XXIX cycle in education: a) the pre-existing structures, habits and practices developed within previous governance assets; b) the peculiar, sometimes very specific and of high quality, research traditions which have for a long time characterized some institutions; c) the reform of higher education and research systems in Italy which has introduced new criteria, indicators and standards for PhD courses; and d) the above mentioned quality standards for PhD education ac-

ording to the Bologna Process and the Salzburg Principles together with the new trends in the international and European educational research agenda.

It is important to say that these forces have had a different impact according to their balance at a local and institutional level taking also into account structural constraints and limitations in terms of economic, human and environmental resources.

A general overview of the PhD programs offered by Italian universities is useful in order to define the profiles characterizing contemporary educational research and training in our country in order to identify specific research trends and educational opportunities but also to highlight some critical points that should be overcome in order to benefit a critical mass of research opportunities and skills localized either in specific institutions or within research networks involving different local, national and international research agencies and institutions.

At first glance, we observe that in many cases there has been an inclusion of educational research and studies within the broader field of *Human Studies or Human Sciences* which is itself not clearly identifiable within the framework defined by the European Research Council, which includes education within the *Social Sciences and Humanities* (SH) sector and, more specifically, within the SH 4 subsection (*The Human Mind and its complexity: cognition, psychology, linguistics, philosophy and education*). Moreover, the reference to a general field of research instead of a specific research issue or trend that could be approached from different perspectives, makes it difficult to identify the specific focuses and trends of educational research within the wide field of human studies.

In other cases, the educational sciences are more identifiable in their relationship with the psychological and social sciences and other research fields, but are somehow presented as part of a mosaic of a repertory of knowledge without a specific research focus.

In some institutions which have a more defined identity and tradition in terms of educational training at different levels (Bachelor's, Master's, teacher training, and PhD) educational research is more clearly situated within the epistemological tradition of the so called educational sciences with a general focus on human training and its implications or, specifically, a theoretical and methodological focus within educational and social research. This helps us to identify a well defined research field and a critical mass even if not focused on specific research issues and trends.

For a small number of PhD courses, the focus is more defined as it identifies particular and specific research areas and issues acknowledged within the SH ERC sector, such as *Human Relations, Human Training and the Job Market, Politics, Culture and Development, Culture, education, and communication* and *The Human Mind and Gender Studies* according to an interdisciplinary approach that situates educational studies within a wider framework of research and defines its specific con-

tribution to the exploration of an issue (or several issues) that, nonetheless, in some cases at first glance may appear too extended and not clearly defined in terms of role and space.

A very specific research focus is instead identified in the international PhD course *Theory & Practice of Education for Teacher Training* (Palermo) which addresses both a social need and an increasing international research trend in education, making it attractive for candidates who have a clearly defined research interest.

This general overview, taking into account all the different forces at stake in the re-definition of the educational research space in Italy within the wider European research area, allows us to identify some critical points that it is necessary to explore and discuss within the Italian Educational Research Society in order to make our PhD offer more attractive, competitive and functional within the national and international scenarios.

A first point regards the epistemological positioning of pedagogy and educational sciences within the ERC scenario, which identifies and articulates an interdisciplinary research area that cannot be clearly acknowledged in its interdisciplinary richness if we consider pedagogy and educational sciences as merely included within the Humanities or Human Sciences as a whole.

A second point regards the identification of a critical mass of educational research and researchers within a number of PhD courses widely diffuse in the country which risk appearing to be a replication of educational opportunities at a local level if not aggregated into consortia or research networks.

A third point regards the necessity of developing an interdisciplinary epistemology which allows us to meet other fields of research within the human and social sciences but also in other sectors on the basis of articulated research areas and not as mosaics of disciplines not involved in common research activities and issues.

A fourth point regards the necessity of arranging educational research PhD education and training around challenging, emerging and problematic research issues which have a cultural, political and social impact in the medium and long term, claiming for educational research a strong social development role within the local and global scenarios as indicated in EERA guidelines for Horizon 2020.

In order to explore in depth the above mentioned points it could be useful to arrange, within the Italian Educational Research Association, a joint research project intended as a meta-analysis of educational PhD trends and development perspectives aimed at the definition of a general framework for PhD planning and development at a national level within the EU and international scenario.

REFERENCES

- EUA, Salzburg Recommendations, 2005
- EUA Salzburg II Recommendations, 2010
<http://www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/eua-policy-position-and-declarations.aspx>
- ERA Steering Group on Human Resources and Mobility “Report of Mapping Exercise on Doctoral Training in Europe “Towards a common approach” 27 June 2011(final) [http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/pdf/research_policies/ Report_of_Mapping_Exercise_on_Doctoral_Training_FINAL.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/pdf/research_policies/Report_of_Mapping_Exercise_on_Doctoral_Training_FINAL.pdf)
- EERA Agenda for Horizon 2020, <http://www.eera-ecer.de/about/projects-partnerships/eera-and-horizon-2020/>
- Wera Symposium on Educational Research in the Changing World, <http://www.weraonline.org/EdResearchChangingWorld.htm>