



Danish Research in the Sociology of Education

Context and Development

Rasmussen, Palle

Published in:

What can Curriculum Studies and Pedagogy learn from Sociology to-day?

Publication date:

1995

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Rasmussen, P. (1995). Danish Research in the Sociology of Education: Context and Development. In Reisby, Kirsten : Schnack, Karsten(ed.) (Ed.), *What can Curriculum Studies and Pedagogy learn from Sociology to-day?* (pp. 123-137). Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitet.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Palle Rasmussen:

DANISH RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION: CONTEXT AND DEVELOPMENT¹

In this paper, I try to outline the development and the present situation of sociological research on education in Denmark. The paper is not, however, an attempt to summarize the actual Danish literature in this field. I characterize the research effort in terms of its main themes and theoretical approaches, and consequently I provide few names and references. I also try to identify some of the institutional structures and political concerns which have shaped Danish research in the sociology of education.

1. Is the Sociology of Education a Strong or a Weak Field of Research in Denmark?

The answer to this question depends, of course, on what the sociology of education is. In my opinion, it involves analysing education as a part of social life. This definition is not as simple as it sounds, because social life is complex, and the business of sociology is to capture and conceptualize this complexity. In contrast to other social science disciplines, such as law, economics and political science, sociology does not regard any dimension of social life as the privileged focus of analysis. The focus on social life as a whole also means that sociology usually tries to identify links between social processes on the micro level (e.g. interaction processes in small groups) and on the macro level (e.g. the distribution of wealth and power between social classes). In fact, educational institutions and processes are often crucial in linking of these levels.

The sociology of education, then, is a field of research which investigates the social reality of education and its interaction with other elements of social life.

What is the state of this field in Denmark? From some points of view it appears as an undeveloped area. This is the case if you look at the research profile of the main departments of education in Denmark, located at the University of Copenhagen and at the Royal Danish School of Educational Studies. Research in the sociology of education is not absent from these departments, but there are few empirical projects, and few examples of research group activity in the field. The main focus is on topics closely related to what teachers and pupils do in the classroom.

Also, if you look at the few sociological departments in Denmark, and at the research debates among Danish sociologists, you seldom encounter analyses of educational institutions and processes.

¹ Published in Reisby, F. & Schnack, K., eds. (1995). *What can Curriculum Studies and Pedagogy learn from Sociology today?* Studies in Educational Theory and Curriculum, vol. 16. Copenhagen: Royal School of Educational Studies.

But if one chooses other perspectives, different pictures emerge. Within some areas of research, such as vocational education or adult education, we find considerable and widespread activity, and a research tradition which relies in many ways on sociological perspectives and methods. Although this is mainly applied research, commissioned and funded by different public and private agencies, it produces often interesting results of a comparatively high standard. So from this perspective, sociological analysis of education is a well established field in Denmark. These different pictures reflect a real ambiguity. Danish research in this field is done in very different contexts, by different people, and on the basis of different paradigms. It is not generally undeveloped, but it is marked by a very uneven development.

2. Institutional Context and Research Profile

Traditions of research in the sociology of education develop in the context of two relationships. Firstly, the relationship between the institutionalized production of knowledge and the institutionalized communication and utilization of knowledge. Secondly, the relationship between the subject-matter and the perspective of sociology on one hand, educational studies on the other.

In my view the development of Danish sociological research in education has been limited mainly by two facts: (a) Sociology as an area of university study and research has never had a strong position in Denmark, and (b) the dominant tradition in educational research has been founded in philosophy. The latter means, that when sociological perspectives have been taken up in educational studies, it has often been in a "philosophical" manner, as contributions to interpreting the general rationality of educational practices.

I shall elaborate a little on these two points:

(a) Sociology was only established as a separate university study in Denmark in 1958, and even after then it has had a turbulent history. In the decade after its establishment the department was dominated by a strongly emphasized positivism, inspired especially by the American sociologist George Lundberg. Following student unrest and a shift of institutional power towards the end of the sixties, the following decade was marked by a strong emphasis on Marxism and anti-positivism. The conflict and shifting of paradigms is not necessarily a bad thing, but because sociology was still just barely established, the conflicts came to hamper the professional development of the discipline. Not least it meant that Danish sociology during the seventies had only sporadic contact with centres of sociological research in countries like England and USAⁱ.

It is not possible in this paper to give a more thorough discussion of the situation of sociology in Denmark. In any case, the result has been that during most of the time since 1958, the two main sociological departments in Denmark (The Department of Sociology and the Department of Cultural Sociology, both at the University of Copenhagen) have not in a very visible way repre-

mented a sociological research tradition, and thus they have exerted limited influence on educational research. To be sure, some educational research has been carried out at both departments, but it has been too sparse to inspire educational researchers in taking up the sociological perspective.

(b) The main channels for communicating educational research in Denmark is tied to the training of teachers for the primary school system. The teacher training colleges and the in-service training at the Royal Danish School of Educational Studies have been the main sites for the institutionalization of an educational studies curriculum. In these institutions the sociology of education has had little impact. This means that the "market" for doing and publishing sociological research in education has generally been limited. Characteristically, the number of Danish textbooks ever published on this subject can easily be counted in one hand. Other factors have contributed to limiting the impact of sociological perspectives in Danish educational research. One of them is the relatively strong separation of the humanities and the social sciences in the Danish research system. Educational research is regarded as a part of the humanities, while sociology is a social science discipline. This leaves its mark on the everyday world of research. To give an example: The library of the university where I work contains a considerable amount of educational research literature, among this books on the sociology of education. But all educational literature is placed in the humanities branch of the library, which is located at some distance from my office in the social science building complex. Furthermore, only researchers from the humanities departments are asked to advice on the acquisition of books and journals on education; and naturally, their interest in sociological approaches is limited.

Another example: The state research councils, which administer a significant part of the public research funds in Denmark, also maintains a clear distinction between the humanities and social science. Educational research is regarded as belonging to the domain of the humanities council, and the social science council generally neglects the field.

Because of this institutional context, Danish research in the sociology of education has had comparatively little background in and contact with sociological research circles and traditions. Most of the research as been done by educational researchers, who have their background in the humanities. This has predisposed many researchers towards a "humanist" sociology, with a focus on qualitative methods, and a somewhat reserved relationship to statistics and survey methods.

3. The Historical Development of Sociological Research in Education

In this section I try to outline the main phases of the development of this field of research in Denmark. Because I try to be brief, I leave out many aspects, especially in the characterization of the institutional and political context.

3.1. Before 1960

From the turn of the century to the end of the fifties, there was only a limited amount of sociological research in Denmark. In the universities, individual scholars did sociological work from time to time, and some of them published internationally; but sociology did not find any stable foothold, neither in the humanities nor in the social science faculties. One of the most interesting attempts to establish a sociological research tradition was undertaken by the German sociologist Theodor Geiger, who held a professorship at the university of Århus during the forties. He is probably best known for his work on stratification and social mobility, and this also led him to investigations of the recruitment to higher education and to the intellectual elite. But Geiger died before a stable research organization could crystallize from his work. The research on mobility was taken up in the fifties by the newly established department of sociology at the University of Copenhagen; but now within a more narrowly positivist tradition.

Outside the universities some empirical social research was done in connection with public policy and decision-making. One example is the economist Cordt Trap, who at the turn of the century did several surveys of the social background of children in different types of school in Copenhagen. But the most important analyses of education were undertaken after the Second World War. In 1945 government set up a youth commission, with the aim of strengthening the role of young people in the democratic society. The commission started several large-scale surveys on educational questions, covering young people entering higher education as well as young people with little or no education beyond primary school. The investigations which focused on the latter group were continued in other governmental commissions during the fifties, and among other things provided the background for the establishment of a system of labour market training courses in 1958.

3.2. The sixties

Two decisive events in the history of Danish sociology took place in 1958. Firstly, an independent study programme in sociology was established at the University of Copenhagen. This signalled the gradual emergence of more stable scientific and professional sociological circles in Denmark. Secondly, a national institute for social research was established, and provided a more stable framework for sociological investigations linked to public policy.

The National Institute of Social Research proved to have a significant impact on educational research in the sixties. At this institute, Erik Jørgen Hansen and other researchers carried out a number of sociological analyses of education, focusing mainly on social inequality in the recruitment to secondary and higher education. The most important project was a longitudinal study of representative sample of school children, tracing their routes through the educational system from the age of 14 to the age of 22.

Some sociological survey work was also done at other institutions. For instance, a study of the social background and conditions of students in higher education was carried out at the

Department of Organization and Sociology of Work at the Copenhagen School of Economics, Business Administration and Modern Languages.

The immediate political background for most of the educational surveys done in the sixties was government work on programmes of economic support for students. But the wider context was the development of comprehensive welfare policies, led by the Social Democratic party. The welfare policies attempted to use the public sector as an instrument for improving the social conditions of the less privileged segments of the population, and to install a higher degree of equality in living conditions and resources. The expansion of access to education beyond the primary level was seen as an important means of promoting equality. The social imbalance in the recruitment to vocational and higher education became an important issue in the public debate, and the analyses of the National Institute of Social Research were often to support arguments. Erik Jørgen Hansen wrote several pamphlets on the problem of equality in the Danish educational structure (Hansen 1978).

The work of the National Institute of Social Research drew on the studies of social stratification and mobility done in the Department of Sociology at the University of Copenhagen. But the growing public interest in the social determinants and effects of education did not inspire the sociologists of this department to take up such questions. Nor was there any noticeable educational research at the later established Department of Cultural Sociology. With its focus on the cultural dimension in social development, this department might have provided a fruitful environment for studying the role of education.

The educational research circles were for the most part unaffected by sociological perspectives during the sixties. Neither academic sociology nor applied social research were seen as relevant to educational studies. 1965 saw the publication of a textbook in educational sociology, intended for use in teacher training colleges (Skyum-Nielsen & Magnussen 1965); but it dealt mainly with historical and institutional matters, and drew very little on sociological research. It should be mentioned, however, that during the sixties social studies was introduced as a subject in teacher training, and this meant that teachers gradually became more familiar with the areas of social science.

3.3. The Seventies

The empirical studies at the National Institute of Social Research were continued during the seventies. Reports were published from the longitudinal youth survey, but other studies were also carried out, concerning e.g. access to vocational education and adult education. Especially the reports from the youth survey are important contributions to the sociology of education, also seen in an international context.

Whereas the National Institute of Social Research pursued the line of research initiated in the sixties, other areas of educational research underwent a drastic transformation in the seventies.

This was due to the spreading of critical social theory in Danish universities, following the student revolt and a wave of democratization. In the humanities as well as in the social sciences, there was a rapid rediscovery and development of different forms of marxist theory. This theoretical perspective informed a widespread interest among students and younger academics in educational policy and the role of education in society. Education was the everyday reality of the critical students; but the interest also reflected the welfare policies developed during the sixties.

Out of this grew an intensive and widespread development of theories on the relationship between education and society. This development encompassed not just educational and sociological circles, but also students and researchers from other disciplines, especially in the humanities. The extent of the interest may be seen from the fact that within relatively few years, a great many books on education and society appeared on the Danish book market, many of them translations of international literature.

This new critical educational research clustered mainly around two theoretical paradigms. One was the reconstruction of the marxist analysis of capitalist society, emphasizing the economic categories, which was at the time being pursued at universities in Federal Germany. In this line of thought, education was primarily seen as the production of skills or qualifications needed in capitalist labour processes (Salling Olesen 1994). The main interest was thus to analyze, which skills were produced in different parts of the educational system, and how these were employed in the labour market (Mathiesen 1980). The second paradigm was structural marxism, which had primarily been developed in France. Here educational institutions were seen as ideological apparatuses, having a crucial role in the dissemination and maintenance of the dominant bourgeois ideology in society. Of these two contesting paradigms, the first (often called "qualification theory") came to dominate, and gradually also became the basis of empirical research.

Alongside these macro-oriented theories there was also considerable interest in understanding socialization processes in the family and in school, and also cultural conflicts around schooling. Some main inspirations were Basil Bernsteins theories of linguistic codes, and the socialization theories developed by German critical theory, on the basis of psychoanalysis.

It should be noted that marxism and critical theory also inspired other developments in educational research, not least the "new sociology of education" in England and the so-called correspondence theory (Bowles & Gintis) in USA. These theories and analyses had very little impact in Denmark.

The new paradigms were quickly institutionalized. The main reason for this was the establishment of two new universities in Denmark in the seventies. These institutions were organized according to new and "progressive" educational principles (interdisciplinarity, project study, cooperative study), and had an natural interest in developing the theoretical basis

for these principles. Both universities created departments for interdisciplinary educational research, and these were strongly influenced by the new critical and marxist theories. In the second half of the seventies, both these departments initiated empirical research projects on the social role of vocational education. These projects were ambitious cooperative efforts. They tried to combine qualitative and quantitative research methods, and they tried to develop comprehensive theoretical frameworks.

As was to be expected, there was a good deal of disagreement and polemic between the new critical research circles and established tradition of educational research at the National Institute of Social Research. The disagreements were scientific (critical theory versus positivism) as well as political (radical socialism versus the social democratic mainstream). But both groups emphasized that research should contribute to the development of social policy and reform. They were both very active in debating the comprehensive educational planning effort, "U 90", which was launched by the social democratic government in 1975.

The seventies thus saw a widespread effort to understand and analyze education from a critical sociological perspective. Research and debate was, however, mainly theoretical, and only a limited amount of empirical research was done. Also, the theoretical framework was rather narrow, paying too little attention to other sociological traditions than marxism. One of the reasons for this was the sparseness of contributions from professional sociologists. To be sure, some educational research was done at both the sociological departments of the University of Copenhagen; but especially the Department of Sociology was plagued by internal conflicts, which hampered the development of continuity and professionalism in research.

In departments of education, the limited interest in sociological perspectives continued throughout the seventies.

3.4. The Eighties

The widespread interest in and debate on the role of education in society did not continue in the eighties. There are several reasons for this. Already during the second half of the seventies, educational reform had been halted by a new balance of parliamentary power, and the student movement had retreated to a marginal role. In 1982 the Social Democratic party had to give up its leading role in government, and for the next decade Danish politics were dominated by an alliance between conservatives and liberals, which great impact on educational policy. While the dominant educational ideology in the seventies had emphasized the broadening of access to education and the strengthening of social elements in the curriculum and in school life, the emphasis in the eighties was on the individual benefits of education and the preservation of traditional culture. This also changed the context of educational research.

The work in marxist educational analysis decreased rapidly. This was not only because of the general change in the political climate, but also because many academics experienced the limitations of an approach based purely on the reconstruction of marxism. Considerable interest was shown in other theoretical developments (for instance the sociology of Bourdieu, and the

work on youth culture at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham), but these theories tended to attract more specialized interest.

The early eighties saw the publication of the last reports from the longitudinal study at the National Institute for Social Research. No further studies of this kind had been launched. This was partly due to the fact that the institute had to rely increasingly on funding through short-term evaluation research, and mainly in other areas than education.

During the same period, however, educational research projects emerged in other non-university research institutes. These institutes mainly did work for local and regional authorities, and the purpose of the research projects was typically to support the planning activities of these authorities. In educational research this led to a focus on the regional interaction of educational institutions and labour markets.

But also in other ways educational research became more closely connected with the development of public policy. This applies especially to research on:

- vocational education
- labour market training
- educational schemes for unemployed people
- adult education in general.

In these areas a number of reforms and development plans were implemented, and these were often accompanied by preparatory analyses or evaluation studies. It is a fair guess that most of the sociological work on education done in the eighties has been commissioned by the Ministry of Labour.

Most often the studies on vocational education, labour market training and local educational planning focused on the demand for skills in the labour market, and on strategies for meeting these demands (examples are Frederiksen 1991 and Kjærsgaard 1993). Though this was somewhat in line with the concerns of qualification theory in the seventies, the theoretical framework was often more narrowly economic. Research on educational schemes for the unemployed, and on adult education in general, took more interest in cultural and social aspects of education (examples are Ehlers 1994 and Wahlgren 1993). Important themes were the motivation for education and the experience of learning in different types of education; and many studies focused especially on women (not least because the greater part of the unemployed are women).

The shift to a conservative-liberal educational policy meant that the educational principles of the two new universities came under pressure, and this in turn impeded the development of the interdisciplinary departments of education established at these universities. Their existence was also undermined by the fact that none of the universities had been allowed to offer degrees in

educational studies. At Aalborg University this led to the disappearance of the department of education as an independent unit, although much of the actual educational research was continued. At Roskilde University Centre there was an expansion of educational research towards the end of the eighties, but only because most of the research was commissioned and funded by external agencies.

As mentioned above, the situation in the sociology departments at the University of Copenhagen had been marked by conflicts between positivists and marxists. Also, there was much tension between sociology and other parts of the social science faculty. By the mid-eighties, the minister of education intervened directly in the conflict, closed the department of sociology and demanded a fundamental reorganization of the study programme. Under these circumstances, academic sociology had even less resources than earlier to invest in educational research. But in the departments of education, at the University of Copenhagen as well as at the Royal Danish School of Educational Studies, sociological perspectives finally gained some acceptance and foothold. This has probably had an effect on teaching and learning in these departments, but up to now, the impact on actual research has been limited.

In sum, the widespread interest in Marxist or critical analysis of education declined during the eighties. There was a marked growth in sociological evaluation studies of education, but not too much work confronting the basic theoretical and empirical challenges of the sociology of education.

4. Danish research and the development of the field

The overall picture, as I see it, is that a good deal of research in the sociology of education has actually been done, and is still being done, in Denmark. Current research is predominantly "applied", designed and funded to deliver knowledge useful in specific processes of planning or decision-making. But some of this work also lives up to general scientific standards, and leads to results which are relevant and interesting, also in the international context. There are indications that educational evaluation research has reached a level, where it may be able to shoulder greater theoretical ambitions. On the other hand, the predominance of this kind of research is not unproblematic. The short-term demands on usable knowledge leaves too little room for a "logic of inquiry", in which interesting questions arising out of study may be pursued in further investigations. Research organization tends to develop around the overriding policy issues rather than around scientific fields. The communication of research is mainly aimed at users and policy-makers, rather than at other researchers and students. The contact with international scientific developments in the field is too narrow or too sporadic.

During the eighties, there has been a marked change in sociological research in countries like USA and England. There is now less emphasis on the traditional sociological specializations (of which the sociology of education is one) and a shift towards new, comprehensive themes like culture, power, gender, the body. Many of these themes have been in the focus of Danish

educational research since the seventies (see for instance Salling Olesen 1989), and this means that Danish scholars and institutions have significant potential for contributing to international sociological research on education. One should realize, however, that in countries with a more developed sociological tradition, the new themes of research are counterbalanced by, and in dialogue with, continuing research and teaching within the traditional specializations. This dialogue is lacking in the Danish context.

Although policy-making is not the aim of this paper, the attempt to outline the development of the sociology of education in Denmark has naturally led me to speculate on the possibilities of strengthening this field of research. As a conclusion, I offer four suggestions:

1. The establishments of professional and scientific circles for debating theories and analyses of education in society. I am thinking here in terms of circles which are not tied to specific sectors, institutions or groups of users, but rather focus on general theoretical and empirical issues.
2. The development of long-term research projects and programs in the field. Projects, in which comprehensive theoretical and empirical approaches would be possible, and which would leave room for the "logic of inquiry". Such projects would also support professionalism and continuity in the collection of data, as has been the case in for instance political sociology.
3. Recognition of sociological research on education as part of both the humanities and the social sciences. Within the social sciences, there has been an unfortunate tendency in recent years to perceive educational research as a purely humanist undertaking.
4. The promotion of research on educational institutions and processes in sociological departments and research circles in Denmark. The main point here is not the development of specialized research on education, but rather that education as an important element in class structure, political mobilization, welfare states, social differentiation, patterns of leisure activity, normativity etc. should also be taken more seriously in sociological analyses of these matters.

References:

Jesper Due & Jørgen Steen Madsen: *Slip sociologien løs* ("Let Sociology Loose"). Hanz Reitzel, Copenhagen 1983.

Søren Ehlers: "The Educational Needs and Demands of Danish Workers as reflected in the Curricula of the Act on Adult Education Grants (the VUS)" in: Tøsse et.al. (eds): *Social Change and Adult Education Research. Adult Education Research in Nordic Countries 1992/93*. Trondheim 1994.

Pia Frederiksen: "Qualification Needs in the Future Labour Market", in: Jeppesen & Lind (eds):

Changes in Labour Market and Industrial Relations in Europe. Centre for Labour Market Research, Aalborg University 1991.

Erik Jørgen Hansen: *Equality Through Education?*. National Institute for Social Research, Copenhagen 1978.

Christian Kjærsgaard: "From Craftsmanship to General Qualification", in: Gam et.al. (eds): *Social Change and Adult Education Research. Adult Education Research in Nordic Countries 1991/92*. Copenhagen 1993.

Anders Mathiesen: "Polarization of the Qualification Structure of the Danish Labour Force: The Role of the Educational System in Post-War Denmark", in *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 23, nos 2-3, 1980.

Jørgen Lerche Nielsen & Thomas W. Webb: *Higher Education in Denmark*. Institute of Communication Research, Educational Research and Theory of Science, Roskilde University Centre 1991.

Henning Salling Olesen: *Adult Education and Everyday Life*. Adult Education Research Group, Roskilde University Centre 1989.

Henning Salling Olesen: "Qualifications and Work. Basic Concepts and Danish Research", in: Tøsse et.al. (eds): *Social Change and Adult Education Research. Adult Education Research in Nordic Countries 1992/93*. Trondheim 1994.

Svend Skyum-Nielsen & Svend Magnussen: *Skolen som samfund. Træk af skolens sociologi* ("The School as a Society. Aspects of the Sociology of the School"). Gjellerup, Copenhagen 1965.

Bjarne Wahlgren: "Activation in the Learning and Activity Centres", in: Gam et.al. (eds): *Social Change and Adult Education Research. Adult Education Research in Nordic Countries 1991/92*. Copenhagen 1993.

Palle Rasmussen is associate professor in the sociology of education at the Department of Social Studies and Organization, Aalborg University.

Footnote:

i. A brief account of the development of sociology in Denmark is given in Due & Madsen (1983). The Danish Sociological Association will soon bring out a book on the history of Danish sociology.