ABSTRACT. How should history of education be written? To put the question is far more easier than to provide a concrete answer. In contemporary research, there continue to be pedagogistic complaints about finding answers to present-day educational problems via history. In our view, such an ahistorical utilitarianism as well as the legitimizing and/or mythologizing belief in a particular pedagogical system, in which the history of this field is so rich since the institutionalization of the discipline at the end of the nineteenth century, should be avoided at all costs. But the danger of presentism lurks around the corner as a sine qua non condition in any form of historical research. As can be found out via the comments on our own work, much of the criticism goes back to old conceptions of the discipline, conceived as “historical pedagogy” rather than as history of education. Apparently, in the field of pedagogy people are still convinced that the history of education, even if it does not provide edifying examples and useful lessons, must in any case have a training value for professionals – which in the light of modern, advanced research is rather a difficult idea to defend.

KEY WORDS: Belgium, Congo, Educational sciences, historiography, history, history of education, methodology of history of education, pedagogy, theory of history of education

The title question, which was submitted to us by the guest editorial team of Studies in Philosophy and Education, obviously has a high normative content. At first sight, that is rather remarkable, because the question about how it should be done contrasts sharply with the blurred norms that are prevalent in post-modern society, as well as with the plurality of opinions and views that are consciously cultivated there. Perhaps it is because in the field of the history of education, there are no longer any
“eminent examples”\(^1\) that the question is put explicitly? There too, a diversity of approaches prevails.

Anyone performing an analysis on a more or less valid sample of the many publications that have been put forward in this category in recent years will probably have to conclude that among the multiplicity of research questions and applicable research methods, it is scarcely possible to deduce a norm for well conceived research.\(^2\) Usually, it is hard to go beyond a few platitudes about the necessarily cross-disciplinary character of the field, the need for an almost ethnographic empathy in order to reach a contextualized, multifactor and/or multi-tier interpretation, the richness of a comparative approach within the scope of a globalizing society, and the need for varied source material, such as the use of verbal and pictorial sources alongside traditional written material. These are all things that are easier said than done, because they are dogged by various methodological problems (see, e.g., Errante, 2000; Crook and McCulloch, 2002; Dams et al., 2002; Depaepe et al., in press).

It is true that there has been a preference since the ‘nineties for the “new cultural history of education”, which has displaced the “new social history of education” of the ‘sixties, while that same “new social history of education” was put forward to oust the old “history of educational thought” dating from the ‘fifties (Tenorth, 2002; Depaepe, 2003). But it is questionable whether this kind of phasing of successive paradigm changes has contributed much to understanding the historic reality of the research, let alone given rise to concrete indications of how to optimize it.

To start with, there is tremendous heterogeneity within the long-established general labels. So, in the study of the theoretical–methodological discussion in post-war (West) Germany, we are confronted with a whole range of divergent and even diametrically opposed views about the relationship between history and theory, and that is the case both in the “old” history of thought and the

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\(^1\) Perhaps there never really were any, but one can say that, for example, in the days of “revisionism” in the United States, the work of Bernard Bailyn and Lawrence A. Cremin exercised a certain appeal. A whole generation of researchers emulated their arguments in favour of socio-historic research. Since then, the mystique of these “pioneers” has been dispelled in the post-modern sense, see Cohen (1999) and Gaither (2001), who challenges, among other things, the Bailyn myth of the “new history of education” since the 1960s.

\(^2\) To an extent, an attempt is made to do this by Roy Lowe (2000).