



## Book Review Essay

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### On the Value of Disciplinary History

Anders Burman, Joakim Landahl &  
Anna Larsson

*Pedagogikens århundrade:  
Uppkomsten och utvecklingen av en  
vetenskaplig disciplin*

Göteborg: Makadam  
2025, 191 pp.

Johannes Westberg, Emma  
Hellström & Esbjörn Larsson (eds.)  
*Utbildningshistorisk forskning under  
2000-talet: Det utbildningshistoriska  
nätverket, forskningsmiljöer,  
konferenser och föreningar*

Uppsala: Uppsala Studies of History and  
Education  
2025, 321 pp.

Writing disciplinary history is a difficult task. In addition to the issues of delimitation and representativeness that all historians confront, there is a risk of reproducing a narrative of ever-evolving scientific progress, as well as merely recounting the stories of “great men” or “great women” within a discipline (Lepenies & Weingart, 1983, p. x; Vikström 2021, pp. 29–32). Moreover, disciplinary history serves several potential functions, many of which are connected to the legitimisation or delegitimisation of scientific knowledge. Among other things, it can legitimise new paradigms and perspectives, delegitimise older ones, build support among sponsors such as governments, funding agencies, and the public, and

socialise novices into the field (Lepenies & Weingart, 1983, pp. xv–xx).

Last year, two books on the disciplinary history of pedagogy and the research field of educational history were published. The authors of these works managed to avoid the pitfalls outlined above. Against the backdrop of the ongoing debate in Sweden concerning the reform of teacher education and its curriculum – reforms that are expected to impact pedagogy departments nationwide – these retrospectives provide valuable insights into the organisation and development of academic disciplines and research fields within educational science.

The first publication, *Pedagogikens århundrade*, written by Anders Burman, Joakim Landahl, and Anna Larsson, offers a historical overview of pedagogy as an academic discipline in Sweden. Based in the history of science and ideas as well as educational history, the authors analyse the development of pedagogy through source material from three arenas: research, higher education, and the media. Their objective is to broaden the scope of the disciplinary history of pedagogy, as previous studies have focused primarily on the research arena and paying comparatively little attention to the other two arenas. Structured chronologically in three empirical chapters, the book traces the establishment, expansion and transformation of pedagogy during the twentieth century.

Thanks to its clear and well-organised structure, the book serves as a solid introduction to the history of pedagogy as an academic discipline. It would

have been an invaluable resource for me as a newcomer to the field ten years ago. When I returned to Sweden from Germany to begin my doctoral studies, I found myself somewhat lost in translation between the German *Erziehungswissenschaften* that I had encountered during my undergraduate studies and the Swedish discipline of *pedagogik*. In this sense, this book could be used to introduce novices to the field, fulfilling the socialising function outlined by Wolf Lepenies and Peter Weingart (1983). At the same time, this historical account is valuable not only for newcomers to pedagogy but also for scholars working within, or at the margins of, the discipline, as it offers relevant insights into an evolving academic landscape.

The first chapter examines the establishment of pedagogy as an academic discipline, focusing on the appointment of the first professorship in the subject at Uppsala University, held by Bertil Hammer (1877–1929). The reader is also introduced to the ‘prehistory’ of pedagogical questions within philosophy in Sweden during the nineteenth century as well as earlier unsuccessful attempts to establish professorships in pedagogy. Upon his inauguration in 1910, Hammer positioned himself at the intersection of pedagogy, rooted in the humanities and philosophy, and experimental psychology. In the early twentieth century, the discipline was shaped at the intersection of these fields. This influenced the subsequent development of pedagogy and shaped the appointment of professors and educators for much of the following century.

Furthermore, the authors examine the content encountered by students of pedagogy at the university level. This ranged from experimental psychology, philosophy, and historical exami-

nations of educators and education to more school-oriented topics, including school hygiene and educational testing. The chapter also discusses the establishment of the Swedish Psychological and Pedagogical Institute, which sought to promote the application of research to the improvement of educational practice.

The second chapter focuses on the expansion of the discipline following the division of pedagogy and psychology into two separate subjects in 1948. This development coincided with political ambitions to expand the education system at all levels in the aftermath of the Second World War. Within higher education, the number of students, professors, and teachers increased, and new academic positions were created. One example was the establishment of the category of associate professor (*universitetslektor*), which remains an important position in Swedish academia and refers to teaching staff with a PhD who are not professors.

Educational expansion was also driven by the idea that education and research were central to the development of a modern society. Although psychology and pedagogy were formally separated in the late 1940s, both subjects remained important components of one another’s university curricula for several decades. The number of students enrolled in pedagogy was relatively stable, not least due to the newly founded teacher training schools in Stockholm in 1956 and the subsequent creation of similar institutions across Sweden during the 1960s. These institutions sought to focus more directly on practical educational issues within the compulsory school system.

This phase was characterised by an increase in the number of students and researchers in the field as well as a growing demand for educational research. For

instance, educational researchers were given prominent roles in government reports and received increased research funding. Moreover, the authors demonstrate that research in pedagogy broadened and became more specialised, with the emergence of subfields such as vocational education and international education. Alongside this broadening and specialisation, heated debates concerning the discipline's foundation emerged. The authors also analyse attempts to standardise undergraduate education at universities. Interestingly, despite these efforts, the content of undergraduate pedagogy education remained largely unstandardised.

The third chapter explores the transformation of the discipline, beginning with the 1977 reform of universities and higher education. This reform granted the majority of state-organised post-secondary education the status of higher education. For pedagogy, this meant that all teachers, from preschool to secondary level, were trained at higher education institutions (HEI), and the former distinction between universities and teacher training schools was formally abolished.

It was during this period of change that Sigbritt Franke-Wiberg became the first woman to be appointed professor of pedagogy in 1982, and women in general gained greater prominence within the discipline. Since the 1980s, more than 50 percent of doctoral students in pedagogy have been women, and the overall number of PhD students has also increased. Moreover, the authors identify significant variation in the educational content of courses on pedagogy across different HEIs.

The chapter also addresses critiques of pedagogy as an academic discipline from

both the political left and right, as well as broader societal critiques of education. It concludes with the transformation of pedagogy, which was “degraded” to the status of a subdiscipline within the umbrella category of “educational science” in 2001 as part of the new funding structure introduced by the Swedish Research Council (Burman, Landahl & Larsson 2025, p. 119). This coincided with a reform of teacher education that adopted a multidisciplinary approach.

In the concluding chapter, the authors discuss how the discipline of pedagogy lost its exclusive institutional claim to producing knowledge about educational processes with the establishment of educational sciences. They also note that the discipline was multifaceted throughout the twentieth century, incorporating elements of philosophy, psychology, and history, and, towards the end of the century, the sociology of education. However, the diversity of the subject increased significantly before the turn of the millennium, making the creation of educational science a “natural consequence” of the earlier development of pedagogy (Burman, Landahl & Larsson 2025, p. 124).

Through the book's chronological overview of developments – from the establishment and expansion of pedagogy as an academic discipline to its transformation within educational sciences at the beginning of the twenty-first century – the authors demonstrate important shifts in the discipline's institutional organisation. Although it is not possible to cover every aspect in an introductory book such as this, it would have been helpful if the focus on the three arenas – research, education, and the media – had been complemented by a stronger emphasis on research politics

throughout. While research politics is addressed as part of the book's broader societal contextualisation, a closer look at research politics would have enhanced the reader's understanding of the disciplinary changes that have occurred over the past century. Fortunately for interested readers, another recent edited volume by the authors focuses specifically on the history of the relationship between educational politics and educational research in the post-war period (Burman, Landahl & Larsson 2024).

In summarising the continuities over the century, Burman, Landahl, and Larsson argue that the core content of pedagogy has remained relatively weak and has not become as canonised or firmly established as in many other disciplines. They also observe that the autonomy of the curriculum across different HEIs has varied over time. However, this conclusion primarily concerns pedagogy as a stand-alone subject rather than pedagogy within teacher education.

The relationship between pedagogy and teacher education has been central to legitimising the subject as an important body of knowledge for future teachers. In this context, the authors highlight the enduring distinction between education and teacher training, often framed as a division between science and the teaching profession, or between theory and practice.

This distinction has been addressed in several government reports and reforms since the Second World War. The close relationship between pedagogy and teacher training has given the discipline certain advantages in terms of expansion and access to funding. At the same time, the discipline has often been assigned a lower academic status than others because it is associated with educat-

ing professionals who require educational knowledge rather than preparing students primarily for doctoral studies.

The authors also draw some international comparisons, concluding that Swedish pedagogy has historically been more closely linked to psychology than corresponding disciplines in neighbouring Nordic countries, which largely excluded psychology from pedagogy in the early twentieth century. They suggest that this close connection to psychology until the 1970s may have contributed to the discipline's relatively weak core. In my opinion, this observation offers an interesting perspective on recent developments in teacher education reforms, which propose once again strengthening the connection to psychological knowledge about learning, cognition, and the brain (SOU 2024:81, pp. 325–356).

Finally, the authors point out that, although weak scientific boundary work has contributed to a non-canonised body of knowledge, pedagogy has remained open to perspectives from other disciplines. They conclude by suggesting that the century of pedagogy may be followed by a century of educational sciences characterised by increasing specialisation and differentiation.

The question of whether the discipline is open or closed is vital and makes it important to return to the question: what is pedagogy? This is particularly relevant given the current political ambition to align teacher education more closely with practice by removing content considered unnecessary for aspiring teachers, such as educational history and curriculum theory, from new teacher education curricula (SOU 2024:81, p. 306). In relation to the present renegotiation of pedagogy within teacher education, the authors might have elaborated further on

the formation of disciplines and drawn more explicitly on their analysis to examine the internal and external boundary work of academic disciplines situated between the demands of inner-scientific research logics, political ambitions, higher education, the teaching profession, the media, and research funders.

The theoretical framework defining what constitutes a discipline is described broadly as “scientific knowledge that has been institutionalised under its own name in academia and functions as a unit for teaching and research” (Burman, Landahl & Larsson 2025, p. 13, my translation). For students and doctoral candidates, academic disciplines may appear fixed and bound by tradition, an assumption that the authors explicitly address and seek to challenge. However, the inclusion of additional analytical tools for understanding the building blocks of a discipline would have strengthened the analysis. Despite this critical observation, *Pedagogikens århundrade* succeeds in providing a well-written overview of the establishment, expansion, and transformation of pedagogy. The book is likely to appeal to readers from a range of disciplines now encompassed within the broader category of “educational science”.

The second publication, *Utbildningshistorisk forskning under 2000-talet*, has been edited by Johannes Westberg, Emma Hellström, and Esbjörn Larsson, and forms part of the *Uppsala Studies of History and Education* series. Published in a timely manner in connection with the 9th Nordic Educational History Conference in Stockholm in May 2025, this edited volume marks the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the educational history network at the Swedish Historians’ Meeting in Uppsala in 2005. By examining research environments,

conferences, and associations related to educational history, the book raises questions concerning how and why research in this field has developed over the past two decades, focusing primarily on Sweden while also situating these developments within a broader Nordic context.

In relation to *Pedagogikens århundrade*, the volume exemplifies a research field within educational science that has evolved alongside reforms in teacher education and the establishment of the Committee for Educational Science at the Swedish Research Council (Broady 2025, pp. 44–46). Although the book focuses on a single research field over a relatively short period, it is highly relevant to the history of science and to disciplinary history more broadly. It contributes to our understanding of how institutional conditions at both local and national levels have shaped and influenced research in the history of education, and within educational science more generally. Consequently, this historiography may serve to establish legitimacy and recognition for the field within educational science (Lepenes & Weingart, 1983, p. xvi).

The 20 chapters are organised into three parts. The first begins with an introduction to the development of the research field, including a contextualising chapter by Donald Broady, who outlines the historical turn in educational research through a personal yet broad presentation of institutional conditions in Stockholm and Uppsala from the 1970s to the early 2000s.

In the second chapter, Sara Backman Prytz and Johanna Ringarp explore the role of girls and women within Swedish educational history. Through a historiographical analysis, they trace the emergence and expansion of women’s

history within the field and discuss seminal contributions by scholars such as Gunhild Kyle (1921–2016), Christina Florin (1938–), Ulla Johansson (1943–), Ingegerd Tallberg Broman (1944–), and Agneta Linné (1939–). Pointing to challenges arising from the often limited availability of sources on girls and women in educational history, the authors conclude with what they describe as “a gentle remark”, which constitutes one of the volume’s most incisive critiques: namely, the existence of a hierarchy in the selection of sources and subjects, privileging certain pupils (boys) and school forms (secondary and higher education) within educational historical research (Backman Prytz & Ringarp 2025, p. 62).

In the third chapter, Johannes Westberg addresses the question of why the history of education should be studied. By outlining the value of historical methods, explanatory frameworks, comparative approaches, and critical examinations of the uses of history, Westberg presents key arguments for the relevance of educational history within the broader field of educational science. Thus, this chapter performs an important form of translational work, facilitating communication across disciplinary boundaries. While such contributions may be interpreted as reinforcing a kind of “methodocentrism” and an effort to align educational history more closely with the social sciences – potentially at the expense of philosophical inquiry within educational historiography (Myrebøe & Schildermans 2026, p. 2) – Westberg nevertheless provides a framing that can enable productive dialogue with empirically oriented scholars who are primarily interested in contemporary educational issues.

The second part of the volume presents 11 research environments, with contributions from scholars in Denmark, Norway, Finland, and seven universities and HEIs across Sweden. The editors position this section as central to the volume, as it demonstrates how research groups have shaped the development of educational history research in the Nordic context. Although the editors do not claim to provide an exhaustive account of all developments and institutions within the field, the selection inevitably reflects the inclusion and exclusion inherent in any form of disciplinary historiography.

Taken together, these chapters present a broad range of themes, including critical studies of childhood, interdisciplinarity, institutionalisation and research politics, doctoral education, bibliometrics, publication practices, the marginalisation of the history of education, and its position within or outside teacher education at the university level. By highlighting both the achievements and challenges of these research environments, this section conveys an image of a relatively consolidated field embedded in diverse institutional settings, facing both shared and context-specific challenges, such as the recruitment of doctoral students and the relationship to teacher education. For example, in Sweden, educational history is situated at the intersection of departments of pedagogy and didactics, as well as departments of history and history didactics. This has resulted in differing emphases across research environments.

The third part examines the role of institutions, societies, and associations in educational history in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. These chapters highlight the field’s connections to school history as well as to school museums, archives, journals, and yearbooks associated with

these associations. One chapter addresses the establishment of the *Nordic Journal of Educational History* (*NJEdH*), discussing the challenges associated with launching a new journal, as well as its content and development over the past decade. The volume concludes with a chapter on the Nordic Network and the Nordic Conference, both of which have played a central role in shaping the field of educational history research.

Taken as a whole, the volume demonstrates that the field has expanded considerably over the past twenty years, as evidenced by the establishment and activities of numerous research environments. Following a broader trend within academia, the field has also become increasingly internationalised, resulting in connections both within and beyond the Nordic region (Westberg 2025, p. 315). For example, nearly 20 percent of *NJEdH*'s corresponding authors are based outside the Nordic region (Åström Elmersjö 2025, p. 300).

By being introduced as a form of closure of the past two decades, the book at first glance may appear as a review of the field's accomplishments and a tale of triumph. However, the individual chapters also reveal ongoing struggles. By demonstrating how the research field is embedded in specific institutional contexts and dependent on the work of individual researchers and research groups, the volume provides valuable insight into the formation of a field situated at the intersection of pedagogy and history under particular conditions in the early 2000s. It offers important perspectives for both new and established scholars of educational history while also pointing toward avenues for further research. For example, an overview of *NJEdH*'s content over the past decade suggests significant potential

for expansion in terms of periods, topics, and sources (Åström Elmersjö 2025, pp. 297–300; see also Backman Prytz & Ringarp 2025).

In light of the recent decline in the number of students entering teacher education, and of political reforms affecting the curriculum and organisation of pedagogy and educational history – particularly in Sweden – these two publications provide insights into processes of institutional change. They illustrate how academic landscapes evolve over time and underscore the importance of collective efforts involving researchers, university educators, journals, and the wider public, including associations, societies, and the media. Read together, they demonstrate the value of disciplinary history through their capacity to socialise newcomers, establish legitimacy and recognition for specific disciplines and research fields, and foster critical intradisciplinary reflection. Here, I think it is especially relevant to consider disciplinary traditions and hierarchies, including those related to who conducts research and who becomes its subject (Backman Prytz & Ringarp 2025).

Finally, these publications invite reflection on what constitutes a discipline or research field, demonstrating that such definitions are closely tied to processes of scientific boundary work and to differing conceptions of openness and closure. In other words, what do “pedagogy” and “educational history” encompass, and what do they exclude? At a time when political ambition advocates the exclusion of certain strands of educational science research, it will be important how the scientific community and academic institutions respond to such pressures. In this context, the works reviewed here could prove particularly valuable.

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Emma Vikström  
Umeå University  
emma.vikstrom@umu.se