# Editorial: "Social Innovation in Education"

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**Editorial on the Research Topic**

**Social Innovation in Education**

The education sector was increasingly confronted with reform and innovation initiatives across relevant fields during the last years. Education reports and international assessments are used by day-care centers to implement early childhood education and to open up to the primary sector. National and international demands confront schools with new concepts of school development. In Higher Education, the effects of international education innovations seem even more obvious. In social education and social work a renewed interest in emerging needs and resources in local communities has led to a rise of social entrepreneurs who promote innovative solutions. In this Research Topic, we discuss educational reforms against the theoretical background of the debate on social innovation and examine how individuals and organizations in the educational sector respond to risks and challenges with innovation. The concept of innovation as a motor of social and economic development was taken up in the sociological discourse of the 1990s, which led to increased public interest in the concept of social innovation. Zapf (Zapf, 1989, 177) argued for a broad understanding of social innovation as "new ways to reach certain goals, particularly new organizational forms, new regulations, new lifestyles, which change the direction of social change and which better solve existing problems than previous practices". Over the last 2 decades, concepts of social innovation have included normative (Moulaert et al., 2013), functional and pragmatic positions, ranging from increasing social justice to identifying feasible (often technical) and novel solutions to social problems (Phills et al., 2008). Others see the core of social innovation in the explicit recombination of social practices (Howaldt and Schwarz, 2010). The impact of individuals, organizations, societies, and education policies, as well as the social dimensions of innovation have long been treated as secondary; however, due to the increasing awareness of both the significant social consequences and the impact of social innovations (Chesbrough and Di Minin, 2014), a growing number of researchers have begun to study the social science aspects of this problem. Recently, scientists have begun to analyze innovations in relation to social issues (Chesbrough and Di Minin, 2014). Particularly in the context of digitization, we find a lively discussion of technical innovations on the one hand, but on the other hand this is closely linked to attention to accompanying social innovation processes. Recent literature on (open) innovation emphasizes the importance of cross-sectoral cooperation, networking and linking different knowledge bases for the creation of innovations (Chesbrough, 2006). Overall, we can observe that the debate distinguishes between more critical and more positive perspectives. This may be related to the perspective from which the dynamics of social innovation are perceived. On the one hand, we find in the education sector a specific debate on government-driven reforms, which are top-down strategies for reorganizing social structures and practices. On the other hand, in the economic context, social innovation is seen as an organizational process that results from specific organizational practices and needs and can thus be described as bottom-up processes of social innovation.

In this Research Topic, we would like to contribute to the further development of the debate on social innovations by opening it to the topic of educational reforms. We understand social innovations as "new

ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations" (Howaldt and Schwarz, 2010). Our position is supported by recent empirical studies, which identify education as an important field for existing social innovation initiatives worldwide (Howaldt et al., 2018). Social innovations in education therefore imply processes of knowledge resources, constellations of actors, pedagogical and organizational practices and educational discourses. From the editors' perspective, there are many good reasons why a critical debate on social innovations in education is appropriate and necessary at this time: Ambivalent experiences with reform projects must be analyzed in a differentiated manner and their implications examined.

Technological innovations in education, such as distance learning, learning software and cloud-based collaboration, continue to change educational practice worldwide, even today. Crises, such as the current pandemic, are likely to further fuel these processes of change. There is an increasing need for bottom-up solutions to social problems worldwide. At the center of the debate is often the search for (new) sources of funding. In the literature on management and organizational learning, too, we find a growing interest in the phenomenon of social innovation, especially in the questions of the supporting and inhibiting factors for the development of social innovation in organizations. It is therefore an ideal time for the bundled publication of highly topical research articles. The Research Topic brings together contributions from renowned researchers in the field who are systematically addressing the question of what contributions social innovations in the field of education make or can make worldwide and, conversely, how education research can enrich the study of social innovations.

The ten articles in this unique Frontiers Research Topic are not reduced to empirical debates and new findings alone. Rather, they also focus on conceptual analyses and theory developments. They raise the topic of social innovation in education from different conceptual points of view, as a process of co-construction (David; Ehmke; Kohlgrüber) or social-dynamic interaction (Wendt) as well as a concept of networking (Kallio; Schuster). Moreover, they discuss social innovation in education from the perspective of the overall discursive and political knowledge (Luthardt et al.; Resch et al.) on the one hand and as a result of individual and organizational learning on the other hand (Semper et al.; Schröer).

Schröer provides a conceptual analysis and discusses furthering and hindering aspects to promoting social innovation in social and educational organizations. The paper examines social innovation through an education research lens and reveals the close relation between learning, creativity, and innovation. Wendt analyzes digitalization in organizations and emphasizes the role of digital transformation for structural automatization and but even more so, for structured structurelessness in organizations. Resch et al. discuss service learning as an innovative and socially responsible teaching methodology and therefore as social innovation in the context of Austrian Higher Education. The article analyses how the strategic development of service learning as social innovation contributes to the policy goal of strengthening the so-called "Third Mission" of Austrian universities. Kohlgrüber et al. describes a software co-creation process, which involves software developers and users, and analyze how technology serves as enabler

of social innovation. Based on this example the authors deduct new skills of employees as key competences for digital transformation and emphasize the importance of mutual learning in the innovation process. Straub and Ehmke present the results of an empirical teacher education study on Transdisciplinary Development Teams (TDTs). In addition to presenting results on knowledge integration and mutual learning, the paper offers a concept to frame interorganizational, boundary-crossing collaboration in teacher education. Schuster and Kolleck analyze Twitter communication networks related to inclusive education. Their findings of a social networks analysis indicate how the online communication tool Twitter plays an important role for the global diffusion of social innovations in education and effect education policies, norms and systems at the global, national and regional levels. Krüger and David analyze the rare practice of entrepreneurial education for persons with disabilities through a social innovation lens; they argue for entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education as empowerment and discuss opportunities of an inclusive entrepreneurship education within an inclusive learning ecosystem. Semper et al. discuss three models of human development, autonomous self (AS), processual self (PS) and inter-processual self (IPS), with respect to their implications for understanding of cognition and their respective educational consequences. This conceptual analysis particularly informs the design of innovative programs in teacher education and training. Kallio and Halverson analyze Networked Improvement Community (NICs) as a social innovation for orchestrating sustained change in education. Their particular focus lies on emergence and building of trust in collaborative design activities within these networks. The results of their qualitative, case-based study contributes to research on measuring effects of networks on participants and their practices and deepen the theoretical conversation on how colloborative practice and design activities contribute to long-term development of relational trust. Finally, the paper of Luthardt et al. is based on the assumption of a discursive production of knowledge on the application of an innovation across different levels of the education system. It analyses an innovation's "journey" from educational policy over training providers to teams of professionals in early childhood education and care. The findings enrich the debate on obstacles to social innovation, such as the lack of a common language across the levels of the innovation process.

In this way, the research topic brings together contributions in an increasingly internationally relevant field of research and provides answers to the questions of whether and how educationally motivated interventions 1) generate social innovation through the mobilization of actors and their knowledge and pedagogical practices or 2) provoke persistence and thus lead to a consolidation of knowledge stocks, actor constellations and pedagogical practices.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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