

FEW IDEAS ABOUT SCHOOL AND EDUCATION FROM JOHN DEWEY'S PEDAGOGICAL POINT OF VIEW

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Abstract: John Dewey, considered the greatest philosopher of education, influences, without any doubt, the pedagogical thinking of the 20th century through his work. His ideas leave a strong mark on the educational system, firstly in the American society, but also in others with educational tradition. His theory and revolutionary ideas promote an active school, focused on the pupil and their needs, a school in which thinking, creativity and imagination simulation are of interest for both teachers and pupils, a school in which learning means access to experience, action, thinking, a school which, as the American philosopher states, "finally understands that education is a process of life and not a preparation for life". We present in our study a number of ideas that belong to this theory, that generated the reconsideration and reformation of school, ideas that we can consider history and actuality alike: school serving the social life, education as a construction and reconstruction of experiences, learning as active involvement of pupils in the teaching process (learning by doing), promoting the continuous learning, as an answer to the accelerated development of society.

Rereading John Dewey's works puts his ideas in actuality. His pedagogical credo drives us to possible reflexions: it is not enough to go to school, but to understand school as a priority, growing and integrating education in philosophical thinking systems.

Keywords: education, learning by doing, continuous learning, active school, experience

1. Experience, action, knowledge – fundamental concepts for the philosophy of education at the beginning of the 20th century

At the beginning of the 20th century, the pedagogical thinking of the philosopher John Dewey puts its mark upon education and school and influences the emergence of new reforms in education, not only in the American school system but in other more traditional countries as well. Educational reforms bear the name of the great philosopher and educator. We must specify the fact that in order to understand correctly his pedagogical concept means knowing

the specific of the American life and reality during that particular time, on the one hand, and the social and economical realities of the time and their impact upon life changes, on the other: industrial revolution, rise in living standards, and the democratisation of society. In order to get the complete picture, we must know that Americans currently teach and educate their children, since a very young age, to be able to withstand hardships in life; they train them for independent living, relying on themselves, on their own strength and confidence, on their know how capacity, expecting very little help from others, even their own parents. Americans educate their children in the spirit of dignity, responsibility and freedom. This is a generalized attitude: within family, school, throughout society as a whole: „From an early age – says N. Creţu (1940) in his study *John Dewey, the educator. His life and works*. – ...children are accustomed to the idea that life has harsh necessities that must be overcome and since there is no victory without a fight, the Americans teach their children to fight life, at a younger age (...). Work, responsibility, freedom and dignity gets shouted at you from everywhere till it pervades your core” (p.25). This is the social, economic and cultural context; this is the atmosphere at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th in American society, with all the issues raised by the evolutionist democracy. (see also M. Suditu, 2003, 2001).

It was obvious that such a context in which knowledge finds its source in life itself, in an actual re-adaptation to pragmatic life, to efficient action, to concrete thinking, would make its mark redefining schools as institutions.

We point below, in a synthetic manner, to the ideas that define the American’s philosopher’s thinking about school and education.

Education - reorganization or permanent reconstruction of experience. The education J. Dewey pleads for invites to development, continuous growth, change in behaviour as a consequence of knowledge, far from fixations and abstractions. The educational process, states the educator, has no purpose outside itself, but it is alive and hence involves transformation, reconstruction, adaptation and reorganization. As a consequence, it is considered that the real value of school education shall be given by the extent to which school shall instil in every pupil the internal desire/ motivation for continual growth. “Education is one with growth”, says J. Dewey (1972, p.87); to be more exact, growth refers – in his perspective – to cultivating the capacity to learn, to be prepared to face new, more intense and

profound experiences, to the ability to form habits, being able to (re)adapt to new requirements. Moreover, J. Dewey - in his work “*Three writings on education (Experience and education; The school and Society; The child and the curriculum)*” – makes additional specifications in analysing the concept of *education – continual growth*, explaining what is his vision on *growth*. Thus: “growth is not enough; we must also specify its direction, its target (...) the issue with growth is whether it hinders or blocks development altogether” (p.36). It clearly results that development equals education only when it leads towards evolution.

Social pedagogy. School in the service of social life. This is another strong idea that the American educator supports and explains. If the social dimension is innate, then it would be only normal that school – by education – to be interested in and contribute to shaping children’s interest in “learning from all contacts offered by life” (see J. Dewey, 1972). Education, argues Dewey, must contribute concretely to social life. Knowing community norms as a child, its customs, acceptances, life norms, ways of thinking, feeling, etc., the young would be able, in the future, to use their thinking, creativity, intelligence and knowledge to change these institutions for the better, to improve and enrich their experiences. (see also M. Suditu, 2003, 2001). In support of this idea, in his book *Schools of Tomorrow*, John Dewey, together with Evelyn Dewey, criticizes harshly the traditional school which forms the youth “*in abstracto*”, without concern for their readiness for life’s necessities, or social integration: „school gives to much importance to abstract, so that its work becomes academic and unsocial” (p.130). Thus, they criticize schools which prove uninterested in training the young to participate in the life of the community; schools disinterested in the existence of the ideal of a democratic society; schools disinterested in/ about shaping in children and youths valuable acquirements and habits with great social benefit; schools maladapted to the essence and experiences of children’s lives, whichever those may be. “School, appreciates J. Dewey is first and foremost a social institution; it must use its own powers to social purposes; education is after all a process of life and not a preparation for life” (J. Dewey, E. Dewey, 1937 p.146 apud M. Suditu, 2003, p.36).

In his work, *My Pedagogic Creed*, the great philosopher and educator stresses firmly the idea of school in harmony with the requirements of society life by connection and participation to social consciousness, as education is life itself: “I believe the whole education is accomplished by individual’s participation to the social consciousness of humankind (...) I

believe education is the regulation of the process of participating to social consciousness (...) I believe respect for education is the supreme duty of community (...) I believe education (...) is a life process and not a preparation for life” (apud Stanciu, Gh., Nicolescu V., Sacaliș, N., *Antologia pedagogiei americane Contemporane*, 1971, p.86).

New school: curriculum, the role of the teacher, teaching-learning methods, learning by doing. New school, in J. Dewey’s opinion, is a school that makes children understand how important their individual role is, in promoting the human spirit, promoting culture and civilization. In this new vision proposed by the author at the beginning of the 20th century, a pragmatic perspective in which knowledge streams from life’s necessities and in which the axis of thought is oriented towards re-adaptation to life and action (see G. Simeon, 1937) – school and society must follow the same path. That path is marked by initiative, thinking, independence, cooperation, coherence, action, flexibility and understanding, activation of senses, originality and dynamism.

School curriculum also changes in becoming a natural extension of societal change. The traditional educational plan, rigid and abstract, must be changed radically with a more viable one that respects the child, its psychological characteristics, psychological dimensions and areas of interest and knowledge. What does this mean concretely to J. Dewey? It means a substantial change in disciplines, contents, knowledge objectives and methods of approaching them (practically, that is). The new school is an institution that grants respect not only to disciplines that foster intellectual development but also to those aiming development of physical skills. We note from the *School of Tomorrow*, the author’s plea for the approach method and didactic understanding of physical education, for example. There is, argues the author, an indestructible connection between educating the mind, thinking, and educating the spirit through body. The development of a young person, sane in his mind and body, implies a healthy, thriving society. Here is why the educator requests increased focus from the part of school regarding these issues. In the same vein we speak about the importance of practical abilities, a discipline that the educator considers a significant means of education. Practical abilities means getting to know more about the day to day activities like woodwork and needlecraft, etc.; as well as physical education, practical abilities must fulfil a double role: educational and motor, individual and social.

This new system of rethinking the school institution influences and changes – obviously – the way we understand school education. Adapted to the new philosophical thinking program, school education must be achieved by discovery, by resorting to multiple means of learning the truth, by “raising interest” (stimulating interest, developing intellectual curiosity) by inspiring children to become observant, to develop their citizenship attitude, the will to follow through independently the projects they start. All these shall replace traditional memorization, learning by the book and accumulating arid and abstract knowledge. (see M. Suditu, 2003, 2001).

Learning by doing remains the motto for the new education and hints precisely at the direct and total implication in the process of teaching, knowledge, learning that takes place in contexts facilitating the ability to understand and apply knowledge. The active method – explains J. Dewey in *Schools of Tomorrow* (1937) – means resorting to the natural stimulation of all senses, to children’s experiences, to the inquisitive nature of pupils, to cooperation and collaboration, etc.; in the end it speaks about learning to love work *per se*. The principle of liking theory and practice is/ becomes the key to didactic activity and success in education. All school subjects must rely on these healthy principles and the author offers countless concrete examples and curricular models implemented by the School of Chicago.

2. John Dewey: model for the pedagogical thinking of our times

Certainly, American school owes a lot to the model of thinking proposed by the great educator and philosopher. And not only American school, for that matter. Freedom and harmonization of school with the ideal of a democratic and scientific society; respecting the nature of children and focusing on stimulating their active, aware, motivated, interested and creative participation to the learning process; tailoring the educational plan to the child’s assimilation ability and to its interests; changing learning methods and introducing the active method, which involves the total involvement of the child – are as many elements that have become a fundamental theoretical basis for American education, helping to explain and build success.

We are not afraid to emphasize that reading and re-reading the works of J. Dewey (see M. Suditu, 2001, 2003) gives us, we believe, important sources of inspiration and solutions for “*the school I dream of*”, as C. Noica declared in his *Philosophic Journal*.

3. School and education – analytical perspectives of students, future teachers

The illustrious educator's ideas marked and influenced the American school, and not only, at the start of the 20th century. These ideas represent nowadays lessons in education for young people concerned about and interested in the issues covered by education sciences. Hence, inspired by his philosophy regarding school and education, we were interested to know how some of the young students, future primary school teachers (sample N=50), express, during several focus-group-type meetings, some of their perceptions as graduate pupils, on school and the education they received: activities in school, relationships with teachers, motivation strategies, efficiency in learning, school discipline, etc. Everything was expressed in qualitative data. We believe that their experiences as pupils, in conjunction with their cognitive experiences acquired during academic study, shall constitute important milestones in their future educational activity.

Specifically, we guided our discussions in the focus group towards the following areas of interest:

- Teacher's role in teaching activity
- Learning content
- Learning strategies

The exchange of experiences revealed part of the answers below:

About the way teachers are perceived by pupils, views are disputed between: „*Teacher is a guide for pupils, contributing to the development of their skills and to a pleasant atmosphere that facilitates learning. (...) Teachers are supportive with our personal issues as well*” and some others, not fewer, from which we learn that: „*Teachers rarely wish to inspire pupils and be their role models (...) Teachers came into the classroom to teach and enforce discipline (...) teachers are very little interested in their pupils (...) Some teachers are dedicated, some are frustrated, others are indifferent (...) Teachers are interested in that the discipline they teach is respected by pupils*”.

Regarding the content of learning, opinions are unanimous, signalling the schedule that is too overloaded to allow for extracurricular activities, passions and hobbies, etc. Therefore, we quote from the answers we received: „*too much information, content is too dense, (...), too little contact between what we learn in school and the world/ society we live in (...), too few applications to theoretical elements taught, (...), too many compulsory subjects (...)*,

discrepancies resulted from the fact that only some disciplines are taught with an emphasis on their practical use”.

Regarding the way teachers find the most appropriate ways to stimulate intellectual curiosity, desire for knowledge, the students in our sample recount their teachers’ endeavour to come up with various teaching strategies that facilitate understanding, retention, and applicability: *“text analysis, charts, readings, auditions, maps, images, layouts, team/ group learning”.*

We notice immediately, all the while paying attention to the emotions that arise during our discussions, the dissatisfaction of young people towards the frequent tensions, even anguish, helplessness mixed with feelings of fatigue. What would they change if they had the power? We gleaned from their responses, taking care to cover the entire range of suggestions: *"I would change the schedule so that pupils to be more relaxed, to have spare time for friends and family, (...), I would introduce culture courses, literature courses (...) I would provide more time for the breaks between learning activities (...) I would make learning more fun and more relaxed (...) I would introduce lessons outside the classroom space to exemplify practical theoretical knowledge, I would give students opportunities to choose their subjects according to ability and interests (...) etc."*

Conclusions:

Listening carefully to the views of students, future teachers, recording their words, feeling their emotions, we note with joy and hope, that they are individuals for whom education and school means life. If backed by solid theoretical foundations, we hope their presence will lead to noticeable changes in education. J. Dewey's pedagogical ideas, his belief in a school respected by society, are to them, and to us all, solutions, inspiration, confidence.

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