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TEACHER, DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND METHODS

In my paper I would like to emphasise that many fundamental problems which John Dewey initially pointed out during his life became a pressing problem nowadays also in Slovakia. Education is a social function given by a group tends to socialize its members but we know that Dewey stresses the quality and value of the socialization depends upon the habits and aims of the group. In order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equable opportunity to receive and to take from others. The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact. Therefore it is necessary to build better bridges between teachers, schools, parents, families and society.

Every adult has acquired, in the course of prior experience and education, certain measures of the worth of various sorts of experiences. He has learned to look upon qualities like honesty, amiability, perseverance, loyalty, as moral goods and also certain rules for these democratic values – harmony, balance, etc. They are very important as standards of judging the worth of new experiences that parents and teachers are always tending to teach them directly to the young. Values provide the standards and patterns that guide us toward satisfaction and meaning.

Dewey's work in the field of philosophy of education is relatively unknown in Slovakia, primarily because no comprehensive work dealing with his philosophy of education has been translated into Slovak to date¹.

¹ In 1998, the anthology entitled *Pragmatizmus (Pragmatism)* was published in Slovakia, containing Dewey's *The Influence of Pragmatism on Education* (1909) and Chapter 24 of his *Democracy and Education* (1916). Apart from this anthology,

I would like to deal with John Dewey's ideas on education in modern society, compare them with some contemporary ones, and perhaps propose a possible implementation of these ideas in Slovak schools at present. I presume that his ideas are still current and relevant in our circumstances as well – especially as far as the period after the year 1989 is concerned, because it has seen many changes in education. Bearing in mind that the issue of education in Slovakia is not central to our politicians' attention, I must conclude that even those proposals for change that have already been made in this area – similar to Dewey's ideas in many respects – have proved very slow to take effect.

Bogdan Suchodolski considers Dewey's pedagogy an important part of the history of Comenius' (Komensky) followers, including Rousseau and Pestalozzi. The main aim of this pedagogy was an attempt at true education². Dewey's philosophical and pedagogical ideas began to form under the influence of contemporaneous thought in American pedagogy (particularly J.J. Rousseau's and J.F. Herbart's ideas). However, Dewey found fault with the Herbart school, asserting that the child is not the focal point. He emphasised that this tendency of pragmatic pedagogy (the child/pupil becoming the centre around which the whole education is built) was not to be understood as extreme pedocentrism; rather, it was to be interpreted in the sense that pupils are supposed to work actively, live their own life, and dynamically grasp the experiences that life brings.

Experience as part of education

The central notion of Dewey's pragmatic philosophy was the category of experience. However, the child had to learn to gain experience first. In his opinion, using experience in education meant taking advantage of the child's natural tendencies and inclinations, process management, and ability to gain experience. He stated that it was vitally important such education in which the learned skills and knowledge of pupils and students are integrated fully into their lives as persons, citizens and human beings. He recognised the importance of the subjective experience of individual people in introducing revolutionary new ideas. For Dewey, faith in experiences was inseparable from faith in democracy.

some of Dewey's essays have been published in Slovak translation recently. The selection of the essays is entitled *Rekonštrukcia liberalizmu* (2001).

² B. Suchodolski, *Wstęp*. W: J. Dewey, *Demokracja i wychowanie*, Wrocław 1972, s. IV.

It was his *Democracy and Education* that brought on a revolution in the tradition of education. No longer isolated from society, school was becoming central in the fight for a better life. Contrary to the approaches of traditional pedagogy, where discipline and study materials were repeatedly emphasised, and the extremes of progressivism, which overestimated the importance of the child's inner life and interests, Dewey created his model of an active school in which experience, free activity, and respect for children's needs were in organic unity with their preparation for social life³. Similarly, the authors of the "Millenium" project have recently outlined the general goals of the education system in the Slovak Republic: they are to be based on a purposeful and systematic development of pro-social behaviour and creation of noble values such as love, respect, good will, tolerance, trust, honesty, mutual help and cooperation, search for the right value orientation, relationship to oneself, other people, environment, and the world as such. As opposed to the traditional school, where the teacher-pupil relationship was directive, the humane-oriented school puts emphasis on the humanisation of man, relationships, and atmosphere in general⁴.

What Dewey had in mind was not just gaining a lot of knowledge and information on the part of pupils and students, but, most of all, developing their motives, moral powers, and adapting and finding their place in social life⁵. He dealt with issues that are still current, and he was partly right to assert that the main source of "the discipline problem" in schools results from suppressing physical activity. With education largely resting on using the "mind", we ought to indulge in physical activities to a greater extent, because the development of a human being cannot do without physical fitness under normal circumstances⁶. Therefore, I believe that in the current era of scientific progress and over-technologized society, in which computers, mobile phones and other technological conveniences

³ M. Krankus, *Škola a demokracia v pedagogike J. Deweya*, „Pedagogická Revue“ 1992, vol. 44 (7), s. 533.

⁴ V. Rosa et al., *Návrh koncepcie rozvoja výchovy a vzdelávania v Slovenskej republike (Projekt „Milénium“)*, Bratislava 2000, s. 11.

⁵ Similarly, the authors of the project mentioned earlier emphasise that, apart from teaching pupils to think for themselves, it is also necessary to teach them ways of obtaining information through dynamic, creative activities, which is, after all, a lot more effective process than trying to instill loads of raw information into pupils' heads. V. Rosa et al., *Návrh koncepcie...*, s. 29.

⁶ J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, New York 1922, s. 175.

are used by pupils and students in schools on a daily basis, we should demand, bearing in mind their healthy physical development that our students get involved in physical activities.

In the concrete, the value of recognising the dynamic place of interest in an educational development is that it leads to considering individual children in their specific capabilities, needs, and preferences⁷. Contemporary education emphasises the importance of treating every single personality on an individual basis. It is necessary to take into consideration any given individual's unique personality characteristics, peculiarities, and abilities to grasp the knowledge that is to be gained.

Since the intellect played a sole role according to Dewey, namely that of using experience to solve problems effectively, the main emphasis in education should be put on activities and various forms of problem-solving. The process of education thus changes from handing down pieces of experience to organising their actual acquisition. The strategy of learning by doing was employed to ensure that the child is in constant contact with nature and social reality. It is thanks to activity and communication with society that man's personality is encouraged to develop⁸.

Values in education

The term "value" had two different meanings. On the one hand, it denoted the attitude of prizing a thing, finding it worth while, for its own sake, or intrinsically. To value in this sense is to appreciate. But to value also means a distinctly intellectual act – an operation of comparing and judging to evaluate⁹.

The specific values usually discussed in educational theories coincide with aims which are usually urged. They were such things as utility, culture, information, preparation for social efficiency, mental discipline or power, and so on. Every adult has acquired, in the course of his prior experience and education, certain measures of the worth of various sorts of experience. He has learned to look upon qualities like honesty, amiability, perseverance, loyalty, as moral goods; he has learned certain rules for these values – the golden rule in morals, harmony, balance, etc. Since

⁷ Tamže, s. 163.

⁸ M. Krankus, *Škola a demokracia...*, s. 533.

⁹ J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education...*, s. 284-285.

Dewey did not make a strict distinction between the goals of education from the process that lead to it, it merged with the process of personality development. According to him “(i) the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end; and that (ii) the educational process is one of continual reorganising, reconstructing, transforming”¹⁰. Bearing in mind our understanding of human activity, the goal of education cannot be a given for all pupils alike either: it is situational, circumstantial, and has to reflect changes dynamically¹¹.

Dewey criticised the old school¹² for its detachment from life, lack of awareness of children’s mental individuality, and relegating the pupil to the passive role. He claimed these elements were in contrast to the demands of the sort of developing society that calls for a new type of man. Instead, he advocated a radical change in the conception of education, one that brought school and life together. He showed respect for various psychological and social aspects, most of which became the cornerstone of his concept of society based on democracy¹³. In his opinion, any new, plausible model of education had to correspond to the development of society and its new forms of social life, the dominant features being the ability of an individual to react to changing situations, search for creative solutions, and fight against rigidity and prejudices. In connexion with some negative phenomena in school and non-school institutions in Slovakia, it has been increasingly emphasised that the role of school is to establish contact with new forms of social life, unify them, and make a selection of the ’most essential ideas thereof. Furthermore, it must be ensured that the child understands these ideas, enjoys active contact with its social environment, and gains control over its behaviour and conduct¹⁴.

¹⁰ Tamže, s. 72.

¹¹ M. Krankus, *Škola a demokracia...*, s. 533.

¹² Nowadays, similar issues are brought into focus by Boyles, who states that, at the start of their professional career, many teachers had their own visions and experiences regarding what to do and how to do it in their future career. However, the social climate and fear of losing their job often makes it impossible for them to differ or stand out from the average, thus potentially impairing the structure of the school system. Instead of implementing innovations that they would greatly appreciate, many of them prefer to stay “in the old ruts”. D.R. Boyles, *Dewey’s Epistemology: An Argument for Warranted Assertions, Knowing, and Meaningful classroom practice*, „Educational Theory” 2006, vol. 56 (1), s. 57-68.

¹³ J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education...*, s. 113.

¹⁴ The authors of the Millenium project emphasise the importance of pro-social behaviour on the part of pupils, students, and other moral subjects taking part in the

Another thing that Dewey considered invaluable was teachers' awareness of various psychological methods: a detailed knowledge of the child, its mental characteristics and the social environment that it comes from is a complementary part of the teacher's acquired personal knowledge¹⁵. In this connexion Brian stressed that according to Dewey psychology should be taught in high schools as a bond between other studies and a means of making the mind more open to new ideas as well as for the student's own self-awareness¹⁶.

The pragmatic school was based on the pivotal idea of organising educational situations around specific issues that the teacher considers important. Rather than a systematic classification of knowledge, the teaching process was understood as a development of the child's experience. It is for this reason that the child was to become familiar with and remain in contact with its social and physical experience. Experience was understood to be acquired through personal activities. In this connexion, I would like to stress that nowadays demands are increasingly placed on pupils to learn by problem-solving designed to make them think effectively¹⁷. The pupil is thus expected to seek and weigh all sorts of infor-

educational process. Furthermore, they stress the significance of ethics; abilities and skills to communicate effectively, live with other people, and help them establish progressive social relationships. Assuming that the new millenium is likely to be a millenium of humanity and emphasis on the spiritual dimensions of man and mankind, they stress the necessity to support shared values and tolerance and prepare the young for the role of responsible European citizens and participants in the working process in an integrated Europe. V. Rosa et al., *Návrh koncepcie...*, s. 16-17.

¹⁵ Especially in an era when we bear witness too many negative, violent manifestations and instances of vandalism in and out of school in Slovakia as much as elsewhere, though particularly in Western countries, it is very important to get acquainted with the mentality of pupils and students influencing their behaviour and conduct. Even though knowledge of pupils and students' mental processes is repeatedly emphasised at present, university graduates training future teachers keep pointing out that, based on various studies carried out in Slovak primary and secondary schools, teachers are still not sufficiently prepared to face these issues. More thorough preparation for understanding children's and adolescents' minds is demanded so as to facilitate understanding this age group and become more prepared to face the kind of ethical and moral issues that are becoming ever more frequent in school institutions nowadays.

¹⁶ A.W. Brian, *Thought and Action: John Dewey at the University of Michigan*, Michigan 1998, s. 20.

¹⁷ However, bearing in mind the rapid development of information and communication technologies, we often witness students giving precedence to computers and

mation, opinions, and solutions. The way Dewey saw it, the basic method of acquiring knowledge was involving in practical activities and experiments on the part of the pupil. This kind of work was seen to offer sufficient room for freedom as well as to create a sufficient number of problem-solving situations. The child's ability to solve a problem was a benchmark of its mental development.

Democracy in education

According to Dewey, one of the fundamental goals of the pragmatic, active school was to mould the citizens of a future democratic society and their moral and social qualities. Project-based schoolwork created the necessary preconditions for individuals to assert themselves in a group, which laid the fundamentals of rational communication and cooperation habits. Learning as a cooperative form of activity is thus a process of forming the socio-ethical qualities of an individual. When addressing the issue of children's education as preparation for life in society, Dewey adhered to the principles of his philosophy of education. Education has to be based on psychological evidence and child's needs, interests, and process of acquiring experience, but equally also on acquiring social experience. Through individuals' integration into various groups, levels, and social environments, life itself is to be seen as a starting point of ethical education. In this connexion, Dewey claimed that a number of interpersonal relationships in any given social group are automatized. Emotional and intellectual predispositions were absent¹⁸ and social experience, primarily involving contact with other people, was one of the most essential kinds of experience.

Dewey described democracy as the only social form in which self-realisation and self-identification are possible. It gives its citizens both the right and duty to participate in and have control over public affairs, while directing them towards an identity of interests and social goals. Democracy was marked by an intensive experience exchange, securing that everyone has their right to seek their own way and to assess the

the Internet over their own reasoning and problem-solving. We should therefore look for ways of taking advantage of their interest in information technology in the process of forming their experience related to real-life situations.

¹⁸ Tamže.

situation by means of independent judgement and rational control. The moral aspect of democracy involved making it possible for citizens to think critically in order to become familiar with inevitable social changes and interpret events from a holistic point of view.

Dewey's moral education was conceived of along the same lines as the newly-emergent socially-oriented individualism. Although he knew that democracy was a process that would never be brought to completion, the task incumbent on schools was to contribute to the implementation of this process. When dealing with morality, Dewey kept stressing the importance of rational, scientific principles: the moral conduct of an individual was formed by their social context and studying the demands and problems of social life. The socially-oriented function that schools are to play in order to bridge individual and social interest's involved shared activity, establishing new contacts and cooperation, all of which make it possible for a child to develop its own social experience¹⁹. The teacher's role is to help the pupils understand current moral issues, although not by means of precepts (nonetheless, verbal expressions of moral principles are important, too)²⁰. Nowadays, teachers face an even greater demand because schools are not isolated from society. It is ever more difficult to emphasise moral and ethical principles in schools when students frequently bear witness to law-breaking in their own society.

Dewey put emphasis on creating the kind of environment for children that would enable them to acquire social experience, make their own way in life, and establish democratic relationships with other people. The development of personality and individuality manifests itself through a growing understanding of one's actions, interest in social life improvement, social goodness, freedom, and progress. Whereas the basis of democracy lies in an individual's moral self-determination, its development depends on voluntary cooperation among all citizens.

Dewey rejected isolated moral education, claiming it was to be implemented through all aspects of school life. Schools were to teach cooperation, support awareness of mutual dependence, responsibility for shared tasks, and individuals' ability to cooperate. Always involving some problem-solving, education ensured that habits related to cooperation and understanding the importance of social changes were formed. Not just the teacher, but the whole situational context, including all circumstances of

¹⁹ J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*..., s. 417.

²⁰ M. Krankus, *Škola a demokracia*..., s. 537.

the educational environment, “has to make pupils’ conduct more conscious, self-consistent, and decisive”²¹. Interpreted as an education of the will, character, and reason, moral education should potentially be included in any educational subject matter or teaching method – whenever children happen to be learning to think independently, organise and plan their work, make decisions and assessments, and behave responsibly.

Siegel claims: “In order that theory and practice may be coordinated, there needs to be a forum where philosophers and educators can talk to each other about their common interest in improving social life. This forum is philosophy of education, that is, philosophy and education properly understood in their necessary dependence on each other. By viewing philosophy and education as Dewey does, philosophers and educators can and should work together, and talk together, so as to preserve and enhance the precarious life of their society. And those who largely play the role of intermediaries, facilitating the conversation as a whole, would be philosophers of education”²².

The place of Dewey in the philosophy of education

Many historians concerned with the philosophy of education claim that Dewey’s insistence on a radical transformation of school and its adaptation to the demands that life places changed the structure of American schools. Moreover, it had an impact on many pedagogical innovations as well as on the development of pedagogical reformism in other countries of the world. His views on the position of the child/pupil in the process of teaching, importance of motivation, interests and child’s experience with

²¹ Tamže, s. 538.

²² H. Siegel, *Philosophy of Education and the Deweyan Legacy*, „Educational Theory” 2002, vol. 52 (3), s. 273-280. Transforming the philosophy of education in Slovakia also implies that upbringing is to become more important than education; more precisely, education is only a part of upbringing. Upbringing is a matter of society as such, not just a matter of school. The philosophy of education is based on humanism, personality development and creativity. Instead of making efforts merely to acquire knowledge, those who are being educated should also try and learn to be positive about life, find motivation and reasons to live no matter how difficult the conditions, acquire skills for social life and progressive interpersonal relationships, adopt the values of creating and protecting human rights and natural environment, and learn to be free, responsible and creative. V. Rosa et al., *Návrh koncepcie...*, s. 20-22.

the social function of school (central to which is cooperation and the principle of individualisation) had a considerable influence on subsequent theoreticians concerned with reforms in pedagogy in both the USA and Europe.

Nauczyciel, demokratyczne wartości i reguły

Najważniejsze problemy związane z wychowaniem, zauważone już przez Johna Deweya, nabrzmiały współcześnie także na Słowacji. Wychowanie jest funkcją społeczną grupy, dążącej do socjalizacji wszystkich swoich członków. Muszą więc oni mieć wspólne wartości i równe szanse korzystania ze wspólnych dóbr materialnych i duchowych. W demokracji szczególnie ważne jest porozumienie między nauczycielami, rodzicami, uczniami oraz z całym społeczeństwem. Każdy dorosły człowiek uczy się – na podstawie swoich doświadczeń – takich wartości, jak: uczciwość, uprzejmość, wytrwałość, lojalność, a także reguły demokracji (m.in. równowagi i harmonii). Są one niezmiernie ważne jako standardy oceniania nowych doświadczeń i powinny przynosić satysfakcję osobistą oraz umożliwiać porozumienie z innymi.