John Dewey's contributions in the field of Sociology of Education

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Abstract

In the present paper, we aim to highlight, starting from reference works of J. Dewey, a series of his contributions in the field of sociology of education. Starting from the principles of pragmatic pedagogy and fundamental paradigms of sociology of education we will identify the main elements of interference between these two conceptual spheres. The premise of this study was that the sociology of education provides a series of effective solutions to the problems facing school in the contemporary society. Therefore, the principles and the values promoted by John Dewey must be addressed as useful instruments for individual development, and social by default.

Keywords: John Dewey, sociology of education, social institution, social life, curriculum

1. Introduction

During the last decennia, most of the national education systems have been faced with a particularly important problem, namely the decrease of the interest and motivation for learning among pupils. The strategies meant to solve or mitigate this problem are diverse, starting with a detailed knowledge of the pupils’ personality in order to realize an individualized training, continuing with the diversification of the teaching methodology and going up to the change of the organization of the educational process and/or system based on the open school or class principle.

The common denominator of all these changes in the educational sphere is the decision factors’ and the practitioners’ awareness regarding the fact that school, society and life cannot be approached as disjunct matters. Today’s pupils need pertinent answers to questions such as: Why do I have to learn this? Is it a useful notion? In what social or professional context will I be able to use these pieces of information? etc.

The sociology of education, as a science with an interdisciplinary character, situated at the confluence between pedagogy, sociology, psychology and other socio-human sciences, has as its specific object of study the functionality of the educational system, approached from both a macrostructural and microstructural perspective. The issues approached by it concern: the integration of the education system in the social system, education design and planning, self-education and permanent education, approached as social demands, the features of the school institution as social organization, the valorification of the social functions of education: social integration, professional selection, transmission, sociocultural reproduction, social conservation etc.

John Dewey (1859-1952) was an important philosopher, psychologist, and reformer of the educational domain. His innovative ideas left their mark on the educational and social system. At the same time, the name of J. Dewey is associated to: pragmatism as a philosophy, the progressive trend and functional psychology. His monumental work includes an impressive number of over 700 articles and about 40 books, out of which the most important for the educational sphere are: My Pedagogic Creed (1897), The

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Although he is not explicitly included in the sphere of the authors in the domain of the sociology of education, nevertheless starting from his representative works and based on his involvement, along with his friend G. H. Mead, in the socio-educational experiment called the Chicago School, we can affirm that John Dewey has had valuable contributions in the sphere of the sociology of education, as well.

As Dewey drew the attention, in many of his writings, school is implicitly affected by social problems for whose solving a series of elements specific of the paradigms of the sociology of education need to be turned to good use, in the context of the current educational practices.

2. Methodology

Next, based on a dominantly hermeneutic, interpretative study, we will try to highlight the most important ideas present in J. Dewey’s works, in relation to the connexions between school and society.

Actually, even since his early works, as is the case of My Pedagogic Creed (1897), J. Dewey demonstrates a sociological perspective of the educational phenomenon, affirming that education is a social process and “school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends”.

At the same time, J. Dewey affirms his conviction that education must be “a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (Dewey, 1992, 48).

In his opinion, school ought to represent a context allowing the child to exercise certain social practices, similar to the family and in a relation of continuity with it. The arguments supporting these opinions are both psychological and social. Thus, it is necessary to assure a certain continuity between the two educational environments both regarding the process of development of the child’s personality and that of his development as a social being, especially in point of the moral principles and norms desirable on the level of the family and of the society as a whole.

In the context of his works, J. Dewey proposes a series of valuable suggestions regarding the content of school education, the teaching methodology and the evaluation process.

Thus, he affirmed that “the true centre of correlation of the school subjects is not science, nor literature, nor history, nor geography but the child’s own social activities” (Dewey, 1992, 50).

Reflecting attentively, we can conclude that, by his vision, J. Dewey is a promoter of the postmodern pedagogy, in the center of which there is the curriculum paradigm, according to which any instructive-educative process needs to be focused on the educational aims and, depending on them, the contents, methods and evaluation strategies need to be adopted. Another affirmation of Dewey’s supporting our previous statement is that according to which “Acting with an aim is all one with acting intelligently” (Dewey, 1972, 87).

At the same time, we can realize a connexion with what we call today the integrated approach of the training contents, which supposes cutting off certain problems of the pupils’ daily life and dealing with them by inter or transdisciplinary connections.

Along the same coordinates is also the idea according to which “we should not omit the importance for the educative aims of the close and intimate familiarization with the immediate nature, with the real things and materials, with the natural process of their manipulation and with the knowledge of their social need and uses” (Dewey, 1977, 89).

In relation to the nature of the methods that ought to be used in the education process, Dewey’ suggestions are centered on three elements, namely:
The teachers’ preoccupation for the acquisition by the pupil of correct representations, “vivid and strong of the objects he comes in touch with during his existence”;

The observation and stimulation by the teachers of the interests manifested by the pupils, as they “indicate the development degree that the child has reached”;

Valorization of the emotions appeared only as an effect of actions and elimination as much as possible of sentimentalism, considered as the worst evil “threatening our education”, after “deadness and dullness, formalism and routine” (Dewey, 1992, 53, 54).

Regarding the evaluation, Dewey considers unequivocally, accentuating the social functions of evaluation, that “examinations are useful only to the extent to which they test the child’s aptitudes for social life”. (Dewey, 1992, 50).

Particularly edifying for the illustration of J. Dewey’s conception regarding the relation between school and society is the work entitled precisely: The School and Society (1900, reedited in 1915). In the eight chapters of this work the author brings into focus a series of problems specific of the sphere of confluence between the social macrosystem and the school institution, as a social subsystem.

In the context of the first chapter, entitled “School and social progress”, the author draws the attention on the changes intervening on the level of the society and which ought to produce effects on the school level as well.

In harmony with his pragmatist spirit, Dewey supports the need to introduce, in the school practice, activities meant to determine the pupils to learn by direct action, by the manipulation of real objects. These, however, need to be viewed as “methods of living and learning, not as distinct objects of study” (Dewey, 1977, 91).

Promoting the principle of work division, pioneered by the founding father of the sociology of education Emil Durkheim, Dewey appreciates that in school, as well as in society, the pupil needs to be involved in an action in whose context he assumes roles and secures statuses in the spirit of a certain social order.

At the same time, the author launches a vehement criticism of the American education of the beginning of the 20th century, saying that it “addresses mostly the intellectual aspect of our nature, the desire to learn, to accumulate information and know the symbols of learning, not our impulses and tendencies to do, to create, to produce under the form of the useful or of art” (Dewey, 1977, 99).

We cannot help noticing that these problems, identified by Dewey more than a century ago, are still present in most education systems, triggering complex phenomena such as: school abandonment and failure, decreased motivation for school, manifestation of undesirable behaviours by all the educational agents etc.

In the second chapter, entitled “School and the child’s life”, the author approaches the relation between the school institution and daily life and the effects of this relation on the level of the development of the children’s personality. The author criticizes the traditionalist educational practices, characterized by “passivity of attitude, mechanical massing of children, uniformity of curriculum and method” (Dewey, 1977, 103).

Actually, he observes that the main pole of school education is by far not the pupil but rather the teacher and, as a result, school cannot be an area where the child truly lives.

According to J. Dewey, school ought to be an area of continual actions related to the four fundamental interests of the child:

- interest for conversation/communication;
- interest for research, investigation, discovery;
- interest for constructing or manufacturing things;
- interest for artistic expression.

Consequently, the instructive-educative actions ought to be designed by the teachers starting from the premise that it is necessary to meet these interests and not to shape a horizon of knowledge as vast as possible supposed to be used the moment when certain life situations are encountered. In fact, we can easily note even in the context of the contemporary society, multiple situations in which pupils and young people with high academic performances do not confirm these results in the daily life or in their professional activity and opposite situations when pupils with mediocre results get to top social or professional positions.
As the author Mirela Mihăescu also notices in her doctoral thesis entitled Fundamentele pedagogice ale dezvoltării teoriei și metodologiei curriculului. Contribuția lui John Dewey (Pedagogical Fundaments of the Development of the Curriculum Theory and Methodology. John Dewey’s Contribution), according to Dewey pragmatist vision, school needs to be a miniature society, functioning based on the respect of the values of a democratic society: “the value of efficient work, the value of individual and group respect, the value of cooperation and collaboration, the value of full respect between the two actors of education – the teacher and the pupil”.
(Mihăescu, 2010, 149)

To illustrate the connections that ought to function between school, society and life, particularly suggestive is the model structured by J. Dewey in his work School and Society, which we present below:

![Fig.1 Correlation between the school system and social life](source: Dewey, 1977, 123)

In essence, by this figure, Dewey illustrates the interdependence relations between the main educational media, at their center being school, as an institution of formal education but which needs to permanently adapt its goals and contents having in view the influences received from the other socio-educational factors.

### 3. Results and discussions

As a consequence of all the above-mentioned aspects, we shall retain as valuable implications resulting from J. Dewey’s works both for the domain of sociology of education and for the current educational practices, the following:

- Approaching school as a social institution, as a form of social life and as an environment for exercising social practices;
- Structuring the aims and contents of education by reference to the daily life problems;
- Centring the teaching methodology on the pupils’ fundamental interests: for conversation/communication, for research, investigation, discovery, for manufacturing things and the one for artistic expression;
- Structuring the evaluation by relating it to the pupils’ social skills;
- Promoting the principle of learning by experience and direct action;
- Valorification in the instructive-educative process of the multiple correlations existing between the main educational environments.
4. Conclusions

We cannot conclude without a short reflective analysis on the extent to which the innovative ideas launched by J. Dewey, nearly a century ago, regarding the need of school reform, find their echo in the current educational practices.

Certainly, important steps have been taken in the direction of a pupil-centered education, related to his interests and preoccupations; in the curriculum have been introduced markedly applicable disciplines; modern training methods, based on action and cooperation, are used; in the approach of the contents of education, there is an attempt to pass from the monodisciplinary approach to the interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary approaches and even to the integrated approach; school is becoming an institution increasingly better anchored in the community problems by the multiple partnership projects it develops etc.

However, the transformation of the contemporary school in agreement with the model of the ideal school imagined by J Dewey, meant to represent life itself, remains a quite remote target.

References