Key concepts in the pedagogy of John Dewey

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Abstract

The American pedagogue of the middle of the 19th century is well known for his philosophy in education. The following article presents some of the main concepts of his pedagogy. The beginning of the article mentions the importance of manual occupations in child’s education. We emphasize on the influence of the experiential learning but also on the ability of the child to imagine. Furthermore, we talk about the tendency of the child to imitate the adult and also about the importance of interest in the process of learning. The article ends with a presentation about discipline and freedom from Dewey perspective.

Key words: pedagogy, John Dewey, child, active learning.

1. Introduction

A theorist and also a practitioner in education, John Dewey emphasized a lot about how children learn best when they interact with their environment and when they are involved with the school curriculum. He argued that the child is not a passive recipient of information but an active individual.

An important idea in the pedagogy of John Dewey refers to practicing crafts in school. In one of his works „Social Pedagogy”, Dewey points to the role of the manual occupations in the child’s education. He refers to carpentry, blacksmithing, weaving, and naming them as the ways of living. He declares himself against any kind of teaching in which the child is passively listening to the teacher’s speech. He introduces arguments in favor of these manual activities like: they develop in the child the need of feeling useful and, therefore, useful for others; they prepare the child for real life and develop the child’s abilities (1919, pp.8-9).

2. Experiential learning

Learning through experience has a greater influence that learning through only the use of memory. Dewey recalls the efficient way of combining crafts with elements of history and geography (p.13).

Experience has a meaning when this refers to consequence, as well. Only in this situation the child learns something new (1992, p. 124). Experience means knowledge.

In his philosophy, Dewey encourages the usage of active occupations in schools, the study of nature, of art, less usage of formal and symbolic elements and changing the morale atmosphere between student and teacher (1919, 20).

The school of our days is made only to listen.

In his experience of teacher, Dewey recalls a moment when he wanted to buy furniture that should be child-sized and he only found furniture that was destined to listening and not working. The traditional school encourages a certain stage of

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passivity, responsiveness and assimilation of many information in a short time (1919, 21). This type of education refers to mass instruction.

Only through experience the child can get knowledge from the world around him. Everything that surrounds him gives information. In this way, the child can learn a lot of things only by living.

He pledges for the idea that the child should be in the center of education. He says that the actual school is not a place for the child to life in reality (p.24).

Is very important for the experience to wake up the child’s curiosity, to stimulate the will to action and to fix intense goals that lead to knowledge (1992, 138).

3. Imagination and play

Furthermore, Dewey talks about imagination and children play. In his work „School and Society”, he talks about the ability of the child to imagine, using the life that unfolds around him. Form this point of view, the American pedagogue calls these simbolic activities (1977, p. 150).

For the child to be able to imagine he has to develop a foundation of real knowledge. Only after he has this information he can use his full potential in imagination.

This emphasize on the fact that if the child’s activities are not real and precise like the ones of the adult, the result is superficiality, nervous tension and exhaustion of the forces (p.150).

4. Imitation and interest

In general, the child imitates the adult and he is open to the adult’s sugestion. An important principle in Dewey’s work is refering to imitation. He says that no activity should be „initiated through imitation” (p.154). Everything should come from the child. The child mustn’t be a perfect copy of the adult. The adult should be a guide for the child. When the child is a perfect copy of the adult, then he becomes dependent on the adult, developing a servile attitude.

The educator can discover the universe of the child but only through a close observation of the interest of childhood (1992, 53).

„To stop the interest means to replace the adult with the child and in this way to diminish his curiosity and his active intelect, to stop his initiative … Interest is always the sign of an ability; the important thing is to discover this ability” (p.53).

Among the characteristics of the child’s interest, John Dewey recalls: „Interest means care, sharing, concern for an object; if this is not developed in activity then it is not real”(1992, 205) but also:

„To be interested means to be absorbed, immersed, stimulated by a certain thing” (1972, 110).

Interest can lead to inner discipline of the child. If a child finds an interest in an activity, he becomes busy in studying that activity and, therefore, he concentrates.

Unfortunately, the school has no patience and time to discover children interests. There are other things that keep teachers occupied but in the process of learning children have a certain tendency to forget the information that do not stimulate their curiosity.

„When a child feels that his activity is a task, he does it only by constraint. It is absurd to presume that a child receives more intelectual or mental discipline when he works with an object in which he has no interest” (1992, 242).

5. Interest and constraint

John Dewey says: „It is true interest when the inner self identifies itself with an idea or a concept: this means that he found the way to express himself. Constraint–which is opposite to interest – refers to a separation between conscience and facts that must be fulfilled. The following of this separation is a struggle between two sorts of activities. There are formed mechanical habits which are expressed in meaningless
outer activity because it is not accompanied by inner activity” (f. a., 32-33).

Another characteristic of interest refer to something active, dynamic, it is not an inactive feeling to an object (p.33).

The true pedagogue is the one that, thanks to his experience and science, can see in these interests not one cornerstone in education, but also functions that have power and that lead to an ideal purpose (p 61).

The most important duty of the educator is to use this interest and these habits in such a manner that he can transform them into something more developed, more disciplined (p. 62).

We can talk about discipline only where the individual works his powers in freedom and in activities that are worthy of being used. Mathematics is not disciplining characters as much because there are separated from their practical application (p. 65).

The child lives into a world in which everything is personal, everything is contact. Things in the world do not touch his experience unless it refers directly to his happiness. He does not live into a world of facts and ideas, but into a world in which there is no room for the truth that refers to exterior facts. Everything is love and sympathy. The child must learn to pass from a physical environment into a whole world (p. 70).

6. Discipline

Talking about order and discipline in school, Dewey says that the result must be followed according to the goal that one wants to accomplish. If the main goal says that 50 pupils should learn the lesson by heart for the teacher that discipline should be organized in such a manner that the goal to be fulfilled. Instead, if the goal of the discipline is to develop solidarity than this must be organized in such a manner that the goal to be fulfilled:

„There is a special order where something is about to be built. It is a kind of clutter in a workshop: silence is not a rule; there is no one to impose a certain physical attitude; the arms are not crossed and the book does not maintain a fixed position. Each one works on different special activities in the middle of the confusion. Movement is an inevitable consequence of activity, of movement. Their activities give birth to a special form of discipline” (Dewey, J., 1919, 11).

John Dewey think that „ discipline should begin from the school life, in general, and not directly from the teacher. The role of the teacher is only to determine, based on a longer experience and a more mature judgment, the way in which the discipline of life will get to the child” (Dewey, J., 1992, 50).

The adult should fulfill the role of a guide that takes into account the child’s interest and potential and according to these he creates the educational atmosphere.

„Interest and discipline are bound together and not opposites” (1972, 112).

When the child finds in his environment something that catches his attention he is drawn to it and he concentrates in that task.

Children also have a need to constantly move and this movements creates great problems for teachers that need tot hem to stand still.

„The main source of the problem of school discipline is that the teacher must waist most of his time for fighting against the activities of the body, that prevent the mid to reach its goal. Physical silence is rewarded; likewise stillness, rigid uniformity of position and movement” (1992, 125).

Unfortunately, because of these tension that is created between the adult and the child, deviation appear:

„The body that lacks attention, without having good paths to channel the activity, it simmers without knowing why or how, in meaningless violence, or senseless activities. The children that are active physically become undisciplined and fidgety; the quiet ones spent their whole energy in the negative energy of maintaining their active tendencies and instincts stopped (1992, 125).

In the end, Dewey gives a short definition of discipline:
„Discipline means to know what you have to do and to do it, immediately, using the necessary means” (1972, 112).

7. Freedom

The traditional methods of education use to involve a lot of inaction and receptivity. The physical silence encouraged these. Dewey talks a lot about the importance of physical silence but only after practicing an action which involve the hands:

„The freedom of the outer action is a mean for the freedom of judgement and for the power to perform the chosen purpose” (1977, 210).

The level of freedom that the adult give to children depends from one individual to another. This has the tendency to diminish once the child grows up. But the complete absence of freedom is very negative for the development of the child.

The body is a mainstream of energy, he has to do something. The educator has the duty to know these aspects. But Dewey emphasizes on the fact that freedom must not become a goal itself. In this case, freedom leads to chaos. The adult must not retreat completely from the environment but, through the objects, materials, and his own suggestions he must guide the activity of the child. Unlike the traditional educator, the task of the new educator is more difficult because this one must be aware of the child’s potential, to use the previous experiences of the child in order to prepare the future learning conditions (p.216).

The ideal purpose of education is to create in the child the ability to self-control. Self-control refers to the perfect combination between observation and memory with the ability to control the impulses from inside (1977, 209).

The American pedagogue does not want to create an image of opposites like old school- new school but the goal is to create the environment that deserve to be called education (1977, p.227).

„Preparing the child for life means to give him the power to control himself; means to prepare him in such a way that he can use his full capacities; that the eye, the ear and hand to be ready to lead; for the judgement to be prepared to discover the conditions in which it can work and the power of activity to action in an effective manner” (1992, 48).

References