On an axiological model of education based on J. Dewey’s view

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Abstract

The education philosophy and pedagogy developed by J. Dewey constitute an inexhaustible spiritual matrix from which, after each search, we become enriched. The new education, self-defined by the (re)discovery of the child and increased confidence in his great power of (self)training, has been proposing, for more than a century, a new axiology of education. The study we propose aims precisely at identifying, categorizing, analysing and representing the set of nucleus-values on which the entire pedagogical edifice developed by J. Dewey is built, an axiological platform that may be a (re)source for current useful approaches to the formative act, eaten to its core by the present education crisis which is primarily a crisis of values.

Keywords: new education, progressivism, pragmatism, values, axiological model

1. (Re)reading Dewey

The individual-society relationship, how it is built and evolves, as well as the role of mediator played by education have always been fascinating themes of meditation. The more disharmonious the society and the more disjointed and dysfunctional the relations with its own members, the more stringent the need for harmonization solutions. Education can be one of the vectors of this reconciliation!

The spiritual return of the 21st century to cultural magisterial works and paideutic models of vast breadth and inspiration feeds the aspiration to salvation (of man, education, society) in a time of post-postmodernism marked by mercantilism, quantitism, standardization, superficiality, improvisation, lack of confidence and, paradoxically, even ignorance. In 1930, J. Dewey characterized the respective contemporary context by the following words: “we are living in the money culture” (p. 9). We find that this is the same, unfortunately, even nowadays, moreover worsened by its negative effects. He argues that this material culture has significantly influenced the whole civilization (and continues to do so! – our note), making traditions, equal opportunities, freedom of association and intercommunication be covered and smothered at the expense of individuality and its free development (ibid, p. 18). Although the author admits that such dimensions as quantification, mechanization and standardization have imposed the American nation as a world power and are not without some strengths, particularly on improving the standard of living, he will not hesitate to show that they have invaded mind and character, utterly subordinating the very soul. For Dewey, the culture crisis is not a quantitative matter, one that would deprive society of the emergence of outstanding creators or the manifestation of the phenomenon of increasing the number of people participating in creation and enjoying art or science. It is, essentially, a qualitative matter, which refers to the transformation of a material, industrial civilization within a distinct hypostasis of liberation of the mind and refining the emotions of all those who take part in it (ibid, p. 124). The last lesson that he teaches us is to overcome a boring (and, in fact, sterile – our note) criticism, and move into the world of practical solutions (ibid, p. 24-25). And this pragmatic orientation means the recovery of human individuality in all its complexity, creativity and efficiency (ibid, p. 142).

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Metaphorically, J. Dewey would say that to get an integrated individuality, each of us needs to cultivate his own garden. „Education therefore means not simply the development of inherent abilities but the learning of something specifically human, and that means communication through symbols” (Tröhler, 2000, p. 180). Only this garden is the world in the angle where an individual reaches his way of being, namely a subjective world, marked by our ever growing individuality. Accepting our world and interacting with it, as part of the ever moving present, we (re)create ourselves and contribute to building an unknown future (Dewey, 1930, p. 171). In other words, „Dewey, however, favours neither the individual nor the community; he prefers their mutual pedagogic impetus” (Tröhler, 2000, p. 180).

2. On the main values promoted by J. Dewey’s philosophy of education

J. Dewey’s philosophy and pedagogy are, by no accident, in a deep and intrinsic correlation, which makes it possible to extend the philosophical thought to the educational process in a holistic and comprehensive manner. From his position of father of progressivism and outstanding representative of the new education, he will submit to attention and reflection profound dimensions of the formative process, two of which being aims and curriculum. Both these and all the other aspects of his analysis (pedagogical creed, the relationship between democracy and education, the aspect of experience, the relationship between ethics and pedagogy, child and curriculum, school and society) rely on the foundation of educational values, discussed both in topical, explicit analyses (Educational Values in Democraţie şi educaţie/Democracy and Education, p. 201-216; Education and value, in Fundamente pentru o știință a educației/Foundations of Education, p. 301-328) and implicit approaches (Școalele de mâine/Schools of Tomorrow, 1940).

His view is a decisive one: education is the process by which the unity of knowledge and values that are manifested concretely in behaviour is achieved (Dewey, 1992, p. 74). Therefore, the philosophical foundation of education and its changes becomes so relevant, being only one, simultaneous, axiological. There cannot be proposed reforms without a clear and consistent architecture of values, without a systematic, high (ideal, goals) and deep (principles) horizon, that may give life, guide and support formative practices. And if these are proposed in their absence, they are empty, superficial and unsuccessful. What is unfortunately omitted nowadays is the relative autonomy of values, the fact that it is not the company management’s responsibility to determine the aims of education but to discover the values worthwhile and establish them as benchmarks and targets to be achieved (ibid, p. 107). By means of horizon, freedom and creative intervention, values – the foundation of education – intervene as regulating factor of social progress (ibid, p. 98-100).

Corroborating the study of a number of 5 works of J. Dewey with the comparative pedagogical text analysis, we propose a first representation of an axiological model of education for the mentioned author. In agreement with the author’s view that we cannot establish a hierarchy of values (ibid, p. 318), we have identified in our readings a set of 6 values that we consider relevant in an order and logic suggested by us, that we shall further analyse and systemize: humanity, individuality, freedom, respect, experience and happiness, all of these articulated around the child, a centre, benchmark and goal of all education. To succeed in its axiological approach, school „must exclude the influence of valueless and devaluing elements in the existing environment as much as possible in order to create “a purified atmosphere of action”, so that a “better society” can emerge” (Tröhler, 2000, p. 181).

2.1. Humanity

Education is defined, inter alia, in My Pedagogic Creed, as a „process of regulating the process of participation in social consciousness (...) through which the individual becomes co-sharer in human culture and thereof its heir” (Dewey, 1992, p. 54, 46). This cannot be seen in isolation, a self by itself, nor can he be understood in a hypostasis other than that of worthy representative of humanity in its defining aspects,
carrier of its accomplishments and a creator in his turn, therefore in a symbiotic relationship of harmonization, representation and mutual growth.

The role of education is to compatibilize the individual and society, to fit each individual as he actually is with real life and school, transformed into a way of social life in and through which students enter authentic relationships with others, in a unity of action and thought (ibid, p. 49). So, the „community’s obligation towards education is its supreme moral obligation” (ibid, p. 54). Since Kant, it has been argued over and over again that through education man turns himself into man as a rational being, through action and voluntary effort. Only the target is different: to do it for the existing state of things, for immediate adaptation and comfort or for a future state that would „promote the best possible achievements of humanity as humanity???” (Dewey, 1992, p. 68-69). J. Dewey suggests that the two are not disjunctive and the pragmatic way of designing and implementing education will enable their (re)conciliation via the active method and school reorganization so that it is not preparation for life, but life itself.

2.2. Individuality

J. Dewey argues that this reconciliation is possible if education assumes the responsibility to discover the heritage of each individual and build the opportunity so that he may be prepared to actually take it (an idea formulated since Plato). A significant role in this endeavour lies with identifying the unlimited skills of each of us and exploiting them (ibid, p. 64), a psychological vector revalued in the Romanian psychology and pedagogy over the past 25 years. In the work Schools of tomorrow (1940), the author will formulate the purpose of education in relatively amazing terms (both for those times as well as, why not, for these times – at least for our school system), corroborating individuality with freedom „If the purpose of education lies in the individual development of the student, then freedom is just as necessary as authoritative discipline in the classical education” (p. 113). To be granted this development, the child should be given the chance to reveal himself without restraint, as he really is. Thus, the teacher will be able to get to know him, discovering what he needs, in its own way, in order to be able to evolve fully, harmoniously, in agreement with himself. Opposing this goal there are the standardized, stereotypical, algorithmic, memorization-repetitive type of teaching practices, that lead to counter-performance and lack of knowledge about the child (ibid, p. 110-111). In fact, J. Dewey pleads for genuine knowledge of the children’s needs and taking them into account. Otherwise, doing the same thing with all the students that we work with in a classroom will diminish their liveliness, interest in learning, their own judgment, understanding of contents, the pleasure and joy of coming to school, increasing „the number of incompetents, who will become a dead burden to society” (ibid, p. 141).

2.3. Freedom

For J. Dewey, individuality can exist and be accomplished only through freedom. It must be manifested both tangibly (freedom of movement, action) and mentally, as the purpose of education is none other than „the free and full development of the body and spirit” (Dewey, 1940, p. 16). The child cannot flourish as an individual when someone else acts or thinks for or instead of him. In such an artificial environment, cut off from life and its challenges, the child will grow like in a greenhouse, without the fresh air of learning through discovery, without strength or creative activity (idem). Given the view taken by Dewey from Mrs. Johnson according to whom the small child is neither moral nor immoral, unable to distinguish good from evil (ibid, p. 21), it becomes obvious why a moralizing approach to his acts is useless, as he understands nothing from it, hence we must give the child more freedom: to practice good or bad deeds, to learn to bear the consequences of his own actions, to assume responsibilities and training and, eventually, to build character. The same work enumerates several manifestation forms of the small child’s freedom: to choose and practice their favourite physical movements; to study outside, in the open air; to
investigate, by themselves, various topics from disciplines such as natural sciences, geography (ibid, p. 26), mathematics, arts, foreign languages. In this way, freedom of action can produce the effect of job satisfaction. In terms of teaching, promoting freedom does not mean the absence of a schedule, but the possibility of a more flexible one whenever there is a problem of great interest to children, as well as putting into action supportive solving mechanisms. All these aspects support Dewey’s idea then it is essential for the child to experience „what he can do and cannot do (...) in order to become a happy, moral and capable person” (1940, p. 112, 109). This point of the analysis requires Dewey’s perspective on the relationship between freedom and discipline, realities that must be understood in a complementary manner. Discipline does not mean obedient training based on coercion but building a behaviour „of proper use of independence” called active discipline (ibid, p. 115). It is about conscious compliance with the rules intrinsically determined based on the interest for the work conducted, the satisfaction produced by it and the identification of their own progress.

2.4. Respect

Knowing the child and restructuring, on these grounds, the whole process of organization and development of education is a sign of respect that adults (parents, teachers, community members) grant to the child. Not regarding the child as small and insignificant, seeing in each child the hidden multitude of possibilities waiting to be discovered and cultivated equals to respecting his nature, needs and growth requirements (ibid, p. 6-7). J. Dewey sadly finds that the educators of his time focus predominantly on the product and almost never on the process, being interested in obtaining results quickly, regardless of how they occur (idem), losing sight of the very process, road, way. Whenever the child does not enjoy the conditions of being free, healthy, able to move, communicate, play, manipulate, learn in a sensory-motor-action way, to understand, participate, meet his interests, manifest initiative, create, enjoy, he is deprived of freedom and therefore the respect he should show to those around him. In My Pedagogic Creed, the author will illustrate in concrete, harsh terms such mistakes that he believed that the educators or education systems made in this regard. This should be, also nowadays, a motif for reflection for decision makers, teachers and parents who rush time and performance achievement: „I think we violate the nature of the child and make it difficult to acquire the best moral results by introducing the child to a series of special disciplines such as reading, writing, geography, etc. without connection to social life” (1992, p.50).

2.5. Experience

The famous definition from Democracy and education that bears the unmistakable mark of J. Dewey, according to whom education is the „reconstruction or reorganization of experience which is added to the meaning of prior experience and which increases the ability to direct the evolution of subsequent experience” (1972, p. 67) expresses the appreciation that the author attaches to practice, to continuous direct action involved in the formative process, both in terms of content and purpose. His unwavering conviction that „any real education is achieved through experience” (ibid, p. 110) will underpin the substantial analysis in the chapter On Experience – The Means and Goals of Education. The vector-idea developed here, found as a leitmotif in all his work, is that education is a process of development of the human personality “in, via and for experience” (ibid, p. 111). For this reason, Brereton systematized 12 attributes of experience (2009).

Consistent with himself, he will develop, in Ethics and pedagogy, the issues of the complex relationship between education and experience. On this occasion, he will argue that in the child’s development, experience is a formative path itself, playing a part not only in building skills, competencies and conduct, but actually becoming, essentially, an attitude vector, defining for shaping one’s character. How this relation is understood may be seen in how a child correlates (theoretical) knowledge and the
ways to achieve it (in practical ways - which becomes a vital aspect!). This type of interaction will lead to a favourable attitude towards labour, an intrinsically motivated orientation of future activities (1992, p. 210). Precisely in and through this close connection between education and experience can there be highlighted, among other things, the value of Dewey’s conception, for whom the ultimate goal of education is character building, and this cannot be achieved through two different sets of values, ethical principles (one for school life, respectively one for society). Therefore, „the only way to prepare for life is to practice life“ (ibid, p. 214). In the constant dispute with the representatives of classical pedagogy, he will emphasize the need to change two essential aspects: 1. adult mentality on the organization and conduct of the educational process; 2. the teaching methods used – both with the aim to transform them into true sources for enriching the experience of the learner. As he will argue in his work The Schools of tomorrow, when faced with knowledge from books, the child is forced to fight against an exaggerated universe of symbols, abstractions that do not even nearly exploit his personal life experiences. Even if he does assimilate these contents, in a quite cumbersome manner, he will do it in a mechanical manner, achieving only a superficial, implicitly apparent knowledge (1940, p. 13). In the chapter Learning through experience, J. Dewey expresses a balanced, rightful position on the relations that should exist, in the formative process, between the theoretical universe of books and the world of practice. Thus, he will show that it is preferable to prioritize experiential activities because in this way children will have access, through direct and personal paths, to knowledge of the world, they will become interested, curious and will gradually rise towards the horizon of ideas, because the relations between the two plans will become much clearer. In fact, action knowledge will trigger the mechanisms of theoretical knowledge, supporting and turning it into a passionate activity (ibid, p. 219)

Therefore, the role of the school should be significantly changed from an informative (to communicate knowledge) into a predominantly formative one (to teach children to acquire this knowledge) (ibid, p. 14), and from product to process (as cited in V. Nicolescu, Introductory study to J. Dewey, Basics of Education, 1992, p. 29). The key to this transformation is the organization, development and realization of a long series of diversified manual and professional activities, personal learning experiences. And the role of the school is the „coronation of children’s everyday experience (...) because there is no book or map that can replace personal experience” (ibid, p. 59, 61). Known as a fervent promoter of interactive learning methods, we may also consider him, at the same time, one of the precursors of alternative methods of assessment, as long as he argues that the „assessment is to be applied with the books open, for student progress looks at how students know to use the books” (ibid, p. 24). Summarizing the strengths of these experiential methods, Dewey will refer to their impact on: the harmonious (physical, rational, emotional, communicational, social) development of children; the formation of intrinsic motivation for learning that will lead to a fair attitude favourable to work; cultivation of general human qualities, relevant to interpersonal relationships, such as initiative and originality (ibid, p. 246-247). All these are arguments that support our interpretation that for J. Dewey experience is the backbone of teaching methodology, because it is the bearer of the facts of life. In this way, the ego harmonizes with society and may become, according to the observation of V. Nicolescu, mutually determinative (in the Introductory study to J. Dewey, Basics of Education, 1992, p. 15). Experience is so important to Dewey that he built an entire “philosophy of humanness around it” (Brereton, 2009, p.7).

2.6. Happiness

Even if the value of happiness does not enjoy conceptual development of the same extension as the other analysed values, in terms of its relevance it may unquestionably stand next to them. Whereas the first 5 values presented are definitely means-values, happiness may certainly be viewed as a goal-value.

By analysing how schools in several American cities (Gari, Chicago, Cincinnati) were organized and operated, Dewey argued that the teachers in those schools gave
priority to children, being interested, first and foremost, in their happiness and success and, only secondly, in the development of industries (1940, p. 207). In his view, the two should be linked in an efficient way, so that the industry may contribute as a support, to a practical, attractive and motivating training of children (idem).

In his work *Schools of tomorrow* (1940), the author will claim with utmost certainty that the „child has the right to a happy life” (p. 15). Experiential practice will create the training circumstances that may ensure individual existence in agreement with social existence. It is precisely the establishment of an intelligent and complete relationship between the child and his community that will determine both the child’s happiness and the progress of the society. For Dewey, there is a strong correlation between the child’s health, the practical activities that he carries out, the manifestation of his freedom and his state of happiness (ibid, p. 239). If noting causes him pain, if he can move and think without restriction, if he can choose and practice what attracts and interests him, if he can take initiative and create, then he is happy. This is how he will grow and be as an adult, and will educate his own children in the same way. Moreover, dialectically speaking, there cannot be a happy individual existence in a society where the majority of its members are relatively unhappy. A society that really pursues its own progress will fight so that each individual may develop his possibilities (1992, p. 241) and become fully accomplished, until obtaining happiness, the utmost goal of, implicitly or explicitly, any person. Ultimately, the role of education is to ensure the formation of a man that is „happy, moral and able” (1940, p.109).

3. A possible axiological model generated by reading J. Dewey’s work

Reading the above mentioned works of J. Dewey may provide a basis for outlining a possible axiological model (Figure 1). As with any new education approach, the core of the system of values is represented by the child, with his profile, particularities and needs.

![Figure 1](image-url)
of all the others. The value of happiness (6) closes the model as goal-value, ensuring its verticality and completeness.

Like any synthesis, the proposed model may have the advantage of bringing into the present a relatively subjective representation of the issues considered essential by its creator. The attempt to systematize and correlate the main values identified in the analysed works in a unitary and coherently articulated structure may be overshadowed by not including all the reference values and, implicitly, an impoverishment of ideas. On the other hand, for comparative analyses or educational purposes, such representations may bring increased clarity, brevity and unity to the approach criteria.

From this point of view, the model may be compared with another one, structured after reading 4 works of M. Montessori, developed and presented by us at the International Conference of Educational Alternatives (CIAE), June 1, 2016 at the Bistrița subsidiary of Babeș-Bolyai University (in press). The openings offered by this approach may continue with the elaboration of the axiological models for each educational alternative, as well as a comparative analysis of all of them. On this basis, there could be more easily and efficiently identified and systematized a set of formative effects and implications that could pave the way for complementing the educational alternatives with classical education, at least at the level of the first five cycles of schooling. As Grigoriev affirms (2014) „sooner or later historical thought finds itself at the end of a story, and then it starts anew by placing itself in the middle of another one” (p. 372).

4. Pedagogical implications

The modernity of J. Dewey’s work and polymorphism openings offered by its philosophical and pedagogical design are beyond doubt. This explains the number and diversity of the studies developed from his work (Višnovsky, Zolcer, 2016; Nelsen, 2015; Hébert, 2015; Sutinen, Kallioniemi, Pihlström, 2015; Grigoriev, 2014; Boyles, 2012; Popp, 2011; Schecter, 2011; Waks, 2010; Brereton, 2009; Hopmann, 2009; Knoll, 2009; Loomis, Rodriguez, 2009; Kosnoski, 2005; Bellmann, 2004; Tröhler, 2000).

Some pedagogical implications imposed:

a. general pedagogical implications – we appreciate that by the analysis and axiological model proposed we can stimulate a renewed interest for focused reading of the representative works on the new education, particularly the works of J. Dewey. This is a new beginning, including for us, to which we shall return, every time when we shall consider the writings of J. Dewey, in an effort to complete, adjust and improve this first version of the model. We admit that one of our objectives is to recover the beauty of the admirably written pedagogical text and stimulate curiosity for the investigation of such books, in a world of education inflated with copy-paste works generally lacking authentic ideas and also, obviously, effective educational approaches. Last but not least, we would like our proposal to remind those interested about the fact that at the heart of our pedagogical culture lies, well preserved, an inexhaustible treasure of solutions, extremely timely and pertinent, to almost all the contemporary issues of education. They only have to be read and (re) discovered here, in their original context and not elsewhere, in the phantasmagoria of some ministerial decision maker or illiterate school manager. The two fundamental skills of intellectual work - thinking and reading can be our saviours!!! Moreover, such an approach to education can contribute to the formation/development of teachers themselves. „The desire to see teachers enact the values (...) is understandable, and it captures the heart of the difficulty of preparing others to enter into such a complex endeavour as teaching” (Nelsen, 2015, p. 86).

b. particular pedagogical implications – with the model we presented we have proved that if you read any work (particularly that of J. Dewey!) through an axiological lens, we may discover, systematize and present a structural package of values (humanity, individuality, freedom, respect, experience, happiness) that gives expression to the philosophical conception of the author and becomes a founder of the
action order. Beyond all the assumed limits of such an attempt, we continue to believe it is useful, both in its theoretical and practical dimension.

c. specific pedagogical implications related to Dewey’s view on education – in order for these values to become objectified and generate the educational reality shaped by J. Dewey, the essential element of change should be school (unlike at M. Montessori, where this is the adult!). He appreciates, in the form of a creed, that the school level would require at least the following transforming accents: 1. The school should become a proactive institution, a genuine form of social life, which, even if simplified, may develop gradually, continuously and coherently out of along with family life, where children „may enter into real relationships with others in a unity of action and thinking” (1992, p.49); 2. The overall aim of the school should not be instructive but moral, aimed at building character and shaping the individual in order to be able to take care of himself in relation to change, irrespective of whether change is produced by something/somebody else or he produces it (ibid, p. 213); 3. The experience should become the vector of change in school. It will give direction and substance to restructuring the whole educational institution, infusing the entire curriculum in an all-encompassing manner: finalities, content, strategy, evaluation. Special attention should be paid to „the problem of organizing contents and methods in order to have a broad and rich experience” (1992, p.327); 4. In terms of acquisitions, the school should empower a child with intellectual work techniques, intrinsic motivation to study („the child should possess the knowledge tools that would help him solve real problems (...) making him feel the taste for knowledge”) (1940, p.14) and only with the knowledge that he can understand. Putting all these aspects together, it results that there are three things that have to be modified in the traditional school: the „subjects taught; how teachers teach and how their students learn” (1940, p.140).

The contemporaneity of his ideas is more than obvious!

References