

Neo-humanistic logic in the changes in Educational concepts [1]

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Abstract: The text will reflect on the concept of general education from the angle of its being subjected to general revision. Having established value polarization (to efficiently address the needs of the labour market) between knowledge of use value and knowledge of no use value (and, thus, not legitimate), general educational knowledge is moving away from functionally equal relevant competencies. As an ideological construct, it works as a total formula which, on the one hand, due to the futility and indeterminacy of its value, comprises all the desired pedagogic performances while, on the other, it turns out to be an alternative to the wide range of values and knowledge which exist in contemporary logic, thought to be of no use value, useless, and undesirable as such.

Keywords: general education function, neo-humanism, reconceptualization of contents.

An increasing number of authors on the world pedagogic scene have been dealing with the issue of the influence of neo-liberal knowledge in the field of education. Some of them emphasize that school, when general education is in question, should reconceptualize the structure and the contents of curricula, as well as the model of school organization and management in order to reach its aims more efficiently.

Neo-liberal tendencies in the field of education have, according to many, inspired and articulated paradigmatic shift in understanding of social role and function of education. For European space this means significant shift from (neo) humanistic understanding of general education and, as many see this, opening up possibilities for characteristic ideas and concepts present since the 18th century, but not dominating general education. Many agree that nowadays pedagogic scene of Europe, as well as school politics

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and even public perception of education is under the increasing influence of the ideas of neo-liberalism. The proofs for this could be traced in the concrete particular measures of school politics, system changes, reform moves, as well as in specific articulation of theoretical pedagogic concepts, which at certain moment in time and in a specific way reshape pedagogic space and ascribe meanings within pedagogic discourse. Their interrelation, the way of interaction, and especially the synergetic effects arising due to contradicting and ambivalent nature have been reconstructing both pedagogic and school-political discourse in a specific way. [2] Some observations in this sense refer to the statements that schools are established for industrial, not informatics economy. This is thought to be significant ground for understanding of the mentioned paradigmatic shifts. In other words, school has to care before all about such an education which will ensure the flow of “human capital” for optimal economic functioning of labour market. Consequently, school is viewed as an institution taking care of successful reproduction of labour power. Individuals leaving schools have to be able for successful economic acting in favour of accumulation of capital. According to some theoreticians of OECS schools used to be organized according to factories and with their classes, lessons and bells have successfully socialized youth and introduced them in the world of labour. Having in mind that this has been radically changed and “knowledge society” has entered the scene, youth should be prepared for this in a different manner. Neo-liberal critique of education assumes that contemporary school and university do not satisfy optimal labour market needs and thus find themselves behind the social changes they used to adequately follow in the past. [3]

Many pedagogues view this as an attitude according to which educational institution could effectively reach their aims by reconceptualization of both levels establishing the system of education:

Program content structure at curricular level should provide future workers with suitable knowledge and practice for them to be in immediate function of labour market needs once they come to labour market.

In order to do this it is necessary to apply labour market mechanisms at the level of organisation and management of schools and universities while this implies the establishment of the system of financing which would force schools and universities to allocation of means and competitiveness at educational market.

It has been pointed out that the described demands and their effects in combination with the dominant pedagogic discourse they support go

beyond the frame of education in general while what is subordinated in it is the importance of individual concepts.

Thus education has become personal goods, like any other goods on the market which has its price. This is considered to be particularly problematic if we have in mind mandatory general education, which is one of the basic human rights and it is therefore organized by the state and according to the logic different from the logic of free market economy. This is where many authors see the point where the conception of general education with the omen of neo-liberal logic moves away from the views dating back to classical liberal authors. [4] Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill consider that transformation of working power leads to orientation towards “profit generation” and education looks like private rather than public good. Numerous authors hold that more long-lasting and for the quality of general educational standard in society more decisive are the implications of neo-liberal logics for curricular field. It has been strived for the revision of curricular contents, aims of learning and psycho-pedagogic strategy which specifically go beyond the space of education. The visible effects of neo-liberal strivings at the level of contents and curriculum structure are the tendencies towards reconceptualization of general education and institutional efforts to substitute general educational knowledge with the concept of (more significant) competencies (emphasized before all by interest and political associations like, OECD, European Union, the World Bank, The World Trade Organization etc). [5]

Paradigmatic shift in the understanding of the social role and function of general education

The core meaning of the modern term of general pedagogy, as it is nowadays comprehended in the Western culture comes from Aristotle who held that one of the significant features of the term was the fact that education should be of public interest and had to be regulated by law. According to Aristotle’s opinion [6], education of all individuals of a community has to be in accordance with the general aim of the community (of course, in the case it has one) and equal for all. Therefore Aristotle points out that education would have to be “public”, and that enabling individuals to do the things which are in common interest should be equal for all. The contents of education are in accordance with the principle that it has to contribute to freedom.

Thus knowledge in ancient Greece was understood as one of the constitutive elements of development of freedom of personality,

established by general education. Knowledge acquisition satisfies and fulfils the mind which thus reaches its own goal. To follow knowledge means to follow the well-being of the mind. Therefore knowledge was considered an important element of good living. Of course, at that time as well a man was something more than the pure mind, but mind was considered his significant characteristic, while knowledge had a function to guide man's life. At the same time, knowledge implied "complex way of understanding of man's life"[7] which is possible to be objectively determined and therefore available through teaching to everybody. Many authors like Hirst consider it possible to comprehend the process of general education simply as a process of mediation and knowledge acquisition. Thus knowledge is based on the following:

- the truth, not belief or current values;
- due to the fact that knowledge itself is human virtue according to which man significantly differs from other creatures, general education is a value, having in mind that it fulfils the mind and as such has nothing in common with utilitarian and professional aims;
- having in mind that knowledge is a significant feature on the whole, general education is based on the fact that knowledge is important for man's understanding and as such it should be significant for his personal life and life in a society. [8]

What could be concluded according to this is that the concept of antique free education is based on the assumption that it will provide human mind with the ability to act in accordance with his own nature, his reason, that he will protect himself of errors and emotional "slides", which would lead to proper and acceptable actions.

The duration of existence of these attitudes[9] and their implementation in the comprehension of grounds and functions of schools and universities to recent efforts to introduce changes is in favour of the importance of the idea which is in the core of the first conceptualization of what has today in Western culture been considered general education. Numerous authors have emphasized that "general", as medieval problem of general education theory appeared in neo-humanism as well, when the idea on general education develops on the grounds of most spread content and theoretical confirmations when neo-humanism, apart from comprehensive theoretical confirmation, expresses possibility for its realization in practice, having in mind that with Humboldt's concept of elementary school, preparatory school and university general education becomes a part of real history of education. It is considered that neo-humanism almost implicitly and explicitly strives to restoration of antique educational ideal. The

striving emphasizes the presence of the overall tradition of the new age and the link with democratization of education. The term *Bildung* is nowadays considered to be the most accepted concept of neo-humanistic educational strivings (Lot, Klafki, Reichenbach, Medves), while its omen is complexity due to which it is considered impossible to translate it directly to other languages. The discussions also rely on, according to many fragmentary, but not less influential, Humboldt's narration "Theorie der Bildung des Menschen". For Humboldt, the basic purpose of education (Bildung) is the development of human "inner powers", his intellectual potentials and ability to aesthetically judge. According to him, this can be realized only through the interaction of a man with the outer world, i.e. in the interaction between subjective and objective. [10]

Neo-humanistic striving in the field of education and views on general education, according to many authors, move away from previous assumptions. For majority of contemporary views, repositioning of education from general human right into market goods and transformation of schools into organizations for provision of service and goods demanded by labour market at the same time means revision of knowledge whose mediation in such a school would be legitimate. According to Laval, in neo-humanistic education the prevailing position is taken by utilitarian understanding of knowledge which has to be, if not legitimate, then before all useful. In other words, only such and so much knowledge is legitimate which currently has the highest price on the labour market. From this standpoint, the overall concept of general education is to be subjected to thorough revision. Having established value polarization (to efficiently address the needs of labour market) between use value knowledge and knowledge of no use value (and thus not legitimate), general educational knowledge is moving away from functionally equal relevant competencies. As ideological construct, it works as a total formula, which, on the one hand, due to its value futility and indeterminacy, comprises all the desired pedagogic performances while on the other, it turns out to be an alternative to the wide range of values and knowledge which are in contemporary logic thought to be of no use value, useless, and undesirable as such. [11]

Contradiction clearly reflected in this refers to the fact that in the intentions to introduce the process of reconceptualization of general education many reject the idea on the change of general education into professional education and point out that it is sufficient only to redefine the organization of education and the curriculum in such a way that they adopt professional logic. At the same time, there are criticisms on account of traditional approaches to general education, i.e. knowledge acquisition,

orientation towards transmission and reproduction which neither has economic value nor carries sufficient potential for knowledge market. Therefore Laval thinks that general education institution cannot be further improved, but new ones should be established to be in function of informational society competences. [12] Numerous foreign and domestic authors already think that it is possible to achieve this goal at the level of curriculum through the implementation of the concept of key competences into the programs of general education. Thus the key competence concept tends to be an alternative to knowledge concept. Consequently, primary school would in this case be left without its basic constitutive element. In this case it will not be even professional despite of functional knowledge, skills and personal characteristics. Nevertheless, the previously sketched dilemmas of the European Union go in the direction of promotion of key competence concept. Lisbon strategy (2000) is considered to be a key document according to which discussions have been intensified on increasingly better adaptability of education to the needs of market economy. The European Council determined the fields in it, as well as measures which would “refresh” employment, economic reforms and social cohesion in European Union according to “knowledge based economy”. For reaching this goal education has in important role to play. According to the article 25 of the strategy, the systems of education and training in Europe have to be adapted to both the demands imposed by knowledge society and the needs of better employment level. In the following article European Council calls for the establishment of a special European framework which would determine new basic skills ensuring “life-long learning”, interwoven with the values of informational technology management, foreign languages, entrepreneurship and social skills. A year after the Lisbon strategy had been accepted, a special expert working group was established in the European Commission and designed eight key competences in a year. One of the first strategic decisions of the mentioned working group was to replace the basic competence concept operated by the Lisbon strategy with the key competence concept. Numerous authors consider that the replacement was not accidental and that more attention should be paid to it, having in mind that the whole idea is permeated by far higher ideological potential of competences in comparison to the concept of skills.

One of the more significant questions is: what kind of knowledge is necessary for knowledge society. The question is not pedagogically redundant. The increasing “flood” of information goes beyond any attempt of transfer; evaluator themselves do not know everything. The application

of informational technologies opens up further problems regarding the quality of life. Therefore we have to reflect more on the insurance and improvement of quality in relation to the resources of information. Our understanding of knowledge has been drastically changed with informational technologies. Therefore we have to grasp once again what types of knowledge are important, what is the relation among them and how knowledge should be transferred. Changes caused by information technology are so deep and their future development is so difficult to anticipate that pedagogical transmission should be thoroughly reconsidered.

Concepts like “learning society”, “informational society” or “knowledge society” have offered significant orientation and the concept of “pedagogic society” where knowledge should take the central place, can be traced in them.

The second, not less important question is the one regarding the task to adjust informational and other modern technologies to human needs. It is considered that only the one who manages to do that will “sell” his service and goods well in the conditions of variety and freedom of choice.

The ways of pedagogical application can regard new contents, new methods and understanding of pedagogy. There are nowadays diverse groups of pedagogy (knowledge-oriented-pedagogy, habitus-oriented-pedagogy, pedagogy of comprehensive development of abilities) at the European professional scene with various funds of knowledge (cognitive-theoretical/curricular, social-theoretical/ competence/ theoretical, developmental –theoretical /anthropological) and with different methods (cognitive teaching, education, project teaching, cultivating education, artistic work...). Profound experience of these pedagogies, as well as their basic orientations will probably not be enough for new tasks to be thoroughly grasped and grounded. As for the knowledge necessary for knowledge society, pedagogy oriented to knowledge will before all have to respect and foster diversity of knowledge types and integrate them around phenomena; pedagogies oriented to modern habitus (like, for example Dewey’s pedagogy) will have to respect and foster diversity and differentiation of various forms of knowledge integration (forms of life) and establish them as a personal integrating decision, while pedagogies oriented to development (like for example, Waldorf’s and Montessori pedagogy) will have to establish a relationship between individual integrations of all powers and new social tasks regarding knowledge.

Close to the previous one is the following issue: changed philosophy of life in postmodernism and its influence on philosophy of education and new pedagogic paradigms – with and individual and his overall development in the centre. As leading educational philosophies and processes within the process of life-long learning, globalisation and individualization of national states, imposing the demands for empowerment of responsibility ethics and increased orientation towards self-aware, cooperative and creative individual, statistically the most prominent place belongs to alternative pedagogies (humanistic models, emancipatory education, step by step, learning in freedom....). In this framework, the essential question of educational aim refers to the question of learning purpose. Many authors working all around the world in the field of philosophy of education point to short-sightedness of the view on learning society as “constant complement to human capital” for economic progress. Contrary to this, there is a great deal of those who advocate for education in general, and especially for higher education which nurtures human aspirations for change and opening up of possibilities for competition, as well as ability of an individual to cope with uncertainty, insecurity and unpredictability. Processes of change and inevitable tensions at the level of higher education should be the strengths, rather than weaknesses. What is necessary is basic knowledge on how changes develop. Special attention should be paid to this in the strategies of education from the angle of identification of a model of change in higher education.

What we would also like to mention here is the following: the concept of the shared European academic space points out the aims which are in the zone of European needs, paying less attention to individual and national ones. New social conditions of life in Europe determine the function of education as knowledge acquisition which will meet new challenges, strengthening responsibility for mutual life and development in Europe. Realization of these values is in close relation with a type of knowledge.

Creativity in European dimensions, i.e. in the unique academic space in the field of practical knowledge is not the same as in the field of social-integrative knowledge, which also has to be taken into consideration. So, what is necessary is to before all once again fundamentally reflect on the purpose and structure of education. What would also be significant refers to the opinion of philosophers and sociologists on the issues of our deregulation temptations, i.e. on the role of the state in the sphere of education. Legal frameworks of education are still determined by the state,

as well as numerous elements of educational policy, while contemporary wave of democratization and globalization implies (not only in the field of education) fragmentation of authority of the state in all, or at least the greatest number of social activities. Beyond all this is the issue of spreading the idea and practice of European Union, implying the advantage of common aims over national differences, which means that the state should more clearly determine the shift from its own authority to common, European Union.

Higher education and the neo-humanistic concept of general education

Emphasis on the needs to pay special attention to student workload during the implementation of Bologna process ideas, as well as to harmonize it with curricula, i.e. demands imposed on students and to involve students in learning process as equal partners... has provoked discussions among professors on the main purpose of university. Namely, a question has been raised to what a degree in such a way understood ideas of university academic purpose lead to preparation of graduated students for the labour market and to what an extent their education for a profession introduces them into the attitude of research and methodology? In other words, to what an extent is the process of enabling students for a profession characterized by higher, competent education and utility knowledge mastery and to what an extent studying is in the function of development of scientific thinking apparatus? The following questions could also be raised: how much is university expected to provide education for practice, i.e. to what an extent university is expected to provide solid grounds for further in-service education and in what a way the expected solid grounds for professional work ensure future resourcefulness in professional work? Is what we have in mind here the overall professional preparedness for professional results? Could these demands be considered an illusion from the previously outlined angle, due to the fact that what the learnt is quickly forgotten and the advantage of judgement importance over what has been learnt... These issues have a significant place if we take into consideration that it is not a rare case that certain faculties have accredited both academic and professional studies and that sometimes the same professors teach at both. It is also important that professional students are expected to dedicate themselves exclusively to profession, without possibility of further academic education (professional graduates cannot continue their higher

education at academic level), while academic graduates should be able to meet both professional and academic needs. Academic studies should prepare students for both labour market and research work.

There are many authors nowadays who express critical attitudes towards the demand for the decrease, i.e. cutting down of learning contents so that students could be less burdened by the broadness of the subject, the number of read books, etc, supporting their standpoint by the statement that university is not a school, but a high school. Therefore they do not overemphasize nowadays so appreciated didactical dimension of a teacher, but hold that a university teacher is even allowed to be not highly skilled in mediation of contents to be learnt, expressing the standpoint the he/she is the only one who can bring the students in touch with the true process of learning and thus to the spirit of science, instead of bringing them closer to dead results which could be easily learnt. University teacher is the one who is science alive, only in communication with him/her science as originally existing can be conceived. He/she drives the same impulses in a student. He/she leads a student to the very source of science. Only the one who is a true researcher, can be a true university teachers. Others only pass to students what is reliable, didactically arranged. On the other hand, university is not a school, but, as it has already been said, higher school, which does not mean that what is technical in the subject matter should not be learnt and didactically arranged. This could further be transferred to independent studying of books. "High school is not a preparatory school", it was said in the beginning of the last century. It makes sense for subject contents to comprise what is relevant for subsequent practice. However, what is most important and what remains is never still spirit, comprehension of problems and issues, mastering of problems and methodologies. It has been thought that this wave at university level, especially in the countries in transition, like Serbia, has significantly suppressed the general humanistic education, disciplines and contents related to national history and culture. The focus is on narrow, specialized courses, university has boiled down to the levels of colleges and polytechnic schools. Argumentation supporting such a situation involves the following demands:

- knowledge has to be turned (directed) to practice, i.e. "usable", utility knowledge (knowledge is goods at market);
- professional knowledge acquired nowadays will be "short-term" knowledge, depending on changes and market needs;

- according to its character, knowledge acquired nowadays are more or less narrowly professional. [13]

Many authors consider that the complexity of the situation and indeterminacy of factors is such that future in general, as well educational future will be difficult to anticipate, imposing the need for greater caution. Consequently, we are often facing the demand to pay attention to the following issues:

- Education should not be a privilege of a minority (no matter what kind of minority), but the right of all people (children and youth);

- We should have critical and creative attitude in acceptance of what is offered (or demanded) and required;

- Education conception in the conditions of globalization has to be in function of developmental needs of a country, developmental needs of children and youth and world peace preservation;

- Small countries and nations would have to wisely confront formally unexpressed aims of those great and powerful, especially in the field of education and culture, so that they could preserve their own identity and culture. [14]

According to its name, university is *universitas*: learning and research: in spite of the fact that they succeed best in professional work, they will exist only as a whole. It is disputable to what an extent university will be able to preserve its own essence if it becomes an aggregate of professional knowledge, along which it, as it has been noticed by K. Jaspers, allows curiosity, so called general education and aimless chatting on general issues as indifferent decorations. Scientific vitality exists only in relation to a whole, implying broadness. Consequently, general purpose of university is to fulfil students with the idea on the totality and broadness of his/her special science as well as with the idea on the totality and broadness of learning. Thus, anything that looks too much like school plant, acquisition of routine and material knowledge becomes harmful if unconnected with the idea on science.

There is an issue beyond all this: to what an extent each of the mentioned moments, i.e. setting grounds for life-long scientific learning and comprehension and directedness to the totality on what is possible to learn, is included in the reform of higher education we are facing. How much attention is paid to understanding and broadness of scientific horizons, and to what an extent education has become preparation for a profession, demanding as many practical skills as possible...deprived from

spirit. The next question could refer to the spreading of university, connected to the issue of the place of university on the market.

Spread of university is an unstoppable process. However, many wonder where it would take us; is university today strong enough to encompass a new world and knowledge and permeate it with the spirit of the totality of science, giving sense to knowledge itself, preserving itself from becoming educational plant deprived from the power of spiritual revelation. And, finally, the question covering all the previous ones is: should university create spiritual aristocracy, liberated from its own origin, rarely encountered, equally present with both nobles and workers, rich and poor? It can be no more than a minority, as observed by the previously mentioned K. Jaspers, consisting of free people with high aims, who in any circumstances have spirit open for the highest. This is one of the values in the core of idea on university when it is discussed, beyond and above everything.

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[2] Štefanc, D: Ideje neoliberalizma v procesih reconceptualizacije obaveznega splošnega izobraževanja: nekatere poteze in praktične implikacije, *Sodobna pedagogika*, No 3, 2008

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[4] Ibid

[5] Brian Keeley in the book *Ljudski kaita* (Eduka, Zagreb, 2009) states that one OECD project has recommended that when establishing key educational aims the following three crude categories of competences should be applied:

- ability for efficient use of the “tools” like foreign languages and computer;
- ability for interaction with people from different cultures and settings and
- ability for managing one’s own life.

[6] Aristotel (1960), *Politika*, Beograd: Kultura

[7] Hirst, ,P.H. (1998), *Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge*. v: Hirst,p.h. u: White, P.(1998), *Philosophy of Education, Major Themes in the Analytic Tradition*, vol. I London/ New York: Rutledge.

[8] The program of ancient Greek general education has been inherited by the Romans as *septem artes liberales*, i.e. seven free arts to later become a part of the medieval period, when the seven disciplines, divided to trivium and quadrivium made the study program of medieval university, as a preparation for studies of laws, medicine or theology.

[9] Ibid

[10] Humboldt,W. von (2001), *Theory of bildung*, v: Wesbury, I. et al (eds.) *Teaching as a reflective Practice. The German Didaktik Tradition*. Mahwah/ New Jersey/London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers

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