

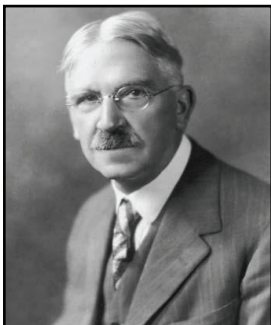
ON JOHN DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION AND ITS IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

Anton ILICA, PhD,
PhD,"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad
anton.ilica@yahoo.com.

Abstract: *As revealed by the title, the study presents the pedagogic personality of John Dewey, who – in the author's opinion – is the first great pedagogue after Comenius, and who changes both a vision and a mentality about the meaning of institutionalized education. The pragmatic character of J. Dewey's pedagogic paradigm has brought restructuring in the American and European educational systems. Thus, they have switched from a mainly intellectualized (and theoretical) character to revaluing its applicative and practical aspects.*

Keywords: *John Dewey, pragmatism, curriculum and child, experimental pedagogy.*

1. Who is John Dewey?



JOHN DEWEY (born 20 October 1859, Burlington, Vermont, SUA – died 1 June 1952, New York) is one of the most valuable representatives of experimental pedagogy. After graduating the University of Vermont in 1884, he gets a PhD in Philosophy with a thesis entitled „*Kant's Psychology*”. His academic career is registered at the Universities of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Minnesota, Chicago, California, Columbia. His research career begins with the volume „*Psychology*” (1887), followed by other volumes: „*Applied psychology. An introduction into the Principles and Practice of Education.*” (1889), „*My pedagogic creed*” (1897), „*School and Society*” (1900), „*School and the child*” (1906), „*Moral Principles in Education*” (1909), „*The School of tomorrow*” (1915), „*Democracy and education. An Introduction into the Philosophy of Education*” (1916). He is an important exponent of universal pedagogy, being placed among the most important opinionated of education.

2. Pedagogue of experience

In the Romanian translation of the volume¹, prefaced by V. Nicolescu, he calls him „*a philosopher of experience*”, with precursors such as C. S. Peirce și W. James. All three are followers of **pragmatism**, of basing any concept on experience („*any hypothesis can be admitted if it capable of undergoing an experimental checkout*”, C. S. Pierce). **Pragmatism** is defined as follows: „*to determine the meaning of an intellectual concept, one needs to examine the practical consequences that could necessarily emerge from the truth of that concept; the sum of these concepts would build the complex meaning of that particular concept*”². Any concept is valuable only through its practical usefulness.

Consequently, **pragmatism** is a philosophical concept. A **pedagogical trend** – based on experience³ emerges from it. John Dewey will be the head of the *School of Education* at the University of Chicago since 1902. Here, he applies his theories mentioned in his essays „*Child and the Curriculum*” and „*School and Society*”. It is the beginning of a transition in the American philosopher`s concerns from *psychology towards education*.

When analysing educational facts, Dewey uses the Method of Hegel`s Triad (thesis-antithesis-synthesis). The titles of his studies suggest antinomic educational realities in an attempt to determine „*the golden mean*” (i.e. a synthetic conception of reconciliation between contradictions): child vs. curriculum; school vs. society; experience vs. education; democracy vs. society. By applying Hegel`s Triad, Dewey believes that there is a contradiction between “*a child centred school*” and a “*o\curriculum centred school*” (study matters). According to Dewey, the entire educational experience aims the child`s growth (**thesis**); the curriculum is important because it presents the reality in an organized, classified and selected manner according to values through subject matters (**antithesis**); giving up on the predominance of child peculiarities in education as well as on the curriculum`s authority in education are important aspects that need to be considered: „*the child and the curriculum are just two limits which define only one process*). Dewey thinks that just as two points define a straight line, this point of view on the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction”⁴ (**synthesis**).

¹ John Dewey, *Trei scrieri despre educație: Copilul și curriculum-ul, Școala și societatea, experiența și educația*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1977.

² V. Nicolescu, *John Dewey – un filosof al experienței*, Prefață la volumul J. Dewey, *Op. cit.*, p.8.

³ Ion Albușescu, în *Doctrină pedagogică* (EDP, București, 2007) believes that J.D. places “*education in the middle of his philosophical concepts*” (p. 366), and “*philosophy and education are two sides of the same coin*”.

⁴ J. Dewey, *Op. cit.*, p.71.

Any major issue – states J. Dewey – „*involves certain conditions that become contradictory at a certain point*”. Two factors are engaged in education: **the child** (as immature being) and the **adult** (as experimented being). The interaction between these factors ensures the coherence of the educational process. Before the interaction takes place, the „conflict” emerges between the *child* (as individual entity) and the *curriculum* (as social experience), the adults` consequence and creation. The child has only his/her broad life and family experience, dominated by affection and affinity. The curriculum presents a broad reality, not delimited in space and time but divided into subject matters according to learning areas. Knowledge is sorted, classified and systematized in the curriculum in an independent manner, totally different from the child`s emotional experience. The contradiction takes place between the „*the child`s narrow but personal world and the impersonal but broad space and time*” (1); *the divergence occurs between the sincerity and the unity of a child`s life and the breach-type of presenting knowledge in the syllabi* (2); *there are conflicts between interactive, concrete, emotional connections of a child`s activity and the curricular abstract presentation, classification and order* (3)⁵.

3. The Relationship between the child and the curriculum

A child`s (personal) study programme has other motivations than the learning projections suggested by adults in the *curriculum*. The child`s experiences as well as his reactive bias do not comply with the curricular contents. The adult suggest a manner of maturing the children while they have the chance to shape and develop their personality in other ways. The man`s “making” project („*paideia*”) focuses on sharing desirable cognitive experiences, placed outside the values accepted by a generation. Knowledge suggested (by the Curriculum) has ensured the progress of humanity and has „shaped” individuals with authentic values. However, each human being, each child has characteristics that make him/her different from the others, just like every generation has its own peculiarities. The curriculum should therefore be as dynamic as to satisfy the self-training needs and to ensure a development that would support a child`s positive experiences. The harmony between a child and the curriculum is about „*two limits that define a single process*”, that of „*continuous reconstruction, which starts from the child`s present experience and reaches organized elements of truth which we call studies*”⁶. The goal of this process „*can be translated into the pedagogical concept of **development***”⁷.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p.69.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p.71.

⁷ „*Development, stated J. Dewey, is a process with its own laws, which can be achieved only under proper and normal conditions*” (p.75).

To be efficient, the educational process which means educating the child into being autonomous, needs stimuli and emotional pathogens. The teacher is not concerned with improving the curriculum but with supporting the child into turning the curriculum into his/her life experience. For this purpose, teachers should be familiar with the "child's environment", namely his/her talents and predispositions: „*What interests us the most is the progress made by each child that we know, his/her normal physical development, the development of his/her reading, writing, calculating skills, knowledge of geography and history, shaping their behaviour, development of order, punctuality and work skills*⁸. "We have listed above some sides of a child's personality which can be determined by the application of curriculum; they are fundamental criteria for an efficient didactic activity in an educational institution. They are made of basic abilities, behaviours and social skills.

4. School and society

Viorel Nicolescu was concerned in the 1970s with making J. Dewey's writings available in the Romanian pedagogic literature and thus translated "*Three Writings on Education*" (*The Child and the Curriculum, School and Society; Experience and Education*)⁹. V. Nicolescu's preface is a micro-monograph (64 pages) and it is entitled "**JOHN DEWEY – A PHILOSOPHER OF EXPERIENCE**". It deals with three basic issues: *John Dewey's pragmatic naturalism* (precursori and influences, cultural patterns), mentioning Charles Sanders Peirce's, William James's and Hegel's formative thesis; *The concept of experience* and *The Concept of education*. Viorel Nicolescu's preface is a model of professional initiation into the proper understanding and knowledge of the meaning of institutionalized education. His discourse is determined by the significance of an illustrative quotation, selected from J. Dewey's scientific writings: "...it is definitely true that problems are solved only where they occur ... namely in action, in behavioural adaptation. But, good or bad, they can be solved only through a method and eventually, the method is intelligence and the intelligence is method". The Romanian pedagogues text on John Dewey is an authentic intellectual and highly philosophical discourse on the meaning of education, human development and roots that generated this new vision on contemporary education.

The measurement of the quality of personality development and training in school is contextualized by the society. The society behaviour is the only element

⁸ J. Dewey, *Școala și societatea*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1977, p.87.

⁹ John Dewey, *Trei scrieri despre educație*. Studiu introductiv, note și comentarii, bibliografie critică de Viorel Nicolescu; translation: Ioana Herșeni, Viorel Nicolescu și Octavian Oprică, Editura didactică și pedagogică, București, 1977.

which validates the value of a didactic exercise. The above statement – as well as the subtitle of this article – are inspired by the essay "**School and society**", elaborated by J. Dewey¹⁰. We are tempted to judge the activity of a school according to some inherited though incomplete criteria: "*normal physical development, the development of reading, writing, calculating skills, knowledge of geography and history, shaping their behaviour, development of order, punctuality and work skills*"¹¹. But we also need something else and that "something" will support "*the new movement in education*": school will become "*part of the entire social evolution*". Unfortunately, social changes are not reflected in school changes. School activities are designed as "*methods of life and learning*"¹². Without "*mutual and productive activity*", school remains vicious in ethical terms because it struggles to "*train future members of social order in an environment where social spirit totally lacks*"¹³. A restructure of the way schools function, namely turning it into a "*miniature community*" is an essential requirement for "*the renewal of the entire school spirit*". Society functions based on experience as form of individual's active participation in constant positive remodelling. Experience is knowledge, namely the student learns by acting, thinking and working.

The prior considerations regarding the school-society relationship and school remodelling according to the organization of a society have been issued a century ago. J. Dewey's pledge for a liberal and democratic education were based on the concept of experience, of organizing the entire school activity on the involvement of pupils in real-life experiences, as they occur in the society. School is part of the society; its mission is to ensure each child's integration through education¹⁴ in the demands of a society. The fundamental mission of education is *social integration*. It ensures the individuals' participation in the social development and it favours their responsible involvement in the improvement of social consciousness¹⁵. Organized as it is nowadays, school – as learning institution – stresses out "the waste of education" by the child's impossibility of revaluing his life experiences in school and using in life what s/he has learnt in school.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 84.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 87.

¹² Ibidem, p. 91.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 92.

¹⁴ "**Education**, in its broad meaning is the means of maintaining the social continuity of life" (J. Dewey, **Democrație și educație** - trad. N. Sacaliș, V. Nicolescu -, Editura didactică și pedagogică, București, 1972, p. 4)

¹⁵ In **My Pedagogical Creed** J. Dewey states that: "*I believe that education ... is a process of life and not a preparation for life*" (1971, p. 86).

5. John Dewey`s Topicality

In terms of time and the influence played by the philosophy of experience on the European and American educational systems, we believe that the ideas of the pedagogue John Dewey are still timely: some "national schools" have assimilated them, other have overcome them, and others continue to ignore them. The current tendency of levelling the curricular organization and functioning could not overcome deeply rooted mentalities in the "classical" school systems. Topics such as "Theoretical education", "traditional methods", "teaching and instruction", fracture between "school and life", school`s inability of adjusting to new society demands are still under discussion. Sometimes, the novelty of American philosopher`s ideas is acknowledged as a project which delays to become a reality. We mention here some of them:

- The education of children can be achieved through experience, ensuring their participation in their own development;
- School has to be organized as an educative environment, so as to function according to the demands and rigours of a democratic society;
- School Curriculum should have a mainly practical character which brings child education closer to real life and the environment the child lives in;
- Youth should be trained through education to participate dynamically in the life of their community.

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Dewey`s pedagogical writings have influenced an important direction in contemporary pedagogy and have cleared out a set of educational issues. The American pedagogue`s considerations aimed the overcome of Comenius`s paradigm, namely a scientific education structured and ordered according to strict principles. If J. A. Comenius, the first opinionated on school structures generated a theory of organizing" and functioning of educational institutions, J. Dewey theorizes, by issuing principles and ideas of educational philosophy. The essence of his theory aims the harmonization between "*individual nature and social culture*" as core of educational acts and process of growth and development. Bringing the school closer to the social community, bringing the curriculum closer to practical issues as well as the pledge for a society-oriented education are the core of students` activism and participation in their own training. John Dewey suggested his followers that education is the harmonization of a child`s individual (mental) peculiarities with the mental peculiarities of a society, commonly known as ***development of personality***. He is considered "one of the great thinkers of the 20th century" (V. Nicolescu), "psychologist, pedagogue and philosopher of education" (N. Sillamy), "one of the greatest theoreticians of education" (I. Albulescu) etc. J. Dewey`s pedagogical writings remain a source of

reconsideration in terms of positive changes in contemporary education, his suggestions being able to provide a different kind of answer to the blend of education with the evolution of contemporary society.

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