

JOHN DEWEY AND PROGRESSIVISM IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

Lucian RADU¹

Abstract: *This paper is focused on Progressivism, as a reaction against the American traditional school in order to accomplish the purpose of connecting education to the realities imposed by the rapid changes of the American society. Progressivism was developed by John Dewey's pedagogic theory, being based on Pragmatism, a specific American philosophy, and on instrumentalism, one of its variants to which John Dewey conferred its climax. Experience represented the core concept of his philosophy. After revising this philosophical current, the paper will deal with John Dewey's pedagogic theory insisting on the method of solving problems as a general method of instruction. The importance of the two schools (Dalton Plan and Winnetka), both based on the progressive theory, will be highlighted. Progressivism opened a new era in American Education based on an active education, which took into account the students' individualities, stimulating teachers' creativity and focusing on a practice based education.*

Key words: *progressivism, pragmatism, instrumentalism, active school.*

1. Introduction

Progressivism is a constituent part of *New Education*, based on pragmatism, and it constituted a revolution in American education, with an outstanding specificity. It is an educational current of American origin, and all the other orientations that have been profiled in the second half of the century (humanism, social meliorism, and social efficiency) have emerged as reactions reported to it.

Progressivism, an educational movement that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century as a reaction to the traditional school in the United States of America, sought to establish an educational system adjusted to the pace of the American societal development.

It was based on John Dewey's educational theory, having as a starting

point the pragmatism, a specific American philosophical current and its variant, instrumentalism, to which John Dewey conferred the widest expression.

Dewey's work is one '*of the most profound and comprehensive theoretical syntheses developed in this century*' [7].

He made major contributions in almost all areas of the spirit: in philosophy (pragmatism), in pedagogy (progressivism), in logic (instrumentalism), in psychology (functionalism), in aesthetics (aesthetic naturalism), in axiology (empiric cognitivism), and so on. Dewey was inspired by his predecessors C.S. Peirce and W. James. The rigor of Peirce's rational realism influenced Dewey greatly, while from W. James he took the '*doctrine of radical empiricism and the thrills of aspiration to the universal*' [7]. The fundamental coordinates of Dewey's work

¹ Faculty of Letters, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

are Darwinism (the transition principle) and Hegelianism (the dialect principle). These have generated an original conception which, as we mentioned, Viorel Nicolescu called 'transactional naturalism'.

Although in *From Absolutism to Experimentalism* (his intellectual biography), Dewey declares a detachment from Hegelianism, he acknowledges in Hegel 'a permanent presence' in his thinking:

'The synthesis made by Hegel between the subject and object, between matter and spirit, between divine and human, was not a simple intellectual formula; it operated as a huge relief, as a liberation' [3].

As for Darwinism, the changes induced by it impose a new logic: *'When Darwin said about species such as Galileo said about the Earth, 'et pur si muove', he promoted genetic and experimental ideas to the rank of real organon of formulating questions and finding explanations'* [5].

In fact, Dewey's philosophy is nothing but *'the penetration of the scientific ideas in American philosophic thinking; the exclusion of fixity of species from nature; the inclusion of man and intelligence in nature; adopting a new biological vision upon intelligence'* [8]. Furthermore, Morton White would notice in *Origin of Dewey's Instrumentalism*, that the latter became a pragmatist, an idealist who assimilated the results of modern biology, psychology and social sciences.

As a leading representative of pragmatism and its variant, instrumentalism, John Dewey was about to conclude that his primary vocation was philosophy.

Considering the significance of the epistemological side that characterizes his philosophy, we often find it in the reference works as naturalist-instrumentalism'.

Viorel Nicolescu, in the introductory study to *Foundations for a Science of Education*, believes that, although

'naturalist-instrumentalism' grasps the essential side of Dewey's philosophy, *'transactional naturalism is the most adequate explanatory principle of the philosophic system built by John Dewey'* [7]. Although the terms mentioned bear some specific nuances, fundamental features of pragmatism can be identified in all.

2. Features of Pragmatism

Pragmatism *'is a specifically American philosophy, as western movies and big cars are specifically American'* [10]. There still exists a great paradox because, while European philosophy has always looked at American influences with reserve, especially in this area, and has considered pragmatism to be a philosophical concept of American origins, American philosophy claims to follow the European peculiarity of this philosophical orientation.

Dewey specifies in this respect that Santiago Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of pragmatism, not only borrowed the term 'pragmatic' from Kant, but as the latter sought *'to establish the law of practical reason in the a priori area, Peirce also sought to interpret the universal concepts in the area of experience'* [7].

Above all, 'experience', a fundamental and unifying concept is the core of Pragmatism. Each experience is based on the interaction between subject and object, between self and its world and represents only the result of the integration of human being into the environment Experience includes action and knowledge. The first one acts on the environment modifying it and the second means understanding the connections within an object, which determine its applicability in a given situation. The process of knowing develops when the human being is in a problematic situation. The dual nature of

man (biological and social), the changes that prevail permanence are asserted by Pragmatism; and, therefore, the relativity of values and critical intelligence represent an irrefutable value for human conduct. John Dewey gives an illustrative definition to his own philosophy, and by default, to pragmatism considering that reality has a practical character, expressed in the most efficient way through the activity of intelligence [3].

3. John Dewey's progressive educational theory

Based on the above mentioned philosophical concept 'progressivism', belonging to 'new education', is 'a Copernican revolution' in pedagogy, promoting 'a child-centered school'.

The concept of experience is the basis of Dewey's theory of instruction, but his pedagogic view is not only based on his philosophical concept, but also on the social, economic and cultural realities of American society: American democracy, industrial revolution, and development of modern science.

In the American pedagogue's opinion, the educational process includes two aspects: a psychological and a sociological one. He considers the psychological aspect to be fundamental and very important. The learning capacity, which should continue in adult life, without disappearing after childhood, represents a very valuable element which is developed in the concept of permanent education. In John Dewey's view, growth is represented by the ability of learning, forming habits and readjusting activity to new conditions. In his experimental school in Chicago, education was focused on the child's needs – Student was learning by doing. The authentic knowledge could be achieved only through direct experience. Dewey combated the

idea that school prepared for life, considering school as being life itself.

He claimed that a clear distinction between content and method couldn't be made and that one couldn't speak separately about methods of teaching. The prestigious American pedagogue is against the idea that the personality of the teacher should be subordinated to methods, forcing him to stick to routine. Dewey does not deny, however, the need for some targeting methods. It is necessary to study the activities that lead to success, as well as those that lead to failure, and a general method of instruction can be delineated. This is how the method of solving problems appeared. As it has been seen, thinking is a prerequisite for acquiring knowledge. This appears in problematic situations as an effort of overcoming a difficulty.

The problem-solving method:

1. In a first instance, an empirical situation is created to reproduce a familiar situation, so that for the child everything seems to be known.
2. As soon as he/she has started to work, obstacles that need to be overcome appear. A problem which stimulates thinking is created.
3. Data provided by past experience will be used in such situations.
4. Based on these elements, the student formulates hypotheses for solving the problem.
5. The hypothesis considered to be the most adequate is chosen, and it will be verified afterwards.

If this is confirmed, it will become an instrument for solving future problems. Using the method of solving problems, Dewey stimulates learning through discovery and discourages the accumulation of what is transmitted by others. The method solves in a way the dispute between learning by effort and learning stimulated by interest. Within the

learning by effort, it is considered that positive results are obtained only by force of will, while, in the learning based on interest, it has been demonstrated that work without interest becomes a real drudgery for students. The method promotes the student's intrinsic motivation and spontaneous interest, and it provides the conditions necessary for undertaking an activity towards fulfilling that interest. The student mobilizes his/her effort to overcome the obstacles that may occur. The educational system based on the student's freedom to choose amongst the subjects of study is deduced by Dewey from the theory of interest.

Dewey's teaching theory opened the way for an active educational system, which has taken into account the particularities of individual students, and has stimulated the teacher's creativity, giving school a practical orientation.

4. The Progressive Schools

Two schools had a special significance from progressive perspective, forming two systems of organizing the educative process: Dalton Plan and Winnetka. At Dalton, emphasis is on individual study, allowing the learner the freedom to organize his/her time and to benefit from teaching aids and laboratories. It is a strictly individualized system in which teaching methods are supplanted by the individual's effort for learning. Winnetka system was based on individualized education according to students' inclinations and their creative capacity.

A number of great names in American education have contributed to the grounding of the theoretical basis of progressivism: John L. Childs, G. Counts, Boyd H. Bode, and William Heard Kilpatrick.

Kilpatrick, for instance, was the initiator of the project method, through which one

of Dewey's fundamental ideas was put in practice: learning by solving problems. Kilpatrick established four types of projects [9]:

- building projects, which were based on the achievement of a plan or of an idea;
- consumer projects, which were to cultivate aesthetic taste through literature and arts;
- problem-solving projects, as they were envisaged by J. Dewey;
- exercise projects, which led to the development of skills and abilities.

Lack of systematic knowledge leads to a worse quality of training if the project method is used exclusively.

The Progressivist school, especially in the third decade, focused on two fundamental theses from Dewey's theory, namely: the child and his interests are placed in the centre of educational activities and the rapid pace of social change. In his work named *Education for a Changing Civilization*, Kilpatrick claimed that due to these rapid changes in society we cannot have a clear image of the future, and therefore we cannot formulate an educational goal outside of its own development. The emphasis on the two ideas led to exaggerations in school practice, which caused the reconsiderations of some progressive theses and concepts.

Boyd Henry Bode, in his work *Progressive Education at the Crossroads*, criticized the anti-intellectualism of American schools, the focus on local circumstances and on the present, as well as the ambiguity of the concept of growth [1].

Dewey himself comes with new additions to his theory in *Experience and Education* (1939). He draws attention to the danger that could appear if the emphasis on progressivism is concerned only with the reaction against the traditional school, without building a theory of its own. If traditional school was

based on imposing authority, the progressive school dismissed any and all authorities, did not study the past, and it was rather concerned with the present and the future, did not involve strict planning, but rather occasional teaching, the link between education and individual experience being reaffirmed once more: *'Education is a development through and for experience'* [6]

We could conclude that the Progressivist School has the following general characteristics: its primary focus is on the child's interests; students are able to choose amongst the subjects of study from curriculum; information on the present and the future has a special share; and, finally, learning is attained by solving problems.

5. Reactions against J. Dewey's Progressive Education

Although J. Dewey's Progressive Education was the dominant educational orientation in the U.S. during the third and fourth decades, reactions against it did not delay to appear, and it became the subject of severe criticism from some mainly antiprogressivist orientations: perennialism, essentialism, and even from progressive direction – social-reconstructionism.

Perennialism considered that the fundamental feature of the world is not change, but permanence and that education was to be carried out according to human nature, and not by pursuing the adaptation of the young generation to social realities. The school was to promote the established, permanent values that were found in *the great works* of the famous authors from the past and present.

Essentialists denied the role of school in social engagement. The main purpose of the school was to prepare youth intellectually, by transmitting cultural heritage. Training was done through theoretical education, students being in

direct contact with fundamental values, with what was essential and common for humankind.

Reconstructionism criticized the individual tendencies of Dewey's theory and the fact that the cultural contribution to social changes was under-appreciated. It did consider that school was to assume the responsibility for building a social order in the American democratic frame, a program for general education, and a heuristically oriented teaching technique.

6. Conclusions

Beyond these disputes that took place between progressivism as a dominant pedagogic orientation in the U.S. and antiprogressivist trends, it should be noted what Ion Gh. Stanciu admitted in his work, *School and Pedagogic Doctrines in the Twentieth Century*: that, as the *'pedagogical theory promoted by John Dewey was the subject of criticism coming from various directions of the philosophy of education, and the force and affirmation of progressivism was decreasing, the intensity of disputes was diminished as well. American society itself has settled in the meantime, exceeding the turmoil that fueled the philosophical rivalry in educational field'* [11]. This does not mean that these directions have not been experienced during the following decades. Essentialism and Perennialism marked the incipient stages of the traditional American humanism. Reconstructionism constituted the basis of social meliorism, and political and business involvement organized education on criteria of social efficiency. Social efficient Education uses *'modern techniques of mathematical statistics in experimental research, and in teaching, it applies principles of programmed instruction, with operational objectives, a clear teaching design'* [10], accountability and standardized testing.

References

1. Bode, B.H.: *Progressive Education at the Crossroads*. New York. Newson & Co., 1938.
2. Dewey, J.: *From Absolutism to Experimentalism*. In: *Contemporary American Philosophy. Personal Statements, vol. II*. Adams, G.P., Montague, W.P. (eds.). Russel and Russel, Inc., New York, 1962.
3. Dewey, J.: *The Practical Character of Reality*. In: *John Dewey, Philosophy and Civilization*, Smith, P. (ed.). Mass, Gloucester, 1968.
4. Dewey, J.: *Democrație și Educație: O introducere în filosofia educației (Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education)*. București. Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1972.
5. Dewey, J.: *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*. In: *The Philosophy of John Dewey, vol. 1*, Mc Dermott, J.J. (ed.). G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1973.
6. Dewey, J.: *Experiență și educație (Experience and Education)*. In: *Scrieri despre educație (Writings about Education)*, Nicolescu, V. (ed.). Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1977.
7. Dewey, J.: *Fundamente pentru o știință a educației (Foundations for a Science of Education)*. București. Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1992.
8. Edwards, R.: *Meeting individual learner needs: power, subject, subjection*. In: *Knowledge, Power and Learning*, Paechter, C., Preedz, M., et al. (eds.). SAGE, London, 2001.
9. Kilpatrick, W.: *Education for a changing civilization: three lectures delivered on the Luther Laflin Kellog Foundation at Rutgers University*. New York. MacMillan, 1928.
10. Stanciu, G.I., Nicolescu V., et al.: *Antologia pedagogiei americane contemporane (Anthology of the Contemporary American Pedagogy)*. București. Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1971.
11. Stanciu, G.I.: *Școala și doctrinele pedagogice în secolul XX (School and Pedagogic Doctrines in the 20th Century)*. București. Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1995.