

## THE POSITION OF THE CHILD IN THE PEDAGOGICAL CONCEPTION OF JOHN DEWEY

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### **Abstract:**

This work will be about the pedagogy of John Dewey, and more concretely, the position of the child in his theory. Firstly we are going to elaborate on the pedagogy of pragmatism, its historical, political and societal context (Liberal tradition of New England, societal and political circumstances in the USA) as well on the philosophical and scientific mood of the early twentieth century (Radical and progressive changes in the science of psychology, Darwinian theory of evolution, English empiricism, American pragmatic philosophers: William James and Charles Sanders Pierce). After giving the explanatory introduction of his philosophy and the historical and societal context he was working in, we are going to move on to his educational theories and shortly linger on the basic characteristic of his pedagogy (importance of experience and interaction, democracy, importance of instincts and habits). And finally we can elaborate on the main theme of the work: the Copernican revolution of Dewey and by that we mean, Dewey reversing the classical educational paradigm, instead of placing the teacher as the supreme “monad” (as was the practice through history, except Rousseau in his romantic writings), putting the child in the center of the educational process.

We are going to extrapolate this theory through five key concepts: the power of the instincts, learning by doing, mediatory role of the interest, and individuality as a token of the child’s personality and the child as a societal mover. Conclusion and critique come in the end.

**Key words:** *Pedagogy of pragmatism, John Dewey, Child, Instincts, learning by doing.*

### **1.Introduction**

The pedagogical conception of pragmatism came into being at the fin du siècle and then flourished at the beginning of the twentieth. USA was the place of its birth where it still has some influence on its educational system; and it also developed with variable success in some European and Asian countries. Its beginning is closely tied with some societal and scientific paradigm shifts, which were revolutionary in its time. Industrialization, advancement in science, secularization and the decrease of dogmatic thinking had gave their due in the rise of this reconstructive pedagogical conception, whose point of departure was Herbartian pedagogy with its a priori dogmatism and strict educational policies. We must state some of the Herbartian points, so that we can counterpoint them with the pragmatic conception.

- Complete orientation to the cognitive aspect of education, while neglecting other aspects of development.
- Insisting on repetition and classical learning theories (neglecting creativity, spontaneity and innovation).

- Ex cathedra teaching, unconnected to real life.
- Passive role of the pupil in general; relying on verbal methods and frontal teaching.
- Knowledge packed in readymade lessons.
- Teacher in the position of an absolute authority.
- Strict time and space limitation in the teaching process.
- Molding policies and striving to the average.<sup>56</sup>

The Herbartian model, useful in its time, was historically overcome by some of the trends in science, psychology and philosophy, but also some socio – historical changes that were formative in the thinking development of Dewey:

Philosophical influences, mainly by the newly established philosophy of pragmatism (James, Pierce and Mead)<sup>57</sup>, the long tradition of empiricism<sup>58</sup>, the revolutionary theory of evolution<sup>59</sup> and some aspects of Hegel's idealism.<sup>60</sup> We can also add the general advancement in physics, chemistry and biology.

Radical changes in psychology, influenced by Wundt and Hall, and their breakthrough sweeping of associative psychology are the second major influence. In turn, they gave rise to functionalism inspired by the theory of adaptation in Darwin's evolutionary theory. They saw the psyche as a dynamical category, influenced by the environment with a strong emphasis on affective life of the individual.<sup>61</sup>

New England and the old liberal traditions of that place (Emerson, Thoreau)<sup>62</sup> and the social and political context of the USA are the third and final influence. Pragmatism was founded amidst the two great wars (the American civil war and the First World War), in which the USA was transformed from a mainly rural country to the well-known industrial giant that we know today. The development of capitalism and industrialism are also factors that we cannot omit.<sup>63</sup>

So, let us synthesize all that was said. The radical changes and belief in progress mainly present in the Weltanschauung of the early twentieth century America, combined with the newly found scientific optimism were some of the major variables present at the basis of the pedagogy of pragmatism. Maybe the dominant influence on Dewey's thought (he was, after all, a philosopher) was the practically oriented pragmatic philosophy, mainly present in the ideas of William James and Charles Sanders Pierce: "Consider the practical effects of the objects of your conception. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object", says Pierce; truth can never be abstracted from practice, so education cannot be abstracted from life. The highly revolutionary development of psychology is also a very important factor, having its basis on experiment, observation, fluidity, activity and adaptation. All of that combined with the dialectical thinking inspired from Hegel, gives the highly idiosyncratic philosophy of instrumentalism- as Dewey liked to call it himself.<sup>64</sup> We can end this

<sup>56</sup> Дамовска, Л., Тасевска, А., (2010), *Алтернативни пристапи во педагогичката*, Бомат Графикс, Скопје, 15-16

<sup>57</sup> Миовска, С., (2005), *Прагматистичката педагогика и основното образование*, Селектор, Скопје, 24

<sup>58</sup> Rejovich, D., (1979), *Filozofska hrestomatija* br. 9 – *Savremena filozofija zapada i odabrani tekstovi*, Matica Hrvatska, Zagreb, 55

<sup>59</sup> Ratner, J., (1939), *Intelligence in the Modern World – John Dewey's Philosophy*, New York: The Modern Library, 138

<sup>60</sup> Russel, B., (1945), *The History of Western Philosophy*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 819

<sup>61</sup> Миовска, С., (2005), *Прагматистичката педагогика и основното образование*, Селектор, Скопје, 31

<sup>62</sup> Russel, B., (1945), *The History of Western Philosophy*, Simon and Schuster, New York, str 815

<sup>63</sup> Миовска, С., (2005), *Прагматистичката педагогика и основното образование*, Селектор, Скопје, 21

<sup>64</sup> Дјуи, Ц., (2006), *Реконструкција на филозофијата*, Аз-Буки, Скопје, 2

chapter with a quote by him: "Knowing is not something separate and willful, but a part of a process with which life develops and reproduces itself."<sup>65</sup>

## 2. Educational Theories

In one of the earliest interpretations of the educational theories of pragmatism, Clapared says that pragmatism gave its best fruits to the field of education.<sup>66</sup> So, now, we must try to sketch the fundamentals of Dewey's pedagogy by extrapolating the moving concepts of its theory and practice.

Firstly, as we said, it is deeply indebted to psychology, to the new, dynamic and fluid psychology of the twentieth century – which is why it is sometimes called psychopedagogy. The main and central concept of Dewey's pedagogy is experience from the pragmatic point of view. The two main qualitative characteristics of experience are interdependent acting and continuity: interdependent acting means that the acting and thinking subject is always mediated by his subjective nature in correlation with his outside environment (we can see the influence of Darwin); the object subject dualism is a myth.<sup>67</sup> By continuity, he means that experience is a constant flux of apperceptions in the Bergsonian sense of the word; every new experience of the outside world is always preceded by the antecedent experience and is molded by it – plainly said, it adapts. That is why the education is mainly and essentially a reconstruction of experience, as Dewey puts it himself "I believe finally, that education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and only thing".<sup>68</sup> Education, then, is not preparation for life but a process of living; the school has to be conceived as an embryo form of the society where real life is going on; simplified, but nevertheless, real life.

The next fundamental key is the child centered conception of education. We are going to elaborate on this question briefly, just enough so that we can fill up the missing links in the theory. Education is a coordination between the psychological (individual) and the social aspect of the pupil; there is nothing new in that. But Dewey switches the places of the priorities; he puts the psychological aspect in the first place (not that he neglects the social side) and puts the child in the center. Childhood is seen not as a handicap, but as a potential for future development; potentiality of the matter that seeks its realization in the form, to put it in Aristotelian terms.<sup>69</sup>

As the third and final aspect we can speak about the curriculum of the school. Basically, the child's human nature is in the center of Dewey's theory, but human nature is never static. That is why the curriculum has to be fluid and dynamic so it can correspond to the intrinsic but changeable needs of the pupil. Being poetic, Dewey sees the educational method as a work of art, not just a lifeless document. The teacher's role is also drastically changed, being more of a mediator than strict authoritarian figure. He is the mediator between the child and the outside world.

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<sup>65</sup> Same, 89

<sup>66</sup> Klapared, E., (1920), *Pedagogija Dzona Duia*, Rajkovic i Dzukovic, Beograd, 14

<sup>67</sup> Dewey, J., *The Significance of the Problem of Knowledge*, (1972), The Early Works of John Dewey, Southern Illinois University Press, USA, 15

<sup>68</sup> Dewey, J., *My Pedagogic Credo*, The Early Works of John Dewey, Southern Illinois Press, USA, 91

<sup>69</sup> Аристотел, Митевски, *Создавање и искезнување на нештата: Физика – Книга 1 (Извадок)*, В., (2008), Аристотел, Матица, Скопје, 154

These fundamentals of Dewey's education have an underlying substratum that works like an axiom for everything in his philosophy. His absolute belief in democracy is that axiom. That is why one of his main and most important books is called *Education and Democracy*.

### 3. The Copernican Revolution in Education

Immanuel Kant in the second preface of the 1787 edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*<sup>70</sup> announced his "Copernican revolution" in the way man perceives himself and the world; he put the transcendental subject in the center of the world. It was a turning point in modern philosophy. John Dewey did the same thing in education. In his book *School and Society* he announced: "it is a change, a revolution similar to that of Copernicus in which the astronomical center is moved from the Earth to the sun. In this case the child becomes the sun around which the educational system rotates, it is the center around which is organized"<sup>71</sup>. It is a revolutionary paradigm shift, as Kuhn<sup>72</sup> calls it that changed the whole face of education to this day. The child is being perceived as a material but also as a form in himself to use again Aristotelian terms – the form is in his nature, his instincts. Since the main topic of our work is the position of the child in Dewey's conception, we are going to extrapolate it through five points:

- The power of instincts.
- Learning by doing/ learning by life.
- Mediating role of interest.
- Individuality as a distinctive characteristic of the person.
- The child as a social mover.

#### 3.1. The power of instincts.

We already said in the anterior chapter that there are two sides of every individual: the psychological and the sociological. Dewey explicitly asserts that the psychological side, or to put it more simply, the intrinsic individual side of every pupil is the more important one. This is a conception that appears in Rousseau's *Emile, or on Education* some 200 years ago (The favorite book of Immanuel Kant – we can see the correlation) but in a very rudimentary form. In the ruling of Herbartian pedagogy this side was completely subjugated by the relations of power / knowledge of that time (institutions, philosophy, psychology and pedagogy) as Foucault would say. As opposed to that, Dewey speaks of intrinsic instincts in the child's nature that have to be respected.

In *School and Society* he dwells deeper in the problem of the instincts. By a phenomenological reduction he comes to the *eidos* of four types of instincts:<sup>73</sup>

1. Social instincts that manifest themselves through interest for communication and conversation.
2. Constructive instincts, that show up firstly in playing, games, moving and gesticulations, and later by handling materials and building concrete forms and objects.

<sup>70</sup> Kant, I., (2012), *Kritika chistoga uma, Dereta, Beograd*

<sup>71</sup> Djui, D., (1935), *Skola i drustvo*, Stamparija Nikola Debac, Nova Gradiska, 18

<sup>72</sup> Smith, P., *The Suspicion of Science (Chapter)*, (2001), Culture: An Introduction, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, 235

<sup>73</sup> Djui, D., (1935), *Skola i drustvo*, Stamparija Nikola Debac, Nova Gradiska, 22-23

3. Investigating instincts; corollary of the first two instincts – shows itself in the child's interest in discovering things.

4. Art instinct, the child's potential for art and creation, or mimesis as at the base of human existence.<sup>74</sup>

"The training has to be based on natural tendencies, respectively it has to find its beginning there."<sup>75</sup> Dewey understands the instinctive nature of the child in a very democratic way; as T.S. Eliot nicely puts it "no man is good enough to have the right to make another over in his own image".<sup>76</sup> But that doesn't mean that this is enough; if it was only this, Dewey would not be better than the speculative Rousseau. Instincts have to be cultivated by the educational process. They are seen as a raw material that needs to be refined and molded.

Seen in this way, education is in a general way a method of enculturation,<sup>77</sup> molding of raw natural materials; or to say it in Dewey's language – to put them in instrumental use. Importance of happiness is also one of the crucial aspects. Freud (Dewey's contemporary) showed that we have an intrinsic need for pleasure, for happiness - it is written in our natural code. The child's happiness is one thing that pervasively comes up in every part of his theory, because as Aristotle says at the dawn of philosophy - it is the one thing that has an end in itself.<sup>78</sup>

### 3.2. Learning by doing/ learning by life.

In this paragraph we are confronted with maybe the most famous part of Dewey's pedagogy, namely, his learning by doing maxim.<sup>79</sup> Rebelling against the Herbartian model of education, in the most part against the passivity of learning, he speaks about a wider tendency in western philosophy – the discrepancy and detachment between/of theory and practice. It is a far reaching tendency beginning from Plato and Aristotle, through the scholastic middle ages, and is based on a wrong psychology.<sup>80</sup> Practice cannot be detached from theory because the concept of truth and meaning is intrinsically bound with practice; *mutatis mutandis*, education is ontologically connected with practical doing.

Lecturing about the environment where the learning takes on – the classroom, he tells a funny and now famous anecdote. While shopping with his wife (his longtime colleague) desks for his utopian classroom, he couldn't find what he needed. After a long search, one especially intelligent shopkeeper said to him: I am afraid I don't have what you need. You are looking for something on which kids can work. Here, everything is made for listening.<sup>81</sup> This anecdote perfectly illustrates the problem Dewey wanted to fix. In a classroom where children listen readymade lessons, as passive recipients, they are being prepared for life but not living it – it is too abstract and detached from real life. That is why Dewey proposes the school as the embryonic model of society, where life is going on in its actuality. How did he propose that?

He proposes doing crafts as a part of the curriculum. Primary sources are better than secondary (a thing we know as far as Comenius), and what better to do than to directly model and change the world around yourself. The industrialization of the USA is a big influence in this

<sup>74</sup> Аристотел, (1979), *За поетиката*, Македонска Книга, Скопје, 22

<sup>75</sup> Dewey, J., (1910), *How We Think*, D.C. Heath and Co, Boston, 29

<sup>76</sup> Eliot, T.S., (1976), *Christianity and Culture*, A Harvest Book, New York, 138

<sup>77</sup> Ацевски, И., (2013), *Културна антропологија*, Филозофски Факултет, Скопје, 84

<sup>78</sup> Аристотел, Митевски, *Среќата како врвно добро: Никомахова етика – Книга I (Извадок)*, В., (2008), Аристотел, Матица, Скопје, 179

<sup>79</sup> Миовска, С., (2005), *Прагматистичката педагогија и основното образование*, Селектор, Скопје, 67

<sup>80</sup> Dewey, J., *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology*, (1972), Illinois University Press, USA, 108

<sup>81</sup> Djui, D., (1935), *Skola i drustvo*, Stamparija Nikola Debač, Nova Gradiska, 24-25

decision, but nevertheless; practice is being done and learning is being done by doing. Some critics say that this is too close to the Marxist work education, but here work is being done as an end in itself, not for a profit or material gained. Work, or to put it better, crafts are done for the sake of learning and knowledge. The embryonic society has embryonic crafts that help children in fully integrating in the real life society.

### 3.3. Mediating role of interest

In his famous essay *Interest in Relation to Training of the Will*, Dewey debunks the dichotomy between interest and effort; he asserts plainly, that this illusory dichotomy is a derivation of shallow psychology. They are not contradictory terms, but analogies. Effort is sometimes good and absolutely not an opposite to interest, and interest is not always a good start. He speaks about externalized and internalized interest. The first one is grounded in the object, the second in the child. The awakening of the second one is the goal of education. That means that the educational process must connect the object of learning with the subjective interest of the child. It is supposed to do that not by sugar coating the object, but by correlation (we see the connection of the concepts) with the past experiences and present interests of the subject – that is called integration and correlation. The general process is being called a mediation of the interest: “everything that is indifferent and horrid, becomes interesting when is seen as a goal connected with the subject.”<sup>82</sup> The problem with math is that it cannot make an objective correlative (a poetry term) with the interests of the subject and with real life. It is too abstract; the goal of education is to make the object concrete and connected (here Dewey anticipates developmental psychology by a decade).

One more similar problem is the problem of discipline. Dewey is a promoter of the positive discipline concept, which says that the interest of the child should be used for discipline measures. Punishing and forbidding is not useful and functional, interest is.<sup>83</sup>

### 3.4 Individuality as a distinctive characteristic of the person

There is no grey figure in education; there is no average student; everybody is unique and singular. In those three statements we can sum up Dewey's relation to the individual. The absolute individuality of the students can be seen as a corollary of his pragmatic philosophy; in Dewey's philosophy there are no abstractions, only concrete and singular situations. That's why in *The School and Society* he says “in the moment when children work, they individualize; they cease to be a mass and become separate individuals that we met outside of the school, in the house, in the family, the playground or the neighborhood”.<sup>84</sup>

Dewey sees the self-realization of the individual as the prime goal of education, the psychological side as we showed it. But that doesn't mean that he is against society and tradition; that would have been a shallow interpretation of his philosophy. He says, (and as we saw, he likes to debunk fake dichotomies) that the society and the individual are two sides of the same coin. The goal of education is to integrate the young individual but only through its own unique human and individual nature. Dewey, once again, shows himself as a brilliant synthesizer. Because in the end, that is the point of democracy, the highest monad in the system of Dewey;

<sup>82</sup> Dewey, J., *Interest in Relation to Training of the Will*, (1972), The Early Works of John Dewey, Illinois University Press, USA, 122

<sup>83</sup> Laurel, T., (1997), *Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today*, Teachers College Press, New York and London, 128

<sup>84</sup> Djui, D., (1935), *Skola i drustvo*, Stamparija Nikola Debač, Nova Gradiska, 17

respect of the individual differences, because they are the ones that bring progress and prosperity to every society.<sup>85</sup> But now we are already moving to the last paragraph.

### 3.5 The child as a social mover

“I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform”.<sup>86</sup>

“I believe that all reforms which rest simply upon the enactment of law or the threatening of certain penalties, or upon changes in mechanical or outward arrangements are transitory and futile”.<sup>87</sup>

“I believe that education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of the social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction”.<sup>88</sup>

With these three assertions, Dewey begins the chapter *The School and Social Progress* in his *My Pedagogical Credo*, and we can immediately see why he was so preoccupied with education - he thought that education is the force that will change the world into a better place. Dewey was an ethical meliorist<sup>89</sup>, he believed that the effort of humans can change the world. We think that in the basis of his philosophy there can be found the Kantian *Sapare aude* and the philosophy of the enlightenment as an axiom<sup>90</sup>, only slightly adjusted to the American democracy. There is also the concept of the Hegelian freedom in the self-knowledge of the spirit wavering somewhere in there.

Dewey is against revolution; he doesn't believe in acute and violent overthrows; he believes in slow change by building the qualities and virtues of every person. Rational and reflexive thinking, strong moral education and authentic character, or “strength of the character”<sup>91</sup> as he calls it. All in all, he wants to educate the perfect democratic citizen as a part of a society that is always striving to the democratic ideal; because, for Dewey, the moral and the societal are one and the same thing.<sup>92</sup> In that sense the child is the ultimate potential for utopia, the perfect society.

## 4. Conclusion

Dewey's pedagogy reached its climax in the 1920 and 1930 and by example of his theoretical and practical teachings (his famous laboratory school), many sub movements tried to copy it, or to interpret it and use it in some unique ways of their own. Some of the examples are The Project Method and The Gary System in America, and the Working School, Functionalist School and Freinet System and others. After those golden years, it slowly started to lose its popularity and was also criticized from different and more progressive perspectives. The

<sup>85</sup> Миовска, С., (2005), *Прагматистичката педагогија и основното образование*, Селектор, Скопје, 75

<sup>86</sup> Dewey, J., *My Pedagogic Credo*, (1972), The Early Works of John Dewey, Illinois University Press, USA, 93

<sup>87</sup> Same, 93

<sup>88</sup> Same, 93

<sup>89</sup> Дјуи, Ц., Давчев, В., *Предговор*, (2006), Реконструкција на филозофијата, *Аз-Буки*, Скопје, II

<sup>90</sup> Kant, I., *An Answer to The Question What is Enlightenment*, (2006), Towards Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace and History, Yale University Press, New Heaven and London, 18

<sup>91</sup> Dewey, J., *Ethical Principles Underlying Education*, (1972), The Early Works of John Dewey, Illinois University Press, USA, 78

<sup>92</sup> Laurel, T., (1997), *Deweys Laboratory School: Lessons for Today*, Teachers College Press, New York and London, 32

essentialist from one side and the Marxists from the other side gave analogue criticism: the overall lack of aim and structure, loose methods and curriculum and the general relativistic tendency – it was too child oriented for them.<sup>93</sup> In some aspects criticisms like this hit the mark, but we think that in many ways they misinterpret Dewey's teachings. Close reading of his theoretical works suggests that he tries to take the Aristotelian middle between the two extremes; on one side is the educator - sculptor who molds and sculpts the child's potentials guided by his own (the educators) ideals and needs, and on the other side is the educator - gardener who nurtures the child and lets it take its own path. Dewey doesn't belong in either of these two counterpoints; he talks about the child's nature and instincts, but only in a wider societal context. To put him in either of these sides is an oversimplification and misinterpretation of his work.<sup>94</sup>

Another problem comes when we read Dewey in today's post-modern context. We cannot talk any more about "nature" and "instincts" in the way that he talks about them. Our perception of Darwinian evolution has changed a lot over in recent time, and the concept of nature, and "going back to nature" as a solution, is not relevant as it was in Dewey's time. Today we speak of nature as molded by culture; we see nature and culture as an indivisible whole; every division would be analytical and abstract, just for the sake of classification. So it is not relevant to ask any more the Wordsworthian question "what has man made of man",<sup>95</sup> and to look for the roots of the untouched nature. Every nature is already culture when it comes to man. The concept of man is indivisible from the context of culture.<sup>96</sup> Today we even say that "nature" is a very elaborate and complicated social construct. Going back to a social construct of highly complicated discursive formulations, and to an essence which is not an essence but a culture-historical derivate is not an option any more.<sup>97</sup>

So, *After John Dewey, What?*<sup>98</sup>, asks Bruner, who after remarking that he reads Dewey today with mixed feelings, tries to contextualize Dewey and makes a close reading of his credo. He is suspicious of his "classical American optimism", his pragmatic notion of truth and the capacity of society to shape man in his best image; its rejection of the "tragic view of life". After acknowledging his paradigmatic shift (the Kantian revolution), he insists that Dewey was a child of his; a time with its own problems and battles to fight. He acknowledges and values his mild revolutionary spirit and warns against misinterpretation and sentimentalism or kitsch interpretations of his work. "His was a noble yet tender view in his time", he says and asks us to respect our traditions - not with an eye of an epigone, but with an eye of a worthy and dignified student. We can say that Bruner is right. Let us respect Dewey as a child of his time, learn from his balanced and practical pedagogy, cherish him like a historical document with practical value, but let us not make a kitsch and cheap sentimentalism of his theories. We owe that to him.

<sup>93</sup> Mitrovic, D., (1981), *Moderni Tokovi komparativne pedagogije*, Svjetlost, Sarajevo, 321

<sup>94</sup> Krulj. R., Kacapor, S., Kulic, R., (2003), *Pedagogija*, Svet Knjige, Beograd, 64-65

<sup>95</sup> Wordsworth, W., Colridge, S.T., *Lines Written in Early Spring*, (2003), The Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth Poetry Library, London, 51

<sup>96</sup> Гирц, К., *Ефектот на поимот култура врз поимот човек*, (2007), Толкување на културите, Магор, Скопје, 45

<sup>97</sup> Foucault, M., *Truth and Power*, (1980), Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977, Pantheon Books, New York, 109-134

<sup>98</sup> Bruner, J., *After John Dewey What?* (1997), On Knowing: Essays for The Left Hand, Harvard University Press, London, 113- 131



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