

The concept of freedom in education – reflections on the context of “the century of the child”

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Abstract

The 20 century is well-known in education as the century of the child. It is not only a book title or an announcement of the great changes in pedagogy which will follow, but also a century of great personalities who influenced the world of education with their ideas and ideals. They are represented by J. Dewey, M. Montessori, Ed. Claparede and many others until the end of the century. In their theories, the expression of the child's freedom becomes a fundamental condition of education. The present paper is aimed to analyse the concept of freedom in the context of contemporary school life, starting from ideas and pedagogical theories initiated in the first half of the 20 century.

Keyword: freedom in education; new education; J. Dewey; M. Montessori; the century of the child; pedagogical ideas; child's needs.

1. Introduction

Periodically, the theory of education brings into our attention traditional pedagogical ideas in new perspectives or integrated in new, adapted approaches. From time to time we talk about the “new schools” and the “new education” on the changeable context of historical transition from a century to another. In the early XIX siècle, the cornerstone book of Ellen Key (1900) announced the new coming of “the century of the child” in education. Her Majesty, The Child, needs a strong orientation to the axiological nature of the education, the real values which may conduct the child to succeed the steps towards the ideal of education and its correlated goals.

By that time, two tendencies will play a major role in the development of theories of education in historical XX century, passing through the pedagogical ideas specific to the “Copernican revolution”:

- the psychological tendency, represented mainly by the A. Binet, who has underlined the importance of individualization of education in the way in which the child returns to and focuses on her/himself;
- the sociological tendency, promoted mainly by the E. Durkheim, who has defined the goal of education closely related to the “social element of the human being”.

These two important tendencies, based on the original pedagogical ideas of J.J. Rousseau, have defined the “new education” era, in an attempt to overcome the social and the psychological factors involved. Ones of the great representatives of the pedagogical ideas of the “new education” are J. Dewey, M. Montessori, Ed. Claparede, Ov. Decroly and R. Cousinet.

Starting from this stimulating environment of education, the present paper will focus on the concept of freedom in education, in the way of some of the great educators of the 20 century have emphasized it, in their theories and practical ideas.

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2. The “new education” and its main pedagogical ideas

I. Gh. Stanciu, who had major contributions of the development of Romanian pedagogy as science, in order to analyze and interpret the main theories in education in the 20 century, has stated in his book “The school and the pedagogical doctrines in the 20 century”: “I believe that the most adequate pedagogical system is the one which succeed to harmonize the best the great values of that cultural and social time and space and develop for each human being the capacity to assimilate these values and create her/his own hierarchy of them. (...). I also believe, as the most of the theoreticians of education as well, that an educational system is a product of certain social, economic, political and cultural conditions, being created to fit the best to those conditions. Consequently, I believe that some of the concepts and theories could be adapted and adopted, but not the entire educational system, because it becomes a stranger entity for the specific structure of reality (...). In conclusion, a specific system of education, no matter how perfect is designed and implemented in a specific country, could only provide suggestions for framing another system of education, specific to another time and space” (7, p.13).

In line with all ideas mentioned above, we will try to present in the next sections some of the most representative theories of the “new education”, emphasizing the educational approach of freedom expressed in the school life.

2.1. John Dewey and the child learning by doing

The “new schools” movement has promoted the extra-school activities, underlying its role in developing esthetic education, the interest for pedagogical research in order to reveal the most important features of the child’s life, framing a new conception about education, defined by the J. Dewey as a “Copernican revolution”. This revolution has promoted a school focused on the child’s specific needs, figuring out a new conception called “the new education”.

J. Dewey has represented one of the most important theoreticians of education. His pedagogical principles are an expression of pragmatism in education and a fundament of the American system of education for at least half of century. In his philosophy, the central concept is the experience, having as main features the action and the knowledge. “Any action, J. Dewey says, is a journey in the future, being always covered by the incertitude. The experience is never definitive, the human facing to a continuous reconstruction and a repetitive adaptation of the means to the new goals”.

The J. Dewey’s pedagogical system values the American democracy and the development of the modern sciences among other characteristics of the American society. Taking into consideration the both, democracy and modern sciences, Dewey ask for a reconsideration of the objectives and means in education, on the one hand, and for a new approach of education, based on the last developments of sciences, on the other hand. It is not a coincidence that the main opera of this great educator is entitled Democracy and education.

From the J. Dewey’s point of view, the education consist of two main aspects, one psychological and one sociological. As we already have presented in the introduction, these two tendencies are not subordinated one to another, but particularly, Dewey has appreciated as fundamental the psychological influence. “The instincts and the own capacities of the child represent the starting points of the entire education.” (6, pg. 87).

In his conception, the effort to develop the capacity of learning and to build-up skills, to readapt the activity to the new condition of the context of education is called growth, mainly the action of ensuring the conditions for developing the learning capacity, which is the same with the education. “Consequently, the education is the same thing with the growth.” (1, pp. 47 and 87-96). Dewey has considered that the aim of education is the growth itself. From his point of view, the theory of education understood as process of growth is superior to all others theories about education. (1, pp. 48-70). In order to educate a child, the teacher needs to adapt the activity to the

new conditions, mainly representing a continuous organization and reorganization of the experience.

Another important idea of the Dewey's pedagogical system is related to the aim of education, perceived as enabling the persons to continue the process of education. In this way, the education receives social efficiency, respecting the nature of the child. This idea is part of the concept of freedom, as Dewey understood the lack of the control in growing the child. In the same way as J.J. Rousseau, Dewey is an adept of following the nature in education.

An important part of his pedagogical principles focuses on idea of learning by doing, a principle still in practice of education. As we already mentioned, Dewey considered that "the experience include the knowledge". The student needs to know the utility of what he learn, only in this process of experience being possible the process of thinking and the understanding of the meaning of things. According to this principle, the education becomes a continuous organization and reorganization of the experience. How he said, the school is the life itself!

As a last argument of freedom expression in the Dewey's pedagogical principles is the method of problem, the method which was figured out in five stages by the Dewey himself, as a starting point for learning by discovering things, ideas and concepts. The freedom of the student is stated. His/her activity is practical and is happened by the very beginning, as a fundament for learning. The Dewey's desire was to create conditions in school in favor of learning by action, each student having the opportunity to try, to discover, to create and interpret in the name of freedom of his/her thinking ability to be curious about facts ad things.

Considering this method as a part of the research method, Dewey has identified as the first moment of problem solving the establishment of the empirical situation, a situation very similar with those encountered by the student at home or in his/her living community. Starting from the known and common situation, the problem seems to be solved based on the previous child's experience. During the solving process, the obstacles appear and this new situation stimulates very much the process of thinking. At this moment, the student needs all the information he/she gets from all the means available. The previous experience is no longer enough. The student formulates hypotheses and imagines possible consequences of these. The hypothesis considered the best fitting to the model of solving becomes an efficient tool for similar actions in the future. This hypothesis, implemented and verified in practice, becomes the new knowledge, integrated in the student's system of notions and concepts.

This method offers the major advantage of development the student's internal motivation. His/her involvement in activities based on genuine interest generates a full mobilization of the person's effort in order to overcome the inherent constraints of the situation. It is the student's choice to pick up one or another solution for solving the problem. This freedom is closely dependent by the student's degree of variety and depth of knowledge, as well as by his/her imagination and curiosity to discover new patterns on the old paths.

J. Dewey has a huge contribution to the development of the pedagogical system, not only the American one, but also at the level of pedagogy as part of the sciences of education. Moreover, in terms of general promoting of freedom in education, Dewey's pedagogical principles assert the force of student's imagination and thinking in order to discover solutions for problems and move knowledge towards future times.

2.2. Maria Montessori and the freedom as a method of education

Maria Montessori is one of the educators who changed the world with her pedagogical theories, succeeding to promote a vigorous and consistent model of education worldwide. In the first half of the 20 century, M. Montessori has influenced massively the perspective of approaching education, considering the freedom of child's manifestation as a fundamental condition of education.

M. Montessori's aim was to know everything about the child, in terms of developments, processes and skills. The premise of this approach was the complete freedom of the child. In this way, the freedom becomes a method of education.

Under the auspices of freedom, the nature of the child has been understood by the Montessori as a huge power which designs the inner creation of the human being. The development of the human nature is entirely dependent by the inner force living inside of every person. (6, pg. 102-106).

According to her pedagogical theory, the child is not trained by the teacher, but is trains him/herself. From this perspective, the education means an appropriate environment for the child's need to assimilate spontaneously the knowledge. This "appropriate environment" consists of preparation and organization the external stimuli, experimentally determined. The teaching materials become – from her point of view – "development materials", correlated to specific periods of child's ages. Accordingly, such a kind of environment - experimentally designed – the child not activates stimuli incidentally, and his/her freedom is not absolute, but limited! The child is dependent by the materials received, and the discipline is in place! In spite of these limits, this pattern of education remains in favor of activity and activism, stimulating engagement and creation. The child's freedom is based on his/her curiosity and interest. He/she may chose alone the acting materials and play with them wherever it like and the interest exists! The school itself becomes "the house of children" and it seems to be the land of pleasure, of freedom and wonderful discovers, in order for the children to develop their mental and physical potential.

A special mention need to be done: Montessori has focused her researches mainly on the age 0-6, the period of sensory development. In many aspects, the Montessori's theory remembers us the J.J. Rousseau's pedagogical ideas and ideals, she considering that the specific of the first period of development (0-6) is the best time for exploring the senses. Despite her efforts to promote freedom in expressing the child's nature, finally, Montessori ended to exaggerate the pedagogical value of the method, but underlying the child's need "for living naturally", in the middle of the nature, doing activities close related to the nature.

The great contribution of the Maria Montessori to the development of the education sciences in the first half of the 20 century is influenced by her passion and commitment to the pedagogical ideals focused on the child's personality. It is due to her the attention paid by the theoreticians of the world to the new education paradigm which emphasize the children's rights and needs. The idea of respecting their autonomy and offering them an educational environment, according to the specific conditions of each age and period of personality's development became a cornerstone integrated in the practical approaches which followed.

3. The confluence of pedagogical ideas about freedom in education: an arch over a century of remarkable developments

At the beginning of the 90'es, Philippe Perrenoud, from the Faculty of Psychology and educational sciences, Geneve, has talked about the child's freedom in school activities. Among other theories and article he has written a Decalogue entitled "*les droits imprescriptible de l'eleve*" and has raised a complicate question, still debating today, *if it is possible to have a school without discipline?* (5, p. 30).

Many aspects have been taken into consideration in order to answer to this question, some of them are still waiting for revision or solutions, for improving strategies and better practice.

First of all, the educational system as a whole is under investigation, referring to its perverse effects on discipline, such as: the rigidity of the contents and of the structure of knowledge, the missing link between theory and practice for the most of the subjects studied in school, the focus of the pedagogy on the formal aspects of learning, the existence of too many constraints in the educational environment, and more normativity and control instead of the freedom etc. It seems to be as an image of apocalypse! This is why more and more educators, psychologists, all people involved in the field of education, as practitioners, theoreticians or decision-makers, are concerned about the functionality of this system.

Secondly, the bureaucracy, manifested in all aspects of the educational system, becomes stronger and stronger. Maybe the one of the most worrying aspect is related

to the expression of the bureaucracy in the teacher-student relationship, influencing negatively the roles, routines and responsibilities of these two main actors of the classroom.

Starting from this reality, Ph. Perrenoud has worked out on a different profile of the student, with different rights and responsibilities comparing with those we assume on behalf of tradition or experience, adapted to the present features of the school life, and more important, adapted to the needs of the students. According to this *Decalogue*, the student has the right to her/his intimacy, the right to move during those 50 minutes of a lesson, to talk with the classmates and choose the team players, and as well as, the right to not cooperate in certain situations. He/she has the right to change places and materials, ideas and experiences, the right not to listen every time and not be attentive all the time. The student has the right to choose different subjects, different activities, and different teachers, learning only if the content makes sense and has a practical utility. The student has the right to play and to learn, and not always keep all the promises. And not the last thing, he/she has the right to not like the school and the right to say it!

Obviously, these student's rights are not formal and definitely, not usual! Most of them we are used to consider as assumed by the students and the teachers, as well. In school practice, they are not. The degree of freedom vs. discipline – understood as rules, regulations, constraints, limits etc., majority of them prescribed for the students - varies very much in favor of the discipline! The normativity is still the main approach of the learning situation, even we are talking about the teachers or the students initiating or conducting the interactions.

From this perspective, taking the risks is the preferable solution for reaching the educational goals. Unfortunately, not the policy-makers are those who decide how to take the risk or what for results in terms of skills and competencies, but the teachers do. They do that every day in the classrooms, take the risks and sometimes win!

Not as the last argument for freedom in education, but a sentimental one, imagining an arch over time and space from the beginning of the century to the end of it, from the American pedagogy to the Romanian cultural space, I will present you another *Decalogue*, belonging to a Romanian personality, a great mathematician and educator, namely professor Solomon Marcus, member of the Romanian Academy.

Solomon Marcus has promoted continuously during his long and prolific career, several pedagogical ideas, and an important synthesis of them being known as “ten human needs the education has to take into consideration”. I will mention them below (4, p.6):

1. The need of giving a sense of life, at the elementary level;
2. The need to refresh;
3. The need to ask and to wonder;
4. The need to uncertainty and suspicion;
5. The need to be wrong and to fail;
6. The need to play;
7. The need to have an identity;
8. The need for dignity and humanity
9. The need for culture;
10. The need for transcendence.

There is no need for comments.

They are general principles based on which education worldwide could be done in better patterns, following the child's nature, as the representatives of the “new education” already stated. The roots of these principles are in the childhood and they should be the focus of education and learning at any age.

Moreover, if we try to compare these Decalogue, one belonging to Ph. Perrenoud and the other to S. Marcus, we could find out many similarities, in terms of the meaning, the values and educational approaches. Despite the fact that, one Decalogue is focused on the student and his/her behavior at school, and another Decalogue emphasizes the general human needs, considered as crucial for education, the main

ideas involved express the permanent struggle of each educator, theoretician or practitioner, to enforce and respect the nature and educational needs of the child during the process of education.

After reading my argumentation exposed in this paper, passing through decades of the 20 century and pedagogical ideas and theories about the education, about the child, the learning objectives, the mission of school or the concept of freedom, a question may be still standing: *why, from the multitude of a child's needs or those of a teenager of our turbulent times, these pedagogical ideas or principles or needs should have priority in formal education?*

I am not sure that I, as an educator, I would choose the same needs or I would pay attention to the same pedagogical theories or ideas. But certainly I would try to get an answer.

4. Conclusions

Many times, at older ages in the upper secondary education, we are used to say our students: *Be spontaneous! Be creative! Use your imagination and your critical thinking skills!* We are the same teachers who forget about promoting freedom at early ages in school, encouraging students to ask, to think, to be curious, to experiment, to talk and express their ideas and personal thoughts! Without freedom in education, using its tremendous power of change personalities as open-minded people, future-oriented, with initiatives and able to manage the prospective shape of their careers, the school is nothing else, but a black whole which wastes time, financials and human resources.

On the other hand, a school without discipline and normativity is a utopia! The solution is given by the fragile equilibrium between the freedom and normativity, a perfect recipe which is not written in any pedagogy or guidelines, but wait to be discovered and practiced by any teacher in searching for his/her mastery in education and by any student curious to experiment relationships, situations or learning opportunities in the classroom.

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