

BOOK REVIEW

Branislav Pupala. *Narcis vo výchove (Pedagogické súvislosti individualizmu)*. [A Narcissist in Education (Pedagogy and Individualism)]. Bratislava: Typi Universitatis Tyrnaviensis, Veda, 2004, 94 pp.

In his latest monograph *Narcis vo výchove (A Narcissist in Education)*, B. Pupala identifies the risks and tensions that have emerged in the area of education as a result of the process of personalization taking place under democratization. In contrast to the one-sided individualizing procedures in pedagogy, the author seeks to return to the fundamental (even defining) characteristics of education by considering it in terms of a stabilizing social process. The theme of the book goes beyond the basic concept of education to refer to the issue of individualization in sociology (culture) or social philosophy and has been inspired by the work of G. Lipovetsky and the attitudes of H. Arendt.

The author regards individualistic logic as an essential factor, which has recently had a significant impact on educational practice and theory and has created (although rather implicitly) an elementary ideology for those involved in education. This ideology lies behind the creation of pedagogical ideas and attitudes, thematic preferences, conceptual pedagogical decisions including the shaping of some methodological approaches and the way that they are implemented. In spite of the fact that the social process of individualization indisputably plays a positive role in the region of education, it also faces the risk that is associated with the neglect of aspects of education which suppress individualization and instead work in favour of the “whole”.

Lying in the background of the debate is, according to B. Pupala, a controversy between personalized attitudes towards individuals and the principal function of education—that of adaptation, through which the reproduction of society takes place. The processes of individualization are stabilized in pedagogical discourse and are manifested particularly through the normative theories or concepts in education which are directly and openly affiliated to the values of a personalized society. An education which espouses the general idea of “alternativeness” thus becomes embroiled in internal controversies and paradoxes: these lead to the risk that its general ideals will be relinquished and all possible ethnopedagogical projects will instead take their place.

According to the author, contemporary pedagogical discourse emphasizes particular questions while neglecting others; it is as if some of these are no longer of interest or indeed have been completely eliminated, despite the fact that they may be crucial. He, therefore, introduces a note of skepticism into his writing when considering the excessive personalization of education in the broader context of the debate about the character of education itself. Education is understood to be a specific sociocultural phenomenon bound to human communities, for which both the reproduction and restoration of culture are existentially constructive. The concept of culture thus encompasses culture as a constitutive human action in the form of intergenerational transfer. Where the author tries to support his conservative approach by arguing that education is a means of cultural transfer and assimilation in terms of the relationship between majority and minority, he risks controversy. He understands education to involve relations between the masters (the majority living culture on the basis of the developed structure of cultural competences) and apprentices (the minority officially having the continuity of life potentially in their hands in the particular community). In other words, according to the author, it is a relationship between those who are legally responsible and those who are not.

B. Pupala is right to say that a liberally-minded person would not be willing to accept a definition of education which held that it was the assimilation of the minority (children) into the culture of the majority and as a means of introducing “novices” to the existing rules of the game, which are both permanent and lasting. Together with Arendt he states that the penetration of permissive tolerance into

education creates and deepens the chasm between the world and children, disrupting their "normal" relations with adults because education looks only to the past and the present; its function is not therefore to prepare conditions for a changing world neither for creating a new world. This argument can be regarded as subjective and it is not improved by the idea that preparing a new generation for the new world may simply mean taking the opportunity to create something new but outside their reach. A developing culture incorporates both the conserving and innovative mechanisms without which human civilization would stagnate. A number of basic values and ways of interpreting almost all the known cultures have been included in this preparation for change for hundreds and thousands of years. The making of a new world (or at least a different one), including trust in the new humans of the future is built upon a wide range of social and cognitive constructs or ethical concepts and there is no reason to argue that educating children so as to maintain the continuity of generations could be achieved without them. Education is unthinkable without the notion of preparing children for change and the creation of a new world; the world is always related to the future and embraces children as its potential realizers. Therefore, there is no doubt that the mission of education is to cultivate in children those skills which serve as a preparation for abandoning tradition. Understanding education as the assimilation of the minority (children) into the culture of the majority appears not only to be problematic but also unprofitable in democratic conditions since there is no single culture in any geographical region or state; society is generally ethnically and socially stratified and also diversified in terms of life styles to the extent that to speak of a minority or a majority is in this sense irrelevant.

The conclusion of the monograph includes references to Foucault's ideas on power frequently used by psychologists and pedagogues in their efforts to reject the use of non-directive methods in therapeutic or educational activities. Pupala begins with Foucault's definition of the pastoral power of the modern state, which "individualizes and fuses society into a whole" and ends by stating that socialization and education are impossible and inexplicable without social pressure; thus a call for naturalness, spontaneity and a flexible approach in the name of personalized education is theoretically anachronistic, utopian and actually incorrect. It is questionable whether it is possible to deny or judge the profitability of these approaches in our current environment from within the four walls of a university department. It is only through researching, in a qualified manner, the results of pedagogical practice that it is possible to ascertain the nature and extent of the socialization process in education, but the book does not contain much information on this point. We should bear in mind that narcissism is not only a threat to the individual but also to a culture, a group, an ethnic group, a nation or a state. History has shown how cruel the consequences can be.

The style of the monograph is absorbing (theoretical considerations, analyses, annotated references and discussions on resources are interwoven throughout the book, reminiscent sometimes of the genre of a review). The text enables us to easily and naturally form our own opinion and picture of the ongoing changes in approaches to education and consider the opposing view. The opposing view should probably not be seen as the 'flip-side', but rather as "insufficiently reflected", because enthusiasm for innovations in the individualization of educational processes should probably be quelled from time to time by the limits established by the character or the core of the matter itself, by realizing the need to pose subtle questions about whether such innovations are adequate and justified. This is particularly true in the sensitive and fragile domain of education: unless of course we want to give up completely and recognize the need of its effect or existence as an important aspect of the practice of socialization. Although not everyone may be persuaded of the need for such a conservative attitude to education as the author and some may even support the introduction of new approaches, the monograph can nonetheless be regarded as a qualified insight into the problem. It might even be considered as an inspiration and at times an intentionally provocative challenge or impulse for the beginning of expert discussion on themes which are not currently fashionable. We shall see later whether this discussion will develop further and if so which direction it will take. But the conservative approach should not, "in its encounter with liberalization", forget that it is not simply expert discussion that is key but also the fact that power in a democratic country is delegated by its citizens: they are the ones who determine on which basis education should take place, whether in respect of their children's nature or "free" approaches. Indeed, just as "narcissism" is a threat to an individual, a group, culture or state, it is also a threat to theories, approaches or concepts. Referring to alternative solutions and taking account of the specificities has so far been shown to be the most profitable defence in the democratic world.

Blanka Šulaviková