

CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES IN EDUCATION

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The monograph *Education in Fundamental Discourse*¹ is a mature perspective on contemporary pedagogical theory. It is based on the conviction that pedagogy has not devoted enough energy to its theoretical underpinnings. Therefore amongst both the lay public and in professional circles there is a lack of understanding of basic theoretical levels, relating to particular pedagogical questions.² This unawareness often means that in practice a variety of techniques and methods are introduced that may produce undesirable effects, since many measures undertaken on behalf of school policy stem from various theoretical approaches, whose aims are often specific, incompatible, and even contradictory. We should bear in mind that they all lead to different practical recommendations, shaping specific goals and creating special technologies of educational practice including a variety of methods and practice, which cannot be freely combined (*ibid.*, 7-9). The high degree of differentiation between the basic pedagogical discourses and the ability to understand their consequences and current impacts manifest themselves as both expected and necessary components of a pedagogical awareness.

The book provides a valuable analysis of the fundamental discourses on education, while, at the same time, approaching the subject from the perspective that each discourse favours specific and unique aspects of human development and seeks to resolve the particular problems associated with them. The authors summarise and describe the individual

¹ Ondrej Kaščák, Branislav Pupala: *Výchova a vzdelávanie v základných diskurzoch*. Prešov: Rokus 2009 (in Slovak).

²This also leads to the fact that throughout the world, the phenomenon of showing “contempt for pedagogy” comes in many different shapes and sizes. One of them is student contempt for the subject of pedagogy. A similar type of contempt may also be found amongst representatives of other scientific disciplines. In pedagogical discussions we find different theoretical discourses that shape the way in which they are perceived by teachers, academics or politicians. On the basis of these views a so-called “public discourse on education”, which is also constituted by the media and that has an influence on parents. In this discourse the educational crises or failures are debated and so another round of school reform is legitimized. Unfortunately, little analysis is devoted to the lack of unawareness about the fundamentals of the discourse on education (*ibid.*).

theories that create the main stream of contemporary pedagogical thought by categorizing them as follows: humanistic, functional, interactional, reconstructionist, consensual and neoliberal. "Each of these approaches thematizes the pedagogical field in a specific way; it has differentiated points of emphasis and revolves around a specially established value framework. These value frames also provide a mirror image of the investigations and interpretations of the field of pedagogy. We can say that these mirror images reflect the way in which the individual approaches create their own pedagogical reality, and, in particular, how they create a specific means of naming and talking about this reality..." In places "the concept of development dominates (typical of contemporary humanistic discourse, in which education is perceived primarily as the self-formation of the subject) while elsewhere it is the concept of education that dominates (particularly the consensualist discourse relating to the values of traditional culture and also the neoliberal perspective); in other approaches, these concepts are organized within a hierarchy, where the central concept is socialization (characteristic mainly of functionalist discourse). All this relates to the kinds of values that are preferred within the different approaches, what their focal point is and which elements of educational reality they seek to attest to most of all ..." A comparison "of the individual approaches enables us to see their weaker points which are not visible from within the inner perspective of these approaches since they are either unarticulated or they relate to questions that simply are not there. We should take note of the fact that humanistic views focus on the individuality of the subject and its natural development within a wider understanding of education, while functionalist perspectives concentrate on the process whereby the environment socializes or even creates the subject, and interactionist theories centre mainly on the psychological aspect of learning, teaching and its requirements. Reconstructionist perspectives go hand in hand with sociology and politics and so development and education are placed within the context of social change or change in social institutions. Likewise, in the neoliberal point of view, pedagogical discourse is derived from the discourse relating to economic change and the nature of the economic setting. For consensualists, the most important conceptual pillar is represented by the paradigmatic patterns of culture, which are central to shaping individuals, that is, education in the strong sense of the term" (*ibid.*,18-20).

A typical feature of *humanistic discourse* is a focus on individuality, on developing it, or, more precisely, on "self-development" and "self-creation". Behind this discourse lies the premise of the predisposed autonomy of the subject capable of self-regulation or of being guided towards self-regulation. The imperative of self-development affects perceptions on the pedagogical conditions that are able to stimulate self-regulation and also influences the conceptual understanding of these conditions. This notion of self-development contains the idea that education is a particular kind of process that should "let the individual grow". Education is primarily the organization of a stimulating milieu, where individuality is self-realized and personal experience is stimulated, offering new experiences. Education as it is traditionally understood, as the mediator of culture or as the acquisition of knowledge, is not the main concern of this discourse. Theoretically, the external management of education is not possible, since the model of "self-creation" has dramatic consequences for epistemology, in that it offers an image of the shaping of one's own individual knowledge. At best, education may be a specifically organized contribution to self-development and is semantically assimilated within a particular interpretation of the concept of education. In a

similar vein to the concept of education, the concept of socialization is also reduced in this discourse (in its disciplined form). The issues on which the elaboration of the processes of socialization focus are repressed in this discourse by the premise of individual self-creation from internal sources as well as the radical thesis of “constructing individual knowledge”. The value limits of the humanistic discourse are denoted ethically (the special value of a subject resonates here) against the relevant philosophical background (characterized by the overlap with existentialism), and then using the values of individual psychology and personalized epistemology (acquiring knowledge through experience and through forming an individual image of the world).

The humanistic line of thinking is particularly evident in the work of J. J. Rousseau. In *Emile: or, On Education* Rousseau clearly states that “everything that comes from the creator of the universe is good”, that “man is good by nature”. This relates to another of Rousseau’s suppositions that “man was born free”. Such a person is immediately bestowed with the innate ability to “control oneself”. The concept of “negative education” then becomes central to the notion of education. Rousseau understands “negative education” to mean negating the traditional interpretation of education, thus avoiding education in some way and avoiding the formative activities to be conducted by adults. “Negative education” is thus non-education. Rousseau literally states that adults should provide children with a natural environment for their natural development instead so that they remain “good”. Since Rousseau’s approach was based on the a priori “goodness” of a child, the formulation of the pedagogical imperative “let the child grow” is entirely understandable. This motto was later adopted by almost all pedagogical ideas deriving from the tradition of humanism. Among those who developed Rousseau’s ideas we find J. Herder, L. N. Tolstoj and later the Swedish pedagogue E. Key, alongside many others.

Adherents of pedagogical humanism currently find support for their ideas in philosophical theories and natural science theories. The most influential of which is considered mainly to be the theory of so-called *radical constructivism*, founded in natural science. These theories include other philosophy-based conceptions that can be denoted as postmodern since they stem from other principles of contemporary *postmodern philosophy*. Postmodern social philosophy states that contemporary humanism relates to a society-wide preference for the values of individualism (focusing on the self, one’s needs, and self-development), privatism (prioritising the private, intimate spheres of human life over public and universal spheres) and in more extreme cases, narcissism or hedonism. The context of education varies in the light of these values, since they are traditionally focused on universal goals and collective logic, which, however, are no longer appreciated. According to R. Rorty (1979, 359), education must be perceived as *edification* and not as traditional “education”. “Edification” is an autonomous process of self-creation and self-expression and it is also the result of the process Rorty calls the “attainment” (of the self). “Edification” is thus seen exclusively as being a “biographical” and individualized process, which, as a “private matter”, does not have to lead to a broader consensus. In his late reflections, M. Foucault, another renowned postmodern philosopher, postulated a similar concept of education. According to Foucault, everyone has to create “technologies of the self” (1988a); “The care of the self is ethically primary since the relation to the self is ontologically primary” (2000a, 139). The development of the individual has to follow the individual’s conception and as

Foucault puts it: “We should now see teaching in such a way that it allows the individual to change at will, which is possible only on condition that teaching is a possibility always being offered” (Foucault 1988b, 329).

By contrast, the focus in *functionalist discourse* is determined by the concept of socialization. Here socialization is an umbrella category of pedagogical reflections since a person becomes a person through the acquisition of social behavioural norms. Pedagogical reality is created through the idea that humans are shaped directly by the environment and the ways in which they adapt to this environment. Education is naturally enforced through the environment; it is a function of the environment (hence its name—functionalist). The theoretical basis is composed of philosophical, anthropological or psychological layers, each of which in some way relates to the key notion that a person becomes a human being precisely through society and education. If the centre of discourse is socialization, education is education in the strong sense of the term, where the aim is not only to develop suitable conditions for “growth” but also to convey the norms of behaviour and action, and to develop self discipline, and provide and adopt social models. The development of discipline and models of behaviour are prerequisite in creating human autonomy. The asymmetry of the educational relationship is unavoidable. Indeed, the individual act of learning has a socializing effect, where, as traditional behaviourists and their followers state, human behaviour is regulated through adaptation to external stimuli. Education ensures that people become accustomed to stable social frameworks of action. This adaptation is necessary for humans to grasp the social relevance of their reactions to the organization of their environment in the broadest sense of the term. If the psychological discourse of this trend centres around the concept of learning, then the image of pedagogical reality it reflects portrays humans as being shaped through their adaptation to the physical, symbolic, and intellectual structure of the environment. At the philosophical and anthropological levels of this discourse, the perspective of pedagogical reality contrasts to that encountered in humanists. The psychological discourse leaves to one side the subject of the so-called “black box”, which concerns the kinds of mechanisms that operate covertly inside humans (particularly in their minds) during the process of learning and adapting to the environment or during socialization.

The “black box” is unlocked through the *discourse of interaction approaches*. These attempt to name and describe the processes whereby people’s humanity is created and within which the specific human psychological characteristics (so-called higher mental functions) are formed and how the symbolic world of human culture is re-shaped to the level of individual forms of thought and action. The discourse in this area of reflection is primarily interlocked with the themes of development and learning. The more full-fledged theses are those concerned with justifying the fact that human development results from the moulding of qualities that stem from the interaction between the internal determinants of development and external incentives. Growth and development (as a consequence of interaction) are much more important concepts than the concept of education; the discourse centres around an explanation of the character and the mechanisms of interactions, which stimulate growth and development in one way or another. We can say that in this case it is primarily a purely psychological discourse, although sometimes it includes more general epistemological questions (for instance, on the phylogenesis of human knowledge); this is

why the concept of education is not particularly dominant or elaborated here. Overlapping with the pedagogical questions themselves, pedagogical reality in the interaction discourse is shown to be one of learning and of teaching. “Opening the black box”, somehow penetrating into the mechanisms of development (which, moreover, is described as an interaction process), directly stimulated pedagogical thinking in this approach and, quite understandably, raised questions as to how to organize teaching in order to achieve as true a copy of the mechanism for development as possible. The pedagogical discourse in this approach is thus saturated with themes about meaningful learning, the functioning of cognitive processes and the conditions they require, which extends as far as the methodology of teaching particular subjects or even the teaching of particular themes. This line of thinking is most reflected in the development of discourse in curriculum and instruction, and it has thereby gained greater confidence and found a particular and justifying theoretical basis. There is no doubt that the core of the interaction approach contributed significantly to the development of the discourse in terms of learning and teaching methods, although these themes also currently represent its limits. In principle, questions on the nature of education are not dealt with here and the discourse does not relate to more general issues regarding approaches to education. These are in some way anticipated but they are not fundamentally considered.

While the interaction discourse describes and shapes pedagogical reality within teaching and in schools, the *reconstructionist discourse* emerges from the other side. This discourse sees pedagogical reality (mainly the institutionalized version) as part of a broader social reality where the basic discursive unit is actually a permeation of and interconnection between these realities. Discussions centre mainly on the notion of school as a social institution, on education and the way it connects to the structure of society, on education in relation to social justice, on the interconnection between education and social and economic threats and prospects. However, the main theme is the reconstruction of the school—an archaic social institution—or the reconstruction of society, through (reconstructed) schools and education. In this discourse, there is evidence of a clearly defined sociological emphasis with clear ideological motives and political goals. The aim of the discourse is mainly action, often almost revolutionary (social and institutional change). Schools and the education that takes place within them may be described as places and processes, which simply copy the logic of a wider hierarchy of social institutions hindering human freedom, and denying justice and real democracy. If the existing society is described as socially unjust and limiting, it is necessary to radically change schools and education, and only then, is it possible in this radically changed system of education to expect significant social change. Reconstructionist elements within pedagogical thought are often represented in terms of discourse by motifs of the emancipation of the oppressed, the socially deprived and the disadvantaged. The theoretical basis in reconstructionist discourse is leftist ideology embedded in, for instance, neomarxist ideological movements or in the liberal ideologies of feminism, environmentalism, multiculturalism or directly in “new sociology”. In pedagogy this line of thinking is found in critical pedagogy. The discourse on reconstructing the school does not necessarily simply come from perceiving the existing social order critically. It may also be bound to visions of ongoing economic change resulting in, for instance, the idea of transition to the age of a “knowledge and information society”. This idea is, however, built upon another—neoliberal ideology, where the linking of this idea with that of social change has

shaped pedagogical discourse in a particular way and provided it with an entirely different value framework. In both the classical reconstructionist and neoliberal discourses, the concepts of education or schooling are directly derived from clearly articulated ideological convictions and goals; this is why they can be directly read as political concepts and as political vehicles.

It is Humboldt's concept of education that reverberates most in the classical roots of consensual discourse in the European tradition. The concept of education occupies central place in the network of pedagogical concepts, since it is regarded as an act that shapes people into complex human beings. Education that is based on the ancient ideal has been understood in its broadest sense as a project in the self-education of a person, moulding their body, soul and spirit, leading people to develop their individuality and participate with confidence in the life of culture, as well as leading people away from dependence and towards autonomy and to creating this autonomy. Although this is concerned with the nineteenth-century classical image of education, consensual discourse is again being debated all over the world, especially when educational systems are disappointed by the lax liberalization of education or if they are critical of the reform activities designed to encourage liberalization. Consensual ideas about education have a long history and are theoretically homogeneous. In both traditional and contemporary discourses, consensual beliefs are articulated in such a way that education (in the sense used earlier) may be established by mediating the paradigmatic content of culture, which does not yield to the pressures of time and which is not limited by the criterion of current usefulness (e.g. cultural and historical traditions, the aesthetic canon or even classical languages). Here, education is also understood and construed as being a major factor in securing cultural stability and intergenerational continuity, which is a particular problem for contemporary liberalized society. The main issues in consensual discourse comprise having stable cultural values, producing a strong cultural human identity through schools and education, and maintaining a significant distance from reformist pedagogical ideas. In conflict with the strengthening neoliberal pedagogical influences, S. Štecha (2007, 331) has the following to say on the quintessence of contemporary consensual discourse: "Subordination to the dictates of always being up-to-date means that the fostering function of education is being trimmed down to a narrow pragmatic function, where the focus is on preparing pupils and students for practical life. Children need to acquire both practical knowledge and skills in schools. However, above all they need school so that they can experience the value of something lasting for ever, of something that characterises us as members of a common culture, whether that be shared poems or the Archimedes' principle. There must always be a consensus on the minimum set of components a culture has and all members of a particular culture must experience them. School should create suitable conditions for sharing the selected body of knowledge, values and symbols that enable individuals to identify with their community. In addition to the dissemination of knowledge, a common awareness is also conveyed of the things, events, ideas, and people that characterize us and to whom we belong and vice versa. They establish a sense of how we belong together, although some people will have only the vaguest awareness of these figures and many will forget them altogether." Embedded within this discourse is a broad concept of education, which can be expressed through the even "stronger" concept of acculturation. In addition to the wider anthropological theory, at the heart of this discourse is the fundamental

psychological background based on the Vygotskian tradition of describing the shaping of the human psyche in cultural and historical terms. The complexity of consensual discourse is increasingly evident today and so is the way in which it connects to the interaction approaches mentioned earlier (based on L. S. Vygotsky and on current trends in cultural psychology).

Neoliberal discourse is politically and ideologically motivated to a far greater extent than other discourses. This is clear from the fact that it is created by political texts, manifestos and declarations as well as from the fact that the ideological system of neoliberalism itself contains connections that link it with political and economic values and their intellectual basis. Neoliberal ideology is built on the central principle of individualism accompanied by the values of free competition, decentralization, freedom, personal autonomy and accountability. On the one hand, the free market is seen as necessary for the natural functioning of society and, on the other hand, there are ethics based directly on these values and human beings are seen as being responsible “managers running their own lives”. Neoliberalism, centred around the idea of a free market based on individual freedom has created a special type of culture, so-called “enterprise culture”. It is founded, in part, on the strong belief that all people can be successful and almost everyone can be an entrepreneur. Humans are seen as being individuals (and autonomous subjects) within the network of economic relations that is based on the principle of competitiveness. The economic principles, that is, the principles of the market in neoliberalism, were extended into non-economic areas of social life including education (*ibid.*). Neoliberalism does not engage with the concept of education but shapes ideas on education in a particular way. Education occupies a significant place in neoliberal ideology, where it is perceived as a crucial vehicle for strengthening economic competition and competitiveness. If the enterprise culture has permeated down to the level of education, then what does that mean for the concept of education? The role of education here is to prepare active individuals for the labour market. People no longer acquire knowledge, rather they acquire competences, applicable mainly in the labour market, including entrepreneurship and long-term flexibility. The content of education is neither solid nor permanent, instead it is the transferable skills and general competences (e.g. the readiness to learn, cognitive flexibility and creativity) that are important. Knowledge has taken a step backwards and the instrumental approach to education is coming to the fore (only things that can be used “in practical life” are valued). The boundaries between specialised and general education have blurred and education cultivates enterprise and an entrepreneurial spirit throughout. Individuality, autonomy and free choice are the key imperatives of education. Education encourages optional systems (the diversification of schools, parental choice, the diversification of subject matter, and again the freedom of schools and of pupils). Transferring responsibility by encouraging the development of individuals in such a way that they will be ready for constant change is fostered by the idea of lifelong learning and education. Autonomy and personal responsibility are again emphasized—the successes and failures of the individual lie in that person’s ability to benefit from long-term educational opportunities. These are on offer at any time and are widely available. Education is thus being thoroughly liberalized. All routes to acquiring the necessary abilities (i.e. education) are equal, whether they be through formal education in school or subconscious learning outside the school environment. In terms of the various

theories of pedagogical thinking characterized above, the neoliberal discourse on education finds itself in direct opposition to consensual ideas.

Ondrej Kaščák and Branislav Pupala's book offers a valuable perspective on current theories of pedagogy. The book provides a lucid and profound description of the sources of these ideas and the impact existing approaches have. As the authors themselves warn, being familiar with these issues is not a commonplace even amongst pedagogical experts; it is therefore important that this process has begun and that it can help shape contemporary pedagogical awareness.

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