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ON PECULIARITIES OF EDUCATION: THE WEAKNESS OF EDUCATION, ITS MCDONALDIZATION AND UNDESIRABLE EFFECTS OF CHANGE

Bartosz Atroszko

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present peculiarity of education which is the source of its weakness, but at the same time it represents its human face and its strength. This distinctive feature is that education is not fully controllable and cannot be, but the pursuit of being controllable is its inherent aspect. On the one hand, education is a planned process, systematically implemented on the basis of program and subject to continuous control. On the other hand, education is not and cannot be fully controllable, because educational processes related to teaching and upbringing - due to their specificity - are not fully foreseeable or controllable. The lack of control is primarily due to the fact that education is a human creation par excellence, based on interactions between living people. However, due to the very important social function of education, attempts are made to make it a measurable and controllable process.

Keywords: education, perverse effect, McDonaldization of education, weakness of education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Education is entangled in an insoluble contradiction resulting from the discrepancy between what education is and what its specificity is, and what society expects from education. On the one hand, education is a process that is reminiscent of a technological process, so it is targeted, planned, systematically executed on the basis of the program and constantly monitored (mainly in terms of "effects" or "products"). Continuous attempts are made to make education more efficient. Schools and teachers are expected to create measurable "effects" in own work. On the other hand, education is not and cannot be fully controllable, because educational processes related to teaching and upbringing - due to their specificity – cannot be fully planned, predicted or controlled. The lack of control is primarily due to the fact that education is a typically human creation, based on interactions between living people. The processes of teaching and upbringing, especially of children and young people, must be based on the personal relationship between teacher and student, so trust, mutual kindness and understanding are needed. Of course, as P. Meirieu noted: Such phenomena as contact with a pupil cannot be guaranteed, cannot be decreed.1 The most important things in education are those which are least measurable and least tangible, such as the teacher-student relationship, mutual trust, the ethos of the teacher, or the atmosphere of kindness in the classroom. At the same time, measurable factors (including those that determine the teacher's professional advancement and the level of his/her earnings), such as formal qualifications of the teacher or his/her seniority, are often of secondary importance to the education and training process. This specificity of education is its weakness in the sense that it conveys the notion of "weakness" of G. Biesta. This author uses the notion of "weakness of education", meaning that education is not a mechanism and cannot be reduced to a well-functioning machine.2 However, in spite of this peculiarity of education, because of the very important, even crucial,

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function of education in every society, there is a strong desire to make it a measurable and controllable process. Control is a technical science concept, and it implies interacting with an object to achieve a specific goal. By writing that education is not controllable I mean that education cannot guarantee anything, it cannot give confidence about the future results of the educational process, including the educational and/or life success of the students. In education you can - at most - try to create favorable conditions in which certain specific situations and phenomena (such as learning, engagement, development, friendship between students, etc.) can arise.

2 WEAKNESS OF EDUCATION AND THE INSTABILITY OF EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES

As G. Biesta points out, education always involves some risk. According to this author, the attempt to completely eliminate this risk is neither necessary nor desirable. Education is not and cannot be a technological process, which is something fully planned, predictable and controllable, although attempts are always made towards this direction. An example of this kind of thinking about education may be B. Gates's speech at the TED conference in February 2009, during which he compared teachers to factory workers and school management to factory management. At the same time, the well-known entrepreneur and philanthropist postulated increasing the control over the teachers by recording classroom lessons and analyzing recordings to detect mistakes made by teachers during lessons. This kind of approach has been met with numerous complaints by educators. The Frenchman P. Meirieu calls this type of attitude aimed at making predictable and risk-free education "infantile". P. Zamojski notes that the perception of the process of learning following the technological process (where teacher is the planner, student is the material to be treated, and graduate is the finished product) is in conflict with the seriousness of the ethical issues related to the schooling. Whereas B. Śliwerski recognizes that the desire to administrate the work of teachers is not the solution of the problem, but it is the problem that needs to be remedied. According to G. Biesta, a certain element of risk, uncertainty and unpredictability must be present in education, as attempts to dispose of it must simultaneously mean removing from the education its key element - the human factor. The elimination of risk out of education would also involve the removal of student subjectivity, the spontaneous interaction between people, and the orientation to freedom and independence of learners. P. Meirieu said that the belief that education can be subjected to total control is infantile because a person who think so denies the facts about the complexity of social life. A person who wants to fully control education negates that other people have their own way of being and thinking, their own motives and their own reasons that may be very different from those of the person in control. In this context risk-free and unpredictable education would be a dehumanized and totalitarian.

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4 "Technology, Entertainment and Design”, conferences organized since 1984, currently organized by the non-profit organization Sapling Foundation.
5 B. Gates, speech at the TED Conference in February 2009 entitled Mosquitos, malaria and education [access 10.05.2017 http://www.ted.com/talks/].
8 B. Śliwerski, Wyspy oporu edukacyjnego, Oficyna Wydawnicza „Impuls”, Kraków 1993.
In education, many intentions have the undesirable and even the opposite effect. R. Boudon calls this type of unintended and undesirable consequences of human activities a perverse effects, while noting that this is an omnipresent phenomenon in social life. This phenomenon is due to the complexity of social life, because the social world consists of people and their interactions. Rarely is it possible for a social action to bring about exactly the desired effect a person was planning to obtain. Such a state of affairs causes that society is not controllable. The total control of people has failed everywhere in the world, – as G. Biesta noted - even in the Soviet Union, the state in which the control of citizens has taken one of the most drastic and totalitarian forms.

Education cannot meet all the social expectations, because, for example, often these expectations are mutually contradictory. It is worth noting that, even worse, an attempt to improve a certain aspect of education could worsen its other aspects. Examples of such phenomena are attempts to standardize examination requirements and create a more objectivized assessment system that contributes to the learning for the test. As a consequence, the test does not measure the knowledge of the examined person, but in fact it measures the person's ability to learn what he or she knows is being measured. In this case, the exam becomes a diagnostic fiction.

Knowledge about social reality - and also knowledge of education - has a different cognitive status from scientific knowledge. Knowledge related to social reality is much less falsifiable and at the same time much more susceptible to different, often contradictory interpretations. Therefore, when discussing education, what some people consider to be the so-called hard facts, turns out to be only some kind of interpretation of reality. These interpretations depend on the individual's point of view and the values of the person who expresses this opinion, as well as on his or her life outlook, personal experience, political views or accepted theoretical framework. Education has different meanings for different people. Often opinions on education are mutually contradictory, and this also includes opinions on specific issues, including issues which apparently are not debatable. For example, M. Fullan notes that at exactly the same time some people think schools are bombarded with change, while others say they do not change at all. A similar phenomenon was noted by Z. A. Kłakówna. At a time when education experts pointed to numerous problems and dysfunctions in the education system, the Ministry of National Education declared great successes of Polish education.

Ethical issues are inseparably embedded in education, as well as issues related to politics, ideology and paradigms. Education is always based on some values and some point of reference (paradigm). Basic issues concerning what to teach? and what is the purpose of learning? enforce ethical decisions. The person answering these two basic questions is forced to establish certain values to be served by the education and the social goals that are worth pursuing in the first place. By making this decision, a person involuntarily pushes those values, principles and social goals which are not in the foreground to the backdrop. As S. Ossowski noted, a constant element of social life is to compare the disproportionate values

14 M. Groenwald, ibidem.
15 M. Groenwald, ibidem.
between which one must choose. Since different categories of values do not share a common
measure, the decision which one to choose must be based on some ideological assumption or
on the person’s individual preferences.\textsuperscript{19}

From the perspective of different paradigms the same event or situation takes on a completely
different value. For example, from the perspective of a functionalist-behavioral paradigm,
adapting a child or teen to society will be considered as the highest value. On the other hand,
a pedagogue who believes in the critical-emancipation paradigm\textsuperscript{20} can ask uncomfortable
questions, such as those regarding the price which young person must pay to adapt to society
(to what extent he must give up his own individuality and sense of freedom), and whether
young man should adapt to existing hierarchies and social structures, or should try to change
them if they are considered unfair, unworthy, etc. Therefore, it is not possible for everyone
regardless of the accepted paradigm or educational ideology - to be satisfied with the state of
education, because the very concept of learning objective and the way of understanding the
desired state of education will be differently defined according to the assumed perspective.

3 DISAPPOINTMENT WITH EDUCATION

Almost all countries have education systems either being reformed or have been reformed in
the last few years.\textsuperscript{21} Reform shows that some part of society is not satisfied with existing
solutions in the field of education. Also Poland is in the process of reforms which will result
in the elimination of all lower secondary schools in the next few years or transforming them
into other schools, and the duration of primary education will be extended by two years. A
large proportion of Poles are disappointed with the education system. My own research
conducted among students of pedagogy of the University of Gdansk shows that students have
mostly negative opinions about education system. For example, more than 80\% of respondents agreed with the statement that the \textit{Polish education system requires reforms}, and
less than 7\% stated that the \textit{Polish education system was functioning well} (sic!).\textsuperscript{22}
Interestingly, although the vast majority of students think that the education system needs
reforms, less than 11\% agree that the Polish education system is changing for the better and
that the changes are moving in the right direction.\textsuperscript{23} Pedagogy students are not satisfied with
the existing education system, but they do not believe in the current educational reform. The
open question remains: \textit{What kind of changes in education are expected for students of teaching specializations? and what kind of changes in education are expected by Poles?}
The history of education seems to be inextricably linked to the criticism of education,
dissatisfaction with its effectiveness and constant attempts to reform it. Education was, is and
will be a problem that arouses many emotions, and these emotions are due to the importance
of education and the disappointment which it often brings.\textsuperscript{24} Continuous attempts to change
the education system are due to the fact that, on the one hand, education is something very
important, valued and socially crucial, and on the other hand, it is an area that cannot be based
only on facts. Education is inextricably linked to values, worldview, politics and ideology.
And since the society is diverse, it is impossible for everyone to be satisfied with the existing


\textsuperscript{20} I refer to the classification of paradigms according to D. Klus-Śtanska, which lists five basic paradigms: 1) functionalist-behavioral paradigm, 2) humanist-adaptive paradigm, 3) constructivist-psychological paradigm (called developmental), 4) constructivist-social paradigm, 5) critical-emancipation paradigm.


\textsuperscript{23} B. Atroszko, L. Sendal, A. Swarra, ibidem.

system. The dissatisfaction of the larger or smaller part of the society with existing solutions is most likely unavoidable.

4 MCDONALDIZATION OF EDUCATION
One of the manifestations of the quest to make control-oriented education is its McDonaldization. The concept of McDonaldization was introduced by American sociologist G. Ritzer and it signifies the pursuit of efficiency, measurability, predictability and controllability in specific areas of social life. McDonaldization is a form of rationalization of social systems. G. Ritzer refers to the tradition of M. Weber's classical sociology, which describes the progressive process of rationalizing social life and the disenchantment (German: Entzauberung) of the world, thus removing from society everything that could be considered magical, spiritual, unexplained or simply mysterious. Efficiency consists in choosing the optimum means to reach the target. Measurability means concentration on what is quantifiable, while neglecting aspects of reality that are difficult to quantify. Striving for predictability involves striving to eliminate uncertainty and unpredictability from the system.

As G. Ritzer noted, in every rationalizing system the main source of uncertainty and unpredictability are the people, and therefore there is a desire to replace people (wherever possible) with machines and computers. Replacing people with machines increases both the predictability and the control of the system. The consequence of the McDonaldization of education is the paradoxical situation that G. Ritzer calls the “irrationality of rationality”, and these are simply all the negative aspects and effects of rationalization. This is a situation in which rationalization leads to malfunction, irregularity and unpredictability. Rationalization involves dehumanization of the social system and potentially promotes the emergence of authoritarian and totalitarian structures.

In the context of education, McDonaldization will seek to increase the effectiveness of education, focus on quantifiable indicators (proportion of people with higher education, results of external exams, etc.), and strive to eliminate unpredictability (standardization, bureaucratization), and to increase the controllability of educational processes (control, evaluation, pedagogical supervision, external exams, etc.). McDonaldization brings many measurable benefits, but at the same time it can cause some negative consequences which are not immediately apparent but which may have fatal consequences in a long time perspective. The pursuit of tangible effects, such as a higher level of percentage of people with higher education in society, causes lowering of the quality of higher education. In this context, higher education institutions are sometimes referred to as diploma factories. A strong focus on the results of external testing causes the already mentioned phenomenon of learning for the exam and the instrumentalization of knowledge. Knowledge ceases to be value in itself and becomes important to the extent that it allows a person to pass the exam. Removing unpredictability and risk from education through standardization and bureaucratization leads to limiting the autonomy of teachers and students.

5 SUMMARY
Education-related processes will never be fully controllable nor predictable, and education itself, as G. Biesta points out, will never be risk-free. However, aspirations in this direction

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are present and it is not to be expected that they will ever disappear. Education is the key sphere of social life, and the future of society as a whole, its prosperity, and even its survival depend largely on it. At the same time, it is a sphere of life with which a large part of society is not satisfied for various reasons, sometimes even completely contradictory. The public opinion will never be satisfied with education, because the views on it depend on personal worldviews, ideologies, values, etc. Since the social costs of education are enormous and the results are not impressive enough, there will always be a tendency in society to change education, and attempts to improve it. Actually, changes in education often take the form of its McDonaldization, stemming from the desire to increase its effectiveness, measurability, predictability and controllability. McDonaldization gives measurable results, but also has negative consequences.

Sources

5. GATES, B., speech at the TED Conference in February 2009 entitled Mosquitos, malaria and education [access 10.05.2017 http://www.ted.com/talks/].

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