



POSTMODERN THINKING AND RELATIVISM THEORY IN THE FIELD OF PEDAGOGY

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Abstract/Povzetek According to theoretical analysis, the text considers the influence of an understanding of postmodern thinking on pluralistic perspectives in education, pluralisation of the concepts of upbringing and education, critique of concepts like causality in gnoseological and epistemological assumptions – determinism, objectivity, rationalization and its consequences in the fields of, e.g., morality. It turns out that the traditional humanistic concepts of education and forming of personality, on the one hand, and learning and knowledge, on the other, demand reconsideration from a perspective involving postmodern scepticism about the idealistic and rigid preconceptions of modern thought. This raises the further question of the efficacy of modern pedagogy in the sense of its consistency with its scientific aims, i.e. its function.

Ključne besede:
postmoderno mišljenje,
pluralizacija pojmovanja
vzgoje in izobraževanja,
pedagogika.

Postmoderno mišljenje in teorije relativizma na področju pedagogike
Besedilo se v skladu z analizo teorije posveča vplivu, ki ga ima postmoderno mišljenje na pluralistične perspektive v izobraževanju, pluralizaciji konceptov vzgoje in izobraževanja, kritiki konceptov, kot so vzročnost v gnoseoloških in epistemoloških predpostavkah – determinizem, objektivnost, racionalizacija ... in posledice, recimo na področju morale. Izkazuje se, da tradicionalna humanistična pojmovanja izobraževanja in oblikovanja osebnosti na eni strani ter učenja in znanja na drugi zahtevajo ponovni razmislek z vidika, ki vključuje postmoderni skepticism do idealističnih in togih predsodkov modernega mišljenja. To nadalje odpira vprašanje učinkovitosti sodobne pedagogike v smislu skladnosti z njenimi znanstvenimi cilji, tj. z njeno funkcijo.

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Introduction

From the viewpoint of the relation between pedagogy and postmodernism, it is significant to start from a postmodernist worldview, which opens particular questions, including the following: what can be said about centuries-old issues dealing with truth and knowledge? A postmodernist could say, “The truth is what people agree about” or “The truth is what works” or “There is no Truth, but a number of small *truths* wandering around”.

Main Argument

Postmodernists are inclined to reject the idealized view of Truth inherited from classical times and existing nowadays and to replace it with a dynamic, changing truth dependent on time, space and perspective. Instead of searching for unchangeable and unchanging truth, they strive to celebrate the dynamic diversity of life. In short, the basic characteristics of postmodern thinking, as expressed by the majority of authors (Digest, Hlynka and Yeaman, as cited by Gojkov 2006) can be freely paraphrased as follows:

- Radicalized pluralism, loyalty to plurality of perspectives, meanings, methods and values; pluralization of concepts like truth, justice or humanity – everything;
- The search for ambiguous meanings and respect for them as well as for alternative interpretations;
- criticism of or a negative attitude towards grand narratives that aspire to explicate everything. This refers to great scientific theories, as well as to the myths in our religions, nations, cultures and professions that exist to explain why things are as they are;
- a general attack on concepts like causality, determinism, egalitarianism, humanism, liberal democracy, objectivity, rationality or the “sovereign” subject (Rosenau, 1992);
- the acknowledgement that – having in mind that there is a plurality of perspectives and ways of gaining knowledge – there are also multiple truths;
- the state that, on the one hand, offers generous freedoms and on the other, opens up even more problematic questions (Welsh 1987).

This could lead to a statement that postmodern thinking, a constructivist perspective or the third period marked the 20th century. An increasing number of

scientists has accepted the standpoint that the gathering of empirical facts within a given world-view will not lead to a quantitatively large step ahead. New waves have come with relativity theory, quantum mechanics and self-regulation theory. Ideas on the relative, rather than absolute nature of observation have paved the way for progress, promoting the idea that science is not guided by a sole general order, but by coincidence. Bertalanffy's (1968) claims on the self-regulation of living systems have opened to dispute the dualistic view of the separation of body and soul, while mathematical tests of the idea of indeterminism have destabilized the thesis on the stability and consistency of order. The characteristics of the third period are the following:

- criticism of the prevailing belief that there is only one correct perspective, absolute truth and validity;
- ontological and epistemological assumptions on the nature of knowledge, valid in the previous periods, are being reconsidered;
- new views on the nature of knowledge have been developed. Popper has offered a standpoint according to which theoretical knowledge does not grow because theories are true, but because of the process of their natural selection, as has been proposed by Stojnov "similarly to Darwin's view on survival of types" (Stojnov, D. 1998).

Out of a whole range of issues related to the title or the text, only a few will be pointed out, which can be taken as the basic markers of the present state within the relation between pedagogy and postmodernism. One of these refers to morality, as one of the significant fields in pedagogy. Given the limitations of space, only some authors will be mentioned (e.g., Oser, Reichenbach & Walker) in discussions on the impact of postmodern plurality and diversity of norms and values on the curriculum of moral education, showing that many concepts of moral education are, in fact, jeopardized by the characteristics of the postmodern world. Oser, Reichenbach & Walker then outline the necessary characteristics of any curriculum of moral education with regard to postmodern *Lebenswelten* (life-world), arguing that the equation of pluralism and ethical relativism has to be refuted. The same author also discusses the curricular possibilities of balancing postmodern realities and moral necessities.

Another significant matter associated with the title is the altered attitude towards knowledge in postmodernism, i.e. knowledge could even be said to have a different meaning. Roland Reichenbach (1994) argues that the prevalence of postmodern approaches in teaching and education is not a matter of personal preference, but

instead follows from the transformation of the meaning of knowledge as a characteristic of the *Zeitgeist*. The concept of an “open future” is an important feature of the postmodern world. Modern belief in (necessary) progressive development of society has lost its appeal to many people. In addition, the major theoretical frameworks (meta-narratives) that typically stood for the “project of modernity” have become less and less compelling. This process of delegitimation is accompanied by radical shifts towards an information society, in which the significance of knowledge and information becomes merely pragmatic. Traditional humanistic concepts of education and personality formation, on the one hand, and learning and knowledge, on the other, have to be reconsidered from a perspective involving both the virtues of modernity and postmodern scepticism with respect to the idealistic and rigid biases of modern thought. Many authors, like Reichenbach, have resisted these tendencies, focusing on the question of whether adjustment of the curriculum to postmodern challenges is necessary and desirable.

Postmodern theories of knowledge also deal with issues regarding the importance of progress. According to the assessment of many authors, the outstanding technological and scientific progress of the 20th century has not been sufficiently encouraging in the social and cultural sense, leading to obvious social and cultural neglect in substantial spheres of human existence, as well as reduced social and cultural concepts concerning the human capacity for growth, etc. Golubović (1973, 2010) detects this in the emphasis on the incapacity of people to understand the complexity of the postmodern world. Under the influence of globalization, this results in a loss of hope in the potential for struggle against the dehumanization of individuals and society, under circumstances involving an obvious increase in depression not only in transition societies, but also in developed countries (Jarić, Golubović & Spasić, 2005). Given the way educational reforms have been carried out, progressively more utilitarian approaches to world understanding are noticeable, while knowledge transfer, supposed to prepare individuals for life, above all, instead teaches forms of adjustment to existing power structures (*ibid*).

The context is briefly outlined as an introduction to an understanding of the postmodern framework within which contemporary knowledge theories are positioned, bearing in mind that questions are raised in regard to the intrusion of economics into social existence, and its dominance in the function of exclusive “economic rationality”, its utilitarian orientation towards efficacy and success as the most acknowledged value, consumerist interpretations of all work results, including educational achievements, as “goods” produced and products viewed as created to be sold. In other words, it is considered that knowledge is spent and will be spent in order to be valorised in a new production, i.e. in order to be exchanged. Thus,

knowledge ceases to be its own purpose; i.e. it gains “utility value”. This is considered a feature legitimizing postmodernism, rather than changes in architecture and arts, as is usually thought. Analysts therefore point out that postmodernism could have remained a mere European caprice; there were no changes in the development of science and politics that would have given it real importance.

It follows from the above that the socio-political context of postmodern society is permeated by a dominant neo-liberal ideology striving for pure economic rationality and reducing individuals to those addicted to “economic success” as a basic behavioural criterion for people in a “consuming society” that is insensitive to the moral norms advocated by Kant’s categorical imperative. Moral nihilism, as many authors see the morality of postmodernism, has, according to Golubović (2012), the following distinguishing features:

- many individuals nowadays are value disoriented and satisfied by a reduced life concept, living according to the principle of a consumerist mentality, not thinking about the importance of the development of human and creative capacities and powers, but subject to technocratic principles as imperatives of life and behaviour;
- imitation and reproduction become replacements for individual and group creativity and imagination, and the average is considered the norm, with creativity and reflectivity thus losing the battle against the spread of populism;
- Enlightenment ideas are accounted as inefficient and marginalized (as “grand narratives”), together with the humanistic approach to the phenomena of modernity, and these are replaced by “neutral discourse”;
- strong tendencies can be noticed towards Euro-centrism and ethno-centrism over creative intercultural communication, encouraging a sense of helplessness at both the individual and national level in the search for a way out of the global chaos that was acknowledged and publicly announced during the global crisis at the end of 2008 (Ibid).

In postmodernism, such moral nihilism from the angle of value is characterised by the relativization of consensus on the “greatest” human value. According to some authors, it is human dignity, as a synonym for the respect for any human being, as well as other liberal, i.e. democratic, values (freedom, equality, autonomy and solidarity). The value system as part of a world-view (individualistic, collectivistic, altruistic, egoistic, active, passive or hedonistic) has also featured, according to its characteristics, the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Numerous

authors consider that it is readily noticeable that postmodernist society has rejected ideas on the need to seek new vision and the improvement and refinement of human existence (a better and more humane society), in order to encourage human intellectual potential and to decrease aggression, violence and poverty. In other words, the end of the 20th century was marked by an alarming value system shift from the philosophical grounds of the basic philosophical questions of existence, towards a narrow definition of economic interests, one that reduces social development to economic rationality, expressed by profit. The consequences involve cynicism, despair, moral indifference and a kind of myopic directedness. Knowledge has gained the character of goods; knowledge acquisition is separated from education; individualism dominates the scene, and the moral aspects of education have been neglected. The ethics of responsibility for globalization has been bypassed. From the standpoint of knowledge, criticism has been emphasized of the prevailing belief in one single correct perspective, absolute truth and validity, as well as its simultaneous reconsideration.

The issue significant for the title of the text is converging on previous images: i.e. it seems less ambiguous. In other words, it is obvious nowadays that “communities are being refigured as space and time mutate into multiple and overlapping cyberspace networks. Youth talk to each other over electronic bulletin boards in coffee houses”, and other places of public gathering, “once the refuge of beatniks, hippies and other cultural radicals, have given way to members of the hacker culture” (Giroux 2013). Giroux continues, “They reorder their imaginations through connection to virtual reality technologies and lose themselves in images that wage a war on traditional meaning by reducing all forms of understanding to random access spectacles” (Giroux 2013). These are the images of mass or popular culture in the postmodern era that cannot be neglected. On the contrary, it is believed that the new electronic technologies, with its proliferation of multiple narratives and open forms of interaction, has changed not only the context for the production of subjectivity, but also the way people “accept pieces of information” (Uzelac, 2012). As Giroux concludes, “Values no longer emerge from the modernist pedagogy of foundationalism and universal truths, or from . . . fixed identities with their requisite structure of closure. For many youths, meaning is en route, the media has become a substitute for experience, and what constitutes understanding is grounded in a decentred and diasporic world of difference, displacement, and exchanges (ibid).

Psychologists might understand and explain the previous statements and thus make it easier for pedagogy in postmodernism. As an illustration of these attempts, there is a recent understanding of the importance of cognitive style in context. It is

thought that persons with a pluralistic cognitive style do not have expressed needs for reduction of a problem to familiar principles and patterns, that they are inclined to research beyond the limitations of the conventional, with expressed intellectual curiosity towards different ideas and an ability to find many arguments in favour of beliefs opposite to their own and to simultaneously reconsider them (Đurišić-Bojanović, 2010).

This is another challenge faced by pedagogy, i.e. narrower discipline, didactics. Space limitation only allows us to mention the issue of the grounded legitimacy and authority of knowledge associated with the image of a “postmodern child” mentioned by Dufour (2001), a new type of learner formed within organizational principles shaped according to the interaction of electronic images, pop culture and a terrifying lack of determination.

It appears that opening new pedagogical spaces in the postmodern era leads to deformation and another methodological fixation; they are marked as political projects, through which subjects will be able to articulate their own projects within critical understanding. In such a way, postmodern pedagogy is expected to deal with discussions of power within and between various groups, as part of a broader social context in which pedagogical institutions are anticipated to be democratic public spheres. The question could be extended further: to what extent would postmodern pedagogy become remote from practical science, having limited applicative value? To whom is this value important? What is meant by the idea that schools should be organized as places of over bridging, negotiation and resistance? How realistic is it to expect teachers to significantly contribute to the issues of authority in democratic processes through better understanding of shared influence that affect and ideology have on knowledge construction, struggle and identity sense? It seems that the education issue in this case has been viewed from the standpoint of social problems in which postmodern pedagogy should intervene in order to bring the lost postmodern youth back to the right track, to introduce them into reality through their readiness to become engaged in research on the public political sphere, with a precondition that they simultaneously recognize the limitations of the useful insights of postmodernism (Uzelac, 2012). Here we have in mind the introduction and determination of possibilities for social struggle and solidarity, which have been often pointed out in scientific papers, and we are under the impression that the first and basic task of pedagogy is motivated by the practical political instrumentalization of education (Uzelac 2012). The question is thus raised here regarding the efficacy of modern pedagogy in the sense of consistency with its scientific aims, its function; what about the assessment that pedagogy in postmodernism functions as a supplement to entrepreneurial capital? Is pedagogy turning into a mechanism of

individual behaviour management? Has it become a technique that facilitates praxis and assists in the political, opportunistic usage of human beings? What about the expectations according to which a certain confrontation with authority should find a place in pedagogy, along with emancipation and self-determination? In other words, what about the promotion of pedagogy as an instrument of pedagogical self-help, expected, through curricular pedagogy or various teaching strategies, to improve critical power and judgment ability, in order to avoid what Nietzsche (Niče 1999, 1991a, b, 1984, 1993) anticipated, and what, unfortunately, has come true in a way few people expected.

Conclusion

It might be concluded that postmodernism has had a shocking effect on pedagogy, but in all this, certain positive aspects can be sought, including ways to create a balance between its advantages and disadvantages, even though it seems that the disadvantages still seriously outnumber the advantages.

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