The Main Principles of Modern Pedagogy in ‘Didactica Magna’ of John Amos Comenius

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Abstract

The pedagogical thought of John Amos Comenius is framed in the historical context of seventeenth-century Europe and it highlights the characteristics typical of ‘modernity’, which in turn defines its new borders compared to traditional education: universal education and thus the necessity of making schools more popular; the creation of a wider epistemological structure of pedagogy and therefore the identification of specific teaching methods and a new concept of culture.

The Didactica Magna represents the work in which the Moravian thinker discusses his powerful pedagogical concept: the close relation between the problems of education and the general issues of mankind; the central role played by education in the framework of social development; the existence of a universal teaching method based on the harmonic processes of nature; the concept of open learning; the concept of the unity of knowledge; and the commitment to an education for peace and for understanding among peoples.

Keywords: John Amos Comenius, Education, Didactics, Pansophism, Training
Theoretical Presuppositions of the Comenian pedagogy

The pedagogical thought and educational activity of John Amos Comenius (1592-1670) are framed in the historical context of seventeenth-century Europe, in a continent hard hit by the Thirty Years’ War and by deep religious and cultural confrontations. The seventeenth century was characterised by the emergence of a new pedagogical trend, which later became known under the name of realism. This new trend introduced a new way of considering education, school, and studying. Besides, this pedagogy was not a mere expression of the refusal of traditional education, but rather and more fundamentally it was the product of a new understanding of the concepts of man and life, in which the rational and scientific explanation of reality played a major role.

This new pedagogical conception highlighted the characteristics typical of ‘modernity’, which in turn defined its new borders. These were concepts like universal education and thus the necessity of making schools more popular; the creation of a wider epistemological structure of pedagogy and therefore the identification of specific teaching methods; and finally a new concept of culture.

During the seventeenth century, a socially committed pedagogy emerged. The main representative of this new approach, particularly in Northern Europe, was John Amos Comenius, who propounded the idea of a universal education nourished by powerful philosophical and political-religious ideals. The Moravian thinker decided to take direct inspiration from the values and beliefs of the Utopians of the Renaissance and developed them with a clear pedagogical purpose, focusing in particular on the ideals of justice, universal pacification, and social, political and intellectual reform. This approach brought Comenius to become a strong supporter of the universality of education and its centrality in the life of the individual and the society. Hence, the ‘modernity’ of his educational proposal became clear in the light of his understanding of universal peace and of the necessary collaboration among people in all spheres of life, in order to create a fair human society and to improve the conditions of humanity, particularly through the practice of education.

In the pedagogical literature, John Amos Comenius is recognised as the pedagogical genius of the seventeenth century. In his pedagogy, according to Catalfamo, theory and action mutually interact in order to harness the power of education to renew a humanity ravaged by war and division (Catalfamo 1999). Comenius lived in an age of war, persecution, slaughter, and demographic and economical depression, therefore he committed himself to a universal renewal of culture and of the society based on the creative role of education.

His educational proposal is built upon a mystical view of reality, in which the Lutheran religious fervour combines with the naturalistic views of philosophers such as Giordano Bruno and Tommaso Campanella. These concepts are expressed
in all his works of mystical and religious nature. As a matter of fact, his thought is strongly characterised by ideals such as universal pacification and the pansophic organisation of knowledge, ideas that represent indeed the most original and significant aspect of his pedagogical thought.

On a strict pedagogical level, the main foundations of the Comenian pedagogy are the close relation existing between the problems of education and the general issues of mankind; the central role played by education in the framework of social development; the existence of a universal teaching method based on the harmonic processes of nature; the concept of long life and open learning; the concept of the unity of knowledge; and the commitment to an education for peace and for the understanding among peoples. All these concepts highlight the role of the Moravian pedagogue as great innovator of the typical characteristics of ‘Modernity’ and as brilliant pioneer of ideas that are succeeding today. His influence was such that Franco Cambi for example describes Comenius as ‘a big agent of change in the history of pedagogy and the best synthesis of the educational and pedagogical labour that accompanies the birth of the modern world’ (Cambi 2008:133).

Either praised or strongly criticised by his contemporaries and then ignored for centuries, his educational ideal and prestige were rediscovered at the end of the eighteenth century with the publishing of the book Didactica Magna (the first edition was dated 1657). This work discusses the main principles of modern pedagogy, like the unity of teaching, the attachment of teachers for students, the gradual development of the subject taught, and the deep respect for the personality of the pupil. In this publication, Comenius develops and thoroughly discusses the issue of methodology, which was earlier examined on a scientific-philosophical level by Francis Bacon and on a didactic level by Wolfgang Ratke. The success of Comenius was linked to his ability of elaborating a genuinely pedagogical interpretation of didactics that led to the establishment of pedagogy as a truly independent science based on criteria and principles epistemologically and gnosiologically valid. The aim of Comenius was to put an end to the subjection of pedagogy to other disciplines by affirming its independence from philosophy and theology and by developing its own research field with its own specific objectives. Pedagogy therefore started initially as ‘didactics’, a methodology that had to search for the means that could develop the skills of students at their different ages by the use of an educational program. In other words, the Moravian thinker tried to find a methodology that could grant the full development of the human character and, for the first time in the history of pedagogy, he decided to focus on the student, whose characteristics became crucial to decide the subjects of the educational program. In this way, he developed an educational concept that embraced both
the theoretical and practical problems. Besides, he strongly argued for the priority and dignity of education and the central role that it had to play in modern society. The unification between social commitment and scientific conscience characterised therefore the start of a structural review of education, in which Comenius, founder of systematic pedagogy, proposed the idea of an active school and argued for the need of a universal education open to all, regardless of their social class, country, religious faith, gender, and psychological or mental skills.

**The Structure and Fundamental Principles of ’Didactica Magna’**

John Amos Comenius started working on his book *Didactica Magna, Universale omnes omnia docendi artificium exhibens* in 1627. It is a work with a specific didactic character and it can be considered as a summary of his pedagogical concept, since it reveals his thought in all its theoretical maturity, toughen up by the practice of education.

The book contains 33 chapters that discuss four basic issues. Over the first 14 chapters, the Moravian thinker outlines his philosophical-religious doctrine: man is at the centre of the universe; he is naturally inclined to a transcendent purpose; he is naturally provided with the ‘seeds of education, virtue, and religion’ (Comenius 1907), which must be sown and cultivated since the earliest age to grant the education of human beings. All this involves the necessity of giving ‘all to all’. From chapter 15 through chapter 19, the author explores the foundational elements that could be derived from nature in order to extend life, to help in finding the general requirements of teaching and learning, and to promote an easier, sounder, shorter, and briefer school methodology. Then, from chapter 21 to chapter 26, Comenius discusses the methods to develop the technical skills of students, to teach them languages, to teach them ethics, and to promote in them piety and discipline. From chapter 27 through chapter 33, the author argues for a division of school based on the age of students: Mother-School (from 0 to six years of age); Vernacular-School (from seven to 12 years of age); Latin-School (from 13 to 18 years of age) and University (from 19 years of age and older). In the end, the author closes his book with the statement that it is necessary to search for a universal and perfect methodology and he proposes some necessary conditions for its practical application.

It is clear that at the basis of the educational proposal of John Amos Comenius there is a specific and precise conception of man defined by a strong religious ideal. According to this ideal, man is the image of the Creator and he is also a ‘microcosmos’ open to the world (macrocosmos). Therefore, together with natural physics, man represents the manifestation of a detailed divine project. According to Comenius, God stands at the centre of the world and of human life to such
an extent that He does not limit man to simply fit in the whole, but He commits him to a task that has the potential of elevating man towards God. Indeed, as ‘microcosmos’, human beings are ‘an admirable compendium of divine works’, they embody the order and harmony of all things in the world, which for human beings are arduous conquer and which represent the task that God assigned to them when He created them, marking their destiny as participants of (His) eternity (Comenius 1907). As creatures assigned to this noble task and specifically as creations of God just like nature, human beings contain the schemes and characteristics of nature, the direct manifestation of God. Yet, contrary to nature, human beings possess free will and therefore they risk to deviate from the pre-established order. This is why, according to Comenius, it is possible to understand the necessity and importance of a proper form of education which should allow human beings to live their existence as a genuine reflection of the order of nature (Comenius 1907).

From the first pages of Didactica Magna, it is possible to perceive and notice the strong religious beliefs that characterises the Comenian projects of societal and academic reform, as much as his irenic ideal of pacification among peoples. These views highlight the character and the ethical-religious purpose of education, as well as its distinctly Utopian connotation. From this perspective, education represents the creation process of a universal model of ‘virtuous man’, assuming at the same time the task of reforming society with the aim of granting the conditions necessary for the harmony that represents the foundation of reality (Cambi 2008). Comenius’s methodology indeed was presented as a ‘way’ to develop man as image of God. Therefore, it presents a form of education that can respect nature and the needs of students at all ages. According to Comenius, the lack of education causes instead a disruption of order, an unfortunate and visible condition of the historical context in which he lived:

For what part of us or of our concerns is in good condition? None. Everything lies overturned or in shreds. [...] The most useful thing that the Holy Scriptures teach us in this connection is this, that there is no more certain way under the sun for the raising of sunken humanity than the proper education of the young (Comenius 1907: 12-14).

In this terms, education becomes a necessary and critical resource in tackling the terrible plights that scourged Europe during the seventeenth century. It becomes a constant endeavour that must be undertaken in every historical period, since it is the reason of an endless necessity rooted in man’s own nature. Education becomes light and hope with the power to transform miserable human beings by allowing them to imagine a better future and aspire to move beyond their current situation. Education thus becomes a necessary tool to renew the historical
conditions in which the Moravian pedagogue lived. A renewal that was possible only by promoting education at an early age and by convincing grown-up men and women that they need to return to their ‘former condition of simplicity, gentleness, modesty, purity, and obedience’ (Comenius 1907: 15). Without many doubts, these words convey the high level of trust that Comenius has in youth, the part of humanity that he compares to seeds and young trees. According to him, children represent the ‘possibility’ of all good deeds and the ‘space’ of reflection for men and women to unlearn their evil habits.

According to the Moravian pedagogue, properly educating the young means providing them with an early protection of their souls from the evils of the world, in order that the seeds of honesty naturally implanted in them could be nourished and flourish. Knowledge, virtue, and religion are the contents of education and they are not offered to students from the outside, but they represent the ‘nourishment’ caused by an inner need. In these terms, culture becomes a ‘call’ to which all human beings must respond in order to know God, themselves, and the world. This is how man create a direct connection with God (Comenius 1907).

Nevertheless, the high level of trust vested in education, noticeable in every single line of Didactica Magna, recalls the concept of humanity of John Amos Comenius, who argues that man is nothing but harmony in nature. According to him, man is the ‘root of harmony’ and the ‘place’ of knowledge (Comenius 1907). In other words, Comenius considers education as the teaching of all things that must be performed in the ‘workshop of humanity’, hence school.

Where the minds of those who learn are illuminated by the light of wisdom, so as to penetrate with ease all that is manifest and all that is secret, where the emotions and the desires are brought into harmony with virtue, and where the heart is filled with and permeated by divine love, [...] in a word, where all men are taught all things thoroughly (Comenius 1907: 76).

The Moravian pedagogue loved and venerated the earthly and heavenly life. He dreamed to see the harmony of skies on Earth and he considered the supemundane world as the final purpose of man. In order to reach it, he regarded school, family, and social relationships, as the vital nourishment to the soul. This is why man and universal education have for him such a high level of dignity. None is replaceable in the arduous and effortful task required to realise his or her own humanity without being led by the instinct or the views of others. Comenius argues that ‘all men’ are called by God to eternal life, but in order to reach it human beings must become real men and fully develop every stage of their human life. Therefore, schools should not be reserved for the privileged few, for the children of rich and nobles. They should rather be open to all children, rich and poor, nobles and plebeians, boys and girls.
In a century of strong prejudices against women, Comenius was a supporter (as Martin Luther) of the idea that women were not only ‘promoters of faith’, a concept based on the idea that the faith of men could be affirmed by conquering the soul of mothers and brides. He argued that women were the main responsible of the education of children and also ‘loving spiritual guides’ of brothers and husbands. In other words, in the Comenian ideology, girls had to be educated because they were images of God and creatures endowed with a sharpness of mind equal to boys and necessary for understanding and developing knowledge useful to attain the highest positions in society (Comenius 1907). Focusing on this topic, in one of the passages of *Didactica magna*, the Moravian pedagogue wrote:

> Why, therefore, should we admit them to the alphabet, and afterwards drive them away from books? Do we fear their folly? The more we occupy their thoughts, so much the less will the folly that arises from emptiness of mind find a place. But let not all books be given to them indiscriminately, as they have been given to the young of the other sex (and indeed it is greatly to be deplored that more caution has not been displayed in this matter); but only those from which, by the due observation of God and of His works, true virtue and true piety can be learned (Comenius 1907: 68).

Therefore, for Comenius the universality of education serves the purpose of making every man and woman able to fully live their lives. Education becomes then a training tool that turns into virtue and religion, hence life, making it possible that ‘none [...] will lack the material for thinking, choosing, following, and doing good things’ (Comenius 1907: 69).

From this perspective, according to the Moravian thinker, education constitutes a tool that human beings can employ to gain awareness of their own ‘mission’. Besides, it represents also a means to identify the criteria that will deliver the necessary reform of society. For these reasons, education needed to be open to all, even women, in a universal perspective that went beyond gender or social differences and had the aim of promoting a complete yet not encyclopaedic knowledge of reality, a concept summarised by the famous line *omnia omnia*, ‘be all to all’.

Furthermore, Comenius’s unlimited trust, overwhelming love, and passion for the fertility of education are clearly visible when he argues that there are no cases in which education is impossible. ‘Nor can any man be found whose intellect is so weak that it cannot be improved by culture’ (Comenius 1907: 67). Comenius argues that ‘there is in the world no rock or tower of such a height that it cannot be scaled by any man’, (Comenius 1907: 86) provided that men have the will and ability to prepare for the challenging ascent starting from the first minutes of their lives by developing their skills and sharpening their judgement. Besides, he argues that
men and women become aware of the fullness of life only when the soul becomes the master and goes beyond the vacuity of intelligence and judgement, the painful cost of cognitive search (Comenius 1907).

Nevertheless, besides this overwhelming trust in education that made Comenius probably the only author in the history of pedagogy who acted with inconceivable passion in the fields of the theory and of the practice of education, it is noticeable also the disdain that the pedagogue felt for the neglect of education typical of his historical context, which he blamed particularly on the leading social classes. His remarks on the rich are therefore extraordinarily harsh:

What are the rich without wisdom but pigs stuffed with bran? What are the poor who have no understanding of affairs but asses laden with burdens? What is a handsome though ignorant man but a parrot adorned with feathers, or, as has been said, a golden sheath in which there is a leaden dagger? (Comenius 1907: 56).

In chapter nine of Didactica magna, Comenius explores this topic further and he notices that none is privileged in the eyes of God, therefore it is necessary to create schools common to all social classes: in all cities and towns, villages and hamlets, all children should be sent to school, ‘not only the children of the rich or of the powerful, but of all alike, boys and girls, both noble and ignoble, rich and poor’ (Comenius 1907: 66). In this way, ‘none of these will lack the material for thinking, choosing, following, and doing good things’ (Comenius 1907: 69).

This passionate declaration of the Moravian pedagogue recalls the common attitude of the bourgeoisie of that time which wanted to suffocate the high creative potential of the poorer classes for their entire lives. Comenius, though, answered to this ‘sin’ by strongly supporting the idea that the lower social classes could produce the best examples of humanity: ‘Let us, therefore, imitate the sun in the heavens, which lights, warms, and vivifies the whole earth, so that whatever is able to live, to flourish, and to blossom, may do so’ (Comenius 1907: 67).

These ideas are expressed in the motto of the Comenian didactics: ‘be all to all’, where ‘all’ are all human beings in the world. They must learn the foundations, the reason, the purpose of the main things in nature and art, without living as spectators, but becoming actors of their lives. Comenius’s main purpose was therefore to promote education from an early age, when the mind of human beings were not ‘entangled with vain, mundane, and noxious thoughts’ (Comenius 1907: 56). The access to knowledge therefore did not have the purpose of informing human beings, but it was aimed at educating them, with an action based on a sound culture that had to be accompanied by deep religious piety and the embrace of a hierarchy of values ruled by a strict and rigid discipline. Obviously, the space in which this knowledge had to be built was the scholastic institution, which could undertake this educational purpose if subjected to an effort of reform.
and reorganisation. A reform presenting at its centre the ideals of knowledge, honesty, and piety, and able to promote at the same time an education without any form of coercion or harshness, but characterised instead by the highest level of sensitivity and kindness.

According to Comenius, the vital task of educating the entire youth without any form of distinction constitutes a primary interest of the State, the society, and humanity, in order to build a better future. On the other hand, he contends that not all families are able to educate in the same way, while some of them are even completely unable to do so: ‘it is very seldom that parents have sufficient ability or sufficient leisure to teach their children’ (Comenius 1907: 63). In this process, therefore, the main role fell on the teacher who, according to Comenius, cannot be everyone, or in other words someone who was part of the majority of teachers who ignored the art of educating to such an extent that they made it a boring and strenuous process both for them and their students, causing schools to produce ‘fiery wild asses and restive mules’ (Comenius 1907: 78). Teachers had to be members of that part of humanity which had been specialised to perform this task. They needed to be aware of the sensitivity of their work, since it had the twofold duty of leaving children free to act and at the same time guide them towards a precise direction, asking students to be aware of their duties. Besides, teachers were not only required to organise the structure of knowledge, carefully dividing and presenting the different subjects at the proper age of students and by considering their passions. They also needed to present themselves as models of a fair moral conduct, a result obtainable only through a constant action of discipline that should resort, if necessary, to forms of punishment, preferably not of a corporal kind.

With a great deal of innovation compared to the mentality of his time, John Amos Comenius identified therefore the State as the entity that should have granted universal education in order to protect the interests of the entire community. According to the Moravian pedagogue, universal education should have been promoted by the establishment of a capillary network of schools of a homogeneous type and by employing qualified and professional groups of teachers committed to the education of the young. As a matter of fact, this form of education was necessary to lend a helping hand to the parents that could not complete their task for a lack of time. Besides, it was necessary also to answer to the educational need of the population with the didactic effectiveness of a collective form of education led by an experienced teacher and based on the criteria of emulation and example.

In his Didactica magna, besides describing the ‘positive responsibility’ of teachers towards the students, Comenius talks also about their ‘negative responsibility’, blaming them for the educational failures recorded in the previous years and for being the cause of the students’ disdain for school (Comenius 1907). Co-
menius identifies the cause of this ‘negative responsibility’ in the ‘haste’ of teachers, highlighting how much they cannot train nor wait. In general:

Teachers almost invariably take their pupils as they find them; they turn them, beat them, card them, comb them, drill them into certain forms, and expect them to become a finished and polished product; and if the result does not come up to their expectations (and I ask you how could it?) they are indignant, angry, and furious. And yet we are surprised that some men shrink and recoil from such a system. Far more is it matter for surprise that any one can endure it at all (Comenius 1907: 88).

As Comenius argues, good teachers are like sowers: they should prepare the land, spread the seeds, and water them; then the plants will grow on their own, according to their own nature. Teachers must hence consider the mental conditions typical of every age group and every class, adapting to them with patience and kindness. Before focusing on the teaching practice in its narrowest sense, teachers must focus first on creating a good working environment with the students and among them. Then, they must persevere with resolution in their task, making sure of the progress of students and avoiding the risk of leaving immense blanks in their education. The gradual process that characterises the cyclical Comenian methodology is the main cause of the validity of its purpose and the unity of its educational endeavour. These principles are reflected also in the combination between intellectual education and moral education which shape the character of students. Finally, students should never be taught in authoritarian manner, but by the use of demonstrations and causes, an approach that will allow them to teach others what they learned.

Conclusions

Taking a fresh look to the pedagogical conception of John Amos Comenius by reading Didactica Magna, one of his greatest and most renowned works, is a practice that encourages curiosity and reflection. Besides, it deepens the knowledge of a difficult and complex author who displays a curious and enquiring spirit, extraordinarily rich in interests and multi-faceted. The depth of his inquiry is reflected by his wide and variegated range of publications, from philosophical works to publications of a religious or didactic character. Even today, Comenius’s thought keeps a genuine and original meaning, both in the field of the theory of pedagogy and in the sphere of the practice of education. As a matter of fact, the fundamental features that structure and identify his pedagogical thought highlight its value and topicality. As a distinctive and continuous expression of the Hussite and Protestant ideal, the Comenian pedagogy fully represents the purity of the vision of the Moravian pedagogue, proposing at the same time a reform of humanity. His educational attention towards ‘the scattered flock of exiles of his
faith characterised by a terrible lack of culture’ deserves particular consideration, because it is a genuine and modest example of an intercultural and socially equal pedagogy which is still valid in our age, four centuries after Comenius lived. The strong desire of offering an equal education to all in shared schools, regardless of social conditions, country, and gender; the duty of all human beings to fight to obtain this kind of education for themselves and others; the common utility that this task entails; and the fact that this possibility will become a concrete reality only if human beings will become aware of its true necessity: all these are indeed elements of Comenius’s thought that highlight the educational and functional values that pedagogy should have in de-constructing and re-orienting the practice of education and the pedagogical thought of a multicultural society like ours.

References


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