The Socio-Pedagogical Thinking of J.A. Comenius as Inspiration for Social Pedagogy

Abstract

John Amos Comenius (1592–1670) belongs to the most important persons in the European culture, philosophy, theology and in particular pedagogy, which is also reflected in the fact that the 400-th anniversary of the birth of the “Teacher of Nations” in 1992 was celebrated across the world under the auspices of UNESCO. Comenius was the founder of the education system, it is to his credit that pedagogy became independent and singled out from the framework of philosophy. With his works, he laid foundations of several pedagogical sciences, in particular didactics, theory of education, pre-school education, education organisation and management, etc. He became famous especially for his didactic works (in particular – Janua linguarum reserata, Janua linguarum vestibulom, Didactica magna, Orbis sensualium pictus, Schola ludus) which brought him fame all over the world and were also used in many countries worldwide already during his life. However, his work has also a strong socio-pedagogical aspect, so far insufficiently studied from the position of social pedagogy and particularly pedagogy of social care as its part.

Keywords: John Amos Comenius, social pedagogy, socio-pedagogical thinking of J.A. Comenius

1. Social pedagogy in Europe in a brief historical context

Social pedagogy originated in Germany in the 40-ties of the 19-th century under a strong influence of the educational philanthropy of J.H. Pestalozzi, positivist soci-
ology and other sciences, as the answer to individual education and Herbartism. It began to develop as practical socio-educational activity and “tertiary education institution” to help to fight the “social danger” and address educational deficits and socio-pathological phenomena, especially in marginalized groups of children and youth. In this connection, we present A. Diesterweg’s thought, written in 1850: ”There is a great danger in the growing rabble in towns. This rabble flourishes in a state without general education, where the spiritual and moral maturity of youth is not cared for. It is the basic principle to prevent it.” (in Marburger, H., 1979, p. 40).

The birth-place of social pedagogy is Germany. Its founder is considered to be K. Mager, who used the term “social pedagogy” for the first time in 1844. He is the representative of the practical direction in social pedagogy and author of the first concept of the socio-educational activity connecting provision of social care with educational activities. In his opinion, social pedagogy is the “answer to the problems of modern society” and should help to address the deficiencies in the education of children and youth, arising from failure of family and school. According to the contemporary representative of German social pedagogy, J. Schilling (1999, p. 53), social pedagogy has its historical roots in practical social and educational care of children and youth in the following institutions:

1. Care of abandoned children and orphans (12–13th centuries);
2. Schools for the poor (14–16th centuries);
3. Orphanages and reformatories (17–18th centuries);
4. Reformatories and kindergartens (18–19th centuries);
5. Social care (social assistance for youth in modern times) (20th century).

The theoretical foundations of social pedagogy were laid by P. Natorp, with his work “Social Pedagogy” considered as the founder of the philosophical, or theoretical, direction in social pedagogy. In his work he explained the subject and focus of social pedagogy for the first time. In his opinion, social pedagogy should focus particularly on the social goals of education and contribute to human socialization and achievement of ideal social unity. The social determination of education and interactive relationship between education and society is apparent, e.g., in his thought “Society itself educates; it is both the instrument of education and its goal.” (in Galla, K., 1967, p. 46). Education should focus especially on socialisation of man and youth, which he accentuated in response to individual pedagogy emphasising the uniqueness of the individual. P. Natorp (1974, p. 90) presented this also in the thought: “Man will be man only in society. Man as an individual exists only in the abstract, as the atom in physics. Man without society is not man.” However, the importance of education for socialization had appeared already in antique philosophy, e.g., in Plato and Aristotle, who J.A. Comenius frequently drew on. Those
ideas resonated practically in all empirically-oriented concepts and stemmed from
the modern empirical gnoseology of F. Bacon, who had a considerable influence
on the whole education system of J.A. Comenius. Later, this approach resulted in
modern philosophy and pedagogy of the Enlightenment, especially in the works of
J. Locke, C.A. Helvetius, R. Descartes, D. Diderot and others. It became even more
apparent upon origination of sociology, emphasizing the social nature of education
(education is social activity) and man (man is a social being), especially in the work
of A. Comte and E. Durkheim. Those ideas were also the starting point of peda-
gogical and sociological border disciplines developed on the borderline between
sociology and pedagogy in the second half of the 19th century; including social
pedagogy which began to develop as the first of them, later followed by sociological
pedagogy, educational sociology and sociology of education. The thoughts about
the influence of education on man and society, as well as the interactive relation-
ship between society and education had been, however, fully covered already in the
work of J.A. Comenius, from which later modern and enlightenment pedagogy and
undoubtedly also social pedagogy stemmed.

From the origination of social pedagogy up to the present time, its representa-
tives have emphasised social determination of education, connection of social
care with the educational influence on man and social groups, with the stress
on activation of an individual’s own potentials. Social pedagogy, unfortunately,
has no clearly conceived subject yet, the cause of which is a wide range of socio-
educational issues addressed at the theoretical and practical levels during its
existence. It is undisputable that despite various approaches to and attempts at
a definition of its aim in the historical context and present time, it is possible
to define areas which have been of key importance in terms of its profiling,
despite certain differences in approaches with regard to the time and countries
where social pedagogy has been developed. The issue of social determination of
education and human personality development, the relationship between social
conditions and education, socialization, substitute family care, orphanhood and
prevention of socio-pathological behaviour in children and youth have belonged
to the key areas in the subject of social pedagogy.

2. Pedagogical work
of J.A. Comenius as inspiration for social pedagogy

The most of the above-mentioned areas of interest addressed by social pedagogy
during its history are covered also in the work of J.A. Comenius. Therefore, it is
appropriate that also representatives of social pedagogy in the Czech Republic and Slovakia include the work and thought of J.A. Comenius in the prehistory of this pedagogical discipline and draw inspiration from it for its current development. However, it should be mentioned that these contributions are so far sporadic, but inspiring.

In his book “Základy sociální pedagogiky” (Foundations of Social Pedagogy) (2008), in the first chapter, entitled “Z histórie sociální pedagogiky” (From the History of Social Pedagogy), the most distinguished contemporary representative of social pedagogy in the Czech Republic, B. Kraus, points at the contribution of J.A. Comenius to social pedagogy in the sense that Comenius understood education as a means of human cultivation, as well as improvement of the world. He also draws attention to Comenius’ social feeling in the access to education and Comenius’ opinion that education should be provided for all people without difference in their estate, to the rich and poor, boys and girls. He also mentions the contribution of Comenius’ work “Informatórium školy materskej” (School of Infancy) to social pedagogy, attributing great importance to the educational influence of the environment on man.

A theoretical discourse on the influence of Comenius’ work on social pedagogy can also be found in the work “Jan Amos Komenský. Odkaz kultuře vzdělávání” (John Amos Comenius. Legacy to the Culture of Education)” (2009), where J. Semrád and M. Škrabal (2009, pp. 177–185) address the contribution of J.A. Comenius to social pedagogy in the chapter “Odkaz Komenského sociální pedagogice” (Comenius’ Legacy in Relation to Social Pedagogy). The authors state: “We see the basis of thoughts linked with social pedagogy in Comenius’ opinions on social tasks of school and on the teacher’s cooperation with pupils and cooperation of pupils with one another as the basis for upbringing and the educational process in class.” Semrád, Škrabal, 2009, p. 180). Also, J. Semrád and M. Škrabal (2009, p. 182) see Comenius’ contribution to the development of social pedagogy in the following areas:

a) Concept of education as an instrument of social development;
b) Emphasis on school understood as a social organisation contributing to social learning;
c) Pansophy and upbringing related concept of education as an instrument of social unification and international communication;
d) Concept of universal human culture;
e) Concept of creativity in the world of human labour;
f) Implementation of Comenius’ intent in the contemporary practice of upbringing and education in integrating Europe.
Also M. Procházka pays considerable attention to J.A. Comenius in his monograph “Sociální pedagogika” (Social Pedagogy) (2012) in the chapter entitled “J.A. Comenius jako inspirace pro sociálně-pedagogické myšlení” (J.A. Comenius as Inspiration for Social Pedagogical Thinking). In M. Procházka’s opinion (2012, p. 24) Comenius’ work offers inspiration to social pedagogy in the following areas:

- Idea of the power of education and its potential for the transformation of society;
- Idea of the democratic character of upbringing and education;
- Accent on the social role of school environment;
- Comprehensive concept of society improvement through education.

In Slovak social pedagogy, the contribution of Comenius’ work to social pedagogy is explained in the publication “Dejiny sociálnej pedagogiky” (History of Social Pedagogy) (2007). This book was also published in the Czech Republic at the Faculty of Education of J.E. Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, within a mutual exchange of faculty publications entitled “K dejínám sociálnej pedagogiky v Európe” (Toward the History of Social Pedagogy in Europe) (2008).

Also Comenius’ work “De rerum humanorum emendatione consultatio catholica” (General Consultation on the Improvement of All Things Human) is interesting from the point of view of social pedagogy, especially its sections “Pampaedia” (Universal Education) and “Panorthosia” (Universal Reform), where Comenius understands education as the basis for the improvement of man, society and universal reformation of the world (Hroncová, Emmerová, Kraus, 2007, pp. 31–35).

Comenius’ contribution to social pedagogy is addressed also in the book “Pedagogika sociálnej starostlivosti” (Pedagogy of Social Care), where the “stages of Comenius’ educational works and their social aspects” and also Comenius’ socio-pedagogical thinking in his treatise “O sirobě” (About Poor People) are analysed (Hroncová, Emmerová, Walancik, pp. 18–24).

With regard to Comenius’ socio-historical as well as conceptual development, according to D. Čapková (1987, p. 43) his philosophical-educational work may be divided into 6 periods. In these periods his works were considerably influenced by the 17th century social and political development, which left deep imprints in them. However, in addition to educational, religious, philosophical and other aspects, one can also find socio-pedagogical thinking in Comenius’ works from each of the periods.

The First Period covers the beginning of his activity up to 1620 (or 1624 including his studies abroad), which is characterised by his encyclopaedic and national-educational works. The works “Theatrum universitatis rerum” (The Theatre of All Things),”Linguae Bohemicae thesaurus” (Thesaurus of the Czech
Language) and others may be included there. From the point of view of social pedagogy, his work “Listové do nebe” (Letters to Heaven) is interesting, published in 1619 as his first printed work. In it, Comenius criticized social injustice and sided with the poor.

The Second Period (1620–1627). His work was marked by the events of that period, namely by the outbreak of the Thirty Years’ War, victory of the Habsburgs in the Battle of White Mountain and counter-reformation, resulting in the persecution of Czech non-Catholics. In this period, Comenius had not found the way out from the “labyrinth of the world” yet and that was why his works bore signs of the social and his personal tragedy (his second wife with children died) and are called the works of the First Consoling Period, or “Consoling Works”. These works were intended to console unfortunate persecuted Czech Protestants and other suffering people. They had a distinct social critical content. They included: “Labyrint světa a ráj srdce” (The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart), “O sirobi” (About Poor People), “Pres Boži” (Press of God), “Truchlivý” (The Mournful), etc. From the point of view of social pedagogy, the writing “O sirobě” (About Poor People) is of particular interest. According to S. Húsková: “The whole writing shows great love for suffering orphaned children and deep social sympathy with their fate. Also, he emphasizes that they are not to despair and resign to their difficult situation, but make effort to tackle the problems they encounter in life. To overcome difficult obstacles in life, Comenius gives orphaned children examples of important people who, despite having been orphaned in their childhood, made efforts to overcome the obstacles in their life and achieved an important social position in adulthood.” (In Hroncová, Emmerová, Walancik, 2011, p. 21). We can only agree with S. Húsková’s opinion that this work deserves a deeper socio-pedagogical analysis. J.A. Comenius’ thought about man making effort to overcome difficult situations in life is particularly inspiring for social pedagogy. The activation of man’s own powers and “help to self-help” has belonged to the key principles of social pedagogy since its origination. In social pedagogy, the problems of orphanhood has belonged to the key areas of its interest especially in German and Polish social pedagogy and thus Comenius’ writing “O sirobě” (About Poor People) should be of greater inspiration also for contemporary Slovak social pedagogy, despite the fact that Slovak legislation does not enable activities of social pedagogues at children’s homes.

In that period Comenius found a fixed point only in taking refuge in God and retreat from this world. This period is denoted as the “Pre-Pansophic Period” (of pre-universal knowledge), when J.A. Comenius stood in positions of medieval passivity.
The Third Period (1628–1641) covers Comenius’ first stay in Leszno, where he wrote the most important pedagogical works of didactic nature and began to develop the idea of pansophy, thus universal knowledge, from which the name of this period is derived – the Pansophic Period of his work. It includes the works “Didaktika česká” (Bohemian Didactics), “Brána jazyků otevřená” (The Gate of Languages Unlocked) and “Informatorium školy mateřské” (School of Infancy), written as parts of a more widely conceived work “Ráj český” (The Bohemian Paradise). They were to serve the needs of the Czech nation and improvement of Czech society. In that period, Comenius already considered education an important factor of man’s personality development and society improvement. It is obvious that Comenius had left the medieval passivity, typical of the previous period, for the modern activity pursued especially under the influence of empirical philosophy, F. Bacon, J.L. Vives and other philosophers. The work of this period of particular importance for social pedagogy is “Informatorium školy mateřské” (School of Infancy), where Comenius laid foundations for purposeful, systematic education of man already in family, because children should be brought up by proper standards of wisdom from early childhood. “All the main branches a tree is to have, the tree sprouts from its trunk already in the first years, thus later there is nothing else necessary but they grow. It is the same with man: “everything depends on the beginning; such is the importance of childhood. The meaningfulness or idleness of life is determined at the beginning” (About Himself).

Comenius understood pre-school education as the foundation for human education, on which vernacular school was to build. Since its origination, social pedagogy has paid special attention to re-education of children and youth, because of their failed upbringing in family and at school. The educational effort of social pedagogues in the process of youth reformation and rehabilitation is very difficult and not always effective. In addition to “Informatorium školy mateřské” (School of Infancy), J.A. Comenius gave the rationale of proper pre-school education of children in family also in “Didactica magna” (Great Didactics) and “Pampaedia” (Universal Education) as follows:

1. The main reason is the consideration of universal reform.
2. All in all, we are such in the body, soul, morals, effort, speech, conduct, as we were made by the first education.
3. It is easier to educate than to reform; for this foresighted care is necessary from childhood.
4. Thus, it saves effort and time if we begin education on time.

Many ideas in “Didactica magna” (Great Didactics) are also inspiring for social pedagogy. His idea that “if man is to be produced it is necessary that he be formed
by education” (title of Chapter 6 of Bohemian Didactics) and also the idea that the “reform of the world must begin with a reform of school and man” has deep socio-pedagogical meaning. The socializing importance of education is obvious, e.g., in the thought: “we are born not for ourselves alone, but for God and for our neighbour, that is to say for the human race. Thus, becoming seriously persuaded of this truth we will learn from our boyhood to desire and strive to be of service to as many as possible. Thus the good fortune of private and of public life would be assured, since all men would be ready to work together for the common good and to help one another” (as cited in: Čapková, D., 1987, p. 49).

The Fourth Period (1641–1642) includes his short stay in England, where Comenius wrote the pansophic treatise “Via lucis” (The Way of Light), where he formulated the thought that education is not the goal but only a means for the development of science and improvement of the world and gave instructions how to overcome fragmentation of sciences.

The Fifth Period (1642–1656) includes his stay in Elbląg, Sárospatak and two short stays in Leszno. This period is called the Period of Reform, because Comenius began to work on the extensive work “De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica” (General Consultation on the Improvement of All Things Human), which he divided into seven parts: Panegersia (Universal Awakening), Panaugia (Universal Dawning), Pursophia (Universal Knowledge), Pampaedia (Universal Education), Panglottia (Universal Language Study), Panorthosia (Universal Reform), Panuthesia (Universal Admonition). From the point of view of social pedagogy, especially the works Pampaedia and Panorthosia are of interest, where Comenius understands education as the basis for the effort of man, society and the world for a universal reform. In Pampaedia he wrote: “general corruption of the world begins in the roots. Therefore also the universal renewal of the world must begin from there...” All hope for a universal reform depends on the first education. If it is good education, matching the standards of the truth and good, then it is not possible that those who undergo it are not superior to others. The happiness of the whole life depends on it, too. Faults of the first education accompany man for the whole life. Therefore the first guard of the human race is in the cradle; what could be easily improved in childhood, becomes irreparable at the old age.” (PŠENÁK, J., 1992, p. 20). From its origination, the attention of social pedagogy has focused especially on addressing and remedying educational problems in children and youth, while laying strong emphasis on the role of upbringing and education in this process. In this connection, it has placed special emphasis on socio-educational work with a dysfunctional family, which as a rule significantly contributes to the formation of deviant behaviour in children and youth. Such
thoughts can be found already in “Pampaedia” (Universal Education), where Comenius writes:

Axiom I: Neglect of education is the corruption of people, families, empires and of the whole world.

Axiom II: Faults developed in family later lead to difficulties at school, church and in the state.

To correct the faults in the development of the young, in his “Didactica magna” (Great Didactics) Comenius recommends proper education and upbringing, because “there is no more certain way under the sun for the raising of sunken humanity than the proper education of the young”.

The work “Panorthosia” (Universal Reform) contains Comenius’ thought that the “reform of public affairs begins with the reform of school”. This period also includes treatises of the Second Consoling Period in Comenius’ work, influenced by events in his personal (his second wife died) and social life. The end of The Thirty Years’ War by The Peace of Westphalia meant the end of his hope to return to the homeland and therefore his works from this period are marked by considerable resignation, sorrow and pessimism, which he later overcame by increased working activities. Important “Consoling Works” of this period include “Kšaft umírající matky, Jednoty bratrské” (The Bequest of the Dying Mother of the Unity of Brethren), which is a moral legacy to the Czech nation, while parting with the dying Unity of Brethren. From the pedagogical point of view, his works written during his stay in Sárospatak (1650–1654) are of interest, in particular “Orbis sensualium pictus” (The Visible World in Pictures), “Schola ludus” (School by Play), “Praecepta morum” (Rules of Morality), “De primario ingenia colendi instrumento sollerter varsando, libris, oratio” (How to Cleverly Use Books, the Main Instrument of Education, a speech) and others.

The Sixth period (1656–1670) covers Comenius’ stay in Amsterdam, where he went to after Leszno had been burnt in the Swedish-Polish war in 1656, in which Comenius had lost his property and many works, to begin to “glue the shards of broken vessels” again. Here he published his most important pedagogical treatises under the title “Opera didactica omnia” (Writing on All Learning) and in 1658 his “Orbis sensualium pictus” (The Visible World in Pictures) was published for the first time. He also worked on additional sections of “Consultatio catholica” (General Consultation), which resulted in the treatise “Clamores Eliae” (The Exhortations of Elijah). There he saw the international staff of scholars as new “Elijah”, who, with the assistance of enlightened rulers, would carry out the reform
of the corrupt world. The treatise “Unum necessarium” (The One Thing Needful) is the philosophical testament of Comenius’ work, where he expressed his longing for peace and harmonious unity of the world. He expressed the necessity of mutual assistance in his autobiographic writing “Continuatio admonitionis fraternae…” (Continuation of Brotherly Admonition) written at the end of his life as follows: “…we who participate in human nature are to help others, also participating in it” (About Himself). J.A. Comenius as a philosopher, educator, reformer, theologian and social thinker striving for the “improvement of things human” is of great inspiration also for social pedagogy. What social pedagogy also finds inspiring, among other things, is the apparent democratic character and social feeling of J.A. Comenius’ approach to education and his view that upbringing and education should be provided to all without difference in their estate. “…not the children of the rich or of the powerful only, but of all alike, boys and girls, both noble and ignoble, rich and poor… should be sent to school” (Váňa, J., 1963, p. 71). Similar views were stressed also by the founder of the theoretical direction in social pedagogy, P. Natorp, in his book “Democracy of Education,” where he stated that education should be provided to everybody by the level of his abilities, to all layers of the nation, while also demanding mitigation or elimination of class differences in education. The socio-pedagogical dimension of his work has not been sufficiently elaborated at the theoretical level, or acknowledged. Comenius’ ideas of the interdependencies of upbringing and education with the reform of man and society and the universal reform of the world are the stimulus also for social pedagogy, which can be expressed with his thought: “Some tried to reform schools. Others wanted to reform churches, and others, for a change, states. However, if at the same time all of you do not reform inside and at the same time do not reform everything that is interconnected, you will never progress and everything will decline in chaos” (Čapková, D., 1987, p. 154).

Conclusion

Comenius’ pedagogical thoughts are timeless and a source of wisdom for many disciplines, but he also provokes modern society to reflection – with his vision of the global world and admonition for the human race to grow wise. “Because: Firstly, we are all seated in the great theatre of the world: every action here affects us all, because the sun provides the light and God the eyes to all. Secondly, we, the whole human race, are one kind, one blood, one family, one house: therefore just as a part helps its whole and any organ all other organs of the same
body and every member of the family to another member of the same family, or, if he can, to the whole family: also we, who participate in the human nature, are to help others, also participating in it. Thirdly: God already at the beginning of creation entrusted every man with care of every neighbour” (About Himself). The controversial period of the 17-th century, when Comenius lived, bears many analogies with the present times. Thorough study of the socio-pedagogical legacy of J.A. Comenius belongs to the future tasks not only of Slovak, but in particular of Czech social pedagogy.

References