

EDUCATION, HUMAN DIGNITY, INTERPERSONAL RESPECT AND SELF-RESPECT

Gabriel ALBU^{a*}

^a Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești, Romania

Abstract

Pressed by the demands of the given historical moment and concerned with solving the immediate problems of society, we overlook - as specialists and practitioners – the fundamental aspects of the objectives and content of education. The study shows and demonstrates the deep relationship of education with human dignity, with interpersonal respect and self-respect. Education is the social action by which we build, defend and promote human dignity, respect, and self-respect. All these are essential dimensions of education beyond the constraints and momentary objectives of society.

Key words: education, human dignity, interpersonal respect, self-respect

Introduction

Often invoked (especially in the everyday context and in official rhetoric), the issue and the relationship between education, on the one hand, and human dignity and interpersonal respect, on the other, occupies - as much as I could observe and as far as we could discover - a place as marginal, as it is fleeting in the specialized literature (Cojocariu, 2010, 2007; Cucuș, coord., 2008, 2002; Frunză, 2013; Gherguț, 2007; Gray, 2013; Guțu, coord., 2013a, 2013b; Ilica, 2015, 2009; Ionescu, Chiș, coord., 2009, Iucu, 2006; Joița, 2000; Kohn, 2015; Orțan, coord., 2012; Păun, Potolea, coord., 2002; Potolea, Neacșu, Iucu, Pânișoară, coord., 2008; Robinson, 2015, 2011; Savater, 2001; Siebert, 2001; Silvaș, 2013; Stanciu, 2003; Șerbănescu, Găbureanu, coord., 2015).

Even though any theorist and/ or practitioner of education (serious and rigorous, truly devoted to school and to the healthy instruction of new generations and concerned with the spiritual well-

* Prof. PhD
E-mail address: gabrielalbu04@yahoo.com

being of society) can deny the importance and significance of education - for the edification, support, defence and promotion and affirmation of human dignity (in any space, time and circumstance), for the formation and manifestation of inter-human respect, we do not, however, encounter widespread (systematic) interest and concerns about these fundamental aspects of existence, evolution and survival of the human being as a human being. In such a (possible) context, addressing this theme could be, if not an (obvious) necessity, then at least an unexpected and pleasant surprise. It could become - for those challenged and delighted by this noble subject - an opening, a path to further search, research, deepening, discoveries or unspeakable working hypotheses. Thus, the relationship of education with human dignity and respect among peers is detached from the matter-of-course state and treated as a stand-alone theme, a top-ranked theme in the horizon of designing and practicing education, in a world – whether we recognize it or not - (tendentiously and mostly) concerned with supporting and developing the market/ businesses/ entrepreneurship, with (unlimitedly) increasing sales, competitive environment, marketing, expanding the call to and using (latest generation) technology, new and more spectacular forms of entertainment.

Beyond considerations, interests, motivations and economic-financial, political-ideological, macro-sociological justifications *of the moment* (revealed from and eventually demanded by the particularities of a given historical datum), education contains in itself – as an intrinsic and invariable element (from a temporal, axiological, anthropological, socio-psychological point of view) – a supreme goal: that of sustaining, defending and asserting constantly and without doubt human dignity and respect among individuals.

As a fundamental fact of culture, it cannot function under any affecting/ violating conditions (under any circumstances); it cannot (passively) assist or participate in the marginalization, camouflaging or (the more or less refined) ignoring of human dignity and interpersonal respect.

Whatever constraints exist or could be invoked, whatever remarks - more or less scholarly - would be made related to the priorities and (social-axiological) functions of education, they cannot challenge the priority of supporting, protecting, asserting and consolidating human dignity and, at the same time, interpersonal respect for any other preoccupation, legitimation that is sought (or claimed) to be the order of the day and supposed to be more efficient, more opportune than any other.

It is - perhaps and probably - the time *to recover fundamental contents and correlations, such as those between the formation of new generations and the assertion of human dignity and respect*

among individuals, and - thereby - to deepen essential realities (often invoked but so little analyzed and deepened by specialists).

Defining and clarifying the concept of human dignity²

It seems that trying to define the concept of human dignity is a venturesome attempt. It is part of those profound and complex concepts that our great majority tends to believe they know and which they tend to use frequently and with (rhetoric) self-assurance, but which, in fact, remains - in most cases - inaccessible or with a default, superficial, rudimentary significance.

Treating this concept carefully, we consider that it assumes the following characteristics:

- The individual, any individual, must be treated and respected as a *human being*, endowed with conscience and sensitivity;
- The individual, any individual, must be treated as a *being who decides, is capable to decide and has the right to do so*; decision is an essential characteristic of the human being; it is the element through which man expresses his capacity to live up to his determination, his will, his orientation and axiological options;
- The individual, any individual, must have the (real) possibility to build his own destiny, based on his education, abilities, tenaciousness, courage, energy, wisdom and ideals; to give life the meaning they wish to (without, of course, damaging the dignity of others);
- There exist the favourable conditions for a *humane* living environment, respectively:
 - the possibility to work;
 - the possibility to live safely;
 - the possibility to live in understanding;
 - the possibility to rest;
 - the possibility to have peace;
 - the possibility to be confident (in one's destiny, one's peers, oneself);

² We need to mention that this modest attempt does not exclude the right and the possibility of any other person be they researchers or not, referring to the definition, deepening and practising human dignity. Also, we want to mention that we are aware of the limitations of our attempt to capture the specificity of this concept, as important as it is delicate. In short, the current attempt invites to dialogue, to searches and clarifications at the centre of the research.

- the possibility to enjoy attachment;
- the possibility to be trusted;
- the possibility to hope; to cultivate one's own hopes;
- The individual, any individual, must be able to say what they have to say; he must not be denied the accountability of attitudes he deems right, necessary for the time and place; he must be listened to, taken into account;
- The individual, any individual, has the right to his own thoughts; he must be allowed to think (to the extent of his capacity); he has the right to keep his experiences, feelings; he must have the right to express what he feels, what he goes through (always paying attention to the comfort and respect due to his peers);
- The individual, any individual, must have the possibility to educate himself, to have access to information, to cultivate himself and learn to the extent of his aspirations; he has the right to lead a cultivated and informed existence;
- His options must be taken into consideration, as the main means by which individuals express their personality and self-respect;
- He must have the (real) possibility to prepare for and exercise his favourite profession; to have the career he wishes and through which he aspires to become accomplished (that career which he thinks gives meaning, value and grounds, purpose to his life);
- He has the right not to be treated like an animal, like an inanimate object, a merchandise;
- No individual must be humiliated, tortured, offended, bullied, exposed to devastating conditions (that may generate mental, emotional, psychological and physical mutilation);
- *Any individual, with no exceptions, must be considered and treated as top priority* in any approach devised by individuals, in relation to the things and interests of the world; he must always represent our supreme goal in all our decisions and enterprises; *the individual, any individual is the purpose of our ultimate, fundamental goals*;
- Each of us should be recognized the merits, contribution, dedication, sacrifices and heroism to the creation and development of an idea, to the coordination and/ or completion of an action (in the service of the community);
- Any individual should be treated by the measure of his merits, contribution, dedication, sacrifice, courage and heroism, according to his talents, aptitudes and creative involvement;

- Any individual, with no exceptions, must have the opportunity to grow and develop as much as he wants to and as much as he can;
- The individual should have access to truth; he should not be lied to, or fed fabricated truths; exposed to diversions, confusion; he must know how things really are at any particular moment in time;
- The individual is always perceived in the light of his honour; he is associated with his intrinsic honour: *the honour of being human*;
- It is a priority to never abandon, desert an individual but always save him, whenever he needs to be helped, by a timely intervention, by the presence and support of his peers;
- There is the need to correlate (as much as possible) the liberty of each individual with their equality to any other of his peers; we envisage the following:
 - equality in the manifestation of freedom, at the extent of their humanity;
freedom in ensuring, protecting and manifesting equality between people, as beings with the same status and existential specificity;
- No human beings should be intimidated, discouraged from self-expression, from asserting their point of view, their own approach to things, their own outlook on life (which, of course, does not infringe human dignity itself);
- Every individual must be given the opportunity to protect and develop his/her life according to his/her knowledge, wishes and possibilities (within the community and culture to which one belongs);
- To take into account the fact that human beings are sensitive; that they are troubled by doubts, confusions and hesitations, fanaticism and prejudices, hopes and aspirations;
- The individual, any individual, must always have the chance to be happy and the confidence that it is possible; to take into account that the life of each of us is meant to achieve happiness;
- Any individual can protect his privacy and has the confidence that his privacy is protected;
- Any human being should see his faith respected, as well as the culture they grew up in, formed into or chose by their own will;

- Any human being must be allowed to dream to the extent of their projections, creativity and aspirations;
- Any human being must be able to use their full potential physically, psychologically, socially, morally and behaviourally, creatively and actively;
- Any human being should really hope for the best, for the most beautiful, in awe for the miracle of the world.

All these characteristics of the concept of human dignity are the main coordinates in designing and practising education, at any level and under any form of manifestation.

Defining and clarifying the concept of respect among individuals³

If we want the construction, support, defence, and promotion of human dignity to function (that is to become a conviction and consequently a stable practice for each of us), then it is important and necessary to consider its close relationship with the construction, support, defence, and promotion of respect among people. Likewise, if we really want interpersonal respect to come to life, then it is important and necessary to consider protecting and achieving - anywhere and anytime - human dignity. In short, from this point of view, for human dignity to exist it requires interpersonal respect as a precondition.

Consequently, given that education has as a fundamental and undeniable priority the edification, protection and affirmation of human dignity, it means that it also has as fundamental and indisputable prerogative the edification, protection and affirmation of respect among people. As with the concept of human dignity, interpersonal respect is also a complex, profound concept, which we - our great majority - believe we are familiar with and which we frequently invoke in our conversations and social interactions, but which - in fact - remains inaccessible or superficially understood. Hence - many of us - do not know what this concept entails, and, as a consequence, we do not know what to demand from others or how to behave ourselves in our (day-to-day) relationships with them.

³ As in the case of the concept of human dignity, in case of inter-human respect we keep the same mention: our modest attempt constitutes a possible (and imperfect) definition and understanding of this relational behaviour. It can be understood as an alternative to other existing or possible attempts on this exciting and always topical theme.

In the same context, it is also worth mentioning that between interpersonal respect and interpersonal relation there is an organic, deeply necessary, indissoluble link. We could say that there is such a close link that *where there is a human relationship, there is always respect, and where there is respect, we can see and/ or accept a human relationship*. In other terms, we mean that *where there is no interpersonal respect, there is - and can never exist - a relationship between people*. As a result, any interpersonal interaction where there is no respect is a degraded, compromised, sub-human, uncivilized, barbarous interaction.

In order to get closer to the significance of the concept of respect, on the one hand, and to behave accordingly, in the direction of some inherent specific requirements, and for respect itself to be in itself as present in our social reality as possible, on the other hand, we need to define it, to get it out of the tacit, diffused, diluted understanding.

Thus, for P. Sánchez and his collaborators (2009), respect means “to accept and understand the way others are, to accept and understand their way of thinking, even if it is not similar to ours, even if, from our point of view, they are wrong” (p. 82). As far as respect is concerned, I. Filliozat (2011) believes that this means “to look without judging” (p. 143). For the French psychotherapist, respect allows neither quick judgment nor automatic behaviour, but compels us to listen to what the other wants to express, to try and understand the meaning of what they manifest (*ibidem*).

Analysing and correlating the two points of view, we can note that both:

- propose a working, contextual-expeditious understanding of the concept of respect;
- see respect as closest to tolerance and inter-personal acceptance, even at the risk of diluting it.

As far as we are concerned, we have found (without claiming to have exhausted them) and propose the following dimensions of respect among people:

a. *Care for one's own behaviour* in relation with others, based on good manners. Respect involves politeness (a word so scarcely used in our vocabulary nowadays), and good intentions. According to A.C. Grayling (2009), politeness includes “a system of practices and attitudes that provide ways to treat one another with a certain consideration, care and attention” (pp. 155-156).

Even if sometimes it is possible that “what a group considers to be polite or proper behaviour, another might consider it rude and strange” (Duduță, 2013, p. 25, a.o.), however, all societies and, implicitly, cultures seem to have notions about what is polite in certain contexts. Being polite and

well-mannered is “showing respect to each other”, observing a set of “conventional social standards” (*idem*, p. 27).

In short, the care for one’s own relational behaviour refers to *our attitudinal care* (care from which a feeling of safety, predictability, humanity, and psychic comfort derives).

b. *Care for our own physical, bodily appearance and clothing*; it means keeping our bodies clean and our clothes clean and decent.

c. *Care for our peers*, so that we can give them the feeling that they are treated as a human being and contribute to their inner comfort. It involves:

- *appreciating* their work, activity, personal contributions;
- treating them with greatest care and seriousness;
- *being grateful to them*, whenever the situation and events require it;
- *making them confident* regarding their own potential and abilities;
- *being punctual*; valuing other people’s time and implicitly their life;
- *not demanding*, but asking politely;
- *not imposing anything on them*, but taking their options into consideration and honestly sharing an opinion about them;
- *empathizing* with their inner moods, and not overlooking their inner universe;
- *being close*; feeling *close*, reliable, trustworthy (not feeling abandoned, betrayed);
- *identifying their individuality* and conveying to them that we care about their fulfilment; this might entail: not minimizing them, not labelling, stigmatizing, ignoring or mocking them;
- *protecting their privacy*, listening to their confessions and always practicing confidentiality;
- *not mocking/ not taking advantage of someone’s goodwill and good faith*;
- *not creating privileges* when this might hurt another;
- *not defying others*, not mocking them;
- valuing others as highly as we value ourselves;

- *giving them our undivided attention*, just as every person deserves;
- letting others exercise control over their own lives; exercising their full capacity to organize, control and lead their lives as they see fit;
- *letting others feel they are valuable* when they are with us.

d. *Careful communication*

It involves:

- neat vocabulary, without vulgarities, trivial and offensive language;
- honest, attentive, empathetic listening to the other;
- warm, reserved/ calm tone of voice;
- treating other's ideas, statements, convictions and reserves seriously;

e. *Self-control*

Self-control is fuelled by self-respect. Self-respect gives consistency to self-control in relation to others.

All these dimensions of the concept of interpersonal respect represent - as with the characteristics of the concept of human dignity - essential, first-rate coordinates in conceiving and practicing education - at any time and in any socio-cultural space.

Defining and clarifying self-respect

When we are concerned about human dignity and respect among people, we are concerned, naturally, with self-respect. As we have seen, deciphering the dimensions of interpersonal respect opens our horizon to the concept of self-respect.

For most of us, education specialists and/ or practitioners in education, addressing respect in interpersonal relationships cannot be separated/ isolated from the approach of self-respect. Some consider that respect for one another is in a clear, inherent and close connection with self-respect; that the manifestation, depth and consistency of the former are largely and indisputably determined by the presence, depth and influence of the latter. Therefore, where there is no self-respect, there can be no respect for peers. Self-respect is the necessary and sufficient condition for establishing, manifesting, and practicing intrinsic respect in relation to the others.

Others consider, on the contrary, that self-respect is clearly, inherently and closely related to respect for others; that the manifestation, depth and consistency of the former are largely and indisputably determined by educating, encouraging, stimulating and influencing the latter. More specifically, this category of school specialists and/ or educational actors thinks that where there is no respect for others, where its seed has not been planted, there can be no question of self-respect. In other words, where respect for people has not been cultivated and cared for (attentively and meticulously), self-respect cannot occur. Self-respect has its root/ origin in respecting others. Also, there are different approaches to understanding self-respect. Some believe that this is the starting point and source of selfishness, self-centeredness. The direction and essence of self-respect is the assertion of personal claims (even with assertive valences). In this situation, self-respect would mean highlighting one's own presence, imposing one's own rules, values, standards, and points of view; it would mean that others should submit to the beliefs, norms, ideological orientation and general vision of the person concerned. In short, self-respect would be a source of power. It would be more accentuated, of more concern for the individual than respect for peers; it would have priority in all one's thoughts, decisions, choices, behaviours and actions.

Others, however, believe that self-respect is the foundation and source of dedication, of a pro-social, empathetic and cooperative vision and attitude. It would be the basis and source of collaboration, modesty and temperance, of the care and concern for others, and of self-sacrifice. In this situation, self-respect would involve putting themselves on second place, downsizing their own claims, their own ideological choices and sharing - knowingly, with discernment and for the sake of their values, the vision of those with whom we live, to assert and protect their mental balance and their emotional tranquillity. In short, self-respect would be a source of dedication, devotion, appreciation of others. It would be less a matter of concern than respect for others. In all the thoughts, decisions, choices, behaviours and/ or actions of the individual, self-respect would leave room to and would accept the priority of respect for others. It would thus become a source of joy, of bringing people together, of good understanding and of well-being for those like us.⁴

In a possible analysis and understanding, the concept of self-respect would involve:

- defending, manifesting and promoting our dignity in any moment and in any context;

⁴ We consider that, besides the two discussed approaches there could be a third category of people (educational actors) that believe that there can never be a priority report between the two manifestations of respect. According to this third approach, self-respect and respect for others are equally present, and have the same weight in the thoughts, decisions, choices, attitudes and behaviours of the individual.

- controlling our language, gestures, reactions within the limits of honouring our condition of civilized, cultivated and educated human beings; using a warm, nuanced and attentive vocabulary;
- really manifesting our humanity and concern, aid and support towards our peers, on the grounds of compassion and common nature;
- being prepared (at all times) to give priority to the issues of others to the extent that we ourselves have the necessary skills to do it. If, with all our inner availability, we are unable to do this, we should admit it and refer to the one who would be best able to solve the issue of the individual in need of help;
- being always prepared to encourage, offer a big smile, a gentle word;
- always being a ray of hope for others;
- always doing our job correctly, conscientiously and to the bitter end; doing our job meticulously, devotedly;
- always fulfilling our duty;
- never compromising our honour;
- answering for everything we choose, decide and do at any moment; assuming responsibility when it belongs to us;
- offering attachment, honouring and getting involved in achieving the goals of the team we belong to;
- keeping our promises;
- being punctual in case we have set a temporal reference;
- bolstering and embellishing life; encouraging the fearful, the mistrustful, those in need of support;
- believing in people, in their desire to be humane;
- not making use of blackmail, not taking advantage of the weaknesses and inherent limitations of our peers;
- not to unload our frustrations on the innocent;
- thanking those who deserve our acknowledgment;

- acknowledging everyone's ideas and contributions to the initiation, organization and running of an event, a project, an action;
- manifesting our devotion for humanitarian causes.

As far as it is concerned, education is strongly and undoubtedly involved in the clarification, manifestation and strengthening of self-respect. In addition to promoting and defending human dignity, asserting and extending respect among people, it is the main way of cultivating and encouraging self-respect.

Possible conclusions and recommendations

We are currently living a time when, overwhelmed by the amount, the scale and the complexity of the structural problems we face, overwhelmed (whether we recognize it or not) by changes (big or small, more or less contradictory), overcome by the avalanche of technological novelties thirsty to prove our own value, dominated by immediate interests (which seem as important as they are inherent), full of ourselves, we become lost among specific educational valences and its genuine purposes.

It seems that we need to recollect ourselves (from our sometimes scholarly wanderings), to withdraw (from the noisy arena of the controversial and incoherent administrative-bureaucratic initiatives), to detach from the multitude of debates (more or less sterile) in the respite of sober reflections, in order to clarify and reveal the ultimate thought: to understand that education is the specific human act of sustaining, defending and asserting human dignity. Along with this, education reveals the fundamental coordinate of our behaviour and that of our relationship with peers: respectively, the consistent and honest manifestation of interpersonal respect. In such an investment, education is also meant to pursue the training, support and manifestation of self-respect.

In short, the concepts of human dignity, respect between people and self-respect cannot miss from the education concepts system. On the contrary, they are the fundamental coordinates and targets of any formative approach, regardless of geographic space and historical time. *People need to grow wherever and whenever in the spirit of the three great foundations of human existence.*

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