

Conformism and Education. How Should Schools Educate?

Abstract

More and more books, studies and articles have been warning us recently that we are experiencing a period of history in which conformism is increasing in prevalence; as if conformism was becoming the underlying principle of social and institutional existence and adaptation. Similarly, this phenomenon is present in the field of education, what is more, the easily conformable student has become a general ideal. Education seems to prefer mass production of students who are compliant and obedient. We are no longer surprised when we encounter phrases such as the NAT (NAT: Nemzeti Alaptanterv: National Curriculum) -compatible curriculum, EU-compatible education and management, or a Euro-compatible value system. It is clear that teaching and education are constantly facing the problem of conformism. Considering this, it is sad and incomprehensible that educational psychology is so insensitive to this topic and that different educational superstitions have such a strong hold in the fields of educational politics, research and pedagogical practice. For the sake of differentiated education it is time we considered the original meaning of conformism and the dilemma of conformism/non-conformism. The American liberal thinker, William Penn, pointed out three hundred years ago that citizens give up their freedom and culture. Ernst Fischer summarised that in the statement: conformism is the submersion of Self in Everyman. From this original and classical definition we can conclude that conformism, no matter how fashionable and powerful it may be, is a pejorative and extreme phenomenon. In and through conformism an individual gives up his/her autonomy and always adjusts his/her opinion and behaviour to something else. We also have to understand that non-conformism is not a positive alternative to conformism. Conformism means adapting without conviction, and likewise,

non-conformism is not-adapting without conviction. Both are harmful and extreme forms of behaviour, neither can exceed the other. So education has to fight against both the compliant, obedient, i.e. conforming student and the rebellious youth, who always says no for the sake of saying no. Our goal is to help, with much more efficiency than before, the development of the process whereby the youth will acceptingly reject and at the same time rejectingly accept the influences of the world.

Key words: *conformism, nonconformism, uniformity, adaptation, community, creative process*

If conformism “is a widely spread reaction, ...and one of the ... basic types of organisational/social adaptation of the individual, which is rather common in a pedagogical and school environment” (Szabó, László Tamás, 1997, p.272) then it is not understandable, or at least contradictory why pedagogical literature and educational policy is so apathetic towards this topic. At present we are more than distant from the pedagogical outlining of the relation of conformism and education. Deep and detailed elaboration of connections arising here only appears as a research task of the near future, let us now make do with an initial and sketched approach to the subject. At this stage of research I only wish to examine two simple and seemingly natural “initiating” questions. 1. What is conformism in reality? 2. What basic principle (or value) should we highlight in the relation of conformism and education that could act as an orienting force in our theoretical and practical pedagogical activity? To contract the question: should the school teach conformism? Or, on the contrary: non-conformism? Perhaps both, or something completely different?

Conformism is losing freedom

The topic of conformism entered the literature of pedagogy in the footsteps of the theory of sociologist *Robert Merton*. In his study, now a classic, titled *Social Structure and Anomy*, While discussing the types of adaptation of the individual Merton proposes that conformism “is the most general and wide-spread reaction. If it was not so, stability and continuity of society could not be maintained.” (Merton, 1980, p. 356) As it can be seen, a general meaning of conformism interpretable independently of social space and time is beginning to be outlined here. A behaviour ensuring social order and operation is being expressed in conformism. According to this, conformism – says *Riesman*, continuing Merton’s

thoughts – is a necessary phenomenon of society, a “device”, a “social character” (Riesman, 1973, p. 54). It is not difficult to see that the American school of critical sociology (Merton, Riesman, Whyte) regards conformism as a broad sense and general phenomenon and in fact understands it to be social adaptation itself without which neither would society work nor would the individual exist. Pedagogy continues on such a theoretical basis. “Conformism is the character, says *György Horváth*, when you adjust your actions to norms external to you, or above you in a way that you accept them as your own: the acts demanded externally are made into a self-act.” (Horváth, 1978 p. 168). And there is one more characteristic and fundamentally similar understanding from current Hungarian publications, *educational sociologist Tamás Kozma* has the following definition: “conformity is an organisational adaptation where one identifies oneself with the aims of the organisation and at the same time accepts organisational regulation and control.” (Kozma, 1999, p.95)

However, I do believe that the pedagogical concept based upon *Robert Merton’s* tradition ought to be further researched and regarded with critical remarks. Allow me to highlight three problems here.

a) Unfortunately there is no solution to the question of what the difference is between adaptation in general and a given special appearance of adaptation. Merton and his followers instinctively feel that there exists a straightforward, necessary, continuously operating and, from the aspect of value judgement, “neutral” adaptation and also a not necessary and not constant, consciously undertaken and changeable, a kind of “adopted” conforming to a negative (perhaps positive) content. The difference between the two levels remains unclarified, or the two meanings are used in a contradictory and arbitrary way. The most typical source of errors (which danger not even Merton is capable of evading) is that the meaning of adaptation in general and of conformism are completely blurred together. Let us not forget that conformism in an etymological sense, based on the Latin word ‘conformare’, means adaptation! Merton for example, uses the expressions ‘adaptation’ and ‘conformity’ alternately, without differentiating the two. And to further complicate matters, he states that there is no reason for us to condemn conformity in itself, only over-conformity and conformism without a soul carry a negative content (Merton, 1967, p. 139). Merton’s followers make the mixing of the two concepts even more straightforward. Allow me to select one characteristic example from among them. *Wolfgang Lipp*, a member of the Department of Sociology at Bielefeld University edited an international selection from the topic of conformism. In the Introduction to the book, he emphasises that “it is sociology that raised the phenomenon of conformism and non-conformism from its historical context and made it the law of life of society.” (Lipp, 1975, p. 19 and 56–56). Here, we are only

one step away from the interpretation that identified the concepts of conformism and adaptation with each other. We can come across drives like these everywhere in public life and publicism and sometimes also in academic theses. We may read, for instance, about legal harmonisations works conforming to the EU's legal system but also about EU-conform management and education. Its "fate" shall reach pedagogy as well: discussions are already taking place regarding Hungarian National Base Curriculum-conform documents (OPKM, 1999, p. 265). We can say that making the meaning of conformism and adaptation the same is growing into a "spectacular" and fashionable drive. Below I will react to this undifferentiated approach, here I only wish to draw attention to an old experiential truth: what is fashionable does not necessarily express a constant and real content (value).

b) Conformism-research can rely upon the *Mertonian* tradition, however it is absolutely necessary and advisable to broaden and deepen the view, technique and method of analysis. The topic of conformism cannot be expropriated by any single professional branch of science, due to the fact that it is interdisciplinary. Particular researchers cannot form a right enabling them to claim that only their approach is right and exclusive. Instead, we ought to observe each other's works and results and the mutual observation of many viewpoints and features could help to dissolve the undoubtedly disturbing simplifications and contradictions.

Sociology, social psychology, politology, ethics and pedagogy are all concerned in the research of conformism, what is more, even philosophy gives its opinion. Obviously, it would be impossible to outline and assess all possible interpretations here. But the indifference that can be experienced in the *original* knowledge and use of the basic word, i.e., conformism is similarly unacceptable to me. If we go back to the historical roots of the usage of the word, it is not difficult to recognise that the concept first appears at the level of social theory and philosophy and the first examinations give the basic meaning of conformism. They outline a deep meaning that is even today valid and has a guiding-orienting effect. I believe that if we were to return to the original interpretation, the conceptual chaos that can even be experienced today would significantly decrease.

I merely conjure an outline of a reminder: the "profane" meaning of conformism is first provided by American philosopher and liberal thinker *William Penn*, in his work dated from around 1700. According to him, *conformism is a civil virtue whose price is the loss of freedom* (Penn, 1971, Foreword, page not numbered). Later *Emerson*, also an American thinker, repeats Penn's statement according to him: citizens renounce their freedom and culture. The main virtue here is conformism. (Emerson, 1932, p.30). The description of conformism as deprivation of freedom becomes stronger in the 20th century philosophy from Heidegger through *Fromm* as far as *Fischer*. I only wish to refer to this last name; according to Fischer's defini-

tion: “the sinking of Self into Anybody is conformism” (Fischer, 1964, p. 97). The original conceptual meaning therefore is outlined, which we can find in social theoretical and philosophical books. A clear and straightforward reference is made to the fact that conformism is to be separated from the meaning of adaptation in a general sense. Indeed, conformism involves a decidedly negative content. What is in question is in fact a phenomenon where the individual does not think and act as he or she would otherwise want and do, when “they adjust their best faith and knowledge to the opinion of others” (Wieswede, 1967 p. 12).

The derogative interpretation of conformism is adapted by many sociological, socio-psychological and ethical analyses. A typical example of these is the view of Russian sociologist/socio-psychologist *Kon*. He regards conformism as an imperfect form of collectivism (Kon, 1978 p. 234). According to ethics researcher Peters, a conformist is a person without any own principles and acts, ... who adapts to any group like a chameleon. ... Conformist acting is the smothering debauchery of ethical life. (Peters, 1974, 194–195 and 251)

Based upon classical interpretation and most modern social science adaptations the reaction of common sense and common opinion is indeed very understandable: the phenomenon is usually rejected, no one dares or wishes to take it upon oneself and would not advertise the fact that they are conformists, although all of us know that conformists do exist among us.

c) Let us clear up another misunderstanding. As we have seen, at least according to the original use of the word, conformism is not the same as mere adaptation, it is not a concept of “neutral” values, but a derogative concept. If, however, that is so, what will its positive binary pair be? The answer seems obvious: what other than non-conformism? General opinion places non-conformist adaptation at a high value level, and indeed, some of the researchers also tend to over estimate non-conformism as a presentation of a desired behaviour to be envied. Only one example: the main essence of the 1968 generation was rebellion against the conformist world, says *Adam Michnik*. And that is non-conformism itself. The main moral of 1968: “One has to be a non-conformist!” (Michnik, Interview, 1998, 05.30, 19)

However, the differentiated analysis of human adaptation warns us and makes us reconsider and re-evaluate the dilemma of conformism/non-conformism as a negative-positive binary pair. The *Kiesler* brothers have already pointed out the comparative nature of this pair of concepts. Outsiders, emphasise the authors, often see conformity as a character feature: there are adapters and those incapable to adapt. Whether the outsider considers him-or herself as a conformist or not can also depend on whom they compare themselves to. If they compare themselves to people they consider as beatniks, hippies, or tramps, they are unyielding conformists. ... And if they are asked whether they believe in ‘progressing towards a better

life, they instantly discover themselves to be brave non-conformists, who are deprived of the shackles of the fear and suppression of the old fogies. (Kiesler-Kiesler, 1969, p.11) Social psychologist *Crutchfield* advances further and gives a clear definition. According to him conformism and non-conformism are not really opposing pairs. The common stem of both is giving up autonomy; dependence upon others. Conformity is adjusting to our peer group without principles (yielding, allowance), and non-conformity is the opposition to the same without principles. (Crutchfield, 1955/10, 194–198) I myself also believe that the spectacular and fashionable establishment of the dilemma of conformism and non-conformism is not well-founded nor convincing, since there are numerous modes and ways possible to resolve conflicts between the group and the individual. I agree with social psychologist *Petrovsky*, according to whom “The real alternative to conformism is group autonomy and not non-conformism.” (Petrovskij, 1973/12, 76) In other words, in opposition to all superstition, authority and popular views, I am of the opinion that it is impossible to pass conformism with non-conformism. Conformism/non-conformism as negative/positive binary opposition is a false alternative, a pseudo-dilemma. In reality both are extreme and distorted forms of adaptation. For that reason it is necessary and desirable to fight them both and at the same time, fight is the creation of democratic public life and real communities.

Whatever way we interpret and judge conformism, however, we have to deal with this question. And if *Castoriadis*' statement, that “we are witnessing the most conformist period of modern history” (Castoriadis, 1994, Oct. p.48) is true, then it is even more important to focus on this problem – important for politics, science and pedagogy.

The “polite”, the rebellious and the community forming student

The question of conformism and education, I believe, can be connected in many equally important ways. Yet, it is incomprehensible, or at least strange to me, that both conformism and pedagogy research today still lack a systematic and deepened analysis of the mutual effects of these two “notions” on each other. In the mind of conformism analysts the value system of education assumes tertiary importance, and pedagogy researchers mostly pretend that conformity does not even appear in the field of education, even in the better case, they merely mention the phenomenon, however, they easily skip over problems appearing in connection with education and conformity. It is well known that it is impossible to jump over research phases without a price, so here we have to make do with highlighting a single viewpoint, which concerns connecting conformity and school education.

Let us start out from the classic dilemma of school education. What is the most important question, the pattern providing norm, the task to be realised for the school? “Breeding” the “polite”, well-educated student who causes few problems, adapts to everything and is therefore predictable? Or “breeding” the always critically-thinking autonomous student who stands on his or her own feet, rebelling, but for that very reason inconvenient? Or perhaps developing the youth of a real community spirit and mentality? It is not difficult to see that all the three behaviour types are realistic although they represent different weight and value pedagogic-ethical principle and virtue. Allow me to present, as a first approach, a viewpoint to be considered for each.

The “well groomed” student as an ideal

We cannot deny that the school as an institution shows a strong inclination and willingness towards developing a pliant, obedient, behaviour in its students where they adapt to the professor, teacher and the school leadership in everything on a mass scale. Many experiences have accumulated on the fact that school pedagogical work mainly focuses on developing an organisational unity. This pedagogical direction is only strengthened by the so-called traditional educational concept in whose centre “stands unconditional and voluntary respect for authority, (according to which) the *future generation* should be what the generation of *today* wants to form it based upon the experiences of the generation of the *past*.” (Horváth, 1997, pp. 34–37)

It is obvious, although educational policy and the pedagogical society does not recognise it or admit it, that this approach in fact depreciates students, only seeing a passive “material in the youth”, which the school and the adult and older generation will teach. As if the student did not have any other task than to accept without a word and to keep at all costs the norms, principles and values imposed upon him or her by the school! So we can hardly be surprised that in the community relations of the students there appears “the principle of structural regularity of increasing conformity” (Schelsky, 1958, p. 381), and “in our schools, the well-adapting and above that well-conforming student has become the ideal.” (Popper, ed:Lénárd, 1975, p.354)

And we cannot neglect the fact that the state socialist process of the former Central and Eastern European era (the 1950s-80s) further strengthened the conformist inclinations of the pedagogical principle value and practice. A widening of conformism was politically and ideologically confirmed and supported. State socialism did not have citizens, but rather subjects who gave up their socio-

political critical rights and abilities and adapted to the ruling political and ideological line in a really conformist way. And it is hardly surprising that such a social and political mass also worded the conformist expectations of pedagogical work.

True, by today we have passed the infamous experiment of state socialism and we trust that we have also more or less surpassed the traditionalist concept of education. But let us not believe that our pedagogical theories and practice have ultimately overcome conformist tendencies. Whether we like it or not, we have to accept the fact that conformist tendencies and willingness have sunk so deeply into us in the past that as a mentality, feeling, conscious and ethical expression do not pass away even today, and will probably continue to cause difficulties in our pedagogical activities (also) for a long time. I only wish to remind everybody of one of the remarks of Hungarian social researcher *Lengyel László* on Hungarian higher education: “The mass production of prefabricated, conformist students is taking place in closed orbit mass universities and provincial and copying systems.” (Lengyel, 2001, Oct.11. p.32) Even if perhaps the summarised statement of the author may be argued, we can be positive about the fact that conformism will not disappear suddenly and miraculously. Even for its decrease we must take significant measures in our pedagogy. To me the first step or at least one of the first steps is straightforward as regards pedagogy. Rethinking of our educational concept (or educational concepts) appears as an urgent burden. I find a change of paradigm in our educational policy unavoidable: this practically means a decided break with the traditionalist value order and approach.

The non-conformist myth

It is usually in opposition to the “polite”, i.e. conformist student that we place the rebellious, always complaining and criticising type. The former behaviour is preferred by the institution and the older generation, while the younger generation tries to accept its conformism reluctantly, or also to hide it shyly. The latter in turn is rather uncomfortable and disturbing to the teacher, however, students attribute a great value to it and try to interpret and follow it as a heroic act. Among them it seems chic to be a non-conformist and a behaviour rejecting everything becomes a tendency. It is common knowledge that for the young person the world is “out of joint”, and it is he or she who is ready and willing to reinterpret and reshape it. At this stage of life and vocation we are only a step from rebellion, from the ruthless and logical criticism of the existing values, ideals, customs, life techniques and modes and cultures, the myth of unconditional negation, to non-conformism. This is how the youth, or student who always rejects everything and adapts to nothing

becomes an ideal, or at least imposing. The student therefore who says “no” to the parent, teacher and authority believes that his/her independence and eccentricity leads to happiness and welfare. These students make themselves believe that this is the way they become great and “divine” to their peers. To the rebelling, non-conformist student it seems that his/her constant, non-selecting criticism, brave resistance is the promise for his/her independent and free thought and acts, in other words, autonomy.

Non-conformist rebellion only works for a short while, there is not much we can achieve with it and in reality it is not progressive and efficient, but destructive and misleading from the point of view of values. The non-conformist youth will become disappointed sooner or later and not mainly because of others (that would hardly surprise them), but by themselves and for themselves. However, by then it is too late and, not seeing other alternative apart from the false dilemma of conformism/non-conformism, when they become adults they fall into, or back into, the petty bourgeois world adapting to everything silently and endlessly.

Our conclusion is therefore that the banner of rebellion on its own is not enough. We have to see that the idol of the “impolitely” not adapting student is the same pedagogical error as the spreading of the “politely” adapting student.

To me it seems obvious that pedagogy has to break with both the constraints of conformist education and the pseudo-glory of the non-conformist attitude. Conformism is comfortable and “pays off”, but in reality it is humiliating in that it deprives one of, or decreases freedom. Non-conformism is a behaviour proudly assumed, which even gives us a sense of bravery, however, in reality it is an activity leading to destruction and anarchy. The question arises automatically: how could school educational work surpass the false extremes of conformist and non-conformist adaptation, what behaviour type could it present in opposition to both?

At first sight we could assume that we are facing an extremely difficult, perhaps unsolvable problem. The answer, however, though on a theoretical plane, seems very simple indeed. I believe that many education researchers and practising pedagogues could accept the pedagogical master plan according to which the young negatively accept [the world], ... and if the negation of reality strengthens, then the individual becomes marginalised, if acceptance is strengthened then the individual gives up sovereignty and becomes conformist.” (Lóránd, 1999/1. p.36) Thus, the student (as of course everybody else) should adapt to the world - family, school, basic social norms - but at all costs, through head bowing and giving up even the illusion of sovereignty. At the same time, the student must not adapt to displeasing phenomena, unconditional authoritarianism, bad habits, unjust and untrue values, and at the same time should value and assume the real values and virtues, even though they may have been true since old times. What we need is

delicate balance, a differentiated understanding, judgement and implementation of adaptation and non-adaptation.

I cannot think of anything else but advocating again and again the importance real, genuine communities. Pedagogy with its simple tools should press so that the school, and in a broader sense the entire society, recognise and acknowledge that the real community will only be strong, firm and rich if it feeds on the creating energy, diverse abilities and will of its members. And vice versa: diverse personal abilities and capabilities can only grow in the background of intimate co-operation, that is a community. That is how community and individual can harmonise and that is how the false dichotomy, structured by the previous state socialism, of the “superior community and the inferior individual” can be overcome.

Fundamentally, I can see the way of overcoming both conformism and non-conformism in forming communities.

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