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*Approaches in Teaching
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PRESENTISM AS A RESEARCH STRATEGY IN MODERN HISTORY OF EDUCATION

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Abstract. The article deals with the peculiarities of use of presentism as an approach in historical knowledge connected with the relationship between the past and the present. The essence of presentism, its cognitive potential, types, strengths and weaknesses are revealed.

Special attention is paid to the analysis of the cognitive capabilities of presentism as a research strategy in history of education, the identification of the risks that arise in connection with its use. It is shown that the main reasons for using presentism in historical and pedagogical research are as follows: substantiation of the relevance of the chosen topic; construction of a methodological research project; substantiation of the practical significance of the results obtained. The emphasis is made on the fact that the presentist approach, the use of which is inevitable, can lead to the distortion of the past, generate bias and tendentiousness in historical analysis, conclusions, generalizations, interpretations, assessments and, thereby, reduce the objectivity, scientific character and theoretical potential of the results obtained. Overcoming the negative consequences of the use of presentism requires balance and attitude to the historical and pedagogical experience as a unique, inimitable phenomenon that cannot be transferred and repeated in the present in order to solve up-to-date educational problems.

Keywords: presentism; antiquarism; research strategy; history of education; historical and pedagogical experience.

1. Introduction

For the last decade, pedagogical historiography has focused on substantiating various versions of explanation and interpretation of pedagogical ideas and educational practices of the past. The emergence and implementation of various methodological projects in research on history of education and pedagogical thought in the post-Soviet countries was welcomed and perceived as an opportunity to overcome uniformity, predestination and predictability of conclusions and assessments. However, a desire to streamline a sprawling evidence base,

relying on different, often contradictory and incompatible methodological approaches, created a mosaic of interpretational models and contributed to creation of “a history made of pieces”.

As a result, new problems have arisen associated with the need to find universal research strategies aimed at overcoming chaos and normalizing the results obtained, presenting historical and pedagogical experience as a kind of a semantic integrity. In other words, a respectful attitude towards emerging diversity of historical narratives, an increase in the role of a subject of cognition, the influence of its worldview and value attitudes on the results of cognitive activity have not disappeared from the agenda of general characteristics of a historical and pedagogical process and generally recognized guidelines for research procedures.

Since time is a fundamental factor for historical science, including history of education, it is generally accepted that the most important task of historical and pedagogical research is to determine a chronological starting point, or a chronological framework and an attempt to substantiate periodization. In fact, this problem belongs to the category of secondary ones and its solution does not significantly affect the heuristic potential of the study. The opposition “past-present” is of much greater importance for comprehending time, understanding the phenomena and processes related to it. According to the famous French historian, representative of the Annales school J. Le Goff, it is the distinction between the past and the present that is the main element of the concept of time, the fundamental operation carried out by historical consciousness and historical science (Le Goff 2003).

The analysis of literature on methodology of historical and pedagogical research (Albulescu & Catalano 2017; Holowchak 2018; Hodgson 2021; McCulloch 2011; McCulloch & Watts 2003; Meynert 2015; Ulrich 2007 etc.) shows that scientists studying history of education and pedagogical thought do not specifically consider the issue of relationship between the past and the present. The exceptions make publications on history of science which interpret the role of the present in representations of the past (Bourne 2006; Chang 2021; Clark 2003; Coombs & Coriale 2017; Dale 2018; Guldi & Armitage 2014; Hartog 2014; Loison 2016; Lorenz & Bevernage 2013; Moro-Abadía 2009; Oreskes 2013; Spoerhase 2008; Tamm & Olivier 2019; Walsham 2017; Wood 2008).

The aim of the article is to identify the problems that arise in the study and interpretation of historical and pedagogical experience through the prism of the present and to outline the ways to solve them.

2. Presentism as a research strategy: pros and cons

In civil history, as well as in history of science, two approaches to historical knowledge have been formed concerning the relationship between the past and the present which are defined as “presentism” and “antiquarism”.

Presentism as an ontological doctrine (meaning *present, modernity*) is the point of view that only the present is real (Hinchliff 1996; Crisp 2004). While recognizing only the present as real, presentism nevertheless applies to intertemporal relations. It involves the study, explanation and understanding of historical facts from the point of view of modernity. From the point of presentism, history is viewed upon not as a cognition of the past objective reality, but as a mental picture of the past created in the present and being a part of this present.

As a conceptual trend in historiography, presentism emerged in the late XIX – early XX century in the United States and was closely associated with the philosophy of pragmatism, the prominent representatives of which were the American philosophers C. Peirce (1839 – 1914), W. James (1842 – 1910), J. Dewey (1859 – 1952).

However, one of the first theorists of historical presentism was the famous Italian intellectual, philosopher, historian B. Croce. In his work “Theory and History of Historiography” (Croce 2017), he distinguished between “modern” history – the history of the recent past, which “takes place right before our eyes and in our minds”, and “non-modern” – the history of the past, which deals with what has already happened and presupposes its critical comprehension, regardless of how much time has passed since then – a millennium or just an hour. B. Croce came to the conclusion that both “modern” and “non-modern” histories originate directly from life, as it is obvious that only interest in the present can motivate us to study the facts of the past: they enter the present life and refer to the present, but not the old interests. This, in his opinion, is reflected in a rather hackneyed formula: “history is *magistra vitae*” (mentor of life).

Antiquarianism (meaning *antiquarian, antique*) as a research approach in historiography proceeds from the fact that the past should be studied and evaluated from the perspective of the past itself. In other words, with this approach, the emphasis is made on reproducing the past in all concrete historical details, and any appeal to the present is undesirable and even harmful (Garber 2003).

Many scholars oppose the use of a presentism approach in historical research believing that history, which is motivated by contemporary issues, is based on prejudice and creates a distorted understanding of the past. Presentism opens up opportunities to use the past to confirm political beliefs, ideologies, and justify certain values. As a consequence, presentism history interferes with portraying the past in an objective historical context.

The reputable American historian David Hackett Fischer defines presentism as a fallacy, a classic example of which was the Whig History, written by XVIII – XIX century British historians to use the past to validate their own political convictions. Presentism, according to D.-H. Fischer, manifested itself not only in the “Whig interpretation of history”, but also in the new liberal narratives of an American historian, writer and politician Arthur Schlesinger, in which American history is

shown as the steady progress of pragmatic liberalism from Jefferson to Jackson and Franklin Roosevelt (Fischer 1970).

D.-H. Fischer underlined that presentism is a misconception that the correct way to write history involves cutting off the dead branches of the past and preserving the green buds and twigs that have grown in the dark forest of the modern world. In this regard, the scientist points to a contradictory nature of a presentism method, which, in the name of modernity, relevance and usefulness, sacrifices exactly that knowledge that historians can most effectively provide: knowledge useful for establishing current and future trends (Fischer 1970).

The Ukrainian historian V. Tkachenko pointed out the limitations of the presentist approach in historical research. He drew attention to the fact that, according to presentism, the modern must independently identify itself, regardless of either its past or the expected future. Moreover, the modern is intended not only to define but to determine purposefully both the past (what we must remember and keep and what to forget) and the future (what exactly we are building and what kind of destiny we are making for humanity) (Tkachenko 2010).

As we can see, the negative connotations of the term “presentism” stem from a rejection of a so-called biased historiography, colored by momentary interests, worries, and values, concerns about the distorting effects and risks of attitudes towards the past from the standpoint of the present, as well as the desire to ensure the objectivity of historical knowledge.

Meanwhile, a more balanced view of the presentist approach in historical research is presented in scientific literature.

L. Repina believes that some degree of presentism is inevitable in the use of a historical method, and its acceptable form is a historian’s use of his or her position in the present to fulfill the role of an intergenerational mediator (Repina 2018).

According to I. Savelyeva and A. Poletayev, in historical studies, the general level of knowledge, current interests, and possibilities of other social and humanitarian disciplines play the role of a scientific and methodological precedent: historians derive themes, hypotheses, methods, ways of proof and verification from them. In a general sense, any study and understanding of the past are carried out in the context of modernity which defines the cognitive horizon of history (Savelyeva & Poletayev 2005).

The position of H. Chang is of considerable interest. He drew attention to the use of presentism in research in history of science. The author believes that it is impossible to create a “a new internal historiography of science” that is free from the present, as T. Kuhn proposed long ago (Kuhn 1977). In his view, presentism of the history of science is inevitable, as historians inevitably live in the present, however they say otherwise. A historian’s present cannot be excluded from the process or the result of the writing of history, because his goals and perspectives determine everything he can say and understand about the past (Chang 2021).

However, H. Chang is confident that a historian has a choice as to which presentism he will use. From his point of view, there are at least three types of presentism which he refers to as “whiggism”, “philosophical history” and “emancipatory presentism”.

The term “whiggism”, which emerged as a reflection of presentist interpretation of the history of the Whigs, is used by H. Chang in the generalized sense, i.e. as a common historical position. As one of the variants of presentism, whiggism is based on the optimistic assumption of progress, according to which modern science is definitely better than the science of the past. However, this widespread assumption is not shared by all. Many scholars believe that it is preferable to view history as a sequence of different ways of understanding nature, none of which is clearly better than the others.

The second type of presentism, philosophical history, according to H. Chang, is related to the fact that most philosophers use modern philosophical concepts to explain and interpret history, rather than those which scholars of the past have based their work on. Herewith, historical facts are used as evidence of the validity of modern philosophical views. H. Chang reminds that T. Kun, as an opponent of presentism, objected to I. Lakatos’s idea of “rational reconstruction of history” and called such reconstruction not history, but philosophy, inventing examples.

H. Chang believes that philosophical history as a kind of presentism is possible, and the legitimacy of modern philosophical concepts as “framing devices for historiography”, in general, does not require any justification. Any concept that is important to us now should be allowed to be used “as a framework tool for historiography”. Virtually any conceptual framework can serve as a means of historical research and, ultimately, its usefulness can only be judged by the results.

The third kind of Chang’s presentism - emancipatory presentism uses the understanding of the past to free us from its heritage (B. Croce reflected the above approach in the well-known saying: “Only historical judgment frees the spirit from the pressure of the past”). Emancipatory presentism recognizes that our present also shapes contingent decisions made in the past. This means that what may seem inevitable to us “actually was, and can again be, a matter of human choice” (Chang 2021).

H. Chang, recognizing the usefulness, cognitive capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses of all three types of presentism, prefers the so-called pluralist presentism, which seeks to restore and develop aspects of the past science that are generally ignored by scientists. In his view, the most urgent task of writing history is to offer new perspectives on the past that do not exist in the dominant body of opinion. This “rebellious” presentism stems from the recognition that in our modern social and scientific world there are different participants, different points of view,

different interests. Historical pluralism is a commitment to recognize plurality and to resist the exclusive conquest of the past by the dominant forces of today. It is extremely important for history of science.

The need for pluralist presentism of history of science stems from the fact that modern science has evolved largely in a monist spirit, based on the premise that there is one correct answer to every scientific question and one sure way to arrive at the right answer. The history of science written by monist scientists tends to downplay the multiplicity that existed in science, reinforcing the impression that successful science always requires uniformity and consensus.

The use of pluralist presentism allowed H. Chang to consider the history and philosophy of science as a “complementary science”, the basic idea of which is to contribute to improvement of modern scientific knowledge. The author identifies three main ways in which complementary science can generate and improve scientific knowledge: critical awareness of modern science; recovery of useful ideas and facts from the past science; exploring alternative conceptual systems and lines of experimental inquiry. In other words, the history of science gives rise to critical analysis of its current state, allowing the revival of forgotten past knowledge to enable it to live in the present, to draw attention to the alternative ways of exploration that existed in the past, which have led to a loss of potential and current knowledge (Chang 2021).

Pluralist presentism, concludes Chang, provides a correct and insightful understanding of the past without which scientific progress is impossible (Chang 2021).

The presentist approach, often spontaneously and unconsciously, is used in studies of educational history and pedagogical thought. Representatives of this branch of scientific knowledge, like a hero of J.-B. Molière, who did not suspect that for more than forty years had been speaking prose, study the historical and pedagogical experience from the perspective of the present, hoping to solve problems of modern education based on it.

3. Cognitive capabilities of presentism as a research strategy in historical and pedagogical research

In our opinion, there are several reasons and justifications for using presentism in history of education.

A. Justification of relevance of a topic of a research.

In dissertations on history of education and pedagogical thought, the need for scientific development of a chosen topic is justified solely by the presence of problems in modern education, which, as scientists believe, cannot be solved without using historical and pedagogical experience. At the same time, authors, especially those who study early historical periods, often require a certain intellectual resourcefulness to confirm this thesis.

In some cases, the presentist version of substantiating the relevance of the topic of historical and pedagogical research is generally acceptable. For example, O. Babakina, not without reason, asserts that the improvement of modern system of advanced training of scientific and pedagogical staff in Ukraine requires studying and taking into account experience of such activities in the last quarter of the XX - beginning of the XXI century. It is quite possible that reliance on experience of the recent past in this case will help to solve modern problems more successfully (Babakina 2021).

However, S. Cherkashyn's assumption that the development of a strategy for reforming university education in Ukraine requires a study of the process of development of university education in Germany in the XX – early XXI century seems controversial (Cherkashyn 2021). It is even more difficult to connect with the present topics of historical and pedagogical works dealing, for example, with the study of education in Kyivan Rus, since this is hindered by a significant historical distance.

Linking facts and events of the past with the current state of education has certain risks and unwittingly blurs the very essence of a historical search.

Firstly, the focus on modernity determines tendentiousness in the formation of a source base and a choice of a set of historical and pedagogical facts. Preference is given to those which, according to a researcher, are progressive and therefore useful for modern education.

Secondly, presentism prevents the implementation of a principle of historicism, which presupposes the analysis of objects of research in connection with concrete historical conditions of their existence and makes us look at the past through the eyes of the contemporary. This leads to erroneous generalizations, conclusions and estimates.

B. Designing a methodological research project.

Presentism in history of education and pedagogical thought is also manifested in the course of determining initial theoretical and methodological positions. It is on this occasion that H. Chang noted that any modern theoretical concept can act as a framework tool for historiography.

Indeed, historians, creating a methodological research project, rely on modern methodological knowledge - philosophical positions and concepts, methodological approaches, principles, etc., which set a perspective for considering a problem and influence the results of cognitive activity. In our opinion, the path of cognition “from modern theory to history” is permissible and justified, since it contributes to the conceptualization of history of education, provides theoretical grounds for conclusions, generalizations, interpretations and allows to overcome the superficially descriptive nature of historical and pedagogical works.

In turn, history of education influences modern theory. According to Albuлесcu and Catalano, history can be viewed as a necessary introduction to pedagogical

science, preparation for understanding the concept of science itself (Albulescu & Catalano 2017).

C. Substantiation of practical significance of the results obtained.

Presentism standpoint allows for the possibility of using historical and pedagogical experience in modern educational practice. Despite the fact that the position “practical significance of the research results” is included in all dissertations on history of education, the issue of extrapolating historical and pedagogical experience to modern practice remains controversial.

Studies on history of education reveal at least three positions in the designation of practical significance of the results obtained: a) use of the results in further research practice; b) application of the results obtained in teaching, as well as when writing textbooks and creating teaching aids on history of education; c) direct use of historical and pedagogical experience in modern educational activities.

There is no need to prove that the results of any historical and pedagogical research contribute to an increase in historical and pedagogical knowledge and therefore recommendations for their use in further research work, in the process of teaching academic disciplines, in the preparation of educational and methodological literature are quite reasonable and explainable. However, recommendations for the creative use of pedagogical experience in modern conditions (in the process of reforming modern education system, in the educational activities of comprehensive schools, vocational and higher educational institutions at a present stage, etc.), to a large extent, look like declarations.

Note that in the history of pedagogy there was an opinion that historical and pedagogical experience must necessarily be used in modern practice, and it was even said about the need for experimental confirmation of the effectiveness of its implementation.

In our opinion, it is impossible to repeat the experience of the past in modern educational practice for two reasons: the socio-cultural context of education and the information situation have changed; the participants of the educational process have changed, as well as the technologies and means of education.

It is worth recalling that K. Ushinsky attached great importance to pedagogical experience, practice, including the experience of the past. However, practice, a fact, in his opinion, is a single matter and its transfer and copying does not make sense. It is not the experience itself that is transmitted, the outstanding educator wrote, but a thought derived from the experience (Ushisky 1948).

One can assume that the task of a scientist studying history of education and striving to show practical significance of the results obtained is precisely to derive an idea from the experience of the past. It is the comprehension of historical and pedagogical experience that makes it possible to understand modern education, to draw lessons from the past that can be used to improve the current educational theory and practice. The fact is that problems and challenges of modern education

are not unique, they have repeatedly occurred in different historical epochs, and scientists have tried to find ways to solve them before, achieving success and failing. History of education, trying to improve modern education, makes it possible to rely on past achievements, makes it possible to avoid mistakes and failures.

Practical significance of history of education is also manifested in the fact that it satisfies intellectual curiosity, contributes to an increase in professionalism of teachers, and encourages them to critically relate to existing educational theories and practices.

4. Conclusions

The use of presentism as a research strategy in history of education is inevitable and justified. Historical and pedagogical research deepens an understanding of modern educational concepts, ensures the continuity of pedagogical ideas and makes it possible to overcome the “monopoly of experimental science” in pedagogy.

At the same time, it is important to take into account the inconsistency and limitations of presentist approach in research on history of education.

On the one hand, presentism ensures interaction of the present and the past, a dialogue with past significant events in education and outstanding personalities, allows you to overcome the gap in time and form a holistic view of historical and pedagogical process. As a result, it becomes possible to identify and understand trends in the development of education, to adequately assess modern concepts, theories, hypotheses, to find optimal solutions to problems existing in practice.

On the other hand, presentism, focusing exclusively on problems and challenges of the present, determines the bias and tendentiousness of historical analysis, conclusions, generalizations, interpretations, assessments, gives rise to the desire to serve momentary political interests, to reaffirm one's own beliefs and values with historical facts. This significantly reduces the objectivity, scientific character and theoretical potential of research results and prevents implementation of the principle of historicism. Under the influence of the present, the picture of the past is distorted, which leads to historical anachronisms – attribution of an event or phenomenon to another time, introduction of features that are not characteristic of it into the image of a period. Presentism ignores the fact that historical knowledge in any broad or general sense is an independent artifact.

As you can see, the use of presentist approach in historical and pedagogical research is inevitable, but it is important to be aware of its positive and negative consequences. Overcoming the negative consequences of presentism requires a balanced and ambivalent attitude towards its cognitive capabilities, differentiating between the past and the present, considering the historical and pedagogical experience as a unique, autonomous resource that bears a special imprint of time and is only capable of influencing modern educational theory and practice indirectly.

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