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# On Émile Durkheim's educational ideas based on selected views from L'evolution pédagogique en France

# O koncepcji wychowania Émila Durkheima w oparciu o wybrane obserwacje z L'evolution pédagogique en France

## Abstract

**Introduction.** Émile Durkheim's works are classical writings in the field of the sociology of education. Their reading helps to get a better understanding of Durkheim's theoretical background, his beliefs, and reflections on the significance of education in France of his time. **Aim.** In the article, there is a special focus on *L'evolution pédagogique en France*, which, to Polish readers, is a lesser-known collection of lectures by Durkheim. The aims of the article are to show the overall context of the book and to discuss over selected problems that are contained in the book.

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ORCID: 0000-0001-7517-6455 **Materials and method.** The article uses the method of critical analyses as well as the analyses of the reference literature.

**Conclusion.** *L'evolution pédagogique en France* contains a number of insights, which may enable taking a different perspective on Durkheim's ideas on education. Durkheim showed that the formulation of an appropriate education of morality could only proceed after it had been learned about values and the evolution of rules and norms in relation to previous structures, even though systems of morals were socially relative. It means that it could not borrow any foreign elements from other systems and that acquired knowledge of social factors that had caused moral and educational ideas in specific periods was a key to changes in the educational system.

*Keywords:* Émile Durkheim, education, social change, evolution of education thought in France, sociology of education.

### Abstrakt

**Wprowadzenie.** Prace Émila Durkheima są klasycznymi pozycjami w socjologii wychowania. Ich lektura pozwala lepiej poznać teoretyczne podstawy jego koncepcji wychowania, jego poglądy oraz przemyślenia na temat znaczenia wychowania i edukacji w ówczesnej Francji.

**Cel.** W artykule szczególną uwagę poświęcono pracy zatytułowanej *L'evolution pédagogique en France*, która jest dziełem mniej znanym polskiemu czytelnikowi z całej triady wykładów zebranych w tomach tego wybitnego socjologa. Celami artykułu są wskazanie kontekstów towarzyszących pracy É. Durkheima oraz dyskusja nad wybranymi problemami zawartymi w tej książce.

**Materiały i metody.** W artykule zastosowano krytyczną analizę pracy É. Durkheima oraz przegląd literatury przedmiotu.

Wnioski. L'evolution pédagogique en France zawiera szereg interesujących informacji, które pozwalają na inne spojrzenie na koncepcję wychowania É. Durkheima. Wskazał on, że chociaż systemy wartości w poszczególnych społeczeństwach różniły się od siebie, to sformułowanie spójnej koncepcji wychowania moralnego zależało od wartości oraz ewolucji zasad i reguł w danym społeczeństwie. Oznaczało to, że nie można "zapożyczać" elementów obcych kulturowo z innych systemów, a kluczem do zmian w systemie edukacji było poznanie społecznych czynników, które przyczyniły się do sformułowania zasad moralnych i poglądów na edukację w poszczególnych epokach.

*Słowa kluczowe:* Émile Durkheim, wychowanie, zmiana społeczna, ewolucja myśli edukacyjnej we Francji, socjologia wychowania.

Émile Durkheim included his conception of education in a series of lectures presented in Bordeaux, where he took up the chair of sociology in 1896, and at the Sorbonne in Paris. Shortly after his death, the lectures were collected and published in two volumes *Éducation et sociologie* (published in 1922, Polish edition: *Wychowanie i socjologia* [Education and sociology], 2021) and *L'éducation morale* (published in 1925, Polish edition: *Wychowanie moralne*, 2015). The

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third collection of lectures, entitled L'evolution pédagogique en France, was not published until 1938 and is the least known work of the triad, although scholars of É. Durkheim finds important themes in this work concerning both this author's sociological method and his political sympathies. According to Ken Thompson (2002, p. 132), L'evolution pédagogique en France contains an exemplary way of doing sociology by É. Durkheim combines elements of structural sociology with a historical analysis of social processes. In the narrative layer of the book, which relates to the issue of the educational system and the importance of collective imaginaries, it is possible to see the typical sociological concern of É. Durkheim's interest in the conditions for achieving social consensus and legitimising the social order (Bourdieu, Passeron, 2006, p. 74). L'evolution pédagogique en France is also cited as a kind of testimony to the political affiliation of É. Durkheim, who was at the time protégé of Louis Lard, i.e., the person in charge of the vision and development of higher education in the French Ministry of Public Education (Allen, O'Boyle, 2017, pp. 13–14, 133). The multifarious nature of the work of É. Durkheim's education is undoubtedly an interesting aspect of his scholarly activity. Underlying the enduring interest in his works is the belief that they contain universal content concerning theories of education (Durkheim,  $2015)^{1}$ .

A crucial element of É. Durkheim's morality is usually framed in his works as a system of principles and rules (Durkheim, 2015, pp. 74, 77–79). This proposal for an interpretation of morality by É. Durkheim is not coincidental, as it provides an opportunity to indicate that the principles, rules, and ideals of upbringing are socially determined, valid, and enacted through education. At the same time, upbringing is an overarching way of forming citizenship and a sense of belonging to one's collective. What undoubtedly troubled É. Durkheim mentioned in his writings on the issue of upbringing the human tendency to rebel and question authority (Durkheim, 2015, pp. 99–101). The remedy for this self-destructive state in his view was the internalisation by individuals of a social order that gives moral and social meaning to their lives. It can therefore be summarised that, for É. Durkheim, there was always an overarching order that defined the ideals and priorities of education.

The practical aim of education as understood by É. Durkheim was to create exemplary citizens who would shed their egoistic instincts and motives in favour of building a political community and participating in public life. The juxtaposition of egoistic inclinations and the tendency of people to rebel against authority is read in the works devoted to the sociology of education by É. Durkheim through

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> See afterword to the Polish edition written by prof. Zbigniew Kwieciński and prof. Ewa Marynowicz-Hetka.

the prism of the socio-political context of the time imposes an interpretation of his texts as a political project in the republican spirit (Allen, O'Boyle, 2017, pp. 132–133). Undoubtedly, the famous definition of education by É. Durkheim, which is quoted below, contains an important passage relating to the role of education in shaping citizens who can respond to the needs of the political community and who accept their position in society:

Education is the influence exerted by adult generations on those not yet mature for social life. It aims to stimulate and develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual and moral states which are required of him both by political society in general and by the particular environment to which the child is destined to belong (Durkheim, 2021, p. 30).

Based on the definition of education cited earlier, researchers trace the political aspirations and sympathies of É. Durkheim, who was closely associated with the circle of educational policy-makers in France (Allen, O'Boyle, 2017, p. 133). Successive appointments of this sociologist to university posts were preceded by recommendations of him as a man concerned about the success of Jules Ferry's educational reform, a flagship political project in Republican circles. The deep attachment of É. Durkheim's commitment to republican values (Lukes, 1975, p. 95). His lectures can therefore be seen as part of a wider strategy to establish control over teacher education by the camp of reformers centred around J. Ferry (Collins, 2005, pp. 104–105). An essential element in the success of educational reform, which would guarantee a move in primary education away from the previous dominance of the Catholic Church and the implementation of universal, secular teaching based on republican values, was the preparation of teachers for this role.

Ferdinand Buisson – after whom É. Durkheim took the Chair of Pedagogical Sciences at the Sorbonne in 1902 – described the reforms of J. Ferry as the creation of a new order based on the foundations of reason and justice, in which secular teachers were to play a leading role (Fournier, 2005, p. 43). Their task was to present French culture as leading the world, embodying the achievements of human civilisation. Every pupil was expected to respect the law and love his or her homeland. Two main issues stood in the way of the full realisation of the mission to create a secular primary education.

Firstly, an obstacle to the introduction of a model of secular education as universally applicable and implementing the republican idea of citizenship was the influence of the Catholic Church in education. The secularisation of schooling pushed by the reformers consisted of replacing religious education with secular education because, according to republican doctrine, they understood change primarily in an evolutionary rather than revolutionary sense. Thus, they shared the belief that the previous stage was necessary for the introduction of reforms. Secular education, on the other hand, was to ensure that French society would turn towards the rights and values already expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and begin to realise the republican vision of a political community. The replacement of the old order was to take place through a harmonious change that would guarantee integration around a new order based on secular values. This idea is well reflected in J. Ferry's words to teachers that in the upbringing of pupils, they would rely on the already familiar moral principles of their fathers and mothers, but without emphasising the role of any religious denomination (Parker, 1920, p. 528). As Piotr Kostyło (2015, p. 19) rightly pointed out in the introduction to the Polish edition of Moral Education, É. Durkheim was sceptical of the vision of framing the whole process as a simple change requiring only the elimination of religious elements from education, as he expressed in his first lecture at the Sorbonne. The series of lectures included in the volume Moral Education indicates the scale of the difficulty of the whole process and the essence of transformation. The scholar believed in the evolutionary nature of change and gave expression to this in L'evolution pédagogique en France. The lectures included in this volume relate to the roots and development of the idea of secular education.

Secondly, French society at the time was a cultural mosaic with diverse local dialects (Weber, 1976). For the republican political project, the linguistic and cultural assimilation of the population became key demands to enable its integration around an imagined political community. This objective was pursued with a view not only to the French territory but also to the possessions beyond its borders. Universal compulsory schooling, together with secular education in the spirit of republican values, was to ensure that pupils spoke the official French language and identified with their state. It can therefore be concluded that the concept of social solidarity, which is important to the thought of É. Durkheim was shaped by the specific educational challenges facing society. The republican vision implied the integration of linguistically and culturally diverse collectivities. The biography of É. Durkheim is an interesting example of successful assimilation along these assumptions.

He was born on April 15, 1854, in Épinal, a small village of about 10,000 people. He was the youngest child in the family of Rabbi Moïse Durkheim. He had five siblings and when he was born, his parents were already stolid and mature people (his father was 53 and his mother Mélanie was 38). As a late child, little Émile was pampered by his mother and sisters. However, the family home had a rather restrictive order based on obedience, a sense of duty and an emphasis on

knowledge. Moreover, the boy was rooted in the local Jewish community, which was a cohesive and well-organised community. Despite his ethno-religious distinctiveness, Rabbi Moïse advocated functional assimilation into the standards of French society. French was used in the home and Émile was sent to the local public school, although he was also being prepared by his father for his future role as a rabbi. Émile proved to be an excellent student and his school achievements allowed him to continue his education in Paris (Fournier, 2005, pp. 44–46). It is important to note here the attitude of his father, who ultimately supported his son's choice of educational path and his future academic career.

Researchers of the work of É. Durkheim have a distinct problem in determining how much influence on his social thought came from his origins. Some academics trace the roots of the conceptualisation of society to É. Durkheim and his concept of moral education in the Talmud (Filloux, 1977). Others point to a kind of nostalgia of É. Durkheim's fondness for the origins of the Israelite nation is reflected in his interest in primitive societies (Dash Moore, 1986). A separate group are researchers who caution against hasty generalisations and show that É. Durkheim had a rather complex and non-obvious attitude towards his origins (Fournier, 2005). On the one hand, he maintained contacts with the Jewish community throughout his life, his wife Louise was Jewish, and he was buried in the Hebrew section of the Montparnasse cemetery. On the other hand, he did not observe the rules associated with the Sabbath, as he taught at the university on Saturdays. He did not comply with the injunction to eat kosher food. His children were assimilated into French society and his daughter married outside the synagogue, which ended in serious family conflict.

Regarding the obstacles to the full realisation of the mission to create a secular primary education, I would like to draw attention to the stratification of French society. This situation encouraged political radicalisation. Republican elites feared the growing popularity among the working class of ideologies preaching inevitable class conflict. The vision of social disintegration threatened the very core of the republican political project, which was the building of community. Ferdinand Buisson emphasised their role in countering anarchy and radicalism in his appeal to teachers. He stressed the importance of their mission to inspire in young people a spirit of unity and cooperation for the benefit of society (Allen, O'Boyle, 2017, p. 138). It is easy to see a direct connection here with the theoretical thought of É. Durkheim, in which there is no shortage of references to the idea of social justice and solidarity as the basic building blocks of the social order. Also in the content of his lectures addressed to teachers, there are clear references to educational tasks formulated by the republican model of patriotism. One of the most important goals of moral education is, according to É. Durkheim (2015, p. 149), to instil a

sense of self-worth in children so that they can "strive for great collective goals with which they can identify so that they come to love the social ideal on which they can one day work to realise". The evoked words of É. Durkheim can be read as a call, on the one hand, to resist the vision of emergent class conflict and, on the other, to introduce a positive pedagogical programme around shared ideals and values.

According to É. Durkheim, this positive pedagogical programme, outlined by him in a series of lectures gathered in the volume *Moral Education*, was to some extent part of his vision of the evolution of the educational system in France and the concept of moral education. This was a contribution to the lectures contained in *L'evolution pédagogique en France*. Unlike in *Moral Education*, however, where the focus of É. Durkheim's argument on primary education, in *L'evolution pédagogique en France* the author's attention is focused on secondary education.

In the view of É. Durkheim, the cultural area of ancient Rome was the cradle of his contemporary intellectual culture in France. He believed that almost all significant social institutions had their origin in religion. For him, it was mainly a social phenomenon whose significance he related to the sphere of relations between people. It had an important sociogenic function, as it constituted the distinct moral "physiognomy" of the community, the initiation of new members into communal life and, through rituals, allowed the community to unite and sustain the most essential components of collective consciousness. Hence, an important element in the analysis of É. Durkheim was to compare how social integration and the control of the collective over the behaviour of its members was realised in Christianity. Instead of demanding subservience in the performance of rituals and the observance of prohibitions and orders, Christianity emphasised the creation of a collective consciousness. It was concerned, in doing so, with the preservation of traits and principles considered appropriate and worthy of emulation (Durkheim, 1977, p. 29). According to É. Durkheim, the socialisation of the child was, therefore, to consist of a total immersion in Christian culture, and not only in taking care of the child's way of behaving by accepted norms.

Within the Christian tradition, É. Durkheim (1977, p. 30) distinguished above all those currents which, in his view, contributed to the recognition of the role of reason in addressing questions of faith and the acceptance of the scientific method as necessary for understanding the truths of faith. For obvious reasons, É. Durkheim (1977, p. 97) paid particular attention to the origins of the University of Paris, one of the most important and oldest institutions of this type, and a model for other medieval universities. In the idea of establishing the University of Paris and in the functioning of it, É. Durkheim recognised progressive trends in the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church in France, despite his sceptical attitude towards the institution of the Church.

He judged the Renaissance period harshly (1977, pp. 202–207), even arguing that it was a time of regression in social development. The reason for É. Durkheim was the conviction of its apparent return to the ancient cultural heritage of Greece and Rome. According to É. Durkheim, the connections of the Renaissance with antiquity were therefore only of a facade nature. Kieran Allen and Brian O'Boyle (2017, p. 139) suggest that behind É. Durkheim's attack on the achievements of the Renaissance, there is a prosaic reason – a critique of aristocratic France itself and its pre-revolutionary face. The pre-revolutionary order (ancien régime) was regarded in the republican camp as an outdated form of government and blamed for social disintegration. By contrast, according to the model of social progress recognised by republicans, the ancien régime was a necessary preparatory stage for social change. This was not unlike the view of É. Durkheim, who – although extremely critical of the legacy of the Renaissance - was a proponent of the accumulation of social experiences. According to him, these made it possible to develop the model of upbringing that he believed was optimal. He believed that the Christian ideal of moral education as a duty had to be enriched with a clear reference to republican values and social solidarity. At the same time, to counteract the harmful influence of all ideologies on education, teaching had to be based on practical reasoning and scientific methods of cognition, i.e., building an intellectual basis for understanding "the real world, that is, as it is" (Durkheim, 1977, p. 285).

Another interesting postulate in L'evolution pédagogique en France is the thesis of the divergence of the evolution of moral systems in humans, which broke with the Christian understanding of the universal nature of people and the sources of their morality (Durkheim, 1977, p. 324). On the one hand, this is consistent with the method adopted by É. Durkheim's method of examining social facts, on the other hand, has its justification in the conception of moral education he created, at the centre of which is a strong conviction of the uniqueness of French education, but also the need for change, fitting into the framework of republican educational reforms. As É. Durkheim, moral education in France, through the emphasis on the value of the human as an individual, was diametrically opposed to that of the ancient cultures of Greece or Rome. This does not mean that they should not be studied to understand the diversity of moral systems in humans, but it should be emphasised that "one type of human collectivity, in particular, is worthy of attention, the one that is our own, the one we aspire to, the one that we French, as representatives of an advanced society, have chosen as our model" (Durkheim, 1977, p. 333).

The paramount importance of the national community was explained by É. Durkheim in terms of the specificity of France's cultural heritage, in particular, referred to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* as a universal document guaranteeing fundamental principles such as freedom of conscience and equality of rights. According to É. Durkheim, republican France succeeded in achieving harmony between national values and universal rights by referring to the rational basis of moral principles. In his works, É. Durkheim portrayed duty as a key moral principle, while he saw the school as the institution best equipped to socialise children, who were expected to understand what their obligations to society were. He wrote: "[...] every time we consider how to act, we hear a voice within ourselves that says: here is your duty" (Durkheim, 2015, p. 136). For É. Durkheim, conformity to social rules and principles was not an expression of passivity, but a necessary step towards realising an attachment to a given collectivity. He argued that once students internalised moral rules, they would develop the autonomy to act by them.

The lectures gathered in the volume *Moral Education* provide instructions for teachers on how to inculcate these principles in their charges. It should be noted, however, that *L'evolution pédagogique en France* provides an important interpretative framework that helps understand É. Durkheim. As he stated, the upbringing of a child is based on knowledge of principles, an understanding of their deeper meaning and their place in the existing social order (Durkheim, 1977, p. 340). However, for teachers to be able to impart this content, they need not only to understand the social mechanisms but also to have knowledge of the historical conditions of these mechanisms. For this reason, the lecture series in *L'evolution pédagogique en France* was dedicated to analysing the social processes and factors that contributed to the development of moral and educational concepts in a particular era.

It should also be emphasised that *L'evolution pédagogique en France* provides important counter-arguments in the discussion concerning some of the objections to É. Durkheim. One of these is the claim that he focused his attention primarily on the functional aspects of the educational system to cement the status quo of the existing social order, and neglected the importance of upbringing and education as instruments of social change. In fact, É. Durkheim warned teachers against a vision of a society devoid of conflict and change. He argued that such a vision would not only be pure utopia but would also lead to social stagnation. In his view, "[...] a society devoid of any conflict would have to be of rather mediocre quality" (Durkheim, 1977, p. 13). For as he reasoned further on:

[...] society has to rely on its ideals, to which its members aspire [...]. New challenges need to arise, so the teacher must prepare the children in his or her care for the necessary changes. The teacher has to ensure that the moral message of our ancestors is not treated like a closed book. On the contrary, the teacher needs to awaken in them the desire to write new lines in this book themselves and give them the right tools to satisfy this legitimate ambition (Durkheim, 1977, p. 14).

Meanwhile, É. Durkheim was a strong opponent of the sudden social changes postulated by radical ideologies. It should also be added that he was quite sceptical about attributing to universal education the kind of causal power that he believed it did not possess: as in changing labour relations and improving the livelihood of wage earners (Thompson, 2002, p. 134). However, he believed that universal education was an important tool for building a civic community.

The specific approach of É. Durkheim's approach to the role of education contributed to the criticism of his concept, which was considered indifferent to class divisions and the accompanying ideological justifications reflected in the educational system (Lukes, 1975, p. 133). In the view of the material collected in the volume L'evolution pédagogique en France, it seems that the criticism of É. Durkheim's approach to class issues is not fully justified. In the passage on changing educational priorities in the Renaissance, he indicated how economic and social factors contributed to the rise of a nouveau riche middle class that began to replicate the lifestyle of the aristocracy, which helped to define educational ideas around its distinctiveness from the lower classes. As É. Durkheim, "neither Erasmus nor Vives was aware that beyond this small world, for whose use was all the glitz, there was a whole multitude of people who should not be neglected, for whom education could mean increasing their intellectual and moral level and improving their material condition" (Durkheim, 1977, p. 204). He further argued that "for the majority, the basic need is survival, and what is necessary for survival is not the art of beautiful speech, but the art of thinking, which enables the individual to take concrete action" (Durkheim, 1977, p. 205). According to É. Durkheim, it was the focus of the vanity classes on their need for distinction that contributed to the neglect of the development of popular education, accessible to the entire civic community.

The educational concept of É. Durkheim is quite obviously consistent with his views on the role of sociological methods and historical analysis of social processes in discovering what social consciousness is and how knowledge of social institutions and mechanisms can contribute to understanding the meaning of social change. Despite his political sympathies, É. Durkheim remained faithful to his

views on the evolutionary nature of social change and his belief that sociological analysis could provide the necessary clues to transformations in consciousness. His conception of education was subordinated to these assumptions. It should be noted that he postulated not to be influenced by radical visions driven by human desires. Instead, he recommended focusing on the structural foundations of social change. He wrote: "[...] we can learn from the facts that change does not occur in man arbitrarily, he will not be transformed on cue, influenced by the words of inspired prophets. The cause of change, given its clashes with institutions inherited from the past, is its necessity and is therefore an arduous process. For change to occur, the desire for it is not enough, since change requires transformations in the whole network of causal relations that determine the human situation" (Durkheim, 1977, pp. 329–330). According to É. Durkheim, it was crucial to reduce ideological influences on educational reforms and concepts of education. At the same time, he believed that change itself was essential, as "we should be suspicious of all those proclaimed views which limit the possibilities for change in the future" (Durkheim, 1977, pp. 329).

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