

Book Review

Teachers, Leaders, and Schools:

Essays by John Dewey

Edited by Douglas J. Simpson & Sam F. Stack, Jr.

Reviewed by David C. Snelgrove

University of Central Oklahoma

Simplification is a part of human nature like categorization or modification. It is what we do when we encounter other ideas, knowledge, and behaviors. We break them down, analyze, outline, and prioritize to try to make them meet our own needs. And so it has always been with work of John Dewey. To his chagrin, his ideas and writings have been simplified, explained, and adapted in order to be seen as the justification for or the problem with new, modified, or reformed educational or social systems or programs. Not so with Simpson and Stack, who state from the outset that Dewey's writing and ideas are very complex and open to interpretation and misinterpretation, application and misapplication, credit and blame.

It is to John Dewey's credit and his genius that his ideas are still so important so long after his death. In looking at the many ways that Dewey has affected education and society, Simpson and Stack have tried to produce a selection of Dewey's essays that speak to the needs of educators and those who wish to understand the place of the educational institution in American society. The sections are not written for individual audiences but for the overall understanding of the reader. Thus, the parent, teacher, administrator, superintendent, professor, or politician can get a grounded view of Dewey's ideas about education as he believed it should be practiced. To this end, they have divided the writings into sections dealing with teachers, curriculum, leadership, the ideal school, and democratic society and provided the sections with introductory remarks that assist the reader with necessary foundation information.

Simpson and Stack have noted that Dewey's vision included teachers as "well-educated, reflective, professionals with high morals, character, compassion, and sympathy who are called to the profession and believe that the process and goal of education are one and the same" (Simpson & Stack, pp. 19-20. All page citations are to Simpson and Stack's introductory essays). It is the job of colleges and universities, realizing that teaching can be an idiosyncratic endeavor, to provide teachers with pedagogical expertise, psychological insight, and theoretical understanding to supplement the teachers' personal attributes yielding a unification of the science and art of teaching. (Simpson & Stack, p. 21)

The curriculum that teachers use has become overly standardized, overly competitive, and overly assessed with benchmarks, standards, and rankings. Dewey would desire that schools have a curriculum rich in imagination, cooperation, and qualitative value. The curriculum favored in most school districts is formal and external to the student, tied to quantitative assessment of knowledge acquired, skills developed, and learning activities completed with little or no desire to accommodate the psychological, interest, abilities, aptitudes, aesthetic, or moral/ethical, needs of students, or to provide for the creative application of intelligence. Dewey would favor an interest and inquiry driven, community based curriculum. "Life—and school—are learning laboratories, and students need to know how to experiment, to ask questions, and to seek understanding if not resolution" (Simpson & Stack, p. 69).

Dewey desired education and society to be highly democratic, not dominated by hierarchical interests of any type. To this end Simpson and Stack identify his goals for school leaders: (1) to view the school as an organic whole, (2) to recognize the necessity to adapt schools to the needs of individual students, (3) to provide interaction, commingling, and suffusing of the content, methodology and administration, and (4) to work to construct and adapt conditions and environments that will develop the kind of individuality which is intelligently alive to the common life and sensitively loyal to its common maintenance (Simpson & Stack, pp. 118-119). This requires leaders who are committed to the development of schools based on democratic principles to provide engaged citizens for an increasingly democratic society committed to inquiry, not being swayed by ideology or "blindly rely on administrative or pedagogical tradition, convenience, or habit" (Simpson & Stack, pp. 120) It requires that teachers not be seen as "clerks or cooks who fill educational orders with prepackaged lessons or fixed recipes but more like chefs who improvise and invent lessons to be more tempting to students." (Simpson & Stack, pp. 121)

The Dewey that most of us would find most welcome is the Dewey

who wrote the selections in the Ideal School section. This is Dewey the critical pedagogue, the Dewey we would most easily recognize as existential. Need I mention again how we like to break things down, analyze, prioritize, and categorize? This is the Dewey who supports indirect education that engages students in the learning process for the “development of particular skills, attitudes, habits, and dispositions that shape their thinking, feeling, and acting ... as an intimate part of the community” (Simpson & Stack, pp. 163) This Dewey, anticipating Giroux (2005) in suggesting that teachers need to understand the lived experiences of students and link subject matter to life, envisions schools as laboratories with experimental methods based on inquiry, sharing, questioning and reflection (Simpson & Stack, pp. 164) This Dewey also echoes Comenius (1907) in suggesting that learning should be seen as a natural process requiring active, self-motivated students with not so much emphasis on an imposed body of knowledge, teachers, texts, and grades mirroring society with a piecemeal curriculum, mechanical pedagogy, and class-based oversight and administration (Simpson & Stack, pp. 165). High-quality schools need to and should be evaluated on clear philosophical orientation, lucid and focused aims, an experimental outlook, their degree of indirect teaching methods, natural learning (not behaviorist) learning theory, more democratic oversight, a progressive view of students, and social intelligence (Simpson & Stack, pp. 166).

Education as an institution of a democratic society requires a clear understanding of the implementation of democracy in this or any society. For Dewey this understanding was constantly being reconstructed, but schools were charged with preparation of students for participation in the three dimensions of democracy—political, social, and personal—and linking these three dimensions into school activities. If the job of the democratic state is to maximize “the values of freedom, justice, opportunity, equality, tolerance, openness, and participation,” the school should clarify and demonstrate democratic “ideas, values, and processes” (Simpson & Stack, p. 210) Liberals, Progressives, and Social Reconstructionists focus on this democratic task of education. Now schools focus more on a fourth freedom, economic freedom. Economic freedom privileges the interests of individuals and corporations who have wealth over the interests of the society as a whole. Unabashed conservative party politics and economic anarchists (Tea Party, etc.) seek to limit the powers of government and its institutions and to limit consideration of the interests of the society as a whole by Machiavellian distortion, brutality, inequity, and war if it is not in the economic best interests of their constituents.

In *Teachers, Leaders, and Schools*, the editors provide us with a very accessible volume, singular in clarity and purpose, of Dewey’s writing.

The introductory essays are very readable and provide an outline of the selected writings as well as a summary and synthesis of Dewey's words that indicate a profound knowledge and appreciation for Dewey's writing and thought. Were I teaching this book, I would begin with the Ideal School section. There is something special about the essays that make up this section. They are critical of education and society as he sees them, but they also indicate a degree of hope that the schools can have the impact on democratic society that potentially exists in them. Anyone willing to read *Teachers, Leaders, and Schools* can greatly benefit from these essays that indicate a degree of faith that our democracy, imperfect as it is, can be improved through its educational institution. Indeed, how else can it be improved?

References

- Comenius, J. A. (1907). *The great didactic*. M. W. Keatinge, trans. London, UK: Adam & Charles Black.
- Giroux, H. (1992, 2005). *Border crossings: Cultural workers and the politics of education*. New York: Routledge.
- Simpson, D. J., & Stack, S. F., Jr. (Eds.). (2010). *Teachers, leaders, and schools: Essays by John Dewey*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.