

BOOK REVIEW

TEACHERS, LEADERS, AND SCHOOLS:
ESSAYS BY JOHN DEWEY

Jon G. Bradley

Douglas J. Simpson and Sam F. Stack, Jr., Editors, *Teachers, Leaders, and Schools: Essays by John Dewey*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010. 258 + v pp. ISBN 0-8093-2999-9. \$45.00 (paperback).

Collections demand great care. In any attempt to select, sift, and/or package the literary efforts of a major literary figure, whatever is included will be debated and found wanting. For example, what short stories of Ernest Hemingway or sonnets of William Shakespeare or pithy comments of Winston Churchill would make up a selected collection? The choices and possibilities are numerous, and the possible repercussions mind bending. Arguments are sure to ensue, and even like-minded advocates will fiercely debate the inclusion or exclusion of a specific work.

Renowned French mathematician Jules Henri Poincare mused to colleague Lord Bertrand Russell that “Science is built up with facts, as a house is with stones. But a collection of facts is no more a science than a heap of stones is a house.”¹ Similarly, a random collection of book chapters and articles does not, as a literary collection, make a substantial structure.

Whether Simpson and Stack were aware of Poincare’s admonishment, it is quite clear that they have exercised care and deliberation to build this collection of Dewey’s words. It must be noted at the outset that there have been many compilations in the past that have attempted to collect specific works around particular topics. Due to the undeniable fact that Dewey lived a long and productive life, his collected works are quite daunting. Any attempt to select a few from such a wide-ranging life’s work is fraught with dangers.

Teachers, Leaders, and Schools: Essays by John Dewey is divided into five sections with each one focusing on a specific topic; namely, classroom teachers, school curriculum, educational leaders, ideal schools, and democratic society. Within each section, the authors have selected six or seven exemplars to explore the issue at hand. These papers are not explanations by others; rather, these are the original works as penned by Dewey without sidebars or explanation.

An immediate strength of this book is the introductions. There is a general one at the beginning (some fifteen pages) of the volume that briefly summarizes Dewey’s life and career and highlights specific articles for various readers. Also,

each individual chapter is further introduced by its own introduction (around five pages), thus narrowing the focus to a more specific landscape embodied by the articles. These many and varied introductions provide the reader with a well-balanced contextual framework and, at the same time, do not overly drive a specific point of view. In sum, the authors are placing the selected works within their own time frame and context but, at the same time, indicating possibilities to present-day educators.

The authors have mined Dewey's breadth and depth with pieces covering the whole range of his literary output. From "My Pedagogic Creed" (1897) to "Art in Education" (1911) to "The Classroom Teacher" (1924) to "What is Learning?" (1937) to "What is Democracy?" (ca.1946), Simpson and Stack offer an intriguing sample of thirty-one Deweyan "gems." The last selection in this volume is telling. Dewey's 1939 opus "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" offers a strangely prophetic glimpse into a debate that is still raging within the American soul. The stirring last sentence in this short article rings as true today as it did for Dewey on the cusp of the Second World War: "the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share to which all contribute" (253).

This book is aimed directly at teacher candidates, classroom practitioners, school administrators, and other educational leaders who are active in public education. At a time when many in North America are not only questioning the validity of the public school system as a whole, but even suggesting that the teaching profession itself is questionable, this collection offers an insight into realistic possibilities. For example, in "The Classroom Teacher," Dewey notes,

Now, either teaching is an intellectual enterprise or it is a routine mechanical exercise. And if it is an intellectual exercise, and the professional spirit means intellectual awakening and enlightenment, there is, I repeat, no way better calculated to retard and discourage professional spirit than methods which so entirely relieve the teachers from intellectual responsibility as do the present methods. (39)

Although this observation appeared one hundred years ago (actually, in 1913), the insights, along with the attendant possibilities and difficulties, are meaningful and as relevant as when originally penned. In a similar vein, Dewey offers some sage advice to school administrators and planners in "General Principles of Educational Articulation":

When it comes to schooling, however, I wonder if there is not too much of a tendency to assume an equal, uniform, four-abreast maturing, and if that does not underlie the conception of 'epochs' of growth which correspond to various units of the school system. If the assumption is not made in a positive form, it is made in a negative way, that is, by overlooking the specific needs and capacities that are ripening, or that may ripen, during each year and month of school life. (138)

A long-forgotten course instructor of mine once proclaimed to his teachers-in-training that clarity of writing was everything. He went on to note that writers like Dewey were to be avoided, as their pieces were far too difficult to read and, if

too difficult to read, obviously without merit. Unfortunately, I adhered to this poor advice for some time, until I stumbled across “My Pedagogic Creed.” As a young elementary school teacher, this heartfelt expose resonated and started me on my own personal journey of Deweyan discovery.

Another colleague once mentioned that he disliked reading Dewey (a backhanded comment in that I had just stated that I enjoyed Dewey’s prose) and likened the experience to attempting to trudge through maple syrup that was flowing uphill in minus temperatures. Frankly, he mused, Dewey was “bothersome.”

Pooh Bear, who found many of life’s trials to be a bother, once exclaimed that “thinking hurts.” In a similar manner, I might suggest that “Dewey hurts,” as he forces us to examine the fundamentals of the educative process. Within this examination, we become embroiled in issues dealing with ethics, personal experiences, pedagogical frameworks, and democratic landscapes. Yes, this is indeed hard slogging, but Douglas J. Simpson and Sam F. Stack, Jr. have made the task, especially for those beginning this odyssey, a tad easier with this insightful and well-rounded collection.

NOTES

1. Poincare, Henri. “Hypotheses in Physics.” In *Science and Hypotheses* (London: Walter Scott, 1905).

Jon G. Bradley is an associate professor with the department of integrated studies in education, Faculty of Education, at McGill University.

