

Zabel, Blaz

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Reviewed by BLAŽ ZABEL<sup>1</sup>

Philosopher, psychologist and educator John Dewey (1859-1952) was one of the historically most influential figures in the philosophy and theory of education. Despite this fact, only three books of his large opus have been translated into Slovenian, with *The School and Society* being the only work from the field of educational sciences (the other two translated books are *A Common Faith* and *The Public and its Problems*). Consequently, the Slovenian edition of *The School and Society* does not strictly follow Dewey's original from 1900. The selection of texts and essays has been altered slightly in order to present his theoretical aspects of educational philosophy in a more complex and complete manner. For this purpose, the essays *My Pedagogic Creed* and *The Child and the Curriculum* have been added, as well as the first three chapters from the book *Experience and Education*. With this particular selection, the editor has brought together Dewey's early and later work, in order to present two major possible ways of understanding his writing, both of which are clearly presented in two afterword studies by Slavko Gaber and Ana Pešikan.

The most common understanding of Dewey's statements on educational philosophy is centred on his strong opposition to what he calls "traditional education" or "old education". In his opinion, the typical characteristics of such education, and consequently of the traditional school, are "passivity of attitude", "mechanical massing of children" and "uniformity of curriculum and method", all of which result from the fact that "the center of gravity is outside the child. It is in the teacher, the textbook, anywhere and everywhere you please except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself" (p. 30). What Dewey proposes is so-called "new education", writing: "It [new education] is a change, a revolution, not unlike that introduced by Copernicus when the astronomical center shifted from the earth to the sun. In this case the child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve; he is the center about which they are organized" (p. 31). It was this belief that mostly influenced later researchers and theorists of education, as Dewey's demand for a shift from the school to the child was, at that time, new and radical. This historical reception

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of his work was also influential for later interpretations.

However, it is possible to read Dewey's texts from a different perspective, taking into account his pragmatism and his philosophical analyses of experience. Although in the original work from 1900 this particular point might not be so clear, the Slovenian translation emphasises it with the three additional chapters from the book *Experience and Education*. In these chapters, Dewey clearly presents his pragmatist understanding of the experience on which his educational assertions are based. His argument derives from the traditional subject-object dichotomy. However, the relation between subject and object is, in his opinion, always an "interaction" (p. 93). "An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment" (p. 94). In other words, the subject and object are always in a dynamical relation: when the subject experiences an outside object, he/she perceives different information and (also through reflecting on this information) knowledge that changes him/her. In this way, the subject him/herself is changed by his/her experience of an object, since he/she has perceived knowledge by experiencing the object. But that is not all. Since the subject has changed, i.e., has learned something, he/she now possesses a new view of the object. Ergo, the experience is a reciprocal interaction between subject and object or, if we talk about school, between the child and his/her educational environment.

If we attempt to read Dewey's texts in this manner, the previous opposition between "old education", where the focus is outside the child, and "new education", where the focus is on the child, becomes much less of an opposition. This is also stressed by Dewey himself in the following words:

"Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-Or, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities. [...] Educational philosophy is no exception. The history of educational theory is marked by opposition between the idea that education is development from within and that it is formation from without; [...] At present, the opposition, so far as practical affairs of the school are concerned, tends to take the form of contrast between traditional and progressive education" (p.79).

In his writing, Dewey attempts to reconcile the two extremes of this Either-Or opposition of traditional and progressive education. One attempt to achieve such unification is his philosophical theory of experience. As we have seen, every experience is a reciprocal interaction between a subject and an object. Absolute focus on the child is just as misleading as the idea that "the center

of gravity is [only] outside the child". Dewey is clear in this regard: "Too often it is assumed that attention can be given directly to any subject-matter, if only the proper will or disposition be at hand, failure being regarded as a sign of unwillingness or indocility" (p. 61). A teacher who focuses only on the child's motivation and attention, neglecting the importance of subject-matter, i.e., the curriculum, will fail in his/her attempt to educate. Experience always exists in a relation between the subject/child and the object/curriculum, which is why the process of education must be based on both poles: on the one hand, the child and, on the other, the subject-matter. This possible reading of Dewey's work is well illustrated in the afterword study by Slavko Gaber.

The translation of John Dewey's *The School and Society* represents the first book by this author in the field of educational science translated into Slovenian. This work is important for the study of the history of educational sciences – a field greatly influenced by the author – since the historical importance of John Dewey, with his critique of "old education" and his emphasis on the necessity of a shift in focus to the child, is well presented. Despite a gap of more than a century, many of the arguments used by Dewey are relevant and still in use today, a fact that is well illustrated by Ana Pešikan in the second afterword of the book. In this regard, this work fills a large deficit of educational science books available in Slovenian.

Furthermore, the texts and essays have been carefully selected to emphasise at least one other major possible reading, as is well presented in the afterword by Slavko Gaber. This view attempts to abandon the influences of the later historical reception of John Dewey, that is, the idea of "new education" and of the child as a centre of focus. Instead, it attempts to grasp the educational argument by reflecting on Dewey's pragmatism. The result is a more unified understanding of Either-Or positions that focus *either* on the child *or* on the curriculum. Following Dewey, the question "the child or the curriculum?" is misleading, as the child and the curriculum are not mutually exclusive. Educational science must thus take into consideration both the child and the curriculum. In this respect, John Dewey and his work *The School and Society* still tackle many of the questions most frequently present in contemporary theoretical disputes.