

BOOK REVIEWS

Progressive Education: A Critical Introduction

By John Howlett

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Review by David Gribble, Independent Scholar

It is encouraging that Bloomsbury has published this book, but disappointing in that its title is misleading. It is not an introduction to progressive education, but a historical account of a wide range of educational theories. It starts with Rousseau and proceeds, via the Chartists and Dewey and many others, to Montessori, Steiner, Freire and Illich. Howlett presumably considers them all to be proponents of progressive education.

He divides his history into seven different chapters: romanticism, gender, psychology, democracy and the New Education Fellowship, Dewey and the American tradition, social reform and critical pedagogy. This means that the sequence is not consistently chronological; for instance after reaching into the twentieth century in the chapters on gender and psychology, in the next we find ourselves back with Robert Owen in the early 1800s.

Howlett appears to be interested primarily in two issues: the influence the various theorists have had on each other, over the years, and a gradual shift from the education of the individual to a drive for a better society.

The book covers an enormous amount of ground, from John Gilpin's Cheam School in 1750 to Pestalozzi and Froebel, from Mary Wollstonecraft to Letitia Barbauld's Palgrave Academy, from the Maltinghouse to the Plowden Report.

In describing all this Howlett has not thought it appropriate to include anything much about educational practice. There is only one description of an actual school; this is an account of the buildings for Robert Owen's New Lanark School, and does give some idea of how they were to be used. The source for this is an extract from Brian Simon's 1972 book, *The Radical Tradition in Education in Britain*, where it is quoted as an extract from an account by Owen's son, Dale. Even this one quotation from someone who actually worked in a school is only a quotation from a quotation. Howlett is interested in what educational philosophers thought, but not in what happened when their ideas were put into practice.

There is plenty of unfamiliar information in the book, but the concentration on theory leaves no space for any account of how all this theory actually worked, or perhaps, in some cases, failed to work.

Given the high number of theories described it is not surprising that some authorities have been overlooked, but it seems strange not to have given space to Tolstoy (who is at least mentioned), Ferrer and the Modern School movement in Spain and elsewhere, Freinet and his broad and continuing influence in France, Janusz Korczak, David Wills or the growing democratic education movement around the world. Perhaps these omissions have been deliberate, because they did not fit into Howlett's definition of progressive education, but it is difficult to know, because he never offers such a definition.

It is also regrettable that Howlett was not given an editor who might have amended such passages as, "the existing curricula [*sic*] was insufficient in having the potential to combat the social ills being propagated by acute financial collapse," (p. 264), and the title of the first section of his conclusion: 'Wither Progressivism?' which, it is to be hoped, must be a genuine misprint rather than a Freudian error.

Howlett's book gives brief accounts of a score of theories. It would be useful if Bloomsbury would now publish a book about progressive practitioners in the present day, for example Keiko Okuchi in Japan, Rita Panicker in New Delhi, Dan Greenberg in the USA and Falko Peschel in Germany.

Reviewer details:

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