

Teachers' Heritage: An Introduction to the Study of Education

Andrew F. Skinner. Teachers' Heritage: An Introduction to the Study of Education, Toronto: Guidance Centre, Faculty of Education, University of Toronto in association with Van Nostrand Reinhold Ltd., 1979, xvii, 270 pp.

Andrew Skinner's monograph, written in a clear, concise and intelligible style, has as its purpose, as the author points out, the stimulation of independent thinking on the part of beginning teachers. Skinner's aim is to have "young" teachers meet again the great thinkers and teachers from the past in order to evolve for themselves an "acceptable" theory of education. Although the author does not define his criteria for acceptability he does express the hope that his readers will develop a critical, reflective mind set with which to judge contemporary educational practices and innovations. In this context Skinner cites Luella Cole's dictum that, "One does not progress by ignoring history but by using it."

It is refreshing to read *Teachers' Heritage* with its humanistic and generalist focus in contrast to the recent spate of highly specialized, jargon-permeated educational monographs. In this respect Andrew Skinner ably elaborates upon Gilbert Highet's lucid commentary on the art and craft of teaching. It is equally gratifying to observe an author challenging beginning teachers to examine the purposes of teaching at a time in their careers when they are consumed with problems arising from the mechanics of methodology.

Skinner elaborates upon his purpose in his preface and first three chapters wherein he discusses the scope of the study of educational thought. The succeeding five chapters provide an outline of the views of famous educationists, a veritable Pantheon, including thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau and Dewey as well as outstanding teachers including: Quintilian, Vittorino, Pestalozzi, Herbart and Froebel. The concluding two chapters attempt to define more closely the author's concept of a general theory of education and provide a very useful list of references for further reading.

A reading of the initial chapters reveals both the laudable intent of the book and its limitations. For example, educational historians and philosophers cannot but applaud Skinner's intention to promote a reflective mind set among teachers within the perspective of an intellectual heritage. However, the book falls short in the effective promotion of this aim in part because of the author's decision to emphasize the pre-industrial eras of educational thought. John Dewey alone among more recent educational thinkers is deemed worthy of close analysis. No doubt exposure to the ideas of the great thinkers of the past can provide inspiration and the opportunity for introspective thought on the part of novice teachers. However, in the opinion of this reviewer, more emphasis on contemporary developments would more effectively promote the author's purpose of attracting readership from among this particular group. In particular, some exploration of the problems of teaching in contemporary society with its complexity of corporate, bureaucratic structures might prove more attractive to present day teachers than a general exposition of maxims from the more distant past.

Skinner is quite correct in pointing out that the initial period of a teacher's career is extremely important in determining subsequent attitudes. However, his assertion, that a course on educational thought, presumably in the "traditional" or "classical" mode, should be taken by student teachers during their professional year, is open to question. Colleagues at a number of faculties of education have reported to this reviewer widespread disaffection among students with such courses on the grounds of irrelevancy during a pressure-packed year of intensive survival training in classroom practice. Surely there are legitimate grounds in the light of such discontent to examine the proper placement of such courses in programs for teacher education, or, alternatively, to redesign them to take into account the more immediate as distinct from the more long term needs of the student.

In its scope and organization *Teachers' Heritage* suffers from some deficiencies. Chapters I, II, III and IX are well-organized, crisp and lucid. Skinner discourses on safe, familiar philosophical grounds in these chapters wherein he explores the relationship between a theory of education and the practice of teaching. The author's logical arguments for the need for directions in education are compelling and are couched in such clearly written language that even followers of Hilda Neatby would approve.

Moreover, the elaboration of maxims for teachers are attractively etched in keeping with the best of the progressive-humanistic tradition. Chapter IV is similarly well structured as Skinner outlines his chronological organization of educational thought which includes: (1) the Graeco-Roman era, (2) the Renaissance, (3) the Period of Revolutions, (4) the Period of the World Wars and (5) the Period of Innovation and Criticism. However one may question the rationale for this schema, it does provide a very sound basis for the organization of subsequent analysis.

Unfortunately, Skinner chooses not to utilize this chronological structure in pursuing his discourse through the middle chapters. He chooses rather to divide his chapters according to a mixture of chronology and the separation of the ideas of thinkers and teachers, a decision which emphasizes the gulf between theory and practice which the author is attempting to bridge. Even the somewhat awkward and convoluted chapter headings tend to confuse the reader. Perhaps less cumbersome and more descriptive titles, on simple chronological divisions would have offered clearer directions. Within such an organization Skinner might have explored educational ideas within the context of the social, political and intellectual milieu of society at large, an omission which, to this observer, represents a significant shortcoming of the book. In short, Skinner's organizational decision causes him to give emphasis to the ideas of past thinkers rather than to the interrelationship between those ideas and current educational practice. True, the author does allude to the Plowden and Hall-Dennis Reports as illustrative of a classical progressive tradition. However, analysis of this observation seems prematurely curtailed. One might add as a caveat for Western Canadian readers that the Worth Report in Alberta could have been usefully examined in the context of the translation of progressive thought into bureaucratic practice.

The author's choice of suggestions for further reading are generally very useful. This reviewer especially applauds Skinner's choices that provide for diversity of points of view and clarity of thought. There are some curious omissions, however, especially in the section for beginning readers where a sampling of contemporary radical writers might titillate the novice. Moreover, inclusion of selected periodical articles and a wider sampling of Canadian educational histories might have provided a little more scope in the selected list.

In spite of the shortcomings outlined above Andrew Skinner's book is well worth reading, not only by beginning teachers but by the more experienced as well. The author, in a very gentle and humane spirit, distills for us the best of Western educational thought. It remains for the readers to take over where Skinner left off and to attempt to reconcile the ideas of the past with the complexities and vicissitudes of our contemporary educational system.

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