

## *Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage*

Johnston, J.S. (2009). *Deweyan inquiry: From education theory to practice*. Albany: Suny Press. 97 pages, ISBN: 978-0-7914-9355-7

Andreas Koepfer, Research Assistant, Faculty of Human Science, University of Cologne, Germany

### **Introduction**

Decades have passed since the paradigm shift in education theory regarding student-centredness altered learning and education; the aim was to have no more teacher-centered classrooms, no artificial textbook exercises, and no student passivity. The intended result of this shift was activity-based classrooms, in which students work together in groups on relevant tasks, experiment, and exchange thoughts and ideas in order to tackle problems and obstacles to gain an extensive understanding of the matter. In this model, the teacher accompanies students as a facilitator. Today, however, peeping into classrooms, one has to admit that — for whatever reasons — the textbooks have somehow found a way to prevail. One can still hear the teacher speak for most of the time, and relevant tasks and projects are initiated scarcely.

James Scott Johnston tries to contribute to the understanding of this divide between education theory and practice by having a closer look into Dewey's comprehensive work. He puts his focus of attention onto the so-called "inquiry" and takes a closer look at the most important terms of Dewey's theory of education and pragmatism. He clearly states, however, that his work is not intended to substitute Dewey's work, but that his overall aim is to point out how "inquiry" can be of use in several fields of education, such as science education, social science education, art and art education, and embodiment and physical education.

Johnston starts off with a general introduction into the idea of "inquiry," the specific context in which inquiry can take place and what the methods and techniques of inquiry look like. The reader gets to know the ideas behind various terms — such as "existential situation," "self-correction," and "universal conception" — that make up the character of inquiry.

He then successively works himself through the educational areas that have been named above, first of all science education, a context in which inquiry is the most likely to occur or to be practiced. The familiarity of these subjects with the nature of inquiry derives from the tradition of experimentation and testing of physical and chemical laws. But Johnston clearly points out that one would be mistaken to reduce inquiry solely to the context of these experimentations. Sciences such as biology, geography, and mathematics provide a far wider range of contexts to which inquiry can be applied. A second area he discusses is social science education. There, he points out that "it is the existential situations of people in all their manifestations, which are investigated" (p. 48). He eventually looks at art and art education as well as embodiment and physical education and argues them to be as highly important for inquiry as any other subject.

As a conclusion, James Scott Johnston summarizes the most important elements of inquiry within the fields of education that he has discussed. It becomes obvious that one of

teachers' hardest tasks is to establish an unsettled situation in which a problem is created — a problem that is genuine for the students — but at the same time one of the essential elements for a successful inquiry classroom.

### Discussion

Johnston takes the overall aim of this book – to show how inquiry works in various fields of education – very seriously. He takes the reader by the hand and systematically proceeds through his work, including and stringently clinging to Dewey's essential thoughts and ideas. Step by step, Johnston discusses the features and prerequisites of inquiry.

The work itself isn't capacious enough to discuss every idea in depth, but it gives an insight into Dewey's theory of inquiry and reinforces the demand that classroom practices have to change profoundly in order to make real inquiry happen. The changes have to come from various directions.

Classroom practice has to be problem-driven. Johnston states that “genuine problems must be established before active experimentation takes place” (p. 35). This refers to all fields of education, as well as social science education, where it seems to be difficult to create a situation where the students can practice active experimentation. But this seems to be the crux of successful inquiry: To decipher the basic elements and coherences of the specific field, i.e. identify human problems within the wide fields of geography, history or sociology and establish an unsettled situation for the students. The path to solve a problem, or better, to create a settled situation for the students, can only be achieved by combining and interweaving different fields of study, and by establishing an integrated curriculum: “Dewey would much rather see a classroom in which art is discussed in relation to history, geography, and mathematics, indeed, human problems” (p. 66).

This leads to a completely different role for the teacher. It is not the teacher who decides when a problem is solved, but the specific student who can judge for herself / himself whether a situation is settled. On the way to the solution, so-called “adjustments” (p. 73) take place, which refer to the self-correcting character of inquiry. The teacher's role can then rather be described as a facilitator.

Discussing the theory of inquiry in a very pragmatic and practical way by using examples and figures, Johnston doesn't neglect to point at the theoretical references that come into play regarding inquiry. He depicts Dewey as a constructivist, but at the same time hints at the different constructivist understandings of child development that Glaserfeld or Jean Piaget had.

All these aspects and features summed up draw the picture of Dewey's overall understanding of “education” and “learning”, which he famously calls “growth”. James Scott Johnston's stringent description of inquiry shows exactly how Dewey's understanding of “growth” can find its way into the classrooms. It needs to be a holistic approach, not neglecting, as Johnston points out, the embodiment and kinesthetics of learning, because inquiry is not only an affair of the mind, but also “an affair of the total organism” (p. 71).

### Conclusion

Johnston's *Deweyan Inquiry* can be judged as a useful, valuable and compact contribution to inquiry in schools. He gives an excellent insight into the practice of inquiry in science education, social science education, art and art education, and embodiment and

physical education. Further Johnston shows how the cleft between theory and practice can be bridged and how inquiry leads to a new understanding of learning and education.