The Advocate of the Talented Tenth as Educational Philosopher

"William Edward Burghardt DuBois (1868-1963) is not typically thought of as an educational writer," notes Eugene Provenzo Jr. in the opening sentence of his fascinating collection of essays, *DuBois on Education* (p. 1). Echoing the earlier sentiments of Derrick P. Alridge, Professor Provenzo postulates that W. E. B. DuBois was one of the twentieth century's great, albeit forgotten, educational thinkers. The lack of attention paid to DuBois's educational views is particularly troublesome, notes the author, given their "relevance to the social, economic, and political realities of contemporary African-American life."[1]

Eugene Provenzo's discovery of DuBois occurred in 1968 when he read the classic text *The Souls of Black Folks*. DuBois's powerful intellect and frank discussion of controversial issues captivated the author. Further study eventually convinced Provenzo that DuBois was a gifted educational philosopher. While scholars have paid a great deal of attention to the running debate between W. E. B. DuBois's and Booker T. Washington's contrasting educational theories, only a few of them, most notably Herbert Aptheker and Derrick P. Aldridge, have identified DuBois's contributions as an educational writer and thinker.[2] Provenzo has attempted to correct the slight by compiling DuBois's educational writings spanning some sixty years (1899-1959) and placing them in a critical and historical context.


*DuBois on Education* begins with a brief biographical overview of DuBois's remarkable life and achievements. Provenzo skillfully uses a detailed introduction to prepare the readers for a deeper understanding of the essays to follow, highlighting DuBois's assertion "that education was a two-edged sword, which could be used to either to liberate or subjugate specific social and cultural groups" (p. 4). Dubois, however, was determined that education be used as a powerful...
weapon of resistance and as a source of African-American empowerment in their unending struggle for equality. The thorough introduction also addresses DuBois's views regarding the role of education for "the Talented Tenth," the selected few of college-educated blacks destined to assume positions of leadership within the African-American community. The author also uses the introduction to explain the differing educational philosophies of DuBois and Washington, paying particular attention to industrial training and Washington's accommodationist philosophy of "make haste slowly." The introduction culminates with a discussion of DuBois's educational ideas during his later years, noting the aging scholar's Afro-centric and Pan-African views.

Provenzo's text is a well-organized collection of DuBois's most important educational writings and speeches gleaned from a variety of sources. The twenty-two selections, drawn from DuBois's copious publications and speeches, many of them inaccessible to the average reader, are organized topically into five thematic strands, followed by a brief concluding section aptly titled "DuBois, Education and Literature." Part One examines DuBois's own educational experience, both as a young graduate student at Harvard during the 1890s and a young teacher confronting poverty and discrimination in rural Tennessee. The selections in the next section, culled from early essays later incorporated into the classic texts *The Souls of Black Folks* and *Dusk of Dawn*, examines DuBois's views regarding the link between education and social power. For DuBois, black colleges should "seek the social regeneration of the Negro, and it must help in the solution of problems of race contact and cooperation. And finally, beyond all of this, it must develop men" (p. 62). The section is especially interesting for readers wanting to pinpoint the genesis of DuBois's call for a "Talented Tenth." The essays demonstrate DuBois's passionate belief in achieving greater access to higher education for African Americans. In his opinion, the problems facing the black community required "the intelligence of a society permeated by that larger vision of life and broader tolerance which are fostered by the college and university" (p. 70). Thus, education and work were the levers that could uplift people, but work had to be "inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence." For DuBois, "education must not simply teach work--it must teach life" (p. 92).

Parts Three and Four, although interesting, cover a great deal of familiar ground. The essays and lectures compiled in section three include DuBois's assessment of the Freedman's Bureau, accompanied by critiques and views relating to elementary and secondary education. DuBois's contention that social environment plays a critical role in a child's educational success is worth noting, especially in light of the recent No Child Left Behind legislation of 2002. "The larger part of the training of human beings," noted DuBois, "must come from the social environment in which they live, and when they are found deficient, when the results of the training are not what we wish, we must seek not simply to improve the schools but just as strenuously to improve the social surroundings, the social opportunities, and the social heritage of the unfortunate and untrained" (p. 121).

The essays in Parts Three and Four also highlight DuBois's long running debate with the accommodationists, advocates of industrial training, northern philanthropists, and Booker T. Washington. The selections elaborate DuBois's personal misgivings with Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute's model of industrial education, something Provenzo calls DuBois's "act of conscious opposition to a system of economic and social discrimination that dominated the United States" (p. 163). Instead of accepting disenfranchisement, civil inferiority, and the lack of funding for black institutions of higher learning, DuBois demanded the right to vote, civic equality, and the education of youth according to ability (pp. 168-69).
DuBois on Education concludes with a compilation of speeches and articles highlighting DuBois's views regarding the purpose and scope of higher education for African Americans, making special note of the conditions at Fisk, Hampton, Wilberforce and Atlanta University. The selections also highlight DuBois's growing Afro-centric views and his firm belief in encouraging the growth of African-American social, economic, and political institutions. The diverse selections vividly demonstrate how DuBois's own educational philosophy had been shaped and refined by his own life experiences.

The sheer breadth, scope, and variety of selections included in DuBois on Education are remarkable. Only a scholar well versed in the nuances of DuBois's life and writings could have succeeded in such a daunting endeavor. Researchers interested in the history of American education should take notice. Provenzo's fascinating collection, gleaned from the pages of popular magazines, university addresses, autobiographical sources, The Crisis, and a host of professional journals clearly demonstrates that W. E. B. DuBois was, without question, one of the twentieth century's leading educational thinkers and philosophers. Moreover, the collection of essays helps readers understand how DuBois linked thought to action. DuBois did not live in an academic Ivory Tower isolated from the real-life experience of others. His persistent pleas for educational reform were intrinsically linked to his passionate desire to free African Americans from the shackles of poverty, race prejudice, and outside control.

The text's annotated bibliography is a valuable tool, especially the final section of DuBois's works relating to education. The bibliography, while helpful, omits a few important studies relevant to topics and themes discussed in the text. While Provenzo rightly mentions James D. Anderson as "the best source available on the debate between Washington and DuBois and the controversy over the Hampton Model" (p. 308), he fails to include the scholarly contributions of others, especially August Meier, Robert Engs and Donald Spivey.[4]

Perhaps the only problem with the text is its lack of footnotes or endnotes. DuBois makes mention of several contemporary events and people in a number of these essays. While DuBois scholars and historians may understand the relevance of these passing names, students of education may have a difficult time understanding the historical significance of the people and events in question. For example, in chapter 5 readers are introduced to the achievements of a number of prominent African Americans as part of DuBois's development of his idea for a "Talented Tenth." While educated readers may recognize the names of Nat Turner, Sojourner Truth, and David Walker, they may have to consult an encyclopedia to learn about the achievements of Alexander Crummel, McCune Smith, and others. The inclusion of endnotes, although an onerous task, would enable the author to elaborate on some of the issues raised by DuBois or place the people, topics, and events mentioned in DuBois's essays within a wider historical context. Moreover, endnotes could also point the reader to the latest scholarship in the field, thereby stimulating further research and discussion. While Provenzo addresses some of these issues in his brief chapter introductions, the responsibility ultimately rests with the reader to explore these unexplained points in greater detail. Minor editorial errors could also have been avoided. For example, Provenzo thanks the staff at the "Moorland-Spingaren Research Center at Howard University" and the staff of the "Schomburg Research Center," misspelling both Spingarn and Schomburg (p. xii).

All things considered, DuBois on Education is a remarkable collection of essays spanning sixty years. The finished product skillfully weaves the most important words and ideas of W. E. B. DuBois on education into a very well organized
and readable volume. Even more important, *DuBois on Education* has introduced an innovative methodological approach that can be adapted to other contemporary activists, thinkers, and philosophers of education. Interested readers will appreciate the contemporary relevance of DuBois's ideas, especially when viewed within the historical and cultural context of the modern civil rights movement.

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