Foundations of Secondary Education – EDSC 3900

Reading Assignment 2

An Overview of Prominent Educational Philosophies

Educational philosophies have been used in classrooms all over the world. Five of the most well known educational philosophies are included in this reading. These include Essentialism, Progressivism, Perennialism, Existentialism, and Social Reconstructionism. It should be noted that many educators adhere to an eclectic approach, which involves combining various aspects of these different philosophies. As you read the overviews below, consider the aspects of the different philosophies that may align with your own views about education.

Essentialism

According to the educational philosophy of essentialism, there is an “essential” set of facts and skills that all students should learn in school. Proponents of essentialism emphasize the importance of students learning a core body of knowledge, which includes a clear set of facts in skills in the subject areas that are studied in schools. As result, essentialists advocate having clear academic standards that establish the key facts, concepts and skills that all students should know. Based on essentialism, teachers should focus on educating students in the key facts, concepts, and skills to ensure that they become proficient with the “essential” curriculum.

Advocates of the essentialist philosophy of education also emphasizes the importance of testing students on their level of proficiency relating to the “essential” knowledge that they are learning in their classes at school. As a result, essentialists tend to be proponents of frequent testing to ensure that students can demonstrate their mastery of the concepts and skills that they are being taught in school.

Based on essentialism, educational leaders, curriculum experts, administrators, teachers, and policymakers determine the “essential” facts and skills that students should be learning in schools. According to essentialists, teachers should focus educating students on the core body of knowledge that is considered “essential” for each subject area.

Essentialist classrooms often have the following attributes:

- Classes are teacher-directed and the learning environment is controlled and disciplined. Desks are often in rows and the teacher is at the center of instruction.
- The teacher explicit provides information to students to make sure that they are learning the key facts and skills pertaining to a subject area. It is the teacher’s responsibility to “tell” the students what they need to know and to make sure that the required material has been sufficiently covered.
- Students are frequently tested over the facts and skills that they are studying to determine if they can show proficiency with the material that has been covered in their classes.
Today, essentialism or variations of this philosophy are found in all types of schools. With the passage of *No Child Left Behind* and the increased use of *standards-based assessments* over the past decade, more schools are adhering to the *essentialist educational philosophy*. For example, states have developed clear academic standards for all or most subject areas and these standards represent the essential facts, concepts, and skills that must be taught in schools. In addition, students are tested regularly to determine their level of proficiency with the academic standards that coincide with the “essential” knowledge that is being taught in schools.

**Progressivism**

Progressivism is an educational philosophy that focuses on how learning takes place instead of just what is being learned. Proponents of progressivism emphasize the importance of experiential learning and having students become actively involved in the learning process (Powell, 2009).

Educators adhering to the progressivism believe that the most meaningful learning takes place when students have direct experiences, see the relevance & real-world connections to learning, are actively engaged in the learning process, have the opportunity collaborate with others, and have a chance to draw their own conclusions on the topics being studied.

Educators who subscribe to progressivism tend to believe that when students have meaningful experiences with course material, it is more likely that they will truly understand and retain what they are learning. As a result, progressive educators promote having students learn by actively participating in experiences such as simulations, field trips, experiments, games, role playing, debates, discussions, group work, case studies, problem-solving activities…

According to the progressive philosophy of education, learning is active. Students should be given the opportunity to learn through their own experiences. As a result, effective teachers provide experiences that enable students to learn by doing. Rather than having information “given” to students by a teacher, advocates of progressivism follow the constructivist view of learning, which involves having students construct and discover knowledge through their own experiences (Powell, 2009). Therefore, the role of the teacher is to create opportunities and activities that enable students to play an active role in their own learning and to participate in meaningful learning experiences.

**John Dewey** was the foremost proponent of the progressive philosophy (Cohen, 1999). He was a proponent of experiential learning and giving students the opportunity to learn by doing. He also believed that it was important to stimulate the interests of students. Dewey believed that giving students a chance to explore their interests and make connections to real world situations was a critical component of effective education. **According to Dewey, the emphasis in education should be on the process of learning and allowing students to find answers through experiential and active learning.**

Features of progressivism can be found in many of today’s classrooms. Teachers often use aspects of the progressive philosophy in their classes when they give students the opportunity to play an active role in the learning process, use experiential learning activities, and spark critical thinking through inquiry-based learning. Many teachers use activities such as simulations, experiments, games, hands-on activities, real world applications, and field trips to help engage their students in the curriculum. As
a note, it is common for teachers to combine aspects of progressivism with essentialism. Thus, a teacher may use a progressive approach by providing students with the opportunity to play an active role in the learning process, but the teacher also focuses on ensuring that students can show proficiency on standards-based state tests, which contain key facts and skills.

**Perennialism**

As an educational philosophy, perennialism emphasizes the importance of teaching students to understand the great ideas that have been developed over time in western civilization (Cohen, 1999). According to perennialists, these ideas have the potential to solve problems in any era. Based on perennialism, an educated person is one who has studied, examined, discussed, and learned about the truths, ideas and principles that have been developed or discovered by the greatest thinkers of western civilization.

The curriculum for perennialists focuses on the study of the Great Books. The Great Books include a collection of classical works of science, literature, mathematics, philosophy, and the arts. Through the Great Books, students study the works of people such as Homer, Shakespeare, Plato, Melville, and Einstein (Powell, 2009). The Great Books contain everlasting ideas, principles, and truths that are needed to become truly "educated". Perennialists believe that while life and times change, the truth remains the same. Therefore, education should focus on helping students to gain a full understanding of the enduring truths, ideas, and principles that have been developed by great thinkers throughout history.

Two of the most well known advocates of perennialism are Robert Hutchins, who was able to develop a curriculum based on the Great Books in the 1960s and Mortimer Adler who further developed the curriculum using the Great Books (Cohen, 1999).

**While the list of writers and works that make up the Great Books is not known to change much if at all**, Hutchins indicated that the collection of the Great Books was not set forever. According to Hutchins,

> In the course of history new books have been written that have been added to the collection of Great Books. Books that were once thought to belong to the collection of Great Books have been superseded. This process will continue as long as men can think and write.

Although new works can be added to the Great Books, this seldom occurs. According to perennialists, the collection of the Great Books is thought to contain everlasting truths that all students need to learn and understand.

Perennialist classrooms often have the following attributes:

- Teachers are at the center of the instruction and lead discussions around passages taken from the Great Books.
- Teachers use their own knowledge to promote discussions that involve analyzing enduring ideas, principles and truths from the Great Books.
- Instruction tends be based around helping students understand important themes and big ideas.
An example of a lesson by a teacher subscribing to perennialism could include the teacher focusing on a quote by Plato such as, “Human behavior flows from three main sources: desire, emotion, and knowledge.” The teacher would provide background information about this quote and begin providing analysis of the quote. The teacher would then lead the students in a discussion about the quote, which would involve the students talking about the ways in which the meaning represented enduring principles and truths for society.

Nowadays, the perennialist philosophical approach to education can be found in boarding schools and very elite private schools. Some charter schools and magnet schools also subscribe to perennialism. In these schools, students study the Great Books and instruction is focused on “everlasting” principles, ideas, and truths (Maya, 2007).

**Existentialism**

Existentialism as a philosophy of education places a heavy emphasis on giving students the opportunity to make choices. An existentialist school does not “enforce” a formal education on students. Instead existentialists believe that education should nurture the creativity and individuality of each student. In its purest form, existentialism involves letting students decide what they want to study, when they want to study, and how they want to study.

In an existentialist school, children choose the subjects that they want to study. Individual students pursue the subjects of their choice, choose their own method of learning, and work at their own pace. Teachers are available to help students, as assistance is needed. Students often receive one-on-one guidance from teachers based on what they want to study using the learning methods that the students prefer. In many circumstances, existentialism works more like an independent study program rather than a traditional school (Maya, 2007).

Teachers who subscribe to existentialism are concerned more with the importance of the development of a student’s identity and self-worth as opposed to focusing on a particular subject. Any topic or area of study that increases a student’s identity or sense of self is considered worthwhile. In addition, existentialists believe that schools should not squelch a student’s creativity or individuality. Therefore, students should have the freedom to make their own choices about what to study and how to study it (Powell, 2009).

In the late 1960's and 1970's some private and some public schools experimented with this form of learning (Maya, 2007). In today's society, existentialist schools tend to be found in alternative schools. However, some teachers use aspects of existentialism within their classes. The idea of providing students with choices is often helpful in motivating and engaging students. For example, a teacher may give students a choice in the way they demonstrate their knowledge of the content that has been covered in class. Thus, some teachers give students the opportunity to choose how they will exhibit their knowledge of a topic, such as by writing and performing a song, constructing a three-dimensional model, drawing a mural, performing a role play, writing an essay, creating a time capsule, playing a game, etc.
Social Reconstructionism / Transformative Education

Social Reconstructionism involves the idea that education should be used to change society rather than just teach about it (Powell, 2009). This philosophy emphasizes the importance of addressing social issues and involving students in the quest to create a better society. Social Reconstructionists believe that education can be used to overcome oppression, discrimination, and other societal issues to create a more just and humane world.

Theodore Brameld (1904-1987) played a significant role in the development of social reconstructionism based on his reaction to the realities of World War II. He recognized the potential for human cruelty and human destruction and he felt that through education people could learn to create a beneficent society through human compassion and education endeavors (Cohen, 1999). For social reconstructionists, the curriculum focuses on students actively examining real problems, such as violence, hunger, international terrorism, inflation, and inequality. According to social reconstructionism, students should be encouraged to think critically about real issues facing society and to develop ways of bringing about social justice.

Social reconstructionism aligns with transformative education, which emphasize the use of learning to transform society. One of the most prominent transformative educators was Paulo Freire (1921-1997), a Brazilian, whose experiences living in poverty led him to champion education and literacy as the vehicle for social change. Freire worked with people in poverty, who were illiterate. He understood the value of people gaining literacy and being able to have a “voice” in society. This was particularly important because, at this time in Brazil, literacy was a requirement for voting in presidential elections. He believed that through education the oppressed could change the world and bring about social justice. In 1967, Freire published his first book, Education as the Practice of Freedom. He followed this with his most famous book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which was first published in 1968. These books have been extremely valuable for educators who subscribe to the philosophy of social reconstructionism and believe that education can truly be used to transform society.

Teachers who are proponents of social reconstructionism promote the idea of helping students to understand and develop ways to deal with real world societal problems. Teachers plan activities and experiences for students to explore issues and to consider real solutions. For example, students might research the issue of hunger within their community, examine statistics about the lack of food, brainstorm ideas to help with the problem, write to their political representative about the problem, write a proposal for taking action to help deal with the issue and plan a community-wide food drive.

Through the adherence to the philosophy of social reconstructionism, teachers guide students in the discovery of new ideas and new ways of approaching societal issues. These goals can be attained using educational context that focuses on reading comprehension, research techniques, mathematical analysis, experimentation, and the use of written and verbal communications skills (Powell, 2009). Applying the ideas from the social reconstructionist philosophy, students learn about real issues and also take an active role in helping to bring about positive change in society.
References


