

# Philosophies of Education

Teaching and learning are guided by a variety of beliefs and principles that direct the practice of administrators and faculty responsible for these educational activities. These beliefs and principles make up a philosophy of education that can be used to guide decision making and practice. These philosophies are widely discussed and debated, subsequently giving rise to several schools of thought regarding how institutions of learning should be structured and organized and what teaching and learning look like within these institutions.

Six commonly debated philosophies include essentialism, behaviourism, perennialism, humanism, existentialism, progressivism, and social reconstructionism. This list is neither exhaustive nor agreed upon that all schools of thought should, in fact, be included. Each school of thought does provide a unique perspective on educational practices and will, therefore, be treated as distinctive and legitimate. Depending on the philosophy to which one subscribes, the structure and organization of the instructional environment and the activities that take place within that structure will range from one end of the educational spectrum to the other. An awareness and understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of each are essential to understanding and identifying the structures, organization, and activities that characterize learning environments based on each of the six philosophies. The order in which each is discussed ranges from conservative to liberal perspectives on education.

## ESSENTIALISM

Essentialism is the most commonly applied philosophy in the American system of public education. Often referred to as the “back to the basics” approach, essentialism focuses on what some educators consider as the essential elements of academic knowledge and character development. Originating in the late 1800s, essentialism's rise in popularity paralleled America's influx of immigration in the late 1800s and around the turn of the century. Losing favor briefly in the midtwentieth century with the adoption of more liberal educational philosophies, the essentialist movement was revived in the late 1950s and 1960s with the space race and the launching of Sputnik as a way to address students' needs for stronger math and science skills. This revival was again supported and promoted by the President's Commission on Excellence in Education through their 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*.

Essentialist philosophy promotes cultural literacy, the traditional moral values, and the knowledge that students need to become productive American citizens. American virtues espoused by the philosophy of essentialism include respect for authority, perseverance, fidelity to duty, consideration for others, and practicality. Essentialism does not view schools as vehicles for societal change. It is important to note that essentialists believe that science and scientific experimentation provide insight into and understanding about the world. Essentialism therefore emphasizes natural sciences rather than nonscientific disciplines such as religion or philosophy. The nonscientific curriculum is often viewed as offering frills and has little, if any, place in the essentialist curriculum.

Building- and district-level administrators subscribing to essentialist thought will often promote and support basic and fundamental academic skills, including math, science, history, foreign language, and literature. A specific body of knowledge and basic techniques and skills are identified as the basis for a schoolwide curriculum that is academically rigorous and focused on mastery learning. This focus subsequently requires more core course requirements, a longer school day, a longer academic year, and more challenging texts. Instruction that takes place in the

classroom is teacher directed and evaluated through the use of standardized test scores. Teachers and administrators work together to identify what is important for students to learn, both intellectually and culturally, and to ensure that students graduate as disciplined, practical, and capable American citizens.

## **BEHAVIORISM**

In the ongoing debate over nature versus nurture, nurture prevails from the perspective of a behaviorist. According to behaviorist philosophy, knowledge and understanding of reality are learned, and therefore the only true reality is that which can be observed and experienced. In addition, learning is the result of our actions and reactions to internal and/or external stimuli. Humans are simply the product of their environment.

The source of behavior results from external factors and variables rather than internal ones. Thus, learning results from stimulation by and observation of external phenomena. Through repetition and experimentation, students learn about the physical world and human nature. A school based on the behaviorist philosophy would typically structure the curriculum in such a way that students would have multiple opportunities to experience and interact with the content to be learned. Teachers and administrators must be aware of the external stimuli and variables inherent in a school that might impact or factor into how and what students are learning in that environment.

## **PERENNIALISM**

Perennialists believe that certain ideas and truths are as relevant today as they were hundreds of years ago when these ideas were first discussed and debated. They believe that these “perennial” or everlasting ideas and truths should be the focus of classroom instruction. Based on the philosophy and teachings of Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, and later, Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler, perennialism addresses these ideas and truths through the study of the humanities and the ongoing development of students' capacity to reason.

Similar to essentialism, perennialism addresses the need for students to develop intellectual powers and moral qualities. Student interests and experiences have little place in the curriculum, since the primary focus of this philosophy is to develop reasoning skills in the context of timeless truths about the universe and the human condition. As such, there is little flexibility in the curriculum, and therefore curricular electives are discouraged. Unlike essentialism, perennialism is universal in its focus and not tied exclusively to American traditions, ideals, and values. Philosophy as a course is an important part of the perennialist curriculum, and serves to help students understand the timeless and universal qualities of certain forms of knowledge. While the perennialist philosophy does recognize the importance of scientific inquiry as a means of developing analytical, flexible, and imaginative reasoning and thinking skills, this school of thought does not emphasize that scientific information or skills that may soon be obsolete have a place in the curriculum. In other words, while it may be of value to study research methodology, it is not as important for students to memorize scientific facts that may change at any given time. Classroom time is to be spent addressing concepts and how these concepts are meaningful to the students' world. Use of textbooks and lectures has minimal importance, while coaching and Socratic seminars comprise a significant amount of class time to engage students in meaningful dialogue to develop a broader and deeper base of understanding.

Adler's Paideia Program, an educational program based on perennialism, promotes a single curriculum for all students, regardless of backgrounds, abilities, or interests, and offers little

flexibility in the curriculum because of his belief that vocational or elective courses detract from the focus of developing rational and intellectual powers and critical thinking skills. The core should be truth, knowledge, problem solving, and critical thinking. Goals and expectations are established for all students, followed by supervised practice of the knowledge and skills taught. Without curricular electives, scheduling of courses in a school based upon a perennialist philosophy can be a daunting task. In addition, the inclusion of didactic classes, coaching labs, and seminars, which are common components of a perennialist school, can add to the challenge of scheduling. However, a school that can overcome these minor challenges can provide teachers and administrators a structured environment in which they can assist students in seeing the proverbial trees through the forest.

## **HUMANISM**

Based on the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, humanism is founded on the belief that humans are essentially good and that they possess the capacity for free will. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, addressed in educational psychology courses across the country, emerges out of the humanist philosophy and states that once all the basic human needs are met, one can maximize the use of his or her talents and abilities. With self-actualization as the ultimate goal of the humanist philosophy, students are encouraged to develop as persons and to become self-directed thinkers and learners.

Teachers and administrators who subscribe to a humanistic philosophy do not dwell on specific curricular requirements but are more inclined to focus on the development of close and meaningful relationships with students. While educators might be viewed as experts and “fonts of knowledge” in their respective disciplines, these humanistic educators attempt to create a learning environment where students are less dependent on them and instead develop into independent thinkers and learners. *What* to learn is less important than *how* to learn. These students adopt a positive view of learning and are encouraged to go on to use their own abilities and talents to the fullest extent possible.

## **EXISTENTIALISM**

Based on the writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialism focuses on the individual and individualized meaning and action. Existentialist curriculum rejects more traditional schools of thought, notably the essentialist philosophy, in favor of student choice in course selection and an exploration of the students' thoughts, feelings, and actions in their search of their own “essence.” Rather than focusing on more objective subject matter, an existentialist curriculum is more self-directed and self-paced, and places a heavier emphasis on creativity and imagination. Students are encouraged and supported in their efforts to find meaning and to develop values on their own and in the context of courses they want to take.

While existentialism is not commonly used as the basis for the structure and organization of most American public schools, certain elements of this philosophy are occasionally integrated into other philosophical approaches. The role of the educator is to create a learning environment where students are exposed to a variety of paths or options from which to choose. Existentialism offers a holistic approach to teaching and learning that gives students a wide variety of choices to help explore and develop their own creativity and self-expression. Most of these options are in the humanities, as it is typically considered less “objective” than the sciences. From these choices, students are encouraged to create meaning as to how the content applies to their own lives.

## **PROGRESSIVISM**

At the very root of progressivism is John Dewey's philosophy of change, reconstruction of experience, and preparation for the future. According to Dewey, textbooks cannot replace the social interactions that lead to learning and the making of meaning. Knowledge is gained through students' application of prior experience to new problems. Progressivism respects individuality, science, and change and connects each of these with American freedom and democracy. Dewey believed that in order to be a nation of democratic, freethinking citizens, Americans must retain their individuality while embracing change. As we alter or change our relationship with our environment, we are changed by the experience.

The progressivist philosophy encouraged schools to broaden the curriculum to make learning more relevant to the needs and interests of students. While this approach was widely accepted in the 1920s, it lost support with the launch of Sputnik in 1957 and the move to a more essentialist approach, which emphasized a more traditional, skills-based curriculum that was less interested in the unique and specific needs and interests of individual students.

A school built upon a progressivist philosophy is child centered. Students' experiences, interests, and abilities are the center of the curriculum. Teachers and administrators create and maintain an environment that students learn by doing and are in constant interaction with one another, with nature, and with society. Cooperation and tolerance of diverse perspectives are promoted, and learning often takes place in the context of interdisciplinary projects and units. Because of the progressivist emphasis on and respect for progress and change, natural and social science comprise an important part of the curriculum. Similar to perennialism, problem solving and critical thinking are promoted and encouraged, and accomplishments by women and other minorities are included. The curriculum is designed to take the whole child into account, providing a choice of opportunities for students to discover truth and gain knowledge through active lessons and activities. Progressivists believe that education is an active, ongoing process and that learning takes place not only in the school but also in the home and workplace. Therefore, learning should be interesting and useful and something that all students should know how to do.

Creating such an engaging and motivating learning environment has significant implications for the building- and district-level administrator. Educators must be aware that promoting and maintaining a progressivist school can be a challenge in a nation that currently embraces a more essentialist philosophy and minimizes the individual interests and experiences of students.

## **SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTIONISM**

Social reconstructionism, also known as pragmatism, focuses on those societal issues that affect students' lives and how students can be active in creating a better world for themselves. The goal of this philosophy is social reform. Students are encouraged to be involved in the identification of solutions to societal problems. Since the school is at the center of the community where these students live, it is the role of the school to be the vehicle for the changes students deem to be necessary. The curriculum is designed to make students aware of their responsibility to self, others, and society and to view education as the vehicle for societal change.

While social reconstructionism focuses on issues and problems students currently face, it can use a more traditional curriculum to analyze and address these issues and problems. History courses can be used to help students understand context; English courses can help to expose students to writing about the problems; and math and science courses can provide tools necessary to

scientifically analyze the problems in order to propose a solution. Educators have the responsibility of confronting students with and introducing students to social problems and issues and subsequently organizing the curriculum around these problems and issues. Teachers and administrators should, however, be aware that more empirical methods of evaluation of student achievement in a social reconstructionist school could be difficult to employ, as these methods often do not directly relate to the knowledge and skills being learned in this setting.

## **SUMMARY**

While some of the six schools of thought discussed are in direct opposition to one another, other schools can coexist and even enhance one another. The school to which each educator subscribes may be based on the type of school he or she attended, the influence of a mentor, or the result of personal experience as an educator. Regardless of the philosophy held by any individual, educators must be aware of their own philosophy, the essential elements of those philosophies held by others with whom they may work, and how each of these philosophies can directly and uniquely impact the structure, organization, and activities related to the teaching and learning that he or she is responsible for.

— Robert L. Sanders

*Educational Leadership and Administration*. 2006. SagePublications. 27 Mar. 2009. <[http://sage-reference.com/edleadership/Article\\_n433.html](http://sage-reference.com/edleadership/Article_n433.html)>.