

Philosophy of Education

Introduction to the Topic

What is a philosophy of education, and why should it be important to you?

□ Behind every school and every teacher is a set of related beliefs--a philosophy of education--that influences what and how students are taught. A philosophy of education represents answers to questions about the purpose of schooling, a teacher's role, and what should be taught and by what methods.

How do teacher-centered philosophies of education differ from student-centered philosophies of education?

□ Teacher-centered philosophies tend to be more authoritarian and conservative, and emphasize the values and knowledge that have survived through time. The major teacher-centered philosophies of education are essentialism and perennialism.

□ Student-centered philosophies are more focused on individual needs, contemporary relevance, and preparing students for a changing future. School is seen as an institution that works with youth to improve society or help students realize their individuality. Progressivism, social reconstructionism, and existentialism place the learner at the center of the educational process: Students and teachers work together on determining what should be learned and how best to learn it.

What are some major philosophies of education in the United States today?

□ Essentialism focuses on teaching the essential elements of academic and moral knowledge. Essentialists urge that schools get back to the basics; they believe in a strong core curriculum and high academic standards.

□ **Perennialism** focuses on the universal truths that have withstood the test of time. Perennialists urge that students read the Great Books and develop their understanding of the philosophical concepts that underlie human knowledge.

□ **Progressivism** is based largely on the belief that lessons must be relevant to the students in order for them to learn. The curriculum of a progressivist school is built around the personal experiences, interests, and needs of the students.

□ **Social reconstructionists** separated from progressivism because they desired more direct and immediate attention to societal ills. They are interested in combining study and social action, and believe that education can and should go hand in hand with ameliorating social problems.

□ **Existentialism** is derived from a powerful belief in human free will, and the need for individuals to shape their own futures. Students in existentialist classrooms control their own education. Students are encouraged to understand and appreciate their uniqueness and to assume responsibility for their actions.

How are these philosophies reflected in school practices?

□ **Essentialism and perennialism** give teachers the power to choose the curriculum,

organize the school day, and construct classroom activities. The curriculum reinforces a predominantly Western heritage while viewing the students as vessels to be filled and disciplined in the proven strategies of the past. Essentialists focus on cultural literacy, while perennialists work from the Great Books.

□ **Progressivism, social reconstructionism,** and existentialism view the learner as the central focus of classroom activities. Working with student interests and needs, teachers serve as guides and facilitators in assisting students to reach their goals. The emphasis is on the future, and on preparing students to be independent-thinking adults. Progressivists strive for relevant, hands-on learning. Social reconstructionists want students to actively work to improve society. **Existentialists** give students complete freedom, and complete responsibility, with regard to their education.

What are some of the psychological and cultural factors influencing education?

□ **Constructivism** has its roots in cognitive psychology, and is based on the idea that people construct their understanding of the world. Constructivist teachers gauge a student's prior knowledge, then carefully orchestrate cues, classroom activities, and penetrating questions to push students to higher levels of understanding.

□ B. F. Skinner advocated behaviorism as an effective teaching strategy. According to Skinner, rewards motivate students to learn material even if they do not fully understand why it will have value in their futures. Behavior modification is a system of gradually lessening extrinsic rewards.

□ The practices and beliefs of peoples in other parts of the world, such as informal and oral education, offer useful insights for enhancing our own educational practices, but they are insights too rarely considered, much less implemented.

What were the contributions of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to Western philosophy, and how are their legacies reflected in education today?

□ **Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle** are the three most legendary ancient Greek philosophers. Socrates is hailed today as the personification of wisdom and the philosophical life. He gave rise to what is now called the Socratic method, in which the teacher repeatedly questions students to help them clarify their own deepest thoughts.

□ **Plato, Socrates's** pupil, crafted eloquent dialogues that present different philosophical positions on a number of profound questions. Plato believed that a realm of externally existing "ideas," or "forms," underlies the physical world.

□ **Aristotle,** Plato's pupil, was remarkable for the breadth as well as the depth of his knowledge. He provided a synthesis of Plato's belief in the universal, spiritual forms and a scientist's belief in the physical world we observe through our senses. He taught that the virtuous life consists of controlling desires by reason and by choosing the moderate path between extremes.

How do metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, aesthetics, and logic factor into a philosophy of education?

□ **Metaphysics** deals with the nature of reality, its origin, and its structure. Metaphysical

beliefs are reflected in curricular choices: Should we study the natural world, or focus on spiritual or ideal forms?

☐ **Epistemology** examines the nature and origin of human knowledge. Epistemological beliefs influence teaching methods. "How we know" is closely related to how we learn and therefore, how we should teach.

☐ **Ethics** is the study of what is "good" or "bad" in human behavior, thoughts, and feelings. What should we teach about "good" and "bad," and should we teach that directly, or by modeling?

☐ **Political philosophy** analyzes how past and present societies are arranged and governed and proposes ways to create better societies in the future. How will a classroom be organized, and what will that say about who wields power? How will social institutions and national governments be analyzed?

☐ **Aesthetics** is concerned with the nature of beauty. What is of worth? What works are deemed of value to be studied or emulated?