

Educational Philosophy

In an ever-changing society there will be constant revisions to any American institution, such as education; however, these changes do not come without consequences and questions of ideology. While it has not been long since the end of the twentieth century, the twenty-first century has quickly posed a different perspective on education. Although government restrictions based on standardized testing in education do not necessarily allow time for creative learning, there are possible ways to maximize a student's educational potential. Education should encourage positive learning within the classroom and always promote a sense of self-awareness that opens the doors to questions, conversation, and laughter. Through discussion of topics, such as the purpose of schools, the ideal school, the role of the teacher, the role of the student, and the classroom, one can begin to apply the principles of a constructivist educational philosophy.

The Purpose of Schools

The primary purpose of schools should be to facilitate learning from teacher to student and vice versa. While it is true that students come to school to learn from their teachers, the teachers, in turn, must be willing to learn from their students. It is important for schools to create a positive learning environment for the children and community. In *Teaching, Learning, and Schooling*, Thomas Jefferson lists the goals of elementary education as such: one, "help the citizen understand his duties to his neighbors and country—and how to fulfill his obligations and duties as a neighbor and a member of the culture;" and two, "provide the citizen with an understanding of various social relationships" (Provenzo, 2002).

In focusing on these ideas, it can be concluded that this ideology represents an essentialist philosophy on education. Essentialism expresses the idea that our schools should focus attention on core principles and values to help students acquire essential life skills, allowing them to become productive members of a society (Parkway, 2000). But who is to define what it means to become a so-called “productive member of society?” As teachers, we must reexamine what we hope to achieve through teaching and learning. Practices in cooperative learning have proven successful in many classrooms across the country, so it would be naïve to say that essentialism could not work even if it was updated with modern revisions.

For example, teachers should adopt constructivist ideology; thereby, allowing students to work together to promote growth in student driven learning and discovery. Through student led learning, the skills students acquire can be self evaluated and justified as essential life skills that will deem them productive members of society. As long as the creation of a positive learning environment within schools focuses on the fundamentals of respect, wide ranging academic ability, and the opportunity for every child to succeed, essentialism can be molded into constructivist theory and can be successfully implemented into twenty-first century schools.

The Ideal School

The ultimate goal for constructivist schools would be to allow every student the opportunity to succeed—while understanding success is not the same for every student because each student has a different academic achievement level. Schools, along with teachers acting as their own curriculum decision makers, would need work on designing curriculum that could become cross-cultured for students from low socioeconomic

backgrounds, different cultural lifestyles, students with learning disabilities, and language barriers. An ideal school would be founded with a common ground of ethics for its students, teachers, and staff. The basis of these principles would be rooted in respect. If a school comes to an agreement that everyone in the building is treated with respect, the learning environment in the school will be more successful in promoting a positive atmosphere that fosters both mental and physical growth.

The Role of the Teacher

Teachers are put in a difficult position because they are expected to fill many roles within a school. There is no *one* role for teachers; they are colleagues, facilitators of information, role models, but most importantly, teachers are learners. As constructivist educators, it is important that teachers be willing to learn from students. Without teachers as learners, they cannot foster growth within their students. In an article from rethinkingschools.org, teacher Angelica Chavez indicates that she goes to teacher workshops to learn as much as she can, and says, "I just like being a student. It's what makes me a good teacher" (Knight, 2010). Teachers who recognize the significance of continuous learning, whether it is from an institution or simply from their students, are most capable of enhancing the structure of the classroom. Therefore, teaching, in a way, could be redefined as learning and inspiring.

The Role of the Student

Students come to school to learn and build a social network by which to make sense of an ever-changing world around them. In addition to students as learners, it is important for students to recognize their role as teachers in the classroom; they serve as teachers to each other, to their teacher, and to the staff and administration. However, it is equally

important that they are mindful of what is being taught and work to embody the core belief of their school: respect. In the classroom, students should always focus on building upon background knowledge and applying newly acquired information to situations around them. The role of the student is to take the information presented to him or her, analyze it, critique it, reflect upon it, and ultimately make a judgment on the information. While the teacher has great influence of how information is presented, it is the students who must decide how to use the information in everyday life.

In *Teaching, Learning, and Schooling* it states that, “schools are centers of resistance. Students do not simply accept everything that is taught to them and typically use the portion of what they are being taught that is acceptable to their lives” (Provenzo, 2002). Schools must recognize this claim as fact. Therefore, as a teacher it would be imperative to find useful ways for students to apply life skills to a real purpose. And, an effective way to do this would be through simulation activities, experiential learning, class discussions, debates, and projects where students engage in research and create something from the bottom up.

The Classroom

Bottom line: the ideal classroom should be inviting, comforting, and safe. A goal that is not difficult to attain if constructivist educational philosophies are rooted in respect. If the students feel welcomed into this “home away from home” then they will be more willing to interact with other students and the teacher, which will further knowledge enrichment. Classrooms that have character offer a way for teachers to express personality within their room while showing passion and interest for the profession. A classroom that has substantial curriculum materials and resources to help guide students’ learning is

essential. Creating multiple means of representation for class assignments and tasks ensures that entry points are being acknowledged and accommodated. Also, teachers who are cognizant of multiple intelligences are more successful in achieving multiple opportunities for engagement (MOE). With MOE, teachers can structure their classrooms around a basic accordion affect of learning—taking lessons from whole class, to individual/group/partner activities, and back to whole class debriefing.

Organization and management of the classroom is key. A lot of this comes back to the idea of respect. In many ways, if the student-teacher relationship is founded in respect, then learning is more likely to occur. Managing a classroom without respect would present a variety of problems. Guidelines and expectations should be clear from the beginning of the school year and should never be waived for any student. Creating this consistency helps establish clear procedures and routines and ensures the expected level of respect is never questioned. Also, a well-organized teacher shows students how to prepare and, in turn, how to organize for themselves. Teachers who have a structured system are far more likely to be a positive role model for their students, which can help foster helpful habits from students as well.

Conclusion

My ambition to teach comes from love, dedication, and an optimistic outlook for the future. Blessed does not even begin to describe my feelings regarding the education I received as a child. Sure there were those teachers who did not put forth their greatest effort, but my will to teach does not come from them; it is strongly derived from the positive relationships with the teachers that highly impacted my life. For the students' sake, I want to be one of those teachers; I want my students to walk away from their day at

school still thinking about school and always curious of the educational opportunities their futures hold.

While I do have a great passion for my field, my desire to become a social studies teacher actually comes from the students who despise it. It seems that many students look at social studies from such a mundane point of view. My goal as an educator is to eliminate that perception. This field impacts our lives more than students may realize, and as a teacher I want to open their world to all of the possibilities that a firm appreciation of social studies can offer.

I do not see education as this cut and dry institution where you go to college and become fully prepared to embark upon your career, but rather as an ever changing road with highs, lows, and curves to learn from. A professor at the University of Missouri once imparted on me a great concept to consider: "Education is an institution made up of individuals. To change the institution, you must in turn change the hearts of the individuals." As an educator I will always strive for the highest education my students deserve, and if that means changing an institution for the better, then I am ready for the challenge.

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Educational Philosophies Chart (Source)

	Goal of Education	Role of Students	Role of Teachers	Teaching Strategies	Curriculum Emphasis
Existentialism	Children responsible for decision -create choice	Accept responsibility problem solving skills	Create environment to promote independent action	Analysis and discussion allowing freedom and choice	Social studies/ humanities
Progressivism	Use matter as a tool for understanding student experiences	Participate in formulating purposes for students in curriculum	Facilitators for student learning	Learning centers, co-op learning, student led discussions	Student interest and needs (democracy, morality)
Perennialism	Develop timeless virtues and instill knowledge for sake of learning (justice, temperance, fortitude)	Apply virtues to life decisions and acquire knowledge	Instill virtues, know subject matter and teach to all students	Teacher knows, student learns (lecture)	Core curriculum (arts and science)
Essentialism	Focus on cultural literacy and cultural knowledge	Acquire and use cultural knowledge, use thinking skills	Integrate cultural knowledge into core subjects	Teacher centered/ subject centered	Unified curriculum emphasizing subjects and cultural knowledge
Social Reconstruction	Solve significant social problems – > make democracy more efficient/ effective	Identify social problems. Use thinking skills to solve these problems	Facilitate students identify problems	Co-op learning, group problem solving. Use own skills	Integrating social problems into core curriculum
Humanism	Self-actualization. Blend cognitive and affective -stress human values in daily lives	Healthy attitudes towards self and others -> to become self-actualized	Help students become self-actualized, make learning make sense -connects to community, nation, world	Group processing. One-on-One interaction	Physical and emotional needs of students