

Essentialism

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Why do we teach the way we teach? Who decides what teachers should teach? Should morals be taught in schools? Where do we draw the line for what is ethical behavior in the classroom? Teachers and administrators face one or more of these questions daily. These questions aren't new to the teaching profession, nor is the act of asking questions about your situation a new phenomenon. Man has been asking questions since time began and there are plenty of people willing to attempt an answer. That is where philosophy comes in to the picture.

Philosophy is the never ending attempt to answer the questions of the universe; to make sense of the world and its inhabitants, to find truth. In researching, one can come across many different interpretations of philosophy, as many as there are people writing about philosophy. Apparently, this is an important topic for people to explore, since man has been probing and questioning since time began. However, not all agree. According to Ozmon and Craver (1995),

...philosophy does not appeal to some people because it provides no clear-cut answers to pressing problems. Of course, philosophers disagree on many issues, but it is often from disagreements (including the philosophical sort) that the search for new social, political, economic, religious, and education systems have developed. Those who avoid disagreement and prefer clear-cut answers may overlook important concerns about the development of civilization, because if there had been no disagreement about ideas,

purposes, and methods, we probably would still be in the Stone Age...(p. xvii).

This is true not only about philosophy, but rings true in real life as well. Without different views, things would stay the same and not change. There would only be one way of doing things and we would grow stagnant. It has to be said that change is not easy and there are people that will try to avoid it at all costs. Some might even say that it is because of the changes that we've been through that we are in the mess we are in today. Nobody feels the brunt of change more than education. Education has swung on the pendulum back and forth from traditionalism to progressivism and various forms of each so many times that this writer is dizzy from reading about it. Any teacher can tell you that new school year brings some new program that is sure to reach every child, whether it is in reading, math, science, social studies, etc.

Even though there are many interpretations of philosophy and educational philosophy, to be exact, Broudy's review of *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* by D. J. O'Connor (2008), offers the following:

It turns out that analytical philosophy can render its most beneficial service to educational theory by making evident to the educator the snares of traditional philosophy and of language in general. It can teach him what is true science, and what masquerades as science but is only poetry or persuasion. It can tell him which of the statements he reads, utters, or hears are "nonsense." It can also help him assess the logical claims of an education theory to being a scientific theory of being related to one." (p. 416).

One might believe this is a good basis for educational philosophy. For, every teacher, not to mention every person, should be knowledgeable enough to make judgments, not only in philosophy or education, but in life as well. This is true especially today in a world where telling the truth is a rarity and it is left up to each individual to determine whether they are facing fact or fiction.

How did philosophy get intertwined with education? For that answer, one would have to go back to Plato (427-347 BC). According to Ozmon and Craver, Plato, the idealist, is credited with cultivating idealism, “one of the most influential philosophies dealing with education.” (p. 1). Since Plato thought that ideas were more stable than objects (because objects are ever changing and our perception of them isn’t perfect), he was labeled an Idealist. One might argue that ideas can and do change too. Even so, Plato’s proposal of having a tri-level society where there are leaders/kings (the wise philosophers), workers (ones who aren’t as capable of judicious thoughts and are better suited to labor) and military personnel (ones who are capable and willing to protect the community) has its merits. His idea of the dialectic offers even more possibilities. It would make sense that if all sides are considered in any matter that the end result would be as close to the truth as one can possibly get. As teachers, we use this method all the time. When a child comes up and complains that another child has wronged him/her, doesn’t the teacher hear all sides of the story before making a decision as how to handle the situation? A fair decision couldn’t be made simply by hearing the complaining child’s side of the story.

Even though Plato's theory of a perfect society didn't quite pan out, he did get people thinking about society in general. He also spawned other philosophical theories from philosophers who embraced his ideas and only wanted to tweak them a little and from ones that totally disagreed with him and came up with their own philosophies to contradict his.

One such supporter was Aristotle (384-322 BC). Aristotle was a student of Plato and supported his views, with one major exception. Aristotle believed that a full understanding of matter would lead to better and clearer ideas and to the truth. Though their end results were the same, the procedure on how to get there varied greatly. Since Aristotle's philosophy dealt with real objects, he was considered a realist. Realists believe that the form that makes up an object never changes, even if some of the components do change. Ozmon and Craver offer the following example:

...People, too, differ in their particular properties. They have different shapes and sizes, and no two are exactly alike. Yet all people do share in something universal, and this could be called their "humanness." Both humanness and acornness are realities and they exist independently and regardless of any one particular human or acorn. Thus, we may say that forms (universals, ideas, or essences) are the nonmaterial aspects of each particular material object that relate to all other particular objects of that class. (p. 40)

From the philosophies of idealism and realism, essentialism was born. One of the strengths essentialism takes from idealism is the idea that the teacher is a central part of the education process and should be someone that students can emulate. The teacher should guide instruction and keep students on track. From realism, essentialism

borrowed the importance of teaching facts and according to Ozmon and Craver any curriculum taught should be “practical and useful” (p. 64).

Throughout time, it seems, education has been expected to take on the responsibility of curing all of society’s problems, even though many consider education to be one of society’s problems. No one can dispute the fact that society, as a whole, has problems. Just watch the news and you will see what kind of shape our society is in with wars occurring around the globe, children starving, corruption and immoral acts going on everywhere. Some people believe education is the answer. You hear it time and time again, but then there are others that say education in the U. S. is so lacking that it can’t possibly help students develop into contributing members of society to solve the problems we face. There are so many critics and there are so many solutions available; it’s hard to say what will work. Also, we, as a society, are faced with constant changes to our world; it makes one wonder if any viable solutions adopted today will work with the inevitable and rapid changes of tomorrow. That is why, in this writer’s opinion, the educational pendulum swings back to philosophy of essentialism, time and again.

According to the online Webster dictionary, essentialism is an educational theory that ideas and skills basic to a culture should be taught to all alike by time-tested methods, (www.merriam-webster.com). However, Broudy (1955) said it best:

...the philosophy of education in the hands of both educators and philosophers boils down to a set of general and not very illuminating statements about the good life and what, in the light of their own experience and preferences, the schools ought to be doing about it. (p. 614)

It is easy to see why there are so many followers of essentialism, a conservative philosophy born from realism and idealism. Everyone agrees that there are basic skills that will always need to be taught. No matter how advanced our society gets with technology, people will always need to know how to read, write, compute, and communicate clearly. Not many will argue with that. In addition, spending valuable time on only the essentials, teaching students respect for authority, stressing the value of a job well done, and perseverance, all are noble qualities of any program or philosophy. In an every changing world racked with turbulence and violence, who wouldn't welcome such a theory? Isn't it in times of chaos or discomfort that we seek comfort and stability? It's only natural for people to turn to a more stable philosophy that uses tried and true methodology in education when they feel they are faced with an unstable situation.

Essentialism, in education, came about as an answer to Dewey's child-centered, self-motivating, inquiry based, progressive educational philosophy, as well as an answer to the too easily understood 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*. For the first time a report was issued not fraught with technical words that only other researchers could understand. Now, the whole world knew our schools were failing and could quote the damning document for proof. Additionally, with test scores declining, the powers that be decided to stop what they considered frivolous time wasting and get down to the basics—the essentials of what students really needed—to get our students back on track and produce productive citizens. Spurred on by business leaders, who were complaining that young people entering the workforce lacked the necessary basics, and the need to try to get control of a world that seemed to be spiraling

out of control, the pendulum swung back toward traditionalism, but with a twist...enter essentialism (which was really just an extension of traditionalism, according to Drost, 1965).

Essentialists believed that if you cut out the unnecessary, extra-curricular activities, like art, music, languages, etc, and delivered just the basic, bare bones subjects such as reading, language, math, history, and computing, and delivered these basics in a systematic, disciplined way, by a teacher who excelled in these areas and was of the highest moral standards, then students would and could be successful. And this success could easily be proven by the outstanding test scores (standardized test scores) that would surely be forthcoming, in their opinion.

The biggest proponent of essentialism, considered to be the Father of Essentialism, was William C. Bagley (1874- 1946). Bagley started out in the teaching profession, due to a lack of agricultural jobs at the time, and eventually taught at Teachers' College, Columbia University. According to I. L. Kandel (1961), it was during this time (at Columbia University) that Bagley was "inspired...to find out more about the principles of education and to inquire whether such principles could not be discovered and established by scientific method." (p. 6). As he began to study education, "he believed that the art of teaching could be eventually based on a sound body of laws and principles resulting from research and experimentation" (p. 63). He spent the better part of his career trying to do just that, but to no avail. He finally gave up on this idea, because he never could obtain concrete evidence that would provide the set of guiding principles to education he desperately sought. Conceding, Bagley wrote:

Twenty years ago, when I began the study of education, I was convinced that its problems

could be adequately described, formulated, and solved in terms of nerve cells and fibers. These concepts of physiological psychology had their brief day and added their small mite to education theory—a day much briefer and a mite much smaller than I dreamed of at that time. ..(p. 164)

In the end, he decided that trying to apply a scientific method to teaching was futile. Instead, teaching was better left compared to fine arts, in that teaching is more of a fine art, rather than a method that can be applied by just anyone picking up a guiding manual. He devoted the rest of his career to books about classroom management, discipline, and sound methodology and curriculum.

Another proponent of essentialism was Arthur Bestor (1908 – 1994). He, too, was a professor at Teachers' College, Columbia University and he, too, was extremely critical of progressive education, calling it "regressive education"(p. 44). He was well known for his controversial writings and name calling of progressives ("curriculum doctors and "life adjusters") in his book *Educational Wastelands* (p.44). He had an interesting idea of any teacher who participates in a program that raises his/her level of knowledge in two subjects up to the level of an undergraduate major should receive a master's degree and if that is done with five subjects, that teacher should receive a doctorate. Some may think It sounds like a win/win situation (even though others may not agree). Just think, teachers become more knowledgeable about the subject they teach and are rewarded handsomely, instead of spending time doing research that may or may not make them more knowledgeable in the subjects in which they teach, of course this depends of what type of research they are doing.

The list of proponents of essentialism is long and continues to grow. However, as with everything else, there are critics of essentialism. Even though essentialists have no problem in changing the curriculum if necessary, the philosophy is still considered too static. Because there is no consideration given to extra-curricular activities, students who excel in these areas are left out and may never come to know their true potential as artists or musicians. An essentialist might argue that these extracurricular activities should be done before or after school hours. Also, as Dewey believed, motivation is an important factor in a child's learning. Doesn't a student's interest need to be considered in order for him or her to be truly motivated? What about the students who can't learn from the traditional classroom setting of desks in rows and a teacher lecturing the daily lesson? Don't they deserve to learn how they learn best? Yes, there are critics to essentialism, just like with everything else in life. It makes one wonder why essentialism was a chosen philosophy at all, if all children cannot learn when so much time is devoted to basic skills and taught by teachers who are masters of the subjects they teach.

Well, essentialism does have its benefits. Students are given proven effective curriculum and methodology. The subjects being taught are ones that will give students the knowledge they need to be successful and because all of the extracurricular activities are taken out, more time can be spent on these necessary and practical subjects. Also, because they are taught by a highly moral, skilled teacher who stresses perseverance to obtain a higher goal, students leave school with all of the practicality and knowledge they need to be successful out in the workforce. And, what's wrong with teaching students traditional values? Isn't that why they are traditional, because they are able to stand the test of time and still prevail?

In conclusion, essentialism is a conservative philosophy that stresses the basics of tried and true curriculum and methodology. If students would only learn to persevere through unattractive tasks, and practice, practice, practice the basic skills, they will develop all they need to become productive citizens. Essentialists believe that children lack the maturity to know what they need to know, because they are just children. They haven't lived out in the real world and have not had the opportunity to experience life enough to know what is best for them. Progressivism had time to show their philosophy worked, but the pendulum did swing back to the conservative end. In time, it can be assured the pendulum will swing back the other way and progressivism or some various form will have its turn again. For one thing is certain and that is education will continue to be changed. Essentialism may not be a cure-all philosophy, but there are some components that would serve every teacher and every student well, for these components come back time and again.

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