



Essentialism & Perennialism

Educational Theory > Essentialism & Perennialism

Table of Contents

Abstract

Keywords

Philosophical Overviews

Essentialism

Perennialism

Applications

Students

Teachers

Administrators

Issues

Barriers to Essentialism in America's Classrooms

Barriers to Perennialism in America's Classrooms

Conclusion

Terms & Concepts

Bibliography

Suggested Reading

Abstract

An overview of Essentialism and Perennialism, their philosophical definitions, historical underpinnings, and their role and impacts on student learning in public school education environments is presented. Also presented is a brief overview of potential applications of Essentialism and Perennialism and their relationship to specific subjects, which are "basic subjects." Further analyzed are ways public education has been impacted by different philoso-

phies. Applications of Essentialism and Perennialism that include roles and impacts on certain groups including students, teachers, and administrators are outlined. A conclusion is offered that analyzes current philosophical viewpoints and a solution is offered to teachers that frames present philosophical thought to inform and support teachers in creating a successful classroom environment aimed at promoting achievement for all students.

Philosophical Overviews

Central to all academic disciplines and the formation of ideas are the philosophies that guide our values and beliefs regarding a given academic discipline. Public education in the United States is guided by five main philosophical viewpoints. These philosophical viewpoints include:

- Essentialism,
- Progressivism,
- Perennialism,
- Existentialism, and
- Behaviorism.

The guiding philosophies of education reflect not only the internal assumptions of the individual teacher, but they also construct the culture of schools and school districts. Clashes occur when guiding philosophies conflict. Philosophies are also tied to an individual's or organization's underlying values, which values are difficult to change, unless an internal transformation occurs within an individual or an organization. Another influence of change in a given school occurs when a new administrator brings their own philosophy to the educational environment that is different than previously held beliefs. However, the overarching determinants for philosophies that drive the public education system are derived from the university or college education program. Any real or substantive transformation in public education environments typically occurs, because of changes in higher education philosophies.

These philosophies are derived from the original philosophers who wrote about the philosophy and reflect a much earlier time and societal construct. In response to changing societal views

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and internal value systems governing philosophies that inspire the teacher's relationship with the student, philosophies for many educators and institutions have changed from teacher-centered to more student-centered beliefs. Essentialism and Perennialism are two philosophical viewpoints contributing to education foundations and these are examined in this paper.

Essentialism

William Bagley was considered the founding philosopher of the Essentialist movement. Bagley's philosophy of education argued that students should learn "something" in addition to the process of thinking. The philosophy also asserted that other philosophies over-emphasized the process of learning instead of content knowledge in the curriculum (Null, 2003). The movement "essentially" began with Bagley's deeply held value that education should teach knowledge from the past, because if students were separated from past knowledge the future of democracy would be endangered. Bagley and other Essentialists believed that education should be rich in basic curriculum content and the need for stricter discipline in the educational environment. The Essentialist philosophy became popular when the American society had been challenged by the Great Depression. Bagley argued that the duty of education should be to teach to democracy and these teachings should offset the overemphasis on growth and individualism (Bagley, 1934, 123 – 126). In fact, in his writings, Bagley was resolute in reminding educational professionals that a healthy democracy was dependant on strong curriculum content. In his first book, *The Educative Process*, Bagley wrote,

The charge of "loose" schoolcraft and a demand for a return to the older and harsher educative methods frequently recur in contemporary educational literature. Under the present regime, it is asserted, drill and discipline have become obsolete terms, effort is at a discount, and the net result is a loss of stamina and a weakening of the moral fiber. The harsher methods, it is maintained, have been justly eliminated....Both parties to this controversy appear to have neglected some very important data that have been accumulated during the past ten years by the now unpopular and much-abused cult of "Child Study," and this neglect is the more unfortunate because the light that child study throws upon the main questions at issue renders these heated and speculative discussions quite superfluous (Bagley, 1905, 184 – 185).

Sadker and Sadker (1994) reported that present day American Essentialism accepts the social, political, and economic structure of American society and culture and is a fairly conservative philosophy. Essentialists believe that the role of educators is to instill traditional American values like the "respect for authority, perseverance, fidelity to duty, consideration for others, and practicality" (p. 369). In the classroom, the educator's role may be impacted by these beliefs in two ways. First, in a classroom constructed by this philosophy, parents would potentially see traditional disciplines like math, science, history, foreign language, and literature being taught. Second, the teacher's role in the Essentialist classroom would be to serve as a model for the students in intellectual and moral capacities.

Based on these conclusions, the Essentialist educator's goal is that all students will possess basic skills, an extensive body of knowledge, and disciplined pragmatic minds ready to meaningfully contribute to a democratic society in America. The overarching theme of American Essentialist teaching is to center on learning and applying basic skills in the real world. Parents most likely will not see very much teacher creativity or student choice in the Essentialist classroom, because teaching is based on an information delivery model that students receive and apply. Also, parents would probably not see a proclivity toward differentiation for the diverse learner. In some Essentialist classrooms, educators have blended Perennialism into the framework of their instruction.

Perennialism

Perennialism is based on the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas. According to Rohmann (1999), Aquina's primary goal was to reconcile faith and reason or philosophy and revelation (p. 23). There are also two types of Perennialists: those who maintain a religious approach to education like Aquinas, and those who follow a more secular view developed in the twentieth century by two well-known educational philosophers, Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler.

According to William F. Buckley, Jr. (2001), Mortimer Adler read Plato's works while working as a secretary to the editor of the *New York Sun*, and resolved to become a philosopher. Later, Adler partnered with Robert Hutchins, then president of the University of Chicago. Together these two philosophers advocated for a new way of thinking and embarked on a philosophical journey that ultimately changed the shape of public education (p. 54). Their philosophies extended a new way of thinking known as Perennialism. Specifically, Hutchins and Adler promoted the Secular Perennialist view. Secular Perennialists advocate education as a means of constructing a common foundation of historical thought and reason directed at transforming the student's paradigm or way of thinking. Secular Perennialist thinkers believe that in order to ensure societal survival, all citizens must be exposed to and taught ways of thinking that will secure individual freedoms, human rights, and responsibilities true to the nature of a Democracy. According to Hutchins, these beliefs do not come from text books. He stated:

The products of American high schools are illiterate;

and a degree from a famous college or university is no guarantee that the graduate is in any better case. One of the most remarkable features of American society is that the difference between the “uneducated” and the “educated” is so slight (Hutchins, 1954).

To support this premise, Mortimer Adler wrote:

The two major obstacles to reform have been mentioned elsewhere. One is the persistent failure of educators to recognize that a proportionate equality of results can be achieved when children who differ markedly in the degree of their educability are given the same quality or kind of schooling. The other is the persistent refusal of the educational establishment to replace the scheme of grading that puts a student in his or her niche on the bell-shaped curve by an assessment of the student’s achievement wholly in terms of that student’s capacity without reference to any other individual’s achievement (Adler, n.d.).

Essentially, Perennialism teaches concepts and focuses on knowledge and the meaning of knowledge. A classroom constructed from this format typically espouses a traditional philosophy where a teacher answers questions and inquires from the students in order for them to gain an understanding. This format allows students to gain the ability to develop a full “range of rational powers.” While students learn the “profound and enduring” ideas present throughout time, there is little emphasis on those who learn discipline by using textbooks (Shaw, 2006). Philosophically, Perennialism seems to espouse personal development and internal transformation rather than focusing on specific disciplines.

The crux of Perennialism seems to initiate multiple ways of thinking about given curriculum, rather than a “one-size fits all approach” and dedication to one set of ideas taught through one specific curriculum. The Perennialist might freely enact debate and see the act of thoughtful debate as an advantage in response to reading a given text, because the debate itself would allow students the opportunity to think about specific texts and form their own processes of thoughts and conclusions. Within this framework, it can be theorized that the Perennialist classroom would encompass the drive for reflective thought based on inquiry. It can be argued that the overarching goal of the Perennialist classroom is to promote opportunities for students to interpret, question, and think, in order to prosper keen insights and renewed thinking about old ideas. A parent, sending their child to the Perennialist classroom would inevitably see an orderly teaching environment adhering to specific rules and common forms of basic curriculum driven by thoughtful debate, inquiry, and teacher driven student introspection. Based on the evidence supporting Perennialism as a traditional philosophical model, a parent most likely would not see differentiated thinking strategies employed for the non-traditional thinker.

After reviewing literature that described these philosophies, and seeking to understand the established philosophies regarding educational foundations in public schools in the United States, it is easily arguable that both of these philosophies of Essentialism and Perennialism can be readily discerned in classrooms across Amer-

ica. It can also be elaborated that most higher education teacher training courses have been founded on the premise of inquiry and thought, underscored by established, district approved or state mandated curricula, which are also supported by Essentialism and Perennialism. However, after reviewing the literature and contemplating deeply, multiple conclusions can be drawn and applications suggested for students, teachers, and administrators.

Applications

Students

It can be theorized that educational philosophies drive the classroom environment of all classrooms in all educational environments. These educational philosophies are largely driven by specific values that individual teachers hold, which are derived from the teacher’s internal assumptions. The teacher’s internal assumptions drive attitudes governing student-teacher relationships, student discipline, and student learning. These internal assumptions and value systems are the clay that shapes that classroom environment and all of the attitudes held within. For students, they may never understand why conflict exists within the classroom environment between themselves and a teacher, in the case of a student with diverse needs or non-traditional thinking patterns. In addition to experiencing conflict within a classroom environment, students may be struggling with a myriad of family issues, learning issues, and internal conflict. The classroom and the teacher-student relationship may be the primary source for the student to learn and relate. In the face of this conflict, students may not be able to clearly articulate their conflict.

Quite simply, some types of philosophies invite fewer kinds of interactions and student-teacher relationships. Students may not understand how or why their classroom has been formed in accordance with specific philosophical underpinnings. An argument could be made that students would benefit from a deeper understanding regarding why the classroom environment has been constructed in a given framework. Teachers should consider sharing their philosophical viewpoints with students in order to allow students the opportunity to reflect on specific attributes of the classroom environment, teacher attitudes, and student expectations. This kind of communication could occur regardless of the philosophies that teachers hold regarding other types of classroom constructs. For teachers struggling with one type of philosophical construct in terms of motivating students or building positive relationships with parents, communicating their philosophical viewpoint could be helpful for alleviating tension and conflict to allow students a window of insight into why the classroom has been designed in accordance with specific guidelines.

Teachers

In most teacher education formation courses, students formulate a philosophy statement of how their classroom will be designed. Many times, student teachers will be able to test their philosophy during the student teaching experience. However, most students are only given a limited overview of specific phi-

philosophies that might shape their philosophical view. Typically, specific philosophies like Essentialism, Progressivism, Perennialism, Existentialism, and Behaviorism taught in undergraduate programs are taught in an introductory foundations course or in conjunction with educational psychology classes. The philosophies taught in university classes are typically guided by the philosophy of the given philosophical platform adopted by the university education department. Based on these assumptions, teachers need to understand that the initial philosophies that guide their educational platform most likely will evolve and transform as the educator matures and new ways of thinking are constructed. It is possible that a teacher's philosophies will grow or completely transform as the teacher recognizes the specific needs in the classroom environment and decide to meet all of the needs in the classroom. Teachers originally dedicated to one philosophy may later find themselves adopting a multi-philosophical approach that will govern their classroom approaches.

Understanding the philosophies of the teaching discipline is useful for multiple reasons. First, it is helpful to know that philosophy springs from our ideas as humans. These are the "intangibles that fuel our thoughts, theories, philosophies, beliefs, ideologies," and an overview of the thinkers who articulated them. It can be argued that ideas "are the foundations of our culture. They inspire our thoughts and inform our beliefs. Many of them form the very basis of our identity" (Rohmann, 1999, p. ix). These intangibles are central to how we view ourselves and those in relationship with us. Most likely, these relationships will impact attitudes toward students and colleagues.

Teachers need to critically understand that many of the conflicts that arise in schools and between school personnel are tied to the philosophies we hold that result in a clash of ideas. When one teacher holds a dramatically different view of their role than another teacher, conflict may occur. One of the central conflicts currently present in education exists between the external culture of the federal government mandating specific demands that educators must meet. Teachers often hold a very different view regarding mandated testing or standards established by No Child Left Behind. Teachers often view these mandates as inhibitors for creating a research based, thought provoking classroom resulting a student-centered, "learningful" educational environment. Solutions to these dilemmas are not readily obtainable, but the beginning of understanding arises from knowing ourselves and our individual philosophies regarding education and our role as teachers.

Administrators

Administrators are central to preparing the educational environment for teachers and students. Philosophical constructs are the building blocks for this preparation. Even in graduate programs preparing administrators for leadership, these formative philosophies are not readily taught. Only when administrators seek understanding or prepare a thesis or increase their educational preparation to better understand philosophical viewpoints can they begin to learn the culture of the school over which they preside. These philosophies govern all interactions within a school and determine attitudes of all adults within the educational set-

ting. The nature of conflict is derived when philosophies clash. For new administrators entering a school setting in which conflict is prevalent, it would be helpful to understand the philosophical underpinnings that guide the cultural construct. Only after these philosophical underpinnings can be analyzed will a new philosophical platform emerge to guide the leadership of the school.

For administrators, philosophical constructs influence district policies and district relationships. Occasionally, conflict arises when philosophical viewpoints are opposed. In addition to the administrator's role in overseeing the school staff, administrators must also balance their role in a larger context. Before entering into administration, professionals should apply for positions in districts with matching philosophies.

Issues

Both the Essentialist and Perennialist philosophies appear to be much more teacher centered than student centered. These philosophies also reflect a much earlier time in American history when cultural mandates significantly influenced established philosophies of specific eras and generations. For other various reasons, barriers exist that preclude full integration of either model.

Barriers to Essentialism in America's Classrooms

Based on the background of Essentialism and its underpinnings, the philosophy adopts a highly conservative construct, which potentially clashes with the political philosophies of today's educational setting. The central concept of Essentialism seems to be a "back to basics" approach to traditional educational concepts. The academics of the philosophy are mainly driven by the notion that American schools should transmit the traditional moral values and intellectual knowledge that students need to become model citizens. It can be argued that Essentialists believe the role of education is to instill traditional American virtues as respect for authority, perseverance, fidelity to duty, consideration for others, and practicality. In this type of classroom, it can be asserted that "a system of diversity" would be difficult to achieve, and individuals with special education needs would experience difficulty in having their needs met. Based on the need for today's classrooms to meet the needs of a variety of students, these are significant barriers that are not easily overcome despite the notion that Essentialism formed the foundation of the American education system and its response to preparing workers to work in factories and farms. These ideals were highly representative of early American culture and an early societal and cultural construct. However, many of these traditional American values have shifted in their composition to include more diversity in thinking, cultural construct, and societal composition.

Barriers to Perennialism in America's Classrooms

Neither Essentialism nor Perennialism allows the students' interests or experiences to substantially dictate what is taught. While the Essentialist philosophy focuses heavily on curriculum basics, Perennialism focuses more on forming critical, analytical thinkers. Well known Perennialist philosophers urged schools to spend

more time teaching about concepts and explaining how these concepts are meaningful to students. However, the methodologies utilized by Perennialist thinkers to teach students to think critically are based on Socratic methodologies that most students in today's culture could potentially view as outdated, despite the fact that many of today's classrooms are based on the cultural norms that Essentialism and Perennialism have integrated in educational norms. In overcoming barriers to implementing Perennialist philosophical constructs, teachers should consider ways of inviting differentiated thinking processes for all students.

Conclusion

Essentialism and Perennialism are both heavily utilized in America's classrooms along with an eclectic combination of the other educational philosophies. Philosophies that construct classrooms shape ways of teaching and set the backdrop for how and what students learn. In all educational environments, all of the main philosophies provide a framework for establishing classroom practices. One of the main issues in integrating philosophies is that the multiple differences in classrooms scatter the way in which students receive information and could potentially hinder how and what students learn from classroom to classroom. In order to create the most relevant learning experience for students, teachers should investigate the relevant educational philosophies, learn the specific philosophies that influence educational strategies integrated in specific learning environments, identify the philosophical constructs that seem to identify their specific ways of thinking and then utilize a philosophy that is well founded and arguable based on researched evidence of how students learn best. Essentially and perennially, the job of educators is to work for students. Best practice would suggest that the most informed philosophical background designed for each classroom dynamic would theoretically produce the best educational setting for the group of students served. Flexibility and research based practices typically inform best classroom results.

Terms & Concepts

Education: Education can be described as the instructional interface that occurs between teachers and students and is governed by philosophical underpinnings, driven by established curriculum, and is framed by expectations in both behaviors and learning outcomes.

Educational Foundations: Educational Foundations can be best described as the philosophical underpinnings that create different education constructs that drive the instructional process.

Essentialism: Essentialism can be described as an educational philosophy rooted in teaching basic educational subjects aimed at creating an American society of contributing citizens to a democratic culture.

Life-long Learning: Life-long learning or life-long thinking can be considered the goal or mandate of the Perennialist philosophy.

Perennialism: Perennialism can be described as an educational philosophy aimed at teaching students ways of thinking that will secure individual freedoms, human rights, and responsibilities true to the nature of a Democracy.

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