FIVE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES

1. Essentialism

"Gripping and enduring interests frequently grow out of initial learning efforts that are not appealing or attractive."

- William Bagley

Essentialism refers to the "traditional" or "Back to the Basics" approach to education. It is so named because it strives to instill students with the "essentials" of academic knowledge and character development. The term essentialism as an educational philosophy was originally popularized in the 1930s by the American educator William Bagley (1874-1946). The philosophy itself, however, had been the dominant approach to education in America from the beginnings of American history. Early in the twentieth century, essentialism was criticized as being too rigid to prepare students adequately for adult life. But with the launching of Sputnik in 1957, interest in essentialism revived. Among modern supporters of this position are members of the President's Commission on Excellence in Education. Their 1983 report, A Nation at Risk, mirrors essentialist concerns today.

Underlying Philosophical Basis

(American) essentialism is grounded in a conservative philosophy that accepts the social, political, and economic structure of American society. It contends that schools should not try to radically reshape society. Rather, essentialists argue, American schools should transmit the traditional moral values and intellectual knowledge that students need to become model citizens. Essentialists believe that teachers should instill such traditional American virtues as respect for authority, perseverance, fidelity to duty,
consideration for others, and practicality.

Reflecting its conservative philosophy, essentialism tends to accept the philosophical views associated with the traditional, conservative elements of American society. For example, American culture traditionally has placed tremendous emphasis on the central importance of the physical world and of understanding the world through scientific experimentation. As a result, to convey important knowledge about our world, essentialist educators emphasize instruction in natural science rather than non-scientific disciplines such as philosophy or comparative religion.

The Essentialist Classroom

Essentialists urge that the most essential or basic academic skills and knowledge be taught to all students. Traditional disciplines such as math, natural science, history, foreign language, and literature form the foundation of the essentialist curriculum. Essentialists frown upon vocational, lift-adjustment, or other courses with "watered down" academic content.

Elementary students receive instruction in skills such as writing, reading, measurement, and computers. Even while learning art and music, subjects most often associated with the development of creativity, the students are required to master a body of information and basic techniques, gradually moving from less to more complex skills and detailed knowledge. Only by mastering the required material for their grade level are students promoted to the next higher grade.

Essentialist programs are academically rigorous, for both slow and fast learners. The report A Nation at Risk reflects the essentialist emphasis on rigor. It calls for more core requirements, a longer school day, a longer academic year, and more challenging textbooks. Moreover, essentialists maintain that classrooms should be oriented around the teacher, who ideally serves as an intellectual and moral role model for the students. The teachers or administrators decide what is most important for the students to learn and place little emphasis on student interests, particularly when they divert time and attention from the academic curriculum. Essentialist teachers focus heavily on achievement test scores as a means of evaluating progress.

In an essentialist classroom, students are taught to be "culturally literate," that is, to possess a working knowledge about the people, events, ideas, and institutions that have shaped American society. Reflecting the essentialist emphasis on technological literacy, A Nation at Risk recommends that all high school students complete at least one semester of computer science. Essentialists hope that when students leave school, they will possess not only basic skills and an extensive body of knowledge, but also disciplined, practical minds, capable of applying schoolhouse lessons in the real world.

http://edweb.sdsu.edu/LShaw/f95syll/philos/phessen.html

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2. Progressivism

"We may, I think, discover certain common principles amid the variety of progressive schools now existing. To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to statistics and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world."

Progressivism's respect for individuality, its high regard for science, and its receptivity to change harmonized well with the American environment in which it was created. The person most responsible for the success of progressivism was John Dewey (1859-1952). Dewey entered the field of education as a liberal social reformer with a background in philosophy and psychology. In 1896, while a professor at the University of Chicago, Dewey founded the famous Laboratory School as a testing ground for his educational ideas. Dewey's writings and his work with the Laboratory School set the stage for the progressive education movement, which, beginning in the 1920s, has produced major lasting innovations in American education.

The progressivist movement stimulated schools to broaden their curricula, making education more relevant to the needs and interests of students. Its influence waned during the 1950s, particularly after the 1957 launching of Sputnik by the Soviets prompted schools to emphasize traditional instruction in
math, science, foreign languages, and other defense-related subjects. In the late 1960s and 1970s, under the guise of citizenship education and educational relevance, many of Dewey’s ideas enjoyed a renewed popularity that decreased again during the education reform movement of the 1980s.

**The Roots of Progressivism: John Dewey’s Philosophy**

Dewey regarded the physical universe as real and fundamental. He also claimed that the one constant truth about the universe is the existence of change. For Dewey, change was not an uncontrollable force; rather, it could be directed by human intelligence. He explained that as we alter our relationship with our environment, we ourselves are made different by the experience.

Dewey not only believed in the existence of change but welcomed it. He regarded the principles of democracy and freedom espoused in America as representing tremendous progress over the political ideas of earlier times. Nevertheless, Dewey found much that was wrong with American society, and he had little affection for the traditional American approach to education. He hoped that his school reforms would alter the social fabric of America, making it a more democratic nation of free thinking, intelligent citizens.

Dewey taught that people are social animals who learn well through active interplay with others and that our learning increases when we are engaged in activities that have meaning for us. Book learning, to Dewey, was no substitute for actually doing things. Fundamental to Dewey’s epistemology is the notion that knowledge is acquired and expanded as we apply our previous experiences to solving new, meaningful problems. Education, to Dewey, is a reconstruction of experience, an opportunity to apply previous experiences in new ways. Relying heavily on the scientific method, Dewey proposed a five step method for solving problems:

1. Become aware of the problem;
2. Define it;
3. Propose various hypotheses to solve it;
4. Examine the consequences of each hypothesis in the light of previous
5. Experience; and
6. Test the most likely solution.

**Progressivism in the Schoolhouse**

Believing that people learn best from what they consider most relevant to their lives, progressivists center the curriculum around the experiences, interests, and abilities of students. Teachers plan lessons that arouse curiosity and push the students to a higher level of knowledge. In addition to reading textbooks, the students must learn by doing. Often students leave the classroom for field trips during which they interact with nature or society. Teachers also stimulate the students' interests through thought-provoking games. For example, modified forms of the board game Monopoly have been used to illustrate the principles of capitalism and socialism.

In a progressivist school, students are encouraged to interact with one another and to develop social virtues such as cooperation and tolerance for different points of view. Also, teachers feel no compulsion to focus their students' attentions on one discrete discipline at a time, and students may be responsible for learning lessons that combine several different subjects.

Progressivists emphasize in their curriculum the study of the natural and social sciences. Teachers expose students to many new scientific, technological, and social developments, reflecting the

progressivist notion that progress and change are fundamental. Students are also exposed to a more democratic curriculum that recognizes accomplishments of women and minorities as well as white males. In addition, students solve problems in the classroom similar to those they will encounter outside of the schoolhouse; they learn to be flexible problem solvers.

Progressivists believe that education should be a perpetually enriching process of ongoing growth, not merely a preparation for adult lives. They also deny the essentialist belief that the study of traditional subject matter is appropriate for all students, regardless of interest and personal experience. By including instruction in industrial arts and home economics, progressivists strive to make schooling both interesting and useful. Ideally, the home, workplace, and schoolhouse blend together to generate a continuous, fulfilling learning experience in life. It is the progressivist dream that the dreary, seemingly irrelevant classroom exercises that so many adults recall from childhood will someday become a thing of the past.

1. Essentialism

2. Perennialism

3. Existentialism

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4. Existentialism

"Childhood is not adulthood; childhood is playing and no child ever gets enough play. The Summerhill theory is that when a child has played enough he will start to work and face difficulties, and I claim that this theory has been vindicated in our pupils' ability to do a good job even when it involves a lot of unpleasant work."

A. S. Neill

Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism.''

Jean Paul Sartre

Existentialism as a Philosophical Term

The existentialist movement in education is based on an intellectual attitude that philosophers term existentialism. Born in nineteenth-century Europe, existentialism is associated with such diverse thinkers as

- Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a passionate Christian, and
who wrote a book entitled *The Antichrist* and coined the phrase God is dead. While the famous existentialists would passionately disagree with one another on many basic philosophical issues, what they shared was a respect for individualism. In particular, they argued that traditional approaches to philosophy do not adequately respect the unique concerns of each individual.

Jean Paul Sartre's classic formulation of existentialism—that "existence precedes essence"—means that there exists no universal, inborn human nature. We are born and exist, and then we ourselves freely determine our essence (that is, our innermost nature). Some philosophers commonly associated with the existentialist tradition never fully adopted the "existence precedes essence" principle. Nevertheless, that principle is fundamental to the educational existentialist movement.

**Existentialism as an Educational Philosophy**

Just as its namesake sprang from a strong rejection of traditional philosophy, educational existentialism sprang from a strong rejection of the traditional, essentialist approach to education. Existentialism rejects the existence of any source of objective, authoritative truth about metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Instead, individuals are responsible for determining for themselves what is "true" or "false," "right" or "wrong," "beautiful" or "ugly." For the existentialist, there exists no universal form of human nature; each of us has the free will to develop as we see fit.

In the existentialist classroom, subject matter takes second place to helping the students understand and appreciate themselves as unique individuals who accept complete responsibility for their thoughts, feelings, and actions. The teacher's role is to help students define their own essence by exposing them to various paths they may take in life and creating an environment in which they may freely choose their own preferred way. Since feeling is not divorced from reason in decision making, the existentialist demands the education of the whole person, not just the mind.

Although many existentialist educators provide some curricular structure, existentialism, more than other educational philosophies, affords students great latitude in their choice of subject matter. In an existentialist curriculum, students are given a wide variety of options from which to choose.

To the extent that the staff, rather than the students, influence the curriculum, the humanities are commonly given tremendous emphasis. They are explored as a means of providing students with vicarious experiences that will help unleash their own creativity and self-expression. For example, rather than emphasizing historical events, existentialists focus upon the actions of historical individuals, each of whom provides possible models for the students' own behavior. In contrast to the humanities, math and the natural sciences may be de-emphasized, presumably because their subject matter would be considered "cold," "dry," "objective," and therefore less fruitful to self-awareness. Moreover, vocational education is regarded more as a means of teaching students about themselves and their potential than of earning a livelihood. In teaching art, existentialism encourages individual creativity and imagination more than copying and imitating established models.
Existentialist methods focus on the individual. Learning is self-paced, self-directed, and includes a great deal of individual contact with the teacher, who relates to each student openly and honestly. Although elements of existentialism occasionally appear in public schools, this philosophy has found wider acceptance in private schools and in alternative public schools founded in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

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