Philosophy of Education

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Abstract

This paper will delve into my personal teaching philosophy. It will include a discourse on the results of my Philosophy of Education Survey, which revealed that I lean towards the Essentialism and Existentialism philosophies. The discussion will analyze the benefits of these two philosophies, and evaluate how they can be intermixed in the classroom to create a class culture of achieving high academic rigor through unique and individual expression and means.

One’s philosophy of education is constantly evolving and growing to meet the needs of their students, families, communities and their personal needs as a teacher. After a year of teaching, attending teacher workshops through Teach for America, and reading about different teaching philosophies, I have developed a philosophy that currently centers around Essentialism and Existentialism. While these two philosophies may seem contradictory at first glance, with the former promoting the need of a common core curriculum, and the later promoting individual choice in the classroom, they blend together to create a classroom where students are achieving high academic rigor, while also initiating their own endeavors to obtain this crucial knowledge. These two philosophies will be elaborated upon and analyzed to highlight their importance in education, particularly in what I hope to create in my current and future classrooms.

Essentialism in education, as theorized by Cohen (1999), is the notion that students need to be taught a common core of knowledge in a “systematic, disciplined way” (p. 3). The ultimate endeavor of Essentialism is that students would learn to become productive members of society and achieve a common ideal of man. In an article composed by Harry Grace (1962), Robert Hutchins is quoted when he asserts that “Education is the deliberate attempt to form men in terms of an ideal” (p. 189). In other words, one component of a teacher’s responsibility towards his or her students is to help develop their students into individuals who can succeed in society. Society has codes of morals and academics that are used to measure success, and used to determine how likely one is to be valued and respected by their larger world. Whether this set standard should be in place or not, has and will continue to be debated. However, as a teacher, I agree that it is imperative to prepare students for the demanding and rapidly advancing society they will enter in to by teaching them the behavioral, moral and academic skills needed to succeed and thrive. In order to have access to higher institutions of learning, and eventually influence the society in which they live in, students need to be proficient in these aptitudes. The AAE Code of Ethics for Educators is in congruence with the baseline of this philosophy, as it outlines in Principle 1: Ethical Conduct towards Students, that “all educators are obligated to help foster civic virtues such as integrity, diligence, responsibility, cooperation, loyalty, fidelity, and respect-for the law, for human life, for others, and for self” (p. 1). Helping children reach society’s ideal of man is something I firmly believe needs to be a primary goal of a teacher, especially when aiming to help all children have equitable experiences in education and their further pursuits of achievement.

While Essentialism is a philosophy of education I passionately align with, I also aim to, and will continue to strive to, incorporate goals of Existentialism in my teaching practice. Existentialism, as described by Cohen (1999) is the educational philosophy that emphasizes reality as subjective, with a “focus on freedom, the development of authentic individuals” (p. 2). Cohen continues to elaborate that genuine learning experiences, which are student directed and initiated, are the pursuit of this philosophy (p. 2). Measuring, tracking or standardizing student learning is opposed by this view (p. 2). What this means, is that a teacher’s goal is to help the individual develop at their pace and in a unique manner. A student should explore learning objectives through their subjective lens, which is influenced by their culture and environment. The AAE Code of Ethics also suggests that this is a facet of an ethical class culture, as a teacher should help a student realize “his or her own personal potential” (p. 1) Over the last year of teaching, I have seen the need for students to be able to creatively express themselves while learning, and to grow into their own personalities. What this model of education is articulating, and what I have witnessed in the classroom, is that students learn best when they learn the content through an experience that is meaningful to them.

Existentialism and Essentialism are two educational theories I draw from when crafting my own values and beliefs about how a classroom should function. While I do see the imperativeness of tracking student’s progress, in order to help the students be responsible for their learning, and in order to motivate the teacher to teach with urgency and conviction, I want students to learn these standards in a way that is unique to them. Children need to know the goals their class is working towards and be invested in them. These goals should connect to the ideal society has set in order to best prepare students for the world they will enter in to. However, students learn best when they can practice the content or learning material in a way that highlights their lived experiences and that is self-initiated. For example, while it is imperative that children in Transitional Kindergarten/ Kindergarten learn all 26 letters in the alphabet, in order to set them up for success in a society that prioritizes those who are literate, the way in which they learn them can and should reflect their authentic beings. Whether they learn the letters through letter raps, which are common in my classroom, through letter scavenger hunts or through artistic means, they are all achieving the ideal, yet in their own genuine and self-initiated way. A classroom should provide many different opportunities and ways to achieve common goals, as this helps students realize their own potential but also ensures that students become “citizens of the greater community of the republic” (P.1).

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