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Assignment 1: Curriculum Philosophy

In the past two decades, I have seen numerous curriculum guides come across my desk; some have even been documents that I have created along with other committee members. After examining and having contributed to a few of these guides, never have I experienced the conversation of discussing the origins of the educational philosophy behind each of the documents that have been developed. Even though the philosophical base whether Realism, Idealism or Pragmatism have not been at the root of the discussion, the end product and the focus of the curriculum has clearly fallen into one of these categories which, at times, has overlapped with one another.

When developing curriculum, it is essential to have a clear understanding of the educational philosophy, the instructional objective, the role of the teacher and the curricular focus in order to lay the proper groundwork to ensure its success. In *Contemporary Issues in Curriculum*, Ornstein (2015) describes four curriculum philosophies which should serve as a basis for curriculum decision making (p.6). The one philosophy that truly resonates with me is Essentialism which focuses on teaching the basic essential skills needed in order to promote excellence in academic institutions throughout our nation.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2003), as cited in Transforming American Education, “One-third of high school graduates are unprepared for post-secondary education, forcing community colleges and four year universities to focus time and

resources on remedial work for incoming students (p.2). As an educator in an urban setting, it is my belief that it is necessary to maintain a philosophical approach based on Essentialism in an effort to promote the basics of a well-rounded education in order provide students with the necessary skills to achieve academic success. One in which the role of the instructor is to be an expert in his/her field and is responsible for teaching essential skills and core values.

The origins of Essentialism can be traced back to William Chandler Bagley, a prominent professor of education at the Teachers College at Columbia University. He was also the founder of the Essentialistic Education Society and the author of Education and Emergent Man (1934). According to Bagley, “It is no accident that the arts of recording, computing, and measuring have been among the first concerns of organized education. Every civilized society has been founded upon these arts, and when they have been lost, civilization has invariably collapsed” (Today’s Education, 1941 as cited in Parkay, F. and Hass, G.). For Bagley, a curriculum based on the essentials was paramount to promoting a literate society.

Curricular initiatives based on the need for a teacher centered approach can be traced to the late 1950’s with the Soviet launch of the Sputnik. According to Gutek, (2000) as cited in Ryan and Townsend, “Progressivism and life adjustment education were increasingly criticized for failing to prepare Americans to compete globally, and the National Defense Education Act of 1958 emphasized a back-to-basics approach by funding math, science and foreign language programs along with teacher training” (p.44). Subsequent to that era, we are currently facing a similar policy environment which has emerged with an essentialist accountability model of high-stakes testing with quantitatively measured standards while teachers still employ progressive, student-centered strategies” (p. 45).

Studies have also been conducted on popular fictional representations of teachers and students in film and in television during the 1950’s. Such portrayals include elementary school classrooms, as well as, college level. One of the television shows highlighted in the study included *Leave it to Beaver* in which, during various episodes, the role of the teacher was to maintain classroom discourse which is clearly an element of Essentialism. The primary purpose of the study was to examine whether the public perceptions of the role of the teacher coincided with the new shift in Essentialism with a teacher-centered classroom (Ryan and Townsend). Even though many of the popular media depicted a progressive student-centered approach, many of the educational journals of the post war period endorsed an Essentialist philosophical approach while promoting progressivism.

As would be expected, the great debate in curriculum and policy has not only been explored in the United States, but also overseas. In a recent article, Swedish upper secondary schools investigated the four philosophical approaches highlighted in Ornstein. Participants examined the best approach to teaching History and what subjects should be mandatory at all levels. “While progressivist thinking was widespread and dominant in the first part of the period under study, substantial inroads were gradually made by essentialist ideas” (Elgstrom and Hellstenius, p. 732). As part of their debate, all four approaches were skillfully outlined in order to thoughtfully lay the groundwork for policy and changes in curriculum.

When designing and developing curriculum it is highly essential to adopt reflective practices in order to create an instructional program which is well-suited for all students alike.

One can certainly argue in favor or against a philosophical educational approach that supports Perennialism, Essentialism, Progressivism or Reconstructionism. The debate has been going on for centuries and will not cease any time soon. All in all, the end goal of institutional settings is to continuously promote teaching and learning in the best interest of all learners by thoughtfully integrating curriculum and design based on a sound philosophical approach.

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