



Research Article

Analysis of Essentialism: The Educational Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the educational philosophy of essentialism. Creators of this theory had strong ideas for what education in America should be like. To create successful, contributing members of society, essential subjects of education were originally decided upon and taught. Some consider essentialism to be an extension of John Dewey's progressivism. Others believe that the theory of essentialism alone was not enough to make positive changes to our education system, leading to more established acts and mandates regarding student success. Throughout this paper, enjoy reading the various opinions and definitions of this theory by a variety of authors. When considering educational philosophies, there are many to choose from. A countless number of great minds have poured into the theories and practices of education that are used today. Some practices are somewhat outdated, yielding insignificant impact, while others are greatly effective within the classroom. One of these educational philosophies is essentialism, founded by William Bagley in 1938. Essentialism is the theory that children are progressively taught basic or essential skills that are needed for life after school. Based on the nature of this educational philosophy - containing the 'essentials' of learning - readers can see why essentialism is one of the most important theories to be considered within an education system.

Summary and Historical Context

The educational philosophy of essentialism states that students should learn "traditional basic subjects and that these should be learned thoroughly and rigorously. An essentialist program normally teaches children progressively, from less complex skills to more complex" [1]. Essentialist teachers typically teach basic subjects, such as reading, writing, history, math, and science. Essentialism supports the idea of teaching common (or essential) knowledge to members of society. William Bagley was considered an influential, historical essentialist. He pioneered this educational theory in 1938!. Bagley's work, *The Case for Essentialism in Education* (2000) [2], explains to readers that learning interests often grow out of topics that are not initially appealing. Additionally, Bagley states that control, direction, and guidance are necessary to the human species. Self-discipline should be the goal of learning and growing, according to Bagley, but imposed discipline is also necessary. Lastly, Bagley believes that freedom is not a gift, but instead, a victory that is

won. As readers have probably noticed, essentialism comes from the word "essential," meaning critical parts or fundamental aspects [3]. Within education, essentialism is considered as the basic knowledge needed for both academics and behavior. When this educational theory was created, it was enforced so that our nation's educational system would not fall behind, but instead, rise above competitors and increase our standards toward education. According to Şahin (2018) [4], challenging work and rigorous effort are the core center of education and curriculum. When adding in the theory of essentialism, the core center of education and curriculum shifts to include essential knowledge and skills. These skills and pieces of knowledge are desperately needed for students to become well-balanced citizens after completing their schooling. When essentialism is discriminated against (or when students are not provided with essential knowledge), then it is considered to be taxonomy within politics and natural sciences. This is why knowledge provided within the essentialism theory is absolutely essential - it is necessary for students' growth and

development as U.S. citizens.

Critical Analysis

When Woolmer published his work in 1976, he regarded essentialism as a relatively new theory. He stated, “There is no single volume exclusively concerned with the essentialist tradition. The indirect or incidental literature, on the other hand, makes a small library, and is discussed in the subsequent chapters” [5]. While several other educational theories were being discussed and established, essentialism was just beginning. Throughout his manuscript, Woolmer seems to believe that essentialism is an adjustment of Dewey’s progressivism. On page eleven, we read that Michael Demiashkevich actually coined the term “essentialism.” He first included it in *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1935) [6], proposing it as a corrective of progressivism. This idea proved that the actual concepts making up the educational theory of essentialism to be much older than the theory of essentialism itself. Regardless, the term and theory of essentialism was vitally important when the Essentialist Committee of 1938 was founded. This committee also included William Bagley, the historian mentioned above!

An analysis by Blanford (2010)[7] examines the belief that life in America is better than in other nations. This idea is due to America’s history of rights for quality of life, economics, and military. Some believe that the United States has become “accustomed to thinking of itself as the best in the world” (p. 12). When the philosophy of essentialism became more popular in America, this idea seemed to fade away. Americans needed to maintain their superior status to other nations and guarantee that their children are coming out of school with crucial and essential knowledge. However, even though Americans can often ‘talk the talk,’ they cannot always ‘walk the walk’. In 1983, a report titled “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform” showcased processes within the U.S. education system that were proving to be ineffective [7]. According to the report, there were several issues within U.S. schools, including areas of literacy, standardized testing, and levels of education among current and previous graduates. After this report, five new basics (or essentials) of education were established, including English, math, science, social studies, and computer science. Additionally, the report encouraged regular standardized testing to identify students’ proficiency levels and strengths within these five essential subject areas.

Unfortunately, after this report was published, the academic results did not improve as hoped. In an effort to combat America’s ineffective education system, the No Child Left behind Act (NCLB) was passed in 2002. In passing the NCLB, the “leaders of the nation raised the role of federal government in the U.S. educational system in “potentially historic” fashion. This new measure was a wide reaching effort to improve the effectiveness of U.S. schools”

[7]. The impacts of the NCLB act have been monumental and can thank the theory of essentialism for giving it a kick-start.

Comparison of Educational Philosophy with Personal Educational Beliefs

In my personal opinion, essentialism is important to education when considering the core subjects. I believe that students need to be taught ‘the essentials’ of education while in school, so that they are well prepared for society after graduation. I am thankful for the growth that has happened within and because of this educational philosophy throughout our education system. Personally, I prefer to teach the essential subjects within my classroom at school so that my students are well prepared to be successful citizens. Additionally, I like to teach on the essential subjects so the content being taught aligns with the school curriculum. Even though essentialism is relatively new (and newly enforced) within our society, I am thankful that we have it and can rely on it to teach our students what they need to know. The ideas of Bagley and Demiashkevich positively shaped our education system to get it to where it is today. While I am thankful for the growth that has happened, I do think that there is more growth to be done. We are teaching essential subjects and enforcing laws that leave no child behind. However, I think as a nation, we could strive for more inclusivity, better test scores, and education that applies to our students as they grow older. This educational philosophy is wonderful and has changed America’s education system greatly, but there is still more work to be done here.

Implications for Today’s Education and Classroom

In today’s education and classroom, essentialism is extremely important. If students do not know the essential subjects, how can they become contributing members of society? If they do not learn the fundamentals of American history, how can they strive towards a better future for our country? If they do not succeed in mathematics, how can they perform everyday tasks, such as balancing a checkbook or measuring a fence? These essential subjects are quite necessary to the students of America as they grow and develop into our country’s future. Essentialism provides our youth with the central knowledge and skills needed to make positive change.

Conclusion

When considering the educational philosophy of essentialism, founded by William Bagley in 1938, we are reminded of the importance of essential skills. Based on this theory, children are progressively taught subjects and skills which are needed for becoming a contributing member of society. Essentialism is one of the most important theories to be considered within an education system, as it deals with what is taught in schools, how much focus is placed upon specific topics, and the impact it has upon our future generation. Our students need these essential skills and our country

needs future leaders that are educated and well prepared.

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