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Philosophies of Education

This section examines four philosophies of education—perennialism, essentialism, progressivism, and reconstructionism—that derive from the larger philosophical systems we have been discussing. We chose these particular educational philosophies because each one has stood the test of time and has had a significant impact on the development of educational policies and practices in the United States. We describe and compare each in terms of how it deals with the three fundamental questions presented at the start of this chapter: What are the purposes of education? What should be taught, and how should it be taught? What should the role of teachers be, and what types of relationships should they develop with their students? Table 3.2 displays the characteristics of each educational philosophy.

We can think of these four educational philosophies as existing along a continuum in the same way the larger philosophical systems do. On one end is perennialism, a school of thought that emphasizes the constancy of human nature and knowledge and the enduring aspects of society. On the other end is reconstructionism, which emphasizes the changes in human nature and knowledge and the need to constantly reconstruct society to meet these changes. In some ways, this philosophical continuum is similar to the conservative/liberal continuum that is used to label political positions and other schools of thought. Generally, people with conservative political beliefs tend to support schooling practices that conserve existing knowledge, values, and practices. People with liberal beliefs, on the other hand, tend to support school programs designed to accommodate changing knowledge and social conditions.

The four major philosophies of education are perennialism, essentialism, progressivism, and reconstructionism.

Table 3.2

Educational Philosophies

	Perennialism	Essentialism	Progressivism	Reconstructionism
Purpose of education?	Conserve society/train intellect	Transmit essentials to all	Prepare for change	Reconstruct society
What is to be taught?	Classics	Basic academic subjects	Based on needs and interests of students	What is needed to reconstruct society to meet new challenges
Role of teacher?	Authority	Leader	Facilitator	Leader/facilitator

Table 3.2 shows the *logical* development and relationship of these philosophies to each other, while the following discussion presents them as they developed *chronologically*.

Perennialism continues to be the prevailing view on which most schooling in Western society is based.

Perennialism

The educational philosophy of **perennialism** is derived from both idealism and realism. From idealism comes the combination of ideas that truth is universal and unchanging. It is independent of time, place, and the immediate physical reality that surrounds us. From realism comes an emphasis on rationality and the importance of education in training our intellect in the search for truth.

Perennialism maintains that the purpose of schools is to prepare children to accept their places in a society built upon a long and tested tradition. Society has a natural order, and schools should operate as testing grounds to determine where children will fit in this order. To do this, schools should offer all children an academic curriculum based on the classics, compendiums of human knowledge that have been tested over time. The purpose of such a curriculum is to train the intellect in a broad, general way. As a result, it will become evident who are the brightest and best, who will be fit to be the leaders in society. Perennialism contends that schools should not address either the fleeting, narrow interests of students or the immediate needs of society. These concerns are left to other social institutions. The role of the teacher, who has been trained in the same type of academic curriculum, is that of moral and intellectual authority figure. Perennialists hold that courses in academic subjects are a far more important part of teacher education than courses in how to teach. Teachers should be role models of educated people.

Perennialism has its roots in the Greek classics, which dominated early education in this country. Its clearest articulation in the United States, however, occurred primarily in the twentieth century. One of its foremost advocates was Robert Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago during the 1960s. His famous "Great Books" curriculum centered on the classics of Western thought—books such as *Darwin's Origin of the Species* and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It is in these great works, he argued, that students can find the best representations of eternal truth, and it is through these works that their intellects are best developed.

In 1982, Mortimer J. Adler published *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto*. In it he emphasized the importance of a broad and intellectually demanding curriculum built around the great works and traditions of the liberal arts and sciences. According to Adler and his colleagues, immersion in great works helps students reach a state called *paideia*, that is, a state of moral goodness and intellectual enlightenment. Adler, Hutchins, and other perennialists argue that requiring students to take an intellectually demanding curriculum is the only way to ensure equal opportunity for all. Other, more diverse, curricula that separate students into various tracks are elitist in that they deny many students access to the richest and most demanding intellectual traditions.

However, critics of the perennialist perspective argue that as long as we expect all children to learn in a single way, through an abstract and mainly book-oriented curriculum, only those students whose cultures have conditioned them to learn in this way are likely to be successful. Other children, whose cultural or cognitive learning styles condition them to learn through hands-on or group-oriented activities, will find school boring and meaningless. Furthermore, critics argue, the books and ideas proposed by Hutchins and Adler promote a Eurocentric view of the world. They tend

to ignore the contributions of women and minorities and the great works produced by other cultures. The curriculum, they argue, should represent the wisdom of the world, not just a small portion of it.

In sum, those educators who identify themselves as perennialists are likely to stress the importance of students' acquiring broad and thorough subject-matter knowledge through the study of the classics; schools' maintaining demanding academic standards with rewards for those who perform at the highest levels; and schools and classrooms in which teachers and students demonstrate the decorum in their relationships and behavior that is necessary to achieve these goals. Perennialism continues to be the prevailing view on which most schooling in Western society is based.

Progressivism

At the end of the nineteenth century, John Dewey, one of America's leading philosophers and a prominent proponent of pragmatism, began to channel his interests toward education, challenging the long-standing grip of perennialism on American education. Although such individuals as Rousseau and the Swiss educational reformer Johann Pestalozzi were forerunners of progressive views of education, it was Dewey who systematically developed and tested the tenets of American progressivism.

As the chairman of the departments of psychology, philosophy, and pedagogy at the University of Chicago, Dewey established his famous laboratory school in 1895. The two announced purposes of the school were to exhibit, test, and criticize ideas about how children learn and to watch children to discover how they learn. Such an approach was in stark contrast to the static, tradition-oriented views of perennialism.

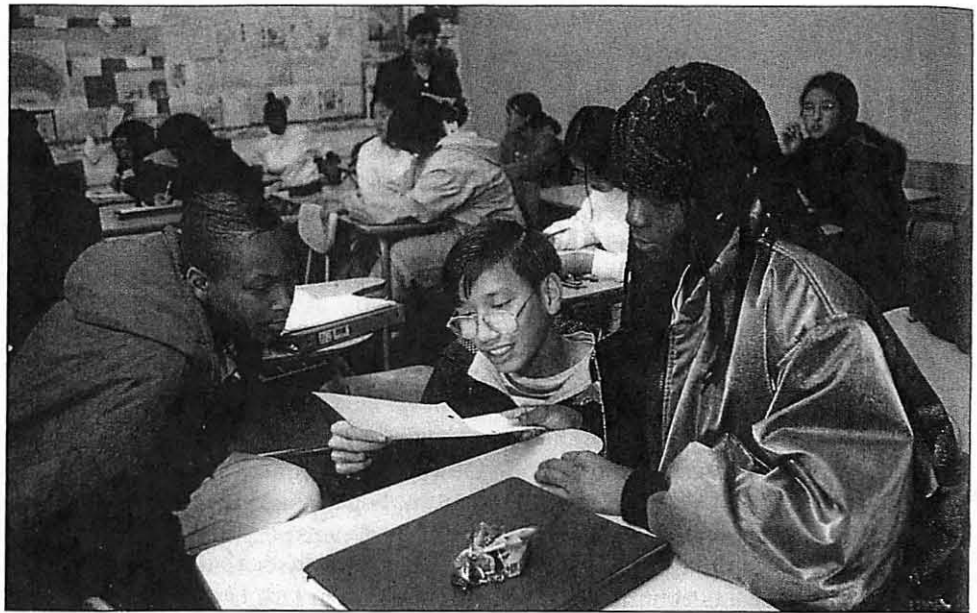
Progressivism purports that the purpose of education is to prepare children to live in society, but that since society is in a constant state of change, schools should prepare students to confront the changing world. Dewey rejected the notion that reality and ways of knowing and behaving are absolute and of divine origin. Rather, he argued, reality is continually reconstructed, based on an ever-changing universe and the changing needs and interests of human beings. This, progressivism maintains, is the world for which children should be prepared.

Whereas the curriculum emphasized by perennialists is academic and teacher centered, that proposed by progressives is highly social and student centered. Rejecting the notion that the function of schools is simply to train the intellect, Dewey argued that children should acquire knowledge through meaningful activities and apply it to real social situations. Thus, progressivism rejects classroom practices that involve children passively learning information "poured" into them by authoritarian teachers or from books. Further, progressivism stresses the importance of addressing the needs and experiences of the whole child, not just a child's intellect. As much as possible, what a child studies should be determined by his or her own experiences and interests. Moreover, the best method of intellectual training is through helping children learn to work cooperatively to solve problems, not through studying a fixed body of knowledge. In short, progressive educators see cooperation and problem solving as the key to human adaptation in an ever-changing world.

Progressivism maintains that the role of the teacher is as a facilitator who helps children to examine their experiences as they interact with the physical and social worlds and to sort out for themselves a satisfactory role in society. Teachers are not considered authority figures handing down knowledge and precepts by which

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children should live. Rather, it is important that they prepare a wide repertoire of classroom activities to stimulate and satisfy the interests of all their students. They need to give students as much contact with real-life situations as they possibly can so students can test their ideas, and learn from their experiences.

How do differences in the tenets of perennialism and progressivism manifest themselves in the classroom? In his study of constancy and change in American classrooms from 1880 to 1990, Larry Cuban (1993) proposed that the following six classroom indicators be used to analyze the dominant form of instruction taking place in a classroom.

1. Arrangement of classroom furniture
2. Ratio of teacher talk to student talk
3. Whether most instruction occurs individually, in small groups, or with the entire class
4. Presence or absence of learning or interest centers used by students as part of the regular school day
5. Degree of physical movement students are allowed without asking the teacher
6. Degree of reliance on tests and use of varied instructional materials

Using these indicators, we can see in Table 3.3 the differences in perennialism and progressivism as they are likely to play out in the classroom.

Essentialism

Beginning in the 1930s and reemerging with increased strength in the 1950s and 1980s, essentialism has decried progressivism's focus on *how* children learn rather than on *what* children learn. A kind of neoperennialism with roots in both idealism

Table 3.3
Comparison of Perennialism and Progressivism

Indicator	Perennialism	Progressivism
Arrangement of desks	Straight rows/facing teacher	Squares/horseshoe/scattered
Teacher-student talk	Predominantly teacher	Predominantly students
Instructional grouping	Entire class	Individuals/small groups
Learning centers	Absent or used only with teacher permission	Use determined freely by students
Student physical movement	Only with teacher permission	At will
Instructional materials	Structured/standardized/routine	Flexible/created with and by students/varied

and realism, **essentialism** maintains that the purpose of schools is both to preserve the knowledge and values of the past and to provide children with the skills essential to live successful and meaningful lives in present society. Academic subject matter has priority in the curriculum, but its primary purpose is to transmit useful skills. In response to the growing progressive movement, essentialism argued that teachers must be returned to their traditional authoritarian place in the classroom as dispensers of knowledge and skills and as role models of useful and competent citizens. Essentialism shares with perennialism the view that schools should conserve important social traditions and the curriculum should be teacher- and subject-centered. But there is more emphasis in essentialism on education's relevance in preparing individuals to live in the current society and less on absolutism and enduring issues. Perennialism focuses more on the value of studying the classics for their own sake, because they help individuals to become liberally educated. Essentialism focuses more on the utilitarian value of these great works that helps individuals develop high-order thinking skills and acquire knowledge which will better society.

In the last few decades, there have been several well-publicized manifestations of essentialism. The **back-to-basics movement** of the 1970s and 1980s criticized progressive educators for becoming so preoccupied with children's social needs that they failed to teach the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. During the 1970s' alternative school movement—primarily a progressive response to the needs of students who did not fit in highly structured public schools—back-to-basics schools emerged in many urban areas. Then, as now, these schools often have long waiting lists.

The back-to-basics movement reached its height with the publication in 1983 of *A Nation at Risk*, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which recommended “five new basics”—English, social studies, science, mathematics, and computer science. In reality, computer science was the only new entry. This report has been the touchstone for educational policy making at the federal level since its publication and has generated volumes of response among both educators and state governments.

Another publication that helped publicize the essentialist view was E. D. Hirsch's book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987). Hirsch states that there is an essential core of background knowledge that all Americans need to know in order to participate in public discourse and to transmit our cultural heritage. He maintained that it is the responsibility of the schools to provide this cultural literacy. To some extent, this viewpoint is a reaction against the growing emphasis on nonwestern, nonmainstream literature that many progressive educators advocate.

In summary, essentialism, which in the post-World War II era has come to replace perennialism as the dominant educational philosophy in American public

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schools, holds that the purpose of the schools is to prepare students for their roles in society through a curriculum focused on basic skills and traditional academic content, taught by teachers who expect respect for authority and discipline.

Social Reconstructionism

The Progressive Education Association was organized in 1919. Members were unanimous in rejecting traditionally structured, authoritarian, teacher-centered classrooms, but their different views regarding the primary purpose of education eventually led to the formulation of a related but somewhat distinct educational philosophy, social reconstructionism. First articulated in the 1930s in George S. Count's book *Dare the World Build a New Social Order?*, this offshoot of progressivism paralleled the growth of essentialism.

Progressives who identified themselves as social reconstructionists believe that the purpose of schools is to address the needs of society as a whole, not just the social needs of individual students. Education should encompass broad multicultural and global concerns and prepare students to deal with social problems on a large scale. **Reconstructionism** asserts that curriculum should focus on such issues as technology, the interdependence of human beings for survival, social inequities, and population and environmental problems. Like other progressives, reconstructionists believe that schools must make students social problem solvers and agents of change if the society is going to survive.

Reconstructionists also argue that schools should model the solutions to social problems and the role of the teacher is to help students examine major social problems and controversial issues. This is consistent with Dewey's views that, as much as possible, schools should, themselves, be working societies, in many ways microcosms of the larger society. This perspective was manifest, for instance, in the decision on the part of the federal government, first in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and subsequently in the 1964 *Civil Rights Act*, that the way to achieve an integrated society is to integrate schools. Many argued, in fact, that it is impossible to achieve social integration without school integration. The growing level of concern about the decrease in minority teachers in our schools, even as the minority population increases, reflects the social reconstructionist's view that schools should be a model of the way we believe the world should be.

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Examples of the Four Philosophies of Education

Let's return to the three situations posed at the outset of this chapter and examine some possible responses.

You are a middle school teacher, and one of your students—a boy from a poor home with slightly below average academic talents—asks whether he should pursue a college preparation program or one that is mostly vocational when he gets to high school. How would you advise him? Why?

A perennialist response: You advise this student to take the college preparation program when he gets to high school whether or not he ever goes to college, because you believe that everyone should be exposed to great works of literature and study the other academic disciplines and high school is likely the only opportunity he will ever have to do so. Your advice is consistent with the perennialist view that schools are responsible for developing everyone's intellect to the fullest extent possible and



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The Forgotten Half

In 1988, the William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship published *The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America's Youth and Young Families*. On the first page, the "Forgotten Half" is defined:

Who are the Forgotten Half? In non-statistical terms, they are the young people who build our homes, drive our busses, repair our automobiles, fix our televisions, maintain and serve our offices, schools, and hospitals, and keep the production lines of our mills and factories moving. To a great extent they determine how well the American family, economy, and democracy function. They are also the thousands of young men and women who aspire to work productively but never quite "make it" to that kind of employment. For these members of the Forgotten Half, their lives as adults start in the economic limbo of unemployment, part-time jobs and poverty wages. Many of them never break free.

In 1998, a group of foundations sponsored *The Forgotten Half Revisited*. The conclusion is that things for this group have improved little in the intervening decade. Because an increasing number of young people are going on to postsecondary education, today they are the "Forgotten 42%," made up of those who either drop out of school or graduate but do not go on to college.

Data on employment and poverty rates show that this "Forgotten Half" are at a clear disadvantage. Only 30 percent of blacks between the ages of 16 and 24 who dropped out of school are employed in comparison to 53 percent of white dropouts. Getting a high school diploma sends the employment rate for blacks to 59 percent and whites to 77 percent. The employment rate for blacks who get a college degree is almost equal

to that of whites: 88 percent versus 90 percent. Data on poverty show that the situation has gotten worse over the last decade for everyone but college graduates. Only 2.5 percent of college graduates lived below the poverty line in 1989 and in 1996. For those with some college, the proportion has increased from 11 percent to 16 percent; for high school graduates, from 19 percent to 24 percent; for high school dropouts, from 45 percent to 50 percent.

The final chapter of this report concludes:

We should dispense with the distinction between educational policy and workforce development policy. The fundamental goal of both is that high school students should be actively engaged by their studies and that they should leave secondary school with a solid base of academic . . . skills that will enable them to succeed in occupational or academic education at the post-secondary level. Whatever the performance of the economy may be, our society is far from achieving that goal.

This report raises the serious issue of what should be the primary purpose of our schools. On the one hand, if the primary purpose should be to sort and select those who will receive the greatest economic rewards, the schools appear to be achieving their purpose. If, however, the purpose should be to prepare all students to be successful in society, the schools are clearly falling far short of their goal. What do you think? In thinking back to your high school years, can you identify students who were part of the "Forgotten Half"? How would you change your high school to meet their educational needs?

Source: Bracey, G. "The Forgotten 42%." *Pbi Delta Kappan* 80 (1999). pp. 711-712.

that the best means of accomplishing this goal is through teaching the classics and the academic disciplines.

Another perennialist response: You advise him that, based on his past performance, he is not likely to be successful in a college preparation program and that the appropriate place for him is in a vocational program, which will prepare him for the world he is likely to be part of when he graduates from high school. This advice is

consistent with the perennialist view that society has a natural order and that a major role of the schools is to determine where students fit in this order.

That you can give such different advice from the same philosophical orientation illustrates that it is not only the view you have or the position you hold that identifies your underlying philosophy but the reasons you give for those views and positions as well. The same assumptions about the purposes of schools, who should control the curriculum, and the role of teachers can lead to very different actions and advice in educational practice.

A progressive response: If, on the other hand, you advise this student to take the vocational course because it seems best suited to his interest in mechanical things and to his hands-on learning style, your advice is based in the progressive view that students learn best when engaged in tasks that draw on their natural interests and inclinations. You hope that the vocational teachers use hands-on learning tasks to teach students how to read, compute, and work cooperatively in groups, not just teach mechanical skills.

Once again, it is the underlying reasons for some recommended course of action that signals one's philosophy of education, not the course of action itself. Two teachers can give the very same advice to a student for completely opposite reasons. It is important always to ask yourself and others why a person puts forth a particular position. You may be surprised at the areas of agreement and disagreement you uncover. Analyzing reasons for your views is the first step toward becoming a reflective educator whose practices are integrated and consistent.

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You are a member of the high school's disciplinary committee and have to consider the case of Connie, a girl who is constantly the source of classroom disruption, frequently misses school, and has been kicked out of school several times in the last month. How would you deal with Connie? Would you recommend that she be expelled or assigned to another counselor more accustomed to this type of student? Why?

A perennialist response: You recommend that Connie be expelled, arguing that she has had plenty of opportunity to find her place in the academic environment, and it is clear that she is not going to, that she does not belong in school interfering with the education of the students who really want to learn. This reasoning is consistent with the perennialist view that schools exist primarily to develop students' intellect through study of the academic disciplines and that other goals, such as developing social skills, cannot be permitted to interfere with these academic goals.

A progressive response: You recommend that Connie be assigned to another counselor or that the school find or develop a learning environment more suited to Connie's temperament and needs. This position is consistent with the progressive view that schools should address the needs and experiences of the whole child, not just his or her intellectual growth. This view further holds that students' social and emotional growth are just as crucial to a healthy society as are the goals of the traditional academic curriculum.

You are a member of a site-based school council and are informed that budget difficulties necessitate cutting at least one major school program. Would you be inclined to cut the athletic program or the music program? Why?

A perennialist response: You support the music program, citing research that indicates students who study music do better in their academic subjects than students

who do not. Your arguments come from a perennialist perspective, which holds that academic achievement is the most important criterion on which to base decisions about school curriculum.

A progressive response: You favor funding the athletic program because it serves more students and addresses a broader array of student needs than the music program. Your views are based in the progressive perspective that schools should be democratic institutions that promote the full development of as many students as possible.

An essentialist response: You support keeping the athletic program because a substantial number of marginal students keep up with their studies only so they can participate in sports. Thus, having an athletic program not only helps to lower the drop-out rate, but provides many students with the essential skills they will need to function in contemporary society. This argument is consistent with an essentialist philosophy of education.

A reconstructionist response: You argue for cutting both the athletic and the music program. Your aim is to use the funds to support the expansion of technology in all the schools, including hardware, software, and teacher training for complete integration of technology into the curriculum. The basis of your argument is that schools must live up to their clear responsibility for preparing students to lead society into the twenty-first century and to meet the demands of a global culture. This is the argument of a reconstructionist.

Although many policy statements and classroom practices are clearly rooted in one or another educational philosophy, in most cases, discovering the underlying assumptions of your own views or those of other educators or educational policy makers is rarely that clear-cut and straightforward. It is often necessary to examine justifications for these views, since it is often the case that a variety of people endorse what appear to be the same practices but for very different reasons and with very different outcomes in mind, as the first case illustrated. The educational philosophies and the larger philosophical systems examined in this chapter are analytical tools, or logical constructs for “peeling the intellectual onions”—positions, arguments, and actions—to see what assumptions lie within.

It is further important to note that there is no *one* perennialist, essentialist, progressive, or reconstructionist response to an educational dilemma or issue. Nor is there a *single* composite picture of what constitutes a perennialist, essentialist, progressive, or reconstructionist teacher or classroom.

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Defining a Personal Philosophy of Education

At the beginning of this chapter, we discussed the relevance of philosophy to your becoming a professional teacher. As Chapter 13 discusses more fully, being a professional involves more than having highly developed pedagogical skills. It involves understanding how and why classrooms and schools have come to operate as they do and what possibilities there are for them to be otherwise. This means that you will need to examine your own classroom practices and analyze your underlying assumptions when you choose to do one thing rather than another. Additionally, you need to be able to define where a particular practice fits in with your overall vision of what teaching and learning are all about and whether or not it is consistent with other things you say and do. Philosophy is a critical tool in the quest to become this kind of teacher because it provides you with logically consistent schemes of analysis and the skills for informed reflection.

Furthermore, as you develop your own educational philosophy—an ongoing activity throughout your career—you will be better able to respond to those frequent, unique situations that teachers face almost every day. Thinking on your feet and doing the appropriate thing in the middle of a classroom situation is probably one of the most daunting tasks new teachers face. Building a philosophy of education through your reflections will not only enable you to become a truly professional classroom practitioner, it will help you to better understand practices and policy statements of others. As you participate in the profession beyond the classroom, whether it is on a site-based management committee, in the teachers' association, working with a districtwide committee, or collaborating with the state department of education in an activity such as standardized test development, you will want to have at least the beginnings of your own educational philosophy from which you can analyze information.

Two Approaches

An eclectic approach to developing a personal philosophy of education can lead to confusing inconsistencies in professional practice.

At this point, you are probably asking how you, as a beginning teacher, can go about the task of critically reflecting on your beliefs, assumptions, and values. Many students studying these systems of analysis say they agree with *some* components of each philosophical system and philosophy of education. Many professors of education endorse doing this, calling it an *eclectic* approach, selecting the best from various views. On the surface, this solution may appear harmless, perhaps even a good idea. However, as you pursue a deeper understanding of both your own and others' beliefs and practices, such eclecticism can lead to confusing inconsistencies in your professional practice.

Other professors argue that it is important that you adopt one philosophy of education—often their own—and insist that you plan your classroom practices around the precepts of that educational philosophy. This approach to working with teacher-education students is most likely to be evident during your student teaching, when your college supervisor or your cooperating teacher might insist that you do things a particular way. If you, as a future teacher, are going to have the opportunity to experiment with various ways of doing things during your student teaching, you will want to be able to articulate which educational philosophy most represents your views and why you, too, want to do things in certain ways.

Choose and Follow

Reflective people who have a strong need for consistency are inclined to adopt a particular educational philosophy, such as Perennialism or Progressivism, and to follow it as closely as possible. In fact, many of the educational reform movements that proliferated during the 1970s and 1980s were centered on two concepts that are an integral part of Perennialism: a curriculum that focuses on the academic disciplines and using objective test scores to sort students according to their academic performance.

The danger in using this choose-and-follow approach when forming your own philosophy of education is the possibility of becoming too narrow in your outlook on the world and on education, especially as a beginning teacher. As we repeatedly point out, being a professional involves adapting your professional knowledge and practice to a never-ending variety of situations and contexts. Just as no single-teaching methodology can be stretched to fit all teaching situations, it is unlikely that any single philosophy of education can be stretched to fit all conceivable educational situations. While adherence

to some coordinated set of beliefs does bring much needed consistency to one's teaching, slavish adherence to any set of beliefs can cause one to become an overly rigid, nonadaptive teacher. Try to own ideas rather than letting ideas own you.

Mix and Match

As already suggested, in reading about educational philosophies, you probably responded positively to some but not all tenets within each. And it is tempting to select what you feel are the best ideas from each and weave them into your own eclectic philosophy of education. This is an appealing prospect to those who like to think of themselves as open-minded, adaptive thinkers. The danger here is that too much adaptability can lead to inconsistency because core beliefs do not exist.

Such inconsistencies in school systems abound. Let's consider a couple of examples. Currently many high schools have advanced placement (AP) courses that students can take for college credit if they are able to pass the standardized tests given at their completion. This is clearly a form of tracking, providing intensive courses for the most academically able students. It is also clearly in keeping with the Perennialist view of education. In one high school in which these courses had been taken for decades almost exclusively by only the highest achieving students, parental accusations of elitism eventually resulted in school officials' opening the courses, which previously had performance requirements for admittance, to anyone who wanted to take them. As you might expect, the teachers were no longer able to teach these courses at a college level inasmuch as some students' reading ability was at the third- or fourth-grade level. As a result, no one was satisfied. The academically prepared students were not receiving the level of instruction needed to pass the college-level tests, and poorly prepared students were not able to keep up with instruction, even though it had been slowed to accommodate the mixed classes. It seems clear that this high school should resume the advanced courses and maintain admittance standards or abandon them completely and have all students grouped heterogeneously.

If you think about your own school experience, you can probably identify examples of such inconsistencies. For example, imagine a teacher who goes through the lengthy "democratic" activity of having students make up their own classroom rules at the beginning of the year, a popular idea among those who consider themselves Progressive educators. She encourages them to agree on the class rules and write them on the board. If this teacher makes a practice of disciplining students for violating rules that never appeared on the board that first day of school, though, she will lose credibility with her students. Before long they will learn that she believes she is the authority figure in the classroom despite her proclamations about building a democratic learning community.

Developing Your Educational Philosophy

How much consistency versus how much adaptability? This is a question you will grapple with throughout your teaching career. No one can give you the answer. As you prepare for a career in teaching, you need to closely study other educators and ask probing questions about their practices to help you develop your own coherent educational philosophy. Before you are actually teaching in a classroom, you may not know what you will do in particular instances, but an understanding of philosophy can help you be prepared to deal with a variety of situations. It is important to

emphasize that no one educational philosophy in and of itself is better. As you begin the pursuit of identifying and defining your own philosophy of education, you will probably find yourself embracing tenets from different philosophies, in spite of the drawbacks we mentioned.

The first step in your reflection process is to identify your beliefs. How do you do this? When your field experiences begin to involve such activities as tutoring and small-group instruction, step back frequently and examine what you tell students about your expectations for them in both their classroom behavior and their academic performance. Where do your expectations fall on the philosophical continuum? Look closely at whether your own motivations to teach have more to do with helping young people develop socially or with getting them to develop academic competence. How do you envision your role as a teacher? Is it more as a leader and standard setter, or is it more as a guide and facilitator? Every time a question about curriculum arises, ask yourself what you would recommend. But more important, *examine your reasons* and, once again, attempt to identify where they fall on the philosophical continuum from perennialism to reconstructionism.

Once you are a student teacher with full responsibility for planning and teaching classes, you may feel overwhelmed with the demands this places on you. Nevertheless, you need to spend time regularly to reflect on what you say and do in your classroom and why. Student teaching is a time of experimentation and learning, a time when you can begin to develop your own coherent educational philosophy and work out its tenets in your classroom.

As you continue your professional career, we urge you to engage in a relentless analysis of your views and practices, thereby reducing the likelihood of confusing your students through inconsistency and contradiction. How do you go about doing this? Engage in frequent discussion with your colleagues and supervisors about what you do and why you do it. Solicit their critique of your views and methods. Take every opportunity that arises to observe your colleagues and analyze their practices. As you become more experienced and confident in your classroom, invite your students to critique your practices and use the opportunity to respond to them to further explore your philosophical justifications. Finally, continue your own professional development by reading a wide variety of educational journals that deal with classroom and policy issues and by participating in in-service and graduate classes that can further help you explore and expand your views.

It is important that teachers and prospective teachers engage in reflection as a routine part of their educational activities. This chapter has attempted to provide you with the tools to begin to discover and to define your own philosophy of education. It is not something that appears ready made on the first day you walk into the classroom as a teacher. Rather, you need to actively develop it while you are preparing to be a teacher. It will continue to develop throughout your professional career.

In some ways, your philosophy of education should always remain "a work in progress."

Summary



- It is important to examine and analyze your own beliefs about education and teaching since they will give direction to your thinking and actions as a teacher.
- Philosophy is the process of systematically reflecting on the world around us in an attempt to build a coherent set of beliefs and values with which to guide our actions.
- Reflective teachers will be better able to develop problem-solving skills, adapt their knowledge to new situations, establish stable and trusting classrooms, and understand divergent points of view.
- The four branches of philosophy are metaphysics, the study of the nature of reality; epistemology, the study of knowledge and knowing; axiology, the study of values and valuing; and logic, the study of the principles of reasoning.
- There are four major philosophical systems. Idealism maintains that reality is mental or spiritual; knowledge is acquired through such processes as meditation, inspiration, intuition, and reflection; and values are determined by those in authority. Realism maintains that reality is physical; knowledge is acquired through the senses; and values are found by observing nature. Both idealism and realism purport that reality, knowledge, and values are absolute. Pragmatism, like realism, maintains that knowledge is determined by the senses but that reality and values are ever changing, not absolute. Existentialism maintains that reality, knowledge, and values are totally individual.
- Philosophies of education address three basic questions: What is the purpose of education? What should be taught and how? What should be the role of teachers, and what types of relationships should they develop with their students?
- There are four basic philosophies of education. Perennialism, derived from both idealism and realism, maintains that schools should offer an academic curriculum by teachers as authority figures to provide a testing ground to identify students' place in society. Progressivism, developed directly out of pragmatism, asserts that the schools should offer a varied and student-centered curriculum with teachers as facilitators to prepare children to live in a constantly changing society. Essentialism, a kind of neoperennialism and also derived from both idealism and realism, believes that the curriculum should be primarily academic but should be made relevant to present society by teachers as role models of the useful and competent person. Social reconstructionism, an extreme form of progressivism, maintains the primary purpose of schools and teachers is to prepare students to be agents of social change and the curriculum should focus on that goal.
- It is important to develop your own coherent educational philosophy in order to achieve both consistency and adaptability in classroom policies and practices.
- Using philosophy to reflect on your educational views and practices should become a lifelong enterprise if you are to become a professional educator. This endeavor should begin during your teacher-preparation program and continue throughout your career.

Readings for the Professional

Griese, A.A. *Your Philosophy of Education: What is it?* Santa Monica, CA: Goodyear Publishing, 1981.

The purpose of this book is to link the formal structure of philosophy to future teachers' life experiences and to relate philosophy to their future experiences as teachers or educators.

Hargreaves, A. *Changing Teachers, Changing Times: Teachers Work and Culture in the Postmodern Age.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1994.

This book describes the political, economic, and social context in which schools are embedded in order to connect educational change to the changes taking place in society.

Knight, G. R. *Issues and Alternatives in Educational Philosophy.* Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1982.

This book is a survey of philosophies and philosophic issues that are relevant to the educational profession. It highlights the relationship between philosophic starting points and educational outcomes—between theory and practice.

End Case for Reflection

In the beginning of this chapter, we described an elementary school faculty meeting where teachers in grades 4 to 6 were discussing the new requirement that all teachers at this level were expected to incorporate group work in the teaching of all subjects. Let's listen to what some of the teachers in Greenleaf Middle School had to say about the requirement and the in-service.

Mrs. Mariani

I have been teaching mathematics for 25 years. There is just no way that math should be taught through a group process. Math is about learning the formulas for finding the right answers, and either you know them or you don't. No amount of group discussion is going to help you learn if you don't know the correct methods or formulas.

Mr. Starkly

I think having kids work in groups to learn, at least part of the time, is a good idea. After all, most of the work in our society is done in situations where people have to work together to solve problems. The schools are supposed to prepare students for the real world.

Mr. Eberwein

That's easy for you to say. You teach social studies, a subject in which there are almost no right answers and the whole idea is to discuss things and see everyone's point of view. I agree with Mrs. Mariani, in subjects like math and science where there is one right answer,

students need to learn how to find that right answer in the most efficient way possible. And discussing things in groups is not very efficient. That's why after I do demonstrations in Earth Science, I require each student individually to write up a very specific and clear description of the demonstration to make sure he or she understands what took place.

Ms. Bigelow

But don't you think that students can learn from each other? Maybe your demonstration or Mrs. Mariani's explanation of how to solve a math problem wasn't completely clear to one student and she might be embarrassed to ask you to explain it again. However, if she was in a group working with other students who understood, she would be more likely to ask for help.

Mrs. Frontenac

There's an even more important question here than whether or not group work is appropriate for any particular subject or teacher; it is the issue of whether the administration has the right to tell teachers how to teach. Sure, the administration wants us to incorporate every new fad into our teaching, but what about parents' reactions to what goes on in our classrooms? Aren't teachers professionals? Shouldn't they be the ones who decide the best ways for students to learn? Different teachers have different philosophies of education. Whether or not they use group work in their teaching has to do with what they think the primary purpose of education is. I don't think the administration has the right to impose their views on us.