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Philosophical Perspectives on Education

Charlene TAN

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy means “the love of wisdom”. It is a dedicated pursuit of wisdom through a systematic inquiry into the nature and meaning of the universe and of human life. Philosophy of education is the study of key philosophical ideas that have influenced educational thought and developments in the world. This chapter introduces philosophical perspectives on education by discussing five major educational thoughts or philosophies (Idealism, Realism, Pragmatism, Existentialism, and Postmodernism) and five main educational theories (perennialism, essentialism, progressivism, reconstructionism, and critical theory). Key concepts and educational implications are highlighted for each of the educational philosophies and theories. Educational philosophies originate from general philosophical systems and are comprehensive and in-depth, while educational theories are specific and formulated to serve the educational needs in the curriculum, teaching and learning. Educational philosophies refer to

complete bodies of thought that present a worldview of which education is a part, while educational theories focus on education itself and on schools (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Table 2.1 shows the connection between the five educational philosophies and five educational theories:

Table 2.1
Links between Education Philosophies and Education Theories

Educational Philosophy	Educational Theory
• Idealism • Realism	• Perennialism (rooted in Idealism and Realism) • Essentialism (rooted in Idealism and Realism)
• Pragmatism	• Progressivism (rooted in Pragmatism) • Reconstructionism (rooted in Pragmatism)
• Existentialism • Postmodernism	• Critical theory (rooted in Postmodernism and Existentialism)

FIVE PHILOSOPHIES OF EDUCATION

(1) Idealism

The educational philosophy of Idealism is one of the oldest educational philosophies, going back to Socrates and Plato in ancient Greece. Other proponents include Rene Decartes, George Berkeley, Immanuel Kant, Georg W. F. Hegel, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Idealism teaches that ideas are the only true reality, and that truth and values are absolute and universal. Idealists argue that the aim of education is to develop the intellectual capacity of the students by helping them to appreciate broad and enduring ideas and principles.

The school is seen as an intellectual institution for students to explore and discover truth. The emphasis is on cognitive development, not vocational training. In terms of curriculum, subjects should be taught with an emphasis on abstract principles, holistic learning and interdisciplinary approach. Teaching and learning should be done in stages with the purpose of preparing students to see the ideas that underpin reality. This means that at the elementary level, students should learn basic skills such as the 3 Rs – reading, writing, and arithmetic, acquire desired habits of mind such as the passion to learn, open-mindedness and perseverance. From the secondary level onwards, the curriculum should focus on subjects that introduce enduring concepts to students. Great works in philosophy, history, literature, politics and culture are especially valued. While mathematics and science should be taught, the aim is to help students grasp the abstract mathematical principles and scientific theories so that students can understand the ideas that underlie the various disciplines. Believing that everyone should know reality through a study of true ideas, the Idealists advocate that everyone should attend school. However, the emphasis on the intellectual development of students means that not everyone is capable of achieving the intellectual standards set by the Idealists. One criticism of Idealism is that it promotes intellectual elitism where only a gifted minority of intellectuals are valued in society (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). This in turn may lead to a neglect of the students' emotional and social needs (Ozmon & Craver, 2003).

What are the implications for teachers? For the Idealists, the teacher is one who is respected for his or her knowledge of the absolute and universal ideas. He or she is able to teach the key concepts and principles from the classics, patiently guide the students in their search for truth, and skilfully promote thinking in the students. While the teacher may use a variety of teaching methods such as lectures, small group discussion and project work, the goal is to encourage the students to understand the ideas and think for themselves, and not merely regurgitate the information in order to pass the exams. The Socratic Method is especially suitable for the purpose of stimulating the learner's awareness of ideas with the teacher asking leading questions

(Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Teachers should also set good examples by being knowledgeable, modelling the spirit of inquiry and living out the desirable moral qualities. As an example of an idealist lesson, consider how a primary school teacher could introduce the concept of gravity in a science lesson on gravity to his or her students in the classroom. The teacher could get students to explore the principle of gravity by studying Newton's experiments on gravity along with examples of different instances of gravity at work. The aim would be to encourage the students to reflect on how the principle of gravity works rather than drilling them with test questions from worksheets. Another example would be a history class in a secondary school on the principle of change and continuity in historical events. The focus of such a lesson would not be on the memorisation of historical facts, but on grasping the enduring themes in history. By getting students to read about great civilisations in the ancient world of India, Southeast Asia and China, the teacher could lead them to explore how the principle of change and continuity is reflected in these civilisations.

(2) Realism

Like Idealism, Realism has a long history dating back to Aristotle in ancient Greece. The other well-known proponents include Thomas Aquinas, Francis Bacon, Alfred North Whitehead, and Bertrand Russell. The realists posit that reality is found in the physical world that we live in, and that knowledge is gained through reason and experience. Knowledge obtained from scientific research and discovery is particularly useful and such knowledge is instrumental for us to survive and succeed in life. Schools are seen as academic institutions to develop the students' abilities in reasoning, observation and experimentation. The function of schools is to train and prepare professionals and technicians in a society where professionalism and technical skills are highly prized (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). The curriculum is systematic, organised and classified under different subject-matter disciplines such as languages, mathematics, and science. While all students at the elementary level should learn the basic skills of reading, writing, arithmetic, and moral values, they should

subsequently specialise in various areas of study. Higher ability students should be given a liberal education in the arts and sciences, while weaker students should be channelled to vocational training. Preferring theory to practice, Realists rate the study of theoretical subjects in liberal education higher than practical subjects in technical-vocational training (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Realists believe in using quantifiable yardsticks in assessment. These include various types of diagnostic, competency and achievement tests for both students and teachers. While Realism has been credited with promoting a down-to-earth form of education that prepares students for a knowledge-based economy, it has been criticised for valuing cognitive development at the expense of other forms of development in students. For example, the feelings and emotions of students are often ignored and undeveloped under the realist model, leading to students being subservient to the curriculum or to narrowly defined standards of excellence (Ozmon & Craver, 2003).

The Realists see teachers as experts in the various disciplines. Such a teacher knows the subject thoroughly, is skilful in explaining the content to the students and in assessing the students' understanding. Such a teacher does not teach what the students are interested in, but what is essential to develop their reasoning powers so that they can gain knowledge of the world of nature. Materials should be presented in an orderly and organised manner, and content is based on facts, reason and practical use. Clearly defined criteria in the various subject-matter are taught to students, and they are formally assessed in standardised achievement tests. For example, a mathematics teacher in a primary school will teach about multiplication by explaining the rule and providing examples with the help of pictures or manipulatives. He or she then gets the students to complete some exercises, and goes through the answers with them. A test is set at the end to appraise the students' understanding of multiplication.

(3) Pragmatism

Also known as Experimentalism, Pragmatism was introduced by writers such as Charles S. Peirce, William James, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey. While Idealists see reality as residing in true ideas, and Realists view reality in terms of the world of nature, Pragmatists argue that reality is always changing and is dependent on what we observe and experience. Knowledge claims and even values are not permanent and absolute, but are tentative and subject to revision. Rather than searching for universal ideas, it is more pragmatic to focus on using knowledge to help us achieve our desired outcomes. In the context of education, schools should help students to grow. Through activities, problems, resolutions to the problems, and a network of social relationships, students will grow by learning more effective, meaningful and satisfying ways to deal with a changing reality and to direct the course of their own lives (Gutek, 2004). To achieve the educational goal of growth, schools should not be just academic institutions; they are social institutions to prepare students for democratic living. As a miniature community, the school offers opportunities for teachers and students to engage in active learning, experiment with new ways of thinking and doing, solve problems, and build social consensus. Rather than stressing knowledge of traditions and cultural heritage, the Pragmatists prefer content and activities that are relevant to the students' interests, needs and problems. The curriculum should be inter-disciplinary, integrated and action-oriented, rather than divided into specialised and theoretical subjects. However, the weakness of a pragmatic form of education is that it may deprecate the acquisition of knowledge and water down the curriculum since there is no in-depth exploration of specific disciplines (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). Some educators are also uncomfortable with the pragmatic claim that all knowledge claims and values are tentative and changeable. They are concerned that this might lead to a relativistic and situational approach to life problems (ibid.).

The ideal teacher for the Pragmatists is one who helps the students to grow by empowering them with the knowledge, skills and dispositions

to make intelligent decisions in life. Such a teacher is not confined to the textbook or a fixed body of knowledge. He or she is able to introduce topics that students are interested in and can relate to in their lives. Rather than being a dispenser of knowledge, the teacher is a resource person and facilitator to guide the students in active learning. The teacher provides a conducive learning environment, encourages openness and collaboration among the students, scaffolds the students' learning, and guides the students in applying their knowledge to their problems. For example, a social studies teacher in a secondary school could encourage students to do a project on the problem of racial riots in Singapore. Students would adopt a cross-disciplinary approach where they research into the historical, geographical, social, cultural and economic factors involved in the racial riots that took place in Singapore. Their investigations could include literature review, interviews, surveys and other experimental approaches to the topic. The teacher serves as a facilitator by alerting them to relevant resources, providing suggestions on the project, and giving feedback on their work.

(4) Existentialism

As the name implies, Existentialism is concerned with issues relating to one's existence. Its key ideas originate from existential philosophers such as Soren Kierkegaard, F. W. Nietzsche, Martin Buber, Karl Jaspers, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Existentialists reject universal and absolute ideas and hold that reality is constructed by the individual. The knowledge that one needs to pursue is the knowledge about the human condition and the personal choices one makes (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). To this end, schools should recognise that every student is a free, unique, and sentient being with personal fears, hopes and aspirations. Existentialists are critical of schools that overlook and suppress this individuality in students and view students as a collective and passive whole to serve the needs of society. Rather than dehumanising them, schools should provide a broad education with many options for students to explore, reflect on and articulate their convictions. There is no fixed curriculum for the Existentialists; the

content and pedagogy is determined by the needs and preference of the students. However, the humanities and arts are especially useful in drawing the students' attention to the issues, challenges, dilemmas and problems that human beings face. They also provide an avenue for students to express their choices in creative ways such as through drama, drawing and creative writing. By focusing on the individual experiences, however, Existentialism has been criticised for neglecting the needs of community and society, leading to selfishness and egoism (Ozmon & Craver, 2003).

The existentialist teacher is one who respects the individual freedom and choice of the student. Open-minded and reflective, the teacher creates a learning environment where both teachers and students are free to reflect, ask questions and engage in philosophical dialogue about issues and moral choices in life. Real-life examples of struggles faced by individuals could be introduced through a variety of means such as literature, films and music. The teacher does not prescribe answers to the problems, recognising instead that the responses vary from individual to individual, and are contingent on particular contexts, life situations and institutional constraints. In terms of assessment, the Existentialists eschew standardised testing, viewing it as a rigid, inaccurate and tyrannical method that restricts the interpersonal relationship between teacher and students, and among the students (Gutek, 2004). Instead, the teacher should adopt authentic assessment where students are free to set their own assessment, and produce creative assignments such as creative writing, paintings or a portfolio. An example of an existentialist lesson is a moral education lesson in a secondary school where the teacher shows the film *Life is Beautiful*, about a family that was imprisoned by the Nazis during the Holocaust. In order to protect his young son, the father constructed an elaborate lie to keep the truth from his son. After watching the film, the teacher could let the students reflect on the choices made by the father in lying to his young son, and the issues, dilemmas and consequences highlighted in the film. The learning process could be in the form of individual reflection, journaling, group discussion or role-play. By reflecting on and discussing the moral dilemma involved in lying,

students are encouraged to make their own moral stand and be responsible for their own actions.

(5) Postmodernism

Unlike the other educational philosophies, Postmodernism is not a single system of philosophy but is more a perspective or viewpoint. Proponents of Postmodernism include Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Henry A. Giroux, Peter McLaren, Cleo Cherryholmes, and C. A. Bowers. A convenient way of understanding Postmodernism is to identify what it is opposed to. Postmodernism opposes the Enlightenment claims to reason, objectivity and universality. The Enlightenment, which took place in the 18th century and introduced the age of reason, promoted the idea that objective and universal knowledge about the world could be gained through the scientific method. Postmodernists argue that the Enlightenment version of reason is not a universal truth: it is merely one rationale or narrative constructed by the rising middle class of that time to reflect and entrench its male-dominated, Eurocentric cultural point of view (Gutek, 2004). Rejecting the existence of objective and eternal knowledge, they assert that all claims to knowledge are constructed by those in power to establish and perpetuate their control over the oppressed and exploited. The latter group includes those who are marginalised due to race, gender, or class. Postmodernists are critical of schools that teach the students that there is officially established and authoritative knowledge they need to accept and learn from the curriculum. The aim of education is empowerment and transformation – to engage the students to reject the dominant or master narratives in favour of a variety of narratives, develop their own identities, and transform society by emancipating the marginalised groups from oppression. An interdisciplinary approach is favoured where the curriculum breaks away from the traditional division of subjects, and focuses on particular issues and problems with knowledge from various disciplines. Critics of Postmodernism argue that its rejection of universal knowledge, truth and values opens the door for cultural and situational relativism, and

also devalues academic and ethical standards in education (Gutek, 2004).

The role of teachers, for the Postmodernists, is not simply to teach a body of knowledge but to help students understand how curricular knowledge is used to serve ideological and political interests in different ways (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). Teachers should provide a student-centred learning environment, employing a curriculum that begins with the concrete personal identities, histories and ordinary experiences of the students and then proceeds to more abstract meanings of culture, history and politics (*ibid.*). No single narrative based on a specific source should be taught as the foundation of ideas, beliefs and values. Instead, a variety of narratives should be used for the students to see the plurality of voices from those in power and those who are marginalised. Through this approach, students are able to recognise the different constructions of reason and knowledge in specific historical contexts and learn to reflect on, reinterpret, reformulate and construct their own identities and histories. For example, a history teacher in a junior college could get students to read two primary sources – one from the Japanese government and the other from the Chinese government – that present contrasting accounts of World War II in Asia. The teacher could explore with the students the different versions of histories, and how the identities and experiences of the Chinese people are interpreted differently due to different historical and social conditions. In particular, the teacher could introduce the students to discourses from oppressed groups whose voices are not commonly represented in historical accounts, such as the oppressed and poor civilians and “comfort women” during World War 2.

FIVE MAIN THEORIES OF EDUCATION

(1) Perennialism

As mentioned earlier, educational theories are specific and focused on educational components such as curriculum, teaching and learning. Educational theories are rooted in one or more educational

philosophies. The first educational theory is perennialism, which is rooted in Idealism and Realism. Leading proponents include Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler. The influence of Idealism is seen in the perennialists advocating that the aim of education is to help students know and internalise ideas and values which are universal and lasting. The focus is on knowledge that is perennial – ideas which has endured through time and space. Its realist influence is seen in its emphasis on cultivating the students' reason and developing their intellectual powers. The role of schools, for the perennialists, is to train a group of intellectual elite. They are expected to be grounded in the classics and the traditions of the community, and charged with passing this on to a new generation of learners (Ellis, Cogan & Howey, 1991). The great books and the classics of art, music and literature are especially important as they are seen as capturing the essence of the human search for what is true, good and beautiful (Gutek, 2004). The perennialists also favour a subject-matter-based curriculum where the students are incrementally taught the skills and inculcated with the disposition to appreciate the classics. The teaching materials, learning activities, and pedagogy are not dependent on the students' interests, but on what is necessary to enhance their intellectual capacity. As perennialists believe that all students should receive a liberal education, they are against streaming where some students receive purely vocational and technical training.

What are the implications for teachers? A good teacher, for the perennialists, is one who is liberally educated, knowledgeable, and intellectually and morally exemplary. Students at the elementary level should be taught basic skills in literacy and numeracy, before proceeding to study subjects such as literature, history, science and mathematics. Students should also understand the underlying ideas and enduring human concerns in all the subjects in an integrated manner. A perennialist teacher is able to develop the students' rationality by teaching from great works of Western civilisation using appropriate pedagogical methods. He or she maintains high academic standards and is skilful in drawing out truths which are timeless and permanent in the subject-matter. For example, a literature teacher in a secondary school

should be well-versed in the works of Shakespeare and able to teach the text by highlighting the enduring themes of love, passion and conflict in the characters. Such a teacher would be able to demonstrate his or her love for literature, and would be passionate about sharing his or her views on these issues that concern all human beings throughout history.

(2) Essentialism

The second educational theory, essentialism, shares a number of similarities with perennialism. It originated from William C. Bagley and is also rooted in Idealism and Realism. Like perennialism, it emphasises the importance of teaching essential and enduring knowledge accumulated through the ages and encapsulated in the great works of art, music and literature. As mentioned, a central feature of Idealism is the emphasis on universal and permanent ideas. The function of schools for the essentialists is to transmit cultural and historical heritage to students, with the appropriate skills, attitudes and values (Ellis, Cogan & Howey, 1991). Its Realist influence is seen in the essentialist accent on the mastery of facts and concepts in order for the students to understand the surrounding physical world. The curriculum is similar to the perennialists in being subject-centred. The essentialists oppose interdisciplinary studies such as language arts and social studies as they prefer differentiated and specialised subjects developed and organised by experts (Gutek, 2004). The curriculum is determined by the traditions and heritage that the students need to master, rather than the interests of the students. The essential skills and subjects will also prepare them for advanced education, the world of work, and effective social and political participation (Gutek, 2004).

The essentialist teacher, like the perennialist teacher, is an expert in his or her subject field and an exemplar of intellectual pursuit and moral character. Such a teacher is also able to maintain discipline, order and control in the classroom, and teach the subject in a systematic and coherent way, with a focus on the essential facts to be learnt. The teacher sets high academic standards for his or her students, and is adept at setting appropriate standardised tests to assess the students'

competence. Students in elementary schools are given a good grounding in reading, writing and arithmetic, and subsequently an in-depth study of core subjects such as the languages, humanities, sciences and mathematics. Discipline is a key characteristic of essentialism – students are expected to learn discipline, civility and respect for legitimate authority so that they can function effectively as members of civilised society (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). The students are expected to meet high academic standards and are assessed through various competency tests. An example of an essentialist lesson is a science lesson where the teacher is able to explain a scientific concept logically, conduct an experiment to illustrate the scientific principle, identify the essential truth involved, and assess the students with appropriate test questions. While perennialism and essentialism are similar, there are some differences between them. While perennialists see wisdom originating from human rationality, essentialists see it coming from tested human experience (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). The primary purpose of education for the perennialists is the absorption of ideas, with the teacher being an example of values and ideals. The essentialists, on the other hand, highlight the importance of the absorption and mastery of facts and skills, and the teacher's role as a mental disciplinarian and moral leader (Ellis, Cogan & Howey, 1991).

(3) Progressivism

Progressivism is an American educational philosophy used to meet the needs and challenges in education in the late 19th and early 20th century. Its proponents include Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. It is a distinctively American thought in its emphasis on preparing students for active participation in a liberal democratic system. Progressivists wanted to offer an alternative approach to education as they found the prevailing schooling at that time to be too teacher-centred and rigid, with the students having to study organised body of subjects that they had no interest in under an authoritarian system. They hold that there are no universal and unchanging knowledge and values to be passed down through the generations, since knowledge and values are dependent on human experiences which are

contingent. The belief that reality is always changing and that knowledge and values are relative shows the influence of Pragmatism. Its Pragmatist roots are also reflected in the progressives' emphasis on schools being social agencies to provide the skills and attitudes for students to participate in a democracy. Students need the wherewithal to interact with an environment that is constantly changing. Problem-solving skills are especially crucial for the individuals to confront their personal and social problems. Rather than learning from a fixed curriculum, students should acquire communication skills, mathematical processes and scientific methods of inquiry (Ellis, Cogan & Howey, 1991). The curriculum should be interdisciplinary since problems by nature are multi-dimensional and involve answers from a variety of subject-matter.

The progressive teacher is like a Pragmatist teacher: he or she is a facilitator and guide to help the students in their problem-solving. The teacher is effective in using a repertoire of learning activities such as problem-solving, field trips, creative artistic expressions and projects to get students to work on activities based on their shared experience (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Such a teacher plans the curriculum based on the students' interests and needs rather than on great works or classics, and creates a flexible, student-centred and creative learning environment with a stress on collaboration rather than competition. Attention is given not only to the students' academic learning, but to the holistic development of the whole child – emotionally, physically, socially and intellectually (Gutek, 2004). An example is an English language teacher in a primary school who guides his or her students in a group project on environmental protection. The teacher could introduce the project topic by using films, newspaper articles and songs on the environment, or even invite speakers from environmental groups to the school. The students are encouraged to take the initiative in researching into the topic and presenting the project in creative ways, with the teacher acting as a resource facilitator. A democratic system is maintained throughout with the students working collaboratively in groups, sharing ideas, and resolving differences through dialogue and guidance from the teacher.

(4) Reconstructionism

Like progressivism, reconstructionism or social reconstructionism is rooted in Pragmatism. In fact, it grew out of the progressive movement in education as the reconstructivists were dissatisfied with certain aspects of progressivism. Its proponents include George S. Counts and Theodore Brameld. Its Pragmatist root is seen in its conception of schools as social agencies rather than mere academic institutions. They are critical of traditional schooling with predetermined curriculum and instruction that reinforces the status quo. Instead, reconstructionists and progressives are united in believing that students should be empowered to solve personal and social problems. But the reconstructionists want schools to do more to solve the problems that plague the world today. In his 1932 book, *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?*, George S. Counts argues that schools should be the centres for the reconstruction of society and the creation of a new social order. This can be achieved only when students are aware of global social, economic and political problems such as poverty, warfare, famine and terrorism, are equipped with the necessary skills to solve these problems, and are convicted to create a new world order. By fostering ideals through curricular, administrative and instructional practices, schools will serve as models for the rest of society by adopting these ideals (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). A reconstructionist programme of education critically examines controversial issues, cultivates a planning attitude in teachers and students, and enlists them in social, educational, political and economic change as means of total cultural renewal (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Reconstructivists favour multicultural education, believing that students need to go beyond their inherited culture to construct a larger sense of identity and purpose.

Reconstructionist teachers are similar to progressivist teachers in their goal to nurture students who are concerned with personal and global problems, educated and ready to change society. A multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary curriculum is adopted with the teacher referring to various disciplines such as history, politics, economics and science. The teacher should be a social activist who is internationally oriented

and humanitarian in his or her outlook, and confident in engaging students in action projects of all kinds (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). Such a teacher not only motivates the students to investigate pressing and controversial issues and problems and provide alternatives to them; he or she also encourages their students to be actively involved in community projects. For example, a teacher teaching the topic of terrorism in a citizenship education lesson could adopt a reconstructionist approach. The teacher could discuss the threat and problem of terrorism in Southeast Asia. Drawing on historical, religious, cultural, social, economic and political perspectives, the teacher could explain the origin and motivations of terrorist groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). This awareness would lead the students to discuss possible ways for countries in Southeast Asia to tackle the problem of terrorism. Students are also encouraged to carry out social projects such as inviting experts on terrorism to give talks in schools, and producing brochures to educate the public on terrorism.

(5) Critical Theory

Critical theory is rooted in Existentialism and Postmodernism, with influences also from Marxism. Leading critical theorists include Henry A. Giroux, Peter L. McLaren, Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire. Critical theory is “critical” in the sense that it aims to analyse social and educational conditions in schools and society in order to surface exploitative power relationships, and introduce reforms that will produce equality, fairness and justice (Gutek, 2004). Critical theory is predicated on the Marxist premise that human history was a struggle for economic and social control, and that educational institutions are used by powerful groups to control those who lack power (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). This conflict over control of curriculum and teaching, and the need to elevate the status of marginalised groups, echo the concerns of Postmodernism. Critical theorists share the same belief as the reconstructionists in arguing that schools should be centres of social change. Its Existentialist influence is evident in its emphasis on the students’ own experiences, history, identities and struggles. Drawing from Existentialism and Postmodernism, critical theorists oppose the

transmission of a fixed body of traditional knowledge, ideas and values, believing them to be the views of those in power. They are also skeptical of the hidden curriculum which refers to the values, behaviour and attitudes conveyed to and imposed on students through the milieu and practices of the school in a capitalist consumer-oriented society. Instead, they advocate a flexible and multidisciplinary curriculum which is based on the students' own experiences. Such a curriculum includes the viewpoints of all groups, especially neglected groups such as the oppressed poor, women, Africans, Asians, gays and lesbians.

A good teacher, for the critical theorists, is one who does not reinforce the traditional way of teaching and learning from a prescribed curriculum. Instead, he or she selects the teaching materials and corresponding pedagogy and activities with the students' life stories as the starting point. A plurality of voices is encouraged with students from different ethnic, language, class and gender groups offering their perspectives. The teacher is able to guide the students in exploring various constructions of knowledge from varied perspectives. He or she also assists the students in achieving their own identity and working towards greater equality and justice for all. Critical theorists see the role of teachers as effecting changes for fellow teachers. Giroux and McLaren (1989) identify the following agenda for teacher empowerment in critical theory (p. xxiii, quoted in Ornstein & Levine, 2003, p. 119):

- (1) fighting for genuine school reform that will give teachers power over teaching and learning;
- (2) engaging in collaborative research with other teachers to reconceptualise curriculum and instruction;
- (3) studying the culturally diverse peoples in the communities whose children the schools educate;
- (4) organising community centres for collaborative action with community members;
- (5) engaging in critical dialogues with students about the realities of politics, economics, and culture;
- (6) giving more power in schools to teachers; and

- (7) involving schools in attempts to solve society's major problems such as racial or gender discrimination, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, illiteracy, poverty, and inadequate health care.

An example of a lesson based on critical theory is a lesson on social cohesion in a multi-ethnic country such as Singapore. The teacher could encourage students of different races (e.g. Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian) or different religions (e.g. Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism) to share what it means to be a member of that race or religion. The focus is not on the superficial aspects of a race or religion, but on the lived experiences of the students in a setting that is non-judgemental and empathetic. Students from a minority race or religion should be given the opportunity to share about their personal, family and community experiences and surface any form of concerns and problems they face. Through the discussions and dialogues, students would be able to see the similarities and differences among themselves, and create their own reflections and representations regarding race or religion.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

This chapter introduced five major educational thoughts or philosophies (Idealism, Realism, Pragmatism, Existentialism, and Postmodernism) and five main educational theories (perennialism, essentialism, progressivism, reconstructionism, and critical theory) (see also Chapters 3 & 4). The salient points and practical implications of these philosophies and theories were also discussed. An inquiry into the philosophical foundations of education is essential for educators to be clear about their personal educational philosophy. For teachers, one's views regarding the aim of education, the functions of school, the role of teachers, the role of students, the purpose of teaching and learning, and the nature of interaction between teachers and students are dependent on the teacher's own educational philosophy and thought. For school principals and other school leaders, their vision and mission for the school or department, the type of curriculum, teaching materials,

pedagogy, and the choice of enrichment activities for the staff and students are also linked to their educational philosophy and theory. One good exercise for the educator is to reflect on and write down his or her educational philosophy based on one or a combination of educational philosophies presented in this chapter. This will help clarify the educator's conviction, values and direction in the teaching profession, thereby sustaining his or her passion to teach and lead.

Knowledge of the various educational philosophies and theories can also help educators analyse and solve current educational issues, challenges and problems. For example, there have been concerns about the unsatisfactory academic standards in American schools in the past few decades. Some scholars attribute the cause to the failure of American public schools to teach students the basic skills and knowledge based on a fixed curriculum. According to these scholars, the adoption of student-centred learning, interdisciplinary curriculum, experiential learning, and moral and cultural relativism in schools have led to an erosion of academic competence in students. What could be the solution to this problem? The report, "A Nation at Risk", submitted during the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s recommended that all high school students be required to complete a curriculum of "Five New Basics" comprising four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of social studies and one-half year of computer science (Guttek, 2004). The No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001, advocated the use of standardised testing to assess the students' achievements and teachers' accountability (Guttek, 2004; Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Readers would recognise that this is basically the educational philosophy of Essentialism, with an emphasis on a set of essential skills, knowledge and values taught and assessed through standardised tests.

In the case of Singapore, the educational philosophy of Realism has been adopted since the 1960s when Singapore became independent in 1965. Schools in Singapore are seen as academic institutions entrusted with the function of equipping students with the requisite skills and knowledge for the world of work and life based on a subject-matter

curriculum. The education system is also highly stratified, with higher ability students streamed into a liberal education in the arts and sciences, and weaker students channelled to vocational training. However, the recent call for schools to “teach less, learn more” under the “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” vision launched in 1997 appears to signal a shift towards a Pragmatist approach in teaching and learning in Singapore (see Chapter 8 for more details). With more changes and reforms in the educational landscape, both in Singapore and other parts of the world, teachers and school leaders can expect more educational issues and challenges. An awareness of the philosophical perspectives on education will go a long way towards helping educators understand these issues and challenges, and respond to them reflectively and meaningfully.

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