

A REFLECTION ON REFLECTION:
PRESERVICE TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON
PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE IN EDUCATION

Jennifer McDraw
Mississippi State University

Mara Oswalt
Mississippi State University

Chandria Lacey
Mississippi State University

Chelli Williams
Mississippi State University

G. Franklin Elrod
Mississippi State University

J.M. Blackbourn
The University of Mississippi

Richard Blackbourn
Clemson University

Abstract

This article is primarily the work of four undergraduate special education majors and is an expanded version of a collaborative project in an upper level course. The faculty authors provided guidance in the outline, structure, and style of the article. The article contends that the development of a personal philosophy of education is the single most critical aspect of instructional effectiveness. In addition, the importance of reflection and its influence on teacher beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors is emphasized. The article also holds that the personal philosophy of a teacher must emerge from the infusion of philosophy into teacher training and that all teacher competencies necessarily proceed from this foundation.

The gangly 18-year-old settled into his cramped quarters in the hotel's attic. It was nearly summer and the awkward youngster from Virginia, with extraordinarily large feet, was on a mission. His mission was to take advantage of an educational opportunity. Orphaned early in his life and poorly educated, the young man had been raised in the homes of relatives and spent more time during adolescence working at

various jobs than studying in school.

Now, due to fate, blind luck, and a series of favorable circumstances, this young man from a deprived, rural background had an opportunity to further his education. The next day would be the day the young Virginian would take his college entrance examinations and pass them, albeit only to appear dead last on the list of those admitted (Krick, 1996).

His initial foray into higher education was painful for some of his contemporaries to observe, hilarious for others. But, as stated above, the young man was on a mission and, through dedication and perseverance, improved his academic standing each year in college, eventually graduating 17th in a class of nearly 200. His commitment to life-long learning propelled him to make up for his early environmental deficiencies by reading 40 to 50 pages daily, a total of more than 15,000 annually, for the remainder of his life. He read Shakespeare, scientific treatises and, his personal favorites, histories and biographies. This relentless push toward self-improvement was reflective of the young man's personal philosophy of education. Educational opportunity, once made available, was a road to be paved with hard work, initiative, and perseverance toward a richer, fuller life.

This better life, attained through academic achievement, also made it possible for the young Virginian to "give something back" to society. At a time and place where such an act would be considered controversial, if not an outright violation of law, this young man started, and supported with regular fiscal contributions from his personal salary, a Sunday School for African-American children (Krick, 1996).

The character of this young Virginian, his passion for learning, and his compassion for others is often buried under a more renown and publicly austere perception. For this young man, who so prized educational opportunity based on a personal philosophy of excellence, became known not for his self-improvement, nor his generosity, but for his leadership in the field of battle. At a critical point of battle, when brigades of his army were routed in retreat, this Virginian exhibited the same perseverance of character that he applied to his own education and stood his ground in the face of advancing enemy troops, forever to be known to succeeding generations as "Stonewall" Jackson.

This historical vignette serves as an example of the difference between an educational philosophy of image and one of substance. The former, often found in the political realm, and fostered at governmental levels, is peppered with "sound bites" and grandiose plans that often require the investment of additional resources in an array of educational programs. The latter, a more personal commitment, is usually not proclaimed, but is clearly evident to self and others through solid accomplishment. Pirsig (1974) warns us of a reliance on the former and outlines the importance of the latter. He states additionally, the latter focuses on "the most critical of all resources, human resources" (Baum, 1991; Hamby, Blackburn, Edmundson, Hampton, & Reardon, 1997).

For years, particularly in the post-modern era, preservice teacher training programs, rather than encouraging students to examine (or develop) their personal philosophies of education, have imparted (and often indoctrinated) as "gospel" the educational philosophies of those who view education's primary objective as social reform (Sykes, 1991). Such philosophies are, to a great extent, reflected in the turn of the century views of Dewey (1916; 1920) and Dubois (1963), or the current writing of Kozol (1991).

Reflecting on the experience of Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, higher education can consider the opportunity to promote substantive educational philosophies that place academic achievement of all individuals ahead of social engineering, rather than the reverse. In so doing, permeating each preservice course and field experience, should be the facilitation of students' personal philosophies of education through study and reflection on current philosophical trends, traditional educational views, varied field experience observations, contemporary social problems that influence instruction, contemporary social problems, and pure classical thought. Such an approach, by necessity, requires faculty in the teacher education unit to apply unbiased, objective facilitation rather than being a proponent of a single superior approach (i.e., a "magic bullet").

The latter component links students of the post-modern era, who often are lacking in knowledge of classical philosophies, to the historically most influential authors of all time.

Instead of basing educational precepts on solutions that have produced greater dependency, students are encouraged, through readings of authors such as Aristotle, Plato, Machiavelli, and Jefferson, to seek a personal philosophy of education that elevates the power of the individual in attaining self-enfranchisement and self-betterment. This personal philosophy can also be derived from spiritual teachings in the Bible, Koran, Torah and other religious texts. Had Thomas J. Jackson viewed himself as a victim of society or circumstance, or had he merely been a label to fit a bureaucratic program, the drive and persistence to learn may not have been as pronounced nor the self-motivated initiative as profound. The same can be said of other notable individuals who overcame barriers of society and circumstance, from Madame Curie to Golda Meir to Martin Luther King Jr. to Colin Powell.

Assisting preservice teachers to examine or develop their personal philosophies of what should be taught, how it should be taught, what should be valued, and what outcomes should be expected are crucial to countering the current educational malaise. Warning signs since the mid-1970s have largely gone unheeded and when action is taken, rather than emphasizing the power of the individual to persevere and achieve, it is collectivist experimentation that is usually prescribed. Bold pronouncements of “leveling playing fields” (necessitating governmental intervention) are declared with accompanying program implementation that has resulted in educational “benchmarks” which de-emphasize quantitative measures of actual achievement and promote a “numbers game” based on race and gender that often has little to do with what transpires (or should transpire) in a classroom.

Particularly in the face of current societal problems, many exacerbated by the institutions entrusted with solving them, pedagogical “best practices” alone are not sufficient. There must be a driving force behind these practices, a personal philosophy of education. Without such a philosophy, a teacher has no underlying purpose for teaching. A philosophy is not just purposeful for the teacher, it is absolutely essential.

Such a philosophical perspective forces the teacher to examine what is real, how we know, and what is of value (Johnson, Collins, Dupuis, & Johansen, 1988). It is important for teachers to understand these components and shape their instructional philosophy to accommodate all children so that they will possess the skills and knowledge to compete in, and be successful in, 21st Century society.

Current pedagogical “best practices” in both kindergarten through grade 12 programs and in higher education have advanced reflection or reflective thinking as a means through which educational policy, instructional methods, and student progress can be evaluated (and improved) qualitatively. It must go beyond the traditional approach of evaluating critical reflective thinking which does not reward innovation, creativity, and ongoing reflection, but rather the “repackaging” of the teachers’ ideas by the student in a new, yet familiar, form (Pirsig, 1974). Indeed, standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) stipulate that not only should teacher education candidates have an opportunity to “reflect on their teaching” (Standard I.D.2) (NCATE, 1995, p. 18), but instruction should also encourage the teacher candidate’s “development of reflection, critical thinking, problem solving, and professional dispositions” (Standard I.G.2) (NCATE, 1995, p. 19).

In teacher training, reflective thinking is often offered as an instructional process that can be incorporated into activities such as field practica or field-based student internships. As such, preservice student teachers, following a lesson taught (or following the school day just completed), are encouraged to reflect upon the effect of the instructional methods they used. These student teachers reflect on self-imposed questions such as, “Did I accomplish my lesson objective(s)?” “Did all students of all ability levels benefit from the lesson?” “How could my lesson be improved upon through changes in instructional methods, assessment, or materials used?” “Are the procedures for evaluation appropriate and valid?” By reflecting on queries such as these, preservice teachers are taught not just how to deliver a lesson, but also how to evaluate that lesson’s effectiveness, and implement pedagogical change, if called for.

One aspect of practice, for example, is that educational policies for gifted students, students with limited English proficiency, students with disabilities, and students from diverse cultural and ethnic origins, have rarely, in teacher education programs, been reflected upon. In

fact, philosophical debate on the original intent, subsequent change, or current status of such initiatives is typically moot, with an abdication of sorts to prevailing legal and legislative thought. Thus, educational philosophy, if encouraged in preservice teacher education programs, emerges as a partial philosophy targeting instructional effectiveness, with often limited discourse on the philosophical direction of education as a result of court decisions and legislative action. These decisions and actions are assumed to have been made in “good faith,” and represent some consensus of “truth” without acknowledgment that many were made with political, not social or educational, intent. Thus, the “letter” of the law is often accomplished while the “spirit” of the law is ignored.

As the nation enters the 21st Century, a more skeptical attitude toward education has emerged among the nation’s citizens and much of its leadership. As the cost of all levels and forms of education, from preschool through college, continues to rise, and as advocacy for public education has shifted from overall system support to “zero-sum” competition for funding among special interest groups of limited, self-serving focus, educational policies will be placed under increasing scrutiny. This scrutiny has been exemplified in a growing criticism of college admissions Affirmative Action policies, a backlash against bilingual education, and a re-examination of the effectiveness of special education programs.

Current national discourse on the status and value of such programs suggest that if preservice teacher education programs are to prepare the educators of the next century, they need to include critical thinking and reflection on educational policy direction (as a measure of its philosophical direction), as well as on pedagogical effectiveness. In a fairly brief period of time, approximately 30 years, the American educational system has made a major philosophical shift, from a primary focus on academic skill development to an emphasis on social re- form. This shift has been accomplished through legislative and judicial mandate, with expediency of implementation often usurping thoughtful reflection.

Reflection, more pragmatic than thoughtful, however, is currently the result of the failure of both courts and legislatures (often pressured by advocacy groups) to consider the systemic effect of their mandates and laws on the larger constituency. By not thinking systemically, those who make policy, set regulations, pass laws, or inculturate students may make small modifications which, over the long term, may have major, unintended results (Senge, 1990). For example, there has been increasing re-examination of the underfunded special education mandate and the problems this under funding brings to bear on local school districts. A major unintended consequence of this well-intended, yet underfunded, legislation has been that many schools are financially strapped trying to provide basic educational services to non-disabled students (Allis, 1996).

Reflecting upon philosophical viewpoints of the past and applying them to contemporary problems and issues is one way to enhance critical thinking on education among preservice teachers. Lock (1690; 1693) provided a useful model from which current educational policies can be reflected upon and discussed critically. His tenets on the need for a diversity of perspectives to (a) open the mind, (b) combat bias and prejudice, and (c) create perpetual learners is directly reflected in current educational philosophy, policy, and practice. He further proposed several principles to guide educational practice. These points are summarized below with application to current educational perspectives.

I. Learning Should not be Burdensome

Lock presumed that learning should be made enjoyable and interesting for children. He stated

None of the things they are to learn should ever be made a burden to them or imposed on them as a task. Whatever is so proposed presently becomes irksome; the mind takes an aversion to it, though before it was a thing of delight or indifference. (p. 51)

This concept is equivalent to the modern concept of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), in which optimum learning takes place where skills and challenges match and Glasser’s (1990, 1991) ideas about educational quality.

In an ideal world, all children would be interested in, and motivated to learn all things. In reality, this learning environment does not exist. Even the most skilled students have subject matter of preference. The good teacher, the expert teacher, with in-depth knowledge of subject matter and pedagogical technique, can make even the most mundane task or abstract concept “come alive.”

At some point, however, usually during adolescence, students must come to the realization that not all things they will learn will be “fun.” In fact, they must realize, some things may be quite difficult and somewhat abstract, but are required nonetheless. Those who will be successful in such learning environments are students who are able to draw on internal motivation or pure diligence to make learning as enjoyable as possible.

II. Children Should be Eased Through Difficulties

On this principle, Lock (1693) relied on the teacher’s pedagogical skill to assist students exhibiting learning difficulties. “Whenever they are at a stand and willing to go forwards, help them presently over the difficulties without any rebuke of chiding” (p. 54). This principle is particularly apropos in today’s classroom where increasing numbers of children with disabilities are being ‘included’ into the general education classroom. These children may present unique difficulties, both academically and behaviorally, to the general education teacher. In fact, in comparison to Lock’s time, it may be virtually impossible for a single general education teacher to address the difficulties of all children in her classroom without ongoing professional development and supplemental support services.

III. Curiosity Must be Fostered

Curiosity in children is but an appetite after knowledge and therefore ought to be encouraged in them, not only as a good sign, but as the great instrument nature has provided to remove that ignorance they were born with and which, without this busy inquisitiveness, will make them dull and useless creatures. (p. 93)

This idea that all individuals have an innate desire to learn is well supported in the literature (Aguayo, 1990; Deming, 1987, 1993). Findings from the field of neurology have advanced the notion that children are born with complex “wiring” which becomes “mapped” as they explore their environment, experience novel situations, and are formally taught. In today’s classroom, it is difficult to promote curiosity when competing against television, radio, video games, and compact disks. The use of technology in the classroom is one way to offset the lure of modern technological stimuli and enhance curiosity. However, technology has not been shown to significantly promote skill development in basic academics.

IV. Children Have the Need to Attend

Lock (1690) stated that, “The great skill of a teacher is to get and keep the attention of the scholar” (p. 143). Educators are well aware of the societal changes that have occurred over the past 30 years resulting in, for example, increasing numbers of children coming from single-parent families. Keeping the attention of the scholar has prompted schools to become more “full service” agents (e.g., providing day-care and extended-day programs) than in the past. Educators, however, must be resolute to keep in mind their chief mission—to educate. While some, not all, of the children in a school may need extended-day programs, for example, all, not some, of the children need to learn to read, write, and calculate.

Those principles outlined above encompass a solid foundation for an overriding philosophy, consistency of this practice is established. Our practice is not independent of our philosophy. The ancient adage, "as a man thinks, so he is" (Proverbs, 23:7) holds as true today as it did 3000 years ago. Our inner belief systems concerning the role of education, the nature of children, or how learning occurs are all reflected in our conscious and unconscious behavior. Philosophy that nurtures democracy in all environments, high expectations for all persons, ongoing individual growth, diversity of thought, personal responsibility, self-motivation, and love of learning cannot fail to have a positive impact on students.

References

- Aguayo, R. (1990). *Dr. Deming: The American who taught the Japanese about quality*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Allis, S. (1996). The struggle to pay for special education. *Time*, 148(21), 81-83.
- Baum, D. (1991). Diversity, viability, and quality in the training of educational professionals. Fall Faculty Development Workshop. University, MS.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Deming, W.E. (1987). *Out of the crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for Advanced Engineering Study.
- Deming, W.E. (1993). *The new economics for industry, government, and education*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for Advanced Engineering Study.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: McMillan.
- Dewey, J. (1920). *Reconstruction in philosophy*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Dubois, W.E.B. (1963). *An ABC of color*. Berlin: Seven Seas.
- Glasser, W.A. (1990). *The quality school: Managing students without coercion*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Glasser, W.A. (1991). *The quality teacher*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hamby, D., Blackbourn, J. M., Edmundson, S., Hampton, B., & Reardon, M. (1997). Metamorphosis and human resource development. *The Record in Educational Leadership*, 17(1), 94-98.
- Johnson, J.A., Collins, H.W., Dupuis, V.L., & Johansen, J.H. (1988). *Introduction to the foundations of American education*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York: Crown.
- Krick, R.K. (1996). Stonewall Jackson's deadly calm. *American Heritage*, 47(8), 56-69.
- Lock, J. (1690). *Essay concerning human understanding*. In R. Woolhouse (Ed.), 1997. London: Penguin Books.
- Lock, J. (1693). *Some thoughts concerning education*. In R. Grant & N. Tarcon (Eds.), 1996. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. (1995). *Standards, procedures, and policies for the accreditation of professional education units*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Pirsig, R. (1974). *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance*. New York: William Morrow & Company.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.
- Sykes. (1991). Present views of teachers past. *Educational Researcher*, 20(1), 31-32.