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Philosophy of Education

"A man learns many things in the course of his life; and if from such point he looks back on his past life, he may say to himself: 'I have learned much.' But in a far less degree will he be able to speak of a transformation in his temperament or character during life, or of an improvement or deterioration in his memory. Learning concerns the astral body, whereas the latter kinds of transformation concern the etheric or life-body…When man enters on a higher training - or, as it is called, occult training - it is above all important for him to undertake, out of the very own power of his Ego, this latter transformation. Individually and with full consciousness, he has to work out the transformation of his habits and his temperament, his character, his memory."[1]

Summary

There are no universal truths in teaching. Each teacher and student brings a unique set of experiences, beliefs, and expectations to the classroom. Rather than try and combat this diversity and attempt to create a monolithic notion of ideal instruction and academic success, I believe it is important for future educators to research existing educational philosophies in order to form a cohesive and inclusive personal instructional ideology. This ideology should incorporate personal beliefs as well as institutional realities. Through my own research and internal self-seeking, I have found that the philosophies of Rudolf Steiner and Paulo Freire can be merged into what I consider my own pedagogical ideal.

Rudolf Steiner is the founder of the Waldorf school system. Started in Germany in 1919, the Waldorf system is simply defined as "an arts-based curriculum in which students learn subject matter through a variety of forms of representation, a pedagogy designed to meet students' developmental growth, an administrative system in which teachers govern the school, an organization devoted to sustaining a sense of community, and an integrated conceptual approach

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[1] Rudolf Steiner, *The Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy*, trans. George and Mary Adams (New York: Anthroposophical Publishing, 1927).

to education generally."[2]   Steiner's ideas of education arose during a particularly tumultuous time in German history, where citizens were concerned about economic woes and political upheaval. It is also clear that much of Steiner's philosophy arose from a general anxiety resulting from industrialization and modernization. Steiner rejected the idea of educating children in a way that resembles a fragmented assembly line. Rather, he felt that his role was "to create a new impulse in education that would enable children from diverse backgrounds to develop the capacities necessary to cope with the demands and challenges of a post-industrial world" and that "human beings need to become more conscious of their capacity to become fully human, if they are to resist competing pressures toward dehumanization."[3] By educating the whole child and merging art, science, math, history, and literature, Steiner sought to avoid the creation of "mechanized"[4] citizens.

Steiner divided childhood and adolescence into three distinct stages- preschool years (birth to age 7), elementary school years (age 7 to 14), and adolescent years (age 14 to 21). School for the preschool years is dominated by first-hand experience and physical activity. Steiner felt that story-telling, singing, and imitation play were the best ways to prepare young children for the later stages where thinking and reasoning became more important. The second stage of education is characterized by "experiences that develop consciousness of feelings and feed the imagination."[5] Additionally, Steiner felt that it was important for children of this age to have a caring authority figure. This figure, the teacher, helps the student make decisions until they are capable of making their own choices based on their lived experiences. The third stage is characterized by a focus on thinking and judgment.[6] The first and second stages are more strongly guided by the caring authority figure, which gives the students the ability to take on more autonomy in the high school years.

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[2] P. Bruce Uhrmacher, "Uncommon Schooling: A Historical Look at Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophy, and Waldorf Education," *Curriculum Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 381, JSTOR.

[3] Freda Easton, "Educating the Whole Child, 'Head, Heart, and Hands': Learning from the Waldorf Experience," *Theory in Practice*, Exploring the Margins: Lessons from Alternative Schools, 36, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 88, JSTOR.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Uhrmacher, 390.

Steiner's Waldorf curriculum focuses heavily on incorporating art into all subject areas. He felt that visual and performing arts could be used to strengthen students' understanding of other disciplines, such as math and history. Inclusion of art in all aspects of the curriculum could "extend and deepen intellectual experiences with images, sounds, and textures that stimulate the senses, enrich feeling, and discipline activity."[7] This notion particularly appeals to me because I think it is an effective way to reach students with differing learning styles. For example, Freda Easton, in her observation of a Waldorf school, saw children learning arithmetic tables through dancing and singing.[8] This incorporation of movement has the potential to reach children who learn best kinesthetically, a learning style that can be difficult to address in a traditional classroom.

Above all, the most appealing aspect to Steiner's philosophy is the concept of developing students' full understanding of the world as an interconnected organism. For example, in a woodworking class in a Waldorf school children may learn about the biology of trees before being given a piece of wood to work with.[9] This interdisciplinary approach to learning is very appealing to me because this is how I understand the world. I believe we cannot understand a scientific discovery, or a specific battle, or a piece of artwork without understanding the larger historical, political, or even musical landscape. Steiner's ideas of blurring the lines between disciplines appeals to my belief that all academic subjects are inextricably linked to one another and cannot be fully understood in isolation.

The other educational philosopher and philosophy with whom I align myself is Paulo Freire and the concept of social reconstructionism. I agree wholeheartedly with Herbert Kohl's assertion that "almost every school in the United States, within and without the public school system, contributes to maintaining an oppressive society based upon an unequal distribution of wealth and a debasement of people's sense of dignity and personal worth."[10] As such, I believe that educators have a political responsibility to improve national and international injustices and unequal social conditions.

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[7] Easton, 90.

[8] Ibid, 91.

[9] Uhrmacher, 395.

[10] Herbert Kohl, "Why Teach?," in *Educational Foundations: An Anthology of Critical Readings*, ed. Alan Canestrari and Bruce Marlowe, Second ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2010), 30-31.

Paulo Freire considered education to be a practice of freedom. In his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* he defined praxis as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it."[11] He felt that the human condition was characterized by a struggle for freedom and that overcoming the dehumanizing aspects of political, social, and economic inequalities was "an educational enterprise."[12] He argued that humans need to be free in order to be able to actively participate in cultural re-creation, to be "self-defining subjects creating history and culture."[13] The concept of culture and history are of utmost importance to Freire. He emphasized that humans "exist meaningfully in and with the world of history and culture that humans themselves have produced."[14] Freire believed that education allowed individuals to attain a sense of political and social agency and permitted them to see themselves as active participants and creators in their own cultural and historical existence.

The concept of "dialogue" is also crucially important to Freire's idea of education as liberation. At its core, "dialogue" combats the silencing of oppressed peoples, paving the road to liberation and more equal distribution of power. Freire's "dialogue" is important because "[k]nowledge becomes founded on dialogue characterized by participatory, open communication focused around critical inquiry and analysis, linked to intentional action seeking to reconstruct the situation (including the self) and to evaluated consequences."[15] This concept of "dialogue" as a liberation tactic is important for educators to consider. We must always ask ourselves if we are creating a classroom culture that is conducive to open dialogue. If we oppress dialogue, then we are oppressing our students and preventing them from seeing themselves as active participants in their own existence.

Social reconstructionism as an educational philosophy tends to see the school as an important social vanguard which "should lead society in the development of bold cultural designs for the future, not only by inculcating in students the sense of the urgency of such designs, but by developing adequate materials and methods for group consensus on the question, 'Where do we

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[11] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* trans. Myra Ramos (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 36.

[12] Ronald David Glass, "On Paulo Freire's Philosophy of Praxis and the Foundations of Liberation Education," *Educational Researcher* 30, no. 2 (March 2001): 16, JSTOR.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid, 17.

[15] Ibid, 19.

as a people want to go?"[16] The education system can be considered a microcosm of the larger social system. More importantly, the education system is the source for repairing all problems with society at large. Essentially, the school "should lead society, be the social vanguard, in the task of reconstruction."[17] As a future educator, this is a powerful and humbling idea. Instructors and educators should always be cognizant of the fact that they have a tremendous impact on not only their students, but on the larger social reality. Social reconstructionism, thus, is a critically influential philosophy because it reminds teachers that their work is of the utmost importance to their students, their community, the global society, and the creation of culture and history.

Steiner and Freire's philosophies are uniquely appealing to me because both elevate the student as the primary unit in the classroom. Steiner's goal to create fully-formed humans with well-rounded personalities complements Freire's notion of education as the ultimate liberator for oppressed peoples. Both philosophers see education as a source for social improvement, a worthy goal which I hope to implement in my own classroom.

Application

The most important aspect of evaluating educational philosophies and determining with which you personally align is the practice of implementing these ideas in practical classroom experiences. Because I hope to be a high school history teacher, I will focus on how Steiner and Freire's philosophies can be applied to classrooms of teenage students. The three areas of application on which I will focus are seating arrangement, use of sources, and community engagement.

Because I intend to work with high school students, the children in my classroom will be in Steiner's third stage of development. At this point, the students are less dependent on the caring authority figure which is more important during the preschool and elementary stages. Because of this, I believe that the best seating arrangement would be a seminar-type setting. Ideally, the students would all sit around a large table. However, realistically, there are few secondary schools that have classrooms with large seminar tables. In the absence of the ideal furniture, desks can be arranged in a circle. This set-up promotes discussion and places the teacher in an equal

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[16] Richard Mosier, "The Educational Philosophy of Reconstructionism," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 25, no. 2 (October 1951): 86-87, JSTOR.

[17] Ibid, 87.

position to the students. Additionally, this discussion-centered seating corresponds to Freire's idea of "dialogue" as an important part of education as liberation. In a student-centered seating arrangement, I can avoid the pitfalls of the students viewing the teacher as the giver of knowledge. Rather, students can develop a sense of power in their own education, which will lead to Freire's ideal of students understanding themselves as participants in and creators of their own culture and history. A circular seating arrangement, thus, typifies both Steiner and Freire's philosophies of what high school education should provide for students.

Another way of implementing Steiner and Freire's philosophies in my own classroom is through the use of source materials. Steiner rejected the use of textbooks in classes because "learning in this way was passive and lacked feeling."[18] Additionally, Freire would also reject the use of monolithic texts as they only enforce the dominant power's definition and description of history and culture. I would advocate using primary sources and encouraging students to bring in their own source materials. For example, during a unit on the Cold War, I would ask students to each bring in a print advertisement or musical recording from the Cold War era. Collaboratively, we can use visual and auditory analysis to glean notions of popular culture, societal anxiety, and consumerism from these advertisements and songs. This can provide students with a full picture of what life was like during the Cold War. By using source materials that students themselves discover, we can fulfill Freire's notion of students understanding and creating their own cultural histories. Additionally, by using primary sources in a variety of formats, we can use Steiner's ideas of providing "experiences that enable [students] to understand and reflect upon the relationships between ideas presented in different subject areas and to make judgements about what is meaningful to them."[19] This use of student-provided primary sources can enable students to see that they can help create their own understanding of history using sources in a variety of formats which appeal to all kinds of learners.

Both Steiner and Freire believed that the function of education was to better the world. Freire saw education as liberation, and Steiner stated that the Waldorf School "arose as a school for humanity as such, fashioned, it could in fact be said, out of the working-class…an educational

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[18] Uhrmacher, 394.

[19] Easton, 89

institution arising on a social basis."[20] Both men emphasized the importance of education as a positive influence on a broken or fragile social system. I believe that the best way to implement this crucial part of both Freire and Steiner's philosophies is to include community engagement in my curriculum. For example, when teaching a unit on the Black Civil Rights movement, I would require my students to do some kind of work with an organization in their community which advocates for black citizens. In this way, my students are engaged with the real, outside world. Additionally, it will force them to experience and acknowledge that inequalities continue to exist and pervade the American experience. Freire's own philosophies arose from his experience working with poverty-stricken students in Brazil and I believe that he would argue that it is crucial for students of all socioeconomic levels to be aware of social injustices in their community. Steiner would also approve of students' community engagement because it is a new kind of lived experience that assists them in synthesizing history into the current reality.

Implementing Steiner and Freire's philosophies in the classroom demands a high level of social consciousness. Educators who subscribe to these two teaching paradigms must be constantly aware of how their classroom structure, source material, and assignments either reinforce or subvert existing unequal power structures. Both Steiner and Freire valued education as a powerful tool for creating fully formed humans who are aware of and comfortable with their role as participants in and creators of their own realities. Being mindful of how students are empowered in the classroom is the most effective way to ensure that they emerge as politically conscious agents of change in the world.

Conclusion

I believe the best way I can serve my students as an educator is by providing them with a cohesive, interdisciplinary education that incorporates a variety of sources and utilizes multiple learning tactics in order to reach the maximum number of students. Additionally, I believe that as an educator I have a tremendous responsibility to my students because it is through open, dialogue-centered education that they can become fully-formed, liberated individuals. I want my students to walk away from their education knowing that they are agents of change in their own lives and in the world.

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[20] As quoted in Uhrmacher, 381.

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