



# Paedagogia

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## **Cultivating freedom and experience: A personal philosophy of education**

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A clear and compelling philosophy is what makes education effective. Without it, teaching is meaningless at best and harmful to students at worst. As a future educator, I find value in becoming aware of my perceptions about education and how they will affect my teaching. My philosophy of education is most aligned with existentialism and progressivism. While reconciling the discrepancies between these two philosophical traditions may seem complicated, I find that they are not mutually exclusive. Existentialism appeals to me in the broad sense of explaining the world, whereas progressivism appeals to me as a way to ground the uncertainty and impracticality of existentialism.

Many of the philosophical traditions that came before existentialism sought comfort in explaining and understanding the meaning of the world. However, existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre began to wonder if comfort could be found in absurdity, which is a lack of meaning (Noddings, 2016). Existentialists argue that there is no predestined or universal reason for life, although some do admit to the existence of God (Noddings, 2016). They argue instead that we must accept that we have absolute freedom and that it is our responsibility to create meaning (Noddings, 2016). This is precisely the stance I take on the world and, by extension, education.

I support this existentialist philosophy in that there is no universal curriculum that every child should learn. Instead, each

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child must decide what is important for them to learn based on who they are and who they want to become. This existentialist education requires a deep level of self-reflection and self-understanding. It gives each child the maximum level of freedom and authority to challenge the way the world is and decide for themselves how it should be. This includes challenging the concept of education itself. What meaning is there to education in the first place? Why is it important that children be educated at all? This is the nature of existentialism. Noddings (2016) explains that to an existentialist, “we make ourselves; we create our essence” (p. 62). There is no theory about human nature that we all ought to follow, and therefore there is no perfect education system that we all ought to follow either. Instead, education is what we make it, and it only has as much meaning as we give it. We decide for ourselves what education means. Although this may seem extremely subjective and individualistic, Sartre, an existentialist, claimed that in taking responsibility to make decisions for ourselves, we are also taking responsibility for everyone because our decisions determine our essence as people (Noddings, 2016). In this way, we are all responsible for the way the world is, and we alone have the power to change it. I believe this to be true of education as well.

As strong as my views about existentialism are, I recognize that this seemingly radical philosophy may not appeal to everyone. Many people have rejected meaninglessness and decided that the world must be a certain way because of their own perception of human nature. It would not be practical, then, for me to ignore that by saying that the universe is meaningless and the conversation ends there. While I do believe in the existentialist idea that there is no universal meaning, this belief also affords each individual the freedom to choose what is meaningful. I choose progressivism as the most meaningful in terms of my teaching philosophy because it grounds my existentialist worldview with a practical tradition for applying it to education.

Progressivism is a philosophical tradition represented by John Dewey. In his writings, he explained that the traditional

schooling process emphasized the curriculum, whereas a progressive education would emphasize the child (Dewey, 2012/1902). His main argument, though, was that the child and the curriculum exist on a continuum; a teacher should neither teach the curriculum without considering the needs of the child, nor cater to every whim of the child without considering the curriculum (Dewey, 2012/1902). Instead, he maintains that education should start by examining the needs of each child and that the curriculum should consist of meaningful experiences from which the child can learn (Dewey, 2012/1938). To Dewey, education and experience are inseparable because each experience impacts the child's future experiences, whether it be for better or for worse; these experiences change the child in the same way that the child, in turn, changes the world (Dewey, 2012/1938). This emphasis on providing children with experiences is what draws me to progressivism.

I support progressivism because I believe each child deserves an education that is unique to them and gives them the opportunity to experience the world. This aligns well with my views about existentialism because I believe this will help children figure out who they are and who they want to become. Where the two philosophies contrast, though, is the amount of freedom given to the child over their education. An existentialist might argue that the child should have absolute freedom to decide what they learn, whereas a progressivist would claim that the child needs a teacher to guide them to learn certain things, which may limit some of their freedom. I believe the two can coexist if a child has the freedom to decide what they learn, but they consult a teacher who sets them up with the experiences to learn what they wish. In this way, the child is not obligated to learn, but is instead able to learn on their own terms. Of course, there is room for argument that a child with freedom may choose not to learn. However, as a progressivist, I would make the rebuttal that children learn from every experience they have, even the ones that have not been manipulated by a teacher in a school. With these ideas in mind, I believe there is a great need for change not only within our system of education, but

also within our global perceptions about education.

### **Philosophical Perspectives on Educational Issues**

Because I identify with ideas from both the existentialist and progressivist philosophies, I have a unique stance on educational issues. Today, getting an education most often involves going to school, an institution of teachers who demand adherence to certain rules in exchange for knowledge that they believe is important. An existentialist might argue that schools as we know them today should not even exist because they represent a system of authority that takes freedom away from children by imposing a curriculum. For a progressivist, schools are necessary to guide children toward a curriculum that is suited to their needs and interests. To reconcile these philosophies, I propose that schools should exist as an option for children who want to learn in schools.

Based on my existentialist and progressivist philosophy, the ideal school would provide students with freedom to figure out who they are, create goals based on what is important to them, and learn at their own pace based on their interests. Students should not be forced to go to school because they should have absolute freedom over their education. Of course, one might argue that a child would never go to school if given the choice, but I believe children are naturally curious and desire to learn. In fact, Summerhill School in England provides evidence for this belief; the lessons at this school are optional, and yet all the students eventually choose to attend them (Neill, 2012/1960). This suggests that children do not have an aversion to learning, but rather their aversion is to the school as an institution. It seems to me that allowing them more freedom would cultivate their desire to learn and, by extension, attend school.

Although my views may seem radical, they are based on the core existentialist belief that we all have not only the freedom, but also the responsibility to change the world. Consistent with this belief is my idea that allowing children the option to attend school may facilitate more responsibility. There seems to be a common belief in the United States and elsewhere that children are not able

to handle responsibility; however, I think it is possible that we have this perception simply because children have never been given a chance to prove otherwise. Children's lives are regulated so heavily that they must ask for permission to go to the bathroom, and then we scoff at their incompetence when we thrust a great deal of responsibility and freedom on them at the age of 18. Of course they become overwhelmed! They have become so accustomed to being told what to do that they have no idea what to do when given the freedom to decide. The goal of my hypothetical school would be to prevent this by exposing them to a high level of freedom and responsibility from the start. Obviously, children will make mistakes, but it seems to me that the best time for this to happen is when they are young and the consequences of their mistakes are less grave. For example, a child may choose to eat ice cream for dinner and experience a stomachache, through which they might learn that they should not do it again. If a child is never afforded the opportunity to learn this kind of responsibility, then they will likely rebel in more dire ways as adults because they have been sheltered from facing any natural consequences. Giving children the option to attend school may be one way to prevent this risk of rebellion by encouraging a higher level of maturity and responsibility at a much younger and practical age.

In addition to the choice of attending school at all, my position as an existentialist is that children should be able to choose what they learn. With the way the school system is set up currently, there seems to be a lack of trust that students will choose to learn the subjects that adults consider valuable if given a choice. However, just as I believe children desire to learn, I also believe that children generally have ambition that would motivate them to pursue meaningful subjects. Consider a child who has a seemingly frivolous interest in toy cars. They may eventually decide to become an automotive engineer or mechanic, which will invariably require learning a variety of subjects that are traditionally considered valuable, such as math and physics. It becomes clear that what adults may consider a trivial interest may turn into an ambitious

career option. I believe this would happen more often if each child had the opportunity to ambitiously pursue their interests without these socially-constructed restrictions about which subjects have the most value.

To balance my radical existentialist beliefs, I propose as a progressivist that schools should still exist to facilitate meaningful and educative experiences for each child. A child who wants to learn should seek out their own education, but there must exist a resource for them to do so. For this reason, although I do express opposition to schools as an institution, I believe they can be beneficial to children. All children should have an equal opportunity to learn whatever it is that interests them, and schools should be a place that facilitates that learning environment. Instead of eliminating schools altogether, I hope to provide an effective argument for why they need to be significantly altered to accommodate more freedom.

### **Application of Philosophical Perspectives on Education**

Under this model, schools would be radically different. Ideally, a school would be a publicly funded place of knowledge similar to a library, but with teachers in addition to books. These teachers would provide students with the relevant experiences to learn the desired subject. The subjects would include English, math, science, foreign languages, health, art, music, computer science, communications, physical education, woodworking, and any other subjects that students request. The teachers would need to get to know each student's learning style in order to create individualized projects and activities in each of these subjects. Of course, if students wanted to learn a subject but were unsure where to begin, the role of the teacher would also be to provide a relevant introduction based on the student's goals.

There would be no stereotypical classrooms, grade levels, or bell schedules. It would be a place where children can freely move from teacher to teacher at their own pace, which would also eliminate segregation by age. One building may not be able



to accommodate all students from toddlers to young adults, so there would be multiple schools in each community. However, there would be no requirements to move from one school to the next, and a person's education would not be limited by their age or test scores. As previously mentioned, going to school would not be required by any federal or local authorities, which may elicit protest from parents and caregivers who argue that their child would never choose to go to school. Realistically, children with working parents and nowhere else to go would likely be dropped off at the school building every day regardless of its status as being optional. However, the goal of this model is to create a learning environment that learners would want to attend because they feel it is meaningful. I trust as a progressivist that all children have a natural desire to make their lives meaningful, which would motivate them to participate in learning.

This kind of reform in the education system would by no means happen overnight. In fact, much of school reform is a response to political interests, rather than the interest of the child. If society continues in this way, our education system may never be set up in the best interest of the child. However, as an existentialist, I firmly believe that we have the power and the responsibility to shape the world. We can either stand back and claim that the world is the way it is supposed to be, or we can decide how it should be and take an active stance to change it. As a progressivist, I propose that one of the ways in which we can accomplish this is by starting with the education system and helping children discover the power within themselves.

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