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Reconstructionism and Educational Programs

Philosophy of education influences and largely determines, individual's educational decisions. (Ornstein & Pajak, 2015) State and local policymakers, researchers, teachers, and administrators confront a variety of conflicting philosophies and prescriptions in the debate over school curriculum, structure and reform. (Elmore, 1990) Ultimately, choices related to school structure, culture and curriculum are influenced by the philosophy (lens) in which decision-making personnel use to view the world. (Ornstein & Pajak, 2015) These decisions affect many components that comprise a school. This paper will discuss examples and impact of the Reconstructionism philosophy on curriculum choices and decision-making in schools.

In the context of educational curriculum development, it is important to understand the meaning of philosophy and its potential effects on decision-making and educational outcomes. Philosophy is comprised of a number branches. There is metaphysics, which questions the nature of reality; ontology, which concerns the nature of being; logic, which focuses on reasoning; epistemology, which focuses on knowledge investigation and ethics, which is the study of morality. (Harword, 2012) All of these branches of philosophy add to the difficulties many face in developing a single definition. However, a general definition of philosophy is a set of ideas about how to do something or how to live. (Marriam, 2015) Specific to curriculum design, Orenstein defines philosophy as a description, explanation, and evaluation of the world as seen from a personal perspective, or through what some social scientists call "social lenses." (Ornstein & Pajak, 2015)

Each school, teacher and administrator have a set of beliefs that influences what and how students are taught. Philosophies of education raise the questions of what is being taught, how teaching occurs, along with the role of teachers and students. (McGraw-Hill, 2016) Ornstein introduces four major educational philosophies that have contributed to curriculum development

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in the U.S. These four major educational philosophies are Perennialism, Essentialism, Progressivism, and Reconstructionism. Perennialism and Essentialism are considered traditional, teacher-centered forms of curriculum development. (Ornstein & Pajak, 2015) Generally, traditional curriculum promotes information sharing from teacher to student and dismisses informal instruction as being appropriate. Additionally, traditional curriculum likely groups students based on ability or other characteristics to expose the group to varying levels of instruction. (Elliot, 2001)

While Perennialism and Essentialism promote the deliver of historical content, traditional information and essential skills students are believed to need, Progressivism and Reconstructionism take a more modern approach. Progressivism and Reconstructionism are contemporary philosophies that promote modern, practical and innovative forms of curriculum develop that focuses on a student-centered model. (Ornstein & Pajak, 2015) These two philosophies focus on the needs of the whole students in conjunction with social, economic and current needs driven by a 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Unlike Perennialism and Essentialism, Progressivism and Reconstructionism place emphasis on providing educational equality and developing relevant skills. (Ornstein & Pajak, 2015 p.7 table 1.2)

The quote below, by John Dewey, expresses the movement towards a Reconstructionism philosophy and need for contemporary education.

*“The past is not recalled because of itself, but because of what it adds to the present. Thus, the primary life of memory is emotional rather than intellectual and practical.”* (Dewey, 1920)

The Reconstructionism philosophy dates back as far as 1920 with John Dewey’s use of the term in his book, “Reconstruction in Philosophy”. (Dewey, 1920) Lauren M. Cohen,

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associate professor at Oregon State University, defines Reconstructionism a philosophy that emphasizes addressing social questions and a quest to create a better society and worldwide democracy. Reconstructionist educators focus on a curriculum that highlights social reform as the aim of education. (Cohen, 1999) Reconstructionism significantly took on traction in the 1970's with increased visibility created by authors like Theodore Brameld. In 1977 Brameld authored the book "Reconstructionism as the Radical Philosophy of education: An Appraisal". Brameld believed that Reconstructionists hold the view that the public sector can bring about social and economic change. (Brameld, 1977)

According to Ornstein, Reconstructionism is a pragmatic viewpoint to improving and reconstruct society through educational change and social reform. The philosophy focuses on students as an active part of the learning process. Teachers act a facilitator and curators of content with the active role of students to examine social, economic, political, local and global content and problems. Additionally, Reconstructionism promotes equality of education, cultural pluralism, international education and futurism. (Ornstein & Pajak, 2015)

With new developments of educational models such as the Charter School model and push for 21<sup>st</sup> century educational development, the Reconstructionism philosophical approach to developing curriculum can be found in many schools around the U.S. Four identifiable educational programs and teaching model encompassing aspects of the Reconstructionism philosophy are Charter Schools, Online Charter Schools, Blended Learning (BL) Classrooms and Flipped Classrooms.

Charter Schools, by design, allow its leaders to use autonomy and philosophy to create their own schools, set governance, design educational curriculum and interventions appropriate for students' unique needs and learning styles. (Miron & Applegate, 2009) The Center for

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Research on Education Outcomes 2009 report described Charter Schools as the largest vehicle for school choice in U.S. public education. (CREDO, 2009)

Over the last 20 years, Charter Schools have been directly or indirectly linked to school reform. KIPP's, the largest Charter School Organization in the U.S., mission is to help students develop knowledge, skills, and character strengths. (KIPP, 2015) Similar to the Reconstructionism view, KIPP's philosophy is to develop the whole child, promote equality and develop modern skills. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are over 6000 Charter Schools in the U.S. today. (NCES, 2015)

One important component of the Reconstructionism approach is teaching relevant skills. (Ornstein & Pajak, 2015) With increased access to technology and information, online education has become a topic of conversation in K-12 education. One novel program model is the Online Charter School (OCS) model, which bypasses the brick and mortar traditional model of schools. OCSs, are publicly funded schools of choice that eschew physical school buildings and use technology to deliver education to students in their own homes. OCSs typically provide students with computers, software, and network-based resources, while also providing access to teachers via email, telephone, web, and/or teleconference. (Gill et al., 2015) Like the Reconstructionism, OCSs focus on utilizing modern technology, students as the central driver of instruction and teachers as facilitators of learning.

If we move inside the classroom, Flipped Classrooms and Blended Learning are two modern forms of instructional models and curriculum that encompass Reconstructionism philosophies. The flipped model of instruction is a relatively new teaching strategy used to improve student engagement and performance by moving the lecture outside the classroom via technology and moving homework and exercises inside the classroom. (Clark, 2015) A core

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component of the Reconstructionism model that a flipped classroom encompasses, is the focus on students and modern approaches to teaching and learning. (Ornstein & Pajak, 2015)

Blended Learning is a new practice being used in K-12 classrooms to transform teaching, and learning through competency-based approaches. (Powell et al., 2015) The design of Blended Learning is that curriculum designers focus on the needs on the learner, chunk learning into modules and determine the best medium to deliver those module to the learner. The medium in which instruction is delivered in a Blended Learning classroom may include, traditional instruction, reading assignments, and asynchronous or synchronous Web-based training. (Hofmann, 2001)

The goal of Reconstructionism theorist is to improve and reconstruct society through focusing on the modern needs of students to ultimately affect social reform. Equality of instruction, exposure to current skills and use of technology are core components of the theory. With the United State's history of educational reform and push to improve global competitiveness, Reconstructionism will have solid roots in the mind of curriculum developers.

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