

SUNY Podunk

Preparing Students for Democracy, Living, and Societal Understanding  
*My Personal Philosophy of Education*

ToodleDoodleMcFee  
Foundations of American Education  
Dr. McDoctorson  
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## My Philosophy of Education

If a teacher is to be effective, they must have an underlying philosophy to guide what they teach and why. Throughout this class, I have been slowly refining *my* personal philosophy of education by reading and discussing historical and contemporary methods and philosophies of education. I have reflected on my values and examined how they align with various educational movements throughout the history of the United States, picking and choosing the ideas that I most agree with, and synthesizing my own philosophy from them. Overall, I believe I have settled (for the time being) on three basic goals of education that I feel that I, as a teacher working to educate students within the schooling system, must work towards achieving. The first is the preservation of democracy, not only in the narrow sense of preparing students to vote and follow laws, but in the broad sense of instilling the day-to-day values of a democratic society. The second goal is preparation for living - not only for a career, but also (and more importantly in my view) for all the other aspects of living that make one a rounded member of society - self-fulfillment and participation in the fulfillment of the greater good of the community. The third and final goal of education, in my view, is deepening the understanding of the society - how it is now, how it was, and how it could be - to give students the skills they need to both participate in and change it. While I may not be dogmatically loyal to these, and only these, goals, they nevertheless currently form the backbone of my personal educational philosophy.

### **The Preservation of Democracy**

The preservation of democracy has been a common goal of education reformers and thinkers throughout American history. Thomas Jefferson was one of the earliest and most

influential proponents of a public education system in the United States, and his ideas were bound up inseparably with his ideas of democracy. To understand the foundations of his ideas, it is first important to understand his ideological framework of Classical Liberalism. Classical Liberals had faith that, if man is given the right circumstances and the freedom to do so, he will be able to use his powers of rationality and reason to improve himself and, by proxy, progress society as a whole towards perfection {1}. Working from this ideological framework, Jefferson concluded that, for a democratic republican government to make progress toward the perfect society he believed it was capable of achieving, all American citizens must individually improve themselves and make themselves fit for democratic society. To do this, they must be taught to use their powers of reason to their most effective extent, lest they allow themselves to fall prey to irrational “appetites and passions” (in the terminology of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle){2}. For this reason, Jefferson sought to institute an education system that would give all American citizens, rich or poor, the basic reasoning capabilities required to participate and live in the republic, appreciating (if not necessarily participating in) the democratic process {3}.

John Dewey would greatly expand upon this idea of developing democracy through education in his writings in the late 18th and early 20th centuries. Compared to Jefferson, who was influenced by a pre-industrial, Classical Liberal society, Dewey was surrounded by the industrial, New Liberal society of the Progressive Era. New Liberalism developed from the ideals of Classical Liberalism, but, in adapting them for the industrial age, made significant changes to the practical applications of those ideals. While Jefferson and the Classical Liberals had put their faith in the idea that the collective reason of many citizens in a democratic society could work together towards progress, new liberals of the Progressive Era felt that reason was best channeled through the scientific process of a few “experts,” who could design a society to

benefit the regular people {4}. The regular people would in turn be educated “socially efficiently,” training them to only be cogs in the industrial machine, to serve whatever role they would be most suited for to best benefit society {5}. This idea of expert control runs rather counter to most conceptions of democracy, and Dewey recognized this and advocated against what he saw as non-democratic, “authoritarian” methods that “put some members of society in control of others” (Tozer 108) [1]{6}. Instead, he advocated for schools that were modeled directly on democracy, where students were given the sort of say in decision-making that citizens in a democratic government should be entitled to. This meant allowing students to ask their own questions, work together to solve them, and chart their own path based on their interests and self-recognized aptitudes, all with guidance, not just direction, by the teacher {7}.

I find myself agreeing with Dewey more than any other thinker on education in terms of the importance of democracy for, and in, schools. I believe that Jefferson was mostly correct in his goals for education to preserve democracy but his biggest flaw comes from the fact that he wanted to apply education to democracy while failing to apply democracy to education. He understood that educated people are important to the survival of a democracy, but due to the highly individualistic outlook of Classical Liberalism, he could only conceptualize this functioning through the creation of a ruling class of *aristoi*, the “best” of society who were able to best use their powers of rational reason {8}. Jefferson saw democracy as a collection of wise individuals getting together to decide which of their ideas they thought was wisest, as opposed to Dewey’s (and my) view that democracy is a collective of individuals producing an idea that is wiser than any one individual could have come up with himself. Dewey strongly embraced the idea that democracy is at its heart a collective effort that only functions if people work together, and so advocated for a school that was geared towards training students to work together to solve

problems together and get to the best answers as a group. Interestingly, this has some parallels with the way scientific discovery works, in that each individual scientist contributes his part to a larger body of knowledge, with the end goal of producing a conclusion that is the result of all of their reasoning abilities coming together. But unlike the expert-driven, scientific decisions of the other progressives, Dewey believed this sort of decision-making could be democratized and applied to the masses if education was built around it, and I agree. Education should be geared towards making students into active, collaborative members of a democratic society, who contribute to making solutions to problems, not simply choosing between them. For an example of this educational philosophy in action, consider a hypothetical civics class. In the sort of classroom Dewey and I would favor, a civics test would not simply be a multiple-choice exam testing knowledge of why the Founding Fathers designed the Federal Government the way they did, but instead might involve students working together as a class to design their own set-up for a federal government, based on readings of various political theorists. By working collaboratively, students would not only learn about democracy in their civics class, but would also learn those skills *through democratic means*. I have personally had positive experience with such education in my senior biology class, where my teacher taught by having the entire class work together on a large, overarching project. It allowed us to collaborate, ask questions for ourselves, and engage in class, while also fostering a skill set for collaborative work that could easily be transferred to the realm of making political decisions in a democratic fashion.

### **Preparation for Living**

Before exploring the ideological roots of my second goal for education, it is important to clarify my choice of words, specifically in my use of the phrase “preparation for living” over

“preparation for life.” I have found that too often, when people say that they want school to prepare them for “life” or for “real life,” what they really mean is that they want school to prepare them for a career or, in more generous cases, for the economic dealings of life, such as paying taxes, writing a résumé, etc. This is the way my parents often talk about what they think in-school education should be for, for example. While participation in the economy is undoubtedly an important part of life, there are so many other things - social pursuits, self-actualization, participation in one’s community, etc. - that are left out of the discussion when we talk about using school to prepare students for “life”. As such, I have decided that “preparation for living” better encompasses the full extent of the process of living one’s daily life which I want education to work towards achieving.

With that clarification out of the way, it is noteworthy how long this goal has been present in the philosophical history of education. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote in his work *The Politics* that all citizens of Athens must be educated in such a way that cultivates their ability to “lead a life of action and war; but ... even more ... to lead a life of leisure and peace” and to “do good acts” as well as “necessary or useful” acts (Tozer 19) {9}. This idea of being educated both for the “useful” and also the “good” constitutes the backbone of what is known as a “liberal education” - that is, the education of a free man, who can make his own choices and actualize himself as he wishes, rather than the education of a slave who is told what he can do and who he must be {10}. This idea surfaces throughout the history of American educational thought, with Jefferson stressing the importance of creating “lifelong learners” who continue to educate themselves even after going through formal education in the school system and Dewey feeling that formal education must encourage, not hinder, a child's innate, natural curiosity and love of learning new things {11}. I deeply agree with both in this respect - as

someone who loves to learn as much as possible and yet can still be bored by and dislike school, I think that fostering a love of learning that is not trampled by the school system is extremely important. Core to all of these philosophies is the concept of *eudaimonia*, a Greek term used by Aristotle to describe the state of contentment and happiness one gets from living well and being in harmony with their virtuous nature {12}. This is what Jefferson was referring to when he wrote that all men have the inalienable right to the “pursuit of happiness.” In more modern psychological terms, this might be seen as achieving the “self-actualization” tier of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs [2].

This runs almost directly counter to the social-efficiency Progressives’ notion of vocational education, who felt that it was a waste of time and resources to give a full, liberal education to someone who is “destined” to become a working-class menial laborer when giving them basic vocational skills will be sufficient for their future job{13}. This, in my opinion, is completely missing the point of a liberal education. As Aristotle points out, one should not only be educated for the productive and useful parts of life, but also equally or more so for the leisurely parts. A child “destined” to be a factory worker may not need to use skills of art composition in his job as much as one who is to be a graphic designer, but he should not be denied the education that might allow him to take up painting as a fulfilling hobby in his free time. Who we think of ourselves as people is often much more closely related to the people we socialize with, the things we do as hobbies, and the value systems we hold than it is to the profession we do to make our money. As such, our schools should make sure to teach with that in mind. Job training is a useful and necessary thing, but that is not what in-school education is for.

Unfortunately, it seems to me that education has become increasingly preoccupied with preparing students to be useful members of the economy at the expense of being good members

of society. National standards, while not *necessarily* a bad thing, seem to be consistently instituted only when the government sees some threat to the national economic interest. This can be seen clearly in the shift from the post-World War II national educational trend of “life-adjustment education” to a more technical curriculum as instituted by the National Defense Education Act of 1958. While the merits of life-adjustment education were rather dubious (being rather indoctrinatory and anti-intellectual), it can at least be said that it was an attempt to center the “leisurely” side of liberal education, such as citizenship skills and relationship management {14}. It taught life skills unrelated to paid careers, such as how to maintain relationships. However, after the Soviet Union scared the United States into believing that they were falling behind in technical pursuits with the launch of Sputnik, the federal government quickly passed standards to focus on “useful and necessary” education such as science, math, and foreign languages {15}. While these skills are obviously important, the shifts of focus towards them always seem to come at the expense of “leisurely” pursuits like music, art, and even physical education. It happened again in the 1980s with the fears that America was falling behind countries like Japan prompting the “Excellence Movement” to standardized schools through testing, teacher accountability, and a return to basics of English, math, science, social studies, and computer skills {16}. It happened in the early 2000s with “No Child Left Behind” after American test scores were showing to be falling compared to the rest of the world. And it is happening still today with a shift towards stressing the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) subjects to prepare students for a world where those are the “useful” skills to have. While I do not think focusing on useful career skills is a bad thing, it cannot come at the expense of skills for daily life and self-actualization. I feel that teachers must stress to children not only the practical applications of what they are learning for their job, but also for their daily life, and



for the simple sake of learning itself. Learning for the sake of learning is a worthy activity, and teachers should not be afraid to encourage it.

As a final note on the idea of education as a means for preparing children to live, I think it is important to note that self-actualization should not mean the development of the individual at the expense of the collective community. Because many of the thinkers in education come from the individualistic tradition of Liberalism, they tend to focus on empowering the individual to be who they want to be. While this is undoubtedly important, I think it is important to acknowledge that, as social animals living in a society, individuals can only flourish so long as their community is flourishing. Education should stress the benefits of collective action toward self-actualization. In my view, one can only reach a state of *eudaimonia* if they are as much in harmony with their surroundings as they are with themselves. I draw some of this inspiration from the “social harmony” teachings of the Classical Conservatism of Edmund Burke and the teachings of Confucius, who both stressed the importance of mutual duties to other members of society. I think that the idea that the individual cannot truly succeed and be happy unless they commit themselves to helping others do the same is an important lesson to instill in schools, especially in a democratic society where we are meant to work together. Students should be encouraged to cooperate and help each other based on their personal skills so that all may succeed, rather than being encouraged to compete and work their way to the top by putting others down. Having gone to a small, rural elementary school, I learned how fulfilling maintaining a strong, close-knit community is. By helping and being helped by others, I was able to feel much more fulfilled than I would have been had I simply worked my way to the top all on my own, at the expense of others.

## **Understanding of Society**

The third and final major goal of my philosophy of education, the furthering of students' understanding of society, draws its inspiration from two seemingly contradictory sources. The first is Horace Mann, who sought to use “common schools” not only to educate students, but also to instill in them common, shared values. In his day, this was used to try to assimilate Irish Catholic immigrants into the dominant Protestant American culture by instilling so-called “Protestant work ethic,” which coincided nicely with the industrial work ethic desired for factory workers of the day - obedience, productivity, and mild-mannered Christian virtue {17}. While throughout history, this “Americanization” has frequently been a code for “indoctrination” (especially in its use to stamp out the native cultures of the American Indians), I nonetheless feel that school education should be used, to some extent, to provide students with a shared moral baseline. When people share some moral common ground, it allows them to work towards common goals, even if they disagree on how to get there, rather than being stuck in perpetual conflict.

However, the indoctrination that this sort of education has created in the past cannot be ignored when considering this as a fundamental goal of education. To combat this, I have taken inspiration from Brazilian education reformer Paulo Freire and other proponents of “critical education.” Freire advocated for an education that equips students to identify, analyze, and combat power structures inherent in society, a set of skills collectively known as “critical literacy.” Critical literacy can be contrasted with “cultural literacy,” which involves teaching students to understand a shared canon of cultural ideas and objects from the dominant culture, an aim much more in line with Mann’s goals for school education {18}. Critical literacy can be achieved by allowing strong, open, meaningful dialogue between members of many groups -

between students and teachers, the rich and the poor, the oppressed and the oppressors {19}. This is especially important given the struggles that many historically oppressed minority groups face in the school system, such as high dropout rates and lack of representation in gifted programs {20}. Open dialogue that takes into account their experiences and legitimizes them will allow for new perspectives on which institutions are and are not oppressive - if you only learn the dominant perspective, it is hard to notice any oppression at all. I think that giving students a balance of cultural literacy (through the form of a shared historical narrative and moral framework) and critical literacy is the best middle ground for education to take. Not all social structures deserve to be dismantled, and many foster social harmony and improve a democratic society's ability to function, but we cannot rely on omniscience from teachers to know exactly which structures these are. It is thus important to give students the tools they need to identify those oppressive structures when they present themselves and make the changes necessary to fix them. A contemporary example of trying to strike this delicate balance can be seen in the fight over the teaching of Critical Race Theory. Progressive activists feel that current educational curricula do not sufficiently discuss institutional racism in America, which stops the nation from effectively dealing with the social injustice it causes, while Conservatives worry that teaching students that some of them come from oppressor groups while others come from oppressed groups will divide them and lead to social disharmony. In my view, the education system should be able to explore the effects of the unjust racial power structures inherent in American institutions and society while still keeping everyone "on the same side" by fostering shared values of working together for the worthy American cause of ending the inequality and living up to the stated goals of the nation. It may be a difficult balance to strike between social harmony and social justice, but I think it is the duty of every educator to try to strike that balance and help

their students to understand how their society is currently, why it is that way, and how they could change it if they see fit.

## **Conclusion**

By analyzing the philosophical underpinnings of various educational reformers and thinkers throughout history, choosing the parts I agreed with, and considering what they had in common, I have been able to synthesize what I believe to be a useful, internally consistent personal philosophy of education. It is one where the preservation of democracy, the preparation of students for living, and the enhancement of students' understanding of the ways society does and could work all reinforce one another to improve individual students and society as a whole. John Dewey and Thomas Jefferson shed light on the importance of education for democracy and democracy for education, Aristotelian notions of education for life and leisure provide guidance for teachers in a world that increasingly seems to be seeking to take the Liberty out of liberal education, and the contrasting viewpoints of Horace Mann and Paulo Freire highlight how finding a delicate balance between indoctrination and agitation in education is essential. Education is a powerful tool for shaping the world, but only if the ones doing the educating (the teachers) have a strong grasp on exactly *how* they are shaping it. While I am sure that my specific philosophy will change and evolve throughout my life, I will make sure that I always have a strong grasp on what exactly I am trying to do through my teaching. Only then will I be able to make the changes in the world that I want to see.

## Works Cited

- [1] Tozer, S., & Violas, P. (2013). *School and society: Historical and contemporary perspectives* (7th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- [2] Moore, C. (2022, March 25). *What is eudaimonia? Aristotle and eudaimonic well-being*. PositivePsychology.com. Retrieved from <https://positivepsychology.com/eudaimonia/>