

IS EVERY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THE BEST?

Is Every Educational Philosophy the Best?

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Abstract

Students and the professor of a doctoral-level class, titled Educational Reform, studied eight philosophical traditions in the West that have had great influence on the preparation and development of teachers and administrators in the US. The eight philosophical traditions that we studied included (a) perennialism, (b) essentialism, (c) progressivism, (d) reconstructionism/critical theory, (e) information processing, (f) behaviorism, (g) cognitivism/constructivism, and (h) humanism. The authors each self-assessed our individual stances in relation to the philosophical traditions using the *Educational Philosophies Self-Assessment* questionnaire (Cohen, 1999). After reviewing and discussing our individual scores, it became apparent that, depending on our experiences in schools as students and as educators, each author had their own preferences for our approaches to education. It also became clear to our group that education in the United States continues to function in a one-for-many mentality—one curriculum for many, one process for many, one pathway for many, ignoring the interests, passions, and talents of too many students. Our conclusion is that United

IS EVERY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THE BEST?

States education must become more multi-faceted in our approaches to teaching and learning if we truly believe that every student can and should be successful in school.

Keywords: educational philosophy, teacher preparation, philosophical traditions, pedagogy, professional development

As part of a course on educational reform, our cohort of New England College doctor of education students wrote this article to share the results of our work with a wider educational audience. As we explored multiple educational philosophical traditions that have evolved in Western culture over nearly 2,500 years, we learned how fixated our schools and teaching profession have become on a small number of educational philosophies that have yielded a narrow array of teaching practices and learning experiences for students (Clark, 2020). These philosophical traditions, both “new” and “centuries old”; have shaped our teacher training, which has critically influenced the development of our teachers and administrators. Traditionalists have embedded deeply engrained assumptions and core educational beliefs, which has impacted the development of our repertoire of teaching practices. They have framed educators about what “great schools” and “good teaching” (best practices) should be, and what we as teachers and students should do every day. These philosophies have served as internal and external drivers of our educational beliefs and values, and they continue to exert influence on school policies, norms, and expectations.

As our cohort explored these eight philosophical traditions, a set of clear, exciting, and empowering alternatives emerged. We decided to write this article to share some of what we learned, in the hope that it may inspire other educators to consider the practical value of exploring, adopting, and applying some of the many available educational philosophical traditions to their teaching and their efforts to inspire students to learn and engage with learning every day.

IS EVERY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THE BEST?

The Problem

Nearly a half century of standardized test results have demonstrated that traditional PK-12 schooling practices have failed to meet the diverse needs of far too many American students. Traditional instructional strategies, curricular decisions, and assessment practices along with typically applied punitive, compliance-focused approaches to addressing student discipline and behavior management challenges, are not working, as many educators have hoped and expected they should (Mohamed, 2020). These traditional practices are firmly grounded within two traditional philosophical educational traditions: behaviorism (Skinner, 1938) and essentialism (Sahin, 2018).

Over the course of the last 20 years, data collected from the Program for International Student Assessment (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2000, 2018), a triennial survey of 15-year-old students, suggests that American students have shown minor improvements in the areas of reading and science and have regressed in math achievement. Additionally, the National Center for Educational Progress noted that in the last 30 years, results of the traditional instructional paradigm have been disappointing. Zhao (2022), in his compelling book, *Learners Without Borders*, labeled the current educational model as the “one-to-many” model. He stated that the current model has failed to achieve the results Americans would want and expect for our children.

In this one-to-many model, there is “one outcome for many students, one curriculum for many students, one pathway for many students, one teacher for many students, one assessment for many students, and one school for many students” (Zhao, 2022, p. 16). Because of this “one-to-many model”, our school systems and decades of attempted educational and pedagogical reforms have not met the needs of all students. This model has failed to deliver the promise of a quality education and educational equity to all students.

IS EVERY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THE BEST?

Our Team Activity

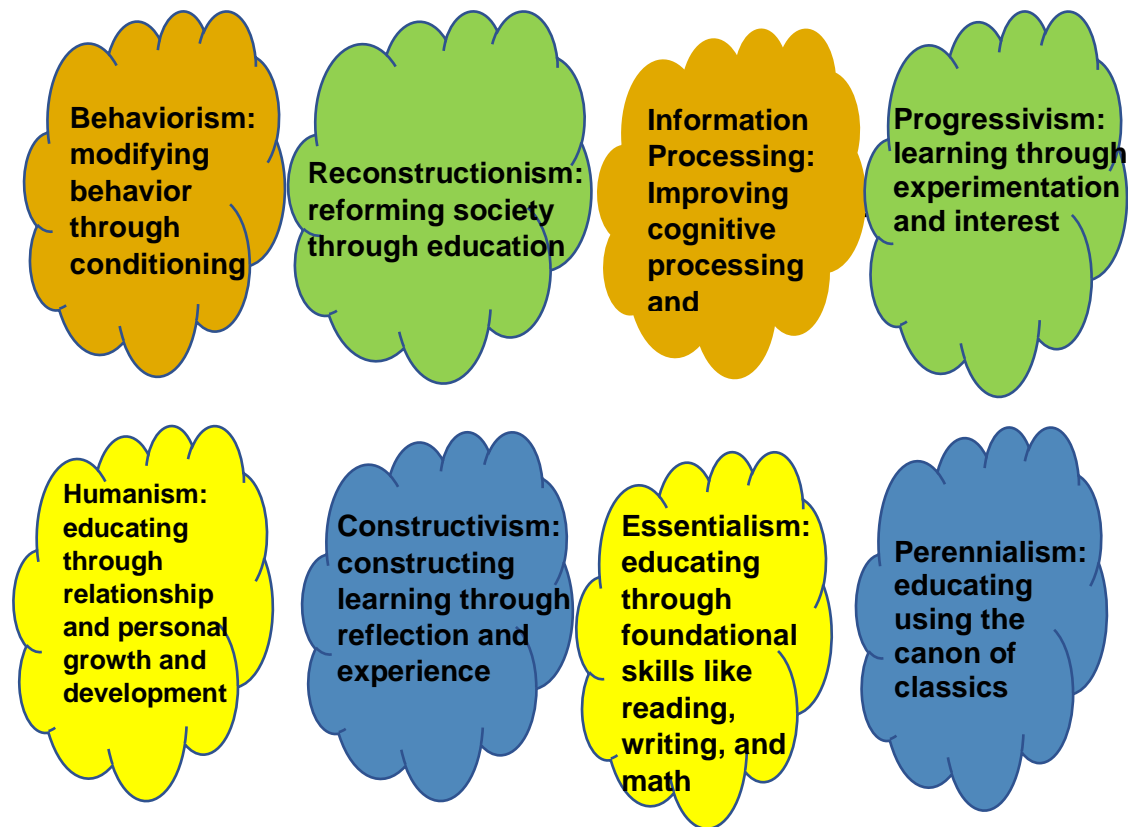
As a team of five education doctoral students and our professor, we assessed where we aligned with the eight educational philosophies as outlined by the *Educational Philosophies Self-Assessment* questionnaire (Cohen, 1999). We compared the outcomes of our individual results assessed using the associated *Scoring Guide (Cohen, 1999)*, with the individual results of others in our cohort to identify themes and commonalities that were representative of effective educational philosophies for modern learners. Our goal was to determine which of the eight educational philosophies most effectively aligned with the current educational needs within our respective school systems.

Our professor directed us to spend 20 minutes individually evaluating our educational philosophies utilizing the self-assessment grading. Once we completed the self-assessment, we used the *Educational Philosophies Self-Assessment Scoring Guide (Cohen, 1999)* to ascertain scores that would indicate our educational philosophy preferences. Figure 1 is a holistic view of the educational philosophies we used to self-assess our personal educational philosophies. While we acknowledge there is an impulse to present these philosophies juxtaposed based on their intrinsic “power dynamics” (e.g., in some traditions, the power is held by the traditional authoritative figures such as teachers, administration, policy makers, etc., and in other traditions the power and autonomy is held by students), we chose to present the eight traditions as a *mélange* of possible educational philosophies, without divisiveness or hierarchical value. At times, the eight different educational philosophies can be seen as competing with one another for value and relatability. What we concluded is that, within each situation in public education, there is a need for aspects of each of the different philosophies so there exists no real hierarchy of value.

IS EVERY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THE BEST?

Figure 1

Educational Philosophies and Psychological Orientations



Note: This illustration depicts the eight educational theories using the metaphor of clouds.

As the winds of change blow clouds to a school district, teachers and students are forced to follow different theories. Then when the winds blow in a different direction (leadership changes), new requirements appear. We recommend that teachers, the biggest constant in most schools, should be trained to understand each educational philosophy, so they can make more strategic and situational decisions for the benefit of their students

After self-scoring our individual philosophical preferences, we reconvened to discuss our findings. We each reviewed our scores in the philosophical categories and self-reported our highest and lowest scoring philosophical preferences and reflected on the results. Lastly, we reflected upon and discussed which experiences have contributed to our individual results and

IS EVERY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THE BEST?

how those results translate into our applied practice in the classroom. Table 1 lists each cohort member, their educational background, their dominant philosophies, and a quote(s) that represents that philosophy.

Table 1

Results of Educational Philosophies Self-Assessment

Cohort Member	Educational Experience	Dominant Philosophies	Quote
Member 1	M.Ed. English teacher 7 years alternative education English high school teacher, 7 years after-school English credit recovery teacher, 7 years summer school English credit recovery teacher, First-year civil rights team project advisory	Reconstructivism Critical Theory	"I was not surprised to see that I ranked very high in alignment with Reconstructivism/Critical Theory. I believe education should seek to change our society for the better in a way that is universally better for all people. I believe education should promote equity in all areas of life."
Member 2	M.S. teacher of reading, 14 years middle school reading teacher, certified reading specialist, lead teacher mentor, 5 years building representative for local union chapter	Humanism	"I already knew that I value, above all else, providing a nurturing environment in which my students feel safe so they can try out new ideas and learn from one another. I was not surprised that my primary philosophy is Humanism."
Member 3	M.Ed., board certified behavioral analyst, 25 years in education as educator, district behaviorist, and administrator	Humanism Constructivism	"It was interesting to see the results of my cohort and realize how different we are in terms of our philosophies. The results helped me realize how we all can have different philosophies and want the same outcome, which is educating our students towards success!"

IS EVERY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THE BEST?

Cohort Member	Educational Experience	Dominant Philosophies	Quote
Member 4	21 years K-8 special education teacher, autism specialist, dyslexia specialist	Cognitivism Behaviorism	"I was surprised to learn how much my philosophies have changed over my years of teaching. When I began my career, my teaching was rooted in staunch essentialism."
Member 5	M.Ed. science teacher, 6 years middle school science teacher	Progressivism	"I think education nowadays is, and should be, vastly different from what many of us experienced years ago. I strongly feel tapping into the lived human experience is one of the most impactful means we have in creating quality learning experiences. While I am not totally surprised by this result, I feel strongly the progressivist philosophy is one that will continue to permeate the educational landscape in the time to come."

Each member had different ideas and philosophies as to what each of thought is most important in education. Member one is a reconstructivist/critical theorist, and wrote:

I was not surprised to see that I ranked very high in alignment with reconstructivism/critical theory. I believe education should seek to change our society for the better in a way that is universally better for all people. I believe education should promote equity in all areas of life.

Member two, on the other hand, was not surprised by her humanistic scores. Member two wrote:

IS EVERY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THE BEST?

I already knew that I value, above all else, providing a nurturing environment in which my students feel safe so they can try out new ideas and learn from one another. I was not surprised that my primary philosophy is humanism.

Member three, who is a humanist and a constructivist, realized that we each had our different views of the world and teaching and learning. Member three wrote:

It was interesting to see the results of my cohort and realize how different we are in terms of our philosophies. The results helped me realize how we all can have different philosophies and want the same outcome, which is educating our students towards success!

Member four, who believes in behaviorist and cognitivism, was surprised to see how they had changed over the years. Member four wrote, "I was surprised to learn how much my philosophies have changed over my years of teaching. When I began my career, my teaching was rooted in staunch essentialism."

Member five, who is a progressivist, wrote:

I think education nowadays is, and should be, vastly different from what many of us experienced years ago. I strongly feel tapping into the lived human experience is one of the most impactful means we have in creating quality learning experiences. While I am not totally surprised by this result, I feel strongly the progressivist philosophy is one that will continue to permeate the educational landscape in the time to come.

It was clear from our reflections that our philosophies stemmed from both our experiences as primary school and secondary school learners, as well as our experiences in undergraduate and graduate schools. At times, we were surprised by our results, and sometimes the results confirmed what we already knew about our individual educational philosophies. Regardless, we were able to find situational effectiveness in the philosophies with which we identified most.

IS EVERY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THE BEST?

Reflection

Anecdotally, our experiences in public education suggested that federally mandated educational reform initiatives create a hierarchy of educational philosophies. Based on the trending initiatives in public education, we have found that an emphasis can be placed on the use of one or two philosophies to be used significantly more readily than others. Federal, state, local mandates, and current social or political issues can result in the preference for or exploitation of one philosophy over others. Figure 2 shows our current perceived conceptualization of the hierarchy of educational philosophies. These notions come from a top-down initiative-based level of importance from federal, state, and local educational powers (Zhao, 2022).

Intertwining Situational Philosophies in Education

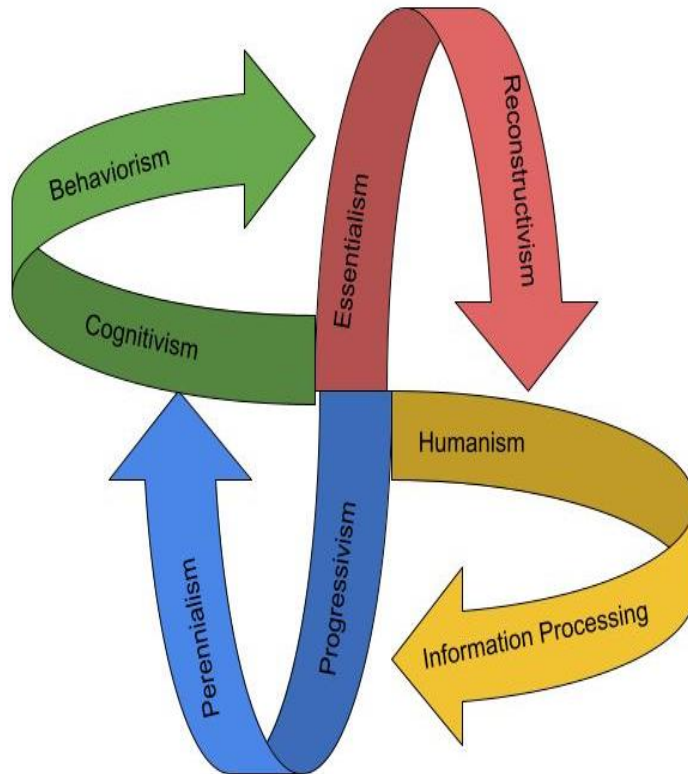
So, after all the questions, and the assessing, and reflecting, which approach do we believe is the best? Much like there is no “best piece of yarn” in an ornate Middle Eastern tapestry, we believe the philosophies all work together to create a beautiful decorative textile (see Figure 2). Our conclusion is there is no single, best educational philosophy. Some philosophies are more successful in certain situations, or with specific students encountering unique challenges, than others. For example, if there is a string of bathroom vandalism incidents in a school, and the bathroom is left without soap dispensers, paper towel holders, and faucet knobs, a solution is needed quickly. A Reconstructivist approach might help long term by allowing students to create and construct the learning environment and experience they value most, but it would take time to get the students to understand why they want to construct a school environment that has adequate supports, resources, and facilities that work with fidelity to their values. In the meantime, everyone else needs soap in the bathroom. A behaviorist approach might be appropriate short term, to create an appropriate school environment

IS EVERY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THE BEST?

immediately where there are consequences for vandalism in the bathroom and rewards for treating the facilities well.

Figure 2

Situational Pedagogy Strategies



As another example, while a student may truly need to know their times tables before they leave the 3rd grade classroom, although drilling them with the information using online math resources is a great plan for helping them retain this knowledge, this method of learning may be unsuccessful at home, if the student does not have housing, internet, electricity, or an environment conducive to learning. A humanist approach to teaching would provide a holistic view of the child that would allow the teacher to make decisions about their methodology in a way that would make an essentialism and information processing approach to fundamental mathematics more successful. Each of these eight approaches is the best approach in

IS EVERY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THE BEST?

situations where they create successful acquisition of knowledge and understanding and allow students to make progress toward their goals.

The Practicality of Using Situational Strategies Going Forward

The *Educational Philosophies Self-Assessment* (Cohen, 1999) can be used by all staff, faculty, and administrators of a school system to see where their philosophies fall on the interconnected flow of educational philosophies. Once educators score themselves, they can analyze their results in comparison to the trends in their school. We recommend that the most beneficial approach to using these philosophies in a school is to see the benefits in each philosophical tradition and use a specific philosophical approach when it is appropriate and applicable to the learners and the learning environment. Policies and practices in the school should reflect the philosophies that best fit the situations in which the policies and practices apply. We believe that this is the best approach to using these education philosophies to improve the quality of education and to ensure that all learners have opportunities to understand, connect with, and retain what that are learning. We believe, for schools to successfully educate the whole student, and enable all children to access learning, all eight of these philosophical traditions will create the most situational success. The answer to our original question in our title, is every educational philosophy the best, is it depends on the situation, the students, the teachers, the administration, the community, and the biggest at a given time. Each education philosophy is the best when it is used at the appropriate time and in appropriate ways for serve the students and their teachers.

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IS EVERY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THE BEST?

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