

My Educational Philosophy Based on My Cultural Identity and Three Influential Philosophers

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Abstract

In this paper I introduce my personal cultural identity and three philosophers who I find influential. In “My Cultural Identity” I summarize how my family and my diverse education have influenced my cultural identity and how this helps me relate to other cultures. In “Influential Philosophers” I explore the background and influences on educational philosophy of H.D. Hirsch, Jr., John Dewey, and Nel Noddings who represent two educational philosophies I agree with, including essentialism, progressivism, and progressivism, respectively. After taking a deeper look at each of these topics I discuss how each has influenced my own views of education and synthesize them into my own teaching philosophy. As I am still in my first semester of graduate school, my opinions could very likely change by the time I graduate and start working as a teacher. I expect them to stay relatively steady, but I include the disclaimer to give the reader a perspective of where in my studies I am writing from.

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My Cultural Identity

Although I am only Caucasian and do not possess a “mixture” of races like Anthony E. Wright writes about in *Little Boxes*, I have been able to develop a diverse cultural identity. I feel that I can “look at issues and ideas from more than one viewpoint”, just as Wright says (Wright, 1990, p. 182). The foundation to my cultural identity comes from my family and birthplace. The diversity in my identity comes from my academic life.

I am from a huge, Irish Catholic family with roots in Jersey City, New Jersey that go back three generations. Most of my life has been lived in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. but the ties to my birthplace remain strong. The thing I love most about my family’s Jersey City culture is the instant connection you have with almost anyone you meet; there are no strangers. We also value supporting our family and friends. I was recently at a wake with my cousin in Jersey City. I knew hardly anyone there, but found connections with almost everyone because of a distant interpersonal connection (they knew my aunt’s best friend whose cousin knew my mom). I look at Jersey City as an established place, with multiple generations of roots and a lot of shared history with the people around me.

My family has always impressed the importance of family. Familial support is something I was born with. This covers every aspect of life, including academic life. Perhaps it was this unconditional support that gave me the motivation to set strict guidelines for myself. Though my guidelines are not as strict and rigid as Amy Chua describes her own in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, I was able to relate to her strict parenting style to my self-imposed set of beliefs. The strongest similarity being that I have always put my family first (Chua, 2011). This familial bond is the biggest cultural difference I have found in Virginia.

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Living and going to school in Northern Virginia has been culturally enlightening for me. The population is constantly changing and growing with new families and cultures. Although I lived in and attended elementary school in a privileged community, my cultural horizons were expanded by travel, volunteer work, and a top-rated education. The thing that most altered my cultural identity was attending a secondary International Baccalaureate school. With over 80 countries and 40 languages represented in the student body, it would have been harder to stay the same than to change my cultural identity. Our school impressed upon us that being diverse was something to feel fortunate and proud of. I have kept that sentiment with me ever since.

Although I have kept this sentiment and I have allowed it to shape my cultural identity, I recognize that I will always keep the core, familial culture that I have grown up with. In their article, *Cultural and Linguistic Investment: Adolescents in a Secondary Two-Way Immersion Program*, Bearse and de Jong indicate that after learning the language, the English-language learners felt like they now belonged to two cultures while the Spanish-language learners still felt only American (Bearse & de Jong, 2008). I am more like the Spanish-language learners in this scenario in that I can learn about a culture and let it influence my outlook, as I did in secondary school, but I will always feel the strongest cultural connection to my family and my roots in New Jersey. I will still include the other part of my cultural identity, which is my ability to accept and appreciate different cultures, viewpoints, and traditions. As a teacher this will be beneficial as the United States grows and our cultural demographics shift.

Influential Philosophers

E.D. Hirsch, Jr. – Essentialist

E.D. Hirsch, Jr. was born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1928, right before the Great Depression, to a well-off Jewish family. He went to college where he earned his B.A. from Cornell University and his

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doctorate from Yale University. He taught at Yale for ten years before moving on to the University of Virginia. He is the founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation, where he promotes his essentialist philosophies of education, which are based around his idea of “cultural literacy” (“E.D. Hirsch,” 2013).

Hirsch started out as a student of comparative literature and hermeneutics and wrote many books on the subject, including, *Validity in Interpretation* and *The Aims of Interpretation*. From his studies of trying to find the true meaning of a piece of literature, he started to wonder what makes some text more comprehensible than other text. This is where he started to develop his idea of cultural literacy (“E.D. Hirsch,” 2013).

He started out by testing the reading comprehension of students at two Virginia universities. He found that although both sets of students were completely literate, one group understood the text better than the other group. He reasoned that because one group had background knowledge about the subjects in the text, they were able to understand it better. It was findings like this that led Hirsch to conclude that without a basic set of knowledge even literate people will find reading comprehension difficult. Reading comprehension is imperative to learning and academic success. Cultural literacy, as he called common cultural background knowledge, is what Hirsch decided to shape his essentialist curriculum around (“E.D. Hirsch, Jr.,” 2013).

The curriculum he created has become known as cultural literacy, named for his most famous book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, but he preferred to refer to it as “core knowledge” (Sadker & Zittleman, 2012, p. 185). This core knowledge is a set of information that every American should know in order to understand the “basics of our society” (Sadker & Zittleman, 2012, p. 343). To demonstrate a real life application of the importance of core knowledge, Hirsch gives the example of a newspaper article he was reading about an “atom smasher”. Hirsch found “references to:

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the Depression, Grand Coulee Dam, black gold, the TVA, the Big Bang theory and mecca” (Trueheart, 1987, B1). One does not need to know everything about each of the named subjects, but a basic understanding is necessary to comprehend the article.

In Hirsch’s article *Culture and Literacy*, published in *The Journal of Basic Writing* in 1980, he discusses how important he believes reading comprehension to be. He states, “It would certainly be useful to literacy if this idea of a central shared education were at least being discussed more widely than is now being done” (p. 47). More than 30 years later and the Core Knowledge Foundation’s core knowledge is not just being discussed, but can be found in curriculums in 46 states (“Innovators: E.D. Hirsch, Jr.,” 2013). An essentialist classroom teaches core knowledge but offer more than just memorization of facts. This core knowledge is essential to further learning and understanding.

John Dewey - Progressivist

John Dewey was born in Vermont in 1859, just before the civil war broke out, and died in New York in 1952, just as the Cold War was getting started. He was the founder of the philosophical movement known as “pragmatism”, he was a leader of the progressive education movement in the United States. As a white man he was able to become well educated, earning a B.A. from the University of Vermont and a doctorate from Johns Hopkins University. While he taught philosophy and psychology at the University of Michigan he also studied child psychology. During this time his interest in the philosophies of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a major figure who helped revolutionize European philosophy, faded. He became more interested in the newer philosophies of prominent American psychologists G. Stanley Hall and William James. His development of his own educational philosophy was due in part to studying the philosophies of the aforementioned men and in part to what he saw as a “changing democratic society” that needed to be interested in what they were learning (“John Dewey,”

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2013). He found that "...need and desire [to learn] are exponents of natural being" (Dewey, 1925, p.64). His philosophy continued to develop as he taught at the University of Chicago and developed the Laboratory School where his progressive pedagogy was refined, and then later at Columbia University as he wrote his most well-known book, *Experience and Nature*, in 1925 ("John Dewey," 2013).

Dewey took a lot of his ideas about progressivism from his philosophy, pragmatism, and applied them to education. A major crossover idea is how important "experimental inquiry", or the scientific method, is in the learning process ("John Dewey," 2013). There are five steps in the scientific method: "(1) Become aware of the problem; (2) define it; (3) propose various hypotheses; (4) examine the consequences of each hypothesis in the light of previous experience; and (5) test the most likely solution" (Sadker & Zittleman, 2012, p. 191). This method of inquiry helps students learn more because they are interacting with the process. He believed that through different experiences, we can learn many things. The combination of an experiment and inquiry is the key to knowledge and understanding ("John Dewey," 2013). He wrote in his book *Experience and Nature*, "For if there were nothing in the way, if there were no deviations and resistances, fulfillment would be at once, and in so being would fulfill nothing, but merely be" (Dewey, 1925, p.62). A student cannot truly learn by simply hearing facts; they have to have experiences and ask questions to build a firm understanding, which they can then use to continue to gain knowledge. I have found this method to be helpful in early elementary through higher education.

Dewey's ideas about the importance of interaction with the environment and peers, and thinking and reflecting have stood up to time. Though the global competition that the Space Race created and the suspicion of anything deemed "un-American" during the Cold War halted the implementation of his progressive philosophy in favor of more traditional methods, Dewey's ideas were strong enough to last through the decades (Sadker & Zittleman, 2012, p. 151). As time has gone by,

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more of his philosophies have been adopted into curriculum in the United States and the United Kingdom ("John Dewey on education, experience and community," 2001).

Nel Noddings - Progressivist

Nel Noddings is a white American woman. She is a teacher, a feminist, and a progressive philosopher of education and ethics of care. She was born in 1929 and attributes her philosophical ideals of progressivism to her early education. She has a bachelor's and master's degree in mathematics from Montclair State University and Rutgers University, respectively. After working for 17 years and gaining an in depth perspective in the New Jersey public school system as an elementary teacher, high school teacher and an administrator, she attended Stanford University to earn her Ph.D. She focused her Ph.D. studies on moral education and ethics of care. After graduating she was a member of many faculties, including Pennsylvania State University and the University of Chicago, where she followed in Dewey's footsteps and directed the Laboratory School before leaving the field to return as a faculty member at Stanford. She remained here for over 20 years, gaining respect and many awards for outstanding teaching. Before retiring she taught educational philosophy at Columbia University and continued to earn many honorary titles from universities around the United States. She is currently a Jacks Professor Emeriti of Child Education at Stanford University ("Nel Noddings; The ethics of care and education," 2004).

Her feminist perspective has a maternal twist. She once described herself as "incurably domestic", which many feminists would find hard to associate with ("Nel Noddings; The ethics of care and education," 2004). From this domestic instinct came some of her best known views on the ethics of care. She believes that in the foundation of human life lies a basic need to be cared for and to care for. She calls this "natural caring" and believes it is instinctive in all humans; we desire it and are receptive

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toward it. Although raised and educated in the United States, she is careful not to be blinded by Western and masculine culture, replacing concepts that might have too much cultural influence with more neutral ones, like “empathy” with “sympathy” in her description of caring (Noddings, 1984, p.30).

According to Noddings, there are four components of caring: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. In the progressive way, the student needs to be deeply involved in the learning process. They need to see their teacher care, they need to have a conversation about it and evaluate it in different situations, they need to demonstrate caring, and their demonstrations need to be affirmed and encouraged by the teacher (“Nel Noddings; The ethics of care and education,” 2004).

Ethics of care connects school to personal life, specifically a teacher caring for a student. She believes that schools and teachers need to acknowledge and take care of a student’s “physical, spiritual, occupational, and intellectual development (Sadker & Zittleman, 2012, p.198). Caring is fundamental to a successful education because when a student is cared for they will learn better, develop good morals, and become able to care for others. She believes that the school is "an educational institution and thus committed to fostering ethicality" (Noddings, 1984, p.173). Morals, ethics, and care all come from the school, requiring a strong relationship between the teacher and student. This is where her notion of caring joins the progressivism philosophy.

She suggests that smaller classes and fewer standardized tests would allow a teacher and student more time to explore subjects that are interesting to them (Noddings, 2004). More time spent with the student on subjects that are interesting will inspire greater and deeper learning from the student. The teacher should try to guide the student and help them form their world views. The Western ideal of individuality has many people questioning how placing such importance on the relationship between teacher and student could be a good idea. Noddings emphasizes the need to

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“recognize moral interdependence” in order to learn (“Nel Noddings; The ethics of care and education,” 2004). The teacher and student will work closely together to find the student’s values, but this does not mean the student will not find their own meaning in the subjects they choose to study.

Noddings’ views stem from the belief that caring is a basic human instinct and it is a necessary skill needed to reach full academic and personal potential. Although it is natural, as teachers we need to be aware of how to make sure our caring is received and recognized. Influenced by progressive ideas similar to Dewey’s, she believes that teachers need to foster an interest in education in their students by guiding them to subjects that interest them. This is when the ethics of care can best help students develop.

A Synthesis of My Teaching Philosophy

There are many points to take into consideration when synthesizing all of this information into one teaching philosophy. I have taken the most influential parts of my cultural identity, as described in “My Cultural Identity”, and the points I agree with most from Hirsch, Dewey, and Noddings and I have synthesized them to form my personal, teaching philosophy. As I will be teaching at the lower-elementary level in Fairfax County, Virginia, I will frame the any implications of my philosophy to this specific academic level and location.

The county I plan to teach in is very diverse and is changing constantly. The philosophers I chose were not very diverse, although Noddings did take precautions to avoid being too Western- and masculine-minded. I will choose to use my cultural identity to relate to the diverse class population I am sure to encounter. My ability to get along with various cultures through learning and respectfully engaging that I learned from my secondary education will help me conduct myself in the classroom that will be relatable for any student. My moral values that I learned from my family will tie into Noddings’

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philosophy that school should be a place for students to develop good ethics and learn to care for others.

The main philosophy I will follow will be essentialism. The main goal in my classroom will be to follow Virginia's Standards of Learning. I believe these standards have been set for the students because they are vital to continuous learning. Just as Hirsch emphasized, a student must master the core knowledge before being able to learn anything else. My students will then be able to discover and pursue passions of their own. With the core knowledge as a foundation, they can use Dewey's philosophy of experimental inquiry and scientific method as ways to reinforce learning and gain new knowledge.

The combination of my experience with diversity, the emphasis on core knowledge with experimental inquiry on the side, and Nodding's ethics of caring will create a well-rounded classroom that will be able to accommodate any type of student. My students will learn in many ways, but will all come out with a core knowledge that will help them continue to learn, an understanding of what they love learning, and the ability to care for others.

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