

## **PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS:**

Based upon fundamental beliefs that arise from one's philosophy of Education, curricular decisions involve consideration of several topics and issues. Precisely for this reason, we consider philosophy one of the major foundation areas in curriculum. In this section, we shall explore several different philosophies of education that influence curricular decisions.

### **Philosophy and Curriculum**

Studying philosophy helps us deal with our own personal systems of beliefs and values, i.e., the way we perceive the world around us and how we define what is important to us. As philosophical issues have always influenced society and institutions of learning, a study of the philosophy of education in terms of Curriculum development is essential.

In essence, a philosophy of education influences, and to a large extent determines, our educational decisions and alternatives. Those who are responsible for curricular decisions, therefore, should be clear about what they believe. If we are unclear or confused about our own beliefs, then our curricular plans are bound to be unclear and confusing. One important step in developing a personal philosophy of education is to understand the various alternatives that others have developed over the years. Here we shall look into the following four major philosophical positions that have, hitherto, influenced curriculum development.

- 1) Idealism
- 2) Realism
- 3) Pragmatism
- 4) Existentialism

#### **i) Idealism**

The doctrine of idealism suggests that matter is an illusion and that reality is that which exists mentally. It emphasizes moral and spiritual reality as the chief explanation of the world and considers moral values absolute, timeless and universal.

If we apply this view to education what would be the implications for the role of teachers and curriculum in education?

Obviously, teachers would act as role models of enduring values. And the school must be highly structured and ought to advocate only those ideas that demonstrate enduring values. The materials used for instructions, therefore, would center on broad ideas particularly those contained in great works of literature and/or scriptures. Since it is based on broad ideas and concepts, idealism is not in line with the beliefs of those who equate learning with acquisition of specific facts from various Proponents of realism view the world in terms of objects and matter. They believe that human behavior is rational when it conforms to the laws of nature and is

governed by social laws. Applied to education, those ideas begin to reveal a second possible philosophy of education.

## **ii) Realism**

What kind of philosophy will that be? 'Realists' consider Education a matter of reality rather than speculation. Application, The paramount responsibility of the teacher, then, is to impart to learners the knowledge about the world they live in. What scholars of various disciplines have discovered about the world constitutes this knowledge. However, like the idealists, the realists too stress that education should reflect permanent and enduring values that have been handed down through generations, but only to the extent that they do not interfere with the study of particular disciplines. Clearly, unlike the idealists who consider classics ideal subject matter for studies, the realists view the subject expert as the source and authority for determining the curriculum.

## **iii) Pragmatism**

In contrast to the traditional philosophies, i.e., idealism and realism, Pragmatism gives importance to change, processes and relativity, as it suggests that the value of an idea lies in its actual consequences. The actual consequences are related to those aims that focus on practical aspects in teaching and learning (Nash, 1995).

According to pragmatists, learning occurs as the person engages in transacting with the environment. Basic to this interaction is the nature of change. In this sense, whatever values and ideas are upheld currently would be considered tentative since further social development must refine or change them. For instance, at a particular period of time it was generally believed that the earth was flat which was subsequently disproved through scientific research.

To consider, therefore, what is changeless (idealism) and inherited the perceived universe (realism) and to discard social and/or perceptual change is detrimental to the overall development and growth of children. You can now visualize how pragmatism would have influenced the framing of curriculum.

Curriculum, according to the pragmatists, should be so planned that it teaches the learner how to think critically rather than what to think. Teaching should, therefore, be more exploratory in nature than explanatory. And, learning takes place in an active way as learners solve problems which help them widen the horizons of their knowledge and reconstruct their experiences in consonance with the changing world. What then might be the role of the teacher? The role is not simply to disseminate information but to construct situations that involve both direct experience with the world of the learner and opportunities to understand these experiences.

Having seen three basic philosophical positions that have influenced curriculum development, let us now look at the fourth one.

#### **iv) Existentialism**

This doctrine emphasizes that there are no values outside human beings, and thus, suggests that human beings should have the freedom to make choices and then be responsible for the consequences of those choices.

According to this philosophy, learners should be put into a number of choice-making situations, i.e., learners should be given freedom to choose what to study. It emphasizes that education must center on the perceptions and feelings of the individual in order to facilitate understanding of personal reactions or responses to life situations. Of primary concern in this process is the individual. Since life is based upon personal meanings, the nature of education, the existentialists would argue, should be largely determined by the learner. Individual learners should not be forced into pre-determined programs of study. Whatever the learner feels he/she must learn should be respected and facilitated by the system. An existentialist curriculum, therefore, would consist of experiences and subjects that lend themselves to philosophical dialogue and acts of making choices, stressing self-expressive activities and media that illustrate emotions and insights. The teacher, then, takes on a non-directive role. The teacher is viewed as a partner in the process of learning. As a professional, the teacher serves as a resource facilitating the individual's search for personal meaning rather than imposing some predetermined values or interests on learners.

Existentialism has gained greater popularity in recent years. Today, many educationists talk about focusing on the individual, promoting diversity in the curriculum and emphasizing the personal needs and interests of learners. Here, perhaps, we can recall the philosophy that underlies the open distance education system. Learner-autonomy, which the existentialists seem to suggest, has been and remains the prime characteristic feature of the distance mode of teaching-learning. Because of the explosion in knowledge and tremendous growth in information technology, the curriculum of the past seems to be obsolete.

To plug the gap between the needs of the learner, the society and the curriculum content, rethinking in the area of curriculum development appears to be unavoidable. What might have been relevant in a particular situation need not necessarily always be so. In essence, social changes demand changes in the existing pattern of education. The inherent potentiality of the system of distance education enables it to accommodate and cater to these changes. It should be clear from the above discussion that by and large, in operational terms, both pragmatism and existentialism find ample expression in open distance education.

Each of the four major philosophies just described begins with a particular view of human nature and of values and truths, and then proceeds to suggest what such a view implies for curriculum development. Before we conclude our discussion on the philosophical foundations of curriculum, we should make note of a few educational philosophies in order to reinforce what has been said so far.

## **Educational philosophies:**

Although aspects of educational philosophy can be derived from the roots of idealism, realism, pragmatism and existentialism, a common approach is to provide a pattern of educational philosophies which derives from the major schools of philosophy some of which have been touched upon above. Here, we shall be looking into the following four educational philosophies for their implications in the area of curriculum development.

- 1) Perennialism
- 2) Progressivism
- 3) Essentialism, and
- 4) Reconstructionism

Let us discuss each one of these in this very order.

### **i) Perennialism**

It advocates the permanency of knowledge that has stood the test of time and values that have moral and spiritual bases. The underlying idea is that education is constant, absolute and universal. Obviously, "perennialism" in education is born of "idealism" in general philosophy.

The curriculum of the perennialist is subject-centered. It draws heavily on defined disciplines or logically organised bodies of content, but it emphasizes teaching learning of languages, literature, sciences and arts. The teacher is viewed as an authority in a particular discipline and teaching is considered an art of imparting information knowledge and stimulating discussion. In such a scheme of things, students are regarded immature as they lack the judgement required to determine what should be studied, and also that their interests demand little attention as far as curriculum development is concerned.

There is usually only one common curriculum for all students with little room for elective subjects. According to this point of view putting some students through an academic curriculum and others through a vocational curriculum is to deny the latter genuine equality of educational opportunity. Such views appeal to those educators who stress intellectual meritocracy. Their emphasis is on testing students, enforcing tougher academic standards/programs, and on identifying and encouraging talented students.

### **ii) Progressivism**

This emerged as a protest against perennialist thinking in education. It was considered a contemporary reformist movement in educational, social and political affairs during the 1920's and 30's. According to progressivist thought, the skills and tools of learning include problem solving methods and scientific inquiry. In addition, learning experiences should include cooperative behavior and self-discipline, both of which are important for democratic living. The

curriculum, thus, was interdisciplinary in nature and the teacher was seen as a guide for students in their problem-solving and scientific projects.

Although the progressive movement in education encompassed many different theories and practices, it was united in its opposition to the following traditional attributes and practices: the authoritarian teacher; excessive dependence on textbook methods; memorization of factual data and learning by excessive drilling; static aims and materials that reject the notion of a changing world; and attempts to isolate education from individual experiences and social reality.

Although the major thrust of progressive education waned in the 1950's with the advent of "essentialism", the philosophy has left its imprint on education and educational practices of today. Contemporary progressivism is expressed in several movements including those for a socially relevant curriculum, i.e., a match between subjects taught and student needs which is one of the theoretical bases of distance education.

### **iii) Essentialism**

This philosophy, rooted partly in idealism and partly in realism, evolved mainly as a critique of progressive thought in education. Yet, the proponents of essentialism do not totally reject progressive methods as they do believe that education should prepare the learner to adjust to a changing society. Thus, in essentialism learning should consist in mastering the subject matter that reflects currently available knowledge in various disciplines. Teachers play a highly directive role by disseminating information to students. According to this viewpoint, the main arms of the institution (be it a school or a college) get sidetracked, when, at the expense of cognitive needs, it attempts to pay greater attention to the social and psychological problems of students.

In recent years, the essentialist position has been stated vociferously by critics who claim that educational standards softened during the 1960s and early 1970s. The most notable achievements of the essentialists have been the widespread implementation of competency based programs, the establishment of grade-level achievement standards, and the movement to reemphasize academic subjects in schools/colleges. In many ways, the ideas of essentialism lie behind attacks on the quality of education by the media and by local pressure groups, which includes, to a good extent, attaches on distance education.

### **iv) Reconstructionism**

It views education as a means of reconstructing society. The reconstructionist believe that as school/college is attended by virtually all youth, it must be used as a means to shape the attitudes and values of each generation. As a result, when the youth become adults they will share certain common values, and thus the society will have reshaped itself.

As for the curriculum, it must promote new social, economic and political education. The subject matter is to be used as a vehicle for studying social problems which must serve as the focus of the curriculum. The following gives you a view of the reconstructionist program of education:

critical examination of the cultural heritage of a society as well as the entire civilization; scrutiny of controversial issues; commitment to bring about social and constructive change; cultivation of a planning-in-advance attitude that considers the realities of the world we live in; and enhancement of cultural renewal and internationalism.

Stemming from this view, reconstruction expands the field of curriculum to include intuitive, personal, mystical, linguistic, political and social systems of theorizing. In general, the curriculum advocated by reconstructionist emphasizes the social sciences-history, political science, economics, sociology, psychology and philosophy-and not the pure sciences. The thrust is on developing individual self-realization and freedom through cognitive and intellectual activities, and thus, on liberating people from the restrictions, limitations and controls of society. The idea is that we have had enough of discipline-based education and narrow specialization, and that we don't need more specialists now, we need more "good" people if we want to survive.

Before we proceed further, let us ask ourselves a question. What insights do we gain from the discussion on the philosophical foundations of curriculum'? Foundations of Curriculum Ideas about curriculum and teaching do not arise in a vacuum. As curriculum development is heavily influenced by philosophy, those involved in such planning should be clear about contemporary, dominant philosophy.

If we are unclear about our philosophy of education, our curriculum plans and teaching procedures will tend to be inconsistent and confused. This being so, we should be aware of the fact that development and awareness of a personal philosophy of education is a crucial professional responsibility. Further, we need to be constantly open to new ideas and insights that may lead to a revision or refinement of our philosophies. Our position should be that no single philosophy, old or new, should serve as the exclusive guide for making decisions about curriculum. What we, as curriculum specialists, need to do, is to adopt an eclectic approach, in which there is no emphasis on the extremes of subject matter or socio-psychological development, excellence or quality. In essence, what we need is a prudent philosophy-one that is politically and economically feasible and that serves the needs of students and society. It is here that open distance education comes forth with its promises for the future.