Constructing a personal philosophy of education

A starter critical conversation

Is it possible to build a personal educational philosophy around just three concepts? Yes, I know that is a big question but maybe we can at least begin to hold a critical conversation about it. Here are some beliefs and ideas to start the conversation. I am not doing heavy stuff here about Rousseau or Marx though, of course, you might wish to, especially as they and many others provide valuable insights. Neither do I spend time digging deep to define the concepts. But at a time of accelerated educational change and some confusing and contradictory educational policy making I want to encourage a bit more critical conversation.

After each short discussion in which I talk about some personal hobbyhorses I raise one or two questions that can be used to encourage conversation. By all means replace or modify these concepts or add ones of your own and raise questions.

Concept One: Accessibility

I believe that we should work to remove barriers to learning. Would you agree? One consequence would be that examinations should not be linguistic obstacle courses for learners designed to trip them up. This also applies to teaching. Learners can easily be confused by teachers and examiners failing to provide fair opportunity for them to acquire and demonstrate what they know, understand and can do.

Talking of examinations, there has been a lot of hot air released recently on the issue of questions that cannot be answered. When I used to set examination questions I did not always expect answers. I mostly expected responses. They are not quite the same thing. The first suggests that you can only pass if you can guess or know what is required. The second suggests that the examiner has to make sense of what is offered to them.

To put this another way: answers imply the use of closed questions; responses imply open questions. When a student responds to an open question they can be taking an examiner into places they did not expect to go and so the examiner has to engage with and make sense of what they are seeing. The more that we use open questions the more we are differentiating by outcome. Differentiating by task inhibits the capacity of

learners to exceed what is expected of them. It is, therefore, a barrier. Or do you like streaming and setting?

Some barriers are, however, beyond the power of teachers to remove. Social privilege cannot be ended easily, certainly not by a schoolteacher struggling to do their best in a classroom. Nevertheless, I guess that if you believe that social privilege brings unfair educational advantages you would not dream of reinforcing it by teaching in that British anomaly the so-called public school. Or would you?

Might the concept of accessibility form part of your educational philosophy? And if so how far would you take it?

Concept Two: Critical Engagement

I believe that education and society benefit when professional educators engage critically with theory, policy and practice. Theory can shine a light on practice but critically examined practice can enable us to challenge theory. The same is true of policy. It can be poorly implemented when not critically examined from the perspectives of theory and practice. Would you agree?

Taking this a bit further, uncritically examined policy is not only in danger of being poorly implemented it is also likely to have been badly designed if criticality has played little part in its construction. Unfortunately, these days professional educators are usually excluded from bringing the perspectives of theory and practice to bear upon the process of policy making. Governments like to throw policies at professionals and expect them to make them work. If they don't work who do you think takes the blame?

Whenever and wherever it is possible to bring criticality to bear I believe it is the duty of professional educators to do so. Perhaps I should qualify this. A former boss of mine used to say that Ofsted was the only game in town and we had to win it. Inspection does not allow much professional wriggle room but to undergo inspection with your mind closed to anything but the surface demands of inspection will, I suggest, impair professional performance. My old boss was right and we did well because we combined focus on the task with a wider and deeper understanding of what was happening. Well, I think so.

How far should critical engagement extend? I think it should extend into the local community and beyond. There has for some time been an emphasis upon teaching subjects. This should not mean that professional educators have to confine themselves to the textbook. All teaching and learning takes place in context. Learners bring something to the classroom. They are not empty vessels. They have perceptions, experiences and values that interact with what teachers have to say. If, for example, there is widespread unemployment in the area it cannot be ignored by the teacher. It will be a factor irrespective of the subject being taught and, therefore, demands critical engagement. So do children.

What do you think about critical engagement? If it becomes part of your educational philosophy how far would you go with it?

Concept Three: Disclosure

By this I mean that learning is diminished when learners become reluctant to disclose what they perceive to be failure. Sometimes teachers can create an atmosphere in which learners fear to ask questions or to reveal what they do not know. This extends to learning to hide apparent failure. In such an atmosphere the real failure is that of the teacher who has not created the conditions in which learners can work to their optimum. Would you agree? I believe that in a professional context the failure to disclose mistakes and misunderstanding can have far-reaching negative consequences.

We can be grateful, for example, to the pharmaceutical companies that invest enormous resources in research to produce drugs to save lives. The cost has to be high because, in order to be successful, they have to try so many things that don't work. So far so good: they believe in the positive usefulness of failure. Unfortunately they don't publish their failures and so other companies have to invest more than they need and unknowingly repeat the same mistakes. Hidden failure is not good.

Do you remember that old phrase: 'It's not a failure but a learning opportunity'? I have seen lots of research carried out both by children and by schoolteachers in which things have not gone according to plan. A first reaction has often been to see this as failure. And so it is if that cast of mind prevails. Add a little critical engagement, however, and the learning blossoms. The real failure would be the failure to disclose and prevent learning taking place.

If you think disclosure should be part of your educational philosophy how might you create the conditions in which learners feel permitted to do it?

Note

As you can see, the above is not a substitute for the serious study of educational philosophy. I do, however, believe that this is a good time to talk about our values and perhaps the above can help.

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