DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 660 CS 511 163

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TITLE	Philosophical Considerations and Literacy.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	9p.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Back to Basics; Elementary Education; *Literacy; Phoneme Grapheme Correspondence; *Reading Instruction; Reading Material Selection; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Idealism

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the philosophical considerations involved in literacy. It explains that one concept that is emphasized in discussions of literacy is "the basics," which are defined as essential skills, such as the association of phonemes with graphemes. This paper notes that "the basics" movement presently stresses the importance of statewide objectives and state mandated testing. Another concept that is considered is that of a changing reading curriculum, in which teaching methods are adjusted over time. A final philosophical consideration addressed in the paper is idealism, which has the following effects on teaching instruction: intellectual objectives come first in teaching; assessment procedures are used to appraise vital subject matter attained by students; survey teaching is frowned upon; education is seen as preparation for adult responsibilities; and student literature should emphasize what is good, true and beautiful. (PM)

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Philosophical Considerations and Literacy.

by Marlow Ediger

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PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LITERACY

There are diverse philosophical considerations in literacy which need to be evaluated. Each has merit and should assist pupils to achieve more optimally in reading. These philosophical considerations differ from each other in degrees and can make for a quite different reading curriculum when comparisons are being made.

The Basics in Literacy Instruction

The concept of "basics" is mentioned rather frequently in educational literacy. Thus, according to its advocates, there are essentials which pupils should achieve to become good readers. Knowledge and skills objectives then may be identified which help pupils to master the tools of reading. If these core objectives are slighted or omitted, the pupil will fail to realize the needed ingredients of becoming a skillful reader. Generally, the essential objectives and goals here might well stress a quality program of phonics instruction. With systemic phonics instruction, pupils learn to associate sounds (phonemes) with symbols (graphemes). If a child does not know a word, he/she can sound it out and determine the correct word. Progress is made in becoming a good reader by relating phonemes with graphemes. Syllabication skills will further assist pupils in reading achievement. They are rather consistent and selected syllables are met up with frequently when reading such as the "un" syllable. By mastering phonetic principles, including syllabication, the pupil can become quite independent in reading and will generally comprehend what has been read. Once the basics of systematic phonics have been mastered, the pupil is then ready to comprehend ideas and information while reading. In some cases where a pupil is quick to master phonetic elements, the learner may move forward rather rapidly in the comprehension arena. The two, phonics and comprehension, may then be interrelated in teaching situations (See Ediger and Rao, 2000, Chapter One).

Dr. William Chandler Bagley (1938) was a strong advocate in his day for the basics or essentialism whereby he disapproved strongly of the following trends in education:

a) The complete abandonment in many school systems of rigorous standards of scholastic achievement as a condition of promotion from grade to grade, and the passing of all pupils "on schedule."

b) The disparagement of system and sequence in learning

and a dogmatic denial of any value in, even in any possibility of learning through, the logical, and causal relationship of learning materials.

c) The wide vogue of the so called "activity movement."
d) The discrediting of the exact and the exacting studies...
e) The "curriculum- revision movement and it vagaries.

Dr. Bagley was living in an era of tremendous changes going on in education. At this time, the progressives consisting of John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick were emphasizing changing from an essentialist to an activity centered or a project method curriculum. Dr. Bagley wished to stabilize the curriculum. He believed strongly in the use of basal textbooks in teaching. Methods which have stood the test of time should be used in teaching. The basics would stress the use of systematic phonics in teaching reading. A strong subject centered curriculum would then be in evidence. Phonics emphasizes essential learnings in associating sounds (phonemes) with symbols (graphemes). He was strongly opposed to a learning by doing approach in teaching and learning situations.

The basics movement presently stresses the importance of statewide objectives and state mandated testing. Under the auspices of each of the fifty states, objectives are developed for teacher use in teaching pupils. These objectives are considered essential for pupils to achieve. The local classroom teacher then needs to align his/her curriculum with that of the state. The state mandated tests, when given on grades three through eight, will measure that which pupils have learned. Feedback is provided to the teacher in terms of what is to be emphasized in the curriculum, based on each pupil's test results.

With the selection of state mandated objectives of instruction, the basics or essentials of learning in reading, among other curriculum areas, have been identified. Testing is done to ascertain how well pupils have achieved these identified basics, such as in the reading curriculum.

The Changing Reading Curriculum

John Dewey (1959- 1953) advocated "change" as being continuously in evidence in school and in society. Quite opposite of a static world, Dewey believed in a world of changing situations. Wahlquist (1942, p. 77) wrote the following:

Professor Dewey overcame the dualism of man and nature by making man a part of nature. Man is born into the world of

nature, being depicted as being full of novel events and uncertainties. as contrasted with the usual conception of a reign of static laws; he lives in this world and this world only, in contrast to the dualistic conception which keeps him suspended between two spheres, this world and the next; and this world is his final resting place, as far as we can know on the basis of human experiences. Life is a continuous process of interaction between man and his environment. Man, in turn, becomes a part of the environment with other persons... The pragmatist's man is an "earthy" man.

From this viewpoint, men are essentially biological and social organisms, living from moment to moment . Life is just one problem after another.

John Dewey stressed the importance of this life only, not the hereafter of which nothing can be known. With continuous change in this world, problems arise and these need identification and solutions found. A wide variety of experiences are necessary in order to develop an hypothesis related directly to the problem. The hypothesis is evaluated thoroughly to notice which is the best solution. New problems may also be selected with solutions again found. The problems noticed and solutions found are in the realm of human experiences. Reading would be one activity in data gathering in order to solve identified problems. With changing times and situations, the curriculum area of reading needs to be modified and revised in a society which is highly flexible and novel. Pertaining to John Dewey and his philosophy of experimentalism, Good and Teller (1973) wrote:

Dewey held that we think when we must, and that thinking originates in a perplexity, an obstacle, or a doubt. Some have regarded this as a great discovery but it is in fact only a truism. If thinking is defined as the effort to find an answer to a problem or to resolve a perplexity, then, naturally, it cannot occur except in the presence of some difficulty. Like other truisms, however, this one is worth stating. It says that truisms can be set up to stimulate thinking.

The sources and varied nature of pupils' problems ... concern the teacher. Children are active by nature, "spilling over with activities," and from these practical concerns many problems arise. getting out of his play pen is for the small child a problem that is about on par with the cat in the cage. Rousseau and Froebel suggested many children's activities that involve problems, but they did not, like Dewey, consider the detailed ways in which the problems are solved by children. Dewey suggests a few somewhat more intellectual but simple

problems. From How We Think everyone will remember the case of the ferry boat with a white pole projecting from the pilot house, the soapy tumblers, and the problem in transportation.

Such examples are altogether appropriate as types of work for children; but they lead the student to the notion that problems usually or always arise from external situations. This is not true. Philosophers, including Dewey, have often gone out in search of problems because they enjoyed thinking...

Idealism and the Reading Curriculum

Idealists believe that mind is real and needs development. Bigge (1982) wrote the following:

The heart of idealism is the belief that basic reality consists of ideas, thoughts, minds of substantive selves, not physical matter. Since priority is given to minds, minds have bodies, but bodies do not have minds. Idealism usually carries with its view the idea of the subsistence (the super existence) of God, who also is basically mind or self. The universe is an expression of intelligence and will; its order is due to an eternal, spiritual reality. For idealists people are good- active substantive minds; they are absolutely real selves endowed with free will or genuine moral choice. This philosophy has ancient roots; it dates back to Socrates (469- 399 BC) and Plato (427-437 BC).

Idealism really is idea-ism. The source of this title is based on Platonic thought. For Plato, ideas alone were genuinely real; they consisted of immaterial essences. That which people perceive is a shadow of reality; each thing they perceive gets existence from its Thingness; an idea. A book is is a book because of its being more or less imperfect replica of Bookness. A woman is a woman because she is a replica of Womaness. Plato's assumed world of "eternal verities" consisted of the True, Good, and the Beautiful.

We can trace the development of idealism by listing some of the leading philosophers who have contributed to this position and stating a leading idea that such has contributed to this philosophy. Socrates believed that children are born with knowledge already in their minds, but that they needed help to recall this innate knowledge. Plato contributed the idea of Ideas, which are the universal forms of all existing things and are the essence of reality. St. Augustine (350- 430) held a dualistic (mind-body) theory of humanity within which the mind or soul is the seat or the force of goodness.

From the above quote, it is obvious that idealists believe that mind provides reality. One then cannot know reality is it truly is, but one can receive ideas therefrom. Human beings live in a world of ideas received from the real world. This can be contrasted with that one can know the real world as it is in and of itself in exact manner. When the observer looks at something, he/she is receiving ideas as to what the item really looks like.

Idealists tend to be highly academic and rigorous in the teaching of subject matter. They place primary emphasis upon cognitive objectives as compared to psychomotor and affective ends. Cognitive objectives in reading involve comprehending what has been read, analyzing the content, thinking creatively about obtained ideas, and assessing that which has been read. Acquiring vital subject matter assists the learner ot move from the finite to the infinite being. Maturing as an individual is then in evidence.

The idealist teacher chooses vital subject matter for pupils to attain indepth learning. Subject matter is salient whereby pupils achieve valuable, universal concepts and generalizations. Pupils are to relate ideas read so that integrated subject matter is acquired rather that fragmented information. Mind or mental development of learners is important then in the literacy curriculum. A study of phonics is necessary to be able to read at an increasingly complex level. However, phonics is a tool for reading ideas contained in any literary selection. Implications for idealism as a philosophy of instruction in reading are the following:

1. intellectual, not affective nor psychomotor objectives, come first in teaching reading
2. quality textbooks and other related print materials which aid in intellectual development should be used as learning opportunities to achieve relevant goals of instruction.
3. assessment procedures used should appraise vital subject matter attained by pupils.
4. survey teaching is to be frowned upon. Rather indepth learning is vital for pupils in order to truly understand subject matter taught.
5. the will or effort of the pupil is necessary to attain worthwhile subject matter. Interest alone is not adequate for pupils to achieve, develop, and grow in subject matter knowledge.
6. pupils need to experience vital subject matter to prepare for the future life of the adult. Education is preparation for adult responsibilities, not present day situations for the learner.

7. learners need to develop from a limited or finite being to one who is increasingly infinite or in the direction of the Absolute or God.

8. a quality general education program, consisting of major academic disciplines, is a must for all pupils

9. student literature should emphasize what is good, true, and beautiful (Ediger, 1995, p. 23).

An idea centered reading curriculum would tend to stress morals and morality. The future is of utmost importance and teachers need to teach that which assists pupils to become more of the infinite or God. The categorical imperative or golden rule is associated with idealism. The categorical imperative states that one should act in a manner whereby the actor wants his/her actions to become universals. The actor then will not behave in which he/she does evil deeds to others since these acts are not wanted by the actor. It does follow the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Wahlquist (1942, p.77) wrote the following:

All philosophical schools are concerned with the nature of reality. Reality, in the philosophical sense, is the property of being real, of really existing, despite appearances, as opposed to the imaginary, the fictitious, or the merely apparent. The idealists holds that reality, i. e., the final stuff, is of of the nature of Mind. He believes that back of and beyond the physical world is the real world of mind or spirit. From this viewpoint, the apparent self sufficiency of nature is an illusion; nature depends upon something else, call it mind, spirit, or idea. The real substance , the ultimate being which explains all other beings, is thought to be more than physical or material. In theological circles this ultimate being is personified as God.

The idealist says in effect, if one seeks for elemental things, he will not find it in matter, motion, or force, but in reason, intelligence, personality, and values. Moreover, these realities have a cosmical significance. They are essences that bring order and unity into the universe. Hence, physical bodies and forces are secondary, being, as it were, eternalizations or manifestations of the mind. Also, the ultimates do not depend upon human beings for their significance; they have an independent existence.

The Great Ideas in literature need to be read by pupils. These abstract ideas provide food for thought and moral standards to live by.

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