

Educational Platform

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Introduction

I entered education with hopes of being able to influence the next generation. I believed that I could help students become future leaders in this country, learn to coexist and work together, and provide students with a compass to figure out their moral direction and hope for the future. As I traced American education from the 1600s to today, I was able to see that many of the political, social, and moral principles that guide me have been foundational to the decisions that have brought us to where we are today. In addition, the central challenges that I face as an educator are not new to me today and in fact are greatly lessened to what educators and students have faced throughout the history of American education.

Political Principles

Political principles that influence education of the past and of today include economic and citizenship preparation. As a world language and social studies teacher, one of my main goals is preparing students for the global workplace and their responsibilities as citizens. My students will be the work force of tomorrow as well as the leaders and voters who make decisions about which direction our country will go. This was a consideration throughout history as well. As the founding fathers of education began to contemplate what the educational system would look like, one of the large considerations was how these students would continue the democratic values of the country.

The founding fathers considered the reality of the individual vs. common good and they believed that part of the role of education was to prepare students for their future

economic roles. “The purpose of democracy is so to organize society that each member may develop his personality primarily through activities designed for the well-being of his fellow members and of society as a whole” (Fraser, 2010, p. 166). If this is the role of democracy, “education in a democracy, both within and without the school, should develop in each individual the knowledge, interests, ideas, habits, and powers whereby he will find his place and use the place to shape both himself and society toward ever nobler ends” (Fraser, 2010, p. 167).

John Dewey was a famous educational reformer and advocate of child-centered education. He believed that education needed to change with the changing landscape of America to make sure that students were prepared for the new demands of the workplace. “We cannot overlook the factors of discipline and of character building involved in this kind of life: training in habits of order and of industry, and in the idea of responsibility, of obligation to do something, to produce something, in the world” (Fraser, 2010, p. 235). Like Dewey, I teach my students skills that will prepare them for future jobs and opportunities. This is seen in the practice of working hard in school through the various activities that are presented and through working together in groups and partnerships, as will be required in today’s global workplace.

As the country developed and advanced, the world continued to develop as well. America was crushed when Russia’s Sputnik beat America. This made Americans feel vulnerable and that they needed to take action to gain power in order to win the Cold War. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 was a campaign aimed at providing federal aid to states to support schools. They chose “to use education to address this

problem-by providing better curriculum materials, better teachers, and better financing for future scientists and engineers” (Fraser, 2010, p. 257).

People wanted federal aid but not federal control. Americans felt that process had become more important than content, which failed a generation who did not become thinkers and doers. I think that this makes a comment about the teachers of this time, but it seems like they adjusted and improved with the next wave of reform. They realized that process and content needed to be woven together. This act focused on math, science and foreign language, which makes sense when you think that it is part of a strategy to win the war.

This reminds me of the pressure in our schools today to rise up in math and science. The US is looked down on as not producing students who are prepared to compete with students from China, Japan, Europe, etc. This puts pressure on teachers to prepare students for state tests especially in math and science. This sentiment can be seen in “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform” which blasted the American education system saying “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (Fraser, 2010, p. 343). In this document, it was argued that other countries such as Japan, Germany, and South Korea are taking over industries that we once controlled and rising above us.

We must keep a balanced approach as we hear these kinds of dooms day reports. In “The Manufactured Crisis,” Berliner and Biddle argued that this report was exaggerated and misleading. They say, “The more we poked into our story, the more nasty lies about education we unearthed; the more we learned about how government

officials and their allies were ignoring, suppressing, and distorting evidence; and the more we discovered how America was being misled about school and their accomplishments” (Fraser, 2010, p. 365). Of course there are always two sides of the story, but it is interesting to see this trend weave through our nation’s history.

In addition, the founding fathers of education believed that education could be an instrument to prepare students to become citizens. Because they believed that this was such an important role, they required that all children receive some sort of education. “The first education-related legislation passed in the Massachusetts legislature. It required that the head of every household teach every child in that household-male and female, biological children, apprentices, or servants- ‘to read and understand the principles of religion and the capital laws of the country’” (Fraser, 2010, p. 3). This law was very revolutionary considering that it covered all children. In order to be able to participate fully in the country, it is important that people are educated to understand the laws and statues of the country. I believe the same to be true today. It is important that the next generation is educated so that they are able to wisely choose our next leaders as well as serve as our next leaders.

Social Principles

One of the key social principles that guides my teaching is equality of opportunity. I want to make sure that each of my students receives an equal chance to access information as they move through their educational careers. Unfortunately, this was not the case in the history of American education and is not always the case the today.

Racism has run rampant in our country from its conception. Slaves were relied on to make the Southern plantations prosper and because of this they did not receive the same rights as whites in this country. Improvements were made and as slavery ended schools were started for black students that were separate from white students. Even some black activists believed that this was the best way. For example, Marcus Garvey believed that blacks should not try to penetrate the white school, but instead create their own schools based on their culture. He said, “The Negro must have an educational system of his own, based upon the history and traditions of his race. The textbooks, therefore, must be different to the white man’s textbooks. The white man’s books loud himself and outrages the Negro. In such textbooks the Negro should substitute all that is bad affecting himself for that which is good relating to himself” (Fraser, 2010, p. 136).

By the 1950s, the Civil Rights movement had begun and people were beginning to fight to have desegregated schools. “We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 341). This famous quote was from the Brown vs. the Board of Education case, the famous ruling that ended segregation in schools, legally at least. “While an end to legal segregation in schools was gained through the Brown decision, the reality of segregation, and unequal schooling continues to the present” (Fraser, 2010, p. 286). During the 1950s, schools began to be forced to desegregate and while many began to allow blacks into their schools, these students were still not treated equally.

Facts that remain true today include that minority students are less successful than white students, largely due to poverty. These issues began to surface during the 1950s

but remain true today. In addition, schools reflect society. For example, if neighborhoods are segregated so are schools. Because of cost barriers, neighborhoods become segregated and schools do as well. One solution that has been developed has been busing. This forces schools to become very diverse but forces some students to travel across town to attend school, making it more difficult to make connections with peers and have a social circle outside of school.

I am lucky to teach in a very culturally diverse area, which reflects the community that these students live in. I try to fight any kind of racism of groups that may form in the school by bringing culture to the forefront of my classroom. From the very beginning of school, I ask my students to share about their heritage and experiences that they have had. I think that this helps to build a culture of trust and understanding that fights to break down stereotypes and misconceptions. I continue to ask students to make connections and comparisons throughout the year and I find that very quickly they feel comfortable sharing in this setting.

Race is not the only factor that affects the quality of education and services that students receive. Students with disabilities were often relegated to the basement and not given adequate services. In 1975, The Education for All Act was passed. “It is the purpose of this Act to assure that all handicapped children have available to them...a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs, to assure that the rights of the handicapped children and their parents or guardians are protected, to assist States and localities to provide for the education of all handicapped children, and to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate handicapped children” (Fraser, 2010, p. 334). In my experience in

education, I see Special Education students receive very good services. The Special Education department at my school works very hard to make sure that teachers understand the accommodations that must be offered to their students and routine meetings allow for a time to check in with families, teachers, and service providers. My school also houses the autism specialists for the school district and it is truly amazing to see how these teachers work with the students to achieve things that never seemed possible.

Moral Principles

The moral principles that have guided education have changed and transformed since the beginning of this country. Education in America was originally founded on biblical principles and these were taught as the forefront of the curriculum. Noah Webster discussed the use of the Bible in schools in “On the Education of Youth in America” in 1790. He said, “My wish is not to see the Bible excluded from schools, but to see it used as a system of religion and morality” (Fraser, 2010, p. 31). One of the foundational goals of education as the country was forming was to instill moral principles into the lives of the children. Horace Mann articulated this quite clearly in his twelfth annual report to the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1848. He said, “Moral Education is a primal necessity of social existence” (Fraser, 2010, p. 51).

This became a bit controversial as some people who expected the religious freedom that the American colonies promised were seeing that their kids were being preached to contrary to their beliefs. One group that was not for this universal schooling was Catholics (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 132). They felt that teachers looked down on their students in the classroom. Textbooks were slanted against Catholics and the schools

were using the Bible as a textbook, which the Catholics believed only the priest should read and interpret. “For these reason, and others of the same kind, you petitioners cannot, in conscience, and consistently with their sense of duty to God, and their offspring, entrust the Public School Society with the office of giving ‘a right direction to the mind of their children’” (Fraser, 2010, p. 71).

We have moved very far away from this type of religious education in public schools. It is no longer accepted at all for teachers to share their religious beliefs with their students or to preach to them like was happening in early American schools. We now talk frequently about the separation of church and state and that religions cannot be taught with preference in public schools.

Because I am a Christian and this drives the way that I live, I show God’s love to all my students while I am careful not to preach or talk about my beliefs. What I do feel is very appropriate is to talk about is creating your our own moral compass. We talk a lot about respect, honesty, and trust which is supported by what I believe but not unique to these ideas. I try to help students create their own ideas, opinions and beliefs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found it to be a very worthwhile practice to take a look at the history of American education and compare it to my experiences today. As I considered the political, social, and moral principles of education, I realized how far our country has come and how lucky I am to be able to be able to benefit from all the growth and changes that have been made since our country began. While much has changed, much has stayed the same and it is interesting to see how my students and I struggle with many of the same issues that were struggled with long ago.

References

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