Abstract

Educational philosophers, from Plato to the present day, have sought to make sense out of the process of teaching and learning. They have described a framework from which educators can be effective. For those of the Christian faith, Scripture becomes a defining element in understanding education. A biblical worldview informs a Christian philosophy of education. This worldview then has clear implications for teachers and students in the classrooms of today.

Introduction

To be a fruitful educator in our context requires more than skills and tools. It requires heart and motivation, it requires passion and vision and a clear sense of mission. These things are fueled by our personal relationship to God through Christ and our immersion in God's Word. They are informed by our understanding of and commitment to a Christian philosophy of teaching and learning.

In this paper I have sought to describe the nature of and need for philosophy of teaching. Effective teachers will know why they are in education, will reflect upon it, and will live out the implications in the classroom. In particular, I have described a Christian philosophy of education, starting with a simple understanding of the biblical worldview. This worldview has implications for belief and practice. It has specific implications for the process of teaching and learning, including the role of the teacher and student, and the issues that arise in education.

Education today has its share if seemingly insurmountable challenges and persistent controversies. If we are clear about our Christian philosophy of teaching and learning, perhaps new (or old) answers will surface and lead us as we go forward.

A Philosophy of Teaching

Departments of Education are actively encouraging their students and graduates to develop their own philosophy of teaching statement. Taking the time to reflect on the practice of teaching and learning "underpins their thinking. Teaching philosophy is about attitudes and individual values" (Walkington, Christensen & Kock, 2001, p. 347). Before developing an instructional strategy, new teachers are being encouraged to "think about values and goals . . . to identify the philosophy behind the practice" (p. 347).

In the light of the recent controversies in the U.S. Department of Education, the mission of higher education is being hotly debated. All agree that student learning is the central goal of all education. However, there is increasing pressure to define student learning as vocational training. Science and technology departments in particular have had to reexamine their philosophy of education, At James Madison University, they have concluded that "the first mission of the university is to teach students how to think" (Pappas, 2004, p. 81). Specifically, they have taken the position that, "If industry is pressuring us to train our students for positions in the workforce only, then we may be ignoring a central objective of teaching: empowering our students to become independent learners who are educated and enlightened individuals capable of meeting their professional and personal needs in a complex society" (p. 81).

The philosophers of the past may provide us with wisdom in our understanding of the rationale behind teaching and learning. Plato's idealism continues to exert a strong influence on educators seeking a transcendent basis for teaching and learning. His timeless allegory of the cave continues to challenge us to reflect on whether or not what we are seeing is real and true (Gutek, 2003, pp. 31-48). Aristotle challenged teachers to "get their heads out of the clouds" and reflect rationally on what was real and observable through human senses. While all reality has a

transcendent dimension, truth comes primarily by a rational process of observation and analysis (Gutek, 2003, pp. 49-61).

Both *idealism* and *realism* continue to be reflected in educational philosophy up to the present day. Christian philosophers such as Aquinas, Erasmus, Calvin, and Comenius, have sought a synthesis between the two. More modern educators such as Pestalozzi, Owen, Froebel, and even Montessori, have continued to advocate an educational philosophy that forms the soul as well as the mind. However, most modern philosophers have chosen to focus on education as a critical analysis of the real, reality being defined as what can be observed through human senses. Rousseau's naturalism, Spencer's Darwinism, and Dewey's experimentalism, have tended to reduce education to a scientific experiment.

On the other hand, American educational philosophy in particular has tended toward some form of pragmatism or utilitarianism. The founding question was: What kind of education will enable us to maintain a healthy, viable American republic? Jefferson suggested a system of public education. Mann added the need for a common school system for the common citizen. Other forms of educational utilitarianism suggested that education could further the cause of women (Wollstonecraft) or the poor (Addams, Gandhi, DuBois, and Freire).

The early twentieth-century philosopher Heidegger wrote, "Real education lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety by first of all leading us to the place of our essential being and accustoming us to it" (as cited in Thomson, 2005, pp. 456-457). In other words, real education involves the formation, and transformation, of the whole person. The philosopher Whitehead supports a holistic philosophy of education, "planned to integrate the different parts of a human being for making a whole person; to integrate the different cultures for creating a culture with global view; to develop the students' creativity so that they can translated their

knowledge into real wisdom" (Fan, 2004, p. 6). Kierkegaard encouraged an attitude of humility when stating a philosophy of education. "Really good teachers know humility, as much as they know mastery, for they understand that however much is achieved in their classrooms by students, the work that is required by teachers is to make themselves unnecessary" (Tubbs, 2005, p. 408). Teachers exist for the learner, not learners for the teacher.

<div align="center">A Christian Philosophy of Teaching</div>

In the light of the history of educational philosophy, why is it important to clarify a Christian philosophy of teaching? Are there significant differences between the underlying rationale understood by Christian teachers and those of other faiths (or no faith)? In 1962, Frank Gaebelein, the Headmaster at The Stony Brook School, made a strong case for a Bible-centered philosophy of education. "For us the truth, as it is in Christianity and the Bible, is the matrix of the whole program, or, to change the figure, the bed in which the river of teaching and learning flows" (p. 4). For Gaebelein, "a thoroughly Christian view of education must not only be based upon Scripture, it must stand under it. For our philosophy of education to stand under the Word of God means that it must be seen as subordinate and in subjection to the Word" (p. 7). David Smith has added, "Even those who are most vehement in their emphasis on the importance of the bible being the foundation of education do not generally mean, for example, that only the geography of the Middle East and the history of Israel or the church should be taught. They rather intend that the data gained through study of the world should be organized and interpreted in the light of a Biblically directed view of reality" (1995, pp. 12-13).

More recently, Gordon Clark has argued for the centrality of Christian theism in the formulation of a philosophy of education. "What is needed is an educational system based on the sovereignty of God, for in such a system man as well as chemistry will be given his proper place,

neither too high nor too low. In such a system there will be a chief end of man to unify, and to serve as a criterion for all his activities" (1988, p. 2). Once gain, David Smith added, "Attempts to find a distinctive Christian approach to curriculum are rooted in a desire for a conscious orientation of all curriculum areas towards the glory of God. . . . What we need is not a blueprint but a sense of meaning and direction which will be clear enough to guide our efforts (1995, p. 14).

Foundations

As a Christian educator, it is vitally important that I reflect on my own philosophy of education, beginning with my understanding of a biblical worldview.

My Worldview

God has created human beings to love and serve him, to share in his life and creative work. Sin – any attempt to live independently from God – has separated and alienated us from our Father-Creator. It has also alienated us from ourselves, our neighbors, and the rest of God's creation. Without God we are alone and without hope in the world.

But God has taken the initiative through Christ to reconcile us back to a personal, intimate relationship with Him. God has revealed himself to us, principally through his son, Jesus Christ, and through the written revelation of God in Scripture. Jesus has given us the commandment to teach "all nations" what he has taught us about God, God's rule, God's will, and God's ways.

Education is an attempt to obey that command. Education is more than information, it is transformation, the renewal of the whole person reconciled to God, and then to neighbor and to the rest of God's creation. Education is impartation, the impartation of life, the impartation of the life of God, from person to person. Impartation in depth can only occur from heart to heart; thus,

it is necessary for the Christian educator to have the life of God in one's own heart, and then to connect personally to the hearts of those being taught. The goal of education is wholeness, whole persons in a relationship of *shalom* with the Father, in community, and with all God has made.

My Metaphysical Beliefs

We live in a world created by God within the context of God's eternal purpose. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Everything that is exists as a result of and an expression of our Creator. Our world is not a result of time plus chance in a random, mechanical process of selection. All we observe, all we study around us, reflects the nature and purpose of God. Therefore, our study of what God has made always has the potential of revealing the glory of God.

Creation is both material and immaterial. However, there is not a contradiction or conflict between the two. Heaven and earth, angels and human beings, all that God has made, complement and cooperate to constitute one unified whole under God.

My Epistemological Beliefs

All truth is God's truth. However, the way we come to truth is not by a process of rational reflection but a process of divine revelation.

In the twenty-first century, deconstructionism has proposed a new epistemology. A universal foundation of absolute truth derived by a rational reflection on nature, applicable to all people at all times and in all places, is no longer accepted. What we claim to know is no longer based on such a universal foundation, but on the distinctive narratives of people and their cultures. In this post-modern climate, the older, modern, universal philosophies of education are to be replaced by a "a minor philosophy of education: a philosophy that is not haunted by the big

figures of philosophy's fathers, picks up ideas from social sciences without anxiety about risking its identity, and connects these ideas in new encounters" (Gregoriou, 2004, p. 234).

As a Christian educator, I believe in "absolute truth," truth as revealed by God through the person of Jesus Christ an in Scripture. Universal applications of truth come through a thoughtful, Spirit-breathed reflection on Scripture, and a careful discernment of how those applications might be made to real people in real times and places.

There is value to the process of "critical thinking" as defined by rationalism and scientism, so long as our reason is submitted to the lordship of Christ and the authority of God's Word.

My Axiological Beliefs

Christian values must ultimately be based on the transcendent values of the God's eternal kingdom. These "kingdom values" are not the same as those of our surrounding culture. In fact, most human cultures place primary values on temporary things: intelligence, power and wealth. Instead, God values "kindness, justice and righteousness" (Jeremiah 9:23, 24). We tend to value "wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important" (1 John 3:16 Msg) instead seeking the rule and will of God.

My governing values and code of ethics will be most fruitful if they reflect God's eternal values, the perspective of the kingdom of heaven. I want to teach and administrate educational programs in a way that will promote God's values for the human beings, families and communities, touched by them. I also want to impart those values to students, faculty and staff.

It is important to teach and lead with integrity. Leading as a servant, compelled by the love of God and not a desire for control or "success" will make my work fruitful from God's point of view. I will seek to not violate the prior relationships of students and families and

communities. I will strive to protect the freedom of students and faculty to explore and discover and learn all that is placed before them by God.

Learning

Given my worldview and the implications of that frame of reference, how does learning and teaching take place? And what is the role of the student and the teacher in that process?

The Process of Learning

In the Judeao-Christian tradition, wisdom comes as a result of evaluated experience. Learning happens in the same way. A wide array of experiences has the natural effect of stimulating the mass formation of connections in the brain. However, true learning does not take place unless those experiences are reflected on, analyzed, and judgments made as a result.

It is essential that students have as many learning experiences as possible, stimulating all the senses in the process. However, some experiences are essentially "evil" and injurious; in those cases students need to learn to avoid them. They need to be guided through their experiences by someone who has already learned wisdom. They then need to be taught how to critically reflect on their experiences, observe the consequences of them, and learn to make good judgments as a result.

Learning is experiential, learning is active, and learning is collaborative. Learning is also guided, ultimately leading to a capacity for a self-directed learning process.

Instructional Models

Therefore, it is essential that children be exposed to as many learning experiences as possible from birth. They require guided experiences, with opportunities to discuss what was experienced and what lessons might be learned. However, it is also necessary for children to be exposed to words as soon as possible, and the more words the better.

Students from low-income families in America come to (and through) school with an 800-word vocabulary. Students from middle and upper class families come with a 3,500-word vocabulary. The difference is simple: as a general rule, children in low-income families, living day-in and day-out with the stress of trying to survive, are not read to as infants, do not have many books in the home, and do not as a result grow up valuing reading. The opposite would be true in middle and upper class families. The consequence for education is that schools and curricula assume a 3,500-word vocabulary. Children can be highly intelligent but have a small vocabulary and will not be able to do well in school.

An effective curricular design will not only emphasize guided learning experiences, it will also emphasize exposure to books at a very early age. Pre-school children need to learn pre-learning and pre-study skills as infants. They need to be read to and taught to value reading. When they encounter words they don't know, they need to learn how to look them up in a dictionary. Low-income children can learn to value time in the library, not just to "surf the web" or wait to be picked up after school, but to be read to and taught the value of books.

These essential learning skills will set the stage for teaching specialty subjects in depth. When students show an aptitude for a certain discipline, they are ready to pursue their knowledge and wisdom in that area. In the meantime, their love of learning and their capacity for independent learning should be cultivated at every opportunity.

While it is necessary to find a way to educate students from class to class and grade to grade in some kind of systematic, "lock-step" fashion, it is also necessary to observe the specific needs and abilities of students. Instructional models must allow for specialized, individualized attention to each student, empowering them to pursue their own learning path as they travel through the school system.

Relationships in Community

Fundamentally, I do not believe God created human persons to learn in isolation. Although some personalities and learning styles (including my own) require more time for quiet reflection in solitude, all require interaction with other human beings, both to learn and to make helpful applications of what has been learned. To be truly effective, education requires the formation of a healthy, learning community.

The first learning community is the family. In fact, some would say, including John Dewey that the school is to be an extension of the family. However, some families are ill-prepared to provide consistent guided learning experiences for their children. The school can help by serving families, providing coaching to parents, providing learning resources to families, and partnering with families at every point in the educational process.

The school also needs to find ways to partner with the larger community in the effective education of children. The business community, community service agencies, local congregations, and community civic leaders, all make an important contribution to the education of a child. Ultimately we are teaching them to be healthy, productive members of the larger community, so our educational strategies should facilitate that objective during the entire school experience.

Assessment

How do we know whether or not learning is taking place? How do we know whether or not we are succeeding as teachers? If our goal is the formation of a whole, healthy person, our assessment needs to evaluate the relevant factors. Is a student learning communication and relationship skills? Are we teaching values and character that reflect our biblical worldview? Can we observe evidence that one is growing in their knowledge of God?

We are also committed to effectively teaching curricular content. The facts and skills involved in various disciplines must be addressed and assessed. It is important to effectively teach reading skills and math facts, skills and facts that can be assessed.

Relying on high-stakes testing implies a certain philosophy of education. In fact, Gunzenhauser claims it has become the "default philosophy of education . . . one that places inordinate value on the scores achieved on high-stake tests, rather than on the achievement that the scores are meant to represent" (2003, p. 51). Furthermore, "Because of the power of this default philosophy, teachers in the current climate may find themselves doing things that fall short of their visions of themselves as educator" (p. 51).

While it is important to assess facts and skills, even in a standardized way, the assessment to learning must also evaluate the affective domain, looking for evidences of a love of learning, and a passion for the contributions that can be made as a result of learning.

<div align="center">The Student</div>

Learning and teaching are two sides of one coin. Learning requires a consistent, healthy pattern of interaction between students and teachers. An understanding of the role of both is necessary if education is to be effective. What is the role of the student in this process? To what extent is the student responsible for the learning process?

The Role of the Student in the Learning Process

Children interact with their environment and with the people in their lives from birth. They are actively observing and responding to their world. In the most basic sense, learning is taking place. Learning is always active, never passive. The brain and senses of a new-born are actively observing and responding to the environment. Throughout the life of a student, learning is always active.

Therefore, learning always requires an active interaction with the environment – with people, with ideas, with expectations. Students will learn more and to a greater depth if they will intentionally reflect on their experiences, working to maintain a proper attentiveness. Students can generate a positive attitude toward learning, committed to finding the benefits in everything they are exposed to.

Students are responsible for prioritizing their time and energy on the learning process. While they need to be taught study skills, they are responsible for utilizing those skills in a consistent strategy. While just "getting the grade" or "passing the test" is not the final goal, students who have learned how to pace their study, do their work, and turn it in on time, will experience academic success.

Diversity

However, not every student comes to school with pre-learning and pre-study skills. In some cases, schools will have to fill in those educational gaps, ideally before school. Pre-school programs and early childhood education strategies can go a long way toward preparing a diverse student population for a successful school experience.

The issue of equal access and equity in education has been crucial to education in the U.S. from the earliest days. American pragmatism tends to see education as "leveling the playing field" economically by closing the "achievement gap" between various groups in society. Educators in the east have criticized that view, claiming that the issue is primarily one of social equality, not educational equality. In Thailand, educational philosophers have concluded that, "In industrial and industrially-developing societies education has become a tool for dividing people into different economic categories. The truth is that the problem of educational inequality is merely an offshoot of the problem of social inequality. People who are fighting for educational

equality are in fact fighting for social equality" (Wisadavet, 2003, p. 177). If the issue is economic more than educational, "why not then use the money [spent on education] and resources to increase the equality of living standards?" (p. 179).

It is more helpful to realize that the world has come to American schools. Non-white Americans are now in the majority. Many of them are from ethnic minorities, many from low-income homes. American teachers are now required to master cross-cultural communication and relationship skills. Those skills involve an understanding of cultural diversity and the ability to build cultural bridges in the education of students from all backgrounds and contexts. Surely all our students are worthy of our best efforts.

Discipline

As a Christian educator I believe that all human persons, including myself, have a tendency to attempt to live and function independently from God. This wandering nature that results in us "missing the mark" is a profound hindrance to our ability to know God and to know everything else from God's viewpoint. Since "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," human learners are in need of redemption, of reconciliation with our Creator, the Source of all life, of everything that is beautiful, good and true. At the same time, because every human person is, though flawed, made in the image of God, everyone has the ability to learning, the ability to observe, reflect, and make judgments.

Historically, classroom management has tended to be focused either on human depravity or human potential. If a teacher works from the assumption of human depravity, the goal is to control students in the classroom in a way that will inhibit their sinful nature and force them to learn what they need to know, whether they want to or not. If a teacher manages his/her classroom with human potential as the starting point, discipline strategies emphasize guiding the

student in the context of potential learning experiences, expecting the best of students while seeking to foster an environment of care and respect.

As a teacher, my confidence in the love and grace of God and the power of redemption would result in a primary focus on human potential and all that it implies. On the other hand, I would not be surprised when human sin is evident in destructive behaviors. Even then, I would understand that sin is a disease as well as a choice, and would seek to be a redemptive influence in the life of a student. Those with behavior disorders need love and care, not just control or discipline.

<div align="center">The Teacher</div>

The Role of the Teacher in the Learning Process

The Christian teacher, then, is a guide, sharing in various learning experiences with his/her students. As a guide, the teacher is committed to learning experiences being positive, intentional, and fruitful. The teacher guides the response to and reflection about the experience. The teacher may also suggest possible ways to analyze and evaluate the experience, ultimately encouraging the student to make independent judgments concerning the value and application of the lessons learned.

The New Testament word *episcopos* communicates this idea. An "overseer" was one who had authority to observe the activities of others, and had responsibility for the results. An overseer was also tasked to care for those others, assuring their well-being, empowering and resourcing them for success.

The Christian teacher is also an "expert." An effective teacher will have taken the time to explore his/her discipline in depth, independently reflecting on the meaning and implications of what has been learned. In addition, the teacher is an expert communicator, exploring effective

ways to impart content. The teacher is ultimately a lifelong learner, motivated by a passion for discovery and a commitment to share that with others.

Professional Development for Teachers

Teachers must be committed to the proposition of lifelong learning. Professional development is not just for addressing weaknesses, but for reflecting on the practice of teaching and exploring new ways to become more effective. The Initiatives in Education Transformation at George Mason University has formulated a program of professional development "designed to enable teachers to reconceptualize their roles and transform their teaching by developing their reflective practice. The program is built around a philosophy of teaching and learning that emphasizes moral professionalism, school-based inquiry, continuous improvement and collaborative work in teams" (DeMulder & Rigsby, 2003, p. 268). Their rationale is that "the focus of education across the professions should be on enhancing the professional's ability for 'reflection-in-action'" (p. 268).

Christian administrators are committed to the welfare and professional development of the academic team. Their growth as persons and as professionals is vital to the ongoing continuous improvement of every aspect of the educational enterprise.

Collaboration

Just as students learn best in community, teachers instruct best in community. As learners, teachers need the continual benefit of interaction and collaboration with colleagues. A culture of collaboration will lead to a culture of innovation and excellence. Teachers must be encouraged to regularly share lessons learned with their colleagues. Administrators must do all they can to facilitate community and the regular flow of communication. If teachers will find ways to learn, analyze, and evaluate together, they will find time to grow and improve together.

Conclusions

To be an effective, reflective teacher, it is important to think through a personal philosophy of teaching. In this paper, I have done so by suggesting the idea of a philosophy of teaching and learning, with a special emphasis on a distinctive Christian philosophy of education.

For Christian teachers, a philosophy of teaching begins with a biblical worldview. If our starting point is the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ and in Scripture, then understanding God's viewpoint as reflected in Scripture is the starting point for a Christian philosophy of education. I have stated my understanding of a biblical worldview and the various implications for education.

This was followed by a philosophy of teaching and learning that addressed both the role of the student and the teacher. Once again, Scripture must inform our understanding of and response to the learning process, the classroom, and most importantly, our students. Seeing students and teachers as God sees them, and responding to them in a way that reflects the heart of God, are ultimately the goal and the result of a Christian philosophy of education.

References

Clark, G. H. (1988, June). A Christian philosophy of education. *The Trinity Review,* 1-10.

DeMulder, E. K., & Rigsby, L. C. (2003). Teachers' voices on reflective practice. *Reflective Practices, 4(3),* 267-290.

Fan, W. (2004). The idea of integrated education: From the point of view of Whitehead's philosophy of education. *Paper presented at the Forum for Integrated Education and Educational Reform, the Council for Global Integrative Education, Santa Cruz, CA, October 28-30, 2004,* 1-10.

Gaebelein, F. E. (1962). Towards a Christian philosophy of education. *Grace Journal, 3(3),* 3-44.

Gregoriou, Z. (2004). Commencing the rhizome: Towards a minor philosophy of education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 36(3),* 234-251.

Gunzenhauser, M. G. (2003). High-stakes testing and the default philosophy of education. *Theory Into Practice, 42(1),* 51-58.

Gutek, Gerald L. (2003). *Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education: A Biographical Introduction.* Columbus, OH: Pearson.

Pappas, E. (2004). Toward a new philosophy of teaching: Creating a center for thinking and meta-cognition in the integrated science and technology department at James Madison University. *Paper presented at the NCIIA 8th Annual Meeting, James Madison University, March 18-20, 2004,* 81-86.

Smith, D. (1995). Christian thinking in education reconsidered. *Spectrum, 27(1),* 1-17.

Thomson, I. (2005). Heidegger's perfectionist philosophy of education in *Being and Time. Continental Philosophy Review, 37,* 439-467.

Tubbs. N. (2005). Kierkegaard. *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 39(2),* 387-409.

Walkington, J., Christensen, J. P., & Kock, Hanne. (2001). Developing critical reflection as a part of teaching training and teaching practice. *European Journal of Engineering Education, 26(4),* 343-350.

Wisadavet, W. (2003). The Buddhist philosophy of education: Approaches and problems. *The Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies, 2(2)*, 159-188.