



## **Philosophy of Education**

### **Philosophy of Education: Reflection on American Context**

**Steve O. Michael<sup>1</sup>**

Every profession has a philosophical tenet that guides professional development, conduct, and performance. What separates a layman from the professional is the understanding of how acceptable philosophy of the profession shapes professional practices. The Australian Council of Professions defines profession as “a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and who hold themselves out as, and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognized body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others<sup>1</sup>”. A profession’s philosophy provides the framework for ethical standards upheld by the professionals and constitutes that specialized knowledge that governs performance.

Teaching is a profession. Linda Darling-Hammond, President and CEO of Learning Institute at Stanford University, remarked that “teaching is the profession that all other professions depends<sup>2</sup>,” To the extent that all other professions depend on the education of the young ones and the neophytes, to that extent these professions depend on teachers, especially the k-12 educators. As noted by Digital Class “teaching is a noble profession which comes with so much responsibility and duty towards students. Teachers do not only teach and impart knowledge but inspire and motivate students for life [as they take] important steps in life. They keep working to boost the confidence of students and direct them in the right

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direction.<sup>3</sup> But why should society trust their children to their teachers? The simple answers lie in the fact that society accepts teachers as professionals who are trained and guided by educational and professional philosophy.

### **What then is this Philosophy?**

Readers may be astonished to learn that everyone has a philosophy even when they cannot articulate it succinctly. If you have ever wondered about existence, what is life? What is reality? Who created this world? Is there a purpose in life? What is the meaning of it all? You have dabbled into philosophy. If you have ever pondered about what is right and what is wrong and by whose standards? What is justice? Why equality or equity? You have meddled in philosophy. Whatever answers you have to these questions reflect a particular philosophical perspective held by some. Therefore, while everyone is not a philosopher with a capital P, everyone philosophizes about life.

Philosophia, i.e. “the love of wisdom” wrestles with the question of consciousness, the most fundamental primordial phenomenon that gives reality a meaning. For there to be perceived reality, there must first exist consciousness even though philosophers and scientists continue to struggle with what constitutes consciousness. Philosophy has several branches with the fundamental ones being metaphysics, a branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of reality or ontology; epistemology, a branch that deals with the nature of knowledge; value, a branch that deals with ethics and justice; and aesthetics, a branch that deals with beauty. All these branches have relevance to educational matters, aims, systems, and outcomes.

### **Educational Philosophy**

Philosophy of education deals with the basic assumptions and thoughts we hold with regards to knowledge and its transmission. What is knowledge? What is truth? Do we believe there is objective truth? What is the purpose of education? Who should be entitled to education? For what reason? What standards should be established and who should regulate them? Who is qualified to teach? What ethical standards should govern the teaching profession? How should curriculum be sequenced? What methods and pedagogies should be adopted and for what content and purpose? What recognition and rewards should be associated with performance? Who should fund education and why?

These and many other related questions have preoccupied human minds from the beginning of modern civilization. Early philosophers provided their thoughts (philosophy) regarding education. For example, Plato “valued education and the way it changes people. He was known for thinking about an ideal government and society and believed that to maintain a stable state, it was necessary that all citizens were educated. Plato was known for having ideas about a perfect state, and he believed that education was one of the keys to eradicating evil and achieving this. Because if people were educated and sound, then the need for establishing laws were unnecessary; but if they were uneducated, then the laws were useless.<sup>4</sup>” Aristotle believed that education was fundamental to fulfillment. “In Aristotle's explicit remarks about the aims of education, it is clear that, like all activities in pursuit of the good life, education is "practical" in that it is a way of conduct, of taking action. At the same time, in pursuing the good life, the aim is to know the nature of the best state and the highest virtues of which human beings are capable. Such knowledge enables us to have a sense of what is possible in education.<sup>5</sup>” Immanuel Kant separates education from training stating that education is primarily about thinking while training is about doing.

The philosophy of education provides the framework for deliberating on education aims, methods, meanings, pedagogies and so on. Branches of philosophy of education include realism, idealism, pragmatism, essentialism, progressivism to mention but a few. Those who subscribe to objective truth that is independent of the mind are realists, those who pursue knowledge of the ideal state are idealists, and those who define knowledge worth by their practical values are pragmatists. Essentialists uphold values that are “absolutes” or the essence that should be taught. Progressivists uphold education for political and social reform.

### **American Philosophy of Education**

The question regarding the philosophy of American education presupposes that every society has a discernible and definable definition of philosophy that governs its educational practice and if that is true, it ought to be easy to articulate succinctly the tenets of American educational philosophy. To the extent that the Romanian educational system differs from that of the US, to that extent, presumably, one can differentiate their philosophical tenets. Perhaps because of the relative size and scale of the Romanian educational system, one may be able to articulate its guiding philosophy readily than that of the United States.

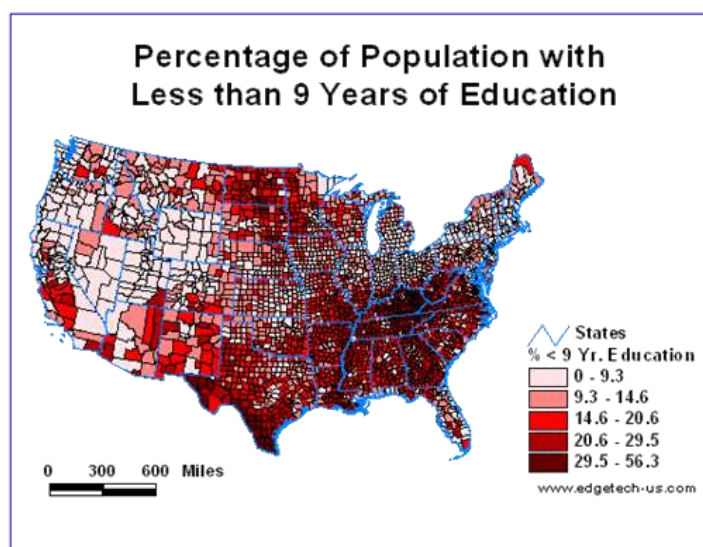
Many people who have not visited the United States sometimes describe the US simplistically as a comparable country to theirs. The United States is a very large country with over 330 million people and ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of land size. Politically, the US Constitution arranges powers between the federal government and the 50 states into exclusive list, concurrent list, and residual list. Exclusive powers belong to the federal government, concurrent list enumerates powers that are jointly held by the federal and state governments, and the residual list is the prerogative of the state governments. In the US, education belongs to the residual list; thus, it falls under the prerogative of the state government. Each state operates its own educational system, while the federal government uses persuasion and the power of the purse to influence federal government agenda. Consequently, it is valid to state that the US has over 50 educational systems. With its strong private education sector in each state, the US can be described as having over 100 public and private educational systems. These systems altogether establish over 130,000 k-12 schools and over 4000 postsecondary institutions across the 50 states. The k-12 sector enrolls close to 54 million students with 3,217,000 teachers in the public sector and 488,000 teachers in the private sector<sup>6</sup>, while the postsecondary sector enrolls close to 20 million students.

The US operates a massive educational enterprise and the philosophy and goals of education stem from the nation's socio-political economic aspirations of the American people. The declaration of independence provides the foundational thoughts for the nation's aspiration: *"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"*<sup>7</sup> The preamble of the US constitution states *"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."*<sup>8</sup>

These two foundational doctrines permeate the fabric of the United States and influence its educational endeavor. One who subscribes to truths that are self-evident is a realist. Progressivism is reflected in the idea of equality and the possession of unalienable rights, while idealism and essentialism are demonstrated by the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. The purpose of education, among other things, aims at building a strong democratic society, a more perfect union, justice and equity, which reflects philosophical tenets of pragmatism and utilitarianism.

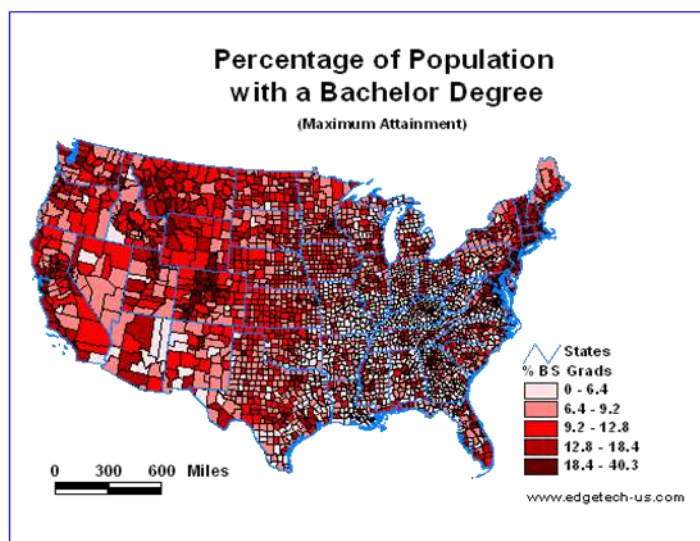
The massive nature of American educational system and the complexity of the nation's aspirations and goals are reflected in its educational philosophy best described as eclecticism, which is a combination of different and multitude philosophical perspectives. Differences among states, from one school district to another, between public and private sector, and in political agenda from time to time shape American philosophy of education. These differences have concrete and tangible outcomes that are manifested in resource allocation, curricular development, schooling and school policies, participation rates, pedagogical preferences, and educational praxis.

Below are two maps that reflect, in part, concrete consequences of differences in regional and state's philosophy of education. The first map shows the distribution of Americans with less than 9 years of education with higher proportions in the southern and midwestern states.



The second map reflects the percentage of Americans with bachelor degrees. Southern and midwestern states also showing lower numbers relatively.

Currently, Americans are faced with severe challenges with implications for educators. The struggle for democracy, the politics over curriculum (attempts to rewrite the nation's history and efforts to include minority agenda in curriculum), the push for resource redistribution, the role of teacher's union during pandemic are few of the hot topics showing the divisions among Americans and the philosophies they hold.



In conclusion, all aspects of teaching as a profession are influenced by philosophical perspectives. It behooves teachers and educational administrators, therefore, to, as often as possible, engage in individual and collective reflection on their beliefs and practices and the philosophy that shapes them. The United States is a country founded upon some ideals—ideals that are reflected in its philosophy of education. The sheer complexity of the nation and its education enterprise require eclectic philosophical tenets. While these divergent and diverse perspectives are inevitable, they further provide the basis for controversies and contentions on educational matters even as the nation continues to strive for *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one.

Readers are encouraged to send their commentaries to **Dr. Steve O. Michael**.

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### **Steve O. Michael, PhD**



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Dr. Steve O. Michael was the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Arcadia University for 5 years, where he was instrumental in establishing the College of Health Sciences, the College of Arts and Sciences, the School of Global Business, and the School of Education. Prior to his time at Arcadia University, he was a full professor of higher education management at Kent State University, where he also held several administrative positions including interim Associate Dean and Vice Provost for Diversity and Academic Initiatives. Dr. Michael was an American Council on Education (ACE)

Fellow in 2000-2001 at Carnegie Mellon University. He also served part of his fellowship at the City University of London and the University of Bath in England.

Dr. Michael is a professor of higher education administration with an interest in higher education finance and strategic management issues. His research interest includes the application of business strategies to institutional management, quality assurance, entrepreneurial higher education and global higher education. He has

published widely in most of the leading international and national refereed journals in the field of higher education on topics such as diversity in higher education, cost reduction analysis and financial constraints in higher education, presidency and trusteeship, academic program reviews and discontinuation, and marketing of higher education. He is an active presenter at international conferences and a consultant on higher education issues.

Dr. Michael was a British/Canadian Commonwealth Scholar and the recipient of the first Sheffield Award for the best article published in the Canadian Journal of Higher Education. His awards include the Outstanding Dissertation Award from the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, the Outstanding Faculty Award from Phi Beta Delta, Dean's Award for professional achievements, and a letter of recognition from the Governor of Alaska. He has directed over 20 doctoral dissertations and theses on topics that include TQM in higher education, financing higher education, internationalization of higher education, and evaluation of college president's effectiveness. Dr. Michael has served on the Editorial Board for the International Journal of Educational Management – the leading international refereed journal on education management; the American Psychology Association's Journal of Diversity; and once the associate editor of the Journal of Research in Education.

Dr. Michael earned his doctorate from the University of Alberta, Canada and he is also a graduate of the Harvard Institutes for Higher Education, a trained accreditation consultant-evaluator by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. He is a recipient of Honorary Doctorate from Danubius University, Romania and holds appointment as an honorary professor at Wuzi University, China, and honorary University Councilor at PeiHua University, China. His wide-ranging international background extends from the Sub-Saharan Africa to the Sub-Arctic Alaska.

Dr. Michael was one of the principal founders of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE), one of the founders of the Association of Chief Academic Officers (ACAO), and one of the founders of the Association for the Global Advancement of Universities and Colleges (AGAUC) for which he currently serves as the President. Steve is a volunteer soccer coach, an ardent ping pong player, and a budding golf player.