


# Rethinking schools: How the philosophy of education holds the key to real change

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**Stephanie Schneider, an Associate Professor at the State University of New York at Old Westbury, discusses the importance of examining fundamental philosophical questions regarding the purpose of education and the values it should promote**

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## Is school the problem?

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‘It is nothing short of a miracle that modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry.’ [quoted in The New York Times, March 13, 1949, p. 34].

‘The wit was not wrong who defined education in this way: ‘Education is that which remains, if one has forgotten everything he learned in school.’ [quoted in Albert Einstein, Ideas and Opinions, p. 63].

These quotes by Albert Einstein show the number one problem with education. In an era where education is reduced to standardized curricula and tests, schooling is divorced from its purpose of passing down knowledge while building critical skills. This is why studying the philosophy of education is more important than ever. Deeper thinking must address fundamental flaws in our current educational landscape. Schooling today has its critics, Ken Robinson among them.

Schools have multiple purposes. Creating productive members of society, passing down knowledge, and building for the economic future of nations are among them. We must examine whether schools are meeting these goals or if these are even the goals we should have. In an era where we face existential crises like climate change, autocratic governments, and the restriction of freedoms around the world, we need to figure out the fundamental roles of schools. We do this by examining the philosophy of education.

## Why study the philosophy of education?

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In today’s educational landscape, we often find ourselves tangled in debates that can feel profoundly familiar and impossibly complex. Parents and policymakers argue over topics such as homework, standardized testing, and the role of technology in classrooms. But beneath these debates lies something more profound: a set of fundamental philosophical questions about what education should be and what values it should promote. Although discussions around the philosophy of education might seem abstract or overly theoretical, they have concrete and far-reaching impacts on policies, budgets, teaching methods, and, ultimately, the society we create.

The philosophy of education warrants study because it helps us examine and refine the fundamental goals, methods, and values that shape how we learn and teach. Consider a few key aspects:

First, it pushes us to question our basic assumptions about the purpose of education. Are we primarily preparing people for jobs? Developing critical thinkers and engaged citizens? Pursuing knowledge for its own sake? Different philosophical perspectives – from Socrates' focus on self-knowledge to Dewey's emphasis on learning through experience – offer distinct and valuable frameworks for these essential questions.

The philosophy of education also illuminates the relationship between knowledge, power, and justice. Thinkers like Paulo Freire showed how educational systems can perpetuate inequalities or become tools for liberation and social change. This analysis remains crucial for addressing educational inequities today.

Perhaps most practically, philosophical inquiry into education helps inform concrete decisions about teaching methods, curriculum design, and educational policy. Understanding different theoretical approaches— whether constructivist, traditionalist, or progressive—provides a deeper foundation for structuring learning environments.

First, consider how education shapes nearly every aspect of our lives and society. When we spend 12+ years of mandatory schooling plus potential higher education, shouldn't we deeply examine what we're trying to achieve? The philosophy of education helps us answer fundamental questions that affect everyone: What knowledge is most worth teaching? How do we best motivate students? Should education prioritize job skills or critical thinking?

A practical analogy might help: Imagine building a house without first understanding what makes a good home or what the inhabitants need. Similarly, running educational systems without philosophical foundations is like navigating without a compass. The philosophy of education provides crucial guidance.

Consider the debate over teaching methods in math education, which has sparked strong opinions on both sides. Some educators and parents advocate for a traditional approach, emphasizing drilling, memorization, and practice. Others push for methods that focus on conceptual understanding and real-world problem-solving. This isn't merely a disagreement over instructional techniques; it reveals a more profound philosophical divide. Is math best learned through discipline and repetitive practice or discovery and creativity? Should educators prioritize procedural fluency, which may help students perform well on standardized assessments, or deep conceptual understanding, which might better prepare them for future problem-solving? The answers to these questions shape millions of students' math experiences, directly influencing how they learn and feel about the subject and their ability to engage with it in the future.

Or, consider the rise of standardized testing, a system that has redefined educational landscapes across the globe. Standardized testing reflects a philosophical stance that education should be measurable, objective, and consistent across diverse populations.

This approach stems from an industrial- era belief that outcomes should be standardized to ensure accountability and comparability. However, critics argue that this reflects a flawed model of education that treats students like products on an assembly line, reducing learning to a narrow set of quantifiable outcomes. This philosophical clash has profound practical consequences, influencing everything from school funding and teacher evaluations to student advancement and curriculum design. Decisions based on these philosophies impact every child, teacher, and parent within the education system.

Understanding these underlying philosophies matters because it helps to illuminate why people disagree on education issues that might otherwise seem purely technical. When we recognize that these debates are rooted in fundamental philosophical questions, we can better appreciate the stakes and values each side is trying to uphold. Moreover, the philosophy of education doesn't just guide educators and policymakers; it also offers laypeople a way to engage thoughtfully in discussions that affect their communities and families. When parents debate homework policies or voters consider education reforms, they often engage with these philosophical questions, whether they realize it or not.

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