

Reflections on the Transformation in a Teacher Educator's Teaching of Educational Philosophy

By **Funmi A. Amobi**

The Traditional Mindset

At first, I only construed philosophy of education as a deep and abstract way of thinking about the purpose and process of education. As a graduate student, I stretched my mind by analyzing the educational philosophies and ideas of great philosophers, such as Aristotle, Plato, John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, Robert Hutchins, and others. Even though I majored in curriculum and instruction and minored in education foundations, I was captivated by philosophy of education and the visions of education held by respected voices in education, past and present.

This was a heady and intellectually stimulating experience for me as a then foreign student who was encountering the wisdom of these great minds for the first time. My academic preparation in the fine tradition of liberal arts education during the 1960s and 1970s had prepared me well to learn and succeed in a reading and writing-intensive environment. I am a product of my native country Nigeria's British educational heritage during the neo-colonial period of our national history. Moreover, I had majored in history as an undergraduate; therefore, reading and analyzing events and ideas were natural to me. For the same reason, the intellectual exercise that went with reasoning through philosophical theories was not new to me, even

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though the theories themselves were. In fact, this cognitive process resonated with the traditional educational mindset that I had previously developed and which I utilized to advantage in my graduate studies in the United States.

Then, I became a teacher educator. I esteemed highly the privilege of molding the minds and shaping the professional preparation of prospective teachers. Since the rich encounter with educational philosophy that I had as a graduate student had made a profound impression on me, I sought to help preservice teacher candidates in my educational foundations courses catch my fascination with examining the beliefs about the purpose of education espoused by respected voices in education. We often teach as we were taught. Thus, in those early years of my experience as a teacher educator, I approached the teaching of educational philosophy in a systematic way. Realizing that neophytes might be turned off by too much abstract thinking about educational ideas, I worked to break down and demystify the content of educational philosophy, thereby rendering it a digestible and even palatable subject to students.

Specifically, I engaged students in discussing the components of philosophy: epistemology, ontology and axiology in terms of how each component informs our beliefs about education. In order to simplify and demystify these components further, I couched each component as an education-related question: (a) epistemology asks the question, What is truth and how do we know truth? (b) ontology asks the question, what is real or what is the purpose of education? and (c) axiology asks the question, what is good? I followed up the discussion of the components of philosophy with an interactive lecture on the epistemological, ontological and axiological viewpoints of four systems of educational beliefs: perennialism, progressivism, essentialism and existentialism.

The ultimate goal of my efforts in teaching philosophy of education to preservice teachers during the initial period of my growth as a teacher educator was to get neophytes to construct meaningful and articulate philosophies of education. By so doing, I believed that I had adequately prepared and empowered students to answer orally and in writing that inevitable question that they would encounter during interviews for teaching positions and on school districts' employment forms, "What is your philosophy of education?" Now, I refer to the approach I have described as being reminiscent of my pre-William Ayers days.

Paradigm Shift in My Approach to Teaching Educational Philosophy

The Influence of William Ayers

I read William Ayers' (1993) *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*, a provocative and inspiring account of his journey in education, while I was planning a revision for a foundations course in Fall 1997. Ayers' assertion that "the learning

environment is a complex, living reflection of a teacher's values" (p.50) triggered a change in my thinking about the function of educational philosophy in teacher education. If the learning environment, that is the classroom, gives away the educational beliefs and values of a teacher, then instruction in philosophy of education should go beyond assisting aspiring teachers to birth and own a cleverly crafted, thoughtful statement about educational values that they would be able to recount and transcribe on cue. Rather, philosophy of education has a life of its own. It is a dynamic force that influences what we do as educators. For this reason, the effort focused on leading students to produce an educational philosophy should also encompass helping them to develop the heightened awareness that a teacher's educational beliefs dominate and dictate classroom practice.

Furthermore, after describing his practice of adorning the walls of his classroom with student work, Ayers situates this conscious action in his educational philosophy: "In this one environmental choice — the choice to display student work — I am expressing larger purposes and more overarching values.... In this choice, I am enacting locally, a range of things I believe in globally" (p.55). Not only did Ayers stir up in me the need to link the teaching of educational philosophy with practice by emphasizing its at-homeness in the everyday life of the classroom, but this new awareness also made me rethink my approach of guiding students to construct their educational philosophy. For example, if, as Ayers notes, a teacher's practice could be a local enactment of the values the individual holds globally, then the construction of education beliefs must proceed in a way that the eventual product provide meaningful rationale for the educational choices that the teacher makes. Thinking this way, I realized that a statement of educational philosophy consists not only of what one believes about teaching and learning, but also what one does in practice. Therefore, in my work with preservice teachers, I need to guide them to define their educational philosophies not in lofty and unattainable terms, but in clear action-oriented terms that should help them to better negotiate the everyday realities of life in the classroom.

Other Influences

While William Ayers' statement prompted the rethinking and reconfiguring my approach of teaching educational philosophy, other voices consolidated the need for a change in paradigm. I recalled that John Dewey (1916) had already stated that philosophy should strive "to attain as unified, consistent, and complete an outlook on practice as possible" (p.324). A similar belief is expressed by Connelly, Clandinin, and He (1997) who describe a teacher's philosophy of education as an important aspect of the teacher's "personal practical knowledge". Connelly et al. posit that personal practical knowledge, of which philosophy of education is a critical element, is ever present in the teacher's practice. In fact, they assert that personal practical knowledge is instrumental in the way a teacher reconstructs the past and the eventualities of the future to deal with the challenges of the present.

In this way, a teacher's philosophy of education encompasses the rules that are

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at work in that teacher's personal practical knowledge. Finally, Fernstermacher and Soltis (1992) note that what a teacher thinks about teaching determines the individual's style of teaching. They further assert that having a clear conception of what education is gives a teacher the "opportunity to control many of the political forces that impinge on him or her, rather than becoming a hapless victim of these forces" (p.57). In the face of Ayers' enlightening establishment of the strong relationship that exists between educational belief and practice and in consideration of the supporting evidence from other respected voices, one thing became clear: there was no justification for my prevailing teaching practice of encouraging preservice teachers to construct a philosophy of education without giving them sufficient background to build a workable system of educational beliefs that is directly connected to practice. The stage was set for a change in my teaching of educational philosophy.

Beginning the Transformation

Initial Tentative Step

My first attempt at teaching educational philosophy from the perspective of relating beliefs to practice occurred in fall 1999 with fourteen preservice elementary education students at an off-campus site of a state university in the Southwest. My main teaching goal during this initial phase of the transformation was to prepare students as knowledgeable observers to test Ayers' assertion that the classroom environment is a reflection of a teacher's beliefs about education. In fact, Ayers has further elaborated his earlier statement by declaring, "When you walk into some people's spaces, you are embraced with an identifiable feeling" (p.50). I reasoned that equipped with the knowledge of the belief systems of the perennialist, progressivist, essentialist and existentialist schools of educational philosophy, preservice teachers should be able to read a classroom and identify the educational philosophy in operation. This thought and the need to help preservice teachers link educational philosophy with classroom practice prompted me to add a classroom observation component to the teaching of educational philosophy.

Given that the ability to read a classroom requires a framework for interpreting what one observes, I started instruction on educational philosophy in the usual way by providing foundational knowledge of the components of philosophy and the belief systems of the schools of educational philosophy. However, the reason for providing this basic knowledge base had shifted from just expecting preservice teachers to fashion their own philosophies of education to preparing them to use their knowledge of educational belief systems as an observational tool for reading classroom spaces. To this end, I provided seven philosophical indicators to structure and guide classroom observation. They are (a) the teacher's organizational structure for arranging students' desks, (b) teacher versus student talk, (c) the teacher's method of subgrouping, (d) the teacher's presentation of content, (e) the teacher's

interaction with students, (f) the teacher's use of oral questioning strategies, and (g) the teacher's assessment methods (Amobi, 2001).

During a four-week field experience rotation, preservice teachers were instructed to take notes on their mentor teachers' recurring behaviors and practices in the seven indicators. At no time were the preservice teachers to ask the mentors what their educational beliefs were: the only source of information was classroom observation. Next, preservice teachers reviewed their notes and analyzed their readings of the classroom as they responded to the following questions:

1. Based on your knowledge of the belief systems of the perennialist, progressivist, essentialist and existentialist schools of educational philosophy, how would you characterize your mentor teacher's educational philosophy?
2. What aspects of his/her classroom practices led you to this categorization?

One preservice teacher wrote:

I would classify my mentor teacher's philosophy as eclectic, with stronger ties in progressivism and essentialism. Her practice in the classroom leads me to this conclusion based on what she values as important to her students. She attempts to equip them with the knowledge they need in order to function, as well as develop each student as a problem solver in his/her own right. I observed progressivist tendencies when it came to student interactions. She encouraged students to think about their actions and the effects on others. I saw similarities to Betty Robinson, in *Small Districts, Big Problems* (course reading), with her patience and praise for her students, as well as her eye contact and positive regard for her students. This supports democratic ideals by placing students on equal ground with the same rights as their teacher. Based on my observations, I conclude that Mrs. Smith believes in both progressivist and essentialist viewpoints.

The visible change that William Ayers and other respected voices calling for a meaningful alignment of educational beliefs and classroom practice produced in my teaching at this phase of my transformation seemed to be more additive rather than transformational. I added a field experience component to what was formerly an entirely university classroom intellectual exercise.

However, a transformation had occurred in my thinking about the teaching of educational philosophy: I had internalized the deep understanding that philosophy of education is not just the way we think, but also the way we do. I could never go back to teaching philosophy of education with the goal of assisting and prompting students to produce a well-rehearsed but decontextualized statement of educational belief. The transformation in my thinking needed to find an outlet for action and implementation.

Matching Thought with Action

The opportunity to transform my teaching of educational philosophy occurred in the summer of 2001. In addition to my unshakeable belief in teaching philosophy

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of education from the perspective of practice, an important variable in the teaching situation itself spurred the transformation in my teaching. While still working as a resident off-campus faculty at the same university in the Southwest, I taught philosophy of education at the graduate level to seventeen inservice teachers — fifteen elementary and two secondary — in the summer of 2001. The graduate students were teachers taking summer courses to speed up their Master’s in Education degree programs. For most, if not all of the teachers in the cohort, the Master’s degree program was construed as a two-year investment in a sustained professional development program that would lead to a graduate degree and a higher elevation on the district’s certificated salary scale. For this reason, practicality ruled in the teaching of graduate students in this off campus program. Inservice teachers expected these courses to furnish them knowledge and skills, maybe magic bullets that would inform their own teaching — “the tip of the week” type of teaching.

To have come into this situation and spun eloquently on the canon of educational philosophy from Plato to Dewey, as intellectually invigorating as that is, would have been an unmitigated instructional disaster. My orientation of marrying philosophy and practice had found a place and a challenge. My approach to teaching changed. Instead of initiating instruction with educational foundations, I invited the teachers to inform me and one another about their beliefs about teaching and learning through creating a root metaphor for their teaching that incorporated a personal interest, passion, or some imagery or artifact. Writing a root metaphor for teaching requires tapping into one’s personal experiences to inform one’s teaching. It is an experience that can help to “focus and energize educators” (Hagstrom, Hubbard, Hurtig, Mortola, Ostrow and White, 2000, p. 24) as these three examples of teachers’ root metaphors illustrate:

Teacher A (elementary school): Quilting an Education

Teaching is like a patchwork quilt. Each student is a piece in the quilt. Looking at the quilt from the back, the strings are tangled and long, the edges are rough and one wonders if it could ever be a thing of beauty. Each year a section is finished and added to my quilt of memories. The class has finally come together. Although some pieces may not quite fit, as a whole the quilt is a beautiful piece.

Teacher B (elementary school teacher): The Art of Teaching

I am given what seems like rough, shapeless figures when the year begins. As I look at my students, I realize that I don’t decide how the sculpture will turn out, but that the sculptures tell me how to shape them. I use various tools and techniques to smooth rough edges, round sharp corners, and add fine detail. Taking the time to accommodate, I leave certain aspects of the sculpture unfinished, so that time, experience and future sculptors may fill in the holes or carve out the niches I have left. When that piece of work leaves my studio, it is no longer the same, it has changed, ready for the next artist. The masterpiece that leaves will stand the test of time, gain appreciation and value with age, out in the real world.

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Teacher C (high school teacher): Puzzle Maker

As a teacher, I work on about 100 puzzles everyday. Each puzzle is different and many other teachers have put their effort into getting their own pieces to fit. I have no control over whether the puzzle has been damaged or is missing pieces. I work with what I have, and do everything possible to get my pieces to fit. Sometimes the pieces fit easily, sometimes they don't. I experience a sense of pride when I am successful, but I don't usually get to see the completed project. Fortunately, I am confident that all the other puzzle makers are putting forth all their efforts to complete the puzzle.

The writing and sharing of root metaphors was a practitioner-friendly way of eliciting the teachers' deep beliefs, hence their philosophies of teaching. Furthermore, this exercise was a timely segue into the next segment of the course which provided a framework for thinking about traditional educational beliefs.

Here, I departed from my previous practice of presenting information about the belief systems of the different schools of educational philosophy. Instead, I subsumed the traditional schools of educational philosophy under the overlay of three approaches to teaching: the *executive* approach, the *therapist* approach and the *liberationist* approach. Fernstermacher & Soltis (1998) provided a descriptive formula T Ø S X Y for explaining the features of each approach. T stands for the teacher, the symbol after the T is the Greek letter *phi* which denotes an action, the S stands for the student, X represents the content of learning, and Y stands for the purpose of learning. Putting it all together, the formula reads, "The teacher teaches the student some content in order to attain some purpose" (Fernstermacher & Soltis, 1998, p.8). This formula provided a framework for structuring class discourse on the three approaches to teaching. In engaging teachers in the discourse on the features of each approach to teaching, I included a pertinent knowledge base on the philosophical viewpoints of each approach. Herein is another example of the transformation that had occurred not only in my thinking about educational philosophy but also in my teaching action. I had made a conscious break from frontloading instruction in educational philosophy with knowledge about traditional philosophies. That knowledge has become incidental to the real-life operation of educational philosophy in the classroom. By tying the discussion of the three approaches of teaching with their root metaphors for teaching, it became obvious to the teachers what their dominant approach to teaching was.

As a culminating assignment for teachers, I structured a two-part oral presentation on the connection between educational philosophy and practice in their teaching. In part one, the teachers were expected to present: (1) personal core beliefs relative to students' growth and development and dimensions of diversity; (2) beliefs about what knowledge is of most worth; (3) beliefs about the most effective instructional strategies; (4) beliefs about the purpose of education; and (5) beliefs about assessment of learning. In part two, teachers were asked to describe how they had consistently implemented or would implement these beliefs in classroom

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practice in: (a) classroom organization, (b) interaction with students, (c) instructional strategies, (d) instructional materials, (e) assessment of learning, (f) perceived and taught curriculum, (g) working with other educators, and (h) professional development.

As a participant observer during the peer-reviewed presentations, I noticed recurring references to the metaphors of teaching that teachers constructed earlier in the course and to the individual presenter's approach to teaching. These two themes permeated the presentations. For example, Teacher B above reiterated the sculpture metaphor as he articulated his beliefs about students' growth and development as follows:

The students come to me as works-in-progress, clay that must be further molded and shaped. They are a sculpture that tells me what they are to become. Their personalities and learning styles create the mold that I will use. The students will then be ready for whatever may come in their educational lives.

This metaphor and identification of preferred approaches to teaching ran through Teacher B's explanation for the connection of belief and practice in the area of instructional strategies:

As an artist, a sculptor must rely on a variety of tools to create a sculpture. A teacher must also depend on different strategies and styles to shape the mind of a student. I am basically a therapist at heart who bounces between the executive and liberationist approaches.

Teacher B supported this preamble with the following instructional strategies: whole class activities, small group activities, "buddy" work within class, working with sixth grade buddies, weekly spelling tests, individual and group projects, discovery learning and presentations. Finally, Teacher B brought up the metaphoric theme in his approach to assessment of learning:

I believe that there are many ways to assess a student. One cannot base a child's learning on any one style of assessment. A student must be assessed using a broad range of strategies. A student must be given a chance to shine, just like a piece of art that has its day in the gallery.

As mentioned earlier, the pattern of intertwining metaphors and approaches to teaching characterized the teachers' presentations. For example, describing his educational belief and practice in the area of instruction, Teacher B contextualized the root metaphor of a sculptor working on a piece of art in an integration of all three approaches to teaching: the therapist, executive, and liberationist. What did this recurring trait of forging a connection between root metaphor of teaching and educational philosophy signify? Two things: in terms of relating course content to student needs, the evidence of success was apparent; and on a personal and professional level with regard to my teaching, I had completed one cycle of transformation.

The transformation that first started as an absorbing thought while I was

working with preservice teachers had found life in a graduate course for inservice teachers. The ability to actualize the transformation in my teaching of educational philosophy in this milieu indicated the authenticity of the paradigm shift in my approach. In seeking to bring about a transformation in teaching educational philosophy aimed at ensuring that educational beliefs and practice are symbiotically connected, what better testing ground could there be than a class of inservice teachers? My reflective engagement with the Ayers'-inspired idea of keeping educational philosophy in the context of practice had found an outlet and a proving ground with practitioners. The high level of their attunement to connecting educational beliefs and practice as demonstrated by the cited examples above, bore out the legitimacy of the initial thought that precipitated my transformation and the culminating instructional action that followed.

Conclusion

This article represents my mindscape as I grew in my teaching of educational philosophy from using a transmissive approach to an approach that seeks to make educational philosophy — an abstract learning content — instructive to the everyday life of teaching in classrooms. I took a detour in my thinking about the relevance of educational philosophy in the curriculum of teacher education as a result of the convincing advocacy for connection of belief and practice from a respected voice in education. Once I became receptive to this initial idea, the door of my mind was opened to consider other voices extolling the same idea. The change in my teaching started first in my mind and thinking. In other words, my philosophy of teaching educational philosophy changed, then tentatively, but assuredly the change that had occurred in my mind took life and shape in action. I have given voice to the stages of the transformation in my teaching for the purpose of inviting other teacher educators to do the same. As we teach preservice and inservice teachers to reflect in action, on action and for action, it behooves us to model these processes and nuances of reflection to our students.

It is also important to reiterate that this process is continuous. I have described one example of how I have effected a transformation in my teaching of educational philosophy with a group of graduate students at an off campus teaching site. This initial implementation of a paradigm shift has opened up other possibilities for empowering preservice teachers to become knowledge constructors, and not mere passive absorbers of the educational beliefs of more knowledgeable others.

Recently, I directed 34 secondary education preservice teachers in an educational foundations course to complete the Witcher-Travers Survey of Educational Beliefs (see Appendix A for survey directions). The results of this survey are subsumed under three educational belief classifications: transmissive, progressive and eclectic. Before I embarked on the transformative phase in my teaching of educational philosophy, Section B of the survey directions (see Appendix A) would

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have consisted solely of prompting preservice teachers to use the results and the descriptive analysis of three educational belief classifications provided by Witcher-Travers to construct a philosophy of education that was consistent with their survey-assigned classifications. Now, I provided an opportunity for preservice teachers to critique the results of their survey assessments. In this situation, the survey result itself was immaterial: what was important was the reaction of the student to the outcome of the survey and the premises (self-knowledge and teacher education content knowledge) on which the reaction was based.

Whether working with inservice or preservice teachers, the major catalyst in my transformation is the persistent practice of refusing to dull the students of education into fitting their educational beliefs into a priori set of conventional platitudes. Rather, I present knowledge of the different educational belief systems not as a template, but as a tool to evoke prospective and practicing educators' own thinking. This is in essence the transformative thought and action in my teaching: philosophy of education is not just the way we think, it is the way we think and do.

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Appendix A: Survey Directions

Directions: Please take 1 hr. 15 minutes to complete this survey and write your responses to B below:

A. Take the Witcher-Travers Survey of Educational Beliefs at www.abacon.com/witcher-travers.

1. Follow instructions and respond to each educational belief statement.
2. Click calculate scores.
3. Get an analysis of your survey.

B. React to the analysis, pointing out any element of surprise with the result. Explain why the analysis is or is not representative of your philosophical tendencies as you presently perceive them. Support your reaction with information derived from your understanding of the perennialist, essentialist, progressivist, and existentialist educational philosophies (Amobi).