

Critical Issues Paper: Humanism in Education

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Introduction

Humanism is a philosophy that has permeated many aspects of the American education system. Humanist philosophy and its supporters have greatly influenced education, inspiring modern pedagogical principles such as democratic, cooperative classrooms and global citizenship (Gibbon). For example, John Dewey, a renowned secular humanist, made seminal contributions to humanistic pedagogy which serve as pillars of modern education institutions worldwide (Gibbon). The American education system, however, continues to struggle to implement truly humanist practices in schools and classrooms. As social and legal pressures on schools and educators increase, particularly in the realms of standardized curricula and testing, educators eschew humanist practices. Instead of prioritizing individual learners and holistic pedagogical methods, schools too often neglect students' individual freedoms, rights, and needs. The following articles explore the historical, current, and future influence of humanist philosophy in American education.

Know Thyself: The Importance of Humanism in Education

In her 2010 article, "Know Thyself: The Importance of Humanism in Education", Laura Zucca-Scott contrasts the educational practices of Italy with those of the United States. Zucca-Scott shares that in Italy, educators are not required to teach to a prescribed curriculum. Instead, elementary teachers use a conceptual framework, "Programmi della Scuola Elementare document," which provides humanistic learning benchmarks rather than detailed prescriptive outcomes (34). Teachers in Italy have freedom to focus on individual learners. Zucca Scott argues, "By denying the uniqueness of the learners, as well as of the educators, we are utterly

denying the values of civilizations that have deeply believed in the transforming power of knowledge as an internal process of growth and self-discovery, the "know thyself" of the Socratic tradition," (35). Zucca cites P.J. Palmer, noting that teachers should assume the roles of mentors and change-agents rather than mediators of standardized programs and tests (37). Zucca-Scott accurately summarizes the disparity between the humanistic ideal, which she believes Italy's education program exemplifies, versus the deficits of the American system.

Standardized Testing as an Assault on Humanism and Critical Thinking in Education

Noam Chomsky and Arianna Robichaud argue for the elimination of Standardized Testing in their article for *Radical Pedagogy*, "Standardized Testing as an Assault on Humanism and Critical Thinking in Education." According to Chomsky and Robichaud, standardized testing, "tends to create performance categories by which individuals are labelled and classified, and fatally leads to social, economic and educational inequalities and injustice," (para. 6). The authors cite recent education reforms, Race To The Top and the No Child Left Behind Act. While intended to enhance school and teacher accountability for student learning outcomes, the authors argue that these reforms are, "designed to enforce obedience, discipline and discharge of individual initiatives, though education should, on the contrary, rely on intrinsic motivation and encouragement of the curiosity and personal interests of a child," (para. 13). Turning to the works of philosopher Bertrand Russell, Chomsky and Robichaud articulate a succinct definition of the humanist educational philosophy as one grounded in freedom of expression, individuality, natural growth, and skepticism of authority (para. 16).

The authors cite evidence of the lack of humanist ideals in standardized testing. While low-income black students in New York City made gains in test scores to close the "achievement

gap” compared to the city average for white students, Chomsky and Robichaud argue that test scores alone do not demonstrate mastery of skills. Students are still disadvantaged by their low socio-economic status despite higher test scores, since more than half of jobs are gained through social connections (Kahlenberg 2009, as cited in Chomsky et al., 2014, para. 23). In this example, the focus on students’ test performance outweighs concerns for their improved social outcomes, directly conflicting with the democratic socialist underpinnings of humanism.

The authors go on to explain other atrocities promulgated by “teaching to the test”, including alienation of students whose strengths lie outside of tested subjects and disrespect by students and parents of teachers (who are subjugated to the role of disciplinarian) (para. 28). Chomsky and Robichaud contrast this reality of American schools with the progressive Finnish education system, which is grounded in humanistic values of individuality and natural creativity (para. 29-30). The United State’s increasing poverty gap and lack of social infrastructure is exacerbated by standardized testing which effectively imbues a “business model” into schools. Thus, the authors boldly conclude that standardized testing’s “control, efficiency and productivity destroys the possibility of humanistic education and autonomy for the teachers,” (para. 37). As a presumed antidote to the perils of standardized tests, the authors call for “courses of intellectual self-defense” that would arm students against “political and academic propaganda” (para. 39).

Humanism and the Futuristic Perspective

Though writing before Chomsky and Robichaud, Morris and Krajewski take a futurist perspective of the role of humanism in education. Writing for *Theory Into Practice* (1980), Morris and Krajewski observe three primary reasons for a growing futuristic perspective on the

state of humanism in education: the criticism by educators that curricula focus too narrowly on the past and present, the lagging of our education system behind social and technological changes, and evidence that the concept of the future aids individual and group motivation (129). As if anticipating 2021 educational, political, and world issues with seer-like precision, the authors observe that without humanistic education reform, we will cause “irreparable harm to the environment and squander the resources on which the well-being of our human community depends,” (Sheen, cited in Morris, et al., 1980).

Humanism necessarily concerns itself with the intrinsic and internal life of individuals, including self-fulfillment, responsibility, citizenship, creativity, adaptability, and intelligent behavior (131). Many of these and other values which Morris and Krajewski cite are embedded into the Cardinal Principles of Education (NEA). Morris and Krejewski hope that rekindling these values, long obscured by decades of misguided reforms, will foster students’ innate capacity to learn and will prepare them to adapt and cope to a rapidly changing future (132).

Synthesis and Conclusion

These articles are just a small sampling of the diversity of ideas surrounding the philosophy of humanism in education. Open thus to broad interpretation, viewpoints such as those above can co-exist amicably within the bounds of a humanistic educational philosophy. These progressive educators share a desire to see a refocusing on humanist ideals in American education, specifically honoring individuality, respecting autonomy, and extending concern and awareness to issues of greatest concern to our human species and communities. Since it is without definitive, unchanging principles, humanism is and continues to be a dynamic, influential philosophy in modern education.

References

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“I pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.”