

# School of Thoughts of the Essentialist Philosophers on the Aims of Education, Role of Education and the Focus of Education: Implications for Curriculum Development and Practice in Ghana

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss comprehensively the school of thoughts of the essentialist philosopher on the aims of education, the role of education and the focus of education. Again, the discussion would pay attention to examine the implications of the essentialism to curriculum development and practice. In this philosophical school of thought, the aim is to instill students with the “essentials” which means the “main things” of academic knowledge, enacting a back-to-basics approach. Essentialists believe that there is a common core of knowledge that needs to be transmitted to students in a systematic, disciplined way. From the Essentialist point of view, the aim of education is to equip students with common core or the “basic” of information and skills needed for the promotion of citizenship. According to the Essentialist, the role of education is the transition of a common body of knowledge, skills, concepts and traditions from generation to learners in order to transform them to meaningfully and constructively contribute democratically to the society. The essentialist focus on intellectual training in the areas of grammar, literature and writing, mathematics, sciences, history and modern foreign language. On the implication for curriculum development and practice, the essentialist places emphasis on core curriculum, the curriculum is developed around the teacher rather than the learner, the mastery of content matter of an essential knowledge as a yardstick before moving on to the next level, placing less emphasis on non-academic subjects such as; Vocational education, Physical Education, Arts and Music and eventually ensuring that the curriculum focuses on grouping students according to their intellectual ability.

**Keywords:** curriculum, curriculum development, essentialist, essentialism, social values

## 1.0 Introduction

The word “Curriculum” is etymologically derived from the Latin word *curere* which is literally translated as “race course” (Castle 2007; Connely & Elbaz 2009). Conceptually, the definitions of curriculum have been grouped into three categories and these are narrow, midway and broad definitions (Tamakloe, 1992). However, these definitions of curriculum in different categories do not form part of the main aims of this write-up, but a cursory look at some of them would be worthwhile as far the discussions on the aim of education, the role education and the focus of the curriculum from the perception of the essentialist philosopher is concerned. With reference to the narrow definition of curriculum, Barakett and Cleghorn (2000), defined curriculum as the courses or the subjects specified by the Ministry of Education that are to be taught at each grade level as well as the amount of time to be devoted to each. In a similar narrow sense, McNeil (1985) defined the curriculum as a course of study to be taught to student in an educational institution. He goes on to say that when considering the curriculum, its purpose, content, method, organization and evaluation must be included. For midway definition of the word curriculum, Eisner (1994) defined curriculum as a series of events that are intended to have educational consequences for one or more students. From another midway perspective, Kerr (1968) defined the term curriculum as all learning which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually inside and outside the school. Lastly in giving a broad definition, Matthews (1989), defined the curriculum as what goes on in schools and other training institutions. It is important to mention that various criticisms have been leveled against the above definitions given by scholars from various educational perspectives. It can be said with no iota of doubt that on the basis of those criticisms the term ‘curriculum’ does not have a precise definition among educators. The write-up is geared towards discussing how the essentialist philosopher perceives the aims of education, the role of education and the focus of education. Again, the discussion would pay attention to examine five implications of the essentialism to curriculum development and practice. Notwithstanding the stated purposes above, let us take cognizance of a brief background history of the essentialist.

## 2.0 Brief Background History of the Essentialist

The Essentialist movement first began in the United States in the year 1938. In Atlantic City, New Jersey, a group met for the first time called “The Essentialist’s Committee for the Advancement of Education. Their emphasis was to reform the educational system to a rational-based system. The term essentialist first appeared in

the book *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* which was written by Michael John Demiashkevich. In that book, Demiashkevich labels some specific educators (including William C. Bagley) as “essentialists”. He described how the Progressives preached a “hedonistic doctrine of change” whereas the essentialists stressed the moral responsibility of man for his actions and looked toward permanent principles of behaviour. In 1938 Bagley and other educators met together where Bagley gave a speech detailing the main points of the essentialism movement and attacking the public education in the United States (Bagley, 1905).

According to McLain, (2007), the pioneers of essentialist philosophy are William C. Bagley and Herman Home while other proponents are James D. Koerner (1959), Arthur Bestor, E. D. Hirsch, Chester Finn, H. G. Rickover, Paul Copperman (1978) and TheodoreSizer (1985). Bagley was critical of progressive education, which he believed damaged the intellectual and moral standards of students. This article reflected the essentialist belief “our culture has a core of common knowledge that should be transmitted to students in a systematic, disciplined manner”. Though similar to perennialism, essentialism stresses the “essential” knowledge and skills that productive citizens should have, rather than a set of external truths.

### **3.0 Understanding the Concept of “Essentialism”**

Kurtus (2001) believes that educational essentialism is an educational philosophy whose adherents believe that children should learn the traditional basic subjects thoroughly and rigorously. In this philosophical school of thought, the aim is to instill students with the “essentials” which means the “main things” of academic knowledge, enacting a back-to-basics approach. Essentialists believe that there is a common core of knowledge that needs to be transmitted to students in a systematic, disciplined way. The emphasis in this conservative perspective is on intellectual and moral standards that schools should teach. The core of the curriculum is essential knowledge, skills and academic rigour. The term essentialism is generally used in three meanings. Firstly, it uses biological, physiological and, increasingly, genetic causes to explain the unchangeable human behaviour. Secondly, term essentialism is used when generalized statements are asserted that make no reference to cross-cultural differences or previous historical variation. Sometimes, it is also known as universalism. The third and final use of the term refers to all the everyday conversations or academic writings in which we make use of the unified concepts.

According to Kneller (1971), it is not linked formally to any philosophical tradition but is compatible with a variety of philosophic outlooks. Brubacher as cited in Onwuka (1996) observed that Essentialism has several philosophical props, one of the principal being idealism but not wholly opposed progressivism rather shares a common view with Perennialism. Essentialism requires that the school curriculum should include a common body of knowledge that all students should know. This implies that education calls for subjects and values that must be studied by all who go to school. Essentialist believes that it the responsibility of the school to provide knowledge for good character building and development. Also, there are some concepts of universal education that everyone in a given culture must have in order to be a knowledgeable and full participant of that culture. In an Essentialist society a person is considered to be educated when he or she possess certain essential or basic academic knowledge.

McLain (2007) depicts that essentialists believe:

- a. Students learn from established fundamentals of education.
- b. Students should study the sensible and wise subject like literature, philosophy, science and other subjects related to the great works.
- c. There is a common core of knowledge that needs to be transmitted to students in a systematic, disciplined way.
- d. The child is a learner to be shaped and developed.
- e. Education is a preparation for life; it is not an imitation of life.

Essentialism is generally considered as a conservative philosophy that pertains to the ever-changing social, educational and technological aspects of society. This presupposes that schooling should be realistic, preparing students to become valuable members of society. It should focus on facts-the objective reality out there and “the basic” training students to read, write, speak, and compute clearly and logically. Schools should not try to set or influence policies. Students should be taught hard work, respect for authority, and discipline. Teachers are to help students keep their non-productive instincts in check, such as aggression or mindlessness. An essentialist programme normally teaches children progressively, from less complex skills to more complex.

### **4.0 The School of Thoughts of the Essentialist Philosopher on the Aims of Education**

From the Essentialist point of view, the aim of education is to equip students with common core or the “basic” of information and skills needed for the promotion of citizenship. For this reason, essentialists believe that students should master “the essentials” before they are to study other less essential material that is possibly more interesting to them. Hence, Essentialists believe in education that stresses the fundamentals.

Education by the essentialist should be built around the cultural heritage of the students’ society in order to

create awareness within the student matters concerning patriotism and statesmanship which are instruments for society's development. When students know facts that have informed their society and the heroes so as to observe and pay respect to such patriots.

Essentialism ensures that the accumulated wisdom of our civilization as taught in the traditional academic disciplines is passed on from teacher to student. Such disciplines might include Reading, Writing, Literature, Foreign Languages, History, Mathematics, Science, Art and Music. Moreover, these traditional approaches are meant to train the mind, promote reasoning, and ensure a common culture. On the other hand, non-academic subjects like Vocational Education, Physical Education, Art and Music should be given low priority in the school curriculum.

Essentialist goals are to instill students with the "essentials" of academic knowledge, patriotism, and character development through traditional (or back-to-basic) approaches thus modern essentialists favour going "back to the basics" of the traditional curriculum. This is to promote reasoning, train the mind, and ensure a common culture for all students. To the essentialist, students must learn to respect authority, both in the school and in the society after they have gone through education.

The aim of education of the essentialist is that content knowledge of the school or education should not radically change the societies rather slowly change the curriculum to ensure the transmission of traditional moral values of the society. The aim of education to the essentialism is to ensure stability of the education. By virtue of the fact that essentialism is relatively conservative and focuses on disciplines which are relatively stable, it is a rather consistent form of education. The same disciplines are taught consistently and in a progressive manner. It is not persuaded by the fads of the time, instead focuses on the basics that students need to know to be productive members of society. Essentialists accord the development of the essential skills of the 3R's (Reading, Writing & Arithmetic) to the outcome of education; thus the end product of education.

Essentialist philosophy is emphasized on a traditional education; developing of the mind, core curriculum, reality is based in the physical world, citizens of democratic society come before individual, teacher directed learning; appreciation of master words of art and literature. Essentialism is a relatively conservative stance to education that strives to teach students the knowledge of our society and civilization through a core curriculum. This core curriculum involves such areas that include the study of the surrounding environment, basic natural laws, and the disciplines that promote a happier, more educated living. Moreover, this traditional approach is meant to train the mind, promote reasoning, and ensure a common culture.

Essentialists aim at promoting modification of "core knowledge" to reflect current culture (always changing). It also stresses realism or using the knowledge and skills to become a functioning and productive member of that culture, outside of academia.

### **5.0 The School of Thoughts of the Essentialist Philosopher on the Role of Education**

According to the Essentialist, the role of education is the transition of a common body of knowledge, skills, concepts and traditions from generation to learners in order to transform them to meaningfully and constructively contribute democratically to the society. In the same vein, students are to be taught to be "culturally literate" and to know about people, events, ideas and institutions that have shaped society. Essentialists believe that education should instill traditional virtues such as hard work, respect for authority, discipline, fidelity to duty, perseverance, consideration for others and practicality that students need to become model citizens.

The role of education is to develop a rational being in command of essential or basic tact and skills that undergird the intellectual discipline. It is, therefore the role of the school to provide a supportive environment to foster students' use of inductive thinking to initiate this kind of thinking by asking probing questions.

Moreover, the role of education is let learners to familiarize with the world as it is real is and to interpret it according to their own desire thus acknowledging the importance of race experience and the study of people's social heritage and culture.

### **6.0 The School of Thoughts of the Essentialist Philosopher on the Focus of the Curriculum**

To Bestor (1956), the mission of the school is "intellectual training" and this is to be accomplished through a curriculum concentrated on the "fundamental intellectual disciplines study of the five great areas:

1. Command of the mother tongue and the systematic study of grammar, literature and writing;
2. Mathematics;
3. Sciences;
4. History; and
5. Modern foreign language.

The school should provide intellectual knowledge that will enable a student to become a model or a good citizen. The foundation of essentialist curriculum is based on traditional disciplines such as mathematics, natural science, history, foreign language, and literature. It should focus on facts, the objective reality out there-and "the basics" training students to read, write, speak, and compute clearly and logically. Essentialists frown upon

vocational courses. In the essentialist system, students are required to master a set body of information and basic techniques for their grade level before they are promoted to the next higher grade.

Furthermore, essentialist education helps in promoting the cultural lag. This philosophy of education is very traditional in the mindset of passing on the knowledge of the culture via the academic disciplines. Thus, students are forced to think in the mindset of the larger culture, and individual creativity is often squelched.

Moreover, the teacher is seen as an expert or sole authority in his/her field of specialization who impart knowledge to students. The emphasis is placed on rigorous teacher-centred education rather than child-centred learning. Even though the essentialists do not believe in the study of great books as the major content of education rather they need to be studied only if they relate to current realities (Onwuka, 1996).

Students should be taught essential virtues such as hard work, respect for authority, and discipline. The teaching of these virtues will be successful through placing emphasis on critical subject areas such as English (Grammar, Literature, and Composition), Mathematics, Science, History and modern foreign languages. These subjects are logically ordered, making it essential to the development of our mental capacities.

To the essentialist, certain so-called academic areas of systemized knowledge best represent the race experience that is to be transmitted to children and youth. Teachers are therefore, to help students keep their non-productive instincts in check, such as aggression. Educational essentialism is an educational philosophy whose adherents believe that children should learn the traditional basic subjects thoroughly and rigorously.

The essentialists hold that the curriculum is centred on the training of the intellect and that 'the path to intellectual power' is found in certain academic studies. An educational theory that focuses on essential set of learning prepares individuals for life by concentrating on the culture and traditions of the past.

### **7.0 Implications of "Essentialism" To Curriculum Development and Practice**

Curriculum development is the process of implementing the theoretical plan to attain educational ends. As cited in Onwuka (1996), curriculum development is frequently used to describe the creation of curriculum materials, including materials for use by students. Curriculum development follows the same structure as curriculum planning in that; it starts with the establishing of educational philosophy. The philosophy of education plays an instrumental role in guiding teachers, schools and administrators to model themselves whether intentionally or not.

Firstly, essentialism influences the curriculum through the emphasis on a core curriculum of social values since the fundamental basic of the essentialism is the transmission of essential or common body of knowledge that all students should know. The heart of the educational process is the assimilation of prescribed subject matter. The values that make up the stable and vital aspects of the universal elements of a culture constitute the heart of the core curriculum. Therefore, places considerable emphasis upon deliberate study of the moral content of the culture. It is used to denote the portion of curriculum required of all the pupils in any institution. It represents what the authorities or curriculum planners consider necessary for every pupil to study. This makes the curriculum consist of broad problem areas from which learning experience may be selected in terms of psychological and societal needs example may include ethic conflict and independence in twentieth century. Also, the curriculum is geared towards the promotion of a greater integration of learning by unifying subject matter. Some core programmes employ systematic correlation of subjects around themes drawn from the functions of living. For instance, materials and topics in social studies, languages, arts and science are correlated around such themes as ethical and spiritual character, work, leisure, thought and its communication, health, social relation. Moreover, the curriculum planners determine the content knowledge, objectives or the educational intention, learning experiences and methods of teaching. The implication of this curriculum is the emphasis on life problems highlights the social function of the school. Schools help to develop intelligent citizens who manage the business of life with a modicum of maturity. This form of education tends to equip the learner with common core information and skills thus cultural heritage needed for the promotion of citizenship. Essentialist has made some contribution to education of most countries such Ghana and America through concepts that focus on primary and basic teaching where strong basic education (such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, etc.) has largely contributed to the education field, enabling students to develop a sound foundation of basic knowledge. Apart from just academic knowledge, essentialism also instills moral values and ethics in students, proving them with the sense to become educated good human beings. In sum, all educational effort should be aimed at intellectual development, character development of learners and give students a sense of historical perspective and tradition. The core concepts of the curriculum open to change because culture changes or is dynamic (encourages people to suggest new terms). For instance, the education within the Ghana education cycle have made some subjects (Social studies, Religious and Moral Education, Natural Science, Ghanaian Language, Mathematics English Language and French as core for learners at the Basic Schools, Junior High School and some at the Senior High School level.

Secondly, the curriculum is developed around the teacher rather than the learner since it emphasizes on rigorous teacher-centred education verse child-centred education. Curriculum developers consider every teacher

to endeavour to familiarize himself/herself with the basic teaching principles as well as the principles of organizing content for effective teaching and learning. The initiative in education should be with the teacher rather than with the pupils. This confirms the essentialist view of the teacher that he should instill traditional virtues such as hard work, respect for authorities both in school and outside the school, discipline and fidelity to duty into students. The skill of the teacher particularly as the initiator of interest cannot be ignored by curriculum developers and planners at all levels of the curriculum development. The teacher become a stakeholder in determining and selecting learning content for students since the teacher is seen as a sole authority in his or her area of specialization and a specialist in the impartation of essential knowledge to learners. The requirement for a successful implementation of the essentialist curriculum needs a trained teacher who has a broad general education in social foundations of education, child and adolescent psychology, the structure and dynamics of social group, guidance and problem-method of teaching. The function of the teacher in curriculum implementation is to facilitate the process of reconstructing the personality of the individual to fall in line with the moral beliefs of the society. Furthermore, the teacher must have adequate factual information and a thorough knowledge of laws and generalizations. In addition, the teacher must be thoroughly disciplined in socio-moral content of the culture; he/she must be familiar with the perspective and strategies of the different social groups. Teachers play a major role in essentialism in education. They need to be patient, have a positive attitude and need to effectively communicate with the student in order to assist in development of a students' mind and body. This phenomenon has become widely popular in that is not only focused on academic growth but also helps student to become better human beings. Moreover, the teacher must formulate measurable, specific and attainable instructional objectives for instruction. The teaching and learning method will solely be lecturing and memorization of essential facts. An example of essentialism would be lecture based introduction classes taught at universities.

Thirdly, essentialists belief in testing and evaluating learners and therefore will influence the curriculum through the use of assessment of students' performance or the mastery of content matter of an essential knowledge as a yardstick before moving on to the next level. The original doctrine for essentialism outlined by William Chandler Bagley in 1938 was a response to what he perceived to be the ineffective educational methods of his time, including: flexible, child-centred approaches like progressivism and "widespread" social promotion or movement of students to the next grade level whether or not their academic performance warranted the move. For this reason, every curriculum of the Essentialist should conduct some evaluation before promotion is warranted. Generally, essentialists are concerned with three basic tasks as cited in Onwuka (1996):

1. The continuous re-examination of curricular matters,
2. Distinguishing the essential and the non-essential in school programmes,
3. Re-establishing the authority of the teacher in the classroom.

The use of assessment enables curriculum developers to determine whether or not the goals or outcomes of education are being met. With this method of evaluating the learning outcome of students, students are made to possess, pass and attain mastery of the core content areas of the curriculum before moving to the next stage of the educational ladder. In Ghana, the form of assessment in the new educational structure and reform is based on two concepts;

1. Assessment is based on profile dimensions of each subject;
2. School-based assessment (SBA).

This system is made manifest through assessment of student performance with the use of tests and examinations. In addition, the curriculum emphasizes on diagnostic evaluation, formative evaluation and summative evaluation of the teaching and learning process. Basically, evaluation and assessment serves as criteria for classifying a person as educated after showing mastery of the five essential disciplines. Accordingly, every curriculum must consist of five essential disciplines to consider a person to be educated (Command of mother tongue and the systematic study of grammar, literature and writing, Mathematics, Science, History and Modern foreign language. These serve as the objectives upon which evaluation and assessment is conducted. This point of view is reflected in the type of teacher-made paper and pencil achievement tests given for purposes of evaluation. The use of objective tests (true false, multiple choice, completion) and essay examinations are the tests instrument used in assessing students' performance. As far as grading is concerned, certain standard is maintained within the educational cycle.

Furthermore, the curriculum places less emphasize on the development and implementation of non-academic subjects like Vocational Education, Physical Education, Arts and Music. In the development of a curriculum, there would be a fundamental shift of focus from topics and educational approaches which creatively engage the reflective, competent and a concern (minds, hearts and the hand) of students, to those required for successful mastery of academic drills and completion of standardized tests. It seems that, in all its efforts to successfully teach the essentials rather than the potential, creativity, innovativeness and capabilities of its people. To the essentialist, fundamental disciplines of English (grammar, literature and composition), Mathematics, Science, History and Modern foreign language. These subjects, logically organized are essential to the

development of our mental capacity. The performing of arts, industrial arts, vocational studies, physical education and other areas of the curriculum are regarded as frills. For instance, the institution geared towards the development of the psycho-motor domain of learners in Ghana is outnumbered by the literal institutions. On the other hand, the curriculum will emphasize the study and the development of essential skills of the 3R's (reading, writing and arithmetic). Bestor (1956) said the mission of the school is intellectual training and this is to be accomplished through a curriculum concentrated on five fundamental intellectual disciplines. In Ghana, students are made to exhibit mastery of English language, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, French and Ghanaian language content before moving to the climbing to the next stage of the academic ladder. For this reason, the bulk of the subject studied in Ghana are in line with these basics of developing students' ability to communicate, read and articulate knowledge for personal enlightenment.

Lastly, the curriculum will focus on ensuring ability grouping of students. Essentialists strongly favour ability grouping and strict classroom management. They feel that when all types of pupils are thrown together, the gifted students are inevitably cheated while the "weak" students are intimidated by the gifted that are the "stars" of such classes. Typically, this is done on the basis of achievement test scores (perhaps with a cut off score), grades and teacher recommendations. For example, the curriculum for the Basic Education in Ghana adheres to this principle where when students complete a cycle of education, the total score of the student is used as a yardstick for placement. With this system, students are placed in first, second and third class schools. Also, within the educational jurisdiction, some schools either private or public for example, group their students according to their abilities. Furthermore, within the Senior High Schools in Ghana, students are assigned to programmes of study according to their scoring abilities where some student will read General Arts, Business, Home Economics while others will be reading Science and Visual Arts. In relation to classroom arrangement, the essentialist prefers desks that can be permanently arranged in rows, perhaps even screwed down to the floor as old school desks were. This says a lot about what the teacher wants the pupil to experience in the classroom. It means that the students are supposed to sit still and listen to the teacher tell them about the world. Similarly, when curriculum planners are considering the infrastructural materials of the school, they consider desk arranged in rolls which is the predominant style with the Ghanaian educational system.

## 8.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, literate culture is the most democratic culture in our dear and loving country, Ghana. It excludes nobody, it cuts across generations and social groups and classes, it is not usually one's first culture, but it should be everyone's second (Hirsch, 1987). Every educator has to be concerned with philosophy of education. It is only through this that he/she can have a comprehensive idea of his profession. By studying the different views of philosophy, the educator gains a clearer idea of what education implies as far as the aims, roles, focus and their implications for curriculum development and practice are concerned. For this reason, there can be no rational curriculum development and practice without a good grounding in philosophy of education.

Our position here is that there is need to focus on other non-academic subjects which have the full abilities to unearth the total potentials of the learners instead of only intellectual training which has the chances of producing students who are only good on paper but worse in practice. This has led to most of the developmental problems the country is confronted with.

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