# 2 How Do I Conduct Inquiry into Philosophies of Education?

## How Does One Begin Inquiry?

> "The beginning is the most important part of the work."
>
> (Plato)[1]

One begins inquiry by asking questions. The simplest approach is based on the "Five Ws and one H" method: *Who*, *What*, *When*, *Where*, *Why*, and *How*. The order in which one asks these questions is not as important as investigating the different factors related to the phenomenon under examination. Three kinds of questions may be asked: 1) *factual* (*Who*, *What*, *Where*, *When* questions that identify concrete details and cite evidence), 2) *interpretation* (*How* and *Why* questions that infer meaning and probe understanding), and 3) *evaluation* (questions that elicit judgments, affirm conclusions, and justify beliefs) (Adler, 1955; Moeller & Moeller, 2002; Great Books Foundation, 2014).

Philosophy asks these same questions, focusing on: 1) *What* we observe occurring, 2) *How* these things connect or relate to one another, and 3) *Why* things are as they are (or *Why* things should be as they are and not otherwise). In doing so, philosophical questions address three issues: 1) *informative* ("determining what is the case"), 2) *practical* ("how to do things, how to achieve our aims"), and 3) *evaluative* ("what to aim at") (Rescher, 2001, p. 5). Our inquiry explores the influence of various philosophical perspectives on education. This entails asking informative questions (about what educational practices we observe in schools), practical questions (about how educational practices achieve their aims), and evaluative questions (about the consistency, compatibility, and coherence of practices in relation to their aims). Within these three basic categories, philosophical questions can probe the very purpose of education (Table 2.1).

In addition, philosophy asks *What if* questions. Speculative or hypothetical questions shift the direction of the inquiry and transform thinking. For example, beyond asking what curriculum students are currently learning, one might ask: "*What if* . . . students learned a different curriculum?" From this type of question, new questions emerge. If the curriculum changed, how would that affect instruction? How would changing instruction affect the role of the teacher? How would changing the role of the teacher affect the role of the student? Would changes in one major element of education lead to changes in the entire structure of a school, from the administration to a school's physical layout and resources? *What if* questions can: 1) *inform* (by describing what is, noticing what is not, and imagining what is possible), 2) influence *practical* actions (by supporting current practice or recommending changes in practice), and 3) *evaluate* (by examining and challenging the purposes of education).

*What if* questions begin in wonder. *What if* questions pique curiosity, stimulate creativity, and promote critical thinking. The following *What if* questions should guide your overall experience in reading this book:

*Table 2.1* Examples of Philosophical Questions

| *Informative* | *Practical* | *Evaluative* |
|---|---|---|
| • Who is educated in schools? Who decides?<br>• Where and when does learning take place? Who decides?<br>• What do schools teach? Who decides<br>• What is the purpose of school? Who decides?<br>• What needs do schools fulfill? Whose needs do schools fulfill? | • How are students educated in schools?<br>• How is the curriculum developed? Who develops the curriculum?<br>• How do teachers teach? Who decides how teachers teach?<br>• How is the purpose of school determined?<br>• How do schools fulfill this purpose? How do schools meet these needs? | • Why should students learn in schools?<br>• Why should learning occur on a schedule?<br>• Why should the curriculum include that content and those skills?<br>• Why should learning require a teacher? What kind of teacher?<br>• How do schools define an educated person? |

- *What if* . . . schools taught in a different way than what I have observed or experienced?
- *What if* . . . I preferred schools taught in a different way than I have observed or experienced?
- *What if* . . . I could design my own school?

How meaningful and relevant this inquiry will be depends on your willingness to pose thought-provoking questions. The quality of our learning rests in our questions. A famous aphorism advises, "Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers."[2]

## What Are the Different Types of Inquiry?

A familiar process for conducting inquiry follows the scientific method: 1) Pose a question, 2) Make a prediction or state a hypothesis, 3) Conduct an experiment and collect data, 4) Analyze and interpret the findings, 5) Report the findings and state a conclusion.

Not all modes of inquiry test hypotheses through experimentation. Different disciplines may employ modes of inquiry specific to those fields of study. Most general models, however, recognize the circular nature of inquiry, wherein each stage of the process informs the others, more questions are asked, and new investigation emerges. For example, the Stripling Model of Inquiry (2003) describes the following steps: 1) Connect (connect to self and previous knowledge, gain background knowledge to set context for new learning, observe and experience); 2) Wonder (develop questions, make predictions, and state hypotheses); 3) Investigate (find and evaluate information to answer questions and test hypotheses, think about information to illuminate new questions and hypotheses); 4) Construct (construct new understandings connected to previous knowledge, draw conclusions about questions and hypotheses); 5) Express (express new ideas to share learning with others, apply understandings to a new context or situation); 6) Reflect (reflect on own process of learning and on new understandings, ask new questions).

The inquiry process is closely related to general principles of critical thinking (Paul & Elder, 2008; The National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, 2013): 1) All reasoning has a purpose; 2) All reasoning is an attempt to figure something out, settle a question, or solve a problem; 3) All reasoning is based on assumptions (beliefs taken for granted); 4) All reasoning is done from some point of view; 5) All reasoning is based on data, information, and evidence; 6) All reasoning is expressed through, and shaped by, concepts and ideas; 7) All reasoning contains inferences or interpretations by which one draws conclusions and gives meaning to data; 8) All reasoning leads somewhere or has implications and consequences.

In addition to the steps or stages of the process, inquiry may also be based on the degree of structure afforded students during the process. For example, in *open* (or *full*) inquiry, students identify the problem, develop the questions, locate and select resources and materials, determine what evidence to collect, decide how to collect and analyze the data, and report and explain their findings. In *guided* inquiry, the teacher identifies the problem, poses the question, supplies resources and materials, provides the data, and suggests possible ways for students to analyze the data, explain the findings, and communicate the results. In *structured* inquiry, the teacher identifies the problem, poses the question, furnishes resources and materials, supplies the data for students to analyze, and provides the method for reporting or communicating the results (Colburn, 2000; Martin-Hansen, 2002). Models may be combined, such as in a *coupled* inquiry approach that begins with teacher selection of the problem and question while students assume greater responsibility as the inquiry progresses. In other variations, students may select from among questions or revise the questions, students may begin by using assigned resources then choose additional resources to continue the inquiry, and other options for shifting the balance between teacher direction and student initiative.

### *Wonder Model of Inquiry*

We will conduct our inquiry into philosophy of education within a framework called the *Wonder Model of Inquiry* (Figure 2.1). Beginning with hypothetical *What if* questions, the model asks all three kinds of questions (factual, interpretation, and evaluation) that address all three philosophical issues (informative, practical, and evaluative) and incorporates all eight elements of critical thinking (purpose, questions, assumptions or beliefs, points of view, information and evidence, concepts and ideas, inferences or interpretations, conclusions and implications). The Wonder Model follows the structured inquiry process by posing questions, collecting data through

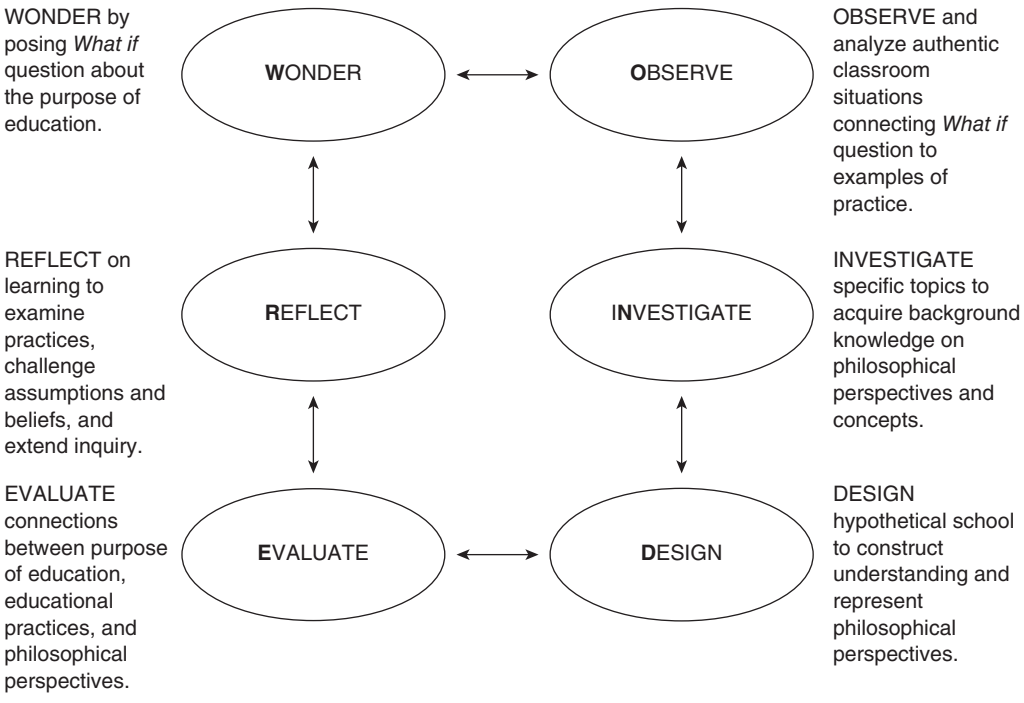


*Figure 2.1* Wonder Model of Inquiry

observation, analyzing sources of information and connecting to philosophical concepts and perspectives, describing a method to communicate learning, applying criteria to interpret and evaluate the results, and reflecting on the process and the implications of the findings.

> WONDER: Pose a *What if* question about the purpose of education to serve as a hypothetical situation to examine.
>
> OBSERVE: Observe and analyze an authentic classroom situation (depicted as a vignette) connecting the *What if* question to examples of practice.
>
> INVESTIGATE: Investigate specific topics to acquire background knowledge on philosophical perspectives and concepts related to the observation.
>
> DESIGN: Design a hypothetical school (and/or examine example schools) to construct understanding and represent philosophical perspectives and concepts, based on the purpose of education and practices presented in the vignette.
>
> EVALUATE: Evaluate connections between the purpose of education, educational practices, and philosophical perspectives depicted in the vignette and represented by the school design.
>
> REFLECT: Reflect on learning to examine practices, challenge assumptions and beliefs, and extend inquiry.

As indicated in Figure 2.1, the steps of the model interact. The Wonder phase poses the purpose of education. The vignette described in the Observe phase illustrates the purpose of education. During the Investigate phase, we will be referring back to the vignette and projecting forward to design a hypothetical school. In the Design phase, we will compare our hypothetical school to examples of actual schools or educational programs. The Evaluate phase applies the "3Cs" criteria from Chapter 1 (consistency, compatibility, and coherence) to the examples.

Finally, the Reflect phase asks how prior observations and experiences in schools relate to the educational practices depicted in the vignette and examples. In doing so, readers can begin to reflect upon their own practices, examine their role in the educational process, question assumptions, and begin to articulate their own philosophical beliefs. As Albert Camus advises, "Philosophical thought only begins when we challenge the logic of clichés with rigor and honesty" (Todd, 1997, p. 92).

## What Tools Will Help Guide and Organize My Inquiry into Philosophy of Education?

Philosophy is a vast field of study consisting of myriad points of view. A common way to determine similarities and differences among philosophies is to ask fundamental questions about the nature of reality, knowledge, values, and reasoning. These four areas of inquiry in philosophy are known as Metaphysics, Epistemology, Axiology, and Logic.

### *Metaphysics: Questions about the Nature of Reality*

Metaphysics asks questions such as: What is reality? What is ultimately real? What truly exists? What is the purpose or meaning of existence? The Greek prefix *meta* means "after" or "beyond." Therefore, we can think of metaphysics as the area of philosophy that explores what may exist "after or beyond the study of nature or the physical." One can believe in a single possible reality or questions may arise asking how many different possible realities exist and what would be the nature of those realities. The philosopher William James (1890) explains, "Metaphysics means nothing but an unusually obstinate effort to think clearly" (p. 145).

Why is thinking about perceptions of reality important for teaching and learning? One's view of reality directly affects how one perceives the world and our place in it. If education concerns itself with learning knowledge and skills deemed reasonable and valuable, how reality is conceptualized ultimately determines the knowledge and skills we teach. Teachers are not in the habit of intentionally presenting to students information they believe not to be true. What is "real" can be argued to form the basis of education.

### *Epistemology: Questions about the Nature of Truth and Knowledge*

Epistemology asks questions such as: What is true? How do we know it is true? What is "real" knowledge? Where does it come from? How do we know what we know? The word comes from the Greek *episteme*, which means "to know" and refers to knowledge, understanding, or belief.

Why is thinking about what constitutes true knowledge, and where it comes from, important for teaching and learning? As mentioned above, we can assume teachers believe they offer students "real" and "true" knowledge. A fundamental question to ask is, "How do we know the knowledge we teach is true?" The sources of the knowledge we teach, and our confidence in the credibility and reliability of these sources, directly influence decisions about teaching. The integrity of the knowledge we teach is a primary issue in education.

### *Axiology: Questions about Values*

Axiology asks questions such as: What is good or bad, right or wrong, moral or immoral, ethical or unethical? Axiology also asks questions such as: What is desirable or undesirable, attractive or unattractive, appealing or unappealing, beautiful or ugly? The Greek word *axia* stands for value or worth. Axiology examines the nature of values such as morals, ethics, and virtues, as well as the nature of aesthetic matters such as beauty or taste in art, architecture, music, nature, etc.

Why is thinking about values, and where they come from, important for teaching and learning? Dispositions of students such as conduct and character attributes directly affect the learning environment of the classroom. Research cites classroom management issues and expectations for student behavior as a chief concern of beginning teachers. In what ways do we teach values in school? Every school and classroom establishes rules and posts reminders regarding traits such as responsibility, honesty, trustworthiness, and respect. Character education has become an explicitly identified part of the curriculum. From the beginning of educational philosophy, identifying and examining these values has been a central concern of inquiry.

Why is thinking about aesthetics important for teaching and learning? Changing priorities sometimes result in art and music education receiving less attention in schools. Nonetheless, aesthetics are present in classrooms. Instruction frequently involves presenting visual representations. Students create using art materials to express their learning. Music is employed to teach topics. Technology and other media convey visual and audio information. In more subtle ways, aesthetics permeate the classroom environment. Hallways and classrooms are decorated to express a theme, walls are painted different colors to indicate locations in the building as well as providing a comfortable, pleasing setting for learning. Students display their work on posters and other types of exhibits. The importance of aesthetics to the learning process cannot be overlooked.

### *Logic: Questions about Reasoning*

Logic asks questions about reasoning. The Greek word *logos* means "word" as well as "reason." Schools emphasize reasoning skills in all subjects. Essay writing stresses offering coherent arguments. Mathematics and science apply logical processes to solve problems. Historical reasoning informs social studies. Two types of reasoning are most often modeled and practiced

in classrooms. Deductive reasoning is top-down reasoning where one reasons from the general (abstract ideas or propositions) to the particular (concrete examples or evidence). Inductive reasoning is bottom-up reasoning from the particular (concrete examples or evidence) to the general (abstract ideas or conclusions).

Why is thinking about how students think and reason important for teaching? The logic or sequence of instruction changes depending on the content, desired outcomes, students, and learning situation. How we ask students to express their understanding involves logic.

These four areas of inquiry (Metaphysics, Epistemology, Axiology, and Logic) can help organize philosophical perspectives along a *Continuum of Educational Philosophy* (Figure 2.2).

The continuum displays educational practices above the arrow and corresponding philosophical perspectives below. Overall, philosophical perspectives and educational practices on the left side of the continuum place greater emphasis on ideas-based, rational approaches to thinking and learning. Perspectives and practices on the right side favor experience-based, empirical approaches. Rationalism argues that knowledge can be gained through systematic, logical reasoning and intuition. Empiricism claims that acquiring or constructing knowledge is dependent on sense experiences, providing the source for all our ideas and concepts. The continuum does not divide these two major positions into distinct, mutually exclusive sections. Certain philosophers insist that knowledge can only be attained through reason. Others propose that phenomena must be observed and verified through the senses for reasoning to have any meaning. However, overlap does exist between rational and empirical approaches, and both can be employed and justified to support one another. The continuum permits us to locate the different outlooks we will encounter along a range, rather than isolate the work of each educational philosopher to a single fixed location.

As one moves from left to right on the continuum, the philosophical perspectives range from belief in a single absolute reality that exists prior to our sense experience to multiple possible views of reality that exist after experiencing with our senses (Metaphysics). Philosophical perspectives on the left side of the continuum believe in universal knowledge that exists independent of subjective experience whereas perspectives on the right believe knowledge is gained from

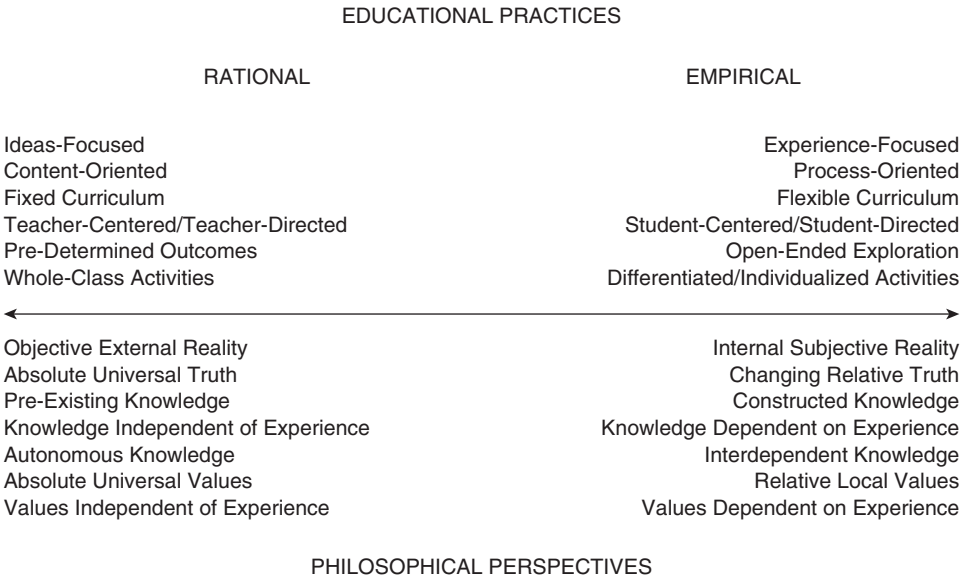


*Figure 2.2* Continuum of Educational Philosophy

one's direct personal experiences (Epistemology). Between the two extreme positions on the continuum, rational reasoning as a way to achieve and defend understanding merges with the requirement to verify truth based on experience and the demand to take variables into account while proposing tentative conclusions (Logic). Morals, ethics, and virtues also range from belief in absolute and inerrant universal values to the need to consider context (including social, cultural, economic, political, religious, and other factors) with respect to human conduct (Axiology).

Educational practices on the left side of the continuum support an ideas-focused, content-oriented curriculum that is teacher-centered. Practices on the right prefer a process-oriented, experience-focused curriculum supporting student-centered learning activities. The edges of the continuum represent polar positions. At the far left, the curriculum consists of a fixed body of content knowledge. Instruction emphasizes teacher-directed methods with students participating in whole-class activities. Assessment consists of meeting prescribed outcomes and achieving pre-set standards. At the far right, a flexible curriculum values student experiences to construct knowledge. Students engage in open-ended exploration with no pre-determined outcomes. Student interests and needs affect the kinds of instruction offered. Individual students initiate and direct their own learning and are responsible for monitoring their own growth.

The majority of the continuum falls between the two extremes, observing different educational practices that invoke interplay among philosophical perspectives. As one moves from left to right, the curriculum becomes less rigid and more flexible. Instruction comprises a variety of methods from teacher-directed to student-centered. The process of learning becomes as valued as the content. Students collaborate or study individually depending on adaptable goals based on the context. Decisions about learning are based on student differences to an increasing degree.

The continuum as a guide permits fluid movement. One is not restricted to an either/or choice between viewpoints. A school or classroom may at times demonstrate practices located in one direction on the arrow (i.e., more content-oriented and teacher-centered) and at times gravitate in the other direction (i.e., more process-oriented and student-centered). For example, some teachers may ask questions such as, "What do I want my students to learn and how do I want to teach it?" Other teachers may ask, "What do my students want to learn and how would they like to learn it?" Many teachers may navigate between these positions, negotiating the curriculum and selecting instructional methods based on the needs of the students, the demands of school administrators, the expectations of parents and other stakeholders, and their own sense of what is appropriate in the situation.

The continuum can accommodate a range of practices and philosophical perspectives. The continuum in no way implies that practices or beliefs on one side are better than or more highly recommended than those on the other. The continuum serves as a tool for conducting our inquiry. As we encounter different examples of educational practices, we will locate these examples along the continuum and investigate philosophical perspectives that relate to those practices.

One word of caution. Practices that appear at locations far apart from one another on the continuum begin to contradict one another. In those instances, instruction loses consistency, practices lack compatibility, and educational programs become less coherent. A school or classroom exhibiting drastically contrasting philosophies creates a tension that becomes difficult to justify. For example, a teacher may wish to act as a guide in the classroom to facilitate collaborative learning, promote critical thinking, and encourage creativity. Yet this same teacher may spend a disproportionate amount of time behaving in a mostly teacher-centered manner, such as delivering content and drilling on prescribed skills to prepare students for testing. We will apply the "3Cs" criteria (consistency, compatibility, and coherence) introduced in Chapter 1 to the observations examined in each chapter to reveal contradictions.

In our inquiry, we will challenge assumptions about existing practices by asking *What if* questions. In addition, we will ask fundamental questions about the nature of reality, knowledge,

values, and reasoning in education, locating examples of these four areas along the C*ontinuum of Educational Philosophy*. In the process, we will envision designing schools based on different beliefs about the purpose of education.

## What Are the Big Questions about Teaching and Learning?

> "Philosophical thought only begins when we challenge the logic of clichés with rigor and honesty."
>
> (Albert Camus)

To explore philosophical perspectives that have influenced educational practices, we will focus on the following inquiry questions:

- What is the purpose of education?
- What do teachers teach?
- How do teachers teach?
- How are schools organized?

## What Is the Purpose of Education?

Schools or school systems commonly offer a purpose statement to the public, published on their websites and in other materials such as brochures and student handbooks. Sometimes the purpose will be called a mission statement or a statement of the school's philosophy. While these statements focus on the learning needs of students, many attempt to generally address all or most of the expectations of prominent stakeholders such as families, policymakers, business interests, and community leaders. However, some schools (especially independent or private schools, charter or model schools, alternative schools, and other schools that serve a specific population of students or are designed according to a particular theme or approach) will express in a purpose statement the qualities or features that make the school unique.

The key questions to ask about the purpose of a school are:

- How would one design a school to fulfill that purpose?
- How does the school define an educated student?

To answer these two broad questions, and to get past the generic language that typifies many purpose statements, specific questions must be asked about the curriculum, the teaching and learning process, and the organization of the school. They include informative, practical, evaluative, and hypothetical types of questions.

The purpose of education differs from its aims or objectives. Aiming implies attempting to hit a target (Peters, 1973). Objectives set specific outcomes to be accomplished under certain conditions within a given time limit. Aims and objectives can conceivably be achieved, with effort and concentration. The possibility of failing is always a potential consequence. "The term 'purpose' carries no such suggestions," Peters concludes (p. 13). The purpose of education is broader, formulating an explanation as to why we endeavor to educate in the first place.

The purpose of education, and the definition of an educated person, changes over time. Frequent calls to reform education represent deeply held opinions that reflect fundamental beliefs, not only about the teaching and learning process but also about how society functions and how the world is viewed. Nevertheless, public discourse regarding education can fall into the trap of spouting superficial slogans or proposing sweeping solutions with scant evidence to support them beyond impassioned conviction.

## What Do Teachers Teach? Questions about the Curriculum

More than one kind of curriculum may be found in schools (Eisner, 1994; Marsh, 1992; Posner, 1992). The *official* curriculum is the formal version—written, documented, published, and disseminated to administrators, teachers, and the public. The official curriculum may be developed at a school, within a school system, and/or produced at the state level. The official curriculum generally guides instruction and forms the basis of the assessment of students and the evaluation of teachers. However, this curriculum varies when implemented. Time and resources may tend to emphasize certain subject areas and content matter, and standardized testing identifies and measures only some aspects of the curriculum for accountability purposes.

Many students also engage in *extracurricular* activities. These are offered as part of the function of a school, but fall outside of the official curriculum. For example, students may perform in the marching band, join the chess club, compete on debate teams, play athletics, act in school plays, and voluntarily participate in other pursuits the school supports and endorses but does not require.

The *hidden* curriculum lies beneath the surface. Students are expected to learn and conform to social and procedural expectations, such as adhering to a schedule, earning grades, maintaining acceptable conduct, respecting authority, assuming responsibility, demonstrating respect for peers, displaying integrity, and other norms and values considered essential to the operation of the school environment and the preservation of the school culture.

The *null* curriculum (Eisner, 1985) refers to what schools do not teach. The official curriculum includes recognizable, familiar subjects such as languages, mathematics, sciences, history and social studies, physical education and health, and the visual and performing arts. Some schools incorporate vocational and technical subjects into their curriculum while in other communities these kinds of courses are offered in a separate school setting. While many schools continue to offer a variety of classes in the visual and performing arts (including drama and dance), other schools have severely curtailed or discontinued these classes, whether due to budget cuts or other reasons.

The subjects that schools emphasize, and the areas reduced or eliminated, reflect decisions with philosophical implications. The knowledge and skills deemed of the highest value (to students or society) represent beliefs about what is worth knowing. The official curriculum codifies a set of values, the hidden curriculum enforces a set of values, and the null curriculum reinforces a set of values. Philosophical inquiry asks questions about *What* knowledge students are taught, *How* these decisions are made, and *Why* this knowledge is taught (or *Why* certain knowledge is taught and not other knowledge). Fundamental questions about the curriculum may include:

- What do schools ask teachers to teach? Why require that curriculum?
- Who decides what to include and what to omit? Does some knowledge receive greater emphasis and other knowledge less? Why emphasize that knowledge?
- Where does that knowledge come from? What are the sources of knowledge the school accepts and values? How do we know the selected content is accurate or valid? How do we know the content is relevant?
- Does some knowledge change while other knowledge remains constant? Is some knowledge universal and useful to all while other knowledge only applies to certain people in certain situations?
- What content and skills do teachers get to decide to teach or to emphasize in their own classrooms?
- *What if . . .* the purpose of the school changed; how would that affect the curriculum? What would teachers teach?

## How Do Teachers Teach? Questions about Pedagogy

As we discussed in Chapter 1, pedagogy involves more than inserting activities into a lesson plan. Techniques, strategies, and activities can be combined into coherent and consistent methods of instruction. Questions to ask about pedagogy include:

- How do teachers teach? Why use those methods of instruction?
- How do teachers prefer to teach? Does the school encourage and support those methods or require a different set of teaching methods?
- How do students prefer to learn? Should how students prefer to learn determine how they are taught?
- How do teachers assess learning? Why assess learning using those methods?
- How do teachers prefer to assess learning? Does the school encourage and support those methods or require a different set of assessment methods?
- How do students prefer to demonstrate their learning? Should how students prefer to demonstrate learning determine how they are assessed?
- How do teachers manage instructional time? Who decides how teachers use instructional time?
- How do students prefer to use their time? Should how students prefer to use time determine how instructional time is allocated and managed?
- *What if* . . . the purpose of the school changed; how would that affect instruction? How would teachers teach?

Beyond issues regarding instructional and assessment methods, pedagogy involves asking questions about the role of the teacher and the role of the student in the learning process. The way teachers behave in classrooms is greatly influenced by their own experiences as students, how they were taught in the past, how fellow teachers behave, how students respond, and expectations of administrators, families, and others in a position to influence school policy and practice. Questions asked to challenge assumptions about the role of the teacher may include:

- How are teachers expected to act or behave in the classroom? How do teachers act or behave in the classroom? How do teachers want to act or behave in the classroom?
- How are teachers expected to interact with the students in the classroom? In what ways do teachers interact with the students in the classroom? How do teachers want to interact with the students in the classroom?
- *What if* . . . the purpose of the school changed; how would that affect the role of the teacher? What metaphors might we suggest for the role of the teacher?

The curriculum, instruction, and role of the teacher influence the role of the students and how they are expected to conduct themselves in the classroom setting. Questions may be asked to challenge assumptions about the role of the student, such as:

- How do students learn? In what different ways do students learn?
- How are students expected to act or behave in the classroom? How do students act or behave in the classroom? How do students want to act or behave in the classroom?
- How are students expected to interact with the teacher in the classroom? In what ways do students interact with the teacher in the classroom? How do students want to interact with the teacher in the classroom?
- How are students expected to interact with each other in the classroom? In what ways do students interact with each other in the classroom? How do students want to interact with each other in the classroom?

- *What if . . .* the purpose of the school changed; how would that affect the role of the student? What metaphors might we suggest for the role of the student?

## How Are Schools Organized? Questions about the Role of the School

Teachers may overlook asking, "What role does the school play in the learning process?" Perhaps this question is not always consciously asked. How the school supports teachers may be taken for granted over time. However, a school is more than a building or location. A school represents the education a student receives. Myriad decisions made at various levels of the institutional structure determine the kinds of things students learn, how they are taught, the methods of assessment, the time allotted for subject areas and specific topics within subjects, and even the space used for instruction. These decisions communicate the kinds of learning valued by the school. Broad questions to consider include:

- How is the school organized to fulfill the purpose of education?
- How does the school manage instructional time? How does the school acquire and allocate resources?
- How does a school's decision-making processes affect teaching and learning?
- How is the school's physical environment and arrangement of space related to teaching and learning?
- *What if . . .* the purpose of the school changed; how would that affect the way a school is organized and its role in the teaching and learning process?

## Philosophy of Education in Action

Asking questions about the purpose of education and the value of educational practices enters into the domain of philosophy. Examining one's teaching and offering a rationale based on reasoning and reflection reveals assumptions, beliefs, and values about education. The Greek philosopher Aristotle describes practical activity (*praxis*) as action toward the Good, concerned with matters of human conduct such as ethics and politics (*Nicomachean Ethics*). Inquiry into what actions are good or worthwhile may be called "practical philosophy" (Haldane, 2011, p. 5). One need not formulate a philosophical perspective in advance to engage in practical philosophy. For instance, the process does not require starting with a philosophical position and either looking for examples of it in practice or applying its principles to an area of practice. Practical philosophy may begin "with questions posed by some area of human practice," investigating the activity, and interpreting and evaluating its consequences (Haldane, 2011, p. 11). Questions about whether the purposes and outcomes of practice are reasonable, appropriate, and worthwhile (or good) have philosophical implications.

The American philosopher John Dewey argues that philosophy should venture beyond a specialized field contemplating arcane issues, restricted to studying itself or caught up in internal disputes. Problems that arise in social practice, and in education in particular, offer rich opportunities for philosophy to have a direct influence on situations that matter to the people involved and affected. He states, "Education offers a vantage ground from which to penetrate to the human, as distinct from the technical, significance of philosophical discussion" (MW 9:338). Philosophical inquiry should emerge from conditions and experiences encountered in daily living and offer practical guidance. "Philosophy of education," Dewey writes, "is not an external application of ready-made ideas to a system of practice" (MW 9:341). Philosophical inquiry can bring problems to light so they may be rigorously examined and honestly addressed.

According to British philosopher R. S. Peters, we assume education results in some condition of life or state of being we find desirable. He reasons, however, that "even though there

may be value in being educated it must be associated with some specific types of value" (1973, p. 239). One view values breadth of understanding and the pleasure of attaining knowledge for its own sake. Another view looks to the utility of what we learn and how it can be applied in the interests of achieving some social or individual purpose. A third view seeks truth that can be regarded as "having a worth which is independent of its benefit" (p. 251). The merits of these views are perpetually discussed and debated, and each places demands on the process of education. Why these different approaches come into conflict, and how they might be reconciled, raise philosophical questions concerning the values that underlie practice. "Philosophy has an important contribution to make to practical wisdom," Peters concludes, although it is not in a position to prescribe specific solutions (p. 29). As an activity, philosophy has significance for the questions it asks.

Two quotations from Chapter 1 convey the theme of this textbook. In the classic Greek period, Socrates stated, "Philosophy begins in wonder" (*Theaeteus*, 155d). In the 20th century, Wittgenstein (1922) claimed, "Philosophy is not a theory but an activity" (4.112). By combining these two ideas, drawn from different eras of philosophical thought, we will describe philosophy as a *wonder activity*. This synthesis represents our view of the inquiry process as an activity that begins by asking questions. The goal is to engage in active and relevant inquiry, focused on philosophy of education *in action*.

## Notes

1 *The Republic*, 377b.
2 Frequently misattributed to Voltaire. The original quotation, "It is easier to judge the mind of a man by his questions rather than his answers," has been sourced to Pierre-Marc-Gaston, duc de Lévis (1808) in *Maxims and Reflections on Various Topics of Morals and Politics, Vol. 1* (Maxim xvii).

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