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Early Postmodernist Pedagogy and Its Role in Reducing Identity-Based Discrimination

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Abstract

Philosophy has a foundational role in shaping moral and intellectual discourses, but its marginalization in modern education has, at least partly, exacerbated societal divisions due to the established biases ingrained by modern or pre-modern philosophies. This paper argues for the integration of postmodernist philosophy into primary and secondary curricula as a means to tackle essentialist stereotypes, promote pluralism, and foster inclusive identity formation. Specific aspects of postmodernist philosophy, such as the rejection of fixed essentialist identities, offer a framework for dismantling reductive narratives. Focusing on particular philosophical ideas of postmodernism –anti-essentialism, relativism, and pluralism– this paper posits that postmodernist pedagogy encourages students to embrace intersectional identities, critically evaluate cultural biases, and engage in democratic discourses. Through the application of postmodern relativism, though contended by critics for its potential in undermining universal truths and fragmenting social cohesion, hate crimes/systemic discrimination may be mitigated through selective inclusion of cultivating empathy, ethical reasoning, and democratic mentality in young learners. It ultimately stands to reason that certain postmodernist principles applied early in education may reshape some rigid and discriminatory societal norms. Ultimately, postmodernism is not only an abstract academic exercise but also a pragmatic instrument for constructing an equitable and cohesive society.

Keywords

Postmodern philosophy, Postmodernism, Anti-Essentialism, Pluralism, Relativism, Identity-Based Discrimination

1. Introduction

"Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good," Aristotle (2016, p.1) writes in his 322 BCE Nicomachean Ethics. Either be it the argument of sense based existence which is a reductio ad absurdum of empiricism, the derivation of reason through knowledge in rationalism, or the exemplification of certainty through an indirect assumption of

universality of justifiable truths in foundationalism, these philosophies must not be rendered nugatory for the altered social constructs and dynamics of the postmodern world; however, one must acknowledge their inadequacy in addressing concerns produced by the reorganized society. In recent years, philosophy is posited as an inconsequential and an illusory liberal art as public opinion resembles the condescending attitude towards the subject given that it is "viewed by the public as a non-essential part of non-academic, political life… and logically insensitive to the goings on of the community" (Chick & LaVine, 2014, p.138). This is partly credited to the lack of early exposure to philosophical ideals as standardized subjects and assessments obscure their relevance in primary educational institutions (Biesta, 2011) engendering a student populace "unfamiliar with philosophy [, who] may be unsure about the benefits and applications of philosophy" (Peterson, 2023, p.1). Likewise, for example, the decentralized nature of American schools enables a variety in the curriculum given multiple levels of local experimentation, deviating from the proper implementation of philosophy or ethics as subjects even if the state or federal level were to mandate their inclusion (Cook, 1999). Hence, the necessity for extensive philosophical teachings and inculcation of such principles in school curricula can be lucidly witnessed provided the underestimation of philosophical values in societal views (Beatty, 2009). As is general knowledge, philosophy has shaped and coagulated the various ideological elements to contour the contemporary world. However, philosophy is not as rigorously taught or even introduced early, this being a parameter defining the peripheries of an inclusive society. Though it is not purely rational to deduce inclusivity based on a non-scientific assessment, the reasoning provided thus forth establishes firm ground to argue for the role of philosophy in determining societal trajectories.

2. Argument

Here, philosophical teachings and inquiries are postulated to be instrumental in individual and societal identity formulation. Granted that occurrences of identity crisis are more prevalent in adolescents (Rani, 2022), critical thinking prompted by philosophical teachings may pave for their appropriate comportments. Moreover, the "overall discernment about oneself" (Rani, 2022, p.27) is being continually sought after given that an array of discourses and philosophical movements aim at producing holistic and distinct identities (Mathur, 2021), yet another validation of the role of philosophies in molding identities. The belief that recent society's progressive ideals encumber the pernicious insinuation of discriminatory beliefs and that it contains no prejudicial divides, cannot be completely substantiated as there lies a significant scope for improvement. Recent hate crimes consisted of race, religion, and gender-based crimes, elucidating the necessity for a coherently binding and influencing philosophical foundation. Although its inclusion does not guarantee the assuaging of the worsening identity-based violence, the inclusion does promise the mitigation of their exacerbation.

Misrepresentation, underrepresentation, stereotypes, and minority oppression are the conspicuous zeitgeist of this era, which explicate the presence of a vacuous philosophical idea within

the society, a philosophy that educates and benefits the differentiated groups to eradicate the above predicaments. Furthermore, a utopian society without discrimination can, at least, be trialed via the applications of education by ingraining philosophical principles into the young, as is proven that "philosophical thinking… influences their attitudes, behaviors, and understanding of social life" (Szwed, 2019, p.73), thusly, shaping their adulthood. Moreover, philosophy incorporated in primary education can provide additional benefits such as moral reflection, sensitivity, better understanding of perspectives and ethical values (Biesta, 2011; Karpouzis, 2024), which further contribute to the fruition of this united 'utopian society'. Countering societal pressure to obey and commit morally appropriate actions stems through a philosophical foundation established via the channels of educational institutions. For that, this paper aims to satisfy the specified purposes by discussing a pertinent school of philosophy, gauging and comparatively analyzing the imposing branches of that philosophy to evidence its pertinence to the discourse. And that being the postmodernist philosophy as it offers the most likely solution to this identity related crises of modern societies.

For the reasons mentioned above and innumerable others, it is necessary to consider postmodernist philosophical education at younger ages in the United States, and various other nations with lacking implementation, to resolve the long-standing crisis of discrimination and strengthen the tenuous ties between diverse groups – made fragile due to dynamical shifts in political and social constructs. The very origin of postmodernism lies in the refutation of idealism and reason (Forghani et. al, 2015) as the twentieth century's prominent philosophers ascribed the era's atrocities to these ideals, giving rise to widespread acceptance of skepticism (a foundational characteristic of postmodernism). And the latter parts of this article will propound that postmodernist philosophy and its core characteristics, by being incorporated into primary/secondary education systems, can provide unmatchable contributions in resolving the aforementioned issues. Postmodernist philosophy can alleviate societal ideals and inculcate necessary doctrines into the young to aid in reducing the partisan paradigm of modern society as a variation of its interpretation capacitates one to believe that its basis lies on establishing a unified multifarious society over a heterogeneous diversity.

3. Philosophy in Education

On the same path, recent papers (Wahab et. al, 2022; Pala, 2022) determined that Philosophy for children (P4C) or its incorporation into education can provide the benefits of democratic discussions, safe environments, and civilized thinking within the students. Avouching that the inclusion of philosophy in terms of improvement in reasoning demonstrates enhanced educational attainment, Gorard (2016) further validates this claim. However, educational attainment is only a narrow aspect compared to the "creative, social, verbal, and empathy skills" (Pala, 2022, p.38) attained. These further

affirm the point that philosophical education contains the potentiality to become the impetus for a more inclusive society as students develop necessary skills and morals which perpetuate ethical attitudes into adulthood. More importantly and pertaining to the focus of this article, postmodernist philosophical education could serve as a catalyst for this process as it regards individuality and moral courage in situations of necessity. And this article will focus exactly on that question of how postmodernist philosophical education can resolve this long-standing issue.

4. Denial of Essential Traits

Firstly, postmodernism's core denial of essentialism and particularly Aristotelian essentialism, exhibits prospects for the elimination of stereotypes and removal of ingrained discriminatory conventions within the society. Essentialism or Aristotelian essentialism is a philosophical view that a trait is absolute or fixed to represent an identity, and more specifically, as author Marc S. Cohen (1978, p.394) puts it, "an attribute is an Aristotelian essence if and only if it is essential to every individual having it which is a genuine subject for that attribute." This idea of absolute essence pertaining to or characterizing particular subjects like individuals, races, ethnicities and genders, was introduced initially by Aristotle for a purpose that is quite distinguishable from the purpose of the modern philosophers. What, hitherto, has been a debate for accounting various views, soon dissolved into one of biological essences by the seventeenth century. Aristotle's (2016) Nicomachean Ethics uses the term to describe, define, and compare philosophical subjects on the dialogue of virtue, but this soon deliquesced into an instrument for racial debate in the modern era. Wherein, world renowned philosophers like David Hume and Immanuel Kant believed in and influenced modern philosophy to assign defining characteristics to various races and genders. Hume (1772, p.372), explicitly states in his essay *Of Natural Characters* that non-white races are "naturally inferior to the whites," adding to which Kant (2007, p.82) states in his *Of the Different Races of Human Beings*, "so fundamental is the difference [between Blacks and Whites] and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color." On the other hand, Rousseau's *A Discourse on Inequality* instigates and reinforces a subordinate role for women by "justif[ying] the perpetuation of a distinct and subordinate sex role for the female that such a role is natural" as Susan Okin (2013, p.106) perceives his argument; again, claiming that an attribute is natural reinforces Rousseau's argument and further exemplifies the role of societal degradation via the improper use of essentialism. These glimpses of explicit racial dismissiveness disclose the sheer pervasiveness of stereotypical behavior, and these philosophies' influences perpetuated into the twentieth and twenty first century in the form of racial discrimination due to ingrained contempt toward various racial groups. Resulting in reductionism/biologism where a person or people's behavior is understood by "reducing them to their fundamental biological drives and dispositions" (Wilkin, 1999, p. 181), which are inherently biased and convey a means of supercilious justification. Further

corroborating this point of essentialist views provoking racism and stereotypes, Stuart Hall (Chen, 2006, p.442), a cultural theorist and a political activist, asserts that "racism…operates by constructing impassable *symbolic* boundaries between racially constituted categories."

5. Anti-Essentialism and Intersectionality

The philosophy of essences directly contributes to the creation of stereotypes and the above examples serve as constructs that rationalized racial hierarchies (Zack, 2014), limiting enlightenment egalitarian ideals to specific races alone. Soon taking mainstream ideologies, these essentialist ideals were preserved and permeated across the world by the means of colonialism and still act prevalent as they continually shape social constructs and stamped the governing principles of the twentieth century. However, most postmodern philosophers refute the existence of fixed or discrete identities and believe in multiplicity and intersectionality. Corroborating the point, activist Stuart Hall (Chen, 2006, p.133) explains multiplicity with an anecdote of a deconstructionist view on language, "there is no necessary correspondence between sign and meaning; every sign is 'multiaccentual."

In other words, it is a subsectional view of postmodernism that one has multiple intersecting identities based on their race, gender, class, ethnicity and other factors (Chen, 2006) and, therefore, cannot be attributed one essential feature. Similarly, as this modernist principle also perpetuates misogynistic ideals, Michel Foucalt resolved them through the avenues of postmodern interpretation of sexuality as cultural constructs and not 'natural phenomena', further supporting "feminist critique of essentialism" ("Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophia", n.d.). These defy the very existence of essential attributes or traits defining an individual or a group, hindering the development and proliferation of stereotypical notions. Educating and inculcating such teachings to the younger generation could foster democratic relations and discussions within the students, as mentioned by Wahab and collaborators, and civilize students by disregarding immoral stereotypical beliefs. The teachings of multiplicity, intersectionality, and anti-essentialism can cultivate attitudes which respect the identities of others, further democratizing society beginning from childhood.

In contrast, author and philosopher Kenan Malik is concerned that this philosophical education would impose the opposite effect. Though thinkers like David Bailey (Malik, 1996) agree that unfixed and floating identities – being the products of social discourses – are necessary to circumvent racial/gender essentialist discrimination; Malik (1996, p.13) describes this understanding of identity as "barely different from that of nineteenth-century racial theorists" or "inherently heterogeneous and diverse which cannot be grasped as a whole." Meaning, in this context, these philosophies in primary education can further fragment societies as students would not be able to define their own identities, identities which fabricate a coherent bond within students. Highly improbable however, as students

immersed in a postmodernist education are better equipped to define and respect their identities, shaped by the richness of social interactions. Despite the declination of enlightenment themes of universality by prominent postmodernists like Foucalt raise concerns, this 'essential unity' endorsed by universality does not last as it ensues governmentality – compartmentalization of defined groups within a nation/state furthering causing division. Therefore, postmodern critique of essentialism in educational discourses assuage inequity and promote respectful behavior within students and ultimately their adulthood, as identity defining stereotypes would be erased.

6. Postmodern Relativism

Secondly, postmodern relativism is another avenue to a democratic and inclusive society as it strictly condemns the reprehensible actions committed under the umbrella of opinionated 'correct' actions. Though relativism has been a perennial concept that attributes knowledge upon the observer, postmodern relativism emerged mostly as a result of dismissiveness towards modern era's enlightenment philosophy of rationalism. Primarily due to the rise of authoritarian and totalitarian rule in the twentieth century as these leaders justified their barbarous acts on reasoning and rationalism based on modern philosophical perspectives (Potgieter, 2015). As discussed above, enlightenment discourses of universality and general theories are dismissed by postmodernist thought given their capacity to induce metanarratives and marginalize other perspectives, thereby tending toward totalitarianism. Hence, the development of postmodern relativism was sparked by the opposition to totalitarian regimes and general narratives lending the path to acknowledging the existence of multiple perspectives. Besides, postmodernist relativism is the rejection of "any constant, definite and universal belief and instead, consider knowledge to be relative, local and fully influenced by special cultures and values" (Forghani et. al, 2015), which is again a reiterative result of anti-essentialism. Put differently, postmodern relativism is the belief in relative truths and that they are based on personal experiences and cultures. Acknowledging the above definition, Potgieter (2015, p. 235) puts it, they are "social construction[s] by individuals, a particular group, community, or class of persons" which give weightage to the opinion that they carry. Because the postmodern relativist view asserts that each person has their own perception of the truth, this ideology provides no space for the creation of atrocious 'grand narratives' asserted by an ambitious few in the twentieth century. 'Grand narratives' that caused mass destruction and genocide.

Therefore, primary education in philosophical ideas such as postmodern relativism enables the elimination of such threats in the future provided its endorsement of elevating oppressed beliefs and perspectives. Primarily, students at younger ages learn to respect opinions and stay away from morally repulsive firm stances, as they understand that their opinions might not be congruent with that of others

and are able to comprehend the influences of culture and tradition upon their views. This has the potential to transform students' attitudes and decrease discriminatory behavior and consequently result in a more inclusive society.

Thirdly, the recognized postmodern idea of pluralism, acting as a synergistic fusion of anti-essentialism and relativism, may bolster the purpose of postmodernism's inclusion in education. Pluralism is an idea that supports the peaceful coexistence of a variety of cultures and traditions, giving rise to an accommodating mindset that acknowledges multiculturalism and perspectives; reflecting a belief that there exists no cohesive narrative but, instead, a plethora of diverse perspectives. The acceptance of multiple identities and interpretations diverges from the modernist idea of foundationalism in acquiring knowledge, further rooting toward an uncertainty of not only intellectual but scientific knowledge as well (Hennig, 2009). At first glance, this may seem pernicious given that scientific knowledge may be rendered irrelevant by students, however, the direct consequence is not abasing scientific knowledge but acting with prudence and verifying it instead. The overall attempt would aim to achieve a deeper understanding of social realities and improve student behavior via the provision of a varied conception of knowledge itself by establishing that "knowledge is not generated by a deeper understanding of an objective social reality… but is in fact a reflection of the histories, cultures, and narratives of distinct groups of peoples over time and space" (Wilkin, 1999, p.182). Further, this enhanced comprehension of pluralistic origins of knowledge prompts the discussion of lingual interpretations or postmodernist deconstruction itself. Deconstruction is a form of literary analysis that closely examines historical texts and literary works by challenging totality and traditionality – the involvement of "binary" or "hierarchical" terms – to relate the text and the opposition of the words on the basis of the text's "construction," rather than independent hierarchical structures (Long, 2024).

In students, this might incite intellectual effort and assist in approaching the meaning of a text through accurate interpretations without being subject to essential truths, and subsequently, verify a piece and deepen their understanding of the text. Students might deem established interpretations of oppositional words as irrelevant and accurately perceive the text within the context of itself given the "desire for unity and order compels the author and the reader to balance the equation that is the text's system," (Derrida, 1997, p.xlix). By ultimately portraying "totalization" as the "opprobrium" (Hassan, 1986), these postmodernist ideas prompt students to utilize fragmentation to analyze texts and invite intentions of intertextual analysis by interplaying the information and interpretations from multiple texts rather than relying solely on one. The inclusion of postmodern ideas such as pluralism and the complementary deconstruction and intertextual literary analysis, may support in ruling out the prospect of grand narratives, stereotypical/essentialist ideals against a race/gender, or biased

'objective realities' as their incorporation encourages the acceptance of perspectives generated by circumstantial identities and inspires the validation of teachings/facts provided to them.

7. Criticisms

Nevertheless, harsh criticism plagues postmodern relativism as some researchers believe that inclusion of this philosophy in education is not viable. Predominantly due to the concerns revolving around extreme cases. Smith (2007) justifies these concerns by providing the example of Deborah Lipstadt – an American diplomat and historian – who denies holocaust on the grounds of relative knowledge and postmodernism. Adding to this argument and agreeing with Smith's argument is the case provided by Noddings (2011) that even mathematical rules are not considered constant or universal which presents an obstacle to consistent educational viability. Apart from these concerns, this would enable students to develop and embrace their own unique sets of values, and strive to live according to those principles. These personal value systems shape their perspective and way of interpreting the world around them. This would pose a purported threat to education systems and further extend the divide between people and identities, however, the very fundamentals of relativism were based on acknowledging others' opinions. Smith (2007), however, reaffirms the viability of postmodern relativism and dismisses the above examples as incorrect or extreme interpretations of the view. Regardless of the opposing claims, postmodern relativism provides the most feasible frameworks for instilling doctrines that are respective of opinions within students. By being able to acknowledge and appreciate others' opinions instead of positioning their own as superior (claimed by above opposition), students will be able to facilitate an inclusive and democratic environment.

8. Conclusion

This hypothetical incorporation of postmodernist ideas into early educational institutions to ameliorate identity perception, showcases optimistic outcomes as the above discourse suggests so. Postmodernism's anti-essentialist quality helps in eliminating stereotypes as essentialist views enable individuals to assume certain traits to be intrinsic to a group of people, race, or gender. Furthermore, postmodern relativism gives credibility to individual opinions, and in the context of philosophical education, it may aid students in realizing each other's' opinion and comprehend the cultural or circumstantial differences. In addition, pluralistic views of the world may encourage deeper understanding of the acquisition of knowledge and its intrinsic subjectivity, while inspiring deconstruction and intertextual analysis to claim validations to their lessons in order to avoid misunderstandings or improper interpretations leading to identity repercussions. Racial and gender-based crimes root from opinions and stereotypes, therefore, eradicating these roots through postmodernist philosophical education can stem a more harmonious and inclusive society as education and educational institutions play a huge role in molding individuals and ultimately, the society.

Nonetheless, some researchers believe that "postmodernism cannot solve the moral vacuum; it only provides space for personal and group values to gain a foothold" (Potgieter, 2015, p.244). In other words, it would not provide a solution that would embolden harmonious values but would highlight the voices of the underrepresented alone. Well, that is the first step in avoiding discrimination based on identity and every action forward will lead to an overall

good as Aristotle (2016, p.1) stated.

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