The Global Philosophy System (GPS): Making a Case for Enabling Reflective Practice

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This paper will examine the problem of enhancing the reflective practice skills of preservice teachers and propose a system with which teacher educators may combat this issue. The Global Philosophy System (GPS) model features two axes, control and resource, that allow educators to chart a coherent position for their own values and compare them to those of others.

The Global Philosophy System (GPS): Making a Case for Enabling Reflective Practice

Helping preservice teachers become more reflective has been a major component of a model developed for promoting critical thinking about educational issues (Davis & Wise, 2008). In this article about GPS (Global Philosophy System), we present a problem we have encountered and addressed as teaching educators; enhancing the reflective practice skills of preservice teachers. As we provide an introduction to GPS, we also discuss the unique reasons why enhancing reflection is a challenge for teacher educators. We have developed a system for teacher educators to use as they provide preservice teachers with tools for linking education theories to professional practice.

More than two decades spent working directly with teacher candidates has taught us important lessons about what it takes to help expand their narrow definitions of good teaching. According to Bondy & Ross (2005), teacher preparation programming is often designed for and built around opportunities for personal growth that come from observing and analyzing real-life situations in field experience classrooms. We have encountered a persistent set of obstacles that make field experiences less productive and useful, both for
the students and for meeting our goals: (1) Students do not show up on the first days of our classes prepared to face the challenge of learning from field experiences. This means the experiential component of teacher education can be as much of an obstacle as opportunity unless the students have tools to help them make sense of those experiences; (2) Our students of teaching tend to oversimplify what they observe. They often define teaching dichotomously as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’; (3) Preservice teachers seem to have a tendency to succumb to their emotional reactions during observations. This is especially prevalent when teachers they observe in field experience behave differently than the students’ entering notions about what constituted ‘good teaching’. This type of thinking inhibits our students’ abilities to consider other perspectives and shuts down the possibility for developing skills for reflective practice.

Review of Literature

A typical solution to the three issues above is having analytic discussions with preservice teachers about actual field experiences or hypothetical teaching situations with the help of a professor. We know that course work and field experience that occurs early in teacher preparation programs can have a dramatic impact on how preservice teachers define ‘good teaching’ (Zeichner & Gore, 1990; Mahlios & Maxon, 1994; Ross & Bondy, 2005). Yet, in our experience, discussion of issues related to good teaching without a systematic approach seldom results in consensus, even among seasoned educators. For preservice teachers, this effort is made more difficult by their recent experience as students. What they claim to know about good teaching is often based on idealized recollections of teachers with whom they found success. Students are also subject to believing in images of teaching from the media and films depicting teachers in
stereotypical ways, and other informal and largely unreflective experience (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). For preservice teachers, the problem is not that they do not engage in debate on what is good teaching; rather, it is that they lack the tools to do so effectively.

Prior to our adoption of a system for training our students to analyze their beliefs, they struggled for a meaningful way to describe what they knew about effective teaching or what they observed in field experience classrooms. We agree with Fang (1996) that teacher educators have the responsibility to provide enlightening experiences on campus, either in advance or during early field experiences, and equip preservice teachers with the tools they need to maintain an open mind. Our students have admitted that their misconceptions might have remained hidden, had they been given no means to express beliefs in a non-threatening way. They are afraid they will sound biased or fear that what they say might be “wrong”. It is clear to us that the onus is on teacher educators to help preservice teachers overcome these hurdles. Our response was to create a system designed to connecting theory and practice; to give students a way to articulate themselves and recognize the preferences of others. Because the system is expressed in terms of ‘preferences’, students feel less self-conscious about discussing their beliefs and those of others.

Our system extends upon the work of Goodman (1988) who contends that for preservice teachers in early stages of their preparation, it is essential to provide easy-to-use philosophically-grounded tools for observing and analyzing teaching situations, whether in course work or that they observe in field experiences. We learned that by practicing using a systematic approach for reflection, our students have been more open to critical thinking and confident at reflection. The system serves as a tool for student
understanding of the broad range of educational goals and the teaching styles students can expect to read about in texts and articles, hear about from instructors, and witness in their field experiences.

*GPS* provides a common and accessible vocabulary, an essential component for professional activity. Well informed teacher educators know that the profession of education lacks a coherent and consistent professional vocabulary. Lortie’s (1975) pioneering study of the work of the teacher highlights the lack of common language for teachers and educators to use when talking and debating with each other. Metzger and Wu’s (2009) recent article illustrates that while efforts are continuing in teacher education toward building professionalism through common vocabulary, there is much left to be done. We see this as a highly significant problem for the field of education that has the effect of maintaining education as a pseudo-profession. We agree with the argument that in order to professionalize teaching, it is essential to devise means for promoting common language and vocabulary for discussing and debating educational issues. Further, we believe that teacher education must use such common language concurrently with increased efforts to promote critical thinking and reflection in teacher candidates.

Lortie’s (1975) study was the catalyst for subsequent efforts focusing on devising specific, professional language and conceptual frameworks for use by educators (Grossman & McDonald, 2009). An important step was devising of widely accepted models and frameworks to describe the work of teachers. Scholars have struggled to devise models for providing insights into the work of the teacher and all have contributed positively to the effort toward professionalizing teaching. With all the progress made, we
still lack a way to consistently and reliably establish a common language amongst educators for referring to basic and fundamental aspects of discussions about and reflections on educational issues.

A number of highly respected experts and researchers have constructed frameworks or systems of analysis that can work for properly and philosophically analyzing educational issues (Fang, 1996; Richardson, 1996). We appreciate and have benefitted from the contributions of the theoreticians and researchers who inform our work and give credit where it is due (Goodman, 1988; Shulman, 1986; Tom, 1984; Schon 1983; Dewey, 1916). The origin of this work is derived from Schon’s (1983) groundbreaking study of reflective practitioners. One of Schon’s premises is that well-examined beliefs and assumptions yield positive results. Either tacit or unfavorable beliefs can be challenged and changed, or favorable beliefs are reinforced and strengthened.

All educational ideas may be seen as expressions of a set of beliefs and definitions which comprise an individual’s philosophy of education (Goodman, 1988). Teacher education research has produced a wealth of literature on the significance and impact of teacher beliefs on their practices (Shulman, 1986; Pajares, 1992; Fang, 1996; Richardson, 1996; Metzger & Wu, 2008). Preservice and in-service teacher educators have made reflection on and documentation of beliefs and dispositions fundamental components of teacher training programs, which tend to rely heavily on field experience as a means of exposing prospective teachers to the realities of their chosen profession.

Current trends in American education include prescriptive curricula and teaching methods, high-stakes testing, and standards-driven accountability, all of which have side
effect of teachers losing their autonomy and confusing their senses of purpose. In our view, current trends in our educational system tend to undermine professionalism by removing teachers voices from discussions about what must be done in order to improve education. In other words, it is becoming more common for teachers to derive their senses of purpose from others when all the powers around them seem to be doing is issuing mandates and threats (Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

When preservice teachers are sent into the field to observe teachers who are operating under such mandates and threats, there is significant risk that they will not engage in reflection that is, first of all, fair to the teachers they observe. It is also likely that, too often, the preservice teachers may simply accept the status quo and resolve to shape themselves in the images of their Cooperating Teachers (Richardson, 1996). In response, we constructed GPS with the intent of preventing the wholesale condemnation or buy-in that is possible as preservice teachers spend time in field experience classrooms.

Sending preservice teachers into the field without proper tools for observation is, at best, ill-advised and puts preservice teachers at risk of choosing to mimic what they see other teachers doing (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). At worst, it leaves them aimless as they observe and at risk for reinforcement for teaching behaviors that are merely accepted at face value. Students using GPS claim that they can more clearly understand the preferences of others, but especially gain facility at stating, explaining, and defending their own principles. Such understanding is essential for preservice teachers to regain their senses of purpose and autonomy, but especially for engaging in reflection about their profession.
Proposal

The reasons for this article and guiding questions that drives our work are:

(1) What are the common and fundamental elements that lay beneath most, if not all discussions and debates of educational issues? (2) Are teachers and teacher candidates prepared to do the philosophical analysis required to inform themselves as professionals in the field of education? Whether they are or not is at best, uncertain, and at worst, the 800 pound gorilla sitting in the corner. Based on our direct observation for a combined fifty years of direct experience in education and on the research and discourse in teacher education literature, we propose that:

- There exists no consistently accessible and reliable framework, complete with clear, understandable language for helping educators do careful, professional analysis of their own or the work of their colleagues, mentors and supervisors.
- A framework is needed that provides accessible, useful language based on common terminology to help educators engage in and retain their understandings of inherently philosophical, educational discussions. Education philosophers have the terminology that fits with what is going on in education, while pedagogues have the concepts and contexts that inform their part of the dialogue; however, the two sides tend not to come together (Bredo 2002). We propose to provide a way for educators to draw from the best of both without the burdens of highly specialized language, which often does more to muddy the water than provide a clear view of what lies beneath.
• Teachers and teacher candidates can become well-versed in doing reflection (Lerch et al. 2006), when they are taught how to do thoughtful and consistent analysis of inherently philosophic issues.

• Common language of reflection and analysis can be taught in ways that promote active, engaged, critical thinking. Too often, teacher educators who teach social foundations course work to preservice teachers choose simply to transmit information rather than engage teacher candidates in active reflection and analysis of educational issues (Murrow 2008). This promotes passivity and results in low retention of both concepts and terminology. By using accessibly vocabulary and active analysis activities, educators can demonstrate remarkable insight and provide cogent, consistent, and defensible arguments in defense of their positions and choices as professional educators.

We are accepting the challenge posed by Bredo (2002) and others to restore the relationship between philosophy and education, which tend to remain at arms distance in both academe and for practitioners. Dewey (1916) sought to build and maintain a symbiosis between philosophy and education; however, the trend has been to separate the two disciplines and especially, to omit philosophic work from teacher education (Bredo 2002).

The foundation of GPS is built upon the premise that powerful forces underpin the preferences people display through their actions. We refer to the basic building blocks of GPS as forces in order to help our students make connections to familiar concepts, such as basic physics. The fundamental ideas about which the model is formed are best understood as being comparable to the physical forces that exert effects on solid
objects. In the GPS model, the forces are abstract 'pushes' or 'pulls' on our values systems of beliefs. Relative strength of the value or belief (force) is represented by the position on a continuum with ideals (extremes) at each end; the more powerful the belief and commitment to a particular value, the closer to the (theoretical) end of a continuum that matches the beliefs.

Resource Axis

The horizontal continuum of force represents the distribution of resources; namely, the range of possibilities regarding how commodities ought to be divided amongst the population in a given context.

In order for any system of beliefs to function, there must be one or many objects of the process of valuation. In other words, there must be literally something(s) to value, in order for the values to have utility. How those commodities are to be sorted amongst stakeholders is a contentious issue in life, as well as in the educational arena. The current economic crisis and resulting political punditry in the media comes up often in discussions with our students and this tends to provide productive teachable moments for linking our students’ analyses of current events to GPS and education.

The GPS model expresses the tension between competing positions on distribution of resources as a continuum of possibilities from ‘Equity’ to ‘Excellence’. Frequently, we have to talk about the concept of a continuum at about this point and clarify that it represents a set of ideals, especially at the ends, and is most definitely not a
dichotomy. Too often, our students think about participants in debates or controversies as having fixed, immovable positions on issues. We prefer to show our students that such a perspective overstates what really occurs amongst groups of diverse people and actually works in contrary to what people truly believe.

The two poles at the ends of the horizontal axis of the GPS model depict the degrees of comparison and difference related to the value and distribution of resources or commodities. **Equity** is represented on the left of the model on purpose; it is helpful, in our view, to have students equate the left side of the GPS model with the more progressive, non-traditional, social justice tradition in education. Conversely, Excellence is represented on the right because we want to access the audience’s familiarity with the more traditional, conservative viewpoint.

**EQUITY**  
*Fairness is unequally sharing the resources available for schooling; according to need.*

The left side of the GPS model represents the view that a necessarily unequal distribution of resources is desirable and the way to create a fair and even playing field for disadvantaged populations. Equitable distribution is based on the idea that fairness
means those who receive valuable commodities have needs that are both unique and different from the needs of others, and some need access to more of the commodities than others in order to make things fair. The ideal to be strived for, in this perspective is a responsive, pragmatic distribution of commodities when and if recipients, both potential and actual, demonstrate need. Equity demands an unequal distribution of commodities by design and on purpose because our society is, in this view, inherently unfair and consequently is unjust.

Typically, the converse of equity is equality, but because this is a model meant for use in discussions and debates on (especially current) educational issues, we have equated the term ‘Excellence’ with equality because of the position held by traditionalists and conservatives whose views are most accurately described as the effort to improve society by providing everyone with exactly the same access to and opportunities for commodities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXCELLENCE</th>
<th>Fairness is equally sharing the resources available for schooling; despite circumstances.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>EXCELLENCE</td>
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<td>High Academic Standards</td>
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Those with a preference for the set of principles labeled EXCELLENCE view fair play as a more equal distribution of resources. Mostly sameness is considered fair. Teachers are encouraged to spend a mostly equal amount of effort to reach every student. Traditional solutions are the first consideration to solving school and societal problems. Upholding the same high standards also helps identify and nurture the “best and brightest” students. When given an equal chance, students who meet the challenge of high academic standards will emerge as leaders who will preserve the traditional values of our society.

When this is done properly, according to the traditionalist perspective, excellence
becomes a possibility for those who rise to the occasion. The ideal, or endpoint on the right side of the continuum would be a perennial tradition of application of a standard of equal access with no deviation whatsoever. It is up to the highest achievers to rise to prominence, often referred to as a Darwinian notion, namely survival of the fittest. Key to this range of perspectives is that when commodities are available, they are divided into equal shares, no matter the recipients’ levels of need, advantage, or disadvantage.

Especially for teachers and teacher candidates, we consider this of tremendous importance since finding common ground, even in a controversy, is much more productive than drawing battle lines and setting up an impasse. GPS reinforces the idea that despite differing perspectives, for example, on how to best use resources like funding in education, there is still common ground in that both ends of the continuum acknowledge that a good education is highly dependent upon having appropriate funding. Having the left and right sides of the continuum recognize common aims would, in our view, be a tremendously important step in the right direction toward having all educators working together toward improvement in things like funding. The ends of the continuum may never completely come together, but at least they can acknowledge that they both have common needs and equally legitimate reasons for their positions on the subject.

Control Axis

The vertical continuum of force in the GPS model represents the exercising of control with emphasis on the organization of decision making power. This continuum may also be understood as a way to express a range of options as to who ought to have the power to make the decisions about commodities.
This is a significant point of transfer since it builds upon the object of the first axis presented in the introduction to the GPS model. The compliment of how commodities are to be valued is establishing who receives the benefits of the commodities being valued; both are necessary for a complete and accurate analysis of educational issues.

The GPS model depicts two poles at the ends of a vertical axis, representing a continuum of possibilities regarding preferences for the organization of decision-making power. In the GPS Model, the position at the top is termed Public while the bottom endpoint of this axis is described as the Personal position.

Those who have a preference for the set of principles described as PUBLIC want more accountability and call on leaders to adopt business models to schools. Systems-analysis designs that emphasize efficiency in operations might increase accountability, which is described both as PROCESS (teaching) and PRODUCT (learning). And, since teacher salaries are the greatest cost (usually about 85%) of any school budget, questions are raised, rightly or not, when teacher salaries increase without measurable increases in productivity, which is generally measured by standardized test score results.

The assignment of the positions on the top or bottom of the vertical axis was due to our belief that it makes the graphic model for GPS more self-explanatory in terms of the axes
and quadrants, especially once they are fully labeled. It was not an arbitrary choice that we have depicted this continuum as a top-down arrangement; rather, we see this axis as having more explanatory power arranged this way because it is in keeping with the history and current orientation to public education in the U.S.

In other words, bureaucracy and the public interest were established early in the history of public schooling in our country and continues to grow and expand in both power and magnitude. It is common for teachers and teacher candidates to see themselves as the street-level participants in our current educational system. That is not to say either we or our students are assigning lowly status to teachers; rather, that there is a very large system in place and teachers work at the surface level, whereas administrators operate figuratively or literally at a distance. Because teachers and teacher candidates to see themselves as ‘being in the trenches’, we use that familiar notion in construction of the *GPS Model*.

For this continuum, Public also refers to delegating decision-making power to those among us who are the experts and deferring this responsibility to those experts--those who have been assigned the necessary, privileged status wherein they are qualified and capable of creating essential goals and objectives that can be measured and therefore can be obtained in an efficient manner. This is significant because the decisions and choices made by these experts affect everyone in the given population, especially those below them in the hierarchy.

Personal is the term used in the *GPS model* as the converse position from Public on the vertical axis for the *GPS model*. It is described as the position wherein decision-making power resides with each individual within the given population.
PERSONAL  Concern for choice: local control of schools and individual in the individual.

Public

Equity  Excellence

School-Based Management  Vouchers, Charter, Private, Home Schools

PERSONAL

Local Control

Those who have a preference for the PERSONAL set of principles are on watch for the slipping away of local control, or centralization toward a common or PUBLIC goal. They perceive that decisions about teaching are too often made at higher and more remote levels, farther away from the school, the classroom or the individual student. Schools can be significant in maintaining this set of principles since they represent the last trace of local government control in the tradition of the town meeting and the local tax referendum.

At its endpoint, the individual reigns supreme and is not part of a hierarchy or subservient to anyone. Said simply, each individual knows and is in the best position to understand her or his own needs, and therefore must take responsibility for making choices and also for the resulting actions and consequences. For the Personal orientation, everything derives from the individual and is not subject to a hierarchy or bureaucracy of any sort.

The GPS Map

A goal of the GPS Model is to provide a means for clarify ones’ position related to both axes and then compare that position with colleagues, instructors and teachers. To determine one’s position on the GPS Map, a score is generated by the GPS Survey. The results of the survey consist of a notation of relative position on a particular quadrant (or directly on a continuum line). This position signifies the degree to which the user agrees with the principles describe by the end point of each continuum, or in GPS
terminology, a ‘pole’. As philosophic commitments increase related to values aligned with the poles, the closer their position moves in the direction of the end of the continuum. Conversely, increasingly higher levels of disagreement move the position relative to the end of the continuum or pole in an opposite direction.

The overall score on the GPS Survey is based on weighted responses. Compiling the overall score places or ‘lands’ the user in one of the four quadrants or ‘regions’. The score on the survey and corresponding position on the GPS regions designates or represents an overall preference for certain principles. We use the term preference deliberately and consistently with the notion of opinions and preferences occurring on continuum instead of dichotomies. Perspective is gained through attempts at understanding one’s own position and understanding the rest of the model leads to better appreciation for the positions of others’ positions and preferences.

Conclusion

Our mission has been to promote intelligent, critical, and consistent abilities for philosophical analysis of educational issues. To that end, we have developed a system of inquiry that includes a heuristic model, which introduces to preservice teachers a common vocabulary. Exercises are designed to promote critical introspective thinking about the preference students have about teaching, learning and leadership. GPS provides a unique framework for identifying and comparing the “isms”, those traditional terms from educational philosophy that are introduced in teacher education programs as a
part of social foundations courses, but seldom find their way into the daily work and especially, the reflective activities of preservice teachers.
References


Author Note

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