

What is a Foundations of Education Perspective?

Many students do not understand why they should study foundations, especially since it does not have discrete answers and issues are continuously debated. Without understanding foundations, it is impossible to truly appreciate and understand your other course work. For example, why are education institutions funded the way they are? That question is not just an economic or political decision, certain philosophies and histories drove the decision to fund education as it is funding in a country. Being aware of the history and philosophy that undergird these decisions makes an individual able to critique, analyze and understand these decisions. Developing vision, recreating new future, challenging existing, systems all require historical and philosophical thought. This type of thinking is necessary for you to address the critical challenges that face education, developing today's answers for complex questions such as: Who should attend college? Should we offer remediation in college? How can higher education promote democracy? How embedded in capitalism should our educational institutions become? Is marketization a good trend within education? Should education promote diversity and how, e.g., affirmative action? Should public institutions promote moral responsibility and character? The enterprise of higher education needs your answers to these and other questions.

The metaphor of examining a house, perhaps for purchase, will help to explain this distinction. Imagine that you are considering a house purchase. The realtor's goal is to introduce you to this house. You will drive up to the front of the property noting a few special characteristics of the house. You would enter the front door, and make your way slowly (but somewhat superficially) through the various rooms, noting wall surface, lighting and plumbing fixtures, furnishings and/or decorations, the attic, and the basement. You might take a casual stroll around the front and back yard. The entire visit might take no more than an hour, at best. If you are interested, you may return again to look more closely at particular aspects of the house. This approach to understanding is very much like an introduction to education approach: a somewhat superficial overview of the field of education, or a particular aspect of education like early childhood education, literacy education, science education, special education, and so on.

A foundations approach to house hunting would be very different. Using a foundations approach, you would be very likely to strip away some sheetrock and pull up floorboards to examine the structural make-up (and integrity) of the house. You would look beneath the surface of all parts of the house to determine how electricity and water (power) flow through the house. You would take a close look at the foundation and attic to determine the basic plans when the house was originally built. You would take notice of additions to this original structure. Throughout this examination you would be trying to understand the purposes of this house and its parts. You would consider the goals and values of the original (and subsequent) builders: what was their intended use of this structure? You might delve into the history of the development of the community in which the house is located. And you would examine the impact of current neighbors, traffic flow, community resources, and access to other parts of the community from this location. This is a foundations approach: interpretive (to understand this house within its context); normative (to understand the value orientations of the house dwellers); and critical (to understand the assumptions beneath the surface, and to identify contradictions and inconsistencies between the values and the structure of the house).