

Synthesis of Essentialism and Reconstructionism: Philosophical Relevance in the Transformation of General Education and Christian Religious Education

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Abstract

This research aims to formulate a philosophical synthesis between Essentialism and Reconstructionism and its relevance to the transformation of General Education and Christian Religious Education (CRE). On one hand, Essentialism emphasizes the preservation of core values and established cultural heritage. On the other hand, Reconstructionism encourages education as an instrument of social change towards a more just world order. Using a qualitative research method with a literature study approach, the results indicate that the synthesis of these two schools of thought creates an educational model that is "rooted yet impactful." In the context of CRE, this synthesis allows churches and Christian schools to remain steadfast in Biblical authority (essential aspect) while actively engaging in social-societal transformation (reconstruction aspect). This integration serves as a solution to the dichotomy between dogmatic teaching and the demand for social relevance in the contemporary era.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is essentially a conscious effort that is never separated from the philosophical foundation as its driving compass. Education is a conscious and planned effort to create a learning atmosphere and learning process so that students actively develop their potential to have spiritual, religious strength, self-control, personality, intelligence, noble morals, and skills needed by themselves and society (Education & Makassar, 2022). Amidst the increasingly massive current of globalization and technological disruption, the world of contemporary education is faced with tension between maintaining the identity of past values and responding to the demands of future change. This tension is often polarized in two major currents of educational philosophy, namely Essentialism, which is conservative-preserved, and Reconstructionism, which is progressive-transformative. In the Indonesian context, this debate is not only relevant to general education but also becomes a crucial discourse in Christian Religious Education (PAK), which has a dual responsibility: maintaining the purity of the teachings of faith while being salt and light amidst social problems.

Essentialism views education as an instrument for transmitting cultural heritage and time-tested moral values. Essentialism believes that education should be based on cultural values that have existed since the beginning of human civilization (Solihah et al., 2024). Essentialism views that education must be based on values that are clear and durable, which provide stability and values.

selected with a clear system. In other words, essentialism wants to return to a time when cultural values were still preserved, those values embodied in the teachings of philosophers and great scholars, whose teachings and values are eternal. Its main focus is character building through

mastery of fundamental core material. However, criticism is often directed at this school because of its static tendencies and lack of responsiveness to the dynamics of developing social injustice. On the contrary,

Reconstructionism presents a more radical vision, viewing schools as the primary agents for reconstructing a more just and democratic society. For reconstructionist, education is not merely a reflection of society, but rather an engine of change that must boldly dismantle the status quo (Halim et al., 2025).

In the discourse of Christian Religious Education, this dichotomy is evident. Religious Education is often trapped in an extreme essentialist approach, where teaching focuses solely on rote dogmatic catechesis and is isolated from the social reality of the community (ivory tower spirituality) (Kia et al., 2025). On the other hand, the drive to be relevant sometimes leads Religious Education down the path of pure reconstructionism, which tends to reduce biblical values to mere social activism without strong theological roots. This condition demands a philosophical synthesis capable of integrating the steadfastness of essential values with the courage of reconstructive transformation.

Educational transformation, both in the general domain and in the Religious Education (PAK), cannot be achieved by exclusively choosing one pole (Franklin & Bilo, 2024). Education that relies solely on essentialism will produce a generation that is cognitively intelligent but blind to the humanitarian crisis. Conversely, education that focuses solely on reconstructionism risks losing its moral compass and fundamental identity. Therefore, this research is expected to yield a model of education that is "rooted" in tradition and eternal truth, but "fruitful" in concrete actions of social change.

The importance of this study lies in the urgent need for a solid philosophical foundation for the Indonesian education curriculum, particularly in aligning the vision of the Independent Curriculum that emphasizes 21st-century character and competencies (Fitrah et al., 2024). By dissecting the philosophical relevance of essentialism and reconstructionism, this article will offer a new perspective on how educational transformation can be carried out without sacrificing moral and spiritual essence, especially in strengthening the role of Christian Religious Education as a transformative force in the public sphere.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a library research type. The method used is library research, collecting data by searching for sources and constructing them from various sources such as books, journals, and existing research sets.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Essentialism: Preservation of Values and Stability of Education

Essentialism is an educational philosophy that emphasizes the importance of preserving the stability of values and education (Ma'arif et al., 2024). Essentialism believes that there are eternal and universal values and knowledge that must be maintained and transmitted to the younger generation. Essentialism is an educational philosophy that can be used as an epistemological foundation in formulating character education in Indonesia. The essentialist educational philosophy emphasizes the absence of rigid learning interactions, but rather emphasizes the meaning of scientific and cultural progress, as well as the values that are firmly held in life (*Visionary Journal (VIS) of AP UNDIKMA Study Program 2020*, 2020). Essentialism is an educational philosophy originating in the United States and emphasizing a return to historical heritage known for its proven benefits to human life. This philosophy is rooted in Humanism, a perspective that encompasses the worldly, scientific, and materialistic aspects of life. Essentialism is also shaped by the influence of idealism and realism, as advocated by famous figures such as Plato and Aristotle (Pratama & Nursikin, 2024).

The basic principles of essentialism are: 1) the first task of schools is to teach basic knowledge; 2) learning is hard work and requires discipline; 3) Educators are a vessel or place

of class authority. Therefore, the contribution of essentialist philosophy to PAK can be seen through: 1) Curriculum; 2) Class management; 3) Methods; 4) Educators; 5) Assessment (Kristen et al., n.d.). Another advantage of essentialism is that it can help stabilize society by emphasizing the importance of eternal values and universal knowledge. Essentialism can also help improve the quality of education by emphasizing the importance of eternal and universal knowledge. In addition, essentialism can also help increase students' moral and spiritual awareness and help them become good and responsible citizens. However, essentialism also has disadvantages, such as being inflexible and unable to adapt to changing times. Essentialism can be too traditional and unable to accept change and innovation, so it can hinder development and progress. In addition, essentialism can also ignore individuality and individual needs, so it can lead to a lack of creativity and innovation. Essentialism can also become too focused on eternal and universal knowledge, so that it can neglect more practical and applicable knowledge.

Therefore, essentialism needs to be implemented wisely and flexibly to achieve optimal educational goals. Essentialism can be the foundation for a good education, but it needs to be balanced with flexibility and the ability to adapt to changing times. Thus, essentialism can help improve the quality of education and preserve enduring values essential to human life.

Reconstructionism

The Reconstructionist school believes that the task of saving the world is the duty of all humans. Therefore, the re-cultivation of healthy intellectual and spiritual powers through appropriate education will re-cultivate humans with the right values and norms for the present and future generations, thus forming a new world under the supervision of humanity (Indonesia, 2015). Social Reconstructionism, exemplified by individuals such as Harold Rugg, George Counts, and Theodore Brameld, shows a significant focus on the correlation between educational curriculum and the political, social, and economic development of a community. The Reconstructionist perspective is affiliated with forward-thinking groups that aim for broad goals. Next are the basic principles of Reconstructionist ideology regarding the world, society, and the education system (Pratama & Nursikin, 2024). Reconstructionism is an educational philosophy that emphasizes the importance of change and reconstruction of society. Here is an explanation of the 3 points you mentioned:

1. Emphasizing the importance of change and reconstruction of society

Reconstructionism believes that society must continually change and develop for the better (UNDARI, 2022). This philosophy emphasizes that change is a natural process and should be welcomed, not rejected. Reconstructionism also believes that education should play a role in creating change and reconstructing society, not simply maintaining the status quo.

2. Focus on creating change and innovation in Society

Reconstructionism focuses on creating change and innovation in society, rather than simply maintaining existing traditions and values (Sadani et al., 2024). This philosophy emphasizes that education should help students become agents of change and innovation, rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Reconstructionism also believes that education should help students develop critical and creative thinking skills, as well as problem-solving and decision-making abilities.

3. Assuming that knowledge and values must be adapted to the needs and changes of the times

Reconstructionism argues that knowledge and values must be adapted to the needs and changes of the times, not simply maintained as something eternal and unchanging (Nawawi et al., 2024). This philosophy emphasizes that education should help students understand and adapt to changing times, as well as develop the ability to think critically and creatively in facing new challenges. Reconstructionism also argues that education should help students become active and responsible citizens and help them develop the ability to cooperate and collaborate with others.

Synthesis between Essentialism and Reconstructionism

Synthesis between Essentialism and Reconstructionism in Education

The synthesis of essentialism and reconstructionism is an educational approach that seeks to integrate essential core values with the need for social change and renewal. Essentialism views education as a means of transmitting core knowledge, basic skills, and time-tested moral and cultural values (Farih & A'yun, 2024). In this view, schools function to maintain societal stability by instilling intellectual discipline, responsibility, and strong character in students. Knowledge such as reading, writing, arithmetic, science, and ethical values are considered the main foundation that every student must master.

On the other hand, reconstructionism positions education as a strategic tool for reconstructing and transforming society. This school emphasizes that the world is constantly undergoing social, economic, political, and technological change, so education should not be solely oriented towards preserving the past. Students are encouraged to be sensitive to social issues, such as injustice, poverty, conflict, and moral degradation, and are equipped with critical, creative, and reflective thinking skills to enable them to actively participate in creating positive social change (Widiantie, 2025).

The synthesis of these two schools of thought presents the view that education must simultaneously serve two primary functions: maintaining the continuity of essential values and being a driving force for social change. The curriculum in this synthesis is structured around core knowledge and solid moral values, yet presented contextually and relevant to the realities of students' lives. Learning materials are not merely theoretical but also linked to real-life issues in society, enabling students to understand the relationship between knowledge, values, and social practices.

In learning practice, the teacher's role is not only as a transmitter of basic material, but also as a facilitator, guide, and role model (Aini & Ramadhan, 2024). Teachers help students master basic knowledge systematically while guiding them to discuss, analyze, and find solutions to various social problems. The learning methods used can combine traditional approaches, such as lectures and structured exercises, with progressive methods, such as group discussions, case studies, social projects, and problem-based learning.

Thus, the synthesis of essentialism and reconstructionism produces an educational model that balances stability and change. Students become not only knowledgeable, character-driven, and disciplined individuals, but also critical, caring, and responsible citizens (Indriani & Suryani, 2023). Education within this synthesis framework is expected to produce a generation that remains rooted in fundamental values, yet is also ready to face challenges and actively contribute to building and reconstructing society in accordance with the demands of the times.

Philosophical Relevance in Educational Transformation

Education has long been considered the most important means of developing and To shape and rebuild society. In philosophical thought, Education has a meaning that goes beyond its purely instrumental function. It is seen as an agent changes that can bring about social, cultural, and political change. (Pratama & Nursikin, 2024). Philosophical relevance in educational transformation is very important because educational philosophy can influence the direction and goals of education. In the context of educational transformation, philosophical relevance can help answer fundamental questions about what to teach, how to teach it, and what educational goals to achieve. Christian education, which has always been rooted in tradition and spiritual values, is now faced with new challenges and opportunities to adapt to these changes. However, the integration of technology in Christian education is not without obstacles. One of the main problems is how to maintain Christian philosophical and ethical values in the context of digital learning. In principle, Christian education is important to balance the use of technology with the preservation of the moral and spiritual principles that are its main foundation. (Gulo & Zai, 2025)

By understanding the educational philosophy underlying educational transformation, we can better understand how education can help create a better society. For example, if we adopt the

philosophy of Essentialism, we will emphasize the importance of maintaining eternal values and universal knowledge. If we adopt the philosophy of Reconstructionism, we will emphasize the importance of societal change and reconstruction. By understanding philosophical relevance, we can create a more holistic, relevant, and effective education in creating a better society (Kurniawan et al., 2025). Therefore, philosophical relevance is crucial in educational transformation to create better education and a more advanced society.

4. CONCLUSION

The synthesis of Essentialism and Reconstructionism can form the foundation for a more holistic educational transformation that is relevant to the needs of society. Essentialism emphasizes the importance of preserving eternal values and universal knowledge, while Reconstructionism emphasizes the importance of societal change and reconstruction. By combining these two philosophies, education can help create a better, more stable, and more advanced society.

The philosophical relevance of educational transformation is crucial because it can help answer fundamental questions about what to teach, how to teach it, and what educational goals to achieve. Therefore, a synthesis of Essentialism and Reconstructionism can provide the foundation for better education and a more advanced society.

In the context of Christian Religious Education, a synthesis of Essentialism and Reconstructionism can help improve the quality of education and promote Christian values relevant to the needs of society. Christian Religious Education can utilize this synthesis to enhance students' moral and spiritual awareness and help them become good and responsible citizens.

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