

CHAPTER I: AN INTRODUCTION TO EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

1. EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY DEFINITION

As a discipline, educational psychology has been around for more than a century, as early as the 1880s. It includes two disciplines: education and psychology. Clifford (1984) argues that combining education and psychology is appropriate. He defines educational psychology as applying the methods of psychology to studying the process of education. Others define educational psychology as knowledge gained from psychology and applied to the classroom (Grinder, 1981). Therefore, educational psychologists are often defined as those who apply the principles of psychology to education and who devote their professional lives to understanding learners, the learning process, and the instructional strategies that enhance learning.

Educational psychologists perform many different roles. Some design curriculum content and evaluate the impact of curriculum changes on student behavior and academic achievement; others are involved with computer-managed and computer-assisted instruction in the classroom. Many educational psychologists teach in university and college teacher-preparation programs.

Their responsibilities are typically divided among teaching and researching the variables determining:

- the effectiveness of teaching methodologies
- how students learn
- how teachers can effectively interact and communicate with students, families, and other teachers
- how best to teach others.

The “scientific methodologies” that educational psychologists have used to answer these complex questions have been fruitful and, on many issues, answers are still being pursued.

Research in educational psychology has been ongoing for generations and, as a result, an accumulated knowledge base (or body of knowledge concerning the ‘science’ of teaching and

learning) has been established (Biddle, Good, & Goodson, 1996; Christensen, 1996). This knowledge base includes such factors as:

- the environmental and cultural influences on the learner
- the cognitive functioning of students
- managing the classroom
- how students learn, and how all of these variables relate to teachers and teaching.

There is spirited debate about how much teaching can be based on *science* versus how much of it is *art*. As a science, educational psychology's aim is to provide you with research knowledge that you can effectively apply to teaching situations. But scientific knowledge alone cannot inform you about all of the teaching situations that you will encounter, and this is where educational psychology is an art. You will need to make some important judgments in the classroom based on your personal skills and experiences as well as the accumulated wisdom of other teachers.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The field of educational psychology was founded by several pioneers in psychology just before the start of the twentieth century.

2.1 William James (1842–1910)

One of those pioneers was William James (1842–1910). Soon after launching the first psychology textbook, *Principles of Psychology* (1890), he gave a series of lectures called *Talks to Teachers* in which he discussed the applications of psychology to educating children. James argued that laboratory psychology experiments often can't tell us how to effectively teach children. He argued for the importance of observing teaching and learning in classrooms for improving education. One of his recommendations was to start lessons at a point just beyond the child's level of knowledge and understanding, in order to stretch the child's mind.

2.2 John Dewey (1859–1952)

A second major figure in shaping the field of educational psychology was John Dewey (1859–1952), who became a driving force in the practical application of psychology. Dewey established the first major educational psychology laboratory in the United States, at the University of Chicago in 1894.

We owe many important ideas to John Dewey.

- First, we owe to him the view of the child as an active learner. Before Dewey it was believed that children should sit quietly in their seats and passively learn in a rote manner. In contrast, Dewey believed that children learn best by doing.
- Second, we owe to Dewey the idea that education should focus on the whole child and emphasize the child's adaptation to the environment. Dewey believed that children should not be narrowly educated in academic topics but should learn how to think and adapt to a world outside school. He especially thought that children should learn how to be **reflective problem solvers**.
- Third, we owe to Dewey the belief that all children deserve to have a competent education. This democratic ideal was not in place at the beginning of Dewey's career in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when education was reserved for a small portion of children, many of whom were boys from wealthy families. Dewey was one of the influential psychologist–educators who pushed for a competent education for all children—girls and boys, as well as children from different socioeconomic and ethnic groups.

3. What is the nature of teaching?

Teaching is multidimensional. It involves many different domains including cognitive/academic, social, affective, moral, and health.

- Teaching involves uncertainty. It is difficult to predict what effect a given action will have on a student. Teachers, therefore, need a tolerance for uncertainty and unpredictability.
- Teaching involves social and ethical matters.
- Teaching involves acknowledging students' diverse abilities and backgrounds.

4. What is effective teaching?

- Some of the key characteristics of effective teachers include a sense of humour, making classes interesting, subject-matter knowledge, fairness, respect, consideration of and equal treatment for all students, and the ability to explain things clearly. Ineffective teachers tend to have boring classes, don't explain things clearly, and show favoritism toward some students.

- Subject-matter competence, the use of effective instructional strategies, goal setting, planning, classroom management, motivation, and cultural sensitivity are some of the knowledge and skills required by members of the teaching profession.
- Caring about students as individuals and learners, having a positive attitude about teaching, and self-motivation are key elements for teaching.
- Effective teaching involves life-long learning and continuous professional growth. Developing a positive self-identity, seeking advice from competent and experienced teachers, and developing and maintaining a database of resources and supports are all part of professional growth in teaching.