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Reconceptualizing Education in Light of Davidson's Relational Concept of the "Self"

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Abstract

Drawing on Donald Davidson's philosophy, this study examines the concept of the 'relational self' and its implications for educational thought. Using a philosophical-analytical method, it reconstructs Davidson's account of the 'self' through his doctrines of triangulation and the principle of charity; proceeding through three stages: clarifying the conception of 'relational self,' formulating a relational educational framework, and examining its implications. The analysis shows that for Davidson, the 'self' is constituted through reciprocal relations with other persons and the shared world—corresponding respectively to the rationality-based and truth-based dimensions of the principle of charity. Communication and mutual interpretation are thus indispensable for the constitution of the 'self'. Education is therefore reconceived not as transmitting fixed knowledge or reproducing social conformity, but as a dialogical process through which individuals achieve rational understanding, shared meaning, and self-realization. Educational institutions should likewise be seen as relational spaces where truth, rationality, and identity emerge through ongoing interaction among learners, teachers, and communities. Davidson's philosophy thus offers a non-relativistic foundation for a relational approach to education, integrating individuality, culture, dialogue, and rationality.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The concept of the self occupies a central position in philosophy of education because every educational theory implicitly presupposes a particular understanding of what a human being is and how persons develop through learning. Many dominant educational approaches continue to portray the learner as an autonomous individual whose identity precedes social interaction. Such perspectives frequently underestimate the constitutive role of language, communication, and shared understanding in the formation of selfhood. Donald Davidson offers a distinctive alternative through his philosophy of interpretation, triangulation, and the principle of charity. Rather than viewing the self as an isolated consciousness, Davidson argues that personhood emerges only through the simultaneous relationship between individuals, other persons, and the shared world. This relational conception has profound implications for educational theory because it challenges transmissive models of education and provides a richer account of learning, dialogue, and human development. Despite the philosophical significance of Davidson's work, its educational implications have received relatively limited attention. Accordingly, the present study seeks to articulate Davidson's conception of the relational self and examine how it can serve as a conceptual foundation for rethinking educational theory.

Method

This study employs a philosophical–analytical method grounded in deductive conceptual analysis. Rather than generating empirical evidence, the study aims to clarify philosophical concepts, reconstruct theoretical arguments, and derive educational implications from Davidson's philosophy. The analytical process consisted of three interconnected stages. First, Davidson's conception of the relational self was reconstructed through close conceptual analysis of his writings on triangulation, interpretation, and the principle of charity. Second, these concepts were synthesized into a coherent conceptual framework capable of explaining education from a relational perspective. Third, the philosophical implications of this framework were examined with respect to major educational concepts, including learning, teaching, educational relationships, institutional identity, rationality, truth, and cultural development. Throughout the analysis, emphasis was placed on maintaining conceptual coherence between Davidson's epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind while extending these ideas into the field of philosophy of education.

Results

The philosophical analysis indicates that Davidson's conception of the self is fundamentally relational rather than individualistic. Selfhood cannot be understood independently of communication, interpretation, and participation in a shared world. According to Davidson's doctrine of triangulation, knowledge, language, and personal identity emerge only through the dynamic interaction among self, other persons, and objective reality. The principle of charity further reveals two complementary dimensions of the relational self. The first is the rationality-presupposing dimension, through which individuals interpret others as fundamentally rational agents capable of meaningful communication. The second is the truth-presupposing dimension, whereby communication is anchored in a shared external world that provides objective reference and prevents interpretive relativism. From this perspective, education becomes a relational practice that enables individuals to participate in shared processes of interpretation, dialogue, and rational inquiry. Rather than transmitting fixed bodies of knowledge, educational activity

supports the continuous formation of personal identity through interaction with teachers, peers, cultural traditions, and social institutions.

Discussion and Conclusion

Davidson's relational conception of the self offers an important philosophical alternative to both individualistic and relativistic approaches in educational theory. By locating selfhood within networks of communication, interpretation, and shared experience, his philosophy reconceptualizes education as the very condition through which persons become capable of rational agency and meaningful participation in social life. This perspective also transforms the understanding of educational institutions. Schools and universities are no longer viewed merely as organizations responsible for knowledge transmission but as dialogical communities in which truth, rationality, and identity are continually negotiated through interaction among learners, educators, and broader cultural traditions. Consequently, educational practice should cultivate opportunities for dialogue, mutual interpretation, critical reflection, and shared inquiry rather than emphasizing conformity or the passive acquisition of predetermined knowledge. Importantly, Davidson's account avoids the pitfalls of epistemological relativism. Although knowledge is socially mediated, truth remains grounded in the shared world that participants jointly interpret. Likewise, rationality functions not as an instrument of exclusion or domination but as a condition for mutual understanding and self-realization. This philosophical position therefore reconciles social embeddedness with objective inquiry. Overall, Davidson's philosophy provides a coherent conceptual foundation for reconstructing educational thought around the relational constitution of human beings. By integrating language, communication, culture, rationality, and truth within a unified philosophical framework, the relational self emerges as a promising basis for contemporary philosophy of education and offers new directions for future theoretical inquiry into education, identity, and human flourishing.

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