

AN EDUCATIONALLY RELEVANT CONCEPT OF RELEVANCE

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ABSTRACT

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There is a highly vocalized complaint lodged against many educational systems that education is not relevant to the needs and interests of students. People have developed great confidence in the power of education. They seem to believe that education is the key to national progress and express deep disappointment with their educational systems when progress, in their opinion, is retarded.

In modern industrial societies, this belief that education is not relevant to the needs and interests of students is sufficiently real and widespread that it arrests the attention of educational decision makers and all those who are engaged in the business of education. Attention to the problem of an irrelevant education is reflected in a wide variety of articles that have been written on the subject. This thesis is a study which purports to examine an educationally relevant concept of relevance.

An examination of the phenomenon of the complaint of education irrelevance is made by clarifying and establishing defensible meanings of the concepts 'relevance' and 'needs and interests' in education. Two substantive theories of education - the subject-centred theory and the child-centred theory - are considered and suggestions are made to establish principles which integrate both of these theories.

This study does not provide a solution to the problem of lack of

educational relevance but it locates the grounds for the accusation of an irrelevant education. In addition, it establishes principles for a new approach to the examination of the concept of 'relevance' and its implication for educational theory.

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INTRODUCTION

From many areas of the world and particularly in modern industrial societies, a cacaphony of voices is heard crying for educational relevance. Some people seem to believe that education is the panacea for society's ills so they give their whole-hearted support to educational programmes whether they are sponsored by the government or private enterprise. But when the various societal problems are not being solved and seem to increase in alarming proportions instead, the blame is attributed to mal-functioning of the educational system, hence the complaint that education is not relevant to the needs and interests of students.

This problem of an irrelevant education is a long standing one and it is also a serious one for those who are responsible for structuring and implementing educational programmes. In educational circles, various ideas have been propounded and adopted in an attempt to improve the educational situation. But these ideas conflict, for each proponent seems unwilling to surrender his preconceived ideas to tackle the problem from a new perspective. And so, different theories evolve - perennialism, essentialism, progressivism, and reconstructionism.

Each group of theorists, according to Dewey: //

... selects that set of condition that ap-

peals to it; and then erects them into a complete and independent truth, instead of treating them as a factor in a problem, needing adjustment.

Consequently, instead of an organic interaction of the fundamental factors - the child, 'certain social aims, meanings, values incarnate in the matured experience, of the adult' - which constitute the educative process, these forces remain in isolation, each competing with the other, while the problem remains unresolved.

However, regardless of the "ism" by which each theory is distinguished, together they seem to represent the ideologies of two popular approaches to education - the traditional and the child-centred. Bernstein has directed his attention to the notion of relevance in education and has concluded that suggestions for change to make education more relevant have two thrusts.² He observes that the first has to do with adding contemporary content to traditional curricula in order to obtain greater student involvement and to increase his motivation, to demonstrate the practical usefulness and application of each discipline, to establish the social significance of each field, and to produce greater

¹John Dewey, "The Child and the Curriculum" in R. D. Archambault, (ed). John Dewey on Education: Selected Writings (New York: Random House, Inc., 1964), p. 339

²Edgar Bernstein, "In Search of Relevance", The School Review, Vol. LXXIX, No. 3, (May, 1971), p. 406.

understanding of the current problems which confound us all, including the young. The second thrust deals with more individualization and active student involvement in the learning process through choice, decision making, and the inquiry process.

But is the complaint against an irrelevant education justifiable? What do the concepts 'relevance' and 'needs and interests' involve in an educational setting? Does relevance have any implications for educational practice? These are the questions for which I shall attempt to find answers as I examine an educationally relevant concept of relevance.

To carry out this examination, I shall first of all try to clarify and establish defensible meanings of the concepts 'relevance' and 'needs and interests'. Secondly, I shall consider two substantive theories of education - the subject-centred which is adopted by the Traditionalists and the child-centred which can be traced back to the ideas of Plato, Quintillian, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and later continued by Dewey and the Progressives.³

Both of these theories ought to have some merits from which educators can profit and since the problem seems to be

³ See Harold Entwistle, Child-centred Education (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1970), p. 11 and Elliot W. Eisner and Elizabeth Vallance (ed.), Conflicting Conceptions of Curriculum (Berkeley, California: Mc Cutchan Publishing Corporation, 1974), p. 3.

due in part to a lack of organic interaction of the forces in the educative process, there might be a possibility of integrating the values of both the subject-centred and child-centred theories. So lastly, I shall attempt to explore the possibilities of integrating these two theories.

I do not intend, through this study, to offer a solution to the age-long problem of lack of educational relevance but, at least, this study could provide a new perspective from which educational relevance may be viewed.

CHAPTER I

THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATIONAL RELEVANCE

It has been observed that by itself, the notion relevance is a mere slogan. What do people mean when they say that education is not relevant? Relevant to what? Obviously, 'relevance' is not an absolute property. Scheffler has appropriately concluded:

Relevance is, in particular, not an absolute property, nothing is either relevant in or of itself. Relevant to what, how and why?—that is the question... if the current demand is to be taken not merely as a fashionable slogan but as a serious educational doctrine.¹

Saylor makes a similar point. He argues that "anything is relevant to something else to the degree that it has a bearing upon or is connected with the matter in hand".²

'Relevance' means different things to different people. We shall now consider some of the various meanings that people have attached to relevance to see what conclusions we can draw from these to help us clarify and esta-

¹Israel Scheffler, "Reflections on Educational Relevance" in Reason and Teaching (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1973), p. 126

²Galen Saylor, "What is Relevant for Today's Students?" Educational Leadership, Vol. XXXI (October, 1973), p. 41.

blish meaning for the concept of 'relevance'.

When major black critics refer to 'relevance', they "speak of relevance to the individual student in terms of building a symbolic community, in terms of social change, as a foundation for the control of their own destinies. The emphasis is upon the collectivity."³ From Goodman's point of view:

The schools are irrelevant, not necessarily because they don't build upon the individual's or his culture's past experiences, not necessarily because they don't choose content and activities which attempt to deal with existing social issues or concerns of students, but because they are not "serious". They contribute to an illusory reality, something akin to the Marxian notion of false consciousness.

As far as he is concerned, "the schools can become relevant in a community of free choice, lively engagement, and social action of Summerhill and American Summerhill."⁵

To critics such as Holt, Khol, and Kozol, the notion 'relevance' is the relevance of the sensitive teacher to the individual student first, and then perhaps to the student as representative of a group, all this aided by pertinent in-

³Michael Apple, "Relevance - Slogans and Meanings", Educational Forum, Vol. XXXV, (May, 1971), p. 504.

⁴Ibid., p. 505

⁵Ibid.

sights from educational philosophy.⁶

Gnagey states that:

In its negative adjectival form, irrelevant is applied indiscriminately, especially by youth, to nearly everything that is associated with the voracious ogre, the establishment.⁷

He further explains that "many adults, too, are on the relevancy binge. Some consider irrelevant anything that does not increase the gross national product."⁸ He is careful to still further explain that:

Certain would be artists without the talent to manage the discipline or form simply dismiss form as irrelevant and let blobs of paint splash willy-nilly, in the expectation that the resultant image may have some Rorschach meaning to the painter, if not to the viewer.⁹

Saylor argues that in educational circles obviously the term in recent years has been to designate a high degree of bearing on the matter in hand.¹⁰ From this point of view, the only basis on which educators can determine what is relevant in an educational programme is to analyse the degree of bearing which the item under consideration has on it.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 505, 506.

⁷ Theodore P. Gnagey, "Reflections on Relevance", Adult Leadership, Vol. XX, (March, 1972), p. 315.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Saylor, op. cit., p. 41.

In the various meanings attributed to 'relevance' cited above, the central idea that runs through them is that one is not free to make a blanket statement that something is, or is not relevant; or better yet, education (since this is the subject under consideration) if one is not prepared to join the ranks of sloganizers but instead wants to be understood. One has to be sufficiently specific to state to whom or what education is or is not relevant. In addition to this, 'relevance' requires specification of the matter in hand. In other words, educational relevance can be determined only to the extent to which education fulfils the purpose it is designed to serve. This is the perspective from which 'relevance' will be examined in this study.

2. Relevance - A Value-Laden Concept

'Relevance' seems to be a value-laden concept. That is, it involves value judgements on the part of the individual or group who makes the decision that supplies the answer to the question relevant to whom or what. Bernstein and Saylor have made suggestions pertaining to whom education should be relevant. I shall examine these two arguments to see what conclusions we can arrive at.

Bernstein argues that "there are three publics concerned with educational relevance - students, educators,

and society".¹¹ Saylor's argument is similar. Whereas he excludes educators from his categorization, he sees the student being educated and the society which establishes schools as basic considerations in relevancy.¹² From Bernstein's point of view, "narrow treatment of the subject suggests an hierarchy of importance."¹³ For example, students may claim that education should be relevant first to them and perhaps they can find justification for their claim. Saylor has pointed out:

From the stand-point of the student, primary consideration must be given to his or her capabilities and potentialities, motivations, aspirations, self-concepts, status of personal, intellectual, emotional, and social development, interests, "hang-ups", the nature and character of the family or foster family and peer group relationships and climate, and the whole gamut of similar characteristics that shape the development of the individual.¹⁴

Similarly, educators and the members of society can vie for first place in the hierarchy of importance. The members of society can argue for first place on the premise that they shoulder the responsibility of providing, according to Saylor:

¹¹Edgar Bernstein, "In Search of Relevance", School Review, Vol. LXXIX, No. 3, (May, 1971), p. 407

¹²Saylor, op. cit., p. 41.

¹³Bernstein, op. cit., p. 407

¹⁴Saylor, op. cit., p. 41.

... the value systems, the pressures, the conditions of living, a system of priorities of wants and comforts, the ethics for personal and group living, the modes and means of communication, including language, opportunities available for productive work, a prestige of hierarchy of success, happiness, and security in the group, the methods and means of social advancement, and opportunities for contributing to the improvement of the life of the social group. ¹⁵

In connection with this view, Bernstein poses a congeries of important questions:

But in this hierarchy, should not education be relevant first to society? If so, who is to speak for society? Teachers? Students? Parents? Individual communities, Political, economic or social groups? The Federal Government? ¹⁶

The important issue underlying these arguments is not to whom education should first be relevant. The real issue is that both Saylor and Bernstein have attempted to make 'relevance' operational by providing a perspective from which to view education as relevant or not.

With regards to relevant to who, Marsh suggests:

... any approach to relevance in education must be based on defining education. If education is fundamentally a preparation for life, it follows that education should centre on those things most useful in life. ¹⁷

But this view of education as a preparation for life has

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Bernstein, op. cit., p. 407

¹⁷ Edward Marsh, "What is Relevance?" Contemporary Education, Vol. XLIV, No. 4, (February, 1973), p. 200.

encountered many criticisms.¹⁸ One group of critics argues that this view of education gives rise to the tendency for teachers to be concerned not with the child's capacity for life as a child but as an adult in the future. In other words, childhood is devalued and viewed as a 'period of deprivation' as teachers constantly direct children's attention away from those experiences which are meaningful to them now and which 'enrich childhood' towards 'the contemplation of the responsibilities' of adulthood.

Another group of critics' protest against education as preparation for life is based on moral grounds. From this standpoint, to sacrifice childhood with a view to preparing children for a vague future as adults is considered to be a denial of human rights, an issue over which many educational struggles have been directed. It is believed that if children are regarded as persons with a 'sacred right of childhood', due consideration will be given to their rights and interests and they will not be thought of nor regarded as raw material to be molded into shape.

Another argument rooted in this point of view is that very often, children are forced to sacrifice immediate satisfaction under the aegis of their future happiness

¹⁸For detailed discussion of 'Education as Preparation' see Harold Entwistle, Child-centred Education (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1970), pp. 77-84.

when in reality, it is the aspirations of adults that are aimed at. For example, parents decide what goals they want their children to attain and the children have no alternative but to strive to realise these aspirations. The list of criticisms can be extended but eventually, 'if the Reaper Death' does not snatch children from their society, do they not become adults and have to shoulder their responsibilities as members of society? This view of education as preparation for life is extremely difficult to deny and does not rule out the function of education as also to "assist the child to make sense of his environment as he perceives it in the present." ¹⁹

Determination of what education is relevant to can be based on Marsh's prescription that any approach to relevance in education must be based on the purpose education is to serve. But this involves judgements of value. There seems to be no escape from judgements of value on the issue of relevance regardless of the perspective from which it is viewed. If this is the case, maybe it is appropriate for politicians who represent the members of society to decide what purpose education is to serve and have the schools implement their decisions. This is the system practically all societies follow whether they be democratic, socialist, or communist. The

¹⁹Ibid., p. 88.

difference lies in the amount of freedom the society is allowed to exercise in accepting or rejecting these decisions.

3. Relevance and the Role of the school

In most societies, schools are entrusted with the responsibility to provide formal education. Saylor argues:

The school as an institution has three primary functions: (a) to contribute in significant ways to the transmission of the culture of our society; (b) to serve as a major agency of socialization of the young; (c) to contribute fully to the maximum development of each student. ²⁰

On the issue of the purpose of the school, or education in its broad sense, Bernstein says:

Education must transmit culture, although exactly what culture comprises is seldom clear in a pluralistic society. But if the dictum "not one culture but many" holds, there is nevertheless a shared culture of values and institutions to be transmitted. They must be informed about the workings of society's political and economic systems. ²¹

If we accept Saylor's and Bernstein's arguments concerning the purpose of education, or schooling in the restricted sense cited above and if the school effectively fulfils its three primary functions of transmitting culture,

²⁰ Saylor, op. cit., p. 44

²¹ Bernstein, op. cit., p. 408

socializing the young, and developing each student's ability to maximum capacity, then it is proper to conclude that education is relevant to the purpose which it is intended to serve.

Gnagey believes that curricular irrelevance is less in the matter than in the manner. It is not major areas of study - philosophy, literature, history, languages, arts, mathematics, science + that are irrelevant. Rather it is that curricula are organized with stifling departmentalization.²² His recommendation for a solution to the problem of educational irrelevance is as follows:

The long-run solution to the problem is education from birth that is good enough and interesting enough to prevent drop-outs; by schooling that instills the realization that education is not terminal, but life-long. This kind of education must stimulate from the earliest identification, the pursuit of interests and the satisfaction of curiosities. At the same time, however, the formal aspects of schooling must assure mastery of fundamentals (the three R's) ... when this condition is achieved, all parts of education have relevance.²³

Saylor, too, makes a very valuable suggestion to American society which probably, can be extended to other societies where the complaint that education is not relevant to the needs and interests of students is

²² Gnagey, op. cit., p. 315.

²³ Ibid., p. 316.

heard. He writes:

To assure that schools have a high degree of "bearing on the matter in hand", professional educators in league with students, parents, and other citizens should reaffirm the basic values of the American society, define the basic goal of the school, and then work together to plan and provide a highly flexible, diversified set of learning opportunities that constitute appropriate routes for attaining these goals - routes that permit students to choose in terms of personal needs and interests the experiences most meaningful and significant to them in striving for these goals. ²⁴

We have seen, then, that relevance is not an absolute property. One has to be sufficiently specific to point out to whom or what education is relevant. In other words, arguments for relevance require specification of the matter at hand. Having established a principle as to whom or what education is relevant, one can determine educational relevance by judging how effectively education accomplishes the purpose it is designed to serve.

It is important to note also, that regardless of the perspective from which relevance is viewed, there is no escape from the valuative aspect of relevance for, as discussed earlier, judgments of value are embedded in the concept of relevance. The important issue seems to be a necessity for a consensus as to what education should be relevant.

²⁴Saylor, op. cit., p. 44.

Once this consensus has been reached, a basis will be provided for the determination of educational relevance. To groups and individuals in educational institutions, relevance seems to be closely connected to 'needs and interests' so these twin concepts will be examined in the following chapter.

CHAPTER II

NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF STUDENTS

The claim that education should be adapted to the 'needs' and 'interests' of students is being made by people of practically every walk of life. In educational circles, there is considerable concern about the notion 'needs' and 'interests' of students and this concern is reflected in extensive literature on the subject.¹ However, I do not intend to go into all the ramifications of needs and interests in this chapter; rather, I shall simply attempt to clarify these two concepts to avoid any confusion concerning their interpretation in this study.

1. The Concept of 'Needs'

According to Komisar, "the curriculum supervisor exhorts teachers to meet the needs of their pupils and it is

¹See for example P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters, The Logic of Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1970), pp. 32-39; R. F. Dearden, "Needs in Education", British Journal of Educational Studies, Vol. XIV, No. 3, (November, 1966), pp. 7-16; R. S. Peters, Ethics and Education (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), Chapter VI; and R. D. Archambault, "The Concept of Need and its Relation to Certain Aspects of Educational Theory", Harvard Educational Review, Vol. XXVII, (Winter, 1957), pp. 32-62.

announced to the pupils with dreary regularity that this is what teachers are doing".² What is actually meant by the concept 'needs'? Many educators have analysed the concept 'need' so we shall take a brief look at some of these conceptions of 'need' with a view to drawing conclusions that will assist us to clarify and establish defensible meaning for this concept.

Perkinson defines 'needs' as "affirmative judgments of some desired, or expected, object or act of behaviour".³ In his opinion, a person can be related to a behavioural act either as the performer of the act or as the recipient of the consequences of the act but in an educational situation, he realizes that there is a great concern with the relation of the child as both the recipient and as the performer of a known skill.

He identifies three categories of needs:

1. Final needs - those expressions of need in which the projected behavioural act is considered to be good in itself. The community decides what these needs should be.
2. Instrumental needs - those needs that are concerned with

² B. Paul Komisar, "Need and the Needs-curriculum" in B. O. Smith and R. H. Ennis (ed.), Language and Concepts in Education (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1961), p. 24.

³ Henry J. Perkinson, "Needs and the Curriculum", Educational Theory, Vol. IX, (1959), p. 235.

behaviour that will lead to, or guarantee behaviour to be good in itself. Educators determine these needs.

3. Felt needs - those judgments of appropriate behaviour made by pupils themselves. ⁴

Hirst and Peters refer to basic needs in which the norm is determined by the way of life of a particular society, and functional needs which depend on the role or purposes of the individual in question. From their point of view, most of what is taught in school can be related to these two needs. ⁵

Dearden's conception of needs is similar to Hirst's and Peter's description of basic needs. From Dearden's point of view, " 'need' is a normative concept and as such, needs are not to be determined just by what is observably the case". ⁶

Tyler discusses two meanings of the term 'needs'. The first appears to be similar to that cited by Perkinson above and "represents a gap between some conception of a desirable norm, that is, some standard of philosophic value and the actual status". ⁷ With reference to this view, to determine the

⁴ Ibid., pp. 235-237

⁵ Peters and Hirst, op. cit., pp. 33, 34.

⁶ Dearden, op. cit., p. 7

⁷ Ralph W. Tyler, Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), pp. 7, 8.

'needs' of a student, it is necessary that one collects information about the student and compares this information with what the acceptable norm prescribes the information should be. In other words, "'need' is the gap between what is and what should be".⁸

The second meaning of the term 'need' as used by some psychologists represents "tensions in the organism which must be brought into equilibrium for a normal healthy condition of the organism to be maintained".⁹ The following illustration should further clarify this point. The absence of equilibrium gives rise to an impulse. For example, an imbalance called thirst gives rise to an impulse which impels one to search for water to restore the balance. Similarly, another imbalance, say tiredness, gives rise to 'acts leading to rest' which eventually restores 'muscular and nervous energy'. Smith, Stanley, and Shores explain need as "that which is required to restore equilibrium".¹⁰

These needs may be physical, for example, the need for oxygen and water; social which includes the need for love, security, and esteem; and integrative such as the need for 'self-realization in one's life'. Komisar's reference to need in

⁸ Ibid., p. 8

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ B. O. Smith, W. O. Stanley, and J. H. Shores, Fundamentals of Curriculum Development (New York: World Book Company, 1957), p. 112.

the motivational sense¹¹ coincides with this second meaning of need. Tyler believes that:

In this sense all children have the same needs and it is the responsibility of the school as with every other social institution to help children to get these needs met in a way that is not only satisfying but provides the kind of behaviour patterns that are personally and socially significant.¹²

The various uses of the term 'needs' suggests that it involves value judgments. Hirst and Peters support this line of argument. According to them, "analysis of the concept of "need" reveals that it always involves conceptions of value".¹³ Dearden holds a similar view which he expresses as follows:

Value judgments are inescapable in determining what ought to be done in education; and if, therefore, discussions are to be formed in terms of need, then the valuational basis of the concept and the subservience of the relevant research findings to this should be explicitly recognized.¹⁴

Since the way of life of a particular society determines the skills individuals require to function in that society and since most of what is taught in schools can be related to basic and functional needs, for my purposes, 'needs'

¹¹ See Komisar, op. cit., pp. 25-32.

¹² Tyler, op. cit., p. 7

¹³ Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 33.

¹⁴ Dearden, op. cit., p. 17.

refer to the basic and functional model posited by Hirst and Peters earlier. Conceptions of value are enveloped in this model. The important point to be raised, then, at this juncture, is by whose values are the needs of students to be determined for as Dearden appropriately concluded:

Curricular discussions revolving around 'children's needs' often leave it uncertain whether it is individual or social values that are being presupposed, and whether it is needs as children feel them to be or needs as teachers think they ought to be which are involved.¹⁵

Sometimes, what children feel they need is inadequate to prepare them for life. For example, some children may feel that since their goal in life is to become masons, all they need is to be able to mix concrete, lay blocks or bricks, and use the various masonry tools. Since these skills can be learnt on the job in a relatively short period of time and since they are not normally taught in school, these children tend to regard schooling as unnecessary. But their ages fall within the range of compulsory schooling so they have no choice other than to attend school, to learn reading, mathematics, and similar subjects taught in school.

In reality, despite the fact that they may actually become masons, they need to learn to read, calculate, and

¹⁵ Ibid.

perform other basic cognitive skills if they are to function efficiently as masons. For example, in constructing a building or even a less complicated structure, they need to master these skills so that they will be able to read and interpret the blue-print that is likely to be handed to them and calculate measurements. These are of vital importance if they are to build according to specifications and thus have control of one aspect of maintaining a good relationship with their employers and fellow employees.

It does appear, then, that since teachers are entrusted with the task of getting children to learn what is worth-while for them to learn, it is their responsibility to decide what children need to equip them for adult life. If this stance is taken, it is evident that teachers will be confronted with the motivational problem.

Many people subscribe to the notion that education should be tailored to the needs of students. The implication is that if this is done, it will provide a solution to the motivational problem which is 'one of the perennial problems of education' but Hirst and Peters refute this notion. They state:

To suggest, therefore, that teaching should be adjusted more to the needs of the child sounds as if a way of remedying this common condition is being opened up which has a solid empirical basis. But an analysis of

'need' gives little support for such optimism and that not all needs are motivational in character. ¹⁶

Dearden adds, "one of the attractions of 'need' seems to be that it is thought that by basing a curriculum on needs the problem of motivation will be solved, but this is not necessarily so at all". ¹⁷ As far as he is concerned:

The motivational problem in teaching is a problem precisely because children are regarded as needing something which they cannot be brought to want or to be interested in. 'Needs' will solve the motivational problem only if they are felt and accepted by the children. ¹⁸

My contention is that education offered through schooling is too important an issue to be left to the immature judgments of pupils, particularly those in the primary school. In the first place, they do not have the experience that is necessary to make such crucial decisions and secondly, the time they spend in any level of our school system is limited; therefore, it is important that they learn what is of educational importance during that limited period. By educational importance, I mean significant for the development of those skills which are necessary to function as responsible citizens.

¹⁶ Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 33.

¹⁷ Dearden, op. cit., p. 10.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

It seems to me that the experienced judgment of teachers is necessary to direct students to pursue those academic areas that will terminate in the development of those skills which they will need when they become adults. Hirst and Peters argue that:

The child needs to learn some elementary mathematics, he needs to learn to read and spell, for unless he masters these skills he will be unable to fulfil his role as a citizen in an industrial society. Needs such as these can manifestly be satisfied at school. ¹⁹

Dearden's position is that "in education, 'need' refers ... to what would be educationally valuable to learn. The child needs to gain skill in reading, proficiency in arithmetic, a knowledge of geography and so on". ²⁰

In answer to the question raised earlier - by whose values are the 'needs' of students to be determined? - Perkinson attempts to provide an answer. He seems to think that the issue of determining students' 'needs' is multi-dimensional and should be the consensus of the groups posited in his model of categorization of the needs hierarchy. These are the community, educators, and students. His submission is:

In the development of the curriculum the felt needs should be last in consideration, in the

¹⁹Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 34

²⁰Dearden, op. cit., p. 13.

actual implementation of the curriculum, they should be first in consideration. The educators, given the final needs ... by the community, devise the instrumental needs ... and then through further experimentation and research, they make adjustments in the curriculum in regard to the felt needs of the pupils. ²¹

This prescription apparently would work in a homogeneous society in which mutual faith is exercised. That is, the community prescribes the need to educators on whom they can rely to devise and implement a curriculum to satisfy these needs. But even in a homogeneous society, there can be conflicting conceptions in education and curriculum design. Educators seem unwilling to allow the community to determine the needs education is to satisfy and conversely, the community is equally unwilling to allow professional educators to practise their expertise and thus make a solid contribution to the field of education.

As is expected, the conflict is even greater in multicultural societies where there is a diversity of conceptions concerning the needs of education. In such a situation, Perkinson recommends:

Because of this diversity, and because of the fluctuation in the intensity of demand for fulfilment of the different final needs, it is possible for the planners of the cur-

²¹Perkinson, op. cit., p. 238

riculum to select what they think are the best final needs, and to devise a curriculum that will guarantee the fulfilment of those final needs so chosen. ²²

His overall conclusion is that:

... debates would be more productive if educators conceded the right of the community to determine the needs of education, and if the community conceded the right of the professional educators to determine the instrumental needs of education ... It demands that the educators have faith that the community, through the democratic process, will develop the best final needs, and conversely that the community have faith that educators, through experimentation and research will develop the best instrumental needs. ²³

Further mention will be made of the concept 'needs' in relation to education when the subject-centred and child-centred theories of education will be considered so I shall proceed to discuss the concept 'interest'.

2. The Concept of 'Interests'

The popular claim that education should be tailored to the needs and interests of students is illustrative of the observation that "needs and interests are regularly coupled together and treated as synonyms, or near-synonyms. This

²² Ibid., p. 237

²³ Ibid.

conflation is facilitated by an ambiguity in the notion interest".²⁴

According to Hirst and Peters, the concept 'interest' can be interpreted in both a valuative and a psychological sense.²⁵ In the former, the teacher focuses on protecting the child and considering what is good for him, whereas in the latter, the teacher is concerned with what the child is interested in, what captivates his attention, with his hobbies and pursuits that absorb him.

Peters gives a more detailed explanation of this concept.²⁶ What he and Hirst in their combined work refer to as the "valuative" sense in which 'interests' may be used, he calls normative and in this sense he agrees with Lamont that it is used in a legalistic sense to speak of spheres of action or activity to which a person has right.²⁷ He also holds the view similar to Benn that in the normative sense, 'interests' is used in a more general sense to speak of those things which are both worthwhile and in some way appropriate for the individual in question.²⁸

²⁴ Dearden, op. cit., p. 11

²⁵ Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 37

²⁶ Peters, op. cit., p. 168

²⁷ Witness W. W. Lamont, The Principles of Moral Judgment (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), Ch. III.

²⁸ See S. I. Benn, " 'Interests' " in Pro. Aristotelian Soc., Vol. LX, 1959-60.

He adheres to the terminology which he and Hirst use to point out the second sense in which 'interests' may be used, that is, the psychological, but he is more specific as he explains that:

In the psychological sense, we speak of what people are interested in, meaning what they are disposed to attend to or take notice of; we also speak of interests in a more dispositional sense when we wish to refer to people's hobbies, or those activities in which they will tend to be interested in a more permanent sort of way. ²⁹

In this study, 'interests' will be used in the evaluative or normative sense. Peters says, "this is the sense of 'interests' which is being used when it is said that the school must be concerned with the interests of individual children". ³⁰

In a school situation, "what a child is interested in may also be of educational value. To develop breadth of understanding in relation to this would be an obvious way into the curriculum; for a child might pass smoothly and eagerly along this path into other realms that have to be explored". ³¹

But it sometimes happens that the child is interested in activities that are not of educational importance and conversely, he or she is not interested in activities that are of educational importance. "So the curriculum itself, as dis-

²⁹Peters, op. cit., pp. 167, 168.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., p. 168

tinct from the point of entry to the curriculum could not be determined purely by his interests".³² With reference to the use of 'interests' employed in this study, Dearden believes that "interest, like the concept of need, always involves values".³³ The crucial question, who determines what is in the child's interest could be appropriately posed at this point.

It seems to me that if the teacher is going to discharge his or her duties efficiently, on the basis of the curricular decisions of his or her educational system and experience, he or she should decide what is beneficial to the child. And not only this, but use his or her professional ability to get the child to engage into those learning experiences that will terminate in the development of those skills that he or she will need to function as an adult.

As with the concept of 'needs', getting children to engage in learning activities in which they are not interested invariably poses a motivational problem. But on the premise of the empirical point that most of children's interests are socially acquired, such a problem is not insurmountable.

Hirst and Peters argue that:

There is ... the empirical point that most of children's interests are socially acquired.

³² Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 37.

³³ Ibid.

They get them from parents, from other children, and from the mass media. If the teacher does nothing to encourage interest in what is worthwhile he is simply opting out of his responsibility and abandoning children to get their interests from other sources which may be antipathetic to education.³⁴

It follows, then, that teachers, through a combination of professional techniques, common sense, and tact can be instrumental in getting children to develop interest in those learning activities that are of educational importance.

Apparently, different schools of thought have emerged from the concept of 'needs and interests' with regard to education. Dearden presents two of these as follows:

.... those who insist that the teacher knows best can take it that the teacher has to settle what children need or what is in their interests, perhaps by reflection upon the nature of a subject, whereas those who insist on 'starting from the child' can take it that what the teacher has to do is to enquire what children feel they need or feel interested in.³⁵

However, he warns that in taking this stance, "a crucial problem of the curriculum will be slurred over" but suggests that "if the problem is squarely faced, ... it is plain that no use of the concept of need" (and I wish to add interest) "is going to solve it, since the difficulty here is precisely

³⁴R. F. Dearden, The Philosophy of Primary Education (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1968), p. 18.

³⁵Ibid.

over the norms which create needs, the norms implicit in any account of what a desirable education is".³⁶

'Needs and interests' are ambiguous concepts; therefore, at the beginning of any discussion surrounding these notions, it is important that one clarifies and establishes meanings for them. It must be kept in mind, too, that in an educational situation, if teachers are to efficiently fulfil their role of teaching pupils what is worthwhile for them to learn, it does appear that it is their responsibility to decide, on the grounds of the policies of their particular educational system, what children need and what is in their interests.

Having arrived at these decisions, the next step is obvious. Teachers need to practise their professional techniques to get students to engage in those learning experiences that will enable them to develop those skills they will need to function as responsible adults. But teachers and educators seem to be divided on the issue of needs and interests therefore, as has been pointed out earlier, different schools have emerged. On one hand are subject-centred theorists who hold the view that teachers know best and consequently should decide what children need or what is in their

³⁶ R. F. Dearden, " 'Needs' in Education", British Journal of Educational Studies Vol. XIV, No. 3 (November, 1966), p. 11.

interests. On the other hand, are child-centred theorists who believe that teachers should find out what children feel they need or feel interested in and use this information as a springboard for designing curriculum. These two theories will be the subject of discussion in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER III

THE SUBJECT-CENTRED THEORY OF EDUCATION

The subject-centred theory of education basically represents a traditional view of education. Perry claims that "its historical background is particularly England of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, but its features are widely recognizable elsewhere".¹ Theorists of this persuasion "believe that the content of the curriculum is all important on the principle that knowledge is the source of power"² so they "stress the importance of knowledge and skill, traditional subject divisions, and the crucial role of examinations".³ Their tenet seems to be the development of the power of thought which, in their opinion, is best achieved by learning the basic skills, arts, and sciences that have been developed in the past. They therefore advocate that the school curriculum "should contain cognitive subjects that cultivate rationality, and the study of moral, aes-

¹ Leslie R. Perry, "What is an Educational Situation" in R. D. Archambault (ed.), Philosophical Analysis and Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1965), p. 63.

² Luella Cole, A History of Education: Socrates to Montessori (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1950), p. 626.

³ P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters, The Logic of Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1970), p.1.

thetic, and religious principles to cultivate the attitudinal dimensions".⁴

Theorists of the subject-centred orientation, like educationists of other persuasions, consider the aim of education to be the maximum development of students so that, as adults, they will be equipped to responsibly carry out the activities of their respective societies. But subject-centred theorists see this development as constituted of subject matter which will meet the needs of students not necessarily as students feel these needs to be, but as educators think they ought to be.

In an attempt to have students, at whatever level of the school system, attain academic excellence, teachers who favour this approach find it inevitable, according to Dewey, to divide "each topic into studies; each study into lessons; each lesson into specific facts and formulae".⁵ Sometimes the emphasis on subject matter takes the form of rigid subject divisions which transfer the student from his 'narrow world of personal contacts' to the wide world of remote ideas. Great emphasis is placed on competition since it is a "conve-

⁴Allan Ornstein, An Introduction to the Foundations of Education (Chicago: Rand McNally Publishing Company, 1971), p. 195.

⁵John Dewey, "The Child and the Curriculum" in R. D. Archambault (ed.) John Dewey on Education; Selected Writings (New York: Random House, Inc., 1964), p. 341.

nient, effective, and inexpensive device for attaining greater effort from pupils".⁶

In this model, the teacher's knowledge is sometimes regarded as unquestionable. He is portrayed as knowing everything that is necessary for the pupils' education. According to Perry:

This knowledge was subject-matter, the transferring of which to the pupils was the ostensible purpose of lessons. This subject-matter was not all there was to be known about a subject but all that a teacher needed to know, and this he knew with complete mastery. It was highly selected, and what had been selected was deemed absolutely essential.⁷

Teachers decide what their students need and what is in their interests and every child in a particular class follows the same curriculum despite the range of differences in ability. Discipline is of paramount importance to teachers of this orientation, consequently, "they will not be averse to using punishment to maintain discipline".⁸ Hirst and Peters give a brief description of the practices of teachers of this approach. They write:

Children were regarded as rather like adults but more wayward, and with original sin rather prominent in their make-up. Methods were used which emphasized formal instruction and learning by heart. Children were instructed en bloc

⁶ Ibid., p. 342.

⁷ Perry, op. cit., p. 65.

⁸ Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 1.

without careful attention to individual differences, and this paramilitary operation was usually backed up by the extrinsic aids of punishment and other forms of coercion.⁹

Peters, Hirst and Perry seem to present an exaggerated account of the subject-centred approach to education. It is quite likely that some teachers who practise this approach, for some reason or other, may over-emphasize the content aspect of education and neglect other aspects, but this does not necessarily mean that the subject-centred theory of education is defective. Many students who successfully complete schooling by this approach attain a certain degree of academic excellence and occupy important positions in their community.

1. Relevance and the Subject-centred Theory

Some critics of the subject-centred theory of education claim that because of the rigid subject division into which the school curriculum is organized and because the learning experiences in which students are compelled to engage are not directly related to their particular experiences, this type of education is irrelevant. But in Chapter I we established the principle that the only way one can determine whether education is relevant is to examine it in the light

⁹Ibid., pp. 29, 30.

of how it fulfils the purpose it is designed to serve. Therefore if we accept the purpose of education to be the transmission of our cultural heritage and the maximum development of each student, it is quite reasonable to conclude that any education, regardless of its orientation, provided it meets the criteria of transmitting culture and the maximum development of each student, is relevant. We shall now look at the subject-centred theory of education in the light of its effectiveness in fulfilling the purpose of education.

It is believed that the ultimate purpose of education is to develop in pupils those skills - cognitive as well as effective - that they will need, as adults, to function as responsible members of society. It must be kept in mind that reference to education implies the restricted sense of the term - schooling. Bestor represents this view. He claims:

.... the schools have a *raison d' être* ...
That function is intellectual training: "the deliberate cultivation of the ability to think".
In a democracy the schools must offer training in the basic academic subjects to all students, because as adults they will be called upon to exercise the responsibilities of self-direction and citizenship.¹⁰

This function of education includes cultural transmission and

¹⁰ Arthur Bestor, "The Distinctive Function of the Schools" in Ronald Gross (ed.) The Teacher and the Taught (New York: Dell Publishing Company Inc., 1963), pp. 194, 195.

the maximum development of each student.

Students have varying abilities. Some are more academically able than others therefore some will enter the professions while others, because of aptitude, academic and other limitations, will fall into the categories of semi-skilled and non-skilled workers. Society needs these varied abilities and the people who comprise the various categories of workers need to realize their dependence on one another. For example, the doctor ought to realize that just as the farm-labourer is dependent on him for medical assistance especially in times of illness, so is he dependent on the farm-labourer to cultivate the soil so that it will produce food to satisfy his physical needs. The important point to be considered is that every individual student should be directed and given the opportunity to develop whatever ability he or she possesses to the fullest possible extent with a view to making a solid contribution to the proper functioning and improvement of his or her community.

Regardless of the profession or occupation that students will follow when they leave school, there are certain basic skills they must master in order to enter the job market and consequently lead independent lives. Minimally, normal citizens should be functionally literate. That is, they should be able to read, communicate intelligently, and do some elemen-

tary mathematics. For example, it is necessary for butchers to be able to read and perform basic mathematical operations so that they can carry out the written instructions of their employers, calculate the prices of the various cuts of meat, and affix the correct labels.

As far as development of skills is concerned, it does not seem to matter whether or not the curriculum is organized into rigid subject divisions because in reality, regardless of the organization of the curriculum, if students are prepared to fulfil their roles as citizens, especially in modern industrial, computerized, technological societies, there seems to be no escape from the content of subject-matter.

There is a strong argument against the subject-centred theory that the content of education is incongruent to the needs and interests of students therefore this kind of education is irrelevant. But in a school situation, if pupils are allowed to pursue those activities they think they need or are interested in that are not worthwhile educationally, they will leave school without having developed the skills that are required for life in the real world except they learn these skills from other agencies outside the school contemporaneously. For instance, if children are interested in playing checkers, they may do so at break periods as a recreational activity but no responsible teacher should allow them to play

this game during the time that is to be spent in the development of worthwhile skills, that is, those skills that are needed for the fulfilment of societal roles. The reason is obvious. Society depends on schools to tap and develop talent to maximum capacity so that there will be man-power resources to carry out the various societal roles. What connection does the playing of checkers have with the fulfilment of societal roles?

It is salutary to make every effort to gear the curriculum to the needs and interests of students and it is 'an important item in the official credo about education' but this should not be interpreted to mean that the curriculum should be geared according to needs and interests as students see them but rather according to what students need or what is really in their interests. In other words, the curriculum should be structured in such a way that it provides the scope for pupils to learn what is of educational importance.

This calls for a great deal of skill and direction on the part of the teacher but if it is true that most of children's interests are socially acquired, then the teacher can be a satisfactory source from which children can acquire interests. And the teacher is functioning within his or her professional bounds when he or she accepts the moral problem of deciding and determining to get children to pursue what is in

their interest for according to Peters:

... the teacher is institutionally concerned with fostering interests which it is in children's interest to develop. This is what education involves. Talk about 'growth', 'self-realization', and gearing the curriculum to the interests of children glosses over this fundamental normative aspect of education. ¹¹

If teachers, in getting children to pursue what is in their interests, have respect for them as persons and demonstrate this respect in their treatment towards them, they should not be doing an injustice to the children. Neither will the children be deprived of the intrinsic values of childhood at the expense of their future happiness as adults as some educationists argue for according to Entwistle:

... in a multitude of ways children's interests are equally those of adults. They watch the same television programmes, play the same games, visit places of cultural interest on family holidays, assume roles (in the sociological sense), have economic relationships, behave in accordance with the laws of physics, show an interest in the past and in distant places, make mathematical calculations and so on. ¹²

Criticisms of the curriculum being incongruent to the needs and interests of students and is therefore irrelevant extend to the centralization of the curriculum, a method used

¹¹R. S. Peters, Ethics and Education (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), p. 36.

¹²Harold Entwistle, Child-centred Education (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1970), p. 89.

in many societies for developing the curriculum. This criticism seems to be based on the belief held by some educationists that since teachers deal directly with students on a day to day basis, they are aware of their needs and interests and consequently should develop their own curriculum instead of having to work with a curriculum that is developed by the government through its ministry of education.

But if teachers in each school system were to develop their own curriculum, what impact would this have on our educational system? Would we have any means of ensuring that the content of the curriculum reflects the consensus of the values and demands of the whole society? And would we be able to determine whether our educational system is insular or adequate when compared with the educational systems of other societies? Hirst and Peters ask a very cogent question that is worthy of our consideration:

... does not a curriculum arise as much from the demands of society and the history of men's attempt to understand and appreciate the world as it does from children's needs and interests? ¹³

It is hard to deny that education plays an important role in the progress of a country or area and since in most societies, government accepts the responsibility for formal education through schooling, perhaps it is necessary that the govern-

¹³Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 31.

ment, through its ministry of education and with significant input from educators, develop the curriculum according to the needs of that particular society and send this curriculum to the school for implementation by the teachers.

The skills a Society needs are determined by the type of society. For example, a highly agrarian society will have a greater demand for agricultural skills than any other skill and similarly, an industrial society will have a greater demand for industrial skills. Consideration needs to be given to this in curriculum construction. Taba reminds us:

Curriculum is, after all, a way of preparing young people to participate as productive members of our culture. Not all cultures require the same kinds of knowledge. Nor does the same culture need the same kinds of capacities and skills, intellectual or otherwise, at all times.¹⁴

But broadly speaking, there are certain basic principles of education that are universal: mathematics, language, and allied subjects are the same whether they are taught in China or Australia so there is a certain degree of unity in all educational systems. Perhaps this unity should be maintained because of the interdependence that exists among the nations of the world despite language and other differences.

In many educational systems teachers do need to play a

¹⁴Hilda Taba, Curriculum Development (Chicago: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 10.

more active role in the development of the curriculum but it does not seem practical to leave the development of the curriculum entirely to individual teachers or groups of teachers in each school if unity of content as well as a greater possibility of ensuring that children learn what is necessary for them to learn is to be achieved.

With a centralized curriculum, there is the possibility that teachers will encounter difficulties in interpreting certain aspects of its content and consequently charge the curriculum with irrelevance. But this difficulty could be overcome through teacher education programmes such as seminars, workshops, and courses offered at teachers' training colleges. However, to those teachers who find that the centralized curriculum is irrelevant, Van Til offers alternatives. He says:

The teacher who realizes that his content of instruction isn't meaningful has two viable alternatives. He can change his content from the irrelevant to the relevant. Or, if he cannot change the required content, he can teach it in such a way as to give it relevance Yes a third possibility exists. One can continue with meaningless content, break his heart trying to teach and achieve very little. ¹⁵

A teacher usually operates within a system and is therefore accountable to both internal and external publics for activities in the class-room. Internally, there are the princi-

¹⁵ William Van Til, Curriculum: Quest for Relevance (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 234.

pal and possibly departmental chair-person and externally, there are the ministry of education and perhaps the school board. Since there may be real problems in changing content, the sensible alternative seems to be to 'teach content in such a way as to give it relevance'. If this is done, most likely, students will derive pleasure from their learning experiences and at the same time, learn what is considered important for them to learn.

Since the subject-centred theory of education presents no barrier against teachers fostering interests which it is in children's interests to develop, and since teachers must teach content that is considered important for children to learn, it does not seem to be of any consequence whether the curriculum is organized into rigid subject divisions or centralized. It seems that by using this approach to education, teachers can transmit culture and achieve maximum development of each student and thus accomplish the purpose of education. Therefore there are no grounds for attributing lack of educational relevance to the subject-centred theory of education as such. Perhaps many teachers who use this approach, because of examination pressures, become over anxious to have their students gain mastery of subject-matter ignore certain factors such as individual differences and a proper regard for children as persons all of which contribute to pleasura-

ble learning experiences. They may even resort to harsh measures of punishment to accomplish their aim. But in such a situation, the problem is related to method and not to the theory itself.

The whole issue surrounding the subject-centred approach and educational relevance stems from a misconception of what the subject-centred approach entails. Although content is vitally important in the process of education, teachers need not consider it in terms of a set stock of information and 'static conformity to a code' but rather as a means of developing critical thinking and creativity among students.

2. Limitations and Merits of the Subject-centred Theory

It has often been said that no theory will completely satisfy the claims of all individuals connected with a particular field of studies and the subject-centred theory of education is no exception to this assertion. Like all theories, it has its limitations as well as its merits. One of the limitations of the subject-centred theory of education is that because of the great emphasis placed on subject matter, teachers who adopt this theory tend to devote their attention to those students who are more academically able and neglect

those who are less academically able. Consequently, the opportunity is not given to each student to develop his abilities to maximum capacity.

The point has already been made in Chapter I that one of the functions of education or schooling is to contribute fully to the maximum development of each student. If teachers who identify themselves with and practise the principles of the subject-centred school, for some reason or other, do not structure their class-room activities in such a way that ample provision is made for maximum development of each student, then this limitation deserves our consideration.

In many societies, it seems to be the common belief that certain occupations are more important than others and only those citizens who follow these important occupations are successful. It is also believed that one of the chief factors that contribute to securing these important occupations is academic excellence. Whereas it is true that certain professions and occupations such as being a university professor, a doctor, or a scientist require a greater degree of academic skills than say being a mail-man or a farm-labourer, this does not mean that one is more successful than the other. If each individual, in his or her sphere, is performing at maximum capacity, then he or she is successful.

But it seems very difficult to convey this idea of

what real success is to the members of society because of existing beliefs and practices. Apparently many societies are not able to utilize all their man-power resources so individuals go through a process of selection in order to enter the job market or higher institutions of learning. Obviously this selection is based not on the grounds of performance at maximum capacity but instead on the grounds of the highest level of performance. So what actually happens is that those who show promise of greatest academic ability get selected while the others are rejected.

Perhaps this is the type of situation that prompts the subject-centred theorists to place so much emphasis on competition since it is believed to be an effective means of obtaining 'greater effort from pupils'. If students are being prepared for life in their society which is structured on the 'survival of the fittest model', then it seems easy for teachers to focus their attention on the 'brighter' students to the neglect of the 'slower' ones and thus maintain the status quo.

Some other limitations of the subject-centred theory of education, so it is argued,¹⁶ are that it fails to recognize the importance of child interest, problem solving, and sound methodology. The question of interest has been discussed to some extent in Chapter II of this study and we have assented

¹⁶ See Reginald Archambault (ed.). Dewey on Education: Appraisals (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 180-189.

to the importance of gearing the curriculum not only to the interests of students but also to their needs. In this connection, we suggested that needs and interests should be interpreted not as children see them but rather according to what children need or what it is in their interests in terms of preparing them for adult life. So Archambault's assertion that "the traditional subject-matter orientation toward curriculum has long suffered from an inability to recognize the importance of child interest"¹⁷ seems to be premised on another dimension of the development of interest.

If this limitation implies utter disregard for children's interests that are not of educational importance, then perhaps we should consider the argument. So far, we have no indication that educators of the subject-centred persuasion suggest that we utilize children's non-educationally manifest interests to teach them those skills that are worthwhile. The emphasis is on the development of latent interest. So the idea of using certain activities in which students are interested and which are regarded as non-educationally important to teach both cognitive and effective skills would be considered out of place in the subject-centred school since stress seems to be placed on 'chalk and talk'.

But children's interests that are not considered to be

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 180.

educationally important can be used to teach them a variety of skills. For example, if children are interested in playing, say, "Scrabble", teachers can use this game in the classroom to teach word structure and sentence construction in Language Arts. This game calls for serious thinking so it also develops in students the ability to think. The attitudinal dimensions of education are also taken care of in the sense that the game provides the scope for pupils to learn to cooperate and respect the rights of others.

The use of students' manifest interest illustrated in the preceding paragraph seems to make it possible for pupils to master a greater amount of skills in a given period. One apparent advantage is that the teacher does not have to spend time to motivate students for the motivational problem does not arise since children are already interested.

But it may be argued that in a class setting, all the students will not necessarily be interested in the same activity. For that matter in a class of average size of say, twenty-five students, there may be as many as sixteen different interest groups. The question is, how does a single teacher cope with these varied interests simultaneously during one class period? Well, probably the teacher can tactfully arrange, with satisfactory input from students, a combination of interests and both teacher and pupils arrive at a decision to

use the combined groups at different times. Educators who regard the introduction of non-educationally important activities in the class-room as a waste of time as well as the country's money may ask: Is it not more advantageous to develop interest in worthwhile activities from the onset than for the teacher to spend time deciding how to incorporate non-educationally important interests?

However, there seems to be at least two dangers inherent in the conception of using children's immediate non-educationally important interests to teach them cognitive skills. In the first place, the teacher has to be sufficiently ingenious to be able to direct students' interests towards learning worthwhile skills or the significance of the enterprise can be lost and only a happy recreational experience is achieved since the class-room can be reduced to a mere play-room.

The second danger is related to the process of selecting the game. The teacher needs to be aware of the fact that even though children's interests may centre in many games, all games cannot serve the purpose of teaching cognitive skills. Chance games such as Bingo do not contribute to learning academic skills nor to the development of the ability to think and therefore should not be included among the games desirable for class-room activities.

That the subject-centred theory of education fails to

recognize the importance of problem solving in the educative process according to Anshambault's schema of limitations of the subject-centred approach seems to merit sympathetic examination. This limitation is undoubtedly related to the philosophy of the subject-centred school that learning is effected when the learner has gained mastery of subject-matter hence their reliance on rote learning and repetitive drills. But educationists with a contrary philosophy argue that this approach does not develop the ability to solve problems nor independent thinking among pupils since they merely accept and accumulate information presented ready-made by the teacher. They cannot use the information so acquired to arrive at solutions to problems and according to Dewey, if a child "cannot devise his own solution, and find his own way out he will not learn, not even if he can recite some correct answer with one hundred per cent accuracy".¹⁸

It does not need empirical evidence to convince us that if a nine-year old child of average intelligence is drilled in repeating say, *Elegy Written In A Country Church-yard* regularly, after a period of time that child will be able to recite with perfect accuracy. But according to the view project-

¹⁸ See John Dewey, "Learning as Problem Solving" in D. Vandenburg (ed.) Teaching and Learning (University of Illinois Press, 1969), p. 29.

ed in the previous paragraph, if the child does not understand the poem and if he has not developed an awareness of its moral and aesthetic dimensions, he has not learnt. The whole idea behind this argument is that learning does not consist of mere repetition of facts but it does consist of the ability to use experience and facts to promote creative thinking which suggests ideas that enable the learner to grapple with problems and arrive at their own independent satisfactory solutions. In addition, the solution of a particular problem ought to develop pupils' ability to solve related and more complicated problems. It follows then, that mere repetition of facts is insufficient for maximum development of students and consequently neglects a vital aspect of education. In this connection Dewey asserts:

Ideas are worthless except as they pass into actions which rearrange and reconstruct in some way, be it little or large, the world in which we live. ¹⁹

The final limitation of the subject-centred theory that we shall discuss is that it fails to recognize the importance of sound methodology. It is said that teachers who adopt this theory put a high premium on content but they regard "this as material to be learnt and believed". ²⁰ as far

¹⁹ John Dewey, The Quest for Certainty (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1929), p. 316.

²⁰ Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 32.

as they are concerned, it is their job to imprint what is worthwhile on the 'mind and heart of the pupil'.

This emphasis on content seems to be the motivating force for the adherents of the subject-centred ideology so although teachers undergo a period of training, only that aspect of the training programme that is directly related to the mastery of subject-matter would be considered essential. The absolutely essential requirement for the teacher is complete mastery of subject-matter. On this issue Perry says:

.... the right belief, the right attitude, the requisite knowledge, would themselves guide one to the mastery of effective teaching ... complete mastery of the subject-matter was the only indispensable thing. ²¹

If students are to be prepared to 'exercise the responsibility of self-direction and citizenship', it is important that they develop such qualities as critical thought and autonomy. This implies that if teachers are to be equipped to participate effectively in the educative process, it is vitally important that they gain complete mastery of subject-matter.

Hirst and Peters aptly point out:

It is pointless being critical without some content to be critical of; autonomy or following rules that one has accepted for oneself, is an untelligible ideal without the mastery of a body of rules on which choice can be exercised. ²²

²¹Perry, op. cit., p. 67.

²²Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 32.

Children cannot learn to think critically unless they are supplied with certain 'environing conditions' - subject-matter for example - which are requisite 'to start and guide thought'.

Dewey's contention is:

Nothing can be developed from nothing; nothing but the crude can be developed out of the crude - and this is what surely happens when we throw the child back upon his achieved self as a finality, and invite him to spin new truths of nature or of conduct out of that. ²³

But the importance of curriculum content does not in any way reduce the importance of a sound methodology. Teachers need to understand facts about childhood, the conditions of learning, and principles regulating the treatment and development of children. With this understanding, they should be able to devise satisfactory methods that will contribute towards making the teaching-learning process a pleasurable experience for both teacher and taught and at the same time, enhance the development of creativity and the ability to think critically among children.

Despite the limitations inherent in the subject-centred theory of education, the idea that many adherents still hold tenaciously to its tenets could be an indication that there is something valuable in the tradition. It must be remembered that the subject-centred theory of education is one dimension

²³ John Dewey, "The Child and the Curriculum" in R. D. Archambault (ed.) John Dewey on Education: Selected Writings (New York: Random House, Inc., 1964), p. 349.

of the traditional approach to education and therefore its general features are common. So when Archambault asserts that "the traditional view has its strongest advantage in its recognition of the need for establishing sound goals for education",²⁴ the assertion applies to the subject-centred orientation as well.

Educators of the subject-centred ideology are absolutely clear about the purpose education is to serve and may even argue that their "job is to shape the development of children in accordance with a predetermined pattern."²⁵ We must admit that this expression 'shape the development of children' does carry with it harsh overtones but nevertheless, in this model teachers realize that if they are to accomplish the goals of education they cannot simply be 'neutral catalysts' in the educative process but that they have a responsibility to direct the learning process.

Hirst and Peters beautifully express this directive function of the teacher. They write:

Whether teachers like it or not a teaching situation is a directive one in which decision about what is desirable are being made all the time.²⁶

And Dearden is even more emphatic as he explains:

²⁴Reginald D. Archambault (ed.) Dewey on Education: Appraisals (New York: Random House, Inc., 1969), p. 180.

²⁵Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 29.

²⁶Ibid., p. 31.

.... in no system of education can the teacher escape responsibility for the direction which things take. Even for the teacher to withdraw as much as possible from the scene is for him to make a choice. He is choosing an environment in which there will be no direction or explicit guidance, and hence he remains responsible for all that happens in consequence of that choice. ²⁷

The second and last merit of the subject-centered theory that we shall discuss is contained in its emphasis on curriculum content. In spite of the arguments of theorists of other persuasions that the subject-centred school is 'rigid, unreflective, and unperceptive' about the manner of education, educators of the subject-centred orientation "did at least have a clear idea that their function as educators was to hand on what is worthwhile in the way of content". ²⁸

The content of the curriculum is important for a variety of reasons. It has been discussed earlier in this chapter that subject-matter is requisite to start and guide thought and that children cannot learn to think critically unless they are supplied with content. Similarly, in the area of experiential learning, it is imperative that children be supplied with content from which they can develop experience, which, if properly utilized, ultimately results in learning

²⁷ R. F. Dearden, The Philosophy of Primary Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1968), p. 13.

²⁸ Peters, op. cit., p. 36.

Children cannot be expected to develop experience from nothing. Just as a carpenter needs lumber, saw, and allied materials in order to erect a structure, so does the child need an educative medium to effect experiential learning. The implication is that talk about critical thought, experience, and other related educational concepts are vacuous without curriculum content.

We have seen, then, that according to the subject-centred theory, primary consideration is given to the content of the curriculum. To theorists and their adherents of this persuasion, the subject-matter of the curriculum is extremely important.

Like all theories, the subject-centred theory has its strengths and weaknesses. In short, to use the description of Hirst and Peters, it is "strong on aims and content but weak on methods".²⁹ We have not been able to arrive at any defensible grounds for attributing lack of educational relevance to the subject-centred theory of education. Maybe we can find such grounds in another theory so we shall focus our attention on the child-centred theory in our next chapter.

²⁹Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 32.

CHAPTER IV

THE CHILD-CENTRED THEORY OF EDUCATION

The child-centred theory of education is a variant of the progressive theory and like other forms of progressivism, it arose as a reaction against certain traditional school practices. Although the progressives differ in many of their principles, it is said that they are united in opposing the following practices of the traditional school: (1) the authoritarian teacher; (2) exclusive reliance on bookish methods of instruction; (3) passive learning by memorization of instruction of factual data; (4) the four-walls philosophy of education that attempted to isolate education from social reality; and (5) the use of fear or physical punishment as a form of discipline.¹

Bantock expresses his view of progressive education as follows:

It involves decay of the intellect, the decline of the will and the triumph of impulse. For all its boast of vitality and parade of joy, it lacks roots; and what lacks roots has a habit of bearing a stunted growth and withering.²

¹See Allan Ornstein, An Introduction to the Foundations of Education (Chicago: Rand McNally Publishing Company, 1977), p. 204.

²G. H. Bantock, Freedom and Authority in Education (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1965), pp: 14, 15.

Since the child-centred theory of education has characteristics common to progressive education, Bantock's statement of progressive education applies to child-centred education as well. But child-centred education "has become institutionalized and is official policy in many educational systems"³ and this is indicative of the fact that this system of education can contribute significantly to the field of education. Bantock's statement gives one the impression that the child-centred theory of education is inadequate and could be accused of irrelevance so we shall consider this theory of education to see if we can find any justification for lack of educational relevance.

1. Nature of the Child-centred Theory

The child-centred emphasis in education appears to have a long history. It is traceable as far back as the ideas of Plato and Rousseau and its imprint is still on our educational systems today.⁴ Theorists of the child-centred ideology detest the view of education as a preparation for life on grounds that it gives rise to the tendency to devalue child-

³ Harold Entwistle, Child-centred Education (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1970), p. 13.

⁴ Ibid., Ch. 1 and Ornstein, op. cit., pp. 204, 205.

hood and to regard it as a period of deprivation.⁵ Instead they consider the aim of education to be 'growth' or the development of individual potentialities. From Peters' point of view, they tend to believe that education consists in the development from within of potentialities rather than 'moulding' from without, that the curriculum should arise from the needs and interests of the child rather than from the demands of the teacher, that self-expression is more important than the discipline of subject-matter, that children should be allowed to 'learn from experience' rather than be told things.⁶

Dewey holds a similar view of the beliefs of the progressives and this applies to child-centred educators as well. He thinks that if one were to attempt to formulate a philosophy of this system of education, it would consist of the following: expression and cultivation of individuality, free activity, learning through experience, acquisition of skills and techniques as a means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal, making the most of the opportunities of the present life, and acquaintance with a changing

⁵This issue has been discussed in Ch. 1, pp. 10-12.

⁶R. S. Peters, "Education as Initiation" in R. D. Archambault (ed.), Philosophical Analysis and Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1965), pp. 93, 94.

world.⁷

In this model, emphasis is placed on creating a happy educational environment for the child. He is the 'centre of gravity' and his 'immediate instincts' are acknowledged. It is argued that the traditional subject divisions are artificial impediments to the child's natural curiosity, and that examinations are an elitist device whose main function is to encourage a sense of rejection and failure. Group projects and individual activity methods are favoured and punishment is regarded as an unjustifiable expression of the teacher's sadism.⁸ The main thrust in the educational situation is not equipping pupils with knowledge and skills to be possibly used in the future but the "development of appropriate knowledgeable behaviour in a social context".⁹

Although child-centred educationists show great concern for the child's capacity as a child and structure the educational programme to utilize those experiences which have meaning for the child and therefore 'enrich childhood', they are not ignorant of the adult role the pupil has to play. In

⁷ John Dewey, Experience and Education (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1970), pp. 19, 20.

⁸ P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters, The Logic of Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1970), p. 1.

⁹ Leslie R. Perry, "What is an Educational Situation?" in R. D. Archambault (ed.) Philosophical Analysis and Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1965), p. 72.

other words, they are aware of the importance of knowledge and skills in a social context but believe that these arise naturally from solutions to problems. Since pupils will acquire skills and the concomitant knowledge, it is not necessary for teachers to emphasize these. The emphasis, then, seems to be on the methods to be used to develop these skills. In this connection, Perry asserts:

The idea of a specific adult rôle for the pupil was not overthrown; it was the process by which the pupil was brought to play it that was different; he was to arrive there by unobtrusive guidance in grappling with his problems, until, in an unbroken developmental sequence, they became adult problems. ¹⁰

It seems logical to agree with Ornstein that the strictly child-centred progressive opposes the interference of adults in establishing the learning goals of children as well as the imposition of social goals and values upon them. ¹¹ In other words, children's educational experiences are structured not on the basis of what adults want them to learn but on the basis of their experiences which are more or less an outgrowth of environmental experiences created by adults. In the area of discipline, teachers strive to develop a friendly relationship with their pupils on the basis of 'mutual acceptance'. This serves as a springboard for them to guide their pupils

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 72, 73.

¹¹ Ornstein, op. cit., pp. 205, 206.

to self-discipline. So the assumption is that the child will desist from unruly behaviour not because of fear of physical or other form of punishment but because of a realization that he or she has a commitment to maintain the 'harmonious cooperative activity' of the class. In addition to this, because the class activities are structured on the experiences of the children, they show great interests in these activities and disciplinary problems are reduced to a minimum. In short, the child shoulders the full responsibility for his actions. But a fitting question may arise in our minds at this point: suppose a child, or group of children for that matter, does not fit into the 'assumed commitment mould' and exhibit unruly behaviour, how does the teacher deal with such a situation? Perry says that the teacher regards disciplinary difficulties not as laziness, ineptitude, moral dereliction, and the like in those who will not learn but as essentially problems of personality which he or she can enquire into, diagnose, and solve. ¹²

The child-centred orientation of education is considered to be a tender-minded approach. ¹³ Some get the impression that children with whom this model is practised emerge from

¹²Perry, op. cit., p. 74.

¹³Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 1.

the formal educational system as happy well adjusted individuals. "But others see - emerging from this system - citizens who are deficient of the ability to do intellectual work with 'thoroughness and dispatch'.

2. Relevance and the Child-centred Theory

In the area of education, there is a popular assumption that the standards of scholarship and literacy have been lowered. The average individual who has completed the educational programme offered by our present school system does not have competence in academic skills as compared with the average individual years ago. This incompetence in cognitive skills, it is argued, is manifested in the inability of some children to read, write, and compute. And even college and university graduates cannot do intellectual work with thoroughness and dispatch. Critics of the child-centred tradition attribute this educational degeneracy largely to the introduction of child-centred principles in our educational system.¹⁴ It is assumed that because adherents of the child-centred tradition encourage students "to do as they please, few choose to make the effort to master the symbolic processes and most

¹⁴See Entwistle, op. cit., pp. 14, 15

are content with second best".¹⁵

To the extent that there is a degeneracy in our educational system, one gets the impression that because of the philosophies of the theorists of the child-centred school, an environment is created for most students to be 'content with second best' therefore this system of education is inadequate and could be charged with lack of educational relevance. So we shall direct our attention to this substantive theory of education to see if we find any justification for the allegation that it is inadequate and is therefore irrelevant.

We established the precedent in Chapter I and reiterated it in Chapter III that relevance is not an absolute property and that it requires specification of the matter at hand. Therefore the only way one can determine whether a particular form of education is relevant is to examine it in the light of how it fulfils the purpose it is designed to serve. We have also assented to the belief that the ultimate purpose of education is to develop in pupils those skills that they will need, as adults, to function as responsible members of society and that this function includes cultural transmission and the maximum development of each student.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, adherents of the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

child-centred ideology are concerned with the development of individual potentialities and are fully aware of the importance of knowledge and skills in the educative process. According to Hirst and Peters, "they really assumed a traditional curriculum".¹⁶ So apparently, their vehement protest against the traditionalists is not in the area of curriculum content per se but in the method of selecting and teaching content.

The child-centred educationists' conception of curriculum content and the methods of instruction, it is argued, is that:

.... curriculum should arise from the needs and interests of children, not from the demands of the teacher; methods are only educative if they involved learning from experience rather than being told things and if the child was a discoverer rather than a listener.¹⁷

So the implication is that in a child-centred school, the teacher enquires what children feel they need or feel interested in and uses this information as a basis for structuring the educational programme. This attitude toward curriculum construction has been severely criticized¹⁸ and Rugg and Shumaker warn:

We do not dare leave longer to chance - to

¹⁶Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 31

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸See Ch. III for more detailed discussion of this issue.

spontaneous, overt symptoms of interest on the part of occasional pupils - the solution of this important and difficult problem of construction of a curriculum for maximum growth.¹⁹

But if the teacher is alert, he or she should be able to utilize children's immediate interests that may not be educationally important and channel them into educational activities which are productive of both cognitive and effective skills.

From the child-centred educationists' point of view, reference to children's needs and interests as the focus of educational attention does not seem to indicate that in a school situation teachers should simply have children pursue those activities in which they are interested. But rather that teachers should use these to teach students what is worthwhile for them to learn. For example, if children are interested in say, cricket, the teacher could teach drama using a cricket scene. Adherents of the child-centred tradition would perhaps argue that in this way, the teaching-learning situation would not be dominated by a teacher lecturing to a group of submissive pupils, but it would be a two-way situation in which both teacher and pupils are given the scope to contribute significantly to the educative pro-

¹⁹ Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker, The Child-centred School (New York: World Book Company, 1928), p. 118.

cess. The pupils are learning from experience while they are developing the ability to think. And above all the environment is created for the class activity to be a pleasurable experience since children are not transported from their real world of personal contacts but are able to transfer those activities which have meaning for them into the class-room as they engage in the programme of education.

Child-centred educationists consider using children's needs and interests prescribed above as the "only method of teaching compatible with respect for the child as an individual person having a distinctive point of view and distinctive purposes to pursue".²⁰ This seems to be an overstatement because teachers do not necessarily have to start their teaching from those activities in which students are interested that may not be of educational importance. They can develop students' interests in what is considered to be educationally worthwhile from the onset and at the same time have respect for them as individuals. However, on this question of using children's interest as the basis for curriculum construction, Tyler emphasizes:

Probably no thoughtful proponent of progressive education ever advocated teaching stu-

²⁰ R. F. Dearden, The Philosophy of Primary Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1968), pp. 21, 22.

dents only things in which they were at that moment interested.²¹

It is quite likely that in a child-centred school, the teacher who lacks initiative may use those activities in which children are immediately interested without moving forward into educationally valuable directions and to convert the class-room into a play-room. But this problem is not inherent in the theory, it is with the teacher.

If teachers exercise common sense with the use of children's needs and interests as the starting point for their class-room activities, they will be able to get students to develop their potentialities to maximum capacity under pleasant conditions and thus accomplish the purpose of education.

Arising out of the emphasis on the child's immediate needs and interests in the educational process is the argument that "this only reinforces his tendency towards egocentrism from which it is the function of his education to wean him".²² Obviously, according to this view, any system of education that encourages this attitude would be irrelevant since it produces attitudes which are antipathetic to education and therefore does not achieve the purpose of education. This

²¹Ralph W. Tyler, Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 11.

²²Entwistle, op. cit., p. 83.

argument is not without some justification. However, the chances of re-inforcing the child's tendency towards egocentrism will be greatly diminished if his needs and interests are used not as an end in themselves but as a means of achieving other objectives, viz: teaching skills that are necessary for active participation in societal activities. Viewed from this perspective, the child-centred theory of education cannot be considered irrelevant.

There is also the claim that the child-centred theorist's opposition to adult imposition of social goals and values on children is a threat to the cultural heritage of our society. This implies that unless a direct effort is made to integrate the younger members of society into those aspects of culture which are considered valuable, it is likely that they may introduce cultural strands of their own devising which may run counter to generally acceptable patterns of culture. This will evidently result in inconsistency and perhaps conflict which in turn will lead to impoverishment of the cultural heritage. Culture, in a child-centred context, does not seem to refer to the anthropological sense which represents 'a whole way of life' but rather to the normative sense which relates to those activities that have "Value in promoting growth of intellectual capacity and aesthetic and

moral sensibility".²³ So adherents of the child-centred tradition would probably argue that they do not in any way pose a threat to society's cultural heritage. And perhaps their argument could find justification in the fact that one of the tenets which they, as well as other progressives, hold is that "social goals, as well as intellectual goals, are important".²⁴

But adherents of the child-centred ideology raise a vehement protest against the practice of instructing pupils in what to believe since, in their opinion, this exerts pressure on their free development. Perry explains the methods the child-centred teacher uses to transmit culture:

He does not specifically instruct pupils in these beliefs, but concentrates on thoughtful discussion of them, attempting however to lead his pupils in the direction of accepted conventions about the rights and duties of the adult citizen and his example is taken to recommend, without verbal persuasion, the worthiness of the beliefs he represents.²⁵

It is assumed that by using this approach, pupils will be reasonable and critical but finally they will accept the culture of their society.

If teachers comply with the prescription of child-cen

²³ Ibid., p. 133

²⁴ Carroll Atkinson and Eugene Maleska, The Story of Education (Philadelphia: Chilton Company, 1965), p. 78.

²⁵ Perry, op. cit., p. 73.

tried theorists that the curriculum should arise from the needs and interests of children, this does not prevent them from carrying out a satisfactory educational programme. By using the child-centred approach to education, teachers can transmit culture and guide their students to develop their potentialities to maximum capacity. Moreover the environment is created for the teaching-learning process to be a happy and enjoyable experience. Since the purpose of education is achieved, there is no justification that the child-centred theory of education is irrelevant.

3. Limitations and Merits of the Child-centred Theory

Theories, even though they may be considered as being good, are not expected to correspond with every practical situation. They are more or less generalizations, therefore those who implement them need to regard them as such and adapt them to their particular situation. Failure to do this generally results in gap between theory and practice and accusations are bandied from theorists to practitioners regarding the adequacy or inadequacy of the theory in a practical situation. On one hand are theorists who, perhaps because of a clear understanding of all the ramifications of the theory, insist on its workability whereas on the other hand are some practitioners who admit that the theory sounds reasonable but

maintain that it is just not workable in practice. Although some teachers may mis-interpret the function of a theory - to be specific, the child-centred theory since this is the one under consideration - an examination of this theory will reveal that it has limitations as well as merits unless this is an exception to the underlying features governing all theories.

Bantock seems to have undertaken such an examination and has drawn our attention to at least one limitation. He has discovered that "one of the great faults of child-centred education has been its tendency to make the child its own arbiter in its own destinies".²⁶ This limitation seems to be rooted in the child-centred theorists' emphasis on child-initiated learning.

A child's environment affects his outlook on life tremendously. Those children who are from homes where they are encouraged to make decisions and where they are taught the importance of education whether explicitly or implicitly are provided with a basis on which to decide their destinies and can therefore make steady progress with this approach. But those children who are unfortunate to have come from homes

²⁶ Bantock, op. cit., p. 64.

where these factors are not present can be at a serious disadvantage with this approach. For example, children who come from working-class homes are likely to have negative attitudes towards education not necessarily because their parents are determined that they follow in their footsteps, though this is the case occasionally, but because the future hardly holds any promise for them. According to Entwistle:

The soul-destroying work which many of them seem destined to perform and the appalling housing in which they are compelled to live must appear to them to mock at any conception of education conceived in terms of cultural improvement. ²⁷

In such a situation, perhaps some children are at school only because they are legally compelled to be there. The implication therefore is that if such children are to change their concept of education and benefit from an educational programme, they just cannot be left to decide their own fate since they have no satisfactory criteria to guide them. Apparently, among other measures, the teacher has to use other methods that will arouse them to participate in the educational programme in a positive way.

The second and last limitation of the child-centred theory that we shall discuss is its lack of specificity about

²⁷ Entwistle, op.cit., p. 192.

the aims of education. As pointed out in section I of this chapter, child-centred theorists consider the aim of education to be growth and Peters gives us the impression that child-centred educationists conceive of the teacher in the educational situation as one who has studied the laws of development, and who has to provide appropriate conditions by arranging the 'environment' so that the child can 'realise himself' or 'grow' without becoming stunted or arrested.²⁸ Concepts such as 'growth', 'self-realization', and 'environment' are ambiguous and need clarification if they are to be understood. For example, growth can be interpreted in many ways²⁹ - the maturational sense, which has to do with the development of the biological organism and the readiness sense which has to do with the teacher assiduously observing "the child to detect signs of maturing 'growing points' best indicated perhaps by spontaneous, felt interests"³⁰ being two examples.

Plants follow the natural course of growth. In other words, provided they get the required amount of air, sunlight, and water, they will grow. They do not have to put forth any

²⁸Peters, op. cit., p. 94.

²⁹See Dearden, op. cit., Ch. III for detailed discussion of growth.

³⁰Ibid., p. 29.

effort to grow in one way or another. But in an educational setting, with children, this is not the case:

'Growing' or realising oneself implies doing things which are thought to be worthwhile rather than others. The standards by reference to which they are judged to be worthwhile are grasped by men and handed on from generation to generation. ³¹

Evidently, this presupposes standards of value which determine the direction of growth. And the child-centred theory is far from being specific as to what is implied by growth or the direction in which it is to be determined. So teachers in a child-centred school can conceive of their role in the educational process as simply allowing children to do what they please without channelling them into educationally worthwhile activities with the belief that they will emerge from the school system prepared to take their places in their society. Or they can see themselves as:

..... gardeners watching development, ready to feed the growth, ready to restrain or weed according to need; trying to help each child to grow the best he may; not be worried to make all the plants the same, but trying to bring out that they shall grow, so that the whole garden shall be in harmony. ³²

³¹ Peters, op. cit., pp. 94, 95.

³² O. B. Priestman, "The Influence of Froebel on the Independent Preparatory Schools of Today" in E. Lawrence (ed.), Friedrich Froebel and English Education (London: University of London Press, 1952), p. 127.

There is a similar obscurity with the concepts 'self-realization' and 'environment'. At this point, it is important to understand that 'self-realization' is a variant of growth and therefore has certain common characteristics.

However, Bantock sees only one sense in which the child-centred theorists' idea of self-realization can be truly fulfilled. With reference to self-realization in a child-centred setting, he says:

It means allowing the child to realize himself and a very part of that realization fostering an appreciation of selves other than self; for paradoxically, only thus can the self come to maturity. In this sense and only in this sense, can the purpose of education be said to be self-realization.³³

But there are other criteria of value by which to determine self-realization. For example, is it the self-realization of an impoverished self that is achieved by the curtailment of desires or by withdrawal of activities? Or is it the self-realization of a self of some richness or the widest and most inclusive self that we can harmoniously achieve?³⁴

Environment is a multi-dimensional concept. Dearden asks a very striking question: Is it the physical environ-

³³ G. H. Bantock, Education in an Industrial Society (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1963), p. 174.

³⁴ Dearden, op. cit., p. 38.

ment, the social environment, the environment opened up by books, or what?"³⁵ There is no explanation stated nor implied so we have no choice other than to arrive at our own interpretation.

It is evident that the child-centred theory is indeterminate with regards to the concepts of 'growth', 'self-realization', and 'environment'. This implies that practitioners in a child-centred school can participate in the educative process on the basis of their interpretation of these concepts and thus distort the theory and consequently fail to achieve the goal that the child-centred theorists intend the system of education to achieve.

The fact that the child-centred theory of education 'has become institutionalized and is official policy in many educational systems' is indicative of the merits inherent in the theory. It is said that one advantage of activity methods is that individual difference is attended to. Undoubtedly, this statement specifically relates to one of the chief precepts on which progressive education and obviously child-centred education rests its case: "we learn best by doing and by having a vital interest in what we are doing".³⁶

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 29, 30.

³⁶ Atkinson and Maleska, op. cit., p. 78.

The notion individual difference can be viewed from a technical as well as a moral perspective. In the former, individual difference is taken into consideration on the basis of a means - end continuum. That is, individual difference is being stressed simply to achieve some extrinsic goal. For example, a teacher who operates a private school in which he teaches Chemistry and Physics can use different approaches in his teaching and so cater to individual differences among his pupils. He does this not because he believes that this is the proper procedure but because he expects to recruit chemistry and physics teachers from his school. In the latter, consideration is given to individual difference on the basis that every child is a human being and should be treated as such. In other words, "individuals matter and ought to be valued in and for themselves".³⁷

In a child-centred setting, individual difference refers to the moral dimension. Entwistle subscribes to this view. He says, "child-centred educationists have stressed that children have a right to consideration and treatment as intrinsically valuable human beings". He further adds that "in educational theory, advocacy of individual education de-

³⁷ Entwistle, op. cit., p. 25.

rives from moral assumption".³⁸

It need not be interpreted that in a child-centred school the teacher caters for every individual pupil. Plain common sense dictates that this would be impractical. It is definitely impossible for one teacher to cater for every child in a class of say, twenty five. But if all the children in a particular class are approximately the same age, it is likely that they will have certain things in common. So those children who have common interests can be arranged into small groups and work on an activity with guidance from the teacher.

In a class where activity methods are used, participants in a group help one another constructively and if the class activity is properly organized and supervised, the teaching-learning process can be satisfactory. In addition to mastery of academic skills, effective skills - cooperation for example - can be learnt. And at the same time individual differences will be attended to.

The final merit of the child-centred theory of education that we shall discuss is embedded in its emphasis on growth and self-realization. Despite the weakness we have observed in the child-centred conception of education as growth discussed in this section, it provides the scope whereby pupils can choose for themselves and learn by experience.

³⁸Ibid.

Peters draws the moral importance from this emphasis on growth and self-realization thus:

They suggest another dimension in which value judgments can enter into education, which relate to the manner rather than to the matter of education They stress the importance of letting individuals choose for themselves, and direct their own lives. ³⁹

In the educative process, the manner in which the teaching-learning process is carried out is vitally important. Some methods of teaching are more conducive to enabling pupils to derive pleasure from their learning experiences than others. The impact of the principles of the child-centred theory is felt in the field of education. In Entwistle's opinion:

School discipline is rarely the repressive, even brutal thing it often was a century ago. Teachers are much more approachable than they once were and children are no longer expected to be seen but not heard. Undoubtedly schools are happier places for being child-centred. ⁴⁰

In this chapter we have seen that with the child-centred theory of education, the manner of education is an absolutely important factor in the educative process. It is highly recommended that the needs and interests of students should be used as the basis for curriculum construction.

³⁹ Peters, op. cit., p. 95

⁴⁰ Entwistle, op. cit., p. 13.

However, there are a few ambiguities surrounding the aim of education and because of this, teachers in a child-centred school, especially those who lack initiative, may engage in the educational process on the basis of their interpretation of the aim of education and consequently cause the theory to lose its significance.

But this does not signify that if the child-centred theory is properly implemented, it will fail to achieve the purpose of education. Like any theory, it has its limitations as well as its merits. The popular opinion is that it is strong on methods but weak on aims and content".⁴¹

The child-centred approach to education does not deter practitioners from accomplishing the purpose of education which is transmitting culture, socializing the young, and developing each student's ability to maximum capacity. Since it can satisfactorily accomplish the purpose of education, we have failed to find justification for irrelevance in this theory. Possibly, the field of education could benefit tremendously from the merits of both the child-centred and subject-centred approaches to education so we shall focus our attention on the integration of the strengths of these two theories in our next chapter.

⁴¹Hirst and Peters, op. cit., p. 32.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Integration of the Merits of the Subject-centred and Child-centred Theories of Education

Perhaps the field of education could be likened to an arena. Different sets of theorists seem to be protesting against the ideas of one another and so the struggle goes on. Among these conflicting groups are the subject-centred theorists who emphasize the importance of the subject-matter or content of the curriculum and the child-centred theorists who contend that:

The child is the starting point, the centre, and the end. His development, his growth, is the ideal. It alone furnishes the standard. To the growth of the child all studies are subservient; they are instruments valued as they serve the needs of growth. Personality, character is more important than subject matter.¹

Both arguments have some validity for educational practice for if teachers are to make a success of teaching they must teach something and that something is content. We often hear the expression 'we teach children, not subjects' but

¹John Dewey, "The Child and the Curriculum" in R. D. Archambault (ed.) John Dewey on Education: Selected Writings (New York: Random House Inc., 1964), pp. 342, 343.

if we are teaching at all, it is just natural that we teach children either how to do something or that something is the case. In other words, content is an indispensable element in teaching. It follows, then, that this expression is not to be interpreted literally. The idea it generates is that attention should be directed to the child as an individual with a 'sacred right of childhood' and that he or she should not be subjected to mechanical modes of teaching nor rigid unreflective educational experiences.

In educational circles, it is an accepted belief that education should develop in pupils the ability to think critically. But critical thinking does not come about automatically; people have to be taught to think critically. Evidently, this presupposes 'mastery of some body of knowledge' hence the importance of the content of the curriculum.

Similarly, teachers cannot teach effectively without giving due consideration to the children they teach because, in an educational setting, children represent one of the fundamental factors in the educative process. Child-centred theorists advocate that children should be respected and consideration should be given to their needs, interests, and stages of development therefore teaching should proceed from those activities in which children are interested even though they may not be considered worthwhile educationally. This implies.

that the teacher should be sufficiently ingenious to move on into educationally worthwhile activities. But subject-centred theorists are in favour of engaging only in those activities that are of educational importance.

Whether teachers start their teaching from those activities in which children are interested but may not be educationally worthwhile as a means of teaching skills that are educationally important or develop children's interests in educationally worthwhile activities from the onset, they, in reality, give due consideration to the children they teach. For whereas one group makes use of immediate interests, it is expected that the other resorts to motivational techniques to arouse latent interests. So it is not necessary for one group of educators to blazon the superiority of the subject-matter of the curriculum on their banner and the other the superiority of child-initiated learning on theirs. If we discard prejudicial attitudes we shall discover that:

.... the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction. ²

Too great an emphasis on either is detrimental to educational practice. Adherents of the subject-centred tradi-

²Ibid., p. 344.

tion, because of their belief in learning as mastery of subject-matter, tend to ignore the importance of method in the educative process. And so they resort to harsh and coercive techniques to get children to gain mastery of subject-matter. Similarly, adherents of the child-centred tradition, because they believe that all studies are subservient to procedural principles or the method of education, they tend to substitute method for 'valuations about content'. Taba and others explain the impact the progressives' and naturally the child-centred theorists' emphasis on method has made on education as follows:

The progressives encouraged a greater concern for the process of learning and the learner as an individual, but their emphasis in turn produced a curriculum that was somewhat defective in the relative lack of emphasis on the quality of the content with which it dealt.³

Peters reminds us that teaching is a complex activity which unites together processes, such as instructing and training, by the overall intention of getting pupils not only to acquire knowledge, skills, and modes of conduct, but to acquire them in a manner which involves understanding and an evaluation of the rationale underlying them.⁴ Unless educators

³ Hilda Taba et al., A Teacher's Handbook to Elementary Social Studies: An Inductive Approach (London: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1971), p. 5.

⁴ R. S. Peters, Ethics in Education (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), pp. 39, 40.

understand this, surrender their preconceived conflicting ideas of the elements of education, and view the educational situation from a new perspective, I suspect that there will be no end to theorizing.

My contention is that there is no need for further theorizing. Additional theories will definitely side-track us from our goal of assisting the younger members of our society to acquire knowledge and skills that they will need, as adults, to participate responsibly in societal activities. In addition, it is likely that they will increase the intensity of the conflict in the educational arena and widen the differences between the child and the content of the curriculum.

Dewey asserts that the fundamental factors in the educative process are the child, and certain social aims, meanings, values incarnate in the matured experience of the adult and that the educative process is the due interaction of these forces.⁵ If his assertion is correct, I suspect that in isolation, no theory that emphasizes one of these factors at the expense of the other will effectively guide practitioners to engage in the process of education satisfactorily.

Two common-places of curriculum theory are the child

⁵Dewey, op. cit., pp. 339, 340.

and the subject-matter. As I see it, to further subdivide these will complicate the issue. But theorists who argue in favour of the subject-matter of the curriculum represent many variants of this theory.⁶ - studies of separate disciplines and the interdisciplinary curriculum being two examples. Each of these contends that his or her curricular contrivance is more fruitful than the other. Similarly, child-centred theorists introduce other forms of child-centredness in their theory. There are those who argue in favour of freedom of self expression and there are still others who argue that education should liberate the 'child's creative drives'.⁷

In any effective educational system, the content of the curriculum and the individuality of the child are equally important; therefore, an integration of these two forces should be productive of a satisfactory educational system.

What, then, is the verdict with regard to an educationally relevant concept of relevance? Throughout this study, and particularly in Chapters I and III, we established a principle that unless one examines a particular form of education in the light of the purpose it is designed to serve,

⁶Harold Entwistle, Child-centred Education (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1970), pp. 102-110 for further discussion on the separate discipline and interdisciplinary curricula.

⁷See Allan Ornstein, An Introduction to the Foundations of Education (Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Co., 1977), p. 206.

one cannot determine whether that system of education is relevant. From this point of view, an education that provides the scope for pupils to develop their potentialities to maximum capacity under pleasurable circumstances and also integrates pupils in those areas of society's culture that are considered valuable, meets the criteria of a relevant education.

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