

# Fact or Fetish?

*In the light of the many major problems of the world which appear to rise more from fetish than fact, the issues in our own field of education may seem of small importance. Yet how can we expect to solve the great problems when we have trouble thinking straight even about the minor ones? The foregoing articles present abstract concepts of thought; those which follow discuss specific issues in education about which our thinking has been muddled. It is much easier to talk about proof and prejudice in the abstract than to take it into our own field and point to this as proof and that as prejudice. But we believe that educators will want to seek solutions to their own problems. Therefore, we invite you to give serious consideration to the matters discussed in the following articles.*

¶ *This is not an either/or issue; there must be the child AND the subject matter*

## SUBJECT MATTER OR THE CHILD

● FANNIE R. SHAFTEL

SEDOM IS THERE a discussion of the modern school in which someone does not raise the issue of whether we are going to teach subject matter or the child. The implication is that emphasis upon child development will result in little subject matter being learned.

This is not an either/or issue. Wholesome child growth demands the use of extensive subject matter. As children inter-act with their environment they are continually trying to understand life phenomena. One of the outstanding characteristics of childhood is an insatiable curiosity.

If children are helped to find illuminating answers to their questions, their curiosity increases and their power to find further meaningful answers grows. If their eager questions are

ignored or turned aside because adults demand that they conform to arbitrarily determined studies, children soon cease to ask questions and content themselves with minimum ways of meeting adult requirements.

The issue is not subject matter or the child but rather *what* subject matter and *how* shall it be developed.

### *Subject Matter to Fit Needs*

The modern school is designed to afford children experiences in exploring their environment in ways that satisfy their growth needs. It organizes subject matter, skills, arts, and materials to serve the developing experiences of the children. In this process, subject matter has no arbitrary organization. Any subject matter is used which helps to il-

luminate the growing experience and which reveals answers to questions. Thus in a project involving boats and water transportation, arithmetic subject matter is used to understand tonnage and distances, science content in explanations of why boats float, and geographic materials in seeing where boats go and why.

The child-development school is concerned with the psychological organization of subject matter based upon analyses of how children connect and relate experiences in order to gain insight and arrive at real understandings. Children, because of their limited background of experience and immaturity, must be guided through cumulative experiences wherein each succeeding experience throws further light upon the previous one, enlarges its meaning, and prepares the way for better understanding of the next one.

In this cumulative process, the time comes for each child—depending on his own rate and level of ability—when the expanding experiences assume meaningful relationships for him and he gains insight into the cultural knowledge he is exploring.

---

*Sometimes in a verbal battle, as in military combat, we have to wait until the smoke clears before we can see real issues. That, in a way, is the situation we face when we begin to talk about subject matter and the child. In the heat of discussion, we forget that the question is not the child OR the subject matter but rather how to fit the subject matter to the needs of the child.*

Fannie R. Shaftel, Elementary Curriculum Coordinator of the Pasadena City Schools, describes here the kind of school program which can develop in children a lively curiosity and sincere interest in subject matter—often in subjects ordinarily considered beyond their range of understanding.

---

This is not a will-o'-the-wisp process of following incidental child interests. Children's growth needs lead them to an interest in all activities appropriate to their maturity levels. Curriculum workers are continuously giving serious thought to the kinds of sequences of experience which will best meet real needs and afford rich experience in the cultural heritage.

#### *From Things That Move to Trucks and Oil*

As teachers become increasingly more skillful in guiding children's experiences, we find several significant things occurring: (1) Children, when freed to explore and inquire use more, and even more difficult, subject matter than was considered possible for them to absorb in the more formal procedures; and (2) teachers, in order to meet their children's needs, find it necessary to prepare themselves more extensively in the areas of child interest and to provide a wider and richer range of sources of information.

This is illustrated in the records of developmental projects. First grade children, for example, working with creative manipulative materials, will express their fascination for things that move by making trucks and running them around their gradually constructed community. Their construction needs will bring them into a consideration, in great detail, of kinds of trucks and their functions, where they go and where they come from. Reasons for the products carried will lead them into the institutions of the community and homes of workers and a beginning understanding of the relations of homes to work and to community arrangements. In the

course of building their trucks these children will work with linear measure and proportion. Among other things they may explore oil and gasoline as they build an oil truck. They use extensive visual aids and develop a readiness for reading, and many develop beginning skill in reading.

A sixth grade that was intensely interested in aeronautics decided to build gliders and lighter-than-air craft and to hold a model craft contest. A skillful teacher who had previously explored the area and prepared for possible questions was able to guide them into a series of experiences which covered the following content:

1. A beginning understanding of the forces involved in flight, such as thrust, drag, lift, and gravity. This included an intensive study of weather, experiments with weighing air, air-pressure, and making a barometer and rain gauge.

2. A comparative study of gliders and airplanes which included parts of a plane, their functions, history and flight, basic materials used in making planes, various jobs of the aircraft industry, airport activities, procedures and jobs in actual flying, plane identification.

3. The work of aircraft in all phases of world culture with special emphasis on how the plane is modifying the culture. Such activities as mapping by air, sowing fields by air, and fire fighting, were studied.

4. This led to exploration of the growing inter-dependence and mutual effort of nations with special emphasis upon inter-American affairs and a re-thinking of time and space relationships involving a study of the history of time, time zones, geography in terms of

time-distance and a re-thinking of communication relationships. As can be seen science, geography, mathematics, reading, and many other subjects were involved.

Because of the high interest and meaningful cumulation of understandings, these sixth-graders were able to use new types of maps, globes, and geographic films that a nearby junior high had judged too advanced for its students.

#### *Publishers Follow Trends*

This demand for more and greater detailed information is further demonstrated by the new types of textbooks now being published. Publishers follow trends, and the trend is revealed by the growing fund of good books that no longer deal in vague generalizations or mere compilation of facts but are definitely designed to serve children's active exploration of cultures and life processes.

There is no doubt that in this dynamic approach to learning not only is more subject matter used but many skills that were previously taught in complete isolation are learned easily and well in projects important to the child. When children see the need for a specific skill in their own activities, they develop purposes for learning that skill which bring them to specific learning periods eager and ready to apply themselves to the task at hand.

Dr. William Heard Kilpatrick has said to us many times that "we learn that which we accept." Children embrace enthusiastically all learning which has meaning for them. The range and kinds of subject matter learned in the modern school shows a great growth in quantity and quality. The challenge for

us today is not whether we shall teach subject matter or the child but rather how can we provide the quantities and

qualities of subject matter the child demands as he avidly explores this great wide world.

¶ *We know that learning is a lifelong process; yet we do little to extend after-school education*

## EDUCATION ENDS AT 18

• PAUL H. SHEATS

IF YOU WERE ASKED to indicate agreement or disagreement with the following statement published in a recent issue of *School Management*, how would you vote?

Learning is a continuous process for the normal, mentally alert individual, a process which begins at birth and continues as long as life continues.<sup>1</sup>

Ninety-nine and fifty one-hundredth per cent of you nod agreement and mutter a few appropriate phrases on the silliness of asking for such an obvious answer. And so, *ipso facto*, the myth that education ends at 18 is exploded and we move on to more pressing considerations. But wait a minute—does intellectual agreement that learning is a lifelong process mean that present school practice is consistent with that conviction? You see what we are leading up to. The gap between profession and practice on this matter of extending educational opportunities to out-of-school youth and adults is so wide that the real myth which needs to be ex-

ploded is the belief that we now have an extensive pre-school and adult program. Actually the public school in its current program is no more than exploring the approaches to the problem.

Briefly, here is a bill of particulars:

### *Why Do We Need to Extend Education?*

1. Out of a potential clientele of approximately 89 million persons over 18 years of age in the United States, probably not more than 2 per cent are being reached by a program of public school adult education at this time.

Among the 75 million persons in the

*Paul H. Sheats, Director of New Tools for Learning, New York City, tells us that there are two contradictory myths extant among us. Myth number one: a youngster terminates his learning at the age of 18; myth number two: youth may quit formal schooling at 18, but that is no cause for alarm because we have a totally adequate program of extended school services for the "post-eighteeners." Mr. Sheats is most concerned with exploding myth number two, for he says that practically all of us will agree that, like breathing, education goes on as long as we live, but that we do not face the facts about our woefully deficient education for out-of-school youth.*

<sup>1</sup> Fern, George H.: "What Plan Is Your Community Making Today for Adult Education Tomorrow?" *School Management*, January, 1944, vol. 13, no. 5, p. 130.

Copyright © 1944 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.