

## Teacher Education Institute (TEI)

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### Overview - Content Areas

We send our children to school to learn. In the past almost the total emphasis was on content. Children went to school to absorb and learn a great deal of information. In recent times the emphasis has started to change and many would now consider that education is not only concerned with the transmission of knowledge but should also help children to develop in a number of other areas.

These areas would include the social and psychological, but also the development of the affective, creative and imaginative. In modern terminology, many of the descriptions given to this growth would refer to right as well as left hand brain activity.

Teachers who base their teaching on nurturing the creative, artistic and imaginative appreciate this holistic approach when dealing with various areas of childrens' development. The results of these determinants mean that curricula should be formulated so that it relates to these different aspects of growth.

Our curriculum possesses unique structures which offer child centred content and methodology. Many educators and psychologists describe different theories of child development. Our approach not only offers such a theory but also describes in detail content and curriculum which directly relates to that theory. The aims of our curricula and how content in the different subject areas relates to stages of development follows.

#### 1. The Aims of the Our Curricula

The main aims of the elementary school curricula are to encourage:

- a) breadth in learning rather than narrow and specialized subject matter;
- b) the involvement of all facets of children's inner experience, so that different types of thinking can be developed (for this to happen the content should be attractive to as many of these facets as possible);
- c) an emphasis on the needs and interest of children rather than the needs and interest of society;
- d) the linking of all content matter to childrens' stage of development.

##### a) Breadth in Learning

The curriculum aims to retain a broad base of subject areas throughout the elementary school (and in high school). However, "breadth of learning" is not only confined to this broad base of subjects; it also applies to the ways in which teaching within the subject areas is approached. On many occasions a thematic approach is more appropriate than a subject based one, particularly at the lower age range of the elementary school.

This approach is not accidental. Content, if it is to have any real meaning for children, must relate to inner experience. Presenting content within narrowly defined subject areas is not only artificial but can harm. For example, if a topic is to be taken in geography, it needs, initially, to incorporate an historical perspective, a social aspect, an element of natural history and so on. Ignoring these other aspects is also ignoring the experience of children for they naturally do not compartmentalize knowledge.

However, as children move into the higher grades they need to gradually make the transition to the subject based curriculum. This begins to happen at around ten and continues and expands until high school. This does not mean, however, that all lessons timetabled in the latter years of elementary school are necessarily taught from a subject based approach. A thematic approach will be suitable on many occasions. In addition the teacher will still, even where a subject based approach is used, include material which is relevant to the creative and artistic.

## **b) Content and Childrens' Inner Experience**

It is generally accepted that childrens' individual experiences play an important part in the learning process. However, we need to appreciate that whereas an adult's thinking follows, or attempts to follow, certain logical patterns which can be described in terms of reasoning, the thinking of elementary school children is different. Children are not miniature adults and it is damaging to them to treat them as such, particularly when they think in a pictorial form which we, as adults, have lost to a great extent.

Adults are able to theorize and think abstractly; children immediately place the information they receive in a totally different context. Children, to a far greater extent, form pictorial images where the imagination plays an influential and determining role. Whereas adults form mental concepts, children's thought processes are composed of images and mental pictures. This type of thinking as well as being pictorial is also uncritical. Children wish to believe what they are told.

They expect adults to know the answers to their questions and they expect those answers to be true. Children give their teacher their trust as a matter of course, and in return they expect, instinctively, to receive wisdom and authority. Not only do children expect their teacher to fulfil this role of sage but they demand almost omnipotent power from their teacher. How many times have we heard young children bring into, or even end, an argument with the statement, "Well my teacher said so"? The responsibility remains, therefore, to satisfy this need, while at the same time preparing them for the next stage of development.

Children's thinking as well as being pictorial and uncritical is also unspecialised. Whereas the adult is predisposed to compartmentalize knowledge, children naturally take an holistic view of the world. Much of the time they feel at unity with the world. This means that, wherever possible, teaching should occur from the whole to the parts.

One of the aims of the curriculum is to allow children to gently and gradually adjust to the outside world; to proceed from involvement in action, through feeling to knowledge. This would include the transition from living to non-living and from unity to dispersal.

Many aspects of our approach could, in modern terminology, be described as relating to hemispheric development, or more specifically, to the balance between right and left hand brain activity. There is more than ample evidence available to indicate that, if children are going to develop to their fullest potential, the educational process needs to relate to the creative, imaginative and artistic as well as the theoretical and cognitive.

Part of this process is to acknowledge different types of thinking. An education which concerns itself with a purely cognitive approach is by its nature a rather sterile one. The recognition of intuitive thinking is happening more and more in today's world and many educators are sympathetic to this trend.

## **c) Needs and Interests**

The changes that occur in present day society are, in many areas, rapid and of some magnitude. The relationship of education to the particular social milieu in which children grow up in is complicated and dynamic. Obviously any particular social environment will influence the contents of the curriculum, although it should be added that that determinant will have a far greater influence at high school level than at elementary level.

Our approach is child centred and as such considers that education relates to the social, emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing of children, as well as to the intellectual and cognitive. Society has every right to make demands that children should learn particular content, but it is held that such content needs to relate to the experience of children. If any conflict arises, the needs of children will usually be of a higher priority than those of society.

This does not mean an approach which lets children indulge in their every whim or fancy, or lets them, for example, have freedom to choose what they want to study or when they want to work. However, it does mean that the approach needs to be child centred. If we relate content to their experience they will learn far more easily.

If, on the other hand, we decide that the needs of society are paramount we shall create barriers to the learning process. In some ways we have as much to learn by teaching children as they have in learning from us. In doing so the needs of society will be satisfied but not at the expense of childrens' wellbeing.

#### **d) Stages of Development**

It is important that content should relate to the stage of development. The stages which are dealt with in this presentation are 6+ to 8+ : 9+ : 10+/11+ and 12+/13+. Children possess certain qualities at each stage; in other words their experience of themselves and the outside world differs as they reach certain phases of growth. The transition from one phase to the next is very gradual. It takes many months or longer; it follows that content should relate to the different type of consciousness at whatever phase the child is at.

### **2) Content and Stages of Development**

#### **6+ to 8+**

At around the age of 7 a significant change occurs; the child moves from a consciousness which is predominantly one immersed in action to one where the affective life becomes paramount. For the most part they feel no separation from nature and the world that surrounds them (a quality retained from very early childhood). Therefore, the content of the curriculum should reflect this. Story content which includes legends, folk tales and fables from many cultures feed this life of feeling. Children relate, through their feeling life, to many archetypal characters found in such stories. Similarly, care needs to be taken in the way in which themes from the natural world are introduced. Children, particularly at the lower age range, will almost certainly endow animals, plants and minerals with human feelings.

At the child nears 9 a change of emphasis occurs, and they not only become more aware of the outside world but also involved with it; subject matter reflects this involvement. Between 6 and 7 children learn about part of their own individuality through the affective and emotional side of their nature. Children experience contrasting moods whether they are of joy or sorrow or, in extreme case, of love and hate. As children experience such conflicting emotions, the school situation can prove beneficial and therapeutic. Content can be formulated so children can feel and understand these emotions; in so doing education becomes a true art form.

Many educators will relate to this approach in subject areas where the creative and artistic element is definable and understood. For example, in art and music; in stories, drama and history. But this artistic element needs to be an integral part of other subject areas which are usually regarded as academic, for example, mathematics, English and so on. Children also want to experience the outside world, and their relationship to it, through rhythms that correspond to their own rhythmic system. In doing so there needs to be a balance between absorption of new experiences and the expression of inner experience. There should be a continual interplay between the breathing in of new experiences and the breathing out of different activities.

#### **9+**

Between the ages of nine and ten, children's perceptions of themselves and the outside world change. No longer is their inner world at one with the outer world. They begin to perceive their own individuality as separate from the world. This process can be uncomfortable or painful at times and children, according to their temperament, will handle such situations quite differently. For example, some might well withdraw; others become assertive or even aggressive.

Children, in their tenth year, are aware of their own individuality in a different way than previously. Part of the curriculum needs to relate to this “new” experience; in essence feeding and nurturing the new kind of awareness. This may be far more important than content that is formulated so as to develop only one aspect of a child’s nature viz. the intellect. For example, much of the content in the study of “Man and Animal” in grade 4 is formulated so that it specifically relates to the nature of such changes. Similarly various mythologies are ideal story content for this age. All the various mythologies have their special characteristics which differ so much in feeling and mood.

#### **10+/11+**

Between ten and twelve is usually a period of relative peace. Hopefully the child came through the adjustments of 9 and 10 without too much difficulty, and there should follow a period of only minor adjustments. The child needs this period of relative calm as towards the end of this time the pre-pubertal storms will start to gather. In many instances there develops a sensitivity which brings parent and child far closer together.

The rising 12 year old is now showing greater awareness of cause and effect in quite different ways to that of the 9 or 10 year old. It is important, therefore, that this new quality is recognized and handled with care through curriculum content. It is far better if one relates to this development, first through living concepts and only later through mechanical ones. That is why, for example, the subject of botany is established a year before physics, so that causality in nature can be handled before causality in the material world.

#### **12+/13+**

This is a period of approaching change. When children entered elementary school they gradually moved from “willing consciousness” to “feeling consciousness”. At the time they are leaving the 8th Grade (13+) they are moving from the realm of feeling into the realm dominated by thinking. It is now possible for children to start handling far more abstract ideas, although again care must be taken to see that the subject matter is introduced in the right way.

For example, in the sciences, the introduction of new concepts should be through observation with strong artistic input. Only then should the theoretical be introduced. There is greater value in acquiring knowledge based on individual perception and observation than in a process where the development of observation has been neglected.

### **Conclusion**

One of the main adjustments to make when examining our curriculum is to appreciate that we consider the process of education as an art. It is a dynamic process and the teacher who uses the curriculum will appreciate the way in which they “tap in” to their own creative ability. Teachers must have freedom to do this. Although they are provided with detailed guidelines concerning the ways in which content relates to the different stages and the way it is structured, they have complete freedom to formulate content and methodology within the guidelines described. It is the teacher who knows the weaknesses and strengths of each individual child and the class as a whole. It is only he or she who should be responsible for choosing individual content.

We offer our theory of child development and content and methodology of teaching, not in a dogmatic way but as guidelines which allow all teachers to use their knowledge, experience and creativity. In doing so education becomes a true art and he encouraged teachers to approach their task with freedom and confidence. Many teachers will no doubt feel some trepidation at what might be termed a considerable “paradigm shift”. Once such a shift occurs however, and teachers starts getting in touch with their creative forces, they will find the teaching process much easier. They will also find many children responding in a way they hardly thought possible, and teaching can become far more enjoyable and satisfying for both student and teacher.