

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3. THE ELEMENTAL AND THE FUNDAMENTAL

In a teaching situation an adult presents contents to a child in particular ways with the aim that he will learn (49, 18). There are a variety of ways contents can be presented to a child so that their essentials speak to him. According to Klafki contents cannot be formative if they are not elementary, basic, i.e., elemental.

Lifeworld contents show a structure that, as far as didactic theory and practice are concerned, offer the possibility of elementalizing or reducing them. The essences of a greater structure of reality are reflected in a particular or typical case that, if it is understood by a child, also makes his understanding of the larger relationship possible.

That contents can be so reduced has given rise to many pronouncements in this regard and they are considered in this chapter. These pronouncements mostly are those of capable and noted didacticians and all fall within the scope of didactic pedagogics.

The question also has to be asked about why contents are generally unlocked for children. The answer is that they have to be unlocked so children can learn them. They have to learn to know the contents of the complex lifeworld because one masters them by knowing them (49, 21). Just as there are a rich variety of forms in which contents can be **presented** to children, there also is a wide variety of pronouncements about their **effects** on a child's becoming or about the formative value of didactic unlockings. The many pronouncements appearing in the literature regarding these effects are dealt with under the concept "fundamental".

The "elemental" is considered first because the fundamental appears only when it has been reached through the elemental (7, 20).

#### 3.1 The elemental

Contents that are made accessible to a child and placed in his field of understanding and life horizon are viewed in the didactic situation as elemental contents or as "the elemental". Various writers, including Klafki, view the elemental as the only way in which children can acquire an understanding of life reality. He also says that life contents cannot be viewed as formative before they are reduced to the elemental.

It is necessary to qualify the reduction or elementalizing of contents. Reducing contents does not mean a splintering or that a part of a whole is presented--it means the essential of the whole content (43, 93). It is not merely a particular characteristic but a particular that reflects a general structure.

Schleiermacher says the elemental has to include the essential points or the life moments of the lifeworld that have to be unlocked.

Several writers also indicate that the elemental is teleologically determined; that is, it is an essential view of the contents in terms of the aims of the lesson. They also indicate that elementals are not isolated and do not appear in the lifeworld as single, existing unities but are always related to other elementals and have to be abstracted from them.

What follows is a rendering of the forms of appearance of the elemental based on a review of the literature. Wagenschein indicates that the elemental is the simple that is not so simple--as is apparent in the range and variation of the pronouncements that follow. Because of the comprehensiveness of the concept it has imminent (sic) relevance for didactic theory and practice.

### **3.2 Pronouncements about the elemental**

- i. The elemental is reduced content.
- ii. The elemental is an essential of reality.
- iii. The elemental is an actual or lived moment of reality.
- iv. The elemental is a phenomenon of reality.
- v. The elemental is a structure of reality.
- vi. The elemental is a category of reality.
- vii. The elemental is an onticity and, as such, cannot be absent from the contents and, consequently, from didactic activity.
- viii. The elemental is an essential element of reality.

- ix. The elemental is elementalized (simplified) contents.
- x. The elemental is an intrinsic part of the learning contents.
- xi, The elemental is a collective, unifying becoming. This view refers to Froebel who describes the elemental as "collective genesis". Lately there is reference to a possible misinterpretation of this pronouncement. The elemental is contents that are not themselves becoming but which predispose it or make it possible because as teaching contents they are "pregnant".
- xii. The elemental is the bearer of the exemplary and also is even exemplary. Scheuerl says the elemental is always exemplary of something for someone. The question of whether the elemental is embedded in the exemplary principle, or the other way, is shown with this. The essential-simplicity to which the contents are reduced is the elemental, which is the comprehensive concept. The exemplary principle is embedded in the elemental.
- xiii. The elemental is a principle, law and even a definition.
- xiv. The elemental is valid in general.
- xv. The elemental is a typical principle.
- xvi. The elemental is an intensification of reality.
- xvii. The elemental is included in the pregnant example.
- xviii. The elemental is also elementary.
- xix. The elemental is a condensation of content.
- xx. The elemental is an interpretation, especially a sign as interpretation of meaning.
- xxi. The elemental is an example, exemple, sample and especially also a paradigm.
- xxii. The elemental is a detail or particular representation of a generality.
- xxiii. The elemental is a concretization of space and time.
- xxiv. The elemental is a pure case.
- xxv. The elemental is an embodiment of content.
- xxvi. The elemental is condensed content.
- xxvii. The elemental is concise content.
- xxviii. The elemental is a focal point of the content and center of becoming.
- xxix. The elemental is a symbol or is symbolic of reality.
- xxx. The elemental is a formative means or formative means of Dasein.

- xxxi. The elemental is knowledge. It is knowledge which is reduced and abstracted from the learning contents. However, it also is knowledge that leads to a meaningful existence.
- xxxii. The elemental is authentic. Although the elemental is always **of something** and **for someone**, it always has to be characterized as **authentically** embodying lifeworld and learning contents in spite of the reduction that necessarily has to occur.
- xxxiii. The elemental is a reduced relationship to reality.
- xxxiv. The elemental is propaedeutic in nature.
- xxxv. The elemental is a field of concentration for didactic work. This pronouncement by R. Meisters refers to the fact that didactic work takes its course by concentrating on the field of the elemental.
- xxxvi. The elemental is concentrated contents or a concentrated form of reality.
- xxxvii. The elemental is a dialogue between the nature (essence) of and the excesses (accidentals) of the contents.
- xxxviii. The elemental is a double-sided unlocking (Klafki).
- xxxix. The elemental is basic (Flitner, Klafki).
- xxxx. The elemental is basic and when it also actualizes becoming, it is the foundational.
- xxxxi. The elemental is representative of the forms in which the contents of reality appear.
- xxxxii. The elemental also can be included in the classical case.

### 3.3. Didactic interpretation of the elemental

The elemental is not valid outside of the activities in a didactic situation. Since, e.g., the elemental is described as the field of concentration for didactic work (Meisters), it should not be looked for in the lifeworld other than in a didactic situation. The elemental is not a field of concentration "in and for itself"--it is a field of concentration when it is used as formative contents in the activity of unlocking. Only then does it become the focal point of the contents and the center point of becoming.

In the same way, each pronouncement about and disclosure of the elemental is viewed as valid in didactic practice. It is the competent teacher who investigates, elucidates the elemental and gives validity

to the form in which it appears in the activity of unlocking. Outside of this situation, each pronouncement about the elemental (and also the fundamental) really is nullified because it ascribes to the contents the possibility of actualizing teaching, while we are obviously aware that a person is not to be thought of as apart from teaching.

All of the forms in which the elemental appears in the above pronouncements are about how it represents reality in a didactic situation. "Reality" also means involvement with the lifeworld, i.e., with reality as experienced. Reality is comprehensive and differentiated and it will become attenuated if it is not presented in one or a few ways. In addition, Kreschensteiner's point that each subject area has its own distinctive characteristics should be kept in mind (16, 219). Thus, it is assumed that certain elementals or representations will lend themselves to better use in some subject areas while other subjects will find different elementals more relevant to their needs.

To select one or some of these forms of the elemental and to elevate them to ways of unlocking by which reality is represented amounts to "elemental hypostasizing" in the sense that Van der Stoep talks about categorical hypostasizing (48, 24). Didactic practice is better served by an attitude that is open to still more ways of representing reality or to ways of presenting contents so they are accessible to a child.

Reflecting on the forms of the elemental, viewed against the background of didactic pedagogics and the didactic situation, is the only valid way in which the elemental ought to be interpreted. Take as an example Froebel's pronouncement that contents, if they appear "clearly", contribute to "collective becoming". This suggests an adult who is the "collector".

Again, becoming is essentially what lies on a person's path--a person becomes, contents do not. In this sense "becoming" has a metaphorical meaning. This means those contents abstracted and readied for a child are going to actualize his becoming. Only in this way should all forms of the elemental mentioned above be understood.

Reference to the elemental as formative contents or formative material also has to be viewed as reality that is elementalized and is

introduced in the situation as contents in terms of which a child's becoming, forming or educating are going to occur.

Other concepts and pronouncements that are similar to the elemental are: dialogue between the nature and fullness of contents; a field of concentration for didactic work; propaedeutic in nature; means of forming; center of becoming; double-sided unlocking, etc. all of which need to be understood in terms of their relevance for the theory and practice of teaching in connection with the above clarification of collective becoming.

Let us view the above in terms of the reduction of contents from the greater reality to contents that have been made accessible to a child by an adult in a didactic situation. Here it is understood that a child makes these contents his own and that his becoming flourishes because of them. As soon as these concepts are viewed against this background, they become interpretable didactically.

As a final example, take Klafki's definition of the elemental as a double-sided unlocking. The elemental first has to be found by an adult. Then it has to be unlocked for a child in a didactic situation. A child has to open himself to and step up to the unlocked reality. If this happens, categorical forming occurs and the child changes as his insights increase because of his participation in a life demanding unlocking. The elemental has to be understood in this way and not as if it merely occurs in the lifeworld as a double-sided unlocking.

For completeness, still other pronouncements about the elemental found in the literature are considered. Here there is reference to a rich variety of views that all are interpretable in accordance with the course of teaching as was clarified in the above discussion about situation, adult unlocker, teleological sense, elemental, unlocking, engagement, making a fundamental effect one's own. All of these views of the elemental have to be understood from a functional-didactic perspective.

The elemental is a reflection of the whole that it represents (Wagenschein). The elemental has to unlock what is intellectually fundamental (See Retrospect--Chapter Six-- for a clarification).

The elemental is disclosed teleologically; i.e., reality is considered in terms of the learning aim to see if a suitable elemental or elemental relationship can be found so that the unlocking will include a

moment of becoming. The didactician has to take a position to be able to determine what anticipated elemental can be used to push a child on the path from where he now is to the learning aim. So viewed, the teleological disclosure of a suitable teaching elemental has to occur with a child's current level of becoming and potentialities in mind from where and to where he can be directed to a fundamental attainment of the learning aim.

Finally, a few more pronouncements about the elemental are:

The elemental has to be near to reality and life;  
axiologically, the elemental has formative value  
(Kerschensteiner);

The elemental implies an elemental unlocking, thus a way of acting in a didactic situation. Hence, there are elemental methods or elemental ways of acting didactically;

The elemental is contents made accessible and gives teaching its character of accessibility (Drechsler, Pestalozzi, Herbart) (6, 25).

The above pronouncements as well as the previous ones regarding the elemental indicate that everything about it implies that one is in a didactic situation. They refer to ways and preconditions for authentically representing contents. If the demand for reducing the contents and making them accessible are met, the elemental is formative contents.

### **3.4 The fundamental**

A few orientational lines of thought are necessary preparation for being able to reach a final conclusion regarding the fundamental:

(a) A review of the literature contains abundant pronouncements about the fundamental but they acquire relevance only when they are interpreted didactically;

(b) Teaching and educative activities are never aimless. This clearly implies intervening in a child's life to bring about changes that have to be made. The fundamental is the expected dividend of teaching that is a result of the unlocking activity--a purposive change in a child's life;

(c) Because teaching and educating are actualized in one act, this implies that the aims of teaching and educating have to be realized simultaneously. Situations are not created purely for

teaching and others exclusively for educating. This sometimes is still a mistaken view and misunderstanding in certain theories and practices;

(d) The effect of unlocking should be thought of as a differentiated effect (47, 93). On the one hand, unlocking or opening elemental concepts have to lead to a conceptual grasp of reality but, on the other hand, the impact of the unlocking on becoming also is actualized as a fundamental disposition(s). This calls to mind Pestalozzi's view of "I see the world" and "I see myself";

(e) Various authors indicate that a child being taught has to experience authentically. A child cannot experience and remain the same. This change resulting from participating and experiencing in a didactic situation falls under the fundamental.

### 3.5 Pronouncements about the fundamental

- i. Where the elemental is contents elementalized by the teacher and aimed at a child, the fundamental represents the spirit or ethos of the presented sphere of or relationship to life.
- ii. The fundamental is what a child makes his own in a didactic situation and that allows him to meaningfully participate in reality and to understand his own world.
- iii. It is his meaningful mastery of the elemental that immediately and in anticipation directs him to a structured reality and to phenomena within that reality.
- iv. Teaching that is built on the elemental principle brings home to a child particular fruitful moments, certain dispositions and fundamental attitudes that are categories of reflection or *fundamentalia* for his future involvement with essentially similar contents (Klafki).
- v. The understanding of contents that a child acquires via the elemental equips him to be meaningfully involved with things (contents) but also to experience and lived-experience his own life as meaningful. This also reveals to him methods and ways of being involved with things. The methods are part of the *fundamentalia* of his becoming (Frick).
- vi. The fundamental has a prominent aspect of transfer (application, making functional) and also has an analogical



character. The fundamental is acquired knowledge that leads to a meaningful existence.

vii. The concept “existence” refers to a genuinely human way of being in the world. The philosophy of existence (that is distinguished from existentialism) views a person as the only being who exists\*. The fundamental gives depth, meaning and content to child existence.

viii. The fundamental is genesis in function (becoming in action).

ix. The fundamental is an intellectual/spiritual penetration of life and life contents through the elemental (Schleiermacher).

x. The fundamental is what a child makes his own and that allows him to participate meaningfully in reality (Herbart).

xi. The fundamental, basic experience that a child has in a situation (such as play) is for him a **key** to the outer world as well as an awakening of his interiority (Froebel). The fundamental is characterized as a "hunch", as anticipating and searching for something in advance (Froebel). In this regard, Kant says, "Human reason is architectonic. It regards all cognitions as parts of a possible system" (15, 83). It is by anticipating that a child can consider a possible system.

xii. It is on the level of categorical forming, says Stenzel, that the formative function of the exemplary (as elemental) is fulfilled because here a child not only grasps reality but also acquires self-understanding.

xiii. The fundamental is the primordial experience of becoming (Flitner).

xiv. Educating only can succeed if it is founded in the fundamental (Flitner).

xv. Eduard Spranger talks of the fundamental as the formative meaning of primordial lived-experiencing.

xvi. Again, for Weniger, the fundamental is the essential relativity within which life is lived.

xv. The fundamental is an adjustment in thinking and attitudes by a subject regarding insights gained through the elemental.

xvi. Nohl says, whoever adjusts his thinking and intellectual attitudes shows by this that for him primordial experience is not acquired only once but that this spirit or ethos has been actualized in him as a fundamental category of his existence.

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\* Exist in the existential phenomenological sense of ex-sist, to be outside of oneself, to be-in-the-world, etc. G. Y.

### 3.6 Didactic interpretation of the fundamental

The manifold indications of fundamentals and pronouncements about them are merely of **encyclopedic** importance until they are interpreted and clarified within a didactic framework. Because of the extensiveness of these pronouncements, their didactic interpretations cannot effect every case, but the guidelines that are laid down will hold for all of them.

As in the case of the elemental, the fundamental has to do with contents. However, where the elemental offers the possibility of entering into, accessing and mastering contents, the fundamental has to do with mastered contents and finally with what a child can do with these contents. Thus, the emphasis is on contents that are brought into function when there is mention of the fundamental.

In a didactic interpretation of the fundamental it is important to note that mastering contents, not the matter of forming, leads to its possibility. After an unlocking a child finds himself with knowledge, insights and dispositions at his disposal that he didn't have before the unlocking. These insights, understandings and fundamental attitudes have accrued to him by his own entry into and mastery of the contents unlocked to him as elementals.

L. Lahrmann, G. Slotta and W. Klafki (19, 100) talk of "extending the elemental into the question-laden, meaning-imbued reality." The intensified contents are not merely extended but figure in the intellectual equipment that has become part of the child and with which he sets out on his additional journeys of life. Future involvement with reality is guaranteed in the signs that indicate an "extension of the elemental". A child's participation in future situations, thus, implies entering them with the already acquired contents at his disposal. Now Nohl says that if a child has a thinking disposition and intellectual/spiritual attitude, he shows with these that this spirit or ethos did not arise for him only once in the original experience (where contents were mastered) but that they have become actualized **in him** as fundamental categories of his intellectual/spiritual existence.

The contents mastered all increase and gradually form the possibility that allows a child to acquire more independent insights. Mastering contents creates the possibility of changing how

relationships are established, deepening involvement with things and others and, consequently, mastering the world and reality. The possibilities that are fundamental equipment, that are the dividends of the unlocking, offer a child the only opportunity to acquire real personal forming when they are brought into function. Thus, Weniger asserts that personality cannot be the result of unlocking elementals; it is the result of a life lived with difficulty; a child becomes a personality to the extent that he puts the fundamental to use.

The above insight holds equally in the framework of the school as well as life. Insights into a scientific hypothesis are mastered contents, i.e., are already fundamentals, but there will be pupils (children) who put these insights into action by applying and practicing them, also in the context of other problems, and there will be those who will neglect such fundamentals. For the first group (who later might become, e.g., engineers or architects), the initially acquired contents are not only contents that are of help in ensuing situations but they also remain insights that are part of and give content to stylizing their lives, in later practicing their occupations or professions, and even in the ways they "live there lives" (Weniger).

The interpretation of the fundamental in a didactic framework is clearly that it is the path one follows that involves contents. The contents fill the lifeworld and are always and necessarily present. From the life world contents, by means of abstracting by the adult, slices are cut and the essentials of these slices of contents figure in the didactic situation as formative contents or elementals. By the child opening up to, entering into and intentionally participating in the unlocking situation, he acquires insight into these contents that are typified as fundamental insights. The elemental, that is the adult's rendering of contents, is a fundamental for a child that implies his own rendering or version of the contents. Thus, he becomes equipped to himself be involved with essentially similar life contents, i.e., to bring into function or functionalize the fundamental. Functionalizing the acquired contents leads to a life that is lived meaningfully but that still demands, as an imperative, mastering life contents to the bitter end. Thus, the circle is closed and one travels the path from life contents to life contents.

The above discussion suddenly advances the appeal and imperative of the act of teaching. For a child there is no other way to give

significant meaning to life than by the difficult mastery of life contents. Hence, didactic pedagogics advances the unlocking of contents as a life-necessary way along which one's forming, educating and becoming are actualized. Central to didactic practice is making contents accessible that offer the possibility of mastering them by which and from which they can be functionalized. The concepts of elemental and fundamental are central to didactic practice.