

## CHAPTER 5

### LEARNING CONTENTS

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

While describing various matters in previous chapters, the question of contents or learning material repeatedly entered the foreground as an important didactic matter which continually had to be considered. Thus, contents have an important place in explaining the relationship between educating and teaching; furthermore, contents are dealt with in relation to the different aspects of a theory of teaching, and their implications for practice also are considered. Contents also are part of the line of reasoning concerning the description of a teaching situation, as well as a clarification of the part which schooling plays in educating a child. Hence, at this stage, it is necessary to examine more deeply the entire matter of teaching contents, and to arrive at an understanding of their importance for a didactic situation.

Comments about contents made in previous chapters lead one to conclude that they are not merely confined to what is reflected in a school syllabus. The curriculum, including all the considerations about its structure and construction, are an important aspect of teaching practice, and warrants a separate chapter. As far as didactic theory is concerned, contents, as such, are fundamental because they essentially influence the activities of teaching.

To understand the problems interwoven with the learning contents, it is wise to once again return to the educative reality or educative situation in which an adult and a child jointly realize educative activities. A study of the original educative situation of parent and child in the home reveals that both exhibit forms of living in the way they participate in this educative event. The parent shows him/herself as an adult, i.e., his/her form of living is clearly that expected of or associated with adulthood. In contrast, a child's form of living is not yet adult. As far as one can judge from appearances,

the form of living adulthood especially is manifested in that an adult person is responsible and morally mature. This responsibility and moral maturity are the results of an adult's command of a wide variety of life contents in terms of which he/she can act independently and responsibly. Because of his/her mastery of life contents, it is possible for him/her to guide a child in an educative situation.

On the other hand, a child's form of living is clearly not yet adult; this implies that his/her grasp, command, and understanding of life contents are limited, to the extent that he/she cannot adequately evaluate and judge, or act responsibly in certain situations. Consequently, a child needs an adult's support, as far as his/her evaluation of reality is concerned. This emphasizes one of the most important differences between an adult's and a child's forms of living; namely, a child does not yet adequately possess the life contents in terms of which he/she can command life situations. These contents of living are known in various forms or categories, such as experiencing, intellectual penetrating, and moral judging. Because of these conspicuous shortcomings in a child's form of living, an adult involves him/herself in a child's existence over a period of many years with the aim that the child must eventually be emancipated as an adult person. One could also emphasize the distance or difference between an adult's and a child's forms of living, which primarily amounts to the fact that a child does not yet possess those contents in terms of which an adult generally lives as an adult.

For this reason, educating also has the aim—and this is a fundamental aspect of its practice—of eliminating these shortcomings by creating a series of educative and teaching situations in which a child is confronted with contents, with the expectation that he/she will master them.

Contents naturally appear in the reality of educating as *contents of living*. Therefore, it is understandable that they cover the wide and varied fields of a person's daily activities. The two-fold origin or source of these contents is mentioned previously: life reality, as such, and one's view of life and the world. These two sources are continually brought into harmony in an educative situation to

strengthen a child's grasp of reality. There is also a definite increase in the amount and complexity of contents as a child progresses toward adulthood. They vary from easy, everyday, concrete matters to complex, exceptional, and abstract ones.

The ways an adult is involved in guiding a child stress the fact that he/she recognizes that a child is not always ready for or capable of understanding certain contents. Consequently, he/she varies his/her presentations to establish a harmony between the nature of the contents and the level of a child's readiness. It is also important to note that, for a teacher, the contents are not always an aim in themselves. Although contents are often exposed for their own sake, an adult always has in mind furthering a child on his/her way to adulthood. Didactically, this is very important: an adult uses contents either as an *end*, or a *means* to aid and support a child on his/her way through the world.

The primary contents exposed in an educative situation understandably are coupled with the concrete, human experience, and everyday life situations in which a child finds him/herself. They are also mainly aimed at certain activities of a child to try to guarantee increasing his/her security and mobility in life situations. Insofar as one strives to arrive at formal (theoretical) conclusions about this elementary, initial presentation of contents, one must not be misled by its seeming simplicity.

The initial contents an adult presents to a child are meaningful and important to him/her because his/her basic situation is acknowledged and accepted. On this acknowledgment and acceptance, a foundation is laid for the later addition of more difficult and abstract contents. For this reason, the initial contents are no less important than the more complex contents introduced later, especially in school. In fact, they provide a beginning to a more complete mastery of life situations without which a child could not eventually show the image of being an adult.

Aspects such as insights into the meaning of healthy and clean habits, correct table manners, a daily routine, the ability to dress oneself properly, reverence during religious exercises, respect for the property of other people, etc. may, superficially, merely seem to

be forming good habits. However, a deeper examination of each of these aspects fundamentally influences a child's forms of living, especially in two ways.

In the first place, each one of these facets introduces a child to a reality which is primarily concerned with certain *norms*. These norms or standards are not merely coupled to activities, as such: they provide an adult with a point of departure on which to base his/her expectations for a child's future. More specifically, they indicate what is decent and proper and, thus, what must be revealed in a person's own lifestyle for it to be as it ought to be. In this light, learning correct table manners has a certain value because it is useful and represents an aim. Usefulness, however, is not the only aim an adult is concerned with when he/she intervenes in an educative situation with respect to a child's table manners. He/she also expects a child to directly acquire these life contents to progressively exhibit the image of a human being in an eating situation. In the light of this aim, an adult continually admonishes and disciplines a child because "a human being does this and not that". The demands of propriety and the authority of the norms (contents) are, therefore, important considerations; in fact, they bring their own influence to bear in every educative situation.

The second aspect which must be considered is that the initial elementary contents are the basis for communication between adult and child. As a matter of communication, these contents necessarily are also a matter of language. This implies two demands a child must meet: in the first instance, he/she must properly master the activity. In the second, based on language, he/she also must arrive at an awareness of the meaning or *sense* of these contents. This meaning or sense is closely related to each person's approval or disapproval of the contents. For this reason, language, *as such*, is an aspect of the educative reality which must be carefully considered in school.

The dialogue or conversation between adult and child in an educative situation follows a certain course provided by the contents. An adult expects a child to master these contents to change his/her activities in the future and, in doing so, to act and behave in ways an adult approves. The educative involvement with

contents must help a child change because he/she can change and, therefore, must change. Thus, educating a child implies that he/she subjects him/herself to the authority of the contents (norms) and which, in mastering them, he/she can act differently in the future, i.e., like an adult. The distance between the basic situation of a child and an adult is eliminated, in principle, by educating him/her. In mastering elementary, everyday activities, he/she learns to act like an adult. Consequently, even at this early stage, a child is beginning to exhibit an image of adulthood, however incomplete or imperfect.

The relationship between forms of living and life contents deserves closer attention. In the light of the above examples, a child learns (is educated) to understand that his/her activities, in certain situations, are subject to evaluation. It is expected that he/she will comply with certain codes of conduct. Such compliance is evidence that he/she has mastered certain contents, which is why demands are made of him/her with respect to them. These demands are aimed not only at a greater mastery of a situation, but also at awakening his/her conscience by means of self-criticism and self-censure. When evaluating a child's activities, an adult generally demands accountability, especially in two respects:

- knowledge a child has of the contents, and
- obedience to the norms contained in these contents, and the ways this is externalized in relevant situations.

What is now of particular importance is the unity and reciprocal bond between the contents (knowledge) and the forms of life (obedience) which are of considerable importance in any teaching situation. Without knowledge of the codes or norms relevant to a situation, a child cannot obey them. On the other hand, unconditional acceptance and obedience of the norms reflects a child's feeling of respect for them. This convergence of contents and forms in elementary, everyday situations is of fundamental pedagogical (educative) importance. As a child grows older, this mutual relationship not only increases in scope, but it also increases the level and quality of the demands made of a child.

In assessing “learning contents” as they are dealt with in a didactic situation in school, a teacher must understand that certain contents are part of a child’s primary involvement in life. Consequently, being confronted with contents in school is not foreign to a child’s experiences at home. The only difference in an educative situation at home and a more formal school situation is that, in school contents are presented in formalized ways in terms of systems and fixed routines. It is obvious that the learning contents a child is exposed to in the immediate, small world of his/her home are not adequate for him/her to fulfill his/her form of living and lifestyle.

Although a parent does not relinquish this aspect of his/her involvement with his/her child, while he/she is still at home, he/she does transfer the formal aspects of his/her involvement to the school as soon as his/her child is ready for it. In this way, a school exposes the wider world outside the home by means of contents, with the expectation that he/she will orient him/herself in terms of them to enrich him/herself and reach a fuller form of living (adulthood). In principle, a school continues the educative activities initiated at home. Within the framework of this brief explanation, it is necessary for a teacher to account for “learning contents” and their implications for the practice of teaching.

## **2. LEARNING CONTENTS IN DIDACTIC PERSPECTIVE**

From what has been said, learning contents represent unknown aspects of the lifeworld which a child must still examine and make his/her own. The relationship between the learning activities of a child and his/her guidance by a parent or a teacher puts the activities in school under the concept “going out into life”. Although the contents in school are generally formal, the transition from concrete, everyday contents of living (in the home) to the more formal, structured curriculum of school, is gradual.

All life contents, i.e., all the knowledge a human being possesses, are products of the activities of the human spirit. Insofar as learning contents reflect the sciences with which humans are involved, it is only an image of reality which a human being gradually builds up. The fact that a child becomes involved with the learning contents in

school implies, on the most fundamental level, that he/she goes out to life itself.

We know that the learning act is an existential matter. In the same light, learning contents also are contents of life, our cultural heritage, and a representation of human ways (means) of living generally. The correlation between learning contents and contents of living are clearly seen in the way a child flourishes and grows in a learning situation to become a responsible and moral adult person. To the extent that a child is involved with contents in school, to that extent he/she is placed in the presence of reality. He/she becomes involved with reality itself. By means of contents, a child examines the human lifeworld and learns to live as a person or human being. This is exceptionally important for a child's eventual perspective on life and view of the world.

In a later chapter dealing with the orienting task of the school, it is indicated that learning contents presented there enable a child to establish his/her own position in time and space. In school, learning contents are introduced to eliminate a child's shortcomings regarding space and time by means of which objects, people, and even God are brought closer. Learning contents, thus, provide a confluence of past, present, and future, and they are presented to a child in various ways (e.g., by means of language, direct observation, and experience). A child's questions about what *is*, what *was*, and what *will* be are answered by contents.

One can only understand the importance of the above for a child if one considers that the initial affective entry of a child into reality is supplemented by introducing learning contents, and that a child's existence is enriched and fulfilled by means of an increasing cognitive command of reality. It is peculiar to a child that, as he/she grows older, he/she deals more rationally with reality; in fact, he/she becomes more adept at intellectually understanding and explaining relationships between various matters. Dealing more rationally with reality occurs whether a child attends school. However, a school offers a wide and varied field of possibilities for a child, with the support and guidance of a teacher, to ensure that he/she fully develops his/her potentialities and capabilities.

When examining “learning contents” didactically, a teacher must carefully consider the following aspects to meet the demands made of him/her in a teaching situation.

## **2.1 The situation of being a child**

The basic thing an adult considers when involving a child with contents is that a child does not know the contents, nor does he/she have the necessary skills to discover their essences on his/her own. For this reason, a child cannot command the various aspects of the lifeworld if these shortcomings are not made good. Hence, the basic issues concerning learning contents are essentially pedagogical (educative). A child must learn the contents, and learn to judge them, if he/she is eventually to choose correctly as an adult, and be capable of accounting for his/her choices.

The relationship between the pedagogic and didactic involvement of a child with learning contents becomes clear if one considers that learning contents represent the whole or totality of the lifeworld. This whole includes religious, moral, social, historical, physical, esthetic, and other categories of reality which directly influence a child’s world of knowledge and, therefore, his/her judgment and choices.

One must also realize that learning contents can never be considered in isolation from a human being’s awareness of values. Thus, learning contents are always subject to the authority of values vested in a view of life and world. It is within this context that a teacher accepts the validity of learning contents.

The unity of a child’s world of knowledge and values is made possible by each one of the categories mentioned above. Because the learning contents selected by an adult represent the totality of reality, a teacher, in his/her presentation (lesson design) makes a representation of an aspect of reality known, which influences the child’s form of living, and which eventually enables him/her to make decisions. The quality of his/her decisions is reflected in his/her lifestyle. A teacher’s responsibility, in this respect, is immense. To represent reality for the benefit of a child means fundamentally to influence the image of reality which a child



eventually accepts as his/her own. Hence, a teacher tries to realize the educative ideal in his/her classroom by overcoming a child's not knowing and not being able to do certain things.

## **2.2 The didactic-pedagogic task**

When a child achieves a certain level of competence regarding reality, he/she also establishes a clear relationship with that reality, in the sense that his/her relationship is stabilized and expanded, thus, providing him/her with a base for further exploration. The nature and scope of a child's relationship to reality is directly influenced by his/her knowledge of it. The nature of this relationship becomes apparent in his/her ability to make genuine decisions in each situation, thereby determining and strengthening his/her own position in it. Eventually, he/she achieves a different attitude toward life, and a certain lifestyle. The realization of his/her relationship to reality, and his/her own lifestyle, make up a large part of his/her becoming an adult person. Becoming an adult represents both a pedagogic and didactic ideal. Consequently, the contents by which a child establishes a relationship with reality, as well as a personal lifestyle, are of fundamental importance.

For this reason, selecting and presenting learning contents in school deserve an adult's careful attention. A teacher must subject the learning contents to his/her educative norms. The validity of these contents is not only assessed by scientific criteria, but also in terms of criteria emanating from his/her view of the world and life. Therefore, he/she makes his/her decisions about learning contents in terms of both these types of criteria. This is especially important if one considers the open, future-directed mode of living, particularly of a young child. The course on which a teacher leads a child to reality is represented by the learning contents and the relationship between the various aspects of them. In this light, learning contents are not primarily the aim of educating, but they are the means for realizing it.

One must understand that a child's going out to and being involved with reality, by its nature is characterized by a sense of achievement. This achievement is directly related to the learning contents while he/she is at school. During the school years, an

adult sees a child's acquisition of the learning contents as the surest guarantee of his/her increasing adulthood and, especially, his/her eventual vocational independence.

As far as a child is concerned, learning contents are a matter of demands, responsibilities, and the acceptance of tasks. On the one hand, they offer him/her opportunities for self-knowledge and self-discovery; on the other, they provide opportunities for creating his/her own lifeworld.

Because of the achievement-directed nature of a child's involvement with reality and, therefore, the school situation, learning contents represent a challenge he/she cannot avoid or deny. In any case, a teacher will not allow him/her to avoid this challenge.

The essence of the didactic-pedagogic task concerning learning contents is to select, order, and present them in such a way that a child will participate authentically in a teaching situation. For this reason, learning contents are studied by a teacher as a didactic problem in close relation to every other facet of didactics. A teacher's task is to select the learning contents and design his/her lesson in such a way that he/she presents a child with an image of reality which he/she will consider worthwhile and, therefore, something in which he/she will want to become involved.

### **2.3 Learning contents and the teacher**

The teaching event is given its course and theme by the learning contents. Hence, it is not strange that learning contents are largely responsible for the meaning of teaching. As an area of involvement of a teacher as well as a pupil, in designing a teaching situation, a teacher can choose the learning contents as an aim or as a means.

It is also important to note that a teacher's authority is largely vested in his/her own command of the contents. A teacher's knowledge makes him/her a suitable person to support a child in his/her discovering and understanding reality. Whether learning contents will have an important formative effect on a child depends on how capable a teacher is in interpreting the contents for him/her. One must also accept that, when a teacher presents a

certain aspect of reality to a child, he/she can never be entirely neutral, objective, or impersonal. As a human being, he/she is a religious person, cultivated (cultured) being, etc. and remains so in a teaching situation. He/she has his/her own experiences and preferences about the contents.

For this reason, a teacher's interpretation of contents is based on his/her own lifeworld and view of life, i.e., on his own experiences, observations, dispositions, and attributions of meaning. Hence, a teacher's interpretation of the contents markedly influences a child's understanding and appreciation of meanings and relationships between concrete matters. A teacher must keep in mind that, in a didactic situation, a child's activities generally follow his/her example. This means that a child generally learns in terms of the teaching he/she receives. A child imitates the example a teacher sets; what a teacher does and says is also said and done by a child. A teacher's interpretation of the contents is the basis for a child's interpretation.

This interpretation of the contents revolves around their *meanings*, i.e., it is directed at their value and appearance/emergence in the lifeworld. Thus, a teacher is responsible to the community he/she serves to ensure that he/she has a thorough command of the contents and, especially that his/her interpretation will allow a child to enter that specific aspect of reality.

The interpretation a teacher offers is closely related to the way he/she him/herself is involved with the contents, and the criteria he/she uses to evaluate a child's attempts. Therefore, it is imperative that, in his/her design and presentation and, especially in his/her interpretation, he/she consciously searches a child's lifeworld to construct new structures which will be meaningful to him/her. In addition to the above, and as far as the didactic imperative is concerned, the relationship between a teacher and the learning contents is summarized as follows:

2.3.1 In designing a lesson, a teacher must ensure that reality is meaningfully represented to a child. To do this, he/she must carefully consider a child's lifeworld and form of living to relate his/her teaching to a child's experiencing, willing,

knowing, and behaving. As an adult, he/she is aware that, as far as his/her lesson design is concerned, he/she must be thoroughly conversant with each one of these aspects of a child's psychic life, because they have not yet been finally formed.

In presenting contents, his/her aim is to ensure greater stability and a more accountable form for these partially formed structures. This is to ensure greater mobility of a child in and out of school.

If children possess certain experiences of a matter, theme, or topic a teacher must attempt to exploit their experiences as far as possible in his/her presentation and interpretation, with the aim of fostering and promoting their learning. If a child does not have relevant experiences, a teacher tries to supplement his/her experiences artificially, or to directly present opportunities for experiencing. This can be done with teaching aids. A teacher's task is difficult. He/she must place a certain aspect of reality which a child does not know within the boundaries of his/her lesson in a classroom. Also, he/she must support a child in learning consciously and with understanding.

2.3.2 A teacher's presentation, therefore, is also a matter of supporting and helping a child. Support and help are not only confined to presenting a lesson. A teacher's task is related to every aspect of the school's activities, whatever they may be. The influence of his/her teaching must be continued in every other form of activity which the school considers to be meaningful for its curricular program. For this reason, controlling (monitoring) and evaluating are the culmination of his/her aid and support. They must be thoroughly planned and carried out responsibly because they are primarily concerned with creating a future for his/her pupils.

2.3.3 In view of the above, a child must create his/her own image of reality. This implies the highest form of influencing (a teacher influences a child, and a child a teacher) in a teaching situation. The formative as well as pragmatic value of the

learning contents must be evident to a child. This means that he/she, as well as his/her image of the world or perspective on life, must change because of his/her contact with the learning contents. Change in a teaching situation always has a positive emphasis, and is expressed in terms of an increased and more effective grasp, wider and sharper insight, more relevant and clearer application, etc. Each of these matters is discussed again when the theory of the elemental and the fundamental is dealt with.

## 2.4 The authority of the learning contents

In the didactic literature, learning contents are often described as form-systems of a culture. Apart from the quality of representing contents of life, they also place time and space within a child's grasp, enabling him/her to transcend the learning contents to situations, realities, and abstract structures which would otherwise remain beyond his/her reach. By starting with a child's immediate surroundings, a teacher offers him/her an opportunity to range farther afield by means of the learning contents. In this way, he/she encounters the rest of reality, enabling him/her to establish his/her own views, opinions, and conceptions. In this way, he/she comes *to* reality, *in* the world *with* other people.

Learning contents, as an image or representation of reality, undoubtedly have authority because certain aspects of what *is* are placed at a child's disposal. After all, the life-space a child inhabits is demarcated by contents and is made accessible by presenting them. Factual knowledge introduced when presenting learning contents has authority, since they are true or valid in one sense or another. By accepting the authority of learning contents in terms of their validity, a child places him/herself under the authority of the contents which provide him/her with access to the lifeworld.

The validity or truth of learning contents is only the first aspect of its authority. When a pedagogue deals with world and lifeworld via contents and learning contents, his/her considerations always include values and norms. Values and norms always impact the meaning and sense of the contents. An adult always aims at a child gaining knowledge of and insight into norms and values of the

lifeworld by means of contents. For this reason, an adult also unconditionally subjects his/her own knowledge and science, especially in practical life situations, to the authority of values and norms. The contents which a child must master in a didactic situation, thus, imply knowledge of the structure of norms which a human being accepts in his/her pursuit of science.

Considering that a human being's past, present, and future converge in learning contents, they have authority (apart from their scientific authority) in terms of the following:

- a) they describe the lifeworld and, therefore, make entry into it possible;
- b) they give perspective to the lifeworld regarding intuitive or pre-scientific existence, and a human being's explanation of reality;
- c) they make certain demands of a child concerning both the scientific and the pre-scientific aspects of reality by which a balanced life-space is made possible.

In this sense, learning contents represent fixed beacons of the general human lifeworld by means of which a child can orient him/herself and establish his/her own position in the world.

The relationship between the authority of a teacher and the authority of the learning contents is obvious and is not dealt with any further.

## **2.5 The learning contents and the pupil**

From what is said concerning the relationship between a child and the learning contents, the main points are summarized as follows:

- a) learning contents and the orientation of a child to reality are closely related;
- b) contents provide a child with fixed points in terms of which he/she can determine his/her own position within reality;
- c) educative authority, and the authority of contents cannot be separated;

- d) because learning contents make certain demands of a child, they offer him/her the opportunity to account for him/herself by means of his/her achievements.

A child's life of achievement deserves closer examination. In a teaching situation, learning contents provide excellent opportunities for a child to achieve affectively as well as intellectually. The meaning of this achievement will be lost if one considers learning achievements in isolation from life achievements. To achieve a certain level regarding contents in a learning situation, essentially means that a child announces him/herself as a person among other persons. His/her achievement is essentially a matter of moving toward or grasping his/her future.

Besides the utilitarian value which the mastery of contents implies, conditions are created for self-discovery and self-realization in a learning situation—but always in the presence and under the protection of an adult. In each one of these activities, a child experiences his/her involvement with reality as a participating person. However, as soon as this participation loses its character of achievement, it becomes pedagogically inadmissible and unacceptable.

In this light, presenting learning contents creates a new life-space for a child, especially in three respects:

- a) they provide him/her the opportunity to understand the values and norms which are valid in the lifeworld of adults. In this connection, a teaching situation influences a child's opportunity to respond systematically to the appeal adults direct to him/her as a person;
- b) presenting learning contents provides a situation in which educating is continued and completed. To act in accordance with the learning contents is being accountable. If one considers that teaching ensures a gradual transition from play to the world of work and labor, then the learning contents open new horizons of living for a child;
- c) presenting learning contents also helps a child to change his/her initial openness to the world to a more closed form of living of an adult. By means of contents, a child achieves a

surer and clearer concept of reality and everything this implies. This quality helps him/her in his/her choices, and radically influences the preferences and rejections he/she, as a unique person, arrives at over time. The difference between what a child accepts, and rejects is an indication that his/her initial open world-relationship has progressed to the more cohesive world-relationship of an adult; this is mainly a result of the teaching to which he/she has been exposed.

This brings us to the essential *nature* of the contents, which is dealt with next under the heading of the theory of elementals (German: *das Elementare*) and fundamentals (German: *das Fundamentale*).

### 3. THE ELEMENTAL AND THE FUNDAMENTAL<sup>1</sup>

To understand the significance of contents in the person-world relationship, the German didactician Glaeser suggests that one try to forget everything one knows, everything one has experienced, heard or learned; one should attempt to ignore everything that surrounds one; stop what one is involved with, and avoid all actions in which one influences something, or by which one is influenced; forget all names, characteristics, all laws, and all consciousness of color, form, and feeling. Then one should try to account for oneself and everything that surrounds one. Although this is not possible, the attempt to imagine a world without contents gives some indication of the scope and complexity of contents and meanings.

Grasping and understanding the world essentially means grasping and understanding contents and meanings. In this way, the relationship between person and world is built up. At the same time, the contents serve as a mirror on which the quality of a person's involvement with everything which surrounds him/her is reflected. For this reason, it is the task of teaching to present the contents in such a way that a child is offered the greatest

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<sup>1</sup> In this connection, see the study by R. A. Kruger: "Die betekenis van die begrippe elementare en fundamentele in didaktiese teorie en praktyk" (M.Ed. thesis, University of Pretoria, 1974) and published as *Pedagogiekstudies/Pedagogic Studies*, No. 86 (1975).



opportunity to grasp them and acquire insight into them. During this activity, a child him/herself must learn to know and establish a relationship with reality. To teach contents means to make them accessible for someone who has not yet mastered them. Therefore, a teacher also must have insight into the total framework or constitution of reality (contents) in accordance with its nature and essences.

This problem is mentioned, in passing, in a previous chapter. In that explication it is indicated that reality shows a categorical structure. This means that one can examine reality only if one views it in terms of or by means of its *essences*. The categories or essences of reality include all its various facets one encounters. In this connection, one thinks of such essential aspects or moments of reality as the religious, economic, physical, chemical, historical, geographical, and many more.

These categories have different identities only in a person's consciousness. This means that, in the totality of reality, they do not appear separately or as different entities. Both reality and the lifeworld are totalities. Therefore, to the extent that one says there are separate categories which appear as the totality of reality, this only means that a person's investigation, and description of this reality makes use of these categories to describe the variety encountered within the unity or totality of reality. Thus, there is not a religious or chemical reality existing as separate unities, as such. Each can only acquire a certain identity through human thinking, and can be denoted and described in terms of human understanding. As in every other case, the whole is much greater than its parts. Also, the parts cannot be separated from the whole or be described or examined as a distinctive aspect of the whole.

The above makes an important statement regarding the *nature* of reality. The separate aspects or categories must always be viewed and interpreted within the framework of the whole. If this is not done, one can easily fall into a scientific error by which the truth or validity of scientific findings are seriously interfered with.

What must be noted is that a person, as a totality, is involved with reality as a unity. The various categories of reality represent the

great number of variations or aspects or moments of reality mentioned. And just as one cannot separate one's intelligence from one's willing, so, e.g., one cannot separate the religious, as a category of reality, from the historical, or geographical, as categories. Each of these facets or moments appears within the *coherence* of the whole. Consequently, especially for a teacher, this coherence represents the most important insight into the *nature* and *essence* of reality, i.e., of its contents. Each of the categories is related to and is in context with each other; without an understanding of the coherence of reality, an insight into the whole of reality cannot be attained.

Reality shows itself as a whole because of the coherence among its various categories. Thus, the religious category cannot be understood fully outside of its coherence with, e.g., the moral and the juridical. If a teacher confronts a child with the well-known commandment: "You may not steal", then this has meaning for the religious, moral, and juridical aspects or moments. The coherence and interrelatedness among categories are clearly illustrated by this commandment.

In the light of the above, one can understand that insight into and command of certain aspects of reality by a person are of a two-fold nature: The first is that he/she gains insight into the meaning or sense of reality. The second is insight into the factual or objective composition of reality. In terms of what is said above about the importance of coherence, a person's knowledge of reality fundamentally is two-fold in nature:

- a) insight into its coherent sense or meaning, and
- b) insight into its coherent factual or objective nature.

At this stage, it is difficult to draw a different conclusion than that teaching ought to be attuned to the coherence of meaning and facts of reality as a whole, but also to disclose their various categories. Only by searching for the meaningful and factual essences of categories of reality, in their mutual entwinement, can a child be led to an authentic participation in it. In this way, evils of teaching such as "knowing-it-all", knowledge without insight or skill, and overloading a child with learning contents are avoided.

However, one also can understand that no single person can be aware of all other categories of reality at the same time. Given our contemporary explosion of knowledge, it is no longer possible for a single individual to make scientific judgments about all the facets or categories of reality. This especially is true of the lifeworld of a child. Not all categories of reality are immediately present from the beginning in the conscious life of a child. From the nature of his/her existence as a child, this cannot be otherwise because certain aspects of reality have a stronger and more immediate appeal than others. As we know, after his/her birth, a child's greatest needs are to be nursed in an emotionally safe and stable way and properly nurtured physically. In many respects, it takes several years before his/her consciousness becomes focused on moral and religious issues and their coherence with his/her emotional and physical life.

One can accept as a mere fact of experience that certain aspects of a child's involvement with reality come into focus earlier than others. In addition to the two mentioned above, one thinks, e.g., of language, fellow persons, and his/her immediate surroundings. In this way, a child proceeds to order reality and establish a lifeworld for him/herself, as is briefly described in the introductory chapter.

The fact that reality is constituted in accordance with essences or categories also implies that the various facets of the categories are similarly constituted in accordance with certain essences or essential aspects. One cannot grasp these various facets of reality without sifting out their essences and making judgments based on them. Thus, there are certain essences which distinguish botanic reality from chemical reality, and essences which distinguish geographical reality from historical or economic reality. To acquire access to any aspect or category of reality means to keep in view its essences. No one can acquire insight into the structure of a particular aspect or slice of reality by concentrating on what is non-essential to it. For example, it would be impossible to understand the contemporary South African political situation if one did not consider the awakening of the national consciousness of Black people in Africa, the mutual economic dependence of different areas and the history of especially British colonial politics. This example illustrates that

certain basic or fundamental insights provide access to the aspect of reality in focus. In didactic theory, these basic facts which provide access to and insight into an area of reality, are known as *elementals*.

To the extent that the question of the elemental crops up in teaching children, one can understand that this does not have to do with content for the sake of content, or with insight for the sake of insight. For an adult, the aim of educating, indeed, manifests itself as an attempt to introduce a child to contents of the lifeworld to help him/her become an independent person. Therefore, teaching the contents must have a clear and recognizable effect. Also, the facts of the contents must influence a child's basic attunement to God, fellow persons, and the world. Insofar as this influence is observable in the life of a child, didactic theory speaks of it as a *fundamental*, i.e., the effective change in a child's lifestyle because of the radical influence of teaching. It is only logical that these two concepts (the elemental and the fundamental) represent the final reduction of the learning contents. Therefore, they warrant further examination in any view of teaching contents.

### 3.1 The elemental (German: *das Elementare*)

The teacher's task is to unlock or expose the contents of the lifeworld for a child. An educator's aim is that, in this way, a child can orient him/herself to reality. The way he/she tries to realize this aim is to expose those categories of reality, which individually and collectively, must form the basis on which his/her mobility in surrounding reality ought to rest. To succeed in this, as indicated, a teacher determines the essences of these categories, or slices of reality. Thus, there are *carefully defined* contents which must provide access to a certain aspect of reality, i.e., elementals.

These elementals (contents) represent the only way a child can acquire an understanding of the lifeworld, as well as the objective facts of reality. The previous explanation implies that not all contents are elemental contents. A teacher must arrive at the elementals by the *reductions* he/she makes. His/her reductions to the elementals have two necessary facets: the first is in the activities of curriculum experts who, based on their careful reductions of a

school subject area in its totality, determine which elementals are relevant for one or another grade level, and for differentiated teaching. A teacher in a classroom has little to do with this reduction and, since the entire question of curriculum theory is dealt with in a separate chapter, this issue is considered there.

The second aspect of reduction to the elementals certainly is the task of a teacher. The themes or aspects of the school subject chosen by the curriculum expert as elementals, and inserted into the curriculum, in their turn, also are a matter of elemental and non-elemental contents. With the aim of designing a lesson, a teacher must be able to differentiate these two aspects of his/her lesson contents. His/her aim is effective learning, as the pupils' insight into the essences of the learning contents. Regarding a lesson theme, the elementals are those aspects of the contents which can carry a child's insight into the theme.

To master an aspect, theme, or problem implies that a child has a grasp of the elementals of that aspect, theme, or problem. Because a child does not yet know and understand, it cannot be expected of him/her that he/she differentiates between elemental and non-elemental aspects of the contents. He/she also does not possess the background of the subject to reduce the contents to their elementals for him/herself. To reduce the contents to their elementals means that a teacher must have the necessary subject background and knowledge, as well as knowledge of a child, to be able to strip a lesson theme of all aspects of the contents which are not essential to it, so it can contribute to creating and stabilizing a pupil's insight into it.

Thus, when one speaks of elementals, one is involved with a comprehensive and difficult concept. The elementals often are that aspect of the contents which exposes the basic, elementary, and fundamental structure of a matter—but which, per se, are not necessarily a simple matter. Elementals, indeed, are basic contents but, as such, not easy or uncomplicated.

At this stage, a brief description of some aspects or descriptions of what elementals are is systematized to make the following explanation clearer:

- i) an elemental implies learning content reduced to its essences;
- ii) an elemental is a basic (essential) aspect of reality;
- iii) an elemental provides access to a basic concept, principle, law, or definition;
- iv) an elemental is always authentic, i.e., the authority of its pronouncements cannot be doubted;
- v) an elemental is always the foundation of insight.

In their coherence, elementals represent the foundation or original composition of reality. One could expand this thought; however, that is not the aim of this introduction. The basic insight here is that elementals are the simple, basic, and authentic contents which *provide access* for a learning child to reality as such. That is why the categories of reality appear in the elementals in the form of concepts or denotations, laws, processes of nature, numbers, quantities, etc. In the case of teaching Christian-Protestant doctrine, elemental contents are the Fall of Man, his redemption, and his gratitude. In the same sense, concepts like “statesman”, “constitution”, and “foreign policy” are elemental contents of history. In natural science, elementals would be, e.g., the fact of gravity, the change of seasons, and the life cycle of plants. Authentic insight into and understanding of these contents (elementals) are the conditions for effective learning in each of the different school subjects. Thus, elementals function as providing access to the greater, constituted and involved descriptions and explanations of phenomena of reality, which are systematized in the school curriculum. In this sense, elementals can be compared to a gateway leading into a city or a door leading into a room.

Therefore, it is understandable that elementals are the primary focus of any didactic theory dealing with contents. Where elementals are ignored, progress in the formal teaching situation is an incidental, haphazard and, thus, inauthentic matter. Each pronouncement about the question of elementals has direct and decisive significance for didactic practice, as this is given form in a teaching design. However, it cannot be denied that a teacher must give form to the elementals in accordance with his/her own insights and teaching skills. Even so, the fact of the matter is that all lesson

designs are in vain if the reduction of contents to the elementals of the matter does not expose the theme directly and clearly.

Everything which has been said above about the elementals refers to the fact that they are how reality is represented for a child. In other words, reality cannot be unlocked for a child by an adult except by means of elementals. To present these elementals directly and clearly, a teacher continually estimates a child's foreknowledge and, especially his/her experiential world. In his/her explanations and interpretations, it is imperative that the teacher keeps as close as possible to reality and life. The fact that he/she focuses on the elementals may *never* allow him/her to lose sight of his/her learning aim; he/she must evaluate everything in terms of the learning aim and, as far as his/her lesson design is concerned, the learning aim must always be at the center of his/her attention.

In this connection, Kruger<sup>2</sup> says directly: "The elemental must first be found by an adult. An elemental must be unlocked for a child in a didactic situation. A child must throw himself open and step up to the unlocked reality. If this happens, categorical forming occurs, and a child changes, in that his insights are increased because of his participation in a life demanding unlocking. The elemental must be understood in this way, and not as if this merely occurs as a double unlocking in the lifeworld."

In this way, formal teaching contributes to a child's becoming. His/her insight into reality, and his/her mobility regarding the elementals must stabilize this becoming or forming with an eye to his/her eventual maturity. Maturity or adulthood is the final, all-encompassing aim striven for. Both the teaching aim and the learning aim are incorporated in every lesson design. All [educative] teaching is initiated from this all-encompassing aim. This means the contents must also bring about effective changes in a child's lifestyle, relationship to reality, and view of the world. In this way, insight into and mastery of reality must return to the situation of life itself. If this were not the case, a school would produce a polished and intellectually facile barbarian in society. The wonders of reality and its inherent order and regularity also

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

compel (under the guidance of a teacher) modesty, a sincere unassuming attitude and wonder, respect for knowledge, and gratitude for life. When this has occurred, the elementals have become fundamentals, i.e., they show educative dividends for the course of a child's life. He/she becomes involved with reality as a *human being*, his/her relationship to reality, God, and his/her fellow persons must change because his/her insights enable him/her to establish his/her own position in the world with greater accuracy. In fact, he/she is progressively creating his/her own lifeworld in which these elementals function as fundamentals.

### 3.2 The fundamental (German: *das Fundamentale*)

It is repeatedly stressed that the activity of educating is never without an aim. Teaching is included in the activity of educating because educating is actualized through teaching. As such, both concepts speak very clearly to the fact that an adult consciously intervenes in a child's life with the aim of bringing about change (more becoming). *The concept "fundamental" indicates the expected dividend which must accrue from teaching.* This teaching dividend can be qualified as the degree of change noticed in a child-world relationship. Also, educating and teaching are actualized in one activity. Therefore, the educative and teaching aims are original in nature, and must be actualized at the same time. Nowhere in educating are there situations which are purely educative, or other situations which are purely teaching situations.

Thus, a school continually strives to present reality as authentically as possible, and to integrate its coherence of meanings and facts into the relationship between child and world. The sense of the elementals is to place the essentials of the contents within an understandable relief. But this is not enough. To support and stabilize a child's becoming, the elementals also must progress to the terrain of the fundamentals. Therefore, one can briefly define the fundamentals as the becoming visible of the coherent meanings and facts, the spirit or ethos of the contents in connection with life itself.

Teaching, with respect to the elementals, presupposes that a child *learns to know*. Teaching, as far as fundamentals are concerned,



implies that a child also *learns to live* as a human being ought to live. Fundamentals are a matter of deepening (in the sense of greater spiritual value) the contents which lead to self-knowledge, insight into one's own being situated, with its demands, and a willingness to answer positively the appeals and demands of life itself.

Seen in this way, as far as teaching is concerned, the concept "fundamental" means a direct and conscious influencing and attuning a child to accept a valid view of life, to respect his/her language and culture, his/her history, and the origin of his/her people, his/her surroundings, and their unpolluted conservation, to mention a few important aspects. Fundamentals influence and form a child's dispositions and views of the world. The grasp he/she has acquired of the elementals must enable him/her to experience his/her own life as meaningful. From the fundamental contents, a child must be able to assess and evaluate his/her own being situated in surrounding reality. He/she also must be able to anticipate the future and the demands it will make of him/her. Under the influence of the fundamentals, he/she must internalize and make his/her own the spirit and ethos, and the explicit and implicit meanings of everything he/she encounters.

As with the "elemental", the "fundamental" is a concept which has to do with contents. Elementals make it possible for a child to enter reality authentically, gain access to and be able to master it. Fundamentals involve the question of what a child is going to *do* with these contents. Thus, to the extent that there is mention of fundamentals, the emphasis falls strongly on making the contents functional (useable). Wolfgang Klafki says that the fundamentals represent an extension of the elementals into a demanding and meaningful world.

Since a child him/herself must learn to know, in a teaching situation, he/she him/herself must use these contents or make them functional. An educator (teacher) certainly will thoroughly guide, influence, help, interpret the contents for him/her and support him/her. But he/she must realize the fundamentals him/herself because they are always a difficult and demanding matter of his/her personal existence. A child's lifestyle, interpersonal relationships,

willingness to accept tasks, sense of duty, and responsibility within the framework of the reality of educating, represent what the fundamentals are about.

The basic insight which must be understood is that the elementals must always be pushed through to the level of the fundamentals if one can speak of effective teaching, and the actualization of educating through teaching.

#### **4. THE CONSTRUCTION OF LEARNING SUBJECTS**

To establish the structure by which the various learning subjects are incorporated within a school curriculum, a didactician should ask the question of how persons order reality as a totality. This means that, in a scientific examination of every aspect of reality, certain major structures are used which enable a person to demarcate the encompassing whole to provide access for research and reflection. The demarcation of reality in major areas, understandably, is in close accord with a human being's experience of reality. This means that those areas with which a person becomes involved will be identified. The following possible classification should help a teacher determine the relationship between the different learning subjects:

- a) the religious-moral terrain;
- b) the linguistic-literary and esthetic terrain;
- c) the historical and social-political terrain;
- d) the mathematical-natural scientific terrain.

To help orient a child concerning the totality of reality, an adult must take each one of these terrains into consideration when constructing a curriculum. The curriculum must represent the totality of reality. Therefore, in school, there is a grouping of subjects chosen from these different terrains and included within the curriculum. The choice an adult makes, in this regard, partially rests on his/her aim to present a child with a representative selection which will include every aspect of reality. He/she also bases his/her choice on the degree to which he/she can make use of the formative and orienting possibilities of the school subjects, in the light of his/her overarching educative aim.

Because language is the basis of communication in a teaching situation, it is understandable that language-study will be a focus of teaching during a child's school career. From linguistic-literary teaching, other esthetically formative subjects (music and art) will develop. The construction of the subject structures in this terrain enables the teaching to intensify and reach a more formative level.

In addition to language studies, school subjects of a social-political nature, with history especially as a focal point, will have to be included in the curriculum. This combination enables a teacher to select and order themes such as citizenship, geography, legal science, and many others. These themes are arranged and integrated within the social-political whole to try to involve a child in this aspect of the lifeworld, but in accordance with a child's readiness.

A third terrain which must be included in the curriculum consists of the mathematical-natural scientific subjects. They provide various possibilities to arrange and order the most important related subjects and themes. Special attention can be given to various aspects of the natural sciences in accordance with the demands of differentiation. The composition of the curriculum regarding this terrain will depend on an adult's teaching aim, and how the related subjects will be dealt with in higher education.

Technical and economic education will have to be included in close conjunction with the above three terrains. On the one hand, technical and economic education provides a solid basis for generally formative educating, especially during the first years of secondary schooling. Technical and economic educating are important themselves, because they reflect an important aspect of human activities in our contemporary cultural situation.

Including the above in a curriculum does not mean that its structure has been finalized. The religious-moral development of a child provided for by relevant school subjects cannot be fully realized by only presenting the specific school subjects. This aspect of educating a child includes all subjects or learning contents and, therefore, must be viewed by a teacher as a primary factor in

teaching [in South Africa—G.D.Y.]. Because this aspect generally represents a particular point of view, it will be interpreted and applied in accordance with specific aims and, therefore, will radically influence the presentation of various school subjects. For this reason, the religious-moral forming of a child deserves careful consideration and attention by those who plan teaching situations.

From this general ordering of various scientific areas, there must also arise a definite indication of teaching subjects to reflect a person's working and creative activities. Whether this aspect of teaching is the concern of vocationally directed schools or whether it should be realized in post-school vocational training is not an issue. What is important, however, is that it is an essential focal point of the curriculum for teaching.

The construction of learning subjects must clearly provide for the following major contents in terms of which a teacher can assess the validity of a school curriculum:

- i) religious education, offered in conjunction with ethics;
- ii) physical education, also offered in conjunction with esthetically formative subjects like music;
- iii) linguistic-literary subjects. Besides the mother tongue, as many foreign languages as possible should be included;
- iv) esthetic subjects or other subjects which will develop a child's esthetic experience and appreciation. Subjects such as art, music, history, of art, domestic science, etc. serve this purpose well;
- v) history, socially, and politically directed subjects, including subjects such as civics and judicial subjects reflecting the social structure, must be included;
- vi) technical subjects which offer the opportunity to do manual work and undergo vocational preparation, but which also provide opportunities for the application of subjects such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry are important;
- vii) empirical-scientific subjects where relationships and logical order, but also the natural phenomena of the world, are the focus of the teaching.

The above views and reasoning put the learning contents in school into perspective. However, it is a teacher who deals with learning contents in school. Hence, the final stage of his/her preparation for teaching is devoted to the study of subject didactics. It is mentioned that the major problem of subject didactics is to particularize the general didactic pronouncements. Learning contents also must be particularized.

Subject didactics starts from the point of view that the didactic pronouncements concerning contents must serve as a background or frame of reference. Against this background, subject didactics interprets each one of the school subjects as a subject with its *own nature*. When subject didactics makes a pronouncement about contents, the nature of the school subject is a teacher's point of departure. The nature of history differs from that of biology, as mathematics differs from chemistry. It is in a lesson design that the nature of a school subject comes into its own right. Therefore, the nature of the subject provides important guidance for designing a lesson. A teacher must be well informed about the importance of the nature of the school subject which makes certain demands of a lesson design and, at the same time, gives direction to a teacher's planning. In the final analysis, it is a teacher who gives substance to the ideals described in the general educational and didactic literature.