

"INTEREST AS AN AGENCY IN MENTAL DEVELOPMENT"

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Interest as an Agency in Mental Development.

"Interest is the greatest word in education". These words of President Schurman greatly impressed me. They set me to thinking and studying upon this subject and the more I study it the more I am convinced of the truth and wisdom of his statement. It is my purpose to try to show what we mean by the doctrine of interest and the part it plays in Mental development.

We may say in general that interest is a feeling that accompanies the idea of self-expression. It has its origin in the exhilaration, the sense of power, of mastery, that goes with every internally impelled effort to realize a condition for the survival of the self, whether such survival touch one aspect of the man or another. Interest is therefore dynamic in character. It has its primary root in inherited impulse. We have impulses to eat, to run, to hunt, to work, to talk, to play, to avoid dangers, to seek pleasure. But these impulses with Modern men, as with primitive people are always directed toward some object, in the approach of which we find the realization of some aspect of our mental or physical being. There is no break between the impulse and the self; for the impulse is nothing more than the involuntary, and perhaps almost conscious, effort at self-expression.

What we mean by the doctrine of interest is that the interest naturally attaching to the ends for which pupils study should be awakened in the means used for reaching them; and conversely, that permanent interest in the ends should be fostered through the means.

When interest attaches to the end, but not to the means for reaching it, we have drudgery, as in the case of a workman who thinks only of the dollars, taking no pride or interest in the labor that

earns it; on the other hand when there is interest in the means but none in the end, we have play not work. Interest is then only amusement. When however, there is interest in the end to be attained by activity, and also by the means for reaching the end, we have the type of work desirable in education.

A direct interest, therefore, should be aroused in the studies as a means of reaching the ends of education. This interest when thoroughly aroused has a ^{flex}relax influence in developing true ideals of life and conduct. The mental attitude of the sculptor is the ideal one for the pupil, since the interest he feels in the statue as an end attaches to every stage in its creation. When this direct interest is moral as well as intellectual and aesthetic, then instruction becomes truly educative. So much for a general statement of the doctrine of interest.

We have said that interest is primarily a feeling. A feeling is an immediate experience of consciousness, and the feeling of interest is an experience familiar enough to growing minds of whatever age. Every one knows that when he is interested something is proving attractive to him, is catching and holding the mind's attention, and that to this something it is no effort to attend. Because of the unity of consciousness the feeling of interest is always attached to some object. This object may itself be something material, and usually is so in the cases of primitive man and childhood. Or it may be an idea, an act, or even another feeling. The artist is interested indeed in his own artistic result, the picture, but he is likewise interested in every thing that contributes to the result - his brushes, his paints, etc. He is, in short, interested in every object or act that pertains to his self realization as an artist in the particular picture upon which he happens to be working. It is

not art in general, the mere idea of art as an abstraction, that claims his attention, but the actual ends which he sets before himself, and the means which he conceives as necessary to the accomplishment of these ends. These are all definite objects to which his interest attaches. The merchant is not interest in abstractions, but in the quantity and quality of his goods, in the markets, the supply, the demand, how his goods compare in price and quality with his neighbors, how he can attract trade by giving or seeming to give the most possible for a certain price. This is necessarily true, for, it is the object alone that gives meaning to the activity. The self does not run like an empty mill, producing nothing, seeking no product; but it is the object which shows to consciousness the quality of the impulse. It gives meaning to the activity. Impulse itself is blind; it is the object that helps to make it intelligent. We must not make the mistake of supposing that the object comes first thus calling the activity into being. The artist's materials would not interest the physician. He would regard them as so much rubbish, perhaps, to self-expression. The thought of self-expression comes first; then the artist's materials are objects of interest to him because aids to self-expression.

A toy to a child is a matter of indifference except as it aids him to realize some form of self-expression in his play. It then becomes a means to enable him to realize himself in play and as such, is an object of interest.

The Herbartian psychology rejects as a pure myth the idea that there is in the human mind any independent or transcendental, faculty whose function is to will, and which is free in the sense that it can originate actions that are independent of all ideas or of thought processes. On the contrary, with Herbarts system, volition

is strictly dependent upon ideas - a product of them as they originally appeared in the mind or as they have come to be through repeated returns of consciousness. Ideas become adjusted into apperceiving masses, with which are associated interests, desires and volitions. A volition is, therefore, only an idea which has passed through a complete development of which interest is an essential stage. This being the case it becomes of the greatest importance that the child should conceive an inherent, abiding and growing interest in the subject matter through which instruction is expected to furnish a moral revelation of the world. Unless the teacher can succeed in exciting such an interest he cannot make knowledge yield more than an intellectual, theoretical morality, which is perhaps little better than none. The teacher desires that ideas of virtue should develop into ideals of conduct; he hopes that the heart will be warmed for these ideals; but of such a consummation there is little prospect so long as the child regards the content of his studies with indifference, it may be with aversion. Instruction cannot, therefore, remain a dry, perfunctory drill upon forms of knowledge and accomplish its highest mission. We see now why all Herbartians make so much of the assimilation of ideas through ideas; why they insist that the subject matter should be selected, arranged, articulated, and presented in strict accordance with the stores and processes of the children's minds. Only in this way can knowledge become rich in meaning to the pupil revealing ever-widening relations to life and conduct.

We often conceive of interest merely as a means of securing attention to lessons, hoping that the knowledge will remain after the interest has departed; whereas, the other conception is that through a proper presentation of the right amount of knowledge in the best manner and at the right time, we may incite an interest that

will abide even after the knowledge has faded from the mind. Each of these conceptions of interest has a certain validity but the latter goes much deeper; it is one of the abiding results that instruction should reach. A harmoniously developed many-sided interest of this sort is, on the one hand, a sort of graduated scale by which we measure the success of our efforts as educational artists; and, on the other, the initial stage is the formation of moral character through the development of ideas, the cultivation of moral disposition and the acquisition of moral habits. We see a new reason for rejecting the doctrine of formal culture of the mind as a desirable education process. \ The moral world is not fully revealed through languages and mathematics, even when these are as concrete as possible, much less when they are formal and abstract. The following quotation from Kern shows that interest is regarded not alone from the standpoint of temporary expediency but from that of its bearing upon the future of the individual: "In a many-sided interest the pupil should find a moral support and protection against the servitude that springs from the rule or desire and passion. It should protect him from the errors that are the consequence of idleness; it should make life again valuable and desirable even when a cruel fate has robbed it of its most cherished object; it should enable one to find a new calling when driven from the old, it should elevate him to a standpoint from which the goods and successes of earthly strivings appear as accidental, by which his real self is not affected, and above which the moral character stands free and sublime".

That the subject of interest should be regarded specifically also, they have been divided into two groups or classes; namely, (a) interests arising from intercourse with others, as in the family,

the school, the church, the civil community, society.

(A) Interests from knowledge.

Of interests as related to knowledge, we may distinguish the following phases:-

1. The empirical interest, or the pleasure excited in the mind by the changes and novelty that arise from a presentation of the manifold and variegated. Wonder is one of the manifestations, and is, as Plato long ago told us, the starting point of knowledge. The exciting of the empirical interest is, therefore, the beginning of education; it explains many of the devices of the kindergarten, and most of the concrete objective work of the primary school. A large part of the devices regarded as methods of teaching are invented to catch the wondering attention of the children until it can be fixed on more serious things. These devices are perfectly legitimate, and even necessary, unless, passing their proper limit, they become hysterical or sensational. One sometimes finds schools in which the children will ignore everything but the most dramatic efforts to attract their attention, and will give but transient heed even to these. That every earnest purpose of education is thereby destroyed at least for the time being is evident.

2. The speculative interest or the search for casual connection of things to which the dark, or problematical, or mysterious impels the mind. "He who rejoices upon looking into the starry heavens has the empirical interest; he who reflects upon the condition of stellar origin has the speculative interest". It is the speculative interest to which we appeal when we teach pupils to perceive the reasons of things; when we lead them to look beyond the facts to the laws that unify them, and make them appear in their rational connection. This interest is of the utmost importance for education. Its beginnings

are found in very young children, and not until a mind has become atrophied by age or occupation or bad teaching does it cease to be the mainspring of intellectual life. So long as spontaneity remains, the casual and other rational relations of things will be sought. It is in the discovery of these relations that thinking chiefly consists. It needs no argument, therefore, to demonstrate that an interest so vital to mental vigor should be developed to the fullest extent by the teacher. The man is intellectually dead whose mind is not continually challenged to investigation, who like the stolid ox plods on, unmindful of all that does not promise to minister directly to his physical profit. How can a man be a good citizen who cares nothing for the causes that produce misrule in the land? How can he be a useful brother who cares nothing for the social and economic forces that produce weal and woe to his fellows? What to him are railroads, steamships, telegraphs, newspapers, and all the great instruments of industry if he is not stimulated by their presence to investigate their functions? The Macbeths of the mind are those who silence its cry for the knowledge of origin and causes. The speculative interest is the gateway to all progress that rests on the apprehension of logical relations.

3. The Aesthetic interest, or that which is aroused not by the manifoldness and variety of things or their casual relations, but the contemplation of an ideal through a sense medium, as for instance, the character of Moses (an ideal) through Micheal Angelo's statue of him (made of marble). It is the interest aroused by the beautiful in nature, in art, in morals. In the case of moral beauty an ideal is manifested, not through stone or canvas, but by means of conduct-action. This interest - a passionate one with most persons of some races, and with some persons of all races - is often neglected through

contempt for its utility or fear of its influence. That art has sometimes been debased to ignoble uses is no more an argument for its neglect, than the fact that religion has often been used to inflame hatred is a reason for its abandonment. The soul has a right to symmetrical development; but this it cannot have if a part of its natural interests are ignored. It must be asserted that the aesthetic sense of the children must be cultivated as the source of much pure joy. The time should come when even the artisan will be an artist in his work, when beauty will be everywhere a sweetness of life. To these ends as well as to the idea of beauty as an end in itself, the teacher must turn a part of his attention.

(B) Interests arising from associations with others.

Of the interests arising from human relations, the following points may be distinguished:-

(1) The sympathetic interest or that which is aroused by the joys or sorrows of others. The cultivation of this species of interest should begin in the family, though as a matter of fact it is very frequently repressed by collision of selfish wills, giving rise to all sorts of bickerings and petty heartburnings. It often happens, therefore, that children first learn in the kindergarten what satisfaction there is in the spirit of co-operation. The school, too, has constant opportunity to develop the spirit of brotherly kindness, ideally in such studies as literature, history, zoology; really in the daily intercourse of the pupils.

If this feeling of individual sympathy is extended by a knowledge of the wider relations of society into feelings respecting the welfare of large numbers, we have:-

(2) The Social interest. It is in laying the foundation for this species of interest that the kindergarten is preëminent. Its

games, plays, songs, occupations, involving the co-operations of all the members are an ideal epitome of social co-operation in its highest form. The school should continue to develop the spirit so admirably generated in the kindergarten, for out of these beginnings grow the great institutional interests of the Anglo-saxon race. It lies at the basis of public spirit, charity, public reform, patriotism, commercial reciprocity, and their kindred virtues. The studies that give pre-ëminent opportunity for the development of this interest are literature, civics and commercial geography. This last study more than nayother, reveals to the child his own present and possible future relation to the business world. Even the bare-footed urchin of the country cross-roads may be led to see that his parents cast their mite into the world's commerce to have it return to them not after many days, but at once, enriched and madnified. The heart of the youth is fired as he beholds the possibilities of a life of co-operative harmony with others; he sees the possibilities of his own worth enhanced a thousand fold, his petty self-hood infinitely enlarged, his dignity exalted through the reinforcement that the race brings to him when he learns the supreme lesson of serving himself through service to his fellow-man.

(3) The Religious interest. This interest may be to a considerable extent awakened in the school, even when not a word is said about the subject in the form of direct instruction. As Ufer says, "When interest is directed to the history and destiny of mankind, when it is as clear to the understanding as to the feelings that the oder-ing of the history of man involves something more than mere human power and that, therefore, the history of each individual does not lie entirely in his own hands, then fear and hope gather in the heart".

The education of the pupil may be regarded as a gradual

self-revelation, by means of a progressive revelation to him of the world of society and the world of nature. Gaining a gradual insight into the world without he comes to have an insight into the world within - his own mind, its powers and aspirations. But a panorama of the world, whether institutional or natural, passed before and into the mind of the child, is not the whole of education. It is only half of it. Revelation alone may do for the Hindoo Seer, but not for the children of the West. They must have action. A good motto for education would be - Insight through revelation, power through action.

Giving up the idea that in the early stages of education we must appeal to the adult life to find motives for action and direct stimuli to interest, let us turn to the resources plainly at our command for securing clearness and vividness of ideas in the minds of children.

Enumerating some of the functions of instruction that pave the way to those immediate interests which become gradually transformed into permanent ones, we find the following points of importance:-

(1) We must raise up and vivify immediate ends, partly through the presentation of near-lying and appropriate ideas, and partly through the utilization of native tendencies of thought and action.

(2) We must, by the charm of our manner, the alertness of our minds and the skill of our presentation, aid the pupil to acquire knowledge and to develop intellectual and muscular dexterity.

(3) We must seek to vivify ideas by making a progressive revelation of their significance to the pupil.

(4) We must arouse interest in subjects now uninteresting not alone through charm and skill but also by showing how these subjects contribute to ends in which interest is already aroused. This is interest by introduction. It is more potent in higher than in lower

grades.

(5) It is one of the chief functions of instruction to arouse the native powers of the mind to their fullest and freest expression. The power of vigorous, rapid and sustained thought is one of the choice fruits of education. This end is not to be attained through compulsion but is attained rather through that joy in work which the pupil experiences when skill and charm of teaching incite to noble effort.

(6) The teacher who would help to build up a permanent group of life interests in the pupil must recognize, to the fullest extent, the native curiosity of the mind. The desire to know is as spontaneous in a child as the desire to eat. New powers are always dawning so that new stimuli to curiosity are always possible. Impulses renew themselves in manifold directions. Now we perceive the impulses to imitate sounds, now to scribble, to draw, to spell, to count, to mimic the actions of others, and always we may count upon the impulse to do, to make, and even to unmake or destroy. These impulses we must interpret according to their ultimate meaning. We must see to what they may or can lead; then we will know whether to encourage or repress. Every fledgling reaches a period in its development when it wants to fly. Fortunately there is little to hinder its trying when the proper time arrives; but with the child, though every stage in his development witnesses new powers and new longings, the conditions under which we work in the schoolroom often lead us to forbid his flying; when that is the next thing he ought to do.

If even a portion of the time spent by teachers in looking over numberless "tests" and "examination papers" were used in devising novel methods of presentation, or in discovering facts or explanations to bring forward during recitation, the school would be greatly the

gainer.

(7) Not only must we interpret and utilize the native impulses clustering about the desire to explore the curious, but we must gratify the equally native impulse to comprehend the casual relation of things.

(8) This enumeration may fitly close with a reference to the aesthetic impulses found to greater or less extent in every individual. There is no child that does not hold something to be beautiful. Some find it in play, some in religious feeling, some in the economic utilization of articles of utility, and some in still other sources; but whatever its origin the art impulse is always present in some degree with children and it may be aroused and gratified as one of the primary instincts of the mind. The school may be made a joyous place by outward adornment of the walls, and by the inner adornment of the recitation through felicity of language, through happy humor, and through the revelation of inherent beauties of thoughts and things.

I have tried to show that by interest is meant something of vast importance to the development of the individual, not a mere tickling of the mind for transient ends. In the words of Stande, "Interest is the light with which Herbart has once for all brought the dark and tortuous course of didactics into the clearness of day. It is the charmed word which alone gives power to instruction to call the spirit of youth and to make it serve the aim of the master. It is the lever of education, which lightly and joyfully moved by the teacher can alone bring the youthful will into the desired activity and direction."

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