

**SECOND SUPPLEMENT
TO THE HERBART
YEARBOOK FOR 1895**

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JOHN DEWEY & CHARLES A. MCMURRY

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Education
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INTEREST AS RELATED TO WILL

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INTEREST IN RELATION TO TRAINING OF THE WILL.

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INTRODUCTION.

THERE is much the same difficulty in isolating any educational topic for discussion that there is in the case of philosophy. The issues are so interdependent that any one of them can be selected only at the risk of ignoring important considerations, or else of begging the question by bringing in the very problem under discussion in the guise of some other subject. Yet limits of time and space require that some one field be entered and occupied by itself. Under such circumstances about all one can do is to pursue a method which shall at least call attention to the problems involved, and to indicate the main relations of the matters discussed to relevant topics. The difficulty is particularly great in the discussion of interest. Interest is in the closest relation to the emotional life, on one side; and, through its close relation, if not identity, with attention, to the intellectual life, on the other side. Any adequate explanation of it, therefore, would require the development of the complete psychology both of feeling and of knowledge, and of their relations to each other, and the discussion of their connection or lack of connection with volition.

Accordingly, I can only hope to bring out what seem to me to be the salient points, and if my results do not command agreement, help at least define the problem for further discussion.

While it would be sanguine to anticipate agreement upon any important educational doctrine, there is perhaps more hope of reaching a working consensus by beginning with the educational side. If we can lay down some general principle regarding the place and function of interest in the school, we shall have a more or less sure basis from which to proceed to the psychological analysis of interest. At all events, we shall have limited the field and fixed the boundaries within which the psychological discussion may proceed. After this we shall proceed to the discussion of some of the chief attitudes assumed toward the problem of interest in historic and current investigations. Finally,

we may return with the results reached by this psychological and critical consideration to the educational matter with more definite emphasis upon the question of moral training.

I.

At first sight the hope of gaining a working consensus regarding interest on the educational side seems futile. The first thing that strikes us is the profound contradiction in current educational ideas and standards regarding this matter of interest. On the one hand, we have the doctrine that interest is the keynote both of instruction and of moral training, that the essential problem of the teacher is to make the material presented so interesting that it shall command and retain attention. On the other hand, we have the assertion that the putting forth of effort from within is alone truly educative; that to rely upon the principle of interest is to distract the child intellectually and to weaken him morally.

In this educational lawsuit of interest *versus* effort let us consider the respective briefs of plaintiff and defendant. In behalf of interest it is claimed that it is the sole guarantee of attention; that, if we can secure interest in a given set of facts or ideas, we may be perfectly sure that the pupil will direct his energies toward mastering them; that, if we can secure interest in a certain moral train or line of conduct, we are equally safe in assuming that the child's activities are responding in that direction; that, if we have not secured interest, we have no safeguard as to what will be done in any given case. As a matter of fact, the doctrine of discipline has not succeeded. It is absurd to suppose that a child gets more intellectual or mental discipline when he goes at a matter unwillingly than when he goes at it with complete interest and out of the fullness of his heart. The theory of effort simply says that unwilling attention (doing something which is disagreeable and because it is disagreeable) should take precedence over spontaneous attention.

Practically the theory of effort amounts to nothing. When a child feels that his work is a task, it is only under compulsion that he gives himself to it. At the least let-up of external pressure we find his attention at once directed to what interests him. The child brought up on the basis of the theory of effort simply acquires marvelous skill in appearing to be occupied with an uninteresting subject, while the

real heart and core of his energies are otherwise engaged. Indeed, the theory contradicts itself. (It is psychologically impossible to call forth any activity without some interest.) The theory of effort simply substitutes one interest for another. It substitutes the impure interest of fear of the teacher or hope of future reward for pure interest in the material presented. The type of character induced is that illustrated by Emerson at the beginning of his essay on *Compensation*, where he holds up the current doctrine of compensation as virtually implying that, if you only sacrifice yourself enough now, you will be permitted to indulge yourself a great deal more in the future; or, if you are only good now (goodness consisting in attention to what is uninteresting) you will have, at some future time, a great many more pleasing interests — that is, may then be bad.

While the theory of effort is always holding up to us a strong, vigorous character as the outcome of its method of education, practically we do not get this character. We get either the narrow, bigotted man who is obstinate and irresponsible save in the line of his own preconceived aims and beliefs; or else we get a character dull, mechanical, unalert, because the vital juice of the principle of spontaneous interest has been squeezed out of it.

We may now hear the defendant's case. Life, says the other theory, is full of things not interesting, but which have to be faced none the less. Demands are continually made, situations have to be dealt with, which present no features of interest. Unless the individual has had previous training in devoting himself to uninteresting work, unless habits have been formed of attending to matters simply because they must be attended to, irrespective of the personal satisfaction gotten out of them, character will either break down, or avoid the issue, when confronted with the more serious matters of life. Life is too serious to be degraded to a merely pleasant affair, or reduced to the continual satisfaction of personal interests. The concerns of future life, therefore, imperatively demand such continual exercise of effort in the performance of tasks as to form the habit of recognizing the real labors of life. Anything else eats out the fiber of character and reduces the person to a wishy washy, colorless being; or else to a state of moral dependence, with over-reliance upon others and with continual demand for amusement and distraction.

Apart from the question of the future, continually to appeal even in childhood days to the principle of interest is eternally to excite,

that is, distract the child. Continuity of activity is destroyed. Everything is made play, amusement. This means over-stimulation; it means dissipation of energy. Will is never called into action at all. The reliance is upon external attractions and amusements. Everything is sugar-coated for the child, and he soon learns to turn from everything which is not artificially surrounded with diverting circumstances. The spoiled child who does only what he likes is the inevitable outcome of the theory of interest in education.

The theory is intellectually as well as morally harmful. Attention is never directed to the essential and important facts. It is directed simply to the wrappings of attraction with which the facts are surrounded. If a fact is repulsive or uninteresting, it has to be faced in its own naked character sooner or later. Putting a fringe of fictitious interest around it does not bring the child any nearer to it than he was at the outset. The fact that two and two make four is a naked fact which has to be mastered in and of itself. The child gets no greater hold upon the fact by having attached to it amusing stories of birds or dandelions than he would if the simple naked fact were presented to him. It is self-deception to suppose that the child is being interested in the numerical relation. His attention is going out to and taking in only the amusing images associated with this relation. The theory thus defeats its own end. It would be more direct and straightforward to recognize at the outset that certain facts have to be learned which have little or no interest, and that the only way to deal with these facts is through the power of effort, the internal power of putting forth activity wholly independent of any external inducement. Moreover, in this way the discipline, the habit of responding to serious matters, is formed which is necessary to equip the child for the life that lies ahead of him.

I have attempted to set forth the respective claims of each side as we find them, not only in current discussions, but in the old controversy, as old as Plato and Aristotle. A little reflection will convince one that the strong point in each argument is not so much what it says in its own behalf as in its attacks on the weak places of the opposite theory. Each theory is strong in its negations rather than in its position. It is a common, though somewhat surprising, fact that there is generally a common principle unconsciously assumed at the basis of two theories which to all outward appearances are the extreme opposites of each other. Such a common

The Verdict.

principle is presupposed by the theories of effort and interest in the one-sided forms in which they have already been stated.

This identical assumption is the externality of the object or idea to be mastered, the end to be reached, the act to be performed, to the self. It is because the object or end is assumed to be outside self that it has to be *made* interesting, that it has to be surrounded with artificial stimuli and with fictitious inducements to attention. It is equally because the object lies outside the sphere of self that the sheer power of "will," the putting forth of effort without interest, has to be appealed to. {The genuine principle of interest is the principle of the recognized identity of the fact or proposed line of action with the self; that it lies in the direction of the agent's own growth, and is, therefore, imperiously demanded, if the agent is to be himself.} Let this condition of identification once be secured, and we neither have to appeal to sheer strength of will, nor do we have to occupy ourselves with making things interesting to the child.

The theory of effort, as already stated, means a virtual division of attention and the corresponding disintegration of character, intellectually and morally. Divided Attention. (The great fallacy of the so-called effort theory is that it identifies the exercise and training of will with certain external activities and certain external results.) It is supposed that, because a child is occupied at some outward task and because he succeeds in exhibiting the required product, that he is really putting forth will, and that definite intellectual and moral habits are in process of formation. But, as a matter of fact, the moral exercise of the will is not found in the external assumption of any posture, and the formation of moral habit cannot be identified with the ability to show up results at the demand of another.) The exercise of the will is manifest in the direction of attention, and depends upon the spirit, the motive, the disposition in which work is carried on.

A child may be externally entirely occupied with mastering the multiplication table, and be able to reproduce that table when asked to do so by his teacher. The teacher may congratulate himself that the child has been so exercising his will power as to be forming right intellectual and moral habits. Not so, unless moral habit be identified with this ability to show certain results when required. The question of moral training has not been touched until we know what the child has been internally occupied with, what the predominating direction of his attention, his feelings, his disposition has been while engaged upon this task.

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