

What Knowledge is of most Worth?

Paul Andrew Bourne¹, Nicola Brown, Devon Crossfield¹, Lenney Grant¹, Vivian Nicholas¹,

Sharon Golding, & Dave Higgins¹

¹Northern Caribbean University, Mandeville, Jamaica, WI.

“What Knowledge Is of Most Worth,” was the question asked by a leading social Darwinist, Herbert Spencer, in 1854; and 160 years later the question has not lost its pertinence. George Knight in his book *Philosophy of Education* makes an interesting observation. He observes that “America has been making an unrelenting assault on technique for more than a century. As a nation it has been busy creating new techniques for travelling, communicating, healing, cleaning, dying and killing. The American people have seldom asked whether they wanted the improvements, needed them, or should have them or whether they would come at too high a cost. The word progress has come to be seen in terms of new methods.” He went on to declare that this was the same mentality of the educationalist. There are new techniques for teaching spelling, new methods for teaching arithmetic to two-year olds, and also new means of measuring intelligence. In the same way, no thought has been given to how the two-year old mathematician will benefit the society.

Therefore, the question remains. “What knowledge is of most worth?” If we were to use Spencer’s answer we would perhaps come up with Science. Why? Spencer thinks that the most important activities which occupy human life are: (1) those activities relating directly

¹Paul Andrew Bourne, Adjunct Lecturer, Northern Caribbean University, Mandeville, Manchester, Jamaica. Email: paul.bourne2ncu.edu.jm.

to self-preservation, (2) those activities that indirectly minister to self-preservation, (3) those activities having to do with the rearing of offspring, (4) those activities pertaining to political and social relations, and (5) those activities that relate to the leisure part of life and are devoted to the tastes and appetites.

"Spencer's answer was probably built upon a principle that activities which are considered most important in life should be given the most important place in the curriculum.

This submission by Spencer is based on his philosophical thought patterns. His perception of who man is, dictated his response to the manner in which the curriculum should be structured.

In this regard it was suggested by George Knight that "the search for meaning in the total educational experience has been a major quest for more than a century. Some have defined the integrating centre as the unity of the classics, while others have viewed it in terms of the needs of society, vocationalism, or science. None of those approaches, however, have been broad enough, and their claims have usually been divisive rather than unifying." He further states that "we seem to live in a schizophrenic world in which many claim that there is no external meaning, while others base their scientific research on postulates that point to an overall meaning. As a result, intellectual fragmentation continues to be a large problem as human beings seek to determine what knowledge is of most worth."

EG White, writing under inspiration, had no such difficulty in explaining the reason for man's existence. She clearly states that in order to understand the work of education, we need to consider both the nature of man and the purpose of God in creating him. We need to consider also the change in man's condition because of his acquired knowledge of evil,

and even more so, God's plan for accomplishing His purpose in the education of the human race.'

In reflecting upon human nature, White emphasizes that man was created in the image of God. The purpose of God in creating human beings was one of constant growth so that man would constantly reflect the glory of the Creator. Therefore, human beings had capacities that were capable of almost infinite development. Because of disobedience, man's physical powers became weakened, his mental capacity was diminished, and hence, his spiritual vision was obscured.

White's philosophy of education, fully expresses the primary purpose of education. She notes that, in spite of man's rebellion, he was not left without hope. "To restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created, to promote the development of body, mind, and soul, that the divine purpose in his creation might be realized, this is the object of education, the great object of life."

When Milne can make a statement like 'The human brain is still the most remarkable piece of circuitry in the world,' and then follows it by saying "it has evolved over millions of years to provide humans with a system that can access information, compute a calculation or remember an event, it begs the question, 'for what purpose'? I wonder, doesn't White have it altogether? I think the idea of being made in the image of God gives me an identity. Spinoza a famous seventeenth century philosopher, states that "in order to live the most perfect life on earth you need to find out why you are here then live your life accordingly."

To Spencer, science may be very important, because of his principle of self-preservation. This attitude to life further lends itself to the idea of survival of the fittest and breeds a culture of bullying as everyone strives to outclass each other. But with the angle suggested

by White when individuals recognise that man has an eternal purpose, the attitude to their fellowmen will be different as each one recognises the value of the individual. The question, however, remains, what knowledge is of most worth today?

References

Knight, G. R (2010) Implications of philosophy for Adventist education, <http://jae.adventist.org>

Knight, G. R. (1998). Philosophy of education: an introduction in Christian perspective (4th ed.). Michigan: Andrews University Press

Milne D. (2006). Teaching the brain to read. England: Smart Kids Publishing

Spencer, H. (1909). Education: intellectual, moral, and physical. New York: D. Appleton

White, E. G. (1903). Education. California: Pacific Press Publishing Association.