

# On Needs in Education

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## Abstract

Those who are concerned with the poor quality of student learning at schools propose different solutions to help rectify the problems that beset education. While sociologists argue that measures to help eradicate social inequity will result in improved learning, psychologists influenced by cognitive science insist that teaching will always remain inefficacious as long as it fails to incorporate the findings unveiled about how our minds work. Regardless of their area of specialization, a very common proposal that is made by many invested in education is that learning will become more meaningful and lasting if it becomes more learner-centered. A learner-centered approach to learning is a wide-ranging educational philosophy that entails distinct views on a number of issues in education such as curricular goals, assessment, and instructional strategies. One of the cornerstones of this pedagogy is the claim that learning must be based on the needs students have. This underlying belief is constantly and often unthinkingly repeated like a mantra by those who uphold learned-centered teaching without inspecting its viability. This present study will raise some problems that revolve around learning that is based on learner needs.

*Keywords:* needs; learner-centered teaching

## Introduction

Education is a subject that researchers working in different fields of inquiry study very closely. Sociologists analyze the relationship between society and schools through the lens of a particular theoretical framework and philosophers scrutinize the arguments politicians or educationalists put forward to support their views on learning. Regardless of their academic background, researchers on education jointly contend that school learning is on the whole uninspiring and banal, where students put in very little effort to learn content that is often trivial. It is, conversely, rare for someone who is well-acquainted with what happens behind classroom

doors to extol the present educational system as beyond criticism or reproof. Depending on their field of expertise, researchers tend to identify different problems with schooling and prescribe solutions accordingly. Those who are knowledgeable about the media, for example, argue that the root causes behind academic underachievement are the students' short attention spans and their unwillingness to persevere when facing academic challenges. They cannot maintain their concentration when reading complex texts or listening to challenging ideas because they have become so used to being entertained by short, mind-numbing programs that don't require deep reflection. Given the powerful influence TV has on students, media experts who are troubled by the drop in academic standards wish for more intellectually challenging TV programs that provoke the viewers' curiosity. Furthermore, sociologists who embrace Marxism as an invaluable tool for sociological analysis identify poverty as the major factor that accounts for the difference in academic performance between students from poor and affluent families. Marxists argue that students raised in poor, working class families lag far behind those reared in privileged households. This is not because they are disinterested in learning or academically incompetent but because their houses are not usually filled with intellectually stimulating books to read and their parents are often too tired and disillusioned after hours of backbreaking work to attend closely to their children's schoolwork at home. Students of the poor, furthermore, cannot afford to attend cram schools staffed with experienced teachers or learn under the tutelage of keen and committed private tutors. As Marxists like Au (2018) contend, the difference in academic output will always remain an unfortunate feature of contemporary education as long as poverty disadvantages the marginalized and oppressed members of society. The problem of academic inequity can be addressed only if the inbuilt socio-political system – a capitalist system whereby a small number of privileged leaders of powerful corporations willingly exploit their employees to maximize profit – that engenders this difference is eradicated. Moreover, many cognitive psychologists maintain that one of the biggest problems with schooling is that students fail to retain and master what they are taught because they resort to ineffective learning practices such as cramming information before tests, highlighting textbooks when reading, or failing to regularly test themselves as they read. Learning, they contend, will be more lasting if the students replace ineffective learning habits with strategies that have

shown to be effective by empirical research done on how the mind best retains new knowledge and information. Experiments in cognitive science have also demonstrated the importance of what learners believe about the nature of intelligence. Those who think that academic ability is innately fixed tend to perform poorly when compared to those who think that their competence is susceptible to growth through effort because they are convinced that the determination to work doesn't result in cognitive and intellectual improvement. Students' academic performance can be improved if teachers take the time to instill beliefs that promote learning and try to correct or dispel those that inhibit growth. Those working in different subject areas all have distinct yet illuminating insights into how education can become more enticing and enriching.

A problem that is identified by researchers working in many different disciplines is that school learning is not learner-centered. Teachers, for example, take center stage by spending most of the class time imparting their knowledge while students are expected to listen quietly filling their notebooks with copious notes. Because schools in a top-down manner enforce rules and regulations that dictate everything students can and cannot do, they lack the right to shape their learning experience by creating the norms they have to personally follow. Furthermore, they don't have the prerogative to choose what and how they want to learn. Irrespective of their aptitude for or interest in math, they have no choice but to learn algebra and geometry and they have no power in determining the kind of tasks or activities their teachers set even when they find the standard fill-in-the-blank type worksheets boring and meaningless.

To help make learning at schools more learner-centered, many pedagogical ideas have been put forward over the years from different quarters. Advocates of approaches to teaching that seek to empower students stress the need for teachers to play a less central and a more facilitative role in class. That is, instead of teachers engaging in longwinded didactic lectures, students are expected to share the responsibility of teaching new content by learning the relevant material and presenting what they learn to their peers. Students will not only learn to become less dependent on their teachers, but they will experience first-hand the importance of being responsible for someone else's learning. Teachers can also share their power with students by creating the classroom rules together. The rules they agree upon may not differ radically from those that were imposed in the past, but students will undoubtedly sense that

they are in charge of their own learning when they themselves create the rules that affect what they experience at school. In addition, proponents of learner-centered teaching insist that the classroom must transform itself to a place where the opinions and thoughts students have about what they learn are treated seriously and with respect. To help achieve this end, students typically exchange their ideas about history, literature, or art in groups, thereby learning the invaluable art of listening attentively to viewpoints they don't share and defending their thoughts with cogent, compelling arguments. Teachers and curricular specialists who take the learners' experiences and interests seriously also contend that themes and issues that are covered in class must be rooted in what students under their charge find meaningful instead of forcing them to learn matters they find irrelevant.

Another recurrent idea that dominates educational thinking and discourse on learner-centered pedagogy is that teaching must attempt to meet the needs students have. The pivotal aim, it is often claimed, of prioritizing the learners above everything else in education is met if what teachers teach is what the students need to learn. On the other hand, teaching fails to be learner-centered if it doesn't deliver what students need to know or do. The basic underlying philosophy does seem to make a lot of pedagogical sense. After all, we would seriously question an educational program as being learner-centered if it doesn't teach basic arithmetic or the ability to read simple texts written in the students' first language. Yet this paper will argue that an education that is based on the needs students have is not without problems. In what follows, several basic questions will be posed that will help frame the discussion and contextualize the problems needs-based educational philosophies face.

## 1 What are needs?

It is not entirely uncommon for those involved in heated debates in education to talk across one another because they don't share a clear understanding of the concepts that are being discussed. As a case in point, the importance of teaching critical thinking is one of the many controversial issues in education partly because many opponents of critical reasoning wrongly believe that it trains students to be negative and scathing towards what they learn, not knowing that critical thinking has more to do with the logical analysis of arguments, not a psychological

disposition towards what is being taught. In a similar vein, one of the peculiar features about recent discussions on the importance of meeting the needs of students is that the participants often fail to define what they exactly mean by needs. Those involved in these debates often assume that a fruitful and informative exchange of ideas can take place without an unambiguous definition of needs. But this is surely a mistake. A constructive dialogue can only take place if the participants know the precise meaning behind the key concepts and categories that are being addressed. Just as theists and atheists cannot have a meaningful exchange about the relationship between God and morality without first defining 'God', a fruitful dialogue will not ensue unless participants share a common understanding of needs. But because this is lacking in many discussions, people misunderstand what others say and fail to convey their ideas in ways that can be understood by those with different educational convictions. Sometimes proponents of learner-centered teaching conflate 'needs' and 'wants' when they argue that what students need to learn is what they want to learn. Needs are mixed with wants in part because needs aren't clearly defined. But the concepts must be kept separate because they are not synonymous. One can want what one doesn't need (an expensive car, for example) or need what one doesn't want (a surgery, for example). Also, educational debates concerning the importance of student experiencing self-esteem at schools take place without a clear understanding of what needs are. While some are convinced that students shouldn't be exposed to failure at school because every learner needs to experience self-esteem, others disagree, on the grounds that self-esteem is not a need. Such debates may yield clearer results if the participants first agree on a common understanding of needs.

Unfortunately, when needs are defined, the definitions are often far from satisfactory. For example, it is sometimes argued that students need X – where X stands for some item of knowledge, form of understanding, or skill – because they will be using X in the future. The aim of learning is to provide the knowledge or skill that students will be required to use in the coming years. According to this account of needs, students now need to learn how to use a computer because most jobs will require basic computer literacy. Basic arithmetic constitutes another important educational need because students will need to add and subtract and do fractions when paying the bills. If, however, this account were accepted as a criterion for deciding what should and shouldn't be taught at schools, much of what was

ordinarily taught would have to be jettisoned as useless trivia, unworthy of educational merit. Reading the canons of great literature, exploring the birth and death of ancient empires, and appreciating the music of Bach and Vivaldi would all lack educational value because it seems doubtful whether students can readily make use of their understanding of Shakespeare or their knowledge of the life of Julius Caesar when orchestrating a business meeting, persuading a customer to purchase a new car, or when raising their children who go to kindergarten. In fact, when utility or usefulness becomes a benchmark for deciding what students need to know, their education becomes very limited in terms of the content and skills they are taught: they might learn typing but not the art of listening to Mozart; read self-help materials, not the moral tomes of Cicero or Seneca; and watch contemporary movies about the hook-up culture or teenage pregnancy, but not indulge in the works of Rembrandt or Cezanne. Vocational training becomes the primary focus of schooling. The practical and useful trump historical analysis and philosophical speculation. As a result, the students' mental horizons will for the most part remain insular and narrow from not exploring the distant past, appreciating the rich cultural heritage that has withstood the test of time, and engaging in philosophical, metaphysical speculations. An additional problem with this criterion is that by implying that knowledge is valuable in so far as it could be put to use, students can easily be led into thinking that knowledge has only instrumental value, or that it has worth in so far as it can help serve some end we want or value. According to this line of reasoning, knowledge of the past is without value if it cannot serve some socio-political end such as explaining why society is organized the way it is now. Scientific knowledge of subatomic particles doesn't amount to much unless it can contribute to new breakthroughs in technology. But knowledge has intrinsic value that cannot always be measured in terms of the practical benefits it brings. The reading of quality literature is its own reward because readers experience immense joy and satisfaction when savoring beautiful prose rich in vivid imageries and memorable metaphors. The study of nature has meaning aside its bearing on the economy. The starry heavens above can fill observers with ineffable awe and the miniscule world of gluons and quarks can provoke a sense of wonder and mystery that cannot be articulated in words. The value of knowledge transcends its use.

Others argue that students need to learn X if X is foundational, something which has to be mastered in order to pursue their studies in a

given field, or an indispensable prerequisite for learning new content or skills. When studying a foreign language, for example, students need to acquire many high-frequency words because they will come across these words countless times when reading in the target language. A poor vocabulary will impede reading comprehension, thereby blocking the process of acquiring valuable, comprehensible input necessary for intake. And students' understanding of mathematics won't improve unless they master fractions, decimals, and percentages, along with the ability to multiply and divide large numbers, because more advanced works in trigonometry and algebra presuppose some familiarity with basic mathematics. Students won't be able to work with graphs involving parabolas if they cannot solve fractions or will struggle with word problems dealing with the relationship between distance, speed, and time if they have difficulty multiplying large integers. Yet this view of demarcating necessary from unnecessary knowledge faces a number of problems. Many school subjects don't follow a linear, cumulative pattern where what students learn at an advanced stage incorporates and reflects materials acquired during the more rudimentary stages of learning. The study of history, for example, is often divided into separate time periods and each segment of history can be learned without much knowledge of what took place before. One can learn a lot about the birth of science and the decline of faith during the Age of the Enlightenment without knowing much about the persecution of Christians that took place not long after the death of Christ. The same point can be said about the biology curriculum. The study of biology is divided into separate components, and students can learn each unit without transferring and making use of the foundational knowledge they acquired elsewhere. They can learn about how DNA molecules that constitute a chromosome can be found in the nucleus of a human cell without knowing much about how neurons transmit signals to different parts of the brain or how insulin secreted by the pancreas helps break down unnecessary sugar in the blood. An additional problem is that even if we can help determine what is and isn't necessary for students to know by focusing on what is basic and fundamental in each discipline, this still leaves us with the question of what they need to know after they learn the basics. No one involved in foreign language education, for example, would question the learning of high-frequency words and basic grammar. But once the basics are covered, one is left wondering how learning should subsequently follow, because there are many things students can do during

the next stage of learning. After mastering the basics, they can translate sentences from the target language to their first language, engage in simple role plays using words they know, or read picture books. The criterion in question cannot function as a useful pedagogical guideline for future learning because it doesn't have much to say about what has to be learned once the fundamentals that can be found in any given discipline are taught.

It is also typical to hear that students need to know X where X stands for what has proved over the years to be of universal, permanent value in a particular field of study. There are, it is argued, canonical literary texts, masterpieces in art and music, and groundbreaking scientific theories that students must become acquainted with because of the central value they have in their respective fields. Reading, for example, the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare and the poems and essays by Goethe is of immense value because their works raise deep philosophical questions – the purpose of life, the nature of love, the fate that awaits us after death, etc. – and attempt to answer them in language that is both beautiful and profound. As Ellis (1997) writes, “The great writers to whom we return again and again are a limitless source of inspired commentary on the endless puzzles of human existence” (p. 39). The self-portraits of van Gogh and his vivid paintings of large stretches of farmland and the dark, eerie sky ominously overlooking the town below have enduring aesthetic value which students need to learn to appreciate. Lessons on music must explore the symphonies and piano sonatas of Beethoven and Brahms, not the hit songs of Madonna or Michael Jackson, so that students can truly understand their unique and everlasting contribution to musicology and why people to this day are deeply moved to tears when listening to their melodies. Science education can of course digress from what is truly important by dwelling on trivia. But an intellectually rigorous examination of the natural world would investigate natural phenomena in light of the theories proposed by scientific geniuses like Newton, Darwin, and Heisenberg: investigating the elliptical orbits of planets with reference to Newton's laws of motion; making sense of the great variation that exists both within and across species by invoking Darwin's theory of natural selection; and pondering on and trying to come to grips with the utterly bizarre behavior of photons with the help of the uncertainty principle. Instead of reading short stories that are philosophically shallow, analyzing paintings that are third-rate, and studying theories in physics that were discarded by the scientific



community for being wrong, students, defenders of this viewpoint insist, need to be exposed to first-rate works of art and well-corroborated, ingenious scientific theories that will always be appreciated for their lasting contribution to human thought. Because the amount of time students spend in class is limited, they need to learn what has perennial value, not what will eventually fade into oblivion.

Despite the appeal it has for many to ascertain what is of value in education, it faces a number of problems. The first point that has to be made about this approach of identifying needs is that it is extremely contentious, an approach that is mooted by many as being biased. Those who support multiculturalism in education argue that the literary works and the masterpieces of art that are typically recommended for their enduring value alienate many students who don't share the artist's background. Because the poems and paintings are predominantly the works by white, heterosexual men from the upper or middle-class, students who are gay, colored, female, or from the working class may find it difficult to appreciate the values they embody because they don't share the same experiences or outlook on life. A novel about a couple from the rich aristocracy living an extravagant life may distance readers from the working class and people of color will struggle to make much sense of a poem portraying the experiences of someone who is white. Critics are wont to insist that students who belong to marginalized groups need to study works that reflect their vantage point and question the unearned, unjustified privilege and status bestowed upon the rich and the powerful. Privileging and mandating works that estrange many learners raises more questions than it answers. An additional problem is that it focuses too heavily on the past without paying much attention on the future. As students read essays written about the past and study sculptures made by men who are not here with us today, the world they inhabit is leaning towards more chaos and disorder, where urgent problems – war, famine, crime, poverty, etc. – that are not susceptible to easy solutions are on the increase. Appreciating and reflecting upon the cultural heritage from the past is not unimportant but it becomes questionable as a way of defining what students need to learn if it leaves little space for students to think seriously about the socio-political problems the world they live in faces. Reflection on the past must be more counterbalanced with thoughts about the present and the future. As DeNicola (2012) observes, "Focusing education on the transmission of a cultural legacy occupies students with

the past and with the lives of others, not with their own futures” (p. 80).

Needs in education can also be understood in terms of what students don't know or cannot do. According to this view, students need to learn about the structure and behavior of atoms in chemistry and study the plays of Shaw and Ibsen in English because they have very little understanding of science and literature. Besides content, schools are responsible for instilling many skills – reading critically, giving a speech, writing an essay, etc. – students struggle with. Students' mind is like an empty receptacle that contains very little knowledge and understanding. The teachers' primary responsibility is to pour valuable knowledge to the very rim to expand their potential. This understanding of needs runs into problems. First, there is literally an infinite range of things students don't know or cannot do. Though they may be adept at a number of skills they have had the chance to practice repeatedly over the years, there are many they cannot do: ski, sew, grow vegetables, take pictures, play chess, use a telescope, or use a compass efficiently. The list can be extended indefinitely. The point is that if schools are required to teach what students cannot do, they will have a vast number of skills to instill. Given the time constraint, it would be impossible for schools to cover even a tiny fraction of what students cannot do. If schools choose to select what skills to instill, then their decision is not based solely on what they cannot do. They are making choices in light of values or what they think is more educationally valuable for students to learn. The same is true of content. The students' knowledge of the world is limited. What they know is but a small droplet in the vast ocean of knowledge. Though of immense importance and relevance for students, they remain ignorant of the findings of educational research, where studies have been done on student motivation, the impact of homework on learning, and strategies that improve retention. Despite their limited understanding, they are not acquainted with the canonical teachings of the world religions and their complex, rich history. Their views, therefore, on faiths they don't share tend to be superficial, often resorting to caricatures and stereotypes that distort their deep spirituality. Besides subjects like education and religion that are not covered in schools in depth, there is a vast array of unfamiliar themes and issues in fields they are taught. Students in English read the novels of Bronte but don't explore the strange and twisted world of Marquis de Sade. They learn the principles of algebra in math but only touch upon the fundamentals of statistics. When studying about ethics, they might read about the life of St.

Francis of Assisi but usually don't study the pessimistic essays of Schopenhauer. If education consists of teaching what students don't know, then schools have an impossibly daunting task of covering an everlasting number of themes. This being impossible, they again must choose the content they think is important, meaningful, and interesting. Their decision, therefore, is reached by considering factors other than what learners don't know. The second problem is that schools shouldn't just cover what students are unfamiliar with. They are obliged to reexamine and reinforce what is already well-known to students. Though students for the most part do not question the values of love and hope, they should read about the lives of extraordinary individuals who embodied these values so that their belief in their importance is further strengthened. Also very few students would deny the importance of exercising to help maintain a strong and healthy body and many schools rightly require students to run, swim, and jump ropes. Their understanding of the value of exercise doesn't mean that schools should thereby forgo the responsibility of requiring students to exercise during school hours. Rather, they should reinforce its importance by setting aside some time for jogging or stretching. Or consider reading in a foreign language. Most students have problems reading and understanding challenging texts that consist of language and grammar structures they are not familiar with. Yet learners don't have problems reading texts that are below their level of competence. The very fact that they can efficiently read texts that are simple doesn't mean that they shouldn't. In fact, there is considerable evidence that documents the positive effects – acquiring new grammar, enjoying reading, building knowledge, etc. – brought by extensive reading. It is sometimes important for teachers to make use of what their students are capable of doing. Schooling cannot rest solely on students' ignorance or incapability. It must also incorporate and expand upon what they know and can do.

To conclude, though various definitions of needs have been put forward by those who champion a philosophy of education that is founded upon needs, they are not entirely free of conceptual problems. A more focused, clearer discussion about the place of needs in education will ensue if a more satisfactory definition of needs can be established.

## 2 Why focus on needs?

The school curriculum can be designed in a myriad of ways. It can

revolve around problems curricular specialists think will interest students. Students who are taught by teachers who follow this pedagogy typically conduct experiments in science and read primary and secondary sources in history to solve concrete problems. Paying heed to the prescriptions from educationalists like Hirsch (2016), the curriculum can also center itself on the acquisition of knowledge, where students can be seen committing large amounts of information and facts to memory so that they have the appropriate background knowledge to read and understand texts. Education can be rooted in needs and those who stress their importance do so because of reasons they find compelling. The first commonly cited reason is that an appeal to needs can in principle resolve differences that are endemic in educational controversies. Needless to say, there are endless, acrimonious discussions about what and how to teach with no agreement in sight. This state of affairs can be amended, it is argued, if education is based on needs because not unlike the physiological needs that must be satisfied in order to maintain health, educators can agree on what students need to learn. In the world of medical science, there is an overall consensus among medical practitioners concerning what people need to stay fit. Besides consuming nutritious food and exercising, people need plenty of sleep and lead a life that is not riddled with stress. And when people become ill, doctors often offer similar advice and prescribe similar medications because there is general agreement regarding where the problem lies and what can be done to help cure it. Hence, when someone is suffering from high blood pressure, she is commonly advised to avoid fatty or salty food, lose weight, and consume less alcohol. Educational needs are thought to be fundamentally analogous to physiological needs so educational practitioners should be able to agree on what students should learn and propose similar solutions if students have problems learning.

The analogy with medical science doesn't work, however, because in education what is seen as a need is shaped by one's philosophical priorities and they differ significantly from person to person. Consider the teaching of art. Many politicians and influential figures in the corporate sector are opposed to art education, attaching very little value to students painting and learning about Cubism in class. They sideline art because first and foremost they seek a vibrant, strong, and prosperous economy and they don't see how the ability to draw beautiful landscapes can help achieve their end of boosting the economy. Conservative Christians are often ambivalent towards art education. They obviously eschew works of art

which they regard as secular, sacrilegious, or hedonistic but are embrative of religious art and those that portray religion in a favorable light. Given their commitment to eradicate inequality and fight social injustice, left-leaning political activists are supportive of art that stresses the importance of socio-political transformation, depicts the self-centered greed of the oppressive ruling class, or underlines the hardships the poor have to endure daily. Because people have different philosophical convictions that shape what they value as important and what they construe as trivial, they won't all agree on what schools should deliver to students. Doctors all agree that sleep is conducive to health but educational practitioners disagree whether art is needed at schools.

And though doctors can and do agree on what measures to take after a prognosis is made, there is a wide spectrum of beliefs and ideas concerning what teachers should do once problems in learning are identified. Again using art as an example, many students simply do not have the aptitude to express what they perceive on canvas by using paint and a brush. Despite their tireless effort, they cannot translate what they see onto the canvas, and what they manage to depict is often skewed and unnatural, not an accurate representation of what they see. One of the central problems in art education concerns how teachers should best respond to those who have very little talent in art. While some argue that those whose artistic intelligence is undeveloped shouldn't be forced to take art, others disagree, claiming that every student, regardless of their aptitude, should learn art because it can teach the importance of nurturing our capacity to imagine and be creative. And even amongst teachers who think that all students should learn art, they disagree about the tracking of students into different levels, depending on their competence in art. Those who favor tracking argue that students who are artistically gifted won't be challenged and their talent will remain dormant if they are in class with students who are incompetent. Critics of tracking, on the other hand, insist that students assigned in low-level classes will feel stigmatized for their lack of artistic talent and the quality of education they receive will be undemanding and uninspiring because teachers tend to lower their expectations and dumb down their lessons when teaching groups that are thought to be inept. As Benesch (2001) writes, "Tracking depresses the aspirations and damages the self-images of students placed in lower tracks" (p. 89). Assessing students who are unskilled at art is another concern teachers are bound to face. If students are to be assessed by a pre-

defined, fixed standard, it is very possible for students who lack talent to fail or receive poor grades even if they made much improvement in class because their initial level was very basic. Or if assessment is based on comparing their painting, sculpture, or pottery with those in the same class, it is again possible for students, despite their progress in artistic expression, to do poorly if their work is assessed in relation to works created by those who excel in art. It is tempting, therefore, to assess students in terms of how much they each improved without invoking a fixed standard or comparing their work with one another. Yet this mode of assessment is contested by some because it is hard for students who excel in art to show much improvement because they commonly reach a plateau which is difficult to overcome. Unlike medical practitioners, therefore, teachers' opinions diverge significantly when encountering problems in education. The anomalies learning poses are not susceptible to neat, tidy solutions that are acceptable to everyone involved in education.

Another reason why many educators stress the importance of needs is that they think that students become more keen on learning if they believe they need what they are taught. To put the matter differently, it is thought that students don't respond favorably to what they learn at school because they are convinced that the content and skills they acquire are not needed once they pass the upcoming test or graduate from school. Not many students are drawn to the past because they think that their knowledge of the pharaohs of Egypt or how the Pilgrims settled in New England will be required when earning a living and many are turned off when learning new vocabulary in English because they doubt whether they will use any of the arcane words they are forced to memorize. There are, however, problems with the view that links needs with motivation. First of all, students can and do become interested in subjects or topics that they know are not useful in any way. It is extremely doubtful that students are drawn to celebrity gossips or Hollywood films because they believe that their knowledge of actors and actresses will be required in the future. They are curious about the entertainment industry despite knowing that their extensive knowledge doesn't serve any useful purpose. There are issues students find intrinsically interesting, unconnected to their personal needs. They can immerse themselves in their interests unconcerned about the effect they have on their lives because the exploration of their passion is itself rewarding. Moreover, students are not necessarily interested in learning materials that satisfy their academic

needs. Students who dislike studying a foreign language, for example, are not intellectually aroused when given a list of very useful words that will aid oral communication. Because they don't care much about becoming a competent speaker of the target language, they are not interested in expanding their vocabulary even if it will help them become a more efficient speaker. Students' willingness to learn won't necessarily bloom if they need to learn something in order to meet goals or objectives they don't find attractive.

Another rationale for focusing on needs in education is that students are thought to retain more of what they are taught if they believe that it is something they really need to learn. Retention is a perennial concern in education because students forget most of what they are taught at schools. This failure to retain can be demotivating for both students and teachers, given the amount of time they spend trying to acquire or impart knowledge. It is understandable, therefore, that educators seek means to aid retention. But it is questionable whether students' ability to memorize content will be fostered when they realize it is something they really need. Students do as a matter of fact learn a lot about things they know they don't need. They are adept at memorizing lyrics sung by their favorite artists, though they fully know that their knowledge of music is neither indispensable or essential for getting a good job, making friends, finding a date, or doing well at school. Further, there are plenty of students who try very hard to commit what they are taught to memory but fail to do so even when they value the content as important and useful. Many forget a large portion of what they are taught after being tested, not because they don't value what they learn, but because they don't use effective learning strategies that help retention. Reiterating how the materials taught at school satisfy their needs won't contribute to retention because they already know their worth. They don't need to be reminded of the value behind what they learn. What they need are techniques that can regularly be used to transfer content from their short-term to their long-term memory. Finally, memory is an exceedingly complex phenomenon that is usually affected by multiple factors other than how learners conceive the value of what they have to memorize. It is naïve to single out a single variable and claim that it has a positive effect on memory. One must always examine this variable in conjunction with other factors when discussing whether it is conducive to retention. Students' ability to memorize something is not determined solely by the importance they

attach to what they have to retain. Their ability is also affected by their familiarity with the subject in question and how often they review the material they have to memorize. When reflecting on human memory, it is paramount to reflect on a range of factors and see how they interrelate with each other.

One also cannot deny that educators are being pressured by people from the corporate and commercial sector to teach what students need instead of imparting content that is not useful. Many managers of businesses, for example, bemoan that recent graduates entering the workplace have to undergo remedial training because they lack the knowledge and skills necessary to be productive employees. The little they remember from their schooldays is often irrelevant and impractical, not suitable for addressing and solving the problems of work. In response to such complaints and accusations, more and more educators are convinced that schools must discard unusable, inert knowledge and impart content and skills that will prepare their students for the workplace. Though this response is understandable, it faces a problem. Obviously, not every student in a given class of twenty or thirty will have the same job. Some might become blue-collar workers in a factory, engaging in repetitive tasks that don't demand a lot of creative thinking. Others will land themselves in very competitive white-collar jobs that pay well and demand critical thought. What employees need to know or do will depend on the nature of their job. What flight attendants need to know will be significantly different to the knowledge required of teachers of physics. But if the required knowledge varies from job to job, and if each class consists of students who will pursue different careers in the future, then the knowledge teachers impart won't satisfy the needs of every student. A one-size-fits-all curriculum won't meet everyone's needs. Mathematics will benefit those who will become accountants or engineers but won't be useful to those who will drive buses. Learning about modern art will be valuable for future curators but won't help students who intend to become farmers. Schools, therefore, cannot cater to the needs of every student because every class consists of students who will enter different fields and each field will demand a different set of skills. In response to this problem, one might be tempted to argue that schools should impart knowledge or skills that will be useful for any job. The ability to read and write or do basic arithmetic may count as an underlying base that every job requires but it seems doubtful whether students need to spend year after year at school



mastering skills that won't take that long to learn. As students, for instance, can and do master the multiplication table within a short span of time, they don't need to devote three years in high school learning how to multiply figures. In other words, teaching what is directly relevant to the workplace will leave a lot of extra time that needs to be filled with learning. This leads to the following problem: How can schools make use of all the remaining time? The effective use of time in education raises a host of problems because the answer ultimately depends on people's philosophical priorities. Those with strong religious convictions want students reading scripture while others who endorse atheism despise religious education as a form of brainwashing. The abundance of time raises issues that must be addressed by those who want to satisfy the demands made by the workplace by focusing on directly applicable skills and knowledge.

Thus, the standard reasons that are given to justify the central place of needs in education are not entirely compelling. The overall philosophical view of prioritizing needs over and above other educational possibilities and concerns requires arguments that are more persuasive, or is in need of a more secure and firmer foundation that can withstand criticism.

### 3 Who determines the needs?

Critics of traditional education bemoan the fact that students cannot decide what they need to learn. They have very little say in determining which subjects to study and the content that is covered in each subject area is already predetermined by the school authorities. The English curriculum, for example, typically requires students to write short stories, analyze essays, read poems, and memorize rules of grammar and spelling, regardless of what they think is paramount in English learning. Biology textbooks are filled with definitions, nomenclatures, facts, and concepts which are thought to cultivate the students' interest in the world of botany and zoology, though most doubt that their knowledge of photosynthesis and the theory of natural selection is necessary for their lives. Though most students know beyond doubt that they won't become professional chemists working for university research institutes or pharmaceutical companies, they conduct experiments using beakers and slides because they have to, not because they think they need to. In civics education, politically disengaged and disillusioned adolescents who have very little respect for their political leaders are forced to learn about the fundamental

principles of democracy and how the parliament functions. There is a significant gap between what schools think students need to know and what students think about the content that is delivered to them. Though teachers often assert the underlying value of what they teach, stressing time and time again that knowledge of history or a deep understanding of algebra can have a positive effect on their lives, students are inclined to dismiss such talk as nothing more than rhetoric, fully aware that most of what they learn at schools is taught to keep them busy.

Enthusiastic supporters of learner-centered education believe that this cynical and adverse attitude to schooling shared by many students will become less pervasive if they, not the teachers or curriculum designers, can decide what they need to learn and plan and execute their course of study accordingly with some help from their instructors. This fundamental change, if implemented, is thought to bring many educational benefits. For example, students will become more enthusiastic about their learning because they are, under learner-centered education, treated as autonomous agents who can freely choose to study what they think is important and act upon the choice they make. An important source of motivation in learning is for learners to sense that they have control over what and how they learn. Learners are more inclined to maintain their interest in learning and are less likely to give up when they face difficulties if their learning is controlled by the choices they freely made. On the other hand, learners easily succumb to distractions and fail to stay focused when what they have to learn is shaped and directed by people other than themselves. Students, in other words, will be more willing to learn if they can shape the course and content of their education in light of their needs. Another case for transferring power to students is that it enables students to become more self-directed. One of the problems with the present schooling system is that students are preprogrammed to become reliant on their teachers, who decide and manage every aspect of their learning experience. But when students deliberate on what they need, try to acquire the knowledge and skills that help meet their personal educational needs, and monitor their progress and setbacks as they proceed in their learning, they are in effect being less dependent on their teachers and are taking more charge of their own education. Students learn to be more responsible by being given more responsibility.

Despite the laudable goal of making learning student-oriented by allowing students free rein to discern and pursue their educational needs,

this approach in education is not entirely impervious to problems. For this kind of learning to succeed, students must be capable of identifying the needs they have. Those with clear future goals may know exactly what skills and knowledge they need to help realize their aspirations. A pre-intermediate student of French who wants to study in France for one year may have a clear understanding of what communicative skills she needs to develop in order to make her stay rewarding. A student with a strong interest in becoming a nutritionist may also be aware of the kind of background knowledge in biology and health science that is minimally required to pursue her studies in depth. But aside from those who have definite goals that can help identify their needs, many are unsure of what they want to achieve or do in the future. They attend classes, complete their homework, and take tests, all the while not knowing exactly why they are doing what they are doing. Those without clear goals would be at a loss if asked to establish the competence and understanding they need to acquire. Furthermore, students are not necessarily the best judges when assessing what they need to learn. They might overestimate their competence in a particular area when in reality they lack the necessary knowledge or skills. A student whose writing is fraught with errors in grammar and punctuation can misjudge her prose to be satisfactory. Students can also underestimate their understanding or level of competence and work continuously on something they have already mastered when more time could be spent learning materials that are more challenging or demanding. Learners who are afraid of taking risks or who are reluctant to work beyond their comfort zone can be found reading texts that are way below their academic level, not works that help build their knowledge or reading ability or challenge them to think in an entirely different way. The students' "comfort zone of learning always needs to be shifting, getting a little harder, always moving upwards, ensuring that each learning session is a struggle." (Boser, 2017, p. 89). Students can also easily misidentify needs. Those who struggle with reading scientific texts may think that it is their lack of general vocabulary that is causing the problem when in actual fact it might be that they lack the background knowledge in science to help decode the meaning of what they read. Most students will also have a hard time discovering what concepts, modes of reasoning, and factual knowledge they need to acquire in a particular field because learners in general become aware of any gap in their understanding after spending a considerable amount of time learning about the subject. A

student of ancient history becomes painfully aware of what more she needs to learn about, say, the warrior ethics of Sparta as she becomes more acquainted with its conflict with Athens. She won't know exactly what she needs to know unless she has some background historical knowledge. Students, for the most part, won't be able to clearly discern what they lack in knowledge and understanding because of the rudimentary stage of their learning. Students, therefore, may not be the most reliable and objective evaluator of their own needs in education. Just as we need to rely on experienced and knowledgeable doctors to help identify what medication we need to take given the physical condition we are in, experts in the field of education – university researchers, curriculum specialists, authors of textbooks, etc. – who have the students' best interest in mind might help ensure an education that addresses and meets their needs.

Some of those who adhere to learner-centered teaching accept the problems that emerge when students themselves are left to assess the needs they have to satisfy, and contend that they themselves must bear the responsibility of uncovering their students' needs and building an intellectually rigorous and stimulating curriculum based on what they identify. Conceding that educational professionals should take the initiative to help ascertain what students should know, they argue that their knowledge of the curriculum and what students find challenging can help tailor instruction to the needs of the students. The problem, however, that arises when teachers who embrace learner-centered teaching are held accountable for establishing what is important in student learning is that they are bound to identify different needs as worthy of learning. What counts as a need or something that should be taught in education partly hinges on the values and beliefs teachers hold. The convictions and commitments teachers have color and shape their outlook on teaching and learning, conferring value to certain areas of knowledge and attaching less importance to others. And because teachers all espouse slightly different educational philosophies, what they conceive as important and enduring in learning will differ in some shape or form. Take science education as a case in point. Many within the educational profession venerate science as the epitome of rational thought, an invaluable subject that unveils truths about the natural world that are objective and reliable. Though they share the willingness and commitment to teach the importance and value of science, they hope to realize this aim in different ways. Some are convinced that the science curriculum should teach the groundbreaking discoveries in physics

and chemistry – Copernicus’s model of the solar system, Kepler’s laws of planetary motions, Newton’s theory of gravity, etc. – that have transformed our way of understanding the physical world. Others think that what is paramount in science education is for students to acquire the scientific attitude of seeking evidence to corroborate beliefs. Instead of memorizing the various laws of physics while tracing the history of science, students should actually do science – propose hypotheses and test their veracity with experiments – and thereby learn the value and difficulty of studying and approaching any given problem from a scientific frame of mind. There are proponents of science education who seek a curriculum that is more centered on what scientists currently don’t know, not one that is based on what scientists have helped uncover about galaxies and the ecosystem. Supporters of this type of curriculum commonly argue that students shouldn’t spend a vast amount of time learning about the theories propounded by scientists in the past. Because scientific knowledge is by nature corrigible and fallible, they will eventually be revised or discarded as erroneous in light of new scientific discoveries. As Bauer (2017) maintains, “Theories that have worked faultlessly for decades or for centuries might nevertheless turn out – perhaps as soon as tomorrow – to be in some way wrong” (p. 114). Another commonly cited rationale for exploring the unknown in science is that just as scientists are spurred to investigate nature by what lies beyond the province of well-corroborated scientific knowledge, students are more intellectually aroused by being exposed to the mysteries that fill the world, not by what is known beyond reasonable doubt. As these examples hopefully illustrate, even among teachers who uphold learner-centered teaching, there are widely divergent views concerning what students need to know in science.

The difference in beliefs about what students should or shouldn’t learn about science widens and deepens when considering the views of those who are more skeptical about the value of science. Teachers influenced by feminist epistemologists like Harding (1991), for example, argue that students need to learn that science, contrary to what is commonly taught at schools, is not free of sexist assumptions and gender biases. The methods, aims, and results of scientific research are, they commonly argue, partial, contextual, and subjective, reflecting and being molded by predominantly masculine values. They insist that the science curriculum must seek to correct the commonly held yet mistaken assumptions – that scientific knowledge is universal and objective, for example – students

have about science and replace them with those that mirror how science is actually practiced. Furthermore, teachers who have a strong concern over the plight of our planet are convinced that valuable classroom time should be spent raising the students' awareness of how the environment is being desecrated by human greed and the measures that can be taken to heal the wounds humans inflict. They insist upon the importance of devoting more time teaching about the delicate interrelationships between species that can be found in the ecosystem because humanity's future existence ultimately depends on whether this system of relationships can be preserved despite the damage brought by global warming, acid rain, and deforestation. Learning about Aristotle's theory of teleology and Galileo's experiments with inclined planes won't eradicate the environmental problems we face and ensure our future presence on earth. Thirdly, though embrasive of scientific ideas that have no or very little religious meaning or implication, some teachers with strong religious convictions are wary of students learning about scientific theories that clash with their faith. Some, for example, urge schools to refrain from teaching evolutionary theory because it is thought to undermine the biblical doctrine of creation. They believe that a literal reading of scripture implies that humans, along with other species, are invariant, or that they have always been physiologically and anatomically the same since they first made their appearance on earth. The theory of evolution, on the other hand, claims that fossil records and DNA testing show that species have all undergone physical changes as they struggled and competed against their rivals to secure limited resources. Teachers with religious commitments seek to safeguard their faith and their students' understanding of truth from the corrosive findings of science. Thus, teachers who for various reasons are more reluctant to wholeheartedly embrace science differ significantly over what should be emphasized and what should be sidelined in science education.

Students can also be negatively affected when their educational needs are identified by others. When important decisions about their studies are made by people other than themselves, students are molded to become passive and obedient recipients of what those who have power and authority mandate in a top-down manner. The students' role in education is to receive and follow, not to direct and mandate. After being on the receiving end of education for many years, they will view their unwillingness to question decisions made by people at the top as both natural and normal. Another problem that ensues when needs are

determined by others is that students are not expected to think about their own education. Because all the thinking and decisions about learning – what needs to be learned, how much time should be allocated to each topic, how students should be assessed, etc. – are made by the experts and the authorities, there is very little room left for students to deliberate on the issues raised by education. They can thereby become dependent on others to think for them. This dependency can unwittingly create an electorate that expects those in the higher echelon of society to think on behalf of a compliant, unquestioning public. The third problem is that when needs are established without consulting students, they learn quite quickly that their views, ideas, or opinions don't count. What and how they learn at school don't reflect their views on learning because they are considered unimportant. If they were considered valuable, teachers would negotiate the curriculum with them. As students become used to their views being unheard, they will become more reluctant to assert their opinions and adopt a low opinion towards the ideas they have themselves.

In summary, students are not necessarily the best judges of their own needs. Many are unaware of their needs because they don't have a clear vocational goal that can help them decide what they should learn. Their judgment can be skewed by overestimating or underestimating what they know. Yet when educational professionals who agree on the importance of centering education around needs are held accountable for making important pedagogical decisions, they can disagree on what should and shouldn't be taught at school. There will be great variation and subtle differences concerning what students need to know depending on the values and beliefs they hold. Problems, therefore, arise regardless of who determines the students' needs. Those who champion a needs-oriented education should address these problems and show how they can be successfully handled.

#### 4 What are the inbuilt biases?

Any approach to teaching has its inherent partialities and preferences, valuing a particular type of knowledge or curricular goal as important at the expense of others. Cooperative learning, for example, stresses the importance of students learning from each other in groups by reading and editing their peers' written work, listening and critiquing what others have to say about different topics, and teaching what they know about the issue

at hand. Consequently, individualized learning, or students learning alone and assessing their own work at their own pace, is rare in classes that make extensive use of cooperative learning tasks. Classroom teaching that is founded upon the principles of behavioral psychology resorts to drills and pattern practice under the strict guidance of the teacher so that through overt training and repetition, students internalize correct language use or memorize key concepts and categories. Given its emphasis of learning through repetition, there are very few tasks that demand the creative and unconstrained use of language or oral discussions that are not closely monitored by the teacher.

Learner-centered teaching that seeks to meet student needs is not entirely free of pedagogical biases. It is akin to any other theory of teaching for underscoring the significance of educating, assessing, and learning in very particular ways while giving secondary importance to what they don't endorse. These biases, however, can have effects on student learning that are not entirely positive. What, then, are some of these biases? First, it focuses much of its attention on the needs of students at the expense of other needs that should be addressed in education. The primary aim of a needs-based education is to identify what students need to learn and for teachers to give explanations, set tasks, and offer effective feedback so that they will retain what they have to acquire. The focus of teaching is strictly about students and their needs: the facts they need to know, the skills and strategies they need to acquire, the dispositions they need to cultivate, and the types of understanding they must develop. But an education that places a premium on satisfying students' needs can misleadingly enculture students into thinking that learning involves nothing much beyond the pursuit of what they need to understand. Consequently, an education that is centered on what students need to learn tends to ignore or pay little attention to needs beyond their ambit of academic goals and interests, cultivating students who are focused primarily on their personal aspirations and goals. But a vital aspect of education is for learners to acquire a much broader and wider frame of reference that helps them see beyond the narrow and confined world of personal interests. This cannot be achieved as long as education's sole purpose and mission is understood in terms of providing students with the necessary knowledge and skills to help them flourish in the future. To expand their mind beyond their myopic and self-centered concerns, schools need to introduce students to needs that are situated outside themselves. For example, countless numbers of



species inhabiting the earth have basic needs that have to be met if they don't want to face extinction. Unfortunately, their need to secure a safe habitat is threatened largely because of our reckless and unbridled lust for economic prosperity. Our thirst for economic domination, that is, has led to the contamination of rivers and oceans with poisonous wastes and the ruthless cutting down of forests, thereby jeopardizing the homes and lives of many innocent and vulnerable species. Students must become acquainted with the effects human technology can have on the environment and how the basic needs of sentient beings are being ignored as so many obstacles for economic expansion. Secondly, "too often it can be easy to slip into the trap of seeing our classrooms as separate from the world, an intellectual oasis from the life beyond its walls" (Eyler, 2018, p. 187). Yet schools don't exist in a social vacuum, separated and isolated from the rest of society. They are all located in a community with its own very specific problems and needs. Students must become aware of these needs not only because their concern should extend beyond their parochial interests, but also because their well-being, safety, and future are intimately connected to the problems facing their community. While some communities may need volunteers, both old and young, to help clean litter, erase graffiti, and protect stray kittens, others may be short of caregivers and nurses to help the elderly in rest homes, parks where children can play, and daycare centers where parents can send their children after school. Many communities are also bedeviled by crime and violence, where disgruntled teenagers resort to vandalism and fights to express their anger or become pickpockets and drunkards because of the disoriented lives they lead. Neighborhoods in the city, furthermore, confront pollution from congested traffic and smoke and fumes emitted from nearby factories. Though needs vary, each community faces their own unique challenges which must be explored and solved in order to ensure a safe environment. Too often schools don't refer to the problems that inflict the community they are situated in. As a result, the themes and issues covered in class are often dissociated from what is happening just around the corner from where schools are located. But schools have the responsibility of raising their students' awareness of problems affecting their community so that they can take the initiative to alleviate its overall living conditions. Thirdly, students must become cognizant of the fact that there are innumerable people living in this world who undergo immense suffering in order to satisfy the basic needs— food, water, clothes, shelter, etc. — shared by

human beings in general. To help put food on the table, many people working in developing countries have to endure intense hardships working in sweatshops established by profit-seeking corporations, where they earn very little despite hours of hard labor under harsh, unethical working conditions. Moreover, as Callero's (2013) study unveils, both young and old women from many parts of the world leave their families living in dire, impoverished conditions behind and work abroad as nannies and caretakers for an extended period of time in order to attend to the needs of the wealthy and the privileged for very little pay. By learning about needs that are not necessarily related to their personal agendas and goals, students can come to realize that education doesn't simply revolve around their concerns and interests and perhaps more importantly understand that there are needs they don't share which must be addressed.

An additional bias with a needs-based education is that there is an exclusive emphasis on satisfying academic needs while paying very little attention to other needs schools can and should address. The sole, overriding aim of everything students experience at school is to meet the academic needs that are deemed worthy by teachers: students read a text to help build their vocabulary, give a speech to cultivate their oral skills, write an essay to demonstrate their ability to organize their thoughts logically, and conduct an experiment to verify a well-corroborated theory in chemistry. Tasks and activities that don't help achieve predetermined academic goals are rarely set. But because school learning is bent on meeting academic needs, very little space and time is allocated for students to reflect seriously about other needs that are also important. For example, students have basic physiological needs that must be satisfied in order to lead a healthy, fulfilling life. They must consume the right kind and amount of food, sleep well, and exercise regularly. Having a healthy body is an important precondition for academic success. People cannot ordinarily concentrate for long if they are exhausted. Nor can they persist when facing learning difficulties if they are in pain or feel nauseated. Despite the importance of physical health, schools don't support the students' well-being by informing them about the types of food they should eat and the kinds of exercises that have been proved to be beneficial. Also very little is mentioned about the illnesses – diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, etc. – that can afflict those who maintain unhealthy lifestyles and the precautionary measures they can take. Partly because of the school's unwillingness to engage in issues related to health, many students

struggle with various health problems – asthma, insomnia, migraine, anorexia, bulimia, obesity, etc. – that affect their studies. It is not unusual for classes to be filled with students who are half asleep and lacking in energy because of their bad eating and sleeping habits. Schools cannot expect students to be well-informed about what physical health involves if they forsake the responsibility to address this important need at school. Besides physiological needs, students have spiritual needs or the need to lead a purposeful and meaningful life. Many adolescents undergo depression and experience existential angst because they cannot fathom the reason for spending countless hours doing homework and studying for exams. Others experience severe boredom and ennui, where nothing really sparks their interests or grabs their attention. Quite a number of students experience fear and anxiety because they doubt their ability to effectively handle the problems and hurdles they will encounter in the future. Students respond to and try to cope with their emotional problems in different ways. Some preoccupy themselves with activities – playing TV games, reading comics, watching TV, surfing the internet, etc. – that temporarily numb and sedate their sense of uneasiness or boredom. As Toshalis (2015) documents in meticulous detail, to give vent to their anger and frustration that stem from their daily exposure to quizzes and tests, students can also resist what they are taught by cheating or plagiarizing work, coming to class late, disturbing their peers or teachers during lessons, or not participating in class. Sadly, some students who cannot cope with the competitive ethos of schooling or the pressure to earn good grades become truants, escaping from the reality they cannot face. Unable to bear the burden of schooling any longer, some commit suicide, bringing unimaginable pain to their families and friends. Schools are very reluctant when it comes to confronting and dealing with issues related to students' spiritual well-being. Many teachers think that their role as educators amounts to nothing more than teaching the textbook, administering tests, and following what the curriculum mandates. Of course the teachers' avoidance is understandable given the gravity and prevalence of the problem. Yet the problem needs to be addressed if schools want students to lead an emotionally balanced life and face the problems they encounter with equanimity. Part of the underlying reason why so many students experience meaninglessness and boredom is that they don't have an overarching philosophical orientation or outlook on life that can supply them with meaning and purpose. Their spiritual craving for meaning, their

thirst for a spiritually fulfilling outlook on the world, is not satisfied. Schools can address this spiritual need for a framework that gives direction and purpose by introducing students to the rich and profound metaphysical views and philosophies – Epicureanism, Marxism, Christianity, Stoicism, etc. – conceived by thinkers who wrestled with the problem of meaning. There are studies done in the field of psychology and its neighboring disciplines that describe the salient features of a life driven by purpose. As Smith's (2017) analysis of these findings show, people sense that their life is meaningful if there are activities – teaching, cleaning, selling, making, etc. – they typically engage in that make a positive difference to the well-being of others. The key is to lead a life that is devoted to the happiness of others without considering how your positive contributions will benefit yourself. Instead of recommending medication, healing music, or psychological counseling, schools can provide their students with the resources to lead a richer, more fulfilling life by exploring both the philosophical and psychological literature that dwell upon the theme of meaning. Otherwise classrooms will be packed with disoriented students who don't know where they are heading towards. A philosophy of education that only concerns itself with academic needs cannot help students overcome their spiritual malaise.

The third bias with a needs-based pedagogy is that it severely restricts the scope of teaching to that of delivering content or instilling skills that are needed. Because the sole, overriding rationale of teaching amounts to nothing much more than the transmission of what is necessary and required, teachers are focused primarily on what they need to teach. Yet this is most unfortunate because besides teaching what is necessary, there are many other important purposes teaching can fulfill and teachers can certainly introduce diversity into the classroom and enrich their students' learning experience by trying to meet ends not necessarily related to what students need. Teaching, for example, can aim to shock students. There is a plethora of disturbing facts and statistical data – the percentage of children who can go to school, the number of people starving in developing countries, etc. – about the world which can really disturb students and make them think about what they imply and mean. Very often, what teachers impart doesn't leave an impression among students because they don't jolt them in any way or it doesn't stir their emotions at any deep level. By shocking students, teaching can make learning more lasting. Furthermore, teachers, in order to enhance learning, can

purposefully obfuscate the materials they present. To be sure, teachers rightly give examples, simplify language, use metaphors and analogies, and draw diagrams and pictures to elucidate matters that may seem obscure to students. Yet there is plenty of room for deliberate obfuscation, where content is made more difficult, unclear, vague, fuzzy, or imprecise, because long-term retention and mastery are often the result of students seriously grappling and being cognitively engaged with materials that are challenging, not when content is spoon fed in neat, manageable, compact sizes. “We’re easily seduced into believing that learning is better when it’s easier, but the research shows the opposite: when the mind has to work, learning sticks better” (Brown, Roediger, McDaniel, 2014, p. 43). Alongside obfuscation, another important function of teaching is to arouse curiosity. Students often view their education as dull and uninspiring. What they are taught doesn’t make them want to inquire further to satiate their thirst and desire for knowledge. Learning fails to spark their interest largely because the content covered is very matter of fact and dry. Definitions of words, dates of historical events, and formulas in mathematics don’t provoke students to ask, “Why?”. They are immutable, unquestionable facts that just have to be accepted without questioning. Teachers, however, can evoke curiosity by instilling knowledge that contradicts what students think or believe or when their expectations concerning what is true are challenged. Because curiosity is awakened and sustained by creating a cognitive dissonance between what is taught and what students know, teachers need to learn the beliefs students have about different issues and deliver materials that are incongruent with them. The rationale behind teaching can also be to instill a sense of wonder or awe within students. Though both the natural and social world are filled with wonders that can amaze the mind and stir feelings, education, on the whole, doesn’t move students emotionally. They remain emotionally unmoved and untouched by what they learn. But their eyes can widen and their jaws drop as they listen to something astounding that jolts them out of their complacency. From the selfless devotion of saints and martyrs to the mathematical beauty and simplicity of the laws of nature, there is an endless source for provoking thought which teachers can make use of. A pedagogy based on needs is too confining because it doesn’t give much weight to purposes teaching can serve besides transmitting necessary knowledge.

A needs-based approach to education is analogous to other philosophies of education for not being entirely free of biases. It has a

tendency to prioritize the needs of students without paying closer attention to the needs society and other species have. It also stresses the students' academic needs at the expense of their physiological and spiritual needs. Finally, it was pointed out that an approach to teaching that is guided by needs doesn't give enough attention to ways in which teachers can disturb, perplex, and interest their students. Those in favor of a needs-oriented education have to become aware of these inherent biases and take measures to counter their effects.

## 5 What does a needs-based education imply?

It is not entirely rare for those involved in education to assert views that don't imply anything specific. Though the tenets they assert seem plausible, they lack content, failing to stipulate what teachers should or shouldn't do. Many educational practitioners and researchers, for example, enunciate the value of making learning relevant so as to enhance the students' level of motivation. Because very few want their students to learn what is irrelevant, many readily concur that relevance is an important point to bear in mind when designing teaching materials or setting learning objectives. Yet this educational prescription amounts to very little because it doesn't suggest anything specific which teachers can implement in the classroom. Unless teachers are told what learning should be relevant to, they are left not knowing how to conduct their lessons. What materials to cover and how lessons should proceed will depend on whether learning should be relevant to the students' present experience, future plans and goals, or their interests. Because the notion of relevance is itself ambiguous, teachers have no choice but to give it their own personal interpretation and translate their thought into something concrete and doable in the classroom.

The same point can be made about needs. When those committed to learner-centered teaching mandate the value of teaching in ways that meet student needs, very few object to the council as too cognitively demanding or impossible to realize. In fact, it would certainly be odd for educators devoted to their learners' cognitive growth to uphold teaching that delivers what they don't need. But part of the reason why very few object when enjoined to make needs central to teaching is that, lacking in substance and content, people can characterize and make sense of it in ways that comport to the beliefs and values they have about education. The tenet of meeting

the needs of students is vacuous. It doesn't entail the kind of understanding that needs to be cultivated or what facts and information must be acquired to pursue their studies. Heeding to the advice of satisfying student needs alone wouldn't enable the teachers of history to compile from what is known, say, about the French Revolution a precise list of necessary facts, figures, and data to teach in class. Nor would the educational decree to align teaching to what students need help teachers of literature choose from a plethora of literary works which plays, short stories, and essays to use in class. As Barrow and Woods (2006) rightly argue, the underlying pedagogical principle of tailoring instruction to needs remains unhelpful as long as there are no overarching learning objectives that can help teachers discern what is necessary for students to learn. To select what to teach from an endless storehouse of knowledge about the past or about the physical world, teachers of history and physics must know what the curricular aims are in order to separate what is important from what is secondary. To state the matter differently, learning objectives can function as a criterion for demarcating what is paramount from what isn't or it can help focus on what is essential and exclude everything else. In history, for example, if the overarching goal is to promote patriotism, teaching can focus on the country's colonial conquests, victorious wars, and charismatic kings and emperors to instill pride and honor. And because patriotic education "repudiates any dark moments of a nation's past" (Stanley, 2018, p. 16), it must ignore or remain silent about past military loses, atrocities committed against neighboring countries, or leaders who accomplished very little. What students learn will differ significantly if the aim of history education is to foster an awareness of how ordinary people lived their lives in the past. As Evans (1997) describes this approach, instead of covering the footsteps of great, renowned figures like Caesar, Napoleon, and Martin Luther King, the past will be viewed through the lens of ordinary folks from the working class, exploring their travails and joys as they went on with their lives. Learning goals will also shape the content that students are taught in foreign language classes: while a heavy emphasis on arcane vocabulary and complex grammar is the norm in classes that aim to enhance students' ability to read academic texts in the target language, curricular aims that seek to instill the ability to orally converse about everyday concerns and topics will concentrate more on the teaching of communication strategies and focus less on cultivating a rich vocabulary. What constitutes necessary knowledge hinges on the purpose or rationale

of learning. One cannot meaningfully discuss the content that should be delivered without invoking aims and goals. The question, “What do students need to know?” cannot be answered without knowing the answer to the question, “What is the goal of the class?”.

When, as it often happens, needs are dissociated from learning goals, it is hard for teachers to discern whether their learners’ needs are being met. The injunction to cater for educational needs when teaching remains shallow because it doesn’t indicate what the satisfaction of needs amounts to in the first place. Meeting the need to know something can mean many things: students can demonstrate their knowledge by answering correctly on multiple choice questions; they can rephrase what they know in their own words; they can write an essay about what they know; or they can apply what they know outside the context in which they learned. Because supporters of an education founded upon needs don’t unpack the meaning of ‘meeting the students’ needs,’ it remains an abstract injunction that doesn’t refer to the conditions that teachers must meet in order for their teaching to count as successful. This being the case, teachers cannot ascertain whether or not their teaching is promoting learning. The problem here is that teachers cannot really tell if they are meeting the needs of students if they don’t know what they are trying to achieve in class. They need clear learning goals that will help assess their teaching. Thus, if the goal of the language teaching program is for students to communicate orally about interests, friends, and their lives as a student, then the teacher will know that the goal is not met if they cannot articulate their thoughts because of their overt concern with grammatical accuracy. But their preoccupation with grammar can be a step towards true learning if the goal is to instill an accurate understanding of syntax. Without goals that serve as clear guidelines, teachers’ work in the classroom will not be made any less difficult or challenging by being told to meet needs because it doesn’t suggest how they can determine if they are making any progress.

What is more, a needs-based pedagogy doesn’t imply anything very specific about how to teach. Those who adhere to an education rooted in needs are inclined to support some of the instructional strategies that characterize learner-centered teaching. A needs-based education after all is one of the pillars of learner-centered teaching. Proponents therefore typically stress group work over lectures and advise teachers to adopt a facilitative role in class because such teaching practices are commonplace in student-oriented instruction. But the kind of instruction they propose as



effective doesn't stem from or have its origin in needs. It is derived more from the pedagogical principles of student-centered, progressive education. In fact, there is nothing much one can deduce about what teaching practices to adopt in the classroom from the imperative to meet the needs of students. It doesn't, for example, specify whether teachers of moral education should clearly take a definite ethical stance and denounce particular types of behavior – murder, suicide, infanticide, gambling, abortion, etc. – as wrong or if they should never assert their moral views in class. While some think that propounding certain behaviors as ethically right or wrong is a form of indoctrination, others think it is irresponsible for teachers to remain morally neutral when students need and seek their guidance. Following the precept to satisfy needs alone won't help teachers of history determine if the past should be seen from a single theoretical perspective or viewed from multiple vantage points. The teaching of history can explore the rise and fall of empires through the lens provided by the author of the textbook the class happens to be using or the same past can be seen through the lens of different historians who vary in their political or philosophical views. Education centered on needs doesn't have anything substantial to say about discovery learning in language education, where students on their own infer the rules of grammar from sample sentences or passages. Advocates of explicit grammar instruction are skeptical of the value of discovery learning because, unlike explanations offered by teachers, it often takes time for students to deduce grammar patterns from available data and it is not uncommon for learners to infer rules that are incorrect. Pedagogical approaches that promote the value of satisfying needs don't specify how teachers should teach. The educational means teachers can productively use cannot be extrapolated from the contention that teaching should address needs. The dictum of tailoring instruction to meet needs doesn't stipulate whether teachers should take a morally neutral stance in class, view history through multiple theoretical frames of reference, or advocate discovery learning. Because a needs-based philosophy of education doesn't ordain what methodological approach to adopt in the classroom, teachers have no choice but to rely on their experience and knowledge to determine how to conduct their classes.

An additional problem with a needs-based pedagogy is that it cannot contribute to the educational debates that are taking place now. In order to make a contribution that enriches our understanding of teaching and learning, a theoretical standpoint must advance views that can somehow

be tested empirically. Whether a particular approach to teaching is conducive to learning can be determined by examining the short-term or long-term effects it has on those who are taught by the method in question, and comparing the results with those taught by a different approach. The effectiveness of teaching methods cannot be determined if they don't prescribe concrete strategies that can be implemented and measured in the classroom. Philosophies of education which focus on needs don't entail specific instructional strategies for classroom use so their overall pedagogical merit cannot be verified empirically. Adherents of needs-based teaching might think that it is built upon evidence that attests its effectiveness but this cannot be the case since it doesn't specify what teachers should do. It doesn't, for instance, instruct teachers to adopt a particular approach when introducing new content to students, when reviewing materials covered in class, or when handling students who misbehave in class. Nor does it exclude many teaching practices as being incompatible with its underlying philosophy. In fact, teachers who differ markedly in their approach to teaching can and do claim that they try to cater for their students' needs by employing the methods they customarily use. Moreover, an overall philosophy of teaching cannot advance the dialogue on educational matters unless it has something original to assert about pedagogy. Whether the debate is about curricular aims or assessment, it will make very little theoretical progress if the discussion revolves around the same ideas put forward by the same theories. Discussions enter a different phase and a significant breakthrough is achieved when a new theoretical standpoint is put forward. It opens new vistas and puts an end to the stalemate by advancing ideas that have not been entertained, enabling the participants to reexamine old issues from a new perspective. The problem with an educational outlook that is centered on needs is that it doesn't contribute much to educational discussions because it doesn't offer an original, unique perspective on learning. The importance of attending to the needs of students has long been recognized as vital in education. It is not an insight into teaching which educators needed reminding. Teachers, regardless of their field or approach to teaching, have, on the whole, endeavored to teach what students needed to know, not what was unnecessary, dispensable, or gratuitous. Progressive educators interested in building a curriculum upon the learners' experiences and educators employed by totalitarian regimes to brainwash students with propaganda would all agree that they are doing their very

best to serve their learners' needs, though they would charge the other as misconstruing what they really need to know. Teachers, both past and present, would adamantly deny that what they teach is useless and inapplicable. In fact, nobody engaged in teaching would contest the value of needs in education. Teaching with need in mind is akin to a doctor espousing the value of exercise or a judge extolling the virtue of neutrality when assessing a case in court.

It was argued that a needs-centered pedagogy is vacuous for a number of reasons. It doesn't have much to say about what teachers should deliver in class and it also doesn't specify what it means for teachers to satisfy their students' needs. In addition, it doesn't entail specific approaches to teaching teachers should adopt in class. It is doubtful whether it can make significant contributions to educational debates because it doesn't make claims that are original or assertions that can be empirically corroborated. It behooves those who endorse the philosophy in question to elaborate a more systematic and substantial account of teaching that has needs as its foundation.

## Conclusion

Dissatisfied with modes of instruction that don't take sufficient account of their learners, more and more teachers are being drawn to a needs-centered approach to teaching that prioritizes what students need to know over and above everything else. Its appeal is obvious: it demands teachers to really focus their mind on what students need, instead of transmitting what happens to be in the textbook or curricular guideline. Yet this philosophy of teaching entails a number of problems. First of all, the proponents don't define or characterize needs in a way that is unproblematic. Discussions about the merits and problems of a needs-based educational will become more fruitful if it can be defined in a manner that is clear of ambiguities. Moreover, the underlying reasons for placing needs at the center of education face problems. The case for a needs-centered philosophy must be founded upon reasons that are both more logical and compelling. The issue of who determines the needs of students raises some additional questions that must be satisfactorily answered by those who subscribe to the philosophy in question. That is, because students are on the whole inexperienced and not knowledgeable about the subjects they are taking, their assessment of needs can often be mistaken.

Yet when educational practitioners take on the responsibility of determining their needs, students can become passive, compliant spectators of their own education. An education focused on needs, furthermore, has its share of biases: it prioritizes the academic (not the spiritual or physiological) needs of students (not the community or other species). Finally, it was argued that a needs-oriented philosophy of learning doesn't imply anything substantial about what content to teach and how it should be taught. If the points raised here have any plausibility, they suggest that the role and function of needs in education are not as unproblematic as they are sometimes assumed to be.

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