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ABSTRACT

Partnership between industry and education is important in establishing programs in visual literacy. The field is likely to become better established as the result of the formation of the Conference on Visual Literacy as a permanent group. However, as yet very little is known concretely about research and demonstration on this subject. Green Chimneys, a private school, has experimented with visual literacy studies in the primary grades. Students were given cameras and encouraged to take pictures. As a result of this program, observers found the children were improving communication skills, becoming aware of the environment, improving their self-concept and self-esteem, and becoming better motivated and more interested in academics. The photographs also revealed the concerns of the various children. Since non-verbal communication is so important a part of the child's early life, it is worthwhile to capitalize on this aspect of experience. Visual literacy has unlimited practical applications. (JK)

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VISUAL LITERACY ACTIVITIES IN THE SCHOOLS

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Visual Literacy Activities in the Schools

For the past three years our school, an independent boarding school, has been deeply involved in visual literacy activity. Some of the things which led us this way can be explained by two separate statements made by former U.S. Commissioner of Education, Harold Howe. The one, an excerpt from a speech made at the March, 1967 conference of the National Association of Independent Schools states that "In view of our national concern about the availability of first rate education for all children, I think independent schools have some obligation which they have not fully assumed. Discharging those obligations will require alliances with the community, with the public schools, with universities and other institutions ... It seems to me the independent schools must avoid thinking of themselves solely as servants of their somewhat specialized clientele and start considering themselves as a community resource with a distinctive contribution to make toward solving local, state, and national problems." The second statement appears in a report of a conference held in New York in December, 1968, to explore "Industry and Education: A new Partnership". In this case Howe states "I hope each of you will devise new modes of cooperation between education and industry to strengthen a partnership that is as promising as it is young. For not only will that partnership benefit our schools, their graduates and the businesses that depend on fresh infusion of youth, it will benefit also a nation."

The present activities in my own school in visual literacy have relevance to these statements of our former commissioner. First and foremost, we have never considered our independent school

as a fortress standing alone but rather we see it as an adjunct to the public school serving those youngsters who for a wide variety of reasons cannot and do not care to be educated in a public school.

Like people throughout our nation, we are deeply concerned with the general problems of education. We are cooperating in the current drive toward the development of first class educational programs for all our citizens. As an independent school however, we have been able to receive only very limited support from the many federal education acts. We, therefore, began exploring industry as another avenue of support.

This exploration on our part lead us to the General Aniline Co., Sylvania, General Electric, and especially Eastman Kodak; for these are the companies which have lent support to the activities we have been engaging in with still and motion picture photography and closed-circuit television. It would be wrong for us not to acknowledge this support as well as the developing service of Arax Photography in Poughkeepsie, New York, a division of Berkey Photo, which has been given generously without any strings attached. The contribution of a Matrix Game which was developed by Lassar Gotkin and is manufactured by Appleton-Century-Crofts as programmed instructional material developed for language learning of young children through visual sequential material also helped us to continue our investigation of visuals in the training of youngsters.

Partnerships with industry are to be encouraged. They have much to offer education. Jack Debes, Coordinator of Education Projects at Eastman Kodak, sees Kodak's activities in Visual Literacy

as having created a feeling of commitment among educators and other professionals. The result may well encourage them to contribute to visual literacy knowledge. He feels Kodak can now disassociate itself from Visual Literacy, yet at the same time maintain some leadership through assistance to the numerous leaders of education and allied professions who have expressed interest and seek guidance and support.

Visual literacy is not a truly new idea in American education; some related programs have, no doubt, been in existence for many years. Maybe they have not been identified as such. Maybe they have been negated because there has been no empirical data describing the activities readily available. To date only generalizations and assumptions have been emerging. Even in my own situation, we can only speak in terms of our observations, for we have no evidence other than this.

In fact, only a small number of the more than 350 participants at the first National Conference on Visual Literacy in March, 1969, were able to speak in terms of carefully researched data. Those present felt that the permanent committee should consider this as a priority and a major chore for the immediate future. Dr. William Bristow, Dean Emeritus of Visual Communication in Education, in summing up the conference, stated, "This has been the most exciting educational conference I ever attended. It could be, in my opinion, the most important educational conference of this decade".

Continuation of probing seems certain since the Conference on Visual Literacy has formed as a permanent group. It has been decided to continue holding conferences in order to create the opportunity for further discussion of this topic. It is felt that the

Conference on Visual Literacy will provide a multi-disciplinary forum for the exploration of modes of visual communication and their application. Nothing similar is available at present.

In a conversation with a state education official in my own state I was hard pressed to answer the statement that "we had placed cameras in the hands of our children ... so what". It is this "so what" that bothers me, for I am convinced as are so many others that we are on to something but haven't spent enough time creating a research design. We have been more concerned with the development of more innovative schemes for inclusion in our curriculum, and I might add, like so many institutions we are limited as far as funds for research are concerned.

Mrs. Mary Dillon and Mrs. Alison W. Birch of the Reader's Digest staff who are exploring this field for a possible story are challenging me to give them some concrete statistics. To date I can't report on too many concrete results. It is hoped that eventually through the efforts of the participants of the Conference on Visual Literacy, a center will be created for research and demonstration. In the meantime, meetings will continue.

Fortunately, a committee under the leadership of Dr. Clarence Williams of the University of Rochester is exploring the establishment of a clearing house at that institution which will concentrate on publications, material design, curriculum development and dissemination to interested professionals. We expect this will provide us with the answers to many of the current unknowns.

In May, 1969, I was privileged to be able to discuss some of the activities at my own school before the Executive Group of the Office of Education in Washington, D.C. I emphasized that in spite

of the fact that we know a great deal about learning, we ignore the need to provide the type of experiences for youngsters which recognize that there are a variety of learning styles among children. We talk about individual differences in children and urge teachers to provide for the individual differences of students. Some effort is made to group, vary assignments, modify pressure, encourage creativity, and develop enrichment, broadening, and remedial material, but it is limited. Teachers remain constant in the structuring of the total school scheme, and more than this teacher training institutions don't prepare teachers to do. Children are placed in various tracks or plans and we seem uncertain about ways to vary this approach. To meet the needs of the ever growing number of children who seem unable to grasp knowledge under our current curriculum, it is imperative that we do otherwise.

Faced with the responsibility to educate all kinds of children, we cannot expect to develop one approach which can meet the needs of the entire group. We must be willing to experiment and must try alternate methods because there may be the key to unlocking the capacities of many undiscovered talented young people. Innovation and change are necessary. Flexible scheduling, programmed instruction, non-graded organization, prescriptive teaching, and individualization are also but some of the modifications in our current approach to meeting the needs of the children.

The move toward early childhood education creates an immediate need to discover and introduce alternate approaches to teaching. Different patterns should be utilized and there should be no one set pattern. Combinations of approaches should be used. Basically, the school would engage children in doing, making, creating, and

exploring. Each step would serve to activate the child's love of learning and the importance of education would be instilled in the child at an early age. The interest and enthusiasm, as well as the personal involvement of the child, would possible circumvent the negativism and lack of motivation that is rampant in the child who is forced into an educational pattern that offers him nothing but continual failure.

We are aware that in the development of the young child, visual stimuli come to be understood before there are any verbal capacities to deal with the world. A tremendous percentage of what we learn is learned through the eye. Yet, when a child enters school our primary way of communicating is the verbal way; our primary way of testing his relationship to his environment is verbal; our primary way of evaluating his conceptual capacities is verbal; and our primary way of testing his capacity for the logical organization of ideas is verbal. In effect, what we are saying to the child whose primary adjustment to the world has been visual, that unless he can tell us verbally about himself, we will not be able to understand him, for we have only verbal ways of relating to him.

At Green Chimneys, in recognition of some of the problems facing us we began probing to see how we could involve students more directly into the activities in and out of the classroom. By chance in the fall of 1966, a discussion with Dr. Milton Willenson, a founding member of the National Academy of Photography and Director of the Germain School of Photography, New York City, led us to attempt the use of photography in our school.

Our hopes were many. We hoped that we would be able to foster growth in the area of communication, develop a new means of expression for the child, and increase the child's perceptive ability.

We saw the camera as a tool whereby the child could be provided with an adjunct to or alternate for writing and reading. We felt this would help the child communicate with his peers and his teachers. We felt the teacher would be able to learn more about the child and discover his real capabilities. Additionally, we were able to supplement the child's program with an activity that complemented his present learning and at the same time provided him with a leisure-time activity.

It is small wonder that in a world where youngsters are literally bombarded with media, today's child prefers to learn through visuals and eschews increasingly the verbal route. The Green Chimneys program is not trying to say that one avenue to literacy is more important than another, but is attempting to show educators that the use of visual communication can be a means of extending verbal language learning.

Dr. Willenson, Dr. Herbert Striner, Project Director, W. E. Upjohn Institute for Unemployment Research, and Jacob Deschin, Photography Editor of the New York Times, all founding members of the National Academy of Photography, helped us explore in depth what we would be doing. A suitable elementary curriculum was prepared by Patrick Culhane of our faculty, who also accepted the responsibility of instructing the youngsters.

In the early stages of the activity a contact was made with Jack Debes, who encouraged us to probe as far as we could. A full project was launched in July, 1967, with the help and support of Eastman-Kodak.

From the beginning youngsters as early as second and third grade spent part of each school day experiencing photographic activities. The Kodak Photo Discovery Sets, a new educational aid

was introduced. Children responded enthusiastically, eagerly explaining the subject matter of their pictures and interacting with their peers and teachers. Even non-communicative youngsters responded. A definite value in continuing and broadening such a program was obvious. Communication skills, awareness of the environment, increased self-concept and self-esteem, motivation, and interest in academics were things we began to notice. It was evident that a multi-media approach to learning was indeed of value. It should be noted, however, that it was not a case of providing the teacher with audio-visual material to help make the teaching more palatable, but rather a case of placing equipment in the hands of youngsters to increase their ability for showing the teacher and their peers what they know.

The photographs made by the children are most revealing and have served as indicators of the child's interest. The objects and events the child deems worthy of capturing on film tell much about him. His further discussions and comments all serve as an additional aid to the teacher in working with the child. The use of this activity as a diagnostic tool seems worthy of research. Our experiences indicate that photography serves as a useful tool for expression and communication. It seems also to point to the fact that the introduction of photography in the elementary school is a very worthwhile experience for youngsters.

As an example, the availability of such an activity enabled our students to keep a permanent record of the visit of more than 150 Soviet nationals who visited our campus. This get-together was arranged by Mayor Lindsay's New York City Commission to the United Nations. The Soviet children, all sons and daughters of U.S.S.R.

citizens in this country, attend a special school in New York City. This is their only contact with American youngsters. Certainly it is worthy of capturing on film. Additionally, young photographers from the Community Resource Center of New York City joined us on that day to try out their photographic skills.

Adequate training for the entire staff was provided through an early fall workshop. We recommend this approach to other schools. Changes require that everyone receive as much advance instruction as is possible. This somewhat guarantees total understanding and reduces the resistance to attempt such a project. All teachers and students were given the opportunity of gaining some practical experience and knowledge of photography and have been provided with equipment so that they could create picture sequences.

Several interpretive devices for teachers and students on visual communication are available to the faculty through Eastman-Kodak. They include "A Visual Fable", a filmstrip with an accompanying record, two visual communications filmstrips "How Does a Picture Mean?" and "Making Sense Visually". The Photo Story Discovery Sets which were used as part of the Green Chimneys summer pilot project have been in continual use since then. Student-made sequences also are being used in a similar fashion. Both still and motion picture photography is available to the entire school, as is the portable CCTV equipment.

Currently we are cooperating on further activities with Ramapo School District #14, Spring Valley, N.Y., a public school district not too far from our campus. Since our groups are similar in size, we will be attempting to investigate the visual and verbal links we are able to establish in the curriculum. Over a two year period

we intend, too, to attempt to study the development of perception in youngsters through observation of the types of pictures they take. Since both our schools operate a flexible year-round education program, continuity is possible. It is well to note here that when schools begin to develop year-round education programs, they must, of necessity, become involved in the changing of curriculum. We first began our photography activities during the summer we adopted New York State's Continuous Education Plan.

From my own experience at the Mt. Sequoyah Seminar on Year-Round Schools, which was sponsored by the Kettering Foundation in Fayetteville, Arkansas, I can state it is no longer a matter of if we have year-round schools but rather what special curriculum must we develop for these schools. The experiences around the nation seem to indicate that curriculum change is the key issue and concern. There will be many who will be quite wary of some of the things we are doing.

We are not trying to develop a new cult or gimmick approach to education. We are, however, responding to the need for all schools to examine the curriculum and determine its relevance to the needs of all the youngsters. We believe that preparation for life is the ultimate goal of all education. We must be willing to experiment with new methods of teaching, for all of us must agree that to date we have lost many youngsters using our present approach.

The passivity of much of the educational process has led us to the knowledge that we must search for new and better methods to actively involve students in the education process. We must rethink through what is meant by the child as a learner. Even the teacher's role in the classroom is now being questioned. New

models are being encouraged. The child needs to be freed from the traditional scheme which finds him sitting in rows supposedly listening to lectures from the teacher. I have come to believe we must add the term "teacher disability" to our list of current problems for many teachers do not understand that different learning styles require the use of different teaching patterns. No one scheme will work for every child. Many teachers are reluctant to accept this.

At a recent conference luncheon, an early childhood teacher called everyone's attention to how children read the facial expressions of their mother long before they are able to talk. Dr. Charles Galloway of Ohio State, has spoken extensively of non-verbal communication and its effect on children. In this connection think now of the many different ways we receive instructions through motions. I can remember how fascinated I was to watch the Italian policeman sequence on one of the Candid Camera shows on television. Some time ago I was returning from the mid-west by commercial airline. The stewardess was instructing us all in evacuation procedure. As she spoke she said "Visually examine the exit". Immediately I thought visual literacy. She assumed people understood what to do. A March, 1969 article in the Conference Board Record by Henry Dreyfuss, entitled "Speaking in a Thousand Tongues" reports his work in breaking the language barrier with symbols. Since esperanto has failed, he suggests a universal symbol language which can be read and understood around the globe. Imagine the implications.

One becomes intrigued with the unlimited practical applications presented by the exploration of visual literacy activities. Certainly visual literacy is not limited to any particular group or

any particular age. It is a means of developing self-image. It can increase one's feeling of belonging and it can be used as a means of self-criticism. For some it may be an alternate way of learning, a means of obtaining success vocationally or just another way of being involved. To others it may be an art form, a starting point for a discussion, a means of recognizing objects, an opportunity for self-expression, or a chance for discovery.

I was amazed to find that 350 people were willing to gather for our March Visual Literacy meeting in Rochester. The conference group is now preparing another get-together in Chicago in April, 1970. Miss Margaret Bushnell, vice-president of Pitman Publishing, suggests that we not wait a full year to bring another group together but have something in the next six months. She feels there is more than enough interest. However, the committee feels it is best to wait until April, 1970 for a full conference in Chicago. Maybe we are all discouraged by the apparent failings we have had to date in education and are willing to grab at anything and give it a try. Frankly, I don't think so. I feel we are experiencing an honest attempt on the part of many to share experiences in this area in order to scientifically determine if there is any merit to our efforts in visual literacy. At Green Chimneys we are very conscious of our obligation to try.