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ABSTRACT

The function of art as an integral part of a humanist education is discussed in depth. Five areas which clearly show the need for art in elementary schools are examined: (1) the relation of art to the unity of the learning process; (2) art, as an emotional outlet, ego fortifier, and sensitizer; (3) art as a progress and problem indicator; (4) art as an aesthetic educator; and (5) art as a counterforce to depersonalization and mechanization. The relevance of art education to the growing field of psychotherapy is also discussed, especially as it relates to self-actualization as the goal of humanist education. (Author/ED)

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ART: FUNDAMENT, NOT FRILL

Robin Lichtig-Rice

A manifesto for art teaching in elementary grades, as well as a plea for heightened attention to the aesthetic malnutrition of the culture in general. Why art is necessary, how its importance can be emphasized, and a look to the future. R.L.

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Elementary School Art: Fundament, Not Frill

by

Robin Lichtig-Rice

The ideas of John Dewey resulted in the introduction of art into the elementary schools in this country on a widespread scale for the first time in the early 1900s. The teaching of art has hardly changed since then. Art is looked upon as play, according to the Puritan tradition, and "the public schools... are a largely unaltered product of this essentially New England tradition."[1]

Not only is art regarded by most school boards as mere curricular decoration, it is being phased out by an increasing number of schools as overall educational expenses rise. This trend goes against the very essence of learning. It is of utmost exigency that art not only be restored in all schools, but that its necessary role in the learning process and in the community be recognized.

Why must we examine the place of art in the schools? There are current happenings in addition to the trends just indicated which are cause for concern among art and humanist educators. Although many "new" media have been introduced into school art courses in recent years (photography, films, video tapes...), "the great national thrust now in the curriculum is toward career education and reading, not toward the arts."[2] Almost everywhere art is regarded as a "special subject," perhaps useful only for increasing manual skills.

Even in a relatively progressive and educationally-enlightened town like [illegible], New Jersey, art is sometimes regarded as just an extra frill. Susan

Gina, art teacher at Travell Elementary School there for four years, points out that "Your approach to teaching art is dictated to a great extent by the physical and philosophical structures of the school where you work." She remembers being a bit upset at her first school open-house for parents. Many visited the music and physical education teachers, but not one parent came to talk to her. "Those two subjects have higher priority with the administration, too," she sighs. This year the art room there has been converted into a kindergarten classroom. Ridgewood is typical of Everytown in this instance.

Arthur W. Foshay, a professor of education at Columbia University Teachers College, speaks for many educators whose voices are often too soft to be noticed: "Our preoccupation with the intellectual has yielded us a school tradition that portrays man as less than he is. It is in the arts that we have an opportunity, precisely because there is no inhibiting pedagogical tradition to stand in our way, to deal with all the aspects of what it is to be a human being."[3]

I cannot go into a detailed definition of what I mean by "art" and "art teaching" in this discussion. However, it must be kept in mind throughout that I am not speaking of the traditional group-think sort of art instruction. The "children this is how you make an apple tree, now let's all make apple trees" approach is not only not necessary in the schools, it is positively harmful. I am concerned with the necessity for organic, individualized art. In such a program, the teacher does not [illegible] but watches the child for signs of readiness (to try a new medium, for example) and stands aside until the child asks a question. Dewey's ideas about the [illegible] process of learning and the need to recognize and utilize the relationship between subject matter and life apply equally well to art as to other studies. [illegible] must be on the process rather than the product. The child must be permitted to express his own personal vision, not given that of the teacher. In the primary [illegible] the teacher will work to provide the child with experiences and stimuli which will [illegible] his inner powers of perception and feeling.

Now I shall examine five areas which clearly show the serious need for art in the schools: the relation of art to the unit of the learning process; art as an emotional outlet, ego fortifier, and sensitizer; art as a progress and problem indicator; art as an aesthetic educator; and art as a counterforce to depersonalization and mechnalization.

As the trend toward more relaxed school strutures (in classroom space, class time, subject differentiation, etc.) spreads, the fact of interrelations among different subjects becomes obvious. Dewey felt that traditional theories in philosophy and psychology had created an artificial division between body and mind. This rigid separation between the strictly intellectual and logical and the emotional and imaginative processes, stiffles the act of living in the fullest sense.[4]

Young children experience life as a unity, in a personal way. What could be a more personal means of expression than painting? What could bring a child more instantaneous feedback for his feelings or produce a pleasing result so swiftly? Children use painting as a non-verbal means of communication, a way to talk to themselves. Margaret Naumburg, an art therapist, says that many of the results of children's art work are the same for children under therapy as for "normal" children. One of the results is that, as they gain experience in reproducing inner feelings on paper, they frequently become more verbally articulate.[5] Since art is, for young children, first of all a language and an art form only incidently, it is easy to see the bridge which it forms to skills in speaking, reading and writing. Studies in the connection between spoken and symbolic language would help us make better use of visual interest in the forms of letters.

One aspect of art which seems most directly relevant to the totality of [illegible] is this relationship to communication. Kenneth Jameson expresses [illegible] well when a child paints he is beginning the process of abstracting [illegible] resulting in forms of personal expression. This shows [illegible] to emotional tensions. "The process of [illegible] creative reorganization may be gradual or rapid,

but, whichever it is, the teacher will watch for it and when it happens she will make use of it as an educational tool."[6] And in addition: By talking with the child about his painting you encourage "growth of awareness of spoken and written forms and their relationship to the child's imagery, and as a consequence, to incipient development of skills in reading and writing. Communication through and about graphic expression is a beginning of academic learning."[7]

A growing number of educators are studying the role which art plays in the total learning function. Philosopher Susanne Langer has developed a theory recognizing art as a symbolic mode which expresses ideas about feelings. "Formerly it had been held that art grows out of intuition or irrational thought and the language and science grow out of rational thought. Art was thus placed somewhat in limbo and its value as a school subject was suspect." Langer offers a point of view that both modes are rational, both draw upon intuition, and can express intelligent symbolism. "The presentational mode (art), however, expresses the idea of feeling most effectively. Since children in open education are strongly encouraged to express feelings as well as to engage in more scientifically structured activities, the arts become necessary for normal expression and the full realization of self."[8]

Assistant Professor of Education at City University of New York Mabel Kaufman writes of art as a worthwhile study. She cites thoughts of child psychologist Piaget: "The ability to manipulate materials, to arrange and to order them, helps clarify [illegible] and makes schooling more in tune to the needs of childhood."[9] George [illegible], Assistant Director of Art of the New York City Board of Education, prefaced [illegible] (1968) by saying: "The child who is free to paint as he pleases grows in ability and power in self-direction...All media serve to give children a [illegible] self-realization - a way of helping to objectify their feelings and ideas."[10]

[illegible], who has worked with disturbed children for many years, also [illegible] work in elementary art. She points out how art makes infinitely

greater demands on the child's faculties and on his moral courage than does play. "The exclaimation 'Look what I have done!' epitomizes the difference between play and art. In play, objects or people assume symbolic roles by a simple act of designation, so to speak by decree...The aim of art is the making of a symbolic object that contains and communicates an idea." The making involves a complex ego function which engages manual, intellectual and emotional faculties.'[1]

Joseph Featherstone, writing about the British Infant Schools, notes that there the children initiate and develop many of their fundamental learning experiences through the arts, particularly visual art. Kaufman comments on Featherstone's observations: "What is implicit in the British experience, is the acceptance of art as a way of knowing and the natural place given art (both in terms of production and aesthetic appreciation) in the school day beyond what Ifeel to be normal in our own more traditional schools."[12]

It is amazing to see the difference in attitudes toward art between British and American educators. Leonard Marsh writes of the English attitude: "Experience of the arts is a vital preliminary" to academic subjects. "It is important that learners should be aware why such activities (painting, modeling with clay, etc.) provide such a fundamental ground for the curriculum of the primary school...It is this writer's view that the 'ground experience' is a dynamic sensuous one which is to some extent intermingled in apparently highly abstract mental activities such as mathematics."[13] Marsh puts forth four reasons why arts and crafts are important in elementary school: First, children can use art to express much of their "investigations within the environment;" second, the symbolism used in art work helps the child come to terms with basic psychological experience; also, the use of many media helps the child cope with his environment in a personal way; and finally, the time scale involved in using art material aids the child in developing working patterns which will be of use in all his school endeavors. I would add to this list the perhaps secon-

dary values of learning to finish a worthwhile project once started, and learning responsibility for tools such as paints and brushes.

To my mind, the argument for the necessity of art in the schools could easily be put to rest at this point. Yet there is a great deal of additional weight which may be added. Art is important in at least three psychological areas: as an emotional outlet, as an ego strengthener, and as a means of increasing awareness of and sensitivity to others and to one's self. I am not speaking of children with marked emotional problems, nor of using art for guidance. I am speaking of helping children realize themselves and their potentials and heighten their sense of reality. Fosnay writes that developmental psychological research gives us six categories of human development: the intellect, emotions, social domain, aesthetic development, spiritual and physical development. "Our tradition in general education consists of treating everything as if it finally were intellectual...the arts deal with all six of these properties of the human condition. They deal with them directly... unimpeded by a formal analytic tradition...General education and the arts are, or ought to be, a seamless web."[14]

Sylvia Ashton-Warner is a major spokesman for bringing all subjects into what she terms the "creative vent." She recognizes the destructive urge in people and recommends art as a natural safety valve for young children. Jameson agrees, adding: "Adolescent delinquency is a direct result of the diversion of creative energy from constructive to destructive channels."[15] Adults may become upset when a child, after carefully painting a picture, obliterates it in a few swift strokes. This is simply a natural (and welcome) exit for normal aggressive instincts. Erik H. Erickson [illegible] value of play therapy for the emotionally distraught child. I think it may serve a similar function for all children, providing an outlet and allowing the child to assert his mastery over the world he paints. Erickson says, "[illegible] 'play it out' is the most natural self-healing measure childhood affords,"[16] or as Jameson would put it, "let the child paint."

Kramer explains further: "Although art cannot remove the cause of tension or directly help resolve conflict, it serves as a model of ego functioning. It becomes a sanctuary where new attitudes and feelings can be expressed and tried out, even before such changes can take place in daily life...art fulfills for the disturbed child the function which it has for all men: to create a realm of symbolic living, which allows experimentation with ideas and feelings; to make apparent the complexities and contradictions of human life; to demonstrate man's capacity to transend conflict and create order out of chaos; and finally to give pleasure."[17]

If art is taught properly, it will allow children to reflect their individual perceptions of reality. One of the major emotional problems today is a fear of reality, according to Kramer. She feels this is because young people have been "fed on substitutes until they have lost the capacity to respond to direct experience."[18] The task then, as she expresses it, "is not so much to free the child from inhibitions as to help chaotic fantasy to become imagination and to develop the faculty for observations and self-observation...The major obstacles to creative expression have changed. Instead of inhibitions and guilt feelings, there are fear of emptiness and fear of annihilation."[19]

Kramer sees art therapy (and art education) as a means of supporting the ego, fostering the development of a sense of identity and promoting maturation. In art, ambivalent material can come to the surface and find symbolic expression without activating rigid sensitive defenses. She shows how art contributes to the development of [illegible] organization that can function under pressure without breakdown or resort to defensive mechanisms.

[illegible] Irwell [illegible] tells that, "Dignity is the most important thing [illegible] in art." She tries to build up their sense of individual importance [illegible] from their own impressions about what is pleasing in their art [illegible] before introducing criteria for judgement. How different this approach is from

the standard tack. Lastyear I heard the art supervisor in a Mahwah, New Jersey, second-grade class state, while holding up one child's rendering of the standard, dictated drawing of a Thanksgiving turkey, "Look, boys and girls. See how good Sue's turkey is! Can you make yours this good?" I wish some child had replied, "Who cares?" (And then, I didn't say anything either, typifying parental lassitude.)

The story James Herndon tells in The Way It Spozed to Be about the black children painting a welcome-back-to-school poster picture of two Chlorox-bright white children strikes home. They painted what theyspozed to, not what was their reality at all.

Art education which teaches the child to feel his own emotions and to express his own ideas will help him become sensitized to his own feelings and those of others.

Perhaps not as important as the other indicators discussed here, but still certainly worth mentioning, is the role of art as a guide for the teacher in understanding the children. As pointed out by Jameson, art activities can provide, "as no other activity can (at this age, pre-school and elementary), insight into the child's personality and social background, thus enabling the teacher to relate more closely to the child; this is equally revealing to the parent."[20] A child's paintings can indicate to the teacher his interests and concerns. The teacher then as a reference point for providing related material as well as insight into the child's emotional world.

When children enter elementary school they are naturally attuned to the essence of art. The role of the school, then, is to build upon this openness, giving [illegible] joy in manipulating materials and creating forms, joy in experimenting with [illegible] textures."In time the child come to use art to make visible an inner reality, for his sensitivity to the sensory world is honed to an aesthetic response."[21]

[illegible] the child is rather away from really seeing the world, reality [illegible] colors, forms, textures, moods. On the other hand, aesthetic awareness [illegible] sensitive and responsive to sensuous things; they can

focus feeling and become more conscious of it.[22] Henry Pluckrose notices that after months of working with many different materials, children become more sensitive, particularly to music, poetry, drama and movement. (His observations on art fill a handbook for teachers in primary grades.) Karmer speaks of the substance of art materials: "Art respects matter without being materialistic. The artist must love and understand his medium. In the act of creation, idea and medium become one."[23] Thus, the child, through art work, comes into touch with his world and its substances in a very meaningful and personal way.

Ivan Illich expresses the horror of the assembly line, mechanized society succinctly: "People who submit to the standard of others for the measure of their own personal growth soon apply the same ruler to themselves. They no longer have to be put in their place, but put themselves into their assigned slots, squeeze themselves into the niche which they have been taught to seek, and, in the very process, put their fellows into their places, too, until everybody and everything fits." He talks about how the institutionalized values school instills are quantified ones. It "initiates young people into a world where everything can be measured, including their imaginations, and, indeed, man himself...The learning I prize is immeasurable re-creation."[24]

Art education is more than tangential to Illich's point. It is at the very heart of much of the problem with traditional education. Many of the writers cited here suggest that if creative activities are ignored then, as automation increases, more and more people will need psychiatric help.

If as children we are given opportunities to express ourselves creatively without censure, as adults we will be less static, will be more inclined to seek out creative activities in many areas. We will act more readily, be less content to passively receive. If an appreciation for craftsmanship is fostered early in life, mass production will lose some of its magic lure.

And more still repeatedly, art is an individual expression. It is the

uniqueness of each person which is of value to the group. While harmonizing with the group is necessary for a peaceful, working society, vital individual input is essential or the group will strike more dissonances and flats than chords. We must infuse academic disciplines with life and creativity. Then the instruments will cease their monotonous fumblings, look at their world, and begin to play fully and with beauty.

How, then, can we help assure the vitality of education through art? One encouraging trend is that toward open education, as mentioned earlier. Art teachers deal with the deepening of the aesthetic response. This response to the world provides a framework within which open education can flourish. Art personlizes learning, gives it human and imaginative dimensions. Only a numb administration would, to my mind, recommend freedom in all areas but art.

One way in which spokesmen for art in the school may better further their cause is by uniting with specialists in the fields of dance and music. There really is no reason to separate the arts, and divided they may more likely fall to the axe of budget cuts. Many educators are calling for "aesthetic education," a combination of the arts. Harlan Hoffa, president of the National Art Education Association, said in an address in April, 1973: "I believe that art education, as I have known it for a quarter century, is obsolete and that it lacks the means to assure its own survival."[25] He recommends joining the arts for a broader base of action. Art educators must more actively promote their ideas to the public. And concerned voters must speak out to school board members, must push for more basic and widespread art education.

Finally (though not definitively) we must work at sensitizing society. This process would be aided by integrating the schools with community life, as proposed by Dewey. Elementary schools should have artists-in-residence, and the children should visit local craftsmen (interpreted very broadly). Many adult education art classes could be messed with projects in the schools. The creative experience is too

structured throughout society. I was surprised to learn that almost no parents give their pre-schoolers paint to work with, categorizing art as purely a school subject. "Parents must be helped to a realization that children's drawing and painting are not mere crude scribbling and blobbing, but a normal and vital aspect of the child's developing process."[26] Parents do give their children coloring books and paint-by-number sets, which do nothing but inculcate false values and remove art from its natural realm of individual expression. Where is the fantasy in a numbered picture drawn by some adult. Verbal suggestions have almost the same effect as drawing for the child. We are so far removed from letting children "do their own thing" that these facts rarely occur to parents.

Similar modern anti-art projects try to fill the gap of frustrated creativity for adults. Kramer speaks of how in the past art was more a part of life because more things were done by hand. "A certain measure of self-expression and self-recognition was woven into the fabric of our daily life...I believe this deficiency (today) has created a hidden hunger, a feeling of emptiness, and a fear of loss of identity that drive people to seek out art experiences where they can still be found."[27] She feels that the lack of authentic art experience and the concomitant saturation with anti- and pseudo-art in large segments of the population constitute a pathologic condition. Vitorio, assistant professor of art at the University of Delaware, echoes this belief: "Between inadequacy and mediocrity, a large proportion of the adult population is lodged on a ten-year-old level perceptually and creatively. The effects may be seen along every highway, in the choices of products and the repetitious selection of things that look alike and are alike - thetotal tapestry of an aesthetic malnutrition."[28] Stereotyped chaos, emptiness and materialistic seduction must be replaced with meaningful human values. People must gain a freshness of vision and a sensitivity to their world. And the time to start is at a very early age.

I have shown the need for art as an integral part of a humanist education, and the need for art throughout society. The goal of any such education must be,

ultimately, the self-actualization of the individual. Elizabeth Monrow Drews forms a beautiful picture of what it means to be a self-actualized person. She has discovered three types of achievers in school, the Social Leader, the Studious, and the Creative Intellectual. "The final group, the Creative Intellectuals, are characterized by the dominance of personally developed values, humanitarian and altruistic. Individuals in this group, in their fullest development, approximate the self-actualizing person as described by the humanist psychologists, which in turn conforms strikingly to the human ideal articulated by the major religious and philosophical systems of both Western and Eastern cultures." These people are, she stated straightforwardly, better people than the rest of us. "The future of our common life depends on such people, on our nurturing more of them, and on the rest of us becoming more like them."[29]

Growth toward self-actualization is tightly tied up with open and organic art experience. Aldous Huxley speaks of the weakness of education on a non-verbal level in Human Potentialities. "What is needed," he writes, "if more of the potentialities of more people are to be actualized, is a training on the non-verbal levels of our whole being as systematic as the training now given to children and adults on the verbal level."[30]

The vision of what could be is dazzling, and perhaps impossible, given the extent of the power so far yielded to mechanization and materialism. I would be satisfied if only the direction could be changed so that growth would be toward the vision instead of away. A necessary part of the new direction would involve pulling art from where it is banished, orbiting around the culture like so much space garbage, and placing it back at the school and community.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Arthur W. Fosnay, "The Arts in General Education," Art Education, Vol. 26, No. 6 (September, 1973), 3.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] John Dewey, "Affective Thought in Logic and Painting," in Art and Education, (from Journal of the Barnes Foundation, April, 1926), (Rahway, N.J., 1929), p. 63.

[5] Margaret Naumburg, Dynamically Oriented Art Therapy: Its Principles and Practices (New York and London, 1966), p. 1.

[6] Kenneth Jameson, Art and the Young Child (New York, 1968), p. 60.

[7] Ibid., p. 64

[8] Sibel Kaufman, "Art in Open Education," Vol. 25, No. 9 (December, 1972), 20.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Jameson, preface by George Kaye.

[11] Edith Kramer, Art as Therapy with Children (New York, 1971), p.28.

[12] Kaufman, pp. 18-19.

[13] Leonard Marsh, Alongside the Child-Experiences in the English Primary School (London, 1970), p. 21.

[14] Fosnay, pp. 5-6.

[15] Jameson, p. 54.

[16] Erik H. Erikson, Childhood and Society (New York, 1950), p. 222.

[17] Kramer, pp. 219-220.

[18] Ibid., p. 13.

[19] Ibid., p. 57.

[20]Jameson, p. 8.

[21]Hilda Present Lewis, "Elementary Schools," The Encyclopedia of Education, 1971, Vol. 1, 289.

[22]Merle Flannery, "Art as Experience," Art Education, Vol. 26, No. 5 (May, 1973), 10.

[23]Kramer, pp. 21-22.

[24]Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society (New York, 1970), pp. 57-58.

[25]Harlan Hoffa, Presidential Address delivered to the National Art Education Association Conference, April, 1973, Art Education, Vol. 26, No. 6 (September, 1973), 15.

[26]Jameson, p. 9.

[27]Kramer, pp. 1-2.

[28]Vitoria, "Art and the Open Classroom," Art Education, Vol. 25, No. 6 (June, 1972), 18.

[29]Ronald Gross, review of "Learning Together: How to Foster Creativity, Self-Fulfillment, and Social Awareness in Today's Students and Teachers," by Elizabeth Monrow Drews, Teachers College Record, Vol. 74, No. 2 (December, 1972), 280.

[30]Steinburg, p. 29 (Quoting from Huxley, A.: "Human Potentialities." Bulletin, Menninger Clinic 25 (No. 2): 63-68, 1961)

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