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ABSTRACT

Imagination is central to our ability to understand reality. Parents and teachers should foster creative processes which facilitate the development of imagination in children. Expensive equipment or artistic expertise is not necessary to help children develop their imaginations. Instead, it is more important for teachers to allow children the time to indulge in the creative process. Suggestions for helping create an effective art environment are given. First, allow children to help plan sessions. A chance to assist in structuring the environment gives them a valuable sense of control over what they are doing and makes the creative process more meaningful. Second, set up a non-competitive atmosphere which values self-expression and description. Try to make art meaningful by supporting each child's individual style. Third, focus on the affective aspects of creativity. Curiosity, openness to experience, self-confidence, and use of imagination are primary affective aspects of the creative process. Fourth, observe children with a research frame of mind. A heightened sense of awareness allows for observation of connections, patterns, and insights which help teachers understand children. Fourteen references of books which promote creativity are included. (SY)

ART IN A FIRST GRADE CLASSROOM

BY

MAUREEN SYNK KARLSTAD

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We are all myth-making beings. We create imaginary worlds that structure and give meaning to our experiences. In children we call such activity play. In adults this activity becomes more complex; we create intricately involved imaginative systems such as the scientific method or modern dance. Imagination is central to our ability to understand reality (Vandenberg, 1984). As parents and teachers, we need to foster those creative processes which facilitate the development of imagination in children. They should be the cornerstones of any elementary school curriculum.

Our ability to create images in our minds is not only basic to our understanding of the world around us. I also believe that our aesthetic sensibilities are the tools with which we learn everything else we come to know. "Facts without image or feeling characteristics, without imagination, cannot be said to have meaning" (Landau, 1985).

I don't believe that it takes expensive equipment or artistic expertise to help children develop their imaginations. More important is a teacher who is willing to allow children the time to indulge in the creative process.

Last semester I had the opportunity to work in my daughter's first grade classroom as an art teacher. Two afternoons a week I went in and watched as a group of 14 six and seven year old children experimented with the basic tools of visual expression: paper, paint, charcoal, chalk, markers, crayons, colored paper, glue and scissors. I tried to make the sessions a time during which the children were encouraged to engage in the creative process.

As a part of the process, I tried to observe carefully what was happening during the sessions. I recorded my thoughts and ideas so that I would have something to use in reflecting on and improving my approach. I would like to share those aspects of the process which I found most helpful in setting up what I consider an effective art environment.

1. Allow children to help plan the sessions. I found that allowing the children to assist in structuring the environment gave them a valuable sense of control over what they were doing and made the creative process personally meaningful for them.

I see the relationship between teacher and student as something similar to a rough carpenter and a finish carpenter. The teacher frames up the house, creates the basic structure, and the student finishes out the house, putting in those touches that make the work personally meaningful and successful. We, as teachers, need to provide our students with a sturdy framework that also allows the most room for flexibility in terms of finished product.

Bruce Klein (1984), in describing a preschool art program, outlines four structural elements which foster creative processes: power,

control, praise and deferred judgment. I used Klein's four elements as a framework for my initial ideas on how I would organize the sessions and for the changes I incorporated into the sessions as I saw the need for change. I was not always aware that what we had done coincided with his elements but I was going on what I instinctively knew would enhance the creative process the children were engaged in. Nice to have someone backing up your intuitions!

To help the children have control over the classroom I decided not to present any specific projects (at least not until they had time to experiment with the materials), but to assist them in using the materials and overcoming any technical problems they might have. Because I was open to having them control the environment to suit their own needs, I watched with interest as they began to rearrange the room to create small art centers where two or three children would work together using the same medium.

One day I hung a painting on the chalkboard to dry and I inadvertently opened up another part of the room for them. Everyone wanted to hang his/her work up and the discussion time at the end of the session was born.

I told the students to put one thing that they had done up on the chalkboard. Then we went through and talked about each piece of artwork. The artist had the first chance to say whatever he or she wanted about his or her work. The first two artists were too shy to say anything. Finally, however, Brandon interrupted me to ask if he could come up and show what he liked about his work! I asked only for what everyone liked about the artwork. The comments were wonderful: "I like the colors," "I like the shapes," "I like the way she colored around the shapes," "I like the things he put in the picture." Tammy was one of the last to talk about her picture. She described each item in the picture--it had a rainbow, her house, her brother, some clouds and some birds. Some of the children talked about how much they liked rainbows and Brian said he liked Tammy's because it reminded him of a rainbow he had once climbed on!

I felt that these discussions were very productive. The children had a chance not only to talk about their own work, but to see that their work was valued by everyone else. I wanted the children to know that their artwork was valued. Talking about it and hanging it on the walls seemed to me to be crucial to that valuing. I also wanted the children to feel good about their work and to want to share it with others.

The children were always eager to work when I arrived and always rushed to set up the room with supplies and new desk arrangements. They were very eager to take control of the environment and manipulate it to serve their needs.

2. Set up a non-competitive atmosphere which values self-expression and description. I tried to make art personally meaningful for each of the children by talking about other artists who do similar things and by supporting each child's individual style. I talked with the children about what an artist is and how artists (and first graders) make pictures of their thoughts and feelings.

During the first session I read Frederick by Leo Lionni. Then I told them that they would have time to practice being artists and that

they were free to use any of the materials they wanted to make whatever they wanted. I was afraid that there might be one or two children who wouldn't know where to start, but all of the children went right to work and forty-five minutes later I had a difficult time getting them to quit.

I tried to start each session with a story as a way of easing into the day's work and to give the children time to think about what they were going to do. One day I read Listen! Listen! by Ann and Paul Rand. It was a short book with bold, brightly colored illustrations and a lot of auditory imagery. The children enjoyed the book. Another day I read Arrow to the Sun by Gerald McDermott. They were fascinated by the myth and the way he had illustrated the story. They made me read it to them a second time so they could spend more time on the pictures. (For a list of other books, see References.) My hope was to inspire them while allowing them to determine the shape inspiration would take.

I commented on their work the same way I would talk with a colleague about a painting or drawing--by looking at the artistic elements. I came to realize that some of the children (Joshua comes to mind in particular) didn't believe me when I said they could do whatever they wanted to with the materials. One day he drew a space ship after asking me if it was all right to do so and on a following day he drew a monster with blood coming out of its mouth and when he showed it to me he still seemed hesitant (as if I would not approve). I think that by the end of my three month stay he had finally begun to trust me. He began to draw and talk about those things that really were of interest to him. He and Mark did a whole series of drawings related to TV wrestling which they presented to the rest of the class. They were very proud of their work.

I tried to encourage the children's self-expression. I was serious when I talked about how much I liked the colors used in a painting or the bold lines used in a drawing. Mark created beautiful compositions using horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines. I could see natural ability at work, but at first I don't think he believed me when I told him how effective his use of lines was. Eventually he became very receptive to my comments about his work.

The children seemed to be very aware of the sharing of power which our descriptive discussions allowed. They were all eager to talk about their work and enjoyed the feeling of being temporarily in charge of what was happening in the classroom --it was their ideas and their artwork which had center stage.

For me, it was an important realization that one of the most fruitful activities I have engaged in with the children, the descriptive discussions, was not part of my original plan, but developed out of my interactions with the children. Starting with a plan was important, but I felt that my success came from allowing for spontaneity and improvisation.

3. Focus on the affective aspects of creativity. I tried to focus the sessions on the affective aspects of the creative process. Treffinger, Isaksen and Firestien (1982) list curiosity, openness to experience, self-confidence and use of imagination as primary affective aspects of the creative process.

No one ever came up to me and said, "I can't do this." They may have asked for help and may have been frustrated with their final product, but no one gave up or talked about not being able to do artwork (self-confidence). If I saw someone having an extremely difficult time, I suggested that they try a different medium and it usually alleviated the problem. Whenever I brought something new into the classroom, everyone was eager to try it out (curiosity and openness to experience). The children also used the time to develop elaborate group fantasies (usually instigated by Brian). One day they began a bunny drawing factory. I had read the book Let's Make Rabbits by Leo Lionni and everyone had decided to make rabbits. Brian made a whole family of rabbits and then more rabbits which he began to sell (for free). Other boys joined him and soon the factory was mass producing pictures of rabbits which the other children were eagerly buying (the price was right!).

4. Observe children with a research frame of mind. I have found what I call the "research frame of mind" to be an invaluable aid in setting up a classroom environment. By research frame of mind I mean a heightened sense of awareness which allows for observations which may otherwise go unnoticed. Because I had a sense of wanting to know and learn about this group of children in a particular setting (an art environment) I was looking for connections, for patterns, for insights that would help me understand not only what the children were about, but how I fit into that.

During one session I found myself being impatient with Jennifer. I had brought back the artwork that I had taken home to look at and she accused me of losing some of her work. I wanted her to know that I valued her work and that I had brought back everything I had taken. I wanted her to believe me and I could see that she wasn't going to accept my explanation. I'm sure my frustration was showing. When we had our discussion at the end of class Jennifer was one of the last to go up to talk about her work (she couldn't find it because it was hanging up and she had walked around saying that someone had stolen it--more frustration on my part). She talked on and on about every line in her drawing. She started making up lines so that she would have more to talk about. I suddenly saw her in a new light. She had needs I hadn't even begun to notice. Her need to draw the class into her work and get their attention opened up my eyes. I was so busy being irritated by her behavior that I hadn't stopped to figure out why she might be responding the way she was.

The more I was involved in trying to give these children a voice in the classroom, the more I heard them talking. And I think it was the frame of mind I brought into the classroom that helped me see the children and the classroom in a different light.

I started to wish I could be in this classroom all the time. In the short time I was there I felt that I had just started to get to know the children, to know their styles, the way they worked, the personal themes that they were working on. Some of the kids were still experimenting with the materials and others were already able to manipulate any of the materials I brought in to their own ends.

* * * * * * *

I have developed a sense that the best educational research comes

from within the classroom, from the day-to-day, intimate contact with whatever aspect of the educational process is being studied. And I have found the "research frame of mind" to be an ideal tool for self-reflective teaching, for developing ideas and assessing classroom progress.

I have come to see each child as a learning puzzle. How do they learn? What do they like to do? What materials do they like to use? What areas are they most productive in? How are they growing through their manipulation of materials? This particular teaching experience has been a beginning for me. I see the way I have approached this as a method for approaching any subject, both in the experimental way I have set up the learning environment and in the way I have attempted to observe and record what happened on a daily basis.

My time in the classroom was much too short to even begin any discussion of patterns, either individual or interactional. But I see patterns emerging and I have new and different questions now. In all of my unanswered questions is the challenge to study more, to turn the classroom into an open research station.

I wanted to create an environment that would encourage the development of imagination. I also wanted to structure the environment in such a way that I was able to assist the children in establishing their own personal themes for visual expression (Gaitskell, 1970). Children must be motivated by their own experiences to produce art. Gaitskell states that art programs must "provide for visual objectification of internal as well as external experiences."

I believe that I was successful in setting up an environment that encourages and supports the creative process. I am looking forward to setting up another classroom art environment soon.

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