

Tools for Learning

ART, SCIENCE, AND PLAY MATERIALS

MARGARET KIRKPATRICK

THE BELIEF THAT art, science, and play materials have a legitimate place in the school environment is now universally accepted. The release and nurture of the creative impulse, the fostering of the art of thinking, the preserving of the joyous freedom and spontaneity of healthy childhood through play . . . all these are now admittedly the function of the schools. The so-called "tool subjects" alone provide a meager education. The easel, the work-bench, the orchestra, the stage, the laboratory, the gym, and tennis court—there is LIFE, and a school that omits attention to these things is as circumscribed as a culture without them.

Time was when schools could offer the basic academic courses, knowing the home and community would supply other training. All departures from this narrow curriculum were considered not only extravagant of time and money but also downright obstructive to learning in that they encroached on precious school time. In the family life of our urban communities now, however, small chance is given for children to work with their hands and brains. It is the rare parent who allows experimentation with science materials in a more than trivial manner or encourages the organization of the facts learned. Many parents want a musician in their homes but cannot tolerate the practice hours. We

live in a society where mothers and fathers play and work apart from each other as well as apart from their children. To many adults leisure is actually a bore. Women are now busier than they were before the war, but many who have no household duties live practically useless lives and grow increasingly restless searching for something to occupy their time. Even after the home and community disclaimed responsibility for seeing that youngsters had a chance to learn by doing (gradually, to be sure, and without asking permission), the "frills" of education were considered an unnecessary embellishment. To many educators it seemed that anything enjoyable was hazardous.

From the sheer enthusiasm of those who wanted a bit of fun, freedom, and feeling in a rather soulless curriculum the unavoidable over-emphasis resulted. That a bit of frenzy was acquired, too, was apparent. Most of it, however, was not in the classrooms but in the minds of uninformed teachers, administrators, school boards, and parents, to whom the creative impulse was associated with biology texts and to whom the act of really thinking out a challenging problem was as remote as the North Pole. The current emphasis on the three R's in some quarters is due chiefly to lack of trained school personnel rather than a shift to a narrower philosophy. We have forsaken extremes for a more balanced program.

What use should be made of learning materials? Much, by young and old of both sexes. No teacher, no governing board, can plan *how much* or how little as well as the individual himself. The teacher of the old-type school habitually imposed her thinking upon the child or did an earnest job of following year after year a program set up by her predecessor. Now the teacher understands how much more the individual learns

Even though thinkers of all ages have reiterated such truths as "we learn by doing" and "experience is the best teacher," only recently have the tools to accelerate and deepen learning been given more than a passing consideration by school planners. With art, science, and play materials as the topic of this month's "Tools for Learning," Margaret Kirkpatrick of the University of Michigan Elementary School, discusses the values to youngsters of learning equipment, pointing out its use and some criteria for selection.

by planning and experiencing for himself. She is not ashamed to admit she does not know all the answers. In fact, she is likely to gain respect by doing so. In a rich environment where children are allowed to seek their own nurture, evidence shows how wisely they perform this difficult task. The idea that all art, science, and play experience must correlate with some main unit of activity in a school setting is outmoded. That was merely a way of getting it past the doubting Thomases in education. Twenty years ago Dewey said, "Arts that are merely useful are not arts but routines." Now we are willing to admit that a wide range of activities has a worthy and unique value.

When valuable materials are on hand, techniques for their best use are necessary. Supply houses are generous in offering helpful instructions. Methods courses and workshops are abundant. But these will not be enough. A teacher must inspire as well as guide. Inventiveness and ingenuity can make much of limited supplies, but an unimaginative, unresourceful teacher will not use even the finest of materials to best advantage.

What are the criteria for selecting these supplies? The social strata of the group will have something to do with the selection but not all. The best that can be secured is desirable—and in ample quantity to avoid the meagerness that hampers self-expression. The "best" should be judged not by cost but by usability, durability, safety, opportunity for expressing imagination, and other such standards. Material which offers a variety of uses is to be preferred to that which has only one. For instance, dry tempera is preferable to bottled poster paints because it may be mixed with shellac to give a more permanent finish as well as being used with water.

It is always well to purchase equipment that is substantial enough to last over a period of time. Dolls and other dramatic play material for young children need to be sturdy and washable. Incidentally, they will invite more careful handling when well made. The safety element is easily recognized to be important especially in climbing apparatus and other playground equipment. We must not overlook this criterion in the classroom and laboratory. And certainly those materials

What You Think About Milttraining

AS THIS ISSUE goes to press, the opinion poll on military training is not complete, but results to date will interest you. Ballots have been received from twenty-eight states.

Eighty per cent of those responding agree with the statement submitted by the DSCD Executive Committee in the October issue of EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP. (*It is our conviction that legislation requiring compulsory military service should not be passed.*) Twenty per cent disagree.

When asked "Do you favor compulsory military training for all young men after the war?" 77 per cent say No; 22 per cent, Yes; and 1 per cent, Uncertain. Eighty-four per cent either have already written their Congressmen or will do so soon.

We are grateful to our readers for the many thoughtful comments and reactions regarding milttraining which they have sent us along with their opinion ballots.

There is still time for you to return your opinion ballot. You will find it on page 28 of the October issue of EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP. Present indications are that milttraining will be considered soon after the convening of the new Congress. Write to your congressman early in January.

which challenge the imagination are desirable. For instance, finished costumes are less satisfactory than a few lengths of cloth that may be adapted for many uses.

And who shall do the selecting? When at all possible, it should be those teachers who are to use the materials. The discerning teacher takes into consideration her pupils' interests and uses these as a basis for her ordering. She may privately lament the messiness of modeling clay and colored chalk and the drippiness of easel paints, but she does not restrict their use. With smocks, aprons, and with newspapers she makes adjustments. She realizes the learning value resulting from the sharing of equipment, but she knows, also, the heartache of trying repeatedly to make something out of nothing. She wants plenty of the basic art media. She wants an ample number of instruments for the orchestra. She wants tools for the naturally curious minds of her young scientists. She wants playground and gym equipment.

These learning materials the teacher will use with foresight, with wisdom, and with pride, bringing the children an enriched en-

vironment. It is the right of youngsters to become acquainted with all the resources their community and the world can offer for a full and happy life, with attention to special talents that will make for creative and contented living. With broadened school environment, we can better achieve the goal of a constructive school program.

Reading for Teachers, with an introduction by Lou LaBrant of New York University, is the subject of "Tools for Learning" in January.

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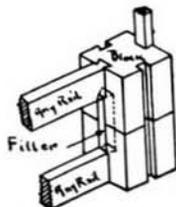
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