

# TEACHING:

## Pattern or Design?

Teachers and students, working closely together, must be constantly alert to the subtle ways in which school days become over-routinized. When time, space, thinking, ideas become too rigidly patterned, there is danger that the creative insight or the thoughtful suggestion that may lead toward a fresh discovery will be stifled.

[The] children were asked to pick a suitable autumn subject for a picture. One child suggested, "Leaves on the ground." "No, Joey, think what time of year it is. What holiday is coming tomorrow? What does Thanksgiving remind you of?"

"A turkey! A turkey!"

"Yes, a turkey. And wouldn't it be nice to have a Pilgrim, too? Hiding behind a tree with his bow and arrow waiting to shoot the turkey?" The teacher got out last year's drawings of Pilgrims-hiding-behind-trees-waiting-to-shoot-turkeys and pinned them on the wall. The children got out their pencils and crayons ("Draw first, color last") and copied. "No, Jeannette. Has anyone ever heard of a Pilgrim wearing brown shoes?"<sup>1</sup>

TODAY we smile, perhaps with some degree of superiority, at such a description of an art lesson. That patterns stifle creativity in art is today on the way to being recognized, in theory pretty generally, in practice to some extent. But patterns—set and rigid ways of thinking and of doing things—still lurk in the shadows of classrooms.

<sup>1</sup> "Miss O'Reilly of Slocum," *Fortune*, XXXV, No. 2 (Feb. 1947) p. 128-31, 140, 143, 144, 146.

### Patterned Time

One year in first grade; one year in second; six years in "grade" school, two in junior high; four years in each of high school and college. Sixteen years—one-fourth of a lifetime, more or less—set aside for schooling. A pattern within which we must work. Creatively or uncreatively?

9:00 Show and Tell; 9:10 Spelling; 9:30 English; 10:00 Arithmetic . . . and so on through a neatly packaged day. "Hurry now, everybody should be finished. . . . Johnny, why must you always hold us up? . . . Don, you know we only sharpen pencils before the bell rings. . . . Everybody in line. If you don't go now, Chris, you'll be asking later to be excused. . . . No, we can't dramatize this story. We won't finish the book if we don't get on to the next story. . . . No one in the building until the bell rings! . . ."

Pressures of many kinds, some from within us, some imposed from without, cause us to forget that creative

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teaching takes time—not over-all more time, necessarily—but time used flexibly. Creative teaching and learning demand time to capitalize upon the mood of the moment, to finish the story before inspiration wanes; time to explore for ideas, to meander in our planning, to take off on a side road or two, until we hit on just the right idea for our assembly program; time to slow down when work is hard and speed up when it is easy; time to play longer when we're full of "kinks" inside.

Time needs to be used flexibly, also, for individuals within groups. Some children operate on "standard" time, but a sensitive teacher knows that there are many exceptions and that time cannot click off at the same rate for all. We deny some children any chance for creative experience when we try to force everyone to "march in time."

### **Patterned Space**

We have come a long way, by and large, from the screwed down desks arranged in rows of endless sameness that constituted the once-standard classroom pattern. Many old schools now have unscrewed the desks and new schools have movable furniture so that the room may be rearranged to meet the needs for grouping; for "stage" space at the front or dancing space in the middle; for individual study time; for a circle arrangement for discussion or sharing; or for seating space at a parent meeting. Even college classrooms are beginning to break down

the rows and to use tables and chairs so that students may face each other.

Imaginative and creative teachers, noting the highly individual physical needs of children have learned to use the floor itself for many purposes: for painting, for games, for listening to stories, and for resting. The space above is used for decorations, such as mobiles. Whole walls have become bulletin boards in newer buildings, and sectional storage units may be moved from place to place to create work and interest centers.

In older buildings, parts of once spacious and echoing halls have been attractively decorated and put to use as libraries, exhibit centers, or rainy-day "game preserves." In newer buildings, hall space has been cut to a minimum in order to make larger classrooms. Individual exits for each room relieve much of the congestion that once characterized the coming-in and going-out times. In crowded urban areas, lack of sufficient outdoor space to play has necessitated the use of roofs or staggered recess periods for this purpose.

Space—or lack of it—is what we make it: a block or an opportunity for creative problem solving.

### **Patterned Thinking**

"Class stand, line up, pass," snapped the orders and the fourth grade responded. Somewhat hypnotized by the speed and precision of the operation, as an observer in the room, I followed suit. I asked the boy next to me where we were going. A shrug indicated he did not know. We were both enlightened as we were led into the projection room to see a film.

It was frightening to realize how completely the natural curiosity of this age had been destroyed by some four or five years of heavily routinized standing, lining up, and passing. Here were children who apparently could be led anywhere with no questions asked!

Curiosity is evidenced "naturally" in the spontaneous question-asking of young children: "How can a puddle go away? . . . How can Santa hear what you want for Christmas? . . . Could you walk on water? . . . What can I say if I can't say damn?"<sup>2</sup> What will happen to this versatile, four-year-old question-asker after she has been in school for several years? Will her teacher take over the question asking? Will she one day be in a fourth grade answering teacher-made questions: "How high is cacao? . . . What do Taro, Sago, and Dvaks mean? . . . Arctic lands have frost in \_\_\_\_\_ (month)." <sup>3</sup> Testing questions—those to which the questioner already knows the answers—are not creative questions that lead to hypothesizing. And so they seldom, if ever, can generate creative thinking.

Over-routinizing is one of the deadliest enemies of creative thinking in the classroom. It is dangerous wherever practiced—getting children in and out of a classroom or school; saluting the flag every morning; following, topic by topic, a course of study; writing spelling words ten times each; learning to divide by the "five-step" method; or giving children answers before they have asked their questions. A school

<sup>2</sup> Hal Boyle, "Children's Questions Harder Than TV Quiz", *Syracuse Journal Herald*, Oct. 26, 1955.

<sup>3</sup> From a social studies test on a board in a classroom.

may be run so "efficiently" that teachers see no reason to question or examine policies. The routine of college classes becomes so well established that students are frustrated and upset when new procedures are introduced.

Teachers interested in encouraging creative thinking both in themselves and in their students are finding ways to involve students in planning for the responsible, intelligent handling of routines. They are attempting to give students responsibilities that will tax their ability to solve problems. Curriculum directors are encouraging the preparation of flexible curriculum guides that leave room for adaptations to interests and abilities of students, as well as to those of the teacher who is himself an individual different from others using the same guide.

### **Patterned Ideas**

"College students would not work without a stiff system of rewards and penalties. . . . But children *love* to use coloring books. . . . My children need the security of being told just what to do and how to do it. . . . Our parents *like* the way they live; they wouldn't take care of better homes if they had them. . . . We have no race problem in our school. . . . If I can do it, so can you. . . ."

And so we could continue to enumerate some unexamined ideas that are influencing the living together of students and teachers in schools at all levels. Will teachers, with ideas such as these, be likely to help students examine some of their taken-for-granted assumptions?

There are numerous techniques being suggested and developed today for

helping students to examine their beliefs: dramatization, role-playing, discussion-stimulator films and filmstrips, unfinished stories, pictures, and other projective techniques. Teachers are trying to help students to see the inadequacy of intellectual understanding alone, and are encouraging them to trust more confidently the evidence of their own experience.

Of all patterned ideas, perhaps most needing of examination are those related to how a teacher sees himself as a professional person. Is he a divided being—teacher in school, a person out of school—or is he an integrated, whole teacher-person who dares to be "himself" in the classroom and not apologetic about his profession in public places? Does he see himself as the standard-setter, as both the question-asker and answer-giver, and as the

most knowing and experienced member of the group? Or does he see himself as both teacher and learner? Does he "dare" to desert the higher levels of language usage in order to communicate effectively and sympathetically with students and parents? Does he try in all possible ways not to limit the learning of young people to what he himself knows?

This latter concept of the role of the teacher is not a new pattern-in-the-making. It has been "discovered" and exemplified by teachers here and there throughout history. And so must the process of "discovery" continue within the heart and mind of every teacher as he seeks, not a pattern, but a design for living—a design, never setting, but emerging ever more richly and fully as he grows in wisdom and understanding of people and of self.

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