

## Aesthetic Power

IS IT incredible to think that children and youth need to develop their aesthetic powers as an aspect of their intellectual development? A first response to this question might be, "Of course not"; but a second thought may reveal several reasons that justify the emphasis upon intellectual development in terms of current social needs and problems. Yet awareness of attitudes, ways of thinking and feeling and skills necessary for coping with these needs and problems have forced many people to take another look at the concept of the whole person and his growth as an adequate personality.

Most people seem to sense aesthetic power when they view something that strikes deep into their inner life of emotion and feeling. How many of these people feel a small, lingering discontent at being constantly in the position of the observer? How many wish that they, too, had some facility in forming their ideas and feelings into symbols so that the meanings might endure in tangible form?

Aesthetic power is a dimension of human personality that awaits development. It involves perceiving the many-sidedness of people, things and situations in a sustained and attentive fashion. It involves an attitude toward people and oneself that makes the person open and receptive to novel ideas and to things. It

involves choices and preferences that are self-determined and supported by feelings of confidence and pride. It involves an awareness of oneself as a discoverer and creator.

Educators need no longer rely upon opinions as a means of planning situations for learning in the visual arts. It is possible to work with scientific knowledge and research with the purpose of relating these ideas to ways of working with children so that they will have a reasonable grasp of what it means to exercise their aesthetic powers.

Studies of the development of children's perception in the visual arts, creative abilities and thinking, and attitudes toward self reveal much about the personal factors which influence the production and appreciation of art.

*Perceptual development and the visual arts.* A study (3) of children's preferences for drawings was conducted to determine the kinds of organized pattern they can be expected to comprehend. An analysis was made of the art products of children from six to eleven years of age to trace changes which occur in various developmental stages in their drawing. These findings were further checked with descriptions of changes as reported in the literature. With these changes as criteria, a test consisting of 13 pairs of drawings was constructed. In each of the

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paired drawings the subject matter was held constant but the organized pattern was either simple or complex. In the simple drawings, lines were unbroken, color was applied evenly within the outline, and perspective was not used to add dimension to the form. In the complex drawings the outlines were sketchy, colors were impressionistic, and the forms overlapped, thus creating the effect of depth.

Children and teachers were asked to choose one drawing which they preferred from each of the paired drawings. Three experiments were conducted with these paired drawings: (a) 88 elementary school teachers were tested to establish an adult, teacher response to the drawings; (b) 142 children attending the first grade in six schools of various socioeconomic levels were tested to establish responses; and (c) 554 children in one elementary school were tested to check changes in responses due to maturation. The findings indicated the following:

1. Eighty-nine percent of the teachers preferred the complex organized patterns.
2. Eighty-three percent of the first grade children preferred the simple organized patterns. There were few sex differences evidenced in their preferences for the simple organized patterns. Differences between children from the high and the low socioeconomic schools were not significant.
3. The preferences of 554 children from kindergarten through the fifth grade showed progressive changes from grade to grade. The highest peak of preference for the simple (85 percent) came at the second grade.
4. A reversal occurred at the fourth grade level where the simple organized pattern received only 30 percent preference. At the fifth grade level, children's responses were in close agreement with those of the teachers, showing preferences for the complex. Only 15 percent of the children chose the

simple organized patterns at this grade level.

These findings support the theory that young children perceive the simple, overall structural features in a more general or global way. The parts which require greater differentiation such as the incompleteness of the shapes and the overlapping of surfaces tend to make familiar elements more difficult to identify. The preference for complex patterns among older children suggests that the direction of perceptual development is from simple to more complex differentiation of form.

Perceptual processes depend upon direct experience. Children use such motor responses as manipulation, experimentation and construction to carry out various phases of the process, those of sorting, analyzing and reconstructing the various parts which make up the whole of an object. How much do we limit perceiving-thinking processes by reducing the opportunities for children to engage in direct experience with concrete materials? What effects do patterns and the practice of copying stereotyped pictures have upon perceptual development and the vigorous, spontaneous expression of ideas and feelings?

*Creative abilities and thinking in the visual arts.* One of the traditional ways of thinking about creative performance in the visual arts is to associate this behavior with the word "talent." The meaning of talent generally implies a gift or natural endowment in a degree which only a few persons possess. Some of the current research on creativity suggests that this behavior is far more complex, involving a number of abilities and other personality factors.

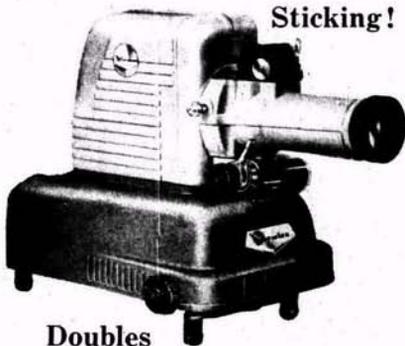
Initial studies by Guilford (4, 5) on creativity and thinking abilities have much to offer in considering the relationship of abilities to performance in the visual arts. His subjects were military

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personnel, including scientists, engineers and inventors. Findings from these studies suggest some tentative ideas about thinking abilities that pertain to the visual arts.

Among the productive-thinking abilities, fluency, flexibility and originality seem to be operative. Within each of these abilities are several factors which are brought into play depending upon the task a person is asked to perform on verbal and nonverbal tests.

Fluency is indicated by the number of ideas a person can produce within a prescribed period of time. Within this category the ability to generate ideas (ideational fluency) and the ability to symbolize ideas in visual form (expressive fluency) are among the factors that help to account for an aspect of art performance.

Flexibility has to do with the amount of freedom a person exhibits while work-

ing on a given task. One factor, spontaneous flexibility, refers to the way an individual goes about working with his ideas. He has the capacity to more or less play with ideas without being asked to do so in a test situation. Another factor, adaptive flexibility, involves the ability to change, to discard familiar or habitual methods of thinking and to strike out in new and unusual directions.

Originality is the ability to make unusual or uncommon responses, remote associations or connections, or clever responses as measured by verbal tests. There may be other aspects such as the temperament and motivation of a person, which are related to this ability. Barron (1) suggests that the ability to respond in an unusual or original manner will be greatest when freedom to respond is greatest.

Guilford has identified two productive-thinking abilities which are used in

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problem situations. *Convergent thinking* is the pulling together of ideas into a single, right answer. *Divergent thinking* is seeing many possibilities and directions to take in seeking solutions to problems. Both these ways of thinking are involved in the production of ideas and in problem solving. However, divergent thinking may be more relative in situations like the visual arts where no single, right answer or one way of portraying an idea is required and where a variety of outcomes is often the goal.

In addition to these abilities, a memory which retains details of visual impressions and the ability to visualize the way something might look may be significant.

Viewing the intellect as encompassing a broad variety of thinking abilities would be a challenge to teachers. What kinds of growth in aesthetic power might occur if children were encouraged: to make choices in the way something might

be done, to experiment with their ideas, to try them out with a variety of media and tools, and to withhold criticism, allowing time for ideas to incubate?

*Self-perceptions and the visual arts.* Another aspect of growth in aesthetic power has to do with a person's feelings about himself as he works with art media and tools. Burkhart (2) studied various creativity-personality characteristics of students grouped as high and low according to their spontaneity and deliberateness during art experience. Two experiments were conducted. One included a group of 36 students in the ninth and tenth grades, and the other a group of 44 college art students. Some of the findings from this study indicated the following:

The spontaneous high group was process oriented. They were more likely to start without an idea or to change their initial concept or to evolve one as the work pro-

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gressed. They had a positive response to mistakes and tended to integrate these into expressive purposes. They frequently had an emotional or expressive purpose in mind in contrast to a specific pictorial objective. The general description given of themselves during the experiment was one of flexibility, freedom, and personal involvement.

The deliberate low group were more product oriented and seemed to have specific pictorial objectives in mind. Their method of work was mainly a step-by-step, one-thing-at-a-time approach which tended to be repetitive. They described themselves as awkward, formal, conservative, and lacking in involvement.

In summary, reflecting upon the original premise that aesthetic power is a process of integrating thought with feeling, and considering the varied abilities and qualities used in this endeavor, what are the changes that need to be made in our thinking about children? In what ways can research help to modify or alter

our ways of working in the direction of facilitating growth leading toward aesthetic power?

First, we need to clarify conceptions which emphasize art as a process of involvement in self-discovery, as a way of visually communicating ideas and feelings, and as a source of deep personal enjoyment. These are internal values which are expressed or symbolized in external ways. The learner is central and what he does in the way of producing art products is a reflection of his understanding of this process.

Second, we need to reexamine our goals in relation to current methods and practices in the arts while keeping the learner in sharp focus. We need to state our goals in such specific ways as to make clear the major ideas and concepts that are significant to the production and appreciation of all art forms. Once these goals of developing aesthetic power are

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established, we will want to test methods and ways of working with children, using research techniques within the setting of the classroom.

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### The Sun

(Continued from page 461)

press themselves. They can look to literature for stories about other boys and girls who have experienced feelings similar to theirs. They can look to history to see what has caused man happiness, anger, sorrow, joy. They can assess what has happened to him as a result of his ambition or his discontent; his struggle with himself, with other men and with the elements; his strengths and his weaknesses.

Art education can assist children in understanding physical phenomena. On a rainy day, ask children what "wetness" is. Ask them, "Can you touch it? feel it? What are the scientific facts we know about wetness? Could you paint wetness?" Try asking, "What is sunshine? Where does it come from? What do we know about it? What are words that describe the sun? You say the sun is hot. Can you show hotness in your picture?" You might try stretching their imaginations by asking, "What would happen if you could reach out and touch the sun at this very moment? What would happen if the sun were never to shine again?"

It is so important to remember the

elements of surprise, excitement, enthusiasm, and self-involvement. You can help children to feel that exploring ideas can be a wonderful adventure in which they can use the self and the world as resources.

In summary, the purpose of this writer has been to create in educators an excitement about art education in its larger dimensions, in its relation to modern man, who is closer to achieving his potential as a human being than ever before because of the explosion of knowledge and newer understandings in the physical, biological and social sciences; yet progress toward its achievement is checked by negating forces. The writer has considered art education as basic in the process of reducing the negating forces and unleashing and giving impetus to children's positive attributes.

What would the sun look like, if man could see it with his naked eye—no more spectacular than the human potentiality of one child, emerging as a mature adult, alive to the tremendous mystery of being, rejoicing in his humanity, continuing to give birth to the self—naturally, spontaneously, dynamically—unclouded by the negating forces of his existence.

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