

Potential of the Arts in Elementary School

*Personal experiences help teachers
construct a dynamic program.*

IN THE elementary curriculum one may find grouped under the arts the visual arts, drama, music and dance. Occasionally industrial arts may be included. Generally music and art are the most common components of the arts area. Dramatics frequently is an outgrowth of creative writing or story telling in the elementary classroom, with little opportunity given for creative interpretation and forming illusions. Dance is perhaps the most neglected area; it is all too often a rainy day activity carried out in the name of physical exercise.

Whether the arts program is an expanded one (embracing the visual arts, music, drama and the dance), or one with two areas, the contribution to learning may be a rich and meaningful one. To make a significant contribution to the elementary school program, the arts need thoughtful study, strong support, and continuous evaluation.

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Within the past decade the public has been deeply concerned about the curriculum of the schools, particularly with the programs for science and mathematics. Focusing on math and science education diverted temporarily the attention of educators from other areas in the curriculum. Public concerns, however, seem to swing like a pendulum. In recent months attention has been drawn to areas other than science and mathematics that need study. The public began to wonder if other areas of the curriculum did not also need re-evaluation, since mathematics and science had been in need of study. Questions were raised about the relative importance of this or that content in the curriculum. There were critics, in the pursuit of greater emphasis on the sciences and mathematics, who clamored loudly about "frills" consuming valuable learning time. The arts were among the areas to be labeled "frills."

Actually, this approach had a positive effect on arts education. It has brought about the rediscovery of the value of the arts to our culture in general and to learning in particular. Sterling McMurrin, U. S. Commissioner of Education has said:

We must guard against the tendency to suppose that our national well-being is served primarily by advances in technology, however important and timely these may be. Knowledge is of value for its own sake as well as for its uses, and unless the sciences are supported in their own right the capital of knowledge on which our technology is nourished will surely diminish. And the social sciences and the humanities and fine arts are as important to the quality of our culture and eventually to the strength of our nation as are engineering and the physical sciences, upon which now so much obviously depends.¹

In the process of reexamination, educators have begun to eliminate the superficial, produced-for-show activities and supplant these with arts learning experiences of a more meaningful kind. Interdisciplinary investigations, drawing upon findings in philosophy, psychology and sociology, have added new dimensions to the arts. Research, as well as experimental curricula, has more clearly defined new concepts.

Contribution of the Arts

The body of new material on the arts in education supports a more vital role in the growth and development of the child. The arts are not insular in their position in the curriculum. While strong as learning experience in themselves, the arts also gain strength from within the total curriculum of the school program.

The arts program is predicated on the assumption that the aesthetic principle is deeply imbedded in man and that its presence contributes to his well-being. The aesthetic needs of man are manifested in many ways. As they have throughout the history of civilization,

the arts today reflect man's continual quest for life's meaning and his progress in solving the problems of his time. Man is frequently in contact with the arts through enjoying and reflecting on them as he finds them in his environment, or through creating the arts for his own purposes.

In the arts the individual, more than in almost any other human endeavor, must become personally involved whether he is creating directly or is a listener or spectator. When the individual is participating in the arts by creating form directly, he is involved in the act of perceiving, judging, selecting and acting upon his judgments as he creates. As a spectator or listener, he becomes personally involved through his senses as he discovers new aspects, assimilates or establishes empathy in the visual or audile stimulus and gains new meanings in the art form he is perceiving. The arts, according to Manuel Barkan,² may be viewed as a means of both communion and communication. Viewed as communion, the arts are a way of perceiving and a means for rediscovering things one has taken for granted. As communication, the arts are a form of language and a medium of expression.

Understanding the arts cannot be accomplished by externalized or appreciative means alone. Research in the arts has shown that knowledges have greater depth and contribute more to our lives when we learn through direct experience or involvement in the creative art processes. Frequently citizens, and even teachers, seem to assume that the arts program in the school is one and the same as the program for the development of the professional artist. The nature of the learning in the arts for the profes-

¹ Sterling M. McMurrin. "A Crisis of Conscience." *The Education Supplement of Saturday Review*. September 16, 1961. p. 58-59, 77-78.

² Manuel Barkan. *A Foundation for Art Education*. New York: The Ronald Press, 1955. p. 6.

sional must differ from that which seeks to deepen the knowledge of the arts for the child or youth. The arts learnings for the child or young person must be designed to build on his particular values, interests and needs to the extent to which he may relate to them. Therefore the arts program in the public or community education must be conceived in terms of the broader, nonprofessional aspects of the arts-in-action in our society. The arts teacher or arts specialist, however, must be familiar with both the professional and nonprofessional approaches. The vitality of the arts in our society is derived from the ferment of change and a continuous search for creative solutions. Thus, the arts program in the elementary school grows and changes as it keeps pace with growing children in a changing world.

Goals for the Arts

Although there are specific goals for each area, the arts have common aims which cause them to be so grouped. They also have interrelations that strengthen them as a group as well as individually.

In the elementary school, the teacher seeks the realization of certain goals in a good arts program. This program should help the pupil develop an understanding of his creative self and to appreciate the creative work of others. Through learning experiences in the arts, the pupil has an opportunity to form aesthetic judgments. He learns to value the creative, not the imitative, in the arts. The program should help the student to become sensitive to aesthetic form, to sharpen his visual and audile perception. Integrated with and directly related to ongoing creative learning should be knowledge of our arts heritage—the art forms which have so greatly

enriched civilization. Development of skills and knowledge of technical processes and media adapted to the developmental levels of the pupil and his needs is a part of the educational process in the arts.

In carrying forward the goals for arts education, the teacher is a catalyst for creative learning. When he becomes directive, imposes his own adult concepts on his pupils, the teacher operates in direct conflict with the aims of a good arts program. It is through the realization of these goals that the arts program contributes significantly to the education of the child.

It is assumed that since the elementary curriculum is already crowded with content that "must be taught," a program for arts education might be watered down or restricted in scope. If we can focus on the quality of experience more than the quantity, there is no reason why a rich program in the arts cannot be effectively provided in spite of limited time.

Teacher Orientation in the Arts

Teachers, principals and supervisors have little opportunity to experience the arts in their professional preparation. Thus, when confronted with teaching the arts as part of the elementary curriculum, they may feel insecure. Generally they are aware of the importance of the arts *per se* in education but their lack of experience usually causes them to substitute how-to-do-it crutches for method and practice which at best provide little more than busywork for the child. In order to bring about more effective teaching in elementary school, we must help teachers, principals and supervisors, through professional and in-service education, personally to explore the arts in depth. Through personal experience,

teachers may gain insights into the nature of the arts, creative behavior and the rich range of media (whether it be art, drama, dance or music).

In school systems where specialized personnel, such as art or music teachers and supervisors, are employed, there are usually workshops and laboratory sessions for helping teachers become more effective in the teaching of the arts. The help classroom teachers receive from these in-service activities is dependent upon the quality of leadership. A teacher, feeling insecure or unknowing, needs in-service activities which constitute orientation and are of a self-discovery kind. As he gains confidence through personal experience in the arts, he relates this to his teaching and the way in which children can be helped to develop creativity. The specialist must be able to see the teacher's problems through his (the teacher's) eyes. This requires inspirational leadership attuned to the teaching needs of those who seek help.

Yet what if there are no special teachers, no special supervisors? The writer has visited many elementary schools in which the faculty has organized an arts curriculum committee. The arts curriculum committee develops resources for teaching, organizes problem-solving study groups and workshops and stimulates self-evaluation. Some of the committees have brought specialists to their schools for workshops.

In one school the teachers had expressed interest in working with their pupils on a mural, but most of them were uncertain about how to get started. The general supervisor (elementary) discovered their problem and suggested that since she herself was not too familiar with mural making, it would be interesting to have a work session in which she and the teachers could develop one be-

fore teaching children about it. A film and several good books on the topic were obtained. In the work session an exciting mural was created and evaluated. This was only the beginning. Since the mural making session, workshops on such topics as papier-maché, picture making and ceramics have taken place. The supervisor's office, it might be added, is now resplendent with art (which she created) hung between the shelves of the state adopted readers and social studies books.

Ideally there should be a provision for equipment, facilities and materials needed for a good arts program. For example, a piano and a record player are important to a good music program. The need for the specialized resources for the teaching of the arts cannot be denied and should be recognized by school administrations. A long range plan is needed in most instances to acquire gradually the resources for teaching the arts. There are, however, ingenious and imaginative ways that facilities and materials can be improvised and found, so that valuable learning experiences can be provided. The lack of facilities, equipment and materials can be studied by teachers, supervisor, principal and parents to find a way of developing an arts program. Sometimes it is surprising to find how many resources for teaching exist in the school community, especially when the faculty, administrators and parents explore the problem together.

Self-Evaluation in the Arts

The quality of the arts program is dependent on self-evaluation. The arts continuously reflect new ideas in our culture. Thus, an arts program must be ever-changing, sensitive to new developments. Growth in the arts is stimulated by ex-

(Continued on page 466)

divisions work together for a common goal. This goal must be constantly in view. I have just finished reading two books, one on curriculum and the other on supervision, and in neither case was there one word about the development of the child as the central function of those fields.

As superintendent of schools, I have a value only to the extent that I contribute to the education of the children and youth of my district. This is true also of the teachers, principals, supervisors, custodians, bus drivers and all others. If we would all look at our colleagues and ask

in what ways they contribute to the welfare of children, we would come closer to appreciating our interrelationship and commonness of function. This would be even more true if each of us considered once in a while how he could make his own contribution more significant to children. In other words, let us quit doing things to each other and, instead, spend our time doing things for children. When that happens, we may be able to see ourselves as we are—colleagues in a mighty cause.

—JAMES A. HALL, *Superintendent of Schools, Port Washington, New York.*

Potential

(Continued from page 448)

ploration of the unknown as well as the known.

In a meeting with the parents of an elementary school, a mother asked the writer if in a good art program her child should be making pot holders each year as her parents' Christmas present. Apparently in grades 2, 3, 4 and 5 the children had made pot holders every year. In this particular school no ongoing evaluation of the art program had taken place; a dull program was reflected in this instance. Through self-evaluation teachers ascertain the creative growth in their pupils, appraise their teaching effectiveness, identify problems needing study, and discover new potentials for the further development of the program.

In another school where parents were invited to participate in the evaluation of the arts program, it was a revelation for them. They became aware of the purposes of a good arts program and the means for implementing it. Prior to their participation, they, as members

of the P.T.A., had regarded the arts as sources of supply for their programs—a musical or dramatic performance (usually precisely drilled) by pupils, or nut cups, posters and program covers for their social affairs (to which the children were not invited). As a result of the evaluation, the P.T.A. began to supplement the record collection in the school. New interest was taken in plays and music, which now became more creative and more closely related to the ongoing program of the school. The point here is that when we reflect on the true purposes of education, we focus on those learning experiences which are more significant to the intellectual and emotional growth of children. Stated goals for arts education are meaningless unless they are studied in all their dimensions.

Through personal experiences in the arts, the study of new ideas and practices and continuous evaluation, the arts program becomes increasingly dynamic. When teachers and parents discover the potential of the arts in the elementary school program the results are richly rewarding.

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