

Letters

Unofficially Speaking

I recently read "America's Math Problems" (Harold Stevenson, October 1987) concerning Asian children and mathematics. For a number of years I have been observing Asian-American children unofficially while teaching in the Chicago Public Schools. I contend that our Asian-American students are also doing well. Now that I have read Stevenson's article, the carryover from Asian culture to American culture is striking.

While substituting in Chicago schools (about 100 per year), I found that Asian-Americans usually constituted about one-third of all the honors classes and represented a high percentage of the advanced math and science classes. I have observed that Asian-Americans help one another in

their studies and that they also have a philosophy among themselves that they must excel in school.

Certainly, we could take a cue from the Asian-Americans as well as the Asians in producing children who are high achievers in schools.

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Backing for Boyer

I have just finished reading your guest editorial by Ernest Boyer ("It's Not 'Either Or,' It's Both," December 1987/January 1988). I will remember his comments: "We are systematically training pedants who have lost a powerful view of themselves as creators

... our children need to see clearly, hear acutely, and feel sensitively" (in their daily living), I might add.

I have spent an entire professional lifetime *in* the classroom with that goal. Dr. Boyer has given me reason to continue looking for some answers—what an interesting editorial.

CAROLYN PURGRASKI
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Why?

As I read George Hillocks' "Synthesis of Research on Teaching Writing" in the May 1987 issue, one word kept echoing in my mind: why? This wasn't the *why* of wonder in the voice of a curious child. It was more the *why* spoken with a hand on the forehead, a shake of the head.

For years now I have been making up answers to the *why* question, why the teaching of writing is no better than it is. My favorite made-up answer is that researchers, writers of educational material, teacher trainers, and, sadly, even teachers do not know how to teach writing.

Teachers should have been able to find a natural and effective way to teach writing; after all, they are the ones teaching the stuff. Even by accident some of them should have hit upon a better way to teach students to write, given their daily experiences and the body of research that has been circulating for nearly 15 years.

In my wonderment I talk to teachers, to kids. I'm sure the real answer will be found that way. Probably it will happen by accident some sunny afternoon when a blue sky leaves the mind open for thoughts to fly in and out often enough to become tame and recognizable. Until that sunny day, I seek answers in libraries. I can get excited over reviews of research. So why was I disappointed when I read Hillocks' synthesis?

I was disappointed in all the jargon Hillocks used; but, more than that, in the issues he chose to discuss. They seemed small. His synthesis made no mention of the research of Donald

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Graves or Lucy McCormick Calkins or Susan Somers. The big issues of student choice, of student autonomy, and of allowing students to write about topics they *know* and *care* about were not there. The notion of teacher as writer and researcher was also absent. Yet there were so many places in the article where these topics would have made sense.

For example, when Hillocks described free writing, he seemed to connect "writing about whatever is of interest to the students in an uninhibited way" and "the process approach to writing" (p. 80). Yet he mentioned neither the power behind students' choosing their own topics nor the necessity of the teachers' having internalized the writing process themselves.

Further, Hillocks concluded that "inquiry," or what he calls procedural knowledge, has the most power in teaching writing, that is, the teaching, of general procedures and specific strategies for the production of discourse and the transformation of data for use in writing (p. 81). Nowhere does his synthesis reflect the change in attitude and ability that occurs when students learn to write because it's a discovery process, a way to make sense of their lives. I feel cheated. So once again I am, hand on forehead, asking why.

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Some Comments on Art Criticism

Congratulations on the excellent issue on the arts in education (December 1987/January 1988). I was pleased to see Anne Meek's account of the "art appreciation" lesson (p. 57), but the article needs some comment.

Art teachers, as well as elementary classroom teachers need to recognize that there are developmental issues at stake as they proceed to introduce art as grist for the young critic's mill. There has been some research—too

little, in fact—about the ages and stages of aesthetic perception (Project Zero, for example), and it is clear from the excellent picture of classroom dynamics created by Meek that the youngsters involved were still at a stage where they valued the "realistic" Ammi Phillips portrait (*Mrs. Mayer and Daughter*) over the more abstract Cassatt painting. This is not, I submit, because "their standard for judging was based on their efforts to be neat, to stay within the lines in their own work" but because developmentally, they were not yet able to "see" the value of impressionism until guided by their teacher.

By claiming to *prefer* the more sophisticated Cassatt *Mother and Child*, however, the teacher entered that treacherous domain of tastemaking. Had she expressed her preference without denigrating the work of Phillips, she might have given kids (who always want the "right answer") an opportunity to be "right" about their preference, even if it differed from their teacher's. The ensuing discussion could still have taken place, and the "Ah-ha!" moment could still have been preserved. As David Perkins suggests, the kids could have had the opportunity to see the art behind the art in *both* pictures.

We need to look at the "tastemaking" role of teachers and how it sometimes conflicts with our desire to create autonomous learners. We need to develop students with heightened critical faculties, able to describe, defend, and advocate for artists and art, past, present, and future.

As the Getty Institute and the National Endowment for the Arts make strong moves to influence the curriculum writing process in this area, attention must be paid to their unwitting complicity in creating "right" answers within lessons in aesthetic criticism, thus entering the realm of "tastemakers." Moreover, they and their educational partners must select works to study that do not ignore the ages and stages in perception.

Artists can help us with issues of

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Let's have more issues that include the arts when talking about curriculum!

CAROL FINEBERG
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**Meek Replies: Teacher as
Teacher, Not as Tastemaker**

If tastemaking had been Mrs. Wainner's objective, she would have been persistently didactic throughout the lesson. Indeed, in letting the students state their preferences, she digressed from the lesson objectives in a relaxed and informal interlude intended to capitalize on their interest. The resulting crescendo in favor of the Phillips' painting became an example of peer group as tastemaker. Then, when Mrs. Wainner added her preference to Ben's, she risked the use of her authority to strengthen attainment of the lesson objectives, not the imposition of her taste. She was teacher as *teacher*. This concentration on the objectives does indeed raise serious questions about teacher accountability and formal evaluations based on a Hunter-derivative model, but I have only enthusiasm for the objectives.

ANNE MEEK
Managing Editor
Educational Leadership

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