Releasing Children's Creative Forces

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The author of this article believes that children should be literate—but to communication through the three R's he would add literacy in communication through the use of all of the symbols of our modern civilization. William V. Vitarelli, educational director of the Allendale School, Lake Villa, Illinois, draws contrasts in terms of learning situations which are, in various ways, attempting to raise the level of cultural literacy. To the reader is left the responsibility for decision as to which is most desirable.

I HAD HEARD a great deal about Miss Straight's art classes. Whenever her work with children was described, it was in terms of unbelievable awe. "How does she get it out of them? . . . Why, she can make a Rembrandt out of anyone! . . . You should have seen her annual exhibit . . . I thought I was in the Metropolitan Museum!"

I had not seen any of her students' work but Miss Straight's fame as a great art teacher inspired me to make a special trip to her school to see how it was done.

Creating Artists—and Masterpieces

Her studio was located in one end of a long hall. As I walked along the corridor looking for the right number, I noticed many nicely framed and skillfully rendered drawings and paintings hanging on the wall. At first I thought they were prints of famous artists, but upon closer scrutiny I discovered that they were the work of Miss Straight's best students. Each one resembled the technique and style of some recognized master. My amazement was exceeded only by my anxiety to see what she looked like and how she did it.

I soon found the right door with STUDIO sedately lettered in classic Roman style. In the heat of my curiosity I almost missed the little card above the door knob. It was lettered to match the large sign and read, "Please knock before entering." I fixed my necktie, took a deep breath, and rapped three little knocks.

I had taken my sixth deep breath and was about to knock a little louder when I heard deliberate steps approaching the door. I entered a well-lit, extremely quiet, but very crowded room. Thirty children sat in exact rows with benches so planned that every child could see between one another and be in line with the "still life" that had been arranged on a Greek pedestal in the front of the room. My presence was recognized only by the opening of the door and Miss Straight's Mona Lisa smile.

She was exceptionally tall and well poised. Her carefully pressed smock was a pale blue with tiny white flowers on the cuffs and hem. Pointer in hand, she was in full command of the group. The children showed exceptional patience as their outstretched arms, measuring sticks, and squinting eyes recorded every detail of the "still life" that Miss Straight pointed out. She continued with her directions: "Now observe the difference in length between

the stem of the apple and the neck of the vase—measure the stem—pencils up —now put in the stem."

Everyone put in the stem. I spent one hour watching Miss Straight's magic pointer transpose the "still life" on the pedestal to each student's paper.

Listening in on the Chatter

A few months after my visit to Miss Straight's room I attended an educational convention. I was emerging from one of those important but long-winded discussions when my attention was drawn to a commotion outside the adjacent conference room. It was a huddle of excited educators. They were waving their arms and chattering in unison. I heart "art" mentioned, so I erased my philosophical frown and joined the group. They were arguing about the last speaker, a Miss Freeman, and her approach to art education. "They pound out their inhibitions on clay . . . She is so free and modern! . . . Her children bounce with life and creativity. . . . You should see their vivacious splendor in line and form . . . So primitive and fresh, you know."

Giving Way to "Creativity"

Two weeks later I was walking down another corridor seeking the room where Miss Freeman held forth. I had come quite a distance to see this adventure in art. This time I could not mistake the room. Hordes of children appeared to be cramming through the enentrance to her room. Colored paper, boxes, oozing clay, fists full of brushes, hair, multicolored jars, noises, and bodies flooded the studio. Miss Freeman fitted into the picture so perfectly that I could not see her for some time. Her smock matched the various colors so well and her hair waved in and out of the movements so harmoniously that it was minutes before I finally picked her out as she flitted from one child to another in constant animation. "Here's more yellow, honey . . . Keep your feet out of it . . . All right, fine . . . I'll be right there . . . Ooooh, how nice! . . . Don't squeeze it all out . . . Ooops, now, easy."

It was quite a while after the class had ended when Miss Freedom noticed me leaning against a table in the back of the room. She was in the process of picking up the remnants of clay and paint from the floor and assorting them from the children's masterpieces. When she saw me she hurried over and, after the preliminary greetings, explained the significance of every line, blob of color, and gob of clay.

Learning What We Need

It was about a year after I had witnessed these two phenomena that I found myself visiting a small school in the rural south. I had walked over a mile along the concrete highway before I found the little building nestled in a grove of pine trees. I welcomed the soft, winding lane that the children had made of the needles they gathered from under the trees. On each side of the lane a green lawn stretched to the far end of the campus where children were playing on homemade apparatus.

Some of the children were working in the flower beds about the building; one boy was making a bench on the porch; and indoors the teachers and children were planning the many activities that occupied their school day. On the walls of the hall there were sev-

eral examples of the industry and imagination of the children. A newspaper chock-full of stories, cartoons, and social notes filled one wall; a bulletin board with announcements of coming events and examples of student work was on the opposite wall. Near the entrance two children sat receiving the deposits in the school bank; and through the door of the fifth grade room I could see children making their purchases in the school store. All the rooms were painted cheerful colors and the windows were trimmed with curtains that the children had woven and dyed. Murals covered the walls of the basement lunchroom that the children and parents had built.

After absorbing my first impressions of the school, I asked one of the children where I could find the art teacher or the studio where she worked. He answered my request with a quizzical smile which indicated that he really didn't know what I meant. I asked again in simpler terms where I could find the person who was responsible for teaching the children how to make all these beautiful surroundings.

"Oh, no one really teaches us—we just learn together as we need to. It's loads of fun! We all help each other on the projects and learn from one another. Now, if you're talking about school work—well, that's different."

I was not too interested in school work at the moment so I pressed my question again. "What about those block prints in Miss Good's room? . . . And who taught you to weave? . . . How did you know how to refine clay? . . . And those flower boxes?" I asked questions of children and teachers, and the answer was always the same.

"Well, if you have to do something you just naturally get out and learn to do it. David's daddy was the one who helped us lay the bricks but Bill helped him a good deal. Sandy was the one who had the idea for painting the walls pretty-like in the lunchroom, and Miss Taylor said it would be all right if we all chipped in—I painted the trees. You should see the stage Miss Joy's class is making—we're going to raise the money for the wood at our next community meeting, and Jake from down my way is going to help us. He showed me how to make box traps—say, do you want to see our new baby bunnies?"

Identifying the Extremes

As I walked down the back lane to the school zoo I thought of Miss Straight and Miss Freeman. I also thought of their counterpart in our society today—of the purists and self-satisfied classicists who have gained a smug security in the belief that all the laws and rules have been made and that to contradict antiquity is heresy. I thought of the pseudo-modernists and charlatans who, in the confusion and tension of contemporary life, gain momentary recognition by merely being different or chaotic. I thought of the unimaginative cleverness, the meaningless skill, purposeless power, and the disconnected versatility with which our civilization is cursed and how we have thus far failed to integrate our lives through the creative forces within us.

Communicating through Symbols

A cursory review of the cultural periods of history show that great art flourished where men were bound by common purposes and where their sym-

bols grew out of efforts to express themselves in the materials about them. Thus, the need to communicate through symbols other than the written and spoken word created a language of feeling which has been one of the greatest influences in annealing the lives of men. A feeling for the way people lived is often more adequately expressed in the things they made with their hands than in their written words.

The Pyramids of Egypt, the design on an Etruscan vase, an early Italian Fresco, or a Grand Rapids chair speak eloquently of the values and purposes of the people who made them. The murals or hand woven curtains of the little southern school are much more expressive of the needs and aspirations of those rural children than the skilled renditions of Miss Straight's class.

The cultural symbols of our time are to be found in the very structure and nature of our technological civilization. Science and the machine must be harnessed through the cooperative efforts of man for the use of all men before beauty may arise from them. Merely being informed about them or being skillful in their use will not help. Information is not education, nor skill artistry. Courses in civics alone will not produce good citizens, nor will credits in drawing and painting create beauty. A true appreciation of the past cultures is impossible without a clear understanding of one's own time.

Teaching the future citizens of America to be skillful in the art of speaking, writing, and reading is perhaps the most important job of the public schools; however, this is only one aspect of literacy. The art of expressing oneself through other symbols is also of major consequence in our highly complex world.

Finding the Symbols of Our Day

Words are chiefly the medium of the intellect whereas man is basically a feeling animal. The first symbols of man were in the form of the things he found around him. The way he shaped them for his needs expressed how he felt about his universe. The language of words grew out of the more basic symbols of nature and utility.

The tensions, frustrations, beauties, complexities, hopes, and miracles of modern industrial society can never be expressed adequately through the use of words alone. If modern man is to remain sane in the midst of the irrationalness of contemporary life, he will have to find the art forms that are most adequate in expressing his feelings about his universe. These symbols will have to be in terms of the things around him —the things he knows and understands. Only through knowing what he is talking about and "feeling in tune" with his environment will man feel secure in the present and be able to see the future. Thus, the modern expression as well as the prophetic vision (which has always been a contribution of the artist) will be possible.

One of the first responsibilities of the schools is to prepare people who are literate in the symbols of our time. This means more than teaching the three R's —it means building a curriculum rich in the *experiences*, thoughts, feelings, and appreciations of our power age.