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Observations on "Art Education for Children"

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The recommendations put forward in the past fifty years by nine Congresses of drawing teachers, the research undertaken by teachers, psychologists and artists, and their advocacy of more and longer art education, and of the pursuit of culture for its own sake, would appear to have influenced the public authorities in France and to have awakened a response among individuals.

It would seem that the principles emerging from those recommendations, from research, and from propaganda in general, are now applied, in theory if not in fact.

Education for all

All children are given some instruction in art without charge.

Freedom of expression

Children are allowed to use their pencils and paint-brushes to express what is in their minds. Their work is treated with respect, carefully kept, and shown for people to admire.

Culture for culture's sake

Children have an opportunity to acquire a wider and more general cultural background than is strictly necessary for their future profession.

Free initiative for teachers

Teachers are left free to make their own choice from a very wide programme and a varied range of methods. They are assisted with advice, textbooks and reports on other people's experience.

Adaptation to the requirements of teaching

The equipment of drawing studios is, to a creditable extent, adapted to the new needs.

Additional education out of school and after school

Young people have opportunities to see works of art, and are able to

make their own free choice among the various organizations available to help them broaden their knowledge of art and train their taste.

Art apprenticeship

Adolescents who are attracted to the practice of the arts as a profession are given thorough training without bias in any one direction.

Those who have a real vocation for art find those older than themselves ready and willing to tell them all they know.

Those who have sufficient enthusiasm and self-denial to teach may enter the teachers' training colleges, where they are trained for their future work.

The training of teachers and the improvement of their status

Art teachers are now recognized as members of a profession in which they find colleagues with an equivalent cultural background holding the same diplomas as they do themselves. Conditions of employment comparable with those of other teachers guarantee them a fitting standard of living.

The situation therefore appears to be satisfactory. Is it so in fact?

Education for all

In 1951, we find there are 1,200 qualified art teachers for five million children; if we count teachers in apprenticeship schools and art colleges, probationers and temporary teachers, we arrive at a figure of approximately 2,000.

There are 40,000 communes in France. On the assumption that one teacher can serve two communes, there are still 36,000 in which art teaching has to be left in the hands of the ordinary schoolmaster or schoolmistress. The latter, whom we may call "primary art teachers" number 80,000. Many of them have only a slight knowledge of art, as the study of drawing is considered to be of little importance in teachers' training colleges. Moreover, there is not always any real attempt to interest students in art, for time is short and prejudice and convention frown upon the supply of resources for this purpose. Some of the more gifted teachers study art for themselves and are constantly improving their knowledge and skill. They then exert themselves to train their pupils systematically.

It may be added that 43,000 of these 80,000 teachers are in charge of single classes of children whose ages range from six to fifteen and who are divided into three groups. In such circumstances, art education becomes still more difficult.

Children attending independent or private schools have no compulsory drawing syllabus. Some of the independent schools have difficulty in finding qualified teachers or competent artists, as the salaries they pay their staff are very low. At best, it may be presumed that about a quarter of our French children are given satisfactory art instruction for a long enough period by competent teachers. For all these reasons, we find glaring inequalities. Primary schools in the country districts and in the provinces in general are less favourably placed than the schools in towns and in Paris,

but there are also inequalities between the new type of secondary school and the older, classical schools.

Freedom of expression

It has not been easy to ensure that the children are given free rein. In fact, not all of them are even theoretically left free.

Even though children are allowed to work according to their own inclinations, and to express what they see and think as they like in many schools, there are limitations to their freedom, which is restricted by the very large syllabus of directed work, the compulsory use of certain materials, and the rigidity of certain methods which the pupils are obliged to follow.

There is too often talk of "mistakes" which must be "corrected", too much insistence on accuracy, too much emphasis on "marks", so that drawings can be "classified" and the "best" selected as models to be imitated, while the worst are held up to ridicule.

What freedom can there be when the materials for its expression are no better than a sheet of scrap paper and a bad lead pencil?

Besides these restrictions hampering a child's spontaneity, some teachers fail to understand the meaning of the term "free drawing". If it is simply a question of checking the mental development of children attending nursery schools or kindergartens, or of perfecting their sensory training, free drawing is a very useful instrument. But the artistic value of a drawing by an older child, done freely, depends partly on the pictures which meet the child's eye at home, in the street and at school. His imagination needs food to stimulate it. He needs to learn various technical skills, which provide a stimulus far more necessary for "free drawing" than for other types of drawing.

The misdirected willingness, or the laziness, which leads a teacher to say nothing and teach schoolchildren nothing, with the object of leaving them "free", robs that freedom of its value.

The position of teachers with regard to instructions and syllabuses

It is by no means generally admitted that the narrow limitations of drawing - as it used to be understood - need to be relaxed today. It has been easy to secure the recognition of drawing as a means of expression generally employed in schools; it is rather more difficult to get people to agree that it can be a means of acquiring knowledge and culture; and it is far harder to make them see that the formation of shapes and lines should be a disinterested pleasure.

When those responsible for drawing up school syllabuses, under pressure from public opinion or a determined reformer, have belatedly adopted the new theories put forward by outsiders, their instructions in turn have been obeyed with calculated tardiness.

There is a gulf, whose width may vary greatly, between the instructions given to art teachers and their application in practice. Teachers are not

given to accepting new theories either quickly or without resistance; nor are they very ready to adopt new methods of work. They are given neither time to study in detail what they have to teach, nor special reward for the extra effort entailed.

The resistance which has been offered by some teachers may be excused by the almost insuperable difficulties they have to cope with in covering an extremely wide syllabus with very scant material resources and with a time-table which is steadily being cut down - needless to say, drawing is the first subject to suffer when a time-table is tightened. What is the use of one hour a week when we consider how long it takes to get the children settled in the classroom and to tidy up after the lesson? What can be done to induce pupils in the senior classes of secondary schools to take an optional course in drawing in spite of their over-heavy programme of other work?

On the other hand, the efforts of the teachers themselves are not always encouraged; the ideas they put forward are ill received, if not curtly turned down, by a strict headmaster or mistress.

In some cases, too, the liberal directions issued by administrative authorities have no effect. The idea of extending children's artistic activities to take in new techniques sometimes remains a dead letter, because neither time nor funds are sufficient to allow pupils to engage in such activities.

Exhibitions

The result of the new methods practised by children and translated into drawings and paintings can be seen today in numerous exhibitions. Their number and their frequency do not prevent us from sometimes being shocked by the contrast between the small amount of effort made to encourage the child to draw and the trouble taken to show its work to the public.

The works exhibited are not always chosen so as to show a definite advance or even the slightest artistic difference from former methods.

All the same, such exhibitions are indispensable. They are our means of discovering and appreciating the educational methods originated by various teachers, and they enable us to analyse the children's acquired skills.

Looking at the wall covered with children's work, we can see how little youthful vigour is produced by the educational system of one State or another and the poor quality of the results obtained. There also we can clearly perceive the vitality or originality of educational theories which receive scant appreciation in official circles.

To show on what a variety of ground this good seed has fallen I might mention amongst others the little school of Chassieu in the Isère, the Creuse School in Picardy, that of St. Paul de Vence, the infant schools at Angers and Rosay-sous-bois - all primary schools; Arnol College (which is an "independent" school), the Ecole des Roches, the Collège de la Jonchère, the Académie du Jeudi and the "Petite Ecole" which is a private foundation; the School of Fine Arts at Dijon and that at Bourges, the College of St. Louis in Alsace, the Janson de Sailly and Jean Baptiste Say lycées, which

are secondary schools; and an appreciable number of primary schools in Paris.

The present quality of children's painting as seen in exhibitions has made as great a stir as any new art movement. It proclaims the supremacy of audacity over technical skill, of self-expression over finesse. We find broad effects rather than exactitude, the juxtaposition of unexpected tones rather than brilliant colour, forceful values, firm draughtsmanship, genuine sensibility and a remarkable feeling for composition which almost instinctively achieves a balance between colour and line.

The education which the child has received seems to allow it first of all to express itself. Besides these two characteristics which are clearly visible, it is not out of place to acknowledge the far from negligible part sometimes played by chance or the unconscious.

Various kinds of equipment

The excellent results obtained in the particular cases described above were not achieved without material equipment. But some schools and some districts lack any equipment at all. In Paris and the big towns a limited but useful quantity of artists' materials is provided for the children free; the rest they have to supply for themselves. In the provinces this equipment consists only of pencils and exercise books, so that the purchase of the necessary materials in art schools is often a rather heavy burden on the student unless he has won a scholarship.

At the present time, a tiny minority of primary schoolchildren have their drawing lessons in classrooms equipped for the purpose. Very often these classrooms are used by children who cannot be accommodated in the school.

In secondary schools, on the other hand, although the pupils supply their own materials, the art classrooms themselves are quite well-equipped.

Out-of-school and after-school education

It is a fact that several organizations vie with each other in furthering art education among children and adolescents. Do the latter take advantage of these opportunities? In what way do they do so? Homework, helping in the house, and the need to play leave children little freedom. In Paris many parents are unwilling to let their children go about alone; others leave them entirely to themselves, and do nothing to encourage them to embark on any suggested art activities. Often, the price of the necessary weekly Metro ticket alone, and the subscription, however small, to enable the child to attend the class are beyond their means.

Few are the favoured districts where the shopwindows offer to the eye beautiful objects tastefully displayed. Many quarters present but shoddy goods to the view of the passer-by.

"Art for Schools" is a formula that has achieved a deserved success. The questions it raises cannot be dealt with in a few lines. All too often "Art for Schools" means school pictures and textbook illustrations of

questionable artistic value chosen, not by the drawing masters, if such there be, but at the behest of haphazard administrative orders.

Another kind of pictorial education is frequently given to school-children in the form of strip cartoons which fill the pages of the dreary and harmful children's journals or "comics".

When the child's taste outgrows "comics", the picture the adolescent most frequently buys, preserves and pins up on the wall is the frightful "artistic" postcard, as vulgar in black and white as it is in colours. The emotional pleasure it gives him may excuse his own bad taste, but it does not excuse the publishers nor the people who draw the originals. Genuine artists ought to supply young people's demand for those postcards so that the windows of tobacconists and newsagents might display cards of good taste both from the artistic and emotional point of view.

In Paris young people can find antidotes to this poison, but in the country it is more difficult.

Art apprenticeship

It is not always easy for students to pass from one course of studies to another. There are age-limits to be overcome, or difficult examinations to be taken. Once brought under a "school" regime, the pupil finds so few signposts to guide him that it is difficult for him to acquire enough general culture before taking up art studies, unless he is very advanced for his age or has a great deal of time.

The profession of decorator is still, today, a branch of art in which young people find the best openings. It is however a career that is somewhat chancy, by reason of changes of fashion and the uncertain demand. There may be brilliant openings for a few, but, generally speaking, decorating work is not very well paid.

Students of the major arts face even more discouraging conditions, if they have no means of their own.

The period devoted to studies, the time that must elapse before they acquire an initial mastery of art, and the further interval that must pass before they can succeed in becoming well known - all this takes a number of years.

The Fine Arts School confers many prizes and awards, but comparatively few students can benefit from them. Here more than anywhere loans on trust (similar to those given for the publication of dissertations) should be advanced to enable those receiving them to arrange exhibitions of their work. Advances for the purchase of materials are too small, and scholarships are neither numerous nor large enough. Young artists working in teams might be commissioned for work; "group" studios might be set aside for them; and they might receive a greater measure of fiscal exemption, to tide them over years in which they may receive no orders.

The difficult position of many students has been aggravated, in recent years, through their expressing views on aesthetics that bring them into conflict with some of their too academically-minded teachers.

It would be pointless, today, to decide in favour of one school or another; but it is reasonable that young people should espouse the cause of new art or some contemporary art "renaissance". It would be a mistake to deflect them from their present taste either for the abstract or "populist" realism.

The training of teachers

There was admittedly a need for a new type of Teachers' Training College, to provide teachers with a fresh outlook. In point of fact, however, the right to train future teachers is monopolized by a number of Teachers' Training Schools, administered differently, but all informed by the same spirit. It is the teachers of those schools alone that constitute the "in-bred" adjudicators who award diplomas.

The result has been a very marked uniformity, which almost leads one to prefer the type of training, varied and inadequate though it was, that obtained some years ago - it was at least "alive".

It would be of great benefit to introduce a reform which, in the first place, would institute a new system of recruiting adjudicators, whereby that diversity which is expressive of teachers' personalities would be preserved.

Improvement of the teachers' working conditions and status

We have already emphasized the difficult conditions in which drawing teachers have to work. There are the shortage of materials; the cramped space in the classrooms; the restrictions upon the children's movements; the lack of models; the inadequate number of hours devoted to drawing; and the fixing of those hours at times when the pupils are feeling most tired. Much of the exiguous time available is spent over arranging the classroom and tidying up afterwards. How, in any case, can the teacher devote proper individual attention to 30 or 40 pupils?

Morally, too, the drawing teacher's position is extremely unsatisfactory. As drawing occupies a very small place in the school time-table, and does not feature at all in the examinations, the drawing teacher is rarely rated as highly as his colleagues, either by the headmaster, the parents or, indeed, the children themselves. Moreover, pupils, parents and headmasters alike are aware that the drawing teacher is less well paid than the teachers of other subjects, though the teaching process must necessarily be lengthier in his case than in theirs.

Yet this "poor relation" in the teaching profession, who plays this thankless part and fulfils this difficult task, is just as much imbued as are his colleagues with what Professor Paul LANGEVIN has called "that concern to enhance the cultural value of every branch of knowledge and of every discipline". And that is enough to shed lustre on his daily toil.