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Integrating Art with Reading

Dr. Yvonne Parks Catchings

The focal point of the curriculum in most school systems is on the reading program, but it seems the infusion of funds has not resulted in a great reduction of non-reading children.

If art were made a part of the curriculum, it could facilitate the achievement of reading skills in many ways.

Before a child can learn to read he must be able to hear. Children need to learn how to listen: In order for a child to learn an art skill, he must listen for directions from the teacher.

Comprehension is another skill important to reading. In order for a child to learn how to cut a linoleum block he must look, listen and think while directions are being given on cutting a block. He must comprehend (How to hold the knife with the blade being away from the body and how to roll the brayer.) The child must know that the ink has a tacky feeling when it is ready for printing. This is realized when the brayer rolls over the ink. Then the student can create a block print. A child who can comprehend the directions for cutting a linoleum block can comprehend reading.

Some children have to be taught how to see, listen, feel, think or concentrate. The art room is the best place for a child to develop

these senses. The child has to use his eyes, ears and mind for directions and his eyes, hands (feelings) and brain for developing his own creation.

A creative product doesn't come out of a vacuum. The creative product usually takes place in the subconscious mind. But the unconscious and conscious are part of the same brain. Taba relates:

Recently creativity has been associated also with the cognitive processes; the importance of a sense of discovery, the possibility of creating something new, solving new problems, or finding new answers to old problems. (H.H. Anderson, 1959)¹

Taba elaborates further: "Cultivating creativity is another way of extending the scope of learning which recently has received much attention." We know that during the creative process the brain is in operation. Taba goes further: "According to Dewey, creativity is at the root of intelligence."²

Creating a work of art or developing art skills is no easier than learning to read. The brain is in operation during the creative process like it is during the reading process. Many educators think of art as one of the easy subjects or even as a frill. Many think this is because children seem happy when producing art. In a successful art program the child and his creation is treated individually. Is this why art is successful? Is this why art seems easy and rewarding to children? Some of the greatest artists in the world were geniuses. Just a very few to mention were: Leonarda da Vinci, Michelangelo, Picasso,



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Rembrandt, Reubens, Cezanne, Braque, Raphael, etc. The list goes on, but this proves art is not a facile subject.

Art can be a way of motivating some children to read. Children come from many backgrounds. Naturally, it is to be expected that these youngsters do not see, think or interpret things the same way. Some children learn to read well by one method and other children learn by quite different methods.

Art can be one way of learning to read, but the key to any good reading or art program is a good dedicated teacher who has positive feelings about himself and his pupils. It is very important to the child that the teacher believes he can learn to read and model in clay. Overly says, "For those children whose educability is in doubt there is a label."³ Many children have been very successful in art classes. The art teacher in most cases has no pre-records on the children as do academic teachers. It was also so shocking to the writer to see art pupils with A's receive all failures in the cognitive subjects at card marking time: Was it that expectations were high for all art students? and/or Was it because the art teacher had no previous records on the student as to pre-grades, intelligence scores, etc. like the homeroom teacher? In most cases these records are open to all teachers but are usually kept and reviewed by the homeroom teacher. Students respond to the way they are expected to respond. If a teacher thinks a child cannot learn to read or improve, the child will more than likely not read or improve. If the teacher wants his class to make Halloween decorations and cut out patterns of pumpkins and cats for the children to color he is telling them this is hard to do. He is sending them a message. When he passes out the pumpkin they will also ask the child to cut out the eyes, nose, etc. Teachers are able to communicate their expectations subconsciously to students.

Many children who have negative feelings about reading and positive feelings about art can enhance their egos through their art creations. Children's self esteem can increase through art, and it should also give them a boost in handling other subjects like reading.

Manuel Barken thinks children should

talk, think, and express their ideas before a creative art activity. Children should be given the opportunity to express their thoughts, to think and talk about what they want to do and how they want to do it. "When art is taught well, children learn to create and express ideas ingeniously, children can be stimulated and motivated by discussing their ideas with their teachers and classmates in a group discussion."⁴ This same process goes on in the mind during the reading process.

Also in many cases when children are engaged in creative activity they will feel relaxed and start talking.

The writer had a very interesting experience with a fifth grade class of inner city children. Their reading level was grade 1 and 2. Near the end of the school year this fifth grade integrated art-reading group was seated around a table making an Indian diorama. The children had discussed their interest earlier in the year so an integrated art-reading lesson was prepared for them with their interest in mind. Their art lessons usually were derived from their reading lessons. As the class got very involved in the creation, the children started talking about cars. The discussion got very involved. They knew all models of cars from Ford to Mercedes to Rolls Royce. They later went to engines in the various cars. The discussion got so technical that the teacher was lost in the conversation. The teacher was among some authorities on cars. It was quite apparent that the children's interest was cars. She also thought back--perhaps they had told her they were interested in making certain things like Indian Totem poles, because it was either what they thought they were supposed to say or what the teacher wanted them to say.

The question here is--why is it some non-readers who are declared as lost, know so many intricate details about a Mercedes Benz, Rolls Royce and Stutz cars? Art was actually used as therapy at this moment and it brought out the interest of the children. Teachers can learn a lot by listening to students.

Other clues to reveal reading problems is to let the children create their own books. They can draw the pictures and write their own script. If the learners are left free to create their own books, the teacher can

discover problems the children have in spelling, listening and pronunciation skills. Sometimes if the learner knows he is taking a test he will try to edit his spelling. Even though he will misspell the word, it will destroy the clue that the teacher needs to see. Some examples of misspelled words are desine (design), once opon (once upon), dis (this), war (where), etc.

Art can open many doors in the learning process. Herbert Reid says art should be in the center of the universe:

It will be already clear, therefore, that the claim I put forward for the place of art in the educational system is far-reaching. Indeed, the claim is no less than this: that art, widely conceived, should be the fundamental basis of education. For no other subject is capable of giving the child not only a consciousness in which images and concept, sensation and thought, are correlated and unified, but also at the same time, an instinctive knowledge of the laws of the universe, and a habit or behavior in harmony with nature.⁵

I believe art should be in the center of the curriculum to relate one subject to another subject.

Learning at many schools has become too compartmentalized. Fragmentation of subject matter lessens the possibility of transfer of learning. John Dewey said the school should educate the whole child. Dewey also said, "Again, the child's life is an integral, total one."⁶ There should be a follow through in learning. An example of fragmentation or lack of follow through in learning is when children learn how to do manuscript in the first grade and do cursive writing in the third grade. In many cases children are not encouraged to continue to use manuscript after learning to write. But these are two skills the learner will always need.

An integrated art and reading program was carried out in grade five in elementary schools in region one of the Detroit Public

School System. Eight hundred fifty two (852) boys and girls were a part of the study. Four hundred forty-four (444) children were in the project group and four hundred eight (408) youngsters were in the comparison group.

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the California Achievement Test were used to measure performance. The time limit of the study was five years (1975-1980).

Children in the project schools were involved in a program of integrating art and reading once a week using fifty art/reading lessons devised by the writer. The art activities were integrated with reading skills.

The principal finding in the study was that the project children made more gain in reading than the comparison children. Performance of girls was better than performance of boys.

The project was equally effective with children who were at different levels of reading performance. For example, children who made more than one year's progress in reading had entering reading scores that ranged from the second to the seventh grade. Also, children who entered the project more than two grades below grade level averaged more than one year of reading growth during the course of the project.

¹ Hilda Taba, **Curriculum Development Theory and Practice** (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 151.

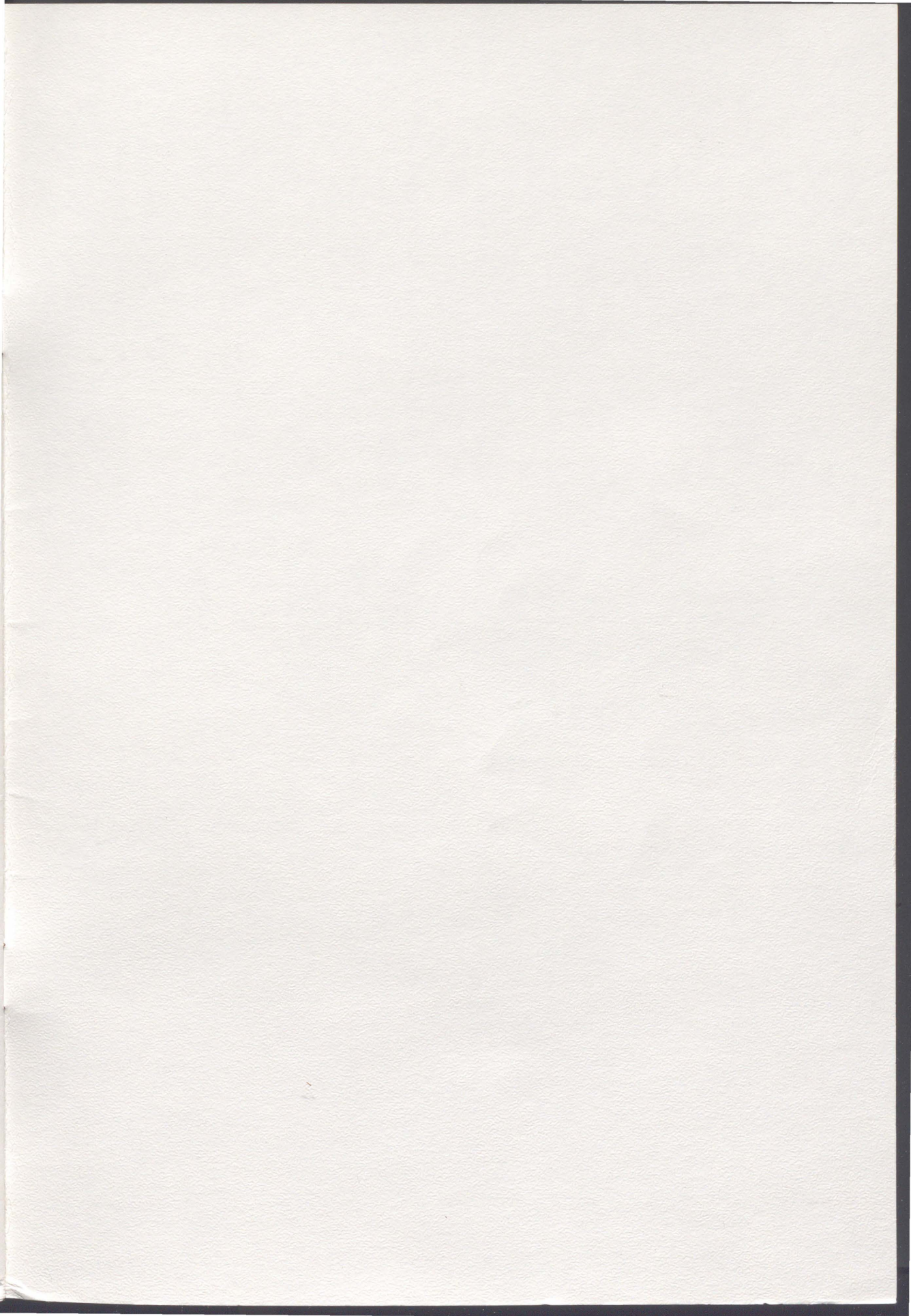
² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

³ Norman V. Overly, **The Unstudied Curriculum** (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, N.E.A., 1970), p. 79.

⁴ Manuel Barkan, **Through Art to Creativity** (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1960), p. 83.

⁵ Read, Herbert, **Education Through Art** (London: Faber & Faber, 1943), p. 71.

⁶ Dewey, John, **The Child and the Curriculum** (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1902), p. 5.



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