

Teaching Art

BY SUSAN STRIKER

Whole Language and Art

Why would an art teacher be interested in whole language? Perhaps the simplest answer is that art is the precursor of language literacy. Children scribble before they can form letters, and draw pictures before they can express themselves with written language. I believe we must recognize the link between visual imagery and reading and writing in order to teach these skills more effectively. In other words, if we help our students express themselves freely through art, we can ease the transition to free verbal and written expression.

You don't have to know how to draw to be able to facilitate meaningful art experiences for your students. To be effective, art experiences, like whole language experiences, must capture a child's interest, be relevant and encourage independence. Teaching a meaningful art lesson requires that you set realistic limits without defining all of the goals of the activity.

Setting firm parameters within which children can act with total freedom fosters the most nurturing environment for true creativity. Just as you would not give a class assignment to "write something," don't hand out crayons and expect art to just happen. A blank sheet of paper can be intimidating; a sheet of paper that has an adult drawing already on it waiting to be neatly colored can be even more so. Parameters provide a safety net, and free expression permits discovery.

Reacting to art. As a teacher, your role is to help children organize and articulate these experiences. How you react to a work of art in progress is tremendously important. "Tell me about your picture" is less intimidating than "What is it?" The latter implies, of course, that if the picture

Some thoughts on the fine art of art instruction — and its link to language literacy.

were "good," you'd know what it is.

Don't judge art activities differently than you would judge a child's early endeavors in other areas. If we want to encourage writing, we must applaud the child's scribbles, just as we applaud his or her first attempts to read. In the classroom, experimentation should be rewarded and encouraged since the results are usually more valuable to the child's development than simply creating a pretty picture.

Early drawings, although undecipherable to an adult, really contain a secret code. All of the shapes children experiment with when they are still scribbling are later harnessed to become pictures and then letters. Rhoda Kellogg catalogued these early scribbles and translated the secret code. I've always felt that her work is just as exciting as the first translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics. If you're interested in learning more about her discoveries, I suggest you read her book, *Analyzing Children's Art* (Mayfield Publishing, 1970).

Although an art teacher is a rich resource in an elementary school, art should not be something children do for 45 minutes a week with a specialist who may or may not know the classroom curriculum. Art programs can be made relevant to the child's academic studies as well as to his or her social development.

Funny families. There are all sorts of art activities you can use to meet these goals. For example, why not challenge the children to create a funny new TV situation comedy? In

its simplest form, the activity could consist of having the children use words and pictures to describe the new program. Take it a few steps further, however, and you can bring in other areas of the curriculum. In *The Newspaper Anti-Coloring Book* (Owl Books, 1992), I described the following activity.

Let's say that you've asked the children to create a sitcom that's based on something funny that frequently happens to families. The children can have a class discussion in which they share their funny stories. If a VCR is available, the class can also watch an appropriate family sitcom.

The possibilities are almost limitless. The art teacher can help create an advertising campaign or suggest other related projects. With the help of the music teacher, a theme song for the program can be created. The children can write their own dialogue and you can direct a performance that a savvy media specialist can tape for eventual viewing on TV.

Later, you might have the children create their own cartoon to further explore and expand the funny family situation. You might also encourage them to create a "gossip column" that features art and writing about what the neighbors might have said about the situation inspiring the sitcom.

And if all of that's not enough, you can even invite the school nurse to your classroom for a discussion of some of the health hazards that are often the end product of too many hours in front of the TV set.

Art has a role to play in the whole language philosophy. Whole language cultivates a child's curiosity, enhances self-confidence and encourages independent thinking. These are goals I have long believed to be the key to successful art instruction. ↓