

THE TEACHER'S LETTER BOX

Dear Letter Box:

I am teaching art in one of the elementary schools here and have classes ranging from second grade through sixth. While I am getting along very well with most of the groups, my little second and third graders really have me puzzled. I don't know just what to do with them or how to get them interested in different things. They are perfect as long as they have a clean sheet of paper to scribble on a little and then throw away, but they aren't a bit interested in doing anything better. Is it better to let children draw just as they want to, or should you try to show them how to improve even though they really aren't bothered about improving?

SUE

Dear Sue:

Though this answer has been delayed so long, I am, nevertheless, much interested in your problems. You ask how to get children interested in their art work. Most people, including children, are interested in the things that seem to them to have value in their lives, that are meaningful to them. Are these children working with objects and ideas which pertain to their immediate surroundings? For example, they will be interested in making favors and decorating napkins for their party, or in drawing pictures of funny things that happened there or of wind-blown trees they saw on the road to school. Art work is, and should be, a part of the every-day living: the school room, the home, the playground.

If they throw away what they have done, something must be wrong, for children usually treasure the results of their efforts. Perhaps their work has not been given its due respect in the past. They have not been made to feel that it is worthy of being kept. Or they may feel that it is not done well. In the latter case, they are in what Margaret Mathias¹ calls the realistic stage and need some definite techniques in how to draw better trees, houses, people, or what-will-you. They may have been needing help for some time and, since they have not re-

¹*Beginnings of Art in the Public Schools*, page 9. (Charles Scribners Sons, 1924.)

ceived it when needed, they have come to feel that the whole thing is not worth while. In other words, they themselves have sensed no growth and so have become discouraged.

On the other hand, and what seems more likely in your case, techniques *may* have been *forced* upon them before they felt any need for them. Until the children feel a desire for better techniques a teacher is wasting her time trying to teach those techniques. The beginners are not interested in "doing better." They are just interested in doing. Activity, and plenty of it, is the idea. They enjoy big work in painting, and bright colors. Get the Mathias book and read it through. In it the author discusses the three stages which children pass through in "the development of the artistic process."² She takes up the manipulative, or scribble stage, the symbolic stage, and the realistic stage. The danger of pushing them too soon into this third stage, she says, is that they do not develop in imagination as they should if left long enough in the delightful freedom of the symbolic stage.

Many writers on this subject are agreed that picture making is a form of language for the beginners in school. They express their ideas more easily in paint than in words. Clay, wood, and cloth are also easy media for them, if adult standards are not imposed. They must be allowed to express their own ideas and not be bothered about techniques in the early stages. They will soon demand better techniques. It is the teacher's business to be "one jump ahead" of these demands and catch them, so as not to allow expression to be hampered. She must anticipate their coming and be ready with the needed reference materials and the ability to demonstrate how it is done.

Possibly, too, these children need rich, meaningful, joyful experiences to paint, and write and sing and dance about. When one has had an all-absorbing experience, it just forces itself up into expression. One just

²*Ibid*, pages 6-9.

has to paint, or sing or verse or dance about it. Heaven help the child who grows up without at least that much of joy in his life. Talk with them about their experiences. Ask them to describe things to you in words. This can so easily lead to drawing and painting. And this leads back to looking again. When it doesn't "look right," when it doesn't tell what they want it to, they'll be asking you for ways to do it better.

Read Margaret Mathias's book and also Belle Boas' *Art in the School* (Doubleday, Page & Co., 1924), and Nicholas, Mawhood and Trilling's *Art Activities in the Modern School* (Macmillan, 1937). Of these three, the first and last will help you most, I believe.

Good luck—and, if I can help you, let me know. I'll try to be more prompt in replying next time.

G. M. P.

THE READING TABLE

MOTION PICTURE EVALUATION RECEIVES NEW IMPETUS

FILM AND SCHOOL, by Helen Rand and Richard Lewis. (A publication of the National Council of Teachers of English.) New York: D. Appleton-Century Company. \$1.12.

Last month's figures on the number of motion picture courses and clubs in American high schools, if there were any, would not be valid this month; the situation is changing too rapidly. What can be said with definiteness is that there are today thousands of schools of which motion pictures are discussed critically by pupils in clubs or classes or both; that motion picture evaluation is now considered a respectable curriculum subject by even the more conservative; and that teacher training institutions are beginning to offer courses in the teaching of motion picture criticism.

The phenomenal growth of this educational movement, hardly more than six or seven years old, has inevitably created a demand for a handbook, useful for student as

well as teacher. This demand the National Council of Teachers of English, pioneers in experimentation with educational uses of the photoplay, has now met with *Film and School*, the first textbook with exercises and planned activities for motion picture study. The authors are Helen Rand, chairman of the Council's Committee on Standards for Motion Pictures and Newspapers, and Richard Lewis of the Glendale (California) Junior College, who had the advice and counsel of Edgar Dale of Ohio State University, one of the leaders in the field, and Sarah McLean Mullen of Los Angeles, whose death occurred just before the publication of the book.

"The movies are already a part of our education," the authors assert. "Our task now is to correlate them with other activities offered in the school program." Among the aims of motion picture study mentioned are development of an understanding of the influence of the pictures upon people's attitude and behavior and development of the ability to evaluate moving pictures critically, "to evaluate their interpretation of life, their technique, and their art."

The twelve objectives given for a school moving-picture program are:

1. Familiarity with the more dependable sources of information about current motion pictures
2. The habit of consulting these sources
3. Consciousness of desirable standards for motion pictures
4. The ability to select the standards most appropriate for evaluating specific pictures
5. Skill in applying standards to motion pictures
6. The habit of using appropriate standards in the evaluation of motion pictures
7. Cultivation of a preference for pictures which meet appropriate standards
8. Immunity to extreme emotional reactions and undesirable attitudes