Educating Artistic Vision, by Eisner, Elliot W.

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His book, Educating Artistic Vision, is written for art educators, art
curriculum developers and teachers responsible for conducting art pro-
grammes. This does not mean though, that it is without significance to all
those who are concerned with the educational welfare of children.

The visual design of the book is in keeping with the crisp, clear and pre-
cise style of the author. An initial feeling that the coverage is limited is
soon dispelled. The 280 pages that make up the ten chapters deal suc-
cinctly with the intellectual currents that influence the pattern of thought
and practice of art education in America and the need to re-appraise the
premises along more educationally viable criteria.

The author subjects the predominantly contextualist influence on art
education programmes, to rigorous examination and points to inherent
weaknesses in the philosophy and resulting practical application in the
classroom. He maintains that philosophical issues are not mere academic
quibbles, but that they directly affect the preparation of teachers, curriculum
design and the instructional programme that is maintained in the school.

Eisner favours the essentialist frame of reference and stresses that:
The prime value of the arts in education lies, in my point of view,
in the unique contributions it makes to the individual's experience
with an understanding of the world. The visual arts deal with an
aspect of human consciousness that no other field touches on;
the aesthetic contemplation of visual form. (p.9).

The thesis is well maintained and convincingly developed. The impli-
cations for practice are apparent and should gain support from the
majority of art educationists.

The critical comments on the general level of art education programmes
that are offered in American schools could just as easily apply to schools
in Western Australia and more than likely to the majority of schools in
Australia. His observations leave no reason for complacency at any level at
which art education is considered. The observations are not novel, but
they have the merit of documentation and a stamp of authority that could
provide the impetus for empirical examination of some of the theoretical
and practical issue that are currently being maintained as an act of faith.

The author presents a triadic concept for the structure, practice and
evaluation of art education, and focuses attention on three domains: the
productive, the critical and the cultural/historical. Each of these area must
be given attention if a complete programme of art education is to be
presented in the primary school. The feature of his approach is the
emphasis that is given to the critical and cultural categories of art edu-
cation. The critical domain is regarded as those experiences that aim at the
development of the child's ability to perceive the aesthetic qualities of the
world. The cultural/historical domain is concerned with those issues that
help the child to understand that art is a product of human culture and is
affected by human culture. These two aspects that have been virtually
ignored are seen as real deficiencies in art education. This sort of weakness
is not only current in curriculum content but also in art teacher training
programmes. The unreasonable assumption that learning in these two areas
is acquired by involvement in the productive domain, is convincingly
exposed as a fallacy. Even the area that has been attended to traditionally,
namely the productive domain, is regarded by Eisner as being a kind of
quagmire of activities that consumes material and adds little to promoting
artistic learning of any great significance.

The solution to this learning by chance rather than by design, is to be
found in good curriculum planning, in which art education objectives are
fundamental to the issues of art, rather than generalisations that are more
like emotional slogans. The curriculum needs to be supported by adequate
and properly prepared material that facilitates learning in the three
domains. In the area of curriculum development it is apparent that the
author has relied on his personal commitment to the Stanford's Kettering
Project, which sought to translate theoretical ideas about art education
into practice. The need for good instructional support material is regarded
by Eisner as an aid to help the child and the teacher to "gradually increase
their sophistication, comprehension and sensibilities to the visual arts".
(P75) It is a pity that the author did not include in this book some research
evidence on the Project. It would have added to the arguments for more
carefully structured programmes of work, and the effects of the activities
on artistic learning.

The need for evaluation, which is continually referred to, is thoroughly
examined and there should be no doubt in the mind of the reader what
the author means. Evaluation should function as an educational tool to
assess the quality of the curriculum, the effectiveness of teaching strategies
and the artistic growth of the child. The suggestions on how evaluation can
be considered for each of the three domains opens up possibilities for
teachers to develop workable schemes that would improve their expertise
in art education, both in planning and teaching.

The author examines the function of research to art education and
while admitting many areas of deficiency, points to the contributions it
can make, "if one looks to research to provide overriding conceptions,
theories or frames of reference through which a phenomenon can be viewed and interpreted, then one can secure from research, ideas useful for guiding practice”. (p.265). The art educationist is made more aware of the need for utilizing the facts of research. If systematic enquiry is used it may well provide the only sort of rationalisation upon which art education will depend, not only for its own generation, but for survival in a society that considers the arts as marginal, rather than essential to the educational process as it occurs under the patronage of the school.

The book provides a scholarly inquiry that has been lacking in the field. It is a crystallisation of ideas that have been submitted to practice. By posing questions, setting problems and attempting to find answers the author creates an uneasiness for some and a sense of assurance for others, which ensures that action will follow. Eisner has tossed a pebble into the relatively calm pond of art education and the ripples must follow.

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