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Book Review

by *Eisner, Elliot, W.*

EDUCATING ARTISTIC VISION

London, Collier-Macmillan, 1972

Elliot W. Eisner is professor of education and art at Stanford University California. He addressed an art conference at Wollongong Institute of Education this year.

He will be the key speaker at the International Society for Education through Art Conference, to be held in Adelaide, South Australia, in August, 1978. It is expected that Professor Eisner will visit Perth after the conference and address groups interested in art education at different levels.

His book, *Educating Artistic Vision*, is written for art educators, art curriculum developers and teachers responsible for conducting art programmes. 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 precise 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 succinctly 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 implications 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 focusses 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 education. 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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