



## SEE, HEAR, FEEL AND SPEAK: THE CHILDREN'S WORKSHOP

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Children are silenced during their childhood under the precept "see, hear and be quiet". What they see is not put in words. What they feel remains unsaid. That is how we found them in the mining community, and the same phenomenon is not so infrequently found in other Western societies. The problem seems to be almost universal.

The work with the children in the mining community has consisted of handicraft and theater workshops, which offer a chance to say what is seen, felt and learned, but in another way. In the handicraft workshop, experimenting with diverse material, they draw, paint, model and create, giving form to many of the images which remain in their memories. While doing this, they feel completely alive. In the theater, they become actors who are allowed to play with their bodies and sensations, represent different characters with feelings they had learned to suppress.

At first, the intention was to offer stimulating activity and the elements necessary for them to amuse themselves. In time, they gradually became creative and entertaining moments with the opportunity to freely express



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their emotions and escape from the at times lethal compulsion of village life and scholl routine. Their development was beginning to be facilitated and their autonomy stimulated.

These are children who come from an environment distinguished by poverty, where many of them have to go to work as helpers or vendors, earning very little but nevertheless contributing to the family income. Society generally does not recognize the phenomennon of the working child, which, in the case of this town, appears frequently along with school attendance and helping with chores at home. (Sánchez, E.G., 1991).

These workshops offer something different from the rigidity and discipline of the traditional school: To search into oneself in one's imagination, turning to memories of what one has observed and experienced, to let oneself go spontaneously, to invent new things as one wishes, to try out the taste of inspiration and iniciative.

Certainly it was not easy. The bonds that allowed them to defend themselves in the world of their experience have been protective. The color did not appear automatically on the paper, for fear surfaced in their eyes and shyness held their bodies stiff and their voices did not come forth in the theater exercises. In school, they had always been told what to do and how to do it, without varying the pattern,



so they did not know how to begin.

Their results, in spite of the beginning characteristics, lack of materials, empty spaces on the paper, were counted an achievement anyway, for the very fact that they had been created. Veronica, the teacher, respects and stimulates the process by which they get there; the result is not so important. The important thing is for others to see what they are able to express, what they invent, how they enjoy themselves, that they experience the materials with their senses.

They work with natural materials, available in their environment, such as water, sawdust, sand, wood, stones, branches; with old cardboard, newspapers, cans; paints, pigments, paper; demonstrating how they can create, without spending money for articles from stores, taking advantage of what they have at hand. When they needed paint brushes, Veronica showed them how these can be made with sticks and cotton waste, or with hair, and how easy it is to use their fingers, or to use their hand as scissors to cut paper by tearing.

The work with the children has implied several principles which we consider very important:

1. Acceptance. No one is rejected.
2. Respect for what they make and feel. No work is ugly or badly done. Everything goes, as long as



- they do not hurt themselves or harm others.
3. Initiative in the child. He is active and decides. He is not directed. The materials themselves suggest to each child something different. In theater, they invent their stories and choose their characters. Their unconscious is allowed to speak.
  4. Immediate practice. Explanations are accompanied by practice.
  5. What is begun is usually finished during the same Sunday session, in order to be able to have a finished piece of work to show for their efforts and motivate them for the next time.
  6. Not to tell which colors to use or what to do with regard to content. They are given a general theme, a day in the life of the community their dreams, or an activity is suggested to them, construct toys, masks, animals, piñatas, etc. and they are shown the technique to be used with the materials available. If a child asks how to make a tree, a house or a flower, he is invited to observe directly or remember a picture and draw.
  7. The teacher does not shout to make herself heard. She offers the explanations in a normal tone of voice. What Veronica has done, for example, if



they are not listening to her, is gradually to lower the tone until she gets the attention of those who, already anxious to begin, feel it advisable to pay attention. The explanations are repeated as many times as necessary, because the children come in as soon as they arrive and leave if and when they wish.

8. The children are not told to be quiet. Verbal interchange among them is permitted. They are encouraged to say and put into words or on paper whatever they imagine, feel and want to make.
9. The final result does not matter so much as the process the experience of manipulating the materials and what their creations express.
10. The materials are shared as on a team. Everything belongs to everybody.
11. There is an effort to sensibolize them so that the teacher becomes less and less indispensable.

These principles have been developing as a process in which we members of the team have placed our credence. The process has been greatly facilitated by the originality, creativity and personality of the teacher, Veronica, who has been our teacher, too.

Recapitulating the experience a little, from the time we arrived until the present, we could make a brief



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relation of some of the most important stages, taking into account interesting changes, which indicate a certain psychological and social development. At first, the children used to work individually, finding it difficult to share some materials like paste and paint brushes among four or five children. It was hard for them to lend these objects, for they wanted to keep them for themselves during the whole session. However, they quickly understood that this benefited some but not others. Then they began to walk around looking for someone who might have what they needed, in order to ask him for it. Later, they gradually integrated in order to execute team projects, such as mock-up models, murals and the huge book of the life of the town, not without the problem of some child who would cut out the part he had done. This permitted them to see how much the cooperation of all is needed, how they are enriched if they relate, for what does not occur to one occurs to another. Their teams, at first, of course, were sexist, girls with girls, boys with boys. In time, they wanted to form mixed teams, and, of course, they discovered different but interesting perspectives by working together. The girls could not make automobiles so well, nor did it occur to them to make roads or airports. On the other hand, they dressed human figures with stylish clothing and decorated the fields with flowers.



Some of the children became Veronica's apprentices, succeeding in mastering plastic and manual techniques which they transmitted to me when I substituted for her. For the plays which they present in their theater, they have recourse to the craft workshop, and in no time they obtain sets manufactured in color with left-over materials and paint from the workshop. This is how the two workshops became integrated at the moment they needed it. Previously, there was one group of children interested in theater and another which attended handicrafts. After a certain time, they switched. Now the same children being in crafts leave and go to theater and when they finish there, they return. Many times in the course of a couple of years, this was attempted in theory (by us): "It would be advantageous to integrate the workshops. Let's make puppets for the theater in the crafts workshop, etc." but, strangely enough, this was never achieved. Now I understand why. It had to come from the children, at their time and from their needs.

They needed the intervention of the teacher a great deal at first, but, as time passed, they needed her less and less. Veronica commented at one time that she felt less and less indispensable as a teacher (Espinosa, V., 1987-88). However, the relationship with the children was becoming more meaningful. She also pointed out to us that the work had gone from simple manual to artistic. When the



works of art are finished, they are valued as important creations, and the children are asked to keep them to set up exhibitions. I remember some occasions at first, when we left the works in the school, they were lost or destroyed and this was much lamented. From that time on, the adults around there were persuaded to respect what was being made and the result was some simple expositions in school rooms where not a single space went unoccupied. Contrary to what one might think, it was a kind of labyrinth, both pleasant and original.

As may be noted, the movement through these so-called stages observed in the course of the workshop's existence represent progress that the children have demonstrated as a group, independent of their varying ages which range from five to twelve years. The experiment is like a small social laboratory, where one can observe what happens in the whole process of individual child development, from greater need of dependence to independence and autonomy, from being self-centered to integration and socializing.

Carlos, the teacher of the theater workshop, is also an unusual teacher. For him, the theater is principally a means of communication (Díaz, C., 1991) and a way for children to get to know themselves and communicate their reality to others, so that the latter in turn will become conscious of what is happening to the former. In the





workshop, it is made easy for the children to invent their own stories, to work out their own dialogues, to choose the characters they wish to interpret and set the course.

A theater game based on improvising (Granados, T., Politi, C., Escurdia, J., 1987-88) was how it was called by Tomas and Carolina, pupils of the Colegio Madrid and teachers of the workshop for a time. The improvisations were about animals, the forest, children punished by adults with jail, abandon and blows, policemen chasing them because they had behaved badly, teachers shouting and reprimanding.

The theater activities have also undergone changes, from the inicial lack of movement and great inhibition, to an agile facility of movement conquering space both on the stage and among the public.

The stories they invent now are more elaborate and touch on problems in their family relationships, representing how they feel, proposing solutions favorable to themselves, even going so far as to criticize the adults. One of the last plays presented was about some girls who fled their homes in protest against the bad treatment they received from their mothers, who, alarmed at the possible loss of their daughters, open a dialogue with them. The latter show their sadness, expressing their feelings of not being loved and they protest the fact that



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the mothers prefer to spend their time with friends or doing housework, even drinking. The mothers, thinking it over, apologize and clearly modify their attitudes, showing their affection. Although the preceding gives form to desires, it presents real needs and expresses emotions they are not permitted to show and proposes solutions, where it is not always the children who are punished and the adults who are right. Moreover, it clearly demonstrates a less timid and more valiant attitude toward adults on the part of the little actors. Of course, among the spectators were their mothers who surely did not imagine what they would have to see and listen to. The play was a surprise for everybody. The adults closely involved in the project have been sensibilized through the chats and somehow have changed their attitude to such a degree that the children are losing their fear.

The attendance has varied a great deal. We have had as many as 50 children during a certain period. But the attendance has gradually diminished, finally consolidating in a more or less constant group of 15 or 20, who are almost always the same ones. They may seem very few, taking into account the total population, and in any community project one would like to include more. However, the subtlety of its qualitative effects has caused our expectations to become more realistic. There is always a



certain amount of movement with the presence of someone new every time. The observable data and the analysis of the reapplication of the questionnaires demonstrate that the project has had an effect on the population studied.

The experience shows us that this work has had an impact in the town, which necessarily implies an influence both on the character traits in formation and on the emotional development of the children. In what way can an influence make itself felt, when the prevailing conditions of life, both family and socioeconomic, largely determine character? This seems to be a theoretical question. However, analyzing the practice, we have two important situations: On the one hand, different conditions have been created with different adults that offer a significant relationship and a new alternative; and, on the other hand, we have the possibility of the creativity which permits the expression of conscious and unconscious emotions and that, according to some authors, helps to live with and survive psychic damage (Miller, Alice, 1990), as well as to orient oneself toward a more productive life (Fromm, Aramoni).

The interesting thing is perhaps the fact that this work has been maintained for six years (not in the case of the teachers) and that, these children being the result of a traditional education, where the pupil submits to the teacher in a passive role and it is the latter who leads



and tries to impart knowledge. The work of the workshops breaks this scheme, giving back to the children an active role with initiative, setting the course, saying and feeling what they are taught to suppress.

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