

An Artist Among Young Artists

A Lesson for Teachers

Charlie's father, Bill, is an artist—a professional sculptor and a designer. When Charlie's parents came for kindergarten registration, Bill asked if he could work with different groups of children in the school each week. Everyone was delighted to have him join our staff at The Children's School.

Bill did not want to be the "art teacher." Instead, he just wanted to talk about design and architecture. He wanted the boys and girls to go outside and see the different designs and models present all around them. He wanted them to think about relationships and connections between everyday objects and sculptures, paintings, and architecture. He wanted them to notice doorknobs and fences and cars and their schoolhouses, and to regard them as objects designed in a studio similar to their "studio"—their classroom. In other words, Bill did not want to direct the children's action. Rather, he wanted to help them view the world with the eye of an artist.

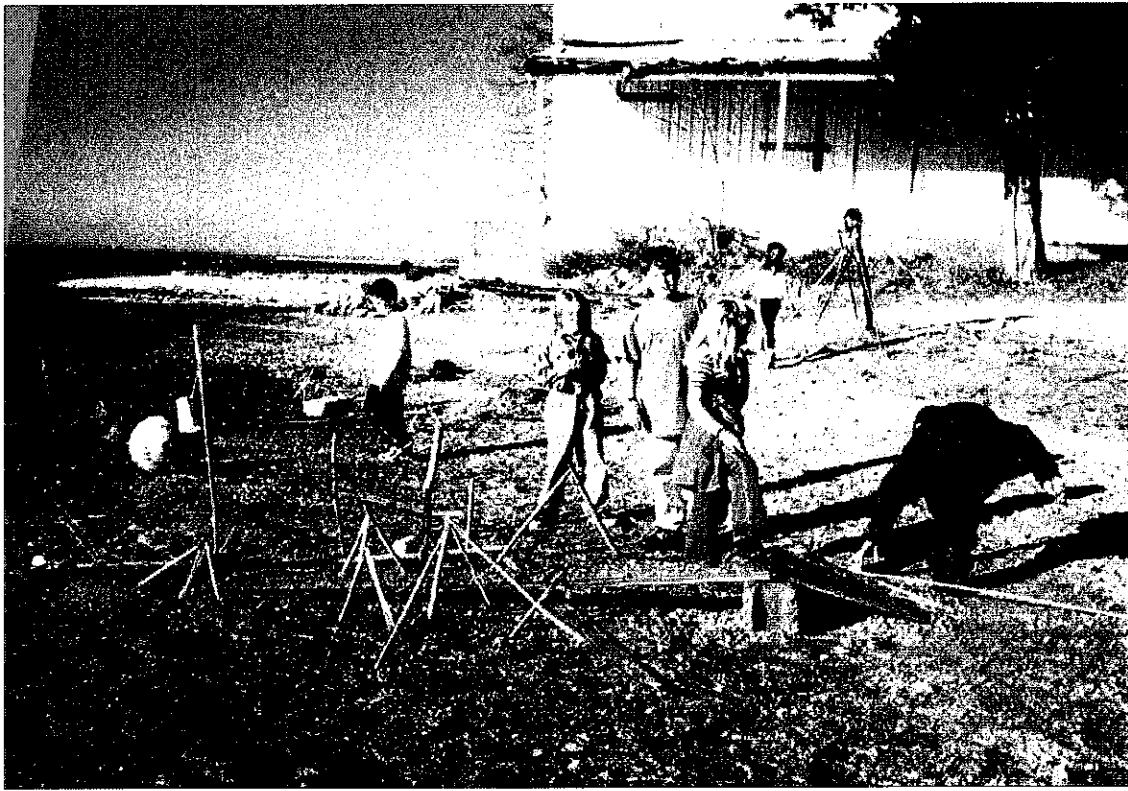
The setting for Bill's "experiment" was somewhat unique. Situated in woodlands along the northern shore of a Long Island harbor, each classroom at this private Montessori school is a separate small cottage nestled in the woods near a large clearing. The surroundings lend themselves to an appreciation of the natural environment, and provide endless opportunities for study and exploration. In hindsight, it seems that the setting may have contributed, in large measure, to the acquisition of an artist-in-residence. While present, the artist's efforts led the teachers and administration to rethink the school's approach to art.

Montessori and Art

Although the school's teachers collaboratively reformulate and redefine the teaching philosophy from time to time, it is fundamentally Montessorian. As such, they strive to provide a child-centered environment where children can explore freely. Children learn by actively exploring their environment under the careful observation of the teacher, who also acts as catalyst.

In terms of art, most Montessori schools emphasize opportunities to appreciate and understand the use of the tools of expression, rather than explicitly, for example, teaching a child to draw by drawing (Kocher, 1972). These tools of expression (such as a paintbrush or crayons) are presented to the child in such a way as to teach respect for the tools. To

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Photos courtesy of author

Artists at work

a teacher and child in a Montessori-type school, the tool becomes the vehicle of self-expression. The child is taught respect for the tools and some basic techniques. Then, he or she is allowed to create artistically according to his or her own desires.

Bill challenged this approach. He believed that supplies and materials were not necessary to get started. He did not concentrate on the instruments per se. He wanted to train the children's eyes. After the children introduced themselves on Bill's first day at school, he asked them what they thought art should look like. He brought library books that showed many architectural styles. Then, he asked them what they were interested in drawing.

Finding Art Everywhere

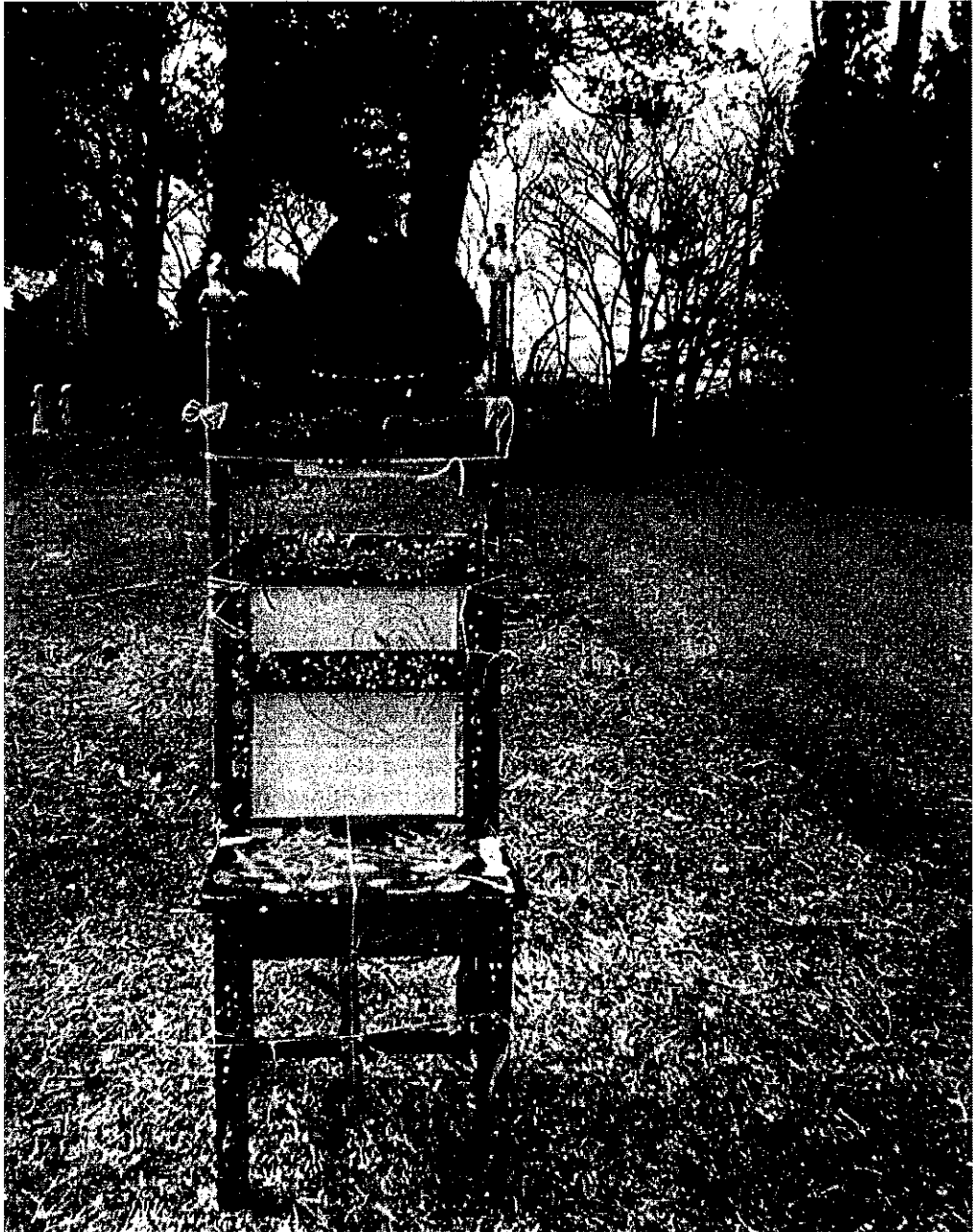
Bill saw art everywhere and he wanted the children to share that perspective. One beautiful autumn day, he took the children for a walk down to the seashore, where they found shells, seaweed, and twigs. The children wandered to the water, around the dunes, and along the underbrush. Some of them decided to make their own sculptures on the sand—castles, people, and animals emerged from the yellow grains. Other children talked about the different animals that live

near the seashore. Still others sculpted a home for the animals. As the days went by, they visited the spot each day and watched what the weather did to their animal homes and sculptures.

One day, the children found some ocher stones on the beach, sometimes known as paint pods, perhaps Indian relics from an earlier time. They were soon talking about Native Americans and how they had lived on this shore many years ago. Bill asked if they wanted to build a teepee, and they did. After building the teepee, the class started to think about all the different houses in which people live. They were especially interested in buildings that they could make themselves.

In October, the children started to talk about the costumes that they would wear for Halloween. Bill brought in a book about masks and suggested that the students might want to make their own. Imaginatively using paper plates and crayons, bits of yarn, and other odds and ends from their classroom, the children were soon in full production. They decided that their masks were quite original and very beautiful. Some were even scary.

Bill brought more books to school. While on a walk around the water, the class discovered a field filled with bamboo. Subsequently, they explored



The Chair

how bamboo is used in Japan as a design element in fences, gates, gardens, and household items. The building mania continued. In no time at all, Bill had the children happily building their own huts, complete with fences and other design elements.

The Chair

One very special project stood out from the rest: The chair. As part of an auction for a fundraiser, the local art league sponsored an art exhibit focused on chairs, and solicited contributions from the surrounding com-

munities. Bill asked the children if they wanted to enter an exhibit of their own. They enthusiastically agreed, and the project was off and running.

First, Bill found an old wooden ladderback chair that was well worn but still strong. The children started to fix it up for the exhibit. There were no rules about how to decorate it. Each child was asked to add his or her own touch to make "Their Chair" different and special. So they did.

Bill brought in glitter and sequins and colorful beads. He invited the children to bring anything from home that they thought appropriate to adorn their chair. Two children brought in plastic animal heads.

One day, Bill brought the chair and the children down to the seashore. He had the children scout the shore for any further adornments. Bamboo shoots were found with which to attach the animal heads to the chair. Shells were added. When it was finished, everyone was pleased.

When the auction director saw the chair, she included it in the main auction! The children's chair was included with those donated by professional designers and architects. Prior to the auction, each feature chair was previewed in the windows of different businesses throughout the community; the local bookstore requested the children's chair for its window. The children proudly invited relatives and friends to admire their artistry, and the chair received public recognition as the only children's chair in the auction. At the gala fundraiser dinner and auction, the chair was purchased by a generous donor!

And so it went—Bill leading the children (and the teachers) through the world around them, pausing here and there to focus more clearly on things that normally went unnoticed or overlooked, and gently fanning the embers of creativity, curiosity, and wonder that are inborn in every child. To some, Bill's art class may have seemed like extra playtime for the children (not necessarily a bad thing in itself), but not an experience that teaches art. Bill's art lessons did, in fact, have structure and goals.

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The Structure of the Class

At the beginning of class every day, Bill would display a reproduction of some painting or other artwork and encourage the children to discuss it. He brought in works by different artists and introduced styles of art from different cultures.

The class activities were not random, but rather were conducted in a series of purposeful steps. First, Bill exposed the children to books that covered the works of artists and architecture. He then had the children explore their immediate environment, walking down to the seashore or strolling through the woods. As they explored the objects and materials at hand, Bill encouraged them to observe and investigate. Next, he stimulated each child's imagination and artistic expression (e.g., helping them create a sculpture of seaweed, shells, and twigs). And last, he helped them turn the idea—a teepee, a mask, or a special chair—into reality.

And so the artist became a mentor. His enthusiasm,

curiosity, and willingness to find materials to explore with the children served as very effective teaching strategies.

Reflections on Teaching Art

In retrospect, Bill intuitively followed an approach that shared many characteristics with the acclaimed Reggio Emilia early childhood education program. In particular, Bill used objects in the immediate environment to stimulate children's curiosity and creativity. He also was adept at improvisation.

One of Reggio Emilia's central principles is the teacher's role as observer. The class projects derive directly from teachers' observations of children's spontaneous play and exploration. Reggio Emilia teachers place a high value on their ability to improvise on, and respond to, children's predisposition to enjoy the unexpected. The most successful projects are those that generate sufficient interest and also stimulate children's creativity and ability to solve problems (Malaguzzi, 1998).

Children acquire knowledge best by personal construction, rather than through direct instruction; they benefit from hands-on, multisensory experiences and active exploration (Staley, 1998). Katz and Chard (1989) suggest that young children be allowed to interact in small groups; working together on a variety of projects will help them make sense of their own experiences. These projects also should strengthen their dispositions to observe, experiment, inquire, and reconstruct aspects of their environment. Even without any formal written curriculum, the artist-in-residence incorporated all of these elements into his weekly lessons.

Bridging Ideologies

As Bill stressed early on, he did not want to be "the art teacher." He saw art in everyday elements of design and structure, and he wanted young children to have opportunities to make some of the same observations. He recognized and valued the curiosity and imagination that are characteristic of young children, and wanted to find outlets for their creative energy.

While Bill only spent one year at the school, he left many legacies to emulate when teaching art:

- He exposed the children to art not only through their environment and immediate surroundings, but also through an extensive use of books.
- He trained the children's and the teachers' eyes by teaching the value of the ordinary and how to make use of it.
- He took advantage of lessons on the use of and respect for artistic instruments, but he did not dwell on that process.

- He heightened powers of observation.
- He taught appreciation for the artistic process and the importance of relishing each other's creativity, both as individuals and as a team.

Bill revived and expanded the teachers' understanding of Montessori. Bill demonstrated how to train children's eyes and actively lead them to their own creativity and expression. In essence, he demonstrated a merging of the precepts of Reggio Emilia, Montessori principles, and the project approach to education. He heightened his students', both child and adult, capacity for observation.

A Report Card

Art, in its many forms, is composed of several elements. From the standpoint of the artist, two fundamental components are, at a minimum, creativity and the mechanics or skills to express that creativity in tangible form. Bill was well-versed in the skills of an artist. He is a professional. But it was not art mechanics or skills that he wanted to teach to young children. He wanted them to see things that are most often missed, and to let their imaginations take them to places where their creativity could flourish. From those activities, he guided them to tangible expressions of that imagination and creativity in their own form of art.

Although we have only the experiences of one school year from which to judge the effects of Bill's involvement, it was clearly a success, if by no other measure than the enthusiasm and energy that the children displayed and their pride in what were clearly cooperative efforts. Perhaps a fair measure of the value of the unstructured art class came from one of the children at the close of the school year. When Bill was asked what he thought was the best thing about his class, Charlie, one of the students standing nearby, spoke up: "We were allowed to do art!" Yes, they were "allowed" to do art, and were given the freedom to express their own ideas in the ways they thought best.

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