

ACTIVITY-CENTERED LEARNING: WHY AND HOW

Preschool children are creative, resourceful, and imaginative. They are fascinated with objects in the world around them—they squeeze, roll, scratch, pinch, taste, throw, pound, and chew to learn as much as they can about their world. Through this experimentation they learn that some things are soft and bounce, others are hard and break up. Some things taste good, others taste terrible. Some things are bumpy and scratchy, others are soft and smooth. Some things spread out and others stay together. Life is a fascinating world of activity to a young child—a place for doing and discovering and trying things out. Too often, however, when a child goes to school, things are different. Instead of learning in this natural way—through play, experience, and discovery—school turns out to be a place where one listens to the teacher “talk” most of the time and waits half an hour before getting his turn. A place where one watches the teacher demonstrate things on the flannelboard or listens to the teacher talk about shapes or categories or how cheese is made. School is usually where one is continually tested with dittoed worksheets and where red marks are made beside things one does not understand, where one learns to play the game of figuring out what the teacher wants for an answer, where there’s a right way and a wrong way and no place for one’s own way. It is a place to “hurry up” or the place for waiting when you’re the first one through because there’s nothing for you to do but “sit still and be quiet” until everyone “hurrying up” is finished. For most children school is a lot of stuff one

has to do for no other apparent reason than that the teacher says it must be done. And for far too many children, school is a place where, for the first time in their lives, they stop learning.

Many teachers are convinced that school does not have to be like this for children. They are convinced it can be a place where every child is actively involved in his learning, where he learns in a natural and enjoyable way through his own experience. It can be a place where a child works with concepts and ideas concretely by handling familiar objects and manipulating them before dealing abstractly with the concepts on paper. School *can* be a place where children are free to make mistakes and to learn directly from these mistakes, where red check marks and "wrong" answers have no place; where errors are used, instead, as clues by the teacher to help him discover what each child, individually, needs to learn. It can be a place where a child learns to think for himself rather than play guessing games as to what the teacher wants parroted back. It can be a place where a child learns to trust his own judgments and thoughts, where he is free to try things "his way" as an expression of his creativity and individuality. School can be a place where each child learns to work independently, where the child, rather than the teacher, takes responsibility and initiative for learning. School can be a place where a child is not told to speed up or slow down but is allowed to take his time, to work at the rhythm and pace best suited to his inner needs, where he is always allowed the pride involved in finishing his work, where he is not made to wait half an hour or half a day for a turn, but is instead actively and personally involved during the whole learning period. It can be a place where every child gains self-confidence and a feeling of worth, regardless of his ability, background, or maturity level; where he is successful at every step in the learning process. School can be a place where children move around freely and still learn; where sitting still need not be what is thought of as "good," and movement and noise as "bad." School can be a place that recognizes the talent for learning the child brings with him from home, and uses this talent to produce *more* learning for the child, not less.

HOW TO BEGIN Theorizing is the first step in individualizing. Putting the theory into the classroom so that it works is a series of difficult next steps.

Each teacher will begin a little differently: Some will begin individualizing with one group of children and build slowly to include the entire class. Others will use an activity center for children who have finished their regular work, for children needing remedial work, or as enrichment for a select few. Still other teachers will begin the program with the entire class. Each teacher will make the appropriate workjobs to fill his particular needs.

Some teachers will want to use solely the math activities; others will use only the language activities. Still others will mix the materials, using a few from math and a few from language during the same period. Some teachers will use language activities during the first half of the year and introduce mathematics activities during the last half of the year while continuing with the language during another period.

Scheduling also will depend on the individual teacher. Some teachers will start out gradually, devoting twenty minutes and, later, an hour to activity-centered work as the children demonstrate their readiness for a longer period. Other teachers prefer a longer period, an hour-and-a-half three times a week, to allow children to become more involved. Still other teachers will feel the need to individualize the entire day and may utilize many different programs to meet this need. These teachers might choose to use workjobs in their classrooms throughout the day.

There is no "right" way nor even one "best" way of organizing the way in which the workjobs will be used in the classroom. This is entirely the teacher's decision and will vary greatly depending on many factors: the needs of the children, the individual teacher's experience in individualizing instruction, the size of the classroom, the freedom the teacher is granted by the administration and parents, the number of activities available for the children to use, and perhaps most of all, the teacher's preparation and daring.

Although the method of organizing the workjobs in the classroom varies according to each situation, there are common concerns which can be discussed to help teachers make an effective beginning. All teachers wonder how many activities to make, how to store the activities, which procedures and routines to establish, how to keep track of and assess the children's accomplishments, what the best methods are for making the activities, and so forth. The following pages contain suggestions with which a teacher can begin. As his experience grows each teacher will evolve the best method for his own class of children.

Making the Workjobs

Quantity How many workjobs are needed to begin? A good rule of thumb is to make one and a half activities for each child who is to be included in the program. If the teacher is going to work with six children, for example, he will need about nine workjobs to begin effectively. If he is working with thirty children, he would need forty-five activities. This provides enough activities for an interesting selection for each child as he finishes one activity and is ready for another.

Strength When making an activity a teacher should try to make it as indestructable as possible. The materials are going to be handled by young children many times each day, and they will last for many years if they are made strong at the outset. Covering all pictures, papered boxes, word cards, and so forth, with clear contact paper strengthens materials and protects them from soiling. Lamination, if available, does the same thing. Cards and games can be backed with cardboard and all edges masked to strengthen the activity and prevent bending. Taping edges of mounted pictures keeps the edges from fraying and makes them easy to shuffle so they can be mixed up at the end of each child's work with the activity.

PREPARATION

Aesthetics Remember, each workjob is, in reality, a concept or skill in an appealing disguise. The child sees the *material*, not the concept, when he looks on the workshelf and chooses a workjob. He sees the pretty buttons, the real objects, the colored Easter eggs, or the Cocoa Puffs cereal. He wants to use these materials, so he chooses the activity. As a result of this choice, the child will experience the concept within the material. From his interest, his choice, the child almost incidentally learns. Keep this in mind when making workjobs and try to make them as appealing and tempting as possible. The goal should be to “hook” the child on the material so he can teach himself!

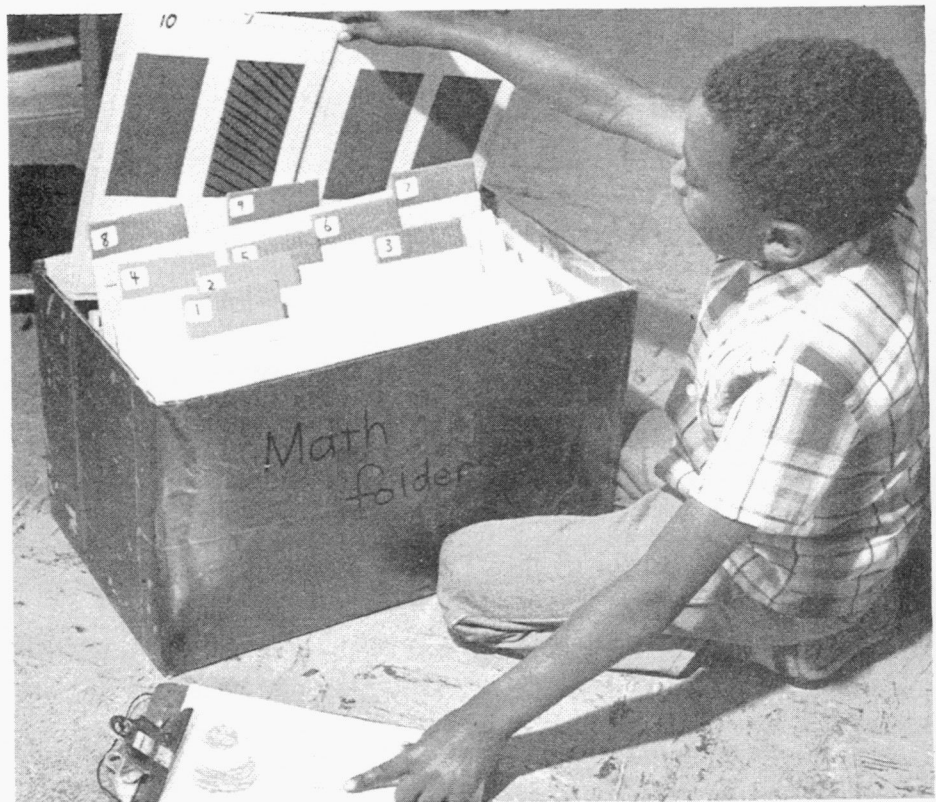
Classroom Organization

Teachers will find that an informal arrangement of furniture where children may work in a variety of places is most suited to an activity-centered learning program. Many teachers keep only half the desks in their room and provide cubby holes or shoe boxes for each child's storage of personal belongings. This provides much added floor space and the floor is where many young children prefer to work if allowed the choice. Be brave. Try an informal arrangement and see what it does for the children, the program, and you!

Storage

A cupboard or bookcase can be used to house the activities. Shelves should be low enough that children can clearly see all the materials from which they are to choose. Some teachers may want to label boxes

Answerboards can be placed together in a sturdy box with cardboard dividers.



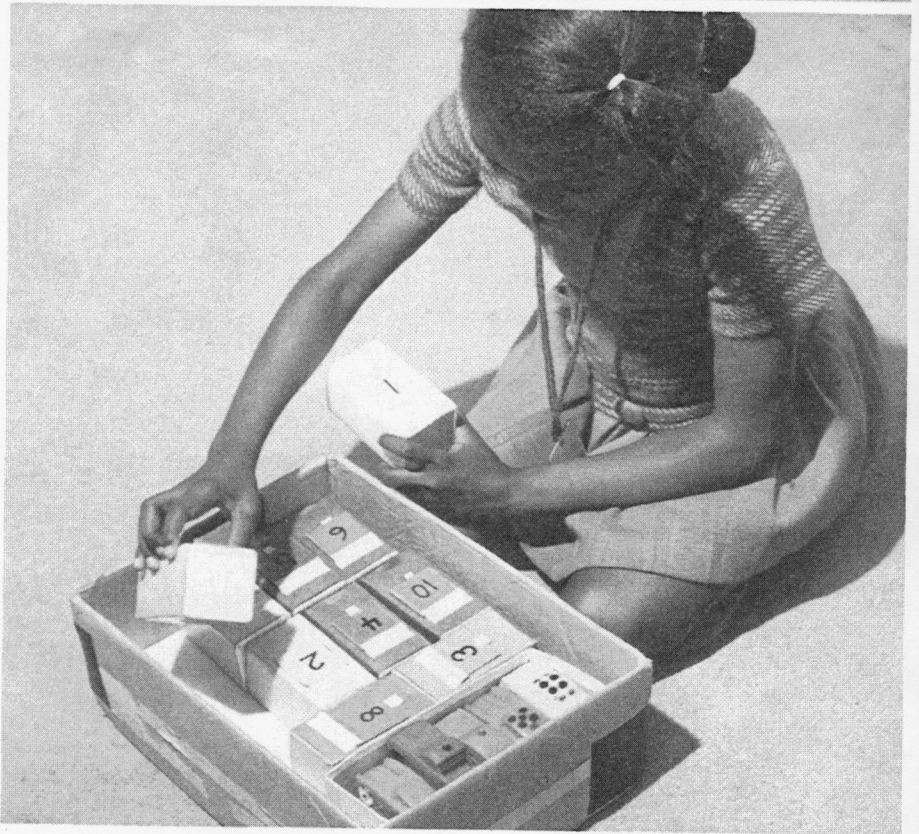
and shelf areas so that the return of materials becomes a learning activity in itself. Other teachers will prefer to allow the children to figure out where there is room for their particular activity on the shelf. Some teachers may not be able to obtain cupboard space because of limited facilities or because they must share the room with another teacher, and they may even have to box and unbox the activities daily and spread them out on the counter tops.



Without the proper container the cars might be dumped into the larger box along with the garages.



The simple addition of a box for the cars ensures the activity will be put away neatly. It is more natural to put things carefully away when there is a special place for everything.



There are several incidents which will inevitably occur in each classroom beginning to use workjobs and activity-centered learning: someone spills or breaks an activity, another puts his work away without finishing it, still another does not put the activity away neatly, and so on. These problems, if anticipated and handled decisively, will be quickly eliminated and the teacher will be free to work with the children, expanding the concepts they are experimenting with, rather than spending his time on problems that could have been foreseen and eliminated.

The following pages describe a routine designed to handle these common problems the first time they occur. Once established, this routine will help the work period run smoothly and provide the atmosphere in which real learning can take place.

The initial training period should extend over six to eight work periods. During this period the teacher is not concerned with any academics. This is a time of *learning how to learn* so that later the children can gain in real achievement. Since the teacher will concentrate during these six to eight work periods only on the children learning the routines he will want to provide work that is well within everyone's capabilities. Puzzles, lotto games, and matching activities, for example, are excellent, for they are easily taught to the children. It is important during this learning time that the children be able to do the activities with very little outside help so that the teacher is free to concentrate on the routines he must establish to ensure the program will run smoothly throughout the rest of the year.

The importance of establishing classroom routines from the start cannot be overemphasized. Once this has been accomplished, teachers will find that they can enjoy the full benefits of an individualized program throughout the rest of the year. The child's attitude about his own ability is formed during this period. He learns, regardless of his previous experience, that his teacher believes in his ability and is very interested in his way of thinking about things. He grows to think of himself as a hard worker, one who sticks to his work even if it's difficult. He feels pride in the fact that he always finishes his work and feels the freedom and responsibility he has during the worktime. He sees that he is free to move about, to select his own work, to choose where he is going to do his work. He becomes aware of his responsibility for working during the entire work period, for finishing his work, for getting help when he needs it, for telling the teacher when he is finished, and for putting away his work so it is ready for the next person who may choose it. This initial training period is a time for the teacher to lavishly praise and compliment each child to ensure his learning that he can be successful.

The basic routines that should be established during the first few workperiods are:

- Selecting an activity.
- Completing the selected activity.
- Checking with the teacher when the activity is completed.
- Putting away the activity.
- Selecting another activity.

Selecting an Activity

Each child should choose his own work. He goes to the workshelf and selects an activity he would like to try. He takes the work to a table or to the floor or wherever he wishes.

Completing the Selected Activity

Each child needs to finish the work he has chosen. If the child needs help or does not know the name of an object or picture, he may ask a friend nearby to name the item. Children enjoy the idea of telling, not showing. They put their hands behind their back and help their friend "with words" rather than showing him what to do. For example, a child working with a matching game asks his friend, "Where does this go?" If the friend may not touch the workjob, he cannot take one of the pieces and put it where it goes. He must tell the child something like, "It's a bone." Through role-playing activities at some other time in the day the children can practice how they can help someone who is stuck. They will gradually understand the importance of not doing work for another child, but instead, helping him by *asking a question* that will get him to do it for himself. For example, the child above can be shown to ask his friend a question about the bone to lead him to find the place. The child might ask, "Who would use a bone?" to get him to place it by the dog.

Because the teacher is attempting to establish the fact that each person needs to finish the task he has chosen, if a child does not finish, either because he says it is too hard or because he forgets to have it checked by the teacher, he should get the task again and work on it until it is finished. This is important because at this stage the child is learning the skill of *finishing his work*. Finishing the task is how he gains the concepts he needs. If he is going to learn, he must finish the task.

Although most children view the workjobs as fun and find finishing a reward in itself, children who have been unsuccessful in the past will try a task and give up at the first difficulty. By putting it away the child is no longer frustrated. The teacher will be looking for these children during the first few work periods and will want to spend time encouraging these hesitant children, helping them see that they can finish their work and be successful.

Children who are easily distracted and whose attention span is short may be helped by playing "Beat the Clock." The teacher sets a small paper clock or an egg timer (the five-minute type obtained from drug stores) beside the child and tells him to see if he can beat the clock. He tries to have his work finished by the time the sand runs out once or twice, or by the time the classroom clock hands reach the time on the paper clock.

Lavish compliments and encouragement for such a child results in his *finishing* a task for which he may then be praised. This success and achievement is real to him, and he feels high self-esteem for the credit given to him for having done his work. Now he will try something else for which he can gain more praise and even greater self-esteem.

During this initial training period routines should be established for two situations that inevitably occur: Some things are going to spill and others will be broken. Children should understand from the beginning that it helps the teacher to know when something needs repair or replacement. When something is brought to the teacher he should thank the child and merely mention, "I can fix it." Thus, in spite of the teacher's disappointment in having to do repair work or find a new item, the children will not be afraid to bring problems of this kind to him. Because there is some unexplainable satisfaction in finishing a task and having every part present at the completion, it is important that damages be quickly repaired and losses easily recognizable. Things spilled, such as buttons or rice or blocks, should be picked up by the child and no comment made by the teacher unless it is a sympathetic observation that the child has an additional job to do.

During this period, the teacher will be watching for children who finish, and lavishly praise their accomplishment. He may even stop the class and point out particular children who are working hard and praise each one for finishing his task so well. The better the children understand that finishing their work is a praiseworthy accomplishment, the more they will strive to finish their tasks to gain this praise. *Finishing* a task becomes so routine that *not* finishing is no longer even a consideration.

Checking with the Teacher When the Activity Is Completed

During this training period, the teacher praises each child for remembering to have him check his work. What the teacher wants at this time is to make the completion of the task as rewarding as possible. He wants to establish the checking period as a time of warm, friendly, even intimate conversation between himself and the child. In time, this conversation will be the most rewarding part of the day because it is the most truly individualized time in the program, geared entirely to the needs of the individual child.

Some children will be very excited over the completion of their work and will bring their work to the teacher. The teacher should explain that, instead, he will come to the work so that things will not be spilled or disarranged. This can be established as a definite routine.

Some children will be so thrilled that they will shout across the room that they are finished and call for the teacher to come. These children should be helped to realize that they should come to the teacher's side to tell him they are finished, for he is busy working with another child and wants to give his full attention, if it is only for thirty seconds, to that child. Teachers may find it helpful to have the children role-play what would happen if everyone called from across the room at once instead of going to the teacher. The children can in this way see, through a clear example, why they should go to the teacher's side.

Children who forget to check with the teacher and put their work away during this initial learning period should rework their tasks and be reminded to check with the teacher. Some children may even forget a second time and end up spending an entire hour on the same activity

the first day of the program. This may seem unnecessary, but the child who reworks his task a second time and finally remembers to have his work checked has learned the routine and will rarely forget it. Remember, the task is not redone for *today* but to establish a routine for three months from today. After all, at this stage the child is not learning to match pictures or whatever he is doing, he is learning to *get checked*.

Putting Away the Activity

This routine is twofold: The child first puts the activity into its containers (small box for individual cards, and so forth) and second returns it to the workshelf, putting it neatly away so it is ready and appealing for the next child's use. The teacher will be looking for children who carry their activities carefully (to avoid spills) and put things away neatly. He will praise the children and may even stop the class and have everyone take notice. This boosts the ego of the child who is being complimented and makes everyone want to put his work away carefully so as to get praise. The teacher who is lavish in his compliments during this stage rarely has to remind someone later in the year to be sure to put the work away as neatly as he found it. It is very helpful to have one child stand at the workshelf and praise those who put things away correctly during the training period.

Selecting Another Activity

The child selects another activity from the workshelf after he returns the activity he has just finished. Later in the year, children may want to "line up" and wait for a particularly popular activity. If it is established at the beginning that the child selects his activities from the workshelf rather than sitting beside someone finishing an activity, the children will already know the routine when this situation arises.

RECORD KEEPING *Methods*

As the child experiences success, the *completion* of each workjob becomes self-rewarding. Beyond this satisfaction, the recording of this completion can be very enjoyable to a child. The teacher who is using the workjobs for his entire class or for one group and has individualized much of the school day will want some system of ensuring that the children are gaining the skills he has set up through the activities.

There are many ways of recording the completion of an activity and teachers will evolve their own systems as they gain experience in using the activities with their students. For teachers who wish a record-keeping system with which to begin, two methods that have proved successful are described here.

To keep track of the activities completed by each child, the teacher may glue a library book pocket to each workjob box and place a card with each child's dittoed name inside. When the child successfully completes the activity, the teacher or the child makes a small star with



a colored pencil beside the child's name. If the teacher has assembled activities that the child may do more than once, such as forming sets in mathematics, this recording system permits great freedom of choice among the activities. A child is working with *sets* regardless of whether he is putting vitamins into the bottles or putting pins into pincushions or counting objects into numbered boxes. Thus, a child who successfully masters one set activity several times will learn the concept of sets as well as another child who works with several set activities only once. For this reason, the math workjobs seem to lend themselves readily to the type of recording sheet described above.

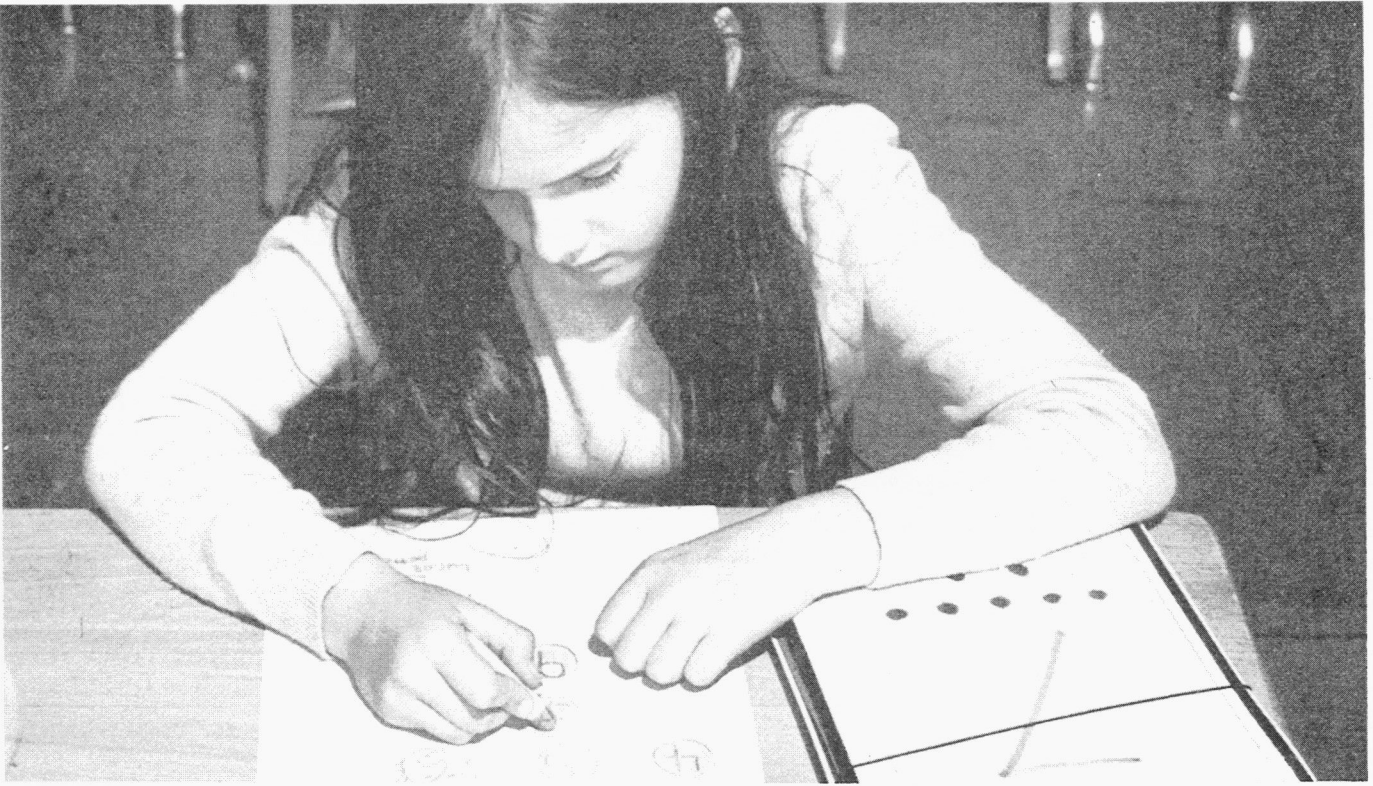
The star-giving record has some drawbacks, however. The teacher who makes a group of activities according to certain skills that he wants to ensure the children gain will not want children to repeat the same activity over and over again. Using a separate recording sheet for each child, as shown, instead of a name card for stars, gives each child an overview of the work he has accomplished. With this recording method, each workjob is numbered, and corresponding numbers appear on the recording sheet. When the child completes a workjob and has talked with his teacher about the work, he finds the numeral on the recording sheet that matches the one on the workjob. It is extremely important that the *child*, rather than the teacher, points to the correct numeral. Even the most inexperienced child can learn to use the recording card if he is allowed to make mistakes and correct them himself. When the

child finds the numeral, the teacher can make a small star with a pencil in the space and the child colors in the area to show he has finished that workjob. If the teacher is working with children who would have great difficulty finding the given numeral among fifty others, he may want to use some other symbols such as familiar shapes and pictures, or to write each row of numerals in a different color. The child would look at the *red* numeral 24 on the workjob box, for example, and then look directly to the red row of numerals on his recording card. Now he has only 10 symbols from which to select the correct one, rather than 50.

The individual recording card gives the child an immediate overview of his work, unlike the star on a card system. He can find out which workjobs he has not yet finished simply by referring to his recording card and noting which ones are not yet colored in. He keeps track of his own work. Therefore, he is competing only with himself. His work is not recorded on a single class chart where he would know at a glance if he were the slowest in the classroom. The child who *is* self-assured and enjoys competition can place his card beside that of a friend, and they can compare their progress, counting the activities they have completed, or as is usually the case, the activities they have yet to finish.

Teaching the Children to Record Their Work

During the early training period, the teacher can help the child to understand the recording activity. As with all learning, it is unrealistic to expect the children to understand the purpose or procedure of recording by listening to directions. The children will learn by *doing*. They can be given a practice card with about ten activity spaces. As each child completes an activity, he colors in the appropriate square. Most children will see the association between the numeral on the card and the corresponding workjob numeral. During this practice session, the teacher can assist the children to whom this association is not readily apparent. Children who are confused often color in *all* the squares after completing one workjob. These children can be asked if they have *done* these workjobs and can be helped to see the square they should have colored on a new card where they can start again. If the child, and not the teacher, has found the symbols or numerals on the workjob and then on the recording card, he will learn very quickly how to record his own work. Occasionally, a child who clearly understands how to record will nevertheless color some or all his squares in without having done the work. This can easily be handled by explaining to the child again the purpose of the record card, and that since he has colored extra squares neither he nor the teacher can tell what work has been completed. Because it is impossible to tell what work has been done, the child must begin all over again with a new card. The teacher will want to watch for this problem for it indicates that the child feels insecure in the routine and will need encouragement and attention for a time.



USING MONEY IN THE WORKJOBS

Teachers may feel that using real money in the workjobs presents too great a temptation to some children and that play money is just as good without the difficulties. However, most teachers feel quite differently when they have tried both play money and real money in the same activity. Not only is the realism of the activity enhanced, but teachers who try real money usually find that the responsibility the children learn is, of itself, worth the added effort. Children will respect money, for even though they would like to have it to spend, they know it really belongs to the class and is to help them learn. The children will guard the money and take great pride in the respect accorded them by the teacher in providing the opportunity to choose whether they want to use real or play money. They learn many valuable lessons if they earn the money themselves, selling cupcakes or collecting soft drink bottles, and if the responsibility for keeping track of the money is theirs. One child may be selected by the class to act as the money lender for a certain period of time. It is the money lender's responsibility to give the money bag to each child needing it and to check the money at the end of the workjob. If there is a shortage, the money lender deals with the problem.

Plastic coin cylinders can be marked to show the level of pennies or other coins. This is an excellent way for the money lender to quickly check the coins.

INTRODUCING A NEW WORKJOB TO THE CLASS

Throughout the year as the teacher makes new activities to replace or add to others, he will want to show the class the new activity before the work time begins and explain it very briefly. At this time he mentions anything special about how it is to be put away or what he wants the children to do when working with it. He points out any parts that are weak so the children know how they can help to keep the activity from becoming damaged. He impresses on the children that he made the activity for *them*. The children's knowledge of some of the intimate details of making a particular workjob often encourages them to be careful with the activities and engenders an appreciation of the fact that their teacher took the time to make the materials. The children love hearing that their teacher had a hard time finding some particular item and then finally found it at such-and-such a store in the neighborhood. Or that he needed 85¢ to buy some special thing for a workjob and had to ask if it was okay to raid the family changebox to get the money. Children appreciate their teacher's problems in making an activity, such as how he couldn't get it to stand up, or that he ran out of paint in the middle of painting the activity. These details make the activity very personal to the children and help to build a feeling in the classroom that *teacher cares!*