

Art in Early Childhood

Drawing With Seven-Year-Olds: assuming the role of teacher

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ABSTRACT

In 2001 there was evidence that in English primary schools the introduction of the Art National Curriculum (DfE, 1995) and a national art scheme of work (DfEE/QCA, 2000), had greatly reduced opportunities within primary schools for children to draw. In particular Matthews (2001, p.29) lamented the lack of opportunity for children's spontaneous drawing. In this article the author reflects upon data gathered from a small-scale investigation in which she engages four seven-year-old children in meaningful drawing activities. Taking a guided-exploration orientation (Bresler, 1993) towards supporting drawing fits with the author's socio-cultural approach to learning and teaching, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) understanding of socially shared cognition. Drawing alongside the children and talking aloud whilst drawing are developed as teaching and support strategies. Whilst investigating with the children the structural, expressive and representational potential of drawing, the author increasingly focuses upon the learners rather than overt training in techniques or achieving pre-envisaged end points.

Introduction

In 2009 the House of Commons Children's Schools and Families Committee published its fourth report on the English National Curriculum. It supports the move to a much less prescriptive curriculum and a less centrally directed approach to its delivery. It recognizes that reliance on immediate 'pedagogical fixes' undermines teachers' engagement with more fundamental issues of curriculum design and the purposes of education. The National Curriculum and National Strategies are perceived to have contributed to the de-skilling of teachers. As the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) observes:

There has been a danger that the guidance documents and resources for the National Strategies have been seen as the way to deliver the curriculum and, where teachers have lacked confidence or experience, there has been a tendency to view these as “teaching by numbers”, leading to a generation of teachers who are curriculum deliverers rather than curriculum developers. This leads to a detachment from the process and a move towards “de-professionalization”. (House of Commons, 2009, p.310)

This article draws upon data from a small-scale investigation carried out in a primary school in the North of England. With the English National Curriculum established, my role as a lecturer in initial teacher education brought me into regular contact with a range of practicing and trainee teachers. Their anecdotal comments had drawn my attention to both the lack of time available for art experiences and changes in the classroom environment that were working against the regular use of art materials in Key Stage 1 classrooms (children aged between 5 and 7 years). Their comments gave evidence of the nationally available, Art and Design scheme of work (DfEE/QCA, 2000), leading teachers to rely on pre-planned lessons as children’s only form of art activity. Whilst the National Curriculum for art and design (DfE, 1995) deliberately does not define precisely what is to be covered, the report ‘Drawing Together: Art, craft and design in schools (Ofsted, 2009) comments on how teachers struggled, ‘often with minimal professional development to... design a curriculum that enabled pupils to build a progression of skills, knowledge and understanding across a broad range of art, craft and design from different times and cultures’ (Ofsted, 2009, p.22).

This report evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of art, craft and design in a sample of primary and secondary schools. It draws together the findings of subject surveys of art, craft and design education between 2005 and 2008 in 90 primary and 90 secondary schools selected randomly to include those in urban and rural areas across England. It concludes that the quality, range and relevance of individual pupils’ experiences were inconsistent with many primary teachers resorting to published schemes of work (Ofsted, 2009). These findings resonated with the anecdotal comments made by my trainees and practicing teachers. Drawing seemed to have become an intermittent activity, part of a cycle of teacher directed art practice. There seemed little opportunity for children to use any skills introduced to then make their own meaning.

Trainees gaining experience in early childhood settings commented upon the fluidity and flexibility of routines and rituals and children, aged between 3 and 5, being given ownership of their use of materials by adults. In comparison, trainees working with seven-year-olds talked of the children merely fitting in with adult prescribed art activity and the lack of meaning their adult-set tasks held for them. Despite the government assertion that there was a need to develop a broad and rich curriculum (DfES, 2003), by the age of seven it seemed many children were becoming accustomed to teachers art lessons that were dominated by their school’s need for pre-defined ‘learning outcomes’. This kind of restriction was seen by Ofsted (2009, p.51) as having ‘militated against the concept of “expecting the unexpected” which can be an important doorway to creativity’.

For Matthews (2001) set lessons are seen as 'destructive to children's use and understanding of visual media' and he states that:

...the art curriculum focuses, not upon the learner but upon bodies of knowledge within the subject area. Because it is devised in terms of the transmission or 'delivery' of these bodies of knowledge to passive recipients, it is inevitably insensitive to children's development (Matthews, 2001, p.29)

He asserts that, National Curriculum priorities encourage teachers to engage in 'active interference' in what he terms children's spontaneous art, i.e.:

...the kind of art children produce, with great intensity and enthusiasm, by themselves, and for themselves. It is an art which serves their own intentions, and with which they construct their own understandings of the world. (Matthews, 2001, p.29)

Such art for Matthews is misunderstood and subject to criticism within the educational system.

The research investigation

The aim of my investigation was to assume the role of a teacher in a primary school, (children aged 5-11), and support a group of four seven-year-old children in developing a meaningful engagement and positive approach to drawing. In the process I would gain greater understanding of ways of supporting them. New to the school, I was aware that I would have to 'tune into' the school's patterns of learning and teaching and work within those boundaries. The first session would be crucial in building successful relationships with the children. Permissions for my involvement were gained from children and parents and I worked with the four oldest children in the class, two girls and two boys. There were no close friendships established within the group. The sessions took place on the same afternoon each week for six weeks and lasted between one and a half and two hours. The sessions were video taped in order that the detail of verbal and physical interaction could be recorded for later analysis. I was able to use a spare classroom in the school and we were seated at a table in a group, the children's normal classroom arrangement for small group work. In addition to the six video recordings I recorded within my field notes comments made by class teachers in the setting relevant to the investigation.

Theoretical background: teaching drawing

Drawing has been 'taught' in varying ways, from the over formal technique-led approach, to the facilitating role of providing materials and little else. This polarization of approaches to teaching drawing is reflected in the two widely diverging views seen by Gardner (1982), as being held on 'the optimal means for developing artistic talent'. One view he calls the 'unfolding' or 'natural' perspective, where the child is viewed

as a seed, small and fragile but containing 'the necessary germs for eventual artistic virtuosity'. The other view he calls the 'training', 'directive' or 'skills' approach. This view sees the child, if left alone, never achieving his or her potential. The highly intricate skills which proficiency in the arts entails, can only, according to this view, be acquired under the direction of a gifted teacher or practicing artist. Gardner (1982) suggests a middle line is taken, based on a deeper understanding of both views.

In early childhood visual art education, Bresler (1993) categorises the many curricula and classroom practices that exist into three distinct orientations: (a) the little-intervention orientation, (b) the production orientation, and (c) the guided-exploration orientation. In common with Gardner's 'unfolding' perspective, the first category leaves children undisturbed because of the dangers of adult interference (Kindler, 1995). The teacher's role is provider of materials and environments where children can explore and experiment (Seefeldt, 1995). In extreme contrast, the teachers in Bresler's (1993) production orientation category plan almost everything ahead of time, and children are expected to follow directions or to imitate teachers. Thompson (1995) describes the practice of direct art teaching in an early childhood classroom as '... a highly directive procedure followed in assembly-line fashion where teachers dictate the process and children end up working on someone else's project' (p. 90). The teachers initiate all of the art activities, determine the final form of the artwork, and tend to devalue children's spontaneous expression.

Teachers in the guided-exploration orientation provide guidelines that help children observe things carefully, use their sensitivities, and express their ideas when they create artwork. This approach does not simply allow children to do whatever they want, nor is it prescriptive. In the guided-exploration orientation, teachers help children learn to observe, to listen, to communicate their sensitivities through artistic expression, and most importantly, to consider the aesthetic qualities in arts (e.g., dynamics, form, shape, and balance). This orientation requires planning and teaching on the part of the teacher as well as concentration and thought on the part of the children (Bresler, 1993).

Interpretation of my own trainees' narratives of their experiences of working with seven-year-olds in primary school settings confirmed Matthew's view that:

Drawings, along with other art forms spontaneously generated by young children, and vital to their intellectual and emotional growth, are suppressed by contemporary educational systems. (Matthews, 2001, p.29)

It seemed that many teachers had re-organised the physical classroom environment to meet the teaching requirements of whole class lessons, and the government advocated daily literacy hours and the numeracy lessons. Space, previously taken by workshop areas and activities, had therefore been lost to additional tables and chairs. Within the research setting, some teachers accepted this regimenting of the day without question as providing a much simpler way of organizing the curriculum. Others recognized management strategies were being prioritised over meeting individual learning needs. Interestingly, a staffroom comment about increased aggression at playtimes brought no teacher responses connecting what was happening to the newly introduced curriculum demands.

My art lessons were to provide the children with an opportunity to select and develop their own projects. The children were to be allowed to draw anything that they wanted in their new sketchbooks. My past teaching experience had shown that when children are given control over the content of their drawing, their responses reflect their own interests, experiences and abilities as well as being personally meaningful and intensely satisfying.

Taking a guided-exploration orientation (Bresler, 1993), I anticipated supporting and stimulating children's drawing and thinking processes through provocative questions and interactive conversations, in order to challenge children to use all their senses and perceptions in art appreciation and production (Seefeldt, 1999). I expected there to be an initial setting of boundaries by me and a gradual movement towards a sharing of control, facilitated by growing mutual understanding. Much of my role would depend on my on-the-spot decision-making in relation to ongoing observations and understandings of children's artistic learning and development. I also recognized the importance of using language that went beyond 'good' or 'well done', in order to give children more precise understanding of what skill, knowledge or understanding I was praising, and to model the kind of language which would support the children in beginning to share their own verbal interpretations of the visual.

At seven years of age children are often seen to be moving away from having the kind of confidence, spirit and originality that many younger children convey as they draw. They may be more aware of the need to represent reality in their drawings and might become disillusioned with any incongruence between the object and the drawing, as well as the drawing process (Gardner, 1980; Malchiodi, 1998). Children's development at this age is characterized by heightened self-awareness (Gentle, 1985). These feelings of inadequacy can be compounded by the child not only having to produce drawings which he or she feels will please the teacher, but also trying to meet the common codes of behaviour, language and drawing which are part of children needing to be accepted by their friends and peers. How things should look can be influenced by many sources at this age, and can include comics, television and older siblings (Anning and Ring, 2004).

I hoped that for any struggling children, teacher-child conversations could help them simplify a difficult task and, through support and guidance, engage them in thinking through the problem solving process in order to find resolution. The emphasis would be on the adult listening attentively and reacting to the children's explanations of their work (Bae, 2004). Certainly, any structure I provided would need to allow for engagement with children working at different levels on different pre-occupations (Healy, 2001).

What follows are excerpts from the transcription of video footage of the first session. I am conscious that in the transcription there is no real sense of time and would like to give re-assurance that conversation took place at a leisurely pace.

The introductory session

I wanted to make the children feel at ease, involve the children in drawing something of their own choice, and gain information about their ways of working which would

help me plan the next lesson. Conscious of inhibiting their drawings, I decide to draw alongside the children – something I had never done before and generally something I wouldn't do – and model talking aloud whilst drawing. By talking aloud about decisions I was making and problems I was trying to solve in my drawing, I hoped I would let them see someone trying to draw, a fellow artist/explorer and not an expert. I also hoped it would encourage them to verbalise the process they were going through. I wasn't sure at all where our talk would lead and felt I must 'go with' the children. My interest was in how I would respond in an 'on the spot' situation. I brought with me A4 sketchbooks, new 2B pencils and, in case anyone had difficulty drawing on the table, clipboards. I wanted to make these sessions special and show I valued them. I anticipated we would follow the model of: talk, draw and talk, discuss. I felt this format would fit in with the school's typical teaching session of introduction, development and conclusion, and that this similarity would be particularly suitable to our first meeting.

From the outset it was evident that this was not to be the biddable group of my imagination. As a newcomer they investigated the boundaries I set for their behaviour. If this was not to be chaotic, an initial show of firm leadership was needed and given. I found that as I gave books and pencils out I modelled the kind of behaviour I wanted in return. I was laying down ground rules, for example, being supportive of a child's freedom to make choices and making clear that there were different ways of doing things that were not better or worse.

D to P: (David to Paul) Why are you drawing like that?

T: (Teacher) Because I've said he can do it anyway he wants. I don't mind.

P: Sarah, you've done it the wrong way.

T: No she hasn't.... that's her book and she can do it anyway she wants.

I was quick to jump to a child's defense in my keenness for no child to be 'put down' by another. I encouraged the children to give their opinions, moving away from the all powerful, all knowing teacher. I also encouraged them to think about the tools they were using.

T: What do you think to the pencils? ... Are they good?

S: (Sarah) They're soft when you draw.

T: Is that good or is that bad?

S: Good.

I was keen to find out what they thought about drawing.

T: Let's have a talk about drawing. That's not something do you talk about drawing very much?

P: Yes (the rest say no)

T: Who do you talk about drawing to?

P: My mum.

T: Your mum? What kinds of thing do you say to her?

P: " ... what shall I draw?" When I'm at home doing practicing and stuff I say "What do I draw mum?" and she says "Anything you want" but I can't think of anything so she says "Okay then a sea-side or anything."

T to all: Do you all think sometimes it's hard to choose something to draw?

All: Yes.

I had thought it would be better not to ask them to draw something that might not appeal to them. I had anticipated that letting them choose would be seen, by them, as positive. Perhaps I had been wrong. I had included myself in choosing something to draw, and had tried to voice any worries that might be going through their heads. If it was acceptable for me to feel unsure then I wanted them to feel that surely it was for them.

T: If I said you could draw anything what would you choose? (to Sarah who is about to reply very quickly) now don't say anything because I want you to have a think first. So have a think ... your favourite thing, and I'm going to have a think, give me a moment, I'm going to choose my favourite thing ... just give me one more minute ... Right, I think ... don't know whether I'm very good at this bit.

This statement was followed up a few seconds later to show there were rules I would be sticking to.

T: Sorry, I didn't hear that little bit Linda, David was talking.

Still trying to pre-empt their concerns I discussed what to do if they made a mistake and took the opportunity to introduce the word 'sketch'.

T: If you start and you're just having a go, a practice, a sketch, you can do it again on the next page. So you don't have to worry, you can just have a try ... Do you know that word ... sketch?

L: (Linda, telling T what sketches are – indecipherable on the videotape)

T to L: So you think you usually do sketches with pencil, I think you're right, It's like a try isn't it? It's like quick drawing.

As we begin drawing, thinking aloud involved the children in my drawing and made them begin to evaluate what I was doing. Most of them listened to what I was saying whilst drawing, but sitting next to me Paul became particularly involved and spent a lot of time watching.

T: I don't know whether to do it like a map, as if I'm in an aeroplane looking down ... yes. Does it matter if it's like a map? That's my plan. Its got lots of paving stones on it, so it's sort of where you can sit ... it's sort of like it ... it's alright though??

P: It's alright like that.

I broached the subject of visual realism with the children.

T: Do you ever get really really cross when you're doing a drawing because you can't make it be like you want it to be?

Both Sarah and Linda seemed to feel it would be easier to draw something that was on

the table in front of them. Linda felt that in that way I could judge whose picture was the best. I took this opportunity to try to explain the difficulty of making a judgment.

T: Ah but you know the trouble with that? The trouble with that is how do you know which is the best? They might all be good. They might not all look exactly the same, but they might all be good.

This was greeted with silence. I encouraged help being given by all the group, rather than all turning to me, but I also picked up signs when children were having problems. This was quite difficult to judge because I wanted to give thinking time to children so that they would have a chance to work through problems themselves, instead of me stepping in too quickly.

T: Do you know what I think on this table, I think when people are stuck we could all give a bit of help

T to P: Now what are you going to do? What do you think about the roof then? Are you thinking that if you did that on the roof it will look too much the same, is that what you're thinking? Have you thought about ...

T to S: Sarah, will you show Paul the picture of the cat you did when you did that bit of shading on it to make it – were you trying to make it look furry? Just show it to Paul – we're wondering if it would work if he did a bit of shading.

I did not give Paul enough time to respond to my suggestion. I took for granted that what I was thinking was what Paul was thinking. It would be difficult for a child not to do as I had suggested. What was worded as a suggestion was, in reality, a command. Paul seemed more interested in talking to me than in drawing. From the start he could easily have dominated the conversation and was eager to give an opinion or volunteer information. It was interesting that when I made a mistake and commented on this he made the same 'mistake' in his picture. When the rest of the group were listening to Linda he tried to distract my attention by making silly noises and 'shuffling'.

Paul's behaviour did influence the way I organized the session and I continued having to be far more authoritarian with the group than I had expected. Turns had to be taken in order to give everyone a chance to speak.

Once he had drawn the outline of his picture of the house (Figure 1), I drew his attention to the possible need for details, and he benefited from looking at the roofs of houses through the classroom window. I felt he would have been satisfied, however, with just the outline. For Paul, talk had taken precedence over drawing.



Figure 1: Paul, 'House And Garden'

Sarah seemed the most unsure about drawing in this first part of the lesson (Figure 2). She looked at what others were doing before beginning herself, and asked for reassurance a few times. She responded well to being asked to show Paul how she used shading to make her cat furry. She seemed to be listening carefully when pictures were being discussed and tried hard to join in. To work well she needed help, reassurance and strategies for developing her self-esteem.



Figure 2: Sarah, 'Lady In Room'

David was concerned that he couldn't write his second name on his sketchbook. He was not happy with just his first name and I wrote it out on paper for him. David had a very strong accent, very different from all his peers and often difficult for others to understand. His attention wandered easily when there was a lengthy period of

conversation or when children were passing by the table. David showed obvious pleasure with his drawing and when his picture was praised his whole demeanour changed. He drew confidently and boldly, filling the page (Figure 3). I worked hard to ensure David was involved in the session. I wanted him to feel part of the group but almost constantly had to bring him back as his attention waned and he seemed to 'opt out' of the conversation.



Figure 3: David, 'Cat'

Linda spent a lot of time drawing with great precision and detail (Figure 4). She was quietly spoken and considered any questions put to her carefully. Her answers were original and truthful. She was not concerned that she took much longer than the others to finish and was immersed in her work. She was aware that in proportion to the chessboard she had drawn, her chess pieces were too big. She was very articulate and seemed to need very little from me.



Figure 4: Linda, 'Chessboard And Pieces'

The final part of this session involved the children in beginning to evaluate what they had done. They were asked to look at their own picture and say something they liked about it and something they would do differently if they drew it again. Everyone else

in the group, including me, was then asked to say something they liked about the picture. I felt that, particularly on this first occasion, comments about each other's work needed to be positive in order to build self-esteem in this early part of my relationship with the children.

The positive comments about their own work ranged from liking "all the picture" to liking a picture because of "how much is on it" or because they liked the subject matter of the drawing "I like cats and I like furry mice". When asked to comment on other people's pictures the comments were "she's really done it well" or "it's really good" and the children had to be pushed to try to say which parts were done really well and why it was good.

I felt the following discussion, where I am trying to help Paul find words to help him evaluate should have given him greater information as "the bits that go in and out" seemed imprecise.

P: I like it because the top of ... around the castle, she's really done it well.

T: Now when you say you like the bit that goes around there are you talking about the shape of it?

P: Yes.

T: The way she's got the shape and the bits that go in and out, that shape?

P: Yes.

When David was pushed to explain why a drawing was "really good" he added, "it's drawn very carefully" and "she's taken time over it". Both these comments had been made by me about the children's drawings whilst they were being carried out and were being re-iterated, perhaps because he knew they would be acceptable to me. David gave the same answer for each of the drawings he was asked to comment on. Linda commented on an aspect of each drawing which she felt was good because it made the picture realistic e.g. the face drawn by Sarah "looks like a real person", David's cat "looks like it's a cat".

From the drawings completed, Linda's showed a striving for visual realism. Although in evaluating, she thought she had drawn it well, she was unhappy that her chessboard and pieces were not in correct proportion to each other and said she would "try and do the castle a bit smaller next time". When it was my turn to comment on the pictures I found it very difficult.

T: Now this one, (David's cat) do you know why I like this one, I like it for a different reason. There I would say I like all the little details, (Linda's chess board and

pieces) there I was saying I liked that smile (Sarah's lady) because I really thought she'd got a good shape to the mouth. This one, do you know why I like this one? I think he's filled the page beautifully. He's not done a tiny cat in one corner or a tiny cat up here. He's looked at the page and he's filled it full of cat and that's why I like it.

Thinking about the session afterwards I felt 'teacher as part of the activity' had worked well. Modelling 'thinking aloud' had been a successful technique, which had influenced the children's choice of vocabulary and perhaps increased their confidence. I was unhappy with some of my explanations, finding it difficult to choose words that described what I could see. The children were showing far more on paper than they could express in words. Because the children were all drawing different things, they had different problems and my responses (relating to the technicalities of drawing) were, in the main, individual. If the children had been drawing the same object, it might have enabled me to focus on common areas of their drawing, which could be developed but I would have been more likely to lose their engagement.

From my responses my key role had been to be sensitive to when a child needed help. My presence as a facilitator ensured they stayed on task and perhaps meant pictures had greater detail. The model of talk, draw and talk and discussion seemed to have worked well. My participation, by joining in drawing, was particularly effective. I was very aware, as I spent time with the children, that I was gathering evidence about individual children and making quick judgements that influenced my behaviour towards them. At the beginning of the session this was based on their verbal interaction, body language etc., but as the session drew to a close I was linking this with their drawing behaviour and noting differences in approach. I was making comparisons and automatically looked for differences rather than similarities.

My role as a teacher was complex. I was conscious throughout the session of the importance of creating an appropriate atmosphere. I was aware that the children had individual patterns of working, some of which might need challenging. I was also concerned that I had been more authoritative than I had expected when the children pushed the boundaries of appropriate behaviour.

Discussion

Why had this whole process felt so strange for me, so unfamiliar to me? What aspects of my own practice was I missing? Drawing in my own classrooms, whilst teaching five, six and seven-year-olds, was ever available and was talked about as part of everyday interaction. It was not something I had to find time for, as it was part of multimodal provision that, if missing, would leave my classroom incomplete. The routines and rituals of our classroom had allowed our multiple voices, children and adults, to be heard and valued. Drawing as a crucial part of this could never be a once-a-week add on. As I look back on my interaction with these children I am reminded

of being a class teacher at the beginning of the school year when both children and teacher begin a journey from the unknown to the increasingly familiar. Much depends upon the teacher's underlying values and beliefs about their role and their understanding of the kind of environment they want to be part of creating with their learners.

Supporting drawing through a guided-exploration orientation fitted within my socio-cultural approach to learning and teaching, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) understanding of socially shared cognition. As recognized by Brooks, 'In the social context of the classroom children are able to borrow the ideas of others and try them out for themselves and so they become part of their own mental processes' (Brooks, 2009, p.15).

I was very aware, in this particular school setting, of the general lack of opportunity for children to have time to think about matters important to themselves in their school environment. The teachers' current pre-occupation with fitting the curriculum into the time available, and the increasing pressure for them to focus upon the measurement of achievement in priority curriculum areas, coloured my need to slow down the pace and pursue what Claxton would term 'slower less deliberate ways of knowing' (1998:3).

For Matthews the Art National Curriculum (DFE, 1995) had led teachers to 'undercut the child's own representations and expressive development'. How did my own decision making impact upon the shaping of children as learners? How did my strategies move children's use of drawing back towards what Matthews sees as 'an ongoing "conversation" between the thinking child, the representational or expressive intention, the unfolding possibilities afforded by the medium, and the interpersonal environment'? (Matthews, 2001, p.33).

Drawing alongside the children

In my most recent research with early years teachers (Ring, 2010), the group discussions about whether you should or should not draw alongside children provoked most debate. The debate centred upon the messages teachers give children if their drawings are more realistic, or more accurate than theirs. For one male teacher, concerned that his three and four-year-old boys did not choose to draw, 'modelling' consisted of getting down on the floor, making big movements and showing how a pastel can be used on its side, with no attempt at a recognizable shape. He explained that his children did not know this was a possibility and, once they did, he did not need to do it again. This activity, once explained, was seen as acceptable by the research group.

Would my activity, described in this paper have been acceptable? Probably not. It fitted, however, with the circumstances. I did not feel it was acceptable to sit and watch. This seemed too oppressive for the children, too much scrutiny from someone whose behaviours they were unfamiliar with. My involvement as a drawer enabled me to gain insight into how children approached drawing whilst remaining as part of the group, trying to give what Sheridan (2009, p.77) calls 'just in time' advice in order to advance or deepen their thinking. Both children and I were 'tuning in' through the processes of observation and listening, communicating about artistic experience

through draw and talk. Over time this developed as a process of blending rather than domination as we built trust in each other and our differences of approach.

Talking aloud whilst drawing

Verbalising the process of decision-making and problem solving whilst drawing, allowed me to give information and insight into some simple techniques. More importantly it challenged children's perceptions of teachers always having certainty of knowledge and understanding and provided scaffolding for the possibility of more complex thinking. My aim was to engage children in reflection upon what they had done. I recognized, once I had begun to engage with the children, that this could occur naturally and not just be an end of process activity. I drew attention to what different children were doing as well as constantly critiquing my own progress. Sheridan (2009) recognizes the importance of children using an object in front of them and mentally picturing different possibilities for it. At seven, these children showed they were able to imagine possibilities for extending their drawings, creating mental imagery of what the actual image might look like.

Whilst celebrating drawing's ability to help to 'focus attention, aid in planning, develop deliberate memory and logical thinking, and mediate perception' (Brooks, 2009 p.16), I was concerned that these children could retain the ability to play with ideas by giving them symbolic form and that drawing did not become 'workful' rather than playful. The need to be playful is essential to human intellectual growth and emotional well-being. Whilst being playful, human minds use the capabilities developed in childhood to imagine, dream, create, consider and invent new ways of problem solving. Playfulness is an important attitude of mind, which is dependent upon the internal qualities that children bring to an activity. It develops over time as a result of experience and interaction and it can continue to influence thinking and behaviour throughout our lives. Being playful allows a child to ensure an activity is meaningful to them. It allows a child to cope with their need for personal freedom in spite of the social constraints, which may arise from interaction with others (Hope, 2008; Howard, 2002; Parker-Rees, 1999). In terms of drawing, all of this has implications for what teachers provide and the ways in which they provide it within educational settings.

In prioritising learning as an active process, involving social participation and playful interaction, I was recognizing that children 'bring prior knowledge and their personal social worlds to the classroom' (Crafton, Brennan & Silvers, 2007:517) and that learning is about individual and group identity construction (Wenger, 1998).

I finish this article with a glimpse of the impact of the six-week programme upon the children. I moved from drawing alongside the children to the perhaps more conventional role of teacher sitting alongside. My joining in seemed to become unnecessary as the children became more confident in their drawing and my presence. Two weeks were spent on drawing from observation and one week on telling a story and expressing emotion through drawing. For the final two weeks the children made their own decisions as to how and what they would draw and how long they would stay with the activity. Whilst investigating with the children the structural, expressive and representational potential of drawing I was conscious that increasingly my focus was on the learners and not on overt training in techniques or achieving pre-envisaged

end points.

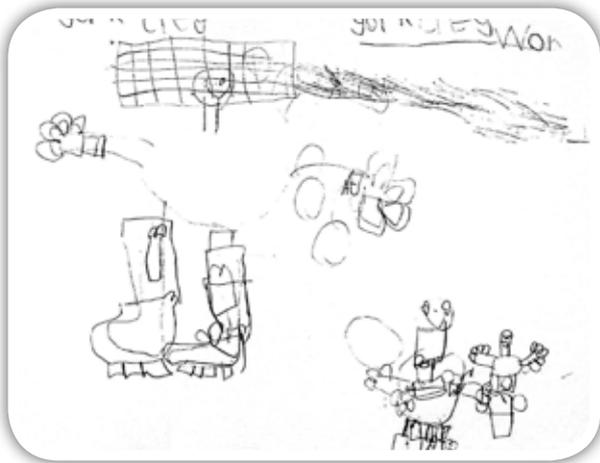


Figure 5: David, 'Footballers'



Figure 6: David, 'Jesus Killing The Baddies'

The child who found the experience most valuable was perhaps David (Figures 5 & 6). As our relationship developed he became involved in story telling through drawing and talking. Long verbal narratives about football and the triumphs of good over evil were released. His regular teacher was in the middle of completing paperwork, requesting additional support for his communication problems. This change from rarely speaking in an adult's presence to the outpouring of vivid storylines was a revelation.

Conclusion

Did I meet my aim of supporting the children in developing a meaningful engagement and positive approach to drawing? Yes I feel I did. Knowing the everyday adult-prescribed activities the children were expected to complete in their school context influenced my analysis of their particular need for them to be counter balanced with freedom of expression during their time with me. Whilst my early preoccupation with ensuring my newly imposed boundaries were maintained enabled all members of the group to work together sensitively and productively, within this structure I was able to recognize, eventually, some of the flexibility and 'going with the flow' that characterized my previous role as a teacher of young children.

In response to Gardner's (1982) call for the adult taking a middle line between instructor and facilitator, I recognise my now broader and more subtle understanding of what guided intervention might mean for the role of the teacher in supporting drawing activity. The reality of working with young children, engaged me in a wide range of behaviours which were sensitive to children building knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes in the socio-cultural context. It included giving children:

- scope to become involved in and focus upon activities that interest and intrigue them;
- opportunities to have their thinking made visible;
- opportunities, when appropriate, to develop their techniques in relation to tool use and be introduced to common artistic conventions;
- time to practice and apply more formal experiences in their own meaning making process;
- opportunities to learn how to think and talk with others about the process of making meaning;
- opportunities to share their images and meanings with an adult who pays attention, who listens, who responds with warmth and humanity and encourages children's dispositions to learn.

One key finding was how much, in taking this particular role, I drew confidently upon my holistic understanding of the young child as a learner within the early years classroom. I was secure in my vision of a more aesthetic environment, where children could take visual risks without the fear of narrow or negative feedback. In contrast I lacked confidence in using the meta-language pertaining to the aesthetic qualities of the visual arts, even though I had studied art at an advanced level. With the increasing dominance of the visual image as a means of communication, there is a need for teachers to be supported in developing the ability to talk confidently about visual images with their colleagues and their pupils.

For young children, drawing is one of a range of experiences which allows them to represent their own meaning, culturally formed within a cultural context. Through the guided-intervention approach the teacher crucially mediates the interaction between the child, the children and the culture of the educational context. It is a far from uniform process and to a large extent the teacher's supporting role is constructed within the event.

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About the Author

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