



FOCUSSING ON DRAWING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: MOVING BEYOND REALISM TO CULTIVATING A DYNAMIC ENGAGEMENT WITH ART IN THE ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Drawings and observations of life at play in a nursery school garden in England are examined with a focus on the children's interactions and artistic expressions. It is framed by England's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and its Early Learning Goals, which tend to evaluate children's drawings based on their representational accuracy of flora and fauna. However, this research delves into the rich and dynamic encounters that occur when children engage with elements such as field poppies and blossoming trees in their nursery garden. It considers how the interplay of the children's use of materials, their physical engagement, the garden's natural vibrancy and the children's evolving concepts contribute to a complex learning environment. The study's results highlight the importance of recognizing and nurturing this complexity, which fosters a sense of response-ability that is deeply embedded in the context. This approach acknowledges the significance of vitality and agency, which are fundamental to an educational practice and experience that is both lively and filled with possibilities for innovative thinking within a framework of care.

Keywords: Attending-to, response-ability, intra-action, agency, drawing, realism

INTRODUCTION

Brooks (2022) suggests that observation and drawing transcend the pursuit of mere realistic representation, fostering instead the birth of narratives and concepts. This article draws attention to the nuanced and experientially rich drawings described by Haraway (2016) and Hedges (2022), which came to life when a group of young children aged three and four, along with their teacher, engaged in observing and sketching the diverse array of small animals, grasses, blossoms, and plant life flourishing alongside them in their nursery garden. The children had penned a request to the school's gardeners, asking for the cessation of weedkiller and pesticide use, as well as a reduction in lawn mowing, in favor of allowing a natural wildness to reclaim their garden. This shift towards rewilding allowed the children to immerse themselves in the process of observing and depicting the evolving changes, thereby deeply connecting with the garden's ecological vibrancy and energy.

Madeley Nursery School is a vibrant learning hub for children and adults, which celebrates the growth and development of its entire community, encompassing kids, educators, families, carers, and even broader circles. The school is committed to fostering a sense of partnership and citizenship, with a

focus on nurturing children's natural curiosity, creativity, and love for play. Its culture of continuous improvement is based on observing, documenting, and reflecting on educational practices.

The school views the educational journey as a collaborative and evolving process, informed by the unique perspectives and knowledge each child brings. Drawing inspiration from the innovative preschools of Reggio Emilia in Italy, Madeley Nursery School emphasizes the importance of the arts in learning and self-expression. The philosophies of thinkers like Gregory Bateson and his daughter Nora Bateson, who explored the interconnectedness of our world and the importance of understanding it to enhance our engagement, are deeply influential in shaping the school's leadership and educational approaches.

The nursery school is a lively and welcoming place that prioritizes the wellbeing of everyone, including the small creatures and plants in its garden. The children, their families, and the educators all grow and learn together, benefiting from each other's presence in a way that promotes collective health and happiness.

This article is based on research that looked into how children and educators learn together with nature in the nursery's garden, rather than just learning about it. The research explored the ways learning occurs and the factors that influence it. This piece specifically examines a part of the research that deals with how children perceive and interact with the world through drawing. It suggests that when children draw from what they see, they're not just copying what's in front of them; they're also expressing their thoughts and building relationships with the world around them. This process is seen as a way of caring and understanding, which is important for both learning and ethical behaviour.

RELATING TO DRAWING AS MORE THAN JUST CAREFUL AND ACCURATE REALISM

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework from the Department for Education in 2023 outlines the mandatory guidelines for the growth, learning, and safety of children up to five years old in registered English settings. Within its comprehensive guide, drawing is mentioned only twice across its 52 pages. Initially, drawing is highlighted as part of Physical Development to develop fine motor skills, with an emphasis on children beginning to draw with accuracy and care. It is also mentioned in the context of Understanding the World, encouraging children to observe and illustrate the natural environment, focusing on animals and plants.

Children in the EYFS are expected to reach certain development levels by the time they turn five, which is assessed through the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP). Teachers use their professional knowledge to evaluate if a child is meeting these developmental goals, categorized into 17 Early Learning Goals (ELGs), or if they're still emerging in certain areas. The EYFSP's results help with the transition to the next educational year and provide the Department for Education with data to analyze various developmental outcomes.

However, the EYFS's limited references to drawing in the ELGs can restrict how drawing is incorporated into the curriculum and daily activities, potentially undervaluing its broader significance. This approach overlooks the complexity of children's drawing, which is not just a way for them to develop motor skills but is also:

- A multifaceted form of communication that intertwines with other ways of expressing ideas.
- A reflection of a child's emotions, interests, sense of identity, personal tastes, and creative process.
- Influenced by the interaction between children and their environment, including drawing materials, which shapes their experiences.

The concern is that the current framework's narrow view on drawing may lead to an educational practice that doesn't fully appreciate or nurture the rich and varied dimensions of children's drawing experiences.

Educators should recognize children's drawing as a complex form of communication and learning, intertwined with other forms of expression and understanding. Instead of viewing drawing as merely a step before writing, it's important to appreciate the intricate details, like the interaction of marks, colours, and surfaces, which all contribute to the drawing's meaning. Drawing is a dynamic activity, full of action and significance, rather than just a simple process or final piece. Debates over whether the process or the product is more important are missing the point and underestimate the skills children demonstrate through their drawings.

Drawing is more than just marks on a page. It's an active, sensory event where different elements interact. As Pacini-Ketchabaw and colleagues explain, using charcoal for drawing is an experience where the material is both a tool for expression and a participant in the process. This interaction isn't just about creating meaning; it's a live, momentary experience that involves both people and their environment.

They see drawing with charcoal as a series of meaningful interactions: fingers touch charcoal, charcoal touches skin, and creative, unexpected things happen. This idea extends to children drawing together; they influence and respond to the materials and each other, creating a dynamic mix of ideas, movements, and impressions. All these elements—thoughts, lines, sounds, and even the charcoal dust—come together to co-create the drawing in a lively, interconnected dance.

ENGAGING WITH DRAWING: A CALL FOR ATTENTIVENESS AND RESPONSIVENESS

To truly grasp the essence of drawing, one must be present and attentive, ready to engage with the dynamic nature of the act. Pacini-Ketchabaw and colleagues (2017) explore how children and educators interact with each other and the drawing process in early childhood settings. They stress the importance of being open to what unfolds in the moment. This concept aligns with Haraway's idea of "response-ability" (2016), which suggests that responding is a form of caring. This care extends to the children, the act of drawing, materials, and the surrounding environment, fostering curiosity and transformative relationships.

The way we approach and engage with drawing influences our observations and reactions. At Madeley Nursery, educators learned to be receptive and move in harmony with the children and the environment during drawing sessions in the garden. Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2017) describe this as an interplay of responses among various elements within a space, allowing for diverse connections and interactions.

Using Haraway's concept of response-ability to view drawing in the nursery garden challenges traditional views on realism and objective representation of nature, as outlined in the statutory Early Learning Goals (ELGs) of the EYFS Statutory Framework (DfE, 2023). Instead of applying a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching, this perspective invites dynamic, relational pedagogical strategies that embrace the unexpected and unknown. Such a shift opposes the certainty and objectivity of traditional educational methods, which tend to oversimplify and disconnect the complex interrelations present in these encounters.

Continuing to follow restrictive ELGs will shape and limit educational practice and children's experiences in early childhood, undermining their ability to perceive the interconnectedness of their world. In contrast, educators who embrace the vibrancy of exploration and are responsive to the diverse array of images, narratives, and ideas, empower children to become more capable of engaging with the complexities and ecologies that make up our world, including its many living and non-human aspects.

EXAMPLES OF INTERACTIVE AND ADAPTABLE DRAWING EXPERIENCES AT MADELEY NURSERY

At Madeley Nursery, teachers value art, especially drawing, just as much as they do science and logic. They believe that embracing different views and ways of thinking is vital for learning. As such, drawing is seen as a versatile activity that can be logical, scientific, creative, descriptive, lively, or tell a story, among other things. The children create drawings in the nursery's garden using various materials like charcoal, pastels, watercolours, and markers on different types of paper. They work both together and individually, creating pieces that not only involve their artistic choices but also incorporate natural elements like flowers, grass, rain, and insects that find their way into the artwork, either by chance or with the children's help.



Image 1 The tree in the nursery garden, a subject of relations. *With permission Madeley Nursery School.*

Upon first discovering the tree in the nursery's garden, the children brought their own stories, knowledge, and curiosity about this and other trees they had known, both real and from tales. The tree itself held memories of its time in the garden, the children who had played around it, and its interactions with the weather, all evident in its bark, branches, and roots. The tree was not isolated; it was part of a community with insects, birds, bees, and elements like soil and rain. With their teacher,

Louise Lowings, the children observed and documented the vibrant life in the garden, creating a guidebook that included everything from plants to creatures, learning how to coexist with the tree.

Throughout the year, the children engaged with the tree, playing games, climbing, and spending time with it, forming a deep bond and developing an ecological awareness. This connection allowed them to see the tree's energy and its place in the garden from various perspectives. The children also experienced the garden's liveliness by watching and sketching the transient field poppies, even imagining the poppies observing them in return. Their discussions with Louise revealed how Saul, one of the children, creatively imagined the poppy as an observer from across the fence, highlighting a playful and reciprocal relationship with nature.

Max: *"That's a poppy".*

Sofia: *"There's another one round there".*

Wanda: *"That looks like a poppy because of the red".*

Saul: *"The poppy is looking at us Lou, it's peeping out".*



Image 2 The field poppy, peeping out and observing the children.
With permission Madeley Nursery School.



Image 3 Field poppy drawings of the children. Marker pen on paper.
With permission Madeley Nursery School.

In a conversation with Tonino in 2016, Robin Wall Kimmerer discussed how plants possess a form of intelligence, with abilities to perceive, sense, respond, and communicate with their environment. Thus, the idea of a poppy 'peeping' at children, as they watch it, shows a kind of mutual awareness. This moment highlights the importance for educators in early childhood to remain open to unfamiliar concepts, to engage with nature in meaningful ways, and to embrace the surprises that come from such interactions.

Similarly, children's drawings of poppies are more than just attempts to capture reality on paper; they represent an interactive process with the flower. These drawings are not focused on precision or creating a perfect plant image as suggested by the Department for Education in 2023. Instead, they are part of a 'visual conversation' with the poppies, seeing them as active, aware entities. By immersing themselves in the garden's life, everyone involved is affected. Recognizing this influence

allows educators to better connect people with nature and art, just as children naturally relate to their surroundings. Children show us how to experience the world in interconnected ways, using their imagination and creativity with simple tools like markers and paper among the garden's elements.

The essence of such encounters, as appreciated in this context, is that by engaging with the artistic aspects of connection and relationships (referenced by Bateson in 1972 and Vecchi in 2010), particularly through drawing, these events can spark learning. This learning environment fosters attention, curiosity, and awareness that helps children understand, relate to, and care for others, such as the poppy in this example. It positions both the child and the poppy as capable entities within a caring and responsible relationship.

In pursuing their investigation into the living things in their nursery garden, the children coined new terms like 'slugging' to describe a slug's slow movement. They observed and sketched various types of grasses, noticing their unique stems, seeds, and movements in the wind, as well as the small insects living among them. They even imagined the scents of clover and the cautiousness of butterflies, which they thought might be wary of humans.

The children developed working theories and temporary assumptions based on their ongoing exploration and activities in the garden. They hypothesized about spiders using 'lip balm' to protect their mouths and determining a ladybug's age by counting its birthday spots. Their observations and theories were not just about drawing accurately, but also about allowing room for creativity and unexpected discoveries through their imaginative and inquisitive approach to learning.



Image 4 The diversity of grasses that grew when the grass was not mowed so often, attracted the children in the creatures they saw, the seeds they produced and their similarities and differences to each other. *With permission Madeley Nursery School.*

The teachers encouraged the young children to share their drawings and ideas, which helped them see things from different perspectives. During one activity, Kim and Amber worked on a drawing of a garden tree over several days. They kept improving the drawing by discussing their ideas with other kids. They decided to add cherry blossoms to the tree in the drawing, imagining how the tree wanted to look beautiful again and how the bees and butterflies would enjoy it.

Kim: "This tree wants to be pink again".
Amber: "Yeah, it wants to be beautiful again".
Kim: "Yeah, it's beautiful".
Amber: "It will love it, and the bees".
Kim: "All the bees will love it and the butterflies. It's food for the bees".
Amber: "They will love it, their beautiful home".

Their conversation and ideas turned the drawing into more than just art; it became an interaction of memories, nature, and creativity. The drawing showed how everything is connected in nature, like the tree with its birds, bees, and butterflies, and the children's understanding of life's connections grew from this activity.

The act of drawing was a way for the kids to think about the tree as a living thing and to explore their own thoughts and stories. They used their imaginations as they drew, painted, and talked about the tree, creating a close bond and a beautiful image of it.

This drawing session was full of love, beauty, and care. It showed how ideas can develop over time and how relationships and wellbeing can flourish when everyone, including the insects, works together and

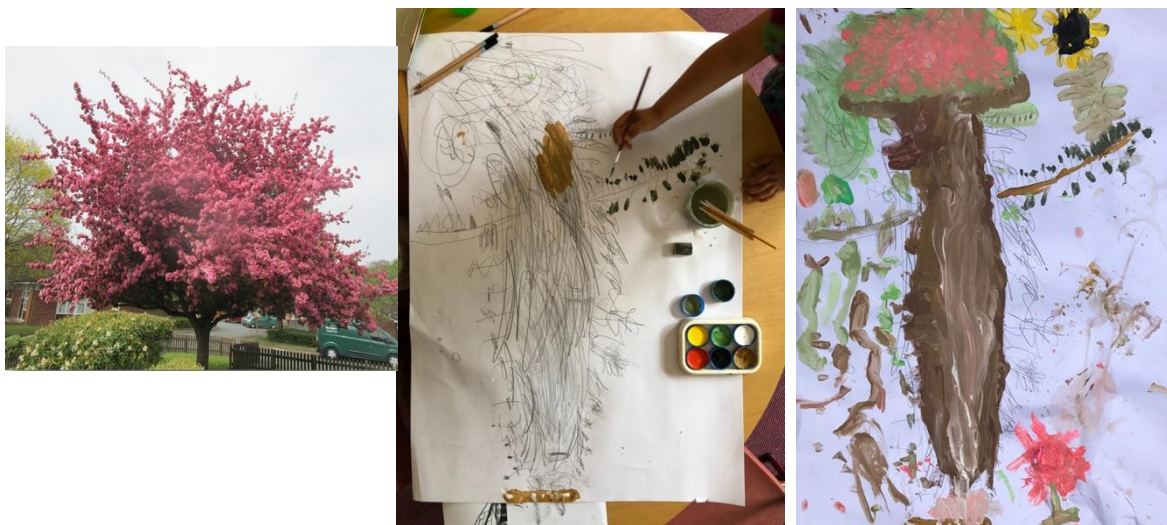


Image 5 The tree, the drawing of the tree which evolved over time, and the addition of the blossom to the tree to make it its best beautiful again, by Kim and Amber. *With permission Madeley Nursery School.*

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this piece, we've delved into Haraway's (2016) idea of response-ability, which emphasizes the importance of an ethical connection to young children's drawing and observation activities at Madeley Nursery School in England. I've outlined the English Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework

(DfE, 2023), which defines drawing by its assessment criteria, focusing on producing detailed and accurate images of plants and animals.

Through examining the children's exploration of their nursery garden, I've highlighted how their drawing sessions became eco-friendly and interactive experiences. These sessions were a blend of the garden's presence, the drawing materials, the children's thoughts, and shared memories, fostering a rich environment for creative thinking and interaction with nature (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017).

I've also touched on the qualities of a response-able teacher who adapts to surprises and connects with the children and their ideas, as well as the impact of materials and living things in the garden. This dynamic combination fuels the children's relationships, imaginative ideas, and theories as they investigate and personify the world around them, such as observing poppies and the tree's wish to be admired (Hedges, 2022).

Thus, drawing is more than just realism or the physical marks on paper (Brooks, 2022). It's a rich process that welcomes diverse thought processes (Vecchi, 2010) and holds the potential for new insights. It's an expression of children's emotions, curiosity, identity, artistic sense, and storytelling, integral to the art of drawing (Anning and Ring, 2004). Drawing isn't just about a child's output or an activity they start alone; it's about relationships, social interaction, and communication. Its complexity and liveliness are what make it beautiful. Limiting drawing to mere realistic precision undermines the potential for alternative ways of understanding, expressing, and acting responsibly. Viewing drawing as both a caring practice and a way of knowing underscores the mutual attentiveness and responsiveness of children, educators, and the environment, which are all interactive elements in the early childhood education landscape.

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