

I'll Close My Eyes: Young Children Early Exposure to Structured Drawing

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ABSTRACT

As young children engage in visual art activities, they develop an awareness and appreciation of pleasant sensory experiences, which is the beginning of esthetic development. Using art materials such as paint, clay, markers, crayons, cornstarch, and collage materials, children express their individual ideas and feelings. As they view their own creations and those of other children, they learn to value and appreciate differences. The purpose of this paper is to report on a visual art activity that was conducted in a preschool center located in the United States. Various visual arts activities are conducted in the center; however, for the purpose of this paper, the researcher chose to share only one of these activities. The results show that the role of the facilitator is essential, given that cognitive theory suggests that adults need to take an active child-centered approach to assisting the learning process of children.

Keywords: *Visual Arts, Preschool, Drawing, Scaffolding*

INTRODUCTION

The importance of visual arts in educating society is undeniable. Visual artists have the responsibility to educate and deliver certain forms of knowledge through their artwork, such as messages on global warming and pollution, as well as awareness campaigns (Raleigh, 1971 as cited in Mat, 2017). Many established and well-known artists have managed to build a career and receive large sums of money for their artwork, proving that there is a bright future in being skilled at visual arts. However, the importance of academic achievement, which many education systems promote, has resulted in the so-called 'academic outcomes' that threaten the implementation of visual arts in schools. This trend has also resulted in arts being seen as trivial and less important (Mat, 2017). Advocates for arts education are therefore pushed to make a strong case for the implementation of arts in the curriculum, especially in early childhood education settings (McClure, Tarr, Thompson & Eckhoff, 2017).

Children's drawings and paintings are traditionally displayed in many early childhood settings around the world. Adults respond variously to children's artworks, considering them artistic, dynamic, and even poetic. Modernist artists like Picasso have looked to young children's artistic efforts for a new way of seeing and thinking about their own esthetics and artistry (Wright, 2003). At the same time, in the early twentieth century, Maria Montessori dismissed children's artwork as meaningless scribbles and directed that young children should be taught about esthetics and gain an appreciation of the 'masters' (Montessori, 1965). Several research studies have revealed that visual arts make a positive and direct contribution to the

development of child literacy, in the aspects of emergent literacy, phonological awareness, and literacy as a social practice (Brown, 2013; Theodotou, 2017).

The Project Zero researchers Winner and Hetland (2005) found that there was no significant correlation between competencies in visual arts and academic achievement. In later studies, however, they acknowledged that visual arts contribute to “broader indirect benefits, even if they were not directly related to quantifiable performance in other subjects” (Hogan, Hetland, Jaquith & Winner, 2018). Students who study the arts seriously are taught to see better, to envision, to persist, to be playful and learn from mistakes, to make critical judgments, and justify such judgments (Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2013).

Realizing the broad benefit that arts could contribute to creativity and personal development, I am interested in learning about visual arts activities for children. Therefore, this paper reports on a visual art activity that was conducted in a preschool center located in Ohio, USA during the researcher’s term as a PhD candidate conducting research at the facility. Various visual arts activities are conducted in the center. However, for the purpose of this paper, I chose to report on only one of the activities carried out.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Visual Arts

Most young children naturally delight in art. They enjoy the process of applying paint to paper, gluing things together, and pounding a lump of clay. Working with art materials offers children opportunities to experiment with color, shape, design, and texture. As they engage in art activities, children develop an awareness and appreciation of pleasant sensory experiences, which is the beginning of esthetic development. Using art materials such as paint, clay, markers, crayons, cornstarch, and collage materials, children express their individual ideas and feelings. As they view their own creations and those of other children, they learn to value and appreciate differences.

For young children, the process of creating is most important, not what they actually create. Artwork benefits all aspects of child development. As children draw, paint, and make collages, they experiment with colors, lines, shapes, and sizes. They use paints, fabrics, and chalk to make choices, try out ideas, plan, and experiment. They learn about cause and effect when they mix colors. Through trial and error, they learn how to balance a mobile and weave yarn.

Through their art, children express how they feel and think, and how they view the world. Art is an outlet that lets children convey what they may not be able to say with words. Involvement with a rich variety of art materials instills confidence and pride. Art also offers opportunities for physical development. As children tear paper for a collage or use scissors to cut, they refine small muscle movements. Making lines and shapes with markers and crayons helps children develop the fine motor control they will need for writing. Art is enjoyable and satisfying for young children. It enables them to learn many skills, express themselves, appreciate beauty, and have fun, all at the same time.

In their book *The Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood*, Dodge, Kolker & Heroman (2016) promote the benefits of visual arts in terms of learning and growth in young children. These benefits include:

1. Developing visual-spatial relationships (such as eye-hand coordination) through painting, drawing, and collage making, and by using clay. This helps children learn to label shapes and objects, and enhances problem-solving ability.

2. Helping children discover the nature and complexity of their world. Children learn about the concepts of color and shape, texture, and the effects of their actions on materials and objects. Art provides a vehicle to explore the possibilities and limitations of materials and encourages children's imaginations.
3. Creating a non-verbal language for young children to use to express feelings. Children can explore the world, process and reflect on experiences, and understand concepts.
4. Building a bridge between the physical world of things and events and the inner world of feelings and meanings. Art encourages spontaneous exploration and promotes individuality.
5. Heightening a child's perceptual abilities.

(Dodge, Kolker & Heroman, 2016, p. 28)

Theories that Support the Use of Visual Arts with Children

Jean Piaget (1956, in Mavers, 2011) believed that cognition in a child involves the process of knowing or perceiving and the act of acquiring an idea. Piaget's theory of cognitive development can be implemented in the learning of visual arts in schools. Piaget believed that cognitive development is a mode of adaptation to the world. He believed that cognitive growth in a child is caused by two fundamental principles: assimilation and accommodation. He viewed assimilation as "taking in" and accommodation as an alteration of the individual understanding of events (Sigel, 1977). In other words, having visual arts in schools can help students grow, in terms of their cognitive development stages, from childhood to adolescence. Moreover, Sigel incorporates how Piaget sees constructivism as the best approach for students to learn in a classroom environment. He views constructivism as the child's opportunity to translate into action what they learn and know. Piaget's idea of constructivism is important as it shows us how a child's knowledge is obtained from personal actions, experiences, and communications with the world. Classrooms that implement Piaget's theory are usually busy, yet highly organized, and they promote environments where children are encouraged to take the initiative, act autonomously, and engage in creative activity. Play and active exploration are encouraged, and arts activities are a regular feature. The role of teachers and other adults is to support children's interests by providing materials and offering a warm and intellectually lively presence. The adult presence is supportive, helping children develop and sustain inquiry-oriented attitudes towards learning while they negotiate the complex task of building social relationships with others (Korn-Bursztyn, 2012).

Most early childhood and art educators strongly support the concept of a relationship between cognitive theory and visual arts education. The constructivist perspective supports a view of cognitive development in which children create individual meanings and understanding from their experiences in art through their interactions with art media and art language (Vygotsky, 1962). Children's involvement in visual arts, especially drawing, is seen to have originated from children's physical action (Matthews, 1999) and play (Vygotsky, 1995). Piaget believes that there is a close relationship between play and art in the process of making meaning and developing cultural awareness among children. Children express their thoughts and understanding through drawings, which was termed "graphic speech" (Dyson, 1982). Children use symbols to share their views and imagination. Children's early formation of symbols in drawing is important as it assists their ability to write. More competent adults should provide directions for children so they can develop early writing skills in their drawing of symbols. Thus, teachers should play the role of facilitators. They are to scaffold students' knowledge and provide opportunities for them that would otherwise be impossible to experience without the guidance of someone more knowledgeable. He maintained that intellectual capacity occurs within a range. The lower limits are represented by what a child can accomplish independently and the upper limits by what the same child can accomplish under the

guidance of an older figure like a teacher, another adult, or an older child, in other words, what is known as the zone of proximal development (Korn-Bursztyn, 2012).

The Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio Emilia approach promotes the idea that children's creativity can be better developed if their learning is not restricted. Children should be given time and space to explore various materials, test new things, and develop new skills. They should also be given the opportunity to form meaningful connections between their experiences and the wider world. In an art classroom that adopts the Reggio Emilia approach, various visual arts media, such as colors, drawing papers, paintbrushes, and natural fibers; items such as glass and fabrics; and various other tools to explore their creativity should be made available and easily accessible to the children. Every space must have a purpose. There should be a bright, cheerful, and calm atmosphere, with carefully laid out resources that lure the children's minds as if to say 'come play with me' (Edward & Gandini, 2018). There must also be social areas, as social interactions provide invaluable opportunities for each child's development, and quiet areas for personal reflection. Most importantly, the work of each child should be displayed beautifully, with care and respect. There should also be a safe space for unfinished work, which children can come back to and finish at a later time (McNally & Slutsky, 2017).

Adults in the classroom, such as teachers, should promote the use of these materials by the children. This would encourage them to be inquisitive and explorative. In this way, children would inevitably expand their natural creativity and curiosity. Their creativity would be more visible when adults are more attentive to the cognitive processes than to the results they achieve (Melaguzzi, 1998 in Edward & Gandini, 2018). The Reggio Emilia approach promotes the idea of adults as learners alongside children (Büşra Kaynak-Ekici, H. Merve İmir & Z. Fulya Temel, 2020). Children would benefit more through the involvement of teachers and parents in the process of learning. Thus, they would view themselves as respected and equal members of society. They would be provided with a safe and beautiful environment in which to be creative and explorative of the world around them.

The role of teachers in the development of visual arts among young children

The main role of an early childhood teacher is to create an environment conducive to its exploration by young children. In order to prepare for such an engaging and stimulating environment, teachers need to provide opportunities for children to explore the learning process through their senses, i.e., sight, touch, hear, smell, and taste (Novakovic, 2015). Teachers of young children need to facilitate the children's learning by including various avenues for exploration, along with diverse objects and materials that would open up various possibilities for the young children to experience and experiment. This process would enhance the children's curiosity and develop their interest further (Mages, 2016).

Teachers of the young need to spend time observing the children at play. Doing so would facilitate their discovery and awareness of the children's current interests, which would, in turn, help the adults to design activities that would be meaningful to the children (Novakovic, 2015). The teachers' role must not take the form of giving instructions on how children should do their artwork, but the form of facilitation that would stimulate children's attention and their interest in further exploration (Billir Seyhan & Karabay, 2018). Teachers' rigid instructions on what to draw or how to paint would restrict the children's exploration and curiosity. Moreover, it would create a situation where children are only completing someone else's ideas (the teacher's ideas in this case) which would discourage their creative development process (Mages, 2016). Instead, teachers should facilitate by modeling to the children how to complete and artwork, in tandem with Vygotsky's scaffolding theory (Vygotsky, 1985).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out through a qualitative method to collect data. The main sources of data came from analyses of the feedback from the respondents, as well as participant observations by the researcher between March 2018 and June 2018.

Setting

A preschool center in Ohio was chosen as the setting for this project. The facility was chosen as the research site as the researcher was working on data collection during her PhD candidacy years there. Every Wednesday morning, the children in the center, aged between one and five years old, would come to the art studio to participate in arts activities. The children were exposed to different art media each week, such as tempera paint, watercolors, clay, crayons, charcoal pencils, and *papier-mâché*. They would experiment with different forms of media, and they would draw, color, use total body paint and build models using these different media.

The existence of an art studio in the facility makes it perfect for children to experience and experiment with visual arts. The art studio is equipped with different forms of visual arts tools, such as various paintbrushes, canvases for painting, papers for coloring and drawing, different forms of colors, and ample chairs and tables so the children can sit. There are four tables, sixteen chairs, one drawer to keep a variety of papers, cupboards to store the art materials, and a sink. The walls and windows of the studio are decorated with children's artwork. The set-up of the studio fits the description of the Reggio Emilia approach. In Reggio Emilia classrooms, all the materials are easily accessible to the children and the walls are decorated with the students' work.

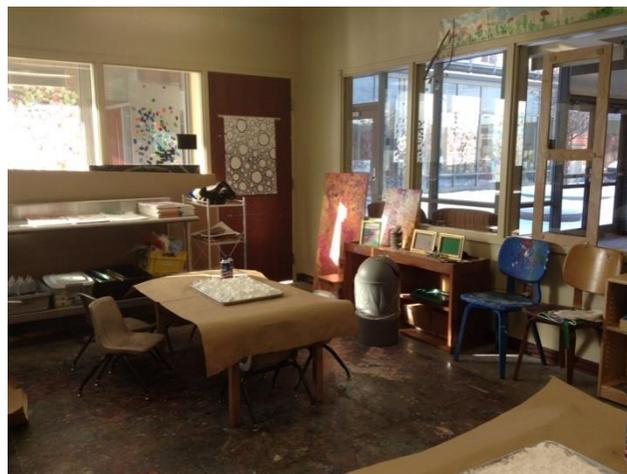


Fig 1: The preschool's art studio

The Drawing Project

Since the children had been exposed to various visual art media, especially the use of different types of colors, I felt that it was time to expose them to drawing techniques. It would be interesting to identify whether the children were able to draw in a more structured manner since they were so used to freestyle drawing. Our head facilitator suggested that we expose the children to structured drawing. On the day of the project, children from the age group of four years old were scheduled to be in the art studio. Therefore, they were the participants for this project. The guidelines for the structured drawing technique were written on paper and pasted at the front of the preschool room so it would be easily visible to both children and facilitators.

The basic drawing skills involved drawing lines that were divided into two types, soft and hard lines. This was followed by shapes, sharp (triangle, rectangular, square) and curved (circle). The next step was contours, which are divided into blind (drawing without looking at drawing paper but at the actual object) and regular (drawing by looking at the object). The final step was to let the children practice what they had learned.

FINDINGS

Organization of the Drawing Activity

The activity involved 11 children with three facilitators. The subsequent discussion in this article focuses on the three children whom I facilitated: Benny, Destiny, and Josh.

Soft and Hard Lines

I started by showing the children how to draw soft and hard lines. They then drew the lines on their papers. Since drawing is seen as play by children, I told them that the crayon pencils that they were using were “magic pencils”.

Me : *I am going to show you how to draw properly today. These are the pencils that you will be using. They are called crayon pencils. These pencils are “magic pencils”*

Josh : *What magic pencils?*

Destiny : *I want one.*

Benny : *Uuuu, can magic?*

They were really concentrating on drawing the lines. Josh did a great job in drawing the lines with the distinct features of hard and soft lines. Destiny succeeded in drawing lines but the distinctions between those lines were not obvious. Although there were no obvious distinctions between the lines in Benny’s drawing either, he managed to produce as many lines as possible. Surprisingly, the lines seemed almost straight. The lines produced by the three children are shown below.



Fig 2: Josh's lines



Fig 3: Destiny's lines



Fig 4: Benny's lines

Sharp and Curved Shapes

I then showed them how to draw sharp and curved shapes. I explained that sharp shapes have sharp and pointy edges, while curved shapes are round shapes. I drew the shapes while explaining this to them. At this point, Benny and Josh were still interested in participating. Destiny, however, lost interest since she wanted something more colorful. She went to find crayons and doodled on her drawing paper. I was impressed how Josh and Benny were so interested in the activity.

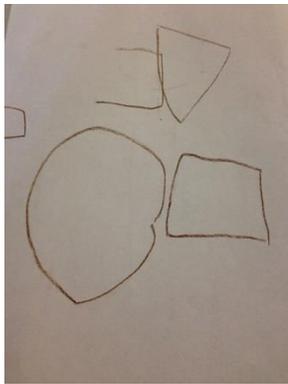


Fig 5: Benny's shapes



Fig 6: Josh's shapes

Benny managed to draw the shapes. Round and square shapes can clearly be seen in his drawing. Josh, meanwhile, managed to draw the shapes too. His, however, were all over the drawing paper. Josh's efforts to draw circles produced semicircles. His square shape had rounded edges.

Contours (Blind and Regular Drawing)

I explained to the children what is meant by blind and regular drawing. Destiny showed signs that she was interested at first. She later lost focus when she saw her teacher had entered the room. Josh and Benny watched while I demonstrated the technique to them.

Me : *Blind drawing is when you draw without looking at the object.*

(The object placed in the middle of the table was a mug. I demonstrated the drawing technique by not looking at the paper but at the object, while I was drawing).

Benny : *Uuu is it like when I draw by closing my eyes?*

Josh : *I can do that! I'll close my eyes and draw.*

Me : *Wow, good idea, Benny. Can you draw with your eyes closed, Josh?*

Using Benny's idea, both Josh and Benny later closed their eyes and drew. They both seemed to be enjoying themselves drawing while closing their eyes. Their drawings began to take shape after a few seconds. The drawings seemed to contain shapes such as the circles and squares that they had learned at the beginning.



Fig 7: Josh's blind drawing



Fig 8: Benny's blind drawing

Next, I placed a squeeze bottle in the middle of our table and began drawing by looking at the object and my drawing paper. I explained to the children that in regular drawing you draw by looking at the object while at the same time looking at your drawing paper. When I asked them to draw, they asked me to place my drawing in front of them. Instead of looking at the object in the middle, they drew by modeling my drawing.



Fig 9: My drawing

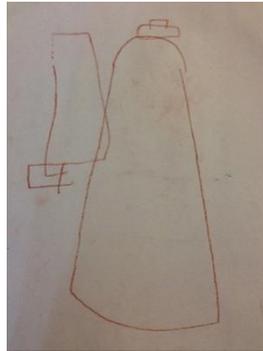


Fig 10: Josh's drawing



Fig 11: Benny's drawing

Analysis of the Activity

It was impressive to observe the children's reactions to structured drawing. The technique involves specific instructions for them to follow. The children were seen to be keen to participate upon learning that the pencils that were given to them were "magic pencils". The three children under my facilitation were, at first, interested in learning the technique. However, upon learning that the pencil had only one color, which was brown, Destiny lost interest right away. In her case, the element of fun and play must have deteriorated upon realizing that there were specific instructions for them to follow. Now the drawing session was not free drawing when she could draw anything she wanted. As children saw drawing as play (Vygotsky, 1995), they rarely spend a long time completing each creation but produce something in an instant, focusing all their emotions on what they are doing at that moment in time (Brown, 2013). Destiny must have realized that it was more serious when that they had to draw a specific object that was not meaningful to her.

Benny's ability to draw lines that were almost straight and shapes that included a perfect circle and square demonstrated his eye-hand coordination. Children at their age would have acquired the ability to produce drawings that were meaningful to them, although the visibility of perfect shapes such as circles and squares still needs practice. This shows the emergence of early writing (McArdle & Wright, 2014). Children's drawing is a form of them expressing themselves and is what Vygotsky termed 'graphic speech' (McArdle & Wright, 2014). Benny also expressed his interest in the activity by showing that he was aware of what was going on when he blurted out the line "drawing as if your eyes are closed". This helped make the activity more interesting and featured the element of play. Josh, being Benny's best friend, exhibited the influence that a peer can have on another child when he, too, seemed interested in participating after seeing how Benny was into it.

The role of the facilitator is also essential in helping to scaffold children's learning. Without their guidance, the children's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1985) would not develop. By first demonstrating how to draw lines, shapes, and do blind and regular drawing, the facilitators succeeded in scaffolding the children's knowledge of drawing. The facilitators started by first doing the blind drawing so that the children would not feel pressured or frustrated that they were not able to draw. This was important as they were still at an early stage of drawing. At this age, children are starting to draw what makes sense to them and their surroundings (Billir Seyhan & Karabay, 2018).

Children normally are interested in imitating and modeling adults (Mages, 2016). This has been proven through play, in which they would imitate the activities that the adults in their life do. Some examples of actions that imitate adults would be placing a phone call, caring for a child (when they are playing 'house'), ordering food from a restaurant, and various others. This explains why they chose to draw by looking at the facilitator's drawing instead of the real object in front of them.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to share and promote the outcome of conducting visual arts activities with preschool children in a childcare center located in Ohio, USA. The findings show that the process of learning the basic techniques of doing visual arts is possible for young children, provided that the activities are conducted in a fun and playful manner. Emergent literacy also took place while the children were engaged in such activities. In the process of conducting visual arts activities, in this case, structured drawing, the role of the facilitators is salient because children at this age learn best through the process of imitating and modeling the adults. Instructions that are too rigid and would restrict the children's flow of thinking and creativity should be avoided. Instead, the process of scaffolding through modeling and imitation by performing such activities should be used. In future research, studies can be conducted on the impact visual arts have on children's thought processes, visual thinking, and learning perceptions.

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