



Drawing. The Universal Language of Children

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the role of drawing as a means of communication in the early childhood setting. Through an analysis of different types of drawing, the article explores how children create meaning and develop a universal language. The importance of the teacher in facilitating this process is considered.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past century there has been a growing interest in children's art from a psychological, developmental and emotional perspective. Drawing in particular, has been recognised and identified as one of the most significant ways in which children feel free to express their emotions, reflect their inner worlds as well as to explore new concepts and problem solve (Malchiodi, 1998).

Unfortunately, from my personal experiences of early childhood classrooms, art can be perceived as more of a rainy day activity; a resource for children that requires little or no teacher facilitation, where approaches to art education are not significantly featured in either the teachers' beliefs or the way in which they practice the visual arts. Pohio (2006) confirms, 'a 'stand back and watch' approach in visual art programmes continues to be firmly entrenched' (p.13). More recently Terreni (2010) claims that the interest in teacher's thinking towards the visual arts in early childhood research within New Zealand suggests, 'many New Zealand early childhood teachers retain a non-interventionist hands-off position in relation to visual art education' (p.7). If art is included in the programme, I wonder about the emphasis that is often placed on children to 'produce' or 'make' something rather than allowing time to look, to collaborate, to communicate and to learn through the arts. I feel teachers can involve children with drawing activities without acknowledging its potential to foster visual literacy, emotional development and communication.

The aim of this paper therefore is to advocate for the arts within early childhood settings, to uphold its significance as a functional, beneficial and essential element of our curriculum; in particular, with reference to its facilitation as a form of communication. Terreni (2010) upholds this position by recognising 'visual art provides children with important tools for thinking and learning' (p.7). Hertzog (2001) when discussing the visual art programme synonymous within Reggio Emilia concurs that art can be 'used to advance thinking and present

challenges...[and has the ability] to make the learning experience “visible” (p.3).

One of the first encounters I had with understanding the relevance of the arts was when I undertook some research into the educators of Reggio Emilia. Through examining their pedagogy, I realised just how important drawing is for children in communicating their thinking (Pohio, 2009; Hertzog, 2001). Many of the children in early childhood centres have not yet developed an adequate vocabulary (written or verbal) to convey meaning and messages through their words. The images they draw therefore, be it realistic or from their imaginations, make this meaning visible. For me as a teacher, I see their drawings as a reflection of what these children are thinking or feeling, and I am able to unearth any disparity in their understanding or inconsistencies in their thinking. These I am then able to address as well as deciding upon a possible direction to follow in furthering the children’s learning. Understandably, I consider the role of the teacher to be fundamental in facilitating children’s communication skills through their drawing and in interpreting their work. I believe a child’s ability to use drawing as a method of communication relies on the teachers’ interests, their encouragement, support and their general teaching methods. Children should view their educators, as a resource for their work, someone they can rely on to be of assistance and to facilitate, rather than to judge or critique (Hertzog, 2001).

THE USE OF DRAWING IN CHILDREN’S COMMUNICATION

Drawing is the prevalent language of children (Rubin, 1984). As an educator of children aged 3-5 years, drawing is a method of teaching I utilise everyday in a number of different scenarios. Wright (2003) reminds us that the ‘arts provide important avenues for making the types of cognitive, emotional and ‘spiritual’ connections that are key to deep learning and knowing...consequently much of the learning, thinking and feeling that occurs in the arts takes place non-verbally’ (p.29). New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki states that children should ‘experience an environment where they develop non-verbal communication skills for a range of purposes’ (Ministry of Education [MOE], 1996, p.72). Communication can of course be verbal and non-verbal, but both of these forms of communication can be successfully expedited through drawing. Similarly, communication may be intentional or at times unintentional, yet I believe both, once again can ably be facilitated through drawing.

Teacher and researcher Ann Pelo (2007) sums up so beautifully how children’s drawings can communicate to us, how they can make thinking visible. She states,

Children’s ideas – like adults’ – are often vaguely formed, not fully defined or clearly articulated. Sometimes, children’s work is anchored in intuition or instinct; they aren’t so much thinking about what they’re doing as simply doing it. A child can give an idea form by drawing...it. In doing so, she can begin to clarify her ideas; she considers details and wrestles with inconsistencies. When her idea is visible, other children and adults can engage with it, thinking with her about its nuances and complexities, its gaps and incongruities (p.110)

Also Pohio (2009) states, when reflecting on her own practice within a New Zealand based early childhood centre, how the “children’s use of graphic languages, expressed through a range of different media, enabled them to reveal their thinking” (p.21).

I would like to share some examples of work I have engaged in with the children. Examples, which I believe, highlight and add clarity to the issues I have raised.

These drawings below (figure 1) were created by *H*, (4 years old). The aim of *H* was to teach her friends how to do a cartwheel; the instinctive way for her to do this was through a series of three drawings.



Fig.1 *H*, (4 years old)

After *H* completed her drawings, had made her thinking visible, I talked to her and subsequently added her words (figure 2).

My belief is that this form of art has the power to extend a child’s thinking; it can encourage children to consider different perspectives, to notice new details and to have a deeper awareness of their ideas. Through their drawings, children can gain more confidence in their abilities, they can make new discoveries and their stories can find a voice. Drawing in this manner assists children in giving and explaining instructions, much more eloquently than their words alone do. However, in this example it was not just *H* who gained understanding and clarified her thinking on cartwheels. Those around her, her friends also gained from watching her draw. Kolbe’s (2005) comments support this ‘as children listen to each other’s ideas and see each other’s work, they have opportunities to learn that there are different points of view. Through exploring a topic in different ways and from different perspectives, they expand their understandings’ (p.111).

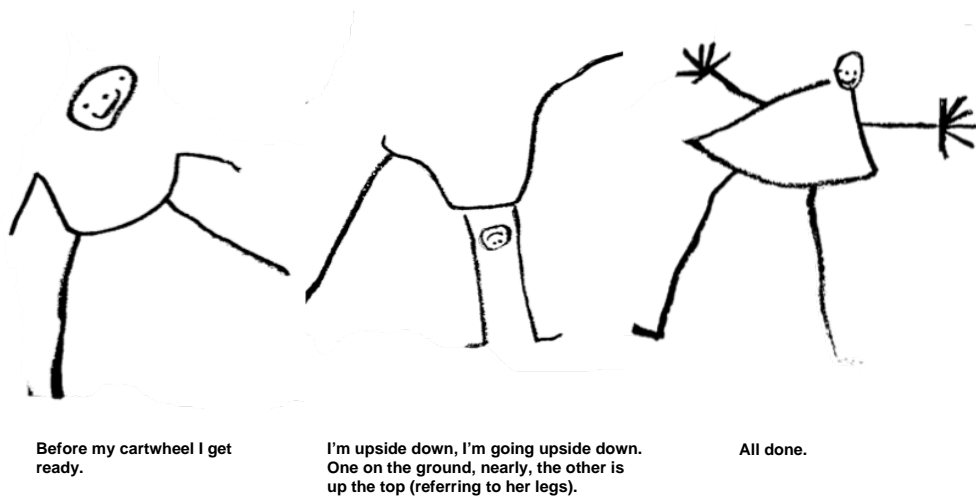


Fig.2 H, (4 years old). Annotations added

From this one example it is evident how drawing for children can have enormous potential on their propensity to communicate and therefore on their development in general.

In considering drawing as a means for communication at an even deeper level, it is Hawkins (2002) who felt that drawing could be divided into three tiers: *cognitive* (thinking, knowing and exploring), *affective* (developing emotions) and *linguistic* (developing visual language).

Let us look at these further and again I'll provide some examples of children's work to clarify these concepts.

DRAWING AS A MEANS FOR COMMUNICATING COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Drawing is a valuable and powerful tool enabling children to *make meaning*. By providing children with a rich supply of drawing opportunities, we can assist in their cognitive development through discussions and reflections on their work.

I have noticed that children are able to think really deeply about their drawings, to share their emerging knowledge and understandings, thereby further enhancing intellectual competence. It is Robertson (2000) who bravely reminds us that when 'a child is thinking on paper, the desire to communicate this idea to others must be respected' (p.156).

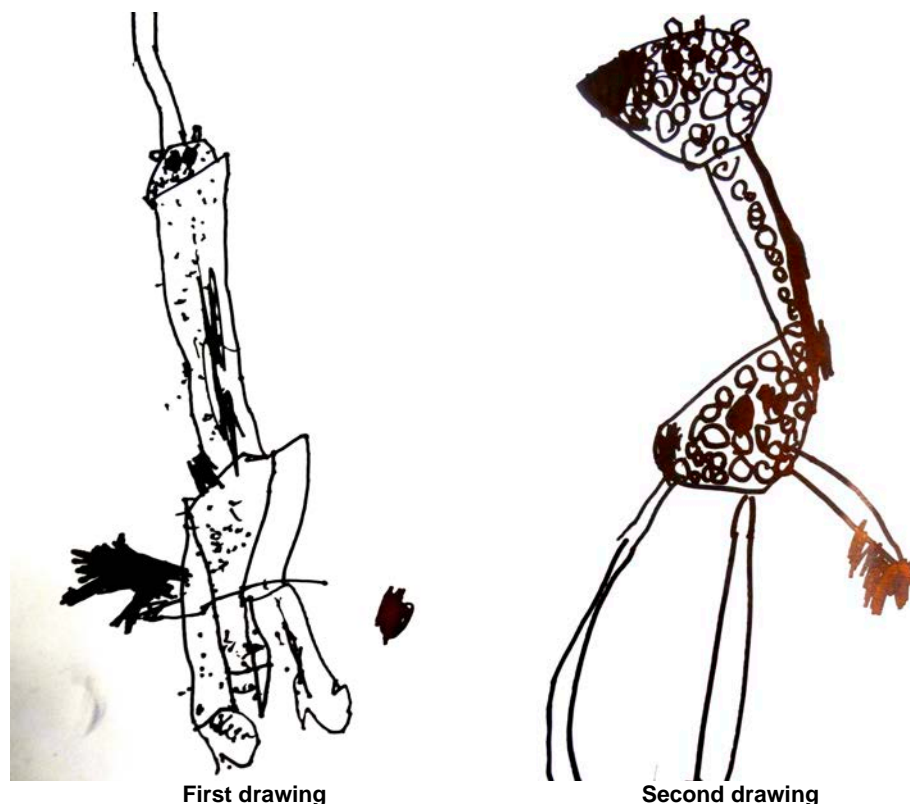
Observational or representational drawing is a method of encouraging children to think deeply about any given subject, and is one that I frequently use in my teaching. Even without the use of drawing I consider observation to be a very effective learning tool; with it, children really 'learn to see' (Kolbe, 2005).

I enjoy immensely working alongside children whilst they engage in observational drawings. I have noticed how children ask questions, challenge their own ideas and thoughts, speculate and hypothesise. Curtis and Carter (2003) remind us,

Rather than thinking of children's image-making as 'art', it may be more helpful to see it in a different light. Just as adults use notes and diagrams to assist understanding, so children use images to make sense of things and play with ideas. (p.152)

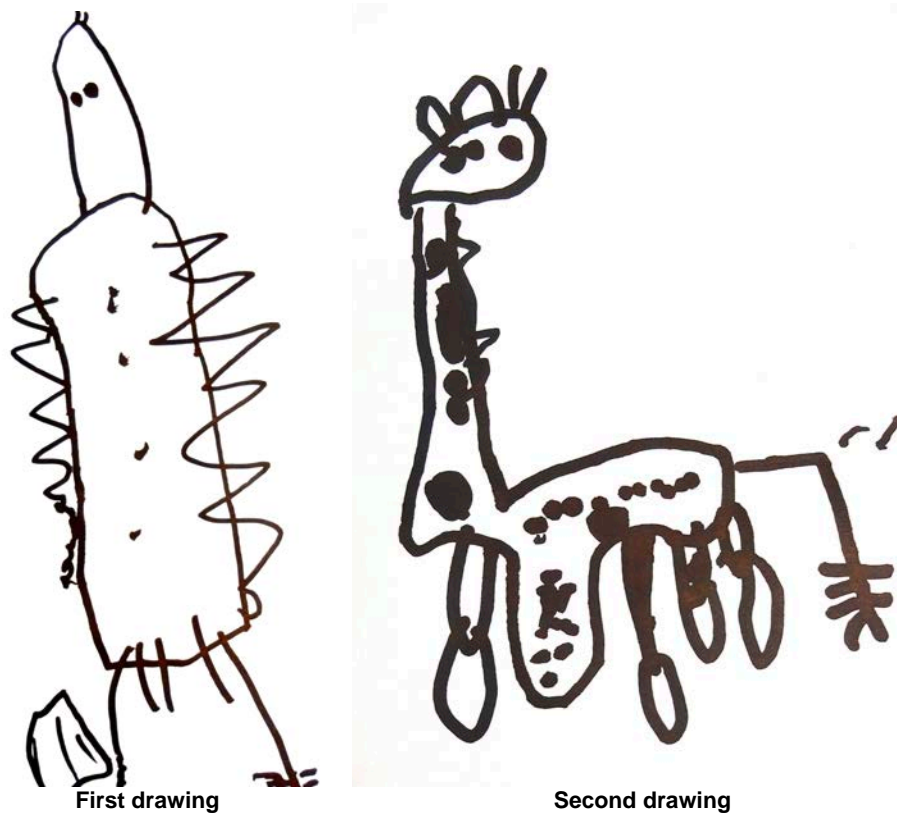
Similarly Robertson (2000) reminds us to consider art as a 'thinking tool' rather than solely for its creativity alone.

These wonderful examples of children's images (figures 3 and 4) really highlight the thinking children are encountering as they draw. In this work the children were invited to work with a provocation based around an interest in giraffes. On this day however I also had another objective—to encourage the children to think about their own learning and accrual of knowledge—to self-assess their work and to communicate their findings. After completing their first drawing of a giraffe, I suggested the children may like to look again at the photographs and models of giraffes I had provided. After some further discussions I then invited the children to draw a second picture, after which I asked the question, 'What are the differences between your two giraffes...what have you discovered and learned?'



They have spots on their head. This one's better (second drawing) this one's not as better (first drawing). This one can reach the leaves (second drawing) cause it's so so long. They have horns but they are too long here (first drawing). The head is better here, look...(second drawing) and the spots are good and big.

Fig. 3 W, 3 years old



My drawing is skinny (first drawing), this one (second drawing) is fat, and I took notice of the body that time. See, there the body is wrong. On this one (second drawing) I drew a tail with hairs on the end of the tail, and spots more like that (pointing to the photograph). Do you know Christine, giraffes have lots of spots.

Fig. 4 K, 3 years old

DRAWING AS A MEANS FOR COMMUNICATING EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Drawing is a wonderful tool for enabling children to express themselves emotionally, to think about and consider their inner thoughts and feelings. 'When children give form and expression to their feelings, they can look at them with new awareness and better talk about them with each other' (Pelo, 2007, p. 112). Pope, Butler and Qualter (2012) concur with these findings in their research by suggesting, 'Drawing is an enjoyable, natural activity which can be used as a means of expressing emotion and feeling' (p.2). They further propose that the creative elements of drawing enable individual children to have and share their voice with others, enabling professionals, such as teachers, to gain a more in depth knowledge into how a child perceives and views the world in which they live (Pope, et al., 2012).



I like to give my mum a cuddle. I also like my Pippa, she's a pussy cat. I have more to add to my heart map. It's a shaker at my home; my nanny gave it to me. I like all the roads, and hearts, and cookies - plain ones with dots on, and caterpillars. Oh, I forgot me - I like me.

Fig. 5 A drawing of *K's* (3 years) map of her heart.



I love my mummy and daddy and Cleo. My dad is hairy! And I'm going to draw Jaimee - I love her. I love my playground; I have my own at home. I love teddy - I sleep with teddy.

Fig. 6 A drawing of *E's* (3 years) map of her heart.

Consider the examples above (figures 5 and 6) of several children with whom I asked to draw a *map of their hearts*. My question was, 'If you drew a map of your heart, what would you include?' My initial idea was to encourage the children to think honestly, to be self-reflective and to develop their metacognitive thinking. That I got something so much more powerful and emotive was a wonderful surprise; many of the children were truly opening their hearts to me through their drawings. The children were choosing to share those emotions that had meaning to them, what was special in their lives at that particular time and those things that they each held close to their hearts.

DRAWING AS A MEANS FOR DEVELOPING VISUAL LANGUAGE

If we can accept drawing as a means of communication, then we can understand that it is a useful means of fostering a child's visual language. Visual language is a form of communication that uses visual elements to convey meaning or an idea. I know I am a visual thinker, I literally think in pictures, and I learn best when information and concepts are presented visually.

Loris Malaguzzi wrote about the hundred languages, of which clearly drawing can be considered. Think of drawings we admire from the great artists. For instance, Leonardo Da Vinci's drawn sketches inform us about his thinking at that time and the problems he had to contend with. However, they also highlight, perhaps through a series of these sketched drawings, how he overcame these issues, and how his thinking clarified (see figures 7 and 8).



Fig. 7 Birds

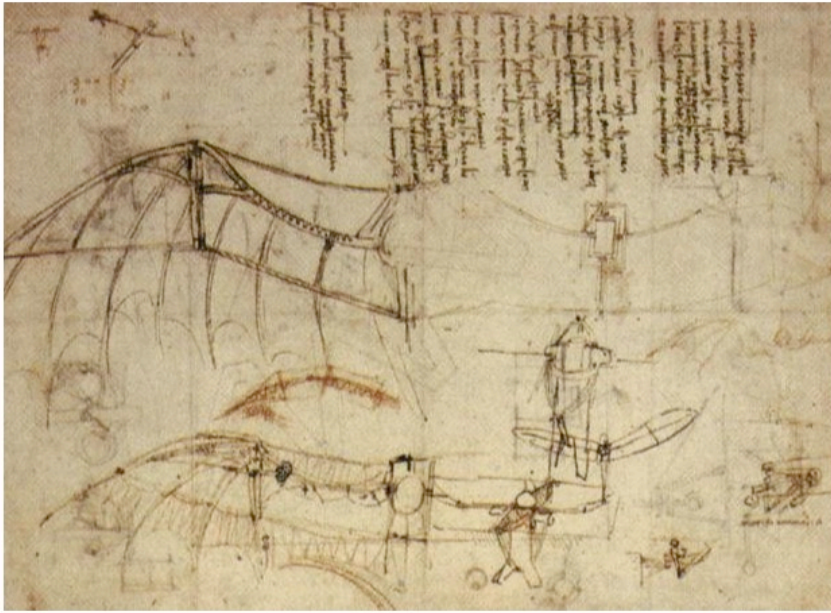


Fig. 8 Leonardo's drawings of a man powered flying machine with mechanical wings that flapped. This was patterned after birds (figure 7) and bats (Da Vinci, 1880).

Te Whāriki states in the learning outcomes for Goal 3 of the Communication-Mana Reo Strand the importance of children developing an understanding that symbols can be read, and thoughts, ideas and experiences represented visually (MOE, 1996). Young children are surrounded by visual imagery—for instance advertising, computer games and shop logos, yet still we need to work as teachers on fostering and nurturing this skill. 'Visual language plays an important part in our youngest students' entry into the world of print' (MOE, 1996).

Furthermore, in my own work and inquiries with children, I notice how drawing additionally enhances children's language development. Children love to discuss and share their ideas; they can talk a great deal (to friends and teachers) whilst they are drawing, thereby developing not only their verbal language but also their social competence.

In this example (figure 9) we can see a combination of these factors. The children were inquiring into trees and the question arose, 'Why do we need trees?' As they drew their ideas on paper and talked through their drawing with their friends you can see the development and progression of both visual and verbal language as well as social development. The term *cognitive narrative* is one that resonates well with me and is suggested by Robertson (2000) to refer to children who enter a 'shared conversation of both spoken and drawn concepts' (p.158). The benefit of engaging in cognitive narrative for children is that the process—as evidenced in figure 9—creates shared meaning and joint understandings amongst the involved children.

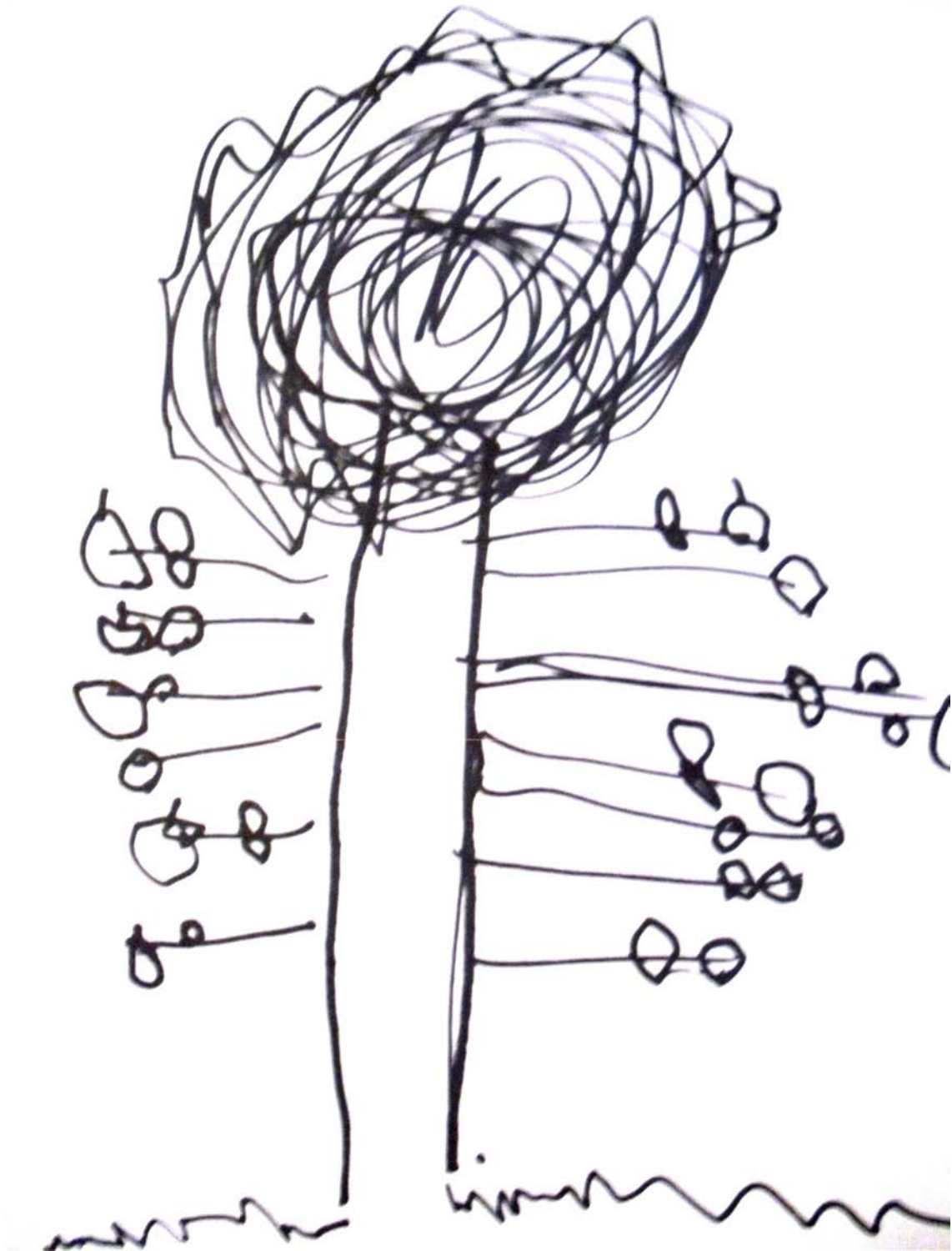


Fig. 9 Image 1



Fig. 9 Image 2

A small extract from a documented conversation along with a sample of the drawings the children were working on. My work as a co-constructor of the children's learning is evident here in my line of questioning as we undertook this inquiry on trees together.

CA: Why do we need trees?

C: Trees are good for playing; if we hurt trees they stop growing.
We can build things in trees like monkey bars and trees can be taller than a house or just little.

P: And if someone cuts the wood off you can use it to make stairs.

L: Trees are very very interesting. Some trees are very big with bushes on the top. Trees are our friends and they have leaves on them, which fall at winter.

CA: Why do trees have leaves?

M: They help people stay dry for a bit from the rain.

L: Yes trees are good to park under to keep the car not too hot.

L-R: Leaves are at the top and sometimes at the bottom of trees.

P: Sometimes leaves are pointy or not pointy, leaves fall off in winter.

W: No it's autumn, the leaves fall at autumn!

L: Well...at autumn time usually the leaves just turn different colours, leaves can fall in winter too!

T M: Trees need rain lots of rain.

CA: Why do trees need rain?

L: It makes them grow.

K B: Or they'll die.

M M: They need water so they can grow.

M: Yes and they need rain for that and sunshine or they'll die forever.

T: You know trees make you breathe!

CA: How do trees make you breathe?

C: The wind blows the leaves around and give you fresh air.

K B: They just give you fresh air.

L: It's when all the bad air is coming up into this hole in the leaf and then it goes down into the soil and the good air is invisible and it comes out into the human mouths.



Fig. 9 Image 3



Fig. 9 Image 4

DISTILLING THE TEACHER'S ROLE

In this article I have described three categories of communication that children enhance through their drawing. I want the reader to be mindful that these categories are largely academic and would not be so delineated in a practical classroom setting. Drawing as a means of communication for children, like all learning in early childhood, should be considered in a holistic manner.

The role of the teacher should be further considered, as it is crucial in facilitating children's drawing for effective communication. Terreni (2010) agrees 'visual art provides children with important tools for thinking and learning' (p.7). Yet in order to achieve an effective and productive art programme teachers need to be involved in children's artist experiences by working 'alongside children, scaffolding or co-constructing work [and] actively teaching specific art skills and knowledge' (Terrini, 2010, p.8).

Robertson (2000) further discusses this concept: 'the teacher's role is complex...[a role which includes the teacher as] provider, observer, partner, collaborator and provocateur' (p.160). The best way I believe to ensure the arts and drawing occur readily is to ensure the environment is enabling, with drawing media readily available whilst also easily accessible. Personally, whenever children are engaging in a new topic, re-visiting an old idea or wishing to communicate a concept, drawing is one of the first disciplines I gravitate towards; I use it extensively across all learning areas.

Encouragement is also a key factor. When children use drawing for communication, for inquiry, for self-expression, for problem solving, or for enjoyment, teachers should be supporting this chosen method of communication through providing positive reinforcement and companionship.

SUMMARY

Children learn to draw, and draw to learn in order to make sense of and represent the world around them (Anning, 1999). Drawing is a powerful means of communication for our youngest learners and naturally they have many messages to convey. Not only does drawing enable children to express themselves in multiple ways, it is also an effective means of communicating with both the peers and the adults in their lives. Indeed as Seefeldt (1995) believes, the feelings children express through their drawings are often more readily communicated than through their words.

Communication is a crucial and integral characteristic of human development. This paper, has attempted to articulate how and why art in early childhood should be cultivated as a teaching resource in order to assist in developing the communication skills of our youngest learners. Drawing should not take a back seat; it should be both highly visible and prominent in an arts programme for the remarkable communicative and meaning-making capabilities that it propagates.

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The Mairtown Kindergarten teaching team

From left to right: Zair Taylor (teacher), Sarah Nathan (administrative support), Christine Alford (teacher), Susie Butler (teacher) and Kim Townsend (head teacher).

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