

The Importance of Drawing and Scribbling

Mobeen Uddin

Years of research have shown that young children's scribbling and drawing are powerful modes of representation and an important part of children's writing development. Although these modalities may have once been conceptualized by educators as "low level" activities (Anning, 1999, p. 169), their benefits are now well recognized (Brooks, 2005; Mackenzie, 2011). To be truly literate, children must be able to communicate in written, visual, and aural ways (Mackenzie & Versesov, 2013). Cultivating children's willingness to use drawings and scribbles not only improves their writing, but also enhances their cognitive and social development. The purpose of this paper is to explicitly highlight the benefits of scribbling and drawing, as well as to analyse the teacher's role in fostering these vital practices in the classroom.

Benefits of Drawing

Scribbling and drawing are essential modalities for young children because they allow them to express their complex thoughts and abstract ideas. At an early age, children form symbolic thoughts and will use any object they find to express their thinking (Kress, 1997). Children's drawings are believed to reflect their inner worlds, and drawing enables them to communicate their feelings and 'hidden' ideas, which they are yet unable to express verbally (Malchiodi, 1998). Drawing is thus part of a silent language that embodies children's thinking, and provides them a means of making sense of their worlds and construct meaning of their

experiences (Anning, 1999; Bagbhan, 2007). For example, if a student watches a movie, he/she may use drawings to express his/her favourite parts. Furthermore, as many pre-school children regularly scribble and draw at home, they naturally attempt to use these modalities in their classrooms as well. Thus, it is important for teachers to continue to allow students to express their ideas through scribbling and drawing, as they are fundamental communicative modes of expression (Anning, 2004; Kress, 1997).

Some researchers have noted that scribbling and drawing serve as avenues for developing children's fine motor skills (Anning, 2004). Drawing tools such as crayons and markers may help children develop their dexterity and hand-eye coordination for future writing skills. Thus, drawing scribbles, lines, and shapes are all activities that help children enhance manipulative skills eventually needed for writing letters (Jalongo, 2007; Kellogg, 1970).

Drawing also promotes students' social and cognitive growth, and provides valuable insights into their thought processes and development. Scribbling and drawing are purposeful activities, as children often think about what they are drawing (Bagbhan, 2007; Karnowski, 1986). Inspired by Vygotsky's (1978) social constructionist framework, some researchers (e.g., Brooks, 2004, 2005; Cox, 2005) have argued that teachers' conversations with students about their drawings will further enhance their students' social and cognitive development.

These scholars believe that when teachers dialogue with their students and ask questions about what they have drawn, the students develop even more ideas about their drawings and writing pieces. Thus, when children are given opportunities to think deeply about what they have drawn and share their understandings with others, they become more critical about their own work. Consequently, talk and drawing interact as mutually transformative processes leading to an ongoing cycle of more complex drawings and pieces of writing. Indeed, this conceptualization of drawing as a social activity, rather than purely a solitary and self-expressive one, adds a greater dimension to the importance of scribbling and drawing in the classroom.

Role of the Teacher

Teachers play significant roles in encouraging and promoting the development of children's writing skills (Adoniou, 2013; Brooks, 2005; Mayer, 2007; Oken-Wright, 1998; Trehearne, 2011). Teachers can support students' writing development by providing their young students with ample time, adequate support, and multiple opportunities for scribbling and drawing to take place (Brooks, 2004). By talking to students about their drawings, teachers will be able to encourage and scaffold students' thinking to lead to further ideas about drawing. It is advised that these discussions focus on the meaning and information the drawings contain rather than on the drawings' aesthetic qualities, or the students' drawing skills.

Oken-Wright (1998) offered a variety of strategies that further detailed the role of teachers, and how they could support students' writing development. With students who are able to draw or orally communicate their ideas, yet experience difficulty in expressing their ideas with written language, teachers could ask them to dictate their story, while they write it down for them. This strategy is beneficial because it can help children see the connections between speech and text. With children who have some basic knowledge of written language, teachers may

write portions of a text, and then ask the students to continue the writing piece. If children have a good mental grasp of some of the letters, then teachers might dictate and help them write the letters with which they have difficulty. Finally, for children who are able to write all of the letters, teachers may focus on developing their phonemic awareness by teaching them the sounds that letters make. Teachers may withdraw their support gradually, so that students could become independent writers (Oken-Wright, 1998).

Creating stimulating and supportive classroom environments that offer a range of activities related to scribbling and drawing is also beneficial for students. This includes establishing writing centres for students, which enable students to observe and converse with others while drawing and writing (Trehearne, 2011). Offering opportunities for students to collaborate at writing centres may serve to engage them for longer periods of time, and thus, they may begin to hypothesize, and/or experiment in their drawings and writings. Drawing and writing in social contexts may especially be beneficial to children who give up easily, as they would now have adequate support to persist and continue (Oken-Wright, 1998). For these writing centres to be successful, teachers are encouraged to provide a variety of utensils such as crayons, coloured pencils, and markers, which will help motivate students to express their ideas (Trehearne, 2011).

Additional strategies for creating stimulating environments to foster children's writing development include the use of print labels on classroom objects around the room (e.g. toys, books, sink) to help students develop an awareness of print in their environment (Hayes, 1990; Mayer, 2007), and encouraging students to integrate writing into their play activities (Mayer, 2007; Neuman & Roskos, 1997). For example, students might draw and/or write menus at a restaurant centre, or create receipts for objects bought at the store centre. This helps create a supportive environment where students feel empowered to write for authentic reasons.

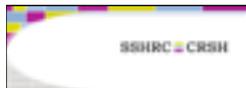
Scribbling and drawing are powerful meaning-making tools and modes of representations that enable students to express their ideas. Teachers play a fundamental role in promoting these practices, particularly in the enhancement of students' emergent writing. Finally, dialoguing with children while they are drawing plays a significant role in promoting the mental functions of children.

Author Biography

Mobeen Uddin recently completed the Ph.D. program in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto.

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