Reflections

Authenticating the ability for children to verbally reflect on their artistic self expression facilitated by adult scaffolding: theoretical contributions, contemporary perceptions and current challenges

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Abstract

This review of literature considers ways early childhood professionals can maximise scaffolding opportunities in the daily discoveries children make and examines benefits in fostering creativity that validates these experiences. Contemporary images of children as capable and independent learners are foregrounded in the discussion, followed by theoretical perspectives that recognise the value of social interactions in scaffolding children's creativity and artistic development. Developmental perspectives as opposed to socio-cultural perspectives will be debated in response to research generated in the area of artistic self - expression. The core element of this article explores the reluctance of early childhood educators to engage in conversations with children despite children's abilities to accompany drawing activity with verbal responses. One of the explanations surrounds the lack of adult understanding associated with the capacity of children to appreciate the arts. The other is concerned with the inability displayed by adults to effectively respond to children's creative expression. Both factors will be examined intensely.

Introduction

Adults interact with young children on a daily basis; however, the quality and effect of these interactions on children's learning in visual arts can often be overlooked. Given the almost universal privileging of the areas of literacy and numeracy, early childhood educators often concentrate on teaching children relevant terms and concepts, such as colours and shapes, rather than engaging in meaningful conversations with children about their creations. Little attention is focused on interactions that support artistic self-expression, reflection and analysis (Epstein, 2001). Such perceptions originate from the misconception that young children are incapable of responding to and appreciating art.

Research conducted by Gardner (1990), confirms that young children are more competent than adults often believe. When engaged in meaningful conversations, children have the ability to be sensitive about the quality of an artwork and to describe the meaning of its artistic content (Wright, 2001). Studies conducted by Schiller (1995) confirm children's ability to discuss artwork style and aesthetic appeal, such as works by Matisse (Epstein, 2001). Despite this explicit evidence, rarely do such reflective experiences with young children occur where adults scaffold children's learning in areas of the arts. Much of this reluctance to scaffold young children's learning in the visual arts has been influenced by early theories of cognitive and social development.

Theoretical perspectives

Early theories of cognition and socialisation viewed these domains as separate areas of development rather than integrated and interactive, with each being integral to the overall functioning of the young child (Resnick, Levine & Teasley, 1993). To determine how external sociological forces guide children's learning, functionalist and deterministic models were developed in the mid 1900s. Inkeles, inspired by research of Parson in 1968 (cited in Corsaro, 1997), began the quest to investigate how individuals relate to society and thus developed the theory of the 'forward-looking' view of socialisation. This belief suggested that in order for a child to be accepted within a given context, he/she must first be shaped to fit into it. Others, who suggested that the functionalist view could be perceived as cloning knowledge rather than developing it, subsequently challenged this theory. Bernstein (1981) and Bourdieu and Passerson (1977) recommended a reproductive model which suggested that children benefit from access to cultural resources and that socialisation of one being into a culture could be replicated by another, particularly in terms of social inequalities. Although quite valuable, according to Corsaro (1997) and Wright (1997), these theories ignore the child's ability to engage in cultural change and refinement.

Theories that did consider such factors, as postulated by scholars such as Vygotsky, were related to the individual's ability to be influenced by their culture and environment: 'A child learns and develops in social context that includes more knowledgeable peers and adults who pass on the cultural heritage' (Nicolopoulou, 1993, p.8). With the socio-cultural framework in mind, it can be clearly seen that higher mental functions such as abstract thinking, metacognition, directed memory and logical reasoning

originate from learning that is mediated and guided by another person. Through continued interaction, members are able to access the information and determine the directions through ongoing collaboration with one another (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). It can thus be assumed that during artistic exploration, children benefit from verbal interaction and prompts because they have extended opportunities for information retrieval and processing (Garbarino, 1992).

One of Vygtosky's (1961, 1981) main arguments for the need for human beings to develop relationships as a basis for cognitive development is that, through this process, individuals begin to develop a sense of cultural belonging within the forum of meaningful information exchange: 'Social relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships' (cited in Berk & Winsler, 1995, p.12). Due to the universality of each exchange, the capacity for information processing maximises, particularly around the age of three when children develop conversation skills and begin to access the world of knowledgeable beings. It is through social interactions that young novices actively participate in conversations, using skills such as turn taking, eye contact, response, and topic maintenance. Once this repertoire of skills is developed it can be applied to any conversation. Thus, it can be assumed that children with more interactive experiences are in a better position sociologically than those with fewer opportunities to interact. When adults scaffold or encourage learning, they engage in collaboration or inter-subjectivity that occurs when children are engaged in daily experiences. An example of this is artistic self-expression (Wright, in press).

Children's artistic expression
Psychologists, educators and artists alike have become interested in children's ability to produce images from the moment they can grasp an implement, despite challenges associated with cultural, economic and cultural boundaries (Kindler, 1995). Researchers such as Piaget argued that cognitive structures required for the onset of artistic growth do not commence until approximately the age of seven or during the concrete operational stage. Hardiman and Zernich (1988) acknowledge that children embark on sensory exploration with art materials as early as infancy. However, they support Piaget's belief that it is only by the age of seven, at the onset of the concrete operational stage, that they 'possess structures necessary to become artists' (cited in Kindler, 1995, p.10). It is not surprising then that, due to the lack of attention placed on artistic growth prior to the concrete operation stage, educators even today view such experiences as less valuable than those associated with literacy and numeracy. Efland (cited in Eisner, 1976) suggested that teacher attitudes toward artistic development are manifested in theories heavily weighted on historical images of children. Attitudes toward children during the seventeenth century were influenced by scientific discourse. Societal beliefs during this time became heavily influenced by Lock's impression of children as being empty vessels or 'tabula rasa', dependant on parents and communities for the development of personality and traits (Gittens, 1998).

Increasing interest in childhood at the onset of the twentieth century led to more positive images of children and the advancement of the child centred approach in development and art

education. Art educators such as Cizek (cited in Kindler, 1995), and Efland (in Eisner, 1976)] believed that teachers should not dominate the process of art, but instead allow children to develop at their own pace. Lowenfeld (1952) supported this belief, claiming that children have a creative impulse that can be inhibited by adults. As a result of such theories that children 'naturally unfold', adults have, for many decades, left children unattended during art experiences, believing in the 'maturational' model of education and employing a non-interventional approach to artistic education. Although teachers want to take a more active role in assisting young children in art, they often 'complain of their lack of insight, understanding, and ability in the realm of artistic expression. They feel illiterate and inadequate'. (Kinder, 1995, p. 12)

Research as early as the 1930s suggested that proper adult assistance could foster aesthetic development (Knauber, 1931). However, this notion received minimal recognition due to the division that existed between the discourses of language and art. Despite these distinctive arguments, an underlying factor what children were expected to accomplish by age of five and seven in both art and language could not be ignored (Chomsky, 1965; Nelson, 1980). According to Palmerton & Nelson (1987, pp. 30-31), 'there are historical and theoretical reasons to expect that the processes of language development and art development may share some important features'. No longer could educators attribute language and artistic development to the theory of 'unfolding' that has, for many years, dominated research in these disciplines (e.g., Kellogg, 1969; Chomsky, 1965]) which

supported Piaget's notion of stages, and argued that artistic development occurs sequentially. However, Palmerton and Nelson (1987) argued that both art and language development are reliant on input received from the environment. According to their philosophy, children are more than capable of being flexible and accommodating when this input occurs, applying abstract thinking to external input. This input contributes to children's cognitive development and to artistic and language output, especially if they are involved in verbal discussion. Palmerton and Nelson's (1987) research focused on 'art dialogues' whereby adult's respond to the child using two distinctive interaction strategies: growth recast and challenge continuation. Their findings indicated that affective dialogue facilitated drawing skills, as 'both art and language dialogues between children and experts are excellent contexts for furthering the comparison processes essential to learning' (p. 31). Results further suggested that specific levels of adult involvement during artistic experiences provided children with the opportunity to work within their 'zone of proximal development'. In other words, adult dialogue was effective in that it challenged children's artistic and linguistic thinking. Burton (1980) also found that reinforcing children through verbal instruction led to reflection that encouraged 'conscious choice making' (Kindler, 1995, p. 13).

Kindler (1995) proposed that although significant research confirms the benefits associated with adult interaction during artistic self-expression, the lack of adult interaction in children's artistic development can be attributed to child-centred philosophy or, put simply, adults just don't know how to respond to

children. The practice that evolved from the child-centred philosophy relieved anxious educators who felt quite threatened at the thought of educating children in areas of creative arts stimulating comments such as, 'I have to teach art and music in my classroom, but I don't have the training. Isn't it best to leave those things to the specialists?' (Kostelnik et al, 1999, p. 298). Child-centred philosophy suggested that fostering creativity could mean adults simply organising specific areas targeted at free exploration in selected art resources and assuming that children would spontaneously approach the materials with limited or no guidance at all. In reality, art experiences and resources areas are often left untouched.

Schirrmacher (1986) measured the type of responses adults provided children during artistic exploration. He found that most responses given to children did not encourage critical thinking or further exploration, an obvious indication that educators lacked the confidence in scaffolding children during creative expression. Educators who did respond, unbeknown, dominated the experience by questioning the product rather than the process, ignoring the fact that creative expression is the means by which children respond to their world. Schirrmacher summarised six responses adults typically used and determined the effects of such responses. The responses identified were: complimentary, judgmental, valuing, questioning, probing and correcting. In the complimentary approach, teachers responded to children's art works by informing the children that their art works were 'pretty', 'lovely' or 'nice'. The judgmental approach consisted of responses such as 'great work' or 'very good', which placed judgment on anything the child produced placing the teacher under scrutiny when faced with very unique images. The valuing approach consisted of responses such as 'I love it' or 'I like that a lot', which placed more emphasis on the product than the process. In the questioning response, comments such as 'what is it' insisted that what was actually produced had to be something, disregarding individual self-expression. The fifth response, probing (e.g. 'tell me about it'), although more positive than previous responses, assumes that the child will automatically want to talk about his/her image, or that all images 'can be told' (Kolbe, 1991). The last response typically used by teachers was the correcting response whereby comments such as, 'very good but the grass should be green' suggests that the child's art must resemble that of the real world rather than an expression of individuality (Kostelnik et al, 1999; Schirrmacher, 1986, 1998).

With such clear evidence of inappropriate responses and their effects, it is not surprising that most teachers opt to say nothing at all. Eisner (1982) recommended that teachers focus on the abstract design qualities, such as form and shape rather than searching for representation:

> Discussing the formal elements of visual arts is vital to the development of aesthetic awareness and aesthetic potential (cited in Schirrmacher, 1998, p. 328).

Young children are capable of recognising and discussing shape, line, design, pattern and colour, therefore the verbal response to children need not be at an 'artists' level, but rather, be focused on the obvious aspects of the image. This

is also supported by literature that validates children's ability to manage this level of artistic language (Hardiman & Zenich 1981; Wright, 2003,1994).

Responding to children's artistic expression

The above literature suggests practical ways to respond to children's artistic communication. Schirrmacher, supported by previous studies by Sparling and Sparling (1973), proposed three ways to do this effectively. First, adults must consider children's developmental levels as comments will vary depending on the child's age and artistic experience. Second, it is imperative that adults relate their comments to the artistic elements present in the image. Third, adults must encourage rather than merely praise children's efforts. It is further suggested that adults develop an artistic vocabulary so that comments will match children's efforts. Repertoire should consist of elements-based responses, which include comments on colour, line, mass or volume, patterns, shape, space, texture, balance and overall design, and processes related to time, effort and enjoyment (Wright, 2003).

Despite the indisputable evidence of the benefits associated with appropriate adult interactions during drawing and other visual arts processes, educators remain uncertain as to how they should respond. A possible reason for this is that contemporary research into early childhood education has shifted focus once again. Current teaching approaches, although continuing to focus on the child-centred model, consider more the adults' role in the learning process, influenced by Reggio Emilia philosophy. Although many early childhood educators around the world have attempted to replicate Reggio

programs within their own settings, they've become frustrated when, despite all efforts, plans do not appear to go as anticipated. It is suggested that educators need not be consumed about replicating the Reggio Emilia program, but instead, instigate reconceptualisations that challenge traditional perspectives, such as considering children as 'blank tablets' (Morrison, 1991). Contemporary attitudes rebut such theories seeing children as being competent advocates for their own learning. With more positive insights such as these, early childhood professionals are beginning to appreciate the individual approach children take to each discovery.

Although it would be favourable to employ a trained visual arts teacher or 'Atelierista' to work with young children, as in Reggio Emilia, such a high level of training is not necessary to encourage children to engage in critical reflection about their exploration. It is suggested that adults consider the benefits associated with positive interactions with young children, whereby statements to children about their artwork centre on their effort, method, and design (Wright, 1994). Such statements could offer children models of adult talk and expanded concepts of what may be seen and felt in works of art, and verbal stimulation and artistic vocabulary.

Conclusion

Early childhood educators need not be consumed with doubt about their capacity to interact successfully with children during art experiences. Children want to share their creative and imaginative representations with adults (Duffy, 1998). What is imperative is that opportunities for such experiences occur within a rich creative environment which includes children having opportunities to freely explore a range of multidimensional

materials available on a daily basis; work in collaboration with others, including peers and adults; revisit previous investigations; and have sufficient time for critical communication and reflection with others. During such processes of critical reflection, early childhood educators can use scaffolding strategies that respond to children's efforts, their use of techniques and imagination, and personal experiences and perceptions of their world.

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