

African Research Review

An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 4 (3a) July, 2010

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

Art in Early Childhood Education Classrooms: An Invitation to Creativity (Pp. 214-226)

Omatseye, B. O. J. - Institute of Education, University of Benin, Benin City
Mobile Phone No. 08033560112
E-mail: *bigbetus2001@yahoo.com*

Emeriewen, Kingsley Osewiyi -Department of Fine/Applied Arts,
University of Benin, Benin City.
Mobile Phone No. 08023453266
E-mail: *kingeme@yahoo.com*

Abstract

Art is more or less a conceptual representation of inner thoughts and feelings. It is in recognition of this that art educators have emphasized creativity as the primary aim of art. Through art activities the child makes real, his ideas. Essentially, the child's concept of creativity can be best described as 'the art of combining things in a new way'. It is in this context that it has been argued that the early childhood teacher should strive to develop in the young learner, the freedom to explore. The crux in this article is that Art activities at this stage of learning should be seen as outlets for children. When children splash paints on paper, draw lines and scribbles in outcomes as a mesh of colours; when they feel the clay, pat and make creations out of it, they tend to express their creative thoughts. But when there are restrictions to such expressions, it may discourage greatly, the natural unfolding of the child's zeal to be creative.

Key Words: Art, Early Childhood Education, Creativity.

Introduction

Play is a crucial method of learning in early childhood education. Play also helps children relieve the different times in their lives. While grown-ups talk about traumatic events, children play them out. Such plays in early childhood learning are naturally creative in various types of artistic expressions like story – telling, music, dramatic play, dance and visual arts. The focus in this article is visual arts.

Art is one of many languages children feel very comfortable in expressing their feelings and ideas. Art activities are basically outlets for these young ones. They get a release from the sensory experience of playing with art materials like paints, clay, crayons, sand and water. These offer ways for children to express their feelings. As children get older, they could even go further to use art materials to illustrate stories. They could spell out ideas and express feelings through art media like drawing, painting or even sculpting. As explained by Garbarino (1990), what some children may find difficult putting in words, may be expressed through the symbolism of their art work.

Art expressions in drawing, painting, moulding etc springs mostly from children’s experiences, none of which comes as a rehearsal of experiences. In other words, children are genuine artists (though young ones). Like adult artists, children have also selected from their experiences, what holds meaning to them. They have only transformed or heightened their reality by their imagination; as Albert Einstein as cited in (Kevin Harris 1995) “imagination is more important than knowledge”. Indeed, it is such imaginations they creatively express in joyous art activities like drawing, painting etc. Below are two such scenarios.

A three-year old in an art class picks up her favourite colour crayons and begins working on paper with what looks like a scribble. She begins a random working, seemingly meaningless, and sometimes not even looking at her paper as she works. Eventually, her outcome looked like a mesh of colours, which actually is her drawing. A work understood by this artist. After all, in the physical activity of drawing, her mood betrayed her mind and emotion as fully engaged. This also confirms Crosser’s (2008) assertion that as three to four year olds begin to draw in a more realistic manner, they may oscillate back and forth between realism and earlier scribbling patterns but, with a general movement towards realistic representation of what they know of the world. See figures 1a – d below.

In another scenario, the kindergarten class teacher steps out for a while leaving the children 'busy' with their art work. It was actually time for these young ones to express themselves. In what could be described as intense concentration, the four year olds, while also having fun, splashed paints with brushes and any other object on their papers. Their bodies and the classroom walls were not spared. Those who had crayons saw the classroom walls as an extension of the paper where they could make something creative. When the teacher came in, she was greatly disappointed at the mess, the kids had made. But in Fisher's argument, in that 'artful mess' the children are experimenting with colours, having fun exchanging their creativity and in so – doing enhancing their level of sociability. In other words, in children's expression of art activities, creativity cannot be ignored. However to get a better understanding of the concept of creativity, within this context, it is imperative to firstly look at art activities in early childhood learning.

What are art activities in Children's art?

There is oftentimes this misconception between art and craft activities. This is also reflected in the ways these activities are taught, and the expectations of the teacher. But in the strictest sense, while the art and craft processes may be related, the activities involved are different. For instance the activities in drawing an object or painting a picture are not quite same with that involved in weaving a basket or making a rabbit cage. Even at that, both activities provide opportunities for the child to explore and learn. In making the distinction between the activities involved in both art and craft, Reyner (2008) has said that craft activities are basically product oriented. It engages the learner in developing cognitive skills in problem solving. Craft activities also require specific materials, and instructions that the learner makes applicable. But activities in art are process oriented. It engages the learner's imaginations and feelings. For outcomes in art, the learner uses basic supplies. Importantly too, instructions in art activities are usually open-ended.

Essentially, when children are engaged in art endeavours, they tend to enjoy both the process and the products. While the teacher and other adults concentrate more on the processes than the products. The implication here is more like restricting the joy and creativity of the child when working on art. Oftentimes, when children are engaged in art activities, they cherish the freedom to express their creativity, as well as look forward to the end product. They work 'hard' on their art project, so that it is worthy of admiration (by their standard). Thus, if the teacher must achieve the goals of teaching art, especially taking cognisance of the stage of learning, his

concern must be the process and products of the activity. Importantly too, the young learner should be provided with stimulating and appropriate materials as well as right instructions. Such instruction should come by way of encouragement and inspiration.

Significantly, art is an avenue that affords the young learner, opportunity to acquire intellectual and social skills, which in turn promotes the ability to express the self. In effect, when the young child is engaged in a satisfying process of creative art, there is the tendency that his intellectual, sensory motor and affective domains are positively affected. In this regard, Perkins and Gardner (1989) have affirmed that even though most Psychologists would usually celebrate art as the domain of emotions, they are also quick to argue that art is usually “profoundly cognitive”. In the summation of Pousette-Dart, as cited in Barnett (1989), when the artist paints in abstract expressionist style, the art production is “the result of somebody bringing all the faculties to it... in a realisation of one’s being, a matter of exquisite focus, awareness and consciousness”. In the same way, the child like the adult-artist brings to bear all his skills in his art productions. This is also made possible because of his unfolding creativity. What therefore is the place of creativity in children’s art? Maybe illustrations 2a-d can give us an insight.

From the figures 2a – d, the child begins with scribbles. These scribbles have been summarised by Kellogg (1969) as six main diagrams. These are the Cross, the Square, the Circle, the Triangle, odd Forms and Diametrical Cross. Some of these identified rhythmic lines are expressed in figure a. From then on, the creativity of the child further unfolds as expressed in figures b, c, and d. In these figures, the child attempts a representation of his imaginative thoughts.

Art Promotes Creativity

The term creativity can simply be defined as the ability of the individual to generate novel ideas or works that are valued by others. In this context therefore, if we allow children describe their definition of creativity; it may further define creativity as the art of combining things in a new way. This may not also be far from the assertion that every child born with innate desires to be creative.

Importantly too, at the heart of art and craft activities is creativity. This also means that art enhances the individual’s creativity, sharpens his imaginations and affords him opportunity to express the self. This, coupled with the child’s natural innate curiosity will no doubt manifest in some art products that may

sometimes marvel the adult; but may be explained by the child. For instance, the child who decides to draw the school teacher's table with only three legs instead of four is only being creative. Just like the child who colours the drawing of her pet dog pink, her favourite colour. Such a child is not only creative, but expressing her feelings. So, when the teacher cautions her choice of colour, or hands down standards on perfection in drawing, the child ultimately loses thrill and excitement in the art task. Furthermore, the tendency to be creative even in other tasks may gradually diminish. As Tomlin (2008) aptly puts it, "creativity in young children can be nurtured – or it can be crushed".

How the early childhood education teacher responds to the young learner's work of art has great implications in the development of the child's self-concept. In other words, the creativity in the child can only be sustained if they are encouraged, and if their imaginations are accepted. On the other hand, where the adults hand down restrictions and controls the child's freedom to self expression, there is the tendency to dampen the zeal to expand his curiosity. This no doubt cuts short the child's spark for creativity. Ultimately his personality is affected, as he may even lose confidence in himself, and his sense of satisfaction.

The foregoing argument is also not in consonance with art educator's primary aims of art. Art educators have always thought of the development of creativity as quite crucial to the teaching of art. D'Amico (1942), Lowenfeld (1947) and Barkun (1960) have in various ways emphasized creativity in art, also as having implications for the mental growth and development of the individual's personality. It is also in recognition of this, that practitioners of early childhood education like Pestalozzi and Froebel have also made their contributions. Pestalozzi evolved a theory of personality integration through art activities. Froebel's theory of Kindergarten "gifts" and "occupations" centred on artistic play materials. The Froebelian "gifts" were objects for discovery, and the "occupations" were activities for creativity.

Essentially, at the early childhood stage of learning, the child ought to learn through play. This affords him ample opportunity to be creative as he explores his world. To attain this, Lowenfeld (1957) has suggested motivational and supportive roles on the part of the teacher. This has been seen to achieve more desired goals, better than a situation where teacher employs explicit instruction, while imposing ideas and concepts on the young

ones. Generally, in the submission of the National Art Education Association (NAEA, 1986)

Making art is central to the art education of all students. Specifically in the early stages of learning, art-making has been identified as a primary vehicle through which children can most fluently tell stories, relate experiences, fantasize, convey messages, express feelings, and make ideas concrete. However, at any age or level of sophistication, making art involves more. It is a complex and integrative process through which students learn to observe, recall, find relationships, make choices, accept or reject alternatives, respond, value, and make decisions

More importantly, the method employed by the teacher in early childhood classrooms should be appropriate. It should be one that leads the child to come up with his personal creations. A situation where a teacher makes (creates) something (an art) or models and tells the children to imitate or copy same is developmentally inappropriate. After all most great artists who have their names in the Hall of Fame today, hardly imitated. Most of their works came out genuinely out of their expressions and feelings. This does not dismiss the techniques that come with finesse in the acquisition of artistic and creative skills. But for these young ones, such techniques ought to come later, after the child has been given opportunity to discover the self. More so, at that stage of learning, the child desires and deserves that initial fun, and should not be denied it. Even in teaching the techniques, the aim is not to teach him to imitate or copy models, but to develop him artistically.

Generally, there are some statements, expressions or comments made in art classrooms that could encourage creativity or limit expressions on the part of the learner. The latter oftentimes is suggestive of doing it the teacher's way. For instance, when the teacher asks the child questions and expressions like:

- i What are you painting?
- ii It is fun to paint isn't it?
- iii What lovely colour you have there!
- iv See what a nice pot you can mould.

The above questions and statements are quite encouraging. It affords the child an opportunity to express in his own language what he has on paper. He

tells you with so much joy, the story behind his artwork like the saying goes, 'every picture tells a story'. His cannot be different. In the several lines, and mesh of colours, he can tell and identify clearly, things the teacher cannot see or easily make out. After all it is his work, and he is in a better position to explain his innermost expressions. Do not older artists do same with abstract arts?

On the other hand, when a teacher makes statements like;

- i. Your drawing would rather be nice if it were neater.
- ii. You are not through yet, you ought to cover the whole paper.
- iii. That does not look like a car, does it?

The above statements may seem to the teacher as developmentally appropriate, but in actual fact, they are not. Where there is an undertone of restrictions in statements made concerning the child's art, there is the tendency to condemn his self-expression especially in the arts there is symbolic or stylised expression of emotional experience. When we try to make the child's art work neat, it may just be to please the teacher, which in turn may remove that honesty, genuine and innocent expression made on paper. So also, when teacher believes the child needs to fill his paper. Any extra may have spoiled his work and the ideas behind it. A child usually puts down on paper what he conceptualizes. By adult standard, he may not be quite right or remotely far from the actual. But that is his perception, and he has a right to it. Oftentimes we find most children draw cars with the driver's legs sticking out, maybe 'working' alongside the car's tyres. That is how best he can express it. This, in the child's conception is creativity – the art of combining things in a new way. This is same with the little child who seats on the passenger's seat in a moving vehicle, and using his hands as pretend steering, drives along with the driver.

Indeed, art activities are not separate from the learning experiences of the child. These learning experiences can be spontaneous, open-ended and perhaps messy. These are the things that make learning an experience. What is wrong if it takes a messy table for the child to achieve his dreams? Words alone may not attain the goals they have in mind, they express fully in drawing, painting, scribbles etc. As it is often said, a picture is worth a thousand words. Art gives the child the time and freedom to express himself creatively. In the opinion of Francis (2008), children are born artist and they are naturally creative, and enjoy all kinds of artistic expressions. For Schafer-

Simmern (1948) “All normal children display this inner drive for pictorial creations. Drawings on walls, doors pavements are visible proofs of the child’s inborn creativeness”. These activities may displease parents and other adults as quite messy. On the contrary, the seemingly annoying marks on the walls, doors etc are significant “marks on the world”.

Generally, children respond to art in many astonishing, yet dynamic ways, as seen below. What is however significant here is their creativity, which are purely innocent expressions of what they perceive, what they know, how they think and what they are interested in.

Figures 3a-f show children’s drawings in their individual expressions of same themes.

Conclusion

Generally, the deductions from the foregoing art productions simply express the pleasure and intense involvement young learners derive from art expressions and graphic representations. Evidently too, when they engage in these activities, they tend to lend themselves to explanations, extend their ideas, and in their own way, solve such problems that could have come from misinterpretations and lack in communication. The vacuum that would have been created through verbal and written expressions are ‘filled’ creatively and graphically too, on paper. As aptly expressed by Reyner, (2008), “if we give our children a chance to grow up believing they are creative, they will in later years have a better chance of finding constructive outlets for creative energy”. Indeed a child’s creativity will not just end up as a memory; it remains a valuable, personal resource to use every day. In the summation of Crosser (2008) “the next time you see a child scribbling with a marker, or splattering paint onto a canvas, stop, admire and praise his or her work. Who knows, your words of encouragement may inspire a future artist”.

Acknowledgements

The Writers are grateful to the Young Children for their spontaneous art works, also to the Teachers of (these Children) South Point Royal School, Benin City, Nigeria.



Fig. 1a: The Scribbling of a Pre-School Child. (Age 2)



Fig. 1b: The Impression of a Girl. (Age 3)



Fig. 1c: The Drawing of a Cat (Age 4)

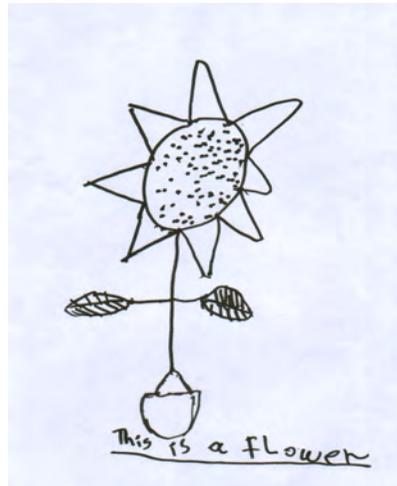


Fig. 1d: A Flower as perceived by a Child in late Nursery School. (Age 5)



Fig. 2a



Fig. 2b



Fig. 2c



Fig. 2d



Fig. 3a

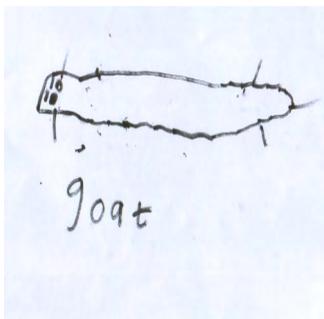


Fig. 3b

Theme for figures 3a & b: Pets.

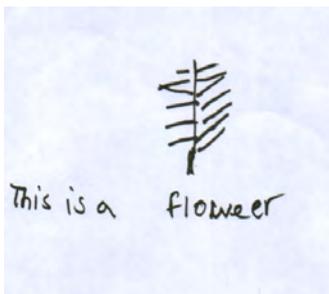


Fig. 3c



Fig. 3d

Theme for figures 3c & d: Flower.



Fig. 3e



Fig. 3f

Theme for figures 3e & f: Father and Mother.

References

- Barkan, M. (1960). *Through Art to Creativity*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.
- Burton, J. M. (1990) "Beginnings of Artistic Language" *Schools Arts*. September 1980, p.9.
- Crosser, S. (2008) "When Children Draw" <http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com> retrieved 12/ 07/ 2009.
- Crosser, S. (2008) "When Children Draw" <http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com> retrieved 12/ 07/ 2009.
- D' Amico, V. (1942) *Creative Teaching in Art*. Scranton, PA: International Textbook.
- Francis, K. (2008) "Take Time for Art's Sake" <http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com> retrieved 11/ 07/ 2009.
- Garbarino, J. & Scott, F. (1990) *What Children can Tell Us*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Gardner, H. (1980) *Artful Scribbles: The Significance of Children's Drawings*. New York: Basic Books.
- Harris, K. (1995) Collected Quotes from Albert Einstein
<http://rescomp.stanford.edu/~cheshire/EinsteinQuotes.html> retrieved 11/ 07/ 2009.
- Kellog, R. (1969) *Analyzing Children's Art*. Palto Alto, CA: National Press Books
- Lowenfeld, V. (1957) *Creative and Mental Growth*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc.
- Miller, A. S. & Fisher, S. (2008) "Don't be Afraid of the Mess! Bringing Collage, Paint and Clay into the Classroom" <http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com> retrieved 12/ 07/ 2009.
- NAEA (1986) *Quality Art Education: Goals for Schools*. Beston, VA: National Art Education Association
- Pousette-Dart, R. (1986) as cited in C Barnett, "The Conundrum of Willem de Kooning" *Art and Antiques* November 1989, p. 73.

- Perkins, D.N. & Gardner, H. (1986) "A Brief Introduction to Project Zero", *Art, Mind and Education*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Reyner, A. (2008) "Art Influences Learning" <http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com> retrieved 09/ 07/ 2009.
- Schafer-Simmern, H. (1948). *The unfolding of Artistic Activity, its Basis, Processes, and Implications*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tomlin, C. (2008) "Expressing Feelings through Art" <http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com> retrieved 08/ 07/ 2009.
- Tomlin, C. (2008) "Role Modelling Creativity in Art" <http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com> retrieved 08/ 07/ 2009.