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**Every Picture Tells A Story: Stages of Art  
Development in Children**

**Omatseye, Bridget O. J., Ph.D.**

Institute of Education, University of Benin, Benin City

Edo State, Nigeria

E-mail: [bigbetus2001@yahoo.com](mailto:bigbetus2001@yahoo.com)

Phone No: +2348033560112

&

**Emeriewen, Kingsley O. (MFA)**

Department of Fine/Applied Arts,

University of Benin, Benin City

Edo State, Nigeria

E-mail: [kingeme@yahoo.com](mailto:kingeme@yahoo.com)

Phone No: +2348023453266

**Abstract**

*In drawing, children begin with scribbles and doodles. Scribbles in this regard are not hasty, careless writing or meaningless marks on paper that should be ignored. Children's scribbles have communicative values. They are a representation and recording of a*

*legitimate enriching experience. Generally, children of preschool and kindergarten age are more comfortable with scribbling their messages, and attempting representations in drawing. Drawing is one of many languages that children employ to “talk” about their world both to themselves and to others. It is in this regard that this paper articulates children’s scribbles as artistic representations and expressive symbols of their thoughts and experiences. Indeed children’s scribbles are pictures that tell the story of their inner thoughts, feelings and emotions. This is itself a burst of creativity.*

### **Introduction**

Two-year-old Ama is busy working with crayons on a sheet of paper. The way she works seems more like “scrubbing” on paper in a rhythmic pattern that goes down and up. The grip on her working tool is so intense that it leaves slight holes on the worksheet. Also, motion of working is such that it employs the entire body movement in a seemingly dance response to the rhythm on paper.

The picture from the above is of a two years who is so focused on her work that it would seem her whole being is involved. Obviously she is not attempting to represent anything that adults can recognise. Even at that, she is not eating the crayon or tearing the paper. She is on a meaningful venture, or so it seems. If an adult by chance asks the child what she is doing, without even taking her glance off her crayon on paper, her response will simply be “drawing”. After all, she has used virtually all colours of crayons in the scribbles, on almost every available space of the paper. At times the child may not even look at the paper as she scribbles. But there is no gainsaying that this child is working with her mind and emotion in this physical act of drawing. To the adult, the child is merely scribbling because the marks made on paper seem random and meaningless. We may not understand this early scribbling any better than we do infant babbling. But this does not prove that there is no meaning in the scribbles for the child.

Oftentimes, adults want to see children's drawing as scribbles that are hastily and not creatively done and as such meaningless marks on paper. This is because they misinterpret the swirls, swooshes and speeds of children's acts as unserious. But in the real sense, scribbles are natural part of children's artistic development. When children begin scribbling, they do it on just any medium, from paper to valuable surfaces. They use any object that would give them the intended marks, be it pencil, chalk, charcoal, crayon, sharp objects and even lipstick. What is important for these young ones is that marks are made. In so doing, there is no doubt that they are being creative. Children express themselves in their own way. They achieve this by putting intelligence and imagination to test. In essence, their products (scribbles) are not borne out of just mechanical skills.

Generally, children's art begin as random scribbles, sometimes called uncontrolled impressions. Gradually, they learn to manipulate the objects of scribbles. By the time they gain dexterity in the control of their hands and reflexes, they begin to create drawings that tell stories. The crux in this work is an analysis of the stages of art development among children. This is with a view to articulating the creativity in the scribbles made by these young ones.

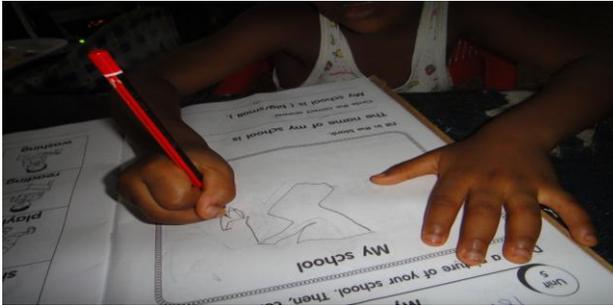
### **The Creativity in Children's Artful Scribbles**

When we go through children's artistic development in the early stages: from about two to five years, what we find is a burst of creativity. Specifically, the creative freedom of the younger child is overwhelmed by the desire experienced at older age for realism and accuracy. In other words, it gets to a stage where older children no longer appreciate, artful scribbles; instead, they see it as just a set of marks.

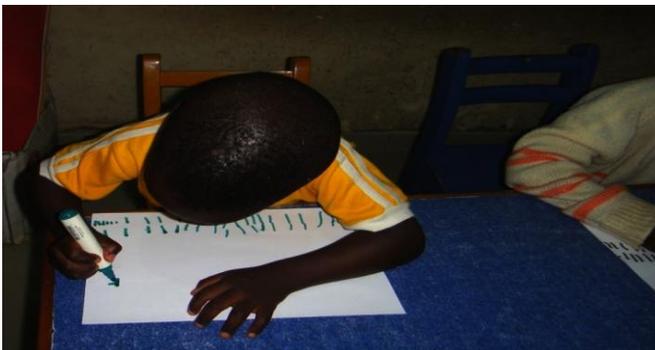
Everyone draws and so do children. Before a child is two years of age he is already making his first scribbles. Sometimes before they make intelligible sentences, they are already drawing. When they draw, they capture fully the joys, fantasies and fears that they ordinarily have limited words to express. In effect, drawing is more like a universal

avenue for kids to express themselves. In the very early stages, however, children's drawings are expressed as scribbles.

Typically, when a child undertakes a drawing task, he grasps the crayon or any other scribbling object with his fist. This creates a bit of difficulty as the child attempts to put marks exactly where he wants them. Notably too, the child in the exploratory stage of drawing has hardly developed fine muscle control. Thus movements on paper are typically large, involving the whole arm, with little finger and wrist control. For some other kids (as seen in fig 3) when they rest their forearm on the drawing surface, they gain some additional control.



**Fig. 2:** Kevwe (a pre-schooler) grasping her pencil in the process of drawing



**Fig. 3:** Ebuka, (4 years) resting his forearm to maintain 'balance' while drawing

Kellogg (1969) describes how the child often places one scribble over another, changing directions frequently, probably to prevent muscle fatigue (15-20). She also noted that the change in direction of the scribble usually causes changes in its form. However, with practice, children gain control of wrist and finger movements.

Generally, children not only derive joy in the physical act of scribbling, but get sensory enjoyment from its rhythmic repetitive pattern. In the assertion of Fox and Berry (2008), “making art is a sensory exploration activity for young children. They enjoy the feeling of a crayon moving across paper and seeing a blob of coloured paint grows larger”. In the same vein, Kamii & DeVries (1993) have suggested that in exploration in the arts, children build knowledge of the objects in the world around them. Significantly too, as children move from one stage to another, their activities and skills in art move beyond exploring with their senses to employing the use of symbols.

De La Roche (2011) is also particular about drawing as a crucial outlet for children whose vocabulary written or verbal may be limited to express themselves. Thus, in their, in the ‘artful’ activities, young children develop control of their large and small muscles. Comparatively in this regard, just as babbling is a natural way to acquire language skills, so also scribbling is a natural gateway to muscle control and coordination. In the same vein, Cratty as cited in Crosser (2011) has termed scribbling, “motor babbling”. So, children grow, their power of imagination and expression heightens. This is also reflected in their artistic skills. It is in this context that Kellogg (1969) has argued that adults should have a clear insight into the developmental stages of art amongst children. When they do this, they tend to appreciate better the need to create the necessary opportunity for children to express themselves spontaneously.

### **Stages of Art Development of Younger Children (2 – 5 years)**

Stages of art development could span from early childhood to adolescence. However, the focus of this research is on younger children, specifically children between ages two and five. This age

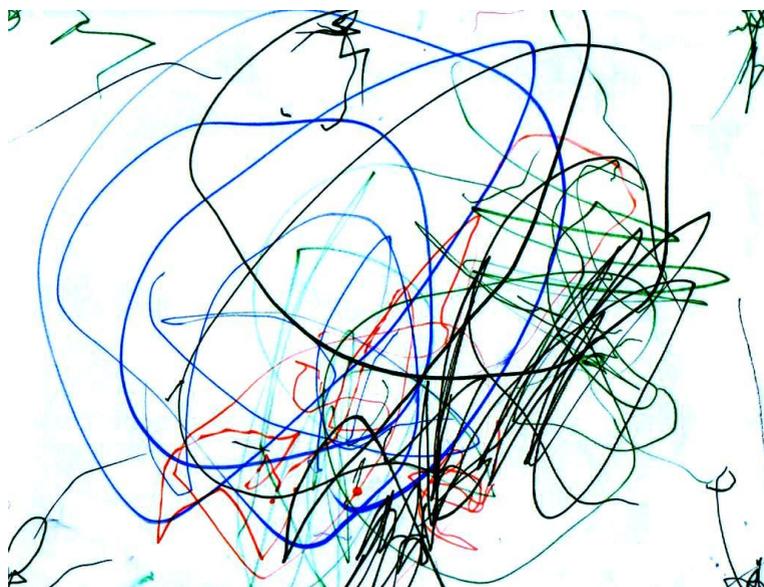
range tends to form the foundational stage of learning and the first step in the developmental process of learning to draw. The analysis in this work will cover the three major stages:

- i. The Random scribbling stage.
- ii. The Controlled scribbling stage.
- iii. Named scribbling stage.

### **The Random Scribbling Stage**

At age two, and sometimes even earlier, children are already making marks. Such marks come as random scribbles. Piaget & Inhelder (1963), have opined that as early as eighteen months, a child is mentally able to use symbols to represent reality. Kellogg (1969) puts this random scribbling stage between ages two to three. He also noted that all children regardless of their culture make the same markings in the same way, at approximately the same age. Sharing this same view, Toumlin (2011) has said that across cultures and class of children, all children go through this preliminary stage of drawing. This no doubt makes random scribbles universally a child's first mark.

Hurwitz & Day (1995) have described this initial stage of artistic development as the manipulative stage or scribble stage. They also noted that whereas scribble implies a distinct early phase of image development, manipulative implies a general stage of initial exploration and experimentation with any new material. In essence, it could be said that scribbling is the beginning of the manipulative stage. Significantly, the random scribbling stage creates opportunities for the child to discover the possibilities of exploring and experimenting with writing tools. From there, he begins to create his own vocabulary of graphic marks. Lindstrom (1970) noted that children's scribbles at this stage come as loops, zig-zags and wavy or jerky tailings; while separate closed circles and rectangles are only achieved when the child can make separate lines of whatever specific length they are determined to make.



**Fig. 4:** Scribble done by Kevwe (at age 2+); note the visible separate lines, zig-zag lines, loops and wavy jerky trailings.

Kellogg (1969) has also identified twenty basic scribbles children use during the exploratory stage which she describes as “the building blocks of art” and elements. In her analysis of these basic scribbles some are single and some are multiple lines as seen in table 1. However, as quoted in Alston & Taylor (1987), Kellogg states, “whatever the single or the multiple scribbles are the first ones to be made by the child I do not know ... I do know that both the single and the multiple lines are made at age two and that they are used later for the purpose of art”.

**Table 1:** Kellog's 20 Basic scribbles (adapted from Alston. J. and Taylor J., "*Handwriting: Theory and Practice.*" Pp.15.

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<b>Name and description of scribble Illustration</b>	
Scribble 1	Dot
Scribble 2	Single vertical line
Scribble 3	Single horizontal line
Scribble 4	Single diagonal line
Scribble 5	Single curved line
Scribble 6	Multiple vertical line
Scribble 7	Multiple horizontal line
Scribble 8	Multiple diagonal line
Scribble 9	Multiple curved line
Scribble 10	Roving open line
Scribble 11	Roving enclosed line
Scribble 12	Zigzag or waving line
Scribble 13	Single loop line
Scribble 14	Multiple loop line
Scribble 15	Spiral line
Scribble 16	Multiple-line overlaid circle
Scribble 17	Multiple-line circumference circle
Scribble 18	Circular line spread out
Scribble 19	Single crossed circle

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Golomb (1998) has a simpler classification, which distinguishes scribbles as two types. There are the whirls, loops and circles on the one hand, and multiple densely patterned parallel on the other. However, Cox (2011) is of the view that most children do not use all of the twenty scribbles. For Gardner (1980) children tend to favour the ones they develop as their individual styles. In other words, children are at liberty to use which ever scribbles they want. It is in this regard that Kellogg (1969) as cited in Crosser describes young scribblers as “decision makers”. This, in another way builds in the young ones a sense of autonomy, which is a positive sign of emotional development. Generally, children find scribbling a pleasurable act, especially when they see the marks made. As Eisner (1978) explains, “the rhythmic movement of the arm and wrist, the stimulation of watching lines appear where none existed before are themselves satisfying and self-justifying. They are intrinsic sources of satisfaction”.

There is no gainsaying that drawing at the early childhood stage influences development and general wellbeing, and later academic performance in school. Early drawing helps to develop socio-emotional and cognitive competences in the child. In the same vein, the child’s fine motor skills are developed. When the child learns to hold his object of scribbling (crayon, pencil etc) he in turn learns to develop arm, wrist, hand and finger coordination, as well as coordination of the shoulder. As Crosser (2011) has opined, scribbling can serve useful purposes for the young child. Small muscles coordination and control improves with practice, cognitive abilities are exercised, opportunities for social interaction arise, and physical movements provide emotional release.



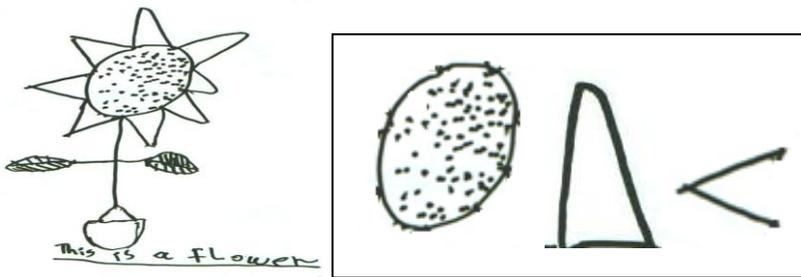
**Figs. 5a, 5b & 5c:** Orinami and Kevwe (both age 4) in different emotional expressions while scribbling

As time goes on, children gain control over these early scribbles. Hurwitz & Day (1995), note that these scribbles become increasingly controlled, more purposeful and rhythmic. Eventually, many children resolve their marks into large circular patterns. Children at the close of the first stage, begin to vary their lines as sweeping, rippling, delicate or bold. Importantly though, their ability in all of this depends on regular practice and cognitive, physical balance. For Toumlin (2011), the duration of the random scribbling stage is dictated by the encouragement of the teacher and parents, the child's general health, muscle development, coordination, intelligence and the quality and frequency of opportunity to randomly scribble.

### The Controlled Scribbling Stage

Between ages two and four, the child is already gaining some control of scribbles made. His scribbles are more of organised circular swirls. This controlled scribble is a manifestation of developed control of the muscles of his hands and fingers. At the early transition stage, the child may yet have problems holding his crayon or marker. However, with time he will learn to hold the marker between his thumb and pointer finger, as seen in figs. 5.

Significantly, the child's scribbles may come as repeated marks. But as Toumlin (2011) has noted, this also signifies the introduction of geometric shapes such as circles, ovals, squares, triangles and crosses in the child's art. The child also makes attempts to intersperse wavy lines and rippling lines with a variety of circular pattern. In the same context, Kellogg (1969) has also asserted that between the ages of two and three, the child begins to form what he terms, "Shapes". Specifically the scribbles at this stage form a cross, an X and enclosures resembling primitive circles, squares, triangles and oblongs. Also, Kellogg as cited in Essa (2011), considers that "developmentally, the diagrams indicate an increasing ability to make a controlled use of lines and to employ memory". Oftentimes too, the children attempt a combination of two of such shapes, as seen in the figure below.



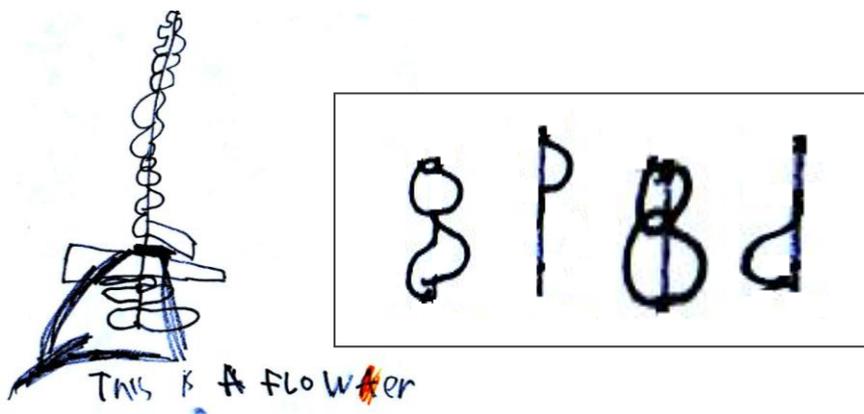
**Fig. 6:** Iwinosa's drawing (achieved) by combining some basic shapes. Encased are some shapes (primitive circle and triangles) extracted from the figure by the authors.

### **Named Scribbling Stage**

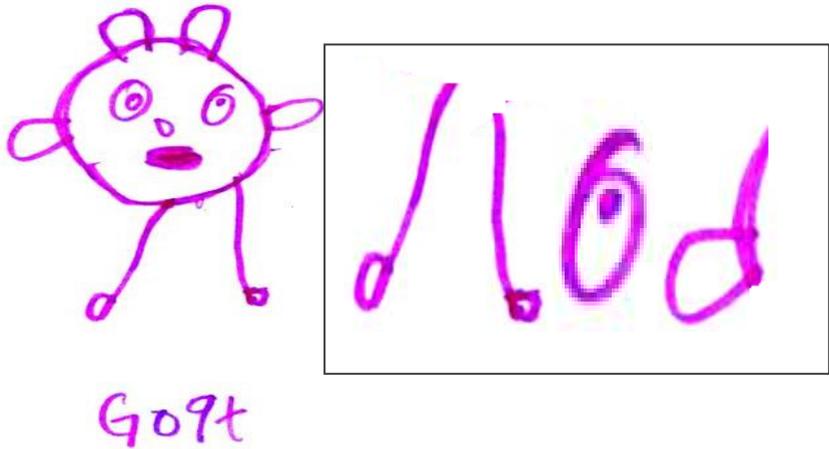
By about age three to about five, the child begins to perfect in combining shapes in his own way to form what Kellogg terms, “aggregates”. Toumlin (2011) notes that with time, suns (a circle), radials (a circle with rays) and madalas (a circle with cross inside) as well as other familiar shapes from the environment begin to appear in the child’s art. Specifically, in terms of madalas, Hurwitz & Day (1995) hold that once a child can return a moving line to its point of inception, a sense of control is vastly increased, leading to the creation of the “mandala” - a term used to describe a circle divided into quarters by two crossed lines. While Kellogg in her analysis of children’s drawings affirms that a great variety of mandalas appear as a final stage between scribbling and representation or the symbolic stage. Essentially the mandala is one of the basics of graphic vocabulary employed by children universally for various purposes. It is in this regard that Jung (1969) and Arnheim (1967) see madala as a universal, culture-free symbol that stems from a physical condition (as a basic property of the nervous system) as well as a psychological need.

Significantly too, this stage of artistic development brings to fore the interrelationship between early writing and drawing. The children begin to recognise that the scribbles, lines and shapes made in drawing could also be employed in writing. In other words, at that early stage of writing, there is the notion that the same kinds of lines are used in drawing and writing. Even at that, the lines function differently in terms of what they are meant to represent. Specifically, the lines in drawing are organised in such a way that they follow the object’s contours. This makes the drawings look like the objects they are meant to represent. But in terms of writing, the lines do not follow the object’s contours. For instance, the drawing or picture of a ball is different from the word, “ball”. This nonetheless, this scribbling stage exposes them to writing as another form of scribbling. It is in this wise that Dyson (1982) asserts that drawing acts as a bridge from one symbolic system to another, in this case, from drawing to writing.

However, in children's drawing, when they make line, curves and repeated patterns, the actual intent is not to write letters even though one may find components of letters in their drawings. Another peculiarity of this stage is the child's ability to identify his drawing by name. He is able to convey the meaning of his work to adults, even when adults may not recognise it as that. But notably, Matthews (1992) sees children's drawing as "located within a family of expressive and symbolic actions used fluently especially by children between three to four years of age". What is significant here is that the child can name what he has on paper verbally and sometimes in writing. This stage is quite crucial to early reading and writing. It also prepares the child for the schematic or symbolic stage in the development of art, when he is able to clearly convert the linear scribble into an enclosed shape. This marks the first attempt at realistic drawing (as seen in figs 8 & 9).



**Fig. 7a:** Drawing by Kelechi; showing forms with semblance of letters. Encased are letter forms (resemblance of letters eight, P and D) extracted from the figure by the authors.

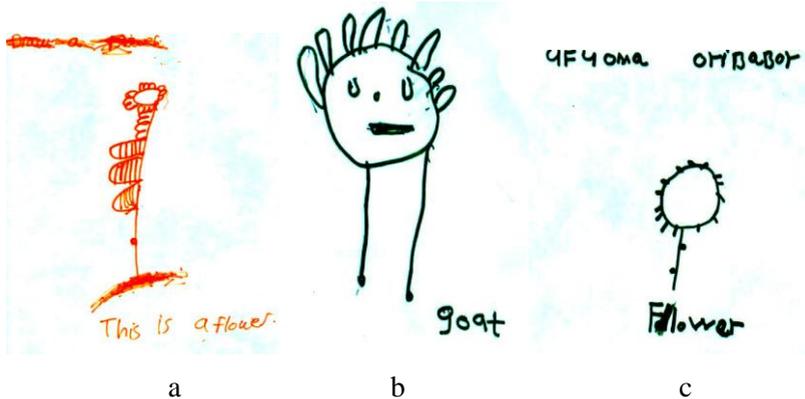


**Fig. 7b:** Drawing by Eseoghene; showing forms with semblance of letters. Encased are letter forms (resemblance of letters Six, b and d) extracted from the figure by the authors.



**Figs. 8a & 8b:** Drawings by Ejiro and Uyi; attempts at realism and naming in writing

Even at the early stages of representational drawing, one still finds traces of earlier scribbling patterns in the child's drawing as can be identified in fig 10.



**Figs. 9a, 9b & 9c:** Drawings by Ebuka, Uyi & Ufuoma; Horizontal lines for the ground line is visible in fig. 9a, Vertical lines used for representation of legs in fig. 9b. Fig. 9c shows a circular loop that resembles the head of a tadpole in the child's expression of a flower.

### **Conclusion**

In preschool and kindergarten, one of the core experiences is in drawing. Importantly, the children's drawings begin as lines and scribbles. The adults will quickly want to dismiss these scribbles as nonsense. On the contrary, the crux in this paper is to establish the fact that in children's scribbles there is "sense". All such scribbles tell a story. These first markings are the foundational block for later drawing. In the analysis of Winner (2000) "the circular loops that children discover in their scribbles later become the heads of tadpoles; the vertical lines are used for legs, and horizontal lines for a ground line on which figures will be placed" (see figs. 10a, 10b & 10c). Significantly, the child is being creative and in the art of combining things in a new way. Children's creativity in this context stems from their experiences, with emphasis on the process rather than the product. This makes their creations a manifestation of their thoughts,

imaginations and how they explore into it. That is why scribbling is not only a motor activity that is pleasurable, but children are also interested in the traces made on the surface.

This singular act of scribbling amongst young learners plays a crucial role in the development of their physical, social-emotional and intellectual competencies. When children are given opportunity to fully express themselves through drawing, they are in another way expressing their emotions, experiencing autonomy, which builds in them, some degree of confidence. In the same way, scribbling helps to develop the muscles of their fingers, and hands and coordination motivated. It is in this context that early childhood educators are quite passionate about promoting children's creativity.

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