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Title:

“My Drawing sucks!” Children’s belief in themselves as artists

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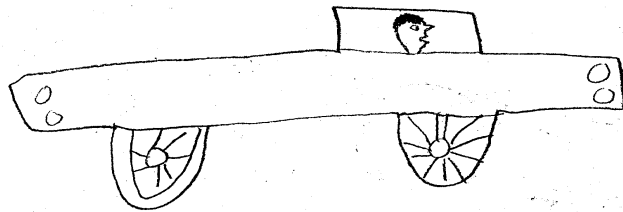
ABSTRACT: It is commonly held that children show a decline in spontaneous art at the age of about seven and that the messages children receive impact on art confidence. Despite this prevailing view little research has been undertaken with children to explore the relationship between art confidence and messages. Therefore research was undertaken with 136 four to nine-year-old children to investigate drawing self-efficacy and the messages children give and receive. The findings show that there were significant differences in drawing self-efficacy levels when both year level and gender were considered, and statistically significant findings for preference for art, vicarious experience, emotional responses, effort and persistence and levels of difficulty. Themes that were generated by interviews and observations include those of participation, teachers’ roles, experiences of boys and girls, nature of verbal interactions and topics of drawings, comments about scribbling, good and bad drawing, art based discussion, concepts of effort and ability and links between literacy and drawing. This paper concludes with recommendations for educational practice including encouraging full participation, theme and inquiry-based programmes, art-based language and discussion, children teaching children, teacher professional development, and understanding drawing self-efficacy.

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INTRODUCTION

The year four children are drawing observational drawings of toys. Andrew critically looks at his drawing and says loudly to one in particular, “My drawing sucks!” He takes his drawing to his friend Eric. Eric looks at the drawing and laughs. Andrew then says again, “It sucks” and rubs out his drawing. Eric watches him and also rubs out his drawing.



This incident, from a fieldwork diary, provides a snap shot of children’s experiences in the classroom. Dissatisfaction with drawing is not uncommon with this age group and some literature and research on children’s drawings suggests that children show a decline in drawing confidence as they mature. Cox (1991) for example, noted that children began to express greater dissatisfaction with their drawings around age seven and Gardner (1982) suggested that, while young children seemed to be driven by some internal dynamism, adolescents lacked enthusiasm about acquiring arts skills. Analysis of children’s drawings led Kellogg (1979) to note a decline in drawings amongst eight-year-olds.

Kellogg (1979) and others have investigated and documented children’s graphic development (for example, Butterworth, 1977; Di Leo, 1977; Eisner, 1972; Gardner, 1980; Lowenfeld, 1959; Piaget & Inhelder, 1959; Wilson & Wilson, 1982). Research on graphic development has provided us with a greater understanding and appreciation of the developmental stages and special characteristics of children’s drawings. As educators we have come to value both the representational images and earlier mark making of young children. In doing so, I suggest, we have elevated the status of young children’s art to a level where we lament the passing of these drawing stages into more developed art forms. We watch as our children become less satisfied with their drawings and choose not to draw. As teachers we seek to make sense of this reluctance to draw, by observing children and reflecting upon our childhood experiences. In doing so we create theory about the reason for children’s decline in drawing confidence. What has developed in our culture is a pervading commonsense view that attributes a decline in drawing confidence and enthusiasm to adult messages, especially those from teachers. Kellogg (1979) for example attributed the decline in drawings amongst eight-year-olds to inappropriate adult pressure, lack of positive messages and poor teaching practices.

Despite these prevailing views little research has been undertaken *with* children to explore the relationship between art confidence and messages. The fact that children usually progress

through school in class groups, sharing similar social experiences and messages, and yet they do not display the same level of art confidence, suggests that development of art confidence is both complex and dynamics. Self-efficacy theory, which is defined by Bandura (1986, p. 139) as “people’s judgements of their capabilities to organise and execute sources of action required to attain designated types of performances,” helps to explain why people with similar experiences behave and act in different ways. Therefore drawing self-efficacy is concerned with people’s judgement of their own drawing capabilities. Research involving four to nine-year-old children was undertaken to investigate drawing self-efficacy, and role of messages in informing drawing self-efficacy (Richards, 2003).

Children receive a variety of verbal and non-verbal messages about their drawing competence. Bandura (1986) suggests four sources of self-efficacy information. These are experience, verbal persuasion, vicarious experience and emotional state. Previous drawing experiences, both positive and negative, are the most influential on drawing self-efficacy. Those with a history of successful drawing experiences are likely to view any subsequent difficulties as easily overcome, while those with previous low success are likely to believe they lack drawing ability. When children see others succeed or fail at a drawing task they are influenced by the vicarious experience. Successful modelling is important and can raise self-efficacy and weaken the impact of past failure (Bandura, 1986). Verbal persuasion can be effective, if set within realistic bounds (Bandura, 1986), and children who have positive drawing self-efficacy are most influenced by positive comment, while those with low self-efficacy are most affected by negative comments (Bandura, 1986). The emotional state of a child can also influence self-efficacy beliefs.

DRAWING SELF-EFFICACY RESEARCH

Procedures

Questionnaires, interviews and observations were used to investigate the drawing self-efficacy levels of 136 children who attended the morning session at a kindergarten, and the new entrant to year four classes of a nearby school. The questionnaire, which comprised 36 items in 8 sections, was based on the four sources of self-efficacy information, and the behaviours associated with self-efficacy. The questions were read aloud, generally prompting a *yes* or *no* answer, and a second question gauged the degree of the response. Responses were designated a number from 1 to 4 and a drawing self-efficacy level was gauged for each child.

Following the questionnaires, kindergarten children were interviewed and observed while engaged in art activities. At the school, children at either end of the drawing self-efficacy scale were invited to participate in interviews and observations. School observations took place during drawing lessons, which were taught by the class teacher.

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Drawing Self-Efficacy Levels

It was possible to score between 36 and 144 on the drawing self-efficacy questionnaire and scores ranged from 70 to 138. The mean was 109, which indicated that over half the children had quite high to high drawing self-efficacy. While the main effect for Year Level or Gender was not statistically significant, there was a significant Year Level by Gender interaction effect, $F(5, 124) = 4.94, p < .01$. As Figure 1 shows there was considerable overlap in scores for boys and girls at kindergarten, year one and year three. Year two boys were around three-quarters of a

standard deviation unit higher than the mean. The new entrant boys were almost one standard deviation unit below the mean, and the year four boys were 1.25 standard deviation units below the mean.

Analysis of the eight sections of the questionnaire revealed statistically significant differences, as displayed in Table 1, for preferences, vicarious experiences, emotional responses, effort and persistence, and levels of difficulty. Preference showed a significant main effect for Gender, $F(1, 124) = 6.73, p < .05$, with girls reporting more positive preferences for art activities than boys. There was also a significant main effect for Year Level, $F(5, 124) = 2.35, p < .05$.

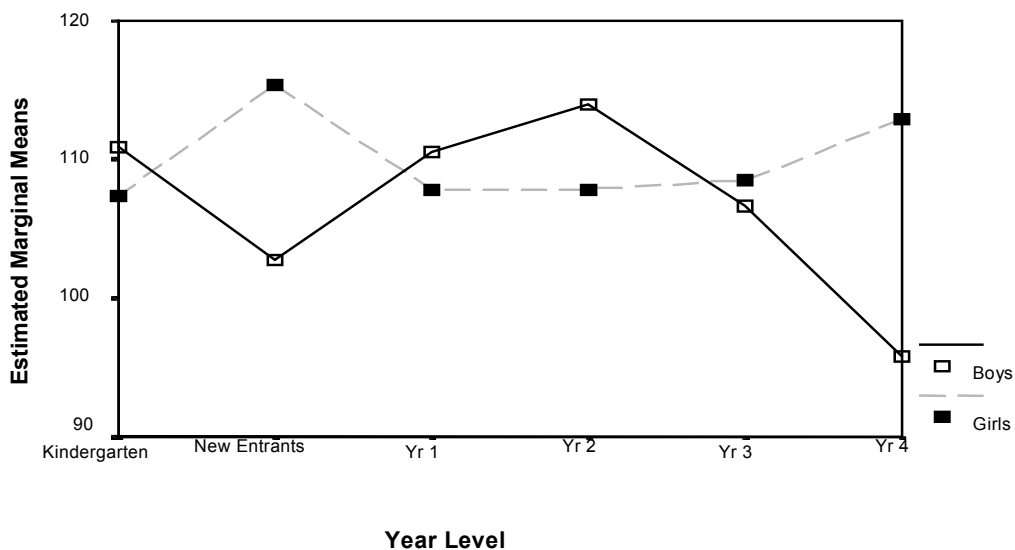


Figure 1. Mean total for boys and girls across year levels

There were statistically significant differences in vicarious experience in terms of Year Level, $F(5, 124) = 3.13, p < .05$, and when both Gender and Year Level were considered $F(5, 124) = 3.19, p < .05$. In general younger children reacted more positively to vicarious experiences believing themselves capable of achieving good outcomes if others did, and the greatest contrast was between new entrant girls, who had positive experiences, and year four boys with negative experiences.

Emotional Responses to drawing revealed that children generally had positive drawing experiences. However there was also a statistically significant main effect for Year Level, $F(5, 124) = 3.99, p < .01$, with year four children showing the lowest emotional response to drawing and the year two children the highest. Gender by Year Level analysis, $F(5, 124) = 4.23, p < .01$, showed the greatest difference between year four boys and girls.

For Effort and Persistence there was a significant interaction effect when both Gender and Year Level $(5, 124) = 2.66, p < .05$. Children with high self-efficacy are likely to persist until satisfied

with the outcomes, while those with low self-efficacy are more likely to give up when they strike difficulty (Bandura, 1986), and the greatest contrast was between year two and year four.

The section on Levels of Difficulty comprised three items that related to confidence in drawing good pictures to go with a made-up story, drawings of themselves and their family, and drawings of a real and observed object. Responses showed the main effect for Year Level was statistically significant $F(5, 124) = 4.66, p < .01$, with a general trend towards a decline in drawing confidence as year levels increased.

Table 1. Summary of Statistically Significant Findings

Scale	Probability Levels		
	Gender	Year Level	Gender X Year Level
Mean Total			< .01
Vicarious Experiences		< .05	< .05
Effort and Persistence			< .05
Emotional Responses		< .01	< .01
Preferences	< .05	< .05	
Levels of Difficulty		< .01	

OBSERVATION AND INTERVIEW THEMES

The questionnaire findings provide some insights into children’s beliefs in themselves as artists and the role messages, or sources of self-efficacy information, has in forming these beliefs. Such findings invariably suggest more questions than answers but the qualitative data provides some further insights into the complexity of children’s art experiences. Observations and interviews revealed several themes that went across all year levels and some that were unique to the school or kindergarten. These are displayed in Table 2.

Common across both sites were comments and messages that suggested that children regarded scribbling as bad drawing. Firm links were also made between drawing and literacy skills. For example, four-year-old Jane related the difficulty she had in drawing to the difficulty she had reading books, and found writing “hard to draw.” At the year four level Danyon suggested that another boy could not draw well “because he needs to learn words like ‘come’.” Rachel also had a theory why some children did not draw well:

When they can’t really read they can’t really draw because – like if you need a word to draw a picture, you know how to draw it – ‘cos if you want to draw a dog, you draw it because you know the word.

To further investigate the relationship between literacy skills and drawing self-efficacy, reading

ages and drawing self-efficacy scores were analysed. Statistical analysis did support a significant interactive effect for Year Level by Gender, $F(7, 90) = 2.88, p < .01$. Data suggested that at years two and three there was a positive relationship between reading age and drawing self-efficacy, but at year four the opposite was observed.

Message or theme	K	NE	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4
Comments about scribbling (*one comment only)	✓	✓	✓	✓*	✓*	
Comments about reading, writing and drawing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Topics linked to gender	✓	✓			✓	✓
Teacher comments are positive	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Boys' comments more negative than girls' comments	✓	✓	✓			✓
Boys and girls appear to have different experiences	✓	✓			✓	✓
Proportionally more girls than boys participate in drawing activities	✓					
Presence of teacher at art area encourages mixed-sex grouping	✓					
Art used as a reward or punishment	✓					
Teacher models drawing process (* children comment on previous experience of modelling)			✓	✓	✓*	✓*
Teacher provides visual motivation or examples		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Teacher encourages children to critique drawings				✓		
Comments about effort and ability (* children comment on knowing how to draw)		✓	✓	✓	✓*	✓*
Comments about persistence leading to success		✓			✓	✓
Children with high drawing self-efficacy dominant in social setting		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Ownership of ideas and topics					✓	✓
Children comment about right and wrong way to draw		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Children comment about being good or bad at drawing		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure 2. Messages and Themes across the Sample

Across both sites some children commented on certain topics being more appropriate for boys or girls. However girls' topics tended to be more acceptable in the classroom, while some boys preferred to draw figures depicting, strength, action and violence. While these images are part of the visual cultural capital of our children, they were not generally accepted as valid art forms. Boys also tended to exchange more negative comments than the girls. Some groups of boys also appeared to have more negative drawing experiences than girls, in terms of verbal exchanges, vicarious experiences and drawing outcomes. Children tended to associate in same-sex groupings, which encouraged positive or negative verbal exchanges, and groupings of children with similar drawing efficacy levels provided vicarious experiences that reinforced high or low self-efficacy.

Observations suggested that many boys did not engage in art or drawing activities while at kindergarten, and overall the kindergarten children showed a lower preference for art activities than any other year level. The presence of a kindergarten teacher tended to encourage participation by boys and girls, but art was sometimes used to control undesirable behaviour. The indoor, sedentary nature of art activity competed with more physical outdoor activities, which the boys tended to engage in and enjoy.

Observations suggested that teachers were more confident in managing and praising children than in teaching and promoting specific art skills. Consequently children often reacted to problems by giving up, or starting their drawing again, without identifying the issues causing concern. In the school setting two teachers modelling and motivated the drawing process, and provided visual models. The year two children, who displayed the most positive emotional response to drawing, were encouraged to comment on each other's drawings. However at Year Four, where interaction and sharing of ideas was discouraged, the children showed the lowest positive emotional responses. While children helping children is one way to convey modelled information, there was a tension between originality and creativity on one hand, and learning from visual images on the other.

School children commented that effort, ability and persistence were important for successful drawing, and by year three children spoke of knowing *how* to draw. Children with the highest drawing self-efficacy levels were more likely to give and receive positive verbal messages, and to tell others what to do, how to do it, and when they were making 'mistakes'. Some children with low drawing self-efficacy suggested that teachers needed to be especially nice about their drawings, even if they didn't like the drawing. Some children also indicated that they would have benefited from re-visiting art activities, as they felt embarrassed by their work on display. While display of art works is generally regarded as a form of valuing children's art, perhaps children would benefit at times from greater input into decisions about what is to be displayed.

Although teachers did not judge the children's drawings the children developed their own critical voice and developed sets of criteria. There were comments that focused on the size of drawings, the content, staying within the lines, colouring-in properly, use of space, drawing appropriate topics, drawing things the *proper* way, and making *mistakes*. Negative comments included drawings being 'stupid' or 'dumb', and positive comments included 'pretty' or 'beautiful'. Children linked drawing success to receiving awards and stickers and also to success criteria in

other curriculum areas, especially handwriting. One boy related competence in team sports to drawing ability.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Considering these findings in relation to sources of self-efficacy information, that is experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and emotional state, provides an insight into the role of messages in the development of drawing self-efficacy.

Contrary to the common sense view, not all children experienced drawing in an educational setting before they went to school. Participation appeared to be an issue especially for kindergarten boys. Furthermore, while drawing experience was the major source of self-efficacy information, writing and reading competence and performance in other areas also provided performance information.

While the commonsense view places the teacher as the central provider of verbal feedback, the children had the dominant role in verbal persuasion. The children developed quite clear criteria by which they judged drawings and at times these criteria mirrored criteria from other curriculum areas. The nature of comments tended to reflect self-efficacy levels with children with higher self-efficacy giving and receiving more positive messages than those with low. Art-based discussion appeared to encourage positive drawing self-efficacy as the year two children, who were encouraged to exchange verbal comments, showed the highest preference for drawing, had the most positive emotional responses to drawing, and the boys had a higher drawing self-efficacy mean than the girls.

Although vicarious experience through modelling was provided by two teachers, children's interactions provided the greatest source of vicarious experience and to a large extent groupings of children reflected existing efficacy levels. However children's belief in their ability to draw well if others did declined with age. Some children were motivated to draw images from the media but in general these were discouraged.

Teachers encouraged positive emotional responses to art. However some interactions in the classrooms were subtle, and children were socially isolated, ignored, or criticised by peers. Also, in general children were inexperienced at discussing their drawings, and children spoke of being frustrated and embarrassed by critical comments. This was most noted amongst those with lower drawing self-efficacy who were least resilient to negative messages. Using art activities to control the undesirable behaviour would also contribute to negative emotional responses to art for some children.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of these findings, and the issues and implications that have been identified, the following recommendations are made.

Encouraging Full Participation

All children would benefit from positive experiences in drawing and art activity, and consideration needs to be given to how to make art activities more attractive to all children. In

some setting this may have special implications for boys, and observations in both sites suggested that involvement and enjoyment might increase with

- Greater teacher involvement and positive feedback during art making processes
- The development of art themes popular with, or initiated by, the children
- Avoidance of the use of art activities as a form of control or punishment.
- Provision of visual and real resources to motivate, stimulate and provide visual information
- Strategic placing of some art activities to allow for greater physical activity.

Theme and Inquiry-Based Programmes

Programmes that allow children to develop visual understandings and expressions through a variety of related experiences are likely to increase drawing self-efficacy. Early Childhood educators could explore the Reggio Emilia approach which advocates the development of child and teacher selected themes as the basis for sustained theme-based programmes (see Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998; Gandini, 1997; Hendrick, 1997). I believe that art programmes based around themes can facilitate increased art self-efficacy if the programme

- Allows for the development of ideas and images over a sustained period of time
- Considers topics that are of interest to the children
- Allows children to explore a variety of art forms and visual information
- Allows for the teaching and development of the skills necessary for the children to successfully manipulate media, processes and techniques
- Involves the children, teachers and wider community in collaborative processes so that children are exposed to a variety of ideas, audiences and fellow artists.
- Encourages children to develop ideas and communicate thinking through a variety of sign systems such as art, music, movement, drama, language and mathematic.

Art-Based Language and Discussion

Because children developed their own critical voice, children and teachers would benefit from developing art-based language and critiquing skills. Deliberate art-based discussion would

- Empower the children to talk about their drawings and drawing processes and find merit in their work
- Provide discussion about strategies for problem solving, and explore possibilities
- Help children to understand how other artists and cultures represent their world in visual images
- Provide a form of formative assessment and focused discussion where encouragement can replace praise, and a focus on achievements can replace one on rewards
- Allow for child-initiated discussion and a focus on the elements of art and the context in which the artwork was developed.

Teacher Professional Development

Teachers need greater access to professional development to

- Increase their own confidence in, and understanding of, art making processes
- Explore and understand the elements and principles of the visual arts
- Develop the skills in facilitating discussion with and amongst children about their art
- Have personal experience in art making so that teachers understand the demands of the

task and how these might be modelled so that children can understand them.

Children Teaching Children

Modelling is most effective where participants share similar personal characteristics (Bandura, 1986). Therefore teachers should encourage children to support one another in the art making processes by

- Children modelling activities and sharing ideas
- Children talking about their art and assisting each other to solve visual problems.

It is important that individual and group interests are fostered and developed and that teachers provide opportunities for various children to become 'experts' amongst their peers. In doing so teachers must also address issues of ownership of ideas and copying so that children are comfortable with sharing ideas. Within the art programme provision should be made for shared ideas to be developed into forms that are unique to the individuals.

Understanding Drawing Self-Efficacy

Understanding children's self-efficacy would help teachers to provide experiences that build on positive beliefs and limit these negative influences.

Teachers could increase their awareness of drawing self-efficacy by

- reading and reflecting on educational research on self-concepts and self-efficacy and observing children while drawing
- using questions and interviews to gauge drawing self-efficacy and talk to children about their interpretations of experiences
- Observing children and social interactions in other classrooms and relating characteristics of high and low self-efficacy to that observed, and by sharing these insights with colleagues.

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