

**ROLE OF DRAWING IN LEARNING TO WRITE: AN EMERGENT LITERACY
PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

Drawing is an important developmental stage in the process of learning to write. Children draw and scribble to express themselves before they learn to write in conventional ways. Recent research indicates a strong relationship between emergent writing and drawing. However, it is often the case that adults or teachers fail to interpret and attribute any meaning to children's drawing and therefore, they see children's drawing as random marks on the page without recognising its significance or value in terms of its meaning for the child. They often tend to overlook children's attempts at drawing and scribbling which are an equally important way in which children express themselves. This paper discusses drawing a precursor to conventional writing that helps children to develop skills for setting up foundations for literacy, by making sense of both visual and verbal signs, which are later developed for reading and writing. The paper also explicates important implications for the classroom and the role of the teacher that can have a positive bearing on the children's attempts to draw and express themselves in school setting.

Keywords: Emergent Literacy, Drawing, Scribbling, Writing

Introduction

Writing is a complex interaction of cognitive and physical factors involving the hand, eye, and both sides of the brain (Bromley, 2007). Writing involves forming complex shapes of the letter and the ability to use 'abstract symbols' to convey one's thoughts (Kumar, 1994). The emergent literacy perspective focuses on the informal aspects of literacy learning before the child becomes a conventional reader and writer. The perspective also gives importance to the child's point of view in his engagements with literacy. Literacy learning is seen on a developmental continuum that begins early in life (Flint,2008).Drawing is an important developmental stage in the process of learning to write. Children draw and scribble to express themselves before they learn to write in conventional ways. Children draw with a purpose to communicate a message to and about the world around them. Several researchers have studied children's scribbles and their drawings in order to gain an insight into its impact on

their ability for constructing meaning, communicating, and helping children to make connections between letters, words, symbols and visual representation to facilitate teaching and learning of literacy skills.(Kellogg, 1970; Golomb, 1992; Matthews, 2003;Anning and Ring, 2004; Hope, 2008).

Drawing as a developmental stage towards conventional writing

In the initial phase of this developmental stage, children like to draw things which they see around them in their immediate environment or objects or characters they hear about in the stories and poems recited to them. Drawing acts a tool for making sense of their world and constructing meaning out of their experiences (Anning, 1999; Bagbhan, 2007).They use drawing to develop, create, communicate and record their thoughts. In this phase their drawings may not be realistic since children are not mature enough to consider aspects such as shape or proportion in their drawings. Also, one may notice that young children would draw anywhere on the page and not proportionately utilize the space on the page. Gradually one may notice that these drawings go on becoming more realistic, making evident the progress they make in the process of more accurately expressing themselves. If we look at the children's drawing carefully, we can see that children gradually develop aesthetic sense as they are exposed to more and more things in the world around them. Each child has his or her own unique style and way of expressing himself through initial drawings. This phase is considered as a passing phase but each child goes through it in their progress towards learning how to write.

Children also go through various stages before learning to talk in conventional ways and the adults around them appreciate their various intermittent attempts. However, they often tend to overlook children's attempts at drawing and scribbling which are an equally important way in which children express themselves. At an early age, drawing helps children to communicate their 'hidden' ideas and feelings, which they may not be able to express verbally (Malchiodi, 1998). Hope (2008) pointed out that "drawing acts as bridge between the inner world of imagination and reason and the outer world of communication and sharing of ideas". Researchers also indicate that scribbling and drawing enhances the development of children's fine motor skills (Anning, 2004).Drawing shapes, random scribbles and lines, with various crayons, pencils, pens and markers augments their hand movement and hand-eye coordination needed for future writing skills (Jalongo, 2007; Kellogg, 1970). As a precursor to conventional writing, drawing helps children to develop skills for setting up foundations

for literacy by making sense of both visual and verbal signs, which are later developed for reading, and writing. Moreover, imagination and creativity have an important place in children's drawings. Bartel (2010) opined that children experience emotional satisfaction when they draw with crayons as it boosts their moral and gives them pleasure for having made an artistic statement. Opportunities must be provided to them to keep their imagination alive. It is a harsh reality of many classrooms that these early attempts at drawing and scribbling are neglected and not many creative activities are initiated to foster children's creativity at this stage.

Drawing is a reflection of children's experiences. However, it is often the case that adults or teachers fail to interpret and attribute any meaning to children's drawing and therefore, they see children's drawing as mere mark making without recognising its significance or value in terms of its interpretation, or what children are trying to portray in their drawings (Anning & Ring, 2004). Therefore, in early grades it can often be seen that the teacher in the classroom decides what the children will draw. Children take great pains to replicate the drawing drawn by the teacher or to draw perfectly the object provided by the teacher for imitation. This early urge for perfection and the teachers' approval eventually makes children less confident in their own ability to draw freely and express and makes them dependent on the teacher (Kumar 1994). It is vital that their teachers try to understand what children are trying to communicate and express. The process of writing begins with children scribbling and doodling on the page. Gradually children make attempts to draw. Children must be encouraged to draw whatever they wish to. Initially the children might hesitate to draw and there may be several factors for it, such as:

- Lack of a print rich environment
- Lack of opportunities which require children to express themselves freely
- Lack of interaction with reading material

Implications for teachers

In the light of the emergent literacy perspective, there are certain implications for the classroom that can have a bearing on the children's attempts to draw and express themselves:

In primary grades, especially in grades first and second it is important that activities that encourage children to relate with and express themselves be taken up in the classroom. Doing so helps children to easily comprehend material they are presented with as well as to imagine and retrieve from their experiences material which can be drawn and written about.

Children's drawings depend a lot on their ability to observe. It is therefore important to bring children in contact with objects characters which they can observe and comprehend. It is important that children are exposed to and immersed in an environment where there is no dearth of stories, poems and other forms of children's literature.

It is extremely necessary that a teacher does not look for perfection in drawings done by children. Even in drawing and writing children go through the process of constructing meaning. Meanings that are constructed are based on things they have seen, read and experienced. Children's drawings should be assessed in this light and given appropriate space such as setting up a corner to display their drawings within the classroom. A teacher should note the changes that emerge in these drawings such as proportion, sense of shape, length and width, use of space on the paper, detailing. These changes that emerge show the developmental nature of children's drawings. All these developments help children in the process of writing. Rather than looking for perfection in their drawings a teacher should try to use these as a starting point of initiating a conversation with the child to know about what he/she has drawn. It is important to realize that if we look at their drawings from an adult perspective we will just find random scribbles on the page. However, if we shift our outlook to perceive what the child tries to convey, we will see their expressions in it.

Recent research indicates a strong relationship between emergent writing and drawing. However, in some classrooms young children are compelled to consider drawing and writing in isolation from one another, rather than as a singular system of meaning making (Mackenzie 2011). Ample opportunities should be provided to children to engage in meaningful drawing and writing. For example, children can be asked to draw their favourite character or scene from a story read aloud to them in the class. Writing should be seen as an extension of talk (Kumar 1994). This means that drawing brings forth children's voice as emergent writers and therefore children should be invited to talk about their drawings and should be asked about what they have drawn. For emergent writers, teachers can jot down these ideas next to what they have drawn in order to demonstrate them the use of written language and help them in noticing the connection between speaking, writing and reading. Gradually children can be asked to write about their drawings or frame stories based on their drawings. This encourages children to reflect about what they have drawn and share their understandings with others, thus developing a sense of audience and a desire to convey, the two key aspects crucial to becoming a sound writer (Kumar 1994). As a result, talk and drawing influence each other resulting in more nuanced drawings and pieces of writing.

Creating print rich environment and writing centres in classroom provides children the stimulus to engage in meaningful and creative reading, drawing and writing activities. Print rich environment includes a variety of children's literature, big books, picture books, story boards, newspapers, children's magazines, labels on objects in the classroom, morning messages, grocery lists and other authentic materials which can give children inputs for producing drawing and writing pieces. Writing centres include ample materials such as sheets of paper, crayons, markers, pencils, pens for children to write. Writing centres also enable children to interact and discuss about their piece of work. It is also important to display student's work in the classroom to develop a sense of ownership in them towards their piece of work, feel connected with their peers' work and to feel appreciated and motivated to continue their efforts at drawing and writing.

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