

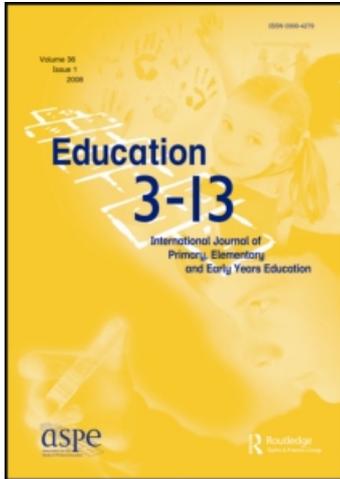
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### Responding to children's drawings

Robert Watts<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Education, Roehampton University, London, UK

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## Responding to children's drawings

Robert Watts\*

*School of Education, Roehampton University, Roehampton Lane, London, SW15 5PJ, UK*

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This article aims to explore the issues that face primary school teachers when responding to children's drawings. Assessment in art and design is an ongoing concern for teachers with limited experience and confidence in the area and, although children's drawings continue to be a focus of much research, the question of what it is that teachers *say* to young children that has a positive impact on the development of their drawing is under-explored. The article aims to identify the components of what constitutes children's competence in observational drawing through a detailed analysis of a drawing made by a 6-year-old child. Connections between the teaching of drawing and the teaching of literacy are highlighted, and the article concludes that children who are able to make confident representations of the visual world are better placed to express their own ideas, thoughts and experiences through art.

**Keywords:** drawing; assessment; primary education

### Introduction: drawing in primary schools

The process of drawing occupies a unique position within primary and early years education. Young children's experiments with mark making often reflect an instinctive engagement with the process, while many older children recognise the potential of drawing as a means of communication and representing the visual world. While theoretically located within art and design, drawing permeates other areas of the primary curriculum, to the extent that many of the drawings children make in school, such as maps, diagrams or illustrations, are made during lessons in areas other than art.

This article takes as its starting point observations made by children as part of a recent research project (Watts 2005) involving over 300 7–11-year-olds. Responses to questions about their attitudes towards making art offered evidence that children value the ability to make convincing observational and representational drawings and also that they frequently link their own declining levels of interest in art with their perceived inability to draw. Drawing, they believe, is the measure by which they succeed or fail as artists. But despite the apparent range of opportunities children have for refining their use of drawing as a means of expression or developing their

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\*Email: [r.watts@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:r.watts@roehampton.ac.uk)

technical skills, children's confidence in their drawing ability often decreases as they progress through primary school.

This decrease in confidence may be attributed to the increasingly peripheral role played by art and design in many primary schools under pressure to raise standards in literacy and numeracy (Herne 2000). However, the 2009 Ofsted report on art, craft and design in primary and secondary schools identifies teacher confidence in the teaching of drawing as an issue in maintaining standards:

... Many of the primary school teachers surveyed lacked confidence in drawing. This detracted from their effectiveness as teachers and from their pupils' achievements. This raises concerns about the limited professional development opportunities provided to help primary teachers overcome their fear of drawing. (Ofsted 2009, 14)

The report goes on to suggest that the development of drawing skills in schools 'is central to progression in art, craft and design ... [and] almost always underpinned the most impressive work seen in key stages 1 and 2' (Ofsted 2009, 7). Yet as Thistlewood (1992, 163) has highlighted, trainee teachers often receive only the briefest instruction in teaching drawing skills and 'observational drawing, more than any other facet of art-making, is impossible to teach and evaluate if the teacher-evaluator lacks appropriate and practised expertise'. Furthermore, art educators such as John Matthews suggest that the practice of teaching observational drawing skills to young children is problematic, maintaining that the process of learning to draw 'has to be both spontaneous and solitary' (2003, 110). This approach echoes that of Cizek who, over a century ago, argued that children's engagement with art would remain stronger with the minimum of adult guidance, and that teaching children to represent the visual world in the 'realistic' way that adults did would only serve to restrict their creativity.

The philosophical perspective from which key art educators emerged 100 years ago was one underpinned by the transformation that figurative art had undergone. The huge tensions between expressive and representative art subsequently preoccupied art educators, as a pamphlet published in 1942 by the National Society of Art Masters eloquently illustrates:

The two extreme attitudes might be described approximately as (a) where the pupil is allowed to express himself in line, form and colour, unfettered in any way, unrestrained and even unguided, relying only upon the pupil's emotions and naïve imagination and his intuition for graphic representation; (b) where the pupil is led through a course of drawing and painting, craftwork and such-like, progressing through stages of graded technicalities with the objective of his acquiring executive competence. As with the most extremes of theorising the practicable course lies somewhere between the two extremes. (National Society of Art Masters 1942, quoted in Thistlewood 1988, 60)

This article argues that, if primary teachers' confidence in the teaching of drawing is to increase, this 'path between the two extremes' is one that they should be strongly encouraged to explore. It begins with a brief overview of theories of development of children's drawings, before providing an overview of recent research in the field. Through a detailed analysis of a drawing made by a 6-year-old child, it aims to identify the components of what constitutes children's competence in observational drawing, before exploring some of the connections between the teaching of drawing and the teaching of literacy.

### Children's drawing: theories of development

Interest in drawings made by young children began to develop over 100 years ago, attracting the attention of psychologists as well as art educators. Prior to this time, as Cox (1992) observes, children were generally regarded as 'imperfect adults', works in progress rather than subjects of interest in their own right. In 1913 Georges-Henri Lucquet published *Les dessins d'un enfant*, and introduced the influential concept of stage theory. Between the ages of 2 and 4 years, children were at the 'scribbling' stage, from which recognisable shapes or images might accidentally emerge ('fortuitous realism'). From the age of around 4, Lucquet proposed, children were at the 'pre-schematic' stage, attempting to depict objects realistically. At 7 to 9 years children progressed through an interim stage before reaching the age of 'visual realism' at 9 to 10 years, by which time their drawings were judged to be able to represent the visual world with some accuracy.

Lucquet's theories were later developed by Lowenfeld, who highlighted the potential of drawing as a means of direct expression for children and argued that adults should avoid intervening in the drawing process: 'Don't impose your own images on a child. Never give the work of one child as an example to another. Never let a child copy anything' (Lowenfeld 1947, quoted in Cox 1992). Anning and Ring (2004) highlight some of the problematic aspects of stage theory, arguing that it portrays young children's drawings 'as "deficit" as they worked towards the goal of visual realism' (18) and that in some cultures children are free from the 'tyranny of representation as the highest goal of artistry' (19).

It is difficult to measure the extent to which theories of development currently influence teachers' expectations of children's drawings. Some teachers will actively advocate the principle of allowing young children time and space to draw independently with minimum levels of adult intervention; others will leave children alone to draw, not through commitment to any principle but because their priorities lie elsewhere. In either case, children will at some point request or demand a response to their drawings from their teacher, whether it is one that is broadly supportive or one that is specific and constructive.

### Children's drawing: recent research

Much of the recent research into children's drawings has been located in either an early years or secondary school context (Rayment and Smith 2002; Cox 2005; Burkitt, Barrett, and Davis 2005; Scott Frisch 2006) with comparatively little rooted in the intervening years of primary education. Researchers have tended to focus on areas such as age-related development (Atkinson 1993; Kress 1997; Matthews 2003), interpretation, intention and meaning (Hawkins 2002; Cox 2005; Willats 2005) and the contexts in which drawings were made (Anning 2002; Anning and Ring 2004).

In an overview of recent literature on children's drawings Rose, Jolley, and Burkitt (2006) draw on evidence from several UK studies to distinguish between the experiences of teachers in different phases. While secondary teachers were, unsurprisingly, sufficiently confident in their knowledge and understanding of the pedagogical issues surrounding drawing to provide specific and targeted feedback to pupils (Coutts and Dougall 2005), it was found that primary teachers were more inclined to adopt an approach that was generally supportive and rarely critical of the child's efforts:

Teachers all reported being very encouraging to children and giving them quite a lot of freedom to choose their own content for their drawing and develop their own drawing style. The teachers did not see themselves as judging the children's drawings; instead, they report giving all children positive encouragement. (Rose, Jolley, and Burkitt 2006, 346)

A key issue that emerges from these examples of the recent literature is that each study is conducted from the perspective either of an art specialist, an early childhood educator or a psychologist, and each is concerned solely with the work of children within a specific age group. There is relatively little evidence of recent dialogue between practitioners about approaches to teaching drawing across these age phases or examples of lessons learned in one context being applied to another.

The boundaries between age phases have arguably been strengthened by the culture of testing in primary schools in England, in which the pressure to raise standards in the core subjects threatens the quality of children's learning in the foundation subjects. While in theory primary teachers enjoy a more flexible timetable than that of their secondary colleagues, in practice the time available for foundation subjects has been reduced in order to focus on literacy and numeracy (Herne 2000). Furthermore, increased levels of funding for 'booster' classes for pupils struggling in the core subjects resulted in many pupils being regularly withdrawn from lessons in the foundation subjects.

In this context it is perhaps inevitable that primary teachers have regarded the development and assessment of children's drawing skills as a peripheral issue. Yet, blissfully unaware of these matters, children carry on drawing – and not only within art lessons but also in almost every other curriculum area, often working independently on drawings that are repetitive in nature and which receive minimum attention from their teachers. Essentially, making accurate observational drawings is something that many children want to learn how to do, and in order to do this they need specific support from their teachers.

### **Issues surrounding assessment in art and design**

If teachers accept that they need to improve the quality of their responses to children's work, they may also argue that assessing children's work in art and design is more problematic than assessing work in other curriculum areas. This is understandable, for several reasons. Firstly, there is little consensus on what constitutes a 'successful' work of art, whether it hangs on a wall at Tate Modern or in a primary classroom. For artists – and perhaps children – this can constitute an exciting and challenging concept: there is no right or wrong, and if that is the way they want their work to look, then no-one can persuade them otherwise. For the teacher, however, this can be confusing and frustrating. *How do I respond to this piece of work? Is it good or bad? Do I like it or dislike it? What could be done to improve it?* A pupil presenting a drawing to a teacher may assume that 'the teacher knows best', yet many teachers may have little confidence in their own opinions and be reluctant to provide criticism or advice. Personal taste may play a role in the process of responding to a piece of work, but teachers' knowledge and understanding of the subject should also inform the responses they make. In other words, a teacher may not particularly like a drawing that a child has made, but he or she should nonetheless be able to suggest ways in which it might be improved.

Secondly, there is a tendency in many primary schools to display only finished pieces of children's work, rather than examples of preparatory work that provide

valuable evidence of the learning process. In creating their work children may demonstrate that they have developed their knowledge, skills and understanding of art and design, yet simultaneously produce work that is disappointing or that obscures the learning that has taken place. A student teacher once described to me how she watched a Reception class pupil make a painting. ‘Yesterday,’ the little girl explained, ‘we all went on a picnic.’ The scene she proceeded to paint began to unfold in a familiar way – a yellow sun in a blue sky, a happy family sitting on green grass – but changed dramatically when the little girl reached for another pot of paint and proceeded to impose thick, dark streaks of grey across the sun, the sky, the grass and the family. Alarm bells rang in the teacher’s head – what was the little girl trying to tell her? What trauma was she intent on revealing through her painting? ‘And then,’ the little girl continued, ‘then it started to rain.’ For this pupil, the finished product clearly meant less to her than the process by which it was made.

Thirdly, many teachers feel that their own personal lack of technical expertise inhibits them from making constructive criticism of children’s work. Teaching children how to draw is perhaps the most common reservation teachers have about teaching art and design. Many adults, as Anning points out, themselves ‘remain arrested in the drawing capability they assumed at the age of six or seven’ (Anning 2002, 198) and claim almost with pride that they ‘can’t draw’. It is important that teachers understand that they do not themselves have to be competent artists in order to be effective teachers of the subject. Arguably, what children need from their teacher is not impressive demonstrations of their own technical skills, but evidence of genuine interest in their work and an awareness of ways in which it might be improved.

### Now draw a picture

The drawings in Figure 1 date back several years, to a wet break-time in a primary school classroom in London. Finding herself placed at a table of 9-year-olds, Aisha,<sup>1</sup> 5, had sought to impress 9-year-old neighbour Lindsey by making a drawing. As a sprightly figure with flailing arms and a broad smile swiftly took shape on the page, Lindsey promoted herself to a pedagogical role. She added her own figure, encouraged Aisha to observe some of the details she had included and to respond with further drawings of her own.

Left on their desk at the end of the break, it was easy to identify which drawing was Lindsey’s. While Aisha’s figures were haphazardly constructed from circles, triangles and rectangles before being set free to float airily around the page, Lindsey’s self-portrait was more detailed, with a striped school tie and feet planted firmly at the foot of the page. Its accidental juxtaposition with the younger child’s efforts only served to highlight the fact that Lindsey’s portrait was not only technically limited, it also lacked the spontaneity of Aisha’s drawings.

Yet Lindsey’s drawing was characteristic of many of the drawings made by pupils in her class. As their teacher, I had grown aware over a period of time that the majority of these drawings were made not during art lessons but as illustrations to accompany written work in other curriculum areas. My pupils, unable to write independently for sustained periods and rarely for long enough to fill a whole page in an exercise book, were regularly encouraged to complete their text by illustrating it. Preoccupied with those children needing extra help with their writing, I would despatch early finishers with the instruction to ‘*now draw a picture*’. Pupils learned to



Figure 1. Drawings by Aisha and Lynsey.

expect little in the way of feedback on the pictures they subsequently produced and they certainly did not expect to be told that their drawings could be improved. On reflection, I realise that my expectations of children's drawings were low, that the progression they made with their drawings was slow and that opportunities to learn and understand more about my pupils were lost, a situation recognised by Anning (2004):

Sadly, within many educational contexts, children's narratives in drawings are not valued or understood. Adults rarely observe children drawing and are therefore unable to tune into these powerful narratives. Instead, 'drawing a picture' is seen as a way of keeping children quiet when they have accomplished the high status task of writing their stories. Feedback is rarely given to the children on their pictures and they quickly learn that drawn narratives are of little value as far as teachers are concerned. (Anning 2004, 34)

Considering this issue from the perspective of a teacher educator, it has become increasingly clear to me that the area of responding to children's drawings brings together two of the issues in art education that trainee teachers find particularly problematic, namely, drawing and assessment. However experienced a teacher may be, many require specific advice to support children's progress with their drawing and to enable them to work to their full potential. Pressures of time and the demands of the classroom can easily result in superficial responses to children's work: 'Lovely,' we often hear, 'What is it?' Teachers know they should be saying something more thoughtful, more insightful, and more constructive and critical but often lack the confidence to make the responses children need in order to make progress with their

work. These responses, whether they are made to individuals or the whole class, are arguably crucial to children’s development in art and design. The question of *what to say* to children when they are learning to draw is one that needs to be explored.

### Representational drawing

Successful representational drawing (in the sense of ‘realistic’ representation, since any kind of drawing ‘represents’) is essentially about close observation, and learning how to draw accurately is a long, complex and often frustrating process. It is a cluster of skills that, once acquired, can be useful across and beyond the school curriculum. Kate was 6 years old and a pupil in my Year 2 class when she made the drawing in Figure 2. It was drawn following a trip to her local park, using blue biro and coloured pencil, on lined paper. She brought it into school the next morning and gave it to me. ‘It’s my brother Jack,’ she explained. ‘He was crying because he didn’t want to go home.’

When I first saw Kate’s drawing (Figure 2), I immediately sensed it was *complete* – although it took me some time to understand why. This was partly because, as is the case with many works of art, its coherence as a finished piece meant that individual elements were not immediately apparent. As a Year 2 teacher, guiding my pupils towards national tests, I had become used to analysing their work in the core subjects. A successful written story, I knew, was one that was not only creative and imaginative but also technically proficient. While striving to engage and entertain the reader with exciting ideas and interesting vocabulary, pupils simultaneously had to remember to structure their stories with a beginning, middle and an end, to use direct speech, to spell words accurately and ensure all sentences had capital letters and full stops. I recognised that Kate’s drawing, with its engaging

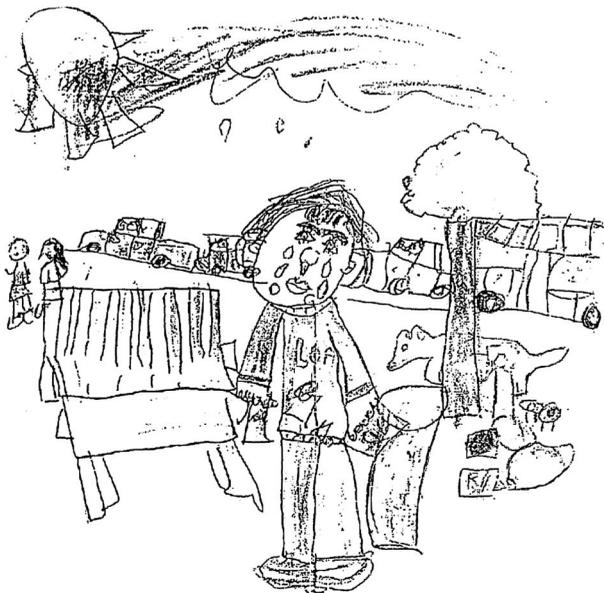


Figure 2. Kate’s drawing.

combination of modest ambition and technical proficiency, was almost a visual equivalent of the stories she and her classmates were struggling to write: the drawing's composition, its level of detail and sense of space are the equivalent of a story's structure, plot, vocabulary and grammar. In contrast to the gradual, often laborious steps that my pupils were taking towards mastering these literary skills, Kate's drawing appeared to leap from the page fully formed.

### *Atmosphere/mood*

The first impression of a work of art strongly informs each subsequent one. What is immediately striking about Kate's drawing is the atmosphere and mood created by the range of minor details she has included. The viewer senses Jack's unhappiness, largely due to the expressive drawing of his face. The six huge teardrops are obvious indicators of his misery, but the sideways inclination of his head – the only visible movement of the figure – and upward direction of his gaze is a more subtle gesture that make us feel that he is appealing to an adult outside of the picture frame – indeed, directly to us as viewers. Jack's centrality in the composition and the distance between him and everything else in the picture adds to a sense of isolation: cars pass by on the horizon and even the dog is ignoring him, busying itself behind a tree. The closeness between the two figures to the left of the picture serves to further emphasise Jack's loneliness (their presence also echoes Edvard Munch's use of two figures in the distance to emphasise the isolation of the central figure in 'The Scream'). The objects closest to Jack are an empty bench and a waste bin and what looks like some rubbish tipped out on to the floor. The scribbles across the top of the picture may be clouds obscuring the sun, and the drops of rain echo the tears on Jack's face. These details, suggestive not only of a miserable day but also of long-term environmental decay, contribute as much as the expression on Jack's face towards the mood of the picture.

### *Detail*

Kate has included other, more incidental details. It is possible to make out the profile of a driver, a steering wheel and a door handle in the first car on the horizon, whilst the last vehicle is clearly intended to be a double-decker bus. Jack's proportions are consistent with those of a small child; we can see his fingernails, eyebrows and eyelashes, the piltrum between his nose and mouth, and read the logo on his sweatshirt. Two birds can be seen rooting around in the rubbish on the ground. The degree of observation and depth of detail in the picture is all the more impressive when we consider firstly that Kate was drawing the scene from memory, not observation, and secondly, examples of drawings made by other children of a similar age.

Callum was only a few months younger than Kate when he made the drawing in Figure 3. Asked by his teacher to draw a picture of himself doing something he loved, he chose to portray himself playing a computer game. Part of Callum's drawing is very detailed. He has included a TV screen, on which can be seen a tiny image of two figures running along what appears to be a railway line below a strip of sky. The screen is linked to a box – a computer game console – that includes a slot for a disk, and from which emerge wires that are attached to the controls that he holds in his hands. Callum's arms extend to his head, where the scale changes dramatically. A large, blank, expressionless face stares out at the viewer. Nothing

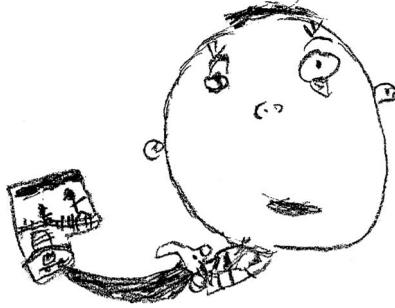


Figure 3. Callum's drawing.

else is included: no neck, no body, and no legs. Why? I suggest because their inclusion would add nothing to the story that Callum is telling us. He has edited them out of the scene, focusing attention away from himself and towards the technology. The details that young children include in their drawings are limited to those needed to tell the stories they want to share.

### **Representation**

From an early age children are accustomed to seeing and 'reading' simplified representations of objects. A house, for instance, is typically represented as a rectangle with square windows and a triangular roof. Few, if any, houses look like this, yet the image is immediately recognisable almost as a symbol. Young children quickly learn to create – or copy – schemas for many things; house, bike, sun, cat, dog, bird, fish. Many of the illustrations aimed at both children (and adults) replicate, to some extent, the same simplified images, and it is arguable that many drawings made by young children are made as much in imitation of these images as of the real or imagined world (for further discussion, see Anning and Ring 2004).

The dog and birds in Kate's drawing, however, are less stereotypical than those typically drawn by young children (see Cox 1992, 204). The birds face towards the viewer, their heads and bodies drawn as concentric circles, each balanced on a tiny pair of legs. The dog is seen in profile, its head dipping towards the ground, its leg apparently cocked behind the tree. The park bench is also drawn from an unusual angle that reveals three of its four legs, as well as the armrests protruding at each side. Interestingly, the two objects in the picture that are seen most frequently in young children's drawings – the sun and a tree – are both drawn in a relatively stereotypical manner: the sun a circle surrounded by spikes, the tree a thin rectangle topped with a cloud of leaves. It would appear that, in drawing these objects, Kate has opted to communicate their presence in a way that makes them instantly recognisable to other children.

### **Composition**

Kate is able to include a large amount of detail into her drawing without crowding the picture frame due to her strong sense of composition: the way in which she has harmoniously integrated various elements into the picture frame. There is a circular

element to the composition, Jack at its centre. No part of the composition is placed along the bottom, and there are very few areas of the drawing in which there is nothing happening. Other than Jack, no single element dominates: larger objects – the cars, the tree – are placed in the background, balanced by smaller ones – the dog, the bin, the birds – in the foreground. Whilst there is a stillness and immobility in Jack’s pose (‘But I don’t want to go home!’) the rest of the world continues to move around him.

When children draw from memory or imagination they are inclined to make comparatively random compositions: Figure 4, a ‘reconstruction’ of the scene drawn by Kate, shows the way in which young children might typically record the scene in the park. Each element is allocated its own individual space within the picture frame: none overlaps with another. There is a strip of sky at the top of the picture, and a strip of ground at the bottom, to which each object except the sun is rooted. Much of the paper has not been used, as if to represent the space between the sky and the ground.

### *A sense of space*

A key feature that distinguishes Kate’s drawing from those of many children her age is its sense of space. Kate convincingly portrays a ‘real’ space by changing the size of people and objects she draws according to where they are placed within the picture plane: those that are nearer to the viewer appear to be bigger, while those that are further away appear to be smaller. The use of a consistent eye level is particularly striking, indicating that Kate is demonstrating a developing understanding of perspective: if we were to draw a horizontal line through Jack’s eyes and across the page, the line would also go through the eyes of the two girls on the left and of at least one of the drivers in the cars. Our eye level is the same as Jack’s, and the inclusion of the horizon means that the space around each object ceases to be empty and becomes either the ground or the sky. It is easy to imagine Jack turning away from us, walking around the bench and across the park towards the two girls in the background.

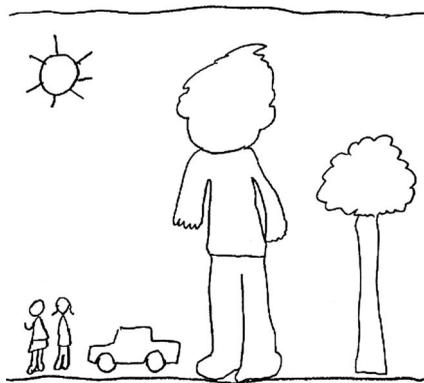


Figure 4. Author’s ‘reconstruction’ of Kate’s drawing.

### Occlusion

The concept of occlusion refers to the idea that more than one object can occupy the same space within the picture frame. There are two clear examples in Kate's drawing: the dog that disappears behind the tree and re-emerges on the other side, and the cars in the background forming a continuous line broken by Jack's head. This contrasts with the way in which children of her age (and older) usually compose a picture. Typically, a child will allocate space on the page to each component of the composition, taking care to avoid obscuring any of the items. It is almost as if they are concerned with telling us the truth about what is there: if a dog has four legs then that is the number that is drawn, regardless of whether or not all are visible.

Two sets of children's observational drawings illustrate this concept. In the first, pupils in a Year 1 class were given an apple with a pencil pushed through the centre and asked to draw what they could see. Half the pupils made drawings similar to Figure 5; half were similar to Figure 6. The latter were drawing what they could see, the former *what they thought was there*. In a sense, the pupils depicting the pencil as visible through the apple were making diagrams rather than drawings: they were providing the viewer with information rather than making a realistic representation of what can be seen from a particular perspective.

The second set of drawings was made by a group of Year 4 pupils sitting in a complete circle around two of their classmates. More than half the class made drawings as if their viewpoint was that of the child sitting directly in front of the pair. In these drawings, the two models can be seen facing the viewer, with a clear gap between the two chairs (Figure 7). Only a minority made drawings in which one figure wholly or partly obscured the other (Figure 8). These drawings exemplify

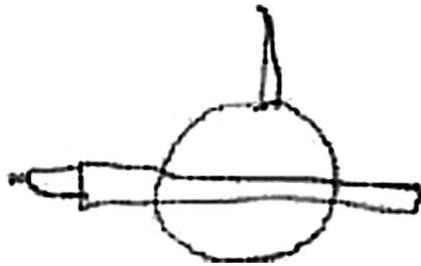


Figure 5. What we know is there.

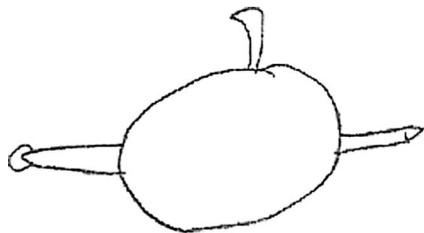


Figure 6. What we see.



Figure 7. What we see: figures overlapping.

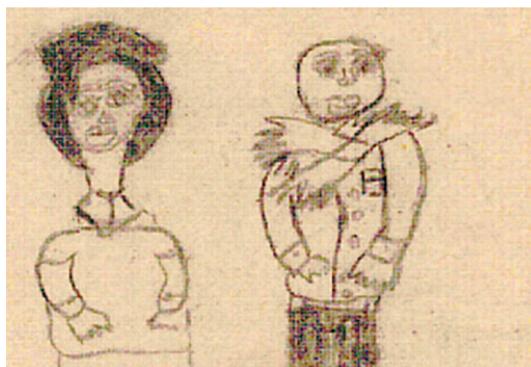


Figure 8. What we know is happening: figures not touching.

theories of intellectual realism – representing what we know is there – and visual realism – representing what we can see – as developed by Luquet (1913, 1927) and Piaget and Inhelder (1956). In discussion following the drawing lesson, some children acknowledged that their viewpoints had prevented them from seeing one figure, yet said they felt compelled to include it in order to ‘complete’ their picture; they recognised evidence of close observation in other children’s drawings and they were able to reflect on how the experience of discussing their work could impact on their subsequent attempts at representational drawing.

### **Responding to children’s drawings**

Clearly, not all children’s drawings should be viewed as attempts at creating as realistic a scene as Kate’s: drawing is a tool for the imagination as well as for recording. But through analysing her drawing we can work out what it is that makes it special, and in doing so identify ways to support children in their efforts to improve their observational and representational drawings.

The following questions and suggestions have been developed through teaching drawing in primary schools and on teacher education courses. They are intended to provide teachers with guidance on ways in which they might respond to pupils

engaged in making representational drawings, whether they are made during art lessons or as illustrations to work made in other curriculum areas. It is not intended that teachers should bombard children with the complete list of questions at every opportunity, but that they should reflect on the themes raised and select appropriately. Some are more suited for us in an early years setting while others are designed to challenge older pupils to reflect on ways of improving their work. None are designed to be used exclusively with one particular age group, however, as the nature of a teacher's interaction with pupils varies from one to the next.

### *Atmosphere and mood*

- How are the people in your picture feeling? How might you show in a drawing the way one person feels about another?
- Make a specific facial expression yourself – look at your reflection in the mirror and draw it.
- Apart from drawing expressions on people's faces, how else could you show us how they are feeling?
- What could you add to change the mood of your picture?
- How might you show that the sun is shining without actually drawing it?

### *Detail*

- Look closely at the features on the face of the person you've drawn. Which have you included and which could be added?
- Look at the size of the person's head compared to his body, the length of his arms compared to his legs, the size of his fingers compared to his arms. Look at people around you and compare how they are similar to or different from your drawing.
- Close your eyes and picture the person you're drawing. Tell me three things about the way she looks and add them to your drawing.
- What details could you include in the background of your drawing that might help us to know more about where it is set?
- Find three trees through the window. How are they similar? How is each different to the others? Draw each in such a way that people would be able to identify each of the trees you chose.

### *Composition and representation*

- Are you drawing what you can see or what you think is there?
- Look through this viewfinder and describe what you can see. What seems to happen to the things that are a long way away?
- Have you used all the space on your page or only part of it?
- Are all the things you have drawn contained inside the rectangle of your paper, or do some extend beyond the edges?
- Do the things that you have drawn each have their own space on the page – or could some of them overlap?
- Look around the room at other children – are you able to see many people from head to toe? Or do things get in the way?

- Are the people in your picture all the same size? What would happen if you were to draw some smaller people here? Do they seem to be closer to us or further away?

### Conclusion: recommendations for policy and practice

Over the past few years I have discussed Kate's drawing with many trainee teachers, and despite its technical expertise there is one aspect of it that continues to engage me more than any other: its modesty. My recollection of her explanation of the inspiration for the drawing – '*He was crying because he didn't want to go home*' – encapsulated for me a simplicity, a directness, a lack of self-consciousness that children often lose as they grow older. One of my sons is now almost as old as Kate was when she drew her brother, and although his drawings are technically less skilful than Kate's, I value them just as much. The things I like about them are things that adults tend to like about children's drawings: their directness, their naivety, their spontaneity.

But I would argue that the reasons why *I* like my son's drawings are not the same reasons why *he* likes his drawings. We envy young children the freedom they have to devote time to drawing, we envy their absorption in the activity and the freshness of the results. What we want is something to keep as evidence of what we know will be a brief time in their lives. We don't look for technical mastery in children's drawings because we know we can find it elsewhere. For most children the process of creating a drawing is more important and memorable to them than the drawing itself.

Many children learn through making art yet, like the little girl painting grey stripes of rain through her sunny landscape, they do not always have the evidence of their learning. Kate's drawing is remarkable for the amount of evidence it contains of her understanding of drawing. Four years after it was made I took a photocopy of it into school – the original had long since been lost – to show her. I was curious to know whether she would remember it and what her response would be. I interrupted her lunch to show her the drawing and she paused, fork in the air, eyes widening at the sight of it. 'What do you think?' I asked. 'It's good, isn't it,' she replied. This wasn't a question. She could see what I could see, she knew that the drawing was good and that this was not something that was up for discussion.

On reflection, this moment of recognition between Kate and myself is linked in my mind to many encounters with beautiful landscapes, objects or artworks. Whether we are looking at the colours of a sunset, a burst of sudden snowfall or a Constable landscape, we recognise something that triggers a sense of perfection and an awareness of beauty. It is unfashionable, almost archaic perhaps, to highlight the link between observational drawing and an appreciation of visual beauty. After all beauty is, as Winston (2006, 286) describes, a term 'almost entirely absent from contemporary educational discourse about the Arts'. Nonetheless I would suggest that we might underestimate the importance of beauty to children and that their awareness and appreciation of the beauty of the visual world can be developed through observational drawing.

Writing in support of the inclusion of observational drawing in the primary curriculum, Coates (1984, 191) quotes James Sully's 1895 assertion that 'It is the feeling for what is beautiful which makes a child attend closely to the bare look of things', sentiments that echoed the work earlier in the century of John Ruskin. 'I believe that the sight is a more important thing than the drawing,' claimed Ruskin

in *The elements of drawing* (1857), ‘And I would rather teach drawing that my pupils may learn to love nature, than teach the looking at nature that they may learn to draw.’ More recently Alain de Botton, reflecting on the sustained value of Ruskin’s philosophy, observes that (engaging in the process of) ‘drawing brutally shows up our previous blindness to the true appearance of things’ (2002, 227). With regard to Ruskin he suggests that:

If drawing had value even when it was practiced by people with no talent, it was for Ruskin because drawing could teach us to see: to notice rather than to look. In the process of re-creating with our own hand what lies before our eyes, we seem naturally to move from a position of observing beauty in a loose way to one where we acquire a deep understanding of its constituent parts and hence more secure memories of it. (de Botton 2002, 221–2)

The process of acquiring technical skills in art and design should therefore be regarded not as an end in itself but as a bridge towards to the development of a broader visual, emotional and perceptual sensibility. Eisner’s (1972, 281) observation that art education can ‘enable us to savour the previously insignificant’ is one that I believe should underpin our approach towards teaching observational drawing. Children should be encouraged to view observational drawing not as a test of their artistic knowledge and skill but as an opportunity to engage more powerfully with the visual world and to appreciate and respond to its beauty.

Finally, I would suggest that our expectations of children in relation to their capacity for engagement with the visual world should arguably be more aligned with those we have of their capacity for engaging with the written word. A clear parallel can be drawn here between the process of teaching observational drawing and that of teaching writing, a theme explored by Buchanan:

In English lessons, children learn the mechanics of writing and speech – spelling, vocabulary, grammar, syntax and so on – as a prerequisite for verbal communication, in much the same way that art and design education offers children a range of practical skills and concepts – a visual language – necessary for visual communication. The skill required to manipulate the mechanics is not regarded as an end in itself, however – rather as a vehicle. (Buchanan 1995, 31)

Children who pay close attention to the conventions of writing and who are technically precise with the language they use are better placed to express their own original thoughts, concepts and ideas. Similarly, a child who can make confident representations of the visual world through drawing is better placed to be able to make visual representations of their own ideas, thoughts and experiences. The possession or acquisition of specific skills can enable children to realise more complex ideas and consequently to develop a deeper and more sustained engagement with the subject of art and design, and for many children the role of teacher intervention in this process is a crucial one. Just as teaching children the technical skills required for learning to write is part of the process of enabling them to express their ideas and individuality through writing, teaching children observational drawing skills need not compromise their creativity. By opting not to intervene in children’s drawing, teachers risk allowing their skills to stagnate and their interest to decline.

Preserving and promoting creativity in education is understandably a key concern for many art educators. But just as children need to be equipped with a

knowledge and understanding of the principles of language in order to communicate original thought through speech and writing, they also need specific practical experiences that support their development as visual communicators. And, regardless of the continuing issues surrounding the status of art in the primary curriculum, children will continue to draw. By responding to children's drawings in a reflective, knowledgeable and purposeful way, teachers can provide valuable support for children as they acquire the visual vocabulary that will enable them to respond more articulately to the visual world and ultimately to communicate more confidently and effectively through art.

## Note

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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