

Preschool Child's Researching Interests and Role of Visual Art's Expressing Media

Uršula Podobnik^a

Abstract

Genuine interest, research zeal, and visual art expressiveness which are typical of the pre-school period can pose a challenge to every teacher, at the same time, guide them when planning different contents for children to explore and discover. As one of the primary expressing media and an important support when forming concepts, visual art plays an indispensable role in the pre-school period. The following thesis is based on an action research whose key tendencies were focused on establishing children's interests in different useful materials and tools while enabling them an autonomous visual art use of these tools and didactical possibilities of the teacher involved. The activities included in the research were fully in line with the Slovenian National Kindergarten Curriculum and the project was carried out in the form of several successive meetings intended for visual art creative activities. All activities in the research were photo-documented while the analysis of the research's data was performed based on observation and written notes referring to individual child's responses, his or her questions, ideas, and incentives, the course of cognitive and creative process, communication with the peers and teachers and other potential particularities.

Keywords

Preschool children, researching interests, visual art, action research

Researching materials and discovering possibilities of their use guide children into manipulations that lead to visual art forms or visual art products. The visual art product that materializes out of manipulation helps children to think and understand the characteristics of objects, environments, and phenomena that they are faced. Especially in the early stages of child's visual art development, the final art product as such is not crucially important to him or her. It is not his or her basic intention to produce an art product, but rather to use image to comprehend the object, its construction or functioning, or to practice the material and tool application. Art primarily represents a materialisation of a certain activity, a stage in discovering and throughout this process, a child can change the product completely, upgrade it, carefully save it, leave

it, destroy it, or cast it aside. The ability of flexible formation, reformation, and deformation of the existing form are encouraged mostly by the child's genuine curiosity, self-initiative focus on the activity, and an unstoppable desire for practical manipulation and represent a basis of the discovery that children are often more competent than acknowledged. False perceptions of children's visual art tendencies originate from different causes, from inadequate knowledge about the purposes and importance of children's visual

^aUniversity of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Correspondent Author:

Uršula Podobnik, PeF, Kardeljeva ploščad 16, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
E-mail: ursula.podobnik@gmail.com

art to the generally weak visual art sensibility of adults. Visual art teaching experts have been trying for a very long time to reduce these anomalies, therefore, this thesis should also be regarded as a small contribution to the sensitization of adult observers of children's visual art functioning, primarily with an aim to learn how to let children express their own visual art and expressive persuasion and how to draw inspirations for further educational activities from it.

Children's visual art derives from the need to discover (Matthews 2003). Structurally, it gives meaning to the importance of perceptive and practical experience and at the same time, presents one of the most accessible expressing media for children (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 1998). The partial and subjective acquaintance with an object that marks children's visual art interpretation, structures an artistically simple but explicitly solid and imaginative form. Despite occasional expressive modesty, each individual form includes all the things that in a certain phase seem important to a child when exploring the object, so in this respect, children should be considered as competent, thinking beings. Taking into account the relational pedagogy and the pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi 2006) deriving from it, we can mostly enable children to sensitize and enrich the adults with their perceptions and understanding of things.

Considering that a pre-school child mostly needs a tangible experience to successfully materialise the understanding of certain concept, visual art represents an ideal expressing media for a child. Through visual art, children can use different materials, tools, and more or less complicated manipulations to embody their thoughts and understanding (Riley 2003). Children seek and develop meanings from birth, their concepts and theories differ greatly from those of adults (Clark, Kjörholt, and Moss 2006) and despite the fact that they see the actual characteristics and image of an object, pre-school children have no need for a direct visual art imitation of reality (Golomb 1992) and "never suffer from delusion that drawings

and paintings are imitations of the visible world" (Matthews 2003: 33). They focus on that aspect of the object that activates their interest at a particular moment and with the help of direct sensual perception, children explain the object in accordance with their understanding, in a subjective and partial way. Visual art form enables children to have an insight into objects, to materialise their thoughts, and to form the concept. However, the recognisability of children's visual art form or its original background is often not entirely evident to adults and that is why listening is so important. Regardless of the fact that visual art expression is not equal to verbal expression and these two expressing forms do not entirely correspond, complementing visual art expression with verbal interpretation of the created form gives adults a chance to have at least a partial insight into the children's perception of objects that are important or interesting for them (see Figure 1). On the other hand, a proper conversation with a child helps him to "talk about his own ways of drawing" and gain "more control and freedom in his drawing because he was helped to think about how his drawing works" (Matthews 1994: 82).

Since the role of the adult by Eisner should be "in ensuring that the child experiences were rich in stimuli and in guiding them toward models of how they might develop ways of expressing themselves" (Anning and Ring 2004: 21), the research contents arranged for the children should also be designed that way. The author believes that they should originate from observation of children's interests and base on challengeable upgrading. Properly designed research contents enable children to test their own ideas in different phases, from the construction of an idea up to the testing its adequacy (Edwards et al. 1998; Vecchi and Giudici 2004). Art activity might provide quality help in that process, but it will be more successful if flexible organizing is assured. Children shall have enough time to percept the experience, to focus on the object, to experiment with the phenomena, to consider, and to

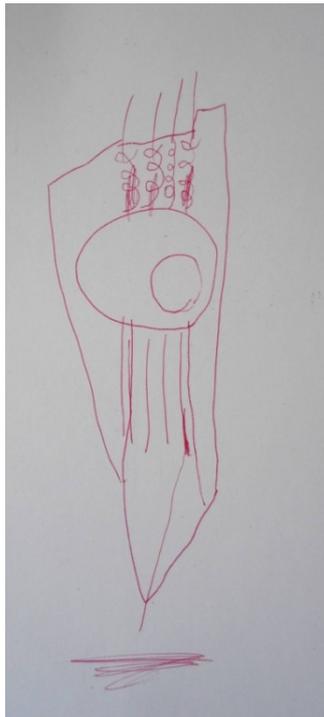


Figure 1. Even Though the Image Looks Like a Space Rocket the Child's Explanation Showed That It Actually Represents "a Revolving Pencil" (Seven Years Old).

respond. The rigid schedule, where activity is the same for all children, which started and ended for all children at the same time, where all exploring materials as well as art materials are available only for short time and then put away and safely tidy up, does not give opportunity for constructive exploring; not to create an idea, test it, change it, and upgrade it. Anning and Ring (2004) quote the UK researcher Pahl ethnographic study who advocates that children for meaning making need to be given space for purposeful mess in their homes without constant nagging to tidy up the space (Anning and Ring 2004). Some similarities in that matter we see at child's art expressing process in kindergarten spaces. Insight into the art ateliers where the creative processes that are put into practice often give the impression of confused disordered places, but for the artists that are working places, places that feel domestic and where they have the opportunity to create without any pressure of

stopping in the middle of the process to tidy up the space in order to start entirely new activity (ending of some research or creative activity usually incite the need for change, clearing, and tidying up of working place to prepare it to the new activity). The process of the children exploring activity usually brings up some similarities in that issue; too strict time or teacher's inflexibility gives them not as much researching opportunities as some of them might need. The activity in kindergarten does not need to be organized as an activity for all children in a group at the same time in the same way. Each child namely needs the opportunity to decide whether he or she will join the activity or not. Some children will join the activity immediately and leave it soon, others will persevere at the activity for very long time, some might join in the middle of the activity stimulated by the interest of his/her peers, some children will only observe the activity and make their reflection long after (the day

after or even later), some will leave it in the middle, but return and continue after some time. Well-thought-out exploration and experimental activities are a guarantee that children will actually master their psychical activities and respond to the challenges that they are faced. On the other hand, the adults' rigidity in time ordering and lack of imagination in this field can severely diminish the children's needs for practical manipulation. However, we may even expect that children will find some necessary material conditions on their own or they will adjust the ones available to them, but the situation becomes much more serious if we respond to children's exploring needs and incentives in an inappropriate way. The lack of ability to observe, listen, and respect the children's explanations regarding the visual art image that is being created, or imposing false patterns signify underestimation of children's visual art abilities.

Numerous studies of children's early art expression development exist and many of them concur with the stage theory in art development (Luquet 1927; Lowenfeld 1964). Children usually start their art activity with random marks or "haphazard array of lines" as Austrian-American art educator Lowenfeld (1964: 94) noted. The random marks typical for the first phase of scribbling stage, are followed by controlled scribbling and naming of scribbling. That usually promptly leads to the representational attempts in preschematic stage and follows with achievement of form concept in schematic stage soon after, which is usually achieved in early school period. The number of stages differs among different researchers. However, most of researchers agree that children drawings always contain some subjective features. Researchers acknowledged a lot of different characteristics of children early visual art expression, such as, partial control of the drawing surface in the beginning, child's discovering that different movements result different marks, gaining control over the hand motion and creating representational marks, showing depth and

variety of points of view, egocentric disproportions of a human figure, and many others. For the requirements of the following research, the author would like to expose some characteristics which also mark children's early visual art functioning: the ability to reform the visual art form, syncretism and associative complexity in design, and the ability of flexible modifications when naming the visual art form.

THE ABILITY TO REFORM THE VISUAL ART FORM

This derives from freedom of solving problems and relaxed manipulation with the objects (in this case primarily with visual art means). By experimenting with objects and researching their qualities, children get to know the characteristics of a certain object and face the consequences of their own manipulation. The activity is analogous to a game whose final aim is not a product but the activity itself which enables children to get to know different objects, the environment they are entering, and the phenomena they are faced. Forming, reforming, upgrading, and/or destruction of the given result (product) is therefore understandable, since in the phase of active manipulation, it gives children exactly what they need in a certain phase. By imposing instructions how to start a certain activity or how to produce the foreseen result, the teacher take away the children's chance to use their own manipulation to come to certain acknowledgements and although their findings are not always "correct" according to the parameters of adult knowledge, they are of vital importance to the child. The possible dissonance of their findings will cyclically push the children into new manipulations, experimenting, research, and new discoveries.

SYNCRETISM AND ASSOCIATIVE COMPLEXITY IN DESIGN

Young pre-school children (aged three) have no

problem using different materials and experimenting with different processes on the picture surface, which they also exceed without hesitation; with confidence they form a syncretic image disregarding the external responses and not falling under their influence (see Figure 2a and Figure 2b). In children's imagination, individual objects are connected in some way, they connect them into a uniform formation which Vigotsky (1986) describes as children's inclination to substitute the lack of objective connections with an abundance of subjective connections. The links among impressions and thoughts are perceived as a connection among things (Vigotsky 1986).

The most typical thing for thinking in complexes, which according to Vigotsky represents the second phase in concept formation, is the establishment of connections and relationships on which such thinking is based on. Generalisations represent complexes of individual concrete objects or things that are not only linked based on subjective connections formed in a child's impression but also on the basis of objective connections that actually exist among these objects. Older pre-school children (aged five) who are already capable of more complex thinking (in this period we mostly talk about associative complexity) observe and compare new materials with interest, however, when it comes to using the materials, children tend to be more careful, they also feel a greater tendency toward the recognisable and organised visual art form (see Figure 3a). So when creating, they prefer to use materials that complement their preceding ideas, namely materials that children associate with certain characteristics, e.g., eyes (see Figure 3b).

THE ABILITY OF FLEXIBLE MODIFICATIONS OF NAMING THE VISUAL ART FORM

The ability of flexible modifications when naming the visual art form, upon the creation of a closed (circular) form, this form is usually given a name. This name is

at first very flexible and carries very different meanings without marking the meanings in this primary figure. It is an example of unspecified and unformed syncretic combining of individual objects that are connected to this form in the subjective children's psyche (Britsch 1966). But eventually, the name of the form is more explicitly defined, however, throughout the pre-school period, the flexibility in naming is preserved—if the name does not correspond to the children's notion of an object or if they get new associations when observing their visual art image, they will not hesitate to change the name or reform the image (see Figure 4).

THE RESEARCH

In the following section, the author wishes to present three visual art activities that formed a basis for the research and resulted in certain conclusions which he has described below.

Taking into account the fact that visual art activity represents an accessible and useful means through which pre-school children get to know, explore, and interpret the world around them, visual art also represented a link among all activities carried out in the research. The research activities were carried out in an age heterogeneous group in the Skofja Loka Kindergarten, with children aged three to six; the group included 21 children (seven under four years of age, four children between four and five years, and 10 older than five years), but there were always some children absent during the activity. The research activity took place during several successive meetings which were devoted to experimental visual art activities with which the researcher tried to identify the research possibilities that are activated when introducing different materials useful for visual art expression. When carrying out the activities, she consistently considered the children's expressive autonomy which is the only factor that ensures the expression of authentic visual art forms structured



(2a)



(2b)

Figures 2a and 2b. Child Creates Freely, Using Different Material Given (3.2 Years Old).



(3a)



(3b)

Figures 3a and 3b. Child Selects Particular Materials and Structures the Recognisable Art Form (5.8 Years Old).



Figure 4. The Image Originates From the Human Figure Whose Hands Are Accidentally Deformed by Drawing. Looking at the Image, the Boy Got a New Association and Drew an Image Entitled "A House With a Head" (6.1 Years Old).

with children's logic. Since it is relatively simple and in pre-school period very sensible to connect visual art expression as experience and expression media to different cognitive fields, and because that provides children interesting research material, the researcher tried to realise this aspect as much as possible. The results given by the research are encouraging and they strengthen our beliefs that research through visual art is something which undoubtedly activates the children's interests and enables teachers to focus on exploring authentic children's visual art expression and sensitizes their attitude toward it.

The researcher carried out a quality analysis of data that consisted of photo documentation, observation notes by the author or teacher (observation of children's functioning during the project activity, writing down their ideas, questions, remarks, and other special features) plus the original visual art products of children.

DISCOVERING EXPRESSIVE POSSIBILITIES WITH COLOUR LIMITED MATERIALS

The key aim of the first research experiment was to observe the responses of a heterogeneous group of pre-school children to various but colour limited drawing materials (crayons, charcoal, pencils, dry pastels, chalks, tempera, and ink)—in white, red, and black, and with drawing surfaces of different colours (white, red, grey, and black squares of different sizes), the researcher tried to ensure either a distinctive contrast or extreme identicalness. She wanted to find out:

- (1) To what extent children would decide to use the colour surface;
- (2) Whether their choice influenced the choice of colour of the material with which they would create;
- (3) Whether the choice of drawing material influenced the visual art expression;
- (4) How the differences in expressing tendencies

were displayed among older and younger children.

The colour limited materials research included 12 children (five older and seven younger). The children decided freely whether they will join the art activity or not. They were not directed which material, tool, and surface they shall use and how. They were not suggested to make one art product or more. The children mostly chose surfaces of less usual colours and at first they picked the already tested materials (crayons and dry pastels) in contrasting colours (one exception).

Younger children (three to four years) carried out their experimenting with various materials on the same surface, while doing that they freely combined different materials by layering one material over other. They strictly worked individually without any verbal communication with each other, but they were inspiring from each other at their choosing of different materials and tools. In most cases, they did not finish with their expression activity until they had filled up the entire surface, from one edge to the other. Then they choose surface of different colour and repeat the exercise but mostly choose the art material of a contrast colour (a four-year-old girl commented that "red line is hidden on a red surface"). When introducing the liquid material (tempera), the younger children's attention focused on testing the unusual brushes, transferring paint from the cup to the surface, applying the paint, "ploughing" the paint, scratching the paint, etc.

Older children (five to six years) were more talkative. They comment their own work, compare it with others and often ask teacher to see and comment their art achievements. They used a new drawing surface for each new attempt, when experimenting with materials they did not display any self-initiative interests to combine different techniques. It turned out that older children were mostly stimulated to linear respond by pen-like drawing materials. In their works, we can observe spontaneous appearance of figurative

image (a car, ship, flower, and house). When introducing the liquid material (tempera) choice of the painting surface and expressive material, the colour contrast was diminished in some cases, but the children mostly corrected their “inaccurate” decision in their second attempt. But there were some older children that accepted the opposite decisions, they deliberately took the material and surface of the same color and they determined on what conditions the drawing can be seen anyway. Some noticed that drawing is visible while the tempera is still wet; other noticed that image can be seen on the proper angle; some children discovered that the powerful lightning also revealed the image.

During the experiment was taking, the author prepared a dark surface of a large dimensions (1 x 2 meters). The author expects that at large surface, children will return to the linear expression, but that does not happen. Children, younger and older, united their power and filled up the surface entirely with a liquid material of different colours. Boys have mostly chosen very wide brushes unlike girls who mostly decided to use tinier tools. They all enjoyed mixing colours and paint the surface. The next day when the surface dried up, a group of older girls decide to draw on the painted surface.

WHITENESS, WHITE MATERIALS, AND CREATING WHITE COMPOSITION

The whiteness research included 13 children (nine older and four younger). Children were offered white materials of different visual and tangible characteristics, and different kinds of white and transparent surfaces to experiment. The author primarily wanted to know:

- (1) Whether the children would accept whiteness with interest;
- (2) Would they pay attention to the differences in whiteness;
- (3) Would they describe whiteness of material and

whiteness of surface as problematic;

- (4) Would they use the chosen materials in one-layer only or would they decide to use them in multiple layers or cover one with the other;

- (5) How would the differences in design tendencies be displayed among younger and older children.

The children were very interested in the materials and they quickly upgraded the visual perceptions with tactile perceptions. The possibility to design a composition from white materials was encouraged with a question if it would be possible to create something from the things available (the author did not wish to expose a defined visual art motif because she was interested what design inspirations children will come up with on their own).

Younger children mostly experimented with the materials without any restrictions, ignoring the depiction recognisability of the image they were creating. Their ideas mostly develop spontaneously as they create and are difficult to identify because children did not verbalise their thoughts on their own (and posing questions could have been understood as an incentive to follow the interviewer’s idea). However, it was noticed that children at about four years did not create their collage aimlessly. They were observing different materials, but took only particular, their images seemed syncretic random form, but their creative tendency was very determined. It became clear when a girl of four ran out of particular material, she was using and she asked for exact particular material to finish her idea. It surprised us that younger children persisted by the activity longer than their older peers. Some even finished their expression and went playing, but came back after some time and again started to compose white compositions.

Older children were interested in materials less familiar to them, they keenly observed them, touched them, talked about them, and compared them, but despite their great interest they rarely used them for creative purposes. The difference displayed between

older and younger children in relation to the choice of materials was related to the motif with the older children. They spontaneously reached for the materials that they associated with a certain form they were trying to realise (a very distinctive example are the eyes for which they mostly used circular or round objects).

The researcher left the white materials in the playing room after the art activity ended. The children spontaneously organized their playing activity on the base of white material left in their room. A group of older boys composed ski polygon for the racing "ski-cars", girls use it at their "hospital game".

EXPERIMENTING WITH A SPATIAL OBJECT

The third experiment included 15 children (nine older and six younger) and the researcher was interested in:

(1) Differences between the children's drawing and sculptural visual art form of an object familiar to them;

(2) To what extent the familiarity with the object and testing the object influences the expressive (visual art) interpretation and whether children would correct their visual art form based on a guided experience.

The researcher tried to discover all things mentioned above through experimenting, observation, and talking about the spatial object (chair), drawing the object presented and designing the object from sculpturing materials (clay and play dough). In the introductory part, she let the children discover the physical characteristics of the object related to its functionality (older children responded with relatively typical answers while younger children tended to hold back). The drawing presentation of the object revealed that a lot of older pre-school children already have a simple image formed (flat profile image) for a chair and this image did not change in spite of deliberate focusing, conversation, and testing the functional characteristics of the object.

A very distinct example of a different drawing presentation was displayed by a girl (5.4) who also listed the largest number of details and functional characteristics of a chair in the introductory activity. Her drawing form of a chair has all the elements she mentioned before: seat, legs, back support, arms support, and even head support.

Observing the chairs that were drawn led the researcher to the conclusion that it is possible to sit on these chairs (a girl, 5.7, showed us that we can sit on the drawing of a chair, however, it is difficult to lean against them because they lack stability). The researcher continued the activity by introducing soft sculpturing material (clay), whereby children mostly stumbled on a problem of instability and lack of solidness. An interesting example is the case of a boy (5.1) who first used clay to follow his drawing image but later he discovered the tangible quality of the material and started to exploit these expressive possibilities. During the creative process, the object created had in his opinion lost the image of a chair and no longer corresponded to his notion of the object presented, so he renamed it into "a house".

CONCLUSIONS

The visual art response, which is often influenced by an experience and depends on the experience's intensity, which triggers certain thoughts, usually needs some time to develop an idea through self-initiative researching and experimenting. In the author's opinion, adults should help pre-school children search for additional materials, information, or sources of information when children show the need to acquire them. At the same time, we should ensure flexible organisation of activities which would enable continuing, upgrading, or repeating returning to the same starting point with a chance of different manifestations of cognitions caused by a certain experience if needed. Preschool children need the activity organization that can be leaded by

associations that appear during the researching process and extend it in different ways, diverse directions, and bring up different even unexpected final results. Teacher therefore needs to provide flexible organisation of activity and shall not stay held strictly to his/her own activity preparation but rather observe children interests, communicate with them, use their nature curiosity, and think how to include their ideas that appeared during the activity into the process.

The thoughts and findings within this research support the researcher in her belief that Reggio Emilia approach and their vision of children as cognitively competent, sensual, and expressively rich human beings reveals plenty what children need in their researching. By considering their capability of researching and discovering as one of the key elements of pedagogy, the researcher enable children to manifest and build their ideas in different ways and share them with others, their peers, and adults. It is of a great importance that adults, parents, as well as pre-school workers and teachers provide an environment where “children feel confident that people will take their drawings seriously” (Matthews 1994: 124) and offer them proper material and mental resources to explore, discover, make sense, and understand the phenomena around them.

References

- Anning, A. and K. Ring. 2004. *Making Sense of Children's Drawings*. Glasgow: Bell & Bain, Open University Press.
- Barnes, R. 1990. *Teaching Art to Young Children 4-9*. School of Education, University of East Anglia. Boston, Sydney, Wellington: Unwin Hyman.
- Britsch, A. G. 1966. *Theory of Fine Arts*. 4th ed. Ratingen: Verlag Henn.
- Clark, A., A. T. Kjørholt, and P. Moss. 2006. *Beyond Listening. Children's Perspectives on Early Childhood Services*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Dahlberg, G., P. Moss, and A. R. Pence, eds. 1999. *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspective*. London: Falmer Press.
- Edwards, C. P., L. Gandini, and G. E. Forman, eds. 1998. *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach*. Greenwich, London: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Golomb, C. 1992. *The Child's Creation of a Pictorial World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hickman, R. 2005. *Why We Make Art and Why It Is Taught*. Bristol, Portland: Intellect.
- Lowenfeld, V. and L. W. Brittain. 1964. *Creative and Mental Growth*. 4th ed. New York: Macmillan.
- Luquet, G. H. 1927. *Le Dessin Enfantin*. Paris: F. Alcan.
- Kellogg, R. 1969. *Analysing Children's Art*. Palo Alto, C.A.: Mayfield.
- Kelly, D. D. 2004. *Uncovering the History of Children's Drawing and Art*. Publications in Creativity Research. Westport, Connecticut, London: Praeger.
- Matthews, J. 1994. *Helping Children to Draw and Paint in Early Childhood. Children and Visual Representation*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- . 2003. *Drawing and Painting. Children and Visual Presentation*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Mavers, D. 2011. *Children's Drawing and Writing. The Remarkable in the Unremarkable*. New York, London: Routledge, Taylor & Frances Group.
- Riley, J., ed. 2003. *Learning in the Early Years. A Guide for Teachers of Children 3-7*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Rinaldi, C. 2006. *In Dialogue With Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Vecchi, V. and C. Giudici. 2004. *Children, Art, Artists. The Expressive Languages of Children, the Artistic Language of Alberto Burri*. Reggio Emilia: Reggio Children.
- Vigotsky, S. L. 1986. *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, M.A.: M.I.T. Press.

Bio

Uršula Podobnik, Ph.D., assistant professor, Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; research fields: visual arts, primary school education, art pedagogic, and special didactic.