A Review of Children’s, Teachers’ and Parents’ Influences on Children’s Drawing Experience

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Abstract

In this article we argue that research into children’s drawings should consider the context in which drawing occurs and that it is crucial to investigate the attitudes and practices of teachers, parents and children themselves that shape children’s drawing experience and the drawings which they produce. We review the findings of seven empirical studies reporting data collected through direct observations, interviews and questionnaires from the three main players (teachers, parents and children) on the attitudes and practices shaping children’s drawing. Issues covered include teachers’ perceptions of the purposes and importance of drawing, support offered by teachers, parents and children for children’s drawing endeavours, and possible factors that may lead to an age-related decline in the amount of drawing children choose to do.

We end the review by reporting some preliminary findings from our own large-scale interview and survey study of 270 5–14 year old children, their parents and teachers, that provides a comprehensive assessment of attitudes and practices influencing children’s drawing experience at home and at school. The findings provide further insight into the aforementioned issues, particularly children’s, teachers’ and parent’s explanations of why children’s drawing behaviour might decline with age. It is hoped that by reporting these preliminary findings some additional understanding of the context in which children produce their drawings can be gained and new areas for debate opened up.
Introduction

The initial interest in researching children’s drawings, which can be traced back to over a century ago, was to describe age-related changes in the forms depicted in the drawings [1], and this work has continued to the present day [2]. Researchers have become increasingly aware, however, of the context in which children’s drawings are produced. In particular, the attitudes and practices of teachers, parents and the children themselves that play a crucial role in shaping children’s drawing experience and the drawings they produce. It is important, therefore, to ascertain the attitudes and practices from these three key players in children’s drawing experience through the use of surveys, interviews and direct observations. Our motivation to conduct a review of the literature of such work is that we are unaware of any such review having been undertaken, and we have noticed that the studies within this literature have made little reference to each other, making the need to synthesise findings more pressing.

As our interest is in the attitudes and practices that have been directly reported from parents, teachers and children the review limits itself to studies that have collected empirical data (through surveys, interviews and observations) from these three ‘players’ in children’s drawing experience. We have therefore excluded papers not primarily concerned with the attitudes and practices of the three key players [3], and non-empirically based papers presenting only authors’ own reflections [4]. Also we have not included empirical studies or opinions on drawing curricula [5] or the training of art teachers [6] as the vibrant debate surrounding these issues is already ably covered in the literature.

The studies that we review indicate some interesting issues in the attitudes and practices that shape children’s drawing experience, for example, teachers’ perceptions of the purposes and importance of drawing, the support offered by teachers, parents and children, differences in drawing practices and support at home and at school, and factors leading to the decline of drawing. Nevertheless, the literature leaves a number of key influential factors on children’s drawing experience unaddressed. These include children’s own reports on the help that they receive in their drawing endeavours and their own views on the purposes and importance of drawing. We end the review by reporting some preliminary findings from a large-scale survey of teachers, parents and children that we are currently conducting that provides an assessment of the attitudes and practices influencing children’s drawing experience at home and at school.

Attitudes and practices of teachers, parents and children on children’s drawing experience

Although extensive literature searches were conducted, just seven relevant studies were found concerning attitudes and practices of teachers, parents and children towards children drawing. Three of these papers concentrated primarily on the attitudes regarding drawing and support that parents [7], teachers [8] and children [9] give to children in their drawing endeavours. The remaining four papers concentrated on how children’s attitudes towards drawing may change with age [10].

Through consideration of teachers’ attitudes towards, and perception of, the purposes of drawing an insight can be gained into the extent and nature of the support offered within the classroom to children’s drawing endeavours. Anning [11] explored the perceived purposes of drawing through observations and dialogues with the preschool workers, primary school teachers and parents of seven young children in the UK. It was found that drawing was viewed as formative to the development of writing skills and perceived to be an opportunity for the children to develop fine motor control. Pre-school staff felt pressured to focus on emerging literacy skills in children’s mark making rather than their drawing experience. For instance, according to Anning, a preschool child showing a member of staff a drawing in which they had drawn a number of circles in a row would be praised because the
marks were starting to look like letters rather than for the drawing itself. Similarly, Anning reports that drawing is given little importance by the teachers in some English schools who simply see it as a way to keep children occupied, out of mischief, and as a means of decorating the classroom walls.

In contrast to Anning’s observations, Coutts and Dougall [12] found, through semi-structured video interviews, that all their respondents (six secondary school teachers in Scotland) held the view that drawing was very important and central to art and design education at each stage of the curriculum. Comments supporting drawing included, ‘drawing is key’, ‘drawing is fundamental’ and ‘without drawing you don’t have art’ [13]. However, it is important to note that in contrast to the teachers in Anning’s study, all Coutts and Dougall’s teachers had an undergraduate degree in either fine arts or design prior to training to be teachers, and therefore the extent of their personal investment in the arts may have contributed to them arguing for the importance of drawing. It is also important to note that the support for drawing found by Coutts and Dougall seems to reflect the positive attitudes held by primary [14] and secondary [15] teachers towards art in general. For instance, general primary and specialist secondary teachers’ comments predominantly focus on the positive value of the arts for emotional growth, development of creative and social skills, improvement of behaviour and motivation, and raising levels of self-esteem [16]. Consequently, it would seem that regard for the arts, and more specifically drawing, is generally high among teachers, although Anning’s findings suggest some preschool workers and early years primary teachers may take a more prosaic approach to children’s drawings.

It has been suggested that primary teachers’ ability to support and enrich children’s drawing experience is hindered by a lack of drawing practice among such teachers [17]. Some support has been found for this through observations that teachers are more confident in managing and praising children than in teaching and promoting specific drawing skills [18]. This corresponds to the findings regarding art in general in primary schools and the type of feedback given to both primary and secondary school children which is generally aimed to positively encourage them rather than to develop particular skills [19].

Any decline in drawing behaviour at school is probably not helped by drawing activities in schools being restrictive. For instance, Anning observed that children had increasingly limited opportunities to choose both the style and the content of their drawings as they progressed from nursery to primary settings. Primary school teachers encouraged even very young children to produce more life-like representations which soon discouraged these children in their school-based drawing activities [21]. Consequently, it may be that most of the secondary school teachers Coutts and Dougall interviewed who took the view that a very structured programme is beneficial in drawing education, may actually be somewhat mistaken as this structure could actually be resulting in a decrease in drawing behaviour. Alternatively, a structured programme may only be detrimental to the drawing experiences of young children who may require more freedom in their drawing. One should also note that the sample sizes of both these studies were very small: Coutts and Dougall interviewed just six teachers and Anning’s findings are based on case studies of seven children. Consequently, basing firm conclusions from these two studies on teacher’s attitudes and practices on children’s drawings experience would be unwise as this is clearly an area requiring further investigation.

Positive parental support for children’s drawing experiences was found by Anning, who
reports two detailed case studies both citing parents sitting with their child discussing their drawing, as well as drawing certain objects in response to the child's requests. It would seem from these observations that drawing at home was generally a child-led activity as although parents may have suggested it, it was the children that generally seemed in control of what and how they drew. This freedom in drawing differed from Anning's observations in the classroom where even very young children's drawing experiences tended to be directed by teachers. Children's enjoyment of having free choice to draw what and how they wanted was noted by Anning, however at school this opportunity only occurred during 'wet playtimes' at the end of which the drawings were 'stuffed into children's lockers and desks under the fierce pressure to tidy up neatly for proper work' [22]. This difference in whether the child's drawing episodes were adult led or child led may be a factor leading to the decline in children's drawing behaviour at school compared to at home. The positive parental support observed by Anning reflects the positive attitudes expressed by parents of preschool children towards art activities found by Kanter and Hoffman [23]. However, both these studies focused on children under seven years of age, so although the parents of young children may view drawing in a positive way we do not know whether this is also evident in the support offered by parents of older children.

We have now discussed the support that teachers and parents provide for children's drawing experiences but what about how children support themselves and each other? Richards [24] used questionnaires, interviews and observations from 134 New Zealand children (aged 4–9) to investigate the support that children both gave and received from their peers, and the influence of this on their drawing experience. Richards observed that children developed their own critical voices and developed sets of criteria for critiquing their own and others' drawings. For instance, children's comments commonly focused on the size and content of drawing, staying within the lines, colouring properly, use of space, drawing things the proper way and making 'mistakes'. Many children made comments suggesting that they regarded scribbling as an example of a bad drawing whereas effort, ability and persistence were believed to be important for successful drawings. Drawing self-efficacy, that is, children's belief in themselves as artists, was found to be positively correlated with the nature of comments made and received by children judging both their own and others' drawings. That is, children with low drawing self-efficacy tended to both give and receive more negative comments than those with higher drawing self-efficacy. As well as giving and receiving more positive messages with regards to their own and others' drawings, those children with the highest drawing self-efficacy were also more likely to tell others what to do, how to do it and when they were making mistakes. This adds support to anecdotal case study evidence found by Thompson [25] of primary school children teaching each other how to draw. Thompson observed that peers often engaged in drawing instruction and copying from one another in an attempt to improve drawing skills and widen their range of subject matter. It would seem, therefore, that the guidance and criticisms made by children regarding their own and others drawings are extensive and wide ranging.

Richards also considered how drawing self-efficacy may alter with age and whether this may be a contributory factor in children choosing to draw less as they get older. However, Richards found no age-related decline in drawing self-efficacy, although some groups of mainly older boys appeared to report more negative drawing experiences than girls. In contrast, Flannery and Watson [26], who asked 106 8–10 year old children to rate on a scale from one to four how good they perceived they were at drawing, found that perceived drawing competence declined with increasing age, and that boys' perceptions of their drawing confidence were higher than girls'. An earlier study, carried out by Rosensteil and
Gardner [27], adds support to Flannery and Watson’s finding that perceived drawing competence declines with age. Rosenstiel and Gardner asked American first, third, sixth and tenth graders (99 children in total) to draw a picture of someone on a bicycle or playing a violin. The children were then asked to evaluate their drawing before being shown drawings of the same topic by either more skilled (older) or less skilled (younger) children than themselves. Subsequently, children drew and evaluated a second drawing and were asked to pick from topics of varying difficulty that they would draw if they were asked to draw a third drawing. It was found that younger children almost always liked their drawing whereas most older children disliked their drawings regardless of which set of drawings they had been shown. Older children were also more likely to make comparative comments between their two drawings. There was some indication that older children chose to draw the topic that they knew they could draw better and in their view was easier to draw.

There are several factors that could account for these somewhat conflicting results found by Richards compared to those of Flannery and Watson, and Rosenstiel and Gardner. First, the samples of children were from New Zealand and America respectively, and drawing self-efficacy may develop differently in children from these two countries. Second, we should be cautious in interpreting Flannery and Watson’s reported decline in drawing self-efficacy as they sampled children within a very narrow age range. Third, these studies used different measures to assess their children’s perceived drawing competence. Whereas Richards’ questionnaire consisted of 36 items based on four sources of drawing self-efficacy information and the associated drawing behaviours with self-efficacy, Flannery and Watson asked only one simple question as indicated above and Rosenstiel and Gardner simply asked children to evaluate their drawing.

Potter and Eden [28] also investigated possible contributory factors leading to an age-related decline in the amount of drawing children choose to do. Self report inventories were completed by 48 5–10 year olds to investigate age-related changes in the nature of children’s motivation to draw and whether they think their drawing talent is fixed or can be improved with practice. No age-related differences in children having mastery (focusing on self-improvement and skill development) vs. performance (achieving in order to impress others) goals in their drawing were found. Potter and Eden also found no age-related differences in children’s expressed enjoyment of drawing, although younger children reported that they were good at drawing more frequently than older children. The younger children were also more optimistic about the possibility for improvement, holding the view that anyone can be good if they try.

The findings of these four studies surveying, interviewing and observing children’s comments about their drawing experience are somewhat mixed, but they do indicate that the assumption held by many that activity and enjoyment in drawing declines with age may not be as simple as one might assume. This is an area in which further investigation is required. First, it needs to be established empirically if and when this decline occurs, and second, the reasons for the decline when it does occur. Furthermore, nearly all of the studies above investigated a relatively small age span and have concentrated on possible internal cognitive factors that might lead to a decline in drawing activity, but have not considered factors external to the child such as peer pressure, increasing demands on time, the development of other interests and skills, not to mention the range of teacher and parental factors.

Despite the disparate aims and approaches of this small body of research, which has largely developed without reference to itself, some conclusions can be drawn. Teachers express generally positive views regarding the purposes and importance of drawing in school. The feedback that teachers give children for their drawing endeavours is primarily focused towards positive
encouragement rather than the improvement of skills or passing judgement on their work. Parents also provide much positive encouragement and offer considerable support for young children’s drawing experiences, such as giving the young child more freedom in their drawing activities. Children themselves develop their own critical voice, often commenting on their own and their peers’ drawings and offering instruction where they feel necessary. But the studies reporting children’s opinions do not give a clear picture regarding age-related differences in drawing self-efficacy and enjoyment, and so as yet it is unclear what roles these have to any developmental decline in children’s drawing activity. The literature as a whole, albeit small, seems to acknowledge the presence of an age-related decline in drawing activity but none of the studies have systematically investigated when the onset of the decline may actually occur, or examine the wide range of factors that may contribute to it. Questions and issues regarding what, if anything, should be done to arrest an age-related decline in drawing were not addressed, and nor were children asked what help they would like in their drawing. Similarly, children have not been questioned about their perceptions of the help that they do receive with their drawing, and similarities and differences in support for children’s drawings at home and at school have not been fully explored.

**Preliminary findings of current survey**

The studies discussed above do offer us an insight into the attitudes and practices of teachers, parents and children that shape children’s drawing experience and the drawings which they produce. They make many thought-provoking contributions to an area previously much neglected by researchers. However, to address their small sample sizes and the somewhat limited scope of questions and issues they investigated we are currently conducting a large-scale interview and survey study collecting views from approximately 270 5–14 year old children, and from their parents and their teachers. Our study explores issues touched upon by previous research as well as investigating new topics too. For instance, data was collected from all three key players concerning the amount of time the children spent drawing at home and at school, and how and why this might change with age. Additionally, parents and teachers were asked to consider their own art values, what they believed the purposes and benefits of drawing to be, and the support that they provided for children in their drawing. Children too were asked about their own art values, how they were helped with their drawing by adults and other children, and what they thought that the benefits of drawing might be. Furthermore, all three groups were asked about their view on a possible age-related decline of children’s amount of drawing activity and how such a decline should be addressed. This study is currently under way but for the purposes of this article some preliminary finding will be discussed. To maintain coherence with the existing literature we shall be concentrating on some of the issues already discussed here, but giving particular attention to our findings that extend the knowledge and understanding of these issues. A full report of all the findings will be published in due course.

Teachers have generally expressed very positive opinions regarding drawing. All believe art to be important within the context of the child’s whole education and recognise the many holistic benefits that drawing in particular has for children including self-expression, creativity, relaxation, enjoyment and an opportunity to experience success. 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.

Teachers, parents and children all report that they believe effort is important in creating a good drawing while some cite scribbling, rushing or carelessness as a bad drawing, although others say that there is no such thing as a bad drawing.
Children generally value visually realistic drawings over an abstract or expressive style, and express the belief that this is what adults value most too. This is reflected in the support that children of all ages generally report receiving from teachers, parents, other children and often a grandparent or older sibling. This support generally seems to be aimed at achieving visually realistic drawings and frequently takes the form of providing images for the child to copy, verbal instruction and positive encouragement. Despite all the support that children do receive many say that they would like more. Almost all children report that they like drawing a lot and the majority believe that they are good at it. No age-related differences have become apparent in the extent that children like drawing, although there does seem to be an age-related decline in children’s perceptions of their drawing competence, with younger children more frequently reporting that they are very good at drawing compared to older children.

A particular objective of our survey is to investigate teachers’, parents’ and children’s awareness of an age-related decline in the amount of time that children chose to spend drawing, and to investigate potential factors which these three main players consider responsible for this decline. Children were asked how much they would draw as teenagers and adults compared to how much they drew now, and to give reasons for their answers. Although a greater number of younger children, compared to older children, believed that they would draw a lot more in adulthood this finding was by no means clear cut. Children who believed that they would draw less generally cited reasons to do with lack of time due to increasing responsibilities, while those that thought they would draw more reported that this would be because they would be better at it, it would help them relax or because they aspired to be artists. Not all teachers and parents agreed that there is an age-related decline in the amount of drawing that children chose to do, of those that did agree many believed that this occurred around the time that children move from primary to secondary school (at around 11 years old) although suggestions ranged from approximately age 5 to age 15. When asked about the potential causes of an age-related decline in drawing, teachers, parents and children cite a number of factors with lack of time and increasing interest in other activities being most characteristic. Most parents and teachers believe that it is a shame if children drew less as they got older as they would lose their drawing skill, creativity, enjoyment of drawing and opportunity to relax. However most children believed that it was down to the child’s own preferences, with it being neither a good nor a bad thing if they were to stop drawing. When asked what could be done to help encourage older children to draw more, many suggestions were offered including more after school drawing clubs, more drawing integrated throughout the school curriculum, more drawing competitions, visits to galleries and artists to provide inspiration, and more availability of good quality drawing materials.

Conclusions
This review of the empirical literature synthesises the findings concerning the attitudes and practices of teachers, parents and children which play a crucial role in shaping children’s drawing experience and the drawings which they produce. As only a few mainly small-scale studies have been conducted in this area many important questions need further investigation and some have yet to be asked. Preliminary findings from our own large-scale interview and survey study addresses some of these gaps. For instance, insight is gained into children’s perception of the support that they receive from others, children’s own explanations of why drawing behaviour might decline with age, as well as the parents’ and teachers’ views on this. It is hoped that by reporting these preliminary findings some additional understanding of the context in which children produce their drawings can be gained and new areas for debate opened up.
References


11. Anning, A. *op. cit.*


18. Anning, A. *op. cit.*; Richards, R. *op. cit.*


20. Anning, A. *op. cit.*


24. Richards, R. *op. cit.*

25. Thompson, C. *op. cit.*


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