



Analyzing Children's Drawings

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Abstract

It is natural for a child to love drawing. The children's works reflect their feelings, thoughts, and actions that were going through their minds. The purpose of this study is to investigate any meaningful expressions in the themes in children's drawings. The study uses case study, non-participant observation, and paper analysis methods of study to collect the data. After five months' study, the results found are as follows: (1) drawings' images reflect children's imagination and creativity, (2) children draw images of the things related to their lives, (3) drawings' images reflect the children's worries and concerns, and (4) children draw image of what they are feeling but not what they are seeing.

Key Words: children's drawings , image

Introduction

Research Motivations

Children innately enjoy drawing. Children's drawings are typically simple and straightforward, and reflect their psychological condition. At the early stages of childhood, children's drawings are equivalent to their language, and characters illustrated in their drawings portray their mental images or self-portraits. Consequently, "people" has generally been the theme that is most favored by children.

Early childhood is a key period in individual development. In this period, children acquire numerous essential experiences that facilitate their growth process, which are presented by children through various methods. Drawing is a unique characterization method used in children's early childhood development process, and the first recognizable drawing illustrated by a child typically amuses adults. Children's drawings demonstrate similar functions and properties as spoken language. Therefore, these drawing have been considered to be a type of picture language by education experts, psychologists, and artists. However, the difference between spoken language and picture language is that drawings include personal and distinct methods of expression and intrinsic thoughts (Golomb, 2003). Thus, drawing activities play an integral role in the development process of children.

Thompson (1995) emphasized that words indicate or promote how children manage their works, thereby facilitating the consolidation or conveyance of their ideas. Therefore, in the process of understanding children's drawings, words that demonstrate personal or social functions are key factors in determining children's nature and their early symbolic development.

Thus, drawings are children's behavioral and dialectical expressions, and their mental and ideological presentations. Children's drawings typically exhibit personal meaning, and present various image manifestations and styles. Although children are designated as "little artists," few studies have examined the images portrayed in children's drawings. Therefore, this was the research motivation of the present study.

Research Objectives

In the present study, we collected children's drawings to determine the relationship between children's drawings and the images these drawings portray. Based on the research results, we propose a conclusion and several suggestions that can serve as a reference for the parents of young children and scholars who engage in future research on this topic. Therefore, the objective of the present study was to investigate the expressive meaning of the themes portrayed in children's drawings.

Literature Review

The Meaning of Children's Drawings

The images portrayed in children's drawings are figures or shapes illustrated by children using various drawing methods. These drawings are a product of children's visual experiences, physical and mental coordination, and motor functions. In other words, drawings are a product of children's instinctive performance (Chen, 2000). The images depicted in children's drawings originate from (a) their memories of specific objects, people, animals, or environments; (b) events created purely through their imagination; and (c) observations of real-world objects in everyday life. Children consequently attempt to recreate these images through drawing (Wu, 2003).

At the initial stages of drawing, images are produced from children's body movements and motion. In other words, images are created through a series of body movements or muscle actions.

As the process of drawing continues, children begin to observe and explore the regularity of specific images, thereby establishing image characteristics. Using this set of predetermined characteristics, children begin to imitate and draw specific images. This stage of drawing is known as the “understanding pictorial signs” stage (Chen, 2000). Following this stage, children gradually acquire specific drawing skills and abilities, which they employ to create personal and unique images. At this stage, children begin to understand the meaning of images, which stimulates their desire to name or assign meanings to their drawings. At later stages, children develop sufficient skills to apply various drawing tools, and present the visual characteristics, complexity, detail, and spatial organization of their images.

Analyzing the Images in Children’s Drawings

Children typically express their conscious and subconscious desires on paper. These conscious or subconscious expressions reflect the concerns and interests of children, which are those displayed in their drawings. Yeh (1985) maintained that the feelings expressed in a child’s drawings can be determined by analyzing the theme, structure, characteristics, and color of these drawings, and comparing analysis results with the child’s everyday life events. In addition, numerous expert scholars have expressed their perspectives regarding the development and analysis of children’s drawings.

Image Themes

When drawing, children can be guided to choose distinctive themes because themes are the key to stimulating the minds of children. With the guidance and thematic suggestions provided by adults, children can express their personal experiences and perceptions of the world (Hsu et al., 1993). Yeh (1985) revealed that the themes depicted in children’s drawings primarily comprise objects and people from everyday life, such as animals, family, fictitious objects, and dreams. Drawing is a method used by children to express themselves; a method to give shape to perception. Children employ exaggerated methods or omit the most meaningful parts of an expression to express their life experiences and emotions (Lin, 2006). Dong (1995) suggested that drawings illustrated by young children sequentially follow three stages: a scribble stage, a basic shapes stage, and a preliminary drawing stage. Children between the ages of 4 and 6 years typically enter the preliminary drawing stage, where they begin to combine and name their drawings. For example, a child names a circular pattern, “puppy.” However, the manifestation of children’s drawings is often a combination of reality and imagination, rendering such drawings difficult for adults to comprehend. Therefore, analyzing the content of children’s drawings enabled us to determine the complexity and depth of a child’s mind.

Malchiodi (2003) believed that drawing enhances children’s story-telling potential. Young children are able to express meaning through figures and shapes. Art therapy practitioners can then analyze the narrative properties of children’s drawings and verbal expressions to understand children. These narrative properties are defined as “a story, a description of the past, or a type of history, statement, report, explanation, description, or record” (Wu, 2003). Moreover, instructing children to explain images by using a narrative method reduces the possibility of misinterpreting the images.

Image Features

The features of children’s drawings involve the modeling of appearances, coloring, and the use of lines during the creation process. Hsu et al. (1993) indicated that in addition to theme, the analysis of children’s drawings must include observations of shapes, colors, materials, decorations, and the beautification of the drawings. Regarding shapes, children sequentially develop from drawing dots and lines to drawing planes. This change in shape formulation requires children to

learn and master numerous drawing skills and concepts, such as expansion, balanced configuration, component, and order, to express the intended shape effectively. In addition, children typically explore spatial expressions when drawing shapes, which is a type of exercise for intersecting surfaces and controlling parallel perspectives. Regarding the expression of “skylines and horizons,” Li (1996) believed that children are able to illustrate the concept of skylines and horizons between the ages of 4 and 5 years (Wu, 2005). Children at this age also understand that the sky is located above people’s heads, the ground is below people’s feet, and air, plants, and houses are located between the sky and the ground, thus collectively establishing spatial position.

A line can be characterized as stipples, vertical lines, horizontal lines, vertical and horizontal lines, and swirls. Children between the ages of 2 and 4 years typically scribble uniform lines in the form of swirls. Children between 4 and 6 years of age are capable of combining basic shapes, such as circles, squares, and triangles, to depict images that are similar to physical objects. However, children in this age group are influenced by egocentrism, causing them to produce exaggerated drawings.

Methodology

For young children, drawing is a continuation of life experiences. Because the metacognition and language skills of young children have not yet developed, they are unable to fully comprehend the properties and content of acquired knowledge, which hinders them from using such knowledge to solve problems. Thus, children employ drawing as a medium to communicate and convey ideas.

This study examined how young children employ drawing to express thoughts and determined the meaning of image symbols by analyzing the “process” and “result” of producing a drawing. A qualitative research method was used to comprehensively understand and present the intrinsic meaning of children’s drawings and image symbols.

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, three research methods were employed: a case study, nonparticipatory observation, and document analysis. The reason for employing a case study was to collect a large quantity of data from a single or several cases. Subsequently, the data were comprehensively analyzed to obtain additional details regarding the case, gain insight into the conditions of the case in a specific situational context, and observe how the case employed drawing to express his conditions. Finally, data were collected from the case for a prolonged period to gain an understanding of the case.

To understand, care for, and guide children, one of the researchers in the present study observed and monitored the drawing activities of his own child (hereafter referred to as Child A) for a period of 5 months. The demographics of Child A were determined based on on-site observations and the qualitative analysis of Child A’s pictorial works and related data. Child A’s demographics are listed as follows: He is extraverted and kind, the only child in the family, and was 4 years and 11 months old at the time of the study. His favorite dynamic activity was playing in the park, and his favorite static activities were reading picture books and, particularly, drawing. Child A enjoyed sharing his drawings with others each time he completed a drawing.

Results

1. The Imagination and Creativity of Children Can Be Derived from the Themes of Their Drawings

Drawing is an alternative method of communication for children; that is, a nonverbal conveyance method. Drawing enables children to materialize their ideas and emotions; and it is a tool used by children to record their ideas, emotions, and experiences. In addition, drawing assists

children in verifying the differences between their sensory world and reality, and opens up a vast space in which to explore the world of the unknown or their fantasy world.

Figure 1 The Abduction of Mr. Cloud



Figure 2 The Trapped Robot



Creativity is the conveyance of mental images through imagination and the use of unique methods and forms. During art activities, children not only arbitrarily attempt to draw various shapes and models, but also enjoy the success that creativity offers (Pan, 1994). Based on Figs. 1 and 2, we observed that Child A perceived each drawing as a situation or scene from a story. The drawings potentially served to convey ideas or were a source of imaginative or creative inspiration.

2. Children Depict Life Events in the Themes of Their Drawings

Yeh (1985) argued that if the life events of children were closely observed and analyzed through the themes, structure, characteristics, and colors of their drawings, the emotions represented in children's drawings could be understood. Based on Fig. 3, we observed that Child A drew his family, which is the most intimate part of his life.

Figure 3 My Family (Father, Mother, Uncle Cheng, Aunt, and Me)



3. The Expression of Concern in the Themes of Children's Drawings

Children typically express their conscious and subconscious desires on paper, which are expressions that reflect the concerns and interests of children, and these expressions are manifested in children's drawing.

Figure 4 The House Is Collapsing



Figure 5 The Typhoon Is Coming



Child A asserted, "How terrible! The house is collapsing" and "How terrible! The typhoon is coming," when drawing Figs. 4 and 5, suggesting his inner fear and uncertainty regarding earthquakes and typhoons. The figures depict the power of the earthquake through the tilting building and the power of the typhoon through the swirling lines.

4. Children Draw What They Think Rather Than What They See in Their Drawings

Young children may draw images of what they have seen or imagined. Thus, we can deduce that children draw using their imagination rather than figures or objects they observe in real life. For example, Child A had previously watched numerous science fiction and superhero films, such as Iron Man, Transformers, The Incredible Hulk, Captain America, and Dinosaurs. Based on memory, Child A depicted scenes from the movies in his drawings.

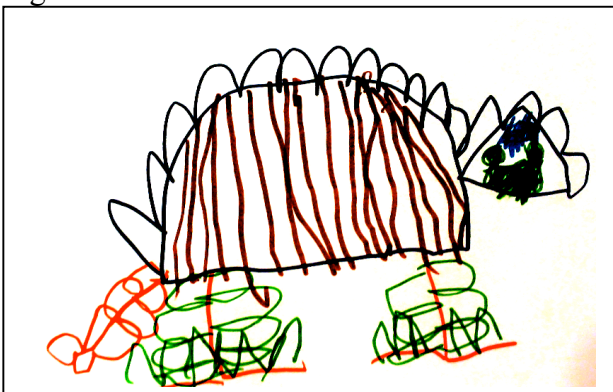
Figure 6 Iron Man



Figure 7 Bumblebee, The Hulk, and Captain America



Figure 8 The Dinosaur



Through drawing, children are able to present scenes or events that they have seen or imagined, and can clearly express the figures and objects they have depicted in their drawings.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Drawing is an alternative, nonverbal communication method for children. Drawing enables children to materialize their ideas and emotions; a tool used by children to record their perceptions, emotions, and experiences. In addition, drawing assists children in verifying the differences between their sensory world and reality, and opens up a boundless space in which they explore the unknowns or their fantasy world. Children should be encouraged to draw so that they may understand and express their feelings and comprehend that independent thinking and the freedom to be creative is respected by others. Attention should be paid toward the aspirations portrayed in a

child's drawings and children should be motivated to express their thoughts on paper or through drawing.

Children enjoy drawing life events, things that concern or interest them, particularly those that influence them. Therefore, education should begin with children's surroundings and their thoughts. Thus, patients and teachers should provide children with diverse education to enrich their experiences.

Suggestions

Parents should enhance their perspective and awareness toward their children's drawing development.

Parents should be able to understand children's drawings, and the meanings and ideas expressed in the children's image symbols to comprehensively understand their children and provide them with a suitable growth environment. We believe that parents can obtain unexpected benefits by objectively and sincerely listening to their children.

Parents should provide their children with a free drawing environment with abundant resources.

Each child has his or her unique life experiences and ideas. Parents should provide their children with an environment filled with resources to stimulate their children's inner emotions and enable them to draw happily and grow in a loving environment.

The number of research subjects should be increased.

The present study comprised one research subject: a child at the age of 4 years and 11 months. We suggest that researchers of future studies increase the number of research subjects to comprehensively understand the relationship between children's drawing performance and image symbols. In addition, children's family members, peers, and teachers can be included in the research to obtain informative results.

Interviews should be included as a research method.

The present study employed a case study as the qualitative research method. We suggest that future studies include subject interviews to determine how adults perceive and understand children's drawings. Such interviews enable objective results to be obtained, which would enhance the future reference value of the study.

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