

**Research Note**

## **An Examination of Children's Criteria used in Evaluating and Producing Drawings**

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**Abstract:** *This is a research note about the project that I am working on as part of my PhD studies. The project, which has the form of multiple case studies, will be looking at the criteria six elementary school children use when involved in activities of drawing production and evaluation. More specifically, the study will examine the extent to which the children are interested in aesthetic qualities when drawing and when judging drawings produced by themselves or other children. In this note, I present very briefly the reasons I decided to work on the particular project after a thorough examination of the literature, and then proceed to a more detailed description of the methodology I intend to use.*

With a background in elementary education, I started my PhD studies in October 2008, looking into the aesthetic understanding and values amongst children. Through an examination of the bibliography, I came across with a very rich literature on both children's graphic production (eg, Luquet, 1927; Piaget and Inhelden, 1956; Lowenfeld and Brittain, 1964; Kellogg, 1969; Wilson, 1997; Davis, 1997) and children's evaluative judgments of works of art (eg, Rump and Southgate, 1971; Hardiman and Zernich, 1977; Housen, 1983, in Fairchild, 1991; Parsons, 1987). Surprisingly enough, though, I noticed that children's productive and evaluative criteria have been studied separately. This reveals the likelihood of a gap in theory between the interrelation of children's use of aesthetic criteria in *judging* visual images and in their own *production* of visual images. This is something that I aim to investigate through this study.

Another limitation of the literature concerns the kind of visual images for which children make aesthetic comments. Most of the previous studies have examined children's responses to adults' artworks – mainly paintings of well established adult artists (eg, Ecker, 1973; Parsons, 1987; Piscitelli, 1988; Savva and Trimis, 2005). Despite the usefulness of the findings of these studies, we nevertheless have limited information concerning children's perceptions about the aesthetic qualities of children's drawings. For this reason, this work will focus on children's judgments of child drawings – including their own.

So, based on the above observations, the research questions that I aim to investigate through this project are:

1. Which characteristics do children use in their drawings in order to give them aesthetic value?
  - a) Why these particular ones?
2. Which characteristics do they consider as the determinants of the aesthetic value of a drawing when judging it?
  - a) Why these particular ones?
3. What is the relationship between their criteria for production and evaluation of drawings?

The study will follow a child-centred approach. My target is to give voice to the children through this project and let them give their own perspective about their decisions to use specific characteristics in their drawings and to explain how they perceive and evaluate drawings made by others. What this study is *not* trying to do, is propose the existence of a general and universal model of aesthetic development. I consider this process highly personal and special for each individual and I am rather interested in specific behaviours of particular individuals in specific place and time, and in the factors that determine these behaviours. With this, I am not suggesting that there are no *similarities* among children's choices and preferences. What I am trying not to neglect is the *differences* among them, in order to shed some light on the factors that make each case unique.

Something else that I would like to clarify at this point is how the terms 'aesthetic' and 'aesthetic value' are approached. Following the etymology of the word (from the Greek 'aesthesia' which means 'sense'), aesthetic can be any element of a drawing that is perceived by the senses. Consequently, anything on a drawing can be aesthetic. However, when talking about the 'aesthetic value' of an element, I am referring to those characteristics which, by being perceived by the senses, they can influence the inner world of an individual either in a positive way by causing pleasant feelings, or in a negative way by causing unpleasant feelings. In simple words, what someone might like or dislike about a drawing. Of course, this usually is not as simple as it sounds. The variety of interfering influences, their interactions and the complexity of these interactions' outcome, render the way each individual perceives and processes a stimulus unique. As a result, the same element on a drawing can be valued by each child in a different way and to a different degree. Through this study, I intend to explore and explain children's aesthetic understanding and values when it comes to making and appreciating drawings.

The practical part of the project will be based on the case-study methodological approach. The collection of the data will be obtained through a combination of methods so that the information can be triangulated for strengthening the credibility of the study. The data collection methods that will be used are:

- a) Interviews
- b) Observations
- c) Analysis of drawings

The interviews will be semi-structured. They will consist of a number of fixed questions and, depending on the children's answers during the interviews, more questions may occur for further clarification of their ideas. The formulation of the questions will be simple and clear, and the vocabulary used will be familiar to the children and similar to the one they use.

There will be three phases of interviews. The *first* phase will be introductory and will examine the children's degree of artistic involvement in terms of the amount of time they spend on artistic activities and the kind of these activities. It will also examine possible influences from their environment, for example, an artist in their family or their art teacher. The *second* phase will focus on the children's productive and evaluative criteria. Information will be collected about the qualities which they consider aesthetically important and the extent to which they try to include them in their drawings or use them to evaluate drawings. The *final* phase will be based on the children's judgments of drawings: four drawings made by themselves and four drawings made by other children that participate in the study.

The observations will be used for the collection of information concerning the art class context. There will be classroom observations and individual observations. The *classroom*

observations will focus on interactions among the members of the class, the teacher's instructions and material availability. Emphasis will be paid equally to verbal and non-verbal behaviours, like facial expressions or gestures. The *individual* observations will focus on each child separately. Attention will be paid to the drawing procedure, including children's choice of materials (where the option is available), their response to the teacher's instructions or comments about their drawings, their own comments or judgments about their or other children's drawing, the kind of corrections they will possibly do to their drawings, and generally all these elements that might reveal the children's interest or lack of interest in the aesthetic quality of drawings.

Finally, children's drawings will be collected and they will be used as primary sources of information, opposed to the secondary sources which are the interviews. There are two kinds of drawings that will be examined. The first group will consist of drawings that the children made at school during the art class and the second group will be drawings made by the children some time other than the art class, either during their free time at school or at home. Both groups of drawings will be studied, since it has been observed that often there are differences between the drawings children make at school and at home (Wolf and Perry, 1988; Kindler and Darras, 1997). There will be no criteria for the selection of the drawings. Some of them will be used in the third phase of the interviews, when the children will be asked to talk about and to evaluate their drawings.

The practical part of this project will be conducted in primary school classes in Cyprus. The schools and the participants will be randomly selected. All ethical considerations will be taken into account: permissions will be obtained from the Ministry of Education, the schools' head-teacher, the children and their parents; the children will be reminded at every stage of the study that they are free to withdraw if they wish; moreover, pseudonyms will be used so that the children and their schools cannot be identified.

The data coding process will be flexible and will follow a circular trajectory of deductive coding with categories predefined by the researcher, and inductive coding, when the categories will derive from the data themselves. After the analysis of each case, there will be a second phase of analysis, this time of the whole population of the participants. Common characteristics and differences will be discussed and possible explanations will be provided. It is expected that the existence of similarities and differences among the children will be due to reasons such as personal preferences, age differences, different kinds and degrees of artistic experiences and/or influence by other individuals' criteria, preferences and beliefs.

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