



## "What Should I Draw Today?" Sketchbooks in Early Childhood

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# “What should I draw today?”

## Sketchbooks in Early Childhood

**F**ive-year-old Pamela turned her sketchbook to show the morning's first drawing to the student teacher seated nearby. "Look what I made," Pamela suggested, "Pretty trees and flowers." "Those *are* pretty trees and flowers," the student teacher agreed, as Pamela, well-satisfied, returned her sketchbook to working position. Pamela proceeded to draw, outlining a crisp black house on the facing page of her sketchbook. She bent industriously to her work, adding a sidewalk leading to the house and an approaching visitor, feet firmly



planted on the walk, body extended at an angle perpendicular to it. When her teacher announced that the time had come to gather for the presentation of the day's lesson, Pamela cast one last admiring glance at her drawing and relinquished her sketchbook with a contented sigh.

A week later, Pamela returned to her Saturday art class, retrieved her sketchbook at the door, and settled on a carpet square, ready to resume a familiar Saturday morning routine. As the children around her reviewed drawings completed in weeks past or searched for fresh pages in their own sketchbooks, Pamela turned immediately to the house she had drawn the week before. "Look what I made," she urged a student teacher. Without waiting for a response, Pamela began to fill the outlined structure with vivid color. On either side of the house, she added two tree trunks, each rectangle gently curved at the bottom, sprouting a crown of branches at its top. "I can't find a good green," Pamela paused to complain. A student teacher helped to locate a usable marker, and Pamela continued her work, carefully coloring the spaces between each branch. This accomplished, she rocked back on her knees, surveying her work for a long, thoughtful moment. She turned the page, apparently ready for a new challenge. But on second thought, the drawing was not quite finished: It needed a row of pink and red flowers between the trees, round blooms atop green stems, each sporting a pair of leaves. Pamela paused, looked around the room, and turned to a new page. Then back: One more thing was needed. A scene as idyllic as this one deserved an enveloping arc of rainbow. Finally, the drawing was complete.

Each Saturday morning, twenty-two weeks each year, preschool and kindergarten children such as Pamela arrive at the art building of this large Midwestern university to participate in classes taught by students majoring in art or early childhood education with the guidance of art education faculty and graduate students. Each Saturday for the past several years these visits to "art school" have included a special time at the beginning of each class, during which children draw in sketchbooks, spiral bound collections of blank pages which the children fill with images of their own choosing. Each Saturday, as the children draw, adults who watch from the sidelines witness young children thinking, acting, planning, composing, embellishing, elaborating, sharing ideas about the world and about the challenging task of capturing that world in images.

As a regular participant in these classes—sometimes a teacher, more frequently a researcher—I've come to believe that the practice of drawing in sketchbooks contributes something unique and valuable to young children and to those who hope to understand and teach them. Sketchbooks provide a bounded space for personal explorations, allowing children to pursue the themes and perfect the skills that matter most to them, to explore realities that puzzle and provoke their interest, to make the decisions that artists make when they draw to please and inform themselves. As children formulate and follow personal projects in the pages of their sketchbooks, they learn something about themselves as artists, as individuals, and as participants in the cultures which converge and emerge in their classroom.

As David Hawkins (1974) predicted,

children distinguish themselves when they are involved in projects of their own devising. Some children choose to create series of related drawings, and others, encyclopedic assortments of images. Some routinely seek considerable challenge; others remain within well-charted territory, repeating favored images and honing emergent skills. Many children return, as Pamela did, to drawings started in earlier sessions, embellishing and completing sketches that remain compelling to them. In this and in other ways, the children routinely contradict our assumptions about the elasticity of their attention and the tenacity of their intentions.

As the assembled adults learn from the children, they are busy learning from one another. Working in close proximity to other children, amid the diversity of interest and experience that any group of young children offers, the children see the possibilities of drawing multiplied many times over, and find their own delight in the creation of visual images affirmed.

### THE VALUE OF VOLUNTARY DRAWINGS

Sketchbooks were introduced to these preschool-kindergarten classes five years ago, an experiment inspired by Anne Haas Dyson's (1986, 1988) accounts of writing journals in use in kindergarten, first- and second-grade language arts classes. The "writing process" approach which Dyson describes is a more sophisticated and sustained variant of a traditional elementary school practice, in which children are asked to draw a picture and then dictate or write a story about it. Advocates of the writing process approach accept Vygotsky's (1978) claim that children's drawings figure

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prominently in the “prehistory” of writing. They capitalize on the narrative impulse that emerges in children’s earliest representational drawings, on the children’s tendency to create stories in their drawings and in the talk that surrounds and supplements drawing events. This recognition of the developmental priority of drawing is coupled with a concern for authenticity in the writing process, the conviction that children learn to read and write most easily when they encounter texts that they themselves have authored. Often, these first texts emerge in the labels and captions and short stories which children dictate or write to clarify or complete or simply to accompany what they have drawn.

The journal activities which Dyson documents involve children engaged in the type of drawings which Lark-Horovitz, Lewis, and Luca (1973) describe as “free or voluntary”: drawings made in response to an adult request, but with topics chosen by the children themselves. Voluntary drawings originate and develop in children’s minds and reflect their inclinations, interests, experiences and abilities, their ways of making sense of the world. Voluntary drawings offer children a form of engagement in art-making which is substantially different from that which they experience in lessons initiated by a teacher, for the significant choices of subject and execution rest solely with the child. Evidence of each child’s distinctive ways of thinking, of drawing, and of attending to the world accumulates, as drawings preserved in roughly chronological order become available for review and reflection. When children select and define their own projects, the work they choose to do is, almost without exception, developmentally appropriate and personally

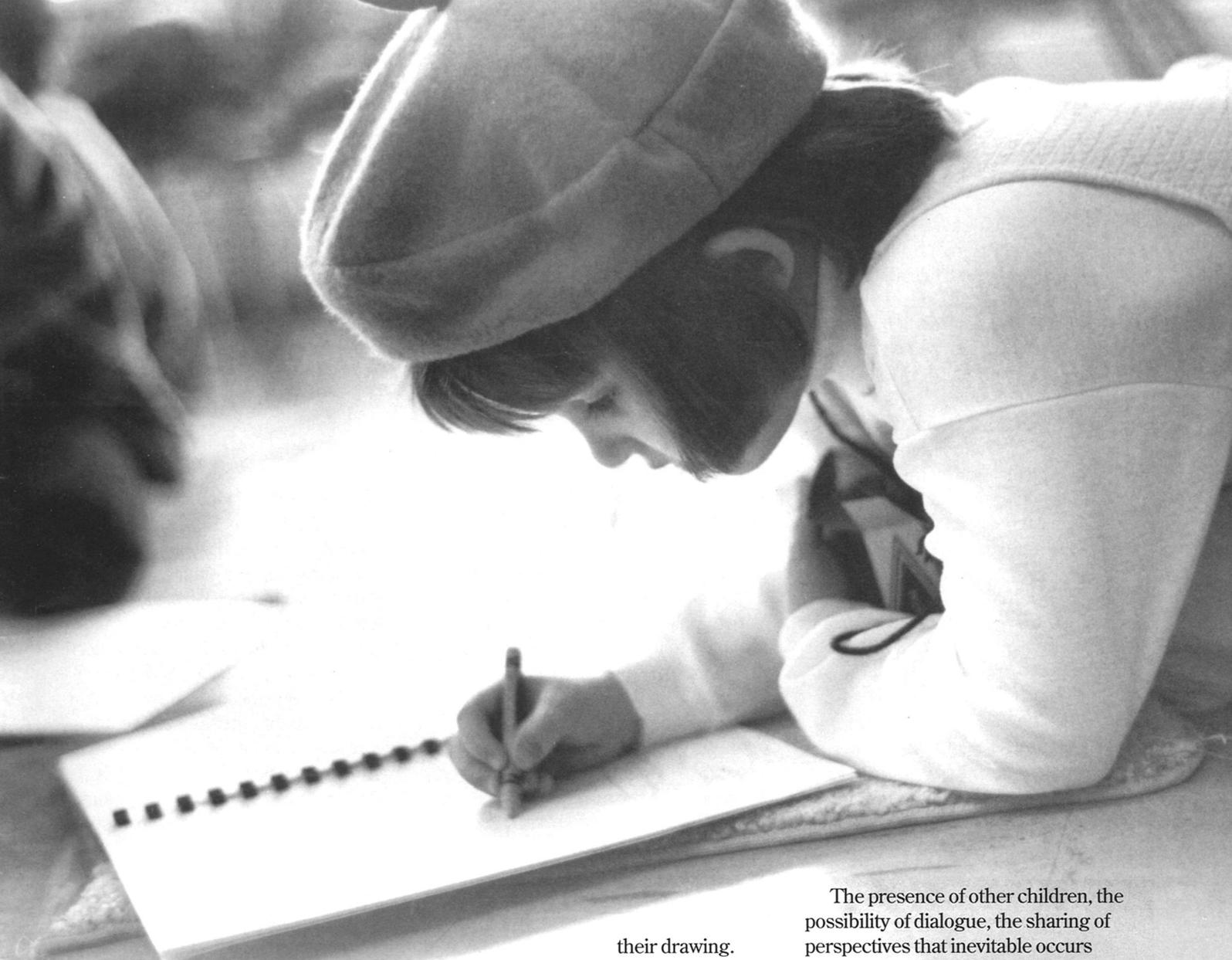
meaningful. Often, these self-initiated projects are far more ambitious and engrossing than any lesson we might think to devise for preschool or kindergarten children.

Nick, a kindergartner in his third semester of Saturday classes, attracted a good deal of attention when he drew a ghost hovering outside the second story window of a solid brown house. The children were intrigued by the subject Nick had chosen to depict, a particularly fine manifestation of their common preoccupation with things just beyond the ordinary. Nick’s teachers were equally impressed by his ability to place the specter so clearly in front of the structure, to create a convincing relationship of occlusion. In the months that followed, Nick mastered this difficult drawing strategy fully and began to use it quite deliberately. Late in his final semester of kindergarten, Nick contributed a tree trunk, with mysterious lateral attachments, to a collaborative cityscape. Asked by a student teacher, Nick explained the appendages: “This is my dog sticking out behind it. You can see his tail wagging.” “Is this a tree, then?” the student teacher asked. “Yes, and you can’t see the rest of it because it’s behind the house,” Nick replied.

Many children pursue personal inquiries within the pages of their sketchbooks, dedicating their efforts to a single subject which they seem determined to practice, modify and perfect. Children who are developing their first representations of people seem particularly apt to remain devoted to this one subject, but more experienced artists may also show a fierce attachment to subjects chosen from their wider range of options. The choices of “subject matter specialists” (Lark-Horovitz, Lewis, & Luca, 1973) in preschool and kindergarten range from the predictable to the idiosyncratic: Michael filled his sketch-

book with diagrams of electrical wiring and transformers; Tom begins each page with a drawing of a stop sign, proceeding from there to invent an appropriate context and situation for this central symbol; Kyuwon filled her sketchbook to overflowing with remarkable drawings of horses, donkeys, and riders, executed with no hesitation in rapid calligraphic strokes. Other children demonstrate remarkable versatility of interest. In David’s sketchbook, a drawing of a baseball game was followed immediately by a drawing of a ship and then by a volcano. Patrick compiled a series of vignettes, featuring, among other things, a devil, Frankenstein, King Kong, crab claws, a volcano, a tornado, an explosion, a desert island with palm tree, and a series of human skulls drawn in eerie color combinations.

Children freely appropriate images they admire and ideas they fancy. Maggie’s drawing of an exotic flowering form was the model for her friend, Sarah, who tried to follow Maggie’s lead, mark for mark. For six weeks, Maggie and Sarah returned to these drawings. When Maggie began a new image, she reached into the basket of markers, retrieved two blue markers and handed one to Sarah before she started to draw. The borrowing of images is seldom this overt or ritualized, but the influence children exert upon one another is pervasive and profound. Aaron and his twin sister Hannah have in common a unique style of drawing and a marked preference for dense and colorful scenes. Hannah volunteered the information that Aaron had taught her how to draw people. James and Kyle, longtime neighborhood friends and Saturday class comrades, share a predilection for monsters and mayhem, for drawings that occasionally



self-destruct at the whim of their marker-wielding creators. They often draw in dialogue with one another.

Children's natural interest in one another is fueled by the accessibility of drawn images and the constant barrage of talk that attends their making. Images, out in the open, are easily read and deciphered. With some exceptions, children talk as they work, lapsing into private, planning speech when they encounter a particularly difficult or unexpected problem in the course of

their drawing.

Vygotsky (1962) noted that young children's thinking-out-loud mimics the form and content of comments directed toward another person: "Now, let's see, I make a line like that," or "His feet are running so fast he looks red." In preschool and kindergarten, such private speech hovers close to the surface whenever children draw. When children draw together, these comments frequently elicit responses from others who overhear them and assume they were meant to be answered. At times, children may find such responses intrusive or simply choose to ignore them, but they often welcome the exchange of opinions that ensues (Thompson & Bales, 1991).

The presence of other children, the possibility of dialogue, the sharing of perspectives that inevitable occurs around the sketchbooks, contribute significantly to early artistic learning. Children quickly become audiences for one another's work, sometimes critical, but more often supportive and enthusiastic. Even in the intermittent gatherings of a Saturday enrichment class, certain children win notoriety for specific inventions, dazzling visual feats or overall levels of achievement. Two of Pamela's friends, for example, marked her absence one Saturday by agreeing that "Pamela draws good," and recalling several of Pamela's most accomplished works. As Dyson (1989) points out, the conversations and visual inspections

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that occur as children draw in social settings highlight drawings as interesting objects to attend to and talk about.

When children's self-selected topics range widely, the focus of their attention follows. Children discuss the execution and the content of drawings, critique their logic and internal consistency, consider the residue of reality that is incorporated or ignored in the "creation of a pictorial world" (Golomb, 1992). The children's talk is rarely extraneous: It hews closely to the drawings at hand and the experiences those drawings embody and explore. With little or no prompting, children engage in philosophical speculation, "passages of intellectual search" (Tizard & Hughes, 1984, p. 114), as they share their theories about the world and its ways.

## THE TEACHER'S ROLE

Where are the children's teachers as this independent and child-powered activity unfolds? Ideally they remain attentive and close at hand. Sketchbooks endow children with a measure of responsibility for their own learning. They also encourage teachers to exercise the particular form of responsibility that Martin Buber (1965) deemed essential to teaching: the ability to respond to particular children engaged in the onrushing flow of events. In this situation, teachers follow where children lead. They react more than they direct. Frequently, they learn more than they teach.

W. Lambert Brittain (1979) concluded, on the basis of extensive study of art activities in nursery school, that young children remain involved in art-making for significantly longer periods of time when an adult is present and interested in their work. Our experience bears this out. Except for those children who are characteristically silent and self-con-

tained as they draw, children in preschool and kindergarten years seem to crave "adult resonance" (Hawkins, 1974) for their work. They need to know that someone is ready to respond patiently, appreciatively, and knowledgeably to intermittent demands to "Look what I drew!" or "Watch me. Watch me. Look what I made!" These calls for attention differ from the requests for approval that sometimes accompany children's work on directed lessons, when the question is more often, "Am I doing good?," "Am I doing this right?" When projects are initiated by teachers, even very young children seem to recognize that there are expectations to be fulfilled, external criteria to be met: There is the possibility of performing incorrectly or badly. During sketchbook time, the children's most pressing need is for recognition rather than verification.

Student teachers are cautioned to avoid posing questions or making comments that divert children's attention from their work. Inquiries about afternoon plans or school events that are unrelated to drawings in progress derail the concentration that sketchbook sessions are meant to foster. Suggestions about what to draw seem confusing to those children who are still unable to predict exactly what might result when pen hits paper, and are simply extraneous to others. The children seem to have an inexhaustible fund of ideas for

drawing, plentiful inspiration and ample energy to follow where it leads. When children do run out of steam, one of the student teachers may invite them to review drawings they personally completed earlier in the day or in previous sessions. Sometimes this informal portfolio review reminds the child of something he or she meant to draw or to add to a drawing. At other times, it serves more simply, but no less significantly, as an occasion to reflect on accomplishments, to recall and explain intentions, and to savor the response of an attentive viewer.

The teacher's role in these conversations is not passive, though it is directed toward enrichment of the children's concepts and plans. Frank curiosity—even if it is expressed, "What is that?"—seldom seems to offend children. In fact, such questions acknowledge the child as the originator of personal work, the expert who is uniquely qualified to inform others about the forms and meanings created.

## DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

The particular developmental tasks that face four- and five-year-old children seem to be well served by the form of sketchbook activity that has evolved in these Saturday classes. The few three-year-olds enrolled in the classes seem less convinced that this is a valuable

activity. They are generally more distractible and far less likely to endure a full twenty minutes of any single activity. Some three-year-olds, uncertain about the point of these blank books that have been presented to them, rapidly mark on each page and declare themselves emphatically "Finished" sometime during the first class of the eleven-week session. Seldom do three-year-olds return to inspect their drawings without prompting and the additional incentive of an attentive adult audience; rarely do they return to a drawing left incomplete on a previous occasion. Very young children, it seems, may be just as happy drawing on individual sheets of paper. The parents of three-year-olds, however, are especially appreciative of the sketchbooks, both because they preserve a great number of drawings in a relatively tidy format, and because comments their child made during or just after drawing are often transcribed on the page. This interpretive guidance lets parents in on what the child intended, or the way the drawing was interpreted, and allows them to respond appropriately.

Even the youngest four-year-olds derive more abundant rewards from work in their sketchbooks. Jordan finds plenty to do as he practices marks and sun faces. Sabrina's humans crop up unexpectedly amid pages of scribbles. Katie draws people and mandalas. Meredith fills pages with blocks of color. These children remain busy, content, engrossed in their work. They seem impressed, but not intimidated, by others' more sophisticated versions of subjects similar to those that appear in their drawings. They plan, direct, and monitor their actions. They see immediate, vivid, concrete evidence of their

ability to formulate intentions and to give them form. They enjoy a time reserved just for drawing, a time in which the distractions that exist support the process of making images, and the choices to be made are confined to those that allow children to focus on their work.

### FREEDOM AND STRUCTURE

Many teachers of young children are dedicated to the concept of freedom of artistic expression: careful to avoid restrictions, concerned about the preservation of children's creativity and the availability of choices. In many early childhood classrooms, as a result, children are asked to choose constantly among an overwhelming array of equally attractive alternatives (Katz, 1993; Kindler, 1995). It's little wonder that we think of young children as distractible and diffuse when the circumstances in their classrooms so often conspire to encourage random sampling of activities and constant flight between them.

Freedom to learn and to grow does not occur in the absence of structure, nor does it thrive when the curriculum is driven by an eternal quest for novelty. True freedom occurs when choices are made within a structure that is stable, reliable, protected from distraction; focused, as George Dennison wrote, on the fulfillment "of activities we deem important and of people we know are unique" (1969, p. 4). Sketchbooks provide a bounded area available for exploration of images and ideas, a format for the pursuit of personal projects and an occasion for sharing theories about the world and its representation through symbols. When time and space are devoted to their use, sketchbooks emphasize drawing as a central activity for young children, one that helps them to make sense of their experiences as they recreate and present them in tangi-

ble and permanent form.

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