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Book Review

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Understanding creativity in early childhood, by Susan Wright, presents a compelling argument for why the creative act of drawing should play an integral role in early childhood schooling practices not only because it represents a crucial step in emergent literacy, but even more importantly, the act of drawing itself affords the artist agency, negotiation, voice, creativity, and the ability to grapple with both the real and imaginary elements of humanity. Wright frames the importance of this research within the broader contexts of recent studies on multimodality and new literacies, as such studies have raised debates of what counts as a ‘text,’ ‘reading and writing,’ thus, expanding what falls under the category of literacy practices (Hull and Nelson, 2005).

The central premise of *Understanding creativity in early childhood* documents how “imagination, creativity, fantasy and play are fundamental components of young children’s art and meaning-making.” (pp8–9). In addition, the author wishes to dispel some of the misconceptions surrounding drawing as a ‘lesser practice’ that is often not given priority in school by “providing a theoretical foundation for understanding and appreciating the artworks” (p8). Wright conducted this research in Australia with the participation of over 100 children between the ages of 5–8. The author uses a socio-cultural/social constructivist lens of analysis with the understanding that these perspectives have “increased our understanding of how childhood is culturally and historically constructed” (p26). Wright draws on seminal theorists such as James and Prout (1997), Vygotsky (1962, 1967), and Bruner (1996) to place her research within this larger landscape of socio-cultural perspectives surrounding studies of children’s cognitive development. In their study, Wright and colleagues collected ethnographic data as they observed, analyzed, recorded and questioned these students during their drawing acts.

Organized into seven chapters, Wright takes the reader on a magnificent journey into the minds and hearts of young children; simultaneously, she

carefully expands her argument surrounding the necessity of drawing as integral to the classroom experience. Thus, Wright leaves little doubt in the mind of the reader as to why this is such a critical issue in early childhood education. Each chapter contains numerous drawings made by the young people in this study, which Wright meticulously analyses. She guides the reader through deep levels of interpretation, utilizing transcribed vignettes and follow-up discussions as evidence for how the drawing process acts as a vehicle for creative thought and expression. Most importantly, she allows the voices and imaginations of these young artists to come alive and speak for themselves within the book. I would argue that this feature alone makes this text particularly powerful, especially when the reader witnesses the young artists' attempts to grapple with mature and advanced issues such as life/death and good versus evil. The drawings and transcripts provide startling evidence of the advanced reasoning capacities that these young people possess. Moreover, the drawing modality acts as a catalyst for the children's thoughts and feelings to emerge through a medium they are naturally enthusiastic about during this stage of development.

Each chapter begins with a summary of key take-away points, giving the reader a focus prior to beginning the chapter. The chapters conclude with a summary that revisits the section's highlights, reflective questions that the reader can utilize to build on the knowledge presented, and suggestions for additional readings. Throughout these multiple modes of presentation, the book addresses the following components surrounding the creative act of drawing for young children: (1) creativity; (2) surfacing voices of children; (3) intratextuality; (4) drawing and embodiment; (5) intertextuality; (6) ancient forms and new worlds; and, (7) implications for teaching. I would argue that another particular strength of this book is the author's ability to meticulously craft a multifaceted approach to young people's creative acts, revealing the depth of creativity and reasoning these children naturally and enthusiastically engage in during drawing.

Chapter 1, "Creativity: Meaning-making and representation," discusses why children find the act of composing through art appealing: it is not strictly rule-bound as other more conventional forms of communication, it is a mode that allows children to 'say' and 'write' what they think and feel, allowing children to combine graphic narrative and embodied signs, and sharing characteristics with dramatic and imaginative play. Wright's approach for understanding what is meant by these drawings is through the multidisciplinary field of semiotics, which assigns much weight to creativity and invention that has served to shape evolution (Danesi, 2007). Her goal is to showcase

how representation “as sign-making, bridges the child’s real world ‘out there’ with his/her inner imagination.” Yet the author also illustrates how “children’s drawings represent something according to specific traditions and practices” constrained by a variety of contextual factors (Danesi, 2007). Wright discusses the “three modes in consort-graphic, narrative, and embodied—that makes visual narrative a powerful source for children’s learning, representational thought and creativity” (p20). The graphic mode involves the actual artistic elements, symbols, and icons that manifest in the drawings; the narrative mode refers to the fictional or real life elements in the picture; finally, the embodied mode includes evidence of spatial relationships, expressiveness, and dramatization in these visual stories (Wright, 2010). In the process of negotiating these modes, the child-artist becomes an author of an integrated text utilizing “a range of voices of communication” (p22). For Wright, the act of analyzing and appreciating children’s drawings is highly complex and potentially time-consuming, but the rewards and findings on the part of early childhood teachers are endless and well worth the effort.

In chapter 2, “Surfacing the voices of children: The role of the interlocutor,” Wright provides some guidelines for best practices surrounding the role of the interlocutor. The interlocutor is defined as a trained individual who sits with the child during the drawing process and acts as a facilitator in ascertaining children’s thoughts. Wright maintains that a good interlocutor sits with the child while the creative act is taking place, thereby catching the thoughts and feelings of the child that may be lost once the child finishes the product. Additionally, Wright insists that the interlocutor must “go with the flow of their [children’s] thinking and depiction” even as the child may shift in and out of fantasy and reality (p29). This involves attending to the child’s intentions and showcases the value of avoiding too much talking because the moments of silence can be “highly meaningful” (p30). The author also illustrates various moments where the artist’s voice comes alive, such as a decision by a particular artist to depict a prototypical (i.e. universal) representation of a runner in his illustration of an Olympic event.

Chapter 3, “Intratextuality in drawing-telling” showcases how children’s meaning-making is an integrated and creative act that includes the use of many signs, which stand for or represent other things. Wright defines intratextuality as involving “internal relations within texts” and provides many illustrative examples, such as children using speech bubbles, or drawing ‘woosh’ lines to indicate movement (p55). These examples of negotiating

internal relations aid in children's construction surrounding themselves and their worlds. Wright also discusses the notions of space and movement in art as a visual discourse that can vividly communicate what mere words can fail to. Drawing affords young artists the opportunity to apply such principals as "in-front/behind, close/distant, above/below, similarity, proximity, and surroundedness" (p.74). The children learn not only how to employ these principles, but they also learn to interpret and evaluate them in the works of others.

The idea that children incorporate art into their bodies and "extend their senses, imagination, emotion and aesthetics through the use of the drawing media" is the focus of chapter 4, "Drawing and embodiment." In this chapter, Wright discusses how children engage in schematic processes when they draw repeated items, almost akin to a rehearsal in a dramatic act (i.e. a child repeatedly drawing circles on construction paper). Drawing is shown to be "strongly associated with spatial and physical awareness-it is thinking through action" (p78). Specifically, it involves developing three kinds of skills: enactive (representing thoughts through motor responses), iconic (comparing and contrasting mental images of objects), and symbolic (reasoning abstractly and employing culturally-based symbols). The chapter illustrates a variety of examples related to each domain. Ultimately, the author argues that through opportunities to manipulate arts materials directly, children's "thinking and reasoning is enhanced, which is why art is such an important medium for children's expression of ideas and feelings" (p78).

Chapter 5, "Intertextuality," takes a look at how children's visual 'stories' seem to fuse personal experience and imagination with intertextual characteristics. Intertextuality is defined as "the blurring of boundaries between texts" (p110). As such, Wright illustrates how children often utilize popular media, youth culture, comic books, etc. in their drawing; the fusion of these elements with their own stories serve to create a new text. This negotiation affords the child-artist agency as he or she can "shape the fate of the characters and determinants of power" (p112). This activity relies on tapping into problem-solving devices as the child becomes "his/her own audience and critic and selects the 'best' methods for depicting particular thoughts and feelings" (p112).

Utilizing chapter 5 as a stepping stone, in Chapter 6, "Ancient forms-New worlds," Wright discusses how popular media use traditional forms of myth and allegory through the interplay of binary oppositions, and that children "utilize such themes in their creation of visual narratives" (p139). Therefore, the drawings can act as a catalyst for further moral and cognitive development

in young children. Through artwork, children can temporarily experience the worlds of others by ‘trying out’ multiple roles and identities in a safe and productive venue. Art then becomes a means for children to share their often mysterious and hidden realities with adults.

Reflecting on how current schooling practices are often at odds with young children’s imaginative development and the call to re-envision the role of drawing in early childhood education is the hallmark of the final chapter, “Implications for teaching.” Wright notes that in an ever-changing society, we need children who will be imaginative and creative in a globally dynamic environment. Affording young children time and attention to their acts of imagination, particularly drawing, is one means to reach this goal. The chapter closes with suggestions to early childhood teachers. Wright insists that educators should advocate for drawing as a critical component of the curriculum; they should also find the time to observe and listen to a child while he or she is creating a visual narrative, thereby emphasizing the creative process and not just the final product. The chapter ends with a powerful lament: “The schooling process has been in danger of deprecating these important capacities in children. We would be wise to preserve them as fully as possible” (p177).

This book offers the potential to inspire all readers to rally for the necessity of creative acts, such as drawing, to serve a fundamental and permanent place in early childhood schooling practices. The many voices of the children throughout the book echo this cry quite vividly. By the close of this text, the reader recognizes that drawing itself should not only be valued as a bridge into what is often viewed as the more ‘privileged’ literacy: the written word, but also be recognized as a distinct mode in its own right, just as vital to communication as other modes. Recognizing this can lead to “the shared development of an emergent curriculum and continued opportunities for children to construct knowledge rather than simply be passive recipients of it” (p176). I believe that all readers, particularly parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers involved with early childhood growth and development would benefit from the wealth of insights this text offers.

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