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Art Education and Beyond: Drawing and Young Children in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the influence of my doctoral studies, under the mentorship of Dr. Tina Thompson, on the ways that I attend to research in the early childhood classroom. In discussing my experience, I acknowledge the phenomenological nature of my own relationship with Tina and its impact on my thinking. To do so, I begin with a personal narrative before reviewing the literature that serves as an abbreviated oeuvre of Tina's work. I then turn towards the present thinking emerging from 3-year research study, in a neighborhood preschool, to think about how children's voluntary drawing is transforming early childhood teacher practice.

Introduction

For more than thirty years, Tina Thompson has dedicated her professional life, and much of her personal one, to advocating for the inclusion of rich, meaningful art experiences in early childhood education. The reach of her influence on early childhood art education is immeasurable, and she is certain to be remembered as a seminal figure in its development as a

respected field of study. I remember the first time that I realized this. I was standing with Tina waiting to pick up the hotel key for the suite that had been reserved for her. She was the invited keynote speaker for the 2011 International Association of Art in Early Childhood conference: a small but influential organization that brings together global voices about the importance of art for young children. Realizing that people from all over the world had come to listen to her keynote address was a lesson in the scope and power of ideas to change the world.

Thompson's body of scholarship traces a career dedicated to art as a way of thinking and being: one that not only enriches the lives of young people, but also acknowledges the sentience of young children and the subsequent moral, ethical, and practical considerations this perspective brings to pedagogical and research relationships. In this paper, I explore the influence of my doctoral studies, under Tina's mentorship, on the ways that I attend to drawing in research within the early childhood classroom. I acknowledge the phenomenological nature of my own relationship with Tina and its impact on my thinking through personal narrative before reviewing the literature that serves as an abbreviated oeuvre of her work. I then turn towards the present to review early findings, from a 3-year study in a neighborhood preschool, to think about how children's voluntary drawing is transforming early childhood teacher practice.

Phenomenology and art education

I did not always identify as an art educator. Before my formal studies of art education began, my path to studying young children and their art was shaped on the front lines of working with families, in early childhood classrooms, and as a mother of two children. For much of my early career, my understanding of children mirrored the prevailing ideas outlined by universal stages and other models forwarded by developmental psychology. These perspectives, reified by undergraduate studies in human development and graduate coursework in early childhood education, from which developmental psychology reigned as [T]ruth, served as an epistemological context for my thinking.

My personal epistemological paradigm began shifting towards the end of my masters degree studies in early childhood education. Upon the advice of fellow graduate student (and now colleague), I enrolled in Tina's Theories of Child Art Class (A Ed 541) at the Pennsylvania State University. I remember the event, as if it was yesterday, that permanently interrupted my developmental mindset. Tina was shepherding a discussion about constructions of childhood—a discussion that was accompanied by a Power Point made up only of images designed to provoke, interrogate, and confront beliefs about children. The presentation of images paused on a portrait of Ricky Dixon, a young boy whose death tableau hung between the break of an inoculated tree. Titled, "I dreamed that I killed my best friend Ricky Dixon", the image was

part of a larger collection of collaborative photographic image making between artist Wendy Ewald and children from Letcher County, Kentucky (Ewald, 2016).

While the other students in the class discussed the finer points of teaching photography with children, I could not avert my gaze from, nor escape the visceral reaction my body was having to, the haunting image. Until that time, I had never really considered children's lived experiences pursuant to deep existential questions, and I certainly never considered that art was an important tool for making meaning. But there was the picture of Ricky Dixon, pretending to be dead under the direction of his best friend Allen Shepherd in response to quarrel over some knives (Ewald, 2016) and there I was, re-thinking my long held beliefs about children.

When I "officially" entered the field of art education, it was challenging for me to find confidence among my peers who seemed to know far more than I did about teaching art. Tina would often smile when I would ask a seemingly obvious question, in class; a subtle reassurance that I was on the right track. This powerful gesture invited me to question further and to explore. I thought a lot in my early years of study about how experience shapes what we know. Tina helped this process along by assigning me to work in the Saturday Morning Art Classes that she supervised for the School of Visual Arts.

Watching young children draw and make art in Saturday School immediately led to questions. The children's work, and especially their drawings, confounded the developmental paradigm that made up much of my prior work with children and their families. Tina's scholarship fed my hungry mind as I tried to make sense, and her gentle but determined guidance mentored the journey. She welcomed all of my questions but also expected me to find the answers. And in my search for those answers, she shaped experiences that would help me to find them. It was how I came to know phenomenological research. Tina explains it best,

Phenomenological research is a very concrete, down-to-earth and modest methodology that simply seeks to enhance our understanding beyond what we must recognize as our normal ways of getting by, being and doing, in the thrall of everydayness. (Thompson, 2014b, p. 82)

In method, some phenomenological practice proffers "bracketing" as a way to look beyond preconceived notions and assumptions. Doing so can help the qualitative researcher mitigate the subjectivity of interpretive work. To be sure, it was easy to bracket my assumptions about children and their art. As a novice to the field, my insecurities of *not knowing* helped to keep any assumptions I might have, about art, "in check"; many things I saw were unfamiliar. Other phenomenological researchers, however, stress the significance of interpretation and

suggest that our role, as researchers must assume that we cannot be thought of as separate from the networks we study (Thompson, 2014b; Tufford and Newman, 2010). My immersion into the artistic lives of young children, in Saturday School made separating myself from research impossible.

Young Children and Drawing in Sketchbooks

For seven years I worked as an assistant in the art classrooms of Penn State's Saturday School¹. Saturday School reflected Tina's scholarship insofar as it offered pedagogically rich spaces for envisioning how to bring choice, agency, and big ideas (Walker, 2004) into the art classroom. It was an ideal constructivist learning environment: there was plenty of time, ample resources, deeply committed educators, and a constant re-imagining of ideas (Thompson, 2015a). Saturday School was a true community effort, a kind of laboratory school where students and teachers shared in developing, implementing, and reflecting on practices and processes of teaching and learning. Undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty regularly shared their thinking in weekly seminars and time was always made for reflection.

Saturday School always began with twenty minutes of voluntary drawing in sketchbooks². Sketchbooks have been a part of Tina's research since her early days at the University of Illinois in Urbana Champagne. Thus for more than 30 years, she has watched, observed, listened, and responded to (likely) tens of thousands of preschool drawings. She contends that voluntary drawing gives notice to children's thoughts and ideas, their interests, and the many ways that children approach the questions they ponder as they navigate their everyday worlds. At times these wonderings are part of larger and more complex scenarios that make up children's personal narratives, while at other times, their concentration is focused on a single subject, technique or skill that they seem "determined to practice, modify, and perfect" (Thomson, 1995, p. 8).

¹ Saturday School is the advanced practicum course for pre-service art education students at The Pennsylvania State University. The course, offered every fall and spring semester, invites community children to the Penn State campus to participate in weekly art curricula that are designed and implemented by undergraduate pre-service teachers. In addition to the weekly art classes, pre-service teachers also attend a weekly seminar that provides time for planning and reflection. Three art education graduate students serve alongside Tina, as teaching assistants to the course, helping to support and supervise undergraduate students.

² Thompson's view of voluntary drawing mirrors that of Lark-Horovitz, Lewis and Luca (1973) "in which children themselves determine the content, style, and degree of completion to their work" (Thompson, 2009b). For Thompson, this approach to sketchbooks not only includes freedom of choice, but also regular time dedicated to its practice, as well as the company of other children and interested adults.

For children of Saturday School, sketchbooks were regarded as a “bounded space for personal explorations” (Thompson, 1995, p.7). In the classrooms of Saturday School, children were regarded as artists who used visual imagery to communicate about things that are interesting, puzzling, and meaningful to them. Consequently, the drawings that children produced, as artists, were understood as artworks- subject to the same depth and criteria for interpretation as adult art. Observing, as Barrett (1994) did, that “all art is in part about the world in which it emerged” (p. 12), Tina’s commitment to phenomenological engagement directed attention towards children: how they experience the art classroom and how children’s art making was (is) situated in relation to their wider world and experiences.

Early in her career, Tina’s careful observations suggested that the stage theories presented by the likes of Lowenfeld (1957) and Kellogg (1969) were insufficient to explain the variety of forms, contents, and styles that made up children’s drawings, as well as the acquisitions of children’s drawing skills that were so varied in the classrooms of Saturday School. Theorizing first from Vygotsky (Thompson & Bales, 1991), later from perspectives informed by childhood studies (Thompson, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2009a), and more recently through the work of Deleuze and Guattari (Thompson, 2009b, 2014a, 2014b, 2015b) Tina’s scholarship advances the idea of child as artist by acknowledging the significance of context, the agency of children, the importance of personal and cultural history, and the intentions and circumstances that contribute to children’s making (Thompson, 2015b, p. 554). As artists, young children’s drawing [read: making] reveals the tenacious and interpretative relationship between what children know and what they desire to know. Drawing is a way that children make answers to questions that they themselves find most compelling,

Working with contemporary scholarship in childhood studies, Tina’s work throughout the ‘aughts included postmodern and post-structural thinking that helped to materialize a new image of the child for art education research. Inspired by the work and writings from the municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, and postmodern theories that saw the child as socially constructed (Prout, 2011), Tina’s scholarship further confronted the hold developmental theory had over the child. In the drawing events that made up young children’s sketchbook time, Tina explored peer culture (Thompson, 2005a, 2009a, 2009b), children’s culture (Thompson, 2003, 2005a, 2009b), and power between adults and children (2005a, 2005b, 2009a, 2015) to forward an image that elicited respect for and recognition of the child as a rich, capable theory builder. She advised to be aware of the ways that we “confine children’s attention to subject matter that reflects adult conception of the interests proper to children, rather than opening a space in which the true interests of contemporary children can emerge” (Thompson, 2003, p. 145).

Tina resisted romanticizing children by acknowledging how children are immersed in the world- in all its form, in both positive and negative ways (Thompson, 2015b). In the pages of children's sketchbooks, no topics were off limits. Choice and freedom afforded children opportunities to explore ideas from cultural resources that they found interesting, and it also allowed them to navigate "the developmentally inappropriate circumstances of their life experiences" (Thompson, 2015b, p.558). She acknowledged that ideas of childhood, and their experiences in the world, looked significantly different than that which Lowenfeld encountered when he first set forth theories of child art. She considered the changes in structures and social milieus in which children spend their time, as well as the influence of the expansive field of popular and visual culture (Thompson, 1999, 2003, 2005a, 2009a) to demonstrate the ways that children drawing served as a site for making meaning. Tina's unwavering commitment to children including her confrontation to narrow expectations of developmental theory and her phenomenological orientation towards understanding the lived experiences of children, serve as the foundation for much of my own teaching and research. She encouraged me, through words and actions to take into consideration, as Graue & Walsh (1998) did, that young children are indeed, "experts in their own lives" (in Thompson, 2009, p.27) capable of reflecting upon, and representing their own lives and learning. And she also instilled in me, the importance of children's drawing for young children in early childhood education.

Fast Forward – Drawing in Early Childhood Classrooms

I am now an assistant professor of Teaching and Learning at Old Dominion University. While I still consider myself an art educator, that title has become much more varied in a college of education than it was in the College of Arts and Architecture at The Pennsylvania State University. I am no longer a regular in Saturday School but my research happens in much the same way as my Saturday School experience. For the last three years, I have shared in the process of a school wide transformation from "traditional" preschool practices to those inspired by the philosophies and theories that inform the municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia. I think of myself as a mentor-researcher; as someone who supports the learning of practicing teachers and young children and as someone who documents that process for purposes of research. I am always aware that the two are in a continuous relation to each other.

I am immersed in the rhythms and flows of classroom life. I spend weekly time in four early childhood classrooms, as well as the school atelier, that serve children ages 18 months to 5 years. I document children's learning, alongside the teachers, and we share and discuss our documentation during scheduled staff meetings. In consultation with the director of the school, I lead workshops that are designed to provoke (and shift) thinking about concepts, ideas, and values related to children, learning, and curriculum. And I observe and document,

how those ideas are taken up in teaching practice. The research itself is a phenomenological undertaking as I try to understand the essence of what it means, for the teachers, to adopt a Reggio inspired philosophy for their school.

Children's drawing, features prominently, in work that I document, as part of this research. No doubt that this choice reflects my continued interest in the socialness of children's voluntary drawing activity and the ways that it livens the learning environment. But it also forwards a way to examine how art serves as a social interstice (Bourriaud, 2002), or rather a space that facilitates human interaction. To this end, my work in the preschool has considered how drawing creates lively interactions that make relations possible. I map the ways that this happens throughout the morning. I then look for moments of interruption, when adults and children take pause to consider each other's difference and how they respond to those differences, in action (Arendt, 1958).

The day after the 2015 Virginia primary elections, for example, I arrived in Miss Kathy's classroom in the middle of the morning and during the height of classroom center activity. Miss Kathy teaches the 4 and 5 year old children. Because choice is central to Miss Kathy's approach, every learning center is intentionally designed to promote questions, explorations, and discovery. This means that no choice is a "bad choice" in her classroom, and children interacted freely with different opportunities for learning. Like practices described in *Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB)*, Miss Kathy, and her co-teacher, Miss Angie maintain a structure of space, time, and materials and help the children in ways that foster children's interests and encourages them to persist and dig deeper for meaning (Douglas & Jacquith, 2009). Both spend much of the morning talking with the children, asking and modeling questions that probe for more understanding, and selecting and managing materials that serve to provoke and refine problem solving abilities among the children.

Prior to my arrival that day, the children discussed a thematic change to the dramatic play center. Miss Kathy invited suggestions from the children to identify their interests, and made a list of their interests for everyone to see. As I made my way around the classroom, greeting the children and inquiring about their work, I stopped to say hello to five-year-old Simon. Simon was busy at a beading station, working through some frustrations about the purpose of the activity when we were interrupted by Violet, who was holding a small stack of 4x4 pieces of blank white paper. "You have to vote, Simon," she said, "What do you want? Star Wars, restaurant or pet shop?" Simon looked at her. He furrowed his eyebrows and thought for a moment. "I don't want to vote," he replied. For Violet, this was an interruption. She thought, and then shrugged her shoulders and turned to me. "What do you want to vote for?". "Pet Shop," I replied without much deliberation.

Violet set to work on casting my ballot. Sitting on the floor, she began drawing on one of the squares of paper she carried with her. Visually dividing the paper in half, she began drawing a cat on the right side of the square, then a vertical line down the center, and last, a “check” on the left. She then placed the drawing beneath a series of sorted, identical pictures. She explained to me as she tallied the votes, “These are the votes for Star Wars, these are the votes for restaurant and these are the votes for pet shop.” Miss Angie, who was standing nearby, caught wind of the conversation and asked if Violet could remember who cast which vote, an interruption to her thinking. Violet did not need to think, and she quickly named each of the 14 voters by name, remembering the choices of each of her classmates. Miss Angie paused, as if to consider how fluent Violet’s memory was, and then she smiled and nodded.

Violet made her way back through the classroom, to survey the choices of a few missing votes. Miss Kathy was one of them. Miss Kathy was kneeling beside a small table working with another student. Violet’s request was an interruption. Miss Kathy took a measured pause. She leaned back on her feet, raised her hand to her chin and gave it careful thought. Perhaps informed by the pizza drawing, she asked, “Can it be any kind of restaurant? Or does it have to be a certain kind of restaurant?” Violet responded, “Just a regular restaurant.” Miss Kathy chose restaurant and Violet grabbed a square and marker, and added the last vote to the humble row.

Much like Thompson has explained, when children are given opportunities to explore ideas that they find valuable, in ways that suit their representational strengths, they reveal depths to their thinking that may otherwise go unnoticed. For Violet, and many other children like her, drawing offered a means by which she could not only express herself in valued, valid, and celebrated way, but she also offered other members of the classroom a chance to do the same. Drawing elicited moments of sociability by creating moments of interruption. There were pauses in thought where questions were pursued, ideas deliberated, and concepts extended: difference, in action.

Concluding Thoughts

For Tina, the students who have the good fortune of her expertise, and those who learn from her rich body of work, phenomenology situates learning (and knowing) as an interpretive experience. Rather than accept what is seen from assumptive and taken-for-granted positions, phenomenological orientations in the world request that we sit back, observe, and listen to the stories, sights, and experiences that surround us. It is, however, important to recognize that what we see and listen to are always a partial or fragmented experience of the larger assemblages that make up living and learning in early childhood classrooms.

Children are rich, resourceful narrators, designers, organizers, and communicators. While these capacities of children often come alive in the activities of children's drawing, it is important to remember that they do not happen outside of the relational qualities inherent in learning. Teachers, materials, peers, curriculum, and the broader culture (and cultural artifacts) are all implicated in how children come to use drawing as a mode of living and learning. Drawing brings children and adults together, into shared practices where meaning can be made, negotiated, and re-made by acknowledging the relational.

Perhaps more than any other age in formal schooling, early childhood educators are concerned with a holistic view of the child- one that includes emphasis on the social, emotional, and intellectual life of the child. As the desire for measurement becomes increasingly (and alarmingly) pushed downward into spaces of early childhood education and care, those of us who are invested in its "outcomes" still have much to learn from the field of art education. Tina's commitment to young children, their agency, and their learning fuels insights into the ways that developmental models (and expectations) fail to enliven the many facets of children's lived experiences and how the voluntary activity of children's drawing and artmaking reveal complexities that often remain in the shadows of more formalized approaches to school and curriculum.

Early childhood art education is a field that champions the experimental and the unfamiliar. It extols the powers of the imaginative and the fantastical and like Tina, it forwards a pedagogical approach that acknowledges the many ways and representational resources that children use to construct and communicate meaning in, of, about, and with the world. In doing so, it recognizes the many diverse ways that children express themselves, relate, respond, and become different in the world.

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About the Author

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