

Chapter 2

Drawing in Kindergarten: The Link to Learning in Reading

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ABSTRACT

Teachers today are faced with the ever-growing challenge of meeting the needs of students in diverse school environments. Students continually come to school lacking the academic skills necessary for school success. As a result, many of these students become disengaged in learning at an early age and are targeted as potential drop-outs before they reach middle school. Through the discussion provided in this chapter, the researcher intends to create a connection between the inclusion of drawing in the kindergarten classroom and success in the development of early reading skills, capitalizing on the idea that through the engagement students experience when drawing, they are becoming active participants in the learning process and are more likely to experience school success in later years.

INTRODUCTION

Educators today are faced with ever-growing and ever-changing demands in the classroom. Yet, the desired outcome continues to remain constant – to develop well-rounded, competent, life-long learners who can problem solve and think creatively and who can effectively contribute to the community in which they live. Hartle, Pinciotti, and Gorton (2014) state that, “educators world-wide are challenged to know and practice the pedagogy that can most effectively close the achievement gap and support each child’s development as well as build the foundation for global citizenry, world of work, and leadership as adults (p. 1)”. However, curricular demands often force teachers to adhere to demanding schedules that do not provide much time for creative outlets in learning. How then, do educators effectively encourage creativity within their students while meeting the rigorous standards of learning that curriculum imposes, particularly in a time when the arts may potentially be slowly disappearing from schools? What is the value of art in connection to learning to read in the kindergarten classroom? Was this why Jonathan (pseudonym), a struggling kindergarten student, had been successful? These were questions that came to mind for this researcher during a recent conversation with a graduate student. This chapter seeks to

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explore the answers to those questions and hopes to show that connecting the learning of new reading concepts to student drawings has the potential to increase comprehension among kindergarten students who are in the beginning stages of learning to read. The chapter begins with a brief introduction to the historical background of art in education and is followed by Jonathan's story, the catalyst for this discussion. A review of literature that supports the concepts of integrating art with learning, particularly as it relates to using the reading strategy of visualization and student drawing to promote acquisition of reading skills is necessary in order for the reader to begin to understand the connection art inclusion provided for Jonathan's success. Further, discussion will also focus on integrating art in learning and what it means to be an artful teacher. As a conclusion to the review of literature, other generalized uses of art in the academic realm will be discussed in order to demonstrate that the inclusion of art can lead to greater academic success. The final portions of the chapter will focus on solutions and recommendations and suggestions for further research.

BACKGROUND OF ART IN EDUCATION

Art has long been valued in society for the aesthetic value that it brings. Historically, however, art was considered as only for the elite of society, and was reserved for those who could afford private tutors to provide instruction in the arts. Horace Mann, in the late 1800s, introduced the idea of including music and visual arts in the public schools (Bowen, Greene, & Kisida, 2015; Melnick, Witmer, & Strickland, 2011). This idea was furthered by John Dewey who noted that inclusion of the arts provided a strong and positive link between the arts and the cognitive activities related to learning in the other disciplines and promoted a more holistic approach to education (Kakas, 2010). According to Melnick, et al. (2011), students engaged in the arts display higher levels of academic achievement, across multiple content areas. As a result, realizing the cognitive benefits the arts offer, educators began integrating art into other curriculum areas in the 1990s. Since that time, school systems across the nation have fought to maintain instruction in the arts during times of financial crisis, some more successfully than others.

JONATHAN'S STORY

A recent conversation with a graduate student, concerning the connection between visual learning aids and long term retention of information, presented this researcher with reason to reflect on Jonathan's (pseudonym) story, a student the researcher had encountered in her kindergarten class over a decade ago in her teaching career. His story is one that resonates a need to understand what worked for him in the academic sense and why. Jonathan was a student who benefitted from the use of visual learning aids and in fact, demonstrated greater levels of learning when he created those visual images himself. While there is not quantitative data to share for Jonathan, nor even real research data, the qualitative aspects of his story convey the need to further explore how drawing and reading achievement are connected at the kindergarten level. His story, that occurred not out of a specific research study at the time, but as a result of a teacher simply trying to find "something that would work for him", upon reflection, demonstrates the essence of the body of literature that will be reviewed in the sections following his story.

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