

Drawing in Early Childhood Education and Teacher Mediation

Karla Raquel Lima Pereira, Universidade Federal de São Carlos, Brazil

Aline Sommerhalder, Universidade Federal de São Carlos, Brazil

Fernando Donizete Alves, Universidade Federal de São Carlos, Brazil

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Abstract

Drawing, as a language, is a creative act developed from the child's dialogue with the elements of reality and the people around them. In early childhood education, it is also a representation, as well as being pre-written. The research aimed to discuss teacher mediation in early childhood education during children's interaction when drawing. It was based on theorists such as Iavelberg (2013), Derdyk (2015) and Vygotsky (2000, 2006). The focus group technique was used with seven teachers from an early childhood education school in São Luís do Maranhão/Brazil. The results were analysed from a qualitative point of view and it was found that in the act of drawing, the interaction between the children influences the choice and decision of what to draw, and that they imitate their classmates' images. This event was considered by the teachers to be detrimental to learning. Other results showed teacher intervention in the act of drawing through what they reported as "making a lot of noise," during child interaction, and also the act of holding the child's hand to draw. The reproduction of the children's drawings on the blackboard and the archiving of the productions in envelopes or portfolios as documents to be given to families were other scientific findings. The study concluded that the teachers mediated the interaction between children when they were drawing, but that they stereotyped the children's actions and mechanised their drawings, inhibiting creativity and the exchange of knowledge between the children.

Keywords: children's drawing, teaching practice, early childhood education

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Introduction

In Brazil, Early Childhood Education (E.C.E.) represents the first stage of Basic Education, encompassing children from 0 to 5 years of age, and is mandatory from the age of 4. It is supported by legal documents such as the Federal Constitution (1988) – Article 208 – and the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (Law No. 9.394/1996). There are also two essential documents that guide pedagogical work in early childhood education schools: the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (2010) and the National Common Core Curriculum (2018). These documents propose a curriculum organization based on structural axes such as play and interaction, and they emphasize drawing as one of the child's expressive languages.

However, Spilere and Camargo (2018) argue that teachers often conduct drawing activities in ways that contradict these policy guidelines, treating drawing primarily as a tool for motor training (Derdyk, 2015) rather than as an expressive language. This approach supports a technical educational model, reflected by the prevalence of copying finished models and coloring photocopied worksheets in Early Childhood Education Institutions (ECEIs), which limits children's creative and expressive development.

Copying restricts children from authoring their own creations, resulting in impersonal reproduction, empty meanings and loss of individual expression (Derdyk, 2015; Vecchi, 2017). To promote meaningful engagement, drawing should transition from rote copying to imitation arising from personal experience, supporting internalization and authentic learning (Derdyk, 2015).

In this sense, drawing cannot be conceived as a form of self-expression by the child in itself, free from any social influences, developing spontaneously. As Silva (2002, apud Tshako, 2016) explains, “both drawing and the child are historical products that belong to a certain culture and develop within it; the role of the other in graphic activity and in the psychic life of the human being is fundamental for both to develop” (p. 31).

Therefore, drawing, as an expressive and cultural language, stands in contrast to two perspectives: free drawing and guided drawing. “Free drawing” is often maintained as a pastime in most Brazilian E.C.E. schools, where children draw “whatever they want” spontaneously. Meanwhile, “guided drawing” corresponds to a pre-established, mechanical, and instructional activity (Boriollo, 2022). Both types of drawing, whether free or guided, lack intentional teacher mediation, which compromises the quality of pedagogical work and prevents the development of children's creative, cognitive, and expressive potential.

Based on this context, this article—an excerpt from a master's research project approved by the Ethics Committee under opinion n°. 4.683.194—aims to discuss teacher mediation in early childhood education during children's interactions through drawing, considering the following research question: what are the implications of teaching practices related to drawing for children's learning?

Teacher Mediating Activity: Meaning and Sense in Pedagogical Practice Regarding Children's Drawing

There still remain, in early childhood education schools, many remnants of teaching practices based on a traditional approach (Boriollo, 2022; Tshako, 2016), which disregard drawing as

an expressive and cultural language. These practices often propose models of a distorted and stereotyped reality that do not correspond to the concrete world, thus emptying the possibilities for the child's drawing development due to the impoverishment of their experiences—experiences that are often limited to the use of materials such as graphite pencils, paper, colored pencils, or crayons. In this perspective, the drawing process occurs through mechanical repetition: sitting at a desk, looking at a proposed model, reproducing it in a sketchbook or on paper, and turning it in; if it does not meet the teacher's standards, the child is asked to redo it because they need to “try harder.”

Another approach, often blended with the traditional one, treats drawing as the child's self-expression. In this case, the children are simply given a sheet of paper or a drawing notebook, along with a graphite pencil and/or colored pencils. They are allowed to express themselves freely, without teacher guidance, under the assumption that direction would interfere with creativity. Hence, the question arises: which approach should be used so that the child can learn and develop through drawing?

According to Vygotsky (2000), the child's main educator is the social environment; it is through their own experiences that they educate themselves. The teacher “must be like the rails along which the wagons move freely and independently, receiving from them only the direction of their movement” (p. 154, our translation). In other words, in the educational process, the teacher must both organize spaces that allow the child to experience different textures, colors, and shapes—appropriating human cultural production and expressing themselves through it—and intentionally guide these experiences. This requires knowledge of both the child and the object of orientation—in this case, drawing.

Educational intentionality, from this perspective, is linked to the concept of activity, which aims to satisfy concrete needs and is triggered by motives arising from social interaction (Leontiev, 1960). All human activity is born from the relationship that the subject establishes with the surrounding world: “[...] it is a system included in the system of social relations. [...] it also depends on one's place in society, on the conditions present, and on how it takes shape in unique individual circumstances” (Leontiev, 1978, p. 67).

In other words, teaching work is an activity driven by motives that direct one's actions toward a specific goal, emerging from an objective and concrete condition. Therefore, teaching practice only becomes an activity, in the humanizing sense, when it is motivated; otherwise, it becomes hollow and alienated.

Motives may be broad and long-lasting, persisting in human consciousness, or specific and temporary, fading quickly, or both may coexist (Leontiev, 1960). In education, both must be present and conscious, as they determine the personal sense of carrying out an activity—a sense created from subjective reality (personal experience), which in turn originates from a meaning constructed socially. Each individual interprets the meaning differently, according to their personal sense.

An activity driven by motivation leaves no room for mechanical or repetitive teaching practices, since it is composed of conscious actions directed toward a defined goal. These actions consist of operations (modes of execution, technical stages); however, if an action lacks motivation, it does not become an activity (Leontiev, 2017).

In this context, the motive behind teaching work related to drawing lies in enabling children to appropriate the teaching of drawing itself, since through this appropriation, they can develop and acquire new learning. Because of this motive, the teacher will perform actions with well-defined stages (operations) to achieve the desired goal, which depends on the given conditions (physical environment, materials, time frame, social interactions, among others).

However, teaching activity must also generate motives in the child—to prompt them to act upon what was intentionally planned, giving meaning and sense to the experience. Drawing only becomes an activity for the child if they are motivated and find personal meaning in it—if they leave traces of their own impressions (personal sense) of what was offered to them (meaning) in their composition.

When drawing, the child “reflects their attitude toward the object itself” (Mukhina, 1995, p. 173), and this attitude depends on surrounding elements, which may be external (through tools) or internal (psychic, through signs). These elements constitute the mediating activity.

For a teacher to carry out mediating activities that influence children’s behavior and enhance their development, they must understand the laws governing such development and the interests characteristic of each stage of childhood. Since achieving the goals of pedagogical practice depends on this understanding. Through teacher mediation, children can reach more advanced forms of drawing by using learned techniques that enrich their expression—a poetics guided by the child as the artist (Iavelberg, 2013).

The path of graphic development thus follows what Vygotsky (2000) called the general law of child development: “[...] the child, throughout their development, begins to apply to themselves the same forms of behavior that others initially applied to them. The child assimilates the social forms of conduct and transfers them inwardly” (p. 146).

In other words, the elements of drawing arise from the child’s appropriation of their interactions with peers and from teacher mediation, which—through questioning and other necessary interventions—expands the possibilities of artistic production.

To foster this development of drawing—and consequently, the child’s overall development—it is essential to consider their actual developmental level (the set of experiences and knowledge already built, what they can and cannot yet do) in order to act within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). Through the ZPD, the child, in a mediating relationship with the social and natural environment, can develop what they have not yet mastered, based on imitation, since “through imitation, the child [...] can perform intellectually much more than they can in their independent activity” [translated by the authors] (Vygotsky, 2006, p. 268). The ZPD directly influences children’s learning through interaction with their social environment and peers, reflecting the inherently social nature of human learning.

Thus, the child appropriates drawing as a language through word-mediated communication and interaction with peers. Children learn to draw through questioning and inquiry, by accessing human cultural knowledge, engaging in challenging and stimulating experiences, and interacting with classmates. In these mediating elements, they find ways to formulate hypotheses and build an understanding of their surroundings, correlating the meanings they acquire with their personal senses.

These learning possibilities help ensure that, during critical moments of qualitative changes and disruptions in psychic development, the child can navigate them naturally rather than through crises, which, according to Leontiev (2017), are “proof that a critical moment or change did not occur in due time. Crises will not occur if the child’s psychic development does not take shape spontaneously but rather as a rationally controlled process—a controlled creation” (p. 67).

In this sense, to prevent automatism and conformism in pedagogical practices, there is a need for intentional, systematic, and guided teaching activity. By understanding the development of the child and their drawing, the teacher is driven by broad and general motives, together with specific and narrower ones, to carry out conscious actions with well-defined operations aimed at promoting a learning process. The child learns by following their natural developmental path.

Methodology

This investigation adopts a qualitative research approach, as it deals with “[...] the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values, and attitudes” (Minayo, 2009, p. 121), making it impossible to quantify reality. The study was conducted in September 2023 at a preschool located in São Luís, in the state of Maranhão, northeastern Brazil. The school operates in two shifts: morning—Daycare I (2 years old), Daycare II (3 years old), Pre-I (4 years old), and Pre-II (5 years old)—and afternoon—Daycare II (3 years old), Pre-I A (4 years old), Pre-I B (4 years old), and Pre-II (5 years old).

We used the focus group technique with the teachers working in the aforementioned classes, and seven in-locus visits were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the context and, subsequently, of the participants’ statements. For data analysis, we employed content analysis based on the following stages, according to Bardin (2016): pre-analysis, material exploration, and treatment of results, inferences, and interpretation.

Children’s drawing, as a form of language, develops through interaction with others. Through social interaction, the child develops both their drawing and themselves. From this perspective, the results found encompass teacher mediation in the child–child interactive process during drawing and in reproduction practices. To illustrate this, we first highlight some teachers’ statements about how children interact with one another while drawing:

PAOLA: Even when they look at a friend’s drawing, some say, ‘Oh, teacher, I can’t draw it; I want to do it better’, as if it were a competition between them.

LOUISE: [...] those [children] who haven’t developed much creativity and imagination yet copy or reproduce other children’s drawings. For example, yesterday they had to draw professions, and one said, ‘Oh, you drew a firefighter’, and another said, ‘I’ll draw a firefighter too’. [...] I noticed that some drawings end up looking similar, following the same lines, while others are more different. So, they exchange ideas, swap materials—‘Oh, I want your pen’, ‘Oh, I’m going to draw this too’. They always interact this way in all the drawing activities. [...] and some ask, ‘Hey, draw for me; you draw better’.

FRIDA: This process of interaction among them [the children], we let it happen, because, ‘Oh, I like your drawing, I want to do it too’ [the teacher gestures drawing]. [...] I think this interaction between them makes drawing easier, for example, because

since we are adults, maybe our lines are harder for them to copy. [...] I believe that when they interact, it stimulates them even more, and then they go [gestures drawing].

Teachers Paola, Louise, and Frida bring to the discussion the idea that children often want to draw the same thing their peers are producing. This behavior aligns with what neuroscience studies refer to as mirror neurons—brain cells activated by the observation of manual and communicative actions (verbal or nonverbal), which are associated with the process of learning through imitation and the perception of human intentions (Lameira et al., 2006).

When a child observes another drawing, the same brain regions are activated as in the one doing the drawing, leading the observer to tend toward the same action. Mirror neurons create a natural contagion among children, fostering, according to Iavelberg (2013), “learning because the child perceives differences between their solutions and those of their peers and finds ways to improve their own drawings by observing, conversing, asking for help, or listening to comments about the drawings being made” (pp. 41–42).

Through others, children develop strategies for their own graphic production, learning procedures that better suit their way of drawing. As in the example given by teacher Louise, the two children’s drawings of a firefighter share socially shaped graphic decisions, yet each child expressed their uniqueness, leaving traces of authorship. Therefore, “the immediate origin of the development of a child’s individual, internal properties of personality is collaboration with other people” (Vygotsky, 2006, p. 270).

We also note in teacher Paola’s remarks the presence of competition among children when drawing. Drawing activities should not become moments marked by competitive or individualistic relations where “my drawing is better” or “prettier than yours”, which fosters insecurity and fear expressed in phrases such as “I don’t know how to draw” or “Draw it for me, you draw better” (as mentioned by teacher Louise).

Competition rushes the time each child needs to connect with what they want to draw, provoking rivalry and a demand for “perfection” and immediacy—traits typical of capitalist and consumerist societies. Moreover, it hinders the development of aesthetic sensitivity toward one’s surroundings, which requires care, empathy, attention, concentration, intensity, and listening. It is essential that children learn to cooperate with one another—if one child is struggling to draw (as described in the excerpts), another can help. In this way, the individual achievement of learning to draw is shared among all.

However, as seen in the statements from teachers Maria and Agatha below, this cooperation can sometimes be interpreted as “doing it for the other”, which can be detrimental to children’s learning:

MARIA: Sometimes one wants to draw for the other—‘Oh, he can’t do it, I’ll do it for him’. [...] Copying is still okay, but doing it for a friend is not.

AGATHA: We don’t allow them to do it for someone else.

What defines whether peer interactions are beneficial or harmful is the educational environment, organized and guided by the teacher. If the environment is marked by hierarchical, competitive, and authoritarian relationships, doing something “for” the other becomes highly detrimental to the child’s creative process through drawing. However, if it is an environment

of connection and dialogue, with reciprocal listening (the teacher learns to speak with the child by listening; the child listens because they feel heard), then doing something for a peer becomes a learning opportunity that does not undermine the child's authorship. On the contrary, it encourages them to further develop this expressive and social language.

From this perspective, let us analyze the statements of teachers Frida and Luana below regarding mediation during children's interactions while drawing:

FRIDA: We don't interfere. If you notice, the teaching method at our school is quite similar among all teachers. What we do in our planning meetings is precisely to find something positive— 'Oh, that worked there; let's try it here'. If you notice, the answers are almost the same. [...] Sometimes we do intervene by holding their hand to guide their line.

LUANA: I don't interfere. Only when it gets noisy do we pause a bit. But I let them talk—at least I do. Especially downstairs, my Pre-II class is very large; if I let everyone talk at once, I can't handle it. But sometimes I say, 'Okay, you can talk'.

We observe uniformity in their responses regarding non-interference during peer interaction while drawing, as, according to teacher Frida, this is part of the school's teaching method. However, she reveals a practice where teachers hold children's hands to help them draw. When a child's hand is guided in this way, they are deprived of exploring their own movements. The development of their drawing becomes rushed, controlled, and devoid of original traces, as it results from automatic, passive, and unconscious action—the child's hand follows the teacher's thought.

Such practice underestimates the child's capacity to appropriate graphic elements through imitation. According to Vygotsky (2006), imitation involves "everything that a child is not yet able to do independently, but can learn through the guidance or collaboration of an adult [or other children], or with the help of guiding questions" (p. 268, emphasis added). In this sense, collaboration has an interactive dimension in which the child develops their drawing through contact with various visual, tactile, and other experiences, with peers' drawings and teacher guidance (questioning, intentional problematization). Thus, the child learns to draw by imitating what surrounds them, actively engaging in the educational process through doing, experimenting, and exploring.

Another point of note is teacher Luana's comment that she only interferes when there is "noise" associated with children's "shouting". She details her practice further in the following excerpt, describing a drawing activity:

LUANA: I often do pair work. For example, last week, I joined two chairs together and said, 'Today's activity is in pairs. Take your books; the task is to draw your partner's house. One describes their house, and the other draws it, then you switch'. Then, 'Teacher, are we doing it together?' 'Yes, you'll form pairs'. They loved the activity because they could talk, right? So, they did it—I didn't interfere, only when there was too much shouting. 'No, no, let's tone it down, or I'll separate you'. But it went well. I let them... they spend a lot of time together.

A healthy environment with children is inevitably full of energetic, curious, and talkative interactions; hence, the importance of organizing it with appropriate, systematic guidance.

Boundaries are not overstepped when there are consistent and regular teaching practices that foster social coexistence, mutual respect, and listening. Vygotsky (2000) also emphasizes the need to educate children aesthetically so that this surge of inner energy can be directed toward something socially valuable, finding in drawing a creative outlet.

However, in the researched setting, the educational environment is predominantly characterized by pedagogical practices in which children reproduce drawings made by teachers on the board—contradicting an aesthetic education that fosters creativity and imagination through drawing. Some excerpts illustrate this:

PAOLA: When it's a guided drawing, I like to draw on the board so they can see—'Teacher, I can't', 'Let's try,' 'so I draw it and they look.'

FRANCISCA: In the toddlers' class [Daycare I], the English teacher always draws on the board. With the image, [...] they [the children] can identify 'it's a doll' and 'it's a house'. They don't draw much yet, but they recognize drawings. [...] Since mine are younger, they don't have full drawing skills yet. [...] They're just starting to hold pencils now. They're better with collage activities.

LIZ: I use the board a lot; I draw there [...] I think that from one drawing, they [the children] can make others—for example, a tree here, some paint there. [...] Often, some can't really draw like the board, but they say, 'I did it, teacher'. They take a bit of that image—almost the same—but it's from the board, and for them, that's it.

FRIDA: In my class, they [the children] are younger—Daycare II—and they're still in the process, so they can't reproduce what you draw on the board yet. They can't because many just started school this year. So, what we use are pre-made drawings for them to color, because at this stage, it's easier for their development. [...] This week we tried—I drew a tree and asked them to reproduce it on a blank sheet—they couldn't, but it was a stimulus, an attempt.

LOUISE: Some things they [the children] don't know how to draw, so we draw on the board. If it's a book activity and they don't know how, we draw for them to reproduce. I also work with symmetry activities to complete drawings because I think it stimulates their imagination. For example, they don't know how to draw a body or a butterfly, a cow, but if I give them a half-drawing to complete, I think it helps them imagine how to draw it. So, I put the model on top for them to reproduce.

AGATHA: Depending on the class, since I also work with Frida's group, I either draw or show it—sometimes I bring ready-made activities for them [the children] to reproduce. In Louise's class, I draw, and they reproduce it.

From these accounts, we see that children reproduce drawings created by teachers, and when they cannot—as in the case of the younger groups (Daycare I and II)—drawing is limited to pre-made, ready-to-color activities. This reproduction—the well-known “copying from the board”—mechanizes thinking. Children are not given creative challenges that could expand their graphic repertoire or advance their drawing development. By being conditioned to reproduce, their traces become alienated, stagnant, and stereotyped.

Conclusion

The research addressed a relevant topic in the field of early childhood education by discussing an object such as children's drawings—something so present in the school routine, yet often undervalued as a language that enhances children's learning. The results showed that teachers believe that interaction among children stimulates the drawing process; however, it is only well accepted when there is no noise among the children or when one does not “draw for the other”. The findings also revealed the presence of competition for the “best drawing”, which may foster perfectionism.

Moreover, the study identified teacher interference in children's drawing, such as holding the child's hand and/or completing a trace, resulting in controlled production and loss of authorship. Teachers also draw on the board for children to reproduce on paper or in their notebooks. Such practices contribute to children's drawings becoming stereotyped, since the images taken from the board, for instance, are filled with the teachers' own experiential stereotypes. Likewise, by presenting a ready-made and finished image, teachers limit children's creativity and imagination—there is no movement on the part of the child to explore the object and make the necessary connections for its materialization through graphic expression.

Therefore, this study argues for the importance of educating teachers capable of organizing and mediating an educational environment that fosters learning—one that values aesthetics as care, attention, beauty, listening, connection, and the propagation of knowledge. This stands in contrast to a capitalist system that imprisons, controls, hastens, individualizes, silences, and marginalizes people—distinguishing between so-called “precious stones”, who are valued and refined, and the “gravel”, whose potential is underestimated. All children have the right to experience their languages, such as drawing, by nurturing them, and, to that end, must have access to human creations and to a school environment where they can develop fully.

In light of this, we hope this research provokes reflection and curiosity about drawing as a language, unveiling its potential for children's learning in early education. It also fosters discussions that contribute to recognizing the child as a bearer of multiple languages through which they interact, appropriate, think, feel, create, and leave marks—breaking away from the dichotomous view still deeply rooted in the educational context.

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Contact emails: karlaraquellp@hotmail.com
 fdalves@ufscar.br
 sommeraline1@gmail.com