

Drawing,
meaning-making
and construction of identity

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Background

In the Maltese context, drawing is typically considered as:

- a time-filler or busy work
 - to represent objects, people, places and events in an accurate and realistic way as instructed by the teacher
 - filling-in of a template that represents the current theme
 - a way to learn and/or revise number and language concepts
 - a standardised craft rather than a creative or expressive activity ... that leads to conformity and the attainment of specific learning outcomes
- (Deguara, 2009)

Background

Inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach (Malaguzzi, 1998) and the notion of the hundred languages

- young children communicate through different modes
- drawing is one of the first modes young children use to make and communicate meaning
- give a voice to children
- learn to listen to children

Aim of the study

To analyse how a four-year old child used drawing
to communicate his constructs of identity

Social semiotics

theoretical framework

- Semiotics is the way we use different modes to communicate meaning
- “No sign or message exists in just one single mode” (Kress, 1997, p. 12); signs are always in multimodal synthesis
- Social semiotics is the study of signs (Chandler, 2007, p.1)
- A sign is “anything that communicates meaning” (Wright, 2011, p.159)

Social semiotics

theoretical framework

- Signs are always newly made in social interaction
- People are considered as active agents in shaping, creating and exploring meanings in specific contexts, societies, cultures and situated moments in time (Kress, 2010; 1997)

Positionality

- A children's rights perspective: children as “active participants” (Alderson, 2005, p. 30), reliable “informants” (Morrow, 2005, p. 151) and agents of their own learning
- A socio-cultural stance: the interaction between children, the context and culture in which they live, are considered as “mediating tools for children to create meaning within and across cultures” (Wright, 2010, p. 26)

Relationship to previous research

Drawing is:

- a sign to be interpreted (Kress, 1997)
- a “method of meaning-making” (Van Oers, 1997, p. 238)
- a “multisemiotic” (O’Halloran, 2009, p. 98) activity
- “a meaning-making process in which children draw signs to express their understanding and ideas in a visual- graphic form” (Hopperstad, 2008, pg 134)

Relationship to previous research

Children's drawings act as symbolic spaces (Hall, 2010, 2008; Ahn and Filipenko, 2007), which allow for a process of "authoring the self" (Edmiston, 2008, p. 81).

My definition of drawing

- 2-dimensional images, graphics or mark-makings young children create on paper through the use of any medium, material and resource (excluding paint) they find at hand and deem as appropriate to represent an object of their interest, and to help them communicate their understandings
- the children's ordinary drawings, which they do out of their free will or as encouraged by adults

Methods and methodology

The participant

Norman:

- 3 years, 11 months old
- only child
- fluent speaker of English
- Parents: very outspoken and assertive; bombastic;
- likes computers
- does not particularly like drawing
- Teacher: a shy, introvert, timid and withdrawn child;
- very diligent in obeying rules and instructions;
- tends to follow others

Methods and methodology

Methods

Method	Tool	Details
Observation	Video-recorded	School: 7 drawings 10 ½ hours (5 visits) (including a preliminary visit)
		Home: 15 drawings 9 hours (5 visits)
Field-notes	Written notes	
Drawings	Scanned /photos	
During and post drawing conversations / narratives with children	Video-recorded	
Conversations with adults	Video-recorded	
Research Diary	Typed notes	

Methods and methodology

Ethical consent

- permission was sought from the school and the teacher
- consent was obtained from parents
- provisional and continuous informed assent was obtained from the child who wanted to be acknowledged for his participation

Main findings and discussion

Drawing as a constructor of identity:

1. Myself in the present
2. Myself in the past
3. Myself in the future
4. My wishes, my interests, my likes
5. My fear

Main findings and discussion

The drawings helped Norman to construct and communicate his identity to others:

- A well-loved, only child
- Small and dependent
- Wishes to go on roller coasters
- Is interested in signs
- Likes Fireman Sam
- Would like to grow up fast and be like daddy
- Is afraid of seaweed
- Lifestyle: Family goes on holidays abroad and to water parks

Implications for practice

Drawing is a semiotic tool that:

- reflects the children's unique meaning-making processes
- abets children in the construction of their identity
- allows children to learn about their interests, aptitudes and individualities; crucial information that facilitates the development of relationships and the learning process
- facilitates listening to children and understanding their individualities
- helps the teacher with getting to know the child and his / her interests better better

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