

Not just a recreational activity: giving artmaking the place it deserves in early childhood classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Visual arts are languages young children use to communicate their experience and knowledge, express thoughts and feelings and interpret the world that surrounds them. As a spontaneous and uncoded language, artmaking has many advantages over verbal language. Among others, it offers vital opportunities to young learners to effectively construct meaning and concepts, appropriate new knowledge and improve their communicative and linguistic abilities. Acknowledging that visual languages feature prominently in the computer age that young learners grow up, this article considers artmaking as something more than a recreational activity and discusses how it can be used as tool for learning and teaching in early childhood. Being informed by the socio-cultural approaches, the authors analyse cases from practice and argue how it can be integrated in different areas of the curriculum, while they suggest ways to make it integral part of the classroom culture.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education, artmaking, visual languages, communication, documentation

RÉSUMÉ

Les arts visuels sont des langages que des petits enfants emploient pour communiquer leurs expériences et connaissances, exprimer de pensées et de sentiments et interpréter le monde qui les entoure. Comme un langage spontané et non codé, l'art visuel a beaucoup d'avantages par rapport au langage verbal. Parmi d'autres, il offre des possibilités essentielles aux jeunes apprenants pour efficacement construire de sens et des concepts, s'approprier des nouvelles connaissances et améliorer leurs capacités communicatives et linguistiques. En reconnaissant que les langages visuels figurent bien en évidence dans l'ère de l'informatique que les jeunes apprenants grandissent, cet article considère l'œuvre d'art des enfants comme quelque chose plus qu'une activité de loisirs et discute comment elle peut être utilisé comme un outil pour apprendre et enseigner dans l'éducation préscolaire. Étant informé par les approches socioculturelles, les auteurs analysent des cas tirés de la pratique et examinent des façons que l'art visuel peut être intégré dans les différents domaines du programme, tandis qu'ils suggèrent des modes de le faire partie intégrante de la culture de la classe préscolaire.

MOTS-CLÉS

Éducation préscolaire, oeuvre d'art, langages visuels, communication, documentation

INTRODUCTION

For over forty years Reggio Emilia educators emphasize the importance of encouraging children to express and communicate their understanding through a variety of symbolic languages – a process that Malaguzzi aptly captured in the term “the hundred languages of children” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). As their work shows, the systematic use of materials such as clay, or natural and recycled materials and the encouragement of experiences such as drawing, painting, dramatic play, writing, sculpture, music and dance, develops children's representational and communicative skills, improves their linguistic abilities and promotes their mental and social development.

What, so far, has been encouraged as a practice to help children understand their experiences and express their thinking and emotions assumes a new role in the computer age. With the spread of Information and Communication Technology (I.C.T), communication has become a multimodal activity and individuals, more often than not, need to combine multiple symbol systems (or else languages) in order to construct a meaning and communicate with others (Yelland, Lee, O' Rourke & Harrisson, 2008). This means that the children of today – the citizens of tomorrow – should know how to manage, analyse, evaluate and communicate information and knowledge, using a variety of symbolic systems: Written, verbal, visual, audible, kinaesthetic (Kress, 1997).

The most common, and children's favourite, way of talking about their world is visual art, which in early years is expressed through drawing, painting and three-dimensional art. As Sakr, Conelly and Wild (2016, p. 5) explain, quoting Malin (2013), visual arts enable children to experiment with materials, explore the imagination, tell complex stories, enjoy aesthetic and physical pleasures, and relate to others. Children, through their visual texts, represent and uncover knowledge, experience, actions and emotions while they can reflect on them. More importantly however, they use artwork to communicate their thoughts and to shape their understanding about the world that surrounds them (e.g. Kress, 1997; Papandreou, 2014). As Brooks (2009) argues, artmaking seems to function in the way Vygotsky (1962) described with respect to language. She explains that, when visual art is acknowledged as a language (that is, a communication and thinking tool) it becomes a mediating system for knowledge construction.

As culturally determined meaning-making systems, visual arts are highly contextualized activities. They are associated with the values of a social group and are influenced by the habits and the attitude people have toward these activities. Therefore, children's artmaking is strongly affected by parents' and teachers' beliefs and practices, who, unfortunately not rarely, view and employ it as a recreational or/and unmediated self-expressive activity (Anning & Ring, 2004). The more artmaking is encouraged by adults, siblings and peers, and valued as a meaning-making tool, the more it is used by children. This is the starting point of the arguments and the suggestions presented here.

Within a sociocultural framework that underpin our pedagogical approach, this article focus on purposes that artmaking can fulfil in early childhood education when it is considered as a visual language. In the first part, we discuss the importance of capitalizing on children's interest in artmaking as a way to integrate visual art in different areas of the curriculum and use it as a mediating device of knowledge construction. In the second part, we offer practical suggestions on how teachers can support young children's inclination to use and communicate through visual languages. The examples, we present and analyse in the following sections, come from cases that have been kindly provided by teachers collaborating with the authors on artmaking projects.

HOW ARTMAKING SUPPORTS THE LEARNING OF YOUNG CHILDREN

Katerina, a kindergarten teacher, is using a picture book ('The Wolves' Lunch', by Geoffroy de Pennart, Kaléidoskope, 1998) to involve children in problem-solving through drawing activity. According to the story, a wolf captures a pig, intending to have him for dinner when his family comes over. However, after few days, the two animals become friends and the wolf can't bring himself to eat his new friend. Katerina pauses the story at the point where the wolf's family is coming and asks children to draw how Maurice, the pig, could save itself from being eaten. The following is an excerpt from the conversation that developed among five children while drawing.

Mimis: What are you doing?

Abraham: A map... here is the door... for the pig to run away and save himself from the wolves.

Konstantina: I thought of a way... but I'm not telling!

Christos: Is this a hot air balloon? (*pointing at a circular shape on Konstantina's paper*)

Konstantina: No... it's a head, don't you see?

Christos: Is this the little pig? (*pointing at another shape*)

Konstantina: Yes!

Christos: You see, I found it! It was the little pig!

Anastasia: I want a bit of black (colour) to draw the wolf!

Konstantina: And I need brown so the pig can blow smoke out of its nose. The pig is really angry! (*Konstantina frowned as she was drawing some dots around the pig's nose*)

Anastasia: But the pig is scared!

Christos: I don't know how to do the wolf. I can't make its mouth.

Abraham: I need to do its body as well (*he refers to the little pig*), its beautiful hands... its legs... and now I will make one leg up to show that it is running.

Mimis: And the other one down (*adds, gazing at Abraham's drawing*)

Abraham: Yes, two legs down and one leg up. And I will do the wolf, like that... here (*shows with his hand on the paper*).

Mimis: I will make the wolf running... How do I do/draw the wolf?

Anastasia: I made a little dog and I put a very big mouth.

Konstantina: Do legs and two eyes.

Abraham: It has to be black! And very big!

Artmaking, communication and multi-literacy

Interactions and dialogues of this kind are very common in early childhood settings. Young children's innate disposition toward communication as well as the way they interact, on the occasion of and through their visual texts, are clearly evident in the above dialogue. As we listen to their conversation, we realize that their drawings are influenced by their interaction. In this excerpt, children 'inform' their peers about their intentions (e.g. "*I want a bit of black [colour] to draw the wolf!*"), "*...and I need brown so the pig can have smoke coming out of its nose*"), explain the meaning of their graphic signs (e.g. "*I made a little dog and I put a very big mouth*"), "*here is the door...for the pig to run away and save itself from the wolves*"), ask for help (e.g. "*How do I do/draw the wolf?*"), or give advice (e.g. "*Do legs and two eyes*", "*It has to be black!*"). Other times, children make collaborative decisions on what to construct or how to draw something, 'borrow' ideas from each other or copy their peers' signs, examine jointly their meanings, try to improve them and generate new ones

(Hopperstad, 2008). As they co-construct their visual texts and respective meaning(s) children gradually comprehend that their signs function as a communication means (Papandreou, 2014). They also broaden their views on the activity itself and the potential it holds (Thompson, 2002).

As new approaches to early literacy are developing, it is acknowledged that meaning-making is always a multimodal process, which suggests that young learners, in order to be literate in today's world, need multiple opportunities to construct meaning in various modes (Narey, 2009). Within this context, unlike the traditional views of artmaking (i.e. as a recreational or self-expressive activity), contemporary early childhood curricula recognize visual languages as essential modes of communication, while define literacy, more broadly, to include multiple forms of communication, both linguistic and non-linguistic: Drawing and painting, talking, gesture, body movement, writing, music, drama (e.g., Yelland et al., 2008; Binder & Kotsopoulos, 2011). More importantly however, everyday practice in kindergartens confirms that, during artmaking, children often construct impulsively multimodal texts and share meanings by interweaving various languages, as Konstantina (Figure 1), one of the children engaged in the drawing activity described above, has done. During her artwork apart from drawing, she used facial expressions (frowned as she was trying to represent the pig's anger), writing and graphic conventions (drew two thought bubbles, which depict the pig's and the wolf's plans in order to escape and then drew two speech bubbles with three A's, standing for "AHA" and intending to illustrate the two friends' satisfaction) and speech (explained to her peers her graphic signs).

FIGURE 1



Konstantina: I did the little pig with the wolf seating there and thinking. They are thinking how to run away from the house so they don't get eaten by the other wolves

Teacher: So, how can they save themselves from the wolf's family?

Konstantina: They thought of making lots of strawberry cookies for the wolves to eat. And the pig can leave. And here, the little pig says «aha» (pointing at her drawing).

Teacher: Hmm, what does [the little pig] mean here? And the wolf... he says something here... as I see...

Konstantina: Yes, the little pig is happy with the wolf's idea, and that's why it says «aha»! Yes... and the wolf says «aha» [too]

Teacher: And what are those circles that you drew above the animals?

Konstantina: They are thinking. The wolf will make strawberry cookies and the other wolves will like them and the little pig had an idea. It should run away.

Teacher: In your drawing, where are the little pig and the wolf?

Konstantina: It's the Wolf's house. This is a flower, it smells... and this is the wolf's closet. And this is the rag (pointing successively at the drawn items).

Konstantina's graphic solution and her description

Artmaking in early mathematics and science

Considering learning as a meaning-making process, the role and value of art-based learning is also acknowledged by early mathematics and science curricula. As Shulsky and Kirkwood (2015) explain “the link between art and more academic subjects provides a powerful partnership that enriches learning. Such integrated experiences allow young learners to

connect learning across the curriculum, building their capacity to make critical connections within their world” (p. 362).

Acknowledging that children know more than they say and often cannot figure out their unspoken knowledge, research in mathematics suggests drawing as an effective strategy for eliciting children’s mathematical thinking and therefore as a valuable tool for planning teaching and learning (MacDonald & Lowrie, 2011). According to this perspective, educators can use the languages embedded in visual arts to encourage children to express and share their understandings.

Art-based math activities can enrich children’s experience when they explore various mathematical ideas such as the rules of patterns or the features of geometric shapes and lines. Artmaking can also be used as a tool for problem solving and help children enhance their reasoning and advance their creative thinking. For example, by creating images and signs, and organizing them in the graphic space, children represent problem data and conceive their own strategies for problem solving (e.g. Papandreou, 2009; Brizuela, & Gravel, 2013). To extend the learning experience and develop children’s mathematical reasoning, later on, teachers can orchestrate group discussions and encourage children to share their graphic solutions.

Similarly, research in science education demonstrates that visual languages enable children to process concepts and phenomena from the natural world and get involved in scientific thinking. The impact of art activities on science learning has been demonstrated mainly in classes where the teacher implements the inquiry-based learning approach. During classroom inquiries, children may draw to display previous or new understandings (Papandreou & Terzi, 2011; Chachlioutaki, Pantidos & Kampeza, 2016; Georgantopoulou, Fragkiadaki & Ravanis, 2016), draw to record their impressions and data collected during a field experience (Chang, 2012), create science journals and storyboards (see Figure 2) or build three-dimensional constructions to explore new learning. Gradually, as they gather more information from other sources like books or the internet they reconstruct their previous immature artwork. Through their successive visual representations, children can revisit their knowledge in order to observe aspects of it, as well as stay focused and engaged in what they do (Ehrlén, 2009). As they re-examine their previous visual texts, and share their ideas and experiences with their peers and teacher, they recall prior learning constructed during a specific inquiry and thus they may become aware of how their thinking changes (Brooks, 2009; Chang, 2012).

FIGURE 2



Dimitris, (four years old), after a class-inquiry into the interior of the human body, decided to ‘write’ a book in order to show his knowledge of human bones. After finishing his work, he gave (his book) the title: “Come with us to learn how our bones are”. The drawing presented here is one of the six pages of the ‘book’ and represents “how the human body moves”.

To illustrate the movement of the body, Dimitris is using human figures and arrows and later on, he complements his visual narrative with oral explanations and gestures so as to communicate the meaning of the arrows in each figure (i.e. moving his hands up and down in order to explain the way our body moves). According to his explanation, in the two upper figures, body movement “begins from our brain (figure in the top-left corner), it gives the signal ... and our body moves”.

In the lower two figures, he uses a number of arrows, pointing towards different directions, to indicate ‘some of our body movements’.

“Come with us to learn how our bones are”

In sum, the mental and communicative processes that occur while drawing, painting or sculpturing help children organize their experiences, bring past and new knowledge more clearly into consciousness and eventually transform and/or extend their understanding on the topic under study (Brooks, 2009). Dimitris' self-initiated drawing (which is part of a self-created storyboard) shown and explained in Figure 2, is a good example of the potential of art activities in science explorations.

FOSTERING ARTMAKING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

In this section, we suggest strategies that teachers could implement in order to enhance their students' artmaking, integrate visual languages in the curriculum and promote learning.

Creating an inspirational learning environment that encourages artmaking

Time, space and resources are key aspects of a supportive learning environment and play a pivotal role in promoting visual art activities. Children need opportunities to engage in experimentations and explore what materials do and how they move and change as they act on them. As they discover new uses and combinations of materials and objects and generate creative solutions, they also construct meaning and become aware not only of the ample potentials of the materials but also of their own meaning-making abilities. More importantly, if teachers provide opportunities for children to experience artmaking with various materials across the different curricula areas, they open up new pathways for thinking and doing, and allow young learners to acknowledge visual languages as tools for exploration and learning. The following five strategies are critical for building an environment that inspires children and encourages their involvement in meaning-making through artmaking.

- Nurture children's interests by providing various stimuli in both indoor and outdoor school settings.
- Allow free access to well-organized materials and tools.
- Encourage children to use them flexibly (i.e. combining materials, and moving them from one learning centre to another).
- Allow time for children to explore the potential of art resources and let them draw, paint, sculpture or craft at their own pace.
- Organize and reserve areas where children can display their creations or store unfinished artwork so as to be able to carry on later.

In such a stimulating environment few children will resist an opportunity to be involved in artmaking. However, we should keep in mind that some children might need emotional support in this area (e.g. they might lack the confidence to experiment with materials or engage in artmaking).

Almost in every classroom there are children who find drawing a challenging task. However, the same children may love painting with brushes or making clay creations. Apart of responding to children's interests and letting them to choose the art tools that suit their purpose and preference, teachers should also scaffold their endeavours and/or reluctance to try new things in a variety of ways. For example, scaffolding children's limited fine motor skills or self-confidence could mean to break a complex art activity into short, manageable parts, provide them with alternative art media or suggest that classmates help each other. To encourage children express themselves, they should feel that their artmaking efforts are valued and the results are treated with respect. Teachers can convey this message by showing a genuine interest in children's achievements (Thompson, 2002; Matthews, 2003). Such opportunities arise mostly in dialogic learning environments that promote talking about

children's artwork in a constructive, respectful and reflective way and in doing so foster their confidence in visual languages.

Allowing children to discuss through and about their artwork.

Thompson (2002, p. 137) points out that "other children may be favoured audiences for children's work because they may be the people who are most willing, and most able, to provide the immediate and reliable responses that children need, to extend themselves as critics". From this point of view, she advocates children's engagement in artmaking "within a community where their expressions are measured against the responses of their peers", and where their symbols are collectively evaluated and transformed in order to encounter their needs. And as Madsen (2013, p. 161) puts it, once drawing and inquiring about each other's images is learned and mastered as a tool, it becomes "part of the pupils' shared repertoire".

In the sustained dialogue, presented in the outset of this article, we can see how their interaction helped children to co-construct their visual texts, either by describing specific details of their images ("*this is the door that the little pig can use to save itself from the wolves*") or by 'announcing' what they will do next ("*I must do the body, its beautiful hands and its legs and now I will do [draw] one leg standing up to show that it is running...*"). It's also noteworthy that after listening to their classmates' descriptions, Christos and Mimis shared what was challenging for them (Christos: "*I don't know how to draw the wolf. I can't draw its mouth*", Mimis: "*I will draw the wolf running... How do I draw the wolf running?*"). Their questions prompted three of their classmates to give their 'advice', revealing, in the process, their own representations of the wolf:

Anastasia: I did a little dog and I put a very big mouth.

Konstantina: Do legs and two eyes!

Abraham: It must be black! And very big!

By encouraging whole-class, small group or one-to-one conversations after artmaking, teachers can draw children's attention to the different ways in which individuals attribute meaning to objects, situations and thoughts (e.g. the wolf is like a "dog" but has "a big mouth", he has "legs and two eyes", he is "black" and "big"). As children discuss about their artwork, the uniqueness of mental representations and individual viewpoints is highlighted and a community of meaning-making is established. Perhaps more importantly, children learn to "accept differences in perception and opinion, laying the groundwork required for development of reflective and respectful learners" (Shulsky & Kirkwood, 2015, p. 365).

As Matthews (2003) observed, even very young children can be pleasantly surprised when they discover that the drawings and forms they produce can be described and discussed. He also reports that when they discuss their drawing efforts with adults, children show greater maturity and breadth in the activity at hand, while their self-confidence grows. However, teachers need to be inventive as some questions may discourage children to talk about their artwork. For example, as Seefeldt (2005, p. 70) remarks, "asking children to 'tell me about it' has been overused in talking to children about their work", while asking "what is this?" may make them feel that their effort to express their ideas or thoughts has failed. Reflective professionals try to discern small details in children's work, (e.g. facial expressions and gestures of the drawn characters), or signs that represent communication (e.g. speech balloons in Konstantina's drawing, Figure 1) movement (arrows in Dimitris's artwork, Figure 2) and changes (e.g. some curved lines behind a car) and make related questions or comments (e.g. "How is this boy feeling? "Is he laughing?" "Are these two talking to each other? "What do they say?" "This is a really fast car! Where is it going?"). Being responsive to children's comments teachers can also stimulate their imagination. For instance, when a child says,

“This is my birthday party”, teacher can ask: “Are the girls in your picture dancing?” “What kind of music are they listening to?”

A focused teacher-child conversation could have also an impact on children’s awareness of the communicative aspect of their visual signs. By explicitly describing the meaning of their images to their teacher, like Konstantina did (Figure 1), children have the opportunity to expand their conception of visual languages.

However, while discussing their artwork with children, we need to be responsive *to individual children’s needs*: It is important to respect their reluctance to answer some or all of our questions, allow moments of silence and reflection and resist the temptation to interrupt a more talkative child.

Modelling the process of meaning-making, communicating and thinking through artmaking

Using their own drawings and paintings to communicate with others, teachers can help children realize the communicative potential of visual texts. They can, for example, play with children the game “drawing to guess” or communicate with parents by composing texts with words and images. Besides, being involved as co-actors in children’s playful artmaking, that is, exploring materials and usages (“This a really big box, If I close my eyes I imagine a block of flats”), wondering and suggesting ideas (“I need a lighter blue. What if I add some more white?”), they exemplify the process of meaning-making through art media.

To model the process of thinking through artmaking to students, teachers can construct a schematic drawing to represent the sequence of actions that took place during an investigation, make a graphic plan for a problem solving activity or keep notes – using self-invented iconographic symbols - during a field experience. While they make such drawings, it is important that teachers put their thoughts into words (e.g. “let’s see what I can draw first? ... and then?”), think together with young learners (e.g. “How can we draw this clever idea you had?”) and reflect on a previous art activity (e.g. “what were the problems we faced during the construction of our school robot?” or “when we drew the map of our schoolyard, how did we start?”).

Documenting children’s artmaking efforts

For Reggio Emilia educators the main tool for making children’s thinking visible is artmaking, while the main goal of their practices of pedagogical documentation is to give voice to the children as co-constructors of knowledge (Rinaldi, 2006). In order to deeply engage young learners in their process of learning, celebrate their achievements and extend their thinking, teachers should take time to observe, listen and analyse their artmaking. In doing so, teachers can also find out how children’s thinking evolves, which are their intentions and meaning-making practices and how they use various art media and compose an artwork.

Here, appropriate use of digital technologies, can be valuable. Teachers can document phases of the artmaking process and perhaps more importantly encourage children to save their own work (e.g. photograph their clay artwork or video-record the problem solving process as they trying to create a zoo in the sandbox).

The vignette shown in Figure 3 is part of the documentation process which was carried out by Fotini a Kindergarten teacher in the visual art centre of her class (Tsirli, 2010). It describes the development of Philip’s artwork and his engagement in creative thinking. The transformation of a piece of construction paper in three different objects, firstly a door, then a warrior mask and finally a pirates’ ship, demonstrates the evolution of his creative ideas, which are generated through his involvement in artmaking. Philip chooses some art media (paperboard, ruler, marker and scissors) and uses them, at least in the beginning, in a way that

seems both his actions and the materials to guide his thinking and not the opposite. For example, he snips the folding paperboard and as he unfolds it, he discovers a shape that looks like a door, while a second snip results in the creation of a new “object”, that he can put it on his head, a warrior mask. During his artmaking, he focuses on the shapes and not on decorative details. Meanwhile, he gives life to his artwork through his oral and gestural narratives: “I will take it home for my mom to see it, she would love it when she sees it”, “I will make it a mask for warriors, because warriors wear something like this”, “guys look, I’m wearing a mask!”, “a Vikings mask!” etc.

FIGURE 3



Philip is taking a large A4 piece of construction paper, a ruler and a marker. He positions the ruler lengthwise and cuts the paper on the line. He keeps one piece of paper.



He folds the construction paper carefully, in two and then in four. He then takes the scissors and looks at the folded paper like he is thinking. After a while, he makes four parallel cuts and he unfolds it. At the same time he shows what he has done to his classmates.



Philip: We open it and we do something like that!

Teacher: What is that Philip?

Philip: Here is a door, there are two columns (he pauses, and looks at his construction) and here the door opens (he keeps looking at his construction and says, talking to himself) I will take it home for my mom to see. My mom will love it.



A bit later, while he keeps working on the same construction he announces:

Philip: Guys, look, I’m wearing a mask (he puts the construction paper on his head – he has cut the ‘door’ part from his construction)

Teacher: The door has become a mask?

Philip: Yes, one of those, a Viki, a Vikin, Vikings, a Vikings mask! (He goes on pretending to be a warrior and shows his mask to a group of children playing in another learning area).

After a while, he comes back to the table. He takes a pair of scissors and starts cutting attentively a piece from his construction. He makes something like a boat. He cuts two more pieces, he glues them to the ‘boat’ and he announces enthusiastically his new piece of work.



Philip: I made a boat!

Teacher: Where does the boat go?

Philip: It will go to an island. I finished that. I want to dry it, where can I dry it? (He talks to himself. He changes position and goes on to draw some human figures). I will make little people.



After a while

Teacher: Philip you’ve made some figures on the boat. Are they travelling?

Philip: Yes and here is where they step on (he shows a horizontal line across the boat). Yes, because here is a wooden thing where the pirates step on (he pauses) and here there are some knights.

Philip’s artmaking (four years old)

This kind of detailed documentation supported by photographs can be valuable for young learners, since it provides them with new art and learning opportunities. We should keep in mind that they need to come back, from time to time, not only to their art creations, but also to the process of composing their visual texts, and look at their work in a reflective way. Thus,

by making visible the successive steps of this process through digital documentation and encouraging children to make suggestions for the improvement of their artwork (e.g. “what can you add to make your building/castle more stable?”, “let’s think what kind of material would be appropriate?”) or compare beginning work with current work, teachers allow young learners to become aware of the development of their artmaking efforts and the way they attain such goals.

The teachers who regularly encourage their students to figure out their achievements by revisiting their previous artmaking make them reflective and confident art makers. As Watts (2010) explains, “the possession or acquisition of specific skills can enable children [...] to develop a deeper and more sustained engagement with the subject of art and design and for many children the role of teacher intervention in this process is a crucial one” (p. 151).

Part of the documentation process could also be the content of sustained dialogues between a child and their teacher at the completion of an artwork. Since children’s imaginative and, often, inventive ideas, like Konstantina’s ones (Figure 1), are not always recognizable in their creations, adults need children’s interpretation in order to grasp the deeper meaning that their artworks convey (Soundy, 2012), and identify themes and big ideas that children are probably exploring. Teachers can also learn about children’s interests and family habits, since they usually represent snapshots of their out-of-school life in their artwork (e.g. students’ favourite home toys and games, the books they read with their parents, their outdoor activities or their computer use at home).

In any case, documentation provides teachers with insights which otherwise could remain hidden, such as Philip’s way of making art and playing with his creations (i.e. his symbolic play, first with the “warrior mask” and later on with the “pirates’ ship”). These insights can be optimized later on by teachers to achieve objectives that suit children’s needs, such as assist them to overcome their hesitations about or difficulties with artmaking (e.g. “How do I draw the wolf running?” “How do I put these two cartons together?”), stimulate and extend their thinking about specific topics (e.g. Dimitris’ thinking about the role of brain on body movement, Figure 2), expand their representational abilities and integrate their interests into the learning process (e.g. Philip’s interest in pirates and knights or Dimitris’ interest in human body and its movement).

Working in partnership with parents

Research suggests that when children are growing up in home environments where drawing and art supplies are provided and are allowed to combine materials and tools they reveal advanced meaning-making abilities (Anning & Ring, 2004). Unfortunately, these abilities often remain unidentified by teachers, since children do not always express themselves in the same way at home and at school. At the same time, children’s artwork could go unnoticed by parents, since they lack professional knowledge regarding the role of art activities in the early years.

Teachers can support children’s visual art activities by creating a bridge between home and school practices: First of all, they can help families gain insight into children’s artmaking and its significance for learning. By organizing parent-child workshops, where parents draw collaboratively with their children or parent-teacher meetings and using specific artmaking ‘episodes’ from the classroom (like the vignette that records Philip’s work), teachers can help parents ‘see’ their children’s meaning-making in action and understand not only how young learners handle artmaking challenges, but also how they communicate think and learn through art. The more informed parents are, the more they can provide teachers with useful information about children’s behaviour at home (Birbili & Tzioga, 2014). For example,

parents can bring to school selected artwork, and their notes on their child's drawing or painting behaviour, to help teachers strengthen children's art activity in class.

As they plan parent involvement in children's learning, teachers are increasingly faced *with families in financial crisis*. Children living in poverty are less likely to have art media at home which in turn means fewer opportunities for out of school artmaking experiences. These children need more encouragement and motivation with various stimuli within the school environment, while their parents may find useful specific ideas and suggestions about cheap, alternative or homemade art materials and tools that can be used to encourage children's artmaking at home (e.g. flour, corn starch, lentils, wheat penne, used wrappers, cartons and boxes etc.).

CONCLUSION

In the digital age, that visual languages permeate many of our social and cultural activities, we as educators ought to reconceptualise our beliefs of learning. We need not only acknowledge its multimodal nature but also struggle to equip young learners with the abilities needed to encounter future communication and learning challenges. In this endeavour, we can take advantage of children's ease in communicating through visual languages and design new pathways for integrating artmaking in our everyday practice as a mediating tool of knowledge construction. This article argues for the crucial role that visual languages can play in generating meaningful learning experiences in different areas through an integrated approach that situates artmaking at the centre of the curriculum. Practitioners' strategies are the key to building an environment that inspires children's creativity, promotes creation and experimentation with multiple materials, encourages respectful and reflective conversations among and with young learners and allow the co-construction of visual texts. Artmaking can be used both as a scaffolding and as an assessment tool that guides children's thinking, extends their learning, provides an insight into their interests, ideas and needs, and makes their achievements visible. With intentional planning and ongoing documentation, teachers can expand children's symbolic abilities and help them build a strong foundation of visual literacy.

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