

## ART AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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Art can serve as a symbol system that parallels and supports language development, especially for those who have an urgent need for language acquisition such as children who are deaf or hard of hearing, children who have specific language impairments/learning disabilities, and children for whom English is a second language. For these children, art can be a valuable tool in fostering language acquisition and development, as well as an alternate means of communication.

Children often use art to communicate. Their art productions can represent their thinking and can be a means by which they share their experiences and ideas. Art has been used to teach basic language concepts to deaf children through an experiential, highly visual art curriculum (Greene & Hasselbring, 1981). Art has been used to teach concepts of space, class and sequential order without verbal language (Silver, 1978). An art based curriculum was highly effective in fostering language learning and acquisition of English for a group of Spanish speaking children (Spina, 1994). Drawing has been shown to be an effective means to rehearse, develop and organize ideas prior to writing (Caldwell & Moore, 1991).

### **Self-Esteem**

For children with communication difficulties, self-esteem is especially important because children need to feel safe, comfortable and accepted in order to risk using a new or difficult means of expression (Ching, 1993). Most children can learn to draw and through drawing can build self-esteem that allows them to participate in classroom activities, even if their language skills are not as well developed as their peers. Drawings can offer visual support for the ideas they wish to communicate, a template onto which language can be mapped, allowing them to share their experiences and relate to their peers.

### **Checking understanding**

Art provides a pathway into the understandings of children with communication difficulties. Incomplete or misunderstood concepts can be discovered by asking children to illustrate their understandings. For example, students can be asked to illustrate new vocabulary words, new syntactical structures, and new concepts so that teachers can check those understandings (Eubanks, 1995).

### **Developing ideas**

Talking, writing and drawing are all ways to work out ideas. Ask students to illustrate their narratives before generating written stories. Their drawings can help the teacher better understand the context of their narratives so that syntactical structures can match the student's intended meaning. Drawings can also become a means by which students request new vocabulary (Eubanks, 1995).

### **Implications for drawing instruction**

Drawing instruction should support children's art as an authentic expression of their own ideas and experiences. To enlarge their visual vocabulary of verbs, teach ways to represent movement by biomechanical alteration, action lines, and repetition of parts of figures or whole figures. To enlarge the space in which actions take place, teach children how to represent three dimensional space in ways that are appropriate for their maturity level. Even though children understand and react to a broad range of emotions, they may not have developed the vocabulary to name

those emotions. Increased perceptual awareness of ways in which emotions are communicated visually and practice representing facial expressions and body language can provide opportunities to develop a larger vocabulary related to emotions.

### **Talking with children about their own works of art**

The presence of an adult when children draw increases the amount of language generated about the drawing during its creation and their progress in learning drawing skills (Brittain, 1979). Children need an audience for their art and time to talk about their drawings with teachers, parents and peers. Both teachers and parents may need some training in becoming sensitive to the opportunities that children's drawings provide and ways to respond appropriately by focusing on the process rather than the art product (Schirmmacher, 1986).

### **Talking with children about other works of art**

Art can be a way to communicate complex ideas to children because they can learn the visual language earlier and more spontaneously than verbal language (Feldman, 1981). They often understand ideas presented in visual form before they are able to understand the same ideas presented verbally, hence, looking at and talking about works of art can acknowledge and stimulate their intelligence. Art criticism, decoding works of art, has been shown to increase reading readiness. Works that are particularly rich in language opportunities include many different things and different categories of things, many different colors; things in motion or with the potential for motion; people and especially children (Gambrell & Sokolski, 1983). Select works of art that relate to the curriculum and use these works of art to reinforce and develop vocabulary. Examine these works in depth. Begin by naming everything in the work to reinforce and enlarge the vocabulary of nouns. Develop a larger vocabulary of verbs by describing all the movement in the work. Description and analysis that includes words relating to position, size and spatial relationships present opportunities for language development at a higher level (Ownes, 1988).

### **Conclusion**

Looking at and making art can present valuable opportunities for language development. By being sensitive to those opportunities, both art specialists and classroom teachers can move art activities to the heart of the curriculum by using art as a means of communication and by adopting language development goals for instruction as well as art-based instructional objectives.

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