Enhancing children’s learning: the art perspective

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Abstract
This study, which was qualitative in nature, investigated what school children in Ghana had to say about their drawings. Observation and in-depth interviews were used to examine links between art and emotion. Parents’ views about art lessons were investigated also. The aim of this article is to transmit what we found out about the value of art for enhancing these children’s learning. The data analysis revealed that art facilitated expression of emotion and experience. Theory in the literature suggests that learning is most effective when it links with emotional experience; thus, we put forward an argument for effective learning in the context of art lessons. Art can also be used as a form of therapy or preventive medicine to contribute to children’s psychological well-being and subsequently prepare them for learning.

Introduction
Goleman (1995) explains that basically people have two minds: thinking and feeling ones. The emotional brain, or feeling mind, is the first to receive input and thus is able to react before the thinking brain (Rettig and Rettig 1999). A look at today’s schools, however, shows that they emphasize literacy and numeracy, which make use of the thinking mind (Flood and Barnford, 2007). In other words, many of the required subjects of study in the school day, such as mathematics, science and English, tap learners’ left brain powers: verbal reasoning, organizing and sequencing – in other words their logical thinking skills (Unsworth 1992). Art is one of the few subjects that draws on the right brain or emotional brain power (which deals with the senses, imagination and intuition of the learner). Yet, it is only when the left and right brain interact that holistic learning occurs; and this is what determines how a person learns and who he/she becomes (Amenuke 1995; Rettig and Rettig 1999; Unsworth 1992).

Understanding the importance of the arts and their impact on the mind and spirit of every child is crucial since they serve as vehicles for developmental learning for children of all ages and abilities as well as offering essential opportunities for creative expression, problem solving and social development (Potter 2007). Similarly, the ability to use the senses (touching, seeing, hearing, smelling and tasting) can help to achieve this
Abbot (1997: 8) adds that Challenge and Interactivity are essential. Passive observation is not enough. "Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Let me do and I understand" says the ancient Chinese proverb.

It is noteworthy still, as Lowenfeld and Brittain (1970) mentioned almost four decades ago, that our educational institutions have not done much to educate the senses that are avenues to learning. It is from this backdrop that this article seeks to demonstrate how art can educate the emotions and as a result enhance an individual's learning abilities.

**Materials and methods**

A qualitative research approach was adopted for the study. This article reports on descriptive research and document analysis. We reviewed and analysed studies on art, creativity and learning, and then used purposive sampling to select four categories of schools in the Kumasi Metropolis. Two were public schools and two were private schools. In each category, one school was well-endowed and the other was a Grade C school. A Grade C school is a school that lacks many basic facilities in comparison to the well-endowed school. In Ghana, public schools are set up and managed by the government and pupils do not
pay fees. They were originally introduced to help cater for pupils from low economic backgrounds. Private schools are privately owned and managed independently of government. A total of 153 children, comprising both boys and girls between 6 and 12 years old, were selected to do artwork from these schools.

Four hundred copies of a questionnaire were given to teachers and parents/guardians also, out of which 230 were retrieved and twenty parents were interviewed. We used participant observation to observe children as they made artworks. The children were given A4 white paper, pencils, felt pens and coloured pencils and the following instructions: 'Draw what you want,' 'Draw any memorable experience,' 'What I will be in the future' and 'My family'. The minimum time allotted for drawing was thirty minutes and the maximum was one hour. The children were
supposed to write their name, age, class and the date on the back of their work but some wrote their name on the drawings. As they drew (and in some cases soon afterwards), they were asked to talk about their work.

At other times, the children were allowed to work any way they wanted with coloured paper cut up into pieces, PVA glue, scissors and cardboard. They were interviewed in groups and one-on-one about their previous experience of art.

**Results and discussion**

**Environmental influences and children’s art**

Every child draws what he knows (Kitahara and Matsuishi 2007; Schirrmacher 1998); this idea is in line with cognitive theory that describes child art as concept formation (Feldman 1970). When they were told to draw anything they wanted, almost all the children from the well-endowed private school and a handful of children from the well-endowed public school, who all came from affluent homes, depicted memorable experiences such as excursions and birthdays, as well as human figures, children playing, butterflies, mountains and seas and cars. In a way, the environments of these children were reflected in their drawings. The term ‘environment’ in this context refers to surrounding influences, or all the external factors impacting on them, including people (friends, family, etc.), cultural background or way of life and social standing, as well as daily routines and experiences.

One 7-year-old boy, a member of an art club at the private well-endowed school, drew a ‘family birthday’ (Figure 8), a yearly occasion when his mother, father and little sister celebrated how long they had been together. He depicted the family’s seventh birthday; and drew seven orange-coloured candles with yellow flames on a red coloured cake with three blue decorations.

A series of interviews and observation established that this child came from a wealthy home and usually travelled abroad with his family during

![Figure 8: Family birthday celebration by Jesse.](image)
school vacations. Very few Ghanaians celebrate marriage anniversaries; and when they do, they typically celebrate silver wedding anniversaries (25 years of marriage) or golden wedding anniversaries (50 years of marriage). They mark these long years of marriage with celebrations that include their children (who by this time are grown up) and make them family reunions. The few couples who celebrate marriage annually mostly 'do their own thing', like going on a retreat without their children. Thus, for Jesse's family to include children is a unique family custom, most probably adapted from travel abroad. It seems to have paid off, since their son drew the cake with candles almost as big as himself showing how important the event is for him. He indicated he always looks forward to this occasion.

A 9-year-old girl at the public well-endowed school (which has since become a private school because it has good facilities and is associated with a university) enjoys riding bicycles. She drew a girl on a bicycle, which she told us was a picture of herself, taking a ride after school one afternoon (Figure 9). A colleague, an 8-year-old boy from the same school, drew a favourite cartoon character in the series he enjoys watching (Figure 10).

As regards pupils at the public, not so well-endowed school, it seems that they did not have many opportunities to engage in art. Nonetheless, all children can draw without being taught. That may explain why the majority of children we studied tended to draw objects typically found in textbooks, although they did not copy them. This situation changed, however, when they were exposed to other kinds of art activities, as will be noted subsequently.

We received questionnaire responses from 171 parents about their children's art activities and interviewed 20 parents. About 60% of the parents who completed the questionnaire pointed out that their children did not like to study and would rather use all their time for drawing or making art. Further probing showed that these parents were not prepared to provide art materials for their children's use, however, because they thought they 'wasted' time drawing. About 15% of respondents also pointed out that their children were talented and skilled at drawing and enjoyed art for this

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**Figure 9:** Girl (aged 9) riding bicycle.  
**Figure 10:** Drawing by boy (aged 8) who enjoys cartoons.
Art could, if used intelligently, contribute to the mental health of the child by giving him an opportunity to alleviate those tensions and communicate those meanings that he could not articulate in discursive language. Art in the schools could be a type of therapy, a preventive medicine that contributes to the psychological comfort of the child.

Naumberg's opinion could be expanded to include the view that art provides an outlet for children to pour out their frustration, for example, at being unable to memorize multiplication tables, or having no food to eat and relying on school feeding programmes (A. Adu-Gyamfi, personal conversation, 2007); as well as shielding them from emotional crises where they do not get the attention and parental care they need. It is art that helps the children in these situations to gain emotional release and subsequently become emotionally sounder people. In these cases, art education is used as therapy. Stronach-Buschel's explanation (1990) of art therapy as a 'method of non-verbal communication, such as a child drawing a picture to express his or her emotions' (Jacobs 2002) is applied in this context. In other words, art becomes a means for the child to communicate his or her feelings.

When they were asked to draw anything they wanted, some children from the less-endowed schools drew pictures that expressed negative experiences and feelings (for example: sadness, hurt and anger) about situations they were involved in (Figures 12, 13 and 14).

Christmas in Ghana is usually a time of festivities, especially in affluent homes. Parties are normally organized where family and friends come together to wine and dine. Those who can afford to slaughter sheep and

Figure 13: Sad scene. Boy (aged 10).
reason, but admitted they did not pay much attention to this. We inferred from this that, for some parents, art is not really important. Moreover, they thought their wards were better off putting more effort into studying other subjects like mathematics and science. However, about 12% of parents, mainly from high socio-economic backgrounds, did believe art was essential to children’s development and purchased art materials for them to express themselves.

The interviews with some children at the private well-endowed school revealed that their parents did provide art materials and created avenues for them to develop perceptual awareness. For example, they stimulated their senses by taking them on excursions and encouraging them to appreciate nature and observe things like the setting sun or experience the swaying of leaves in a gentle breeze – all of which are all essential for developing creativity and imagination.

One thing is noteworthy: the children’s drawings support the assertion that ‘as a man thinks so is he’ – in other words children draw on knowledge from a store of experiences they already have to feed creative potential. It follows that, the extent to which children are conscious of their surroundings, the breadth of their world vision or strength of experience with the environment, greatly influences the content of their drawing(s) (Kitahara and Matsushi 2007; Schirrmacher 1998).

Basic schooling in Ghana consists of six years of primary education and three years of junior high school education. It is worth mentioning that, as of the 2007/2008 academic year, art was introduced into all basic levels of schooling under the name ‘Creative Arts’.

**Children study better when they are able to express their emotions or release emotional tensions**

More than three decades ago Naumberg noted links between children’s unconscious needs and art:

To the child experiencing stress under the rigours of growing up and in the confines of the school, the visual arts could serve as a form of release.
goats or roast turkeys, guinea fowls or chickens do so while those who cannot patronize fish. It is also a time where children and adults alike wear new articles of clothing.

Children who do not get new clothes and shoes or the chicken they so desperately wait a whole year to eat, experience feelings of sadness and disappointment. This is why one 8-year-old girl from the public Grade C school displayed articles of clothing in her drawing (Figure 12). She pointed out that she had a bad Christmas season during vacation since she did not get a new dress and a pair of shoes. However, she enjoyed a fried fish head at this time and showed this as well in her picture.

In one drawing (Figure 13), a female figure is depicted crying in the foreground. The explanation this child artist gave was that she is sad since her child has been taken away in a car headed for Kumasi. Behind the sad woman and almost in the centre of the picture there is a house. To the left side of the house there is a tree with two figures underneath. The child told us that he was the person furthest from the house and was crying because he was sad, though he did not say why. The figure nearer the house was his sister. At the other end of the house, surrounded by red, blue and yellow dots, was a building described as a kitchen. On top of the kitchen there was a plane flying the family abroad and, close to it, the child is holding onto something he described to us as a parachute. He said he was not on the plane and he thought the parachute would help him get to his family’s destination as well.

The public Grade C school in the study doubles as an orphanage. Following a series of interviews with this child and the principal of the school, who is also the director of the orphanage where he resides, we concluded that he was portraying the scene that ensued as he was brought to the orphanage. Thus, he may be reliving sad memories.
through this picture. Simon (1992: 13) opines that 'memories, emotions, sensations [or feelings] and ideas that a [child] may wish to communicate [...] also help determine the pictorial content'. So in this drawing, the mother is depicted as sad and crying because her son (the child who drew Figure 13) is being taken away; similarly, he is crying since he was separated from his mother. The symbolism for flying objects (freedom) can be detected here as well (Hammer 1980; Issahaku 1999). It is possible this boy wants to be 'freed' of the fact he is in an orphanage. This may explain why, even though he could not be on the plane, he depicted a parachute. It is of note that he added colour only to parts of the picture where he 'felt' happy.

Figure 14 is an example of another drawing the same 10-year-old boy made. He assembled his family in this picture, which includes friends, his parents and baby sister. He told us that his parents live away. The picture shows a group of people in the lower half that includes a white lady friend who bought him food when he was hungry and crying one morning while out skating.

This boy produced a total of about seventeen drawings, but this was the only time he acknowledged he had a baby sister – who was just days old when this drawing was made. Reports had come in earlier of his mother giving birth to a baby girl. Perhaps, it was at this point that he accepted the reality that he was might never be reconciled with his family. This is the case with other people in the home who have lived there since they were children and are grown up now. While some of them are in tertiary institutions, others are working to earn a living. However, this child still engages in fantasy and creates his own world in drawings where the people he loves come together.

As Jacobs (2002) and Malchiodi (2001) point out, art sessions make it possible and easier for children like these to depict what they find difficult to verbalize, especially feelings of sadness and loneliness. Further analysis of the drawings and participant observation revealed that their learning attitudes in class showed significant improvement in the ensuing weeks as they participated more in answering questions and volunteered to work sums on the chalkboard.
Art activities enhance children's social interaction
During observations in recess and classes, we noticed that some children were withdrawn and generally downcast. In view of this, we arranged some art activities whereby children were required to share art materials such as coloured pencils, felt pens, scissors and glue and also to talk to each other about their work. This strategy was designed to promote interaction amongst children who otherwise do not generally volunteer to play or communicate with each other and we noted that some of them gradually warmed to unfamiliar peers.

This finding supports other research findings about art playing a major role in education and child development, including social development (Hammer 1980; Lekettey 1995).

Conclusion
Education modifies behaviour and art expresses self. Thus behaviour can be modified through the use of art where this is understood as expression of a child's intellectual, artistic or creative and social life. Art must be given a central place in all school curricula from basic to tertiary levels. We know that holistic education is not limited to education in English, mathematics and science and children need to learn to appreciate and use abilities of the hand as well as the mind if they are to be creative and intellectually broad-minded. Although art is subsumed under 'Creative Arts' in basic schooling in Ghana, the emphasis is mainly on teaching skills in drawing and painting and opportunities to draw and paint freely are few and far between.

Besides, children learn to solve problems in art and employ these divergent thinking abilities to other subjects, making it easier for them to learn. They can learn how to make friends through the communal use of art tools and materials. Notwithstanding, individual children should be allowed to deviate from group art activities if the need arises. Denying their desire to work independently, treating them as disruptive and taking disciplinary action frustrates them. It might even cause them to withdraw from participating in class activities, which in turn affects learning output, thereby defeating the aim of using art to enhance the learning experience.

Children basically put themselves into their work (including their ideas, wishes, feelings and emotions). Where they have learning difficulties, art educators can use their drawings as a tool to diagnose problems and investigate the messages they express and what they say about them over a period of time. What a child says is of utmost importance, because it can help us tailor responses to their educational needs; and where there is an emotional concern, seek the necessary support such as counselling or art therapy.

As art educators we can also meet pupils' emotional needs by using art to provide safe outlets for outbursts of emotion. Children often channel emotional conflict through art. Art seems to be well suited as an intervention, therefore, where children are experiencing emotional conflict since it is easier to use pictures to interview them than to just talk about painful feelings and experiences (Jacobs 2002; Malchiodi 2001). Subsequently, they may develop sounder mindsets towards their studies.
References


Suggested citation

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