

CULTURE AND VISUAL REPRESENTATION IN CHILDREN'S UNSOLICITED GRAPHIC ART: INSIGHTS WITH PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Children utilize graphic art as a medium of visual communication to express their social learning, self-awareness, societal values, and community identity. This case study examines how children represent culture in their spontaneous graphic art and discusses the emerging educational implications. Data were collected through interviewing selected teachers and students, observing children engaged in drawing activities, and analysis of the artwork produced. The findings reveal that children's spontaneous art serves as a vessel for cultural knowledge and a preferred mode of expressing daily life and gender roles. Educational implications from the study include fostering self-expression, cultural identity portrayal, and enhancing visual communication between the young artists and their audience.

Keywords: Art education, cultural education, educational art practices, graphic art, performing arts, visual arts.

Introduction

Graphic art encompasses visual expressions on flat surfaces, such as paintings, drawings, or prints (Gair 1996; Getlein 2008). It is a crucial cathartic outlet for children at various developmental stages as they convey their imagination, emotions, and cultural influences as part of social learning (Fabris et al., 2023; Sanga 2009). Research indicates that while traditional art education often emphasizes structured pedagogical strategies in drawing, alternative approaches that allow for more freedom can lead to significant creativity, self-expression, and confidence in children. Understanding the meaning and symbolism in children's art, particularly within their cultural context, is therefore essential. Spontaneous drawings by children typically reflect their socio-cultural environments and imagination. Cultural influences play a significant role in children's visual art development, as suggested by neo-Piagetian theorists like Court (1989), Golomb (2002), Jovchelovitch et al. (2017), and Pariser (1995). These theorists posit that children's art starts with the emergence of scribbles, which evolve into named and narrated drawings that reflect cultural contexts. Psychoanalysts have attempted to understand children's psychological complexities through visual interpretations (Fabris et al., 2023). Therefore, it

becomes vital to analyse children's spontaneous drawings to fully grasp their cultural import and educational importance.

In an African setting, children's art often features elements from daily life such as household items, wildlife, landscapes, and people engaged in routine activities (Court, 1989; Sobania, 2003). The nature and substance of children's art vary depending on their cognitive level (Lau, 2020), emotional significance, experience, and cultural background (Court 1989; Longobardi et al., 2022). Thus, visual representation holds personal value for the creator. Short (1995) and Fabris et al. (2023) suggest that to comprehend an artwork, one must consider both its intrinsic qualities and its descriptive aspects, hence this study aims to investigate how African children's spontaneous drawings reflect the cultural environments of these young artists. This is envisaged to have practical application on art education that takes cognizant of cultural knowledge and experiences.

The study was driven by three key questions:

1. What is the connection between culture and children's visual representations, especially in drawings?
2. How does culture influence children's graphic art at various stages of their artistic development?
3. Which educational methods can enhance the understanding and expression of culture in children's art?

Child Art and Social Learning

As children mature, their art naturally progresses through developmental stages that reflect their psychological and social growth (Fabris et al., 2023). This art is a personal reflection of the child's experiences and is marked by an uninhibited and spontaneous style as they explore their creative processes. The originality and freshness of child art stem from their reliance on imagination, fantasies, and personal emotions. Children's art also provides a window into their social and cultural experiences. For instance, in China, children's art is rooted in their life experiences, teaching them to be valuable contributors to their families and communities. The selective pre-primary and primary schools in China aim to develop talent and promote self-initiated art at an early age (Cox et al., 2002; Lowry & Wolf, 1988). This art is often seen as noble and inspiring. In Italy, children's art captures individual experiences of the natural world's beauty and mystery, often depicting domestic themes like marriage, birth, and family life (Longobardi et al., 2022). Both Italian and American children's art connects school, home, family, and community, fostering an appreciation of cultural heritage. In the USA children are exposed to art appreciation, techniques and skills development and exposure to a variety of art media (Lowry & Wolf, 1988).

Court's (1989) research on the Luo and Samburu Kenyan children's drawings illustrates that graphic art is deeply intertwined with social and community influences. Children's art varies

depending on their cultural heritage, language, community artifacts, daily experiences, gender roles, clothing styles, and economic activities. Samburu art, for example, is gender-specific; boys' drawings often feature cattle herding and hunting, while girls' art includes fruit gathering and clothing details like accentuating waist belts. These drawings narrate personal stories about family life and cultural values, conveying the lived experiences of the pastoralist and agricultural Kenyan communities. Sanga (2009) argues that in Tanzania where children are taught in their mother language, Kiswahili, girls' art depicts age-appropriate attire, while boys are portrayed as warriors with earplugs and red lines on their faces, emphasizing bravery in hunting and domestic tasks. Thus, African children's art serves not only as a means of self-expression, but also as preparation for societal roles and cultural awareness. How then does culture interface with art education?

Cultural Interface with Pedagogical Praxis

Culture sometimes clashes with the national curriculum, creating visible tensions between ethnicity and nationhood. Teachers, often untrained in the diverse cultures of their students, face pedagogical contradictions. Despite these pedagogical gaps, art serves as a foundation for harmonious teacher-learner relationships within educational spaces. Maghembe (2009) acknowledges that teaching unfamiliar cultural concepts and patterns can be challenging, as classroom culture may be at conflict with community norms. Teachers' understanding of art education and aesthetics significantly influences children's artistic representations. Therefore, teachers must grasp the curriculum's context, considering learners' needs and societal expectations.

Campbell (2006) advocates for innovative methodologies and timely curriculum reviews to enhance art education and curriculum relevance. The curriculum should prioritize critical and creative thinking, communication skills, personal development, and independent thought. Teacher development should focus on effective pedagogy and curriculum management. Guided by the concentric curricula model, the Zimbabwean Primary School Arts Syllabi acknowledge that art education starts from home and expands outward to the community, nation, and beyond. The Visual and Performing Arts Junior Syllabus (2015) outlines a flexible methodology adaptable to specific topics and communities, accommodating local and school cultures. Pedagogies should be engaging, innovative, and child-centered, incorporating experiential activities and spiralling content according to learners' developmental stages. Interactive methodologies, including group activities, critiques, and class discussions, foster appreciation of other people's art and cultures (Court, 1989). Such content and approaches also apply to the teaching of drawing, which can be a vehicle for cultural depiction. Children as young as two years explore drawing as a conduit to unlocking cultural learning.

Methodology

This qualitative case study was conducted at a rural primary school in the Gutu District of Zimbabwe, offering an in-depth examination of children's cultural expressions through visual art. The qualitative method was selected based on the recommendations of scholars like Newman (2000), who endorse it for its direct engagement with participants, and its potential for holistic understanding of the problem (Koller & Sinitsa, 2009). The lead researcher was engaged as a non-participant observer in the classrooms of four teachers at the chosen school, gaining insights into their pedagogical practices. The teachers were teaching Early Childhood Development (ECD) B, and Grades 4, 6 and 7. The four teachers were purposively selected considering their positive attitude and aptitude towards the arts. These were selected from two classes per grade level, that is, Grades 4, 6 and 7, while the only ECD B teacher was conveniently sampled. By virtue of a teacher being selected meant that the class automatically became the purposive sample of participants for data collection.

Data collection also involved unstructured interviews with the four teachers and their selected students, and the analysis of teachers' educational plans and students' artwork. The purpose of the interviews was to understand how the students represented culture in drawing, their conceptualization of culture, the adequacy and management of time allotted for free drawing, the teaching strategies that teachers employed, and the influence of students' cultural backgrounds on the learning of art. The cultural contexts include social beliefs, norms, values, behaviours, and activities that influenced students' artistic performances. Such contexts aided corroboration of data, and their analyses and interpretation. Interviews with teachers were conducted in English, with each session lasting 15 to 20 minutes, ensuring expression of candid responses. Interview protocols were adhered to. Follow-up questions were asked aimed at clarifying any uncertainties and ambiguities. Conversational interviews with the learners during the drawing activities were conducted in the mother tongue (ChiShona), mainly because of the language barrier to communication (proficiency in the use of English), and that they freely express themselves. Observations of a twenty-minute art lesson for ECD B class, and one hour for the other Grades (one lesson per teacher) provided additional contexts, and complemented discussions and curriculum document analysis. This triangulation of data collection methods bolstered the study's reliability and validity.

The researchers conducted content analyses (Marczyk et al., 2005) of teaching plans, syllabi, classroom art displays, and learning centres to determine if drawing activities were aligned with students' social experiences and syllabus requirements. The extent to which children's cultures were reflected in their art was also assessed. Analytical methods, namely, provenance, semiotics, and iconology (d'Alleva & Cothren, 2021; Van Straten, 2012) were employed to assess children's artwork. Provenance examined the children's backgrounds, semiotics focused on the materials, subject matter, cultural context, symbolism, and meanings of artworks, while iconology delved into the deeper significance of the art pieces (Migiro & Magangi, 2011).

This analysis aimed at capturing the nuanced interplay between the socio-cultural contexts and the young artists' stylistic choices. Iconological analysis, in particular, utilized a variety of texts, cultural themes, and other elements related to the artists' backgrounds. The following section presents the study's thematized findings and discussions.

Findings and Discussions

Referential drawings as visual texts

Insights from teachers shed light on children's graphic art and its cultural significance. Despite the rich cultural content in their artwork, children struggled to verbally explain their cultural contexts. One teacher noted that art by ECD learners consistently portrays their culture, often featuring human figures that represented family members. Additionally, children's play activities outdoors naturally align with their everyday experiences.

The teachers observed that learners willingly express their life experiences through drawing. Artworks often depict people engaged in various functions, such as cooking, hunting, and ploughing. Cultural narratives that emerged include traditional gatherings like "*padare*" and "*biras*," as well as depiction of traditional healers and ritual shrines. On the theme of hunting one student said, "My friends and I always go hunting on hot weather so that we get rabbit meat because we always eat *sadza* and vegetables, *muboora* and *derere*" (Fig 1).



Fig 1: A hunting expedition

In an x-ray drawing, one girl tried to depict what is inside the house. This stage is described by Winner (1992) as the prolific stage between 3 and 6 years where children are keen to demonstrate that they have knowledge about what is inside the house and thus trying to communicate the information (Quaglia et al., 2015). She also indicated she has the duty of feeding chickens every day after school.

She disclosed that their chicken runs are opened in the afternoon because if chickens are allowed to move freely from morning, they may destroy crops in the fields.

Children between 5 and 7 years produced artworks featuring named family members engaged in gender-specific activities, as similarly found by Longobardi et al. (2022). For instance, boys herded cattle, while girls worked in kitchens or attended to chickens. These young artists added details to enhance communication with viewers. Artworks from learners aged between 8 and 10 years exhibited similar characteristics but with added perfection and detail. Boys were depicted on hunting expeditions, ploughing fields, and playing soccer, while girls engaged in traditional games. Children expressed their individuality and shared real-life events in their verbal responses. Fig 2 shows a field preparation scene using draught power and an ox-drawn plough depicted by two boys.

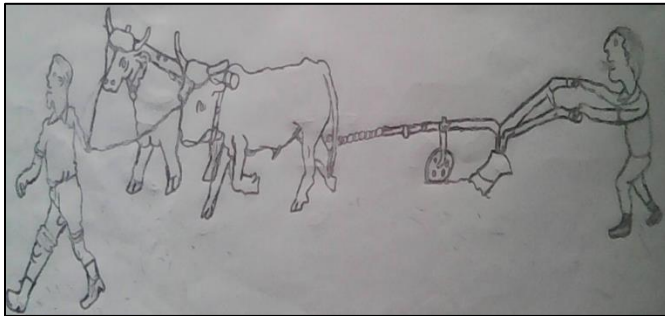


Fig 2: Land preparation using draught power and an ox-drawn plough.

In one of the cultural drawings a boy explained that “My grandfather is a traditional healer, after a morning session in field work at around lunch time everyday people gather at our home for help from grandfather” (See fig 3). He went on to say that his grandfather uses herbs in the form of roots, tree bark, leaves and burnt ashes and powders. The grandfather was reported to be able to cast out evil spirits and destroy demons used by the witches as depicted in Fig 3. The owl in the top left corner of the picture is an example of objects brought to the healer by witches so that they are destroyed by the traditional healer as a way of cleansing and setting the witches free. The artist disclosed that those who attend the healing sessions disperse around sunset.



Fig 3: A traditional healer performing a cleansing ritual

Learners aged 11 and older, produced more mature and complex drawings, representing real-life experiences. Artworks became more complex, requiring in-depth analysis and interpretation (d’Alleva & Cothren 2021; Van Straten 2012). For example, male figures gathered at a place called ‘dare’ for discussions, while others queued at a traditional healer’s place for medical assistance and cleansing ceremonies - themes not depicted by girls.



Fig 4: Fetching water from a well

The artwork in Fig 4 distinguishes duties done by girls who are associated with tidying the house and cooking whilst boys are known for taking care of domestic animals and working in the fields. The artwork depicts one of the differentiated gender roles; girls do kitchen displays, fetch water and carry babies on their backs. This clearly indicates that children recognize their cultural practices through the visual language.

One cultural event is that every evening all males in the family gather outside at a specially made fireplace (*padare*) listening to social issues, advice, and folktales from adults. Discussions on the programme for the following day are also made during that time. As one child explained, “Boys above the age of eleven years are not allowed to play in the kitchen whilst supper is being prepared. *Vanhu vose vanenge vari padare havabvumidzwi kunge vakapfeka majuzi kana mabhachi* (people gather outside at a fireplace and one is not allowed to put on warm clothes).”

In summary, children’s graphic art reflects their daily experiences, regardless of the drawing activity. Learners were given time to narrate their work during discussions and lesson closures, allowing peers to appreciate their art.

Methodologies that recognize culture through graphic art

Teachers employ various methodologies to enhance cultural recognition through graphic art. Teacher A utilizes the play-based approach, allowing learners to freely express themselves during visual art lessons. Respondent B adopts learner-centered approaches, occasionally permitting learner demonstration as he said, “I use child-centered methods in which I at times permit learners to demonstrate drawing for the class.” Participant C, recognizing the challenging concepts in the Visual and Performing Arts syllabus, invites specialist art teachers to deliver some lessons for them, “Due to the challenging terminology in the Visual and Performing Arts syllabus, I always invite an art specialist teacher to conduct drawing lessons for me.” These strategies align with the learners’ needs and encourage class interactions, self-expression, and critical thinking. Drawing lessons are best taught by capable teachers. Such drawing teaching methodologies used by specialist art teachers are most suitable for the VPA syllabus. These include the play way method, demonstrations, and inviting resource persons as demonstrators in this regard (Campbell 2006; Mamvuto 2013). These sentiments are also shared by Getlein (2008, p. 149) who opines that “in drawing far more than in speech children reveal fantasies and fears.”

Unfortunately, the study revealed that learners had limited time for drawing activities—typically only one hour per week; this sounds inadequate for full exploration of the self. Some teachers were hesitant to allocate time for unguided graphic art due to the packed syllabus and timetable. However, Participant D allows learners to practice drawing during their free time; “I do not have time for formal art lessons and in my class, drawing is only done in preparation for composition writing; I ask my learners to draw picture stories and instruct them to give explanations about their drawings in not more than one hundred words.” In this context, drawing serves as preparation for composition writing, where learners create picture stories and provide concise narrative explanations about the pictures. Despite time constraints, children still found opportunities to draw and share their experiences in class. Teachers unanimously agreed on the importance of providing encouraging feedback and asking probing questions about children’s artwork. Engaging in class discussions fosters mutual appreciation among learners and encourages them to value their visual representations.

The study analysed the Visual and Performing Arts national syllabus, scheme-cum-plans, and displayed artworks. Timetables were visible in all observed classrooms, although teachers did not strictly adhere to them during teaching. Lesson evaluations of drawing lessons in scheme-cum-plans were generically stated as “learners could draw very well” or “the work was well done by all learners.” This indicates that teaching of drawing is not taken seriously by the teachers who tend to give uninformative reports when evaluating.

Classroom observations also focused on depiction of culture through learners’ visual representations and their freedom to express feelings, views, and emotions. Teachers employed strategies that allowed learners to express themselves through visual language without specific instructional guidance. This approach facilitated an assessment of whether children could effectively represent their culture through visual images. Observations during lessons highlighted children’s eagerness to express their opinions and emotions. They openly shared their daily experiences and did not shy away from revealing aspects of their personal lives through drawing. Some students even found moments within and beyond the classroom setting to convey their feelings through drawing.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest that free-choice drawing allows learners to articulate their social life and daily experiences. Children’s artwork demonstrated their ability to depict culture and personal experiences, drawing familiar subjects to communicate with others. Drawing is essential for individual development, encompassing expressive, social, cognitive, and aesthetic growth. Learners should be allowed time for spontaneous drawing to encourage the free expression of ideas and sharing of experiences. Effective teaching strategies for drawing might include fostering class interaction, recognizing cultural elements, allowing freedom of expression, and promoting critical thinking. Art from learners at various developmental stages conveys individual experiences and gender-specific activities, reflecting their community and home life contexts. The art produced by learners also showcases a rich cultural heritage, indicating that children’s graphic art conveys their deepest understanding of their immediate environment. The quality and detail of children’s artwork vary according to the developmental stages.

Some children’s artworks were initially challenging to interpret. However, when asked to explain their creations, the young artists shared stories connected to their lives and surroundings, indicating that visual representations closely mirror their real-life experiences. The analysis led researchers to conclude that children’s art predominantly centres on daily life experiences. If accorded sufficient time to analyse children’s spontaneous drawings, teachers could gain deeper insights into their students’ social lives, which would inform their pedagogical practices. Mmasy (2010) argues that drawing fosters social cohesion within the classroom. The study found that while learners could express themselves visually, they often lacked adequate time for spontaneous art, which is sometimes viewed as less important compared to other curricula areas (Mannathoko

& Mamvuto, 2018). Nonetheless, students were eager to communicate their lifestyles through drawing.

The study found that children use art to share their life experiences, home environments, and the roles of various family and community members. They consistently depicted their personal experiences, family, and lifestyle. Drawings also illustrate gender roles, with boys typically depicting activities like hunting and ploughing, while girls focused on domestic scenes such as cooking, fetching water, and caring for infants. This demonstrates that children use visual language to represent and understand their cultural identities and socialization processes by the communities.

Insights on cultural learning indicate that students are eager and capable of exploring different cultures through their artwork. Sanga (2009) advocates for inclusive education, suggesting that all students should engage in exploratory art. The research demonstrated that students are enthusiastic and adept at exploring diverse cultures through their artistic expressions. Sanga (2009) emphasizes the importance of making art accessible to all students, advocating for the inclusion of spontaneous drawing in art education. This practice deepens students' cultural understanding and enhances their analytical thinking, as opposed to limiting them to predefined drawing tasks. Educators are, therefore, encouraged to continue investigating the traits of children's art and how cultural elements can be integrated into art instruction.

Observations from art lessons highlight the need for educators to critically reflect on their teaching practices to ensure they acknowledge and incorporate students' cultural expressions in visual art. Art education should inspire teachers to use engaging and creative teaching methods, providing students opportunities to interact, discuss, and share insights about their artwork, thereby reflecting their social learning experiences. It is also suggested that children's artwork be analysed and appreciated to foster clear communication between the artist and the audience, as recommended in the Grade 6 Visual and Performing Arts Syllabus (2015). Visual art is thus essential in conveying and preserving societal values and traditions.

Conclusion

Culture plays a significant role in the growth and development of children. It is the primary interactive context for social learning. In an attempt to depict this social engagement, drawing particularly spontaneous and unguided drawing becomes a critical avenue for cultural learning and expression. While there is a tendency at universalizing graphic art, this is only true as far as the technical abilities are concerned. Subject matter and the visual narratives are culture bound. Philosophical and sociological undertones become some of the fundamental factors that gild visual representation by children, particularly as observed in this study. These seem to cut across cultural boundaries. The findings can be applied to similar African contexts and beyond.

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