

# Exploring Children's Communication through Art in the Early Years: The Role of the Teacher

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## Abstract

The idea that art influences children's communication and their general well-being is shared by most art educators and early childhood philosophers. Most children in the early years express themselves through art since they lack the ability to communicate with vocabulary and written words. This implies that teachers need to use a lot of art-based activities to meet this need of children in the early years. Based on a case study design, the study explored the pictorial representations of art done by children between the ages of two and four years at the pre-school level and the role of teachers in facilitating art activities at this level. Guided by observation and semi-structured interview guide, a qualitative approach was used. A sample of 30 pupils' works and 5 teachers were used for the study. The study revealed that children communicated through art but teachers did not have enough skills to guide them to promote their artistic abilities. The study, therefore, recommended that teachers should be given in-service training to equip them to provide children with the needed opportunities to express themselves through art.

**Keywords:** Art, Communication, Children, Early Years, Teacher

## 1. Introduction

One important aspect of every human endeavour is communication. Froemling, Grice and Skinner (2011) define communication as a process of sharing meaning through a continuous flow of symbolic messages. It always involves someone giving and another receiving and making sense of information. Therefore, for communication to be effective, it is required that the system of symbols, otherwise termed as language, that is used must be mutually intelligible.

Everybody communicates and so do children. However, of the many different 'languages' that children communicate through, art is one of the few that they find very useful and comfortable in expressing their feelings, thoughts and ideas (Omatseye & Emeriewen, 2010).

Children's inclination to the use of art as a means of communicating is often motivated by the challenge presented by the intricacies of an oral language system when they are not able to master in the early years, even though they have a myriad of environmental experiences that they would want to share. These make them use art, especially drawing, as a means of communication. Children have different artistic ways of expressing themselves and make meaning out of the world around them, therefore, the medium of drawing (art) give them the chance to make their thoughts and emotions known to the world around them (Anning, 1999).

Most children feel comfortable in expressing their feelings and ideas through art. As they explore with variety of materials such as paints, crayons, pencils, markers and clay, they try to communicate many thoughts which cannot be written nor said. Therefore, through their art symbolism most children are able to convey their ideas which they may find difficult to communicate in words (Garbarino, 1990).

According to Omatseye and Emeriewen (2010), the ideas children present in their arts are mostly based on experiences they have gone through and not mere rehearsal of those experiences. Jalongo (1999) further argues that children's artwork replicates their self-expression and as such, they always search for new ideas in their immediate environment to communicate.

Thus, children's art presentations are very meaningful and important to them, and therefore, it should not be taken for granted. Teachers and other caregivers need to be conscious and respond to children's artistry, since it is through this communication that teachers will get know children's thinking, what they are going through and what is important to them.

However, if teachers do not have the required skills and interest in art, children's artistry may be neglected in the classrooms of the early years. When this happens the beautiful dreams of children will not be appreciated, their thoughts will partially or completely not be heard, and their rare innate potentials will atrophy from lack of nurturing.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

The role of art in children's communication is not only appreciated by children alone but also by educators as well (Anim, 2012). This is seen in the fact that, in the Kindergarten syllabus in Ghana, drawing is often suggested as a key tool for assessing children's knowledge acquisition in many areas. Averagely, in the lesson plan of Early Childhood teachers, drawing is almost always seen as a key activity that children engage in, either in the

course of teaching or in assessing at the end of teaching. All these underscore the importance of art in the life of every child especially as it is through art that they communicate their thought given that they lack the ability to use written language.

Though the use of art in Early Childhood may be considered as developmentally appropriate, the mere presence of the use of art may not be a panacea to ineffective artistic development of children. As a result, children are made to draw at the end of a lesson to evaluate what they have learnt. Teachers in their lesson notes at this level also indicate that children will draw at the end of the lesson. The pre-school curriculum also makes room for drawing at the end of the lesson which children need to communicate what they have learnt. It has been observed that some of the teachers do not have the requisite skills to guide the children during artwork and so leave children unguided after which they assess their outputs. According to Jalongo (1999), teachers who are not confident in their own artwork will influence their own students negatively. This shows that teachers have great impact in influencing the child's art and therefore, they need a great deal of skill and knowledge to guide the child. A lot of research has been done in the area of art and most of them were based on children expressing themselves through art. For example, Lowenfeld and Brittain's (1970) approach in their book creative and mental growth, focuses on artistic expression through 'natural-unfolding' behaviours where children's developmental stages through art were identified. Despite the important role teachers play in children's art, there is not much research in this area. This research investigated what children use art to communicate and the role teachers play in terms of interpreting as well as the skills required to help the children succeed in artwork.

### 3. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Explore how children communicate through art.
2. Assess teachers' interpretation of pupils' art work.
3. Find the roles that teachers play in facilitating art of children.

### 4. Literature review

The main focus of this study was to explore children's communication through art, the teachers' role in the assessment of children's art work.

#### 4.1 Children's communication through art

Being able to express oneself is an important need (Anim, 2012). In the early years as the verbal and the written expressions are limited, children resort to art to communicate. Children feel comfortable in expressing their feelings through art (Omantseye & Emeriewen, 2010).

National Art Education Association of USA (1996) hold the opinion that children learn through art and it is through this that they able to observe, recall, make choices, accept and rejects alternatives and make decisions. They are able to communicate better through the use of art than words and text.

Whether in school or out of school, children express themselves in aesthetic ways. Children produce more than art that hangs on walls, that stands in spaces, that is read out aloud during assembly, or is part of a performance or concert piece (Cannatella, 2007). The child's aesthetic experience assumes the form of the child that signifies their conversations with people, and things, with words, and actions, facial expressions, bodily movement, and sound. Cannatella argues that unconsciously and involuntarily the child approves of many things that reflect their inner life. Unknowingly the child may risk everything in an unrestrained aesthetic experience that more vehemently tastes the world, the free play of its psychic forces to achieve something in the world, to generate itself through the world, and to feel the passion of the world.

As such they do not engage in art just to exhibit skills but use their artwork as free expression of their feelings devoid of 'hidden meaning' (Levick, 1986). Thus, for young children, art is a form of one's experiences and the principal purpose is communication but not the artistic quality, especially as seen from an adult's perspective.

Children artistic communication differs greatly depending on their level of artistic development. Olson (2003) asserts that the subjects they draw often are reflections of what they know and understand. Since, children grow up in diverse environments and have varied experiences due to their culture, and their drawings often reflect these differences (Grandstaff, 2012).

There is a general acceptance that the characteristics of children's drawings are developed in stages (Lowenfeld, 1947; Olson, 2003; Grandstaff, 2012). Lowenfeld's study which is considered to have paved the way for the subsequent studies of children's art, examined children's art in a consecutive way from birth till the age of seventeen years. These stages were categorized into Scribbling, Preschematic, Schematic, Dawning Realism, and Pseudo- Naturalistic (Lowenfeld & Brittan, 1982). The first stage, scribbling, begins at age two and usually lasts until the age of four. This is the child's first opportunity to draw and use art materials. The young artist begins with random marks which later evolve into controlled scribbles. The second stage is the

Preschematic Stage, which usually starts from age four to around seven years. This stage is characterized by children drawing people and representing objects in their environment. Children are able and interested in discussing their art with adults and are eager to explain it without being self-conscious (Grandstaff, 2012). The next stage is the Schematic Stage, which begins around seven and ends around age nine. Children's drawings begin to symbolize parts of their environment; representations are usually repeated with variation. Young learners in this artistic stage arrange objects in a straight line across the bottom of the page, called a baseline, creating decorative art. Around the age of nine, peers become important to the child. This marks the beginning of the Stage of Dawning Realism or the Gang Age and lasts until about twelve. The child becomes more aware of him or herself, and this is evident in the drawings. At this point, the drawing is small and contains more details. The child is no longer eager to explain his or her drawings and hides them from adult observation. The final, the Pseudo-naturalistic stage, begins at age eleven or twelve. This stage is characterized by reasoning and self-criticism. The child becomes more aware of his or her natural surroundings and begins to unconsciously become concerned about proportion and depth and other essential principles of drawing. Evidence of great detail in the human figure, an increased awareness of sexual characteristics, and greater awareness of differences and gradations in color is evident. For some, this marks the end of artistic development. If children are not involved in art beyond this stage when asked to draw, their adult artwork will exhibit the typical characteristics of a twelve year old (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982)

This, therefore, implies that what is needed in the development of artistic skills in children is not a form of adult censorship of their art works, since adults might not necessarily comprehend their thoughts conveyed through their works. Children, however, need to be nurtured in this area to be able to develop their skills. Mackenzie (2011), in her research, recommended that drawing must become central to children's writing programme in their first year of formal schooling; it was also found that children created text which were more complex than those they created with words. Various studies have been done in the area of art among children, most of which investigated art as a tool by which children expressed their feelings. (Cox, 1992; Clark, 2005; Veale, 1992).

#### **4.2 The teachers' role in Children's Art**

Most literature on art education agree that adult role is very essential to children's artistic development, Bae (2004) argues that the quality of preschool art experiences depends largely on the teacher. The role of the teacher is very important in recognising the functions of art, to enable him/her to enhance children's full experience and communication through art (Gentle, 1985). In as much as teachers may have key roles to play in the artistic development of children, their involvement must be appropriate in order to bring the expected results. Grandstaff (2012) has observed that many adults may for example discourage children drawing visual culture images because they want them to create something new and original. Freedman (1997) also argues that teachers and parents try to discourage or filter out popular culture images in children's drawings for fear of stifling creativity and individuality.

When children are invited to draw what they want, their drawings are quite spontaneous, relying on many different graphic media forms, and this may be a tool for exploration or an avenue for creativity. Their drawings provide a look into what they observe, value and understand, but it may be less evident when teachers control the subject matter of children's drawings (Thompson, 2003).

Kindler (1995) therefore holds a strong view that active interventions of artistic development by adults are unnecessary during the preschool years. Even though the appropriate roles of teachers in children artistic development may not be direct intervention, there are other varied and but yet critical roles to play in children's artistic development (Lindsay, 2015).

One of the key roles of the teacher is to prepare the art materials and the environment for explorations through art activities (Brittain, 1979). Again, Seefeldt (1995), in his studies with children's art, found that most teachers only provided materials and environment where children will work.

Aside the preparation and provision of materials and enabling environment, teachers are also expected guide the children through a specific step-by-step process of using the variety of art materials made available to them such paint brushes, crayons and pencils (Grandstaff, 2012). As the guided to explore their use and children gain the skills to manipulate these materials they are able to use them more confidently as vehicles to convey their thoughts.

Again, expected of the teacher to create a space in which children are free to explore. They need the encouragement to try something different rather than being forced to conform to known ways of doing things (Kosrof, 2006). Even more important, children have to be respected and helped to gain self-respect for their new ways of seeing. They always need reassurance from their teacher. But the opening of a new space for them, and the encouragement and assurance that their first ingenious works have value, goes a long way to develop a level of confidence in them and build their curiosity enough to move them to act on their own.

Perhaps one of the most critical roles of the teacher in children's art is assessment. Teachers are always

expected to measure growth and performance in children's art. Unlike the traditional forms of assessment, in assessing pupils' artwork teachers and pupils work in an apprenticeship relationship. As pupils go through the process of carrying out meaningful real-life project, teachers provide guidance along the way. Assessment in art therefore must basically be a joint evaluation of pupils' work (Danjuma, 2006).

The major problem with art teachers has always been that they are not too clear about what is to be assessed and in what ways criteria can be defined (Olorukooba, 1992). Another challenge facing most art teachers today is that they do not know the most appropriate method to use. Teachers therefore resort to using different methods and criteria in assessing and measuring students' artistic skill and competence. The problem of art teachers is further compounded because they tend to believe that the art "product" of learners are indicators of progress with little or no attention paid to how the work is carried out. This practice seems to overemphasize the importance of product at the expense of the process (Danjuma, 2006). They also tend to demonstrate an inclination to assess the more objectively score able aspects of artistic performance. Mahi (1999) considers this practice harmful to the learner because it turns attention away from artistic creativity to concerns for the picture or object itself. He argues that real – life artistic products must be judged by subjective criteria. In other words the only person who can properly judge a product of art is the person who produces it.

The teacher's role therefore is very critical because if the teacher makes a mistake it will affect the child, but if there is a healthy attitude towards creativity in art that begins in early childhood this can continue throughout the child's life. Striker (2001) also opines that a teacher's positive attitude towards children's art will encourage a healthy, confident self-image and high self- esteem in children. This study is focused on what children communicate through art, the ability of the teacher in interpreting the child's art and the skill put in place to help children to develop on their art.

## **5. Method**

A qualitative approach, specifically a case study was employed to investigate the unique characteristics of children's communication through art and the role teachers played in interpreting and developing the art of children. Case study was employed because it could help to understand the dynamics presented in a single setting. (Yin, 1994). A schedule was made to observe 30 children between the ages of 2 and 4 years and their teachers (6 teachers) for a period of three weeks. A semi- structured interview guide was used to interview teachers. This guide was constructed based on the observations made on the various art activities children did in class and the roles their teachers played.

## **6. The Setting**

This research was done in three private schools from the Cape Coast Municipality of the Central Region of Ghana. This is an urban environment where there is access to electricity and other social amenities. The environment has influence on the visual experiences of children as they are exposed to variety of media.

## **7. Data collection and analysis**

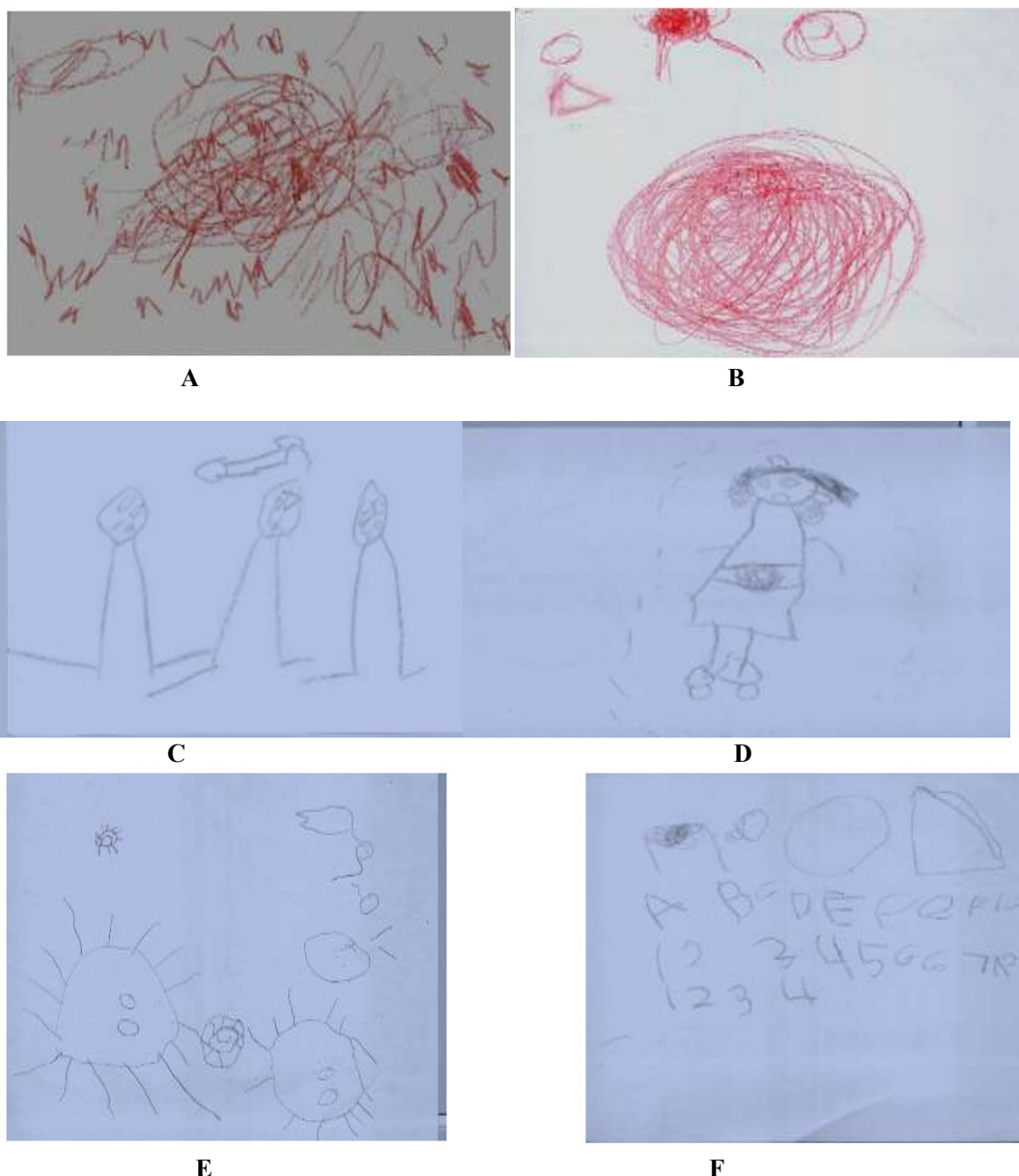
To identify the role teachers play in facilitating art in the early childhood classrooms, the researchers visited three early childhood centres where art lessons were conducted. We spent two hours each week to observe what children use art to communicate and the role teachers played in facilitating children's art. A sample of ten children's art works were collected from each of the schools visited making it 30 artworks. Each school was visited three times. Two teachers from each of the schools visited were made to identify five of the drawings done by her own pupils, while they were interviewed. The data collected were analysed by means of thematic content analysis.

## **8. Findings Analysis and Discussions**

This section presents the results of the data analysis carried out and the data collected from the teachers and the pupils' artworks.

### **8.1 Research question 1: Children's art as a means of communication**

It was a creative art lesson and to know what children communicate through art, the children were made to draw on any theme of their choice. The children were given crayons and pencils to work with. Among the many drawings that were presented these children between the ages of 24 months and 48 months told stories about their drawings.



**Figure 1: Samples of Children's drawings** Figure 1, drawing A was done by 2 years eight months old Keziah (pseudonym) who said her drawing is about herself and her friends at the playing ground singing and dancing around. Drawing B was done by 3 years old Dede (pseudonym) who said her drawing is about her friend's birthday party which she attended. He said the big round thing on the paper is the cake, while the three things found at top were biscuits, chocolates and drinks she took at the party. Drawing C was done by 3 years, six months old Kwamena (pseudonym) who said he and his siblings were looking at an aircraft. Drawing D was done by 3 years, eight months old Martha (pseudonym) who said her drawing is her mummy who has a baby in her stomach. Drawing E, was done by 4 years old Patrick (pseudonym) who said what he has drawn were spiders. Drawing F was done by 3 years 11 months old David (pseudonym) who drew shapes, letters of the alphabet and numerals. From the representations, it was realised that most of children's art were basically ideas that interest them and they have experienced. This supports the assertions of Korn-Bursztyn (2002) that children draw from their experiences. Again it confirms the general view that children's drawing at this stage portrays some form of universal characteristics (Lowenfeld & Brittan, 1982).

## 8.2 Research Question 2: Teachers' interpretations of children's drawing

For teachers to interpret children's drawing, teachers gave children a common theme to draw on. The theme was "My school". Teachers led children to mention some of the items, people found in their schools and some of the things they do at school and gave children tools and materials to work with. All the children made interesting representations of items found in their school and some of the activities that go on during school hours.

Samples of children’s works were picked for teachers to interpret. Figure 2 presents a sample of such artworks (drawings) by the children.



G ( 3years 4months)



H ( 4years)



I ( 3 years)

Figure 2: Samples of Children’s drawing on themes.

The accuracy of the interpretation teachers gave to pupils’ drawings are summarised in table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of the Interpretations of drawings by Teachers**

Teacher	Correct	Wrong
A	0	5
B	2	3
C	2	3
D	0	5
E	1	4
F	4	1

Among the lots, teacher A was asked to interpret her pupils drawing and out of the five she could not interpret any of them. For example, she said drawing ‘G’ looks like butterflies but when the child was consulted, she said she had drawn the children sitting in the classroom learning. When teacher ‘B’ was asked to interpret five of her pupils’ drawings she was able to identify 2. For example, to interpret drawing H, she said she could see human beings with some letters, but when the child was consulted, she said she had drawn her teacher teaching them the letters of the English alphabet. Teacher ‘C,’ however could not tell what drawing ‘I’ meant but the child who drew it, said it was snack and play time in the classroom, this teacher however could interpret 2 out of the five drawings. Teacher ‘D’ also said she could see some shapes and scribbles in the drawings shown to her but she could not tell exactly what the child had drawn and could not identify any of the drawings shown to her. Teacher ‘E’ could interpret only one drawing out of the five. Teacher ‘F’ who has taught for eighteen years could identify 4 of her pupils’ drawings.

From this finding it’s obvious that teachers cannot easily tell what children present in their art but do guess work to try to interpret what they have been drawing. This therefore will affect the kind of assessment they do on children’s art. If the teachers can interpret and understand what children communicate, that is when they would know what interest them, what they are going through, what their experiences are and plan activities to meet their needs. From this one can say, the context under which children’s art works are assessed is problematic because one cannot assess something he or she does not understand. This supports the views of Mbahi (1999)

who argues that teachers may not have a clear idea about what children have drawn for them to attempt an assessment of them.

### **8.3 Research Question 3: Teachers' Role in Facilitating Children's Art**

The study also sought to find out the key roles that teachers play in facilitating children's artistic development in the classroom. Observations and interviews were used to gather data and from this three themes relating to the roles teachers played emerged.

#### **8.3.1 Making children draw at the end of a lesson.**

Teachers confirmed that after taken children through a lesson, children were made to draw to communicate their answers. When asked if they asked children to interpret what they had drawn before it is assessed. All the teachers said they do not ask the children to interpret but guessed what the children had drawn due to the class size and sometimes time. Three of the teachers said in order for them to understand what the children draw they sometimes drew on the board for the children to copy. Teacher 'A' who had taught for two years had this to say:

*Due to the class size and time allotted for the lesson, I am not able to allow each of the children to interpret their work but guess what they have drawn based on the lesson if it is related, and if it is related I give a tick, if not I write seen'. But sometimes during creative art lessons I display the art works of the children and we talk about them (25 years, female).*

It must be noted that guessing to interpret children's work could give a wrong interpretation (Mbahi, 1999), which in effect can affect the kind of assessment teachers give to children's work.

Teacher 'B' who had taught for eight years also had this to say:

*I realised that sometimes children struggle to draw, so I draw for them to copy and based on that I find it very easy to interpret what they have drawn because I know what I have drawn for them to copy (30 years, female)*

The teacher's assertions are generally a confirmation of the observations of Kosrof (2006) that in most cases teachers try to force children to conform rather than exhibit their ingenuity. Drawing for the children to copy may sometimes not be very good since it can also limit the creative development of the children. When children are drawing without copying they are recalling, imagining and fantasizing. It is therefore important that they are given the opportunity to work on their own.

Teacher 'C' who had taught for a period of 6 years and teaches children between the ages of two and three years had this to say:

*The children in my class draw everyday but it's meant for them to gain confidence so I do not ask them to interpret because they are very young to even interpret what they have drawn (27 years, female)*

Teacher 'D' who had taught for a period of 2 years had this to say: I provide the needed materials for them and I encourage them to draw (25years, Female)

From this finding it was realised that teachers only dictated the process at which children worked as confirmed by Thompson (1995) but not teach them any skill to draw because they do not teach art as a discipline, But according to Efland (1990) Instead of teaching art as a form of creative self-expression as in the past suggested by Lowenfeld and Brittain (1970) where children were mainly made to express themselves through art. Art educators have promoted the idea of art as a discipline (Efland 1990) which should enable the teacher to use the appropriate teaching methods at this stage.

#### **8.3.2 Teaching art as a lesson**

Studies have generally suggested that the teaching of art lessons should be more focused on helping develop skills of using tools (Grandstaff, 2012) and applying conceptual skills rather than being forced to drawing given objects (Kindler, 1995).

All the five teachers agreed that they taught art during creative art lessons in their various classrooms but because they were not guided by any approved curriculum, their school developed a guide for them to use to teach. All teachers except one said they have had some art education training in their initial teacher training programmes to take children through some basic art activities but not teaching skills in developing their art works. Two of the teachers said they took the children through some printing processes such as palm printing but because the children messed the classroom during these lessons they do not do it regularly, let alone allowing them to explore using art materials. The others said they did drawing only during creative art lessons because they did not have enough materials for the children to work with. It must be noted that, when children are exposed to varieties of art activities they get the opportunity to learn to explore on their ideas, interest and share meaningful experiences (Korn-Bursztyn, 2002). When teachers were asked how they went about their teaching of art, teacher

'A' who had taught for 2 years had this to say:

*I group the children into small groups and I show them the materials we are going to use and I teach*

*them how to use the materials and if its printing, I demonstrate how the printing is done to the children and I ask them to practice (24 years, female)*

Teacher 'F' who had taught for eighteen years also had this to say:

*when it comes to art I wish I could teach the children to draw but I personally do not know how to draw and so I had difficulty in teaching the children. But anytime I'm able to draw, the children are encouraged and they try to copy what I have drawn (42 years, female)*

Teacher 'E' who had taught for a period of 10 years also had this to say:

*The time allocated for creative arts is only two periods which is only one hour per week. I wish to give the children enough time for them to get the opportunity to explore to see what art materials could do and what they themselves are capable of doing but the time allocated on the timetable for creative art lesson is too short for the children to do that (35 years, female)*

The observation made during the creative art lessons were that teachers only provided the materials for children to work undisturbed and this is to help them to develop their art naturally (Kindler, 1995). Teachers put up that attitude because, it seems they lack confidence and knowledge in terms of providing art education for the young child.

### **8.3.1 Evaluating children's art work**

To evaluate children's art works, teachers indicated that they do not often celebrate the art of the children. They complained that, lack of enough time did not allow them to celebrate children's art works regularly. It was only one teacher who asserted that she sometimes displayed the children's works and discussed them. She said anytime this was done, the children became happy and confidently spoke about their works. Also some of the children compared their works with others'. They teased themselves and based on this some children who do not want to be teased improved on their drawing. When teachers were asked how they assessed children's art work. Teacher 'C' had this to say:

*...initially I was not giving them any mark but realised that any time I gave them marks the children put in their best (female 27 years)*

When they were asked what they assessed in children's art, all the teachers said they look at the children's ability to do what they have been asked to do. When the teachers themselves do not have the skill to teach the children what will they be assessing? Observation indicated that the teachers were just facilitators during creative art lessons. They only provided materials and encouraged the pupils to work.

## **9. Conclusions**

From the findings that emerged from the study, it was realised what children communicate is more detailed than what teachers interpret. Teachers interpretation of children's art works are either a glimpse or even at times totally wrong interpretations of what children want to communicate which has an implication for the reliability of their assessment. Again most teachers seem to find themselves influenced by the traditional role of the teacher as someone who impart knowledge and assesses the end product. As a result they have challenges recasting themselves in a new role of which puts them at the peripheral of learning. Their actions confirm the views of Olorukooba (1992) that teachers are not always clear about what to assess and how to assess them. Also instead of teachers guiding children through how to apply tools for drawing (Grandstaff, 2012), they rather drew on the board and expected the children to copy. This ultimately suggests that teachers lack the competencies and skills needed in supporting children's artistic development to a large extent. Perhaps the only area that teachers show great competencies is in providing materials and enabling environment for the children to work. This may not help children to improve on the art. If children were guided with some skill on how to do their art works they could do better than what they are doing now in their various classrooms.

## **10. Recommendation**

Given that teachers seem not to be able to interpret fully what children communicate, it will be important that the children go beyond art of drawing to interpretation of their own drawings. Teachers should be given regular in-service training to help update their skills in teaching art. It will also be important to incorporate a compulsory Art Education programme in the pre-service training for Early Childhood teachers so that they will come out well equipped to help children to develop their artistic and creative skills.

## **11. Suggestions for further research**

There are other areas related to this study that could not be adequately investigated and discussed. These issues are recommended as areas for further research. This study used a sample that comprised preschool pupils in only the Cape Coast Metropolis of Ghana, it would not be possible to generalise the results in terms of teaching of art. It would be helpful if it were done in other regions in Ghana to give a general picture of the teaching of art in Ghana. There is the need for similar study to be done on how pre-service teachers are prepared in the various Colleges of Education to teach art in preschools in Ghana.



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