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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE USE OF WRITTEN SYMBOLS IN PRESCHOOLERS AND EXPOSURE AND USE OF ART MEDIA

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE USE OF WRITTEN SYMBOLS IN
PRESCHOOLERS AND EXPOSURE AND USE OF ART MEDIA

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

The visual arts are an important part of the daily life of an early childhood classroom. Through drawing, painting, and other expressive media, young children develop early representational skills. These skills are an important component of early literacy development. This paper documents an action research project that took place in a 4K classroom. The aim of the project was to understand why the children in this classroom did not voluntarily spend time writing and drawing in the arts center while also working on strategies for promoting the children's use of the arts center and representational experiences. This research provides support for the integration of action research projects in early childhood classrooms while offering early childhood educators strategies to promote representational experiences with young learners.

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PRESCHOOLERS AND EXPOSURE AND USE OF ART MEDIA

Helen Prince

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This thesis reports on an action research project conducted in a 4K classroom. The project aimed to uncover the reasons behind the minimal use of the art center in students' daily classroom experiences. The project was initiated when I, as a teacher-researcher, became concerned about many of my students' drawing and writing skills. Through classroom observations, analysis of student drawings, interviews with parents and children, the primary objective of this classroom intervention was to document the affordances and challenges of working with the students in my classroom to "redesign" an arts space that encouraged student interest in drawing, writing, and representation. Findings from this project demonstrate the importance of bringing students into the decision-making process about classroom design in an effort to encourage student engagement in areas of the classroom that are not the child's first choice.

Project Rationale

Prior to the start of the school year, teachers in the classroom set up the entire room, including the art area, as a child friendly space with inviting displays of materials. This classroom follows to plan-do-review sequence from HighScope. All components of a daily routine are conducted daily by the children as prescribed by the HighScope curriculum. Children are introduced to new materials through small group time, where the children are free to explore and use the materials in conjunction with older materials. The children may then collectively decide on the best place in the classroom for the materials to go. Exploration of art materials is a favored small group activity. The

younger children seem to enjoy the sensory input of the activities, while the older children benefit from the creative outlet.

However, in spite of interest in the arts during small group time, the classroom teachers noticed that during planning time, another component of the daily routine, children did not call the art area by any name. In fact children might say they want to do small group again or ask if they could stay at the table leaving teachers to infer that the child wished to continue work in the art area. Teachers were not sure if this meant that the children felt a disconnect to the art area itself and/or the materials there. Even after teachers modeled the use of the area name, asked children to help create signs or pick a name for the center; the children seldom used the words, “art area”. Teachers became further concerned when it was noticed that children did not spend the same amount of time in the art center as the other classroom learning centers.

Parents of the children in the class and administration put pressure on teachers to have the children do more writing, specifically tracing and writing their own names on worksheets. When asked the children’s families said that reading and writing as one of the main goals of sending their children to school. Not wanting to sacrifice the developmentally appropriateness of the classroom, teachers added a “name writing” component to the morning routine. The rationale was that as children came in the classroom, parents would be required to stay with their child and help them write their name. This was mainly a way to get parents to interact with their child (one of the goals of the program), provide opportunity to model appropriate ways to interact with your child and for parents to be able to see what other children that are on similar

developmental levels are doing. Another rationale was that children were being provided with exposure to writing tools and visual exposure to their name in print. Teachers gave parents information about the development of fine motor skills in young children at conferences and on home visits, particularly about drawing and writing development in young children. Teachers expressed their belief that children must learn to control the writing tools of their choice and have the cognitive and motor ability to create written symbols before they would be able to formally write. Teachers also felt that it is inappropriate to punish children for not writing or for lack of skill or even expect children to spontaneously be able to write.

However, based on research and recommendations from High Scope and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), it is appropriate to expose children to art and writing and support their learning and early attempts at writing and drawing. For the purpose of this research, only drawing that the children created was used because initially only a few children had the ability to correctly make letters or even create letter like shapes. Eventually it is expected the children will learn how to write their name, a skill required for kindergarten in our state. The egocentric nature of the young child. The primary objective of this classroom research was to document the affordances and challenges of working with the students in my classroom to “redesign” an arts space in a way that encouraged student interest in drawing, writing, and representation.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine what the children in this classroom were doing in the art learning center, the frequency they chose to go to that center and to observe if that frequency could be increased. The art center was chosen for the focus because of the strong association between writing and drawing (Clay, 1977, 1975; Bloodgood, 1999). As curriculum continues to be pushed down from formal school into kindergarten and pre-k programs, parents, policy makers and administration continue to put pressure on young children and their teachers to include more academic content areas in the early childhood classroom. Parents and administrators have insisted on teachers introducing and “teaching” children to write, in spite of the developmental level of the children.

Teachers value the arts and the process of creating art as more than just a pathway to writing. This classroom guiding principle was to put more emphasis on the process than the product created. Visual arts are important to young children for many reasons including: providing an expressive outlet, early exposure to science concepts, exploration of complex cognitive skills, and promotion of communication skills and social skills. The expressive nature of art materials also can have a positive impact on the children’s emotional development. In particular teachers felt that the children in this classroom benefited from using art in a therapeutic way. With all the positive aspects of art in an early childhood classroom, the teachers became concerned that the children were not taking complete advantage of the environment provided to them for exploration of the visual arts.

To try to uncover possible remedies to this situation I decided to utilize an action research method to better understand and document the reasons behind the minimal use of the art center in students' daily classroom choices. "Action research is a research approach which focuses on simultaneous action and research in a collaborative manner" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005, p. 13.). Action research can best be thought of as research *in* action and, as such, has dual focus—both on the inquiry process and the implementation process. Additionally, "action research can include all types of data gathering methods. Qualitative and quantitative tools, such as interview and surveys are commonly used" (p. 12). As teacher-researcher, I implemented the inquiry experience with my preschool students, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data.

The specific research questions are:

1. What are children doing while they are in the art center?
2. What children go to the art center on a daily or weekly basis? / How frequently do the children go to the art center?
3. How can I encourage more children to go to the art center and be purposeful?

Importance of Study

The information here will be valuable to teachers as it may provide some answer to the question of how to get children to engage in an area that is not the child's first choice. The information found here may also provide insight to administrators and serve to hold the teacher accountable to the progress of the students. The child being reflective of their own work during the progress of this study is important to their own art development. As children are being required to have more skills sooner for formal

school, this study will provide knowledge in how one classroom teacher attempted to solve the issue of lack of exposure to materials and/or tools.

Definition of Terms

- Social Contracts of writing – rules of writing messages implicitly understood and followed by individuals in any given culture (Rowe, 2008)
- Post drawing response – description about a particular drawing that is given after the drawing has been completed (Cotes, 2002)
- Emergent Writing- drawing, scribbling left to right, creation of letter like forms by a child to convey a message through print (Mayer, 2007)
- HighScope- an early learning curriculum that emphasizes shared, adult-child interactions, carefully designed learning environment to support children’s explorations, and features a planning component designed to promote children’s initiative and personal interests.
- Planning Time- a component of the HighScope curriculum where children are expected to plan what they are going to do during free choice work time
- Working/ Free Choice Time – the component of a HighScope curriculum where children are able to select their own activities and materials
- Scribbling Stage- early stage of drawing where children’s art is not recognizable and may or may not convey a message
- Preschematic Stage- stage of drawing occurs between ages three and four, where children purposefully try to represent something in their drawings
- Symbolic Play- Piaget’s term for children’s play using one object in the place of or representing another.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Review of Research on the Artistic Development of Young Children

As children begin to develop their drawing and artistic skills they pass through several development stages. Young children's first experiences with writing media are largely sensory based. That is, children touch or break the crayon and/or enjoy the large movements of their arms as they make marks on the page as part of their first experience. For the purposes of this research we will focus on the scribbling and pre-schematic stages given the ages and developmental stages of the children participating in this project. As children move farther in the scribbling phase (Lowenfeld and Brittan, 1987) they begin naming what their scribbles are. This shift from engaging in an activity for motor or sensory input to engaging in an activity for imaginative reasons is important. This shows that children now understand that their marks can convey meaning to others. In this stage because children are generally younger than four, their egocentric nature causes the scribbles to record non tangible messages as well as visual messages. Children in this stage still do not hold an idea mentally as they complete the picture and their descriptions of the picture often change as they are working. These marks, although named by the child, generally will hold no meaning to anyone other than the child. Child development now shows evidence that language development and cognitive development grow together. By age four, children are creating shapes in their art that are recognizable to others. A typical developing four or five year old will make some attempts at

representation in their art. (Lowenfeld and Brittan, 1987) It is also at this time that children begin to represent words on paper.

Vygotsky (1962) considers written speech as a higher level of thinking. Language is the “tool” of the mind (Bodrova, 1996). Children using written language must tap into their understanding of symbols and social context. Drawings are children’s earliest attempts at writing. Symbols on paper allow for ideas to be revisited by one and shared by others at different times. When you examine the writings and pictures of children, you gain a glimpse into what they know, what skills they are learning and what breaks they have in their understanding.

People also learn from each other in society as a whole. As a child observes a more skilled person utilize writing they can pick up those skills and add them to their own knowledge for later use when constructing new messages. From this social constructivist perspective (Bandura, 1962), children’s early writing attempts are tangible evidence of the concepts that a child has grasp of and what he does not yet fully understand. A child must understand that words have symbolic meaning before s/he will attempt to “write” or draw anything as a way to convey a message or story.

Symbolic play begins to be seen in children around age two in most typically developing children (Piaget, Callahan, 2002). Children must understand that there is a meaning in the wavy lines on paper that represent actual items in real life. Children seem to develop different schemas to represent writing and drawing even though both acts employ the use of essentially the same motor skills.

In a study of emerging symbolic understanding with children aged 2.4 to 3.6, Callahan (2002) confirmed the stages of symbolic functioning children go through. Children can comprehend symbols before they produce them. Appropriate scaffolding provided between the age of two and three may accelerate symbolic functioning. The study also found that graphic symbol formation was positively correlated with language production. This correlation appears to agree with the line of thought that children's prewriting efforts must be supported within a social context; that is adults should encourage children to attempt writing text even if the resulting markings do not appear conventional. They should also provide opportunities to recognize the meanings inferred from children's writings.

As children grow in their understanding of the social contracts of writing they begin to refine their marks into something that better resembles formal writing. According to Clay (1977) the first step toward writing in young children is the concept that signs carry messages. These initial stages begin with strange letter forms, invented words, and make believe sentences. (Clay, 1977) As children create messages they construct them in such a manner that the intended reader will be able to decipher the message. Often in early childhood an adult is the one who attempts to decipher the message. This is how adults pass on social expectations, ideas and boundaries to children about written language.

Artistic Development in the Early Childhood Classroom

Teachers can utilize the implications from the research and formulate strategies that enable very young children to move from scribbles into more formal and accepted forms of writing. When children under age two begin making marks on paper, they often make random scribble marks, and do not differentiate their art/drawings from writing (Rowe, 2008). As children become older they begin to assign meaning to their “unconventional marks”, however children under three should not be expected to form alphabet letters per se.

Teachers also can provide an important role in scaffolding children’s writing. Children need to see teachers engaged in the writing process (Mayer, 2007). Teachers also must provide an environment conducive to writing and drawing. A plentiful assortment of writing and print materials are needed to properly support children’s’ advances in writing. In addition, children benefit from seeing a variety of different print forms and font styles in their environments (Mayer, 2007). Providing opportunities for writing during center play is another way to engage children in meaningful writing experiences. When teachers view writing as an activity that is child-centered and meaningful, teachers can provide support in natural situations that leave young children feeling empowered and ready to enter kindergarten with a strong literacy base (Mayer, 2007).

Researchers report that young children’s drawings do hold significance even if the drawing is discarded soon after completion. When observing young children you may

gain insight by listening to their utterances (Coates, 2002). Initially children's drawings are not intended to be shared with others, or to be used to communicate messages. As children get older their post drawing responses- descriptions they give after having completed a picture and gone back to it- become increasingly more explanatory about their work. Children aged three and four seem to label all the items in their post drawing explanations even in instances when they told a very dramatic story while in the act of drawing (Coates, 2002). Drawings help children externalize their thoughts and are used as a form of composing and pre-writing. Children of age five produce a stage, or a background, that the characters in the picture can act in, to serve as a prompt for their verbal narratives, Coates cites Kellogg (1955) support to her observations of five year olds.

The National Art Educational Association prescribes a comprehensive way to teach art to young children (NAEA, 1994). As art is integrated in the classroom and into the other subjects being taught art is increasingly used as a type of language and expression. Even toddlers can be taught to appreciate art even as their representation of the art is limited. As teachers of toddlers strive to extend their art curriculum beyond allowing the children to engage in sensory activities with art materials, they need to search for artwork to display. While teachers should be sensitive to the background information of a piece, making the most of the children's connections to the art is what is most important. (Finnegan, 2001) Thompson (2003) argues that traditional accounts of developmental stages may not accurately describe young children's artistic experiences in the beginning

of this century. Another look at young children's voluntary drawings can provide the teacher with knowledge of what the child notices and values most.

Although the body of research is deep concerning teacher methods to aid in emergent writing for children over six years of age, research on the emergent writing of preschoolers seems to be sparse. Current research is taking place to better understand the development of symbolic realization and creation in young children. More research could be done to understand better the emergence of writing in preschoolers and the relationship between children's art skill and their writing.

Impact of HighScope classroom environment on early childhood development

Recent research acknowledges that the classroom environment can have an effect on young children. In a HighScope classroom emphasis is placed on adult/child interactions, classroom arrangement, daily routine, and curriculum based around 58 key developmental indicators (KDIs). Adult/child interactions in the HighScope classroom are balanced so that the teachers carefully scaffold children's learning in a purposeful way. The classroom is to be arranged in a thoughtful way as to optimally promote the children's independent choice of materials. HighScope curriculum prescribes that the room be arranged into "interest areas." These areas are flexible and have affordances for specific types of play. The daily routine, or schedule, is important to the HighScope classroom because it allows the teacher to provide intangible structure to the day. Children become accustomed to the length of components of the day and the order that they occur. KDIs are built around five developmental domains; approaches to learning;

language, literacy, and communication; social and emotional development; physical development, health, and well-being; and arts and sciences. As teachers collect anecdotal evidence to support each of the KDIs on each child a extensive portfolio and picture of the child's total development and growth is created.

Environment plays an important role as a social connection between the classroom culture, teacher, and the child (Durak, 2009). Durak notes that the characteristics of the learning environment provide children a place to actively engage in their own learning. Children need to have the ability to be autonomous in their selection of materials for use. Durak (2009) reports, "Children's active involvement in the design of these activity areas is a necessity for encouraging their satisfaction with their classroom and feeling responsibility for their learning environment."

Rosen (2009) documents the creation of a play space in one classroom. The children were empowered by responsibility of having to design a use their own space. By children being involved in the design and construction of this space they used it in a novel way.

The literature is deep concerning the benefit of quality, well planned classroom environments for young children. As a teacher researcher my aim was to research why children were not fully utilizing the art center in our classroom and if I could change the frequency that children voluntarily chose the art area and engaged in purposeful work there.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to document the affordances and challenges of working with the students in my classroom to “redesign” an arts space that encouraged student interest in drawing, writing, and representation. Utilizing an action research approach, the data collection and analysis focused on four traditional qualitative measures: classroom observations, analysis of student drawings, semi-structured interviews with parents, and semi-structured interviews with students.

Participants

This study was conducted in a classroom of sixteen children of ages range 3.0 to 5.3 years. Children are selected for this classroom on the basis of six criterion: score DIAL-3, household income, if the child lives in a single parent home, level of parental education, if the live with their parent, and if they have a referral from another agency. Children are given the DIAL-3 prior to entrance in the classroom. In the fall of 2009, 14 of the children had a score of 30 or under on the DIAL-3, two children scored between 31 and 50. These scores indicated that these children were at risk. All 16 children enrolled in the classroom at the time of the study were invited to participate in this research, eight are females and eight are males, 14 are African American and two are bi-racial. The participating children’s primary caregivers were also invited to take part in this study. In total there were 16 adults participating, 15 African Americans and one Caucasian caregiver. The adults that participated were in daily contact with the children involved

and act as the child's primary caregiver. All participating families are considered to live below the South Carolina poverty line and most receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. A questionnaire given to parents prior to the school year started revealed that most families wanted their child to "read and write" or learn their "A, B, Cs". This questionnaire also revealed that prior to entering this classroom the children's usual activities included watching television, physical activity (riding bike, going to playground, wrestling with siblings), coloring, and listening to music.

This classroom is housed with-in Happy Town Center, a community center. This classroom has two teachers. Mrs. H., the lead teacher, has a B. S. and Mrs. C., the assistant teacher, is currently enrolled in a CDA program. Both teachers have completed HighScope's Preschool Curriculum Course. The classroom strictly follows the HighScope Curriculum and Perry Preschool Model- including weekly home visits into the children's homes. The classroom is set up with learning centers including an art center with various supplies for writing, drawing and creating art. The children have opportunities to use these materials outside of the writing center. In the classroom, all children are provided with quality materials for writing and drawing most of which they are familiar with and some that are new. Teachers model appropriate use of new materials for the children by introducing that material in small group.

Materials and Equipment

Children have access to instructional materials and shelving is low. Children's artwork is displayed where the children can see it. The classroom has centers including: art, books, table games, dramatic play, science and blocks/construction. Children also

have a message board or cubbies for placing messages from and to each other. Along with other appropriate, child sized materials, the classroom materials for art and writing include: easels, markers, fine tipped black pens, markers, crayons, glue, clay, paint, scissors, chalk, play-dough, clip boards, and various paper (different colors, sizes, and weights). Children may take materials from one area into another. Materials are authentic and offer affordances to the task the child is trying to accomplish at the time. Writing materials specifically are of high quality to assist in children's success. For this study we chose to focus on chalk, crayon and marker drawings that were spontaneously produced by the children. The selection was based on the criterion to score the drawings in an attempt to show progress the children were making through the stages of art as set forth by Lowenfeld (1970).

In the HighScope Supporting Young Artists curriculum (Epstein and Trims, 2002) children spend extended periods with each type of medium. Children's sequenced experiences with art materials are selected by the teachers based on their knowledge of the developmental stages of the children in the class, and their belief in children's ability to make and appreciate art. Art activities are used to promote and enhance children's learning in literacy (e.g., writing and illustrating stories, labeling pictures), mathematics (e.g., sequences and patterns), and other cognitive and social areas. According to Lowenfeld's categorizations of the stages of children's drawings, the children in this classroom were all in the beginning stages of art development for the first half of the year. The children are given an opportunity to experience a learning area of their choice

daily. Teachers noted that children, particularly those going to kindergarten next school year, would use the art materials during small group but not during free choice time.

Data Collection

Classroom Observations

Prior to initiating the redesign of the art center, a matrix was created to measure the amount of time and what materials were being used in the art area (Appendix A). This allowed the teacher to look at exactly which child was in the center and also to evaluate any correlations between the stage of drawing that the child was in and amount of time spent doing that activity. Children's artwork created spontaneously and by invitation was collected for work samples.

In order to initiate the redesign, the children were provided with black and white 11x8 pictures of art areas from other classrooms to inspire ideas and frame the conversation about our art studio during a large group time. During small group chats smaller pictures (2x2, or 3x1) of actual art materials were given to each group along with a paper replica of the shelving from the art area. These concrete representations allowed all children to be a part of all discourse. During large group and small group time, I recorded my observations of the students' comments and discussion.

Following the small and large group discussions with the children about the art area, the art area was redesigned according to the children's specifications and another matrix was completed (Appendix A). This matrix allowed teachers to record the frequency of the children's visits to and activity choice in the art area.

Child and Parent Interviews

Child interviews about their artworks were also coded during the initial stages of the study. Child interview questions included a request to “tell me about your picture,” and then follow-up questions as needed based on the child’s response. Parents were interviewed by phone and also asked to respond to a few, semi-structured interview questions about their child’s choices in activity and access to art materials at home (Appendix B).

Procedures

The data were collected over two months in the second half of the school year. During this time, a baseline was established and the children’s reaction after the intervention was recorded. The data were recorded in each phase for two weeks per phase with a one week break during the intervention time period when data was in the form of field notes.

At the beginning of the school year caregivers were given a questionnaire when registering their child for the program. This questionnaire contained general questions about their child, including “What goals do you have for your child this school year?” and “What does your child enjoy doing at home?” Artwork that the children had created spontaneously was kept in portfolios.

The first matrix was used to collect a baseline to identify what children went to the art area, how long they were there, what materials they used and if they worked alone or with a peer. While collecting baseline information, children were interviewed while drawing. Children were invited to tell me about their picture. Conversations were later transcribed and coded to show how many utterances were descriptive, told a story, were

non-related to the question, provided a rationale, requested help or indicated planning. Children's artwork was also compiled and evaluated to determine what stage of artistic development the children were in. According to Lowenfeld (1970), the scribbling stage has four sub-stages; disordered - uncontrolled markings, longitudinal - controlled repetitions of motions, circular - further exploring of controlled motions demonstrating the ability to do more complex forms and naming - the child tells stories about the scribble. The next stage is the preschematic stage, this stage usually occurs between ages three and four, where children purposefully try to represent something in their drawings.

In the third week, the children were invited to redesign the art area with the expectation that their input and ownership of design would increase the likelihood of their use of this area. On Monday of this week during large group, a daily gathering of everyone in the classroom, the teachers brought in photographs of art studios and art centers from other classrooms. Children discussed what they saw and shared stories about the spaces in the photos. I recorded ideas on a large piece of paper as the children spoke. The next day, during the morning message, the class revisited their ideas and talked briefly about what materials they would like to see in our own art area. Additions were made to the list we had created on the previous day. Wednesday and Thursday, during small groups, children were given clip art pictures of the art materials from the list the class had made. A paper replica of the shelving unit in our art area was provided to each group. The children worked together to arrange the art materials on the shelves in whatever way made sense to them. As small group time came to an end each group was invited to place their "new and improved art area" at the best place in the room. During

this week caregivers were invited to be interviewed. The questions asked were very specific to their children's exposure to and use of art materials. (Appendix C) After the children had left for the day on Friday, I rearranged the classroom and art area to reflect the changes the children had decided on.

The final phase of this research took place during the fourth and fifth weeks. The matrix was used a second time to mark what children went to the art area, what they did there, and if they worked alone or with a peer.

Analysis

During the first phase of research the children's artwork samples were examined. Through an iterative process of analysis and discussion the principal investigator and a faculty mentor determined with 100% agreement that the children were in the pre-schematic and scribbling stages of drawing. Due to natural maturation, some children progressed into the representational stage of drawing during the course of this research.

To begin analysis on the semi-structured interviews with the children, we employed an iterative analysis cycle. The project investigators examined data sources derived from transcriptions of student interviews. The student interviews were semi-structured and focused on the nature of the students' artwork. Introduced through informal conversations, the interview questions prompted students to talk about their artwork in a manner they felt most comfortable with.

We carefully read each transcription and recorded our initial views related to the research questions. Following the initial review, we then identified portions of the transcriptions related to the research questions. The initial coding system was refined

through an iterative pattern of observation and analysis. Image data sources – photos of student artwork– were then used to triangulate findings uncovered during narrative data analysis. Both coders coded all data and any differences were resolved until the coders had 100% agreement.

Specifically, interviews with students were coded by rating the children’s responses to the main question of “Can you tell me about your picture?” Responses were found to fall in the categories of descriptive, telling a story, giving a rationale for creating the picture, a request for help, planning to draw or write something, giving no response, or other non related responses. To be coded as descriptive a response had to provide a concrete answer about what was on the page. Responses coded as telling a story conveyed some type of action that was going on in the picture, the action or event might be recognizable or not.

Parent interviews were coded based on the following criteria: negative response toward art, closed-ended use of art materials, open-ended use of materials at home, tolerance/encouragement of artistic activity at home, creative or symbolic play at home. A negative response was categorized by statements about their child’s inability or the parents’ choice not to allow the child to engage in artistic activities at home. Closed ended use of art materials was used when the adult alluded to the child being restricted to creation of a preset creation/product. For example, this category includes the use of coloring books or art materials that are “pre-colored” and require a child to pass a special marker or crayon over the paper for the color to appear. Conversely, open-ended use of materials was used to code statements about children being able to use their materials in

an individual or unique way. Examples of encouragement of artistic activities include caregivers stating the desire for their child to engage in an activity using art media or having purchased art media for their child's use. Creative or symbolic play at home included play with action figures and dolls or other dramatic types of play.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The teachers in the study's classroom became concerned to find that the children were not taking complete advantage of the environment provided to them for exploration of the visual arts. As the teacher-researcher, I decided to utilize an action research method to better understand and document an effort to increase the use of the art center in students' daily classroom choices. The three research questions under exploration are: What are children doing while they are in the art center? Who goes to the art center on a daily or weekly basis? How can I encourage more children to go to the art center more frequently and be purposeful there?

Pre- redesign

Using the data collection matrix during the first phase of the research, I recorded the children that went to the art center, what they did there, and how long they were there. During phase 1, I recorded that the 16 children went to the art area a total of 35 times. In comparison, there were 160 opportunities for children to choose the art area during planning time. One third more females went to the art center as opposed to the male students. Once at the art center, the male students used marker and paint media, while the female students used collage and crayon media. The longest time any child spent in the area working on a project was 25 minutes; conversely, the shortest amount of time spent was 40 seconds. On average the children spent 7.5 minutes in the area prior to the redesign.

The redesign of the art center

This research focuses on art materials use from drawing and writing specifically. In the classroom art area however all types of art media are included. Researcher notes from small and large group discussions about the art center revealed that children still considered some materials forbidden, for example one child stated, play-doh should stay in the closet, or “paint splashes on your new shoes!” When asked about what they would “like to see in the area” vs what “should be in the area” children always stated they did not know. To possibly give children some ideas and a reference about what an art area could be, children were able to look at pictures of other art centers. The class then as a large group discussed what materials “should” be in the art area of our classroom. The children listed all the materials currently in the art area. No children requested to bring in other materials such as blocks, other toys, or objects from home. Teachers then gave children the opportunity to place the materials on a model of the art area shelf. Children were also able to talk to each other during small group time and decide if they still wanted to include all the previously named materials or put some elsewhere in our classroom. Each group chose to include all the named materials. The art area still included: pencils, colored pencils, crayons, markers, variety of paper, glue, scissors, collage material – which was put into different containers, paints- tempa and watercolor, stencils, and stamps. After small group a child suggested that they hang their new art centers on the wall. All three groups hung their art center collages up on the slim piece of wall between the teacher sink and the children’s sink. A teacher asked “why did you hang it there?” -wondering why they chose to hang their poster there and not in another space. A five year old responded, “Because that is where the art center goes.” After

individually speaking with the children during work time, the teachers decided that when they moved the materials in the area around, they would also change the location of the entire area. This changed the dynamic of one third of the classroom, causing changes not only to the art area but the puzzles and games area, sensory spot, cozy corner, and eating area. The art center is now located in the front of our classroom four to five feet from the front door, sandwiched between block area, dramatic play, and the sensory area.

Following the redesign

After the children redesigned the art area the usage of that area increased from 35 total times to 59 total times. Females continued to use the area more than males. In addition, the children 36-47 months used the area less after redesigning while the use of the area by the 48-63 month olds increased.

During the course of this study, the developmental, drawing level of 36-59 month olds did increase minimally. The children 60 months and older moved from scribbling stage to preschematic stage. The development of more complex levels of drawing by children included progressing to the naming stage of drawing indicated that the children were being productive and thoughtful while in the art area (can you tell us how many students moved – give percentages here). While this increase in drawing levels is positive, there is no way to determine whether the increased focus on the arts and the center redesign is a result of this study. However, the increase in children's representational skills during the course of this research is important to note.

Analysis of caregiver/parent interviews revealed that all but one caregiver did report allowing their child to do some type of art activity in the home, surprisingly some

of these same parents also had negative responses about allowing the child to do art in the home. Caregivers did mention the allowance of open-ended use of materials over closed-ended use. Physical play was mentioned more often as a more favored activity of the children according to the caregiver interviews.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Overview of the Study

The main goals of this study were to get the children more engaged in an underused center and to encourage the children to draw and write more. Art is and was important to a child centered comprehensive early childhood curriculum. Children in this classroom would most likely benefit from art through an introduction to other curricula areas and through the creative outlet that art can provide. By looking over planning comments made by children, the teachers became concerned by the lack of use of the art area. As a teacher, acting as a researcher, I decided to create an action plan to further investigate this problem.

The action research plan called for the teacher to document on a matrix the children that entered the art center, how long they were there, and what they did there. Children were also interviewed while they were creating artwork, those conversations were later transcribed and coded. Conversations were also held with children to find out why the children did not choose voluntarily to go to the art center. Artwork was categorized by developmental level. Next the children worked as a large group and in three small groups to redesign the art center. Teachers acted as the scribe of the group during large group discussions and then provide picture representations to the children for the small group discussions. As the children were re-designing the art center, caregivers were then invited to be interviewed; answering questions specifically about their child's art activities at home. These interviews were later transcribed and coded as well.

Finally, the teacher used a similar matrix to document what children came to the art center and what they did there. The artwork of children was collected systematically during the entire project. The artwork was examined again and categorized by developmental level as well as compared to artwork created early in the action plan.

Summary of Findings

After the children redesigned the art center, there was an increase in the children's use of the center. Children also used more of the materials, not just the materials that were left on top of the shelf or used during small group that day. The girls still used the art area more than the boys. However, post redesign, the males tended to stay in the area longer. The males also saw a slight shift in their development from scribbling stage to the preschematic stage. The three year olds gave no descriptive or story like responses while creating their pictures. And the four year olds saw the small overall shift in developmental level of drawing. Age seemed to have no impact on caregiver response to the interview questions. Parent/caregivers that commented art activities were "messy" tended to only provide their children with close ended activities to do.

Conclusions

After redesigning the art center children came to the center more for several reasons. By having the children redesign the center and choose where to put the center, ownership of the center may have been shifted from the teachers to the children. As children looked at other art centers from other classrooms and talked about what materials to put into the art center, the children may have gained more exposure to the materials that were in the center and why they were there. This is a possible explanation

as to why the children may have used more of the materials in the center. By allowing children to place the materials on the shelves in a way that made sense to them, children may have been more able to use the materials in a way that made more sense to them.

Prior to the center redesign, the females in this classroom worked in the art more than the males. This may have occurred due to the children's conceptions of gender role issues about what "girls do" and what "boys do". The males stayed longer in the art area post redesign because they had moved into the preschematic stage of drawing development and their pictures were becoming much more detailed, thus taking longer to complete their illustrations. The three year olds were all still considered in the early stages of scribbling, this can explain why they did not give descriptions or tell stories about their pictures. Caregivers that gave the reason of art being messy as the excuse for why their child could not do art at home may explain the reluctance in the beginning of the year of the children to go into the art area. Classroom observation notes indicated that the children at times showed fear of getting marker on their hands and paint. Lack of exposure to the drawing media may have contributed to the delay in drawing ability. Caregiver attitudes about art media may have had an initial impact on the children's use of arts materials, but did not seem to make a difference on in classroom use of the art area.

Recommendations

Allowing the children to redesign the area seemed to make the biggest impact on the use of the area. In general, this action would be helpful to use at the beginning of the school year. As children are becoming familiar with materials, teachers should give

children an opportunity to plan what materials go into an area or at a minimal allow children to decide how to place materials in an area. Teachers should also provide children the chance to plan how their classroom will be aesthetically pleasing. Allowing children to have input is a strategy often forgotten in classroom planning. Children that have been provided with ownership can show a manor of respect and have a sense of pride for what is theirs.

Caregivers have expressed that they have a reluctance to allow their children to complete art projects at home. Professionals can provide families with information of other ways to incorporate art into home life. Teachers should also be sensitive to the fact that children may come into their classroom with no previous exposure to art materials. Teachers should also be aware of the culture that a child has in their home. Children that are not allowed to use art materials at home may be unsure of these materials when they see them in their classroom. For example, children that are not allowed to use scissors at home may shy away from an area that has scissors on the top shelf.

The conversations that the teachers held with the children during this study may have prompted the children to become more interested in the art area. As the project unfolded children began coming up to teachers and showing them their work. Teachers were careful to provide objective comments, like “you used a lot of purple,” and not judge the artwork or provide empty praise, like “oh, I like that.” Teachers should also ask open ended questions to children to provoke thoughts into their creations. Children that think more about what they have created, and are using symbols to communicate with others by putting their thoughts onto the paper.

The underlying context in this research is that in our classroom it was communicated to families and most importantly to the children that the teachers truly respect them. Children are able to learn in an environment that they feel is safe, safe to make mistakes and safe from ridicule. Children were interviewed in respectful ways and all their art was also valued in its own right and as an extension of the child.

Limitations of the Study

During the course of this study several children left and some new children were enrolled per the center's policies. Also, because the classroom was a shared space with other organizations, displayed artworks were destroyed on several occasions. To see their art work destroyed was particularly difficult for the younger children- causing some of the children to seemingly devalue their own art work. We used this opportunity to leave notes for the other children to not disturb the displays, which opened up another literacy activity for the children to engage in the art area.

Ideas for Future Research

Teacher-action research has powerful opportunities for early childhood teachers to explore teaching and learning issues in the classroom. For example, allowing the children to redesign other areas of the classroom that were neglected could allow more insight into how to get children to utilize those areas too. Further research could be done to better examine the correlation, if any, between parental attitudes about art and the use of classroom art materials.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Art Area Data Collection Matrix

<u>Picture Matrix Art Studio</u>									
<u>Date:</u>									
Time:									
Child's Name	enter	left	media type	easel or table	solo	parallel	cooperative	picture number	notes

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Children

Question One: Tell me about your picture?

Follow up questions were based on the child's response.

Appendix C

Parent Interviews

Question One: What does your child like to do at home? Follow up- What do they like to make?

Question Two: Does your child spend time at home drawing or writing? Follow Up- How often?

Question Three: Does your child use coloring books or just plain paper?

Question Four: What types of art materials does your child use at home? How often do they use them?

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