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Children’s Creative Intentions: Where do the ideas for their drawings come from?

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Abstract

The process of drawing is a creative endeavor, often beginning with ideas of what to draw. This exploratory study aimed to explore these creative intentions of pupils from Mainstream schools (tending to focus on observational, imaginative and expressive drawing), and from Steiner schools (tending to focus on imagination and expression). Fifty-seven children (age 6 to 16 years) drew a single drawing at the request of the researcher. Before and after drawing, children completed a semi-structured interview about the content of their drawing. This interview was first analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis to describe where children got the ideas for their drawings from. Four key themes were identified: 1) content from immediate surroundings, 2) content from memory, 3) representational content with element of imagination added 4) intention to express a mood or message. Content analysis was then used to quantify the interview responses and compare them between the school types. This indicated no difference in the frequency that Mainstream and Steiner pupils referred to ideas based on real-world referents or imagination. However, Steiner pupils talked more about expressive ideas. The results suggest that children use a wide range of sources when generating ideas of what to draw, including their educational experiences.

*Key words: creative ideas, art education, representation, imagination, drawing*

CHILDREN’S CREATIVE INTENTIONS: WHERE DO THE IDEAS FOR THEIR DRAWINGS COME FROM?

There has been considerable research investigating the development of children’s representational and expressive drawing skills (for reviews, see Cox, 2005; Jolley, 2010). However, little attention has been given to the source of children’s creative intentions when drawing, that is, where the idea for their drawing has come from. Furthermore, theories of the creative processes involved in drawing, whether suggesting a linear (Lubart, 2001) or a cyclic process (Sawyer, 2016), involve inspiration and idea selection. Therefore, considering where children get their ideas of what to draw from is necessary to fully understand the process of creating a drawing. The current study had two aims. Firstly, to explore the creative ideas children expressed when talking before and after drawing. Secondly, to consider the extent to which these ideas refer to representing realistic subject matter, imaginative ideas or expressive content, and whether these differed between pupils experiencing two contrasting educational approaches. These educational approaches were the English National Curriculum where representational, expressive and imaginative drawing are taught to all pupils up to the age 5 to 14 years (Department for Education, 2013a, 2013b), and Steiner schools where the emphasis is on expressive and imaginative drawing until representational drawing is introduced at approximately age 12 (Carlgren, 2008; Jünemann & Weitmann, 1977).

Chapman (1978), an art theorist, speculated that children found inspiration for their drawings from the natural and constructed environment, ordinary experiences, inner feelings and imagination, and a quest for order. Despite little empirical investigation of the sources of children’s ideas for their drawings, recent work by Coates and Coates (2011) provides some evidence to support Chapman’s ideas. It was found, from their analysis of drawings and comments made while drawing from a large sample of 3- to 7-year-olds, that children gain inspiration and ideas for their drawings from (1) first hand experiences, (2) their imagination, and (3) the media. Coates and Coates’ theme ‘first hand experiences’ is very similar to Chapman’s ‘ordinary experiences’ as both suggest that many of the ideas children have for their drawings come from their everyday experiences. Furthermore, both Chapman and Coates and Coates recognize that children can draw on multiple sources of inspiration while drawing, for example, a drawing may start with an idea from something that the child has experienced first-hand but then be added to include elements of fantasy.

Coates and Coates’ (2011) theme of the media includes children using things that they have already seen presented 2-dimensionally as ideas for their drawing. This reflects earlier evidence that children use drawings and images, created by others, as inspiration for their own drawings (Wilson & Wilson, 1977). Indeed, Wilson and Wilson concluded from interviews with high school and college pupils that almost every image that they had drawn as children could be traced back to a pre-existing graphical source. These sources were varied and included drawings that had been done by parents, older siblings, peers, images from the popular media, and from illustrations and photographs. While we acknowledge that using preexisting representations has been found to stifle idea generation, and therefore creativity and innovation (Cardoso & Badke-Schaub, 2011), recent evidence suggests that although using examples may limit the number of ideas generated it can actually result in more elaborate ideas (Vasconcelos, Neroni, Cardoso, & Crilly, 2018). This is supported by Wilson’s (1997, 2000) observation that children adapt the images they see around them and use them to invent their own representations.

Although evidence (Coates & Coates, 2011; Wilson & Wilson, 1977) has been found for the sources of inspiration suggested by Chapman (1978), the methods used to collect this evidence had significant limitations reducing the validity of the data. Wilson and Wilson (1977) relied on adolescents and young adults recalling drawings made earlier in childhood. Consequently, participants were required to remember the idea behind their drawing and therefore the reliability of their recall may be questionable. Furthermore, being directly asked whether it was a copy, or based on an example drawn by someone else, may have primed participants to think that it was likely that the drawing had been based on a pre-existing image, especially if they lacked confidence in their own recollection of the source of the image. Therefore, although some children are likely to use an idea based on a previously seen graphical image this study probably overestimated the frequency with which children do this. Coates and Coates collected information from children as they were engaged in drawing, so recall was not an issue for this study. However, their use of the spontaneous narrative from pairs of children drawing together is problematic as children drawing together have been found to collaborate and share ideas (Thompson, 1999; Wilson & Wilson, 1977). Indeed, Coates and Coates comment on the interaction and dialogue between the children as they drew influencing the drawing process, suggesting that this encouraged the inclusion of more fantasy elements as the children competed to try and out-do one another. Therefore, the data collection methods used by Wilson and Wilson and Coates and Coates are likely to have biased their conclusions.

Drawing is just one creative activity in which children have ideas about what to produce. Consideration of evidence of where children gain ideas from in other creative domains are therefore relevant, particularly due to the paucity of studies examining children’s creative ideas when drawing. In story telling, Geist and Aldridge (2002) found that young children draw on sources that are in a similar medium to that which they were inventing – that is stories that were familiar to them. Whereas those in middle childhood based their stories on their immediate surroundings and experiences, either with a realistic focus or developed to include an element of fantasy. Consideration of children’s free play provides further evidence for children’s creative ideas coming from what is familiar to them (e.g., imitating familiar daily routines such as cooking) as well as fantasy elements (e.g., ‘we will pretend that we are pirates’) (Singer & Singer, 2009). Consequently, it does seem that young children represent familiar and fantasy elements in their own creative inventions with models that are in the same modality, whether that be pictures, actions, or stories providing inspiration.

**Influence of Education**

It has been argued (e.g., Torrance, 1972) that the education a child experiences influences their creativity, and emerging evidence suggests that pupils attending Steiner schools have superior creativity compared to those attending Mainstream schools (Kirkham & Kidd, 2017; Ogeltree, 2000). Worldwide there are over 1000 Steiner schools teaching according to the philosophies of Rudolf Steiner (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, 2017). Imagination is valued throughout the Steiner curriculum (Carlgren, 2008) and between the ages of 7 and 14 years drawing is included in almost all subject lessons (Woods, Ashley, & Woods, 2005). However, few directions about what, or how, to draw are given. Instruction in representational drawing skill is not introduced until pupils are 12 years old. Instead, pupils are encouraged to produce imaginative and expressive drawings (Carlgren, 2008; Jünemann & Weitmann, 1977). Teachers are expected to create an artistic environment within their classrooms, with decorative items, wall hangings and pictures being displayed (Nicholson, 2000). Furthermore, those involved in Steiner education report that the artistic abilities of the teachers are a distinguishing characteristic of the pedagogy (Woods et al., 2005). In addition to their school-based experiences, these pupils are likely to have other experiences that influence their emerging art values. For example, the Steiner pedagogy discourages parents from allowing their children to watch television at home (Nicol & Taplin, 2012) and encourages them to buy picture books inspired by the Steiner approach (Dancy, 2006). These books are colorful and tend to contain only scene-based pictures which are often based on images made using water color paints and lacking in detail (Dancy, 2006).

Mainstream, state-funded schools in England teach the English National Curriculum. For drawing, the curriculum aims to support children between the ages of 5 to 14 years to develop representational, imaginative and expressive drawing skills simultaneously (Department for Education, 2013a, 2013b). Although the curriculum aims to develop skills concurrently, many primary school teachers appear to value and encourage representational drawing (Burkitt, Rose & Jolley, 2010). However, representational drawing is creative as it is based on the idea to depict something from the world and relies upon the creative process to translate a three-dimensional referent to a two-dimensional page where there are infinite possibilities (Gombrich, 1960). Nevertheless, the creative ideas found in mainstream pupils may be more limited to representation, at least in the primary school years (up to the age of 11 years) where typically art is taught by general teachers who have rarely received art training themselves (Ofsted, 2009).

The contrasting experiences of pupils attending the two school types may lead to differences in the sources of their ideas for their drawings. In particular, the emphasis on imagination and expression may inform Steiner pupils’ creative intentions, whereas Mainstream school pupils may favor realistic subject matter. Indeed, comparative studies on expressive drawing between Steiner and mainstream educated pupils suggest that Steiner pupils may have more imaginative and elaborate creative intentions. For example, when Rose, Jolley and Charman (2012) asked 5- to 9-year old children to draw happy, sad and angry pictures they found that generally the Steiner pupils depicted a wider variety of topic themes within their expressive drawings and produced drawings of higher expressive quality than their Mainstream school counterparts. While, Rose and Jolley (2016) found that in a free drawing Steiner pupils (age 6 to 16 years) used more colors, combined colors more frequently, used more of the page and produced more scene-based drawings compared to the Mainstream school pupils. The consistent finding that Steiner pupils tended to draw more content themes within a scene may be a consequence of Steiner pupils having more imaginative ideas about what to draw.

**Current Study**

The aim of this study was to firstly explore and secondly compare where the ideas behind the drawings that pupils from Mainstream and Steiner schools produce come from. Data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews carried out with pupils (age 6 to 16 years) prior to, and after completing, a free drawing. This drawing was completed in response to a request from the researcher, not as part of an in-class activity. A time limit of 10 minutes for the drawing was given as it was anticipated that Steiner pupils, who are generally given more class time to complete drawing activities, might have spent longer on their drawings than the Mainstream school pupils and that this, rather than their wider educational experiences, might have influenced their creative intentions. Ten minutes was selected as a suitable amount of time as this has been used in previous research studies with a wide age range of children completing a variety of different drawing tasks (Jolley, Barlow, Rotenberg, & Cox, 2016; Rose & Jolley, 2016).

Wright (2010) makes several suggestions about how to talk to children about their drawings. During the interview nudging (e.g., ‘can you tell me anything else about your drawing?’) and reflective (e.g., ‘yes, that is colorful’) prompts, as advocated by Wright, were used to encourage detailed descriptions about what the child intended to draw and what they had drawn. The other types of prompts (clarification and out-loud-thinking) recommended by Wright were avoided as the aim was not to encourage the child to think of additional ideas. Furthermore, the pupils were not directly asked any questions while drawing to prevent the questions becoming a source of, or prompting creative ideas that were not entirely their own.

The interviews were transcribed and initially analyzed following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines for conducting a thematic analysis. This method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data is a widely-used technique for analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The aim of applying this analysis was to describe where the ideas for the content of the drawing had come from. The second aim of this study was to compare the extent to which pupils from Mainstream and Steiner schools described the ideas for the drawing coming from 1) real-world referents, 2) imagination or 3) a motivation to express themselves. This aim was met using content analysis on the interview data, as it is a well-recognized technique of systematically and objectively analyzing the messages contained within speech or text (Krippendorf, 2013). Furthermore, content analysis, unlike thematic analysis, is suitable for carrying out quantitative comparison as coding frequency data is generated. It was anticipated that due to the greater emphasis on imagination and expression in Steiner schools that these pupils would have a greater number of expressive and imaginative ideas compared to their Mainstream school counterparts.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Fifty-seven children and adolescents participated, 30 from Mainstream, state-funded and 27 from Steiner schools. Most pupils were of white ethnic origin and all were between the ages of 6 and 16 years old. The mean age of the Mainstream school pupils was 11 years 5 months (SD 3y:5m, 15 girls). The mean age of the Steiner school pupils was 11 years 7 months (SD 3y:4m, 14 girls). Cluster sampling was used as pupils were from four specific age groups; 6- to 7-year-olds, 9- to 10-year-olds, 13- to 14-year-olds, and 15- to 16-year-olds. The mean ages (with standard deviations) and the gender distribution for all groups of pupils are shown in Table 1.

To reduce sampling bias participants were recruited for each age group and each school type from at least two schools. Five Mainstream schools and four Steiner schools which had been found to be ‘satisfactory’ or ‘good’ in their most recent government inspection participated. The schools were matched on geodemographic location as all were from areas consistently classified as ‘affluent achievers’ and ‘comfortable communities’ according to Acorn (2014). The participating Steiner Schools were fully accredited by the Steiner School Fellowship.

Teachers were asked to select approximately four pupils from their class. They were requested to select those who would be happy to talk to the researcher and who represented the variety of drawing abilities and attitudes to drawing within their class. The British Picture Vocabulary scale (BPVS, second edition: Dunn, Dunn, Whetton, & Burley, 1997) was administered to participating 6- and 7-year-olds to check that the youngest children had sufficient verbal ability to understand the task instructions and engage in the interview. Standardized scores were calculated (min = 85, max = 128), and these indicated that all children in the youngest age group had average, or above average vocabulary comprehension.

**Materials**

Each participant was provided withan A4 piece of paper, seven colored pencils (red, green, blue, yellow, pink, brown and black) and an HB pencil. A digital voice recorder was switched on for the duration of the session to record all dialogue between the researcher and participant.

**Procedure**

Ethical approval was given by the university in which this project was conducted, and APA ethical guidelines were followed. Prior to visiting the school consent letters were sent home to the parents/guardians of each pupil, and each pupil was verbally asked if they were happy to participate. No parents denied consent and all pupils gave positive verbal consent.

Children took part individually during lesson time at their respective schools. Participants were seated in classrooms away from the rest of the class at a table with the researcher. The following instruction was given

 *“I would like you to draw me a picture of anything that you want; you can draw whatever you would like to. Use the sheet of paper in front of you and any of the pencils that you want. You have ten minutes to do the drawing. Please try to draw the best drawing that you can. Before you start drawing I would like you to spend a moment thinking about what you are going to draw, I would then like you to tell me about what you are planning on drawing. Once you have finished the drawing I will ask you some questions about what you have drawn”.*

After the instructions, the participant was given the opportunity to ask questions. All questions were answered but no instruction about what or how to draw were given. Time was allowed for the participant to consider what they were going to draw. Once the participant appeared ready to draw (e.g., reached for a pencil) the researcher, who was the first author, asked them what they were planning to draw. Encouraging reflections, such as ‘that sounds good’, ‘I look forward to that’ were used. As the participant drew they were not interrupted. If the participant initiated conversation the researcher responded but was careful to avoid comments that might influence the content of their drawing in anyway. Once the participant had declared the drawing finished, or the ten minutes’ time allowed was up (calculated from when they made their first mark on the paper), the researcher asked the children to tell her about their drawing. The participant was encouraged to give as much information about the drawing as they wanted. Reflections (e.g., ‘what a lot of colors’, ‘that is big/small’, ‘really!’) and nudging prompts (e.g., ‘is there anything else that you can tell me?’) were used.

**Analytic Approach**

All the interviews were transcribed and included all the utterances made by the researcher and the participant. Other aspects of the communication (e.g. gesture, pauses, intonation) were not transcribed as the goal of the research was not to infer meaning beyond the words that were spoken. The drawings were not included in the analysis as the research aim was to analyze the reported ideas, rather than the recognizable content or style of the finished drawing. The thematic analysis was conducted first. This was done following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). Analysis began by collating all the transcriptions together and removing any identifying information about the age of the participant or school they attended. The second and third stage of analysis involved the reading and re-reading of this textual base – first to gain familiarity with the content and then at a deeper level to identify common themes that ran throughout the data set. In identifying the themes Braun and Clark’s definition, “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82) was used. Consequently, the approach taken to identify the themes was an inductive, or bottom up approach (Patton, 2002). This type of analytic approach is appropriate to the exploratory nature of this study as it ensured the analysis was driven by the data and that the themes were directly linked to the participants’ comments. The fourth stage of analysis involved an independent researcher, familiar with researching children’s drawings but blind to the aims of this study, reviewing the coded extracts placed under each theme. In discussion with the first author, themes were clarified and theme names were decided (fifth stage). The final stage of analysis involved choosing extracts to illustrate the identified themes.

Once the thematic analysis was completed attention was given to the second aim: to compare the frequency with which ideas from the pupils attending the two school types reflected an intention to represent life-like subject matter compared to ideas from imagination or expressive content. To investigate this content analysis (as described by Krippendorf, 2013) was used to systematically and objectively analyze the messages contained within each interview. Each interview was coded by the first author for the presence/absence of ideas based on three categories: 1) real-world referent, 2) imagination and 3) expression. Multiple occurrences of the same category within an interview did not receive any additional credit when scoring. For coding purposes all identifying information, including any references to school attended, were removed from the interviews. To further control for potential bias the same independent researcher who assisted with the thematic analysis, was blind to the hypothesis of the study and did not know that the pupils came from two school types, also coded 15 (25%) of the interviews. Inter-rater reliability was excellent to good (*k* = 1 for real-world referent and imagination, *k* = .076 for expression).

**Results**

**Thematic Analysis**

The thematic analysis resulted in four key themes relating to where the idea for the content of the drawing came from. These were, 1) content from immediate surroundings, 2) content from memory, 3) representational content with element of imagination added and 4) intention to express a mood or message. These themes, along with their subthemes are presented in Figure 1. Three additional themes regarding factors influencing children’s choice of what to draw were identified. These were a ‘desire to draw something “not too hard”’, ‘initial uncertainty’ and ‘awareness of time limit’. The themes relating to content will be described first, followed by those regarding the other factors that influenced children’s choice of what to draw.

**1. Content from immediate surroundings.** Some pupils related their drawing to content from their immediate surroundings, indicating clearly that they had used this as a source of inspiration for their drawing. While some indicated that they had used three-dimensional objects that they could see as their source of inspiration (e.g., extract 1) others talked about using a picture that was displayed, for example on the classroom wall.

*Extract 1.* 16-year-old male from a Mainstream school

*Researcher: What are you going to draw?*

Participant: That [points to door handle, this is just in front of them]

*Researcher: Can you tell me about your drawing?*

Participant: Well I have drawn that door handle [points].

 **2. Content from memory.** Whereas in the previous theme pupils talked about drawing representational content that was directly in front of them in this theme they talked about drawing representational content from memory. That is, content that they could not see in front of them but that they had seen previously. Many extracts contributed to this theme and from these there was evidence for three clear subthemes: a) personal experience, b) media and popular culture and c) common objects.

***2a. Personal experience.*** Some pupils made clear links between the content in their drawing and things that they had personally experienced. While for some this involved talking about things that were theirs, for example drawing their pet, others talked about things that they had experienced at school or in their free time, for example going on holiday and shopping with friends.

***2b. Media and popular culture*.** Some pupils indicated that the idea for the drawing was based on characters and scenes that they had seen in television programmes and films. For example, pupils talked about drawing scenes from Star Wars with Yoda and Luke fighting ‘baddies’. Also, within this theme were extracts which referred to content and ideas for the drawings coming from popular culture, for example pictures of celebrities.

 ***2c. Common objects.*** Some pupils drew common objects that were not present in the immediate environment and included very little detail about the source of the idea. For example, some just named the content within their drawing or provided a short narrative about the actions taking place in their drawing (e.g., extract 2). The pupils’ responses were short and focused on naming the object(s) that they were going to draw, or what they had drawn. In all cases, there was no detail to indicate that any element of fantasy, imagination or intention to express a message had been included and the drawings were not of objects visible in the immediate environment. Consequently, it was assumed that these drawings of common objects were based on memories.

*Extract 2*. 9-year-old, male Mainstream school pupil

Participant: I will draw a car…… a sports car I think….

*Researcher: Can you tell me something about your drawing?*

Participant: It was filling up at the pump…. Now it is going

*Researcher: Is there anything else that you can tell me?*

Participant: No

**3. Representational content with element of imagination added**. As in the previous two thematic categories these pupils also referred to drawing representational content from their immediate surroundings and memories. However, unique to the extracts within this theme was the inclusion of detail relating to an element of the drawing which had been altered based on imagination/fantasy, or indication that the event had not happened and that they were imagining what something in the future would be like. These two types of imagination resulted in two subthemes: 1) specific fantasy element added and 2) future events.

***3a. Specific fantasy element added.*** Some extracts represented an idea for a drawing being based on something that the pupils had experienced or seen but the extracts in this subtheme also included details of how something about the experience had been changed to incorporate an element of fantasy. For example, one pupil talked about drawing her pet rabbit, but then after the drawing was completed explained that she had drawn him ‘more like wild rabbit, eating a carrot in the forest’(7-year-old, female, Steiner school pupil).

***3b. Future events***. It was evident that some pupils gained inspiration and choose to draw things that were going to happen to them in the future. While some of these anticipated future events were imminent, such as lining up to have their photos taken at school the following day, others were in the more distant future, such as them getting married or going on holiday (e.g., extract 3). These extracts seemed to be a combination of drawing representational content that they were familiar with but adding an element of imagination in terms of how things would be in the future.

*Extract 3.* 15-year-old, female, Steiner pupil

Participant: Well people always say that you should close your eyes and imagine where you would like to be.... I would like to be on holiday.... by the beach.

*Researcher: Can you tell me about your drawing?*

Participant: I have drawn a sunny, sandy beach.

*Researcher: Can you tell me about what you have drawn on the beach?*

Participant: Well this bit (points at sand castle) reminds me of when I was younger, and we played on the beach on holiday and then this is (points at chair) more like what I would want to do now – sit sunbathing and reading a book.

**4. Expression.** Extracts within this theme included an intention to express either a feeling, mood or message within the drawing. For example, some pupils spoke of drawing how they felt while others were trying to convey a particular message through their drawing, such as in extract 4 where an environmental message seems to have inspired the content of the drawing. These drawings usually included representational content, but this had been inspired and chosen with an intention of conveying a message to the viewer.

*Extract 4.* 15-year-old, male, Steiner pupil.

Participant: I drew a landscape, it was just what came to my mind really, I then drew a road through the landscape, showing that people had destroyed the landscape and shot the bird…

*Researcher: Is there anything else that you can tell me?*

Participant: It is a sad picture showing how people are destroying and changing nature.

**Initial uncertainty.** This is the first of three themes that relate to more generic factors which influence pupils’ choice of what to draw. In this theme, ‘initial uncertainty’, pupils were unsure of what they were going to draw and communicated this uncertainty before starting to draw. They seemed to believe that as the initial marks that they made on the page might prompt an idea of what to draw. For example, one pupil started drawing a pattern of interconnecting lines; these lines then became the scales on a creature ‘sort of like a crocodile’ (10-year-old, male Mainstream school pupil).

**Desire to draw something ‘not too hard’.** Extracts in this theme tended to reflect an assumption that drawing is difficult and that as the pupils had free choice they would draw something that was easy. Some extracts referred to specific content being hard, e.g., people and other content being simple, e.g., a flag. While others referred to elements of the drawing process, for example one pupil said, ‘I won’t use colors ‘cos if you make a mistake it is harder to make it better’ (14-year-old, male, Mainstream school pupil).

 **Awareness of time.** In the instructions, it was explained to pupils that they had ten minutes to do the drawing, and some pupils referred to this when talking about what they had drawn. All of these comments related to running out of time and things that they would have liked to have included or done ‘better’ had they had more time.

**Content Analysis**

The purpose of the content analysis was to compare the extent to which pupils from Mainstream and Steiner schools described the ideas for the drawing coming from real-world referents, imagination or a motivation to express themselves. Therefore, each interview was coded for evidence of ideas from these three sources. Ideas from real-world referents were the most common, with 50 of the 57 interviews including them. Fewer interviews included imaginative ideas (20) and even fewer include expressive ideas (9). Table 2 suggests that although pupils from the two schools talked about ideas from real-world referents to a similar extent, imaginative and expressive ideas were more frequently talked about by the Steiner school pupils.

To further assess between school differences for the sources of ideas three chi-square test of goodness-of-fit were conducted: one for each type of idea (real-world referent, imagination and expression).[[1]](#footnote-1) For real-world referents there was no significant difference in the frequency of ideas from Mainstream compared to Steiner pupils, χ² (1, *N* = 57) = 0.07, *p* = 1.00 (Fishers exact 2-tailed probability) and the effect size was very small, *w* =.03. Similarly, there was no between school difference in the frequency of imaginative ideas, χ² (1, *N* = 57) = 1.97, *p* = .130, (Fishers exact 1-tailed probability) with an effect size between small and medium, *w* = .19. However, more Steiner pupils referred to expressive ideas and this was marginally significant, χ² (1, *N* = 57) = 3.96, *p* = .051 (Fishers exact 1-tailed probability), with an effect size approaching medium, *w* = .26.

**Discussion**

The first aim was to describe where children and adolescents get the ideas for the content of their drawings from. Through thematic analysis four main sources of ideas were identified: 1) content from immediate surroundings, 2) content from memory, 3) representational content with element of imagination added and 4) intention to express a mood or message. These themes, including their subthemes, reflect those found by Coates and Coates (2011) (first hand experiences, imagination, and the media) and Wilson and Wilson’s (1977) finding that that children use already existing images as inspiration. However, they also significantly extend these findings as they indicate additional sources of inspiration, including expression. Furthermore, little evidence that children’s ideas of what to draw were based solely on existing pictorial representations, or that these stifle children’s idea generation was found. In addition to identifying a larger number of themes (especially when the subthemes are taken into consideration) than previous research the current study also identified several factors that may influence children when they are choosing the source of inspiration for their drawing. These seemed to reflect their awareness that drawing could be multifaceted and complex.

Some participants expressed uncertainty about their ideas and this reflects the experiences of adult artists (Thrash, Maruskin, Cassidy, Fryer, & Ryan, 2010). Indeed, artists themselves often claim that they do not know where their ideas come from, that “ideas suddenly fall from the sky” (Yokochi & Okada, 2005, p.241). Nonetheless, researchers have attempted to understand the sources of artists’ inspiration and Mace & Ward’s (2002) semi-structured interviews with 16 artists suggest that they too use life experiences, especially things that they have personally experienced, as well as their ongoing art-making and external influences as sources of inspiration.

The second aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which pupils attending Mainstream and Steiner schools had ideas for their drawings from real-world referents, imagination or expressive motivations. Content analysis indicated that there was no difference in the frequency that Mainstream and Steiner pupils had ideas for their drawings from real-world referents and imagination, however, Steiner pupils did have a greater number of expressive ideas than their Mainstream School counterparts. It is not surprising that the pupils from the two school types had a similar number of real-world referents ideas as most drawings with imaginative and expressive ideas also contained ideas based on real-world content. It is surprising that no significant difference was found between the numbers of ideas involving imagination as this tends to be emphasized throughout the Steiner curriculum (Carlgren, 2008). To some extent this reflects an issue of statistical power, as the sample size of 57 in the current study was only sufficient to detect an effect size greater than medium. Nonetheless, it does seem that the extent to which Mainstream and Steiner talk about using imaginative ideas in their drawings does not differ as much as might be expected. A potential explanation is that although there is often less emphasis on imagination in Mainstream compared to Steiner schools overall, when it comes to art the emphasis might be similar, with both school types emphasizing imagination equally.

Steiner pupils were more likely to report having an idea based on expressive intentions compared to their Mainstream school counterparts. This may be a reflection of the suggested emphasis on expression throughout their curriculum (Jünnmann & Weitmann, 1977; Nobel, 1997). Furthermore, their ability to talk about the expressiveness of their own drawings may be facilitated by the teacher facilitated discussion of drawings to encourage pupils to develop a deeper understanding of art and particularly color (Hallam, Egan, & Kirkham, 2016). For example, Hallam et al. report that Steiner teachers encourage pupils to look at their own drawings and those of their peers and consider questions such as “where’s the blue looking a bit shy?” and “Where’s the blue stronger?” (p141). This repeated use of probing “where” questions, is suggested by Hallam et al. to encourage the pupils to consider both the formal and the expressive qualities of color. This type of experience may have resulted in more Steiner pupils talking about expressive ideas within their drawings.

In addition to considering school-based differences and similarities that may influence children’s narrative about their drawings, wider influences must also be considered. This is particularly relevant due to the exploratory nature of this research. Participating children may have different experiences outside their education which may account for the extent to which they indicated their intention to depict content from real-world referents compared to ideas from their imagination or a desire to express themselves. In particular, children who attend Steiner schools may also have parents who value expression, and may even themselves be more expressive, compared to parents who send their pupils to Mainstream schools. Consequently, it may be differences in their wider environment, not just school, that contribute to any differences in the sources of their ideas when drawing.

Although it was not an aim of this study to analyze the narrative style children used when talking about their drawings it was anecdotally noticed that this appeared to differ among the Mainstream and Steiner pupils. Many Mainstream pupils tended to focus on content description, primarily involving naming the content or topic drawn. Whereas, Steiner pupils seemed to focus on this less and instead often recounted a story about what was happening in the picture. These different narrative styles relate to those described by Coates (2002). Coates’ explanation for why children talked more descriptively or more imaginatively about their drawings focused on differences in how teachers in the classrooms used drawing and their expectations of the role of drawing. This explanation seems particularly salient when considering the differences between the Mainstream and Steiner pupils reported in the current study. In Steiner classrooms teachers aim to develop pupils’ imagination through recounting stories, and considerable time is spent on this in lower school classrooms (Nicholson, 2000). In comparison, the Mainstream pupils’ succinct accounts focusing on naming the content or topic of their drawings may reflect a potential pedagogic focus on topic-based drawings in the Mainstream schools.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The tendency of some pupils to provide very brief accounts of the content of their drawings, rather than spontaneously providing information explaining the source of their ideas was a limitation of the current study. This may have resulted in some drawings which had imaginative and expressive ideas not being recognized as such. For example, if the drawing contained realistic content, which most did, and children just named the content items depicted without providing any explanation of an imaginative element or an expressive motive these would have been categorized as being based on real-world referents and not having imaginative or expressive ideas. Although direct questioning could have been used to try and elicit this information, doing so may have influenced the drawing process (if carried out at the time of drawing) or resulted in the fabrication of information in an attempt to please the researcher (if carried out after the drawing was complete). Indeed, evidence about the fragility of children’s memory (Roberts, 2002) and the openness of their memories to suggestion (e.g., Brady, Poole, Warren, & Jones, 1999; Leichtman & Ceci, 1995) and the impact of repeated questions (Krähenbühl & Blades, 2006) has been well documented.

To address this future research could consider using a ‘think aloud protocol’ (TAP, Ericsson & Simon, 1993) asking participants to draw and concurrently reporting what they are thinking, without interpreting, censoring, over-explaining, or otherwise distorting the information in any way. The premise is that the contents of their conscious mind would be verbalized and this record of their cognitive processes could be used to hypothesize about the mental processes underlying creative thought (Ericsson & Simon, 1993). This technique has been successfully used to examine the cognitive processes and evaluations made by artists and non-artists while creating an original piece of artwork (Fayena-Tawil, Kozbelt, & Sitaras, 2011). Although, TAPs have been used infrequently with young children their use for older primary school pupils is increasing (Vandevelde, Van Keer, Schellings, & Van Hout-Wolters, 2015). Furthermore, Wright (2010) suggests that many children spontaneously talk while drawing and that this narrative along with the drawing and any non-verbal communication make up a single, multimodal communication. Consequently, careful use of TAPs to gather rich narrative data in the context of children’s drawings may be valuable in future research considering the sources of children ideas for their drawings. This method could provide data to support a richer and more in-depth qualitative analysis with potential to advance understanding of children’s creative intentions and the relationship between these, their drawings and their own development.

In the current study a time limit for the drawings was used to control for any potential between school differences in how long children typically spend drawing. However, this has resulted in some children choosing to do a ‘quick drawing’. Furthermore, if children were encouraged to talk aloud, such as in TAP, while drawing this would be likely to prolong the drawing process. An alternative might be to record the amount of time that children spent drawing so that this could be taken into account during the analysis and interpretation of the data.

No attempt has been made in the current study to investigate developmental changes in children’s creative intentions. Future research, with a larger sample size, should investigate this, as it is likely that the sources of children’s ideas may alter as they get older, as found for the stories they tell (Geist & Aldridge, 2002). Furthermore, analysis of the drawings, in addition to children’s narrative, could be used to consider whether the children’s drawings and their ideas for drawing evolve in parallel and the extent to which development coincides with their broader cognitive development Moreover, although the curricula prescribed in the two schools appear to differentiate them this cannot be assumed. Therefore, to develop our understanding of associations between children’s educational experiences and their creative intentions classroom observations should be carried out and linked to the findings. All these avenues for further investigation may provide new insights into pupils’ creative intentions when drawing and the factors that influence these intentions, including different educational settings.

**Conclusion**

The aim of the current study was to carry out an exploratory investigation into where children get their ideas of what to draw from and the extent to which these may differ in children attending two different types of schools. Investigating what children say about their drawing using thematic analysis has resulted in new insights into the range of sources that children use to inspire and inform their choice of what to draw. This provides evidence for a wider range of sources than previous research suggested, and indicates that the experiences of children when generating and selecting ideas for their drawings may not be that dissimilar to the experiences of artists. In addition, evidence suggests that a child’s experiences can influence the extent to which they use particular sources of inspiration in their drawings. This complements an emerging body of evidence that education can impact the style of children’s drawings (Rose & Jolley, 2016), their expressive drawing ability (Rose et al., 2012) and creativity (Kirkham & Kidd, 2017).

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Table 1

*Means (year: month), standard deviations (in months) and gender of participants by age group and school type*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | School |
|  | Mainstream |  | Steiner |
| Age group | 6-7n = 8 | 9-10n = 10 | 13-14n = 6 | 15-16n = 6 |  |  | 6-7n = 7 | 9-10n = 6 | 13-14n = 7 | 15-16n = 7 |
|  |
|  |
| Age Mean (St. Dev) | 7:2(2.92) | 9:11(3.06) | 14:4(2.99) | 15:11(4.83) |  |  | 7:3(3.10) | 10:0(3.24) | 13:8(3.92) | 15:10(4.32) |
| Gender | *4f, 4m* | *5f, 5m* | *2f, 4m* | *4f, 2m* |  |  | *4f, 3m* | *3f, 3m* | *4f, 3m* | *3f, 4m* |

Table 2

*Number of interviews referring to ideas based on real-world referent, imagination and expression by school type. Percentages represent proportion of interviews from each school type.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Mainstreamn = 30 | Steinern = 27 |
| Real-world referents | 26 (86%) | 24 (88%) |
| Imagination  | 8 (27%) | 12 (44%) |
| Expression | 2 (<1%) | 7 (26%) |

1. An omnibus Chi Squared Test of Association could not be carried out as the assumption of independence was violated as the same child could count in more than one cell as their interview might be coded as containing multiple sources of ideas – for example real-world referents and imagination. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)