



Cultural differences in Chinese American and European American children's drawing skills over time[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Parents and early childhood teachers in Chinese societies and the United States have had dissimilar views about appropriate art instruction for young children. The Chinese view is that creativity will emerge after children have been taught essential drawing skills. The American view has been that children's drawing skills emerge naturally and that directive teaching will stifle children's creativity. Forty second-generation Chinese American and 40 European American young children participated in this longitudinal study at ages 5, 7, and 9 to explore possible cultural differences in and antecedents of their drawing skills and creativity. Chinese American children's person drawings were more mature and creative and their parents reported more formal ways of fostering creativity as compared to their European American counterparts. Correlations showed that children who had more opportunities to draw and who received more guidance in drawing were more advanced in their drawing. For Chinese Americans, fathers' personal art attitudes and children's Time 1 drawing skills predicted 53% of the variance in children's drawing scores four years later.

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Parents and early childhood teachers in Chinese societies and the United States seem to have different views about appropriate art instruction for young children. In China, the cultivation of basic skills is primary, and it is believed that creativity will emerge after children have been taught essential skills (Gardner, 1989). The dominant view in the United States has been that creative expression is best developed through a nondirective, progressive educational approach. It is believed that directive teaching in early childhood will diminish a child's natural creativity and that skills are more appropriately developed at a later time (Gardner, 1989). This study was designed to examine whether parents from a culture which favors more explicit early instruction

in basic drawing skills have children whose drawing is lower in creativity.

The attitudes we hold regarding children and young children's art have been shaped by our cultural beliefs. These cultural beliefs, in turn, affect the kinds of experiences we offer to our children at home and at school. Culture affects many aspects of children's drawing (Alland, 1983; Cox, 1993; Golomb, 2002; Wilson, 1985). The developmental rate, the graphic elements, the topics of the drawings, the need to develop representational skills, the nature of adult art in a particular culture, and the value of developing artistic skills relative to other skills are all influenced by culture. Patterns of cultural influence are evident in the drawings of even very young children (Alland, 1983). Golomb (2002) states, "...models provided by the culture, the teaching strategies used, and the expectations of teachers and parents can have a notable impact on the art children produce" (p. 42).

1. Cultural comparison of parental attitudes, beliefs, and practices

Parental attitudes, which are influenced by cultural values, have been demonstrated to be related to children's performance in various domains (e.g., Eccles, 1993; Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Hess & Holloway, 1984). Parents can influence children's beliefs and achievement motivation through the messages they communicate

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regarding their own competence and preferences (Eccles, 1993). In addition, children may observe parents' own efforts in a particular domain and imitate the parent's technique. Parents who value graphic arts highly and who are more competent in art very likely have children who become more skilled. This may be particularly true of Chinese children, because their parents have uniform high expectations for their children's achievement (Chao & Tseng, 2002). In a collective society like China, children achieve to bring glory to their families (Ebrey, 1991). Profoundly influenced by Confucian teachings for 2500 years, Chinese people have been guided by the principle of filial piety—respect of and responsibility toward parents (Chan, 1963). Ebrey (1991), quoting a late Ming Dynasty document (16th–17th century) on family harmony, reports parents in a family “should utilize their authority to dictate matters, to maintain order, and to inspire respect, so that members of a family will all be obedient” (p. 318). Parents' attitudes and expectations are communicated very clearly to their children, and children do not perceive that they have the choice to disregard parents' ideas. In contrast, European American parents in the U.S. embrace independence and individualism. Children have more choices and are encouraged to be unique.

Several researchers have demonstrated that immigrant Chinese American parents are more directive and controlling in their parenting style than are European American parents (Chao, 1994; Huntsinger & Jose, 1995; Lin & Fu, 1990). Chinese parents have also been found to endorse personality characteristics (which would aid children in learning how to draw) of persistence, neatness, concentration, and precision more strongly than European American parents (Jose, Huntsinger, Huntsinger, & Liaw, 2000). Most researchers of parental attitudes have examined the influence of mothers', but not fathers' attitudes. The scant extant research shows Chinese fathers have been described as gentle, respected, dignified, and interested in education (Fukaya, 1995); as blending strictness and kindness; and as more involved than fathers from other East Asian countries (Shwalb, Nakazawa, Yamamoto, & Hvon, 2004). Paternal warmth has been shown to predict child achievement (Chen, Liu, & Li, 2000). Because the traditional role of the Chinese father as an authority figure is to ensure that their children achieve (Chen et al., 2000), the attitudes of immigrant Chinese American fathers might have more influence on their children's drawing skill development.

2. Chinese versus American views about appropriate methods of art instruction

Winner (1989) noted that graphic arts are regarded very highly in China; children begin formal instruction in drawing and painting beginning in kindergarten (which includes children from 3 to 6 years of age). The primary focus of early art instruction is on skill-building and technique (Thompson, 2005). Winner (1989), Gardner (1989), and Cox (1992) have noted the differences in the quality of drawing skills that exist between Chinese and American children. Chinese children display extraordinary ability to master the prescribed ways of drawing and painting in their small, neat pictures. The superior drawing performance of Chinese children has been attributed to the explicit instruction in calligraphy, drawing, and painting in Chinese schools and the early encouragement of compliance in children by their families (Winner, 1989). In China's long artistic tradition—over 4000 years, children have been taught the precise steps that are required to draw butterflies, flowers, fish, and birds, for example. The teacher draws the figure step by step, and children are expected to copy the teacher's model (Golomb, 2002; O'Keefe, 2001). When children are taught Chinese painting, they follow prescribed brush strokes, using specific brushes. The same tools are used for calligraphy, which was developed to serve as a

means of communication and as a form of artistic expression (A Look at Chinese Painting, 2009). Calligraphy requires specialized training and careful practice. Each Chinese character represents a word or an idea. To learn to write, children need to concentrate very hard on the unique details of each character. Every Chinese character is constructed within an invisible square, and Chinese children practice writing on graph paper. In the last two decades, the Ministry of Education in the People's Republic of China has created a national art curriculum with standards, textbooks, and teaching materials for children from kindergarten (ages 3–6 years) to secondary school (Art education in China, 2001; Golomb, 2002).

In the United States, the emphasis has been on creativity, imagination, and self-expression rather than on correct ways of drawing. Early childhood professionals in the United States have long endorsed a stage theory of artistic development (Brewer, 2004; Kellogg, 1969; Lindstrom, 1960), believing that children naturally progress through predictable stages of drawing, beginning with scribbling. According to Thompson (2005), the emphasis on the biologically determined unfolding process has probably been “motivated by the desire to preserve children's art in the most unadulterated state possible” (p. 224). In fact, American early childhood teachers for decades have been admonished not to show the child how to draw (e.g., Brewer, 2004; Edwards, 1997; Lasky & Mukerji, 1980; Read, Gardner, & Mahler, 1993). Read et al. (1993) recommended, “We do not give the child directions or set any kind of pattern. It is important that the child is free to express himself without the interference from adults” (p. 329). A decade before, Lasky and Mukerji (1980) prescribed, “Do not draw pictures for a child, because your drawing is likely to be superior to the child's. Do not comply when the child asks you to draw; instead, encourage the child to do it. . . Never have children copy someone else's drawing” (p. 15). More recent early childhood education textbooks (Coppie & Bredekamp, 2009; Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002; Gordon & Brown, 2008) advise teachers to avoid adult-made models. Gordon and Brown (2008) state, “Avoid models, making things for children to copy. It insults children and can make them feel inadequate in the face of something you can do so much better” (p. 568). This view of artistic growth has its roots in the Romantic philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau who believed that “the child was endowed with an inborn creativity and an internal artistic time clock, which if allowed to unwind at its own speed and in its own natural manner, could maintain the creativity of child art until adulthood” (Wilson, 1985, p. 90). Early childhood professionals in the United States have accepted this position and have tended to resist other views (Thompson, 2005).

If drawing is influenced by culture, then it can be argued that “graphic schemas” are transmitted through social means (Braswell, 2001; Callaghan, 1999). Drawing is a symbol system which precedes the development of writing. Just as children who are learning language need language models and social interaction with a speaking partner (Vygotsky, 1978), children who are learning to draw probably benefit from guided participation in drawing tasks with a more experienced person, usually a parent or an older sibling (Braswell, 2001). Young children's drawing is facilitated by social experience (Callaghan, 1999) and direct instruction (Kindler, 1995). Golomb (1992) and Callaghan (1999) have found that young children will successfully represent a simple object when directed to do so, even though their free drawing is typically non-representational. Children as young as three years old improve their drawings when they receive feedback that their drawing does not look like the object they intended to draw (Callaghan, 1999).

If young children are taught to draw, are their drawings more mature than those of young children who are not explicitly taught to draw? To answer this question, we investigated human figure drawings by Chinese American children of immigrant parents as well as European American children. We chose human figure draw-

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