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# I CAN'T DRAW!

A RESEARCH BRIEF ON THE LIFE OR DEATH OF A CHILD'S ART

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## THE LIFE OR DEATH OF A CHILD'S ART

### INTRODUCTION

Picture a group of 27 bright-eyed young children. Now ask, "Who in here knows how to draw?" The result will be 27 excited little hands shooting up in the air, bouncing up and down, hollering for the opportunity to show their masterful skills. Ask this same question in front of a class of adults and the exact opposite reaction is likely. There may be one or two who raise their hand with a hesitancy that says, "I can... but why do you want to know?"

Somewhere along the way that childlike confidence is lost and many will resort to that good old standard phrase "I can't even draw a stick person." Some of this self-doubt simply comes out of psychological development, as children make sense of the world they begin to try to represent it by drawing what they know and can see.

Viktor Lowenfeld's 1947 edition of *Creative and Mental Growth*, describes how a child moves from scribbles to geometric shapes to identifiable pictures (Wachowiak & Clements, 2001) and due to the various paces in natural development, for some this comes easy and for others it is a struggle, thus potentially discouraging efforts due simply to the fact that someone else makes it look so easy!

### THE PROBLEM

The problem is a combination of child's confidence and a lack of opportunity to explore and time for creative, critical thinking. The purpose of this research brief is to explore the reasons that children decide they can or cannot create art and further look in to what educators can do to help.

In 1959, Jean Piaget notes that children need to be seen as problem-seekers and not problem-solvers. When students are given lots of facts or problems to solve they are prevented from discovering and constructing things on their own. (Wachowiak & Clements, 2001) In many elementary classes, including art, they are constantly bombarded by the idea that there is a problem that has a "right" answer or that artwork should look like the teacher's example

"THEY SIMPLY HAVE NEVER BEEN ASKED TO EXPLORE AN IDEA THROUGH ART-MAKING BEFORE AND HAVE NO IDEA HOW TO BEGIN"



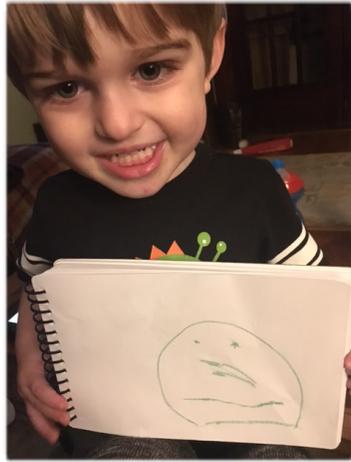
LUDWIG, 2016

and if a student does not experience this rightness, confidence fades even more. Carl Rodgers (1961) says, "In education we tend to turn out conformists, stereotypes, individuals whose education is "completed," rather than freely creative and original thinkers." (p.348). Rodgers describes two major conditions that foster creativity—psychological safety and freedom. This safety is not something a teacher can merely wish for but something that is brought about in their attitude towards their content, work style and assessment. It comes about in the way students are allowed to interact with each other and with the teacher (Gude 2010). Perhaps here, is where a large root of the problem exists, not in students, but in the way teachers approach and teach art.

Art teachers, technically trained in colleges and universities, seek the ever elusive and magical aesthetic (Tavin, 2008) while learning how to use the elements and principles to help students become skilled young artists. Many preservice teachers are trained to use Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) that calls for the content for instruction to be derived primarily from the disciplines of aesthetics, art criticism, art history, and art production. (Brandt, 1987) Striving to provide students with the moments that young teachers remember being inspired by in school, all the while forgetting that only some students that are energized by open-ended opportunities not defeated by them (Gude, 2010). So, when students have the chance to really express themselves rather than creating a realistic representation of an image or object, floundering for ideas, it boils down to one thought "I'm just not that creative." (Walker, 2014) Teachers, sadly, begin to have attitudes about "today's youth" (Gude, 2010) when in reality Walker says, "...they simply have never been asked to explore an idea through art-making before and have no idea how to begin" (Graham, 2010, p.288).

# REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT

There are many factors that contribute to a child's artistic development, from the way they look at and process their world to the social implications that art work might have. In Viktor Lowenfeld's *Creative and Mental Growth* he notes some consistencies in stages of development and groups them by age, the scribbling stage 2-4, pre-schematic 3-6, schematic 6-8, the gang stage or the dawning of realism 7-12, the pseudo-naturalistic 12-14 and the period of decision 14-16. It is worth while to note that due to the fact that we are human some of these stages can be skipped or possibly reversed



(Wachowiak & Clements, 2001) but the characteristics of each of these stages can be helpful to be aware of when helping a child develop artistically.

Lets look back at that group of kindergarteners, not a single one is has been raised the same, come from the same culture, social or economic class, yet when looking at their drawings striking similarities can be seen, various types of scribbles and some geometric shapes. According to Lowenfeld's Stages these children would be in a pre-schematic stage but this is also where an art teacher or parent might begin to see some differences in the way a child is perceiving their world. Many are beginning to draw small figures that include circles with eyes, a nose and mouth with arms coming from where their ears should go and legs where a neck should exist (Wachowiak & Clements, 2001). While others might display more of an understanding of the differences between people and show those in their artwork. At this young age even though they are very social it doesn't often play a very large role in the way that they make art.

As children get a little older (schematic stage) we see their concern about what their peers think of their art grow as the pace of the development of their skills begins to vary greatly from child to child. Their

feelings can be very easily hurt as they look for approval from their teachers and classmates. It is at this point they are also trying to figure out what art is. They make pictures of things that they like and are eager to learn ways of seeing and drawing.

As they enter the Lowenfeld's Gang Stage or the Dawning of realism, usually around 3rd grade, socially, they can be seen joining various cliques and modifying their behavior and their artwork to better fit into those groups. Students at this age level are very critical of their skills and will compare their work to more realistic work adding comments like "I wish I could draw like this." (Wachowiak & Clements, 2001. p. 94.) Children start having feeling of accomplishment or inferiority during this time and those feelings seem to get shaken up a little in the upper elementary and middle school age groups as "Children's criteria of what is good in art outrace their abilities" (Wachowiak & Clements, 2001. p. 99). This can cause a lot of discouragement

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and disengagement in art class as they search of a set of rules or "right" way of doing something and if left in this state of mind for too long a child might begin to conclude that they are just "not good at art." There are many social implications and academic shifts for middle school aged children that become front runners in their development as they search for their own identity and make decisions about their artistic abilities. These young people need to construct meaning and express their feelings but are often stuck because they work so literally (Graham, 2003) There are a variety of reasons that adolescents shift away from or continue on in art. Often times middle school is the last time that art is a required course in school which sends the message it isn't a required part of adult life either (Michael, 1983). Lack of opportunity in art or art being tailored specifically to gifted art students who will go on to be art majors in college can be intimidating or welcoming at the secondary level. Students at this level "need to be able to create artwork that is both meaningful and artistically accomplished according to their own aesthetic and perceptual standards" (Graham, 2003. p. 163).



## WHAT IS ART?

Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (1889) is art. Recognized around the world for its brilliant use of color, line and movement. Van Gogh depicts a swirling sky with bright glowing stars scattered throughout. An individual would be hard pressed to find another person who doesn't recognize this work as art.

Fast-forward to 1917 when Marcel Duchamp created *The Fountain* and a whole new idea of what art is and who can make it arrives on the art scene. Signing the work 'R Mutt' "Duchamp thought he could test the board's openness to art that didn't conform to conventional standards without compromising his relationship with the other board members." (*The Fascinating Tale of Marcel Duchamp's Fountain*, Phaidon, 2017).

In order to create art it would be important to define what art is and since with each stage of development this idea changes it should never be seen or taught as a rule. "Despite our good intentions as art educators to have students seek and represent



VAN GOGH, 1889



DUCHAMP, 1917 PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALFRED STIEGLITZ

knowledge and consciously use language to describe what they see, the things we *think* they should see and the signifiers that come out of their mouths (and through their bodies) always reveal that there is something else going on —between them, us and the world." (Tavin, 2014. p439)

The problem here is that art can be defined in many ways and everyone can define it as they see fit and that the definition itself is a fluid one. When students understand this a weight is lifted that allows more room for creativity and perhaps even play. This is not to say that skill, technique and talent should not be an important part of creating art just that our constant need to find that "magical" quality the art world calls aesthetics can produce a lot of anxiety in our students. (Tavin, 2003).

Instead a balance between ideas and skills must be found. Pablo Picasso said "One must learn the rules like a pro in order to break them like an artist." (Picasso)

## SHERRIE AND WALKER

On the right is an image by the famous Walker Evans of Allie Mae Burroughs... or is it? In 1981 artist Sherrie Levine photographed reproductions of Evan's famous Depression era work. This is a picture of a picture which Levine claimed was no different than taking a picture of a still life.

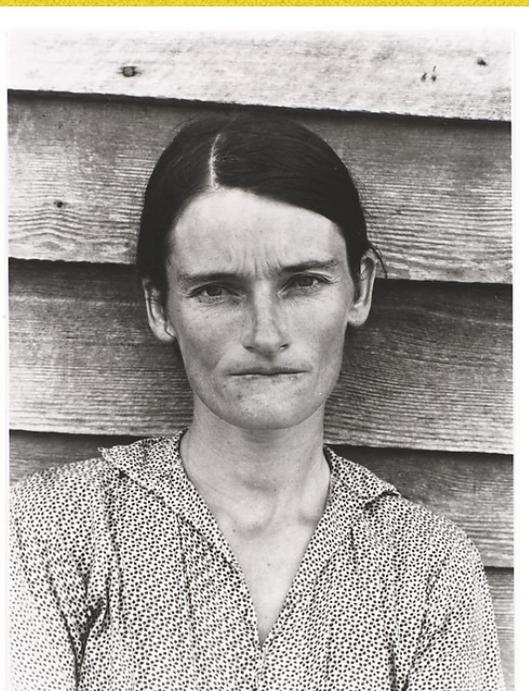
### FOR THE CLASSROOM:

Is Levine an artist or a con-artist? Have students gather evidence to support the reason for their opinion. Generate questions and criteria during a debate for or against her artist status. Cut off debate before one team "wins."

Have students focus on the questions and criteria they generated.

- Was the point to arouse aesthetic response?
- Who has the authority to designate Levine as an artist?
- Is there a right answer?

Next, have students bring in two objects, one they consider art and the other they don't. They should be ready to defend their choices about why or why not. What are the criteria for successful art? One-of-a-kind or mass-produced? High-skill level or creative idea? Does one criteria remove art status from another classmates object? The discussion could go on and on. (Anderson, 1998)



LEVINE, 1981

## SKILLS VS. IDEAS

Teachers must find that very delicate balance of developing skilled, young artists and deep, young thinkers. In Mark Graham's 2003 study he concluded that "cultivating artistic activity is more complex than simply teaching students pre-packaged conventions for drawing. Without meaningful connections to issues of personal importance, these skills would have withered"(p.175). Creative abilities and habits don't just develop because a student is given choice on a drawing project. In fact, just leaving a project wide open will energize some students but debilitate others (Walker, 2014).

Art teachers generally list "enhancing creativity" as an outcome of their art programs but analysis of lesson plans point to very little curriculum actually doing this (Gude,2010). Many art programs focus on building skills as teachers are tied to standards and grading practices that don't necessarily focus on building creativity but creating technically good artists. Carl Rodgers definition of the creative process is "that it is the emergence in action of a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand and the materials, events, people, or circumstances of his life on the other." (1961. p.350)

## CRITICAL INQUIRY TO ENHANCE CREATIVITY

To get students working beyond skills and media choices, artists and teachers look to big ideas and critical inquiry. The important thing here is to allow students time to really explore an idea and connect to what they want to explore. These ideas are more than just subject matter they are concepts. Artist Andy Warhol used pop culture logos and images like the Campbell's soup can as a subject but his big idea and concept was denouncing high art. The subject matter is merely a creative tool that the artist is using to

explore their big idea (Walker, 2001). Students must, however, be taught how to creatively inquire about these big ideas because this is where art curriculums are falling short.

In Margaret Walker's study of David Miller's High School art classes, Miller says, "inquiry-oriented thinking comes in handy. It might outlast the color wheel with respect to general relevance to one's life" (Walker, 2014. p.293) Millers classes had a strong focus on inquiry as an integral part of artmaking. He combined this with workshop days that would help build skill and teach relevance of art history but students made a lot of the decisions about their concepts, media and process. He scattered critiques throughout a unit instead of the traditional end piece of study. Miller has his students write proposals and reflections about their projects as a way of processing their thinking and saw a "new depth of conceptual complexity" because of this. As students were allowed to explore ideas while building skills their engagement increased (Walker, 2014)



WARHOL, 1962

Art teachers are however pressed for time and contact hours keep getting smaller and classes keep getting bigger. If a young artist isn't allowed to fully explore their big idea and that knowledge is left undeveloped the result will be shallow projects and a lack of interest in classroom activity (Walker, 2001). This big idea and knowledge can come from anywhere, and it does not need to be obscure or exotic. Drawing on student interests is a great way to help students build confidence and knowledge all at once. Even if a topic seems dull, if a student comes at it from a place of inquiry they might find a spark that can fuel amazing artwork. Practicing artists such as Chuck Close and Robert Motherwell do a lot of research when it comes to their work and studying their processes can often times be just as important if not more important than studying the artwork itself (Walker, 2001). These artists don't use fancy mediums or experimental skill



## A PLACE FOR FEARLESS FREEDOM

In Olivia Gude's 2010 study she describes the art making process in three acts: anxiety, resistance and cultivating creativity. During Act One: Anxiety, students display dispiritedness because they "lack the spirit of fearless exploration needed to make art" (p.32) Even though an art teacher might say there isn't a "right answer" the student struggles because they have been trained in all of their other schooling that there is a right answer and they don't "know how to judge what solution will be acceptable" (p.32). This dispiritedness can spread to the teacher as they misinterpret student reactions. This anxiety can often lead to Act Two: Resistance, as students try to guess what the teacher wants or hold on to their status as a good artist by not failing as a the teacher encourages them to think outside of their usual art process. Other students might resist because they don't see the relevance of art making in their life. Act Three: Cultivating Creativity, the teacher recognizes that many things stand in the way of creativity. From their own self-consciousness with peers to the very art standards teachers are supposed to educate their students about. Gude noted that Carl Rodger's describes two major conditions that foster creative thinking—psychological safety and psychological freedom in his 1961 book, *On Becoming a Person*. Rodgers writes about three things that are required for creating this freedom in the art classroom.

- (1) "Accepting the individual as of unconditional worth. [The student] gradually learns that [they] can be whatever [they] are without shame or facade, since [they] seem to be regarded as of worth no matter what [they] do."(p.357)
- (2) "Providing a climate in which external evaluation is absent. Evaluation is always a threat, always creates a need for defensiveness." (p.357)
- (3) "Understanding empathetically. If I see you and what you are feeling and doing from your point of view, enter your private world as see it as it appears to you—and still accept you—this is safety indeed." (p.358)

If a teacher can provide an environment that creates this kind of freedom young adults can begin to think and inquire

without fear of failure. Art is naturally inclined to this kind of thinking because it can be understood in so many different ways (Geahigan, 1997). When fear of wrongness is removed creativity and art flow freely and energetically. This freedom cannot be absolute. It was Pablo Picasso that said "Forcing yourself to use restricted means is the sort of restraint that liberates invention. It obliges you to make a kind of progress that you can't even imagine in advance"(Picasso). Sydney Walker suggests two or three purposeful requirements as unlimited options often "fail to offer the resistance needed for creation"(p.73)

## PRINCIPLES OF POSSIBILITY

In a Spiral Workshop for Teens, at the University of Illinois at Chicago they use the Principles of Possibility—playing, forming self, investigating community themes, encountering difference, attentive living, empowered experiencing, empowered making, deconstructing culture, reconstructing social spaces, not knowing. Students in Gude's program investigate complex themes and work to free the mind from the damage an overly regimented academic career has done (Gude, 2010). Students learn how to play and "catch the unconscious mind unawares and capture the images of the unfettered imagination" (Gude, 2010. p.35) Students also begin to learn that a large portion of their initial ideas are thrown out as they look for the spark that will make a body of work worth investigating. Even though this time is considered play it is also a way of developing good work habits. Chuck Close says "Inspiration is for amateurs, the rest of us just show up and get to work." (Close, 2004) Gude says "the primary objective of a creative curriculum ought to be developing the capacity of students to instinctively respond to situations with playful creative behaviors" (Gude, 2010. p. 36) She cautions not to let skills that might inhibit that free flow get in the way.



"THE PRIMARY OBJECTIVE OF A CREATIVE CURRICULUM OUGHT TO BE DEVELOPING THE CAPACITY OF STUDENTS TO INSTINCTIVELY RESPOND TO SITUATIONS WITH PLAYFUL CREATIVE BEHAVIORS"



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO ART EDUCATORS

- Create an environment where students are free to be themselves, show them that they are valued then they will be comfortable enough to take the risks and make mistakes (Rodgers, 1961).
  - Help them build knowledge by looking into what they are already learning in their classes. By using material they are learning in class the knowledge base is being added to by other teachers and class work. (Walker, 2001).
  - Give two or three simple boundaries that don't put a damper on student creativity.(Gude, 2010).
  - Find a balance of skill building activities and creative inquiry practices (Walker, 2014).
  - Critique along the way to help guide students rather than one that feels like judgement at the end of a project (Constantino, 2015)
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## RECOMMENDATIONS TO PARENTS

- Hang up / display your child's art. They worked hard on it and put pieces of themselves into it. Show them their time and effort creating is valued (Gude, 2010).
  - Share experience and knowledge to help them build their own and make sure they create lots of their own experiences (Walker, 2001).
  - Ask "thinking" questions when talking about art and other subjects rather than making suggestions (Bartel, 2001).
  - Celebrate success and failure and make sure they know that the failure is just as important (Gude, 2010).
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## RECOMMENDATIONS TO STUDENTS

- Talent is only part of art making. Emile Zole once said "The artist is nothing without the gift, but the gift is nothing without work."
- "If you think good work is somehow synonymous with perfect work, you are headed for big trouble. Art is human; error is human; ergo, art is error." (Bayles, 1993.) Let that soak in.
- Draw on your knowledge of anything and everything. Pick something you love and know a lot about and start there with your art making (Walker, 2001).
- Make a whole bunch of art...eventually some of it will be good (Bayles, 1993).
- Ask for advice and guidance along the way from teachers, friends and parents (Constantino, 2015).



## FURTHER RESOURCES:

### ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN ART

The New Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain by Betty Edwards

This classic drawing book is one of the most widely used resource books in the art world. Information about childhood art development as well as recent research on the brain's plasticity and value of learning new skills.

### SHERRIE LEVINE, ARTIST OR NO?

Art History, After Sherrie Levine by Howard Singerman

This book examines the career and work of the controversial artist.

### ON OVERCOMING FEAR AND FINDING YOUR ART AGAIN

Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking by David Bayles & Ted Orland

"This is a book about making art. Ordinary art. Ordinary art means something like: all art not made by Mozart. After all, art is rarely made by Mozart-like people; essentially—statistically speaking—there aren't any people like that. Geniuses get made once-a-century or so, yet good art gets made all the time, so to equate the making of art with the workings of genius removes this intimately human activity to a strangely unreachable and unknowable place. For all practical purposes making art can be examined in great detail without

ever getting entangled in the very remote problems of genius." (Bales, Introduction, 1994).

### FOR ART EXPLORATION AND INCREASED CREATIVITY

How to be an Explorer of the World by Keri Smith

This book is a great way to just begin "seeing" the world around you and collecting those experiences. Observe, collect, document, create. This book will help you on those days when you "just can't think of anything."

Steal Like An Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative by Austin Kleon

"You don't need to be a genius, you just need to be yourself." Austin Kleon helps readers find creativity in everything. A quick read with great exercises that will get your creative juices flowing again!

### SPIRAL ART WORKSHOP

<https://spiral.uic.edu/index.html>

This is the website for Olivia Gude's Spiral Art Workshop for teens.

### MARVIN BARTEL

[https://people.goshen.edu/~marvinpb/MB\\_Home.htm](https://people.goshen.edu/~marvinpb/MB_Home.htm)

He is a professor at Goshen College and has a lot of amazing things to say about kids, learning and creativity.





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