

# Transition to Writing: Drawing as a Scaffold for Emergent Writers

Pam Oken-Wright

Children draw, and magic happens. Or nothing happens. Drawing holds the potential for rich expression and complex learning. For confirmation one need only watch a child study a concept over and over through drawing, never stopping until the "big idea" with which she is wrestling is resolved. Five-year-old Carly, for example, drew picture after picture with essentially the same theme: the inside of a house with stairs and a person climbing them; in two rooms upstairs, people asleep in bed; downstairs, people sitting at a table. Carly was apparently working on representing movement, profile, and perspective (for example, the parts of the body that show when one sits behind a table).

Watching Carly, I wondered if it is precisely this promise of complexity that so engages children in drawing for long periods, day after day. And I thought about children who have become disengaged from drawing, about children who have not learned that

their ideas can become visible through the pen, and about children who have resorted to quick "formula" pictures, unsatisfying for them and lacking in fertile ground for cognitive growth.

On the first day of kindergarten, Jessie, using quick blue lines, drew a spare picture of a girl. When her teacher invited her to tell about her picture, Jessie said, "A girl."

"Oh, is it a girl you know?"

"Nope. Just a girl."

The next day and the next, and for the first several weeks of school, Jessie drew the exact same girl; the girl never developed an identity and always seemed to float on the page without connection—and apparently without a story. Jessie didn't have anything to say about her pictures, nor did she seem to believe she had anything to "write" about when her teacher offered to act as scribe for her.

Jessie's teacher was concerned because Jessie neither wrote stories nor drew them, but she did not know how to help her or the other children who find the transition from drawing to writing difficult.

The strategies outlined in the accompanying boxes reflect some of the ways teachers can help children use drawing as a scaffold for their early writing efforts.

## *Paving the Way with Drawing*

The urge to make one's mark is such a strong one that it is manifest on many a bedroom wall, executed with whatever implement was handy or seemed exciting. Making a variety of drawing and writing materials available and always accessible in every classroom area (see Schickedanz 1986) and posing well-timed suggestions and provocations can often be enough to encourage children to draw and write.

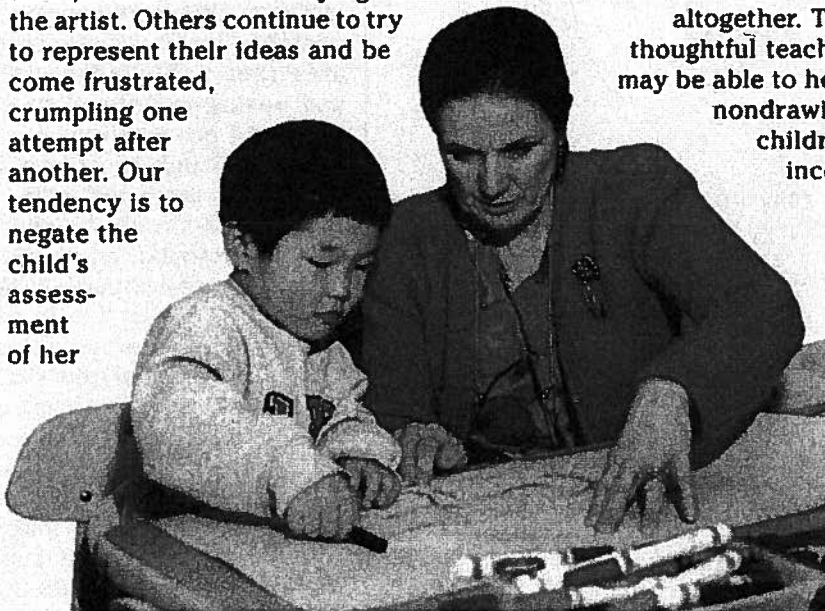
Materials should be chosen for their potential for representation and not just because they are novel. Pencils, felt-tip pens (including thin-line markers and the black pens often reserved for the adults in the classroom), colored pencils, crayons of many colors, pastels, and chalks will invite exploration and representation. New materials may be added to the supply, but it is important not to substitute them for the old. Children generally need time to "learn" new media before they can concentrate on expression through them. We do not want to push a child to represent before he has satisfied his drive to explore a medium. Nor will we want to deny a child media through which he is already comfortable representing.

One final caveat: Some children may be representing, but not in a way the teacher recognizes immediately. And so observation is of paramount importance. Only by carefully watching the child's process, hearing his words as he works, engaging him in conversation, and watching his work over time will we know if he is exploring media, line, and his own

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movement or if his intent is to represent. It is his intent that must drive us and not our own teacher agenda.

Often, however, children as young as five have learned not to try; they have already learned that they cannot make their big ideas visible on paper (or in any other way). Some, like Jessie, have resorted to formula pictures, static and unsatisfying for the artist. Others continue to try to represent their ideas and become frustrated, crumpling one attempt after another. Our tendency is to negate the child's assessment of her



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attempt, concentrating on the product: "Oh, but it's a *fine* cat!" But children who don't draw comfortably may need a different set of conditions from those we are offering. They may need to learn to trust that they *can* make their ideas visible and that if they get stuck, a teacher will be there to help.

The teacher's help, of course, must be offered with care. We might engage the child in conversation about what characteristics a cat *has*, for example, or what shape the body of the cat might be. Or perhaps the teacher can help the child recall a similar problem she had in another drawing and how she solved it, or even provide a photograph or drawing

of a cat for reference. Whatever help we offer, it must not be more than the child needs, it must be respectful of the child's agenda, and it must not be for the purpose of making a "better" cat; rather, it is to help the child move forward when she feels stuck.

Sometimes the child's assumption that he cannot represent his ideas visibly results in avoidance of drawing altogether. The thoughtful teacher may be able to help nondrawing children incor-

porate drawing into a chosen activity. For example, every day in kindergarten Scott chose to do construction with either wood or recycled materials; he never chose to draw. Knowing that drawing leads to talking and writing, his teacher wanted to help him move forward, so she introduced Scott to construction with paper—cutting, taping, stapling, and so on. When he was comfortable with paper construction, his teacher showed him how to make different kinds of books. Although Scott's initial ef-

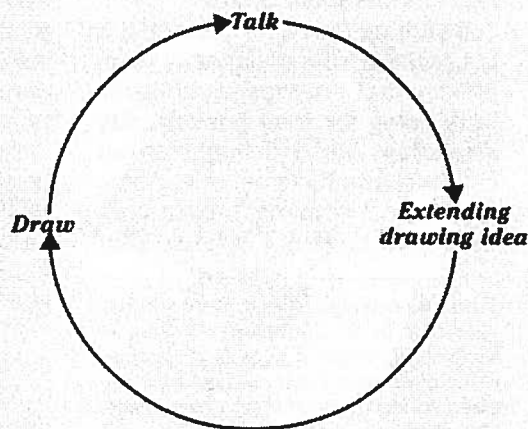
forts to fill those books represented no real investment, with support from his teacher, he eventually drew pictures for his books from which a story could be told.

### Talking about drawing

Drawing to tell a story is but one of many purposes of drawing. Others include development and illustration of a concept or theory, exploration of media and design, drawing to "collect" memories, drawing from life in order to study an object. The scope of this article, however, is limited to the support that drawing can offer to the child just beginning to write.

Language and drawing can come together in ways that enhance growth in representation. Talking about their pictures can help children remain focused as they draw, and it can help them extend the ideas about which they are drawing. When children talk about their pictures on a regular basis, their drawing becomes richer and is more likely to hold a story, making the stories easier to tell.

If we observe children drawing, and if we listen and think about what we've heard when children talk about their drawing, we have the information we need to



construct a sense of why the child draws, what she *can do* and what she *could do*, and how her drawing might support her learning about many things, including literacy.

When we listen, we may hear children planning their pictures *before* they put crayon to paper ("Here, I'll draw you a picture of what I mean"). Children who do not yet declare intention before they begin to draw may be able to tell about their drawing when they have finished; later, they are able to declare intention while in the middle of drawing. Often, in response to encouraging questioning, a child will add to her drawing as she talks, extending both idea and representation of the idea.

### Getting story into the pictures: Asking the right questions

When children draw the same picture, devoid of detail or "plot" over and over—like Jessie—or when children repeatedly draw "wrapping paper" drawings with objects like rainbows or hearts floating on the paper, they can have difficulty using their drawings as springboards for language. If we are to help children use their drawings as expression and as support for writing, our responses to their drawings must help them get story into their pictures.

The questions we ask will determine the success of our efforts. When adults respond to children's drawing with "What is it?" they not only risk offending young artists who believe it should be perfectly obvious what it is, but they also may get minimal language in response ("It's a house"). "Oh, what a beautiful picture!" or "How

nice" requires no response from the child at all. Even "Tell me about your picture" may not encourage children to aim toward story in their pictures, because it does not challenge children to move beyond static pictures and static language: "It's me," "It's my mom," "It's a sun," "It's a rainbow."

But if we ask, "What's happening here?" when talking to children about their drawing, we set an expectation that there is something happening—the beginnings of a story. At first there may be no story, of course, but if we keep asking the questions, "What's happening here? Oh, and here, with the prince?" and so on, children eventually begin to add story as they draw.

### Drawing in a social context

In a classroom culture that provides and appreciates a social context for learning, children have the advantage of an environment full of "teachers." If children are invited to draw beside other children who are drawing, they talk, observe, hypothesize, experiment, adjust, and ask for and offer help. In doing so, they may remain engaged for longer periods. To ask children to draw in isolation diminishes the learning environment and may disengage the cycle (drawing—> disequilibrium—> drawing—> satisfaction—> drawing) that seems to occur in social contexts, particularly for children who tend to give up easily when drawing. It may also be useful to set up a situation in which children draw collaboratively, for example, to make a mural.

### Getting the story in writing

When a child's drawings contain "something happening," and when she is comfortable telling the stories in her pictures, we will want to invite her to have her stories written down.

How a story gets written depends on the child's writing ability and intent. Certainly, it is always appropriate for a child to write the story her way, whether in scribbles or strings of letters or something closer to the conventional. When writing independently this way, children attend to the characteristics of print that are salient for them at that particular moment in development (Clay 1975). The child is working on what she *can do*.

When a child works at a level of personal challenge or when he is working, with an adult, toward what he *could do*, he encounters some of the best conditions for learning about letters, sounds, and how writing works. Eventually, children may need invitations to go beyond their scribble or strings-of-letters writing. Some children may need our help to get any print on paper (see Figure 1).

### Supporting the child who is just learning what letters look like

I have found the following to be a useful sequence of strategies for posing sufficient but manageable challenges for children. This sequence is not necessarily linear; we want to provide whatever assistance a child needs to take on a challenge. Work with these strategies must be accompanied by

## Figure 1. As Children's Writing Emerges: The Teacher's Changing Role

| The Teacher  | The Child   |
|--|---|
| Takes dictation of entire story.   | Tells the story/talks about his picture. May begin to break thoughts into words.  |
| Helps the child distill the story and takes dictation.                         | Traces the letters the teacher has written.                                       |
| Helps the child distill the story and dictates letters to him.                 | Copies the letters from teacher's printing.                                       |
| Dictates letters and solicits the child's help to hear sounds.                 | Copies letters from alphabet strip.   |
| Encourages the child's independence in writing; offers support only as needed. | Writes the letters from memory.   |
|  | Begins to hear beginning, then ending, then medial sounds in words, with support. |
|  | Independently writes text that is readable by experienced others.                 |

insight into what the child knows about print—knowledge gleaned from watching her writing, both process and product.

**1. The teacher takes dictation.** After asking "What's happening here?" the teacher listens to the child tell the story about her picture, and she transcribes the whole story to demonstrate the gestalt of oral story into text (that is, the teacher demonstrates the process, "You can write what you can say," "Text bears a message," "It goes left to right, top to bottom," and so forth). At some point the teacher may notice that in two ways the child has begun to make her story dictation more like written language than like conversation: the child introduces phrases used only in stories, such as "Suddenly, he . . ." or "There once was . . .," and the child begins to offer one word or phrase at a time, apparently break-

ing speech into written components. Although the child will still want some stories transcribed in their entirety, sometimes . . .

**2. The story can be "distilled," the teacher writes the shortened story, and the child copies.** The teacher might say, "Tell me, if we were going to write down one important thing from your story, what would it be?" Then she writes that one word or phrase or sentence. For the child who will copy or write his story himself, this puts the task into manageable proportions and avoids the frustration of starting something that he cannot finish. When the teacher writes the text, she may say each word as she writes it if the child is just learning to break speech into words. Or the teacher may say each letter as she writes it if the child already breaks speech into words and is now learning about letters.

The child may want to copy the teacher's writing after his message is on paper. It may be wise to write children's text on a piece of paper separate from their drawing; many children will see no reason to write something themselves if it is already where they wanted it! The children who do not yet copy can trace. Doing so may help them construct a mental image of letter forms.

### Supporting the child who has a good mental image of some letters

**3. The teacher dictates the letters.** Once a child has a good mental image of most letters, the teacher can dictate the letters in the child's story to her so she can write her own message. To do that the child must call up all she knows about a letter as well as about how letters go together to make a story (for example, left to right and top to bottom). This process not only helps the child practice what she knows, but it also gives the teacher the opportunity to teach any letters the child does not remember (or at least to make a note to focus on them later) and to teach other conventions of written language, such as using space as a word boundary.

It can help at this point to have available an alphabet strip for reference and to accompany the visual aid with a spoken one ("H is the one that looks like a gate" or "Remember, B is the one with a line and two tummies"). Using both visual and auditory referents, children seem to develop strategies for recalling letters more easily.

I have encountered kindergarten and first-grade teachers who on general principle refuse to tell any of the children in their class how to spell words but insist that each child "write them the way