

Aspects of Using Drawings as an Expressive Way of Understanding the Children

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Abstract. *Drawing has an important role in the activities performed by children of preschool and early-aged children. In most cases, the immediate appreciation of the children's drawings is an aesthetic one, relevant for identifying the creative potential. Besides those, it is important to keep in mind that beyond this aspect of a work, we can find other information about the child's personality, about their cognitive and emotional development or maybe what concerns them by trying to decipher the messages that the children choose to convey to us, somehow indirectly, through their drawings. In our paper we will point out some of the ways and directions of interpretation of children's drawings and we will explain five projective tests, in a way accessible both to teachers for primary and preschool education, and to parents concerned with this subject. Our study aimed to draw attention to drawing as an expressive (non-diagnostic) way of understanding the child, which can be used by teachers in the class or group in any school or preschool environment, without requiring an initial psychological training, but a minimum of knowledge about the analysis and interpretation of children's drawings.*

Keywords: *to draw, children's drawings, projective tests, understanding, children.*

Introduction

Drawing plays a major role in the lives of preschool and early-aged children. Children draw in kindergarten or school, at home or when they visit someone, even when they are bored. As a general rule, parents offer the children some pencils and sheets of paper, knowing that this activity will keep the child preoccupied for a short time.

It is better to get children used to drawing when "they have nothing to do" than to sit in front of a screen, therefore young children will tend to grab a pencil rather than watching TV.

Why do children draw? There are several possible answers to this question. It might be that they want to create something beautiful, it might be that they want to repair something that they consider wrong, from what they have seen. It might be that they are told by the adults to draw or finally they feel the need to communicate something for which they do not have the verbal tools to do it.

As we can find drawing everywhere in children's lives, we strongly believe that drawing is a means of understanding early school-aged children.

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Directions in interpreting children's drawings

We delimit three main directions of interpretation for children's drawings:

- ⇒ *measurement of children's intelligence* (F.L. Goodenough, C. Pârlog, U. Şchiopu, M. Gârboveanu)¹
- ⇒ *children's understanding through psychoanalytic interpretation of drawings* (M. Klein, F. Dolto and partly R. Davido)²
- ⇒ *understanding children as a whole*, from an emotional and intellectual point of view and with some psychoanalytic references (G.L. Luquet, M. Prunthommeau, J. Boutunier, C. Enăchescu)

The first perspective for interpreting children's drawings is the *psychologist-intellectualist* one. It assumes the follow statement made by F.L. Goodenough that the nature of children's drawings in early childhood is conditioned by the children intellectual development³. The author develops a relevant test (later famous) for the study of the development of the child's intellectual level, which consists in drawing a little man by the child-subject, telling him "Draw a man, how well you know!".

The test can be applied to children between 3-13 years old, each age corresponding to a certain type of little man. Goodenough applied the *Draw-a-man test* to 97 children of different ages and nationalities, establishing 18 criteria totalling 51 points, the subjects being graded according to the presence or absence of the elements required by the criterion, then establishing their IQ.



Figure 1. Evolution of the "Little man"- The drawings of a girl at 3, 4,5 and 6 years old (personal archive)

¹ U. Şchiopu, M. Gârboveanu, *Studiu asupra unor aspecte ale creației artistice în desenele copiilor*, in Culegere de Studii de Psihologie, vol. IV, București, Editura Academiei, 1962.

² M. Klein, *Povestea unei analize de copil*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Sigmund Freud, 1994.

³ F.L. Goodenough, *Measurement of intelligence by drawings*, New York, N.Y. and Burlingam, Brace&World, 1954.

The differences between these four drawings gives us information about the cognitive development of the child, about her attention to details and so on.

The Romanian psychologist C. Pârlog studied the evolution of drawing in children according to their stages of intellectual development. Thus, he establish the following phases:

- ⇒ *Scribble phase* (2-5 years old) with preliminary stage (2-4 years old) and cell stage (4-5 years)
- ⇒ *Schematic phase* (5-9 years old) with the transition stage (5-7 years old) and the stage of complete representation (7-9 years old)
- ⇒ *Realistic phase* (9-15 years old) with the stage of transition to profile (9-15 years old) and the stage of complete representation of the profile (11-15 years old)

The author criticizes the drawing after a model, especially the geometric one and promotes the frequency of free drawing.⁴

The second perspective of interpreting children's drawings is the *psychoanalytic analysis*. M. Klein is one of the most frequent appearances in the children's psychoanalysis literature. What we want to highlight here is the fact that M. Klein uses drawing a lot in his therapies with children. The analyst focuses a lot on the colours used by children in drawings, the objects represented by them and less on the shapes, which in turn can be analysed to capture a broader picture of the subject.

F. Dolto is another personality of child psychoanalysis, she studies especially the free drawing of children and the representation of the human figure in drawings concluding that the drawings displayed colours and shapes are already spontaneous means of expression for most children and they like to *tell* what their hands have translated from their phantasm.⁵ It is interesting how both authors prefer free drawing and do not discuss projective drawing tests.

The third direction presented brings a *global approach*, capturing aspects of the child's personality, of his intellectual development, but also leaves room for interpretations of a psychoanalytic nature, where appropriate. First of all, we consider it absolutely necessary to appoint one of the initiators of the interpretation of children's drawings, G.H. Luquet, who claims that drawing is a way for children to have fun, being a game like any other and that it is practiced especially by children with a melancholy temperament. He proposes a general rule by which children

⁴ C. Pârlog, *Psihologia desenului*, Cluj, Editura Institutului de Psihologie al Universității din Cluj, 1932.

⁵ F. Dolto, *Psihanaliza și copilul*, București, Editura Humanitas, 1993.

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represent in their drawings everything that is part of their own experience, everything that was given to perception and that the intention to draw a certain object comes from the fact that at that moment that element has an exclusive place and is mainly in the spirit of the designer. But it also says that past events can determine the drawings, through the possibility of reliving that moment.

Luquet's fundamental contribution is the identification of the evolution stages in children's drawings. The classification is made from the perspective of realism in drawings, which the author considers present in children's drawings up to 8-9 years-old. These steps are as follows:

- ⇒ *The fortuitous realism* or the scribble phase
- ⇒ *Missed realism* or the tadpole phase
- ⇒ *Intellectual realism* (the drawing offers the attributes of the represented elements, but has no perspective)
- ⇒ *Visual realism* (graphic narrative phase).⁶



Figure 2. Evolution of stages in children's drawings, according to Luquet, of a girl at 2, 3, 4 and 6 years old (personal archive)

Reviewing the works of this child, we can appreciate the evolution of realism at the time in this girl's drawings. It's a visible difference between the third and the fourth stage, for example. Correlated with other information we can easily establish the cognitive and emotional evolution of the girl, her latest preoccupations and so on.

A few years later, also in France, another researcher appeared interested in the issue of interpreting children's drawings. It is about M. Prundhommeau, who proposes a test of intellectual evaluation of personality and behaviour of children through drawings. This is called the "drawing sheet" and involves copying the drawings presented on a sheet by the child, in spaces parallel to the boxes containing the model

⁶ G.H. Luquet, *Le dessin enfantin*, Paris, Libraire F. Alcan, 1927.

drawings. While the child fills in the empty boxes on the paper sheets, his behaviour is noticed and noted.⁷

A contemporary author who subscribed to this type of approach (which is from our point of view the most reliable of those we mentioned) is R. Davido. She supports the use of projective and intelligence tests, using both variants in the investigation of her subjects. In addition, the author proposes a projective test consisting of the elaboration of four drawings, called by Davido- Childhood Hand that Disturbs (CHaD).⁸

In Romania, C. Enăchescu considers projective testing by drawing an expressive technique, appreciating each drawing as a “creation”, which depends on the typological structure of the respective personality, with the necessary individual variations.⁹

In conclusion, we argue that the interpretation of children's drawings must be viewed from a multifaceted perspective, because once made, a drawing can give us intellectual, emotional, personality or psychoanalytic information about the subject who made the drawing.

Projective tests - short presentation

Projective tests may bring in addition to psychometric tests some information about the personality and area of concern of the subject. *Projection* is an “operation by which a neurological or psychological fact is displaced and located outside and by which the subject expels from himself and locates in another in another person certain qualities, feelings and desires that he does not know or reject in himself.”¹⁰

The tests we propose for the study of preschool and young children are the following:

1. *The Family Drawing* test - was proposed by Porot and Corman. It has two phases: in the first drawing, the child is asked to draw a family, without giving additional explanations. The second drawing consists of representing one's family. The idea is that the first family drawn is the image of the ideal family, as the child imagines it. In this drawing the child projects his desires, which he expects from the real family. The child will produce the second drawing of his/her family as it is and

⁷ M. Prunthommeau, *Le dessin chez l'enfant*, Paris, PUF, 1947.

⁸ R. Davido, *Descoperiți-vă copilul prin desene*, Editura Image, 1998.

⁹ C. Enăchescu, *Elemente de psihologie proiectivă*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Științifică, 1973.

⁹ C. Enăchescu, *Elemente de psihologie proiectivă*, Editura Științifică, Cluj-Napoca, 1973.

¹⁰ *Dicționarul de psihanaliză*, București, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 1997, p. 271.

where the relations between its members can be identified. This test can be applied from 5 years of age up to adolescence.¹¹

2. *The Kinetic Family Drawing* test (KFD) - was elaborated by Burns and Kaufman in 1970. The child is asked to draw each member of his family while doing something. This test aims to reveal intra-family relationships, harmony or family tensions.¹²

3. *Draw-a-Man* test - was initiated by Goodenough and later analysed by J. Boutonier who adds the comment that the little man's drawing would be the projection of his own person¹³.

4. *The Tree Drawing* test - was developed by E. Juckev in 1928, but has undergone many changes over time. The standard tree test was standardized by Charles Koch in 1957. The instruction given to children is usually: "Draw a fruit tree the best you can." For younger children, the simple formula is also recommended: "Draw a tree", without other adjacent comments. R. Stora¹⁴ exchanges the instruction with it: "Draw a tree, any tree except the fir tree". The elements of the drawing that can be interpreted are: the placement of the tree on the page and its size, the type of tree drawn, the soil line, roots, stem, crown, branches, flowers, leaves, fruits and landscape.¹⁵

5. *Childhood Hand that Disturbs* (CHaD) is a new projective test developed by R. Davido involves four different drawings made by the child.

- 1) The childhood draw (C)- drawing that the child made more frequently when he was younger.
- 2) The hands draw (Ha)- drawing random hands, in any position.
- 3) The Hand that Disturbs (D) the child must draw a hand that is disturbing for him.
- 4) The free draw- the child is asked to draw anything he wants.

By analysing these drawings we can appreciate the emotional development of the child and any possible abuses, claims Davido¹⁶.

¹¹ <https://virtualpsychcentre.com/family-test-what-is-it-and-how-is-this-projective-test-used>, accessed 10. 06. 2021.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ J. Boutonier, *Modalități de exprimare la copil și desenul*, on M. Daubesse in *Psihologia copilului de la naștere la adolescență*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1970.

¹⁴ <https://insightandcoaching.com/2016/03/draw-a-tree-but-not-a-pine-tree>, accessed 09. 08. 2021.

¹⁵ A. Rozorea, M. Sterian, *Testul arborelui*, București, Editura Paidea, 2000.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

Additionally *The house* drawing, which is not exactly a test, can provide key information for understanding children, because drawing a house is supposed to be an effective means of revealing the child's personality. The interpretation takes into account the house as such, but also the environment. "The design of the house is emblematic for the world in which the child lives, for the interactions with his own family and for the ability to interact with the outside."¹⁷

Also, *free drawing* - is used to reveal the current concerns of the child or to bring up to date previous experiences. Here the child is asked to draw what he wants in a limited time.

The elements pursued in the appreciation and analysis of each drawing that we propose would be:

- ⇒ *Graphic space* - to what extent did the child use the space of the drawing sheet, on which part of the sheet he focused etc.
- ⇒ *Shapes* - the type of lines used, the outline of the represented objects or beings.
- ⇒ *Arrangement* - arrangement in the sheet, order on the drawing sheet, details.
- ⇒ *Colour* - colours, tones, shades etc.
- ⇒ *Execution mode* - realism or imaginary representations, additions or omissions in the drawing, transparency or perspective.



Figure 3. Some random drawings of the same girl at 4, 5, 6 years old (personal archive)

All those details give us information about many aspects of the child's cognitive or emotional development that may sometimes be ignored because of the focus on the declared behaviours and abilities.

We consider that these tests are quite accessible and easy to interpret by teachers without an initial psychological training, without

¹⁷ E. Crotti, *Desenele copilului tău - interpretări psihologice*, Bucureşti, Editura Litera Internaţional, 2010, p. 169.

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claiming a psychodiagnosis, but as guidelines for identifying landmarks on children's personality and revealing their concerns. Moreover, we propose tests on the child's relationship with their family and also some tests that may help in understanding the personality of the preschool and young school child.

Conclusions

Our suggestion to approach the projective tests, in a non-diagnostic way, by the teachers from the group or from the class, does not replace the presence of a psychologist in the institution, but can partially supplement the concerns in the direction of additional information about the children they work with.

It will be useful for the teachers of primary and preschool education to have minimum knowledge on the application, analysis and interpretation of projective test data, so they can increase their effectiveness in intervening concretely in building the profiles of children in their classes.

We suggest that drawing as an expressive way of understanding the children should be used in, as many school and preschool environments as possible, to help the children express themselves, considering that teachers' access to children's "after school" life may only bring benefits in the current teaching activities and why not, in the lives of the little ones.

In addition to the fact that children's drawings could give us (teachers or parents) valuable information about their cognitive and emotional evolution, it has a great benefit, that of supporting the development of their creative potential and creative imagination. It is important for both parties, parents and teachers, to get additional information on their kids for finding the best way to relate with them, for a good relationship and for better long term communication.