

## **Emotional communication: Tracing aspects of self-expression in paintings of preschoolers**

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Present research focuses on the ability of Greek preschool education children to be self-expressed through spontaneous painting in a subject of their free choice communicating their emotions. The method of this research based on painting analysis which focus on content, size, use of paper and colors that were chosen by the children. Moreover, factors as gender and socio-financial status of participated children was correlated with their capability to express themselves. The observation and data analysis of colors that kids selected, the forms that they painted; and the dimensions of their painting provided important information for their ability to express their emotions. The most of preschoolers expressed their emotions making colorful images in an effort to represent their familiar persons with images revealing their relationships with their parents and siblings. The ability of children self-expression is a part from their creativity, mental and emotional communication which they construct interactively their social relationships among them and other children; and their teachers and parents in an initiative level. As research concluded painting helps children to express spontaneously their real positive and negative emotions, thoughts and feelings.

*Keywords:* Preschool education, painting, emotional communication, self-expression.

*Comunicación emocional: rastrear aspectos de la libre expresión en las pinturas de los niños de educación preescolar.* Esta investigación se centra en la capacidad de los niños griegos de educación preescolar, a auto-expresarse a través de la pintura espontánea en un tema de su elección, sin revelar sus emociones. El método de esta investigación está basado en los análisis que se centran en el contenido, el tamaño, el uso de papel y el color que fue elegido por los niños. Por otra parte, factores como el género y la situación socio-económica de los niños correlacionaron con su capacidad de expresarse. La observación y el análisis de datos de los colores que los niños han seleccionado, las formas que pintaron y las dimensiones de sus pinturas, facilitaron información importante por su capacidad de expresar sus emociones. La mayoría de los niños en edad preescolar expresó sus pensamientos y sentimientos haciendo imágenes coloridas, en un esfuerzo para representar a sus familiares con las imágenes que revelan sus relaciones con sus padres o hermanos. La capacidad de los niños de auto-expresión es una parte de su creatividad, la comunicación mental y emocional con que ellos construyen interactivamente sus relaciones sociales con otros niños y sus maestros y padres, en un nivel de iniciativa. Como la investigación reveló, la pintura ayuda a los niños a expresar espontáneamente sus pensamientos y sentimientos reales, positivos y negativos.

*Palabras clave:* Educación preescolar, pintura, comunicación emocional, auto-expresión.

Preschool children communicate their emotions in a creative way by revealing aspects of self-expression into their paintings. Searching out the meaning of “self-expression” into international bibliography we located a few books which just included this meaning in their titles and only in short terms into their contents. Also, a small account of articles and studies which connected the “self-expression” meaning either to metaphysical notions or to pedagogical connotations such as “creativity”, “aesthetics education” or the fine arts generally speaking (painting, music, dance) and the expression through reading, writing or literature anyway have been located. Some articles which correlate self-expression with play therapy, creative expression, self-disclosure by verbal or non verbal communicative skills and social interactions are believed to be on the right side, according to our opinion about what “self-expression” means however. Moreover, some authors like M. S. Green (2008) presents a systematic philosophical study of self-expression, noting that self expression is a pervasive phenomenon of the everyday life of humans and other species, which has received scant attention in its own right. He explores the ways in which self-expression reveals human states of thought, feeling, and experience, and he defends striking new theses concerning a wide range of fascinating topics about human ability to perceive emotion in others, artistic expression, empathy, expressive language, meaning, facial expression, and speech acts. He draws on insights from evolutionary game theory, ethology, the philosophy of language, social psychology, pragmatics, aesthetics, and neuroscience to present a stimulating and accessible interdisciplinary work.

Discussing the theoretical framework of present research it is quite interesting one to pinpoint that similar studies on self-expression of preschoolers are not too common. However, the literature review claims in the most categorical way that as children sharpen their verbal skills and become more comfortable with their peers, they feel increasingly capable of expressing their feelings and concerns (Levick, 2003). Preschoolers enjoy the challenges of experimenting with a wide variety of materials and tools, using them to express their feelings, ideas, and wishes while sharpening their basic skills. In a such direction move to the conclusions of present research, which confirms the similar conclusions in Greek preschool education environment as many other western countries show (Baraldi, 2008).

In any case, trying to ascertain an integrated definition for “self-expression” we would pretend that “self-expression” means an inherent ability which exists in any human being to express its inner world (senses, feelings, interesting, wistfulness, cogitations, moods, etc.) in a unique and creative way aiming to its psychological discharging and to development its communicative skills. Although true self-expression comes from deep inside (DeLestrade & Docampo, 2010), like any other human inherent ability self-expression could be cultivated; more developed and finally is able to constitute an important structural element of child personality development.

The concept of self-expression in five (5) years old children include a number of activities which through them achieves to emerge their inner world, their soul as feeling and their spirit as high mental functions (Vygotsky, 1978) in an effort for revealing, naming their human behavior and realizing by body language their verbal or non verbal communicative ways (Kotzman, 1989). Self-expression is the path for self-socialization according to Baraldi (2008) who claims that “in communication processes, self-expression provides cues for self-socialization because it indicates that children autonomously create their own meanings, while adaptation to external rules and models indicates that children simply reproduce generalized social meanings. Self-expression indicates that the origins and conditions of actions lie inside the individual. In general, self-expression is the result of the cultural relevance assigned to autonomous individuality and individual self-realization in modern European society. In this society, self-expression is a cue of a personalized discursive positioning in which the self is freely realized and can freely produce its own socialization, embodying personal agency”.

Furthermore, children's paintings obviously show artistic development and emotional expression. In educational and clinical settings, as online Encyclopedia of Children's Health refers ([www.healthofchildren.com/D/Drawings.html](http://www.healthofchildren.com/D/Drawings.html)), “they can be vehicles for assessing a child's personality, intellectual development, communication skills, and emotional adjustment. Children's drawings can also aid in helping to diagnose learning disabilities. Law enforcement officers, social workers, and counselors often have children draw traumatic events, especially when they lack the communication skills to explain what they have witnessed or experienced. Children may also feel distanced from the traumatic event by drawing it and talking about what is happening in the picture, as if discussing a character in a book or on television”.

In a Greek Nursery school environment there takes place present situation activities which, without constitute self-evidence, promote the realization of self-expression concept in children which constitutes fundamental ability for the construction of their personality. For this reason research aimed to ascertain mainly if and how many of the Greek kids, which are indeed in this very sensitive age; are being in Nursery-school, have the possibility to express themselves, constructing also in this way their personality, for developing in the future into complete personalities, socialized, competitive and responsible citizens in a globalized society. The cultivation of self-expression originates by straight recognition and acceptance of kid's self and be extended to other's recognition in a context for whole life expectancy socialized process which premises the creative cooperation and lead each person (Leontari, 1996), when this is in adult age, to self-recognition, to responsibility, to each other respectfulness, to progress and most of all to self-creativity, as a result of creative thinking (Xanthakou, 1998) which established and initiated most importantly for the childhood, the age of

personality's structure elements in infant-toddler and childhood years 1-6 (Reynold, 1992).

## METHOD

It is quite known that art is an important tool in teaching young children crucial concepts related to self-expression, reading and writing. As opposed to more structured exercises, such as coloring on dittos and underlining pictures in workbooks, Striker (2001) stresses that scribbling and free drawing experiments are the most important art activities a child can engage in; they better prepare children to read independently as they grow. Encouraging children's artistic growth will have beneficial effects on all other aspects of their emotional and intellectual development. Keeping in mind the above common sense in our research we tried to trace the trend in what ways the kid's self-expression be appeared through free or spontaneous painting, an activity which constitutes one of the most famous activities in kids. It is absolutely true that each child at preschool age enjoy painting, drawing, living in a magical world of mixing the colors be particularly interested in the realistic depiction of the environment (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). This period of life which has already called by J. Piaget as "the preoperational stage" underlines precisely the necessity of a child to approximate the outer world not only by its own senses and movements, exactly like in "sensorimotor stage" it used to do (Piaget, 1952). Three to six (3-6) year old child reclaims intuitional thought and absolutely substructure criteria not in the slightest by logical and realistic mean. Child reclaims its verbal abilities combine with non verbal skills, imitation combined with facial expressions, gestures, postures etc. aiming at configuration of specific concepts (Stamatis & Kontakos, 2008).

Kids wish also concern and learning by trial and error through their free employment with all objects and particularly by playing with natural materials such as soil and water. So kids mainly achieve to create and learn in parallel or to be told better, they learn by creating (doing) or create by learning in the house or in Nursery-school where mustn't be, as J. Dewey said "a room of preparation for life but the life itself" (Dewey, 1980). The kid's self-activation constitutes, in our opinion, the fundamental pedagogical principle which ought to know all parents and teachers if they are going to be daily cooperated helping their kids self-expression development, something that we consider to be very important as we already have referred to.

In the above theoretical framework, the research exactly requested kids to paint spontaneously whom or whatever they love more. What mainly required of preschoolers was to choose and paint just one, the most beloved figure. Alternatively, the researchers (through their teacher) had given them the clarification that they could include in their paintings more than one beloved person, creatures or materials, if they

wished. Furthermore research tried to look into the possibility kids to express themselves by painting which just taking as an indicative example whereas painting constitutes kids likeable activity, and positive consequences for kids senses delineation, so that helps pedagogically, in order to provide some advice to parents and preschool education teachers. Also, research tried to find out how painting contributes in interpersonal relationships enlargement in a creative way and also increases classroom interactions and to ascertain if and how the majority of Greek preschoolers, have the ability to communicate their emotions for beloved persons or creatures by spontaneously express themselves. So, the basic research questions were the following:

- How preschool age children communicate their emotions in a spontaneous and creative way as painting is?
- Who or what are they love more?
- How are they painting beloved persons?
- How are they perceived creatures or materials of their environment and which way kids incorporate them in their paintings?

Specifically, the research was conducted in 2013 on a sample consisted of 200 kids (95 boys and 105 girls), chosen from an amount of 1352 kids which attended in preschool education of all units of Rhodes island-Hellas. The sample constituted by kids which were born in 2008. Rhodes island could be characterized as a semi-urban area with common and mixed social elements in their population synthesis.

Also, it was kindly requested of preschool teachers, after their guidance in the painting activity, to complete a questionnaire which looked for family's identity useful elements for the description of social-financial levels of kids family environment, because of the correlation between their social status and self-expression. According to provided information of preschool teachers, 96% of participating kids are living in a family environment which is composed by two parents and 55% of them live in a family with one at least older brother or sister. This means that majority of sample kids were second genitures.

When the operations had been completed in the preschool environment then researcher moved to the elaboration and the analysis of researching data which was done by Statview II (Mac) statistical computer program. In this research, descriptive analysis was used in order to be revealed all quantitative data. Also, painting analysis method was used in order to be revealed qualitative data derived from the inner psychological background of all kids' works such as real thoughts, desires or emotions related to their beloved humans or creatures. This method focuses on analysis of the examination of shapes and lines of drawings, colors that been used, size of sketches, and position of them onto the given A4 page leading to interesting results combined with some gender and social status correlations with kids' self-expression.

## RESULTS

Kids' fathers were working either as private employees (30%) or as professionals (28%) either as government-public employees (20%) or finally as enterprising (10%). The rest was unemployed. Most of them, like mothers on the other hand, had completed the nine (9) year compulsory education level. Mothers, in their majority (52%) were mainly working as private employees (27%) either as government-public employees (18%) either as professionals or enterprising (7%) respectively. Nevertheless, less of them but a significant number (48%) didn't work. They stayed at home doing the house keeping and mothering. From those who didn't work most were wives of professionals or private employees. In any case, comes of that in six hundred seventy (670) parents totaling two hundred (202) wives were not working and this fact explains that kid's families had been, in their majority, lower than a middle financial level while both parents were working before financial crisis.

From the descriptive analysis done cognitive that kids which prompted to express themselves spontaneously by painting, most of them painted their family persons. Specifically, 25% of them painted their father, 41% of them painted their mother and finally 32% of them painted their siblings. Totaling 96% of the kids preferred to paint a direct familiar person and this makes sure, plus in this way, what most important educational researchers believed (Goossens, 2010), has evolved strong bonds of love between kids and their family environment like kids feel the necessity of parent protection and the sibling comradeship. The observations of paintings show that the forms of people, despite individual differences, have mainly the following characteristics. Father appears almost always husky, with short hair and sometimes having a mustache or beard. Mother appears slender compared to father, has long hair and in most paintings wears a dress. Siblings appear small size and often depicted close to parents or to another brother or sister, in cases that they have one.

Generally, one could say that kids seem to paint their beloved persons based on a scale of three levels relatively to the size of the drawings. The father figure is usually larger. The figures of siblings have the smallest dimensions. Among both previous dimensions lies the mother figure. In a few cases, this model is reversed while it seems to indicate the deeper emotions of children, which are revealing through idealization of the beloved persons.

In parallel and in spite of given instructions, 23% of the participating kids concluded in their painting materials and this event, according to our estimation, shows that most of the kids, although they strongly intend to a personal world, start steps steadily even though they boggler to interest their material world, which constitutes an out-parental environment. Just 12% of the sample boys and girls included in their paintings creatures and this is in fact what impressed most because it is known that kids

love animals very much (Anderson & Anderson, 2011). Also, there were a few plants, flowers of colorful butterflies or other creatures, some buildings, clouds, sky and sun as children usually enjoy to paint.

As Malchiodi (1988) and Xanthakou (1998) stressed that preschoolers may draw what they know, but usually they prefer to paint what they feel. Thus, anyone could claim that painting consist a cathartic experience for kids that enables them to release their emotions. Painting is also a medium that requires children to analyze, organize and synthesize their experience or in other words, painting requires and in parallel increase kids' critical thinking. In this framework, any tutors have already concern how kids choose and utilize colors by conducting special researches which jumped to the conclusion that kid's choice of warm (red, yellow, orange, pink), cool (blue, green) or neutral (white, black) color and then usage in kids paintings signals and discloses their psychological and sentimental situation in which the kids are being generally or the feelings which kids feel towards people or things in this way it is portrayed in this paintings.

According to the painting analysis and describing the colors which were utilized by kids it is observed that 60% of them preferred to express themselves by using warm colors and in our opinion this means that most kids express positive feelings towards painted familiar persons (Kaila & Xanthakou, 1986). It is estimated to be fairly justifiable since kids prefer to paint mother, father or their siblings figures, fellow persons like there are strong family bonds, as we have already mentioned above. Certainly, this trend has splayed if any keep in mind that most of the mixed colors that were used by 25% of participated kids constituted by warm colors too. Nevertheless, cold colors utilized the minority of the sample (14%) and supposed to be an event that insinuates the negative feelings existence which often appear on inner-familiar relationships. As specific factors consequences which mainly relates with rivalry between siblings and they face express directly to brother or sister either, or as grievance or negative attitude against parents (Herbert, 1988).

Completing our inference description was observed that kids prefer self-expressing by painting covering 1/4-2/4 of total space in an A4 paper, utilizing mainly the right half and less of the paper surface (43%). This seems to ascribe the size of their love analogically with the painted sketch proportions which obey respectively to a double triptych:

A. Much love - king size proportions - warm colors,

B. Less love - small size proportions - cool colors, and this seems to be moved escalated to one or the other direction of this double pole shape.

Relevant research conclusions claim that placement of the face, especially on the right half of the page, expresses optimism, dynamism, openness and kids' interest for their academic progress (Kakisi-Panagopoulou, 1994).

Furthermore, correlation revealed no relevance between gender and self-expression ( $p < .05$ ) which could mean that boys and girls express themselves in an equal way without any hesitation. Also, the correlation between parents' employment and self-expression revealed no relevance ( $p < .01$ ) which could mean that boys and girls expressed themselves, very successfully indeed, without any negative influences related to socio-financial family status. Consequently, neither gender or socio-financial differences were not found to negatively affect mood and ability of children to self-express spontaneously themselves by painting what they love most.

## CONCLUSIONS

As the Encyclopedia of Children's Health refers ([www.healthofchildren.com/D/Drawings.html](http://www.healthofchildren.com/D/Drawings.html)), "color analysis has often been a means of determining a child's emotional state. A lot of black or red recurring in a child's drawing may be a troublesome sign. Black often is an indication of depression or feeling hopeless or restricted. Red may indicate intense anger. Blues and greens are usually calm colors, and yellows and oranges often indicate cheerfulness. Therapists are not ordinarily concerned if a child does one drawing in one of the troublesome colors, but may want to investigate a series of dark drawings, especially if the content is also frightening or disturbing. Therapists may use the therapeutic session as a means of emotional release and may encourage a child to create drawings that express their deep fears and angers. Drawings in this case are not assessment instruments, but become therapeutic tools".

Keeping in mind the above description, color and content analysis and presentation of research inferences come to the conclusion that when requested by five (5) years old kids, in Rhodes island-Hellas, to express spontaneously their mutual loving feelings (RQ 1), they made this by painting with satisfactory success, while all the kids presented deeds and no one refused or was reluctant to participate. It is plausible to be comprehensible considering that painting as an option, as use of color stirring constitutes one of the most likeable kid's activities. Also, it is clearly understood that the way children participated consist an initiative context for interaction development between kids and their fellow parents. Preschoolers prefer to paint familiar persons like a father, mother or siblings figure expressing in this way their love to them (RQ 2). Certainly, they utilized for this purpose warm, cool and mixed colors in their effort to ascribe, in different proportions their fellow persons disclosing in this way their unique personal choices, their weaknesses and their feelings for anyone or everything (RQ 3). It is quite remarkable that kids avoided to paint buildings or creatures like animals, plants or insects (RQ 4).

According to the above statements painting seems to be a valuable way for preschoolers to communicate emotions achieving to express remarkably their love. This



finding constitutes simply a small sample of what the preschoolers could do systematically, so that it could be able each teacher to diagnose at first the psychological situation of each child through the painting activities and at continuity to aim kids in possibly confronting other existing problems. Therefore, teachers could implement in their instruction a wide amount of strategies, processes and methods which are very important and useful for the complete self-recognition, self-esteem, self-respect through creative kids self-expression (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997), which offer, except for all the other important parameters, for the child's development, happiness through painting by exercising creative fantasy and thinking. This is in our opinion the keystone for improving normal human personality (Stamatis, 2009).

Parents as the early childhood or preschool education teachers ought to emphasize self-expression cultivation, into the context of our theoretical definition, guiding their children to recognize, to accept and to cooperate with other kids since recognizing and accepting themselves allowing self to be expressed in a way that not only will satisfy them but moreover will respect and consider personal and social rules at the same time. Many of current violent events all over the world which take place in childhood indicate parents and teachers how important is for each kid to be self-expressed and show them its real inner world, senses and feelings for itself and the other. How important is for each kid to spontaneously communicates emotions by painting. A vigilant observation and interpretation of kid's paintings by parents and teachers could help in any kid behavior's problem confrontation in time while children's art is not a frill, but the very foundation upon which all later fundamental skills are built.

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