Why Are Children from Asian Cultures Advanced in Drawing Skills?

Return to the elaborate, expressive drawing, by a Chinese artist just 4 years old, on the opening page of this chapter. Observations of young children’s drawings in Asian cultures, such as China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam, reveal skills that are remarkably advanced over those of their Western agemates. What explains such early artistic ability?

To answer this question, researchers have examined cultural influences on children’s drawings, comparing China to the United States. Artistic models offered by the culture, teaching strategies, valuing of the visual arts, and expectations for children’s artistic development can have a notable impact on the art that children produce.

In China’s 4,000-year-old artistic tradition, adults showed children how to draw, encouraging them to master the precise steps required to depict people, butterflies, fish, birds, and other images. When taught to paint, Chinese children follow prescribed brush strokes, at first copying their teacher’s model. To learn to write, they must concentrate hard on the unique details of each Chinese character—a requirement that likely augments their drawing ability. Chinese parents and teachers believe that children can be creative only after they have acquired a foundation of artistic knowledge and technique (Golomb, 2004). To that end, China has devised a national art curriculum with standards and teaching materials extending from age 3 through secondary school.

The United States, as well, has a rich artistic tradition, but its styles and conventions are enormously diverse compared with those of Asian cultures. Children everywhere try to imitate the art around them as a way to acquire their culture’s “visual language.” But American children face a daunting imitative task, much like a child growing up in a context where each person speaks a different language (Cohn, 2014). Furthermore, U.S. art education emphasizes independence—finding one’s own style. American teachers typically assume that copying others’ drawings stifles creativity, so they discourage children from doing so (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Rather than promoting correct ways to draw, U.S. teachers emphasize imagination and self-expression.

Does the Chinese method of teaching drawing skills beginning in the preschool years interfere with children’s creativity? To find out, researchers followed a group of Chinese-American children of immigrant parents and a group of Caucasian-American children, all from middle-SES two-parent families, from ages 5 to 9. At two-year intervals, the children’s human-figure drawings were rated for maturity and originality—inclusion of novel elements (Huntsinger et al., 2011). Findings revealed that on each occasion, the Chinese-American children’s drawings were more advanced and also more creative.

Interviews revealed that Caucasian-American parents more often mentioned providing their children with a rich variety of art materials, whereas Chinese-American parents more often reported enrolling their children in art lessons, rating the development of artistic competence as more important. The Chinese-American children also spent more time as preschoolers and kindergartners in focused practice of fine-motor tasks, including drawing. And the more time they spent, especially when their parents taught and modeled drawing at home, the more mature their drawing skills. At the same time, Chinese-American children’s artistic creativity flourished under this systematic approach to promoting artistic maturity.

In sum, even though young Chinese children are taught how to draw, their artistic products are original. Once they succeed at drawing basic forms, they spontaneously add unusual details of their own. Although Western children may come up with rich ideas about what to draw, until they acquire the necessary skills, they cannot implement those ideas. Cross-cultural research indicates that children benefit from adult guidance in learning to draw, just as they do in learning to talk.