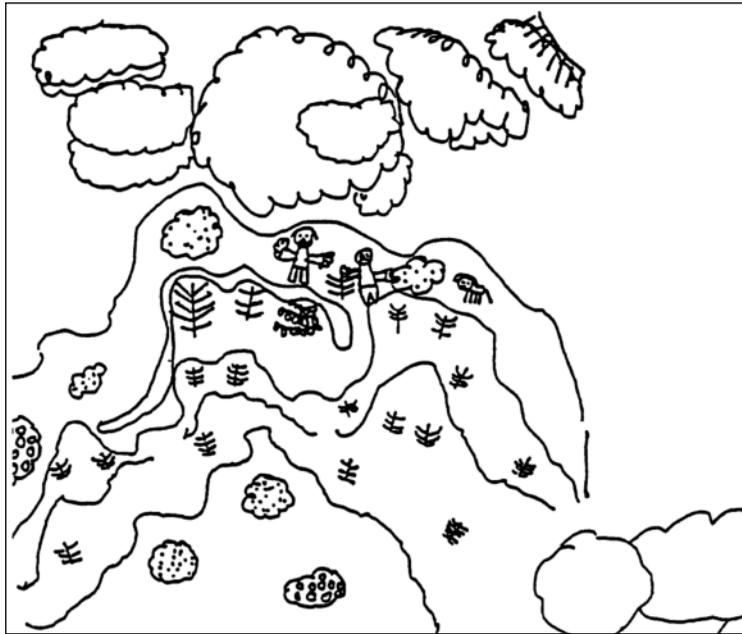


A NEW LOOK
AT LANGUAGE EDUCATION
FOR CHILDREN



Bob Steele
September, 2016

The Drawing Network is an informal group of parents, teachers, academics and interested citizens who want the best schooling possible for children. As language is such an important factor in mental development, psychological health and successful learning, our focus has been on ‘emergent language’. Here, in brief, is how we view it:

Literacy has always dominated schooling but we are convinced that spontaneous drawing is equally important, especially in the preschool/kindergarten/primary years. Drawing as a language medium has been undervalued or completely ignored with untold negative results. Not only is spontaneous drawing a language medium but a significant aid to the emergence of literacy. When I refer to it as spontaneous it is to discourage adult caregivers from trying to teach it or correct the child’s efforts to make it up. You can teach literacy but you can’t teach drawing; you can only inspire it through conversations about themes.

Words and spontaneous drawing emerge in the second year of life as the child begins to feel the need to articulate, express and communicate a wide range of formative experiences. (*Articulate*, I take to be what goes on in the brain/mind. *Express*, I take to be the influence of medium.) Literacy is coded, a gift of culture which must be learned to be useful. It is difficult for children to use except for oral communication. Drawing, on the other hand, is a language without a code and is relatively easy for children to use. The relationship of the two languages is symbiotic: drawing aids literacy and literacy aids drawing.

There has always been a potential for three languages: 1) words alone for oral communication and, as the written code is learned, the full deployment of literacy 2) drawing on its own for telling nuanced stories, recording information, describing events too subtle or complex for words alone 3) words and drawings working together for enhanced language power.

No one questions the value of literacy but in the early years it is unable to marshal sufficient language power to ensure optimum psychological growth and health for children, enhanced learning across the curriculum and spontaneity in language expression. And yet we have relegated the arts to personal entertainment, cultural gloss, commercial enterprise and community pride and have ignored spontaneous drawing, the arts language most easily linked to words and most comfortably used by children.

This neglect - and we all share the blame - inhibits the mental processes which children need to “grow up” whole: 1) perception 2) intellect 3) feeling/emotion, 4) memory, and 5) imagination. When any one or combination is the focus of a drawing theme the child’s mind shifts to the creative mode. On the other hand, when home and school ignore drawing as a language medium and the arts are treated casually or dulled by artsy-craftsy activities, children function below their potential and will grow-up mentally disadvantaged and emotionally undernourished. The long term effect on individuals and communities is not known but it is likely tragic. We maintain that there is a connection between participation in the arts and a nation’s mental health.

In what way do the arts nurture the child’s developing mind? Observe a preschooler in the act of drawing for starters. Note that he is comparatively unaware of his surroundings while he draws. He is driving the truck and making appropriate sounds, flying the jet, remembering his Mom’s embrace or a holiday with his cousins. The drawer is on “automatic pilot”, that is in direct touch with his intuitive pre-conscious mind. He is truly experiencing empathy with the subject of his drawing, a feeling of at-oneness with subject matter and process. Empathy is the power to make whole the scattered thoughts and feelings of the growing child. If practised daily or frequently, spontaneous drawing transfers the unifying power of art to the emerging mind of the child. The effect of daily involvement is to open unexplored language dimensions. It seems folly not to take advantage of this opportunity!

But don’t we also experience empathy in the practice of non-arts subjects, Algebra for example? Indeed, we do. While I was failing Grade 12 composition through disinterest in formal grammar and correct usage, I was experiencing empathy by solving Algebra problems! Empathy in any subject is surrendering to the intuitive or preconscious workings of the brain/mind. But there is a difference! Empathy in Algebra promotes an understanding of Algebra. Empathy in the Arts integrates the brain’s intellectual function with the heart’s emotional function. Empathy manifested in the ARTS is empathy for living creatures - the artist himself for starters, his family, his community, his fellow humans the world over and empathy for the environment and natural world.

It is essential to bring empathy into learning across the curriculum but if we want to survive and evolve we must integrate mind and heart. This is the bare-bones argument for a Balanced Curriculum of ARTS, STEM and PHYSICAL CULTURE which we are presently engaged in designing.

When The ARTS are given equal status and when spontaneous drawing is considered a language medium, children will blossom as never before and empathy for human communities and the natural world will dominate our culture. And then, and only then, if we persevere, will we experience no more war, an end to poverty, the fulfilment of the great religions and philosophies living in harmony, a culture that values co-operation more than systems of greed. Human evolution will then continue on its mysterious and inevitable path.

Bob Steele, Associate Professor (Emeritus) UBC, for the Drawing Network, September 5, 2016

DRAWING GAME STRATEGY FOR THE “I CAN’T DRAW” SYNDROME

We may wonder why children in their early years draw their own unique and often exquisite images without really giving it thought and yet when they get into the intermediate grades they will claim that they can’t draw. It is the “I can’t draw” syndrome, the result of growing up and becoming more self-critical, more aware of peer opinion and, for many, a background of spurious art activity at home and school. In the early years, drawing is a natural language used spontaneously but once the child is in school, it dries up and a hugely important learning resource is lost. Can we prevent this from happening? Can we take spontaneous drawing into the self-conscious years of late elementary and beyond? The answer is a resounding yes!

When I started my third year in the Faculty of Education, UBC, I taught mostly graphic arts but two classes of art education. I had discovered that my students who were to be elementary teachers were mostly without background in art and yet they would be teaching art to children. I decided to cut back on the number of techniques I would introduce and concentrate on giving them an authentic experience in making art and build on that in the time available. Media and technique would be limited to drawing, painting and modelling in clay. I would lean heavily on a remedial technique I called the “Drawing Game”. Calling it a ‘game’ helped to establish a

willingness to give it an honest try! Based on a technique called “continuous line drawing” it would have the effect of getting it into and keeping the production of imagery in the intuitive preconscious. There would be no room for the defeatist “I can’t draw” attitude.

Prior to the performance we talked about contour line and matching the defining contour edges observed on the subject with the contour lines we were making on the paper. (It will always be a rough approximation.) We talked about ‘touching’ the subject into a drawing by the feeling of the drawing tool on paper thus introducing a ‘tactile’ element. (There should be a little drag on the line.) We talked about tempo - not too fast and not too slow. If the model is visible, i.e. fixed before you as something you can see, keep the line moving uncritically and synchronize eye focus and moving line as best you can. If the drawing is from memory or imagination, don’t try to freeze the image on the ‘inner screen’, rather, play the role of quiet observer and watch the image unfold. I repeat: the psychology is based on establishing contact with the preconscious and going on ‘automatic pilot’. The urge to say “I can’t draw” is short circuited if you keep the line moving and so is the urge to “make it look more real”. We are in the business of making our own language of symbols not taking photographs!

The resulting image is, as I have said, a symbol. Knowing this should make it easier to accept the drawing which, in the early stages of the Drawing Game, you may not like. The finished product may not please you at first but the empathic feeling while drawing will. Keep in mind that this is a temporary remedial technique, to free you up, to get you back to the self-confidence of childhood. The drawing may even look childish but remember Picasso saying that he could draw like an old master as a youth but it had taken him a lifetime to draw like a child! Give it time. In my teaching I sometimes made a contract with students and called it, “Thirty Days of Drawing” in which I played the taskmaster, The prize which everyone can win is a way of working that will lead to a life-changing, life enhancing avocation or even vocation in the visual arts. You will be able to produce authentic drawings, authentic paintings, authentic prints, sculptures, photographs. This is not a promise but a prediction! You have to work at it but the work is liberating.

SUPPORT FOR THE DRAWING NETWORK APPROACH TO LANGUAGE

For the past four years, I have been volunteering with K to Grade 2 students in a program that uses drawing as a means of expression for pre-literate children. The results never cease to amaze me. The progress made by each child is profound. Marshalling ideas on paper is never a chore and at the end of each session, the children are clearly able to articulate the stories contained in their drawings. Their drawings are unique providing a basis for compositions that they are as yet, unable to express in written form.

Nan Oliver, retired High School Art Teacher

The drawing as language approach challenges educators and researchers to understand that the drawings children create explore relationships, explore the world and the way children make meaning and express feelings.

*Marni Binder, Associate professor,
School of Early Childhood Studies, Ryerson University*

The insight, that children's drawing is an early and essential mode of communication, a first language, is supported by both parental intuition and academic research. (Alford, C. 2015). Guided by the engagement of parents, teachers and researchers, the Drawing Network approach offers a model of commitment to a gently serious drawing practice that can be shared learning between a child and her or his significant adults.

*Itation: Alford, C. (2015) Drawing, the Universal Language of Children.
The New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work 12 (1) 45-62.
Michael Emme, Associate Professor, Art Education, University of Victoria*

I would be happy to support your drawing-as-language approach as being a valid and truthful way of looking at emergent language in the early years. As you know, my work with practicum students from UBC includes this pedagogy as a foundation for the Sketchbook Project, a joint venture between UBC Community Field Experience and the Vancouver School Board.

Phyllis Schwartz, Artist and Art Educator

Since discovering the Drawing Network philosophy for drawing as a language I have never looked back. The power of drawing has amazed and inspired me. Through Daily Draw sessions I have witnessed children opening up to traumas such as abuse and bullying. I have seen it help overcome barriers of communication with autistic children and others who have communication difficulties. It has also assisted me greatly in my daily literacy session. I have encouraged the approach across all age groups from three years to eleven years.

I believe it is an essential approach. My students are using more powerful verbs, more colourful adjectives and an abundance of nouns to communicate sophisticated ideas even before they can read, or the preschool children can spell their names.

*Ann-Marie Gray, classroom teacher, Arts coordinator,
Kirkbymoorside Primary School and mother, U. K.*

We use drawing to create symbols and images. Languages are composed of symbols and images, therefore drawing is a language!

Ray Arnold, retired college art and design professor

Asking my primary students to do their own art work, perhaps as a response to an event, a good story, a holiday, or a field trip allows them to express their own thoughts and feelings in a very personal way, well before they are able to express them through writing. This art work helps them develop as individuals and their self-esteem grows. They also come to appreciate the unique art work their classmates produce, and the classroom and hall bulletin boards come alive with this diversity! The Drawing Network has been encouraging to me in my teaching. I have especially enjoyed the analysis of children's drawings that have appeared from time to time.

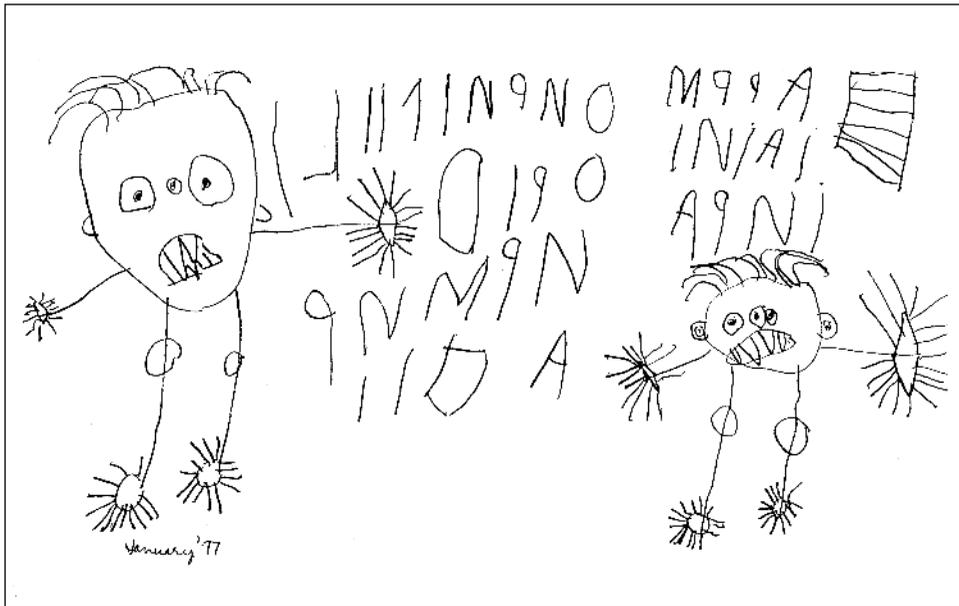
Linda Picciotto, retired teacher, South Park Family School, Victoria, B.C.

ILLUSTRATIONS AND CAPTIONS

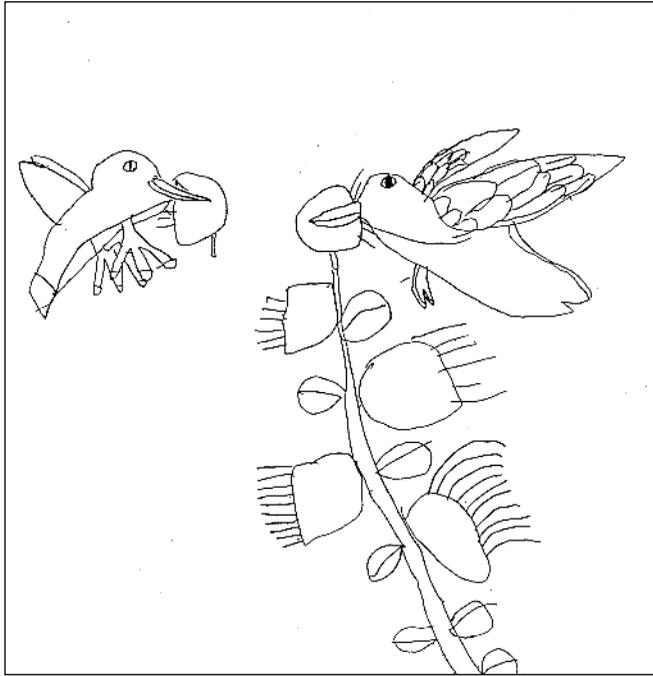
All illustrations are from “A PICTURE BOOK OF CHILDREN’S DRAWINGS: THE STORIES CHILDREN TELL US WITH A DRAWING TOOL”, self-published by the author of this pamphlet and distributed at cost by the Drawing Network. The text examines 82 drawings in all, most full page spread.

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CONVERSATION by Janika (age 3): This drawing by 3 year old Janika carries two mysteries. Striking in its union of drawing and words, I have been unable to translate the text. Perhaps she is just fascinated by adults making similar marks and is imitating them. The second mystery is the detailed body parts of her two figures. She doesn't count fingers yet but she adds hair, eye details, teeth, ear canal, nose hole, knees, hands, feet and toes all before she has thought to separate head and body! Whatever Janika had in mind there is a happy urgency in this drawing that is compelling.

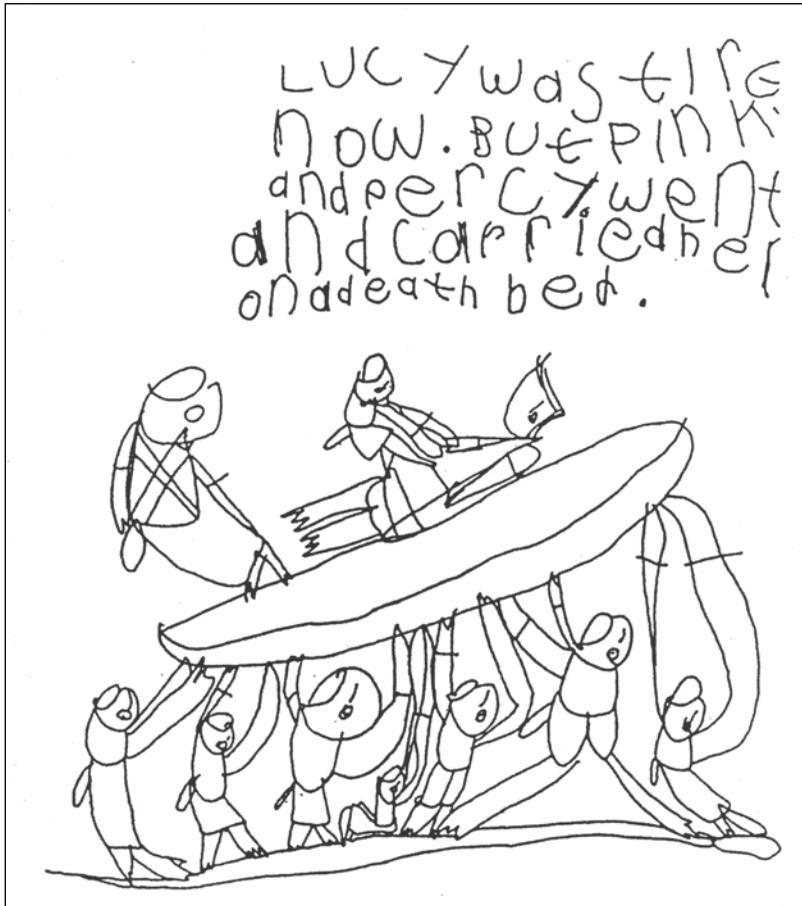


HUMMINGBIRDS by Sylvan (age 4): Of particular note here is how the drawing was motivated. At the low end of possibilities a teacher could have distributed a sheet for colouring-in. What really happened was the teacher used slides to give a mini-lecture based on a story in the National Geographic. The class then made drawings from memory. This drawing reminds us of the importance of motivation to help children achieve authentic art, that is an art based on personal experience. We assume that we have a responsibility to provide food, shelter, clothing and so on to the physical child. Do we not have an equal responsibility to provide the motivation for an authentic language leading to transformation?

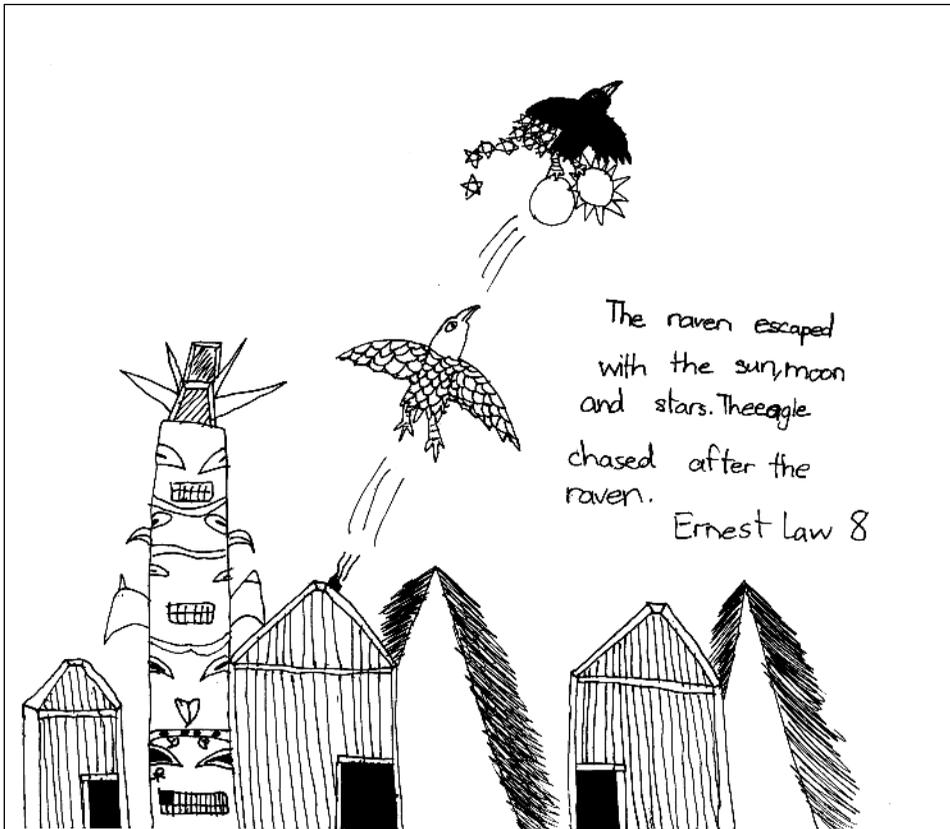
THANKS TO SUE LEUNG: Here I wish to acknowledge and express my profound appreciation to my colleague Sue Leung who teaches authentic art to children privately. For some thirty years she has kept in touch with the Drawing Network and provided us with extraordinary drawings that have inspired us all.



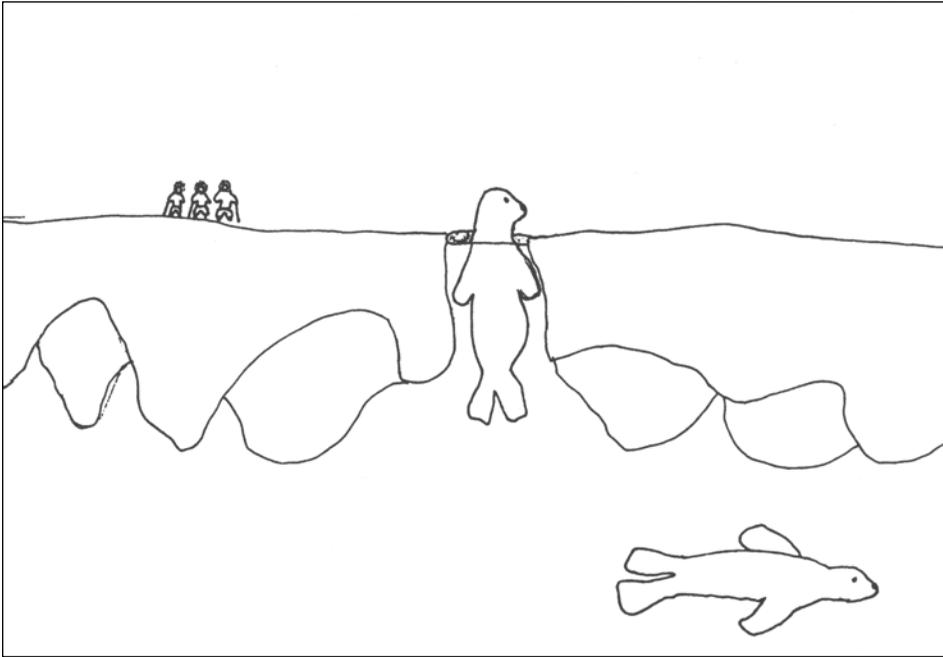
SANTA AND HIS REINDEER by Brendan (age 5): Powered by the energy of a childhood myth, Brendan made a drawing energized by “the hidden order of art” which he managed without any contact with ‘lessons’ on the elements and principles of design. There’s plenty to discover in this drawing but I will resist in order to give you the pleasure of finding out for yourself. Think about this truth: all drawings in this folio show aesthetic energy through the medium of empathic line. I doubt you will find an uncertain wobble, a repeated line to make it better in the entire collection.



LUCY WAS TIRED NOW by Joanne (age 6): Disadvantaged by partial sightedness, Joanne has put together a complex composition of ten figures with startling effectiveness. Seven loyal companions buckle under the strain of supporting what the text identifies as a death bed. Two more pals lower Lucy to a resting position. Tension is the overriding principle and all ten figures manifest it. The roughly rectangular patch of text tells the story verbally and adds to the structure of the piece. It is a narrative in two supporting languages.



RAVEN AND EAGLE by Ernest (age 8): An 8 year old has illustrated a myth from another culture and, in doing so, has turned it into a myth of his own. I would suggest that we know this because the drawing is so rich in the “hidden order of art”. An image as integrated in its formal parts as this one takes on mythic overtones. This is obviously so in the upward chase of the birds and their shape relationship to the longhouses but also in the many pointed forms throughout the drawing which convey energy, movement and perspective and yet the composition is held to the ground with three black rectangles that lead to mysterious interiors.



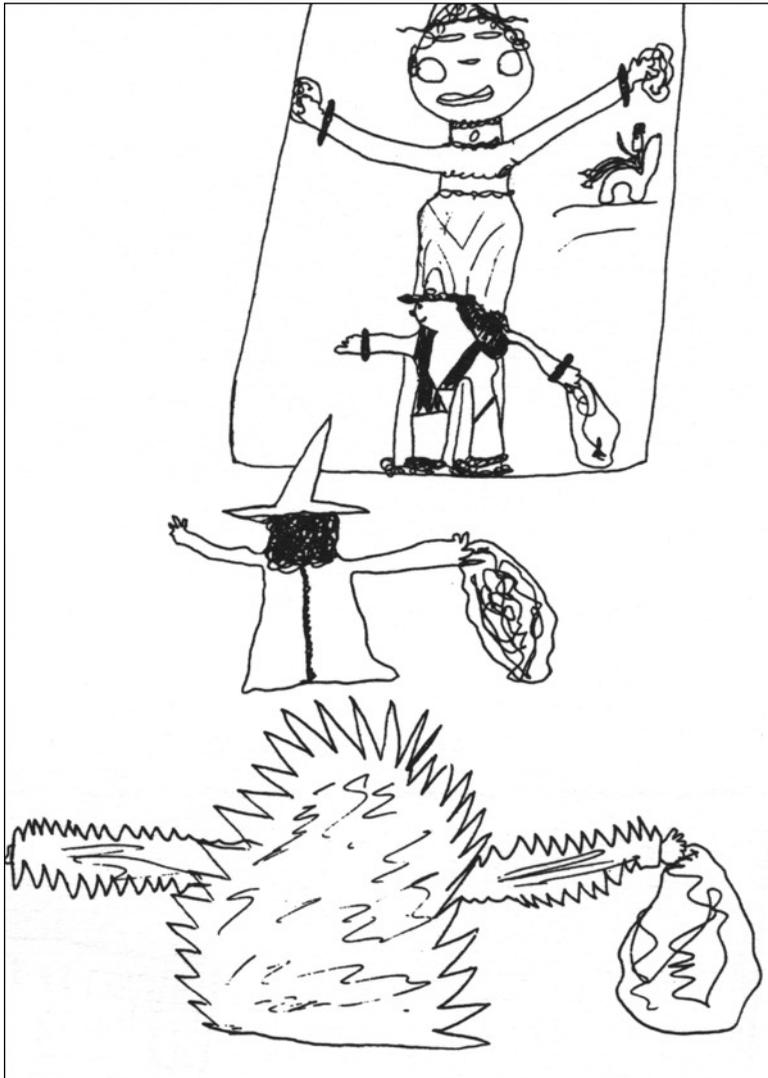
SEAL AND HUNTERS by Michael (age 11): Michael made this drawing from the point of view of the seal as part of a Social Studies project. The three Inuit hunters appear on the horizon like gunslingers in a Western and the seals look nervous. Not only do we feel empathy for them but admire the artist's use of scale, the minimalist use of line to evoke space. The sureness of line makes us feel vast spaces and silences. The point must be underscored: Michael's drawing is a work of art and its value as such is considerable. It also contributes to his and our interest in Nature, the Environment, and this particular unit in Social Studies and Science! Actually words are a part of it too: don't forget the pre-drawing class discussions, the silent monologue as he draws and the post-drawing conversations with teacher and classmates.



CAPILANO SUSPENSION BRIDGE by Jovi (age 13): Jovi and her art class have been taken on a field trip. Back in Sue Leung's studio she made this drawing from memory. I have been there and have walked the bridge. Jovi communicates the visceral feeling one gets, the thrill of being high over the tree tops, the rushing brook below, the steep rise of the bridge at one end. Every tense figure conveys it. I call this achievement 'empathic realism'. Applying rules to get everything correctly proportioned has nothing to do with empathy and results in 'academic naturalism' which for anyone except commercial artists is largely a waste of time.



CHILDREN PLAYING: a first ‘game drawing’ by a male school principal on leave who was taking a graphics studio class for enrichment. He thought it was great fun. Note that he lifted the pen to relocate. In the interests of empathic realism I urge drawers to keep the pen moving in the air over the drawing even when it is relocating. This avoids needless “clothes lines”. Game drawers float the drawing tool over the paper to relocate but do not sever the empathic connection if they can help it and if they can’t help it, they take a deep breath and pick up where empathy was lost. No correcting of previous lines is allowed!



HALLOWE'EN: ANSWERING THE DOOR: This is always a good story to launch Game Drawing because the human figures are masked and costumed and not so intimidating . This was an in-class drawing by an elementary student teacher who had no background in art at home or school.