

Look and See: Using the Visual Environment as Access to Literacy

By Lori Phillips, EdD

We know that children are natural scientists and learn from the world around them. Even more interesting is that infants and young children seem to be capable of having aesthetic experiences. When a young child holds a breadfruit and feels its bumpy skin for the first time, or delights in its color, he or she is experiencing the aesthetic. By offering toddlers opportunities to touch, see, talk about, and enjoy everyday objects, we engage them in the basics of art education. National and state arts education standards ask students not only to create art, but to also describe, discuss, and make judgments about their visual world. Teachers should hold conversations with children about what they see, introduce the elements of design, and help them make meaning of this world (Feldman, *Becoming Human Through Art*, 1970 [Prentice Hall]).

Toddlers can express preferences for objects, colors, and certain images. When they do so, they are making judgments, or aesthetic choices. When they favor a certain crayon, or look over and over at a picture or wallpaper print, they are learning to make visual decisions about what they prefer. As Erickson points out in “Teaching Aesthetics K–12” (in S. Dobbs [Ed.], *Research Readings for Discipline-Based Arts Education*, 1988, National Arts Education Association), when teachers offer children the opportunity to make these types of judgments, they are creating the opportunity for them to hold an aesthetic discussion.

According to a 1998 *Early Childhood News* article by White and Stoecklin titled “Children’s Outdoor Play and Learning Environments: Returning to Nature,” studies have provided convincing evidence that

people in pleasing natural environments have better information recall and creative problem solving skills. In the Pacific islands, children may have few chances to visit an art museum, however, they live with unbelievable natural beauty. They see color and learn about nature and beauty by seeing, touching, tasting, and smelling. Early experiences with the natural world have been positively linked with the development of imagination and the sense of wonder. Wonder is important as it is a motivator for lifelong learning. There is also strong evidence that suggests young children respond more positively to experiences in the outdoors than adults, as they have not yet adapted to unnatural, man-made, indoor environments.

Look and See: Drawing and Comprehension

It is through both image and word that children construct meaning and understanding. Drawing enables us to visually present, in the concrete, our understanding. In their 1999 book *Picturing Writing* (Christopher Gordon), Hal and Michele Takenishi argue that if students are struggling in the writing process, educators should encourage them to draw an image, adding more and more detail. “Students who do not have clear details in their writing need more details in their illustrations to help them visualize what they are trying to say” (p. 6).

Drawing the visual environment enhances understanding and visual vocabulary of objects in the natural world, helping us document ideas about how things work, and clarify our understandings in a graphic language. According to Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (Eds.) in *The Hundred*

Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach—Advanced Reflections (1998, Ablex), Reggio Emilia, a unique set of early childhood schools in northern Italy, encourages children to use “graphic language” to describe their understandings. Children are encouraged to use drawing as a means to record their understandings of events or objects, to reconstruct previous ideas, and to predict how objects or events work. In the United States, early childhood educators have long acknowledged that children can express their understanding verbally and through dramatic play. However, observations at the Reggio Emilia schools demonstrate that young children are able to construct meaning through graphic language (drawing) at a younger age and more competently than we in the United States had assumed. After a trip to the supermarket 4- and 5-year olds at one Reggio Emilia school drew this sketch of cashiers.

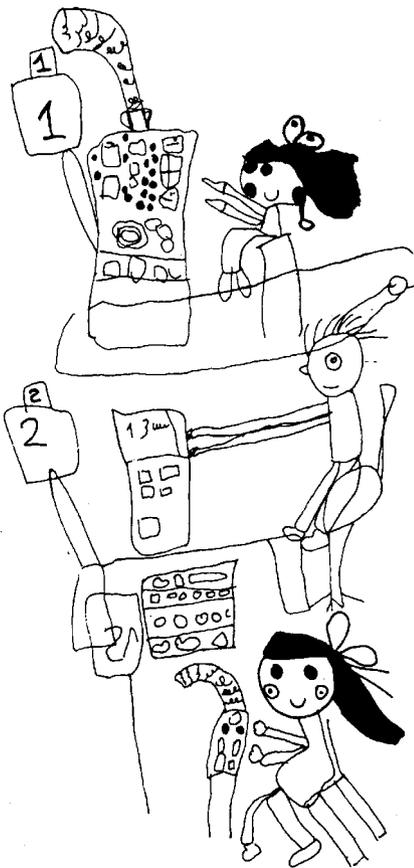
The children’s drawings alone only documented part of their understanding. The following are comments recorded by the teacher after the supermarket trip:

- It is as large as a forest.
- You could get lost in it, just like on the Via Emilia.
- It is as huge as the whale in Pinnocchio.

It is through both verbal and visual descriptions that we see the child’s growing knowledge and true comprehension of events.

Look and See: Vocabulary

In a 1987 article in *Young Children* titled “A Thing of Beauty: Aesthetic Development in Young Children,”



Note. From *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach—Advanced Reflections* (p. 30), by C. Edwards, L. Gandini, and G. Forman (Eds.), 1998, Westport, CT: Ablex. Copyright 1998 by Ablex Publishing. Reprinted with permission.

Feeney and Moravcik note that aesthetic experiences can promote language development and artistic creation. Talking about art, objects, or book illustrations helps build the child's "allusionary base." Building the allusionary base is building the image base. As children build their image base, both their language and art making skills are enhanced.

Young children also build their allusionary base by interacting with objects from the environment.

Looking closely at, touching, and talking about their visual world not only prepares the child for the process of drawing, sculpting, and painting, but also for visual and verbal literacy.

Vocabulary is not just knowing individual words, but knowing the array of associations surrounding them. By having children talk about what they see, you are helping them make deeper connections. You are also helping them build their verbal associations, so when they encounter words in reading, they will have a fuller understanding, leading to better comprehension.

In a 1982 *Journal of Educational Psychology* article titled "Effects of Long-Term Vocabulary Instruction on Lexical Access and Reading Comprehension," Beck, Perfetti, and McKeown point out that there is considerable research that equates low vocabulary to low comprehension. Other research shows that we learn vocabulary through association—we learn words in groups that hang together. The imaging process can increase vocabulary by making children draw wider associative networks of meaning, and can help improve reading comprehension by enforcing the concept that every word has multiple associations.

Look and See: Comprehension

Reading comprehension relies on more than knowing the words on the page. It also depends on the associations the reader adds to the text on the page. As readers, you and I will have greater understanding of an article on "apples" than on "jack fruits" because we probably have deeper associations with apples. In other words, the background knowledge we bring to the image or text greatly influences the depth of comprehension we are able to attain.

My colleague Rod Mauricio demonstrated this concept in one of my favorite stories in a conversation last year. Rod is from Pohnpei, an island in Micronesia. Rod introduced us to the word *dopwolong*. He asked us to pronounce the word. All 10 of us had a difficult time. He pronounced it again and taught us the correct pronunciation. He asked us to try to spell it. We came up with many different but incorrect predictions. Then he taught us to spell it. Rod wrote "dopwolong" on the board. We all read it back, proud that we could pronounce it correctly. Rod asked us if we felt we were reading. Some felt that we needed to know the meaning of the word to really be reading. Rod told us *dopwolong* meant to wash your hair in Pohnpeian. He asked us if, now that we knew the meaning, we felt we were reading. We felt satisfied and were quite proud of our multicultural lesson. However, Rod then told us a story of *dopwolong*. It turns out *dopwolong* is not just washing your hair as perceived in the English context. The washing of hair is so important in certain medicinal ceremonies in Pohnpeian culture that it has gained its own word. Otherwise, Pohnpeian, like English, would just have the phrase *uden moangomw*, literally translated as "wash your hair." According to Rod, this would not express the rich cultural importance of *dopwolong*. *Dopwolong* implies medicine penetrating deep into one's skull in a ceremonial event held in Pohnpei at certain times with certain people. To fully comprehend the word *dopwolong*, one must understand the contexts and background from which the word originates. Having this conversation helped us to really read the word with deeper meaning. Were we really reading?

Lori Phillips, EdD, Director, Pacific Center for the Arts and Humanities in Education, PREL, may be contacted at phillipl@prel.org.

