Jared, a kindergartner, is drawing something that resembles a human being. When I ask him what it is, he says, “A pumpkin on wheels.” I look closely and realize that the circles at the bottom of the pumpkin are wheels. The horizontal lines are arms that are outstretched for balance, as if the pumpkin figure is skating. Jared explains that the pumpkin does not want to be a jack-o’-lantern and sit on a porch. This pumpkin is racing downhill so he can escape from Clee and her father—characters in the book The Pumpkin Blanket.

Jenna, age 5, draws a series of XOXOs across the page in a grid, filling the entire space with the same pattern of letters. The finished product contains 54 squares, forming nine horizontal rows of XOXOs and six alternating columns of pink Xs and red Os. Jenna knows that XOXO symbolizes hugs and kisses and that the colors pink and red express love. When I ask Jenna to tell me about her picture, she says, “This blanket patch is my favorite in the world. It shows how much Clee loves her father.”
Children draw in many different ways to construct knowledge and to make sense of the world around them. Jared and Jenna completed their drawings after listening to Deborah Turney Zagwijn’s book The Pumpkin Blanket. Each kindergartner followed the same instructions to create his or her own design for a quilt patch for the pumpkin blanket. But the artwork was very different, as Jared’s realistic depiction and Jenna’s page of patterns show.

Little is known about the logic children apply when creating art. This article encourages adults to recognize and respect the structural dynamics of children’s drawings and the little flickers of invention that occur in their visual representations and oral communication. The authors review five examples of kindergarten and first-grade children’s artwork to demonstrate ways children play with ideas, patterns, and relationships. The objective is to help readers think critically about children’s drawings and to equip teachers with the understanding to support children’s art as a significant learning, thinking, and communication tool.

Learning about children’s visual thinking

Children’s drawings reflect attempts to create representations of their experiences. These visual representations begin when young children use marks, lines, and shapes to stand for a person, object, and in some cases, movement. Infinite variations are made possible as children construct meaning in artwork that reflects their personal experiences and interpretations of life (Einarsdottir, Dockett, & Perry 2009; Watts 2010). Both realistic depiction and patterning appear in children’s early meaning-making attempts, but neither form of art is considered better or more advanced than the other (Wright 2010).

When children draw characters and scenes that have meaning for them, they tell about people, places, and events. They often rely on their visual representations for telling a story (Coates & Coates 2011). This narrative aspect of image making is a form of storytelling in which children depict ideas and feelings in real time. When young artists show an early interest in making designs, aesthetics rather than storytelling become the driving force. Although many children can draw realistic pictures, they often choose to repeat lines and shapes, divide spaces into smaller units, and apply color to their ornamental design work (Kolbe 2005). Golomb (2002) characterizes this approach to creating art as “a playful and imaginative activity, and for some children it is an alternative to pursuing naturalistic depiction” (28). But whether the intent is realistic depiction, storytelling, pattern making, or a combination of the three, children’s visual intelligence is at work.

An integrated art and literacy project

This article describes an integrated art and early literacy project in which student teachers document children’s responses to literature. The authors, two teacher educators, investigate the ways young children create and express meaning through art (defined as the representation of a real or imagined object or scene) and through design (production of decorative patterns or ornamental embellishments). The study explores young children’s communicative powers using visual images in combination with spoken and written language.

Forty preservice teachers in six kindergarten and first-grade classrooms worked with young learners on visual and verbal responses to the picture book The Pumpkin Blanket. One early childhood student conducted read-alouds of the book with a group of three children. Each student teacher followed the same set of directions in the read-draw-write-tell sequence.

After introducing the book’s title and author, the practice student announces to the three children in his or her group, “We’re going to learn about Clee’s beautiful patchwork blanket.” Following the reading, the student teacher
closes the book and asks the children to each design a patch for the pumpkin blanket in the 5” x 5” box on a sheet of paper. As the children draw, they can see each other’s pictures and talk freely among themselves. When the children finish their drawings, the student teacher gives a second prompt: “Can you write about your design? Please describe your patch on the lines below the picture box.” Most of the children participate in the writing, but a few of the younger ones dictate a short phrase to the student teacher.

The final prompt gives the children an opportunity to expand their thinking: “Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your design?” The student teacher records the three children’s oral responses in his or her field notes. After the activity, the student teacher writes a short journal entry describing and reflecting on the experience.

Analyzing the children’s drawings

The authors worked with the preservice teachers in collecting and analyzing the data. We authors and the students were not concerned with the performance level the children achieved or with coding the drawings using developmental or technical criteria. Rather, we analyzed the students’ field notes and journal reflections—in combination with the children’s writings and ways of talking about what they were representing—to help us identify the children’s drawings as examples of pictorial realism, nonrepresentational art, or a combination of the two. The three categories provided a base for our search for meaning and order in the children’s art.

In the data analysis phase of the study, we analyzed the children’s drawings, writings, and verbal expressions, with the support of the student teachers’ field notes and reflective comments from their journal entries. This qualitative study is one in which “researchers focus on the meanings people ascribe to their experiences and phenomena” (Mukherji & Albon 2010, 28). The analysis includes the elements in the image and what children say about their drawings, both during and after the activity, and any written forms of communication. Creating opportunities for children to offer interpretive explanations during and after the drawing is crucial for understanding the child’s purpose, especially how and why the child produced the image.

Scenes from the classroom

The five examples of children’s work selected for this article came from drawings produced by the 120 kindergartners and first-graders in our study. The first drawing illustrates how Caitlyn constructed a pictorial response while engaging in realistic depiction and storytelling. The second drawing presents Samika’s blended format and shows that nonrepresentational and representational features can be part of the same artwork. The remaining three are examples of nonrepresentational art by Shannon, Morgan, and Ted.

Pictorial realism

All children’s drawings include fragments of realistic depiction, creativity, and narration, with plenty of room for imaginative and intellectual activity (Wood & Hall 2011). For some children, drawings become pictorial equivalents of figures in relation to the landscape, objects, and events from the story. While drawing, children “explore feelings and ideas, and through their images they communicate thoughts to others as well as themselves” (Kolbe 2007, 7).

Through visual narratives, young artists represent—both factually and emotionally—their understanding of the content in the picture book, and they temporarily experience the world of others.

Caitlyn, a 5-year-old, drew a picture that is characteristic of pictures by children who have had many experiences with read-alouds and storytelling activities (see “Caitlyn’s Artwork”). The figures in Caitlyn’s artwork resemble the characters in the storybook, but the image does not replicate any particular scene. Rather, her artwork shows characters doing things that are logical in the environments they inhabit. To locate the picture in an outdoor setting, she included rows of garden vegetables in the background and weather details such as a sun and clouds. Using the context of the picture book as a source for ideas, Caitlyn can creatively organize and structure the elements of the picture and can construct deeper...
layers of meaning. By adding a butterfly and smiling sun to the scene, the picture functions metaphorically to connote a happy moment in the lives of Clee and her father.

Children learn a lot as they engage with story characters and events through their drawings. Although young children's early artworks are rarely stories in the formal sense, with a beginning, a middle, and an ending, when coupled with narrative, they help children expand their thoughts. Caitlyn relied on the context of the picture book as she narrated her own ending. While her drawing does not convey a series of events or actions, it illustrates an important outcome—the plentiful harvest of pumpkins.

Caitlyn's emergent writing, “The picture, it’s us ... my dad,” identifies the two figures in the image as Clee and her father. Her use of the first-person plural pronoun us indicates that Caitlyn is providing information from Clee’s point of view. When Caitlyn adds her comments, the listener learns that the father and daughter are happy because all the pumpkins have survived the frost. They plan to celebrate Halloween and to decorate the porch by carving pumpkins into jack-o’-lanterns.

**Pictorial realism and design**

When children draw in response to literature, they typically sketch their favorite character or event from the story rather than make patterns or create designs. Some children, however, combine story figures and design elements in a single picture (Kolbe 2005). These young artists respond to the inner urge to represent the natural reality of the scene and to indulge in the playfulness and fluidity of design activity.

Samika's drawing is characteristic of kindergartners’ art because it uses a lot of colors, forms, and shapes to explore meaning (see “Samika’s Artwork”). Both systems of imagery—visual realism and design—are important elements of Samika's style of communication. She selects and mixes different aspects of these
two traditions in the setting, and creates events and objects from the story that hold heightened emotional significance for her. The visual realism of the girl, the house, and the pumpkin and the design elements of the blanket in Samika’s drawing unite to create a well-balanced composition that conveys energy and excitement.

Samika’s composition shows a smiling figure jumping rope as the decorated squares of the blanket are whisked away in a current of wind. Samika created a different design for each patch in her drawing of the blanket. Some of her images in the patches, such as the sun, moon, and checkered designs, are the same as those in the blanket in the book. But other designs and patterns appear to be original. A clue to understanding this drawing comes from Samika’s verbal comments. She narrates in Clee’s voice when she describes her picture: “I was playing outside, jumping rope. Then I was picking up a pumpkin and my blanket flew into the air . . . and over my house. All the pieces were lost in the wind. All the patterns were gone. I went inside and cried.”

Design

While many pictures drawn by young children are characterized by visual realism and the desire to narrate aspects of a story, some children gravitate toward making patterns because their primary intention is to create a design rather than to make a representational picture or invent a story. They experiment with a range of colors and repetitive forms. Indeed, many children’s artworks may have no meaning beyond the aesthetics of the pattern or design. But sometimes a child’s fundamental drive to make meaning or to express feelings can be powerfully captured in their seemingly amorphous or abstract creations. It is important for adults to try to understand these children’s logic.

Shannon’s design.

Six-year-old Shannon created a striking design full of meaning, and one that is more complex than it first appears (see “Shannon’s Design”). Rather than draw a real-life image, Shannon transformed the pictorial space into a rich kaleidoscope of colors. The organizing structure of her composition consists of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal axes that intersect at the center point of the picture plane. The resulting eight triangular spaces create a strong contrast between the lower and upper halves of the image. The upper section contains two stars and two white spaces. Shannon divided the lower part of the picture plane into horizontal and diagonal components and filled each with different colors.

Shannon’s choice of stars as her subject matter seems random at first glance, but it fits contextually with the celestial theme on the blanket’s patches in the book. Shannon extends the elements of the sky and universe with her star motif and creates a logical addition to the sun, moon, clouds, raindrops, and snowflakes on the blanket. Shannon’s written words are brief: “I made a blanket with lots of colors.” Her spoken words reveal her inquisitive nature: “The book has clouds, raindrops, and suns on the patches, but no rainbows. I think there should be a rainbow on the pumpkin blanket. I saw one once and wanted to touch it.” She completes the activity by asking, “Why
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is it called a pumpkin blanket if there is no pumpkin on it?” Moments later Shan-
on presents her finished image to her teacher, saying, “Look, the stars are shining and keeping watch over the pumpkins during the night.” Shannon’s seemingly abstract design shows her mastery of a symmetrical arrangement and a strong connection to real-life experiences and the images in the book.

**Morgan’s design.** Morgan, a 5-year-old, uses a centering strategy as she draws the sun and moon in the middle of the picture plane and encircles them with 12 pink pumpkins (see “Morgan’s Design”). Although deeper layers of meaning are hard to ascertain from the finished artwork, it’s possible that Morgan thought about the harvest theme and the pumpkins that played such a central role in the storybook. Her writing includes the simple caption, “12 pumpkins ... sun, moon, pink.” When asked about her design, she said, “The picture is about pumpkins in the sky.” And she referenced some content from the book to further explain her thoughts: “The little girl is looking at the sky and a coyote is sitting beside her.” Her final words, “That's all,” signal that she has finished with all aspects of the project. Additional interactions would be necessary to reveal whether this young artist was attempting to invent new content or whether she was simply revealing her understanding of the story.

**Ted’s design.** Ted’s design is rich in communication potential, but his writing and oral responses do not contribute much to understanding how meaning and ingenuity were interwoven in the process (see “Ted’s Design”). The organizing structure in the design is defined by central vertical and horizontal axes and two diagonal axes that cross in the middle of the picture plane. Six-year-old Ted created an image with a vibrant center. Eight triangular shapes are intersected by three yellow lines and one strong black diagonal line. The black line narrows and comes to a point as it traverses the page from the upper right to the lower left. Two yellow stars, outlined in black, are embedded in triangles on the lower half. It is a powerful work of art. Much more seems to be at stake in Ted’s design than the simple creation of an aesthetically pleasing picture.

Ted’s written words are brief: “I have a blanket.” When talking about his design, he says, “I made this. I draw a lot at home, so I’m really a good drawer. My dad’s an artist and a fireman. That’s what he does, so that’s where I learned how to draw.” Rather than describing the intricate design, Ted chose to talk about his drawing abilities and the person who influences his work.

**Applications for the classroom**

A fundamental component of early childhood educators’ work is making sense of the drawings young artists create. How well teachers interpret children's feelings and help them extend their ideas is an important factor in developing children’s communication skills (Danko-McGhee & Slutsky 2007). Teachers can prepare by establishing a safe environment in which children can create and shape their thoughts at will. By taking time to talk with children, teachers can help them become aware of their feelings. Teachers also can work with empathy alongside child artists, offering children freedom to voice their imaginations and their creative thoughts. A dynamic classroom incorporates children’s developing ideas, expands their diverse interests, and takes into account their home lives. When teachers welcome artistic exploration, children’s conscious expression of emotion can be given form through art.

The first step for teachers in creating a dynamic classroom is to observe children, to acknowledge their flow of ideas, and to note any emotional factors at work. For example, teachers can encourage children to express their feel-

**The first step for teachers in creating a dynamic classroom is to observe children, to acknowledge their flow of ideas, and to note any emotional factors at work.**
Teachers need many opportunities to practice understanding what children’s drawings mean in relation to their ideas and feelings.

Teachers can challenge children to find patterns in books containing graphic designs and can view them with young learners to determine ways that artists use positive and negative space, symmetrical forms, and vertical, horizontal, or diagonal lines. Give children opportunities to explore concepts in three dimensions through building with architectural blocks, designing with pattern blocks, and creating with papier-mâché. Children can also work with templates, geoboards, and computer drawing tools to further develop their understanding of geometric concepts and spatial sense.

To succeed in today’s world, children need many opportunities to read high-quality picture books and produce meaning in visual texts. And teachers need many opportunities to practice understanding what children’s drawings mean in relation to their ideas and feelings. A number of writers attempt to understand the meaning in children’s artistic forms. Readers may be interested in books such as The Pictorial World of the Child, by Maureen Cox (2005), and The Child’s Creation of a Pictorial World, by Claire Golomb (2004). Both offer descriptions of the internal structure and visual realism of children’s depictions. Danko-McGhee and Slutsky (2007) demonstrate the importance of artwork in literacy development. They suggest a variety of ways to foster literacy through early visual art experiences that include studying lines, shapes, and colors, as well as by developing higher levels of critical thinking and visual perception skills.

Concluding thoughts

By focusing on children’s visual thinking in their search for meaning and order, we perceived more clearly children’s drawing processes and achievements. Creating opportunities for children to offer interpretive explanations during, rather than after, the drawing process is a critical component of learning to understand the specifics of the children’s visual language. Future practice needs to recognize that rich understandings of the artwork and the artists arise when teachers learn to observe children’s various verbal, visual, spatial, and other forms of representation as they unfold.

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