Is This a Line? Visual Literacy, Visual Inquiry, and Visual Communication in the Elementary School Years

Connie J. Broadbent
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ABSTRACT

Is This a Line? Visual Literacy, Visual Inquiry, and Visual Communication in the Elementary School Years

Connie J. Broadbent
Department of Art Education
Master of Arts

As a mother and public elementary school art teacher, I recognize the impact images have in the lives of children. Our culture is image rich and often image saturated. I believe I can do more to prepare my students to become discerning consumers and creators of images. Art teachers are uniquely qualified to teach visual literacy and visual inquiry. If grade school children can be taught to think more deeply and critically about their visual world, they will be better prepared for responding to it in a healthy, empowering way. This research describes an elementary school curriculum based on teaching some of the elements of design that provides a framework for children to investigate important issues using their own visual language. This thesis also describes a research project that explored images and ideas that are important to children in their artmaking decisions. Both of these research projects offer a combined unique perspective on visual literacy, visual inquiry, and visual communication in the elementary school years.

Keywords: elementary school, children, visual literacy, elements and principles of design, visual inquiry, visual communication
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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a mother and public-school teacher, I recognize the impact images have in the lives of children. Our current culture is image rich and often image saturated, and I believe I can do more to prepare my students to become more discerning consumers and creators of images.

My undergraduate degree is in elementary education. I was trained to teach children how to read, to be text literate. I have taught kindergarten and first-grade students and have been immersed in early-reader literacy. It would be unthinkable to expect a child to get important information out of written text without first teaching them to read. I believe the same reasoning applies to reading images. I believe that there should be a greater emphasis on visual literacy in the elementary grades. From my perspective as an elementary art educator, visual literacy is particularly important in helping students understand the world around them and in communicating their own feelings and ideas. Children need to learn how to interpret images, particularly since visual culture, and visual expression are such an important part of contemporary life.

Because of my experience working with elementary-age children in many settings, I am convinced that visual literacy should be a critical component in their education. I also believe it is an important element of art education. Within art education scholarship, visual literacy is a topic of great interest as well (Barney, 2019; Duncum, 2001; Freedman, 2003).

There are many effective approaches to visual literacy in art education including using the elements and principles of design as a foundation. Some researchers have asked whether the elements and principles of art are still relevant or useful in teaching visual literacy to children in a postmodern world (Gude, 2004, 2007). Based on my own experience, I believe they can be a solid starting place. Even when children learn to read, there is still much to learn for successful literature interpretation, but without knowledge of the alphabet and mechanics of reading, they cannot even begin to find meaning in written text. Likewise, by understanding some of the
building blocks of visual understanding and visual communication, children will begin to be empowered to think critically about images and to create meaning in their own works.

This thesis includes a curriculum for elementary-age children that is based on teaching the elements and principles of art. The review of literature describes both advantages and limitations of the elements and principles of design as fundamental content for art education. My curriculum draws heavily on the ideas of British art educator Kurt Rowland’s 1970 *Looking and Seeing* and his approach to teaching children art through the elements and principles of design. I have found many of his ideas relevant to my current art education issues. As an elementary teacher who later became an art teacher, the elements and principles of art were important tools for me to develop my own approach to teaching art.

Mary Hafeli described how we often neglect educators from the past. She argues that these past art educators often have relevant ideas for our current practices and encourages art educators to look back and discover past influential art educators who might offer insights into modern art education issues (Hafeli, 2009). Like modern scientists, art educators can reflect on ideas of the past, discover relevant issues, and build on them, enhancing our present understandings and practices. As examples of this, Judith Burton studied the work of Victor Lowenfeld and Manuel Barkan was an historic exemplar to Juan Carlos Castro (Burton, 2001; Castro, 2014).

The curriculum I have designed can be used to explore and encourage the development of visual literacy and meaningful self-expression among elementary children. Based on my own experience, I believe the elements and principles of design can be a useful starting place for developing visual literacy and artistic inquiry for younger children. In my own teaching practice, the formal elements of art are part of a holistic approach to education that values what children know by providing them with rich and varied opportunities to express themselves. Art teachers are uniquely qualified to teach visual literacy. If grade school children can be taught to use
formalist ideas such as patterns and shape to inform their own visual inquiry, they will be better prepared to fashion and communicate their own ideas in a visual medium.

This thesis includes a pilot study that explored how an art and design foundations might be used to develop personal artistic inquiry and visual literacy. The thesis also contains another research project that I conducted during the 2020 school year when my personal and school schedules were greatly altered due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of the limitations on my art classes imposed by the pandemic, I had to find alternative means to teach my art students. These involved engaging with students outside of the normal classroom situation. The most significant of these projects was the Trading Wall. This became a space where students could exhibit and trade artwork they had created, guided by their own inspiration and my art assignments. As demonstrated in figure 1, both projects provided surprising and valuable insights about teaching, learning and art making as well as two perspectives on visual literacy in elementary school children.

**Figure 1: Visual Literacy Venn Diagram**

1. **The Pilot Study**
   - Visual Literacy
   - Children’s personal visual language using shape and pattern
   - Visual Images Important to Children’s art making

2. **The Trading Wall**
I have a personal philosophy about children, who they are, what they are capable of and a profound respect for how children move through life. In my experience children have a surprising depth to them. The elements and principles of design are an important guiding principle for how I design curriculum and a vocabulary with which to talk about artmaking. But my aims for children are ultimately about visual inquiry, or an inquiry through the visual. Even though I include detailed descriptions of the affordances and limitations of the elements and principles of art as foundational strategies, my approach with children focuses on their personal visual inquiry as a catalyst for developing visual literacy. I view the elements and principles of art as a valuable and effective lens through which artistic communication can take place.

“Is this a line?” I turned around to the eager kindergarten faces that looked up at the short, straight line I had drawn on the whiteboard.

“Yes!” They all called out.

“That’s right.”

Taking my dry erase marker, I drew a spiral. “Is this a line?”

There was a pause, and then an answer: “No!”

“Yes, it is.” I smiled. “It’s a curly line.”

“Oh.” A few kids nodded; the others look confused.

I have taught elementary art for over ten years now, and I am concerned about the world in which my students live. I raised my own family during the explosion of social media and sudden easy internet access where you can find literally anything. This was something I was unprepared for as a mom and tried to navigate with my children’s welfare in mind.

I turned back to the whiteboard and drew the line found on Charlie Brown’s shirt.

“Is this a line?”

The answer was hesistant now. After a longer pause some said yes, and some said no.

Smiling I said, “Yes, it is a line. It’s a zigzag line.” More students nodded as the lights went on.
I turned back to the whiteboard and, with a dramatic flair, my dry-erase marker went left, then right, then looped and wandered around, never once lifting off of the surface until I was done.

“Is this a line?”

By now most had caught on. “Yes!”

“That’s right, it’s a crazy line!”

“A crazy line!” some kids repeated.

I squinted my eyes at them mischievously. “I’m going to draw a few lines, and I’m going to bend them around. Watch!” They waited for my performance. I had them.

What could I teach my students that could help them navigate their world of images as well as help them contribute to this world of images in an intelligent and empowered way? I was thrust into art teaching largely because I needed to work part-time while raising my own kids. The art teaching position I had been offered was ideal. Even though I had been involved in creating art ever since I was a child, I had never taught it. I was introduced to the elements and principles of design by a chance meeting with a newly retired elementary art teacher. I found a lifeline, a structure for teaching art, and for me, a surprising way to help art make sense in a way that it had not before.

After I completed my bent lines, a handful of students burst out, “It’s a flower!”

“Nope.” My students were baffled. It certainly looked like a flower.

“Would you agree that generally flowers smell good?” They all nodded.

Sticking my nose next to my drawing I sniffed loudly and pretended to cough. “Blech, it smells like dry erase marker.” They laughed.

“Can we pick flowers?” I asked. Again, they all agreed.

I grabbed at the image on the whiteboard and then turned around empty handed. A student spoke up, “It’s a drawing of a flower. It’s not a real flower.”

I smiled, “That’s right. Aren’t lines magic?”
I had opened their eyes to a critical way of looking at things taken for granted. No more could these young children see a drawing of a flower and think it was a flower. They had gained the beginning of power over the image because they understood what it was—and what it was not. They saw what lines could express. I started with the concept of line, but could I teach some of the elements of design in such a way that my students could communicate important ideas through this formalist framework? Could they become more aware of the visual information surrounding them and use it to their advantage? That is what I wanted to find out.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Our modern society views education as a very important component of competent adulthood and puts a great deal of importance on cultivating educated individuals. This effort begins at a very young age. Understanding our world is enabled not only through reading and writing but also, to a great extent, through our visual senses. As a visual-arts teacher of students at the beginning of their educational journey, I was interested in discovering what research had already been done on the subjects of visual literacy and visual culture among elementary-age children. The results were surprisingly sparse. I found a few articles specific to visual literacy and visual culture in relation to young children, but not many. I concluded that more research was needed in these important areas.

To effectively teach children visual literacy, I needed to not only understand what visual literacy was but also to understand the realities that are particular to my students, to see into their world and minds as well as an adult possibly can. I have seen adults who understood children and could connect to them work with children, and I have also seen adults who did not understand children work with kids. It is foundational to me to know my students—otherwise, how can I effectively teach them? I began my research with this foundation in mind and then moved to build my more specific subject of visual literacy on this base.

Ideas About Childhood Development and Learning

What is important to me as an educator of children and how my beliefs about teaching fit within theories of learning and development are critical parts of my thesis.

The important ideas about foundations in art education begin with who we as educators believe students to be and what our student-teacher relationship should consist of. If we have a vision of who our students are, we can more clearly see what they need to be successful, thus guiding how and what we teach.
**Reggio Emilia**

The philosophy of Reggio Emilia toward literacy is based on the idea that children possess what they call “100 languages,” a metaphor for the “extraordinary potentials of children, their knowledge building and creative processes, the myriad forms with which life is manifested and knowledge is constructed” (Reggio Emilia Approach, n.d.).

Teachers who follow the Reggio Emilia philosophy have a profound respect for the way children move through life and acquire knowledge. These teachers believe that fostering the many ways children learn is critical to children’s development of knowledge. They know what is meaningful and relevant in their students’ lives; they teach skills as a means of exploration and creation; they create a safe learning environment; and they mentor their students in the paths of creative life-long learning.

“To make a lovable school, industrious, inventive, livable, documentable and communicable, a place of research, learning, re-cognition and reflection, where children, teachers and families feel well - is our point of arrival” (Loris Malaguzzi, as cited in Reggio Emilia Approach, n.d.).

**Stacey Mckenna Salazar**

Stacey Mckenna Salazar (2014) wrote an article for *Art Education* based on her research about how artists are educated, “Educating Artists: Theory and Practice in College Studio Art.” In it, she addressed the issue that teachers of undergraduate art foundation classes lack relevant information on pedagogical practices. Based on her research and survey data, she proposed five pedagogical ideals (Salazar, 2014). Salazar’s five pedagogical ideals were developed based on information gathered from freshmen college students and not on children. However, having taught children for 13 years, I found them very relevant when teaching children and have included them for this reason. Here are her five pedagogical ideals and how I feel they inform elementary school art instruction.
Know Us. “Art students want their teachers to get to know them—to take a personal interest in their individual artistic inclinations and abilities, their lives, and their futures” (Salazar, 2014, p. 35). Elementary students want the same thing.

Help Us Make Personally Meaningful Art. Salazar found that students held their professors who helped them make meaningful art in high regard. She states that the literature advises teachers of art K–12 and higher education classes in general to help their students make personal connections to the artwork they are creating. I can always tell when one of my students has not connected to the artwork they have made because I find it in the trash can in my classroom or I witness them crumble it up as they walk out the door.

Teach Us Skills (But Not for Skills’ Sake). Salazar found that students wanted to know how to do things. They wanted to have the skills they needed to create what they wanted. They appreciated instructors being honest and encouraging as students acquired these skills. I have found this to be true with elementary school students as well. They enjoy learning new skills and are very excited to apply them. They feel very empowered to communicate ideas when they have been taught relevant skills.

Create a Safe Community for Us. “Students praised their best professors for creating a positive classroom environment by telling stories, facilitating interaction among peers in the classroom, and engaging students in meaningful dialogue” (Salazar, 2014, p. 36). My students enjoy sharing their ideas when they feel it is safe to do so. They are also willing to take risks in their artmaking when given the space to make imperfect art.

Teach Us How to Live Creative Lives. In Salazar’s view, it was important to notice that “students did not identify creativity as a thing to enact, but instead described ways-of-being (a risk taker, a hard worker, a confident person) that contribute to living a creative life . . . [T]he students learn how to live a creative life through the act of making itself” (Salazar, 2014, p. 38).

In my experience, elementary school children want to feel safe and included. They want to share their ideas, and I believe it is in elementary school where children form their
IS THIS A LINE?

first beliefs about whether school is a safe place or a place to merely survive. I also believe that elementary school is where children begin to form their ideas about learning, including how to learn, whether they can learn, and how to approach learning. If the skills of living a creative life can be infused into the elementary school years, students will have the beginnings of important life skills. Building upon these foundational ideas of who our students are and what our relationship to them should be, we can then begin to sort out what it is we should teach and why.

**Visual Literacy**

An important element of my research was exploring visual literacy and why it is important. Both literacy and visual literacy are large fields of study. Within these large areas I will provide a definition of literacy and then explore the meanings of visual literacy in more detail. Throughout this review of literature, I will provide a context for my own vision of visual literacy, which emphasizes a child’s personal artistic inquiry using the elements and principles of art as important tools for their own meaningful visual expression.

**A General Definition of Literacy**

For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the definition of literacy as competence, or knowledge in a specific area. To illustrate this idea, I will give an example. If I needed to translate from Italian to English for some visiting Italians, I would not have sufficient knowledge to be useful. I might be able to get by, but my knowledge and experience is not enough to be competent in communicating or understanding important information. While I know some Italian, I am not literate in it.

The same can be said for visual literacy. We see images every day—on social media, in advertisements that accompany social media, on TV, in artworks in public places and in our homes, in pictures on cereal boxes, on covers of magazines and books, etc. Most of us move through our days not thinking deeply about what is being communicated through these
images that pass by us. But are we literate in our understanding and communicating with things that we see?

In their book, *Arts Education and Literacies*, Amy Peterson Jensen and Roni Jo Draper (2015) make the argument that “all human interactions are mediated by texts (print and otherwise) that individuals create and imbue with meaning” (p. 4). Therefore, to be *literate* is to be able to create and understand these texts. The National Standard for Arts Education includes this definition for artistic literacy:

> The knowledge and understanding required to participate authentically in the arts.
> Fluency in the language(s) of the arts, or the ability to create,
> perform/produce/present, respond, and connect through symbolic and metaphorical forms that are unique to the arts, is embodied in specific philosophic foundations and life-long goals. (National Core Arts Standards: A Conceptual Framework for Arts Learning, 2022. p. 17).

Within the research literature, there are many approaches to, definitions of, and descriptions of literacy. Included among the definitions of literacy is visual literacy. In the International Visual Literacy Association’s official publication, the *Journal of Visual Literacy*, is an article detailing research that had been published in that particular journal for 36 years of its 38-year lifespan, “Past, Present, Future: Mapping the Research in Visual Literacy” (Brumberger, 2019).

The article explained that because visual literacy was a subject that intersected many different disciplines, it was difficult for the subject to have “a clear and distinct identity” (Brumberger, 2019, p. 166). “The definition of visual literacy fluctuated depending on what discipline was discussing it” (Brumberger, 2019, p. 166).

While visual literacy is a substantial and important concept, in a general sense it is not a well-defined one. Even in the more focused subject of art education, visual literacy can manifest differently depending on approaches and interconnected subjects.
If I could create a piece of artwork depicting the idea of visual literacy, it would be a large circle filled in with one opaque color. The edges of the circle would fade into the background, defying definition. There would be other smaller circles, all with their own opaque colors and various degrees of ill-defined edges, some fully contained within the bigger circle, some overlapping the faded edges of the larger circle but mostly contained within it, and some overlapping the larger circle only a little and mostly contained without. Each circle’s color would create new color in the overlapping sections, even as the edges remain in differing states of definition.

In the research literature, visual literacy touches on several fields of study. In each of these broad areas, visual literacy takes on different names, each bending in a specific direction and overlapping each other. These fields of literacy include creative literacies, media literacy, and visual culture.

**Approaches to Visual Literacy**

There are many approaches to the larger picture of literacy, competence, or knowledge in a specific area. I wanted to start from the foundation of respecting and understanding how children naturally construct knowledge. The schools in Reggio Emilia are world renowned for their child-centric approach to learning, and I was interested in exploring their ideas on literacy.

**Reggio Emilia.** Renee Dinnerstein (2012), a New York City elementary school teacher, visited the Italian schools with the question “How is literacy interpreted and supported in the schools in Reggio Emilia?” (p. 1).

She observed what she termed as an expansive approach, which stemmed from her observations of a Reggio Emilia teacher acting on the interest her students took in the flowering jasmine plant that was in the classroom. The teacher listened to what the students were talking about and wondering about. She carefully noted her observations and then, based on her observations, she provided opportunities for her students to explore perfumes.
This exploration of perfumes led to a discussion among the students about their mothers’ perfumes. The teacher acted on that by setting up a display of all sorts of aromatic objects and providing the children with art supplies as well as graters, peelers, and mortars and pestles to explore how to extract smells from the various objects. As the students engaged with the supplies and objects, the teacher took notes in the form of sketches, photographs, and written notes consisting of snippets of her students’ conversations. She guided the students occasionally by asking questions and making observations.

So, what is the Reggio Emilia approach to literacy? Renee Dinnerstein concluded, and I agree, that the Reggio Emilia approach to literacy is not just about knowing how to read and write or even knowing information about something. Rather, this approach is about the deeper knowledge gained through collaboration, analysis, experimentation, wondering, and discourse in a subject that a student is curious about. In my own practice, I think of these strategies as important components of visual inquiry. This is a rich and nuanced definition of literacy. The elements and principles of art can provide a foundation for these approaches to artmaking.

I resonated with this approach because of its inherent respect for how children tick and what they are capable of when given the opportunity. This approach moves with children’s natural curiosity instead of pushing children through expectations set by others. A child’s curiosity is a key concern in my teaching. I use the elements and principles of art as a way to encourage their curiosity about what they observe and think.

James Rolling, Jr. In an editorial for Art Education, James Haywood Rolling, Jr., (2015) describes the advantage of a more expansive approach to literacy like the one demonstrated by the Reggio Emilia schools. He explains that the development of fluency in many literacies replaces the more restrictive concept of literacy as being able to read and write with a deeper and more contextual skill of learning to interpret. This larger concept serves as a springboard for wider communication taking many different forms in many different social contexts. He argues that this more expansive view of literacy develops a flexible and open mind,
one that can navigate through our modern, interconnected world. “Identity itself is an interpretation and those who are not literate enough to create a plot from the chaos are subject to having their destinies written for them” (Rolling, 2015, p. 5). Rolling (2015) would describe visual literacy as the understanding of how “the arts and design are systems of understanding” (p. 5) and as part of the family of creative literacies.

**Elliot Eisner.** In his book *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, Elliot Eisner (2002) sums up the approach of art education where visual culture is the focus:

> Now, one may very well argue that in a society with as many social inequities as our own, it is appropriate that attention to such inequities surface to a level of priority. After all, if society is hurting, perhaps our first priority should be to try and alleviate the pain. If the study of the arts can provide such relief, why not? (p. 30)

He explains that this approach to art education is consistent with other social movements in our modern society, namely, multiculturalism, feminism, and postmodernism. He explains that all these movements have a common goal of bringing about significant change in how the world is viewed. He points out that nearly all of them challenge foundationalism and promote perspectivalism. In the art world, that translates to the value of a piece of artwork being dependent on the viewer's perspective, as driven by social forces, rather than on the skill and inherent quality of a work. This perspective views intrinsic values extolled by the Greeks—beauty, truth, and goodness—as not being universal but rather as needing to be understood within cultural contexts. Personal perspective and cultural contexts are essential elements in both understanding and making art.

Eisner (2002) sums up this approach as follows:

> Art education, focused on the visual world within this frame of reference, is interested in helping students become astute readers of visual images and sensitive, politically informed interpreters of their meanings. The interpretation of meaning, in this view, is in large measure a matter of social and political analysis. (p. 29–30)
Eisner describes visual culture in his book as more than reading images as texts. He promotes teaching students how to “decode the values and ideas that are embedded in what might be called popular culture as well as what is called the fine arts” (Eisner, 2002, p. 28). In this way, understanding and responding to visual culture becomes a part of visual literacy. This approach runs counter to formalism. However, in my teaching practice, the elements and principles of design are used within the context of my students’ personal concerns to develop their personal visual inquiries.

**Abigail Housen.** A less expansive view of visual literacy, yet one that can also lead to the acquisition of other literacies, is the ability to understand and interact with art. Philip Yenawine (2003) discusses using the research of cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen on the stages of aesthetic development. According to Housen, there are three stages:

**Stage 1: Accountive Viewers, or Storytellers.** They use their senses, memories, and tastes (what art they like). They weave their observations through a narrative. Their reaction to an artwork is emotionally driven.

**Stage 2: Constructive Viewers.** They actively build a framework for looking at the piece of artwork, their own knowledge of nature, and their perception of their social, moral and conventional world. “Their sense of what is realistic is the standard often applied to determine value” (Yenawine, 2003, p. 8).

**Stage 3: Classifying Viewers.** They “adopt the analytical and critical stance of the art historian . . . This viewer believes that properly categorized, the work of art’s meaning and message can be explained and rationalized” (Yenawine, 2003, p. 8).

Understanding these developmental stages can help guide educators in selecting images to be viewed and discussed by their students, thus scaffolding the students as they acquire the skills of engaging with art and, I believe, ultimately broadening their understanding in other disciplines as well. As individuals successfully move through these
stages, their knowledge of history, art techniques, means of expression, and social and political awareness must all increase.

**Philip Yenawine.** Yenawine (2019) has built upon the idea of engagement with art and expanded it to a method of coming to know, which he terms Visual Thinking Strategies, a type of visual literacy used more as a tool to expand not only art knowledge but also other academic knowledge.

As I read Yenawine’s (2019) article “Art in School: As Essential as Language,” I connected with many of his ideas about helping young students to think deeply about what they observe visually. The most exciting thing I discovered was that according to Yenawine’s research, eight to ten hour-long discussions in a sequence over several months had a measurable impact on students’ ability to observe, think critically, and respond effectively to what the students were seeing. Yenawine has worked for 30 years to develop this visual literacy in young people and to help educators see the value of this way of thinking. Yenawine (2019) might describe visual literacy as successful “guided looking,” a way of knowing and understanding.

**Kerry Burke Mackenzie.** In her article “Imagination and Transformation: Performing a Universal Narrative Theme,” Kerry Burke Mackenzie (2012) explains that students may defend their interpretation of an artwork as intuitive, but she argues that any intuitive response to an artwork is built upon prior knowledge that may be “analyzed, defined, and expanded” (p. 13). Mackenzie (2012) contends that students must be versed in visual literacy and that the process of becoming visually literate is the challenge. “As a student builds vocabulary in the visual arts, he/she is able to use that vocabulary to construct ‘sentences’ and ‘paragraphs’ of meaning that elucidate a concept” (p. 13).

She explains that a bond is created between the audience and the artist when the viewer can interpret with clarity and the artist can create clear meaning. This, in Mackenzie’s approach, is visual literacy. Again, a less expansive view, but one that hits important ideas of visual literacy.
Sheng Kuan Chung and Michael S. Kirby. Sheng Kuan Chung and Michael S. Kirby (2009) delve into the concept of media literacy in their article “Media Literacy Art Education: Logos, Culture Jamming, and Activism.” They believe that media literacy is critical to education and that being media literate helps students in three critical ways. First, it helps them to develop an appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of media. Second, it fosters a recognition that media culture is often a product of social struggle and helps them accurately interpret meanings. Third, media literacy assists them in using the tools of media as a means of creative expression and social activism. These goals of teaching media literacy prepare young people to “function in a predominantly ‘mediated’ society saturated with manufactured media constructs” (Chung & Kirby, 2009, p. 34). Although my research is less concerned with media literacy, these insights about literacy are relevant to my own investigations about visual literacy. Chung and Kirby would describe media literacy as a large and important part of visual literacy; to be media literate is to understand a profound and impactful aspect of our modern culture.

Visual Literacy and Visual Culture Studies

An important question is how visual literacy is connected with visual culture studies and the recent emphasis on visual culture in art education. The connection between visual culture and visual literacy is a tight one. Jensen and Draper (2015) make the argument that the concept of literacy they find most useful is literacy as a social practice, and I agree. They advocate for framing discussions about arts literacy through this social practice lens by encouraging art teachers to consider the events, the historical situation, the differing domains, social institutions, power relationships, and change over time (Jensen & Draper, 2015, p.5). All these factors that feed into arts literacy are greatly influenced by culture. What children are surrounded by, their family's culture, the culture of their community as a whole, and the separate cultures that feed into the community culture all inform a child’s perspective and thoughts. A significant way these cultures are manifested is through the visual world that children engage in regularly. An understanding of visual cultural studies can empower children
to negotiate their visual world in a healthy and constructive way, rather than as thoughtless consumers.

The studies that have been done in the areas of visual culture and visual literacy among elementary-age children do not seem abundant. I have broken the research literature into three parts. The first part covers the early education schools of Reggio Emilia and their integration of visual culture and visual literacy into their educational spaces and practices. The second part covers the idea of visual literacy and the studies that have been done about visual literacy among elementary-age children. The third part covers the idea of visual culture and the studies that have been done about visual culture among elementary-age children.

**Reggio Emilia**

In the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy, the term “visual culture” is manifested in an integrated way. It is not taught as a separate subject but rather is infused into the DNA of the schools. Reggio Emilia teachers consider deeply the visual culture of their physical schools and what the local surroundings offer their students’ learning and development. The physical surroundings reflect the community and culture while respecting the many ways children learn and express their ideas. As Louise Cadwell (1997), who has adapted the Reggio approach to the College School in St. Louis, Missouri, learned from her work with Reggio educators, “no space is marginal, no corner is unimportant, and each space needs to be alive and open to change” (p. 93). At Reggio Emilia, the teachers often refer to their environment as the “third educator” (Cadwell, 1997, p. 36).

In this sense, visual literacy and visual culture are an integral part of the physical surroundings found in the actual building, furniture, decorations, and even supplies in their schools. The teachers’ philosophy expresses the idea that “children can best create meaning and make sense of their world through living in complex, rich environments that support complex, varied, sustained, and changing relationships between people, the world of experience, ideas and the many ways of expressing ideas” (Cadwell, 1997, p. 93).
**Visual Literacy and Visual Culture**

A search among the research literature resulted in surprisingly few articles directly related to studies of visual culture or visual literacy among elementary-age children. Even with the expert assistance of Chris Ramsey, the art education librarian at the Harold B. Lee Library, I was not able to find much on the topic.

In probably the most relevant article, “More Lessons from the Superheroes of J. C. Holz: The Visual Culture of Childhood and the Third Pedagogical Site,” Brent Wilson (2005) describes three primary visual culture sites of children. First, “the vast ‘territory’ containing many informational spaces outside of and beyond classrooms where kids . . . both construct their own visual cultural text and consume the visual cultural texts made by others”; second, any formal art classroom setting where teachers direct artmaking; and third, “a site between school classrooms and kid’s self-initiated visual cultural spaces—a site where adults and kids collaborate in making connections and interpreting webs of relationships” (Wilson, 2005, p. 18).

Wilson (2005) admits he favors the first visual culture site of children. He sees great value in the voluntary exploration and work where children produce visual culture “to please themselves and their audiences” (p. 34). He concludes that “it may be in this marvelous site that the richest visual cultural pedagogy transpires” (Wilson, 2005, p. 34). As an art teacher of children for 11 years and a mother to five independently creative children, I would agree with Wilson.

Based on my search for previous studies that have been done in the areas of visual culture and visual literacy specifically among elementary-age children, I would have to assume based on the limited information that not a lot has been done. The lack of such studies could be because doing studies with children is not easy due to permissions needed, or perhaps art education research for children is not a topic that has been deemed as important as so many others.
Foundations of Art Education

An important theme in my research is the idea of developing foundational skills in children that will provide them with a visual vocabulary with which to become more visually literate. There are many ideas about foundational skills, knowledge, and concepts in the history of art education.

Kevin Tavin, Jodi Kushins, and James Elniski

In their article, “Shaking the Foundations of Postsecondary Art(ist) Education in Visual Culture,” Kevin Tavin, Jodi Kushins, and James Elniski (2007) list three different concerns that create debate over what constitutes a foundational art education. The first concern is a belief among some educators that “the Modern, formalist agenda ignores the complex contexts in which art and visual culture is produced and given meaning. Critics call for transdisciplinary studies that engage knowledge and skills that go beyond formal objectives” (Tavin et al, 2007, p. 14). The second concern is “the development and incorporation of new technologies that challenge traditional definitions and functions of art, artists, and artistic institutions” (Tavin et al., 2007, p. 14). And the third concern is the increase in diversity of students’ cultures and backgrounds in our classrooms.

Marilyn G. Stewart

The Art Standards that rolled out in 2014 would be a natural place to begin a national discussion of the important ideas in foundational art education. Marilyn G. Stewart (2014) helped to write these standards and detailed the thinking behind these standards in her article “Enduring Understandings, Artistic Process, and the New Visual Arts Standards: A Close-Up Consideration for Curriculum Planning.”

In this article, Stewart (2014) explained that there were 195 new standards and admitted that that might be “off-putting” to educators but encouraged them to dig in and understand how they were “philosophically tied to a commitment to teach for understanding” (p. 6). Out of these 195 new standards there were 15 big ideas known as Enduring
Understandings. These Enduring Understandings are broken down into four distinctive groups having to do with “full engagement in the visual arts” (Stewart, 2014, p. 7). These four groups are Creating, Presenting, Responding, and Connecting.

**Creating.** “As makers, students develop increasing recognition of the communicative power of images, objects, and places in their contemporary world” (Stewart, 2014, p. 7).

**Presenting.** “[This] require[s] an increasing sophistication in curatorial practice, all the while allowing for a shift of focus from the display of one’s own work to the presentation and preservation of artworks, objects, and artifacts made by others” (Stewart, 2014, p. 8).

**Responding.** “With increasing sophistication, students recognize and explain how their responses to the natural world, constructed environments, and visual imagery shift and change depending on context” (Stewart, 2014, p. 9).

**Connecting.** “These standards essentially ask students to step back and consider art and its connections to their world—to think about art, culture, and history, in general” (Stewart, 2014, p. 10).

This new approach is still concerned with knowledge and skills but is centered around the student’s contemporary life and world, “with a strong emphasis on experimentation, invention, and discovery” (Stewart, 2014, p. 8) addressing elements of the first and third concern listed by Tavin, Kushins, and Elniski.

**Olivia Gude**

A critic of the modernist, formalist agenda, Olivia Gude (2007) begins her article “Principles of Possibility: Considerations for a 21st-Century Art & Culture Curriculum” with this question: “Has any art teacher ever reviewed the national or state standards for art education or the prevailing list of elements and principles of design and then declared, ‘I feel so motivated to make some art!’ I don’t believe so . . .” (p. 6).
According to Gude (2004),

The elements and principles of design were never the universal and timeless descriptors they were claimed to be. Indeed, they are not even sufficient to introduce students to most modern art because modernism has always been a tradition with two sharply different manifestations, the “coolly formal” and the often “enraged engaged” (p. 12)

In other words, according to Gude, are not sufficient guides for a modernist approach and also fall short when it comes to postmodern art education. Also, according to Gude (2004),

The elements and principles are presented as the essence of artmaking. If not literally engraved in stone, the big seven (elements) + seven (principles) are refined in print, achieving theoretical unity, not through persuasive argument, but through seemingly endless repetition in formally oriented textbooks or, during the last decade, as government mandated standards. (p. 6)

She contends that the main topics of a curriculum should pique students’ and teachers’ interests and desires to participate and that the current traditional lists of approaches do an injustice to the place art can have in our lives. Focusing on elements and principles; various media; or lists of rationales, domains, and modes does not inspire the student or teacher.


**Playing.** This principle unearths the ideas of imagination and spontaneity often lost after childhood, seeing things as new and unexpected.

**Forming Self.** This principle rejects simplistic symbols of self in favor of accessing the true self through creating artworks from indirect means, such as personal experiences, desired objects, and childhood spaces.

**Investigating Community Themes.** This principle encourages art creation from themes found in the community that promote awareness of societal issues touching the larger community, such as waste, the status quo, and community expectations.
**Encountering Difference.** This principle helps students see through the eyes of others in a way that diminishes otherness. This principle embraces differences while accepting the differences as part of our collective society.

**Attentive Living.** This principle embraces the idea that “artistic thinking is not separate from daily life” (Gude, 2007, p. 10) and that awareness of nature, household arts, traditional crafts, and so on play a vital role in enriching our lives.

**Empowered Experiencing.** This principle enables students’ ability to notice and interpret a wide range of visual practices.

**Empowered Making.** This principle expresses the idea that relying on “traditional” methods of creating limits contemporary expression. This principle instead encourages a more exploratory approach using postmodern methods of creating.

**Deconstructing Culture.** This principle seeks to empower students to question cultural influences on beliefs and practices and reconstruct images representing these ideas to create new meanings.

**Reconstructing Social Spaces.** This principle encourages the creation of social spaces for people to “connect and interact” (Gude, 2007, p. 13) and actively combine traditional and progressive aspects of modern life.

**Not Knowing.** This principle is related to the first principle of play. The principle of not knowing underscores the ideas of willingness to change perspectives, to see things differently, and to think critically.

Olivia Gude’s Principles of Possibility infuse energy and postmodern purpose into foundations of art education. In her vision, these Principles of Possibility, reach for the encompassing idea of “a sustainable global culture of joy and justice” (Gude, 2007, p. 13). There are many aspects of Olivia Gude’s Principles of Possibility that resonate with me as an art educator and that I find exciting. However, traditional approaches, including design elements can also have a useful place in art education by providing a visual vocabulary upon
which children can build. The place that teachers hold with their influence over young minds is
delicate, and we need to be careful to not project our ideals onto children who have not yet
decided theirs but, rather, to give them ideas to consider as they navigate their own realities.

Peter J. Smith

On the other end of the spectrum, as a staunch critic of the visual culture agenda, Peter J.
Smith (2003), in his article “Visual Culture Studies Versus Art Education,” argues for a much
smaller place for current social issues in the subject of art education and argues for more focus
on what he calls its “traditional goals” (p. 7), with aesthetics playing a large role. He contends
that there is a place for understanding the social issues facing students; that “wise art teachers
will be aware of, and always learning about, the experiences of students”; and that “the good
teacher will incorporate relevant materials from the mass (media) world . . . but it should be
treated in terms proportional to its lifelong educational potential” (Smith, 2003, p. 7). He
explains that the idea of basing art education on a foundation of visual culture is a fleeting one
with no lasting value. According to Smith (2003), “the art teacher has to seriously evaluate how
much time she or he can spend on any example in light of its long-term learning value” (p. 7).

Smith expresses concern that delving into social issues and mass media as a foundation
for the subject of art threatens to turn art teachers into social studies teachers and psychologists.
It relegates art to an applied subject and even to an idea, rather than recognizing art as what he
felt was a broader, more timeless concept.

Smith suggests that art’s foundational value to students goes beyond the social goals that
art can be used to promote and explore. He believes that the aesthetic experience “makes life
seem to have a richness and a worthwhile character” and that “too much exposure to mass-
oriented objects and images becomes anti-aesthetic, dulling, producing the sense that nothing is
unique or is special” (Smith, 2003, p. 7).

Smith contends that anything that leads to this feeling while offering no greater choice
must be open to ethical scrutiny, especially when young people often grapple with a sense of
meaninglessness already. He continues, “I believe intelligent attention to art [in the more traditional sense] is a healthy alternative [to a visual culture art foundation]” (Smith, 2003, p. 7). Smith was not explicit in mentioning the elements and principles of art, but based on his defense of traditional art, it is not an unjustifiable assumption that he would see a place for them in contemporary art education.

One goal of visual cultural studies is to give children tools enabling them to make conscious, informed choices about how they engage with visual culture as opposed to being mindless consumers. Smith’s concerns center on traditional art. Other art educators’ concerns comprise a broader field that includes visual culture as an important component of art education as well as traditional art.

Elements and Principles of Design as a Foundational Construct

Bauhaus

It would also seem from the literature that the thrust of postmodern art education finds the elements and principles of design less important but not entirely useless. Based on my experience and the elementary school art teachers I associate with, many of whom have not been formally educated in postmodern art theory, the elements and principles serve as a guide for a good part of elementary school art curriculum. Also, for the trained art teachers who resonate and find value for their students in the more modern, formalist agenda, I believe the elements and principles of art still have a secure place particularly in design disciplines.

According to Frank Whitford (1994), an art history lecturer who wrote a book on the Bauhaus, “every student now pursuing a ‘foundation course’ at an art school has the Bauhaus to thank for it” (p. 10).

The Bauhaus began in 1919 in Germany. Its foundational goal “was a radical concept: to reimagine the material world to reflect the unity of all the arts” (Winton, 2016, para. 1). The founder, Gropius, created the Proclamation of the Bauhaus, explaining his vision for “a union of art and design . . . which described a utopian craft guild combining architecture, sculpture,
and painting into a single creative expression” (Winton, 2016, para. 1). The curriculum was craft-based with the goal to build artisans and designers who would create “useful and beautiful objects appropriate to this new system of living” (Winton, 2016, para. 1). Both fine arts and design education were elements found in the curriculum of the Bauhaus.

**Arthur Wesley Dow**

Wendy Strauch-Nelson (2007), in her article “Magical Words,” recounts the history of the elements and principles of design and explains that “Bauhaus regarded the elements and principles as fundamental to the study of design” (p. 13). According to Strauch-Nelson, another source for the origins of the elements and principles of design is Arthur Wesley Dow, who published *Composition* in 1899. In an effort to create an “underlying structure of art with universal application” (Strauch-Nelson, 2007, p. 12). Dow offered three elements and five principles of art.

Dow (1920) wanted to create an approach based on suggested facts that would allow a greater consideration and power to create and understand the structure of art. He was dissatisfied with what he described as the limited method of teaching art through imitating nature, studying the styles of history and ignoring the explicit teaching of structure. He believed the approach he offered would empower his students’ learning and creation of art.

**Discipline Based Art Education**

Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) “embraced the structure, which by then had grown to seven elements and principles and quickly became embedded in DBAE curriculum” (Strauch-Nelson, 2007, p. 13). Further cementing the elements and principles into foundational art education, in the 1980s the Getty Foundation became a staunch supporter and promoter of DBAE, which continued to use the elements and principles as a foundational structure for teaching art. With Getty’s wealth, the Foundation successfully promoted DBAE throughout the United States and internationally (Smith, 2003). Then came postmodernism with its “penchant
for questioning all assumptions. The elements and principles were seen as neither universal (but rather Euro-American) nor adequate” (Strauch-Nelson, 2007, p. 13).

**Olivia Gude**

According to Gude (2007), “the teaching of artmaking in schools is a hybrid practice” (p. 11). Elements modeled on academic practices like observational drawing and perspective drawing, elements of modernist ideas of color theory, principles of design, elements of craft based on more traditional practices, and media combine to make up typical art courses today.

Gude (2007) explains that “the reason many art making practices were deemed important in a child’s education at different points in time” was “profundely historical” (p. 11). Curriculum always echoes the values of a particular or cultural context.

**Limitations of the Elements and Principles of Design as a Foundation**

The literature and my conversations with educators versed in postmodern teaching practices revealed three major concerns about using the elements and principles of art as foundational to art education.

First, there is a concern that the meaning of art will end with a discussion of composition, the elements and principles that went into it, and that the whole point of the artwork will be lost to the mechanics, rendering the idea that the artist wanted to express meaningless to the viewer (D. Barney, personal communication, 2020).

Second, focusing so much time and attention on the elements and principles can create a disconnect to modern life and the issues found in it. Tavin et al. (2007) assert, “The focus on so-called fundamentals of art tends to separate student knowledge and experiences of art from understandings of cultural production and the material conditions of life” (p. 14).

And third, the elements and principles of art often do not directly apply, in the traditional sense, to postmodern art and are therefore not as useful or relevant to a solid postmodern art education. Gude (2004) states, “Postmodern thought embraces the heterogeneous, the local, and the specific. It affirms the choice-making capacity of individuals
who select from the past those things that will best serve them as starting points for today” (p. 13).

In spite of the criticism and limitations of the elements and principles of design, these elements and principles do offer valuable perspectives on composition and the visual language of artmaking, particularly in design education. However, it is important to keep in mind that they are one way to understand and make art that was developed in a particular historical and cultural context.

**Kurt Rowland**

Kurt Rowland developed a useful approach to curriculum and teaching. Although he developed his ideas in the 1960s and 1970s, I found them to be particularly relevant to the development of visual literacy.

**Finding Rowland**

In one of my first master’s program classes which was taught by Dr. Dan Barney, we had an assignment to create a field guide for our subject of interest. A literature review of the well-known *Art Education* journal revealed an article that lit up my mind. “Responding and Connecting: Visual Literacy for Today Using the Mid-20th-Century Ideas of Artist and Educator Kurt Rowland” (Goodwin et al., 2019). In 1964 British designer and art educator Kurt Rowland had written, illustrated, and published a series of textbooks, *Looking and Seeing*, to teach children his idea of visual literacy. A quote from the article summarized what I fervently believed: “[Rowland] believed providing students with a ‘foundation of knowledge on which to base sound visual judgements of their environment’ to be one of the most important tasks of educators” (Goodwin et al., 2019, p. 40). I was intrigued that someone over 50 years ago felt just as I did about the importance of teaching students sound judgment based on their visual environment.

I wanted to learn more. A search on Amazon for the *Looking and Seeing* books resulted in a dead end. I did a broader Google search and found them on AbeBooks, a website that
specializes in selling used books. Also on this site was Rowland’s book *Visual Education and Beyond*. I purchased them all and started reading *Visual Education and Beyond*. His work continued to intrigue me. I knew I wanted to somehow implement it into my thesis by applying many of his ideas in my own art teaching pedagogy and discovering the results for my students.

**Who Was Rowland?**

Rowland was a British designer and art educator. He was born in 1920 in Vienna, Austria. After grammar school, he studied technical engineering, and for the remainder of his life, as described by his son, Paul, he would consider himself foremost an industrial designer with a firm belief in the “utility and practicality of art and design, and their concomitant emotional habits, in our everyday lives” (Goodwin et al., 2019, p. 40). Due to circumstances presented by the Spanish Civil War, Rowland ended up in Australia, where he began to draw and paint as well as learn English.

Rowland eventually returned to the United Kingdom and attended the Wakefield College of Art, after which he earned a postgraduate degree at the Slade School of Art. He became a naturalized British citizen and taught at both Walthamstow College of Art and as a visiting emeritus lecturer in the Post-Graduate Art Teacher Training at what is now called Middlesex University.

Rowland later worked as a freelance graphic designer for television and print media. Because of his good reputation in these fields, he became a member of the Society of Industrial Artists and Designers. Later, he became an editor for an educational book publishing company, which “inspired him to write a series of visual education books” (Goodwin et al., 2019, p. 41).

**Rowland’s Ideas About Visual Literacy**

In the introduction to his book *Visual Education and Beyond*, Rowland (1976) sets out his philosophy of visual literacy, the state of art education in his day, and the advantage of seeing art education in a new light, a new light that is 50 years old now. He explains that most educators would agree that general education must “reflect the problems of the society it serves”
(Rowland, 1976, p. 7) and that it should prepare students for the realities of adult life. He goes on to state that art education, as it was being taught in his time, could not make any contributions to that end. Rowland then continues by suggesting that there is a type of education, *visual education*, that draws from art, and which *can* contribute to this important adult life preparation.

Rowland acknowledges that connections between art and a vital education are not straightforward. He recognizes that art contains many important educational elements but that “mere contact with art does not necessarily educate. On the other hand, the latent contact of art, once it is understood and unraveled, may become educational material” (Rowland, 1976, p. 8).

Rowland stresses that discovering the processes of art is more important than the production of objects. He contends that if children can discover in these processes “a natural way of ordering the sensations received from the environment, as language is a natural way of ordering thoughts” (Rowland, 1976, p. 8), then children will not only create better art but also produce more creative responses to life in general. He sums up his introduction by saying we must lead students to find a visual language.

Later in the book, Rowland expands on the idea of written language being comparable to visual language. He explains that a writer has at hand tools for communicating ideas—metaphor, cross-references, analogies, double meanings, et cetera. Writers understand these tools and how to use them to greatest effect. They understand that the placement of a single word can change the whole meaning, and they rely on this knowledge to get their message across with clarity.

Rowland explains that a designer, or any creative person, works in much the same way. They understand their materials, their visual tools, and how the materials and tools work together to create solutions to problems or communicate meanings. There is nuance to materials and methods just as there is nuance to written words. He explains that just as a writer would be a poor one if their skill relied only on a dictionary, a visual creator’s communications would be
flat if they focused only on their tools. “Visual education does not aim at an inventory of forms, but rather a language of form and forming” (Rowland, 1976, p. 110).

To sum up Rowland’s ideas about visual education, I offer a final quote:

Visual education is not concerned with the mechanics of composition or the canon of taste. It deals with both language and content. It nurtures a more perspicacious sense of the environment (and of reality) which will not tolerate stock responses; feelings are both articulated and integrated. (Rowland, 1976, p. 111)

An important part of my research includes the development of a curriculum oriented toward visual literacy and elementary children. I have adopted many of Rowland’s ideas in the design and content of my curriculum.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Qualitative Methodology

In my research, I wanted to explore how the elements and principles of art and design might influence children’s personal inquiry through the visual arts. My research into the history of visual literacy in art education ultimately led me to focus on the work of the art and design educator Kurt Rowland. My thesis includes a curriculum for elementary-age children based on his ideas, which I used as a platform to guide my students’ visual inquiry. Teaching schedules were compromised in 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, I was only able to put into a place a small part of my curriculum. My studies became, in essence, pilot studies of my curriculum and experiments in research methods, which pointed the way to further investigation.

My formal research consisted of a carefully planned exploration of a visual literacy curriculum based on the ideas of Rowland and a more informal experiment, which I call the Trading Wall, within the limitations of art teaching imposed by the pandemic.

In my years of experience working with close to 2,000 children, I have found that they are nuanced and imprecise according to the adult world; however, in their own world they are focused on their ideas and clear. The nature of researching with children and about children lends itself to a more fluid methodology that allows “sufficient scope for the unexpected directions that a qualitative research study can take” (Emme & Kirova, 2017, p. 10).

A large component for the researcher using qualitative research is their personal philosophy, or epistemology—how they know what they know and what distinguishes justified belief from opinion. Before I began, I considered my own personal epistemology. My conclusions should be viewed through this lens. According to Michael J. Emme and Anna Kirova (2017), “qualitative researchers are often drawn to methodologies founded on research paradigms other than positivism because they permit assumptions about perceptions of reality and knowledge that align with the researcher’s area of inquiry” (pp. 19–20). However, there is
an understanding that the line between philosophical moments and research paradigms can and does stretch and give a little (Emme & Kirova, 2017, p. 20).

Given this component of philosophy in qualitative research, I was even more excited to pursue my thesis research with children. I have a fairly developed personal philosophy about children, who they are, and what they are capable of and a profound respect for how children move through life. In my experience, children have a surprising depth to them. They care as passionately about their interests and life experiences as adults do. Their approach to life is not simple, but rather unencumbered with the details that burden adulthood. They have a keen sense of fairness and wonder, and they relish a good listener. In my estimation, children are not developing into individuals; they are already individuals—in the fullest sense.

While I was open to surprises, I was also confident in my approach to researching with and about children. An important component of my research was this: Child researchers have their own ideas and paradigms, and I needed to be aware and discerning as I traveled through this research experience with them. Another consideration in favor of qualitative research was that the nature of my study would be based on children’s observations and opinions. I would not be looking for numbers as much as emotional reactions and engagement with visual information.

My qualitative methodology was an advantage to me in my research, as the subjects I studied, and my fellow researchers, all demanded flexibility and the option of surprise because of their very nature. I realized as I began to act as a researcher within my school that my original vision of what I would do would also have to adjust because of how much the pandemic changed schools. As a consequence, an important part of my work shifted to historical research and curriculum design. Nevertheless, I was able to complete two curricular experiments with children.
Children as Participant Researchers

As I read Good Question: Arts-Based Approaches to Collaborative Research with Children and Youth (Emme & Kirova, 2017), the first thing that struck me was how fun it would be to enlist children as co-researchers. In her research with children, Lucy Atkinson (2006) expresses this idea:

Experiences using playful child-centered research technique . . . generate rich and varied information, and often in unexpected ways. They also create a format whereby the researcher and the children can interact and form relationships outside the usual social relationship of adult and child, the researcher and informant. (p. 79)

In the chapter “Co-Researching with Children,” Emme and Kirova (2017) describe the cautions and the advantages of such an arrangement. First the cautions. Children are not versed in research methods or the context of research. “Without such knowledge or understanding of the research process, children cannot be equal partners with the adult researchers in a truly collaborative research process” (Emme & Kirova, 2017, p. 229). This situation can lead to research that uses children as puppets to express adult interpretations. The voice and contribution of children will be reduced to that of placeholders, not contributors. The way to avoid this unintended problem is to consider carefully the methodologies used in such a partnership.

An approach suggested by Emme and Kirova (2017) uses the idea of collaborative apprenticeship:

A purpose-ful, play-ful exploration that recognizes that each participant or researcher comes to the research studio and participates in its processes not only as a master of his or her life-skills, experience, and cultural knowing, but also as an apprentice prepared to learn through active engagement with the contributions of the other research participants in relation to a shared, meaningful project in a local context. (p. 230)
They then add this explanation:

Providing opportunities to practice being researchers alongside experienced researchers, to ask and refine questions to be explored with their peers, to notice, observe, and document events, locations, and people that they have not noticed before, to collectively discuss their findings and decide on a plan of action, is what we mean by collaborative research with children. (Emme & Kirova, 2017, p. 230)

Before reading these articles on researching with children as co-researchers, I had thought only of the advantages to me of fun interaction while fulfilling my thesis requirement, that involvement of my students in this manner would make research much more enjoyable for me and my findings more authentic. However, Emme and Kirova point out that such a method of research also greatly benefits the child-researchers. By working beside a research mentor, children can develop research skills and acquire research tools that they can then apply to their own lives going forward. They will learn critical thinking and discovering skills that will enable them to stand in a stronger place as they continue their lives and the realities they live in (Emme & Kirova, p. 230).

**Research Questions**

1. How might a curriculum that uses the formalist language of the elements and principles of design inform student visual inquiry?

2. How can children use a study of visual pattern and shapes to better understand and express their world?

**The Pilot Study**

**Limitations**

My hope was to write and teach an entire curriculum influenced by Rowland’s ideas of visual language and see whether I could discover answers to my questions posed above. However, as I began, I ran into some limitations.
First, the class schedule had changed from what it had been for the last many years. Instead of seeing my students once a week, I saw them once a month for 4 consecutive days. This schedule left a substantial gap between groups of lessons.

Second, my class time was reduced from 40 minutes to 30. This difference created a challenge in covering the relevant materials and allowing time for students to explore their ideas based on what had been taught.

Third, I had agreed to mentor a student teacher before I had decided that I needed to graduate in April. This created challenges in giving my student teacher time with my classes and retaining time for my research.

The combinations of these factors reduced my intended research to a pilot study. However, the small study I did had some unexpected and pleasing results that I am excited to report on. It also shed light on the possibilities of this approach in helping children become more visually literate and empowered to express their ideas.

**The Study**

Drawing on the work of Rowland and his 1970s curriculum *Looking and Seeing* I created a lesson unit titled “The World I See and Live In”. There are four sections, Patterns and What They Can Tell Us, Other Peoples Patterns, Groups as Patterns – an Expanded Idea, My Shapes and Patterns.

The intent of this lesson unit was to explore with my students the patterns and shapes in our lives, from the bricks of the school walls to the patterns we saw in people and routines. We would also explore an expanded idea of pattern in grouping things with common traits. The end of the unit would culminate in an art project where students would create a 3-D sculpture using patterns and shapes drawn from their lives. This sculpture would be a visual expression of important patterns and shapes in the student creator’s life, a window into their own personal visual language.
The Site

This study took place in my art room at Orchard Elementary in Orem, Utah.

The Participants

I picked two classes to participate, one from fifth grade and one from sixth. The fifth-grade class had 29 students. The sixth-grade class had 27 students. These classes were well behaved and full of creative and curious students. I teach all the students that attend Orchard Elementary, and thus I have a year-over-year perspective on students and can decide with some accuracy which students would be engaged and willing to take this journey with me.

The students participated as researchers by being engaged in the discovery process. We talked together about our observations about patterns and shapes we saw in our lives. I would write their observations down on the board, summarize our findings, and then get their input before concluding. In part 3 of the lesson unit, “Patterns in Groups or an Expanded Idea of Pattern,” students decided the rules for shapes as we played the shape game. Rules were also negotiated and voted on. I led the discussion and set out the concept, but the students decided on the rules and how to apply them.

The most important way the student researchers participated was in their self-reflection, thinking through how these ideas of shape and pattern were manifested in their own lives and creating their final product expressing their own visual language. The students were the interpreters of information and the deciders of content based on the concepts taught, and they shared their ideas with me.

Data Collection

To collect my data, I asked for students who would be willing to share their sculptures and graphic organizers with me. Initially, I attempted to capture the student’s descriptions by writing down their explanations of the shapes and patterns they had selected. I found I could not do the students’ ideas justice and asked their permission to make a video recording of their explanations. Hearing the students describe the thinking processes and meanings of their work
in their own voices was powerful. I also took still pictures of their graphic organizers and sculptures. I complied these videos and still shots into one folder and reviewed them all. I selected five that I thought represented the variety and power of these student-created works of art.

**Pilot Study Curriculum: The World I See and Live In**

We are surrounded by shapes and patterns. Often, we do not even consider these basic visual elements because we take them for granted. However, there can be a wealth of information and a means of expression found in shapes and patterns. These four lessons explore the potential of shape and pattern that surround us and how seeing and understanding them can enhance our ability to understand and create with greater depth. Based on Rowland’s curriculum *Looking and Seeing* these lessons seek to explore a more conscious understanding and awareness of the shapes and patterns in the lives of elementary-age students. I was curious whether this understanding would help students to creatively solve problems in other areas of life as well as in their artmaking.

The pilot study addressed three essential questions:

- Based on the elements and principles of art, what are the visual patterns and shapes children see in their lives?
- What information can children get from a study of visual patterns and shapes?
- How can children use this information to understand and express their world?

The rationale for the pilot study is described by the following quote:

> Although art contains much of educational importance, mere contact with art does not necessarily educate. On the other hand, the latent content of art, once it is understood and unraveled, may become educational material. We must reveal the processes of art . . . if we can [help children] discover some of these . . . [they] will produce not merely better art objects but more creative responses to life in general. In short, we must lead them to find a visual language. (Rowland, 1976)
Lesson #1: Patterns and What They Can Tell Us

Learning Goals.

• Students will define what a pattern is in the simple sense of something that repeats.
• Students will find patterns in the art room.
• Students will articulate what information we can get from patterns.
• Students will look for patterns in their own lives.
• Students will identify information that can be discerned when patterns get broken.

Discussion. Explore the definition of pattern: something that repeats. Find patterns in the classroom. Discuss why these fit the definition. Discuss these questions and explore examples.

• Ask: What kinds of information can patterns give us?

Examples:

Object: A piece of pottery with a bumped-out striping all along the outside in a stacked pattern
Information: This pottery was made with coils.

Object: A wavy curtain hanging to cover an open shelf
Information: The pattern of waves indicates that the fabric of the curtain is longer than the space in which it resides.

Object: The walls in the art room
Information: The line pattern on three of the walls indicates they were built with brick. The smooth texture from the fourth wall indicates it was not.

• Ask: What kinds of information can we get when something breaks the pattern?

Examples:

Object: A blue marker in the red marker bin
Information: The marker was put in the wrong spot.

Object: An empty space in a set of books on the bookshelf
Information: A book is missing.

Object: A normally happy student who is quiet and frowning
Information: Something has happened to upset them.

**Activity—Game: Guess My Pattern.** The students will get into pairs and draw patterns they see in the classroom. They will take turns guessing each other’s patterns. If they are right on the first guess, they get a point. If they can say what information that pattern can give us, they get a bonus point. At the end of the class, the person with the most points wins.

**Lesson #2: Other People’s Patterns, My Patterns**

**Learning Goals.**

- Students will be exposed to patterns from other cultures.
- Students will understand that patterns of different cultures are affected by geography, experiences, materials, et cetera.
- Students will consider the objects, ideas, and patterns in their own life.
- Students will create their own personal pattern.

**Discussion.** Introduce patterns from different cultures:

- Native American beadwork
- Indian rangoli (radial patterns)
- African pottery
  
  Discuss these patterns.

- Ask: What information (e.g., geography, experiences, available materials, culture, or customs) do the artists use to create their patterns?
- Ask: What patterns can you find or make from your life?
**Activity—Personal Patterns.** The students will be given a strip of paper and access to markers, colored pencils, or crayons. They will create a personal pattern with elements from their own life.

**Lesson #3: Patterns in Groups or an Expanded Idea of Pattern**

**Learning Goals.**

- Students will broaden their idea of pattern to include groups of common but different things.
- Students will identify the rules that these shapes must follow to be a part of the pattern.
- Students will explore shapes that fit the rules for that pattern.
- Students will identify groups that indicate a pattern of similar yet different things in their surroundings.

**Discussion.** A simple line of cartoon cars drawn on the whiteboard represents parents dropping off or picking up students. Each vehicle is a different model. Explore whether this is a pattern.

Discuss how some elements are the same even though the shapes in the group are not identical. Discuss the expanded idea of pattern: groups of similar things.

Examples:

- Groups of students: They are all students and human beings. In that sense they can be considered a group of like objects even though they differ in physical appearance, preferences, experiences, backgrounds, et cetera.
- Pottery on a shelf: The pieces are all pottery, but they also differ in size, color, and shape.
- Cars lining up to pick up students: They are all vehicles and share a common purpose (picking up students) even though they look and sound differently.
**Activity—Drawing Game.** The teacher will draw a simple shape on the whiteboard. The students will decide the rules of this shape. They will then take turns coming up to the whiteboard and drawing a shape that follows the rules but is different from the initial shape in some way. They will see how many shapes they can create and then adjust or reaffirm the rules as needed.

**Activity—Create an Artwork with Shapes That Follow Your Rules.** Have students draw a simple shape and decide the rules of that shape. Next, they create other shapes based on the rules. Then they can combine the group of shapes into abstract works of art.

**Lesson #4: Patterns in My World**

**Learning Goals.**

- Students will identify patterns from their own experiences and environment.
- Students will identify what information some of these patterns give them.
- Students will articulate meanings of broken patterns they noticed.
- Students will develop more awareness of their visual world.
- Students will create a 3D sculpture responding to the patterns they have discovered and considered in their lives.

**Discussion.**

Explain the graphic organizer (Figures 1 and 2)—this will help students identify shapes and patterns in their surroundings to increase their awareness and to prepare them for their final art project of this unit.
Activity—Graphic Organizer.

Figure 2: Graphic Organizer Part 1

Figure 3: Graphic Organizer Part 2

1. Students will fill each box with a pattern and write where they found it.
2. Using pictures, students will record patterns they see with people or routines and write an explanation.
3. Students will notice simple shapes in their surroundings and record a few in the boxes.
4. Students will pick one shape and decide up to three rules for that shape.
5. Did students notice a broken pattern? If so, they should record it visually.
6. Students will describe the broken pattern and record any information it gives them.

Activity—My Visual Language Sculpture.

1. Students will decide a shape they want to use as their foundational shape.
2. Students will cut out several of these shapes.
3. Students will draw or paint their other patterns on the sides of the shapes.
4. Students will make these shapes into a sculpture.
The Trading Wall Project

Figure 4: The Trading Wall

Because of the pandemic in 2020-2021 I could not do the job I had been hired to do and conduct research for my thesis in the way I had planned. To lighten the load of the regular teachers who would be required to teach students in person as well as online, the specialty teachers had volunteered to be the online core instructors. We were all certified elementary school teachers and knew we could help. We taught our specialty subjects only a few times a week when the Spanish Immersion teachers gave the online students some Spanish language exposure. Otherwise, we lived on the computer, posting and correcting language arts, math and science assignments and meeting with our students over the internet. I missed teaching art to all my students and wondered how artmaking and conversations about artmaking could still happen.

While walking into school one morning two young sisters caught up with me.

“Are we going to get to trade art cards? We made some last spring.” When school had shut down at the beginning of the pandemic, art had been relegated to prerecorded weekly online lessons. Not knowing what supplies my students would have on hand, one of the lessons I
recorded was how to make art trading cards with any medium available. I was hopeful that we would be able to do some trading in the fall. However, here we were, back in school with things completely different. I didn’t know how to answer, I really doubted we could do any trading, at least how I had envisioned it.

“Bring your cards to the art room, I will trade some of my cards for yours.” They seemed content with that and went on their way.

Considering my drastically changed schedule and my limited access to my art students, I wondered how I could enable art card trading. This exchange planted the seed for the Trading Wall. I began to create a plan to use the wall by my art room as an art card exchange space for any students who were interested; every class lined up along the art room wall on their way to lunch, it was the perfect location.

The Trading Wall started as a simple pocket chart, the kind the lower grades use with long clear pockets sewn horizontally across a vinal sheet, and a few instructions on poster boards attached to the wall. Over the course of the year more sections were added to address various issues that arose. It also became a way to investigate student artmaking in a negotiated space between a teacher’s formal instruction and a student’s independent artmaking. Brent Wilson (2008) describes this as the third pedagogical site, a site of art education that can be created between teachers and students.

Unlike many other disciplines, in studio art-and-design education, student and teacher are involved in frequent conversations as the student’s create their work. Because of this interaction, studio art teachers influence student learning through their personalities, values, teaching experiences, engagement with academic and popular culture, and personal aesthetic choices (Salazar, 2021). Due to the pandemic’s effect on my schedule, I had to reconsider my role as an art teacher. Traditionally, an assignment means directing a student to do something, but when the teacher is not actually there, the assignment might be the whole class. For many of my students during the year 2020, the art making suggestion and the posters of instructions on
the wall were all they had. This project allowed me to explore ways of enabling and encouraging artmaking while I was not there in person.

**The Trading Wall as a Research Site**

Although I did not plan the Trading Wall as a place to do research, I was both surprised and intrigued by what I was discovering. I was also fascinated by future research possibilities. Questions that I began to ask included:

Could my curriculum be guided by what I see students creating or not creating?

Could I discover what topics were of most interest to my students?

What other social issues would come up in the context of trading artworks?

How could I move my students from simple drawings to creating art with more depth?

How can student choice contribute to their artmaking?

**Different Sections of the Trading Wall and Their Purposes**

**Pocket Chart.** The Pocket Chart is the “free trade” section, and it is the largest. This is where students can freely trade cards without my involvement. I have found that for some students it is more important to have their art cards put into this public place rather than actually trade. For others it is the act of trading that is most important and for others it is both. About once a week I have two sixth-grade volunteers clean out the pockets from cards that have lingered for a while or the scraps of hastily made cards. It was interesting to me how the public display or presentation of my students’ artwork influenced their artmaking and how the idea of art in exchange with other people could motivate students.

**Hall of Fame.** The Hall of Fame was implemented to encourage better art cards, to inspire the students to think beyond a pencil drawing in the middle of a blank paper. Originally, I controlled this section, but I have since enlisted two sixth grade volunteers to search the Pocket Chart and pick cards for the Hall of Fame that fit one or more of the descriptors: unique ideas, good effort, skill, thoughtfulness, surprising, beautiful, good message, and kind/happy. After this section went up, I overheard student conversations through the walls in my quiet room as
they waited in line to go to lunch. “Do you see that card in the Hall of Fame? That’s mine.” It was a big deal to get their card in The Hall of Fame. I had hoped that would be the case. This was another instance where I wanted to see how students would create without a teacher being present. It was one answer to the question of how to encourage quality work among my students.

**Challenge of the Week.** This is a simple sign that offers a challenge of the week for those interested. Some challenges have been, 3-D, nature, books, and abstract. My sixth-grade assistants get to pick the topic and post the challenge. The purpose of this section is to keep the Trading Wall new, interesting and engaging. The art challenge is very similar to an art assignment that teachers give to students. In this case, however, there was no art teacher around to help with the assignment.

**Request Cards.** Request Cards are cards I make and invest more effort into. Theft of my really good cards had cropped up occasionally and this was my way of attempting to exert a little control over the loss of artwork. If a student wants a request card, they need to see me first to make the trade. This is the one section I have retained control over. The other sections I have turned over to rotating pairs of sixth graders who were interested in managing the Trading Wall for a week at a time. The Request Cards also involves some of my artist friends. These friends include our school librarian and the former principal’s wife. The cards they donate are highly sought after, white drawings on black paper of wild animals, magical unicorns, and cards with Link, a character from a popular video game.
Chapter 4: Findings

The Pilot Study Findings

Before I began this curriculum unit with my students, I wanted to discuss what my working definition of visual literacy was. My students would need a foundational understanding before we began exploring ideas of visual literacy and fleshing out some of their personal visual language (see Figure 3).

Figure 5: Visual Literacy Whiteboard Discussion

I wrote “literacy” on the whiteboard and asked the class what this word meant. Through the course of our conversation, the students decided that it meant the ability to read and write. I agreed and then added the word “understand.” Because these students were learning a second language, I knew they would resonate with this concept. I explained that I have been learning Italian. I can read the Italian language quite well, and I can spell Italian words that I hear. But where I struggle is to understand what these words mean. Just because I could read and write Italian does not mean I understand it. I cannot consider myself literate in Italian. With this added information, my students agreed that understanding what was read or written was key to being literate.
I wrote the word “visual” in front of “literacy” and asked the students what that might mean. During our discussion, we decided it meant understanding things that we see and using visual images to communicate ideas. I explained that they would be exploring their own visual language.

**Lesson #1: Patterns and What They Can Tell Us**

For this lesson, we talked about the definition of pattern. To introduce the lesson, I challenged the students to find simple patterns in our classroom, which I had drawn on the whiteboard. They enjoyed that challenge and managed to find them quite well. We also talked about other patterns and what information those patterns could give us.

- **Pottery**

  I held up a piece of pottery a student had made. I asked the students what pattern they saw. One student described the pattern of stripes. I asked whether the stripes were flat or bumpy. The student replied, “Bumpy.” I asked the class what information that gave us, and they were stumped. They seemed stuck in only the visual description. I explained that we could know that the pottery was made with coils. We did not even need to ask the artist; we could tell by the pattern.

- **Curtains**

  I then turned the students’ attention to the striped curtain hanging in a shelf to cover the contents. I asked them what patterns they saw, and the first thing they mentioned was the striped fabric. When I pressed them about another pattern that was there, they had to think before another student said, “The wrinkles in the curtain.” I told them that was correct and asked what information we could get from that. It took the class a while, and finally someone said, “It means the curtain is longer than the shelf space, so it wrinkles to fit.” I told them that was exactly right.
• **The brick walls**

  The students noted that three walls in the art room were made of brick, and they could tell because of the pattern. The fourth wall was smooth and painted. Since it did not have the same pattern as the other walls, they decided it was made differently.

  One student noticed the brick pattern changed above the doorway. Instead of a traditional pattern, the bricks were lined up vertically. I asked them to imagine that the year was 4021 and our elementary school had been buried under mounds of dirt. An archaeologist discovered the ruins of our school and all that was left was the walls. Would it be easy for them to decide where the doors had been if all they had to go on was the patterns in the brick? They all agreed that the distinct pattern above the door would give them that information. We then discussed how that idea is what helps archaeologists today when they are digging out old ruins. They look for patterns to understand what they are finding.

  We also reviewed what information we could get if a pattern was broken.

• **Student’s behavior**

  I asked what information I could get if a student who was normally happy came into class looking upset. The students responded that something bad must have happened and that I would need to talk to that student. I agreed.

• **A blue marker in the red section**

  We discussed how I might recognize that I needed to remind my younger students how to put the markers away, or maybe someone just needed to see the blue marker was in the wrong place and put it in the right place.

• **An empty space in a set of books**

  We discussed that the empty space was a break in the pattern in the set of books. The students decided that it meant a book was missing and maybe someone borrowed it without asking. We would need to find the book to have a complete set.
We discussed how scientists, biologists, doctors, engineers, and people in so many more professions rely on patterns and observation of broken patterns to learn what they need to make our world better.

After the discussion, the students played the Pattern Game where they guessed each other’s patterns. This activity engaged all the students, and they enjoyed discussing what information these patterns could give them. As class concluded, I challenged them to find patterns in their own lives and decide what information they could learn from those patterns. I told them to report back what they discovered.

**Reflections.** It was a hard mental shift for the students to switch from pattern being only a visual description to it being a source of information or a way to communicate. At the beginning of our discussion, the students were stumped and slow to understand what information specific patterns could give us. The other problem they ran into was overthinking the information that could be obtained from patterns. However, as we continued to discuss examples of patterns or broken patterns, they began to understand that patterns can be a source of information and expression.

**Lesson #2: Other People’s Patterns, My Patterns**

As we began this lesson, I asked my students what patterns they had observed in their own lives. One student talked about how he noticed the turns and landmarks of his walk to school. I reminded him that a pattern repeats and asked him how this was a pattern. He explained that it was a pattern because he walked that way to school every weekday and saw the same things over and over. Another student noticed that if their mom could park in a certain spot, she was happy, and if someone else parked in that spot, she became frustrated. This was a pattern of behavior.

As students commented, the big topics where patterns were noted were landmarks, routines of other people, the student’s own routines, and cars waiting to deliver or pick up
students. The choices of topics were surprising to me. I am not sure what I expected, but I felt that I had stepped into my students’ world in a small way.

We then watched a few videos detailing patterns in artwork related to three distinct cultures: Native American beadwork, rangoli from India, and patterns found on African pottery. I reviewed with my students how geography, culture, and materials available affect what patterns a culture creates. They then created their own personal patterns using elements from their lives.

**Lesson #3: Patterns in Groups or an Expanded Idea of Pattern**

I began this lesson by asking the students what makes a pattern, and they said it was something that repeats. I then drew a line of simple cars on the whiteboard—each one different. I asked them whether this line of cars was a pattern. Some said yes, and some said no. I asked the “no” students to give me their best argument why this was not a pattern. Their answer was that the cars were all different. I then asked the “yes” students to give me their argument why the cars I drew were a pattern. They answered, “Because they are all cars.” I told them they were both right. The definition we had been working with meant this line of cars was not a true pattern but that an expanded idea of pattern was a group of things that had something in common. I asked the students what these cars had in common besides the fact that they were cars. They responded that they all had two wheels and a straight line between each wheel.

Expanding on the idea of groups of similar things being a pattern, I drew a simple shape with an arching line and a straight line at the base. I asked what the rules were for this shape. It took a bit for the students to decide on two simple rules. The first rule was “one curved line,” and the second was “one straight line.” I then asked what other shapes they could think of that fit that rule. I was surprised when they started looking around the room and found a variety of shapes that fit: the head on a wooden human figure, the mouth of the Crayon Paper Eater (a box for the little crayon papers kids invariably peel off the crayons), the half sun painted on the back wall, and so on. These shapes all fit the rules.
I drew a new shape on the board. The students decided the rules were four straight lines and one curved line. I then had students take turns drawing a new shape that fit the rules. One student drew a four-sided shape with the curved line coming out of the shape versus curving in like the original shape. Some students felt that shape did not follow the rules. I reminded them that there was no rule about the direction of the curved line. We then voted about whether there should be a third rule specifying the direction of the curve. The majority voted against the new rule. This approach opened up more possibilities for variation of shapes that could be included in the pattern. After this game, I explained that the students would be creating an abstract work of art using a simple shape that they could choose. They had to figure out the rules and then create other shapes that fit those rules, putting them together in a finished artwork as shown in Figures 6-10. Figure 6 followed the rules of two colors, one hole and no straight lines. Figure 7 followed the rule of six straight lines. Figure 8 was created following the rules found in the shape of a ruler. In Figure 9 the student wrote her rules on her artwork.

Figure 6: Doughnuts
Figure 7: Shapes from a Ruler

Figure 8: Six Straight Lines
Reflections. It was surprising how quickly the students caught on to the concept of shapes following certain rules to create a broader pattern. They relished the chance to come to the whiteboard and draw their shape. I was impressed at their creativity within the rules they had decided, and it led to a lively conversation when the first student drew a shape that was unexpected yet technically fit the rules as they were written. I was interested to see how open the students were to unexpected variations and how willing they were to keep the rules broad and less specific. It was also interesting to me to see how the students responded to this more open interpretation and their creation of new shapes.
Lesson #4: Patterns in My World

I began this lesson by showing my students the graphic organizer. I explained that they would be filling this organizer out so they could use it as a reference for their final art project. They spent the bulk of class filling out their graphic organizers. The next class period I showed them an example of a sculpture I had made with patterns from my childhood. I think this example helped them picture the possibilities. The next few classes were dedicated to their sculpture creations, as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Working on Their Personal Sculptures
Reflections. As the students finished, I had them show me their sculptures and explain them to me. They also showed me the graphic organizers, which had informed their sculptures. As they showed me their sculptures and explained them to me, I realized I had expected simple concepts to be explored. Some of the projects were of that nature—places they liked to visit, patterns in their home, or their favorite books or games—but others were quite profound.

**Figure 11: A Brave Heart**

_A Brave Heart._ A fifth-grade girl explained to me that hearts remind her of the paper hearts her mom cut out and hung around this student’s bedroom. This is why she chose them as her shape. The three black hearts represent the three years she has had anxiety. The color black represented how hard it has been. The red heart on top of the three black ones represents the chance to handle her anxiety with bravery.
**Child in the Middle.** One fifth-grade boy’s shape was patterned after a sand timer the boy had in his room. He told me that his parents were divorced and that this sculpture represented what was currently happening in his life. The top shape represented his dad’s time with him. The color blue at the top of the shape was his dad’s time, and the dots falling down into the lower part of the shape represented his dad’s time falling down into his mom’s time. The next shape represented his mom’s time, and the pink color falling down into the blue color represented his mom’s time crossing over into his dad’s time. The third shape was a combination of striped blue and pink that covered the entire shape that represented the confusion, stress, and tension they all felt, even his siblings, who did not have to switch homes. He took his finger and pushed the sculpture back and forth until it fell. He said that is what would happen if this tension continued—someone would snap.
**Favorite Things.** This Favorite Things sculpture intrigued me. I really liked the shapes. The sixth-grade girl who created it explained that her family likes to camp in Southern Utah, where there are a lot of cacti. She created an arch with the cactus form to represent the stone arches found where they camp as well. The ladybug shapes represented a TV show she liked, which featured ladybugs. The artistic decisions this girl made were both intriguing and satisfying.
**Block C.** The fifth-grade student who created the Block C sculpture loved to write code. The C represented code. He explained to me that he did not want to put any other colors on his black and white sculpture for a reason. The black and white represented coding because you code in black and white. The different shapes of the Block C sculpture represented how coding allows the programmer so many options. You can manipulate objects and make them do whatever you want or look any way you want. One of his life’s goals is to build robots, and he explained that coding is the biggest part of that; otherwise, the robots will be stationary, and what is the point of that?
**Figure 15: Distractions**

*Distractions.* The Distractions sculpture was created by a fifth-grade boy. He explained that the open door represented his goals. The objects around were the distractions that made it hard for him to reach his goals. He too shared that he struggled with anxiety and that made it hard for him to do the things in life that he wanted.
The Trading Wall Findings

As this experiment unfolded, I found myself reflecting on the work of Wilson (2008) when he said, “We teachers and researchers should remain open to the possibility that when kids and adults meet informally on common ground, share common interests, and sometimes encourage one another in their uncommon interests something life-changing might happen” (p. 8).

My traditional interactions with students were very limited during the pandemic. I was able to teach a few art classes, place posters on the wall, and have spontaneous conversations after school when small groups of children would gather. But, in spite of these limitations, something magical was taking place for both me and my students through the Trading Wall. I have listed many of the concepts that were explored.

Fair Trade/Honesty

To get the Trading Wall started, I loaded the pockets with art cards I had made over the summer. A few days later, five of my cards were missing, and in their place were hastily ripped papers. I made another poster, glued the torn papers onto it, and hung it on the wall. “This was not a fair trade. I worked hard on my cards. Bring them back or make some nice cards.” Later that day, as I was teaching a fourth-grade class, a group of students surrounded me during a pause in the lesson. “We know who took your cards. We saw them.” Normally I do not encourage tattling, but I wanted to know. They told me what they had seen and the name of the guilty party.

That afternoon I was out in the hall making some adjustments, and I saw the offender. I called them over and informed them of the many witnesses to their deed. They confessed, somewhat, and showed me a nice card they had made and placed in the pocket chart after seeing the new poster.

“So, there were other kids that took cards, too,” the student said defensively.

“Can you tell them to bring my cards back or make me some good ones?” They agreed.
I never saw any other cards, but that same student brought me two doughnuts a day later “just because I was a nice teacher.” I figured their conscience had been pricked and that the student was making amends; the matter was closed.

Another problem arose early during the process. Many students were making hasty cards and trading for really nice ones. So, I made a new poster: “A fair trade is when you take the time to make something nice. An unfair trade is when you make something quick, just so you can get a nice card—not fair!” In my experience, of all people who live on earth, children are tuned into the concept of “fair.”

Satisfied that the issue had been addressed, I was taken by surprise when I encountered a new fair-trade issue. One early afternoon, the halls were empty except for a lone student, a third grader wearing a bathroom pass. He was looking up at the trading cards I had placed in the Request Cards section. “What’s up?” I asked as I walked up to the student. “I really like that card.” He said, pointing to a little watercolor card I had painted. “Do you want to trade for it?” “I can’t,” he replied quietly. “I don’t draw that well so it wouldn’t be fair.”

I had not expected this response.

“Well, I did my best to make that card. What if you did your best to make a card? Would that be a fair trade?” He thought for a moment and then agreed. I gave him a few blank cards to use, and he promised to make me his best card and bring it the next morning. I promised him I would save the watercolor for him.

The next morning before school, he showed up in my room, smiling broadly. He handed me his card. I was charmed. He had drawn an art room (Figure 16). We traded, and he left my room with more blank cards. In the days that followed, I saw his name on carefully rendered art cards in the Trading Pockets.
Although these exchanges and fair-trade conversations were a small example contained in an elementary school, they caused me to consider larger social questions about responsibility, fairness, and citizenship.

**Empathy and Kindness**

Because of the Trading Wall, opportunities have arisen to address the ideas of empathy and kindness. The morning the capitol building was stormed in Washington DC, I came to work and found the pocket chart full of index cards with thoughtful designs all exhibiting the same words, “You are loved” (Figure 17). The trouble in Washington DC had not taken place yet, but after the historic events of the day, I happened to walk past the Trading Wall again. The hard things we had all been through this last year were front and center to my mind—the challenges
of teaching during a pandemic, so much change, so much division, so many worries of every kind—they all came into focus.

Later that day, a sixth-grader stopped me in the hall and mentioned that his younger brother and sister had worked on those cards all weekend. It was serendipitous timing and such a kind and moving gesture. I took a number of cards and put one in each of the teachers’ boxes in the workroom.

An opportunity to teach empathy arose during a sixth-grade art class. I was informed that first graders were “stealing cards” on their way to lunch. I explained that the way many
students learn how the Trading Wall works is to read the posters. First graders are new readers and may not understand the rules. I reminded them that as the oldest students in the school, they have a lot of influence, and I encouraged them to kindly help the first graders understand and follow the rules. The feeling in the class changed from “someone did something wrong” to “sure, we can help them and oh, yeah, I remember being in first grade and learning how to read.”

Another teaching moment came when I was sorting through the cards, weeding out the ones that had lingered for a while and the hastily made cards, when a group of students gathered around me. “I’m just tidying up,” I explained. They began to help, pointing out the cards that looked like they were made in haste and with not much thought. As I picked cards out, I explained, “I have to be careful because maybe a card that looks sloppy could be the best work a little student could do.” They nodded with understanding and began to sort through the cards with more care.

**Social and Emotional Learning**

Confidence, self-efficacy, a growth mindset, perseverance, an understanding of emotion, self-regulation, and resiliency are outcomes often associated with social and emotional learning (Frey et al., 2019). These dispositions might also be associated with art education. Recent research has suggested that there are important connections between artmaking and social and emotional learning (Edgar & Morrison, 2021; Omasta et al., 2020). The National Consortium for Core Arts Standards 2020 describes a primary purpose for arts education as the development of social and emotional well-being. For some art educators, social and emotional learning became particularly relevant because of the stress connected with the pandemic (Sobel, 2021). Because the Trading Wall involved many opportunities for students to express empathy and responsibility as well as to engage in self-initiated learning, it became an intersection between art and social and emotional learning.
Negotiation

One afternoon after I finished up a Google meeting with an online student, a fifth-grade boy walked into my classroom and right up to my desk. It was Tony, one of my more assertive students.

“Can you put my card in the Hall of Fame?”

“Let’s see it, Tony.” He handed his card to me. It was a nice, colored drawing of an Among Us character sitting by a flower.

“Go out and read the description words on the poster and then come tell me why it should be in the Hall of Fame.” Tony left for a minute and then came back.

Holding his card so I could see, he said, “It is a skillful drawing.” I agreed.

“I made a good effort to draw it.” I agreed.

“And it’s kind.” He finished.

“How is it kind?”

His brows furrowed a little, and he looked at the card. “I guess that one doesn’t really fit.” I smiled; I could not help it. “It looks like your card fits a few of the requirements. I will put it in the Hall of Fame.” He was pleased. Tony was not the only student who came in requesting admittance for their card in the Hall of Fame. I had similar talks with a few of my students—all of them convincing me their cards belonged in that spot.

One day I saw an older student putting a card into the Hall of Fame. This concerned me because I did not want this section of the Trading Wall to become just another extension of the pocket chart and dilute the encouragement it gave students to put more effort into their cards. The student was leaving as I arrived.

“Hey John, did you put this card in here?” John turned around.

“I did.”

“Okay, I need to tell you that I decide what cards go into this section.” I could tell John felt bad.
“Oh sorry, I didn’t know that.”

“No worries.” I showed him the poster explaining the rules. Then I glanced at the card. It was a cute, colorful scene of a prancing horse and a house with flowers.

“Why do you think your card belongs in the Hall of Fame?”

“It’s actually my little sister’s.” He explained, “I thought it belonged because she worked really hard on it.”

I smiled and said, “It’s well drawn and demonstrates good effort. I agree with you.” John smiled. I hoped his sister would notice it in the Hall of Fame on her way to lunch that day.

**Personal Discovery/Self-Motivated Artmaking**

As I looked and sorted through the trading cards each day, I began to notice themes. One sixth-grade girl drew cats, all kinds, and did not worry too much about the background. A sixth-grade boy loved drawing detailed scenes from *The Mandalorian* on very small papers. Many students from all grades loved to draw pictures from the game *Among Us*. Another girl loved drawing meticulous flying dragons in pencil. One quiet sixth-grade girl, Tawni, drew sunsets over the ocean; there were a lot of cards with sunsets over the ocean.

Tawni came into my room one morning and shyly asked whether she could get more blank cards for making trading cards. I showed her where they were and then asked, “You like to draw sunsets, don’t you?” She gave me a timid smile and nodded.

“Do you want a challenge?”

“Sure.” She replied hesitantly.

“Google pictures of sunsets and see what other colors you can add to your artwork.” I saw her brighten a little, and she said she would.

Tawni came in the next day and proudly showed me her picture. “I did what you said.” I could see a little more detail. “That looks great! Do you want another challenge?” She smiled and shrugged, “Sure.”

“See where else you can find beautiful sunsets besides the ocean.”
The following day she showed me a picture of red cliff formations with a sun setting behind. “That’s so cool, Tawni! I love that picture, and you are right, there are spectacular sunsets in desert areas, too.”

One afternoon, Tawni came running up to me in the hallway, “Mrs. Broadbent, one of my friends wants a sunset card and I don’t have any more. I traded all my cards. I just don’t know what to do! I mean, nobody has asked for my art before.” That was the most she had ever said to me.

“You can make another one. I can give you more blank cards.”

She looked relieved and then self-conscious, “Okay, I mean, this just hasn’t happened to me before and I didn’t know what to do.”

“Isn’t it the best feeling when someone wants our artwork?”

She smiled big and nodded. I gave her some blank cards, and she left to draw a sunset for her friend.

Another day, a tiny first grader wearing a backpack as big as he was came hustling down the hall with his sister. He threw his backpack on the floor in front of the trading pockets and began digging through it. I was engaged in a conversation with some other students but watched him out of the corner of my eye. After some effort, he found what he was after, hurriedly placed

*Figure 18: First-grader's Trading Card*
his card in the trading pockets, zipped up his backpack, and ran with his sister down the hall to catch their ride home.

I asked the students I had been talking to what picture that first grader had put in the pockets. They pointed it out. It was a small, crookedly cut paper with a careful drawing from Among Us (Figure 18). The first-grade room was as far away from the art room as you can get in the school. It was also in the back of the school, the complete opposite direction from where kids get picked up. Judging from the hurried manner of his visit, it had cost him some anxiety to get his card where he wanted it. His efforts and his desire to get his card put in the pockets of the Trading Wall delighted me.

The following figures (Figures 19-27) are examples of the variety of trading cards students created for the Trading Wall.

![Dream Team](image)

*Figure 19: Dream Team*
Figure 20: Folded Paper Flower

Figure 21: Under Water
Figure 22: Laser Eye Duck

Figure 23: Abstract Cat
Figure 24: Mr. Green

Figure 25: Imagination
Figure 26: Fire Tree

Figure 27: The Swirls
Chapter 5: Discussion, Impact, Future Directions, Conclusion

This thesis includes a curriculum for elementary-age children that is based on teaching the elements and principles of art as adapted from the ideas of Rowland. I have found many of his ideas relevant to my current art education issues. But my work is also influenced by many other sources, as described in chapter 2.

The Pilot Study

What surprised me most when my students explained their sculptures was the depth of thought found in many of them. Their ability to connect concrete ideas with abstract forms was enlightening to me. Their vulnerability in sharing their struggles and the way they visually portrayed them moved me. Overall, I felt that this pilot study revealed the depth that children are capable of in expressing their ideas. Their use of shape and pattern to express thoughts and feelings was profoundly interesting to me. Exploring their own visual language and creating a personal text through some of the elements and principles of design was a successful endeavor. I am anxious to explore more of Kurt Rowland’s ideas. I would love to see if there could be even more impact on my students’ visual language and awareness of their visual world.

This research project was based on how to connect my own experiences with developing visual literacy among my elementary school art students and a personal quest to define some foundational ideas, skills, and language that might be a springboard for visual literacy. A valuable and surprising discovery was obtained in my historical research. It uncovered the work of Rowland, an influential art and design educator whose work is now rarely mentioned. I was able to adapt his ideas within a curriculum design for elementary-age students and then test this curriculum in my own classroom. Although this part of the project was abbreviated and constrained by the limitations placed on my program, I was still able to gain valuable insights into how this curriculum might help my students in creating and recognizing their own visual language.
The first insight was that students were able to take the design elements of pattern and shape and think deeply about what they observed in their visual world. What started off as a dull discussion about patterns and shapes turned into deep, insightful conversations between my students and me. They created meaningful art that not only spoke to their thoughts but also gave insights to the viewer on the impact of children’s life experiences. Students who have the ability to express themselves using their visual language are empowered.

The original goal was to explore the idea that learning the elements and principles of design would enable children to have more power over the images they encountered. Social media and popular culture images had been my focus but digging into Rowland’s ideas shifted my focus to patterns and shapes in my students’ physical and emotional lives. Instead of looking from the outside in, focusing on what visual images children encountered and their reactions to them, I looked from the inside out, focusing on what was inherently important to them, what they thought about, and what they then applied to their art creations. Discovering what existed and bringing it out through some of the elements and principles of design was an enlightening and satisfying journey for me.

The second insight was that if given the opportunity and guidance, students can learn to see more options than just one. This is an important life skill. The observations of shapes and the expanded idea of pattern enabled students to rethink their initial assumptions. They could not stay with their first ideas. A student who can see beyond their initial idea is empowered.

The third insight was that students discovered that there is information in broken and intact patterns. This was a new and exciting thought to them. They moved beyond the idea that patterns are static images that only need to be described to the idea that patterns can be rich sources of information. A student who knows how to get information is empowered.

Going forward, I would like to explore more ideas contained in Rowland’s *Looking and Seeing* series. Given the impact that this first pilot study had on my students, as evidenced by
the depth of their final art pieces and their expanded mental flexibility, I am curious about what further ideas from Roland’s work could be useful in expanding students’ visual language.

**The Trading Wall**

Another important part of my experience as a researcher came about by limitations placed on my regular teaching practices due to the pandemic. The Trading Wall experiment emerged from my efforts to engage all my art students in artmaking without the traditional interaction of the teacher. I discovered that this project connected to my own ideas about how children learn and my relationships with my students. As the Trading Wall experiment unfolded during that school year, the idea of students participating in a research project led me to use the Trading Wall as another method of research, which I found surprising and intriguing. This project gave me valuable insights into how children think about their artmaking. I have been frustrated, charmed, surprised, and deeply moved by the interactions I have had with students, by their artwork, and by the lessons taught by the Trading Wall.

**Student Choice**

“Children need time to create unfettered by systems, institutional expectations, and government-directed assessments.” (Rufo p. 23).

In Arthur Efland’s book “The School Art Style: A Functional Analysis” He makes this statement:

Voluntary drawings originate and develop in children’s minds and reflect their inclinations, interests, experiences and abilities, their ways of making sense of the world. Voluntary drawings offer children a form of engagement in artmaking which is substantially different from that which they experience in lessons initiated by a teacher, for the significant choices of subject and execution rest solely with the child. (p. 8)

This statement is exactly what I am discovering. The artwork my students make voluntarily for our Trading Wall is varied and interesting. I have a window into what is important to them and what they like to think about. More importantly, I have noticed that they
care more about the art they are making this year than assignments I have given them in class, many of which end up in the trash can by the door as they leave the art room.

How do I implement this freedom in my regular classroom when I go back to teaching in a more formal fashion? David Rufo describes the importance of letting children be in control and own their ideas. “Giving up arbitrary control over creativity in the classroom allow(s) children to have ownership of their own creativity” (Rufo p. 22).

**Mentoring vs. Teaching**

Because I was not teaching art in my regular, formal setting, I was concerned that last year’s art experience would be very limited. However, thanks to the Trading Wall the art my students experienced was more authentic and meaningful. As a teacher I came to feel that I was a better teacher of students as opposed to a teacher of art. I had the privilege of seeing my individual students in a different light, not as part of one of the groups of 25-30 who rotate through my classroom six times a day, but rather as separate people with their own interests and great ideas as demonstrated by a sampling of student trading cards. (See figures 18-24)

I had the emotional energy and mind-space to hear their thoughts all the way through and have relevant discussions about their ideas. At the end of a regular teaching day that includes 200 students I do not have enough energy left to engage in every student’s ideas, or to reach out to the deeply thoughtful but quiet student. Going forward my hope is to create enough space in my regular classes for both my students and me to capture some of that individual attention that The Trading Wall and pandemic year has afforded. I don’t want to lose the vision I have gained.

**Future Research**

My historical studies, curriculum design, and teaching experiments suggested possibilities for future research and the future of my own teaching. For example, I will continue to extract ideas from Rowland’s *Looking and Seeing* curriculum and create lessons based on them. I look forward to assessing the impact on my student’s visual language. Children’s visual
literacy is an area that needs more research, and with the results of my pilot study, I am encouraged to pursue research in this area further.

The Trading Wall offered me many insights into children’s artmaking and ideas that were important to children. I would like to explore the following questions: Could I use the art trading cards from the Trading Wall to inform my curriculum development? Could I discern trends of interests from the art trading cards? Could I discover improved artmaking by students over time as recorded by the quality of art I see in their art trading cards? How could I enable more voluntary art creation among students who do not consider themselves artists?

**Conclusion**

“Is this a line?” stands as a metaphor for seeing more and understanding more from what we see. This metaphor is about recognizing the impact of our visual world and the texts full of information that we find in looking and seeing. I want my students to take this information and create new texts to express their ideas that can be read and understood by others. It was a delight and an honor to take this research journey with my students at Orchard Elementary. I hope I have increased their power to read and create meaningful images. I am looking forward to continuing my journey of discovery with them.
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