



Look and See:

# Using the Visual Environment as Access to Literacy

by Lori Phillips, EdD\*

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I will never forget my first reader. It was titled *Fun with John and Jean*. The first page said, "Look, look." I was proud to be able to read these words. I loved the images of John and Jean's adventures.



*Note.* From *Fun with John and Jean* (p. 6), by J. A. O'Brien, 1952, Chicago: Scott Foresman. Copyright 1952 by Pearson Education, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

Not until recently did I realize why the author had chosen these words for the first pages and why they were so important. Looking and seeing is a powerful way for young children to learn. Observing and talking about what they see helps children understand their world and how they fit into it.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how the visual environment—what we see when we look—can be used to develop both visual and verbal literacy, including aesthetic appreciation, comprehension, and vocabulary.

## Look and See: Aesthetic Appreciation

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

Toddlers can express preferences for objects, colors, and certain images. When they do so, they are making judgments, or aesthetic choices. When they favor a certain crayon, or look over and over at a picture or wallpaper print, they are learning to make visual decisions about what they prefer. When teachers offer children the opportunity to make these types of judgments, they are creating the opportunity for them to hold an aesthetic discussion (Erickson, 1988).

According to White and Stoecklin (1998), studies have provided convincing evidence that people in pleasing natural environments have better information recall and creative problem solving skills. In the Pacific islands, children may have few chances to visit an art museum, however, they live with unbelievable natural beauty. They see color and learn about nature and beauty by seeing, touching, tasting, and smelling. Early experiences with the natural world have been positively linked with the development of imagination and the

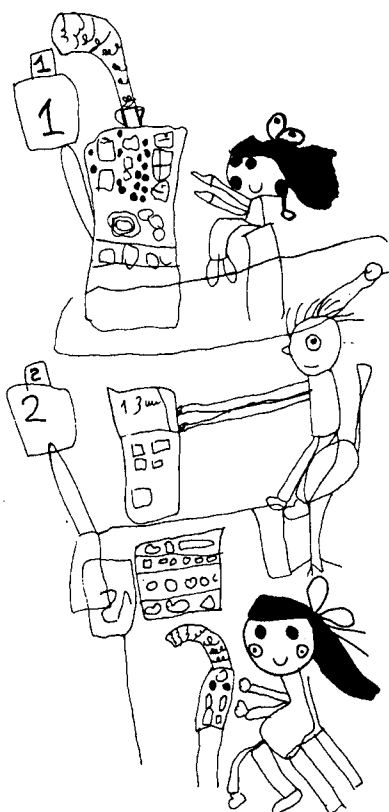
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sense of wonder. Wonder is important as it is a motivator for lifelong learning. There is also strong evidence that suggests young children respond more positively to experiences in the outdoors than adults, as they have not yet adapted to unnatural, man-made, indoor environments.

### Look and See: Drawing and Comprehension

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

Drawing the visual environment enhances understanding and visual vocabulary of objects in the natural world, helping us document ideas about how things work, and clarify our understandings in a graphic language. Reggio Emilia, a unique set of early childhood schools in northern Italy, encourages children to use “graphic language” to describe their understandings (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998). Children are encouraged to use drawing as a means to record their understandings of events or objects, to reconstruct previous ideas, and to predict how objects or events work. In the United States, early childhood educators have long acknowledged that children can express their understanding verbally and through



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

dramatic play. However, observations at the Reggio Emilia schools demonstrate that young children are able to construct meaning through graphic language (drawing) at a younger age and more competently than we in the United States had assumed. After a trip to the supermarket 4- and 5-year olds at one Reggio Emilia school drew this drawing of cashiers.

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

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

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

### Look and See: Vocabulary

Aesthetic experiences can promote language development and artistic creation (Feeney & Moravcik, 1987). Talking about art, objects, or book illustrations helps build the child’s “allusionary base.” Building the allusionary base is building the image base. As children build their image base, both their language and art making skills are enhanced.

Young children also build their allusionary base by interacting with objects from the environment. Looking closely at, touching, and talking about their visual world not only prepares the child for the process of drawing, sculpting, and painting, but also for visual and verbal literacy.

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

There is considerable research that equates low vocabulary to low comprehension (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982). Other research shows that we learn vocabulary through association—we learn words in groups that hang together. The imaging process can increase vocabulary by making children draw wider associative networks of meaning, and can help improve reading comprehension by enforcing the concept that every word has multiple associations.

### Look and See: Comprehension

Reading comprehension relies on more than knowing the words on the page. It also depends on the associations the reader adds to the text on the page. As readers, you and I will have greater understanding of an article on “apples” than on “jack fruits” because we probably have deeper associations with apples (T. Donahue, personal communication, June 2005). In other words, the background knowledge we bring to the image or text greatly influences the depth of comprehension we are able to attain.

My colleague Rod Mauricio demonstrated this concept in one of my favorite stories in a conversation last year. Rod is from Pohnpei, an island in Micronesia. Rod introduced us to

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

## Look and See: Tools for Teachers

Some research indicates that the quality of young children’s artistic and aesthetic experiences improves with adequate time, space, and some adult intervention (Bruce, 1998). What might this intervention look like? Aesthetic intervention, whether in adults or young children, requires creating an environment and process to slow down and really see. Whether looking at fine art or a beautiful leaf, the objective is the same: taking time, looking, describing, and suspending judgment (Edwards, 1979).

Teachers and parents can use simple techniques to slow down the process of seeing and promote looking, describing, analyzing, and interpreting. This is sometimes known as building an allusionary or image base. Whether it’s a McDonald’s sign, an ad on television, a painting, or a breadfruit, we are confronted with a visual message that can be read. Literacy is not just reading words, but reading our visual environment. By looking, describing, analyzing, and judging, we build our allusionary base to understand what we see and build connections to our world. By speaking, listening, writing, and reading we build our vocabulary, which leads to comprehension, and ultimately to literacy.

The following two processes can be used by many educators to slow down the visual process for looking at art. The first is for looking at images and the second is for looking at objects in the environment. These processes help the viewer to look closely and describe in words the image or object in front of him or her, suspending judgment for later.

## Making Meaning with Art

### Step 1 Initial Response

(Ask for one word or a short statement; repeat what is said.)

- What do you think about this piece/object?
- What is your initial reaction?
- What is the first thing you thought when you saw it?

### Step 2 Description

(Describe the art piece in front of you; pretend you’re describing it to a blind person.)

- Start with, “I see \_\_\_\_\_.”
- What else is there?
- What is it made of?
- What elements of art are used (line, shape, color, texture, value, other expressive qualities)?
- Make up a narrative or story about this piece (who might be walking in the door; what time of day it is).

### Step 3 Analysis

- How are the “elements of art” (line, shape, color, texture, value) used in this image?
- Choose one of the elements, line, shape, color, or texture, and ask, “How it is used in this piece?”
- Where does the artist want you to look (focal point)?
- How is light used to create mood? Color?

### Step 4 Interpretation

- What do you think the person in the painting is feeling?
- What is he or she thinking?
- What mood do you think the artist was trying to express?
- How does this piece make you feel?
- What emotion is best expressed in the piece?
- What’s going on in this piece?
- What do you think the artist was trying to express?

### Step 5 Judgment

- How do you feel about this piece now?
- Do you feel differently than when you first saw it?
- How has your feeling for it changed? Would you like to own it?
- Would you like to see more of this artist’s work?

Using these same steps, one can use similar questions to look more closely at interesting objects within the child’s environment.

## Making Meaning with the Visual Environment

- Initial Response: What do you think? What is it?
- Description: Describe it. What does it smell like? What does it feel like?
- Analysis: Tell me about its shapes, color, and texture.
- Connection: What else is this like? What do you know about this object?
- Judgment: Would you like to find more of these objects? Have you seen anything that is the same but different?

These conversations help children observe the essence of the objects in front of them, and can improve aesthetic appreciation, vocabulary, and comprehension.



## Look and See: Making Meaning By Drawing

If one wishes to trace visual thinking in images, one must look for well-structured shapes and relation which characterize concepts and their applications. They are readily found in the work done at early levels of mental development, for example in the drawing of young children. (Arnheim, 1969, p. 255)

Children's understanding of their world and what is important to them is often best described in their drawings. By asking children to draw what they see, not what they think they see, you offer them the opportunity to slow down and really look. The following is a description of how to offer children this type of opportunity:

*Give children dark colored pencils or felt tip pens and ask them to carefully observe objects in their environment. Describe the shape and texture of each object with lines. Talk to children about using "confident lines" and visually describing using lots of detail. The role of the teacher is often only to ask, "What else do you know about this object or event?" "Show me more." "I understand the shape of your object but I'm wondering how you will show how it felt." (texture) "What else was there?" "What is missing?"*

The goal is to create drawings that demonstrate the same clarity that is often achieved in talking about an object or event. Looking and seeing, talking and drawing, and moving from image to word and word to image, all help children in language development and constructing meaning and, ultimately, improve literacy. According to Lilian Katz in *The Hundred Languages of Children*, children should be engaged in multiple ways of showing what they know in the quest for deeper understanding of the world around them (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998).

## Look and See: Children Made Materials Development

When children are offered opportunities to talk, draw, and read about their visual environment, their creative ability and their interest will peak. In the Pacific, reading materials in the vernacular are needed. Children's drawings and paintings are useful resources for creating colorful culturally appropriate materials in the first language. The *Island Alphabet Books* series, published by Pacific Resources for Education and Learning and Bess Press, uses illustrations created by Pacific children to create first language readers.

This paper has described the value of aesthetic appreciation and its connection to literacy. It has explained the relationship between vocabulary, comprehension, and learning to see. It has provided a few tools for teachers to try in their classrooms.

**"Look and see" how exciting using the visual environment in your classroom can be!**

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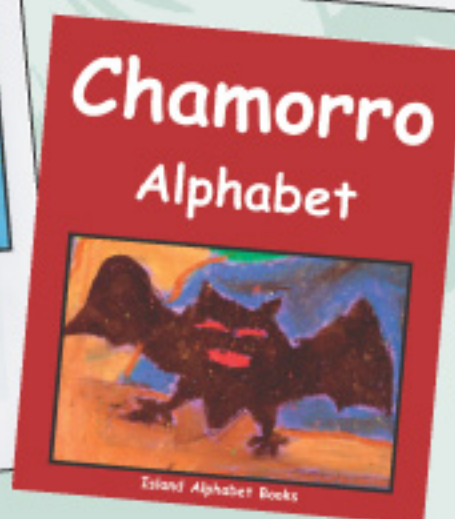
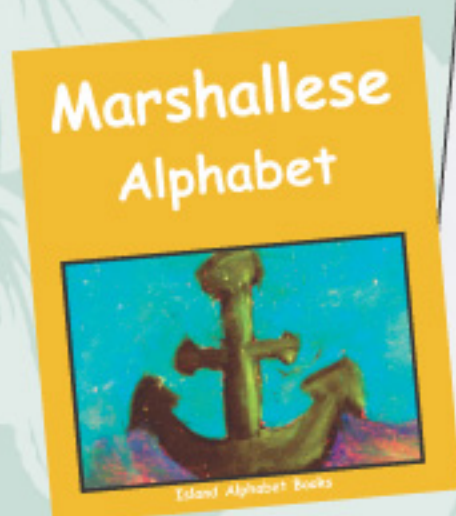
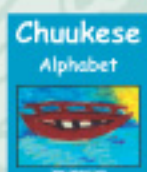
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# Island Alphabet Books



The Island Alphabet Books series features languages and children's artwork from the U.S.-affiliated Pacific. Each book contains the complete alphabet for the language, four or five examples for each letter, and a word list with English translations. The series is published by PREL, a nonprofit corporation that works collaboratively with school systems to enhance education across the Pacific.



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