

Chapter 1

The Art Education Program

If we are concerned both for the child as learner as well as the child as artist, we must include visual-narrative drawing in our art curricula. Visual-narrative drawing provides a natural basis for both visual and verbal literacy, with neither sacrificed for the sake of the other. In fact, both will become stronger because each naturally informs the other.

The foundation for the first edition of this book was a visual-narrative drawing program that began during the 1977–1978 academic year at the Edith C. Baker Elementary School (grades K–8) in Brookline, Massachusetts. At that time, professors Brent and Marjorie Wilson of Pennsylvania State University were employed as art education consultants for the Art Department of the Brookline Public Schools. The Wilsons (1979, April) believed that children have a natural but largely unexplored inclination to tell stories with their drawings. Unfortunately, this natural inclination is, for the most part, unknown territory—traditional programs in art education have never devoted much time to assessing the narrative dimension of children’s artwork. Yet the Wilsons maintained that if children are encouraged to develop and explore their “private visual worlds,” educators may be able to understand more fully the nature and meaning of this unique aspect of cognitive activity.

If we can understand and accept visual thinking, then it should be possible to develop an entire art curriculum based upon the drawing of visual stories. The purpose of the visual-narrative art curriculum that we designed (Olson and Wilson, 1979) was to develop the visual-narrative drawing skills of children further by stressing the storytelling components of characters, props, settings, plots, and even special effects. When students’ drawing skills improved, so did their visual-narrative vocabulary. They were able to draw more detailed, more complex, and more satisfying stories. And it is by attending to their own stories, according to the Wilsons (1982, 104; 2009, 113) that children create what is appropriate to their own needs and concerns; whatever the plot of the story requires, it can contain a drawing problem to be solved. It is through the very structures of story that plot, character, and consciousness are integrated (Bruner, 1986). This is why Bruno Bettelheim defends the pedagogical

value of fairy tales in the face of those who would argue that many fairy tales expose children to unpleasant and even terrifying images, and therefore such stories should be avoided. To the contrary, Bettelheim argues, it is “just because life is often bewildering” that such tales must be used responsibly, for “the child needs even more to be given the chance to understand himself in this complex world with which he must learn to cope” (Bettelheim 1977, 5).

Drawing plots for the imaginative world of fantasy and fairy tales is particularly powerful—and with good reason. The visual capabilities of some children are much more highly developed than their verbal, prosaic, and analytical capabilities. This is why fantasy and fairy tales translate so well out of verbal narratives into the world of visual imagery, whether by illustrations, comics, animations, or movies, for it is the translation into the visual that places a premium on immediacy. The visual-narrative approach to writing takes advantage of these properties by acknowledging that the elements of plot are frequently more complex and detailed in children’s drawings than is evident in their writings.

Can children’s interest in drawing stories be sustained throughout an entire year? The answer is yes. The Wilsons’ theories concerning children’s natural inclination to tell stories with their drawings were confirmed at the Edith C. Baker Elementary School. It is indeed possible, from the foundation of visual-narrative drawing, to address and encourage the evolution of all the other, more traditional, artistic concerns such as the use of various materials and techniques, composition, the elements and principles of design, as well as art history, criticism, and aesthetics.

The second edition of this book now includes a chapter devoted to the visual-narrative images and writing examples from students in middle and high school. It is our view that narrative drawing knows no age limit. We found that students at Chelsea High School (grades 9–12) in Chelsea, Massachusetts, were as eager to explore the potential of visual-narrative drawing as were their younger counterparts.