Drawing The Multifaceted Discourse of Drawing: Art in Childhood and Adolescence

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Abstract

This study aims to redefine the understanding of artistic expression among children and adolescents, particularly emphasizing the importance of non-traditional drawing practices within the context of Pakistani culture. It explores the multifaceted nature of drawing as a form of artistic expression through innovative image-making among children and adolescents in Pakistan, challenging prevailing adult-centric perspectives that equate artistic talent with the ability to produce realistic imagery. The research examines the mark-making practices of my daughter, Dia, revealing the significance of alternative forms of creativity that often go unrecognized in traditional educational frameworks.

The literature is organized into themes, including mark-making, the relationship between text and image, the role of dialogic symbols and meaning-making, realism, and drawing as a research tool. Through an autoethnographic approach, the study utilizes a purposive sample, focusing on Dia's artistic development over a span of ten years (ages 7 to 17), using both textual and visual data. Textual data comprises entries from my journal notes based on observations and informal conversations with Dia from ages 9 to 17, as well as Dia's own writings on her art-making documented in her diaries, for which prior consent was obtained. For visual data, Dia's artworks and my archival photographs of her artistic activities and play from ages 7 to 17 years were purposively selected.

Visual and thematic analyses were employed under themes such as creativity, self-expression, emotional engagement, empowerment, non-verbal communication, and the exchange of ideas. The findings indicate that drawing transcends the conventional boundaries of representational visual mark-making, incorporating textual overlaps and interpretive emotional expressions that extend beyond a defined space, such as a sketchbook, a predefined art space, or a picture frame. Allowing these engagements within the artistic discourse empowers children to embrace their unique voices, highlighting the necessity for adults to broaden their understanding of the creative processes unique to children and youth. This research advocates for inclusive practices within art education that prioritize children's voices, positioning children's unique artistic expressions as valid and valuable contributions to the discourse on art.

In Pakistan, a child's ability to produce realistic imagery is often equated with artistic talent, leading to those who struggle with this skill being perceived as lacking creativity (Iftikhar, 2020, p. 61). This paper argues that children and adolescents who do not engage in traditional drawing are overlooked and deemed unsuitable for art in academic and home settings. This adult-centric perception marginalizes genuine artistic engagement and stems from an evaluative framework that fails to acknowledge alternative forms of image-making. While successful drawings are valued for their technical skill, this focus neglects diverse drawing modalities that can convey emotional depth (Owens, 2014, p. 74). Reflecting on my own experiences in Pakistan I recall observing my daughter's mark-making during her early childhood. Initially, I interpreted her disinterest in traditional drawing as a lack of artistic engagement. However, upon deeper reflection, I realized that her mark-making represented a legitimate form of artistic expression that provided valuable insights into her inner world.

Introduction

This paper employs an autoethnographic approach to examine the act of drawing through the lens of my daughter's artworks. The drawing discourse is organized into themes such as mark-making, the interplay between text and image, dialogic symbols, configurational signs, and meaning-making. I question the conventional adult-centric perspective that emphasizes realism—often linked to artistically gifted children—and question the tendency to view drawings solely as research tools. Milbrath (1998) notes that artistically gifted children perceive visual information effectively by focusing on shapes rather than concepts, leveraging strong visual memories and attention to detail to refine their representations (as cited in Winner & Martino, 2000, pp. 95-96). While acknowledging the value of drawings as research tools (Theron, Mitchell, Smith, & Stuart, 2011; Guillemin, 2004; Springer et al., 2020), I argue that overemphasizing this function can constrain children's creative potential by imposing predetermined roles on their expressions of image-making.

Moreover, fostering observational and collaborative experiences between children

and their parents can enhance inclusivity in art-making. A child-centered perspective encourages innovative thinking about drawing and art, allowing it to serve as a vital mode of expression for children and adolescents who may not conform to conventional definitions of successful drawings and art.

My inclination towards this child-centered approach has been shaped by my extensive experience teaching art and design in Pakistan for the past 30 years. During this time, I have worked with adolescents in private schools preparing them for the O and A Level Cambridge International Examination Board of the UK. After completing my Bachelor's in Fine Arts at a university in the USA, I returned to Pakistan with a passion for teaching art that aligns with these principles. As both a visual artist and an art educator, I have observed innovative approaches to art engagement among my students, many of whom have successfully ventured into the arts as art critics, visual artists, art educators, and writers. Throughout my teaching career, I have documented and archived both my students' art-making processes and my own through journal notes, photography, and videography.

This extensive experience, however, took on a deeply personal dimension when I became a parent. Eighteen years ago, when I welcomed my only child, my daughter, Dia, I was excited to introduce her to the world of art from an early age. To my surprise, I found that she was apprehensive about certain art materials and processes, such as drawing and coloring, a tendency that persisted for several years. Additionally, I was taken aback by her secretive approach to art-making, especially from me, which continues to this day. This personal experience prompted me to reflect on whether there was something amiss with me as an educator or with Dia as a young artist.

Fortunately, my inclination as a keen observer and documenter facilitated an autoethnographic exploration of her artistic journey. Autoethnography is a method that combines elements of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010). By photographically and textually recording everything relevant to her activities—whether in art, academics, or play—I unveiled not only her artistic evolution but also the emotional landscape accompanying our shared experiences. I was captivated by the immense creativity exhibited through consistent patterns over the years. However, in all these decades of teaching art, it became evident that Pakistani contemporary society shows preference for realism and representational art, leading many educators and parents to validate only such artworks from children. In contrast, Dia's beautiful non-representational pieces illuminated a significant misunderstanding regarding art and its interpretation. This perception often creates a barrier between children and their ability to express themselves fully, limiting the possibilities for growth due to the adult lens of approval.

Methodology

To analyze the observations in this study, I employed an autoethnographic approach, documenting various occurrences in my journal through text, photographs, and videos. Bochner (2016) states that truth relies on human intelligence, while facts do not. Ethical autoethnography allows researchers to explore multiple meanings in experiences, navigating a constantly evolving reality and fostering self-understanding (as cited in Wexler, 2025, p. 367). I

used two forms of data: textual and visual. The textual data consisted of informal conversations with Dia from ages 9 to 17 and my observational notes on her art-making processes from ages 7 to 17. This information was recorded in my journal, along with some text written by Dia about her artworks in her diaries, accessed with her consent.

For the visual data, I included her original artworks as well as my archival photographs of non-available original artworks, past activities, processes, play, and more. Through visual and thematic analysis, I explored themes such as creativity, self-expression, emotional engagement, empowerment, non-verbal communication, collaboration, and innovative ideation. This research has not only shed light on Dia's artistic journey through the discourse of drawings but has also provided insights into the broader relationship between childhood art-making and societal expectations.

Drawings as Mark-Making

According to Mathews (2004), children's semiotic development of symbols and signs extends into varying levels of representational expressions and communication discovered through infancy. This artistic development evolves from simple dabs and arcs to vigorous strokes, eventually leading to more complex shapes and actions as perceived by the children. Such sophisticated forms of communication may appear as abstractions to adults yet can transform into visual realism over time, although this development is not uniform for all children, as conventional theorists suggest (p. 260).

Emotions such as fear, excitement, hopefulness, anger, anxiety, and love—feelings that children may find challenging to express verbally—can be communicated effectively and spontaneously through drawings (Weng et al., 2024, p. 1). I have observed that even seemingly ordinary drawings often contain deeply engaging stories, full of meaningful symbols and signs created by children. It is important for parents and teachers to explore these expressions rather than dismiss them. As highlighted by Wilson and Wilson (2009), they pose the critical question, 'What is this?' (p. 110).

Interestingly, I noticed that my daughter never showed an interest in drawing and coloring during an age when most children are deeply engaged in these activities. This lack of interest led me to assume that she was not inclined towards art. However, as Einarsdottir, Dockett, and Perry (2009) suggest, 'Not everyone likes to draw…' (pp. 229-230), this realization prompted a shift in my understanding of art, leading me to recognize that art is not as concrete as drawing is often perceived to be. Pearson (2001) argues that drawing can be seen as an innate biological process, a cultural construct, or both, leading to ongoing debates about children's artistic expression and existing knowledge gaps. The concept of a desirable theory often relies on the authority of historical research practices (p. 350).

Most people engage with art in various forms (see figure 1), but few choose to use traditional drawing as a means of communicating their ideas. This led me to contemplate the need to re-imagine, re-examine, and perhaps redefine the term 'drawing'. As Einarsdottir et al. (2009) point out, "Drawing is not a favored method of communication for all children but has been used by many…" (p. 229). Through these reflections, it becomes evident that exploring both verbal and non-verbal modes of expression can offer profound insights into a child's emotional world, enriching our understanding of their unique experiences and narratives.
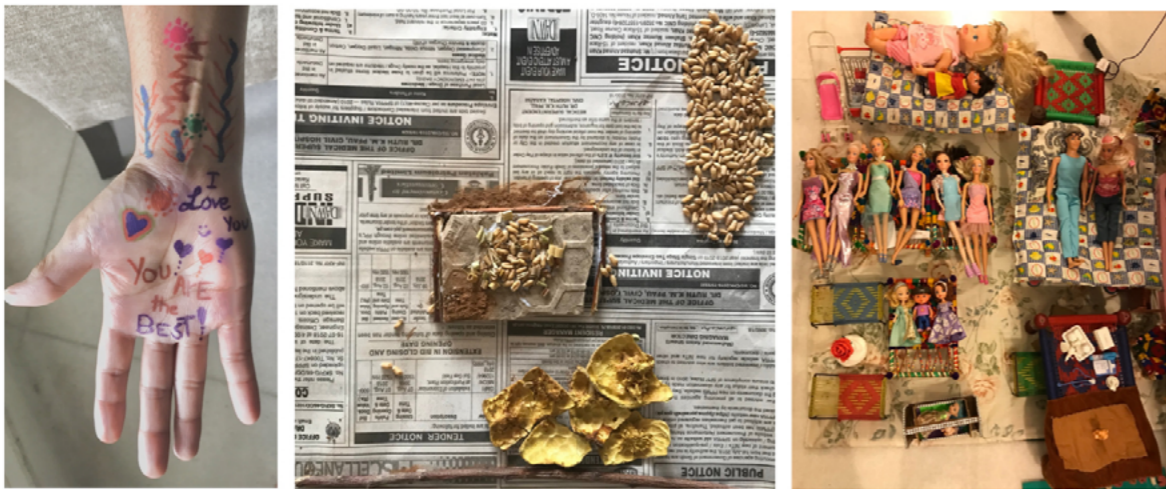
Figure 1. Dia. Multiple Artworks and Play. Mixed media.

Kindler (2004) explores the stages of artistic development in children, which progress from basic scribbling to more intuitive and intention-driven creations. She contends that this development should not be defined solely by pictorial realism or technical skills (p. 233). While researchers such as Hagen, Willat, Piaget, and Luquet emphasize visual realism in children's art, others, including Arnheim, Golomb, and Darras, argue that children often create their own representations rather than merely focusing on replication (pp. 236-239).

To understand child art it is essential to recognize that children's scribbles, doodles, notes, text, and images—created at various ages during their daily lives at school and home—deserve more attention than they typically receive, especially from parents and art teachers. The margins of notebooks, small torn pieces of paper with writings, and symbols drawn by children, as well as those created during adolescence, are not random or insignificant; rather, they serve as breadcrumbs leading to significant ideas. These creations act as scaffolding for conceptual ideas and expressions that may later manifest in children's and adolescent's art.

Drawings as Text and Image

I remember an unusual experience with my daughter when she began communicating with me through little notes in her notebooks, books, sketchbooks, and diaries. Generally, children express a wide range of emotions—including anger, love, hate, remorse, happiness, frustration, need, demand, and apology—through spoken words or drawings. However, my daughter, both as a child and an adolescent, chose to express herself through tiny notes.

I noticed that her writings represented her internal struggles and perceptions of her surroundings. The type of paper or card she selected, the visual appearance of her texts, and even the choice of torn-edged paper to express anger contrasted sharply with the neatly cut, colorful paper adorned with hearts, which she used to communicate different feelings. She illustrated her emotions with drawings, such as a teardrop-laden face to signify sadness or a sunny smiley face surrounded by flowers to convey happiness. Additionally, her untidy writing and half-formed letters often expressed her unwillingness to comply, see figure 2.

'This is cutesy Dia'
'I'll put it up in my room'
'If it doesn't look like me, I'll just write a note next to it that this is Dia'
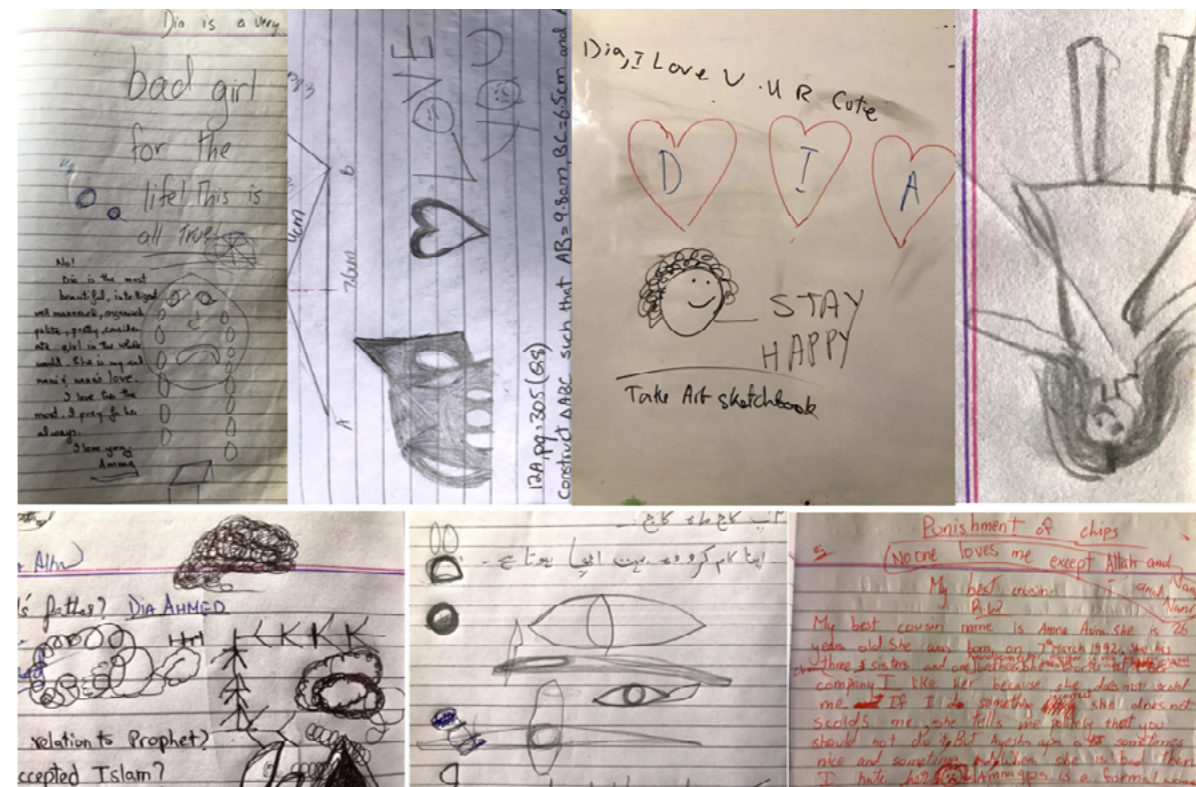

Figure 2. Dia. Multiple texts & doodles on notebooks.

I never insisted that she draw for me; I considered those little notes as precious pieces of communication and expression, akin to drawings. I wanted to minimize my control and interference in her method of expression and communication. Einarsdottir et al. (2009) suggest that "children have some control over what they draw and what they say, and they exercise this control. Our response is that such action is their right" (p. 230). These researchers point out the importance of recognizing the right of children to exercise control, which many educators and parents often overlook through authoritative methods, such as telling children to change a color or remove/add elements to a composition according to adult aesthetics or and an examiner's liking. Encouraging children's self-directed drawings and narratives relies on the teacher's or researcher's ability to build empathic relationships in a supportive environment (Rudolph & Wright, 2015, p. 505).

In Dia's artwork, the integration of text with images conveys emotions and it ultimately transforms into the image itself. This development blurs the clear distinction between text and visuals, entering a conceptual visual realm characterized by ideas. According to Iftikhar (2024), in her journal, Dia reflected on one of her paintings titled 'Garden of Peace' (Figure 3) She wrote:

> The flowers with lights (pencil sharpening) are glowing and shining. The portion at the end is the soil (painted with copper acrylic) on which is written Dia, which means light, so that is why everything in this 'painting of peace' is glowing and shining. (p. 355)

As Ross (2014) states, when readers or viewers lack knowledge of a written or pictorial language, images may be misconstrued as writing, and vice versa. She

echoes James Elkins's (1998) question: "How do we know when we are looking at writing and not at pictures?" (p. 92). In the aforementioned painting, Dia's name becomes the focal point, serving as both text and image symbolizing light. Also view figure 4.
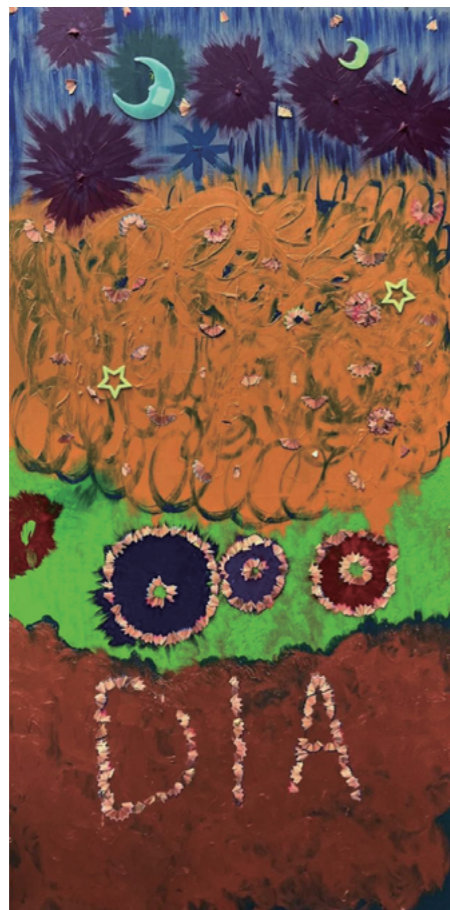
Figure 3. Dia. Garden of Peace. Mixed media on board.
Figure 4. Dia. 'Artist'. Acrylic on canvas.

Wright (2010) suggests that "intratextuality involves internal relations within text" (p. 55). For Dia, the concept of intratextuality during early adolescence became increasingly engaged with the idea that text could evolve into an image, emphasizing aspects such as color, material, medium, and expression rather than serving merely as a support for the visual, see figure 5. The text transformed into the idea itself rather than just a form of communication (Figure 6). Ross (2014) also notes that Baldessari's word-based visual artworks challenge and interrogate "the very nature of visual art by using words alone" (p. 114).

Figure 6. Dia. Mixed media on canvas.

Figure 5. Dia. Acrylic on canvas.

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If art is allowed to demonstrate the tangibility found in the rigid conformity of text, image, and idea, then it enriches the landscape of art and thought through the works of artists like Davis, Peto, Lichtenstein, Wiley, Johns, Magritte, Picasso, Carra, and others. This perspective should also be reflected and embraced within the existing education system and home environments. According to Ross (2014), Magritte's exploration of the relationship between visual and verbal elements—through 'enigmatic text and pseudoscripts' that combine pictures and words—along with Max Ernst's concept of 'mysterious picture writings,' suggests that words and images should not be viewed as separate communication systems (p. 92). Zarina Hashmi asserts, 'My work is about writing' (Tate, 2013). See figure 7.
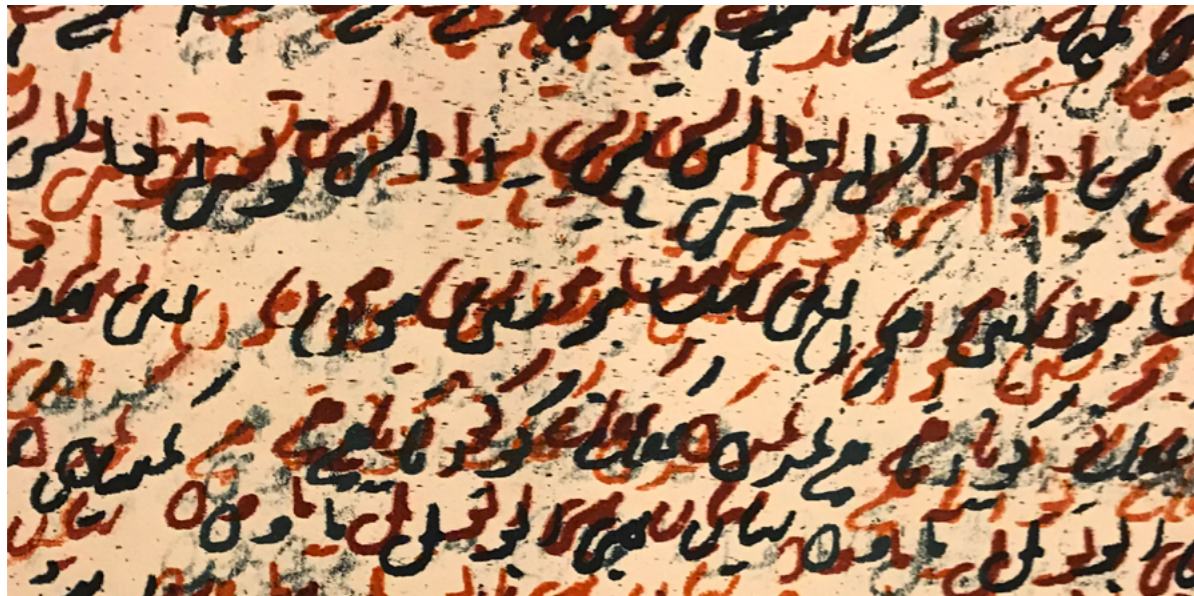

Figure 7. Nausheen Iftikhar. My Mother's Letters. (Detail). Screenprint on handmade paper.

The educational framework often emphasizes literacy, placing a strong focus on the written word and text. In contrast, visual arts typically prioritize visuals alone. However, through art, children can express their ideas and make connections in ways that often exceed their verbal or written communication skills (Rudolph & Wright, 2015, p. 504). A more inclusive approach can combine text with various materials, broadening the range of what can be considered valuable imagery. By allowing children the freedom to explore different mediums—such as drawing, painting, writing, tactile materials, and construction methods—educators can encourage the creation of unique and unconventional art. This approach enhances children's ability to find meaning, express themselves, and effectively communicate their ideas.

Ross (2014) highlights that viewers need to actively engage in interpreting the intricate verbal and visual languages used by artists like Stuart Davis and William T. Wiley to grasp the complex messages embedded in their works (pp. 75-76). This perspective should strongly resonate with art educators, parents, and researchers committed to children's art and art education, especially in developing countries. Written words, in the form of phrases and sentences, can be viewed as small pieces of drawings. According to Dyson (1986), children at a young age engage in 'symbol weaving' because they cannot easily distinguish between drawing and writing (as cited in Anning & Ring, 2004, p. 5). Their creations carry significant ideas that are not solely represented by text or visuals but should be understood as a coherent

whole. For instance according to Iftikhar (2020), this perception was enhanced by including Pakistan's flag and family names: 'na' for 'nana'[maternal grandfather in Urdu], 'ni' for 'nani' [maternal grandmother in Urdu], 'ma' for 'mama', with her name 'Dia' prominently at the center (p. 66) in her painting 'Masjid-e-Nabvi', see figure 8.

Figure 8. Dia. Masjid-e-Nabvi-(detail). Acrylic on paper.

In my observations of my daughter during her formative years, I noticed that when she was given the freedom to engage in graphic representation without adult-imposed standards at home, she produced visual artwork that reflected her personal interpretations. She utilized a variety of materials, including text, pictures, and colors in her creations. Although she did not particularly enjoy traditional drawing, these early graphic representations evolved into artwork that was both distinctive and meaningful, as shown in figure 9. This work illustrates a unique approach that transcends conventional art-making.

Figure 9. Dia. Multiple artworks. Mixed media.

Drawings as What is Art?

I used to view my daughter's casual drawings as important forms of communication. However, after researching children's art, I began to appreciate these creations in a broader context, recognizing them as meaningful expressions rather than just written words. Over the years, as I observed her doodles evolve into significant artwork, I found myself reflecting on my own assumptions as both an art educator and a parent. I began to ponder what defines a drawing and what constitutes art. As Pearson (2001) asks, "Why do children not draw?" (p. 359), I wondered if they actually do draw, but perhaps their art is not understood within the framework of an adult's perception of drawing. Ross (2014) references Irving Sandler (1996) when he asks,

> What is painting? What is art? What is non-art? What are ideas? What is visual, what is verbal, and what is the difference? Can verbal information constitute a visual image? Where is the art—in the idea or the object? (p. 114)

These questions have sparked ongoing debates within contemporary visual arts, which still seeks relevance in both formal and informal art education.

If art is allowed to showcase tangible qualities within the structured boundaries of the professional art world, then this richness should also be reflected in our education system. There is often curiosity surrounding the misunderstanding of original art students whose work doesn't conform to established norms or engage with the traditional canon (Rohr, 2013, p. 18). A paradigm shift is necessary for parents, teachers, and researchers to recognize and embrace creativity, expressiveness, and meaning-making through contextual understanding in children's art.

We need to reevaluate the acceptance and rejection that are often influenced by adult perspectives and a longing for realism in art. As Unsworth (1992) references Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) who assert that art holds more potential for children's development than is commonly acknowledged for which we must move away from traditional views and stop promoting what adults prefer; otherwise, we will continue to marginalize art education in schools (p. 68).

Drawing as a Research Tool

Drawing has proven to be a valuable tool in psychological research for studying cognition, offering insights that range from realistic perceptions to abstract cognitive reflections (Bainbridge, Chamberlain, Wammes & Fan, 2025, p. 2). In this context, Duncum (2018) notes that children's drawings were first systematically studied in the late 19th century. However, he highlights that Wilson and Wilson (1981) identified significant flaws in the Stage-by-Age models, which, despite their considerable impact on art education, tend to emphasize figural accuracy and spatial arrangement while often overlooking narrative content, themes, and children's intentions (pp. 224-225).

Moreover, Ivashkevich (2009) explains that children's drawings, whether initiated by the children themselves or prompted by adults, have been extensively studied, leading to two main research paths. Firstly, the first path focuses on using these insights to develop effective educational interventions. Secondly, the second path examines children's drawings as a form of artistic expression, analyzing them through their aesthetic and formal qualities (p. 51).

Furthermore, the significance of drawing goes beyond mere artistry as Pearson (2001) argues that different perspectives on drawing are shaped by its relevance to science and education in research, thereby emphasizing what drawing can reveal about children rather than the drawings themselves (p. 351). In addition, Duncum (2001) emphasizes that the meaning of a child's drawing is not solely determined by the image itself. Rather, it is influenced by the surrounding sociocultural context, including interactions with peers and adults, as well as influences from visual and popular culture. Consequently, this leads to various interpretations of the artwork (as cited in Ivashkevich, 2009, p. 52).

Drawings as The Realm of Realism

The spontaneous expressiveness and communication of ideas are meaningful for children. This can be achieved through organized and conventional methods such as drawing, writing essays, painting, creating 3D constructions, or verbal communication. Additionally, children express themselves through patterned yet unconventional means, like marks, text, or small images on paper, notebooks, whiteboards, sidewalks, or any other forms that adults may not yet understand.

Our understanding of drawing development has changed over time. Instead of viewing it as a universal and linear progression toward realism, we now recognize that development is nonlinear and influenced by sociocultural factors, as well as individual differences in learning styles and experiences (Ivashkevich, 2009, p. 51). In my thirty years of experience in art education, I have observed that both adolescents and children often strive to achieve visual realism in their drawings and artwork. This suggests that we have made limited progress in embracing non-linear drawing styles, which in turn restricts the discourse around drawing and excludes those children and adolescents who do not conform to traditional representation practices. The lack of traditional drawing among children does not indicate an absence of meaning-making; rather, they may create in ways that diverge from conventional definitions of drawing.

According to Kindler (2004), artistic development is no longer defined solely by pictorial realism, technical proficiency, complexity, elaboration, or form-oriented artifacts (p. 233). My daughter, Dia, has never been particularly fond of drawing or coloring, especially in a realistic style, throughout her childhood and into her adolescence. When people ask me to discuss her art, I often find myself at a loss for how to understand and respond to their questions. The art she creates does not conform to the traditional standards for child and adolescent art. However, she aspires to be an artist and truly feels like one, despite her unconventional style and strong artistic abilities, which are grounded in her innovative ideas and unique material choices.

According to Golomb (1994), findings by theorists suggest that a child's mind operates through constructive interpretations of what they see, revealing diverse representational styles. This challenges the traditional belief, rooted in Piaget's theories, that children's representational skills are linear and limited (p. 16).

As a mother and an art educator, I intuitively recognized Dia's expressiveness, conceptual ideas, preferences, and creativity, which extend beyond the defined traditional norms. However, I sometimes struggle to articulate this understanding. Dia constantly engages in unstructured writings paired with visual symbols, creates paintings devoid of concrete objects, and utilizes play and other multimodal

constructions to express herself.

Art provides immense possibilities like learning, understanding, engaging, creating, and joy. Observing children as they draw in unconventional ways provide us with insight about both them and us. I witness immense creativity and energy in children's mark-making and bodily gestures—similar to Hayashi's and Tobin's (2015) concept of heterocorporeal dialogue (as cited in Rech Penn, 2019, p. 105)—as they engage in acts of art and creation. Unfortunately in Pakistani schools and homes, this creativity diminishes when viewed through the limited lens of standardized structured art education, which comes with a long list of restrictions, focusing more on what not to do rather than encouraging creativity, gearing towards producing accurate representations of objects or people. Additionally, art may be undervalued when parents or elders prefer children's artwork that leans towards realism. Non-realistic pieces may be viewed as mere playful expressions (Iftikhar, 2020, p. 61).

A paradigm shift may help parents, teachers, and researchers recognize a wider range of creativity, expressiveness, and meaning-making in children's and adolescents' art. This can be achieved through a more open-ended understanding of form, material, and context. Goodman (1969) views image representation in art as interpretive rather than merely imitative (as cited in Golomb, 1994, p. 18). The established norms that determine what constitutes drawing or art—shaped by adult perceptions and expectations of realism—need to be reassessed.

Drawing as Meaning-Making: 'Dialogic Symbolism' and Configurational Signs
The process of meaning-making in a child's visual narrative is more significant than previously acknowledged by psychologists and researchers. Wright (2010) highlights that the theories of Vygotsky (1962, 1967) and Bruner 1996) on social constructivism, combined with Danesi's (2007) concept of indexical elaboration in children's art and Chandler's (2002) insights on polyvocality in children's expressions, significantly enhance our comprehension of how children create meaning through their artistic endeavors (pp. 26-40). This understanding is further enriched by the active dialogue fostered by art educators or adults who engage with children about their creations. The role of an interlocutor is vital for uncovering the meaningful imagery present in both children's and adolescents' art. Greene and Hogan argue that adolescent art, along with discussions concerning it, offers a window into the meanings and myriad associations that young people encounter. This dialogue reveals intricate and often unknowable aspects of their environments and influences (as cited by Thompson, 2017, p. 14). In Wright (2010), Golomb (1988) describes children's art as a dialogic symbolism of reality, whereas Kellman (1995) argues that children's image creation offers insights into how children perceive the world around them (pp. 17-18). As Lackey (2021) suggests, children's image creation is more about sharing their experiences than simply creating representations of reality or engaging in process-oriented activities (Lara Lackey, Personal communication, October 9, 2021).

I believe that children's unique interpretations of their reality, shaped by their personal experiences, are essential and deserve to be depicted in their visual narratives as symbolized dialogues. For instance, Dia's experiences with me as her mother and her perceptions of our relationship were expressed through various mediums, such as handwritten notes, birthday cards, framed artwork, and our portrait. This journey emphasizes the importance of symbolized dialogue over time. While it may be easy to overlook the significance of one or two pieces of children's artwork, viewing them as part of a larger pattern reveals a continuous and powerful art-making process that results in meaningful dialogues between adults and children.

A portrait painted by Dia of herself and me reflected her perspective rather than my perception of her or how she wanted others to view our relationship. It was solely about how she perceives me as a mother with her in our portrait and life. According to Diket (2003), "From highly engaging, stimulating, and thoughtful encounters with art, students [adolescents] initiate and sustain interest in art as a mode of personal expression and an enduring venue for creativity" (p. 175).

I was particularly intrigued by Gallas's (1994) observation that children's ideas and themes unfold as their thinking evolves, which may not follow a sequential order (as cited in Wright, 2010, p. 18). As adults, we often expect a linear progression and gradual development, while children's thinking processes can be quite different. Children build knowledge from a graphic base through multimodal meaning-making, narrative construction, and explanatory metaphor (Rudolph & Wright, 2015, p. 504). For example, I tend to plan extensively, think deeply about what I want to create, and prepare thoroughly before executing an idea visually. In contrast, I observe that my daughter and several children in my class engage in contemplation and problem-solving during the art-making process itself. They frequently adjust their choices—changing colors, overlapping elements, incorporating new objects, or removing parts—taking their ideas in new directions as they create, see figure 10.

According to Wright (2010), the loosely structured use of configurational signs in art, when intertwined with storytelling, gestures, and role-playing, offers boundless opportunities for symbolic communication (p. 22). In our portrait painted and drawn by Dia, I noticed that she exaggerated the size of our lips and smiles to emphasize happiness. For her, details like our hairstyles, the thickness of our eyebrows, and the direction of our gazes held significant meaning. The dot pattern on our matching shirts became a symbol of love. Additionally, the prominent circles representing my cheeks highlighted my chubby features, while the attention given to my ears accentuated the jewelry I was wearing, see figure 11.

In expressing her affection, Dia included the text 'Two love/heart Loves,' which served as a clear declaration of love and a form of 'symbol weaving.' Through art, children not only learn to harness the power of signs but also express their identities and forge connections with the surrounding world, all while creating imaginative realm (Wright, 2010, p. 23) much like what Dia did through our portraits in figure 11. This evolution in expression can be contextualized within Peirce's semiotic theory, suggesting that the icons and symbols created by children, adolescents, and adults can be viewed as vibrant systems of 'dynamic signs,' each carrying specific interpretations (Kindler & Darras, 1997; 1997b; 1998, as cited in Kindler, 2004, pp. 239-240).

Figure 10. Dia. Multiple portraits of herself with me.

Reflecting on Dia's painting titled 'Boat in the Sea,' (figure 11) which incorporates configurational signs, polyvocality, and indexical signs, I engaged in a thought-provoking dialogue with her about the artwork. She shared her narrative that the dark and scary sky depicted in her painting was a reflection of a violent storm, resulting in the tragic drowning of all the passengers in the boat. This conversation made me realize how metaphorical expressions often become increasingly prevalent during adolescence, revealing deeper emotional undercurrents (Picard & Gauthier, 2012, p. 6).

Moreover, employing a dialogic pedagogical framework can significantly enhance agency for both teachers and students, thereby fostering a more democratic educational environment (Garcia-Lazo, 2022, p. 19). It is essential for adults—be they parents, teachers, researchers, theorists, or psychologists—to broaden their perspectives on children's art. By recognizing the unique ways in which children think and express their feelings, we can uncover a wealth of undiscovered treasures in their joyful imagery, visual expression, and innovative ideas (Iftikhar, 2020, p. 66). While a child's drawing may appear charming or skillful from an adult's perspective, it should never be judged by adult standards; its true value extends far beyond what adults can perceive (Goodman, 2018, p. 31).

Figure 11. Dia. Boat in the Sea. Acrylic on canvas.

Egan (1997) observes that children between the ages of 7 and 14 utilize romantic understanding to interpret the world, with a desire for philosophical understanding beginning to emerge around age 14 (as cited in Manifold, 2021, p. 32). This transition is evident in Dia's description of her painting. I believe that restricting children's ability to fully express their thoughts through graphic narratives limits their freedom to communicate effectively. Over-intervention can hinder the fluidity of their expression, causing them to lose the excitement and freedom they once experienced in drawing and storytelling. I was particularly struck by Wilson's (1974) observation, where he compares the spontaneous art created by children on scraps of paper to a "whole world of excitement" unfolding (p. 3).

Conclusion

The exploration of drawing as a multifaceted discourse within the context of childhood and adolescence reveal a significant gap in our ability to evaluate artistic growth. As societal, cultural, and individual experiences evolve, the pursuit of an effective evaluation criteria becomes increasingly complex. While we can strive to refine our understanding and mitigate the risk of flawed assessments of artistic development through thoughtful deductive methods, a definitive standard remains elusive.

The artistic journey of children, exemplified by Dia's artistic growth from childhood to adolescence, highlights the transformative power of creative expression in shaping identity through drawing. Her transition from using torn papers and text to confidently wielding a paintbrush as a painter epitomizes her developing artistic identity and her unique means of communication, diverging from conventional pathways in art. Art, especially drawing, may play a role in children's development by allowing them to express their identities and share their unique perspectives and emotions joyfully. Unfortunately, certain practices can hinder this expression by promoting conformity and suppressing individuality (Goodman, 2018, pp. 172-173). As an art educator, I have often observed these stifling practices, which include rigid educational curricula that prioritize standardized outcomes, an excessive focus on perfection that discourages experimentation, competitive environments that put children against each other, limited creative choices, and negative feedback that undermines confidence. Often enforced by parents and educators, these approaches can significantly suppress children's creativity and self-expression.

Conventional definitions of drawing and artistic processes often prove too restrictive, overlooking the vast array of experiences that encompass both children and adults. As art educators, parents, curriculum designers, and researchers, we often evaluate from an adult-centered perspective, which can inadvertently reinforce the status quo. This may lead to a situation where some children feel they must conform to established criteria, while many others do not fit these molds. Labeling the majority as uncreative, untalented, or unsuitable for artistic engagement can create a restrictive mindset that may hinder children's spontaneous artistic expression. This perspective likely contributes to the increasing disengagement of young people from adult-led art activities, which is reflected in the decline of enrollment in art programs and the closure of formal school art initiatives. In contrast, this trend highlights the rise of vibrant, peer-driven informal art activities that are flourishing.

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Throughout my teaching experiences, I have witnessed the profound comfort and fluency with which children engage in artistic discourse, discussing one another's creations as if sharing a unique communal language. Rarely do they engage in harsh criticism or impose rigid standards of realism; instead, they interpret their art through the lens of their personal experiences and perspectives. This observation underscores the urgent need for adults—including parents, teachers, researchers, theorists, and psychologists—to expand their understanding of the artistic discourse that children navigate. By shifting our focus to effectively observe and appreciate children's artistic thinking and expression, we might unlock invaluable insights into the rich and dynamic world of creativity that defines the artistic journey of youth. In recognizing this, we might fully embrace the complexity of drawing as both an individual and collective experience during childhood and adolescence.

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