

From Play to Drawing: An Analysis of Children's Pictorial Representation of Play Experience in the Context of Anji Play

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Abstract: *The play story drawing segment in Anji Play is a crucial process through which children transform dynamic physical experiences into visual representations. However, in practice, teachers tend to focus on listening to children's narratives while overlooking the cognitive significance embedded in the pictorial forms themselves. Adopting a qualitative research paradigm, this study takes a senior class in an Anji Play kindergarten as the main sample, with middle and junior classes as comparative samples. Four types of data—drawings, play videos, dictated texts, and field notes—were collected to investigate three core issues: children's selective focus in their drawings, their creative spatial schemas, and age-related developmental differences. The findings reveal that children do not replicate the entire play process; instead, they selectively represent peak moments such as sliding impacts and shifts in the center of gravity. By employing strategies like tilted composition, X-ray perspective drawing, and temporal juxtaposition, they creatively transform physical experiences. Clear developmental stages emerge across junior, middle, and senior classes in terms of narrative structure and spatial organization, with senior-class children already able to represent virtual modalities and psychological expectations. The study confirms that these unconventional drawing schemas are not cognitive errors stemming from immaturity, but rather proactive solutions children generate when faced with complex representational tasks. Accordingly, it is proposed that teachers shift from merely listening to narratives about drawings to a professional paradigm of reading forms and discerning cognition, establish a triadic interpretation mechanism integrating play videos, drawings, and dictated texts, and incorporate innovative representational strategies into child development assessment systems. This provides a theoretical basis and practical pathways for identifying deep learning and offering precise teacher support in Anji Play.*

Keywords: *Anji Play; play story drawing; children's drawing; visual representation*

1. Introduction

As a localized model of China's early childhood education reform, Anji Play is built on the core principles of “love, adventure, engagement, joy, and reflection”^[1] and has established a unique daily routine, in which the “play story drawing” segment forms an indispensable part of the learning cycle^[2]. After extended periods of self-directed play, children record their play experiences through drawing, narrate the stories in their pictures to teachers during one-on-one listening sessions, and subsequently share and display their works collectively^[3]. A notable problem in current practice, however, is that teachers often focus solely on the oral narratives shared during the listening sessions, overlooking the complex meanings embedded in the visual forms themselves—lines, colors, composition, and spatial layout. Lacking an analytical framework grounded in visual grammar and representational theory, teachers find it difficult to penetrate the surface narrative of the pictures to identify children's cognitive development levels, emotional states, and logical thinking, which limits the precision of their support strategies. Accordingly, this study aims to decode the visual language in children's play story drawings, reveal the patterns and mechanisms of the transformation from play experience to pictorial representation, and address three core research questions:

- 1) Which parts of the play do children draw, and what is the relationship between the pictorial content and their actual play behaviors?
- 2) What creative spatial schemas that break away from a single viewpoint do children use to represent their physical experiences?
- 3) What staged differences do junior, middle, and senior class children exhibit in terms of narrative

structure, figure depiction, and spatial organization?

The significance of this study lies in its theoretical endeavor to build a model for the transformation of play experience into visual representation, extend the empirical application of representational redescription theory in the field of early childhood art education, and provide localized evidence from the Anji Play context for the theory of children's drawing development. On a practical level, it offers front-line teachers an actionable analytical framework for play story drawings, helping them identify children's implicit thinking and embodied experiences from the formal elements of the pictures, thus achieving a professional advancement from merely "listening to drawings" to genuinely "seeing drawings."

2. Literature Review

2.1. Play Stories in Anji Play

Current research on play stories in Anji Play spans multiple dimensions, including curriculum value, children's representational behaviors, and the role of teacher guidance. Based on long-term teaching practice in Anji Play, Huang outlined the practical process of play stories, analyzed its core functions, and conducted specific analyses of related works, clarifying the educational essence and curricular practical value of play stories and providing a theoretical reference for the implementation and promotion of the curriculum^[4]. Focusing on children's representational behaviors, Zhang took 62 children aged 4–5 from a provincial pilot kindergarten in D City as research subjects and employed observation, interviews, and work analysis methods to investigate four dimensions: willingness to represent, themes, forms, and post-hoc interpretation. The study found that children in this age group commonly exhibited cognitive biases, ambiguous attitudes, and content divorced from actual play scenarios in their play story drawings, revealing shortcomings in children's autonomous representational practices^[5]. Yu focused on teacher roles and guidance strategies. Through a case study, it was found that teachers' guiding functions in the two major phases of "autonomous play" and play stories each have their own emphasis, encompassing multiple roles such as ensuring safety, creating environments, guiding experiences, recording stories, and distilling experiences. Meanwhile, in play-generated curriculum, teachers' support, cooperation, and guidance behaviors showed a clear preference for emotional support, assisted cooperation, and verbal instruction^[6]. Overall, existing research has clarified the curricular connotations and practical status of play stories, but there remains room for further investigation into optimized strategies for addressing problems in children's pictorial representation and refined pathways for implementing teacher guidance.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations of Children's Pictorial Representation

This study integrates three theories. Lowenfeld's theory of stages in drawing development divides children's drawing into stages such as the scribbling stage, the pre-schematic stage, and the schematic stage, noting that children in the schematic stage begin to establish relatively fixed spatial concepts and figure models^[7]. However, the rich physical experiences in Anji Play may give rise to special expressions that transcend conventional schemas. Karmiloff-Smith's representational redescription theory provides a more fundamental explanation of the cognitive mechanism: knowledge needs to undergo a process of representational redescription as it transforms from an implicit procedural form into an explicit declarative form^[8]. Physical skills such as sliding impacts, shifts in the center of gravity, and speed changes in Anji Play, as procedural knowledge, are externalized by children into visual symbols during the drawing process—a transformation that itself constitutes a high-level cognitive activity. Furthermore, Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of visual grammar emphasizes that images, like language, possess a specific meaning-making system^[9]. Children's tilted compositions, tandem arrangements, and skewed body postures are not random aesthetic expressions but semiotic choices loaded with meaning potential. The integration of these three theories provides analytical tools for examining the visual representation of play experience.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Paradigm and Design

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, employing a combined design of case study and

visual work analysis. The qualitative paradigm was chosen because the research focuses not on causal relationships among variables, but on the intrinsic meaning structures and generative processes of children's play pictorial representation, which require in-depth description and thorough interpretation within specific contexts. The case study method allows the researcher to conduct holistic, longitudinal tracking observations of specific classes, capturing the natural ecology in which phenomena occur. The visual work analysis method provides a methodological tool for systematically interpreting the drawings themselves, making images independent objects of study rather than mere appendages to narratives.

3.2. Research Site and Participants

Using purposive sampling, a kindergarten that had implemented the Anji Play model for over three years was selected as the research site. One senior class was chosen as the main sample for in-depth longitudinal tracking, because senior-class children are at a crucial developmental stage of the schematic period, with relatively mature pictorial representation abilities that can present richer visual forms and narrative strategies. Meanwhile, one middle class and one junior class from the same kindergarten were selected as comparative samples to reveal differences and developmental trends across age groups. The research focused on play areas such as the barrel area, the climbing frame area, and the block construction area, which stimulate high-intensity physical experience and social interaction, providing the richest sources of material for pictorial representation.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

To overcome the interpretive bias of a single data source, this study established a triangulated data chain by collecting four types of data: drawings, which are original works created by children daily after play for eight consecutive weeks, labeled with date, author, and play area, with no fewer than 400 valid works expected; on-site play videos, which film children's actual play processes on the same day, focusing on physical movements, spatial movements, and peer interactions; one-on-one dictated texts, which preserve the children's verbal descriptions recorded by teachers, serving as contextual references but positioned as auxiliary data; and field notes, which are observational records of the play site atmosphere and children's non-verbal behaviors during the drawing process.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis followed a three-step progressive procedure of image-text cross-verification—formal categorization—thematic abstraction. First, individual works were compared and cross-verified with corresponding play videos and children's oral descriptions to establish a specific interpretive context. Second, based on a coding system, the five dimensions of the works were systematically coded and categorized to build a database of formal features. Third, on the basis of formal categorization and combined with thematic coding, core patterns of play experience representation and age-related developmental characteristics were abstracted.

3.5. Research Ethics

This study strictly adhered to the ethical norms of educational research. All data were anonymized. Written informed consent was obtained from the kindergarten administration, teachers, and the guardians of all participating children before the study commenced. The children's willingness to participate was fully respected; if a child showed refusal or discomfort, data collection was immediately suspended. All data were used solely for academic research purposes, stored confidentially, and destroyed after the study concluded in accordance with regulations.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Selective Representation of “Peak Moments” in Anji Play

The study found that children's play drawings do not completely replicate the entire play process; instead, they selectively capture and represent the “peak moments” in their play experience—critical instants when physical stimuli are most intense and emotional tension is at its highest, such as sliding impacts, speed changes, connection breaks, and shifts in the center of gravity. In these pictures, children do not give a plain, sequential depiction of the routine process of pushing a cart, ascending a slope, or

sliding smoothly. Rather, they freeze the conflict-ridden moment of high-speed descent: connected slides suddenly breaking apart, the body tilting to one side, the imminent loss of balance about to rush out of the track, the pulling and separating caused by speed differences during multi-person linked sliding (Figure 1). To restore the dynamic embodied sensation on a static sheet of paper, children spontaneously construct their own specific visual representational grammar: using slanted compositions to convey a continuous downward motion trend; lining up figures on linked slides in tandem to represent group sliding; using stretched and skewed body postures to intuitively present the physical sensation of an unstable center of gravity and wavering balance; and positioning multiple characters in staggered front-to-back layers to suggest speed differences during the sliding process. This set of visual expression methods cannot be simply attributed to limited drawing skills; rather, it is the result of children proactively responding to the core representational challenge: how to capture fluid, dynamic physical play experiences in a static image. Children sift and refine the embodied experiences of speed, balance, collision, and pulling during slope sliding, transforming them into visible graphic symbols and completing a creative transformation from first-hand physical perception to abstract visual expression. The selective recording of peak moments embodies children's simple yet spontaneous exploration and reflection on the relationships among motion, force, balance, and speed.



Figure 1: Selective representation of "peak moments" in children's sliding game

4.2. Non-Traditional Spatial Representation of Physical Experience

The study found that when depicting their physical play experiences within space, children spontaneously employed numerous creative spatial schemas that break through a single fixed viewpoint. They cast off the constraints of realistic perspective rules, prioritizing the complete expression of physical sensations and play narratives. The most typical strategy was X-ray perspective drawing. When depicting a wooden box game, Wang preserved the complete outline of the box while directly drawing the figure inside it within the rectangle. When representing the experience of sliding inside a barrel, Zhang drew the barrel's external outline while also clearly presenting herself sitting inside the barrel, forming a contrast with her image of having fallen outside the barrel. Children actively dissolved the occluding effect of the outer shell by using a see-through drawing method, aiming to simultaneously present the spatial form of the container and the physical situation of being enclosed within it, intuitively expressing the unique embodied experience of being inside a closed space. Additionally, narrative representations employing temporal juxtaposition appeared, forming original sequential narrative compositions. For instance, Chen's work arranged three small figures in sequence within the same picture, continuously presenting the process of a child moving upward along steps. Lu split the same character into two moments: the instant of sliding down a barrel slope and the state of having fallen to the ground after sliding, supplemented with a question mark to express the experiential contrast before and after the slide (Figure 2). Children break through the limitation of a single real-life moment, juxtaposing multiple action stages that occur successively and multiple play scenes on the same plane, forming a narrative structure

similar to storyboard comics and solidifying the fluid playtime within a single drawing.



Figure 2: Non-traditional spatial representation of physical experience

4.3. Staged Differences in Age-Related Developmental Characteristics

The study found clear and continuous staged differences across junior, middle, and senior class children in the play drawings created based on their Anji Play experiences, manifesting in dimensions such as narrative structure, figure depiction, spatial organization, and internal psychological representation. For junior class children (aged 3–4), the focus of representation lies in immediate, isolated physical experiences. Their pictures concentrate on single actions, single play materials, and the simple subject-object connection between themselves and the material, for instance, depicting independent moments like “sitting inside a rolling barrel” or “rushing down a slide.” Open, contoured forms are common, with figure depictions mainly consisting of simplified head-feet images. Elements are arranged loosely and freely, with no stable spatial order yet formed, and images are scattered across the paper. Color choices are based on subjective emotional preferences, with little reference to the inherent colors of objects, prioritizing the recording of immediate intense physical sensations. Middle class children (aged 4–5) begin to demonstrate an intention for sequential narrative and basic plot awareness. They can imply the sequence of actions in their pictures and attempt to represent coherent play behaviors such as climbing or marching. For example, a middle-class child's drawing of a suspension bridge game arranged multiple figures standing in sequence along a horizontal baseline, orderly presenting the scene of peers playing together, reflecting an initial ability to organize group activities and planar order. Senior class children (aged 5–6) exhibit a highly complex representational system. They can flexibly integrate multiple perspectives, proactively constructing layered spatial depth with elements arranged in front-to-back positions. Their narrative logic features a complete structure from beginning to end, and they can use a combination of multiple elements to tell a full-fledged game story. Crucially, senior class children possess the ability to represent virtual modalities and psychologically anticipated events—they can visualize psychological realities that have not actually happened and exist only in imagination or prediction, such as expressing “nearly losing balance,” “an imminent collision,” or “an intended construction form.” In the construction play drawing by the senior class child on the lower right, the picture accommodated multiple game structures, various characters, and rich scene elements, simultaneously presenting the construction outcome and the game participants, fully narrativizing the collective construction activity and fully embodying a leap in representational ability (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Staged differences in age-related developmental characteristics

5. Discussion

This study reveals the core nature and educational value of children's pictorial representation in Anji Play, confirming that children's play drawings are not passive reproductions of real scenes but a process of embodied abstract cognition based on first-hand physical perception. Among these, highly challenging physical play experiences such as sliding impacts, shifts in the center of gravity, speed changes, and spatial enclosure are the core triggers for children to generate innovative visual representation strategies like tilted compositions, X-ray perspective drawing, and temporal juxtaposition. This fully corroborates the core viewpoint that physical experience is the fundamental raw material for the development of children's cognitive schemas^[10], and also provides empirical support from the dimension of pictorial representation for the educational value of the adventure elements in Anji Play. In the process of refining and transforming dynamic, three-dimensional embodied play experiences into static graphic symbols, children autonomously complete the exploration and contemplation of physical relationships such as motion, force, balance, and speed, fully activating their symbolic creativity and higher-order cognitive abilities. Simultaneously, this study overturns traditional understandings in Lowenfeld's classic theory of children's drawing^[11]: drawing features such as X-ray perspective, mixed viewpoints, and disproportion, previously judged as signs of immature spatial cognition requiring correction, are in fact targeted solutions proactively generated by children when facing complex representational tasks. They are crucial external manifestations of children's metacognitive thinking, problem-solving abilities, and engagement in deep learning. This also means that educators need to completely transform their evaluation concepts, viewing these special drawing schemas as positive signals of cognitive development rather than drawing mistakes. Based on the above conclusions, this study also provides a clear practical direction for the support strategies of Anji Play teachers. The core is to promote a professional paradigm upgrade for teachers from “listening to narratives about drawings” to “reading forms and discerning cognition.” During play story sharing sessions, teachers should not merely ask children about the content of their drawings; they should more importantly focus on visual forms and pose in-depth questions to guide children to reflect on their own representational ideas and creative intentions, deepening the cognitive level of teacher-child dialogue. Meanwhile, teachers can leverage opportunities such as work displays and group sharing to organize children's exchange of diverse representational strategies, continuously promoting the development of all children's visual representation abilities and creative thinking through the collision of peer wisdom.

6. Conclusion

The pictorial representation following Anji Play is a crucial process through which children transform their dynamic physical play experiences into structured cognition. Children do not passively record their

play; instead, they proactively create unique visual representation methods, using strategies such as tilted compositions, X-ray perspective drawing, and temporal juxtaposition to present three-dimensional dynamic play experiences on a static two-dimensional plane. The richer and more challenging their play experience, the more creative their pictorial representation becomes. At the same time, children's pictorial representation across junior, middle, and senior classes shows clear stepped developmental characteristics, with senior-class children already possessing the ability to represent virtual modalities and psychological expectations. This development represents a qualitative change in cognitive schemas empowered by play experience, rather than a simple linear accumulation of drawing skills. Based on these findings, three practical recommendations are proposed: first, incorporate the analysis of visual forms in children's pictorial representation into teacher professional development content to enhance teachers' professional ability to interpret children's works from dimensions such as spatiality, kinesthetics, and narrative; second, establish a triadic interpretation mechanism integrating play videos, children's drawings, and dictated texts, and optimize teacher-child interactive questioning during play story sessions to deepen the quality of dialogue; third, incorporate children's innovative pictorial representation strategies into the developmental assessment system as core evidence for evaluating children's deep learning and symbolic creativity development. This study has certain limitations. First, visual symbols are polysemous; even with cross-verification through videos and dictations to minimize bias, the interpretation of the works inevitably involves a degree of subjective interpretation by the researcher. Second, the single-site small-sample research design limits the cross-site and cross-regional applicability of the conclusions. Third, potential influencing factors such as family aesthetic education and children's personality were not included in the analytical framework of this study. Further research can be expanded in the following directions: conduct cross-site and cross-regional multi-case comparative studies to verify the scope of applicability of the conclusions; and carry out long-term longitudinal tracking studies from junior to senior classes to fully clarify the developmental trajectory of children's visual representation abilities within the context of Anji Play.

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