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The Environment as an Informal Curriculum: A multidimensional analysis of children's drawings in Ghanaian basic schools

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Abstract

Children's drawings are recognized as non-verbal narratives that reflect their cognitive, emotional, and social worlds, shaped significantly by their environmental contexts. In Ghana, however, research has remained largely descriptive, cataloguing what children draw without deeply examining how their surroundings function as an informal multidimensional curriculum. This qualitative study addresses this gap through the analysis of spontaneous drawings of 16 children across four schools in northern and southern Ghana, alongside the perspectives of 10 key stakeholders, all totaling 26 participants. Through thematic and visual analysis, the study found that the children's drawings represent four categories of realities. This includes the Common Reality of their immediate environments depicted through detailed renderings of local infrastructures like boreholes, classrooms and bicycles among others. The children's drawings are also encoded with their Normative Realities, evidenced by consistent inclusions of religious attire, while Projected and Prophetic Realities emerge through aspirational elements such as aeroplanes and fishing boats, reflecting future hopes. Also, the study found pronounced regional variations in the children's drawing between southern and Northern Ghanaian settings, underscoring the socio-ecological specificity of artistic content. The study concludes that the environment acts as a dynamic, multidimensional informal curriculum for children artistic development. It is imperative that teachers, parents, and cultural coordinators in Ghana, particularly within the studied contexts, actively collaborate to recognise, and intentionally leverage the child's environmental milieu as a legitimate and vital curriculum for children artistic development.

Keywords

*Children Drawings,
Curriculum,
Multidimensional,
Realities
The Environment*

1. Introduction

Children's drawings are widely acknowledged in developmental and educational research as potent, non-verbal narratives that provide a critical window into their cognitive schemas, emotional landscapes, and social understandings (Malchiodi, 2021; Vygotsky, 2004). These graphic expressions transcend mere imitation, functioning instead as active constructions and cognitive maps that mediate a child's lived experiences and interpretations of their world (Anning & Ring, 2004; Cox, 2005). The content, style, and symbolism of these drawings are profoundly shaped by a constellation of environmental factors, encompassing the physical landscape, cultural norms, familial interactions, and the formal pedagogical structures of schooling (Kellogg, 1970; Matthews, 2003). Consequently, children's art serves as a vital, yet often underutilised, source of insight into how young learners perceive and internalise their socio-ecological milieu.

Within the Ghanaian context, emergent scholarship has begun to document the thematic content of children's artistic productions. Studies consistently report that drawings from basic schools are predominantly populated by tangible elements from the immediate environment, such as boreholes, school buildings, vehicles, and local flora (Acquah, 2018; Anning, 2020; Asante & Siaw, 2021; Navei, Akyem & Diabour, 2022). Furthermore, preliminary observations indicate that children's drawings largely represent their diverse worldviews (Acquah, 2018; Issah, 2022; Navei, Akyem & Diabour, 2022; Profice, 2018). This suggests an artistic lexicon derived from direct experience, preliminarily underscoring the local environment's influence.

However, a significant and persistent gap characterises this body of work. Existing research remains largely descriptive, functioning primarily as an inventory that catalogues *what* children draw without sufficiently interrogating the deeper socio-ecological meanings or pedagogical implications embedded within these representations (Acquah, 2018; Issah, 2022). This descriptive focus does not conceptualise the environment as more than a passive backdrop or a source of thematic inspiration. As Driessnack (2005) argues, children's art constitutes a form of "voice" frequently marginalised in educational discourse. The core problem, therefore, is the paucity of a systematic and theoretically robust framework for analysing the environment as a curriculum in shaping the drawings of Ghanaian children. This gap limits the understanding of how the physical, social, and cultural environment functions not merely as an influence, but as an active curriculum that instructs children about their place, values, and possibilities (Siegler, 2016; Vygotsky, 2004).

To address this conceptual and methodological lacuna, the current study examines how the environment acts as a profound and lasting teacher of all, including children, offering a more sophisticated, context-rich understanding of its role in nurturing children's artistic development in Ghana. Its novelty lies in re-conceptualising children's drawings as complex texts that reveal how the environment, informally, functions as a dynamic curriculum.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Several seminal theoretical frameworks have guided the analysis of children's drawings, each offering distinct insights. Developmental-stage theories, such as those proposed by Kellogg (1970) and Lowenfeld (1947), provide valuable maps of formal artistic evolution and socio-emotional growth, charting predictable progressions in schemata and creative intentionality. However, these models often foreground universal sequences over the deeply contextual meanings embedded within graphic content. To move beyond cataloguing developmental milestones and into the realm of interpretative meaning, this study employs the multidimensional theory of 'realities' proposed by Wilson and Wilson (1982). This framework posits that children's artistic representations are constructed from the interplay of four distinct domains of experience: Common Reality (the tangible, observable world), Projected/Anticipated Reality (imagination and fantasy), Normative Reality (internalised cultural and moral values), and Prophetic Reality (future-oriented hopes and aspirations).

The salience of this framework lies in its capacity to deconstruct the environment as a complex, layered curriculum rather than a monolithic backdrop. It shifts the analytical question from a simplistic "What is drawn?" to a more nuanced "Why is it drawn, and which experiential reality does it signify?" This is particularly critical for research in non-Western contexts like Ghana, where a child's graphic output is a rich palimpsest of immediate physical surroundings, communal values, global media influences, and personal aspirations. While other models excel at tracing formal development, the Wilson and Wilson (1982) lens is uniquely positioned to decode the socio-ecological and pedagogical narratives inscribed within the drawings, making it the preferred analytical tool for this investigation.

2.2. The Environment as a Pedagogical Force in Artistic Development

Empirical research consistently affirms that children's drawings are not created in a vacuum but are profoundly mediated by their environmental contexts, physical, social, and educational. The pervasive depiction of tangible elements from the immediate milieu, such as houses, local flora, and key infrastructure, underscores how familiar objects attain salience and act as primary referents in graphic communication (Issah, 2022; Gernhardt et al., 2014; Navei et al., 2022). Cross-cultural studies further illuminate this mediation; for example, Profice (2018) demonstrated that Indigenous children in Brazil depict an integrated relationship with nature, in stark contrast to the fragmented urban landscapes drawn by children in New York. This highlights the environment's role in shaping not only content but also fundamental conceptual frameworks of space and relationship.

Within the specific sphere of formal education, the classroom environment exerts a powerful influence. Eisner (2002) and Wright (2010) establish that pedagogical approaches valuing exploration and creativity significantly enrich artistic expression. Conversely, under-resourced and overcrowded settings can constrain it, acting as a limiting factor on creative output (Shamaki, 2015). The home environment provides the foundational layer, where parental encouragement is linked to advanced draftsmanship (Hindman et al., 2012), though

socio-economic disparities inevitably condition access to materials and the range of expressive possibilities (Jolley, 2010).

In the Ghanaian context, emergent studies have begun documenting thematic content, noting a predominance of local, tangible subjects and preliminary regional variations (Acquah, 2018; Anning, 2020; Asante & Siaw, 2021). However, this body of work remains predominantly descriptive, cataloguing visual themes without employing a robust theoretical lens to interpret their socio-ecological significance or pedagogical implications. Consequently, a significant gap persists: while prior research confirms that the environment influences Ghanaian children's art, it lacks a framework to systematically analyse how this influence operates across the intertwined dimensions of lived experience, cultural norms, imagination, and aspiration. This study directly addresses this gap. By applying Wilson and Wilson's (1982) multidimensional framework, it moves beyond thematic listing to conduct a nuanced analysis of how Ghana's diverse environments function as an active, informal curriculum, thereby offering a more sophisticated understanding of learning and development through art.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, situated within a constructivist-interpretive paradigm. This paradigm posits that individuals actively construct meaning from their lived experiences within specific socio-environmental contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative methodology was essential to facilitate an in-depth, nuanced exploration of the meanings children ascribe to their environment through artistic expression, thereby aligning with the study's core aim of decoding the socio-ecological curriculum embedded within their drawings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To achieve this analytical depth, a multiple case study design was implemented. This design enables a detailed, cross-contextual examination of the contemporary phenomenon, the environmental influence on children's drawings, within its real-world setting (Yin, 2018). Investigating four distinct cases allowed for analytical generalisation and the exploration of both common patterns and unique, context-specific manifestations, providing a robust structure for the intended multidimensional analysis (Stake, 2006; Flyvbjerg, 2011).

The study population was children aged 7 to 10 years in Ghanaian public basic schools, a developmental stage characterised by increasingly intentional and narratively rich graphic representation (Kellogg, 1970; Matthews, 2003). A two-stage, hybrid sampling strategy was used to ensure contextual diversity and pragmatic rigour. First, four schools were selected from Ghana's northern and southern regions using a heterogeneous-purposive sampling technique to maximise variation in geographical, cultural, and economic environments (Patton, 2015). Subsequently, within each school, four children (4) were selected via a combination of heterogeneous-purposive and convenience sampling to capture variation in age, gender, and class level, resulting in a total sample of 16 children. To further enrich data triangulation, ten (10) stakeholders (5 teachers, 3 parents, and 2 cultural coordinators) were also selected through heterogeneous-purposive and convenience sampling for their diverse

insights into the children's socio-ecological contexts. The overall sampled size comprised sixteen (16) children and ten (10) key stakeholders, all totalling 26 participants.

Data collection employed a multi-method strategy to construct a rich, triangulated corpus. Primary data originated from child-led, spontaneous drawing exercises prompted by "draw something important from your environment," followed by semi-structured interviews to elicit narrative explanations of the artwork. This was supplemented by structured non-participant observations of classroom art sessions to contextualise the pedagogical environment. All drawings, interview transcripts, and observation notes constituted the dataset for analysis. Data analysis followed the six-phase recursive process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), enabling a flexible yet systematic exploration of patterns across visual and verbal data. With the embedded use of a visual analytical approach, the entire analytical process was sensitised by Wilson and Wilson's (1982) theory of four realities, while themes were ultimately derived inductively from the data itself.

To ensure the study's trustworthiness and authenticity, several strategies were deployed. Credibility was established through methodological and data source triangulation, member checking with participating teachers, and prolonged engagement. Dependability and confirmability were addressed via a detailed audit trail and peer debriefing. Transferability is facilitated through the provision of thick, contextual description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). Researcher reflexivity was maintained through a critical journal to bracket preconceptions and acknowledge the interpreter's role (Finley, 2015). Ethical considerations were paramount, guided by the principles of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). Formal institutional and school approvals were secured. Informed consent was obtained from all headteachers and parents/guardians, with additional assent from each child participant. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly upheld, and all participants were informed of their unconditional right to withdraw without penalty (Israel & Hay, 2006; Orb et al., 2001).

4. Results and Discussion

The findings from the children's drawings revealed a multifaceted expression of Wilson and Wilson's (1982) four realities: common, normative, projected/prophetic, and regional, demonstrating how environmental factors and lived experiences inform artistic creation among Ghanaian basic school pupils. Across the 16 spontaneous drawings analysed, supported by interviews with key stakeholders (teachers, parents, and cultural coordinators), the dominance of common reality was evident, followed by elements of projected/prophetic, normative, and regional realities.

4.1. Common Reality

The data reveal the overwhelming dominance of common reality, wherein children's immediate physical environment serves as the fundamental scaffold for artistic development. This predominance confirms Wilson and Wilson's (1982) assertion that early graphic development is deeply anchored in the child's perceptual and experiential world.

The study revealed that children's drawings function as cognitive maps that chart their daily journeys through familiar landscapes, a phenomenon which manifests powerfully in the frequent depiction of infrastructural elements essential to daily survival. The drawing of a borehole (Figure 1) by a child from Northern Ghana exemplifies this reality, with children's verbal annotations revealing profound environmental awareness and illustrating how art becomes a visual record of lived ecology and domestic responsibility.

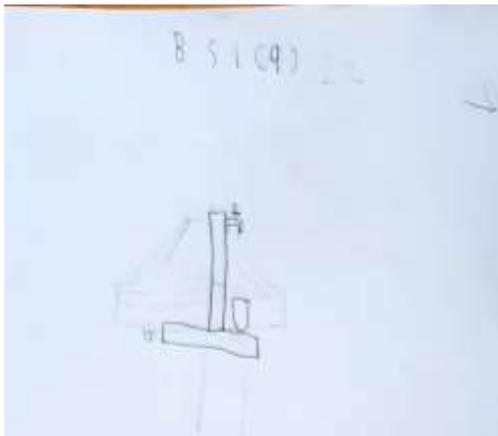


Figure 1: A communal borehole Drawn by a Basic School Pupil in Northern Ghana (Source: Fieldwork, 2022).



Figure 2: A Drawing by a Basic School Pupil in Southern Ghana Depicting a Teacher Seated in Class (Source: Fieldwork, 2022).

One of the children explicitly connected her drawing (Figure 1) to daily practice, reporting that as part of her routine household chores, she fetched water with a bucket every day after school. “I illustrated our borehole [Figure 1] because I fetch water from it every day” (Child Participant 1, personal interview, 11 March, 2022). A cursory observation of the drawing (Figure 1) reveals a close resemblance to a borehole. The child's annotation confirms the drawing (Figure 1) as a direct transcription of a familiar, functional object central to daily routine. This aligns with Lowenfeld's (1947) visual realism stage, where children's increasing control over form and proportion reflects both perceptual accuracy and emotional attachment to familiar objects.

Similarly, the inclusion of precise classroom details, such as a teacher seated in a swivel chair (Figure 2), demonstrates how direct, present-moment observation directly scaffolds and shapes artistic expression. These instances reveal the proposition that personal familiarity and possession act as catalysts for meticulous visual representation. Cox (2005) observes that the precision with which children render familiar objects reveals the depth of their perceptual engagement with their everyday world.

Additionally, Figure 3 presents an agrarian scene drawn by a child that reflects the rural farming life familiar to him. At the centre of the composition is a human figure shown in a bent posture, which the child interprets as his father preparing the land at the beginning of the farming season (Figure 3). The bent stance effectively conveys the physical act of tilling,

suggesting engagement in manual farm work. The figure is outlined with simple geometric forms, with angular legs and a lowered arm, reinforcing the impression of active labour. Surrounding the figure are three sparsely positioned trees, each sketched with a vertical trunk and clustered leaves. Their scattered placement across the picture plane creates a sense of open farmland rather than a dense forest. Flowing, curved doodle lines fill much of the background and ground area. These lines appear to represent the tilled soil or the textured landscape, visually suggesting movement and the disruption of the earth during cultivation (Figure 3). “This is our farm [Figure 3]. See my father farming [preparing the land] for my mother to sow maize...” (Child Participant 2, personal communication, 15 March, 2022). The child reflects both the agrarian livelihood of his family and the gendered division of labour within the farming household. Overall, the artwork reveals how lived experience and parental occupation shape children’s visual representations of their world.

The drawing demonstrates the child’s awareness of his immediate environment and farming activities engaged by his parents.



Figure 3: Agrarian Scene Drawn by a Child from Northern Ghana
(Source: Fieldwork, 2022).

The primacy of the immediate environment as a creative resource was corroborated by educators' observations. A teacher participant explicitly validated this interpretive framework, noting that the children's artistic output (Figures 1, 2 & 3) functions as a direct transcription of their visual surroundings: “These children draw what they see every day with incredible accuracy...” (M. Tetteh, Personal Interview, 23 March 2022). This testimony from an educator intimately familiar with the children's daily lives reinforces the proposition that the common reality is not merely a passive backdrop but the primary text from which these young artists construct meaning.

The influence of common reality was further evidenced in the enhancement of detail and accuracy, indicating that familiarity fosters both technical confidence and visual coherence. For instance, an eight-year-old girl who possessed a bicycle rendered it with remarkable precision, annotating her drawing with, "...this is my bicycle" (Figure 4).

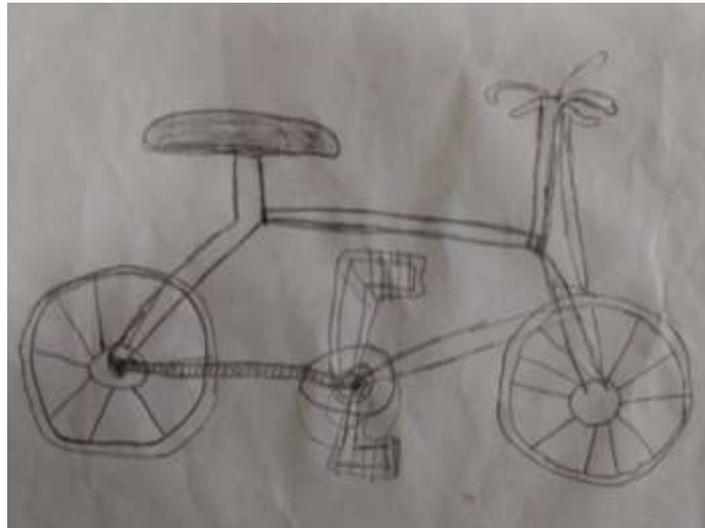


Figure 4: Drawing of a bicycle made by a child from the Northern Ghana (Source: fieldwork, 2022).

The technical annotation of objects, as observed in Figure 4, reflects the child's innate drive to document and master their environment through graphic representation. A cultural coordinator explained this phenomenon in local terms, emphasising that "children learn through doing and touching; when they draw the borehole pump or fishing net, they are showing their understanding of how these things work in their community."

The recurring depictions of the borehole (Figure 1), the teacher in the school environment (Figure 2), the agrarian scene (Figure 3), and the bicycle (Figure 4) constituted the primary visual lexicon through which children articulated their understanding of place and purpose. Collectively, these findings affirm that common reality functions not merely as a source of subject matter but as the fundamental structural framework that scaffolds and organises children's artistic development.

4.2 Projected and Prophetic Realities: Imagination as Future-Making

The study revealed a sophisticated interplay between projected and prophetic realities, wherein children employ imagination as a tool for future-making and identity exploration. This emergence extends Wilson and Wilson's (1982) model by highlighting the transformative role of imagination as a bridge between present experience and envisioned futures. Lane et al. (2015) contend that children's future-oriented drawings represent cognitive experiments with possible selves and worlds, a concept describing these works as cognitive rehearsals for possible selves. This manifests vividly in the synthesis of everyday

objects with aspirational elements, as observed in Figures 5 and 6, where children envision transformative futures.

For instance, one of the children's drawings of an aeroplane was accompanied by an ambitious declaration, revealing an intersection of personal ambition and collective hope. The child interpreted that the aeroplane drawn (Figure 5) represents his future flight to London "to become a doctor and operate on people's eyes so that they can see again" (Southern Child 2, personal communication, 14 March, 2022). Another child connects present and future through her bicycle drawing (Figure 6) by stating that it depicts her riding a bicycle that her father will purchase in the future for her to ride to school to do away with the stress of walking.



Figure 5: Drawing made by a child from Southern Ghana depicting a Flight (Source: Feldwork, 2022).



Figure 6: A drawing by a Child from Southern Ghana. It depicts her riding a bicycle. Her father will purchase in the future (Source: Fieldwork, 2022).

A teacher participant from the southern part of Ghana observed that "when children draw these aeroplanes and others, it is not just fantasy; they are seriously imagining their future lives, noting this as an example of future-orientation in classroom practice.

Another teacher participant from the Northern part of Ghana noted that the drawing of bicycles and airplanes represent mobility, both physical and social. According to the teacher, with such mobility related drawings (Figures 5 & 6) show that the children understand that education and transportation can take them somewhere better. These prophetic representations function as what Profice (2018) identifies as visualisations of social mobility and transformed identities, where artistic practice mediates between socioeconomic constraints and aspirational possibilities. This suggests that the character of these prophetic aspirations was distinctly influenced by the children's regional and economic context.

Similarly, a child from Northern Ghana interpreted her drawing (Figure 7) as her becoming a renowned female footballer in the future.



Figure 7: Drawing made by a Child from Northern Ghana. It Depicts Her as a Renowned Future Footballer (Source: Fieldwork, 2022).



Figure 8: A Drawing of a Southern Ghanaian Child. It Depicts a Future Scenario of a Him Navigating a Canoe (Source: Fieldwork, 2022).

In coastal fishing communities, prophetic reality was expressed through drawings of fishing boats or outboard motors (Figure 8), representing familial aspirations for economic improvement. The coastal children's drawings of fishing boats in navigation (Figure 8) represent what Lane et al. (2015) term aspirational capital, where artistic expression becomes a means of envisioning economic advancement. As one coastal child interpreted, "... my work [Figure 8] represents my father's future new boat. He will catch more fish with it and give me some to eat (Coastal Child 1, personal communication, 30th March, 2022). A teacher participant affirmed this aspirational artistic expression of the coastal child by stating that children often draw the type of work their parents do for a living. Therefore, such prophetic imagery reflects broader cultural narratives of better days ahead.

A cursory view of the children's drawings (Figures 5-8), the study established that their representations function as powerful visual metaphors for hope and social mobility, transcending mere wish-fulfilment to articulate deeply felt aspirations for the future. These findings collectively demonstrate that children's artistic practice serves as a crucial medium for negotiating present constraints and envisioning future possibilities. They reinforce that children's imagination is not detached from material reality but deeply informed by it, corresponding with Vygotsky's (2004) conception of imagination grounded in experience. Thus, art functions not merely as escapism but as future-making, an imaginative reworking of social and environmental contexts toward transformation.

4.3 Normative Reality as the Internalised Curriculum

The analysis reveals normative reality as a powerful, often subconscious, curriculum governing representation. This phenomenon illustrates how sociocultural codes operate as invisible curricula within creative expression. As Eisner (2002) argues, the child's imagination is invariably structured by the cultural codes that surround them, making even the most spontaneous drawing a cultural artefact. This emerges with striking consistency in the imposition of religious attire on human figures, as evidenced in Figure 9 (A&B), where children systematically added hijabs and *taqiyahs* to figures regardless of the original stimuli. One child from the northern part of Ghana explicitly connected the practice to religious identity, that the mother wears her hijab (Figure 9A) when going to the mosque - it shows they are good Muslims. Another child from the same northern Ghana demonstrated normative reasoning, which signifies that all good Muslim men should cover their heads for prayer as a sign of respect (Figure 9B). A parent from the northern part of Ghana affirmed this cultural transmission that they teach their children things that matter, including their religious practices. As such, they draw people covered properly to show that they understand their way of life. Another parent participant elaborated that even when they draw from picture books showing uncovered women, they automatically add the hijab. It has become natural to them.

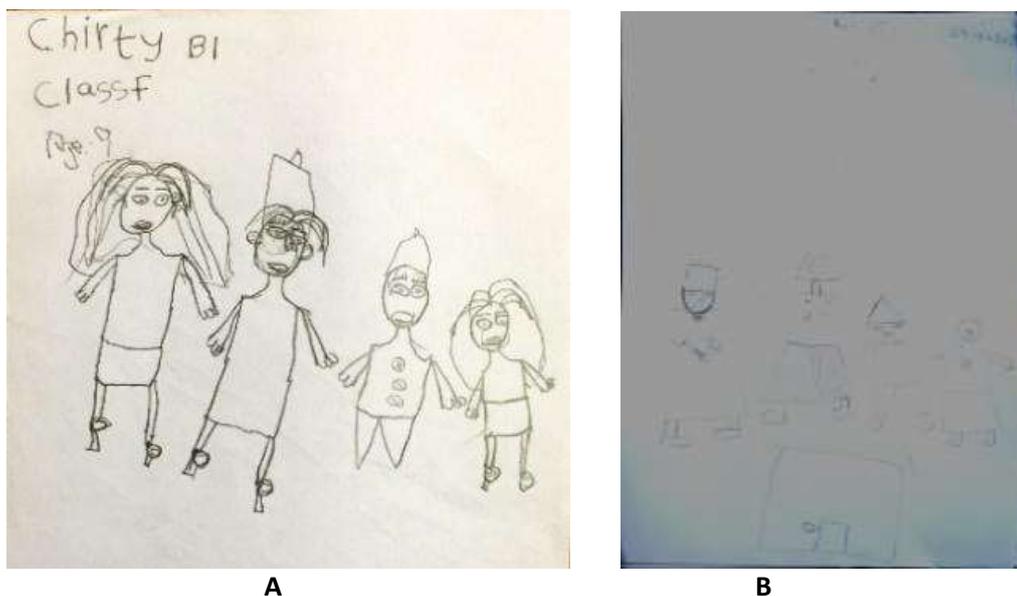


Figure 9 (A&B): Drawing made by a child from Northern Ghana, Showing Women and Men Wearing *Hijabs* and *Taqiyah* respectively (Source: Fieldwork, 2022).

The consistent incorporation of religious symbolism in the children's drawings aligns with what Kellogg (1970) identifies as the cultural unconscious manifesting through graphic representation. The drawings thus become visual narratives of cultural identity, where children unconsciously reproduce and affirm their socio-religious belonging, embodying deep-seated cultural scripts transmitted through family, community, and religious institutions. A cultural coordinator from the Northern Region explained that these drawings

are not just pictures, but they are maps of our religious values. When a child draws a woman in hijab, they are drawing our community's religious soul.

Consequently, the findings demonstrate that normative reality operates not as explicit moral instruction but as what Matthews (2003) considers an invisible curriculum that structures children's perception and representation of their social world. This consistent encoding of religious-specific markers (Figure 9) shows that children's artistic output transcends mere representation, functioning instead as an active construction and negotiation of religious identity. Such visual expressions are, therefore, not passive reflections but active acts of identity performance. The Ghanaian data reinforce that art functions as a symbolic language for belonging and moral order, where drawing becomes a means of visually negotiating faith, modesty, and respectability, providing empirical support for Eisner's (2002) contention that imaginative expression is never culture-free but is fundamentally structured by prevailing societal values and cognitive schemas

4.4 Regional Variation as Ecological Determinism

The analysis of drawings from the northern and southern ecological zones of Ghana provides perhaps the most compelling evidence for the environment's function as a dynamic, place-based curriculum. The comparative analysis reveals two distinct artistic ecosystems. In the coastal communities of southern Ghana, the artistic lexicon is dominated by maritime and fishing elements. Children's drawings are populated with fishing boats and canoes (Figure 8). This maritime environment teaches a specific relationship with their fishing world, where the depiction of the boat is not just for fun, but a symbol of a familial source of livelihood.

In stark contrast, the artistic productions of children from the agrarian northern savannah enclave of Ghana are grounded in a different set of ecological imperatives. Here, the landscape is characterised by a lack of sea resources and reliance on subsistence farming and boreholes in rural settings. This is visually articulated through drawings of communal boreholes (Figure 1), which are depicted not as generic water sources but as the vital, social heart of the community. Similarly, the depiction of the agrarian scene (Figure 3) is not a generic field but a specific representation of the family farm, revealing the child's intimate understanding of the family's economic survival cycle.

A novel finding of this comparative analysis is how the regional ecology even influences the depiction of objects common to both areas, such as the bicycle (Figure 4). While a bicycle in an urban or peri-urban Southern Ghanaian context might represent leisure or personal transport, in the northern savannah context depicted in this study, it is more profoundly a tool for utility, essential for navigating dispersed settlements and transporting goods. Therefore, the child's ownership and detailed rendering ("this is my bicycle," Figure 4) signify not just possession, but a mastery of a tool critical for functioning within that specific environment. This demonstrates that the "Common Reality" is not a universal catalogue of objects, but a locally specific toolkit for survival and participation.

Furthermore, the regional variation extends into the very fabric of normative reality. While both regions express cultural values, the symbols used are place-based. The normative requirement for modesty in the northern, predominantly Muslim communities is expressed through the consistent addition of hijabs and *taqiyahs* to human figures (Figures 9A & 9B). The use of *hijabs* and *taqiyahs* to cover the hair is a critical aspect of the dress code of Muslim communities in northern Ghana, as demonstrated by the children. This religious and cultural script is part of the local curriculum, just as the imperative to depict fishing boats, canoes and nets is in coastal Ghana. This finding challenges any simplistic notion of a universal artistic developmental trajectory and instead supports what might be termed "eco-graphic development," where the formal and symbolic aspects of a child's art co-evolve with their ecological and cultural immersion.

The testimonies of cultural coordinators powerfully encapsulate this phenomenon. One coastal coordinator observed, "One can tell where a child hails from by what they draw. Children from the coastal area draw boats and nets, the inland children draw crops and water pots. Their environment is seen in their drawings" (Cultural Coordinator – Southern Ghana 1, personal communication, 14 March 2022). A northern counterpart added that "the drawings are geographical documents that show how different the children's worlds are within the country" (Cultural Coordinator - Northern Ghana 2, personal communication, 25 March, 2022). These statements validate the interpretation of children's drawings as sophisticated texts that narrate not just individual experience, but collective ecological dependence and cultural continuity.

In essence, the child from the coast draws a curriculum of the sea, while the child from the north draws a curriculum of the savannah. This demonstrable specificity, rooted in lived material conditions, provides robust empirical evidence for understanding the environment not as a mere influence, but as the primary, place-based textbook from which children learn the fundamental lessons of survival, identity, and possibility.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study focused on examining how the environment functions as an informal, yet powerful, curriculum for children in Ghanaian basic schools by conducting a multidimensional analysis of their spontaneous drawings. It employed the multidimensional approach as an analytical lens to interpret the socio-ecological and pedagogical narratives encoded within this artistic output.

The study confirmed that children's drawings are sophisticated texts that articulate multiple, intertwined realities. First, *common reality* dominated, with the immediate physical environment (such as boreholes, bicycles, school furniture), serving as the foundational scaffold and primary subject matter, acting as cognitive maps of daily life and survival. Second, *normative reality* was powerfully evident in the consistent imposition of cultural and religious symbols (such as *hijabs* and *taqiyahs*), revealing an internalised *informal curriculum* of identity, values, and belonging. Third, through *projected* and *prophetic realities*, children engaged in imaginative future-making, using aspirational motifs

(such as aeroplanes, soccer players, and improved fishing boats) as cognitive rehearsals for possible selves and visions of social mobility. Pronounced *regional variations* between coastal and agrarian communities demonstrated that the environment as an informal curriculum is not generic but is specifically mediated by local ecology and subsistence patterns, making drawings potent ethnographic documents of place.

The study concludes that the environment operates as a dynamic, multidimensional informal curriculum for Ghanaian children's artistic development. It is not a passive backdrop but an active, pedagogical force that instructs through physical interaction, cultural norms, and aspirational horizons. This theoretical contribution attempts to demonstrate how symbolic content and meaning are co-constructed within specific socio-ecological niches. Practically, the study encourages educators and researchers to “read” children’s drawings as rich data sources on environmental literacy, cultural identity, and aspirational capital. It is, therefore, imperative that teachers, parents, and cultural coordinators actively collaborate to recognise and intentionally leverage the child's environmental setting as a legitimate and vital informal curriculum for children's artistic development. Art educators, particularly within the studied contexts, are uniquely positioned to lead this paradigm shift. This requires moving beyond technical assessment toward interpretive dialogue, designing pedagogical activities that explicitly invite children to draw and narrate their lived and aspirational realities. These artistic creations should then be elevated as foundational texts to augment formal school knowledge and lived experience. This pedagogical integration validates local content and context as authoritative subject matter. This requires parents engaging in dialogic viewing to strengthen home-school connections, and cultural coordinators providing depth to ensure the curriculum reflects the social, cultural, economic, and religious fabric of the community. Through this tripartite collaboration, the child’s environment is transformed from a passive backdrop into a central, dynamic textbook for fostering agentic creativity, critical environmental literacy, and a rooted sense of identity.

Acknowledging that this study’s qualitative depth was achieved with a limited sample size, future research should seek to test and refine the outcomes of this study on a broader scale. A quantitative approach, encompassing children from diverse rural, peri-urban, and urban schools across all regions of Ghana, would valuably assess the generalisability of the environment-as-informal-curriculum. Furthermore, participatory action research, involving teachers as co-researchers in implementing and adapting these pedagogical principles, is essential for developing practical, context-specific resources to revitalise art education and, ultimately, to better honour the sophisticated ecological intelligence children already possess.

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