At five years of age, Dominic drew this picture in his kindergarten class as part of his regular Friday afternoon end-of-week activity. In this Midwestern kindergarten class, art functioned as a behavioral tool—engagement whose sole purpose was to keep the children’s behavior in check before school let out. Art as a behavioral strategy is common; it demands time, concentration, and attention, and can fill empty spaces in the curriculum when other subject areas have been covered, leaving a spare 15–30 minutes in the day. Unfortunately, such a belief in art positions it not as a language system that communicates important messages and demonstrates learning, but as an activity that fills time. In this issue, we reposition art as a purposeful activity that significantly contributes to our understanding of literacy, not as an “entity (something you either have or don’t have),” as Harste (2003, p. 9) argues, but as a social practice, a way of learning and being in a classroom. To think of literacy in this way is “revolutionary” (p. 9).

In their everyday lives at home, in their communities, and online, children speak visually about themselves, their learning, and their thinking. Children’s visual messages are informational, expressive, humorous, satirical, serious, and sad. Further, they have clear and distinct forms and structures that can be read and analyzed, in much the same way teachers analyze and respond to children’s written work. Yet, in the classroom, children hear responses that are often limited to “That’s a really nice drawing,” or “Tell me about your picture.” Additionally, when students are asked to create visual texts in response to their reading or to accompany their writing, they may hear, “Don’t worry about the art.” Such statements about art may lead children to believe that art is not that important as a language system. Further, they are less apt to make art a part of their everyday practices.

The undervaluing of the arts in schools is becoming much more visible as schools cut art, music, and drama programs. Within the past five years, there has been a 50% decline in children’s access to music in schools (Nieves, 2008). A number of reports across the past decade have identified severe cuts in the arts across states, and the resulting learning costs associated with these cuts (Dillon, 2006; Hurley, 2004; Persinger, 2011). At the same time, there are organizations like the Arts Education Partnership (AEP) that have worked hard to demonstrate, through research-based studies, the significance of the arts to learning (see https://aep-arts.org).

Grounded in a plethora of informal and formal studies (Burnaford, Brown, Doherty, & McLaughlin, 2007), literacy and the arts have obvious connections; however, in many schools the idea that literacy instruction should help students develop
frames for talking about visual texts is new. The arts contribute to what Dyson (2006) calls a new set of basics informed by children’s lived and diverse sets of cultural and linguistic experiences, especially as they concern children’s use of a range of symbolic conventions and everyday literacy practices.

Further, a number of scholars have contributed to the ongoing and important conversation about the symbiotic nature of the two forms in building strong literacy practices, including Albers, Vasquez, and Harste (2011), Olshansky (2008), Reilly (2010), and Rowsell and Pahl (2007), among others. These researchers have found that children convey important social messages in their lives through their art, be they related to gender, race, the practice of reading, or their identities. As such, art as a language must be made significant to research and practice.

In conceptualizing this theme, we wanted to position the visual arts, specifically, as a significant language through which visual messages of all types and contexts are expressed daily in P–8th-grade classes—messages that remain largely unread because educators have little experience reading art (line, perspective, color, organization of objects on canvas, and so on). Further, we believe this study of pictures, such as those produced by children like Dominic, allows educators to understand how children’s pictures tell all sorts of stories, from personal interests to their connections to classroom learning. We suggest that if these images are left unread, we as educators may not be able to support children as they need to be supported.

Dominic’s image (Figure 1), for example, not only demonstrates a skill at drawing, but offers messages about his interest and knowledge about soccer. Dominic clearly reveals disciplinary knowledge about the sport, particularly the goalie who guards the net outfitted with a special gridded mask, large gloves, and protective shin and arm pads. Dominic’s illustration demonstrates not only his interest in soccer, but his understanding and probable participation in this sport. Rather than comment that Dominic’s picture is “nice,” as educators we can comment on the extent to which he knows the sport. What stories might emerge from his knowledge about soccer? And how, as educators, can we draw information from his pictures to create curriculum? To study children’s pictures as important messages to be read, interpreted, and responded to is to engage in critical literacy practice (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Luke & Freebody, 1999) and, more specifically, to understand the social practices (Street, 2001) that inform the content around which these pictures were made.

As editors, we continue this scholarship in the arts through this themed issue, Writing the Image, Writing the World. Maggie Chase’s yearlong study in one diverse kindergarten classroom examines the revision processes of children, and how revision was taught to young children. Specifically, she sought to understand how and where the revision process began and how it evolved over the course of the school year. She investigated questions that looked at the driving forces behind children’s “best work” and the steps involved in achieving “a culture of excellence.” In this study, Maggie particularly focused on children’s visual drafting and its impact on their learning and writing. Further, she studied how Rika, their teacher, recognized and built on the skills, or languages, that her kindergarten children brought to school—the ability to draw or make marks on paper and the ability to use oral language—thus setting the stage for the hard work involved in accepting the need for engaging in a multi-draft process. Maggie’s study examines Rika’s essential instructional practices and how they can encourage teachers to support the writing and learning of very young children.

Nadine Bryce’s piece presents an arts-based interdisciplinary and thematic approach to curriculum called “Mano a Mano,” a schoolwide project that emphasized visual texts, nonfiction literacy, and content area learning as ways to pursue a deeper, richer understanding of a topic. In this Harlem school, the topic changed year by year and integrated all subjects (science, social studies, mathematics, English language learning, English language arts, technology, art, music, and the performing arts). In this piece, Nadine describes this school’s approach to a study of “New York: Past, Present, and Future,” which provided curricular vision for teachers and children in all grades. This
article features children’s work related to this theme and particularly focuses on the role of the visual arts as a means for developing children’s understanding of the world and promoting nonfiction literacy.

In addition to these featured articles, this issue’s departments—children’s literature and professional books—focus on writing in literacy learning and offer Language Arts readers ways in which to think about how to implement the visual arts with more intended purpose. Our Conversation Currents scholars, Jerome C. Harste and Gunther Kress, offer additional insights into the role of the arts in language arts learning. We hope that these articles, departments, and podcast will encourage you to consider the ways in which art can become a social and critical practice in your own classroom, and how children’s visual texts offer insights into their literacy practices.

References
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