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Assessment Practices for Children's Drawings in Urban and Rural Kindergartens: A Mixed Methods Study in Jiangxi Province China

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Abstract: Assessment of young children's drawings can document expression and guide further exploration, yet it can also privilege adult expectations of resemblance and neatness. This article develops an urban–rural comparison of assessment practices in Jiangxi Province, China, using an explanatory sequential mixed methods framework. The demonstration design combines a teacher questionnaire with classroom observation, interviews and drawing-based conversations with children. An explicitly synthetic questionnaire example contains 240 teacher records, equally divided between urban and rural settings. Constructed descriptive counts illustrate greater reported use of portfolios and child explanation in the urban group, while resemblance-based judgments remain common in both groups. Hypothetical qualitative scenarios show how documentation opportunities, expectations about display and recognition of local experience could account for such patterns. A joint display connects numerical contrasts with competing explanations and specifies evidence needed to assess them. The article proposes an assessment cycle linking observation, child explanation, descriptive feedback, documentation and instructional response. Its contribution is a context-sensitive comparison framework that treats children's interpretations as assessment evidence without converting urban location into a proxy for pedagogical superiority. Because the evidence is synthetic, the article demonstrates an analytical approach rather than establishing the prevalence, significance or causes of urban–rural differences.

Keywords: Children's drawings, formative assessment, urban–rural comparison, kindergarten, child participation, mixed methods, Jiangxi.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Research Problem

A kindergarten drawing is both a visible product and a trace of a developing activity. Lines, colours and arrangements may represent remembered events, imagined possibilities, bodily experimentation or relationships that are not obvious to an adult viewer. An assessment based only on the finished picture therefore risks overlooking what the child intended and how the work developed. The practical question concerns what adults notice, whose interpretation counts and how feedback changes the child's subsequent opportunities to draw.

China's Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3–6 Years encourage adults to respect children's artistic intentions instead of relying on simple adult judgments of resemblance or quality (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2012). The 2022 kindergarten quality assessment guidelines additionally prioritise educational processes and naturalistic classroom observation (MOE, 2022). The latter document addresses institutional quality assessment; it should not be misread as a drawing-scoring instrument. Together, these sources justify examining everyday interaction rather than merely counting displayed works.

Jiangxi is the proposed setting for a context-sensitive comparison, not a statistically established representation of China. Urban and rural kindergartens may differ in access to professional learning, staffing, documentation tools and family expectations, but the size and direction of those differences require evidence. Rural teachers may draw on detailed knowledge of local experience; urban teachers may face pressures to produce attractive displays. Both are research possibilities rather than established descriptions of Jiangxi. A comparison should examine variation within each setting and avoid equating access to equipment with responsiveness to children.

1.2. Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose is to examine how teachers assess children's drawings, compare urban and rural patterns and explain how professional and contextual conditions relate to assessment decisions. The focus is on assessment practices, not on ranking children's artistic ability or extending the full set of differences in painting instruction into an unrelated outcome measure.

Three questions guide the study: RQ1, what criteria, feedback forms and participation opportunities characterise assessment of children's drawings? RQ2, how do these practices vary between urban and rural kindergartens and within each group? RQ3, how do teachers' accounts, observed interactions and children's explanations help interpret questionnaire patterns and inform feasible improvements?

1.3. Contribution and Scope

The proposed contribution is to connect assessment criteria with the feedback process and the distribution of interpretive authority. A teacher may endorse creativity while still correcting a drawing before asking what it means. Conversely, a teacher with limited documentation resources may provide specific, respectful dialogue. The comparison therefore separates material capacity, stated beliefs and enacted interaction. This demonstration supplies a coherent manuscript and evidence structure; it does not supply new empirical knowledge about Jiangxi.[1]

2. Conceptual Foundations and Analytical Framework

2.1. Formative Assessment and Drawing as Meaning Making

Black and Wiliam (1998) provide a foundational account of the relationship between classroom assessment and learning. Applied here, the formative function depends on whether information about a child's drawing informs a useful response. General praise alone provides little evidence about what the teacher understood or what the child can explore next. An assessment episode becomes informative when it connects a noticed feature with the child's purpose and an accessible opportunity to continue.

Research on drawings as a means of engaging children's perspectives emphasises attending to their accompanying narratives and interpretations (Einarsdottir et al., 2009). This supports drawing-based conversations in the present design. It does not license researchers to decode a child's internal state from colour choice or spatial arrangement. Interpretive uncertainty should remain visible, and a child's account may change during the activity without constituting an error.

2.2. Developmental Responsiveness and Cultural Context

Developmentally appropriate assessment takes account of children's experiences, languages and current accomplishments (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020). In drawing activities, age, familiarity with materials, communicative preferences and opportunities to participate can affect what becomes visible. A verbally confident child should not automatically receive a higher judgment than a child who communicates through gesture, selection or continued drawing.[2]

Cultural responsiveness requires an additional distinction between recognising a local motif and understanding a child's meaning. A picture of a field, market, bridge or ceramic vessel does not by itself demonstrate cultural understanding. Teachers can ask about the event or relationship represented and avoid imposing a supposedly authentic regional style. Equally, popular media and imagined worlds belong to children's lived experience and should not be dismissed because they are not locally traditional.

2.3. Dimensions of Assessment Practice

Table 1. Analytical dimensions and evidence indicators

Dimension	Operational focus	Evidence source
Criteria	Resemblance and neatness; intention, exploration and change	Questionnaire; feedback episodes
Feedback	Generic approval; specific noticing; invitation to continue	Observation; teacher explanation
Participation	Child explanation, self-selection and supported peer response	Observation; child conversation
Documentation	Work samples linked to process notes and later planning	Portfolio review; teacher interview
Contextual recognition	Attention to family experience, language and locally meaningful content	Child account; interview; observation

These dimensions describe practice rather than a validated psychometric scale. Product-focused and process-focused acts can coexist in the same lesson. A request to look again at a line can support a child's own purpose or enforce an adult model; coding must attend to the surrounding exchange. The primary analytical unit for classroom material is therefore the assessment episode, with classroom and kindergarten identifiers retained.

3. Research Design and Methods

3.1. Explanatory Sequential Design and Evidence Status

The proposed design first maps reported practices through a questionnaire and then selects contrasting cases for explanation. Integration occurs when survey patterns guide qualitative sampling, when interviews address specific discrepancies and when a joint display combines both strands. This follows the distinction between connecting and merging evidence discussed by Fetters et al. (2013). Observations are intended to test the correspondence between reported and enacted practice rather than simply illustrate teachers' preferred accounts.

For this manuscript, 240 hypothetical teachers across 24 hypothetical kindergartens provide the numerical example. The counts in Table 3 were deliberately constructed; they were not sampled from a population, estimated from actual records or generated to reproduce known Jiangxi distributions. The qualitative strand consists of explicitly invented analytical scenarios. Consequently, no recruitment, response rate, fieldwork dates, pilot coefficients, observed reliability statistics, interview quotations or statistical significance claims are reported.[3]

3.2. Sampling and Urban Rural Classification

A field implementation would stratify kindergartens by urban–rural location and public–private status, then record district or county, class size and staffing. The example allocates 12 kindergartens and 120 teachers to each location group. Equal allocation improves the clarity of the demonstration but does not reproduce the regional distribution of teachers. Ten teachers per kindergarten are assumed solely for the example; an actual design must accommodate unequal staffing and document selection probabilities.

Urban–rural classification should be assigned from the official statistical area classification of the kindergarten's physical location for the fieldwork year, with the code and source retained. Town settings should be identified separately and either analysed as a third category or handled under a predeclared rule. Administrative county membership, school name and teachers' household registration are insufficient substitutes. The current numerical example contains only assumed urban and rural labels and makes no claim that these were verified against official codes.[4]

An illustrative follow-up plan selects eight kindergartens, four in each group, including cases that diverge from the group pattern. It envisages 16 teacher interviews, eight leader interviews, 16 observed drawing sessions and 32 voluntary drawing-based child conversations. These are planning quantities, not completed samples. Children aged approximately four to six would be invited through a consent and assent process, with provision for nonverbal participation and withdrawal.

3.3. Instruments and Field Procedures

The teacher questionnaire would record background

characteristics and the frequency of 20 specific practices during the preceding four weeks, distributed across the five dimensions in Table 1. Response options would range from never to almost every activity, with a separate not-applicable option. Items would ask about actions, such as inviting a child to explain a selected feature, rather than rely only on agreement with desirable principles. The descriptive illustration dichotomises five selected actions at often or almost every activity; these illustrative thresholds do not establish scale validity.

Before use, early childhood and assessment specialists would examine item relevance and clarity. Cognitive interviews with teachers from both locations would identify differing interpretations of terms such as portfolio and feedback. A separate pilot would inspect missing responses, floor and ceiling effects and feasibility. Any reliability or factor estimates would need actual item-level data. A total score would be considered only after dimensionality and urban–rural comparability had been examined; the present draft reports neither an invented alpha coefficient nor an assumed validated scale[5].

Observation would preserve the sequence of each assessment episode: the task, child action, adult response, child explanation and any subsequent revision or continuation. Coding would distinguish opportunities offered from opportunities taken. Teacher speech would be considered with gesture and material access, while reasons for absent episodes would be recorded. Repeated observations are preferable because one session may reflect an unusual task or an observer effect.

Interviews would use specific work samples or recalled episodes to ask why a teacher noticed a feature, how the child's explanation affected judgment and what constrained the response. Child conversations would begin with an invitation to choose a drawing and indicate something they wished the adult to understand. Participation would not require explaining every mark. A drawing that a child declined to discuss would remain unclassified on meaning-related indicators rather than be assigned a low score.

3.4. Quantitative Analysis and Qualitative Interpretation

In a completed study, descriptive analysis would report denominators, missingness and distributions before group comparisons. Teachers are nested in kindergartens, so analyses treating all teachers as independent would be inappropriate. A prespecified binary outcome, such as frequent child explanation, could be modelled with a kindergarten random intercept and fixed effects for location, relevant professional learning, experience, class size and ownership. With only 24 clusters, model complexity and uncertainty would require particular attention and potentially a larger kindergarten sample.[6]

For a multi-item ordinal instrument, the analysis would preserve ordinal responses or justify any composite. Measurement comparability would precede comparisons of latent or composite means. An adjusted location coefficient would describe a conditional association; training and resources may themselves lie on a pathway connecting location and practice. Their inclusion changes the estimand and cannot automatically be described as removing bias. Sensitivity analyses should state the alternative question addressed.

Qualitative analysis would use iterative familiarisation, coding, theme development and review, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analytic memos would distinguish what was observed, what participants said and what researchers inferred. Contradictory cases would be retained. A subset of structured observation episodes could be independently coded to examine code clarity, but a reliability statistic would not substitute for reflexive discussion of thematic interpretation. No themes are presented here as having emerged from transcripts.

3.5. Ethics and Data Protection

Actual research requires review by the relevant institutional body before recruitment, permission from participating institutions, voluntary adult consent, parental permission and ongoing child assent. School permission does not replace individual consent. Teachers should not nominate only compliant or visibly skilled children. Refusal must not affect teaching, assessment or access to materials, and public ranking of drawings should not be introduced for research purposes.

Drawings can contain names, family details and recognisable events. Permission to discuss or analyse a work should be separated from permission to reproduce it. Transcripts and images would use study identifiers, controlled access and a documented retention schedule. The present draft uses no identifiable drawings or genuine participant quotations. An ethics approval number, funding statement and author contribution statement must be supplied by the authors from actual records if fieldwork is later conducted.[7]

4. Illustrative Results and Integration

4.1. Demonstration Sample and Descriptive Contrasts

Table 2. Hypothetical sample allocation and follow-up plan

Component	Urban	Rural	Status
Questionnaire teachers	120	120	Synthetic allocation
Kindergartens	12	12	Assumed clusters
Follow-up kindergartens	4	4	Proposed
Teacher interviews	8	8	Proposed
Leader interviews	4	4	Proposed
Observed sessions	8	8	Proposed
Child conversations	16	16	Proposed

Table 3 illustrates five reported practices with the same denominator in each group. No missing values are introduced into this constructed example. Percentages are arithmetic descriptions of the chosen counts; the percentage-point contrasts do not estimate population differences. Multiple practices can be endorsed by one hypothetical teacher, so counts across rows should not be added.

Table 3. Synthetic frequent-use counts and descriptive contrasts

Practice	Urban n/120 (%)	Rural n/120 (%)	Urban minus rural pp
Resemblance or neatness criterion	78 (65.0)	90 (75.0)	−10.0
Specific process feedback	84 (70.0)	60 (50.0)	20.0
Invitation to explain drawing	90 (75.0)	66 (55.0)	20.0
Portfolio with process notes	72 (60.0)	36 (30.0)	30.0
Supported peer discussion	60 (50.0)	42 (35.0)	15.0

The constructed pattern gives portfolio documentation the largest contrast, while resemblance and neatness remain frequent in both groups. This is useful analytically because it separates an institutional documentation practice from an interactive practice. However, the example cannot establish that portfolios improve feedback, that location causes a difference or that the listed contrasts are statistically significant. There are no kindergarten-level records from which cluster-adjusted uncertainty could be computed.

4.2. Hypothetical Scenarios for Explanatory Inquiry

Scenario A concerns a teacher who regularly uploads finished drawings but rarely records the child's explanation. A questionnaire response may count this as portfolio use even though it offers little process evidence. The follow-up would examine whether stored materials influence later teaching. This scenario highlights the need to distinguish a collection of products from a formative portfolio rather than assume that digital documentation is educationally useful.

Scenario B concerns a teacher who asks a child about a picture of a market near home, listens to the account and offers more space to add a person who was initially omitted. The interaction could support meaning making without specialised equipment. It is an invented case illustrating how local knowledge and an immediate response might matter; it is not a report of rural teachers' actual strengths.[8]

Scenario C concerns a child whose picture is selected for display because it resembles an adult model, although the child prefers a less conventional work. The relevant issue is the difference between teacher recognition and child ownership. A real follow-up would ask how display decisions are negotiated, whether alternative works remain valued and whether the child can decline public presentation. No verbatim quotation is manufactured to make this scenario appear empirical.

4.3. Joint Display and Provisional Explanations

Table 4. Demonstration joint display

Synthetic pattern	Hypothetical explanation	Evidence needed
Portfolio contrast of 30 pp	Access and workload may shape documentation	Work samples; time-use accounts; planning records
Child explanation contrast of 20 pp	Stated participation may differ from actual uptake	Episode sequences; child accounts; declined invitations
Resemblance common in both groups	Display expectations may compete with child intention	Task models; feedback; display selection decisions
Process feedback contrast of 20 pp	Professional learning may influence response specificity	Training content; observed feedback; contrary cases

The display integrates questions and candidate explanations rather than manufacturing convergence. Genuine convergence would require independently collected sources supporting the same interpretation. Divergence would also be informative: frequent reported child explanation alongside little observed dialogue might indicate social desirability, an unusual lesson or an overly broad questionnaire item. Further data, not immediate preference for either strand, would be needed to decide among these alternatives.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1. Interpreting Location without Deficit Assumptions

The demonstration shows how an urban–rural comparison can locate assessment differences in opportunities and routines rather than assign fixed characteristics to teachers. Location is an entry point for investigation, while resources, professional relationships, task expectations and institutional priorities are possible explanatory conditions. Neither a higher count of digital records nor a lower frequency of resemblance comments is sufficient by itself to establish the overall quality of assessment.[9]

A completed study should actively seek urban cases with limited child participation and rural cases with rich process dialogue. Such cases test whether an explanation extends beyond group averages. They also prevent the discussion from turning a descriptive contrast into a universal hierarchy. The synthetic pattern in this draft is only one possible pattern; actual evidence could yield smaller, reversed or absent differences.

5.2. An Assessment Cycle Centred on Children's Intentions

A feasible classroom cycle begins with observing a specific choice, inviting the child's interpretation and giving a descriptive response connected to that interpretation. A brief note or selected work sample can then support a later invitation to extend, revisit or discuss the drawing. Each step should remain proportionate to classroom demands. Requiring lengthy documentation for every work could reduce the very interaction the process is intended to support.

For example, a teacher might notice that a child repeated curved lines, ask whether the child wants to explain them and offer additional paper if the child wishes to continue. The feedback avoids requiring verbal explanation and does not prescribe a correct image. The instructional response is meaningful only if it connects to what the child is trying to do. This is a pedagogical example, not an observed intervention

outcome.

5.3. Professional Learning and Family Communication

Kindergarten professional learning can use anonymised assessment episodes to compare what teachers notice, how they interpret child intention and what response follows. Moderation should develop shared attention to evidence without standardising children's imagery. Cross-setting collaboration could exchange low-cost documentation methods and examples of responsive dialogue, with reciprocal participation rather than an assumption that expertise moves in only one direction.

Family communication can explain why varied drawings may represent worthwhile exploration even when they do not resemble an adult model. A work sample accompanied by a brief child account and a teacher observation can make the rationale accessible. Families should be invited to contribute contextual information without being asked to coach a polished product at home. These are proposed practices; their acceptability and effects require evaluation with teachers, children and families.

5.4. Methodological Limitations and Next Steps

The decisive limitation is the absence of field evidence. The numerical counts were chosen for demonstration, the qualitative scenarios were authored for explanation and no integration claim has been empirically tested. This draft cannot support prevalence estimates, group significance tests, causal explanations or claims that an assessment approach improves creativity. A journal submission framed as original empirical research would require real data, documented procedures, ethical approval and a rewritten results section.

Even after data collection, a single-province cross-sectional study would face selection effects, reporting bias and limited transportability. Repeated observations and explicit comparison of ownership, class size and local context could improve interpretation. A later longitudinal or intervention study might examine whether changed feedback routines alter participation and opportunities to revise, but outcomes should be defined in advance and should not reduce artistic development to adult ratings of attractive products.[10,11]

6. Conclusion

Assessment of children's drawings should examine the relationship between visible work, child intention, adult feedback and subsequent opportunities to act. This manuscript offers a mixed methods structure for studying that relationship across urban and rural kindergartens in Jiangxi. Its synthetic illustration identifies useful comparisons and competing explanations while establishing no empirical urban–rural difference. The proposed practical direction is to make assessment more descriptive, participatory and responsive to children's experiences, with documentation serving instructional decisions. Field evidence is required to determine where these practices occur, what supports them and how they matter to children.

7. Declarations

Data availability: All numerical examples and qualitative scenarios in this manuscript are constructed illustrations; there is no participant dataset. Ethics: No human-participant research was conducted for this draft. Funding and competing interests: To be declared by the authors; no information has been assumed. Authorship and affiliation: To be confirmed. AI assistance: This draft was prepared with generative AI assistance; authors must verify all content and disclose assistance in accordance with the selected journal's policy. Submission status: Demonstration manuscript requiring empirical evidence before submission as an original research article.

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