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Making meaning: children's perspectives expressed through drawings

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The importance of listening to children's perspectives has been emphasised in a wide range of recent research, using a variety of strategies. This paper explores the use of drawing as a strategy to engage with young children around the topic of starting school. It describes the approaches we have used, examines the benefits and challenges we have encountered and discusses implications of using drawings as a strategy for engaging with young children (aged 4–6 years) in research.

Keywords: drawings; children's perspectives; research methods

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on involving children in research. Childhood and children are seen as worthy of investigation in their own right, and researchers now seek to learn about children's knowledge, perspectives and interest from the children themselves (Christensen & James, 2000).

Graue and Walsh (1998) have pointed out that research is a creative process, and generating data with children challenges researchers to be creative. Participant observation has been widely used in research with children in early childhood settings (e.g. Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Johansson, 2005; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006) and video has become increasingly popular for recording observations (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Group interviews, child conferencing, conversations and individual interviews have also been used (Clark, 2005a). Some researchers have recommended having children engaged in doing something during the interviews (Cappello, 2005; Parkinson, 2001) or using props, like toys, paper and crayons, sand, clay, pictures, photographs, dolls and puppets (Doverborg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2003). Questionnaires have been adapted to use with young children. For instance, Einarsdottir (2005b, 2007) designed a cardboard game that served as a questionnaire to discover children's views and opinions about their experiences in an early childhood setting.

Children's drawings are used to access young children's views and experiences by listening to children as they draw and paying attention to their narratives and interpretations (Clark, 2005a, 2005b; Dockett & Perry, 2005a; Punch, 2002; Veale, 2005). Photographs taken by children have been used as an avenue for them to express their

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views and experiences. The children are given cameras and take pictures, which they discuss with the researcher. In this way, the data gathering is, in part, in the hands of the children. They make choices about what to photograph and pick out things that are important to them. The photos then direct the interviews that follow (Clark, 2005a; Clark & Moss, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2005b; Einarsdottir, 2005a; Rasmussen, 1999; Rasmussen & Smidt, 2002). In the Mosaic approach tours and maps are also used to elicit children's perceptions and experiences. Tours involve young children taking the researcher on a guided tour around their early childhood settings. They make maps and record the experience through photographs, drawings or audio recordings (Clark & Moss, 2001).

This article focuses on drawings as a method for listening to young children's perspectives on their lives in early childhood settings.

Children's drawings – review of the literature

A great deal of existing research analyses the graphic, perceptive and psychological aspects of children's drawings (Pillar, 1998). Much of this research has centred on children's drawings of the human figure and connections between children's mental models and their drawing (Goodenough, 1926; Goodnow, 1977; Kellogg, 1969). While more recent research has supported this (Cox, 1992), there have also been cautions that the developmental sequence outlined may well reflect the dominance of Western culture and expectations (Cox, 1998), and that assessing realism may underestimate the symbolic content of children's drawings (Golomb, 1992; Matthews, 1994), particularly the meaning attributed to the drawings by the drawer (Gross & Hayne, 1999). Similar cautions have been voiced about assessing children's drawings in relation to their emotional adjustment (Madigan, Ladd, & Goldberg, 2003) and compositional elements (Catté & Cox, 1999; Jolley & Vulic-Prtoric, 2001).

A range of recent research has moved from the psychological stance of describing children's drawings in terms of developmental sequences, to considering children's drawings as expressions of meaning and understanding (Ring, 2006). Recognising their communicative power, Stanczak (2007, p. 11) notes that: 'the meaning of images resides most significantly in the ways that participants interpret those images, rather than as some inherent property of the images themselves'. This view regards drawings as an effective means for children to explore and communicate their understandings, particularly when attention is paid to the narratives that develop around the drawings (Kress, 1997; Steele, 1999). Focusing on drawing as meaning-making moves away from the discourse of drawing as representation and, instead, focuses on children's intentions, considers the process of drawing and recognises children's drawings as purposeful: 'drawing thus becomes a constructive process of thinking in action, rather than a developing ability to make visual reference to objects in the world' (Cox, 2005, p. 123).

The discourse of drawing as meaning-making recognises the importance of context in children's drawings. Context includes the availability of resources and materials as well as social and cultural elements. Drawings both reflect their cultural context (Cox, Perera, & Fan, 1999) and constitute a cultural practice (Cox, 2005). The social context of drawing – be it within communities of practice (Anning, 2002), in the company of peers (Richards, 2003; Thompson, 1999) or in interactions with significant adults (Braswell & Callanan, 2003), also impacts on the drawing process and the meanings constructed and conveyed (Light, 1985).

The values significant adults ascribe to drawings, including parents and teachers' perceptions and expectations of drawings, are important. For example, Rose, Jolley, and Burkitt (2006) note that teachers in prior-to-school settings and schools tend to differ in their perceptions of drawing, as well as their purposes for including it within the curriculum. Drawing in prior-to-school contexts is often open-ended and child-initiated, but interpreted in terms of a fine-motor activity that is an important precursor to writing. School contexts can see drawings used as a 'time-filler' as well as an activity to encourage realistic representations of object, people, places or events. Drawing at home is generally more child-led than in educational contexts. Both Richards (2003) and Anning (2002) note that as children move through school their interest and engagement in drawing tends to decline, possibly because of the changing contexts.

Adult provisions, interactions and supports influence children's drawings. Peers are also important, with many children drawing in the company of others (Anning, 2002; Anning & Ring, 2004). Children's drawings can be influenced by what others draw or say (Richards, 2003; Thompson, 1999) and the meanings ascribed to drawings may be co-constructed by the participants in the drawing experience (Cox, 2005).

Focusing on the process of children's drawings directs attention to the narrative that accompanies the marks made on paper (Kress, 1997) linking children's meaning-making to the marks made as they draw. Drawings and the accompanying narrative are not separate entities – both are integral parts of the meaning-making process (Cox, 2005; Matthews, 1999; Wright, 2007). Considering both the commentary and the drawing recognises the social construction of meaning and directs adults to the meanings children seek to convey in their drawings, rather than what they contain (Light, 1985). This approach recognises the fluidity and flexibility of children's meaning-making – changes that occur to drawings as a result of comments, or drawings that generate different comments are all recognised as part of the construction of meaning (Cox, 2005). Such transformations are not perceived as limitations that reflect developmental deficiencies. Rather, they reflect children's control of the process: 'changes of mind are central to what the child is quite intentionally engaged in when drawing – the process of decoding and encoding mark and meaning' (Cox, 2005, p. 123). Two immediate consequences of this view emerge – firstly, the importance of noting the children's narrative throughout the drawing process and secondly, the implications of recording or fixing the meaning of the drawing by labelling it.

If children's narrative over the drawing process records the journey of their construction of meaning, it is this, as well as the drawing itself, that will provide insight into children's understandings and perspectives. It then becomes important for researchers to engage with children or at least to be aware of this process, in order to understand children's intentions in drawings. However, much of the attention to children's drawings has been on the finished product and the labelling of that product. Barthes (1967) argues that words anchor meanings, as evidenced in the way captions serve as interpretations of photographs. Hence, once a label is attached to a drawing, the meaning is ascribed. Children in early childhood settings are quite familiar with this process – they draw something, say what it is and the adult scribes the text. While the aim of asking children to explain their drawings may well be to avoid adult interpretation of drawings (Merry & Robins, 2001), Coates (2002) notes that this highly ritualised process does not necessarily result in children sharing their intended meaning: children can become quite adept at giving the information that is required to complete the task.

The discourse of drawing as meaning-making is evident in recent research involving young children. For example, Wright (2007) notes the complexity of children's drawings as verbal and non-verbal signs are used by children to convey meaning; Haney, Russeo, and Bebell (2004) have used children's drawings as a way to document educational phenomena and to gain insights to children's perspectives of lives in schools and classrooms; Óskarsdóttir (2006) has engaged children in drawing to help access their knowledge about the body; and Lenz Taguchi (2006) has used children's drawings to assist teachers examine the beliefs and values underlying their pedagogical practices. In addition, the longitudinal study of young children drawing in home, pre-school and school contexts reported by Anning and Ring (Anning, 2002; Anning & Ring, 2004; Ring, 2006) has done much to extend our understanding of drawing as a tool for constructing and sharing meaning.

Drawings in research with young children

Across our different contexts (Iceland and Australia), we have asked children to share their experiences of preschool and starting primary school. One of the strategies we have employed involves asking children to draw (Dockett & Perry, 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Einarsdottir, 2005b). The contexts in which children have been asked to draw encompass one-to-one interactions between researchers and children in preschool and school, whole-class activities and small group experiences. Our purposes for using drawing are to:

- (1) provide a context where children had some control over the nature of their engagement in data generation activities;
- (2) establish a non-confrontational basis for interactions, where children can draw and are not forced to maintain eye contact with researchers. This is particularly important in a school context, where existing power structures can encourage children's responses that align with teacher expectations;
- (3) provide familiar tools and materials to encourage children to engage in conversations about school or preschool in a meaningful way for them;
- (4) encourage children to take time to respond to questions or engage in discussion as they take the time to draw, recognising that co-construction of meaning takes time and is a transformative process; and
- (5) recognise that some children prefer to convey their perspectives and experiences through a combination of verbal and non-verbal means.

The following discussion reports the strategies we have used, examines the benefits and challenges we have encountered and discusses implications of using drawings as a strategy for engaging with young children (aged 4–6 years) in research.

Example 1: Reflections of first year at school

In several studies, we have asked children to draw impressions of their first year of school. Sometimes the focus has been on how children feel about that year at other times the focus has been how they have changed over that year (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Einarsdottir, 2005b).

In one Icelandic study children were asked what had changed for them over their first year of school. On a large piece of folded paper, three classroom teachers invited children

to draw how they felt when they started school on one side and how they were feeling at the end of the first year of school on the other side. Two of the teachers gave the children the activity to work on independently during their free time. One teacher discussed the activity with the whole class and then asked the children to draw about school.

In an Australian study, children in their first year of school were asked to reflect on what had changed for them over the year. Again, using a large piece of paper folded in half, children were asked to draw and/or write to complete the statements: 'When I started school I ...' and 'Now I ...' Comments were either written by children or scribed by the teacher. With some groups of children, class teachers introduced the drawing activity to the whole class, after some initial discussion (Figure 1). In other groups, children were invited to join the researcher, either individually or in small groups, to talk and/or draw about starting school (Figure 2).

In terms of the generation and sharing of relevant data, the activity of asking children to reflect upon their experiences has been a very successful strategy. Children's willingness to be involved and the significant amount of time many of them spend completing the task and sharing it with researchers have indicated that they regard it as a meaningful and worthwhile activity to complete. We have encouraged the use of this activity as a means of demonstrating children's competence as communicators and as people capable of reflection on what is meaningful for them.

However, we have also experienced some challenges in the use of this activity. In particular, we note that teachers and the classroom context are influential factors in the generation of drawings and conversations. When the teacher introduces the task to the whole class, children clearly identify it as an academic task, potentially open to correc-

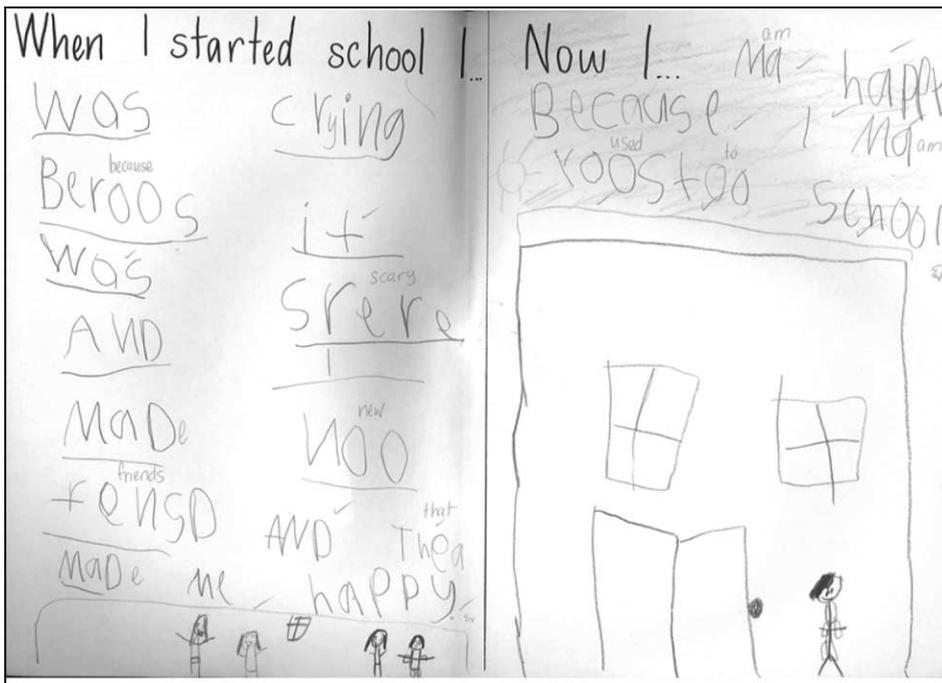


Figure 1. Child's reflection on how he has changed during the first year of school [When I started school I was crying because it was scary and I made new friends and that made me happy. Now I am happy because I am used to school.]

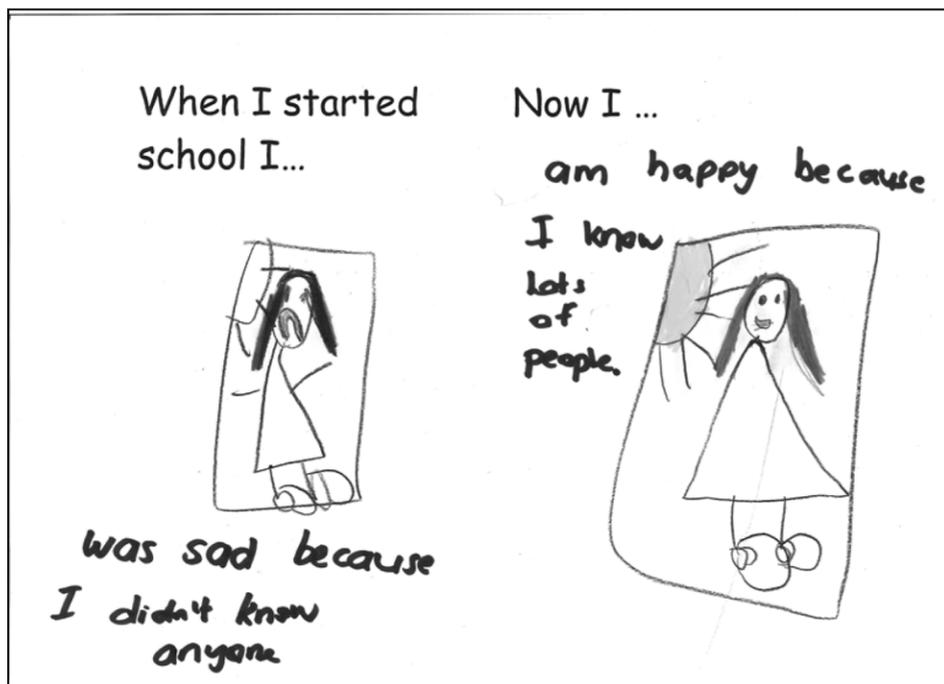


Figure 2. Child's reflection on how she has changed during the first year of school [When I started school I was sad because I didn't know anyone. Now I am happy because I know lots of people.]

tion or assessment (as in Figure 2 where the teacher has corrected the spelling). In other studies, children have indicated that anything produced in class for the teacher constitutes work (King, 1987). We should not be surprised then, if children completing the activity with their teacher may be constrained by regarding it as a work sample (Coates & Coates, 2006). We have also noted that teachers when sharing the drawings with researchers have tended to share those they perceive as 'good', rather than 'poor' drawings. As researchers, we are interested in the drawings of all children, and fully expect that some drawings and comments will not relate to the focus area (starting school). We accept this as children exercising some control over the activity.

We have also noted that when the activity is undertaken by a whole-class group, it is preceded by discussion, often led by the teacher. Does this discussion influence the drawings and comments made by children? We believe that it does, particularly as we conceptualise data as co-constructed by the participants in any experience. Discussions with the children could have influenced their drawings and their explanations. Were they drawing what they wanted or were they influenced by the classroom discussion and/or the views of the teachers? Was the teacher consciously or unconsciously influencing what the children drew? All of these are possible. On the other hand, the discussion could also have been beneficial and thought provoking for the children, helping them to recollect and reflect on their experiences.

Clearly, there are advantages and disadvantages in introducing the drawing activity as a part of the classroom routine. Advantages include children participating in an activity that is familiar, in a familiar context that does not disrupt classroom routine. Disadvantages relate to children regarding the activity as 'work'. One way to build on

the advantages is to conduct the activity within the familiar context, but in small groups led by the researcher.

Example II: What did you like/dislike about preschool?

Studies in both countries have asked children about things they do, and do not, like about school or preschool. Drawing has been one of several different strategies children have chosen to use to convey these likes and dislikes. Individually or in small groups, children have been asked to talk as they draw, again using a large piece of paper folded in half. As children drew, or at the end of the activity, they have been asked about their drawing. Researchers have then recorded these comments on the drawing (Figures 3 and 4).

The task of drawing one situation and then the opposite situation – such as what children like about school as well as what they do not like, has been described as offering two opportunities for children to clarify meanings (Maxwell, 2006). It also has the potential for forcing children to think in dichotomies. In some drawings children themselves have negated this potential to dichotomise, by nominating the same things as likes and dislikes. We are keen to promote a range of opportunities to explore meaning, and the use of opposites in drawing achieves this. However, we are cautious about enforcing any polarity of thinking, and recognise that the boundaries between opposites – such as likes and dislikes – are often blurred and are highly dependent on context.

For some of the children participating in the Icelandic study, the drawing and talking activity was a stimulating exercise: they were excited when they were given a sheet of paper and crayons to use and they spent considerable time on their drawings.



Figure 3. Child's likes and dislikes about school [At school I like skipping. I don't like Hoola Hooping because I don't want to get hurt and it's hard.]

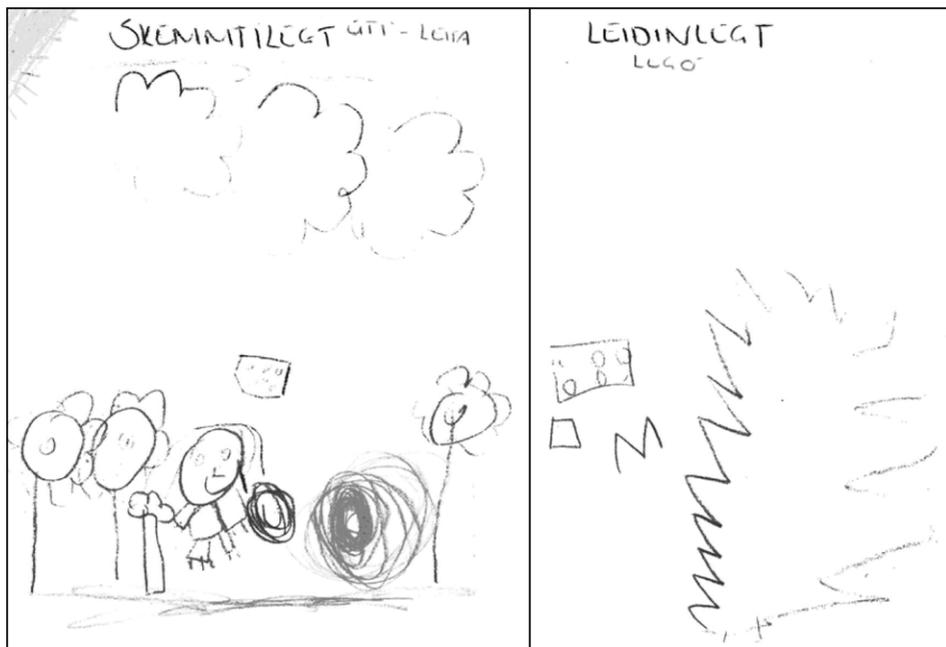


Figure 4. Child's likes and dislikes about school [I like to play outside. I don't like Lego.]

However, other children did not care much for this exercise. They left the paper blank or did not spend much time on their drawings. This was more common with the preschool children; for the school children this was a more appealing exercise.

There are several possible explanations for this difference. According to the results of the Icelandic study overall, some of the school children were bored with school activities in general. Perhaps they were more content to spend time drawing, and so avoiding some classroom activities. The preschool children, on the other hand, may have felt that they were missing out on playing with their peers or participating in some other interesting activities while interacting and drawing with the researcher. Regardless of the reason, it has been important for us to remember that not all children like to draw: indeed some are adamant that they 'can't draw', or that their drawings are 'no good'. Richards (2003) has noted that both children and adults expect drawings to become more realistic as children get older. There is also evidence that children compare their drawings and make judgements based on how accurately drawings reflect reality (Richards, 2003). It may be that children's discomfort about drawing relates to their perceived lack of ability to draw realistic representations. Classroom climate also has an influence on children's willingness to draw. Where teachers emphasise the process of drawing, rather than the quality of the final product, and where dispositions such as creativity and persistence are rewarded, children are likely to regard drawing as a pleasurable activity.

Example III: Memories of preschool experiences

Drawing was used in a study investigating how Grade 1 children in Iceland (the first year of school) remembered their preschool experience. Data were gathered midway

during the children's first year of primary school. The children's preschool teachers were co-researchers and participated in the data gathering. The children were interviewed in small groups. They were asked to draw pictures about their preschool experience after the interview. It is interesting to note that these children put a lot of effort into their drawings. Most of the children took 10–15 minutes to work on the drawings and some of the girls took even longer. The drawings provided a range of data which complemented the interviews. The children expressed their feelings and emotions very clearly in their drawings. For example, Figure 5 is one boy's recollection of being sad and lonely. Figure 6 reflects a girl's positive memories of rest time.

The high level of children's interest and engagement in this task made it a successful means of exploring children's perspectives. Part of the success of the task may be related to the involvement of the preschool teachers, who made special visits to the school to talk with the children. The positive relationship existing between children and the preschool teachers may have been responsible for the children's excitement and eagerness to be involved. Another possible explanation for the successful use of the drawings is that these children came from a preschool that incorporated curriculum principles based on the Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1993/1998) and especially emphasised creative activities. The presence of the preschool teachers could well have prompted the children's willingness to draw.

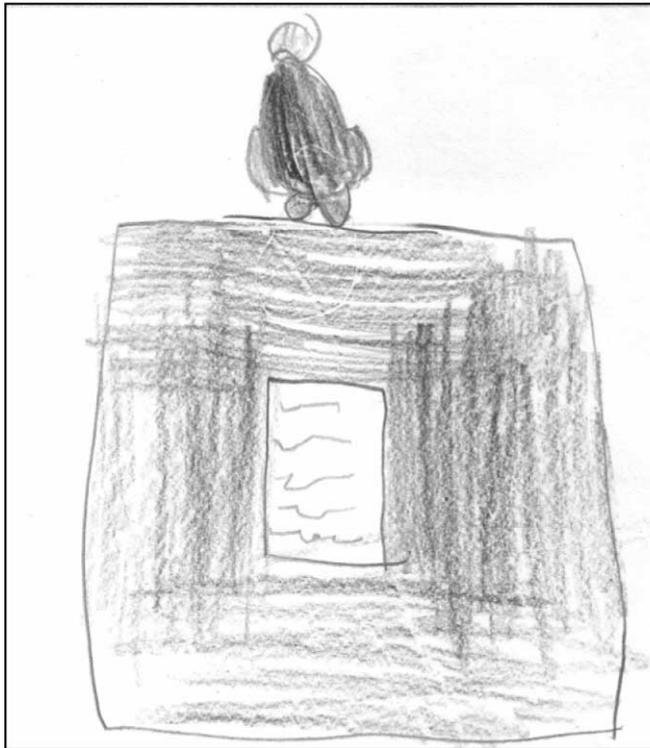


Figure 5. Child's memories about sad things [I was sad when someone was unhappy.]



Figure 6. Child's memories about happy things [I liked the rest time in playschool.]

Example IV: Expectation of school

As part of several Australian studies exploring children's expectations of school, we have invited children to draw while engaging in a conversation about school. The combined task, described as 'drawing-telling' by Wright (2007), has been undertaken either by children individually or in small groups, with a researcher. These interactions have taken place within the early childhood setting, guided by the children's interest. Figure 7 was produced by one child, Ellen, aged four, in her child care centre, over a 15-minute period. An excerpt of the narrative accompanying the drawing is also included.

- Ellen: Mmm, school [Draws two windows].
Do you know this is Reecey's school? Just over there – 'cross the road'.
Researcher: Is that your friend, Reece?
Ellen: Yeah, he's my friend, and my cousin. You can write that if you want ... 'This is Reecey's school ... and Trany, Leanne and Warwick...' and do you know my name is the same as my Nanny's? You can write that too: 'my Nanny's name is the same as mine'. Not the same as my Mum's, just the same as mine. See the E? Mmm, that's for me, and my Nanny [writes name on top left of paper].
[draws a dot, continues drawing over it until it is a filled in circle] Mmm, a door [adds a rectangular shape around the circle. Repeats the actions to complete another 'door']



Figure 7. Child's images of school [This is Reece's school and Trany, Leanne, Warwick and my Nanny's name is the same like mine. This is Reece's part and a little door. This is the window. This is grass with big bindies.]

Reecey, he started school just now. He did. An' he just lives near me ... This is Reece's part here – and a little door [laughs]. An' he's gotta be really little to get in the door [laughs]. This is the window. He could just climb out the window if he can't fit in the door!

The narrative and the drawing together reflect the meanings Ellen was constructing in response to the task of drawing what she thought school would be like. Ellen's strategy of making meaning of the task was to relate it to her friend and cousin, Reece, who had just started school. In keeping with this, Ellen described school as a personal place as well as a physical space. Yet, it is the physical structures only that are represented in her drawing – it was her narrative that reflected the personal element. The combination of drawing and telling provided opportunities for Ellen to focus on both physical and personal elements. Throughout the process of drawing, her conversation was reflected in the drawing and vice versa: the marks Ellen made on the paper both influenced her comments and were guided by them. For example, Ellen started drawing a dot, which became a circle and then a door. Her label of 'a door' came after the drawing. On other occasions, her conversation influenced the drawing – for example, when Ellen added a window because Reece might not be able to get out of the door. The ritual process of drawing and having an adult scribe some words was anticipated, and Ellen was clear about what should be noted on the drawing. However, her conversation included much more than this – it became a more personal narrative relating to family and friends and the contexts in which she was familiar.

The strategy of asking children to draw while also engaged in conversation has the potential to promote meaningful interaction, over an extended period of time. However, some children are uncomfortable with drawing and talking, focusing on one or the other. For example, Liam focused on his drawing, rather than engaging in

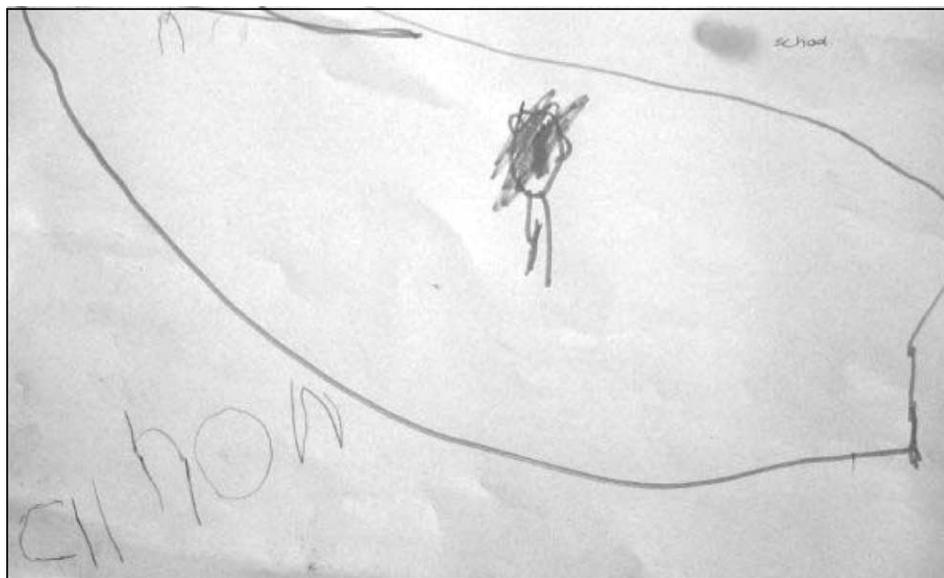


Figure 8. Liam's school.

conversation. He drew a figure, indicating that it was his school, and then scrawled over the picture. He added some letters, but then indicated that he had finished the task. He indicated that he wanted the label for the drawing to be 'Liam's school'. He was keen to complete the drawing task, but also keen to do it as quickly as possible (Figure 8).

Discussion

Inviting children to draw their experiences and expectations of school has facilitated discussion of their perceptions and understandings. In most of the studies reported in this paper, it has been the children's choice to draw. Several other means of engaging with researchers have also been available – including photo-essays, role play and discussions. Yet, these children have made an active choice to draw, suggesting that they are comfortable and familiar with the activity. In the remaining studies, teachers have introduced the activity of drawing and children have participated in this activity, much as they would in other academic activities. However, even in this latter case, children have exercised control over what they have drawn and what they have chosen to share about that drawing. In each study, some children have chosen not to draw, or to draw in ways that have not been clearly related to the suggested focus of starting school – again indicating some exercise of control.

Drawing has been proposed as a familiar task for children. Indeed, many of the children involved in these studies seemed eager to draw. However, in each study there have been children who did not want to draw, said they 'couldn't draw' or avoided the drawing activity. While regarding drawing as an effective strategy for engaging with children in research, we are cautious about promoting drawing as a comfortable and positive experience for all children.

In each of the studies referred to in this paper, we have considered children's drawings and their accompanying narrative as the unit of analysis. While it is certainly

possible to analyse children's drawings in terms of the aesthetic and compositional elements, we have been interested in the meanings constructed by children, rather than their ability to create a particular style of drawing. This is not to suggest that the drawing is not important – it is an essential aspect of the meanings constructed and shared by children. We rely on children's combined narrative and drawing to convey the meanings they have constructed and are prepared to share. In keeping with this view, we expect children's narratives (and the narratives of other children around them) to influence their drawings, and conversely, for the drawings to influence the narratives that surrounds them.

There is a range of advantages connected with the research strategy of seeking children's involvement in drawing. These relate to drawing being an open-ended, often familiar activity. For some children, drawing is a preferred means of communication (Barker & Weller, 2003). An invitation to children to draw can encourage them to address issues that are relevant for them, in a way that also is meaningful for them. When engaged in conversations with children, drawing can provide a focus that enables children to interact on their own terms – for example, by not necessarily maintaining eye contact with an adult, by having something to do when interacting with others and by controlling the discussion about the drawing. In addition, the combination of children's drawing and narrative can provide valuable insights into the meanings children ascribe – in this case, into the meanings they construct about school.

It is possible to identify a number of disadvantages in research methodologies where children are invited to participate in drawing experiences. These mainly relate to time and the provision of resources. Engaging in conversation with children as they draw and talk does take time – yet it is also a great opportunity to promote mutuality in interaction as researchers and children share focus and attention. Some children are uncomfortable with drawing, indicating that they cannot draw. Richards (2003) suggests that this belief is more prevalent as children get older and reflects the expectation that drawings will be realistic and representative.

A further potential disadvantage relates to the control children can exercise over their drawing. In several instances in our studies, children have spent considerable time on a drawing, but then scrawled all over it, effectively masking the drawing. If the drawing alone was the data to be considered, researchers could be quite disheartened. However, where the process of constructing the drawing and the narrative that accompanies the drawing are considered, the final drawing product assumes much less importance.

Conclusion

Much recent research has emphasised the importance of listening to children's perspectives on issues that are important and relevant for them. In reporting several studies where children have been encouraged to draw, we have noted the importance of drawing as a process, rather than the drawing product. In particular, we note that when children draw and talk, they construct and convey meaning, in our case, meanings related to the transition to school.

Drawing is not a favoured method of communication for all children but it has been used by many of the children with whom we have interacted in our studies. Their choice of drawing and our choice to consider both the drawing and the narrative that accompanies the drawing has proven to be a powerful combination. Children have some control over what they draw and what they say, and they exercise this control.

Our response is that such action is their right and, if we are serious about the importance of listening to children's perspectives, we must facilitate their involvement as equitably as possible.

The stimulus of having children draw and comment on their drawings has enriched the research reported here. It has given researchers – both adult and child – another way in which to communicate with each other and this has led to important findings. Not everyone likes to draw but those that do have enhanced research on starting school through their rich drawings and accompanying narratives.

Notes on contributors

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Bob Perry is Professor in the Murray School of Education at Charles Sturt University, Australia. Bob's research interests include educational transitions, notably the transition to school, young children's mathematical thinking, pedagogical approaches in early childhood education and teacher professional development.

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