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'I forgot the sky!' Children's Stories Contained within Their Drawings ELIZABETH COATES

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Abstract

What stories do young children's drawings contain? So often children's free drawings are not held in high regard but are seen as an activity which is undertaken outside lesson time or as an illustration to some prescribed task. However, the concentration and care with which some children undertake a drawing suggests that the content has real significance and that the drawing has not been undertaken lightly. This small-scale study arose from observations in a school setting of young children talking to themselves as they drew pictures. Often it seemed that this talk was a rehearsal for the drawing and it was this link that the project set out to explore. Children aged from 3 to 7 years were studied in their classrooms where they were participating in a free choice of activities. This paper examines the drawings collected together with transcriptions of the children's descriptions of their drawings. It looks at the symbolism contained within the pictures and the stories woven within each one. The study is intended as a pilot for a longitudinal research project focusing not only on children's drawings and accompanying narrative but extending to an exploration of emergent writing.

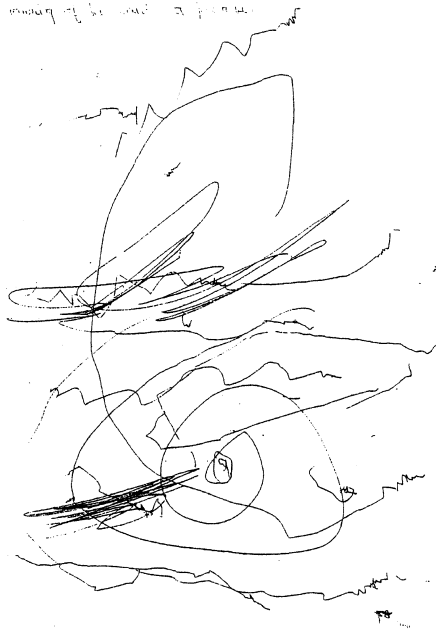
Introduction

For the young child the very process of making marks may be seen as part of their play, an exploration of the way surfaces can be transformed through their actions. Observations of 2-year-old children at a local nursery showed their absorption in a tray of damp sand using their fingers to investigate its texture, making grooves and squiggles in its smooth surface. At this stage such experimentation, whether it be with sand, paint or crayon, would seem to be the enjoyment of mark making for its own sake. However,

Gentle (1985) suggests that in fact a child's mark making progresses through a store of marks and schemata common to children worldwide. Research undertaken in the 1950s by Rhoda Kellogg provides a basis for such an assumption, since her study of more than 100,000 drawings led her to conclude that between the ages of 2 and 3, children repeatedly make a number of definite marks (Kellogg, 1955). These she categorised into 20 basic scribbles, examples of which can be seen either by themselves or in combination as we study young children's drawings today. To the uninitiated such scribbles may appear to be meaningless, except as an indication of developing manipulative skills, but Kellogg intimates that this may be because the work is being viewed from an adult's perspective. To the child, she feels, each scribble has particular significance and those observing young children may gain insights by listening to the child's simultaneous utterances. This notion is given further credence by the work of Nutbrown (1999) whose study of schema led her to propose: 'given that children working on particular patterns of thought can represent their schemas through making marks and talking as well as through their actions, it may follow that "vertical" and "back and forth" schemas emerge before "enclosing and enveloping" schemas'. If one accepts this hypothesis then it follows that these very early drawings form an important part of children's learning. Such activities allow rules to be explored, the child choosing the direction, shape and format appropriate to that moment (Matthews, 1994). The spontaneity of these drawing episodes might lead the adult to consider connections between recent events and their content, and whereas it might seem logical to relate a lively combination of scribbles to a visit to the seaside, without knowledge of the child's internal thought process we cannot be certain. Observations of the child in other contexts may suggest an exploration of a particular schema allowing an entirely different interpretation to be made (Cooke et al., 1998; Malchiodi, 1998; Nutbrown, 1999). Asking the very young child to talk about the drawing can lead to unexpected results, for whereas the child might seem engrossed in the activity, once he has finished interest is frequently lost. How completely this interest disappears was illustrated for me by my son (Figure 2.1) who at 2 years 2 months drew a complicated and vigorous mixture of scribbles which I felt must surely have real significance. When asked what it was, he replied 'a drawing'. To the question: what is it a drawing of? he answered, 'a picture'.

At this stage, Matthews (1994) feels the child's drawings are personal and not intended to communicate or be shared with others. As Jameson (1968) says, what the child really wants to do is to talk to himself in pictures, which suggests that the child weaves stories around the marks being made, each scribble having particular meaning dictating the story's direction so that the whole turns into a fantastical journey, a parallel for active fantasy play. To anyone living or working with young children this must seem a familiar idea, for they will almost certainly talk to themselves all the time they are drawing. It is not often, however, that adults pay attention to the content of this talk and much of the literature written about art education and the

Figure 2.1 Bruce, aged 2 years 2 months. 'A drawing.'



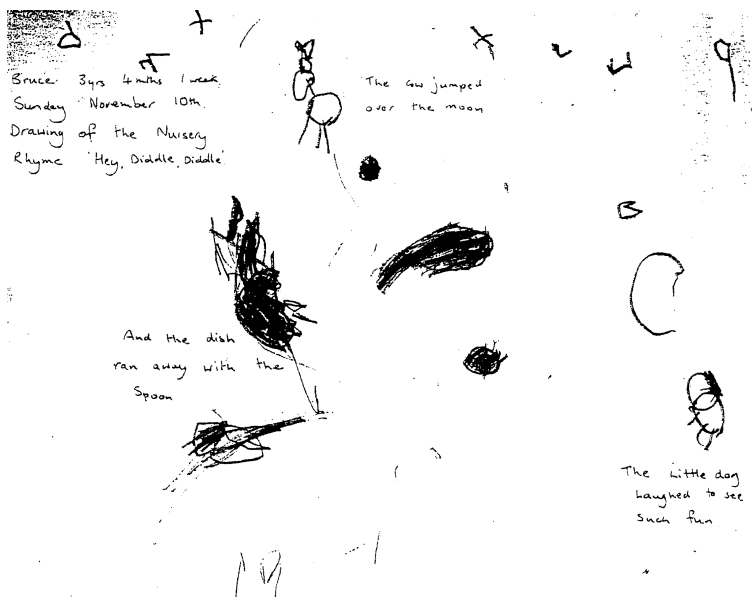
drawings of young children focuses far more on the developmental aspects, missing what to me seems an essential ingredient. Indeed at times it seems as though it is only the product that is being interpreted whilst utterances which could aid understanding are ignored (Kress, 1997).

Mark making and emergent writing

Consideration of children's utterances whilst drawing is more likely to be found in text relating to pre-literacy, where links are made between mark making and emergent writing. Pahl (1999) suggests that drawing helps the child externalise a thought and is a first step in creating symbols to represent real objects. Kress (1997) in *Before Writing* goes further, seeing the form and content of drawings as being as powerful as composing and writing. My own experience both as a parent and a teacher of young children confirms this, for the progression from scribbles to forms recognisable to others paves the way for a dialogue which aids understanding of the child's perception of the world (Coates, 1993). There is a danger, however, that in our eagerness to respond to perceived images we put our own interpretations on them, seeing and labelling figures, for instance, as 'Daddy', 'Mummy' or brother or sister. If we accept Kellogg's (1969) claim that

children accept adults' responses even though they may not be a true interpretation then we can begin to understand why the description of the drawing's content once completed differs from the narrative which the child told to himself as he drew. If this is the case then it is possible that children from an early age are being conditioned into the format so familiar in educational settings. They come to expect to be asked about the drawing's content and a routine of drawing, telling the adult about the picture and the adult writing a sentence about it, is established. Browne (1996) stresses that this is no longer sufficient as an introduction to writing, for the expectation that the child will copy the adult's writing denies him the opportunity to show how much he already understands. For some children, however, Jameson (1968) feels this is necessary, for the adult's writing creates a link between the written and spoken word in the context of drawing. Within today's print-laden society it is difficult to imagine young children being unaware of the symbolic nature of writing, and many of the spontaneous drawings I have examined contain evidence of graphemes scattered across the page or lines of loops and zigzags resembling an adult's hand. When such signs first appear it is difficult to say with any conviction that there is a distinction being made between drawing and writing: certainly unless the child's spoken discourse provides a clue. I would agree with Kress (1997) that the 'child is (either) "drawing" both the print and the image or "writing" both print and image' (p. 61). Bruce's

Figure 2.2 Bruce, aged 3 years 4 months. 'Hey, Diddle, Diddle.'



drawing of the nursery rhyme 'Hey, Diddle Diddle' (Figure 2.2) illustrates this point well, for he sang as he drew and the letter-like shapes, which may include his initials (B.C.), appeared to be an extension to the drawing rather than a separate entity.

Drawing and language within nursery

The concentration within English nursery and infant schools today on developing children's literacy skills seems to have moved the emphasis away from spontaneous drawing to the more formal pursuit of using it as source material for copy writing, until by the age of 7 writing takes precedence, with drawing used to illustrate. It was an awareness that even in some of our nursery schools 3-year-old children were spending time copying letter shapes and tracing over writing with little opportunity for free drawing that led to this small-scale study. While observing student teachers I had become very conscious of the different values placed on children's drawing as they progressed from nursery to the top of the infant school. I felt that often the role of the teacher and early years practitioner precluded their sitting to observe children during free-choice activities and therefore valuable links between talk and drawing were being missed. To explore this further a decision was made to set up a pilot study which allowed time to be spent looking at children across the 3–7 age range. From this it was hoped to construct a sound basis for a longitudinal project not only focusing on children drawing and the accompanying narrative, but extending to an exploration of emergent writing.

The pilot study – observations

Twenty children in three settings were observed: four 4-year-olds (nursery setting), eight 5-year-olds, four 6-year-olds and four 7-year-olds (in two primary school settings). Because of the nature and organisation of some of the classrooms it was not always possible to set up a drawing area within them and some observations took place in the activity area outside. Although it was originally intended to spend several sessions with each age group this proved impossible, so one morning was spent observing each age group instead.

It was apparent to me prior to this study that there was often a dichotomy in nursery and reception classes between the child's narrative during each spontaneous drawing episode and the off-task talk which arose as they laboriously traced sentences dictated previously to their teacher. These sometimes stilted and short descriptions contrasted with the lively dramatisation that occurred as children took on the role of the characters being drawn. As Cox (1992) suggests, although the marks may not look like the objects involved, it may be the movement or functional aspects of these

objects that are being represented. Observations in my first setting, a large nursery, seemed to support this idea.

The 3- and 4-year-olds

Although much emphasis was put on developing formal literacy skills there was a drawing area set up as a free choice activity. Thomas's drawing of a 'dog factory' (Figure 2.3) was accompanied by a commentary on the route the ingredients took. As he drew each part he said 'in there', 'down there', 'down there', 'down there', 'here!' Although his description of his drawing was phrased in a more conventional format, 'A dog factory. The ingredients go in here then they go down the pipes, round there and come out here', it was obvious that his commentary had been integral to his completed picture. My second example (Figure 2.4) is another 4-year-old, Jack, whose approach initially was similar in that he named each part as he drew it. However, far from drawing the head shape and then adding the features, his starting point was the eyes, saying 'one eye, two eye' followed by the nose, which he didn't name but called 'massive' (see Figure 2.4). The jaw and top of head were added separately and the drawing was abandoned when he drew the second ear piece 'too long'. This drawing, which he gave to me, he labelled a clown but immediately started another 'clown' drawn in the same way but to which he added a very small body. As he drew this part he laughed and said, 'Has a big head, when he sits on the settee his head is bigger than the settee. When he goes to bed his head is bigger. He needs an enormous pillow.' This again was labelled 'a clown' with no more details. Jack set about his drawings in a very deliberate fashion, the repetition in exactly the same order of the clown's head suggesting that he had a particular plan in mind. It would have been interesting to see if this was peculiar to the clown or whether this order occurred in other figure drawings, supporting Goodnow's (1977) contention that young children are remarkably consistent in their drawing sequences. To the adult seeing only the completed picture, Jack's particular and perhaps unconventional order would not have been obvious. Certainly they would not have been aware that his narrative for the second drawing echoed Kellogg's (1969) claim that children are well aware when their pictorial representations are out of proportion. Although I was present when both Thomas and Jack were drawing and therefore aware of the precise circumstances in which they took place, as Pahl (1999) points out, the observer is not in a position to know the thinking behind them. Without knowledge of the social and emotional factors at play and an understanding of the culture surrounding the two boys it is possible only to surmise about their subject choices. Neither of the remaining two nursery children observed stayed for any length of time. It was obvious that drawing for them at that time was only a transitory affair, for they talked steadily to other children, made cursory marks on paper and then threw them in the bin after no more than three minutes.

Figure 2.3 Thomas, aged 4 years 6 months 'A dog factory. The ingredients go in here, then they go down the pipes, round there and come out here.'

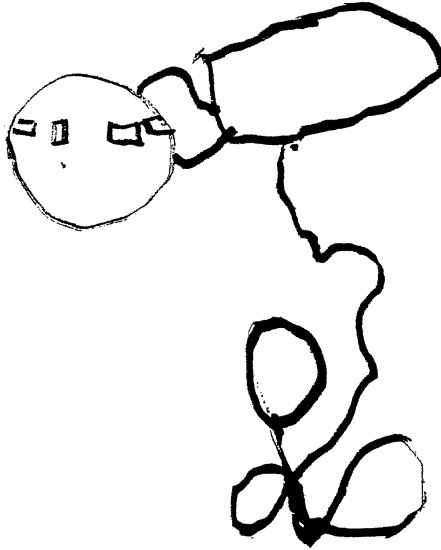
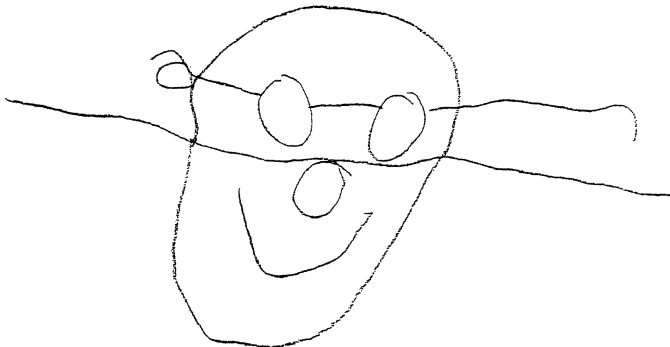


Figure 2.4 Jack, aged 4 years 10 months. 'A clown.' Drawing sequence: 1. eyes; 2. nose; 3. jaw; 4. moustache; 5. top of head; 6. mouth; 7. glasses-ear pieces.



The 5-year-olds

In the two primary schools, observations were made of four children at a time. There were similarities between the two groups of 5-year-old children in that all eight drawings contained the stereotypical houses described by Kellogg (1969) and Duffy (1998) and, unlike the 4-year-olds, these children discussed their drawings, announcing what they intended to draw and adding details as ideas came up in the conversation. The first group, which

consisted of two boys and two girls, showed different approaches. The two girls talked throughout about their drawings, mentioning each new detail and competing with each other, as this extract shows:

- Tamara:* I'm going to do a doorbell. I'm going to put a road. [*talks as she draws these*]
Tom: I've already put one in. [*doorbell*]
Shannon: I'm doing one as well. [*adds road*]
Tamara: You're copying me!
Shannon: I've made a road like you.
Tamara: I'm putting lines on.
Shannon: I'm going to do a kennel.
Tamara: I'm going to do one as well.
Shannon: You've got to do a roof. [*to Tamara*]
Shannon: Look, I've done a sun.
Tamara: I'm going to do one.
Shannon: I'm going to do a moon.
Tamara: I'm going to do a moon as well.
Tom: You can't have the sun and the moon at the same time.
Tamara: I have in my drawing.

One of the interesting aspects of this exchange is the reversal of roles. Part way through, Shannon initially accused of copying becomes the source of the sun and moon images as well as the kennel. The finished pictures (Figures 2.5 and 2.6) do appear similar in the central placing of the house and road. Both contain elements of writing placed strategically and appearing, as Kress suggested, an essential part of the drawing rather than as a separate entity. Tamara's 'emforty5' refers to the motorway near her home, and Shannon's writing forms part of her address. Whilst Tamara was happy to talk about her completed drawing (see Figure 2.5), Shannon, like some of the children in Matthews's (1994) research, wanted to move on to another activity rather than describe her work. Neither of the two boys really joined in the conversation although it was clear from Tom's description of his drawing that he had been listening to the girls and some of the details suggested appear in his drawing. When Tamara realised she had forgotten the sky, Tom echoed 'I've forgotten it as well' and coloured a broad patch of blue at the top of his paper saying, as he coloured round the sun, 'The sun's going, it's getting to the evening.' Examining the children's descriptions of their drawings (see Figures 2.7 and 2.8 for Tom's & Charlie's) they seem to form a pattern. Rather than a continuous narrative they follow the familiar naming of items format which Browne (1996) warns us against. Having said that, however, the dialogue between the two girls follows a similar path for there is no story as such, only a detailing of each item being drawn.

The combination of Charlie's narrative and drawing (Figure 2.8) tells us a great deal about his level of understanding. His van, drawn accurately with just two wheels visible, not only stands firmly on a road but the actual

Figure 2.5 Tamara, aged 5 years 1 month. 'That's the M45 [points to road]. That's a house with lots of people together. That's the sun and that's the moon and "Oh", I've forgotten something. I forgot the sky [starts to draw it as a blue line] now I've got to tell you about the sky. That's the sky.'

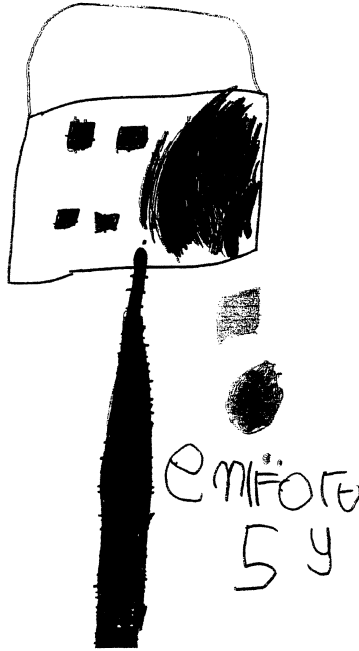


Figure 2.6 Shannon, aged 5 years and 4 months (no narrative offered).



Figure 2.7 Tom, aged 5 years 8 months. 'The sun's going, it's getting to the evening' (as he adds the sky and the sun). Description: 'It's a house with the sky. A green door. That's a butterfly and that's a dog kennel' (points to each item as he speaks).



road is identified, as 40 (the M40 is the nearest motorway). Charlie's name appears on the side of the van as a reversal and one gets the impression of a potential storyline as the van heads away from his house (identified as number 10). Although it is possible to gain some insights, through observation, into the drawing's content, as Pahl (1999) states, so much more could be gained from a knowledge of the culture within which the child lives.

The dialogue between the other group of 5-year-olds followed a similar pattern. Haas Dyson (cited in Pahl, 1999, p. 4) in her studies of children of this age talks about the complexities of these discussions and how the children support each other, stimulating and extending their compositions. I could relate her findings to my study groups. However, there was a distinct difference in the way these two groups talked about their drawings once completed. Whereas the first group described their pictures, the second group offered definite storylines instead. Kress (1997) suggests that

Figure 2.8 Charlie, aged 5 years. 'A butterfly on the top of the house. There's a house underneath it. That's the van with my name on it and two letters. There's a door with number 10. There's a road under the van. There's a tree by the house. That's the sun on top of the tree. There's a cake on top of the house and that's all.'



children typically produce a stage set of figures and objects which serve as prompts for their verbal narrative; certainly one could read this group's drawings in this way. Melissa, whose drawing (Figure 2.9) conforms to Kellogg's human, vegetation and buildings groupings (1969, p. 114), uses the characters to 'tell a story', referring to all the items drawn: 'She's going to climb the tree to pick some blue berries and red berries and then she is going into the house to put her berries in the basket and then she's going to pick some flowers to put as decoration in her bedroom.'

The 6-year-olds

Observations of the 6-year-olds again showed a brisk exchange of ideas after an initial stating of intention. Unlike the last two groups, the two boys dominated the conversation, with contributions from the girls. As they started, Daniel stated that 'girls draw the same things boys draw the same' which in this instant was true, for the girls focused upon house and pictures and the boys on Pokémon characters. The two boys worked closely, naming characters, singing songs and discussing the features of each one. They seemed to be entering into the spirit of the drawing, making appropriate noises and movements, thereby dramatising their creation. Once again the

Figure 2.9 Melissa, aged 5 years 9 months. 'She's going to climb the tree to pick some blue berries and red berries and then she is going into the house to put her berries in the basket and then she's going to pick some flowers to put as decoration in her bedroom.'



dialogue was more involved than the description given at the picture's completion. The following extract gives a flavour of their discussion and comes halfway through the session.

- Craig:* I'm going to draw Charzard.
Daniel: He's the biggest one.
Craig: Mine's saying Charzard come here. Charzard has a really, really long tail.
Daniel: He has such a long tail doesn't he?
Daniel: Yes, but he has a really fat tail.
Craig: Pikachu is really, really little.
Daniel: Do some fire on his tail.
Craig: He has fire in his mouth.
Daniel: I'm going to do Charzard red. Who's that one who is red?
Craig: Oh, that's the baby Charzard. Right here comes the fire! [*draws fire*]
Here's the baby, the baby can't fly, can he?
Daniel: I like the baby Charzard
Jodie: The baby has fire, doesn't he?
Craig: No, the baby Charzard doesn't.

Compare this with Craig's description of his drawing which he gave as he was adding the last figure:

Pikachu's in it, Charzard and there's going to be Baby Charzard and Squirtle and I'm going to have one more and that's called Charmander. I'm going to do one more and that's going to be Bulbasaur.

and Daniel's comment: 'Mine's the same as Craig's.'

Although one of the girls offered a similar descriptive passage, the other girl whose picture showed an awareness of composition indicated the beginnings of a storyline (Figure 2.10) with:

A cottage in the wood, and some mountains in the distance and there's the stars cos it's night-time. There's a rabbit popping out of his hole.

The picture itself was interesting for the way it had been laid out, as it took the observer's eye straight along the path to the house whilst the surrounding dark blue focused the action on the lighter central area. The black and white version does not do the drawing justice for the stars and moon, both essential elements, are yellow – a colour that will not reproduce in this circumstance. It felt as if Jodie was not only beginning to understand composition but also had a sense of an audience, seeking to involve the viewer in her story. Such supposition, of course, can only be raised as an idea, for without knowledge of her background and many more observations it is impossible to draw more positive conclusions.

Figure 2.10 Jodie, aged 6 years 6 months. 'A cottage in the wood and some mountains in the distance and there's the stars cos it's night-time. There's a rabbit popping out of his hole.'



The 7-year-olds

The last group to be observed again consisted of two girls and two boys. These were in their last year in the infant department and would be moving to the other side of the building housing the junior children after the summer break. To begin with, the children drew in silence, Matthew taking his inspiration from a circus poster on the wall, including a clown and a cannon in his drawing. The cannon obviously triggered a memory for him since his last comment: 'Sam, I do like the gun on fire, like the boy who set the cannon on fire' started a long discussion about Florence Nightingale, a drummer boy and how cannon balls can shoot your legs off. Conversation was sporadic and although occasionally it focused upon the drawings, generally the talk was about issues related to television, guns and James Bond. Although all four children had chosen to draw they seemed to treat this as an opportunity to socialise rather than concentrate on the activity. This was reflected to a certain extent in the finished pictures and descriptions, which lacked the detail and depth of content of those produced by most of the younger children. Again, a series of observations might have contradicted this but, given the prescriptive nature of the curriculum generally offered to 7-year-old children in the English school system, it seems a reasonable assumption. Gentle (1985) suggests that by the age of 7 children are able to stand back from their experiences; their drawings may register this change in their seeing and thinking. By this age, too, many children have become critical of their attempts at representation, aware that they fall short of the real object, and this can have the effect of inhibiting them. Two of the completed pictures were of clowns juggling from the circus poster, but whereas Evie included a flower and butterfly with the clown in the foreground, Matthew (Figure 2.11) placed the clowns in context and explained the action happening in his picture. Both Matthew and Sam (Figure 2.12) included speech in their drawing and their narrative shows an element of wit, with Matthew's 'help me' as he shows a person flying in the air after touching the hot cannon and Sam's monkey in the tree saying 'hello' to the panda as he walks past.

Sam's drawing is very regimented, with the three trees set at intervals and the pandas spaced carefully between – again, one might suggest, relating to the stage set referred to by Kress (1997). The technique Sam used in his drawing of the trees was very different from the way any of the other children attempted them. He started by drawing brown blocks one on top of the other until Matthew asked what they were and suggested, 'If you put a top on them it could be a trampoline'. Sam then proceeded to put green ball shapes on the top and responded to Matthew's 'What is that?' with 'They're trees.' It seemed that everything he did was very deliberate and he spent time thinking about each aspect before drawing it.

Sophie, the fourth member of this group was noticeably quiet throughout the session and her drawing was quite different. Her picture (Figure 2.13) was dominated by two arched doors. These, she said, were part of the old

Figure 2.11 Matthew, aged 7 years 8 months. 'He says "help me". He flies in the air because he touched the cannon and it's on fire. They're the people [points to faces]. They're the only ones you can see.'



Figure 2.12 Sam, aged 7 years 8 months. 'They're panda bears going for a walk in the woods. There's a monkey in the tree saying "hello".'

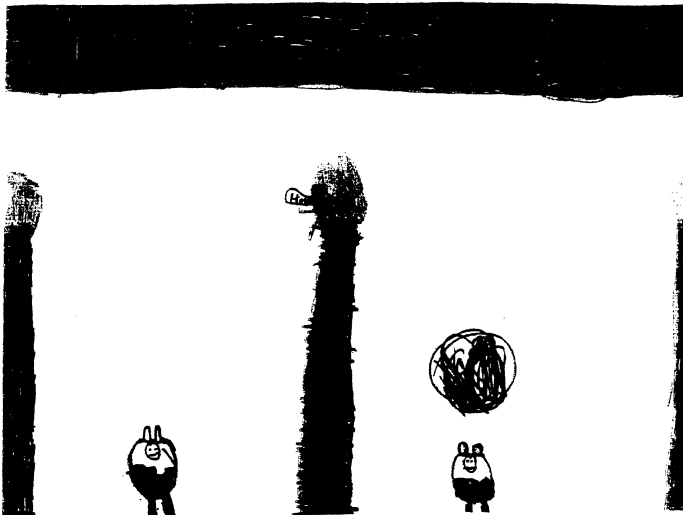
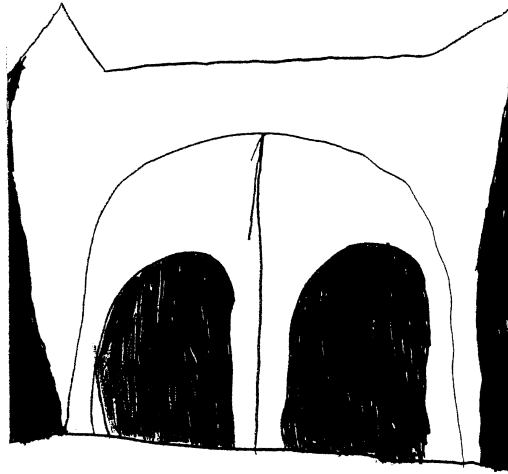


Figure 2.13 Sophie, aged 7 years 9 months, 'I'm drawing the old school. That's Mrs Chapman's and that's Mrs Harrison's.'



school and she named the teachers who had classes there. Whether this drawing was a result of her imminent move to the juniors or whether a sibling was about to go into one of these classes it is difficult to know. Without more knowledge of Sophie one can only surmise but the old building is a prominent part of the school and houses the two oldest classes.

Concluding discussion

Despite the fact that this was only a small-scale study, the children's drawings and accompanying narrative offered tantalising glimpses of their differing approaches. The progression through drawing styles from figures, houses and vegetation to culturally specific objects such as Pokémon, school buildings and motorways gives credence to the findings of Kellogg so many years ago and shows why her work is still important. There did appear to be a change in the accompanying narrative as the age group changed. The youngest children communicated to themselves as they worked through their drawings and there seemed to be a definite link between the direction these took and this self-talk. One of the most obvious and frequent findings was the descriptive nature of the children's narratives about their completed pictures. It did seem as though they were working to a particular formula similar to that referred to by Browne (1996) and one which they had realised was acceptable to adults. There were instances, however, where a real storyline emerged and the drawing could be seen to illustrate and enhance this. This was not necessarily restricted to the older children;

although the 7-year-olds did seem to have moved away from the descriptive, one group of 5-year-olds also told stories in relation to their pictures. As all these children were firmly established in the school system this might have something to do with teacher expectation, as the two groups of 5-year-olds were from different schools. The other common feature of these groups of children was their interaction, following the pattern described by both Kress (1997) and Haas Dyson (cited in Pahl, 1999). There was evidence of the stated intention and the influence of peers altering both content and direction of drawings. There were also occasions when the children's enthusiasm for their characters (in particular Craig and Daniel's drawings of Pokémon) led to dramatisation, as sounds and movements were introduced into the conversation.

As an exploratory study, observation of these children highlighted many areas for future research. Talk and drawing certainly did seem to go hand in hand but it seemed that the self-talk of the 4-year-olds added an extra dimension which would bear closer scrutiny. At what point do children move away from this communication form to the interactive peer discussions and will there be evidence of emergent writing as they become more aware of the print around them? Will there be progression through humans, animals, buildings and vegetation, as Kellogg suggests? The questions are countless and such a small study can only hope to raise more rather than give soundly based answers.

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Commentary: Elizabeth Coates

Starting points

For the past fifteen years I have worked at the University of Warwick, Institute of Education as a Lecturer in Education. My interest in the 0–8-year-old age group arose from many years spent as an infant teacher in Birmingham working mainly with reception age children.

Throughout my adult life I have been interested in the twin strands of art and language. While working with children who were just beginning to write I found instances of self-talk as they wrote a few words, read them back, added a couple of words and then wrote them down, carrying on in this fashion until the sentences were complete. Their concentration was intense and this ‘thinking aloud’ process provided real insights, not only into the way sentences were constructed but also into the decision making about the actual content.

Observing teacher training students in nursery and reception classes gave me an opportunity to watch children drawing. Many of them talked steadily as they drew, sometimes to each other but more often to themselves. Was it possible that the talk was a rehearsal for the drawing? Would it tell the listener the story behind the drawing or the thought process that the child was going through as the drawing took shape? The tradition of children dictating a sentence to be written by a practitioner under the drawing has always seemed limiting, both in terms of the time afforded to each child and in the ephemeral nature of the child’s interest. The actual completion of the drawing seems sufficient for most young children, and one might question whether they really want to stop and talk about it or move on to something new. It was these dilemmas which caught my interest – particularly when I observed children laboriously working on a picture, muttering furiously all the time, only to look blankly at the adult who asked about the end product.

Formulation of hypothesis/research questions

A study like this begins because the researcher is curious, wants to know how, why and what if; the motivation to do this work coming from within

oneself rather than from outside funding or commissioning agencies. Reflecting upon my classroom observations, I began to speculate: what did I really want to find out and, given that my abiding interest lay in the links between language and drawing, how was I going to set out to satisfy my curiosity? The following hypothesis became the starting point for the study:

Talk when young children are drawing is inextricably linked to it, telling its story and dictating its content.

From this it became possible to formulate research questions, although these were refined at the writing-up stage and new ones suggested.

- Was the child's talk a rehearsal for each stage of the drawing?
- Did the talk tell the story behind the drawing?
- How different was the child's description of the completed drawing from the talk which accompanied the activity?

Early thinking processes

If I was to be able to test my hypothesis then I required schools where children had the opportunity to undertake free drawing rather than operating solely under the restrictions of the Literacy or Numeracy Hour. I opted for schools where I had already worked as a link tutor. This had another advantage in that head and class teachers knew me and were sympathetic to my request.

The three school settings all had free drawing and writing areas, therefore the decision about which children I observed was not mine but depended on which children chose to work there. The tables contained materials for a group of four to draw together. The crowded nature of the average classroom makes it difficult to be unobtrusive as an observer so the early part of each morning was spent just being in the room in the hope that this would make me seem less of an outsider.

As anyone familiar with infant or nursery classrooms will know, the introduction of a video camera causes maximum disruption, whilst tape recorders pick up so much extraneous sound that it is often difficult to distinguish who is talking, particularly if the children in question are unfamiliar to you. With this in mind, it seemed more appropriate to make notes since this also allowed for information about the drawing sequence and interaction to be recorded.

Methodology

I had two purposes in mind as I approached the research: one major, that of conducting a pilot, the other minor, but equally interesting to me, of exploring

the possibilities of the issues involved. It has always seemed to me that definitions of research terminology vary according to the individual and even texts which focus upon such areas do not always agree on the finer points.

Aspect one: The pilot

Having formulated a hypothesis and identified initial research questions the reality of project design and selecting appropriate methods had to be addressed. I was using the pilot to tell me several things:

- Would a free drawing area within each classroom generate sufficient interest to ensure children came and worked there?
- Would observer notes provide enough information to enable the research questions to be adequately addressed?
- Was it possible for an observer to make accurate notes of all the children's narratives or would a tape recorder give a better result?
- Was the qualitative form of analysis the most appropriate one to use?
- How did one elicit narrative from the children about their finished product?
- And most importantly, was there sufficient mileage in the hypothesis to make a large scale project worthwhile?

I regarded the pilot as a means of testing the nuts and bolts relating to the research framework.

Aspect two: The exploratory

This aspect explores the issues surrounding the project. It suggests further possibilities or different directions a larger project might take. As well as testing the hypothesis it raises questions such as 'Yes, that is happening but have you thought about...?' or 'I hadn't realised that might occur, should I extend my research to include it?' Through considering the observations, notes made and other data collected, and revisiting the initial research questions, it is possible, through what I consider to be an exploratory study, to revise one's thinking and redefine the focus of the next stage.

Qualitative methods and data collection

With such a small sample and the nature of the task being undertaken it seemed that a qualitative approach was the only feasible method to use. If the aim of the research method is to gain as full and rich a picture of what is happening as possible then making anecdotal observation notes should provide valuable information. This type of note taking also allows for the

inclusion of the unexpected, which may have a bearing on the interpretation of data collected. Initially though it was consideration of the hypothesis and the identified research questions which drove the choice of method.

A real concern that arises with qualitative research, especially when there is such a close focus on a relatively small number of children, relates to ethical issues. Whose permission do you need to undertake this kind of observation and if you explain to the children exactly what you are doing will they really understand? My initial approach was to the schools concerned, explaining what I wanted to do and how I was intending to do it. Through the head teachers, parents were informed that I was going to be in the class and that their children might be involved in my research, the nature of which was also explained. Because it was stressed that this was not a 'test' and in no way was judgmental, the reaction of parents was that of interest and no problems arose. I promised to give copies of any papers prepared for publication to the schools to vet before submission to a journal was made. This was done and teachers provided valuable feedback. Violating the children's space is an ethical issue that I found more difficult to solve. It was another reason not to use video or audio tape recording, because note taking allowed for some behaviour/interactions to be ignored and made it possible for the children to remain anonymous. If they asked me what I was doing then I explained but I did not tell them beforehand since I thought that might affect their interactions. Seeking permission to keep the children's drawings was done in conversation when they were describing their pictures to me and they were also asked if I might share them with other people.

At the end of the research I was left with three sets of data for each child:

- the interaction/narrative taking place during the drawing process;
- the finished drawing;
- the description of the completed work.

Because of the small number involved, the most obvious way forward was to examine everything, separating data into age-specific sections. Starting with the youngest children, I collated all their material and analysed it to build up a picture of what had happened during their drawing episodes. As I progressed through the age groups, reconstructing scenarios, the work became more and more fascinating as differences appeared: the self-talk of the 4-year-olds giving way to dialogue with the 5- and 6-year-olds and on to the often 'off-task' interaction of the 7-year-olds. The analysis sought to address the research questions which focused upon the relationship between them.

Drawing conclusions and writing up

Reading through the data analysis and cogitating upon the literature I had examined as a prerequisite for this research, there seemed to be support for

my hypothesis, which encouraged me to consider the next stage. There were some surprises, particularly in the clear demarcation between the dialogue and the drawings of the 7-year-olds and the difference in emphasis between the 4-year-olds and the next age group. On reflection, this was to be expected but really highlights the need for a much larger sample to be examined. There were frustrations too, mainly in relation to time constraints: I knew that a series of observations in each school would have enabled more sustainable conclusions to be drawn; but also in terms of interruptions from other pupils or staff which disturbed the children's concentration.

The writing-up process offers the writer an opportunity to think deeply about what they have done and throws up issues for future consideration. How does one set about writing this kind of paper? In my case I always start with a plan, reflecting upon the sequence of events, and how to offer the reader sufficient insights into the underlying research process to enable them to understand my thinking. To this end I feel that it is important to set a context by surveying relevant literature and discussing related issues. This provides evidence of the reasoning underlying the research hypothesis and leads smoothly on to the study itself whilst also furnishing material for the concluding discussion. Inevitably this process led to a reappraisal of my research questions, although the initial hypothesis still holds.

Where to next?

The next project is still in the planning stage but is likely to have two main strands:

- observation of free drawing areas within Foundation Stage classrooms over the period of a year – focusing upon drawing and accompanying narrative;
- the development of children's drawing from 3 to 5 years old – a longitudinal study following a class of children from their arrival in the nursery setting through to their move into Key Stage One. This will include noting evidence of emergent writing.

Hindsight reflections

Looking back on this study, I realise that I am now more committed to extending the research. I do regret that time and work constraints limited what I could actually carry out but the value of running a small scale pilot project as a precursor to further work is immeasurable.