


# Young children talking and drawing


Elizabeth Coates\* and Andrew Coates

*University of Warwick, UK*

Research related to how young children's drawings change and develop is well documented and an extensive literature on this area can be traced back to the nineteenth century. Most of this literature, however, focuses on developmental aspects and largely fails to explore what would seem to be an essential ingredient in each drawing's production—children's simultaneous utterances which might potentially inform the nature and content of the work and help elucidate their intentions and processes of thinking. In this respect, Kress (1997) suggests that at times it seems as though it is only the end product being interpreted, whilst utterances which could help understanding are ignored; and Jameson (1968) opines that what children want to do is to talk to themselves in pictures, thereby weaving stories around the marks being made as a parallel to active fantasy play. These may or may not be true, but although the end products are something tangible which can be viewed by other than those present, what they cannot communicate is the social interaction, problem solving, conceptual and creative thinking, predicting, debate and introspection which may well be a fundamental attendant of the process of drawing.

 The relationship between children's narrative and their drawing process, therefore, formed the basis for this investigation and built on both previous knowledge and many years of observing young children in early years settings. It focused upon children in the two age phases (three to four year olds—nursery, and four to five year olds—reception class) of the English Education Foundation Stage. Narrative observations were carried out during each drawing episode with pairs of children, and audio recordings were also made to complement these.

## Introduction

 Young children's drawings offer a freshness, boldness and sense of purpose which we as adults might struggle to emulate. Gardner (1982) talks of the 'preschool years ... as a golden age of creativity, a time when every child sparkles with artistry' (p. 86). The project which forms the basis of this paper focused upon this 'golden age' by collecting, describing and analysing drawings and accompanying narrative from children aged between three and five years. Like Gardner, we were impressed by the way children approached their drawings and the pleasure they took in producing

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\*Corresponding author. Warwick Institute of Education, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK. Email: e.a.coates@warwick.ac.uk

them. Observations, which formed an essential part of this research, revealed the many facets of the experiences these children were having. Although the end product was something tangible which could be viewed by other than those present, what those finished drawings could not portray was the thinking, talking, social interaction and mark-making sequences that formed a fundamental part of the process. The significance of accompanying talk has been emphasized by Kress (1997), who points out that interpretation of the product alone ignores utterances which facilitate a deeper understanding. This was highlighted recently when an artist and a musician, both committed to their own disciplines and highly regarded by their academic peers, were presented with some of the drawings and their responses sought (informal discussion with the researchers, 20 August 2004). They commented positively on the use of colour, the surety with which each line was made and the composition of the whole, relating the latter to a sophisticated use of space based on a seemingly inherent sense of design. Reference was made to Kandinsky, Klee and Picasso and the way some of the work produced by these artists might be said to have childlike qualities. They recognized and acknowledged the processes these artists went through but had little understanding of the processes which informed the production of young children's drawings. Indeed, coming from a background unconnected with young children, this was to be expected, but it would seem to reinforce Malchiodi's (1998) view that it is difficult for adults to see children's drawings with anything other than their own adult eyes. It might even be argued that a knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the main thrust of Western art since the Renaissance with its stress on fine draughtsmanship, often related to a concern for the imitation of recognizable appearances (Stolnitz, 1960), might well prove disadvantageous when seeking to appreciate children's work, as the perspective brought to bear would inevitably be informed by criteria related solely to an analysis of the work of adults. At the other extreme, Viola (1942), writing about the work of Franz Cizek who observed the artworks of 2- to 14-year-old children in his Juvenile Art Class in Vienna between 1897 and 1938, was of the opinion that 'The best way to understand Child Art is to study primitive art, both of races that lived tens of thousands of years ago and the art of living primitives' (p. 16). These problems were something the researchers were aware of but it was envisaged that their professional backgrounds—one an early years educator, and the other an artist and art educator—would be complementary, helping to temper flights of enthusiastic fantasy. Both had spent time with children as they engaged in art activities and knew the intensity of their commitment. Participant observation had always played a major part in previous research and had demonstrated the importance of an understanding of the context of each drawing episode (Coates, 2002).

The project to be described here built upon knowledge gained previously (Coates, 2002, 2004) and focused not so much on the completed product as on the process the children went through to get there. In contrast to this earlier research (Coates, 2002), in which groups of four children were observed on a single occasion, it was determined that observations should be carried out across a whole school year, setting out to investigate what happened during drawing episodes with young

children working in pairs. This was informed by the work of Matthews (1994, 1999), who feels that the actions of young children, when they draw, play an important part in their cognitive and affective development. He suggests that there is an internal structure and system to their approach and goes on to comment that a microanalysis of children's actions 'reveals an exquisite orchestration of different sensory channels, working in harmony to compose the structure of events and objects' (Matthews, 1999, p. 6).

Available literature on the partnership between narrative and drawing is sparse. It seems that although lip-service is given to the relevance of accompanying talk, this is often in the context of the child describing a drawing after it has been completed. Jameson (1968) points out how misleading such a description can be since he suggests that by standing close to children who are drawing or painting, one can frequently hear them talking to themselves about their work. The same children, describing their completed work, may offer a very different version to the one overheard.

The importance of narrative or thinking has been highlighted by Gardner (1982) who, in discussing the work of Piaget and Chomsky, states that 'the important aspects of the mind lie beneath the surface. One could never solve the mysteries of thought by simply describing overt words or behaviours' (p. 18). In relation to this, the current project interrogates the difference between describing a finished drawing and understanding the creative and conceptual thinking which guides its development. Gardner continues by examining the work of Levi-Strauss (p. 31), suggesting that 'the anthropologist must look for the units of measuring and discover how they relate to one another within a coherent and organised system'. Parallels may well be made, therefore, between children's language, their thinking and the drawings being undertaken. It was this particular relationship that informed the approach to the literature search and it seemed that the main texts examined focused either upon talking or drawing but rarely both together.

Of those who considered the role of language, perhaps Gentle's (1985) reference to the value of children working together in small groups is most pertinent to this study with its emphasis on working in pairs. He feels that children's discussions and the ideas they share have a direct influence on the content of their work. Shugar (1988) takes this notion further by suggesting that not only did they influence each other's actions but they were also learning valuable social skills. Not all the literature, however, focuses upon the social aspects of talk: some looks at the individual child and the way in which they use language to help them build up the story behind the drawing. The continual dialogue that some children engage in led Gardner (1982, p. 117) to describe them as 'inveterate verbalisers', talking their way through the drawing process until it reaches a conclusion. He makes reference to a three-and-a-half-year-old child's approach to drawing as one who 'activates those simple contours with a rich story line, filling out their simplicity with dramatic play and narrative' (p. 110). Listening to children using language in this way helps the adult to understand the ideas on which the drawing is based, providing insights into the children's interests and background (Gentle, 1985; David, 1999). This is important since, as Pahl (1999) states, the adult working with the child in a setting is unlikely

to share, or even begin to comprehend, the child's culture and home environment (p. 74). Indeed, the role of the adult during such an activity might be questioned for, as Tassoni and Hooker (2000) point out, children can become so involved in their drawing that they seldom address the adult or ask for help. The significance of these shared drawing activities for the adult, however, might partly be in the display of some of the children's linguistic skills. In their study of children at home and in the nursery, Tizard and Hughes (1984) found that initial judgements of children's linguistic ability in the educational setting could only be tentative until a context could be found in which the children were at ease and could talk freely.

Literature relating to the drawing process examined the development from Kellogg's (1969) basic scribbles and big head or tadpole people to detailed and carefully drawn pictures passing through what Stevani (1968) terms stages. Burt (cited in Stevani, 1968, p. 57) suggests that these 'purposive pencillings' or scribbles represent actual objects and as such may be named by the child. This is supported by Luřcat (cited in Krampen, 1991), who opines that children 'put on to paper the properties of "internal models" of external objects' (p. 38).

In her detailed study of children's drawings, Kellogg (1969) refers to the way children often develop a formula for drawing figures and use the same formula in their initial drawings of animals. Nutbrown (1999) found that children, when they are working on particular patterns of thought, often represent them in their mark making, repeating formulas or revisiting 'schemas' (p. 21) in a similar way. These may also fall into Burt's category of 'descriptive symbolism' where he suggests that 'the general "schema" assumes a somewhat different type with different children, but the same child clings pretty closely, for most purposes and long periods, to a favourite pattern' (cited in Stevani, 1968, p. 58). A common formula which children often use is related to baselines and skylines, which Cox (1992) found in many children's drawings and are, she thinks, drawn in this way because the air around them is invisible.

Although many talk either to themselves or to each other when drawing, this is not the case with all children. There are those who become so involved in their work that they are unaware of the conversation surrounding them. Such children may hold an image of their intended picture in their head as they draw and see no need to converse or talk their way through the process. Gardner (1982) calls them 'committed visualisers' (p. 117).

Between the ages of three and five years children become aware of letter shapes, and these often appear in drawings. Luřcat (cited in Krampen, 1991) feels that at first they are incorporated into the drawing and are not seen as separate entities, so that letter shapes appear in all parts of the completed picture (p. 47). As children's drawing skills progress and their knowledge of writing increases, both Luřcat and Pahl (1999) suggest that their pictures frequently contain both types of graphics: symbolic representations and writing with recognizable letter forms, each of which is used correctly. Letter forms may appear in clusters, representing not just the child's name but the story of the picture. In some cases these letter forms may occupy a specific space in the drawing, i.e. a road sign, a house name or number. This was illustrated

in the drawing of Charlie's van (Coates, 2002), where the combination of pictorial symbols and letter forms produced a picture in which the written forms served to extend the viewer's understanding. This illustration reinforces the findings of Matthews (1994), who found that children who include letter forms in their works do so deliberately, drawing on their knowledge of writing to complement the pictorial element.

### **Methodology**

The project was intended as a pilot for a longitudinal study following children from nursery through to the end of year one, that is for a period of three years. After a review of previous findings (Coates, 2002, 2004), two overarching aims were identified, namely to:

- explore the relationship between young children's drawing and any accompanying narrative;
- consider the implications of this relationship for our understanding of children's creative and conceptual development.

Although these were based upon a realization of the significance of language, the short-term objectives included ones related specifically to drawing.

### **Participants and settings**

The project focused upon children in the two age phases (three to four year olds in nursery and four to five year olds in reception) of the English Education Foundation Stage. Settings in two very different socio-economic areas, both mainly white indigenous, were identified. Settings One (a nursery class) and Two (a reception class) were in the same school in the middle of a council estate in the suburbs of a large city. Settings Three and Four were two schools in an area of predominantly home owners in two small towns. Setting Three was a state nursery school in its own grounds which acted as a feeder for several neighbouring primary schools and Setting Four was a church primary school. Permission to research was sought prior to the start of the project and regular narrative observations were undertaken in each one. Only those children who were happy to participate were included and all were told that they could leave at any point during the episode.

### **The nature of the investigation**

The investigation was essentially open ended in that the direction, content and duration of each episode were largely determined by the children who participated. They were supplied with drawing media and asked to make images of subjects of their own choice. The researchers' role was to immerse themselves in the context in which the drawings were being made, not as detached observers, but as participant observers, playing an active part in the children's conversations and acting as

a focus for their questions and insights when the need arose. Woods (1979) writes: 'Though the research style is termed "participant observation" and there is, indeed, a great deal of "observation" done, many studies based on it rely equally, if not more, on interviews, discussions, conversations: in short, some form of "talk"' (p. 263).

Success in eliciting self-directed drawings and encouraging related narratives depended almost entirely on the researchers' ability to establish empathic and harmonious relationships in a non-threatening context, based on mutual trust and a familiarity of the situations in which the children worked. Indeed, it was recognized that 'Children may not feel inclined to make disclosures to unknown adults' (Aubrey *et al.*, 2000, p. 117) and that rapport is not possible if they either dislike or mistrust the researchers. Skills both as teachers of and communicators with young children proved useful in establishing appropriate relationships. The researchers' utterances, rather than directive, aimed by means of prompting, encouraging and social talk to persuade children to extend their visual explorations and spoken discourse, and enhance their confidence in the worth of these by the means of approval and positive reinforcement. The results of each episode, therefore, were entirely unique, deeply personal and incapable of replication.

### **Procedure**

The project was carried out in stages corresponding to the three terms of the school year. The first term was seen as a period of adjustment to allow the children to become accustomed to the presence of a researcher (only one researcher worked in each school), observations were carried out in the classroom and no restrictions were put on the number of children working in the drawing area. This was to help identify those children who drew on a regular basis for inclusion in an in-depth study in the final two terms. The time that the children spent drawing varied considerably but they determined this themselves. One of the problems anticipated was ownership of the actual drawings as in this type of project retaining the originals is important and negotiations took place between researcher and child at each episode. Photocopying their own drawing proved very popular in Setting Three, whilst a scanned copy was considered better than the real thing by both the children and their parents in Setting Four.

Both researchers carried out narrative observations, but most importantly audio recordings were made as a basis for further analysis. The presence of a researcher at each drawing episode was of paramount importance, since it was felt that this was the only way to achieve a clear understanding of the dual elements of talking and drawing. Observing children's approaches to drawing and listening to their utterances extended this understanding by revealing some of the thinking behind the drawing and the influence the presence of peers might have on its content. In addition, notes made by the researcher during each episode made it possible to effectively transcribe the tape-recorded narrative, not only by helping the identification of each speaker but also by supplying the context in which these utterances were made.

## Data collection and analysis

Once the data had been collected, transcription of the audiotapes was undertaken. These transcriptions, together with the observation notes and the children's drawings provided the material for analysis. Initial areas for further investigation—drawn from the research aims which focused upon the relationship between young children's drawings and accompanying narrative, and the implications of this for understanding children's creative and conceptual development—were subsumed under the following headings:

- the role of talk;
- the nature of the drawing activity;
- subject matter;
- children's creative and conceptual development.

The significance of these areas and the reasons for their selection are discussed in the next section but it should be pointed out that whilst the project's original aims have remained the focus, other unanticipated and highly relevant areas were identified.

## Areas for investigation

### *The role of talk*

Whilst a potent relationship between a child's drawing and accompanying narrative had been anticipated, talk was actually used in a variety of ways. This area is, therefore, explored under the following headings: talk related to the subject matter; social talk; and interaction with an adult.

*Talk related to the subject matter.* Observation notes indicate that subject-focused talk occurred in most sessions but the amount and detail varied considerably. Analysis of the audio recordings provided some evidence of self-absorbed talk but discussions between the children about subject matter were more common and frequently involved the researcher. The influence of these interactions could often be found in their completed drawings. Such exchanges have also been noted by Gentle (1985), who observes that children shared ideas for making drawings in the same way as they shared ideas in games. Songs which had obviously been learnt in class were noted on several occasions as they accompanied specific drawing detail. These included 'Humpty Dumpty', the 'Alphabet song' and 'The sun has got its hat on'. What was not clear was the order in which these occurred. For example, did the drawing of the sun with the hat on prompt the song or was it the other way round?

There were, however, children who definitely used the drawing activity as an opportunity to rehearse verbal constructs showing more concern for the narrative than the detail of their drawings. An instance of this was Sophie, aged four years two months (Setting Three) who, in February, drew a fine ship but her accompanying narrative told a detailed Pirate story, the content of which was not at all obvious

from the drawing alone. Such children would seem to fall into Gardner's (1982) category of 'inveterate verbalisers', producing copious amounts of language whatever the task.

Sophie: The pirates have gone off the ship, they have told the builders to put a telescope on while they are away. For the telescope man, so they can see the islands for the treasure.

By June, Sophie, now four years seven months, had become more involved in sharing ideas as her drawing with her friend Andrew, aged four years eight months, indicates. Their drawings of Peter Pan (see Figures 1 and 2) contained many common elements, triggered by a shared narrative and a shared experience of seeing the film. The following extract from the observation and recording of this session shows just how rich this sharing was:

Andrew and Sophie had been playing in the sand pit before coming inside the nursery to draw. Both brought in a handful of pebbles. This started Sophie drawing a row of pebbles on her paper.

Sophie: Look, loads of pebbles on the ground and then I'll draw some pirates standing on the pebbles having a fight.

Both carried on drawing for a little while, still talking to each other.

Andrew: Are you good at drawing pirates? I'm good at drawing Captain Hook.

Sophie: I'm good at drawing pirates and I'm going to do Captain Hook's crew having a fight.

Sophie and Andrew talked constantly throughout the 25 minutes with very little interjection from the researcher. It was obvious from their conversation that they were familiar with the story of Peter Pan and had seen a videotape of it. They appeared to have been playing out scenes from it in the sand pit before coming in, and these drawings may have been an extension of that play.

The children's involvement was so strong that their voices became animated and there were shrieks, battle cries and singing.

Sophie: Now I'll draw Captain Hook.

Andrew: Captain Hook.

Andrew: We're fighting Captain Hook ... Lots of pirates in mine.

Sophie: Lots of pirates in mine too.

Sophie drew Captain Hook's dagger.

Sophie: There's his dagger, he's holding his dagger, look. His dagger looks like a heart.

Andrew: Have to draw their blood [drew blood over Peter Pan] Now he can never lose.

Sophie: We're forgetting ears! [Added them to drawing] That one's got earphones on so he can't hear the terrible noise. [Smallest figure—head and legs only]

Later.

Andrew: He [Captain Hook] thinks he's going to win but he's not, is he. We're going to beat him.





Figure 1. Andrew (four years eight months)

Sophie: Cos Peter Pan is going to push him into the water and Captain Hook never gets out again and um, Mr Croc gets him.

These examples show the significance of this aspect of children's talk and reveal it as an important area for further investigation.

*Social talk.* Most sessions contained instances of social talk, defined as talk which does not directly relate to the drawing activity or its subject matter but instead focuses on common issues of companionship. Children in all settings talked about subjects such as families, homes, class and friends in what might be termed 'off-task' conversations. A concern often raised by early years professionals is their lack of knowledge about children's backgrounds and interests. The function of such conversations within a group drawing session forms part of our analysis, because of the insights they may offer about children's backgrounds, influences, concerns and ways of thinking.

The following example (from Setting Two), though not strictly an 'off-task' conversation in that it describes the contents of the drawings as they progress, certainly focuses on the relationship of Chloe, aged four years seven months, and Jamie, aged four years eleven months, to their families, friends and possessions.

Chloe started by drawing a 'tadpole' person in blue whom she described as: 'I drawing my mum poorly ... I drawing a little poorly person ...'

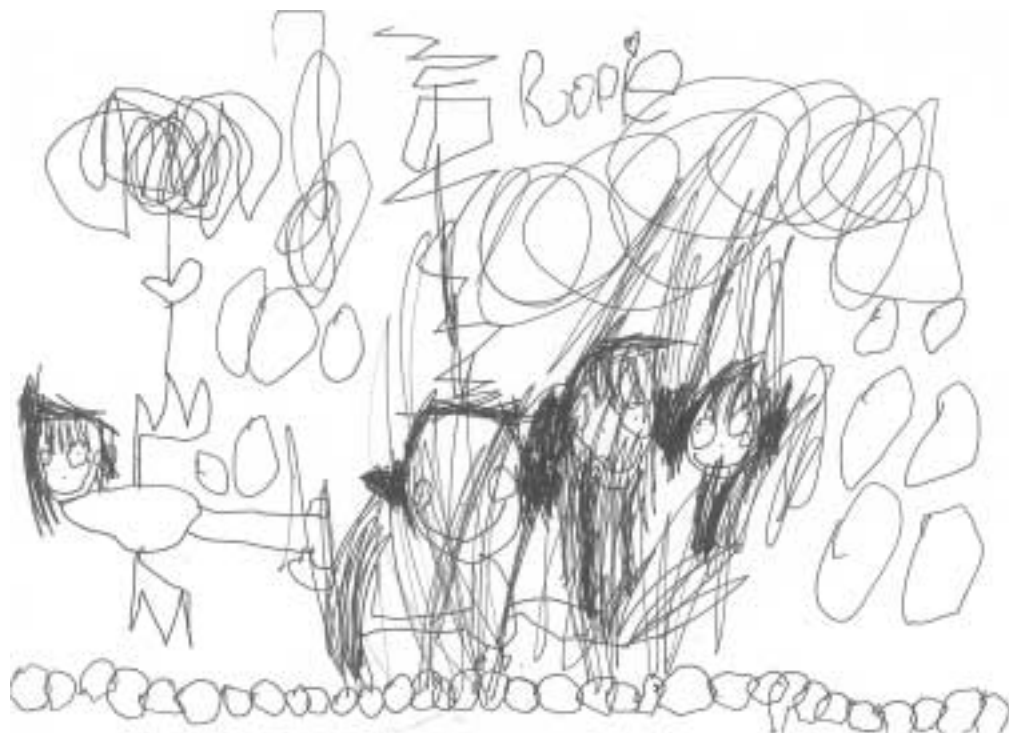


Figure 2. Sophie (four years seven months)

Jamie copied her figure, but called it 'a big boy'.

This gave rise to an exchange—mostly in single sentences—in which each tried to outdo the other:

- J: I drawing a smiling man, a big boy that's got a car ... My dad's got a car  
C: I got a big friend  
J: And I have ... bigger friend than you  
C: Yea, he plays with us ... he plays with us last night he did ... he's in a bigger class  
J: I got three big friends in a different school ... in Year Two I've got Natalie, Jason, Titch, and I've got a friend called Luke and he plays with us ... I've got a Spiderman ... a film at home, I've got ...  
C: My mum, my brother, yea, she got a Power Ranger, eh ... dramas.  
J: Guess what! I've watched a pirate film.  
C: Have you watched ... er ... Batman on it now ... such Robin? Cos I have ... with Robin in ... have you watched Peter Pan?  
J: Peter Pan! Guess what I got ... Mary Poppins!  
C: Guess what I got, Spock!

The effects that such conversations have on the development of social skills and friendships between children was also seen as a further area for investigation, for, as Shugar (1988) suggests, one of the functions of such group interaction is learning what it means to be a peer.

*Interaction with an adult.* Anyone who has observed young children in a non-participant capacity knows how difficult this can be. These challenges are multiplied if the researcher is with a small group, since the children's natural curiosity often causes a barrage of questions which are impossible to ignore if their co-operation is to be achieved. The value of such interaction was highlighted when it was used by some, not only to test out and extend ideas but also to exchange points of view. As David (1999) states, knowledge of children's interests and past experiences help the adult understand where their 'amazing ideas, sometime misinterpretations, come from' (p. 3).

Although Tassoni and Hooker (2000, p. 208) feel that children rarely ask for help when they are painting or drawing, in this project interaction with the researchers about the content of the drawings occurred on a regular basis, not only helping to stimulate subject matter but also enabling the adult to model, reinforce and support the children's language. A good example of this was found in Setting One, where, in addition to interacting with the children, the researcher became the subject matter for a number of drawings. In one instance two young children included him, one child copying the other. The first child, Shona, aged three years eleven months, began with a purple figure with a circle attached (see Figure 8). This was named 'That's you holding a balloon.' Although she worked mainly in silence she responded to the researcher's later prompting by repeating 'that's you holding a balloon' and then commenced naming some of the other shapes: 'a big head—it's yours [in relation to a large black circle], writing ... a frog ... writing again'. Lewis, aged four years four months, responded immediately to Shona by drawing a purple tadpole figure with a circle attached and repeating 'that's you holding a balloon'. Soon after, this was followed by another tadpole figure in black to the right of the first image accompanied by the utterance 'that's you holding a balloon again'. This became a game as the researcher began to count the images in response to the utterances, and Lewis completed 14 black tadpole people before he drew a circle in red and grey and added a house and a number of scribbles and shapes in various colours (see Figure 3).

### *The nature of the drawing activity*

The way in which the children approached the drawing activity varied considerably. Some balanced their mark making with a narrative accompaniment, but others focused intensely, offering minimal talk only when necessary or when spoken to by the researcher. Such children might be described as committed visualizers (Gardner, 1982, p. 117), plunging directly into the drawing activity and seeing very little need for talk. The length of time children spent on each drawing varied from as little as two minutes to, in some cases, as much as 50.

This area is discussed under the following three related but distinct headings: the stages of drawing development; the use of colour; and emergent writing.

*The stages of drawing development.* Given that the ages of the children when the project started ranged between three years two months and five years one month it



Figure 3. Lewis (four years, four months)

was anticipated that there might be considerable differences in their stages of drawing development. In the nurseries (Settings One and Three) examples were found of both basic scribbles and 'big head' or 'tadpole' people. These might be categorized as 'purposive pencillings' (Burt cited in Steveni, 1968, p. 57), where the emphasis is on the scribble but which may be given a name by the child. One of the most interesting drawings produced at the start of the project was Emily's 'Xylophone'. Emily, aged three years seven months (Setting Three) used strong circular movements to produce her picture, which at first examination seemed to be a typical scribble, but on further investigation this was belied by a black musical note drawn at one side and her name written in pink at the bottom. Many instances were found of 'big head' people, a favourite subject, according to Burt, for children around the age of four. In Setting One, Richie, aged four years three months (see Figure 4) and Jamie, aged four years zero months (see Figure 5), both produced big head drawings to the accompaniment of 'Humpty Dumpty', first spoken by Richie as he completed his picture and followed by Jamie singing it as he copied Richie's idea.

At the other end of the age range in Settings Two and Four, detailed drawings were often produced, although it was observed that some of these children followed a theme across several months. Burt would describe such children as 'descriptive symbolists' as they cling to a particular way of doing something for a long period of



Figure 4. Richie (four years three months)

time. At five years six months, Nicholas's drawing of three leopards might be said to represent this phase as he used the same approach to construct their form on several occasions. His drawings could also reflect Kellogg's (1969) findings from her large-scale study of children's drawings, that once a formula for an object has been learned by a child and found by them to be acceptable to adults, it would be used again and again in different guises. This can be seen in Figure 6 where, at five years nine months, the leopard formula became 'a cheetah, a baby cheetah, birds in the sky and lots of raindrops'.

At this stage some children were showing evidence of visual acuity, taking care in the application of the medium and the placing of the contents of the work, and the inclusion of a great deal of complicated detail and colour relationships. These children seemed to be involved in making what they thought were the best drawings they could do. One of the last drawings to be produced by Daniel, aged five years zero months, in Setting Four is a good example, for his picture of a house with car and boat reflects these criteria (see Figure 7).

*The use of colour.* The children were provided with felt tip pens in 12 colours. Initially, many of the nursery children experimented with the colours, trying out each one and producing either blocks or, like Sophie, aged four years zero months (Setting Three), creating lines of varying intensity and overlapping each other. At the other end of the age phase, Daniel's house referred to in the previous section is what one of the children described as 'a rainbow house'. Most of the 40 minutes he took to complete this drawing were spent on the house which he meticulously filled with patches of 11 colours, repeating some of them but never overlapping or crossing the lines of the carefully drawn windows and door.



Figure 5. Jamie (four years zero months)

*Emergent writing.* Lurcat (cited in Krampen, 1991) suggests that young children's drawings often comprise scribbling and the first attempts at drawing letters or writing (p. 47), but between four and five years their graphic activity splits into two functions. In this project letter forms were evident in many of the nursery drawings often combined with Burt's 'purposive pencilling'. At three years eleven months, Shona's drawing of the researcher in Setting One was accompanied by 'writing'—purple and blue letter shapes which were quite different from the rest of the picture (see Figure 8). When encouraged to write her name she added this in black. The way she approached this was typical, with only the initial letter of her name being clearly legible. At this age, Pahl (1999) suggests that writing may be an activity of less significance to the child than drawing.

In the reception settings, although most children included a correct version of their name on the drawing, very little evidence of writing was found. One of the exceptions to this was Victoria, aged four years ten months (Setting Four), whose focus in the episode towards the end of the spring term was writing. Having divided her page into lines she then commenced to fill the sheet with a mixture of lower case and upper case letters. The only assistance she required was how to spell 'Nemo went to Sydney' (a cartoon film) and when she read her writing back she said each letter in turn until she got to this sentence, which she read accurately, reverting back to letters for the remainder of the page.

### *Subject matter*

This is an area of immense interest since our survey of the drawings so far has indicated a number of common themes which crossed settings and continued for most of the year. The influences behind these themes as well as their iconography are considered.

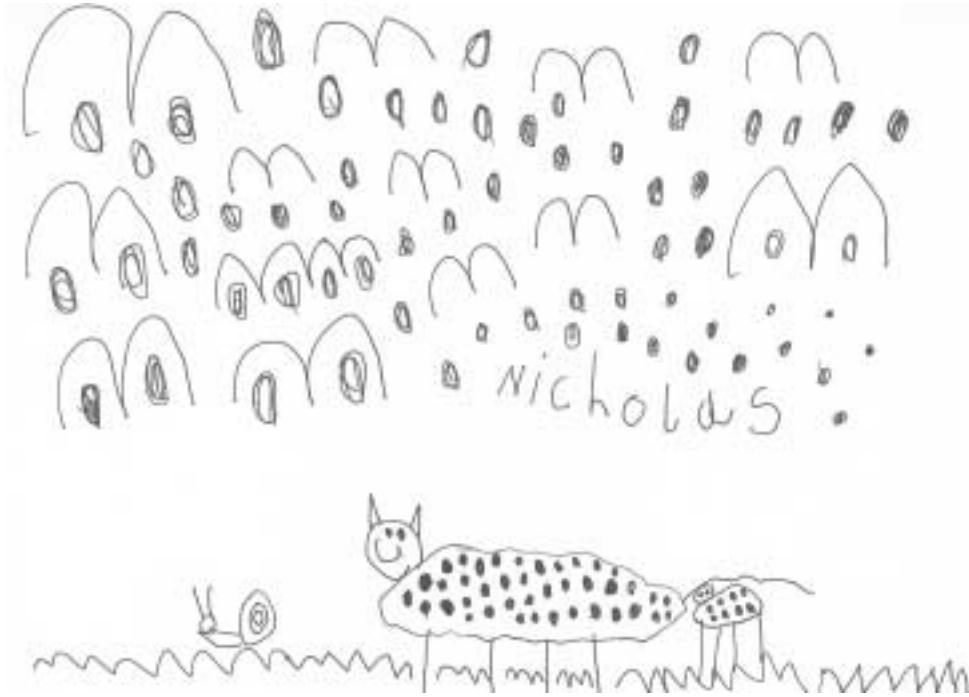


Figure 6. Nicholas (five years nine months)

*Common themes.* Kellogg's influential work in the 1950s and 1960s offered insights into the common themes used by three to five year olds. Her findings suggest that children's earliest images include humans, animals, buildings, vegetation and transportation—groupings of which can be seen in many of the drawings within this project. One of the most interesting points she raises concerns the identification of big head or tadpole people (Kellogg, 1969, p. 96). Her suggestion that it is the adult rather than the child who names the figure in the first instance such as 'mummy, daddy and me' may be controversial but there is no doubt that family members form an integral part of the drawings of nursery-age children.

Certain elements also reoccur. Rainbows were found in drawings of four and five year olds, not always as distinctive shapes but represented by stripes of different colours. Butterflies, too, were frequently represented with children using similar formulae to produce them. At this stage many of the children seem to be moving into what Krampen (1991) terms 'completely meaningful drawings' (p. 71), as they develop ways to reproduce objects so that their meanings remain constant.

This can be seen by the stylized, but instantly recognizable, pictures of houses, flowers and trees with their ground and sky lines at the bottom and top of the page. Cox (1992) suggests that such lines occur at this stage because the air around the children appears colourless and the sky is only blue when you look up at it. On the other hand, Jameson (1968) offers the opinion that the strip of sky



Figure 7. Daniel (five years zero months)

along the top of the paper and the strip of land along the bottom is entirely logical to the young child in that ‘the sky is up above, the ground is down below and in the middle there is nothing’ (p. 80). It is possible, however, that the child fails to see why the area down to the ground needs to be filled, for as someone who is focused on the moment, anything other than expressing the immediate may seem irrelevant.

Tracing the progress of some of the children reveals themes that follow them across the year. These are not necessarily general themes but are specific to each child. Nutbrown (1999) suggests that the child is revisiting schemas and following particular patterns of thought. Isabella (Setting Three) was fascinated by stars and her images explored several different formats until she mastered one using crossing triangles (see Figure 9). At this point, when she was four years five months, the stars joined the moon in the sky on one side of a house with the sun shining on the other. This was the first time she had composed a house, garden and sky picture in the observed drawing episodes.

Another child, Freya in Setting Four, became interested in the idea of travel and several of her drawings over a period of a few months were dominated by roads linking two places. These drawings absorbed her and were done mainly in silence, with the few comments seemingly addressed to herself as she appeared to be thinking aloud.





Figure 8. Shona (three years eleven months)

*Influences.* Gentle (1985) recognizes the significance of a child's surroundings, suggesting that: '... the kind of images a child draws and their association in the child's mind are coloured by the way they are embedded in the society and culture of which the child is a part' (p. 35). As the child enters the school environment these influences increase not just in terms of the curriculum but also in relation to other children's ideas and starting points. Shared out-of-school family and social experiences or those from, for example, television programmes, films and favourite stories may provide visual stimuli. Some of these have been identified already through observation notes, and Sophie's and Andrew's Peter Pan drawings (Setting Three) and the 'Humpty Dumpty' song (Setting One) are good examples. More difficult to trace are influences coming from the children's home background. As Pahl (1999) notes, teachers sometimes do not recognize certain of the children's creations for what they are, simply because they do not have a visual image of the models in their minds. Although they value the culture of the children they work with, the fact that they do not share that culture must invariably limit understanding.

#### *Children's creative and conceptual development*

Observation notes and transcribed tapes suggest that narratives often provide evidence of the thinking behind the end products. It was possible in some cases to



Figure 9. Isabella (four years five months)

follow the development of the drawing and see the point at which it changed direction or when the child became really involved and extended its content. The discussion of Grace, aged four years two months, and Sophie, aged four years three months (Setting Three) about Grace's drawing of a rowing boat shows knowledge unlikely to be revealed by the formal school curriculum. Grace worked by herself initially but was joined by Sophie after five minutes. The first part of the narrative shows Grace working out how to start her drawing and what it might contain:

G: How do you draw a boat? Because I'm not going to draw a pirate boat, I'm going to draw a rowing boat ... see my rowing boat, it's a proper rowing boat, isn't it ... that's a rowing boat ... that's a big rowing boat what you see ... big, that's big ... do all the water, done it ... do a colour, waves have to be in blue ... blu-e wa-ter ... look at all the water, water all around.

Once Sophie arrives, the dialogue focuses on the drawing's content with Grace telling Sophie what it is about and then asking what else might be added:

- G; Hello, Sophie, drawn a little boat. It's a good boat isn't it, Sophie, and I'm drawing the seats.  
S: Grace, are they flip up seats?  
G: Yea they're flip ... no they're the seats, they're the flippers. [Points to part of drawing]  
S: That's called scribbling, Grace. [Referring to sea]

- G: No, it's supposed to be like that, Sophie, water ... water's supposed to be scribbly, isn't it, Sophie.
- S: Yes, cos it's wavy.
- G: Yea cos it's wavy.
- G: What shall I do, shall I do ducks, Sophie?
- S: O.K. then.
- G: Shall I do yellow ducks?
- S: We're making ducks ... [sings] ... with the sharks.
- G: Shall I do some sharks? Shall I do some ducks first? Shall I do some fish as well?
- S: O.K.
- G: Shall I do a dolphin?
- S: O.K.
- G: Shall I do a dolphin leaping up?
- S: All right.
- G: I'll just do some ducks first, a duck paddling.
- S: That's a nice body, it's a nice head and body.
- G: Actually it's a rubber ring duck [laughs]
- S: Where's the rubber duck? You should do one eye cos the other eye should be on the other side.
- G: And there's his ... and there's the boy's body and this is his face and there's a boy and there's the rowing boat ... in case he wants to get in his boat.

They talked continuously throughout the 20 minute session and although Grace completed three drawings in this time, her picture of the boat took 15 minutes. At times it appeared that the two girls were working and talking in parallel about the content of their drawings, although Sophie's picture appeared to be directly influenced by Grace's boat. The resultant drawing and the language which accompanied it, however, showed a creative ability to take an idea and make it her own. In a perhaps unexpected twist, what started as her house turned into a house with seats attached which were suspended over the sea or swimming pool:

- S: Now I've got to do the lake cos if someone's been naughty their mum asks them to go in that seat and it's got a hole in the bottom just big enough for a person. So they'll fall into the sea ... actually it's a really big swimming pool there under their house and I need to draw a little bit of grey land that the house is on.

[This idea was picked up a little later and extended]

- S: There, that's some of the hole, the really big hole, it's stuck in the, in the sea so just call it a circle. If they wanted to have a swim they would go into the swim, get into the sea and they would drop into the paddling pool, that's how it works. They would have a swim ... if they wanted to they could bring a ... if they were a little girl, um, if she wanted to just sit in the swimming pool she would have a little chair to sit on that would float but it wouldn't float along it would just stay where it was ... and she could and my little girl liked to paddle things along and she wanted to paddle things along in her little seat boat.

## **Discussion**

In many of the research episodes it was impossible to separate the twin elements of talking and drawing. The significance of observation as a research tool was under-

lined as working notebooks provided vital information about the context in which the drawings and narratives were made. The project highlighted the richness of the drawing activity for young children and revealed that far from being a quiet, self-absorbing task, drawing in pairs may provide a focus for the development of a range of creative skills. Not only is talk being used to define possible subject matter but also the children's pictures show the way in which such discussion can influence the direction that drawings take. Instances were also found of children continuing storylines from their imaginative play for, as Gardner (1982) found, stories spill out into drawing as children 'engineer on paper what was out of reach in play' (p. 122). Elements within many of the drawings provided clues about children's interests with instances of rainbows, stereotypical flowers, and suns with hats suggesting links to favourite television programmes and songs. Such factors may be recognized and used to advantage by the discerning professional, whilst information about children's culture can enhance our understanding of how they relate to elements of the school curriculum.

Not all talk focuses upon the drawing activity, as many instances of social exchanges were recorded. These offer insights into children's cognitive and social skills as they explore the notion of family relationships and friendships with peers. Such exchanges are often missed in the everyday bustle of the classroom, but the transcripts suggest that listening to children as they work may provide a deeper understanding of their thinking and developing sentience. Evidence of this was found when children involved in the drawing activity discussed its content, often adding information about the derivation of subject matter which was not obvious from looking at the completed picture.

Although it may seem that language has dominated our discussion of children's acquisition of creative skills, information gained from the analysis of the pictures themselves is equally important. Interrogation of these drawings shows not only the stage of development being demonstrated but also the way some children appear to have an innate sense of visual acuity, creating pictures which are often extremely complicated as well as carefully and clearly composed. Children's delight in the use of colour was also marked as many deliberated over their choice, showing awareness of the relationships of colour and the qualities of each with regard to its visual purpose. Many of the completed pictures testify to a child's developing awareness of writing, showing two distinctive forms of mark making which separate letter forms from symbolic representations.

What often needs to be overcome, however, is the adult's lack of awareness of the quality and depth of young children's spontaneous and self-taught visual expression which provides evidence of their conceptual and creative development as well as the richness of their fertile imagination. In the words of Kellogg (1969, p. 117): 'Age five is often a time of crisis in child art. The child's spontaneous art is seldom appreciated by Kindergarten teachers who are unfamiliar with pre-school work.' Nevertheless, it would seem that much can be discovered about children's interests, enthusiasms and culture from observing drawing activities and listening to accompanying narrative. The insights to be gained from encouraging them to work together in the company of

a perceptive professional are manifold and have real potential for informing teachers' judgements about the capabilities of the children in their charge.

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