Drawing as Communication

A qualitative study of 3-4 year olds communicative drawing behaviours and the contexts that support them.

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Abstract

Drawing is widely recognised as an expressive art but its communicative value is less prominent.   Communication, language and literacy is an area in early years education where drawing can be used both as a strategy for and as a form of communication. This study makes visible communicative practices of drawing in a nursery school and the contexts that have supported them whilst also exploring some of the concerns and dilemmas of the educators. Multi-modality and social semiotic theory are used to explore the meaning-making of the children and pedagogic strategies to support communicative drawing practices are discussed.

Introduction

As an artist-educator working in early years education, I was interested in how drawing and the construction of images was a valuable mode of communication and expression for young children. In previous research, I explored how the pedagogical practices of early years educators at two case study settings did not recognise the multifaceted strategies that children used when creating images (Keyte-Hartland, 2007). It revealed how educators beliefs were often based on deficit stage models of drawing development and that planning, assessment and the learning environment for drawing (or its problematic generic term of mark-making) was mostly perceived and planned for as a precursory physical and cognitive stage to writing.

Children's drawing is often valued as a tool for developing spoken communication (Anning & Ring, 2004) but my interest lay in how drawing could be a communicative language in its own right. The role of visual communication is increasing rapidly (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and in such a complex culture of visual information and communication I believe that we have to develop strong multiple modes of representation across a variety of contexts. Yet to enable this multi-modal approach to communication, all modes of meaning-making should be treated as equally significant in its production (making) and consumption (reading and understanding). Writing and text therefore would assume an equal partnership to the image and the visual as well as to movement or sound.

In the Local Education Authority (LEA) in which I worked, the Foundation Stage Profile assessment across the region revealed that Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL) of a significant proportion of young children was below average and therefore an area to raise achievement and standards in. The investigation of drawing as a communicative tool for young children thus was a relevant area ripe for investigation that would contribute towards raising the profile of the communicative potential of drawing.

To explore and make visible the communicative behaviours of young children engaging in drawing I have structured my research around four key themes.

- Drawing as communication

- Multi-modal communication and meaning-making

- Pedagogic strategies that support visual communication

- Young children's communicative drawing behaviours

In the Literature Review, I critically examine other researchers' perspectives and findings surrounding the communicative potential of drawing and explore the concepts of multi-modality and visual communication. The Research Methodology establishes my reasoning for my chosen methods and strategies of collecting, analysing and interpreting the data. The Findings give clear examples of communicative drawing episodes and illustrate the significant strands that have emerged from the research relating back to the concepts and

ideas explored in the Literature Review. To conclude, I consider practical implications and suggestions that have arisen out of this research.

This research has informed my professional practice as an artist-educator enabling me to gain a deeper understanding of the complex issues surrounding my field. Although I do not claim that this research can generalise young children's drawing experiences, educators, artists and others working in similar fields may find this research relatable and of interest to their context.

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Literature Review

This review explores the four key themes outlined in the Introduction and has been obtained from UK and International educational sources as well as those from Art Therapy disciplines. I was conscious of the choices that I excluded from this study, which included texts about the development of drawing in children, as the focus of this research was to explore and make visible the communicative practices of drawing rather than its development. This study builds upon my previous research where I explored the complex issues of the development of drawing in young children (Keyte-Hartland, 2007).

Drawing as communication

Children's encounters of and with the world are represented in their drawing and image-making (White, 1998). From an early age, babies begin to make marks (arcs, dots, lines, enclosures) that are from the beginning intentional and deliberate, that convey an understanding of their actions upon the materials to hand (Matthews, 2003). In the pursuit of 'making marks', babies are engaged in an active investigation that uses their scientific skills, their desires to solve problems and capacity to learn through comparison and experimentation.

Trevarthen (1995) argues that the infant's communicative potential is strong from its earliest beginnings. His 25 year observational studies revealed how from a few weeks old they engaged in protoconversations with their mothers that co-ordinated expressions and gestures that were deeply communicative, requiring participation from the other. He

described how babies far from being passive consumers of lullabies and song, invited mothers to respond to their non-verbal active signals to speed up, slow down and in how they anticipated the timing of the finale in rhymes such as Round and Round the Garden. Rather than something that is learnt, his work suggests that the ability to communicate is something we are born to do.

Both Trevarthen (1995) and Matthews (2003) describe the young child as not one whom accidentally "discover[s] mark-making by chance…" or waits until they are 16-26 months to "listen to and enjoy rhythmic patterns…" (DCFS, 2008). Instead, they are strong visual, gestural, vocal and physical communicators with a strong capacity to listen attentively. In tune with the practice and theory of educators from the Reggio Emilia pre-schools who view the child as strong, rich and competent from birth, a strong communicative child requires a rich communicative context (Rinaldi, 2006). In an educational context, that means sensitive interactions from educators who understand the many forms of communication and not just those of speaking and listening.

Drawing is a mode of communication that goes unnoticed by educators who primarily view it as an expressive form and precursory stage to writing (Kress, 1997; Anning & Ring, 2004). Adams (2002) describes the purposes of drawing are often to communicate sensations, feelings or ideas to another: a visual message that contains sharable codes and conventions so that the viewer will be able to read and understand what is being communicated.

During the 2007 study tour to Reggio Emilia, Italy, educators presented a visual documentary that explored the way in which a visual code of one individual 3-year-old became a communicative code between a group of children that fits with Adams (2002) idea. Educators explained how Giovanni formed a piece of wire into a looped form that he described as a bicycle. The group took up the visual form as they all began creating different variations of looped wire bicycle forms; see figure 1. Educators' initial
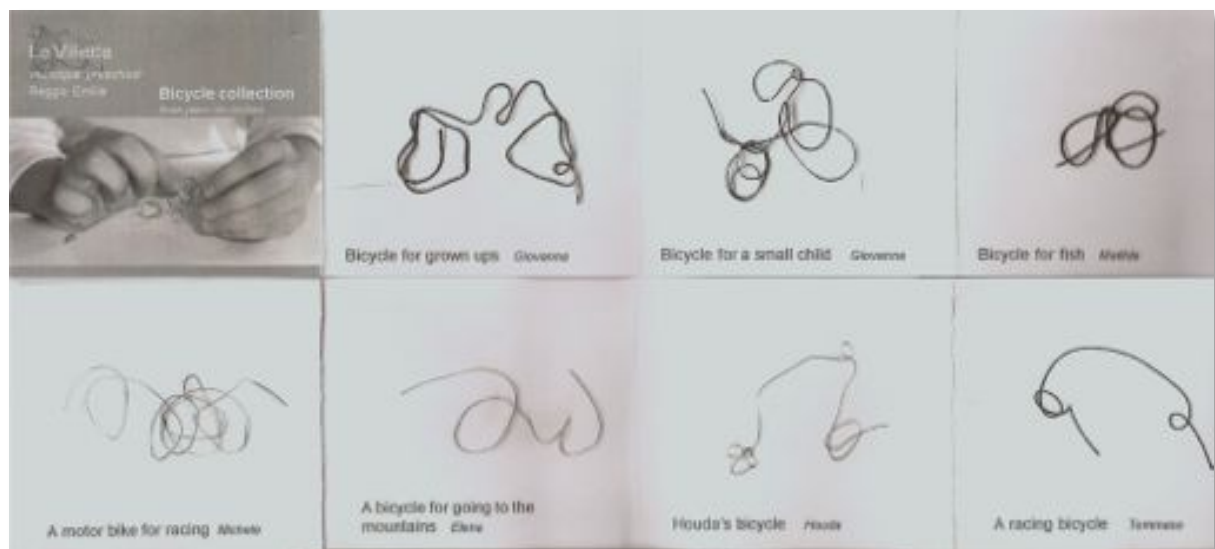

Figure 1

interpretations were that the children were not passively copying one another but instead engaged in an active process of transmission and transformation.

In looking at the bicycle forms, I can see variations of a shared visual code whereby the aesthetic looped forms of wire capture what was understood about bicycles. The signifying criterial elements could be produced, reproduced and read by others. The group received the original idea from Giovanni and a consensus symbol of a bike was sustained, shared and communicated through the group. Although this episode involves the manipulation of wire, one could see how this interpretation would fit with the modality of drawing.

The children described here are not following the conventions of a language that have strict rules to be adhered to but instead adopt the innovative and inventive disposition Kress (1997) suggests is required for the new social, economic and communicational environment that we inhabit. He considers that children far from being mere language users are indeed language makers and that this disposition can be nurtured and fostered if we are conscious and pay attention to the communicative potential of their image and meaning-making.

In viewing the action and content of drawing through a social semiotic lens it is possible to make clearer the communicative processes involved. Social semiotic theory sees representation not solely as a self-expressive or perception based activity but as a constructible and shifting visual language set within complex cultural, social and psychological contexts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Therefore, signs or symbols within drawings are not static, pre-existing or universal but set within these variable backgrounds and its production and reading are changeable and affected by the situation in which it's created. The criterial aspects or signifiers that are represented in the *sign* are related to what the *sign-maker* at the time considers the most appropriate and apt representational mode whether that be for the child a drawing, a dance or the manipulation of a piece of wire, or indeed a combination of many modes (multi-modal).

In the above example of the wire bicycles, social semiotic theory makes visible the communicative processes. The sign-makers were children using the representational mode of wire to create a sign of looped forms that signified bicycle. This was done in an Italian

town where bike riding remains a prominent method of transport. It was done in an early years setting where children have daily access to bicycles, where the ritual of arguing over who has what bike and for how long is an important component of their day and where wire is an available material for them to make-meaning and communicate their understanding. The educational environment supported the many modalities of children to communicate in different ways (other than verbal and in writing) and made visible these communications in the presentation of documentation in books, wall panels and slide shows. The children created it because of their experience, knowledge and access to materials and the educators recognised it because they were conscious and aware of its potential to happen.

In considering drawing as a mode of communication, it is not to set it apart or in an adversary position to other forms such as speaking, listening or writing but instead to embrace its potential as another language of communication rather than limit it to the aesthetic and expressive realm. Children read images that communicate meaning everyday through pictures in books, road signs, adverts and television cartoons. The images that that they see and read reinforce the power of the image to be communicative (Anning, 1999) yet it is not planned for or recognised in young children's educational environments (Anning & Ring, 2004; Hall, 2007).

At times, drawing is not enough for some educators. Anning (1999) cites an example of a child drawing a bee. The child had drawn the signifying identifying factors of 'bee' e.g. repetitive vertical stripes, rounded shape, head and wings but this was seen as not enough

to communicate 'bee' as the educator wrote " A bumble bee" on the drawing for the child to copy beneath. As Anning (1999) writes, "The message to the child is clear. The expressive nature of the drawing does count for much." In this instance, which I myself have witnessed on many occasions the educator is demonstrating the superiority of words over the communicative form of drawing.

Sometimes children cannot express in words (verbal or written) what they know but can through drawing. In therapeutic situations, some children find it easier to talk about their experiences indirectly using images they have drawn rather than reflecting directly about themselves. This can create a sense of safety, especially when working with sensitive issues of trauma, abuse or those in palliative care where the emotional pain, is truly, sometimes unspeakable (Tomlinson, 2007).

Driessnack (2006) worked with children using draw-and-tell conversations to enable children to discuss their attitude to fear. She found that the use of drawing as a facilitator of communication increased the amount of information that the children shared and that the information expressed was more enlightening than verbal speech alone. Rollins (2005) used drawing as a communication tool for children with cancer and also found increased illumination on issues when it was used rather than direct verbal interaction with the child.

The permanency of drawing creates opportunities for extended dialogue that speech does not (Brooks, 2005). This is utilised in the therapeutic arena where drawings are kept and

referred to regularly. Drawing therefore offers a viable means for visual and verbal reflection, where communication and meaning-making demand a different supportive practice where drawings are stored, kept and referred to again to build on previous knowledge and understanding of the child rather than seen as completed and sent home at the end of each day.

Multi-modal communication and meaning-making

In making a 'drawing' a child might draw with a pen, use scissors to cut-out some paper shapes to glue onto the image, then cut round the composite drawing before then reassembling onto a piece of card which is then attached to a block construction. To consider how meaning is made and communicated in these complex, yet common episodes an understanding of multi-modality is useful.

Kress (1997) considers that children act multi-modally both in the materials they use and in the types of objects they make. He also includes in this how they engage their bodies, in talk, dance, gesture and vocalisation of sounds in the creation of complex communicative images. The contextual and kinaesthetic information required to capture the full intentional meaning of the image in all of is dimensions, transformations and modalities is an important aspect to consider when recording and observing the creation of such images.

Each material, mode and tool offers different affordances and properties. They each have their own potential and limitations and as such offer the child a way to communicate with materials that in its very choice can contain significant messages (Foreman, 1994).

Case (1994) describes how in art therapy the action of cutting up, cutting out and sticking down can communicate very different and significant meaning for the child. She describes the interplay between the destructive and creative modes of cutting using Tim Burton's film Edward Scissorhands (1990) as a viewing frame to consider these contrasting modes. Her observations of children in therapy reveal how the action of cutting material can for some communicate visually and through action the severing of mental and physical links, or the sense of cutting out and sticking down representing the possibility of hiding, protecting or the keeping of secrets.

Hall (2007) discusses how multi-modality and the use of drawing as a strategy and medium for communication are not present within the statutory curriculum documents of the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 Primary National Curriculum. The danger in this is that educational practice will continue to separate and prioritise speaking and writing and limit the potential of drawing to make and communicate meaning. If children are born communicators (Trevarthen, 2005) then there is a risk of educating out this inherent skill of children.

Pedagogic strategies that support visual communication and drawing

I am using the term pedagogy to describe the practice of teaching i.e. the interactive process between teacher and learner and to that of the environment, family, social culture and community. Siraj-Blatchford (2004) includes within this definition the pedagogical strategies of modelling, demonstration, questioning and direct instruction.

Within the realm of children's creativity and in particular reference to drawing, views differ on the role of the educator between what Duffy (1998) defines as the interventionist and non-interventionist approaches to pedagogy. A non-interventionist approach is a facilitative role where materials are provided for children within a learning environment and children are largely left to get on with it themselves. Intervention of any kind is seen as harmful and destructive of the child's natural creativity. Children's free self-expression is seen as the motivating factor and the subjectivity of the image and the maker therefore is not questioned.

An interventionist role places the construction of the image and its maker within a social context i.e. children need to interact with others if learning in any area is to progress. One of the main pedagogic strategies therefore is to construct learning opportunities that enable children to participate with one another so that educators act as guides, creating and devising conditions in which children can build on knowledge and skills already gained using sensitive interventions when appropriate to move learning forward. Part of this role is to

help children become aware and conscious of the possibilities and processes of image-making including its communicative potential (Matthews, 2003).

In the Reggio Emilia context, pedagogy is situated towards the interventionist role yet always remaining reflexive to the context. My observations of this pedagogy on study tours (2003, 2005, 2006, 2007) have revealed that significant time is given for children to explore the properties and affordances of the materials and tools for the construction of images (both expressive and communicative) with an educator always close to hand. The educator observes, participates and documents the strategies of the children, noting their approaches, what they find of interest and with what they struggle. In creating sharable traces of these experiences (pedagogical documentation) and in reflecting on them with children, other educators and families, the educator engages in a process of continual professional research, which allows the pedagogy to be responsive, reflexive and highly visible.

> "Learning to listen, see, observe and interpret the children's actions, thoughts and logic of investigation and construction helps us to learn the art of being and talking with them, to understand better the processes and procedures they choose for developing personal relationships and acquiring knowledge. The educators' responsibility is thus to design and construct contexts that sustain these processes and foster relationships, loans of competencies, expectations, imitation and 'contagion'." Filippini & Giudici (2001).

The 'Reggio' educator is an active participant of the context of learning: developing opportunities for children to find and discover strategies to overcome problems and

building strong relationships where children and educators lend each other skills and knowledge so that they can be reconstructed to become their own. The learning is not just restricted to the children but belongs to the educators too who are learning from the children how children learn.

The Reggio context values drawing because it helps children to understand that their actions communicate and that visual communication can sometimes be clearer than words. Drawing is used in combination with other modes and materials but to communicate well, their graphics must be understandable to others (Malaguzzi, 1998). Drawing is not seen as a separate faculty but as a basis for all thinking (Matthews, 2003).

The drawing experiences in Reggio often take place with a group of three or four children. Educators use these as a basis for conversations with children, often revisiting previous drawings to enable evaluation and critical thinking within the group. Many drawings are kept in school so they can be referred to again and used to make visible the learning processes. Children are encouraged to revise and modify drawings and use them to test theories and communicate ideas to others. Different representational media and multiple modes of making and expressing meaning are used to deepen and broaden the children's understanding of a theme or concept, so that the growth of knowledge is enabled by passing from one modality to another (Forman, 1994; Malaguzzi, 1998).

Matthews (2003) believes that it is never too early to discuss with children how drawing works. For a baby this may require the educator to tune in – participating with gesture, facial expression, movement or sound. In my experience, this can mean echoing or tracing a finger along a drawn line, holding eye contact and smiling in recognition that the drawn line holds a shared interest. For a slightly older child Matthews suggests pointing out the names of marks and forms and how the lines, shapes and colours are working.

However, Bruce (2004) reminds the educator that when a child comes to show you their image that they are not always looking for a critique or a demand for a verbal explanation. Sometimes children do not draw visually realistic 'things' but instead draw actions, sounds, feelings or movements and these too are difficult to discuss using words (Keyte-Hartland, 2007). Educators are often not present to the drawing activity and so use questions to establish meaning and as Anning (1999) points out, educators are unaware of such strategies so often questioning is often highly inappropriate.

A supportive pedagogy that adopts meaningful questioning can be found when educators engage with children in sustained shared thinking. Siraj-Blatchford (2004) describes this as "…episodes in which two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify an idea, evaluate activities or extend narratives." This means constructing situations that foster exchange and encounter amongst children and educators that use open-ended questions to search for beliefs, theories and ideas rather than seek answers to questions already known by the educator. In a drawing pedagogy this means not asking

what a child has drawn but instead focuses on the how and why. The educator works alongside the child, providing formative feedback as drawing emerges.

The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) study supports the fostering of sustained shared thinking as it is seen as a valuable and highly effective pedagogy across all areas of learning (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). It suggests too that there must be an effective balance between teacher-initiated and child-initiated activities.

Anning & Ring (2004) comment on how teachers are failing to construct meaningful and appropriate teacher-initiated experiences of drawing, instead relying on worksheets that guide children into methods of drawing that neither facilitate sustained shared thinking or reflection on methods or modes of visual communication.   Child-initiated drawing experiences are often unassisted so there is little opportunity here too for appropriate educator intervention. There is clearly a gap between what is known in the academic and research world and what practitioners working alongside the children know.

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In this section I have reviewed literature that has not just been located within the field of education. I have found that literature from art therapy disciplines have proved more fruitful and thought provoking than many in education fields. Literature is rich and in abundance from Reggio Emilia contexts but there is a lack of material based specifically to the UK context. The limited UK research is useful in terms of pointing out the problems of

early years and primary contexts for drawing but does little to help improve the situation of what to do to improve pedagogy and the experiences of children.

There is a need for more UK based studies into children and drawing that uses the current educational context however flawed, to make visible the richness and potential that young children's drawing and image-making hold as a language of and for communication. Educators are right when they say, 'we cannot do what they do in Reggio' as we have to find our own answers, based within our own contexts. Connecting theoretical and international perspectives to UK practice in settings will be crucial in creating data that can challenge thinking within the UK classroom as well as create ripples of debate throughout LEA's, training agencies and beyond. Research must impact upon pedagogy and be shared widely at practitioner level for it to of relevance. I hope that my research will help contribute to this.

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Research Methodology

The research methodology that I adopted was **qualitative** in nature, the strategy contributed towards an **ethnographic approach**. The methods used to collect data included **participant observation** and **semi-structured interview**.

My focus was to collect children's drawing experiences that I personally observed in the contexts in which they were made that would illuminate the communicative potential of drawing and its supporting pedagogy. The context was a maintained UK nursery school where I worked as an Artist-Educator for a day each week that had 86, 3-4 year olds on role. The description from their recent 'outstanding' Ofsted report described the setting as serving an area in which many families faced considerable social and economic challenges. Most children came from White British families but a few came from other ethnic groups. The proportion of children with learning difficulties was above average and children's attainment when they started at the Nursery was well below what might be expected for their age, particularly in language and communication.

As I was interested in the meanings communicated within and from the activity of the children's drawing, I chose a **Qualitative** approach. Denscombe (2003) describes this as being concerned with the way people understand and make sense of human activity through reading the symbols and meanings created by members of a social group and in how they form patterns of behaviour. In this research I was concerned with the drawing

behaviours of both the children and the educators and how the drawings were read and understood by both.

A primary concern of qualitative research is that the data collected, whether that be words or images only becomes data through the process of interpretation by the researcher (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Denscombe, 2003). However, a highly subjective analysis may have lead to biased findings so to counteract this I reflected on the data collected with the educators I worked alongside to gain their perspectives. Photographs and video were used as visual aids to reflect on the drawings and processes involved. I also acknowledge my position and interest in the Introduction.

The **Ethnographical Approach** to this research strategy was concerned with providing a rich, interpretative holistic account of the values and perspectives of those involved within the socio-cultural context of the early years settings (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). In an early years context that was limited by period of time to study (one academic year) and the available word length of this study I instead refer to this research as contributing towards an ethnographic approach.

Ethnographic approaches have been previously employed to early childhood educational research notably in the EPPE Project (Sylva, et al., 1999) and in work by Paley (2004), (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). The ethnographic approach goes beyond the rich and thick descriptions and multiple methods of case study and avoids the snapshot description

of survey and aims instead to re-construct the episodes being observed taking account of the context. The re-construction is crafted through skills of writing of the researcher (Denscombe, 2003) and visual documentation in this instance (Pink, 2007).

I planned to use these re-constructions to make visible the communicative practices of drawing for others to see and also look for possible theoretical connections to the broader context of Early Years educational practices, a nomothetical approach that locates ethnography within a theoretical context (Denscombe, 2003).

As an ethnographic approach is concerned with lived experiences, I engaged in **Participant Observation** to simultaneously participate in the drawing episodes whilst observe and record what was taking place (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). As an outsider to the setting I considered that I could see the strange in the familiar noting the common and accepted practices of the children's and educators' interactions with drawing. The regularity of my visits enabled me to build a complex picture of the setting so that I was happy that my observations were capturing everyday nursery life and not just one-offs.

Field-notes were written in the moment in a journal and added to afterwards to elaborate on points and add initial interpretations and reflections. Being part of and capturing the unfolding action was important but I noticed that in the very process of writing down inevitably meant that I stopped listening and observing in that moment.

Photographic sequences helped to re-create the visual story unfolding but lacked the auditory layer, so the use of video film became increasingly useful to capture multiple layers of rich data. However, the consequence of video required that much time was spent editing, tagging information to clips and converting it into readable and sharable formats even before interpreting its contents. A photograph was quicker to store, manage and analyse but lacked the time-based and multi-layered advantages of film.

Throughout the enquiry, I reflected upon the observations of drawing episodes being collected and began to formulate provisional categories and ideas. This enabled me to become more selective in my approach to the observations. To elaborate further on some of these episodes I decided to revisit these with the teacher using the visual documentation as prompts within a semi-structured interview.

The **Semi-Structured Interview** was piloted (see appendix 1) with an educator of the setting. I asked her to select a drawing she would like to talk about, that she was present to and found interesting. Using this as the visual impetus with some prepared questions I wanted the interviewee to be able to offer in-depth answers to the questions I asked. It was important that they were able to respond freely and for myself to be responsive to their answers. A loose structure enabled me to keep to the task of exploring the communicative potential of drawing whilst allowing me to probe deeper to clarify emerging ideas and elicit further responses as they arose. I was aware of the potential for the interview to go off track and that the open nature of the questions could invite answers that the interviewee

thought I wanted to hear (the interviewer effect) which is why I tried to keep to questions related to drawing episodes of which they were part of (using their expertise). Questions were slightly amended after piloting (appendix 2) to ensure there was opportunity for the interviewee to define the key terms of drawing and communication and the focus was to be elicit opinion of drawings I selected that the educator was also part of.

Bias, Triangulation, Ethics, Validity and Reliability

Throughout the research process I was aware of the potential for **bias**. As outlined earlier, I tried to counteract a strong subjective handle by reflecting on data with educators present at the time and by sharing data where possible in staff meetings to elicit their views. The children were also invited to share what they thought at the time of making the drawings using Ring's (2000) paper on the methodological dilemmas of talking to children about their drawings. This helped to guide my interactions with the children during the participant observations.

There were times however when nursery routines and busy, loud environments affected the opportunities I had to talk with the children and often they didn't want to talk after completing their drawings. I was concerned about the representation of the child's voice within this research and felt that I could have explored alternative methods to enable the child to contribute more directly to interpretation of their drawing experiences.

Although **triangulation** of data does not suggest a perfect approach the multiple methods of collation and analysis of data (reflective research journal, observing closely the drawing behaviours of both children and educators, reflecting/sharing data with children and educators and interviewing key players) helped to ensure that my methods and research strategies did not overtly alter the research data.

Although I cannot guarantee the **reliability and validity** of the results, by having multiple sources of information to compare, in making visible and transparent the process of the research and in sharing data with others to gain further perspectives to counteract my personal bias I feel that if this research was carried out again, similar results would be found. The more general observations I made in the beginning helped me to locate the context of drawing in this setting but that later, by being more specific on the communicative behaviours helped to maintain that what I was seeking to describe and find has been measured and observed sufficiently.

In considering the **ethics** of this research I reviewed the BERA Ethical Guidelines (2004) and have adhered to five of these that have been relatable to this research. I have also completed the BCU Research Ethics Guidelines and this is included in the appendix (3).

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To conclude, I consider the strengths of this research to be that I have spent much time in the field collecting rich sources of multiple forms of data. This data has been shared and

discussed with participants helping to create a culture of reflection and deep thinking on the everyday drawing practices of young children. However, if I was to undertake this research again I would work on ways of reflecting with children about their drawings which has as much to do with developing a drawing pedagogy as it does with the research process itself.

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Findings

I have organised this section to reconstruct and reflect upon a number of communicative drawing episodes that I documented over the course of the academic year at the nursery school setting described in the previous section. Although there were many episodes recorded in my journal, the ones selected here have been chosen to illustrate the themes explored in the literature review and point to theoretical implications. I will begin by describing the drawing contexts of the nursery and defining the term 'communicative drawing'.

Communicative drawing

I am defining communicative drawings as those that invite response and require a joint level of participation in what Trevarthen (1995) describes as people, or in this case children who are "comparing, negotiating, persuading [and] showing their interests to others." These exchanges of meaning and therefore communication can only be constructed together between the maker and the audience.

Drawings may communicate sensation, feelings or ideas (Adams, 2002) but must, as in the Reggio Emilia wire bicycles illustration hold a sharable and readable code or convention. This sharable code maybe in its infancy, still under development, however, its primary purpose is to engage another in shared expression of meaning (communication). Therefore,

drawings done by the child in isolation, where there is no contextual information or audience throughout the making and reading have not been included in this definition.

The drawing context

The nursery school has two large open rooms with four base areas where small groups gather at the beginning and end of sessions. In one room there is sand and water provision, interactive whiteboard, graphics table (primarily set up for 'mark-making' activities) and an open space where children can bring their play and other resources. In the second room, there is an art space where clay is used, a studio table where drawing, painting and other creative activities take place, easel, mirror pyramid, lightbox and OHP. Adjacent is the block play area, music, role-play, dress up, computers and snack table. There are two additional outdoor spaces, a garden and a traditional playground used for bikes, climbing, outdoor sand and open-ended construction materials. There is also a room for stay and play sessions and where parents gather for celebration circle time.

Over the Autumn Term, as children were settling in I observed and documented the drawing activities taking place both inside and outside. My observations were shared with staff and used as discussion points at weekly meetings, which resulted in the production of a summative documentary panel of findings and questions for display within the nursery. This had been reproduced as a table in appendix 4.

The main areas that children chose to draw within were at small group times, the graphics table, easel, studio table, interactive whiteboard, computers, outside chalkboard and using resources from the outdoor trolley on clipboards. I have compiled a visual record of drawing contexts and experiences to give a richer picture, see figure 2.

The quality of interaction between educator-child when drawing outside was discussed in a staff meeting. It was generally felt that educators were mostly managing resources and children's safety and behaviour and that specific drawing interactions where staff could work in smaller groups or on a one to one basis were more suited to inside activity.

Educator-child interactions during drawing experiences (inside and out) were predominantly what Duffy (1998) referred to as non-interventionist, i.e. those that were accepting of what the child produced, that did not challenge thinking or encourage evaluative modes of assessment. Nursery practitioners employed the non-interventionist role mostly at child-initiated time, which formed the largest part of the child's session. The teacher however, was more interventionist in her approach, pointing out potential ideas, sharing skills if she saw a child struggling and often being challenging in terms of encouraging the child to think and talk about both the content and construction of their drawing. During interview, the teacher described this as:

" ...pointing out possibilities. You see, by sharing possibilities it helps them to consider something they may not have previously considered. I think it always worth

challenging children because you are helping them to consider alternatives…. and this is where the drawing becomes a dialogue between the child and the teacher."

The issue of educator challenge within the drawing process was also debated in meetings where one educator commented that she felt uncomfortable doing anything but smile and encourage because to do anything else "might really upset the child and put them off drawing for life." In the pilot interview, another educator spoke about her fear of joining in or of knowing what to do for the best:

> "Maybe I have got too fixated on not intervening and perhaps, hand on heart I don't do enough in terms of showing them what is possible. Of course, I provide the resources and environment but maybe there is something else I could do… I have seen it done so badly in the past you see, it frightens me."

Smiling and providing resources does not involve sustained shared thinking (now a feature of the new EYFS) but the reticence to "support and challenge children's thinking by getting involved in the thinking process with them" (DCFS, 2008) whilst drawing is not unique to this setting. In my experience, educators are uncertain in ways to support and challenge many aspects of creative development, as often they have not had appropriate training or professional development in this area and fear hampering creativity. Drawing in all its forms is about sharing something and in order for children to get better at communicating their ideas to another they have to engage in evaluative modes whereby they can progress

and extend their communicative practices. In fearing a more interventionist role, educators may indeed be hindering children's progression in creativity and communication.

Daily drawing routines

Figure 3

Children were observed drawing upon welcome into their small group bases. Drawing boxes available in each group contained felt tips, scissors, tape, rulers, pens and pencils and were accessible for children to self-select from and/or combine with a number of other small welcome activities. Children used these boxes on the floor (figure 3) that allowed for them to gather around.   In this way, the children often spoke to each other as they shared resources and noticed what each other were doing much more so than sitting at the graphic or studio tables.

One member of staff commented that for one of the girls in her group, it was the first thing that she did each morning, she thought it helped the child to settle during the difficult time of separating away from mum. Another educator noticed that drawings created at this time became important transitional objects between home and nursery.

A significant proportion of children were observed drawing pictures of their parents and it was proposed by educators that maybe this was a symbolic act, whereby the child was creating a *symbol* or *sign* of Mum or Dad that through the action of drawing came to exist within the nursery, albeit symbolically in their box. This was an interesting hypothesis that would benefit from further investigation in the future to explore the links between drawing and emotional security.

However, educators encouraged the use of drawing as a settling activity. I observed on many occasions upset children being guided to draw pictures for or of their parents so as to give it to them when they came to collect the child. Also, as part of the 'getting to know the nursery' routine, children were trained as such to put completed drawings in their boxes. As there was no alternative of what to do with the drawings, this particular drawing behaviour appeared symptomatic of the environment and pedagogy of the nursery. Drawing per se was not what helped to settle children but indeed any activity offered might have achieved a similar effect.

In the above sections I have described the environmental, pedagogic and daily routines of drawing within the setting. In the next sections, I reconstruct drawing episodes that illustrate specific strands of my findings.

Looking for significant meaning: What does the drawing communicate?

Journal entry, 20/11/07 (Figure 4)

Lauren came to the studio table, choosing to participate in the self-portrait drawing activity set up by the student teacher. Encouraged by the student teacher she looked at herself in the mirror, then turned to me and said "I have my hair up different today". Her hair was in a ponytail with a bobble at the top and another halfway down. She picked up a black pen and began drawing an outline of her face that filled most of the A4 paper [1]. Without referring to the mirror for the rest of the drawing she added two smaller enclosures on either side of the face shape as ears, a small circular nose, an upturned arc for a mouth, a series of straighter lines, which became the chin. The eyes again were circular, large spots, similar in construction and form to the nose but to which she added radial lines, which, I presumed to be eyelashes. Two arcs completed the eyebrows before she added the ponytail, a single line with a circular form at the top and another at the bottom. When asked by the student teacher, she named each part of her face and this information was written directly onto the drawing without any negotiation. She went on to complete a second drawing [2] in a similar fashion, although completing this one much faster before going to the
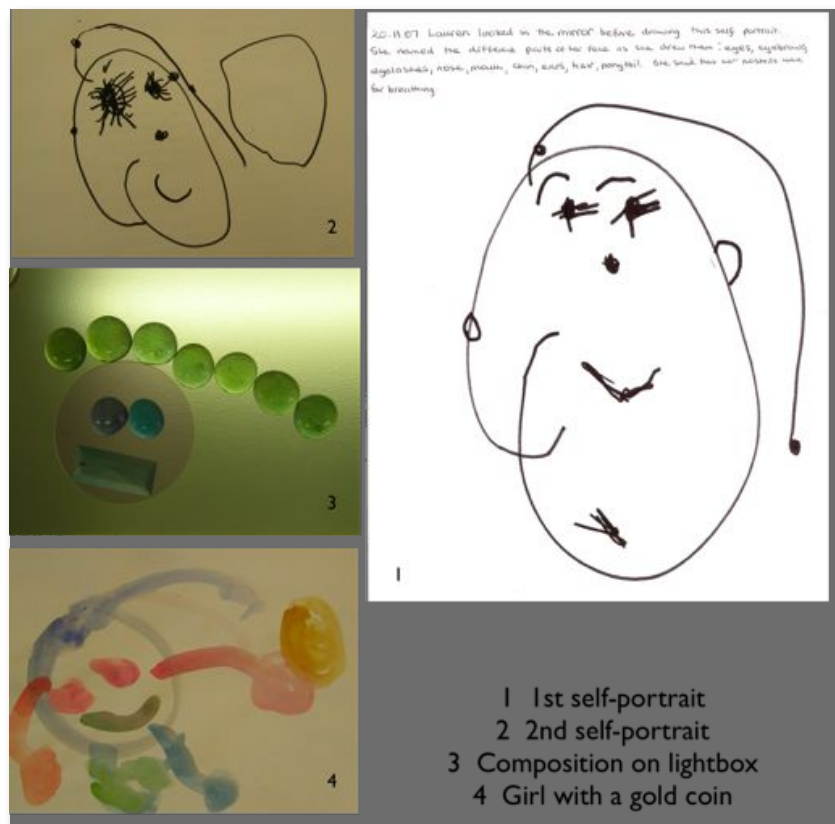

Figure 4

1 1st self-portrait
2 2nd self-portrait
3 Composition on lightbox
4 Girl with a gold coin

lightbox [3] and making a composition of her face using circular glass nuggets and a
transparent plastic coaster. She placed several green nuggets in a line protruding
from her head as a ponytail. Finally, she went to paint, and 'drew' with the paintbrush
[4] a figure that she described as "a girl with a golden coin in her hand" which again
featured a ponytail.

For the student teacher, the importance of this drawing episode was that it enabled her to
assess Lauren's knowledge and vocabulary of facial features. The drawing activity of self-
portraiture was an aside and subsequent drawings and use of multi-media were not noted
for any significance or seen as connected to her learning.

I shared by observations with Lauren's keyworker to gain another perspective and these
were subsequently shared with her Mum. Another drawing done on a previous day was
found which also featured the striking ponytail and eyelashes. When I asked Lauren about
her drawings, she simply said they were pictures of herself. Some might take this verbal
description of the visual form at face value; however in seeking out the opinions of others I
wondered if a more complex understanding could be attained. Lauren's Mum revealed that
Lauren had been paying close attention to her recently whilst applying her mascara. Lauren
was also fascinated with how her own hair looked in the morning. In observing her Mum
enhance her face with make-up and having her own hair style changed was Lauren exploring
her personal appearance(s) and identity(ies) through her drawings?

Applying social semiotic theory as a framework to interpret this drawing episode suggests that the drawn forms of extended (mascara) eyelashes and decorated ponytail were the criterial aspects (signs) that represented what Lauren (the sign-maker) considered the most apt representational mode for communicating her own identity (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The signs are not static but set within a shifting social focus of family life of watching Mum getting ready and of getting ready herself for nursery. Maybe too there is a fascination with transformation, the makeup and ability to change one's hair and how that can make you different, *note, she didn't say my hair is nice today, she remarked that is was different.*

In this section, this episode reveals that the sharing of information with parents and other educators is crucial in understanding the rich, complex and deep thinking that young children are capable of in their drawings and that in looking for connections (across media and timeframes) powerful interests are revealed. In the next section I explore how images can communicate scientific knowledge and understanding.

Communicating what you know in images rather than words

Journal entry, 11/12/07 *(Figure 5)*

Reece had come over to the table where I was sitting with a group who were drawing and working with simple collage materials. We were in his new reception class and I was there to help with transition. Reece picked up a shiny piece of foiled paper. As he held the foil in his hands, the bright sunlight coming through the window cast

reflections around the room. Reece noticed these dancing lights and soon realised

that he could control them by moving the paper around. In doing this, he also noticed

that the reflection disappeared if he did not hold it at the correct angle to the sunlight.

He did not say much but his delight was registered clearly on his face. He showed the

other children at the table and myself what he could do exclaiming "Look!" I asked

him how he had made it work and this direct question was met by a shrug and a

puzzled look.

Not put off, I asked again, "I am just wondering how you made the light move, and I

don't understand you see." Again, Reece just looked at me and physically

demonstrated what to do but could not tell me how it was happening. Was this because Reece did not have the words to describe this phenomenon or did he not know how?

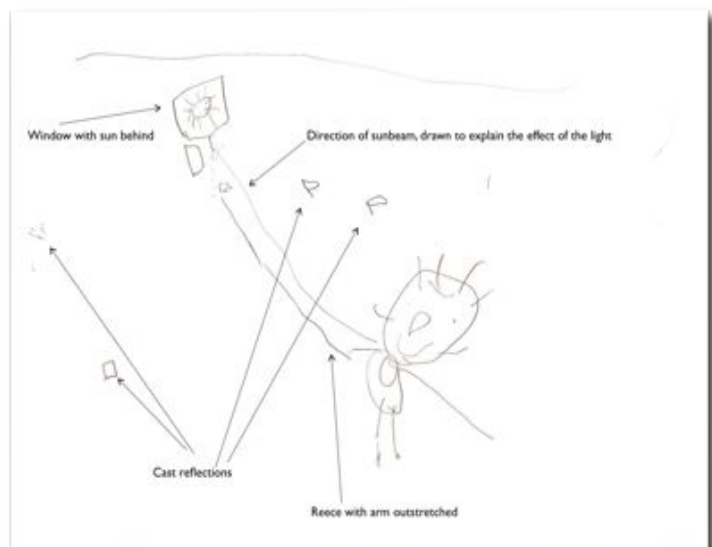*I picked up a piece of paper and suggested that maybe he drew*

Figure 5

how instead. This he did with ease and with a visual form to refer to, he was then able

to talk through the mechanics of light and reflection.

When I shared this drawing and observation with his new reception teacher her response was, "It's all very well to draw it, but in reception he has got to be able to write and say it." Hall's (2007) review of Foundation and Key Stage 1 curriculum documents reveal how the use of drawing as a strategy and medium for communication is not present so the reception teacher may not have valued this drawing because it did not match assessable criteria.   As Anning & Ring (2004) found, drawing often goes unnoticed as a mode of communication in contexts that separate and prioritise verbal and written modes from other forms and functions of communication.

When I shared the same with his nursery teacher her response was different.

> "Wow! This just shows how drawing can be used to describe and formulate theories that perhaps he could not do verbally. The action of drawing has enabled him to do this…I should imagine that it helped him to clarify his ideas in his mind."

The perception of the nursery teacher is that the process of drawing has helped Reece to internally organise a complex idea that facilitates the external construction and communication of a developing thought. Similarly to Rollins' (2005) and Brooks' (2005) work with children in art therapy, the action of drawing has helped to formulate and illuminate thinking where direct verbal interaction failed. This is a powerful example of enabling a child to use drawing to structure their thinking and make visible and therefore sharable their understanding and knowledge of a subject.   Instead of prioritising one communicative mode over another, Foundation Stage curricula should embrace and identify

multi-modal communicative strategies that support and strengthen all areas of communication.

In the next example, I explore the use of combined media in a multi-modal communication involving the drawing process.

Multi-media and multi-modal drawing

Journal Entry, 5/3/08 (Figures 6 & 7)

Figure 6

Lauren worked alongside her friend Kara building a city from small wooden unit blocks.

Lauren said she wanted to make people for her city and looking around the studio space, she spotted some paper and pens and began drawing two people (figure 6). When she finished she came to me saying that her drawings of people had to go in the city and that they should stand up, she also

Lauren demonstrating how in her drawings her figures look like they are lying down flat (1) and that what she wants is for them to be upright, like she is so they can move around the city (3). (4) shows the cut-out drawing

Figure 7

demonstrated this using her body to show me how on the page, her drawings of people looked like they were lying down (figure 7).

Lauren seemed stuck, so I suggested that maybe she could cut-out her drawing and make them stand up and thus, she did. Drawings were given voices and moved around the city as if small figures. An idea I suggested helped bridge the gap between Laurens idea and the material form she had chosen. Lauren then shared this new skill to other children, which resulted in a frenzy of cut-out people appearing across the nursery.

Lauren used different media (paper, pen, wooden blocks) and multiple modes of representation (drawing, construction, animation, physical use of body, verbal) to communicate her idea of a city inhabited with buildings and people. Kress (1997) considers that children act multi-modally both in the materials they use and in the types of objects that they make and I think this example illustrates this concept. Foreman (1994) thinks that the choices made by children over which materials are best fit to express their ideas contain significant messages in their choice; I feel Lauren's rejection of the blocks to make people from is noteworthy because although the blocks could have been used symbolically to stand in for people, drawing enabled Lauren to represent the very essence for her of what being a person is about, and that is the ability to move.

The drawing itself features two people; they are lively and energetic, holding hands almost as if they are dancing (figure 6). The teacher commented upon this too during interview:

"For Lauren, movement is incredibly important, she often sways and dances from side to side when drawing and when you look at these cut-out drawings there is an element of movement within them too... they are very vibrant characters."

Case (1994) described how the action of cutting could communicate different meanings for the child. In this example I think the action of cutting out symbolised the liberating of the people from the 2D fixed page to a free 3D world where movement was possible. The action of cutting transformed the image and somehow made it more valid. Pahl (1999) noticed this too when observing children moving from 2D to 3D in their model-making and suggested that the reason had something to do with making the object being represented 'more real'.

This movement between modes and dimensions is an area that has become increasingly visible in my research into young children's drawing strategies, something that I hadn't noticed before, maybe because I wasn't aware of it. It highlights the need for further research and richer documentation of strategies of image-making to be made visible and sharable within the early years community (and not just within the academic world) so that educators can support these processes.

In this section I have explored multi-modal forms of communicating through images. In the next section I look at how a teacher interacts alongside a child whilst drawing to examine the supportive pedagogic practices.

Pedagogic practices: exploring the process of meaning-making in drawing

### Context to observation, 6/2/08

Sarsha had been part of a group following up a nursery visit to the park the previous day. They had collected fallen twigs and branches and this had provided the imaginative impetus for talk about dragons (the twigs were possible dragon claws). A group of interested children had been invited to be part of group to discuss and share their thoughts both verbally and visually about what they thought dragons were and what they might look like. Sarsha had originally disappeared when the other children in the group had begun drawing but had come back at the end of the session which was when the teacher invited her to draw what she thought a dragon looked like.

Transcript from observation 6/2/08 *(Figure 8)*

Sarsha stared at her piece of paper as if unsure of what to do. After a long pause, the teacher spoke.

Teacher	Where are you going to start your drawing *[of a dragon]* from?
Sarsha	With its head *(she pauses again still not sure how to proceed).*
Teacher	Ok, so what shape do you think its head is?
Sarsha	This shape ←--------→ *(holding her arms in front of her and gesturing).*
Teacher	Ok, so can you draw that shape? *(Sarsha draws a horizontal line (1).* And what comes next do you think?
Sarsha	His belly, like this *(she draws two straight vertical lines downward on separate parts of the page (2).*
Sarsha	Now his tail *(she draws a set of separate horizontal marks, again on a different part of the page (3).*
	There are now several elements of the dragon drawn upon the paper. None are connected.
Teacher	What do you think Sarsha, should all the bits be joined up?

Sarsha	*(Question ignored.)* Ummm…look there is his tongue… (*she makes an arc line forming an enclosed shape (4) and adds a smaller inverted arc inside (5)*…and he is blowing smoke out *(draws dots (6).*
Teacher	Does the dragon have any ears?
Sarsha	No he don't…I've drawn the sun now (7)…he is going to go shopping now to buy a costume. He lives in a big nest.
Teacher	Can you draw the nest so I can see what it looks like? *(Sarsha draws a vertical arc (8).*
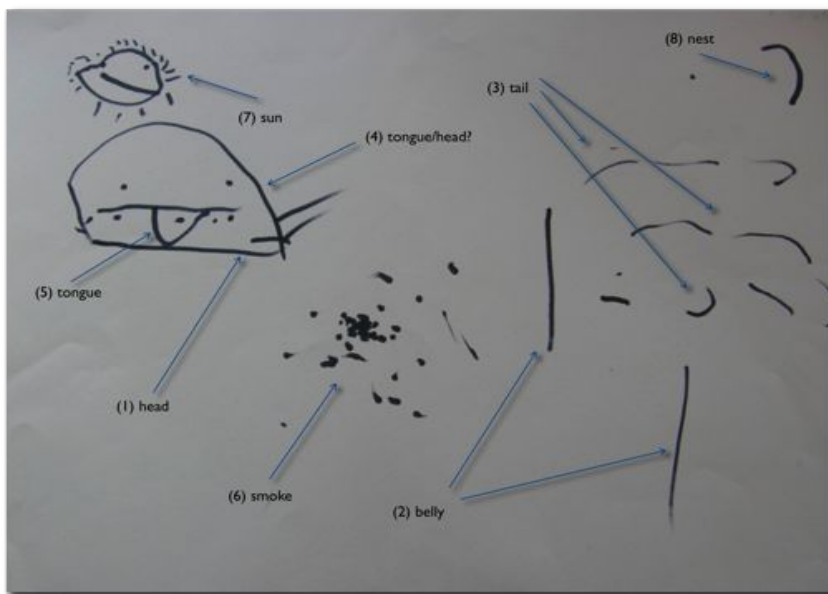
The teacher described Sarsha in interview as "someone who was not very confident about drawing although she was articulate…"

Figure 8

The teacher's challenge to Sarsha to draw the dragon was something she found neither easy nor convinced of its worth possibly, but she was willing to participate and have a go at something new and difficult. The teacher constructed a context that was challenging yet supportive to the child. It confronts a dominant pedagogy that is centred around and seen to follow passively the interests of children whereby Sarsha would not have drawn a dragon because she would not have chosen to. The teacher's direct involvement in this example again evidences a more active and interventionist approach to teaching (Duffy, 1998) and although I do not have the scope within this research to go in-depth into issues of what child-initiated learning is, I do wish to alert the reader that the issue of inviting children to

do things that they don't choose themselves to do echoes the differing positions that educators adopt towards teaching skills of drawing.

The teacher's strategy in the beginning of this episode was to manage Sarsha's unease and unfamiliarity with the task by breaking it down into manageable stages. Asking her where she would start the drawing, gave Sarsha a starting point that could be built on and added to in subsequent stages. I have found on many occasions that children often say *I can't draw a […]* but often, when talking this through with them it often indicates instead *I don't know how to start drawing a […].* Identifying a beginning to a drawing is often the first obstacle to conquer, echoed also by Kolbe (2005) and this is clearly something very easy that educators can do to help children in their communication of visual ideas and thinking.

In thinking about the appropriateness of the intervention I found it interesting when the teacher suggested to Sarsha that the separate elements of her dragon as they appeared on the page could be connected somehow. I have seen children draw composite objects as separate elements on a page often, especially when beginning to make visually realistic images. It's as if, like learning to write a word, they are breaking it up into its constituent parts, like sounding out a word phonetically in order to understand it. I also wonder if the edge of the paper suggests to the child a boundary that holds together the ingredients of their drawing reducing the need for incorporating them together.

The teacher described this suggestion to join up the elements in interview as "pointing out possibilities to help Sarsha consider something she had not previously considered before… maybe because she was not an experienced mark-maker…"

Initially, when I first began the analysis of this interview, I suspected the teacher said this because she desired or considered the image of the dragon to be joined up a better one. I was uneasy with this and found her suggestion discourteous to the creative choices of the child. But in thinking about how this drawing was co-constructed through dialogue and exchange I have shifted my position. This has required me to be open to the re-interpretation of the research data to see this suggestion as an approach to developing thinking about sharable codes and conventions through image-making. For a drawing, or in fact any image to communicate meaning successfully it has to (according to my own criteria as stated at the beginning of this section) hold a sharable and readable code or convention. This sharable code maybe in its infancy, still under development however its primary purpose is to engage another in a shared expression of meaning (communication).

The separated elements do not convey a sharable message about dragons, they are hard to read and decipher in a similar way to how words scattered over a page do not a make a comprehensible sentence. Malaguzzi (1998) described how in Reggio Emilia drawing was a tool for communicating that was often "simpler and clearer than words" but that the graphics produced by the children must be understandable to others in order to communicate effectively.

In this instance, the teacher is not telling her how to draw a dragon but helping Sarsha to consider and evaluate how communicative her dragon is to others. As the teacher states here, "I think Sarsha is confident enough to say 'no', if she thought the elements should not be connected… but I think, in this instance, it was more about that Sarsha did not realise that the different parts could be connected with additional lines." Sarsha interestingly did not join up the elements in this drawing, but in subsequent drawings connections between elements became more noticeable.

Sarsha's use of bodily gesture to describe the shape of the dragon's head illustrates how gesture is as communicatively powerful as the spoken word, just as a raised eyebrow, wink or roll of the eyes in the adult world can too. In this drawing the teacher encourages the movement between different modalities of communication (verbal, gesture, visual) by encouraging Sarsha to draw her gesture or verbal suggestions. This interplay is a strategy used by the educators in Reggio Emilia who view these relationships between modes, media and dimensions as sites of developing understanding and knowledge. As children go from one mode to another, the children find that each mode generates a new understanding and thus advances them (Forman, 1994; Malaguzzi, 1998).

What Malaguzzi and Forman emphasised was the learning of the child rather than the teaching of the educator. It requires the educator to create generative contexts that sustain the child's motivation to understand a subject for a longer period of time that involves

exploration, investigation and discovery of meaning across these modes and in different media. In doing so, less content is explored but greater depth of understanding is achieved.

To limit choices and experiences can help support children to develop expertise, proficiency and skills whilst also fostering strong creative dispositions but there are arguments against this that favour broader and wider curricula that encourage children to experience a multitude of activities and experiences. This was summed up by an educator I once heard saying, "Were supposed to encourage children to become a jack of all trades and masters of none, aren't we?"

In terms of drawing experiences, if the pedagogy of the setting is positioned towards a non-interventionist approach that favours breadth over depth, that also sees drawing as an expressive mode rather than a communicative one then children could enter Key Stage 1 without having had any support in their drawing methods and strategies. As Anning & Ring (2004) found, support in Key Stage 1 becomes even less likely as drawing becomes used primarily to illustrate writing and is reduced in status to spare time or wet play based activities.

A pedagogy that only offer resources and watches children draw does not help children to make those transitional steps that contribute to rich communication and learning. For Malaguzzi (1998) this was not just an issue of graphic expression and communication but one that addressed learning and teaching as a whole.

"Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active, reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning how to learn."

◆ ◆ ◆

Conclusion

The key to understanding children's communicative practices of drawing in early years settings is simply to look for it as it is happening all the time beneath our very noses. Early years education can no longer limit the use and value of drawing to either expressive modes or technical coordination skills that lead to writing. Drawing is a rich communicative mode that underpins and strengthens all other modes and areas of learning when transitions between modes, media and dimensions are supported. Watching children draw and smiling at the results will not help children access a complex world of communication and information. Words and print are not the only ways to engage with others, we already inhabit a world where images play an important part in communicating and imparting knowledge and information, one needs just to access the Internet to see how powerfully images are used.

The implications for practice challenge both how we view children (as constructers of knowledge rather than receivers of it) and how we view teaching and learning (whereby we co-construct learning alongside the child in a reciprocal exchange of ideas, understanding and meaning-making rather than impart our learnt knowledge to the child). Observation is key, but not in an inert sense of standing aside, passively watching but in analysing what we

see and sharing this to gain richer understandings and differing perspectives to determine what we do as educators next.

What I suggest educators can do to help children develop skills in communicative drawing are:

- Help children to find the beginning of their drawing when they get stuck

- Manage children's fears of the whole complex task of drawing by splitting it into manageable chunks

- Maximise opportunities to enable children to move between modes, dimensions and media to revisit and explore ideas and themes

- Collect their drawings in portfolios, not just for record keeping but as a place where children and educators can refer back to previous drawings, using them as plans as reference points for further investigation

- Encourage children to see drawings not as finished products to take home but as working drawings, able to be modified and revised

- Use drawing to help children test out ideas and formulate theories

- Talk to children not just about what they are drawing, but about how and why

- Accept that children are not always drawing visually realistic images, but might instead be exploring images that involve dynamic movement, analogy, or narrative

- Don't be afraid to make suggestions and point out possibilities that help children to consider alternatives

- Share skills and lend your competencies to children to bridge the gap between their skills and intended ideas

- Slow down and sustain deep thinking. Maximise opportunities for children to evaluate their own and each others drawings

- Share information about drawings amongst colleagues and with parents to gain richer understandings

- Be present to the activity of drawing so that you can make visible in records and displays the developing codes and conventions that help make children's drawing rich in communicative potential

The real challenge for educators is to notice and recognise these multi-modal communicative strategies inherent in the action of drawing. Observing closely and analysing children's search for meaning and ways to communicate is key to developing a fitting and responsive pedagogy.

Apart from the areas already identified as subjects for further research, I think the role of drawing and how it is used within emergent projects is worth investigating to explore how a more interventionist approach to teaching can be applied and managed within a group.   I

recognise that I must find ways to involve the voice of the child more in the analysis of their drawings and a way to investigate this maybe to explore the context of group learning.

To conclude, the strength of this research is that it makes visible both the pedagogic strategies of the educators and the processes of the child making the drawing using documentary and ethnographical methodologies to re-construct the drawing event and associated behaviours. It is my hope to find ways through existing networks and in developing new arenas to share these ideas as provocations for debate as I am passionate about engaging with educators to raise standards of pedagogy in the early years. There is no single way forward but in reflecting upon and rethinking how we as educators interact, respond and understand children's drawings we may begin to notice just how rich, competent and capable young children really are and that a curriculum and pedagogy that separates learning and communication into categories, stages and generalised assessable criteria is failing children to realise their communicative potential.

Debi Keyte-Hartland (2008)

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