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Children’s voices
Within many research arenas, there is growing recognition that children’s lives are complex and multi-faceted, and quite different from the childhood lives remembered by adults. Moving away from the positivist approach of categorizing all children according to stages and developmental expectations, there is an increasing trend to recognize the “historical and cultural influences that ensure that every child has an individual and unique experience of his or her childhood” (Greene & Hogan, 2005, p. x). Accompanying this trend is the belief that as educators, researchers and adults, we have a lot to learn about children and children’s experiences, from the children themselves. This belief assumes that children “both construct their worlds and are constructed by their worlds” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. xii), as they engage in daily practices.

Starting school
Starting school is an important time in the lives of children and families. Children experience the transition to school in many different ways: their experiences differ, as do their expectations and understandings of what school will be like, their connections with school, the ways in which they will engage with the school community and ways the school community engages with them (Brostrom, 1998; Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Einarsdóttir, 2003; Rimm-Kaufmann, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Studies of children’s experiences and expectations of school indicate distinct differences from the experiences and expectations of adults (Dockett & Perry, 2004). Despite this, few schools have seriously considered ways in which children’s experiences and understandings can be used to inform programs to support the transition to school.

Researching children’s experiences and expectations of school has been a prime focus of the Starting School Research Project, based at the University of Western Sydney. The methodologies adopted within the project reflect efforts to reposition children as participants and contributors both in the research and in their own transition to school. Underpinning these efforts are views of children as competent, capable, as experts on their own lives (Clark
& Moss, 2001; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998), and whose experiences and perspectives are important areas for study (Barker & Weller, 2003). These perspectives are varied and can depend on the approaches used to interact with, and the artefacts gathered from the children. The study reported in this paper focused on children’s expectations and experiences of school, as expressed in their drawings and the narratives accompanying these.

**Children and drawing**

Several researchers have developed a range of innovative approaches to engaging children in research, including the use of photographs (Fasoli, 2003; Prosser & Schwartz, 1998), conversations with children (Mayall, 2000) and children’s drawings (Punch, 2002). These approaches are characterised by listening to children’s agendas, addressing issues relevant to children, utilising children’s preferred methods of communication, and mutuality in interactions between children and researchers (Barker & Weller, 2003; New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, 2005).

One approach to learning about children and their experiences has been to invite children to draw. Several recent studies have used children’s drawings as a means of researching lived experiences (Soto, 2004; Soto & Lasta, 2004; Veale, 2005). Soto (2004) has combined children’s drawings with narrative inquiry to “visualise voice” and describe children’s theories:

> children’s representations, voices, and wisdom can guide our democratic dreams as we listen to what children intend to say…. Our role as narrative inquirers can help to guide knowledge about how children “experience the world” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and how to afford voice, possibility, complexity, and theory in our research with children. (Soto, 2004, p. 18)

Children’s representations can be complex, multi-faceted and shifting. Kress (1997) reports of his investigation of his own children’s representations, that play-based narratives often support and intertwine with drawings, as “language [is] used to indicate action and narrative sequence, and drawing [is] used to represent, to display, the people and objects in the story” (Kress, 1997, p. 24). This suggests that drawing and narrative together can provide valuable insight into the experiences of children.

For many years, children’s drawings have been used as a standardized assessment tool for cognitive and emotional development. For example, studies have focused on drawing connections between children’s intellectual development and their drawings (Goodenough, 1926), describing a developmental sequence of children’s drawing development (Kellog, 1969), often in relation to human figures (Goodnow, 1977). Underlying these studies was a firm belief that children’s drawings provide some insight into their thinking (Eng, 1954). There has been less focus on the interpretative potential of drawings – where children provide the interpretation that reflects their lived experiences and realities.

Recent research across the area of children’s drawing suggests a more prominent place for the consideration of social and cultural context as influences on children’s drawing and a greater focus on children’s own interpretations of drawings, rather than the interpretations of adults. This change in approach sees drawing as a means to encourage young children to communicate effectively, without heavy reliance on verbal and literacy skills (Brooks, 2004; Steele, 1999; Young & Barrett, 2001), and as a means of helping children to “make their thinking visible to others” (Robertson, 2000, p. 161). The importance of considering visual
imagery is emphasised by McNiff’s (1981, cited in Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 35) view that “drawing is not a process of imitating or copying the physical world, but rather of synthesizing life experiences”.

Drawing is embedded within cultural and social contexts. Drawings both reflect cultural context (Cox, 1998) and constitute a cultural practice (Braswell & Callanan, 2003). Children’s drawing itself has been described as a discursive act–a visual discourse–where children call upon a set of “drawing conventions, a visual vocabulary and a visual syntax” (Hawkins, 2002, p. 216) that can be understood as children’s expressions of agency and power within particular contexts, as well as their ability to manipulate these contexts through drawing.

Often, drawing is also a social act. Anning (2002, Anning & Ring, 2004) uses the framework of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) to describe how children make meaning through interactions with more experienced others. This approach focuses on the context of children’s drawings, recognising the power of the context to influence what is drawn, how it is drawn and the meaning ascribed to the drawing.

The meanings ascribed to drawings by children often come from an accompanying narrative (Veale, 2005). Barthes (1977) has described dialogue accompanying drawings as an ‘anchor’, that fixes meaning in much the same ways as captions serve as interpretations of photographs. In relation to children’s drawings, the narrative is important in ensuring that children’s interpretations are paramount. As indicated by Kress (1997), the narrative and the drawing together create powerful and multi-faceted representations, particularly in familiar, comfortable environments. When environments are more formal or contrived, such as in schools, some caution is necessary in automatically assuming that narrative and drawing are indicative of the intended meaning. The task of drawing and then submitting dialogue for an adult to scribe as text has become a highly ritualised process in many educational contexts (Coates, 2001).

The transition to school has been identified as an important time for drawings, as the differences in educational settings (such as preschool, or home, and school) are highly salient and children are expected to observe large numbers of differences, as well as similarities. Anning (2002) suggests that drawing is an important tool for communication and reflection at this time, building on Dyson’s (1989, p. 25) view that “children’s dramatic play and their imaginative drawings are their own re-playings and graphic organisations of their experienced worlds”.

**Research outline**

To find out about the experiences and expectations of children as they started school, we invited a group of Kindergarten (first year of school in NSW) children to draw something about school. The children had all started school in a major city in NSW, and were in their first term of school.

Children were supplied with a blank sheet of paper and a variety of pencils. Their usual classroom teacher introduced the task with discussion and invited the children to draw. The teacher explained the purpose of the activity, focusing on helping other people to find out what school was like. The teacher then scribed any comments children wished to make. The writing activity was presented as having no ‘right’ or ‘correct’ response – it was open-ended
and a generous amount of time was provided, with the aim that children not feel rushed to complete the activity.

Thirty-nine children from two Kindergarten classes in the same school participated in the drawing activity. The school is located in a major city of NSW and draws students from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The children were aged between four-and-half and six years, and there were approximately equal numbers of boys and girls. Their drawings and accompanying narratives form the data for this paper.

The drawings and narratives were coded by two researchers (initially independently, and then using discussion to resolve any differences) using the categories established through the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 2004). An additional category of “other” was added to reflect drawings where children had not offered a narrative to accompany the drawing, or where the narrative and/or the drawing did not reflect school-related content. The categories used for coding were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Ideas, facts or concepts that need to be known in order to start school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment</td>
<td>Adjustment to the school context, including interpersonal and organisational adjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Small units of action that could be observed or inferred from observable behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition</td>
<td>Attitudes towards, or feelings about school or learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>Fitting in with the school and school expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Physical attributes, needs or characteristics. Also includes issues about safety, health and age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family issues</td>
<td>Issues related to family functioning or involvement with the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational environment</td>
<td>The nature and/or characteristics of the school environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Categories from the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 2004).

Results
This group of children reflected only 4 of these categories in their drawings and narratives of school:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational environment</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Children’s drawings according to categories.

For this group of children, the issues mentioned most often were how children felt about school (disposition) and what happened at school (educational environment). Adjustment embodied elements of getting used to school and the routines of school (such as eating at the right times) and the only mention of physical issues related to the “look of the classroom”.

Children’s drawings
Drawings included in the ‘other’ category included those where children chose not to offer a narrative (6) or where the narrative and drawing together did not relate to school – the one instance of this has a drawing of two figures in the foreground and another in the background, with the comment “Monsters”. As the child did not wish to elaborate, this was coded as ‘other’.

Disposition – how children feel about school – was a feature of 14 drawings. In these drawings, children referred to their friends, and playing with their friends and feeling happy about school because they had friends at school (Figure 1). Children indicated that they were excited about school (Figure 2) and having fun at school. Some children expressed excitement about what they would do at school (build, play), while others expressed excitement about having lunch at school and wearing their school uniform. Only one child indicated any aspect of a negative disposition about school – her drawing was of “not crying at school”.

![Figure 1. “Playing with my friends Kirsten, Sarah and Dylan.”](image1)

![Figure 2. “Excited about school.”](image2)

What happened at school was the focus of most drawings in the educational environment category (Figures 3, 4). Learning featured prominently in this group of drawings, with 5
children picturing school as a place to learn, and more specifically, a place to learn to read and write. Two children also nominated school as a place where they learn to swim, possibly reflecting their recent attendance at swimming lessons with the school. Other activities at school were painting, drawing, working and playing.

Figure 3. “Doing drawings.”

Figure 4. “Learning.”
Adjusting to school, particularly routines and expectations, featured in several drawings. Aspects of school referred to included “sitting in the front row” (Figure 5), “I am good at eating my sandwich quickly” (Figure 6) and “leaving Canery [dog] at home”. All of these reflect school practices that children feel they have to ‘get used to’.

Figure 5. “Sitting in the front row.”

Figure 6. “I am good at eating my sandwich quickly.”

Teachers featured in 6 drawings. In each case, the teacher was drawn as female (the only principal was drawn as male). Gender was indicated by clothing (typically a dress or skirt), facial characteristics (such as large lips with lipstick) and long hair (sometimes with decorations). As reported by Weber and Mitchell (1995), almost all teachers were smiling. There was not a clear difference between the drawings of teachers of boys and girls, with both drawing teachers as female. While two teachers were positioned at the front of a classroom or group of children, most teachers were drawn without some of the stereotypical props that are often associated with teachers in the drawings of older children (Weber & Mitchell, 1995).

Discussion – what are children’s experiences and expectations of school?
Despite what could be described as a ‘common’ experience of school – with children attending the same school in the same community at the same time, and experiencing the same educational program and the same teachers – there are remarkable differences in how children depict their experiences and expectations of school. Some clearly focus on how they feel about school – with the feelings reported being generally positive. Other children focus on what happens at school, particularly on what they expect to learn. Still others emphasise the adjustments they need to make to fit into the routines of school. There is a wide range of individual differences in how children experience and regard school, from very early in each child’s school career. While children are often described as a class group, the individual differences are important for educators to consider.

Few children who completed the drawing activity reported any negative emotion about school – in contrast, whenever there was mention of how children felt about school, words such as ‘fun’ and ‘exciting’ were used. We are cautious about interpreting this to mean that all children experience positive emotions all the time, and are conscious that the participating children may have been hesitant to note any negatives in a task that was controlled by the classroom teacher.

Despite this constraint, the children’s drawings and narratives provide a range of information about how children experience school. Twenty three of the drawings and comments depict children with others – mostly other children, but sometimes the teacher. The comments relate to being with friends, or learning in some way at school. This suggests that these children see themselves as belonging at school – school is presented as a place that accepts them and they picture themselves as ‘fitting into’ the school. This is a significant achievement after a relatively short time at school, particularly given that some children were unfamiliar with school and what happens at school before their own enrolment. The sense of belonging within a school has been linked to experiencing success at school (Brostrom, 2003), in that children who have an image of themselves as belonging within a school environment and who regard themselves as competent within that environment, are likely to engage with what happens at school and to experience school success.

There are few explicit mentions of the teacher, yet the teacher’s presence is important in several drawings. In some drawings, the teacher stands at the front of a group or classroom, in others there is a teacher in the background. Teachers and schools clearly go together.

Considering children’s drawings of school provides some insight for adults into the experiences and expectations of children. These children expect school to be fun, and several reported the experience of being excited about school. While it is likely that school will not always be fun and exciting, it is important to note the enthusiasm with which children approach school. It is a significant time for them, and educators, as well as family and community, can share some of that excitement.

Children expect to learn at school. In other conversations with children, they report clearly that they expect to read, write, do ‘hard sums’ and homework when they start school. These activities are regarded by children as markers of their ‘school student’ status, that it, this is ‘what big kids do’ (Dockett & Perry, 2004). The drawings of these children indicate that they expect to learn at school, particularly to read and write. Children’s expectations are real and important. When they are not met, children may feel let down, or incompetent (Brostrom, 1995). Knowing children’s expectations can assist educators in their discussions with children about what will happen at school, and help set realistic and positive goals for the
first experiences of school. Discussing children’s expectations with them would seem to be an important step in this process.

Children’s drawings reflect many of the understandings they construct about school. Possible understandings from the drawings of this group of children include:

- it is important to eat your lunch quickly;
- ‘it was important to be nice and good’;
- school is a place to learn;
- drawing and painting are activities at school;
- classrooms ‘look’ a certain way.

These understandings are not presented as definite, or unchanging. Indeed, it would be expected that children’s increasing experience at school and of school would influence their understandings in many ways. Nor are these understandings presented as representative of all children starting school. Rather, they are presented as a means of engaging in interactions with children with the aim of gaining insights into their experiences and expectations of school. Gaining such insight is important if adults are to identify what matters to children and to respond in ways that support this. In this context, educators could respond to the children’s enthusiasm about school, recognise the importance of friends and acknowledge the importance children place on learning, particularly learning to read and write at school. Not taking these into account sets up the possibility of children and adults working in the same context, but with different aims and understandings.

Just as children’s experiences and expectations of school are likely to change, it is noted that different approaches to seeking information from children are likely to result in different responses. For example, conversations with children about starting school indicate a strong focus on friends, as reported in this paper, as well as a strong focus on rules and the importance of rules (Dockett & Perry, 2004). The same focus on rules is not evident in the drawings of this group of children. Does this mean that children are inconsistent in their understandings and should not be believed? Is this a failure to triangulate data? We suggest that the different results reflect different ways of seeking information. We also suggest that children may not have one ‘true’ experience or expectation that will be revealed. We do believe that children, just like adults, respond differently to different questions asked in different contexts, and that their understandings of topics, such as starting school, are complex and multifaceted. Within the Starting School Research Project, researching with children has involved seeking a range of approaches and strategies for engaging with children that are both appropriate and relevant. However, we are cautious about assuming that such a range of strategies and approaches will reveal the ‘hidden truth’, heeding the warning expressed by Greene and Hill (2005, p. 16):

Triangulation can imply that there is a reality to which one can come closer by combining multiple perspectives. Richardson (1994) questions ‘the assumption that there is a “fixed point” or “object” that can be triangulated (p. 522) and suggests that the metaphor of the crystal might be more useful than the metaphor of the triangle … Each representation in research can be seen as a facet of the crystal, and crystals ‘reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on the angle of our repose’ (Richardson, 1994, p. 523).
While it is clear that the drawing process is influenced by social and cultural contexts, expectations and values, it remains a task over which children can exert high levels of control, ranging from control over the participation at all, to the nature of the drawing undertaken and the finished outcome. This is clear in the different drawings included in this paper. For example, Figure 6 is a black and white drawing, with relatively little detail. Despite this, when combined with the written narrative, the meaning is clear. The relative lack of detail does not detract from the interpretation. Other drawings are much more detailed, but the accompanying narrative remains important.

Drawing is usually a familiar activity for children, though it cannot be assumed that it is positively valued by all children. Children can express as little or as much as they wish, in ways of their choosing, through drawing. Drawing is a task that can be added to, or changed as the process continues. It does not require a rapid response: it can be thought about and drawings can develop as the drawer chooses. One of the advantages of inviting children to draw is that it can result in reduced eye contact, and hence be less confronting. Having something concrete to focus on while talking can be a much more comfortable situation than facing someone in an interview context.

Conclusion
Inviting children to draw something about school has provided opportunities to consider their experiences and expectations of school. Children represent school in different ways, and drawing provides a forum where individual experiences of school can be reflected and acknowledged. Anning and Ring (2004) have emphasised the importance of the interplay between narratives expressed in the modes of speech, play, drawing and symbolic representations in young children’s development … The point about narratives is that they can encapsulate cognitive, affective and aesthetic aspects of understanding. So for young children they offer powerful tools for expressing complex ideas. Making drawings gives young children opportunities to represent intricate personal narratives and use them to communicate with significant others in their lives. (p. 117)

In the Starting School Research Project, drawings have been used as one of many ways in which children can express what they feel is important as they start school. Through this variety of approaches, the project has endeavoured to honour children as active participants in the research, as people who have something to contribute to the research and who deserve to be heard. With the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People (2005), we believe that “children are ideally placed to comment on their own lives because they have a unique perspective on their own experiences, skills and abilities” (p. 9). Children’s drawings and accompanying written narratives are one way in which this commitment can be brought to fruition.

References


