“My brain printed it out!” Drawing, communication, and young children: a discussion.
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Abstract
This paper discusses the initial findings from the first phase of a three-phase study, which focuses on the communicative potential of young children’s drawings as explored through a case study of a mixed reception/year one class. Data was collected over seven weeks in the autumn term. Each of the fourteen children were given two scrapbooks in which to collect their drawings from school and home. The drawings were discussed fortnightly in individual, audio-recorded, research conversations. The teacher and children’s parents were interviewed, and observations of the children drawing in class were also conducted. The majority of the drawings collected were produced spontaneously, and as such reflected the children’s personal interests and experiences. A wide range of factors influenced the drawings: family, friends, school activities, hobbies, the local environment, holidays and visits, stories, television etc. In terms of thematic content, gender differences were identified in support of previous studies, with the boys preferring action scenes, vehicles and objects and the girls drawing more tranquil scenes and figures, often including hearts and flowers. It was also possible to build an understanding of individual children’s motivations for drawing, their different purposes, and the different contexts in which their drawing activity took place.

Introduction
Adams defines the drawing process as “making marks that have meaning” (2002, p. 222). However, drawing is more complex than mere “mark making”, and although this is a popular term in early years circles it actually undermines the importance of drawing in early years education (Ring, 2001). Labelling an activity as “mark-making” suggests a certain degree of insignificance and a lack of particular purpose; and such a deficit view fails to recognise the communicative potential of young children’s drawings. It is vital to stress that viewing drawing as mark making activity or as a pre-writing skill undermines the complexity and richness of young children’s drawings that often belies their apparent simplicity (Coates & Coates, 2006; Eng, 1999; Goodnow, 1977; Paine, 1981).

Even before the development of speech, drawing offers young children a means of self-expression and also allows them to explore ideas and feelings in two dimensions. This is explained by Matthews (1997; 1999) in his theory of the ‘4 dimensional language of infancy’: influenced by their physical and social environment, children use “scribbling” as a form of exploration into shape; movement and emotion - they may also be investigating visual and dynamic structure in itself. The activity of drawing helps children to make sense of the world around them and they often become involved through whole body...
actions and accompanying dialogue or sound effects. The process, therefore, is commonly more important than the product to the very young child - but these spontaneous drawings, as products of self-motivation, are worthy of attention as they reflect children’s interests, rather than adult’s expectations (Paine, 1992). Paine (1981, p. 3) states that: “In early drawing just as much as in that which is the product of greater maturity, images can be complex in technique, in intention and in meaning”. However, young children’s drawings cannot be easily understood out of context or judged using the same criteria that may be applied to adults’ drawings. Adults bring their own, often misleading, expectations to the interpretation of children’s drawings (Brittain, 1979); therefore it is important to talk to children about their creations in order to fully understand their interests and intentions, and to also show that their drawings are valued (Davis, 2005).

In recent years there has been a shift from a de-contextualised, psychological focus on children’s drawings towards an increased interest in children’s meaning making through drawing, and a focus on the socio-cultural contexts of drawing activity (Anning, 2003). My study builds on recent research on young children’s drawings at home and in school which utilises socio-cultural theory to explore the influence of context on drawing, meaning making and representation (Anning & Ring, 2004; Brooks, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2005; Ring, 2006). Contemporary socio-cultural theories reconcile individual and social accounts of learning in which co-operation and communication are essential conditions for learning (Engeström, Miettinen & Punamäki, 1999). This theoretical stance encompasses three dimensions regarding the nature of communication. Firstly, in the subjective dimension children express personal knowledge and meaning about their social and cultural worlds, placing drawing within a wider framework of multi-modal representation (Kress, 2000). Secondly, in the intersubjective dimension meaning can be co-constructed around the drawing and shared across members of the community (Jordan, 2004). In the third dimension communication in the drawing and about the drawing may have meta-communicative and meta-cognitive elements (Matthews, 2003). Therefore, my study aims to explore the communicative potential of drawing across these dimensions, with specific reference to children’s personal and shared interpretations, meanings and intentions.

Initial findings go some way towards answering the following: What do young children communicate through drawing? How do young children communicate through drawing? What influences young children’s communication through drawing? Following a brief overview of the study, these questions will be discussed below and exemplified with a selection of drawings.

Overview of the study
In brief, the aim of my study is to explore the communicative potential of young children’s drawings through a case study of a mixed reception/year one class. The case study school is situated in a rural area of South West England and the study focuses upon 14 children in a mixed reception and year one class: 8 girls and 6 boys, aged between 4 years, 8 months and 5 years, 11 months, their parents and teacher. The class teacher, Faye, has an artistic disposition. She sees drawing as a “must have” in her classroom, but with the day-to-day demands of teaching she feels that she would like more time to talk to the children about

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1 Including triplets (one boy, two girls)
their drawings. Faye was a willing participant; she had previously been involved in research studies, and welcomed the opportunity to be involved in a study about drawing. Following ethical consent from all parties\(^2\), data was collected over a seven-week research period in the autumn term (phase one of the study). Each child was given two scrapbooks: one to collect drawings produced at school and the other for drawings produced at home. The drawings in the scrapbooks were discussed fortnightly (seven children week A, seven children week B) in individual, audio-recorded, research conversations where the children’s ideas were sensitively explored and extended. Throughout the children were recognised as expert informers and witnesses regarding their own experiences and perspectives (Wood, 2005) and were asked to choose their own “project names”. Non-participant observations of the children drawing in class were also conducted, focusing on the children drawing in different classroom contexts. Running records were used to document the observations, and supplement the research conversations. Faye was interviewed twice: once at the start of the data collection period and again near the end and the children’s parents were also interviewed at the end of the research period. In all research conversations and interviews the children’s drawings provided the focus of discussion. In addition, a research diary was used to track my experiences, assumptions and biases and also acknowledged researcher positionality, enhancing reflexivity and rigour and strengthening the audit trail.

In total 374 drawings were collected from home and school. Following data logging and transcription of the research conversations and interviews, an interpretive framework was employed in the data analysis. The analytical framework was developed through an iterative process, drawing on previous studies and the nature of the data gathered in this study. As it is possible to misinterpret or over-interpret drawings (Lewis & Lindsay, 2000), internal validity was achieved through utilising multiple data sources: drawings produced at home and school, conversation and interview transcripts, observation notes, my research diary and other empirical research. In order to ensure reliability and consistency, a colleague was asked to interpret data samples by assigning coding, as part of an audit process.

What do young children communicate through drawing?
The vast majority of the drawings collected were produced spontaneously, and as such reflected the children’s personal interests and experiences. These interests and experiences were evidenced in various ways, but for the purpose of this paper I have chosen to focus on some of the broader topics evidenced in the children’s drawings: self and identity; storytelling; pattern and decoration; and special interests.

**Self and identity**
Identity in drawing is a topic that has been explored by Hawkins (2002), who concludes that drawing offers a powerful medium of expression for the perception of self-image. All of the children in the study produced at least one drawing featuring a person and the most frequently drawn person was the self (96 drawings). In general, the girls were far more likely to draw people than the boys and all eight girls had at least one self drawing compared to just two of the six boys. There were many ways that the children represented themselves within their drawings, alone or accompanied by others, animals, or objects.

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\(^2\) The children, as a group, were shown a storyboard explaining the data collection process and then given their own copy.
Role-play and dressing up were popular themes, particularly with the girls. In Figure 1 Elizabeth is “like a queen” and her friend Kiki is “the little princess”. Although Elizabeth has written another friend’s name on the drawing, Ann, it was not uncommon that the children should change their minds about who and what their drawings represented. The green sections on the drawing were added to ensure anonymity as Elizabeth has written her name, along with a label for her play partner. In Figure 1 Elizabeth has written her name four times, possibly emphasising the interest she has in her own identity and asserting her ownership of the drawing. She explained that Kiki is bowing to her, but she could not depict this to her satisfaction. (This is just one example of a child conveying his/her perceived success of his/her drawing.)

In Figure 2 Elizabeth takes her understanding of identity to another, more surreal, level. To the uninformed viewer this drawing appears to show a group of animals; however the figure on the left is actually Elizabeth as a scarecrow. In another drawing, discussed on the same day, Elizabeth pointed out a toy scarecrow and she might possibly have been influenced by this description in her explanation of Figure 2. It is interesting to note that on the same page of her scrapbook Elizabeth had a drawing of herself as a pony, with a human head. These drawings were very different from her usual depictions with wigs or hats. Pollard (1996) writes about a little girl called Hazel who had a particular skill in drawing and would sometimes portray herself and her family as dragons. Elizabeth was the most prolific drawer in the study and perhaps her confidence in her drawing skills enabled her to take risks with her creations. These drawings not only reflect Elizabeth’s interest in her identity but also illustrate how she is able to represent herself in various imaginary situations.
Storytelling
Some of the children’s drawings featured characters from books, television or films; however these were not necessarily the drawings that had the strongest narrative elements. Although it was possible to co-construct stories around the children’s drawings if the research conversation led in that direction, there were many instances where the drawings were like stills in an action sequence. In this example, Red Dragon (reception) imagined what it would be like if his toy plane, Lightening Queen, were life size and he were its pilot (Figure 4). What is interesting here is that although the plane could be seen as the focal point of the drawing, the exciting action is elsewhere, beginning in Figure 3:

EH: Why’s the sun worried?
RD: Because look.
EH: Is that a bonfire in the middle of the picture?
RD: No!
EH: What is it?
RD: A volcano!
EH: A volcano! So, the sun is worried. Why is the sun worried?
RD: Because…I, I think the volcano is going to put it out!
EH: Oh dear. What? Put the sun out?
T: Yes!
...
EH: And how’s, is this a bird? [pointing] How’s the bird feeling?
RD: Umm, a bit worried too.
EH: Mm? Why’s the bird worried?
RD: Well, because he wants to fly straight over the sun to fly back to its nest...because that’s right down on this picture [points to the drawing on the opposite page] (Figure 4)
...
RD: There, there it is again! So, it’s gone “Ooooooooooo” [shows motion of journey with hand from one picture to the next]
EH: So, the bird’s flown all the way between two different drawings...

Figure 3. Red Dragon (4 years, 8 months)
In his drawing Red Dragon has the ability to fly a plane, but it is the bird that has the starring role in the story. These two drawings illustrate a strong narrative with a clear beginning, middle and end: the exciting drama is happily resolved with the bird escaping the volcano and the sun celebrating by waving a flag. Red Dragon is also playing with the drawings in a way that goes beyond their physical boundaries when he acts out the flight of the bird from one drawing to the next with accompanying sound effects. According to Gardner (1980) children approach their drawing in different ways depending on whether they are patterners who are interested in observable regularities in their environment, or dramatists who prefers to depict stories. In this example, Red Dragon is drawing as a dramatist but at this point in the study it is not possible to easily categorise each child as either one or the other. Although different children showed some preference for pattern or drama sometimes they would combine both in their drawings, particularly the girls.

**Pattern and decoration**
Of all the children in the study, Beckham (year one) showed a special interest in pattern, shape and order. His mum commented that she was concerned when he was younger that he might have been autistic because he was so obsessed with everything being “just so”. Figures 5 and 6 show two rockets. When I first discussed Figure 5 with Beckham the rocket did not have any windows, but when I pointed out that the second rocket (Figure 6) was slightly different Beckham used the green pen he had brought out of the classroom to add windows in order to make the rockets match. Then when I asked if the blue circle was a door handle in Figure 5 he proceeded to add a door handle to the rocket in Figure 6. Even though the drawings did not match exactly, the better sense of order resulting from the additions seemed to please Beckham.
In terms of decoration it was the girls who more commonly added adornments to their drawings, such as patterns, flowers, hearts and kisses. Tink (year one) most frequently included decorative elements in her drawings, often with the explanation that she just liked them. She said “I like girly things” and this was reinforced in her mum’s comment that “She’s a girly girl: makeup, shoes, dresses and Elizabeth...she’s always writing ‘Elizabeth, I love you!’”. The drawing in Figure 7 was made for Elizabeth and is a good example of Tink’s use of decoration. Butterflies, as featured profusely in Tink’s drawing, were the most popularly drawn insects in all of the children’s drawings. Coates and Coates (2006) also noted that the children in their study frequently drew butterflies. Perhaps it is the symmetrical nature of these insects that is appealing to young children; this would certainly fit in with Gardner’s (ibid.) argument that patterners are interested in observable regularities in their environment.
**Special interests**

Thompson (1999) has identified three types of drawer: the autobiographical drawer, the subject matter specialist, and the diverse drawer. For example, subject matter specialists, who have an area of expertise that is constantly revisited and refined, are often seen as competent artists by their peers and may provide inspiration to less able drawers. Although at this stage of the study I would not deem any of the children to be subject matter specialists, some of them had particular interests that were clearly apparent in their drawings. Both Jim (year one) and Lilac (year one) had a special interest in animals.

Overall, a wide range of animals and birds were included in the children’s drawings, including domestic animals, farm animals, wild animals, and insects.

Jim produced a six-page book in choosing time at school that told the story of a horse and her foal. Figure 8 is one page from the book. The research conversation excerpt below shows how Jim has used his knowledge of nature and life cycles to create his story:

J: …it’s a farm.
EH: A farm.
J: And, um, there’s a snail.
EH: So, inside you’ve got a snail.
J: A snail climbs up the farm and, um, in the next summer a horse has a baby.
EH: Ahh.
J: And when the, when the horse has died, when the horse has grown up it gets older and older [turns pages saying this]
EH: Yes?
J: And then it gets exactly like his mum.

Although it had already been noted that many of the children’s drawings had narrative elements this was the only example of a book produced in the first phase of data.
It is also noteworthy that Jim was not a confident reader at this stage in the study. Perhaps this explains why the book “reads” unconventionally from right to left. Jim is familiar with life and death, having explained to me in a later research conversation that this family used to have some pigs but they ate them at Christmas time. Although he told me about the pigs in a matter of fact way his story of the horse and the foal is surprisingly moving.

In Lilac’s drawing of herself riding a horse (Figure 9) she is imagining what it might be like to own a horse of her own. It is interesting to note that in a previous drawing of herself colouring at the table in her house she explains that she is drawing a horse. She does not have riding lessons, so the drawing is a wish fulfilment. Drawing realistically was important to Lilac, the second oldest child in the study. Her mum said that: “[she’s] trying to get the drawings as she sees ‘correct’. She’s practising drawing things to try and perfect it rather than just drawing willy-nilly what she feels like drawing…there was an elephant that she was practising…she drew over and over again”. There was one elephant drawing in Lilac’s home scrapbook, but no evidence of any practising. It should be noted that there was a degree of selection in what went into some of the children’s scrapbooks and perhaps Lilac was only happy to share her “best” drawings.

**How do young children communicate through drawing?**

All of the drawings were analysed in terms of use of drawing media, use of colour, the inclusion of writing and numbers, and paper use. Despite the children’s access to a wide range of resources at both home and school there were some particular preferences; and these were most notably different between the girls and the boys.

**Drawing media**

The most popular drawing media for the girls was felt pen, followed by wax crayon. In contrast, the most popular drawing media for the boys was “ordinary” pencil, followed by felt pen. I occasionally asked the children to explain their choice of drawing media and often their replies simply related to ease of access: i.e. “Well, because I’ve got felt tips at home” (Red Dragon); “I’ve actually got my own pens at home” (Rosie, year one). Ownership of drawing resources seemed to be quite important, but some children could explain their choice of specific drawing media, for example Kiki (year one) said that she wanted to use felt pens as “they show up a bit more”. However, Ben (year one) used coloured pencils rather than felt pens for his rainbow “otherwise it won’t look nice”. I observed him making this drawing in class and he took great care in colouring in each section of the rainbow according to the mnemonic “Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain” (which he recited). He clearly wanted this drawing to look perfect; therefore coloured pencils were a sensible choice in his opinion.

The girls were more likely to use a wider range of drawing media than the boys. For example none of the boys used glitter pens; however, the boys were five times as likely to make computer drawings. Beckham had the most computer drawings in his scrapbooks, including some clipart image collages. During one observation session Beckham made a colourful drawing on the computer and asked me how to write “fireworks” for a label. Almost immediately afterwards, and away from the computer, he produced a drawing in ordinary pencil filling the whole page with spirals in a matter of seconds and declared...
“Fireworks! Finished!”. This is one example of a child reproducing a specific theme in a new drawing, and in this case also in an alternative medium. Matthews (1999, p. 59) has noted that it is not uncommon for children to create similar drawings in both electronic and traditional media, particularly with “deep structures of visual expression and representation”.

Making their drawings pretty seemed to be a common goal amongst the girls and some of the girls’ drawings featured stuck on embellishments, e.g. stickers, glitter, paper etc. When I asked Violet (year one) why she chose to add stickers to one of her drawings, she replied that “I thought it would be good work”. Perhaps this reasoning was connected to the writing that she included on the drawing. The children sometimes received stickers as rewards in school, but these were not stuck into their books. Interestingly, there were no similar embellishments in any of the boys’ drawings.

Use of colour

Colour use varied for all children, but in total nearly three quarters of the girls’ drawings were coloured compared to exactly two thirds of the boys’ drawings. Also, whereas the girls used up to ten colours on average in their drawings, the boys used up to six colours on average. Drawings were left un-coloured for various reasons: occasionally the children explained that they intended to add colour but had run out of time, but more frequently they simply had no desire (or need) for colour. When Beckham used a black biro to draw and shade a bonfire the reason for the lack of colour was very simple: the bonfire had “already been”.

My conversation with Ben about the drawing shown above (Figure 10) provided some evidence about sensitivity to aesthetic appearance and “correctness” in terms of colour. He was quick to point out that he had used two different reds because the first one was lost on holiday. He also, in discussing another drawing, made sure that I could see that two different yellow crayons had been used – even though this difference was remarkably subtle. Referring to the stone of the village church, he explained that “it didn’t really have a colour like the colour it normally is”, thus highlighting his awareness that the drawing was not a realistic representation.
As noted above, the girls seemed to be more concerned with the aesthetic appeal of their drawings compared to the boys, with the possible exception of Ben. Often this concern centred on drawing attractive female figures. There were not many examples of non-figurative drawings produced by either the boys or the girls; therefore the example below is quite unusual. Kiki described her drawing (Figure 11) to me as “colourful” and to her mum as “A swirl of colour to look pretty”. Interestingly, prior to this drawing Kiki had produced a similar one which she explained was fireworks.

Figure 11. Kiki (5 years, 8 months)

Writing and numbers
Nine of the children included writing in one or more of their drawings and in total nearly one in five of the drawings contained writing; however, overall, the girls were twice as likely as the boys to include writing in their drawings. Writing usually took the form of labels, with the exception of the occasional phrase or sentence. In terms of name writing, the girls were nearly five times as likely to include their name in their drawings. It is interesting to note that names were more frequently included on drawings produced at school, perhaps because the children were used to this practice so that their work did not get mixed up with someone else’s. Although numbers did not occur in very many drawings, the boys were three times as likely to include numbers in their drawings compared to the girls. Generally speaking, those children who produced less drawings were also less likely to include writing or numbers; this included two of the three reception children in the study, as well as the oldest year one girl, Lilac, who did not include any writing or numbers in her drawings.

Paper use
Unsurprisingly, the drawings were mostly on A4 white paper. Very few were on coloured paper and even fewer were on lined paper. Of those drawings that were not on A4 (nearly one quarter of all the drawings collected) it was more likely that smaller paper was used rather than bigger paper. In terms of gender differences, the girls were over five times as likely to use smaller than A4 paper compared to the boys. Often the small paper was taken from notebooks. Ann (year one), in particular produced a large number of drawings on notebook paper, which was decorated with small printed illustrations. Large drawings were less popular: sometimes these were on A3 paper and in some instances a couple of A4 sheets of paper were stuck together. For example, Red Dragon produced a series of
tunnel drawings and these were on two A4 sheets of paper stuck together on the vertical edge. He explained that the drawing only showed part of a long road:

EH: How can you explain what’s happen there?
RD: Well, [pointing] that’s a road going off round the tunnel.
EH: Right. All round the outside.
RD: And round the outside and it’s going off [gestures]
EH: Off the page.
RD: Off the page, down to that seat [the seat next to the table]
EH: So, it’s coming right off the page, down, off the table onto the seat.
RD: Yeah. And then it goes zig-zag all the way down and down through the carpet!

On various occasions the children would refer to people, objects, or action outside of the drawing. The example given above is just one instance of a child’s awareness that meaning can go beyond the boundaries of the paper on which the drawing is produced. This is evidence of the increased conceptual understanding that children develop when they move beyond what is embedded in the drawing in its physical state (Matthews, 1999). “Invisible entities” present another important analytical strand of the study, which will be considered in more detail at a later date.

What influences young children’s communication through drawing?
The influences on the children’s drawings were varied: family, friends, school activities, hobbies, the local environment, holidays, special events, stories, television and film, to name a few. For the purpose of this paper a selection of these influences will be considered under two main headings: home influences, and school influences.

Home influences
As well as family members being frequently drawn, they also played a role in influencing the children’s drawings. Sometimes the children mentioned that their brother or sister had been drawing with them. Violet told me that her older sister, on various occasions, had shown her how to draw flowers, apples, and stars. According to his mum, Nick (reception) was impressed by his older brother’s ability to draw skateboards and motorbikes, similarly Sonny (reception) enjoyed copying the skateboards and skateboard ramps that his older brother liked to draw. The triplets’ mum commented that: “As you’ve probably noticed, when one starts to draw something the other two copy”. This was evident in many of the triplets’ drawings.

Parents also influenced their children’s drawings, either by making suggestions about what they might like to draw or actively modelling drawing techniques. When questioned about the source of his ideas Beckham would often reply “nothing”, “nowhere”, or “I just wanted to”. However, he said that his dad showed him how to draw a butterfly and it was clear that he was proud of his dad’s drawing ability: “My dad can draw a bat…My dad can draw a cat. My dad can draw everything!” In contrast, Elizabeth’s mum explained that although her two older brothers would sometimes draw with her, Elizabeth’s dad did not “cos he’s not good enough for her!”. A couple of the parents mentioned that they had bought “how to draw books”. According to her mum, Lilac had
ignored the instructions but had spent an enjoyable time copying the completed pictures. Her mum thought this was because the step-by-step approach was too complicated. Sonny’s mum had also bought some how to draw books and explained that Sonny would draw from these if she drew with him.

![Figure 12. Red Dragon (4 years, 8 months)](image)

Red Dragon’s mum explained how she had sat opposite her son and had shown him how to draw a cat’s face by making a t-shape, like a teddy bear. She drew upside down for Red Dragon to copy, but instead of drawing what he could see he reversed the t-shape, as it would appear to his mum. This can be seen on the red cat’s face, above (Figure 12). Nick also had some guidance from his mum, who painted a dragon’s head for him as he was unsure how to do it himself. Interestingly, a couple of weeks later Nick used a similar style in a drawing produced at school (Figure 13). This really impressed his mum.

![Figure 13. Nick (4 years, 11 months)](image)

**School influences**
The class teacher’s confidence as a drawer certainly influenced the children’s drawings, and possibly also their attitude towards drawing. Faye explained that she drew with the children on a regular basis: “when they give me their ideas I then sketch them up on the board”. The children had been following an islands topic in class and this had a visible
impact on drawings produced at school and at home. Faye told me that “cos we’ve been doing The Lighthouse Keeper’s Lunch they’ve been doing lots of seagull pictures…fish pictures, lots of fish pictures”.

Figure 14. Violet (5 years, 3 months)

Violet made a series of island drawings at home, one of which is show above (Figure 14). (Faye had been encouraging the children to think of unusual shapes for their islands, hence this one being bone-shaped.) Violet’s mum was particularly interested in the island drawings, commenting on the churches and graves and explaining that the family were “not religious in any way!”. The churches and graves were important island features in Violet’s eyes. Faye had been modelling mapping symbols and she explained how the children really took to  this  idea. There were many other children who explored the mapping symbols that Faye had introduced in their spontaneous drawings. As drawing is often considered to be form of self-expression and a product of creativity some think that it cannot, or should not, be taught; however, as Edwards (1993, p. 241) puts it: “the sources of creativity have never been blocked by gaining skills in drawing”.

In general, drawing as a free-choice classroom activity was more popular with the girls than with the boys. This observation was supported by Faye saying that: “the girls are drawing definitely every time the graphic stuff’s out; they’re desperate to go and draw”. I noticed that the girls liked to draw in groups and seemed to be influenced by each other’s ideas. Many of the girls’ female figures were treated like dolls and “dressed up” with flowing dresses, high heeled shoes, jewellery and nail varnish; it was almost like they were holding an impromptu beauty competition. Figure 15 is so unlike Kiki’s usual style that I wondered if it perhaps belonged to one of her friends, and the level of detail even surprised Kiki’s mum. Rosie seemed to start the craze for rainbow dresses and similar jewellery can be seen in the drawings of Lilac and Tink. Apart from her own role, Faye noted that the children’s school drawings were most probably influenced by each other. She added that “some strong characters are having quite an influence on other characters and that whole ‘copy cat’ thing’s going on”. Cox (1997) observes that it is not uncommon for children to eschew making their own graphic images in favour of copying those around them. In the example of Beckham and the fireworks given above the other children on the computers, Jim, Elizabeth, and Red Dragon, also said there were drawing fireworks that particular afternoon. The images themselves were also quite similar.
Discussion

Drawing is often considered to be an important element of “multi-modal meaning making” (Anning & Ring, 2004; Kress, 2000; Pahl, 2001, 2002). However, according to Davis (2005) there is a clear distinction between meaning making and communication, even though these terms are sometimes used interchangeably. She remarks that “the symbol systems of art give the child media for both the internal construction of representations or understandings (meaning-making) and for the external representation of those understandings to others (communication)” (ibid, p. 63). From an educational perspective, the communicative potential of young children’s drawings is of great importance. Faye certainly recognised this function of drawing in her classroom.

“My brain printed it out!” was a comment made by Red Dragon when I asked him about the idea behind one of his drawings. In the developmental tradition children’s drawings are seen as products of their mind, reflecting their cognitive and perceptual abilities. However, the process of drawing can be complex and what appears on the paper should not be viewed as a “print out” from the brain. Young children are active learners, looking for meanings in what they experience of the world around them. In discussing the children’s drawings with them, I was able to co-construct these meanings, bridging the gap between the subjective level of communication (in other words, meaning-making), which is hard to access (Pollard, 1996), and the inter-subjective level, which relates to social interaction. The third dimension of communication, concerning meta-communication and meta-cognition has not been discussed here due to limitations of space; however, it is an important area to be considered at a later date.
It was evident that the children’s social and cultural environments had a significant role to play in what they communicated through their drawings, as well as how. Above all, gender differences were most marked: along with the beautiful female figures, the girls seemed more interested in making their drawings look attractive by the use of decorations, stickers, and a wider pallet of colours than the boys. In contrast, Red Dragon’s exploding volcano was fairly typical of the subject matter in many of the boys’ drawings, reflecting their interest in action. The boys also drew more vehicles and monsters - amongst the girls only Mary (year one) had a monster drawing and this was a “monster ballerina”. That said some subject matter was popular with boys and girls alike, such as the fireworks that appeared in their drawings around the time (and sometime after) bonfire night. Interestingly, for both the girls and the boys, the most popular specific features were: the sun (71 drawings), grass (30 drawings), and birds (21 drawings); thus showing that the natural environment also had an influence on their drawings.

Matthews (1999, p. 30) declares that “drawing and emergent representation as a whole are concerned with the children’s search for their own identities as well as the identities and structures of event and objects”. Self and identity is one of the themes looked at in this paper, along with: storytelling, pattern and decoration, special interests, drawing media, use of colour, writing and numbers, paper use, home influences, and school influences. Even though I came to the study with some reasonably well-informed expectations about what I might find, the complexity and richness of the children’s drawings still surprised me. This paper has just touched on some of the key themes that are emerging from the data at this early stage of analysis. It is anticipated that the next two phases of data collection will provide further evidence to support the view that drawing offers a powerful means of communication for young children.

References


