Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

'My favourite things to do' and 'my favourite people': Exploring salient aspects of children's self-concept

Journal Item

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

oro.open.ac.uk

My favourite things to do and *my favourite people*: Using draw-and-write to discover salient aspects of children's self-concept

Mimi Tatlow-Golden (1,2) and Suzanne Guerin (1)

(1) School of Psychology, University College Dublin, Ireland
(2) School of Education, Childhood, Youth & Sport. The Open University, UK

*Corresponding author mimi.tatlow-golden@open.ac.uk

Abstract

This study explores the potential of the 'draw-and-write' method for inviting children to communicate salient aspects of their self-concept. Irish primary school children aged 10-13 years drew and wrote about their favourite people and things to do (social and active self). Children drew and described many salient activities (39 in total) and people – including pets. Results suggest that widely-used, adult-constructed self-esteem scales for children, while multi-dimensional, are limited, and that 'draw-and-write' is an effective multimodal method with which children can express their social and active self-concepts.

Keywords: children, drawings, draw-and-write, self-concept, self-esteem

The great majority of psychological research into children's self-concept has consisted of measuring self-esteem with standardised scales (Byrne, 2002). Based on the assumption that high self-esteem leads to optimum educational and personal development as well as better mental health outcomes (see e.g. Brandon, 1994, cited in Marsh and Craven, 2006), children's self-esteem has been of pervasive interest to psychologists, educators and researchers. Thousands of educational and clinical programmes, designed to raise children's self-esteem, are in use in many countries (DuBois, Burk-Braxton and

Tevendale, 2002), and these are viewed as a kind of psychological vaccine to inoculate children against all kinds of developmental ills (DuBois and Tevendale, 1999).

Critics of the self-esteem enterprise, however, point out that decades' worth of tens of thousands of research publications have yielded mixed results. While many studies have found positive statistical relationships between higher self-esteem and many beneficial life outcomes, some reviewers of the literature query the validity of these positive findings. They point to the fact that correlations are typically low, and also that contradictory results are often found in the field (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger and Vohs, 2003; DuBois and Tevendale, 1999; Leary, 2006). The value of classroom-based self-esteem-raising programmes has also been challenged, as their content may be too generalised to be effective (DuBois and Tevendale, 1999). Some researchers have even suggested that pursuing self-esteem may be damaging, as it may affect a person's motivation, capacity to relate to others, and mental health, among others (e.g. Covington, 2001; Crocker, 2006). Self-esteem may not therefore be the psychological or social panacea hoped for, and it has been argued that researchers, clinicians and educators should direct their attention elsewhere, for example, to motivation, self-efficacy & other as-yet unknown factors (Baumeister et al, 2003; Covington, 2001; Damon, 1995; Leary, 2006; Seligman, 1993).

These opposing perspectives are still a matter of debate (Crocker, 2006, Kernis, 2006, Marsh and Craven, 2006; Swann, Chang-Schneider and McClarty, 2007; Krueger, Vohs and Baumeister, 2008), the core of which centres on how self-esteem is defined and measured. The aim of this paper is not to attempt to resolve this debate but rather to suggest that the dominant, quantitative model of self-esteem assessment and research would benefit from perspectives which are more child-centred and exploratory. The paper first outlines the ways in which quantitative self-esteem has been conceptualised, and the dimensions of self-esteem which researchers have chosen to measure in children. It then assesses the potential of a more open, multimodal method to discover salient aspects of children's self-concept which self-esteem scales do not access.

Self-esteem and self-concept: A note on terminology
Where self-concept and self-esteem are concerned, terminological disagreement is rife and the use of definitions which are informal rather than precise and explicit is widespread (Butler and Gasson, 2005). This can lead to confusion in interpreting the literature. For example, 'self-esteem' and 'self-concept' are

often used interchangeably, to refer to various aspects of self-description and self-evaluation. In order to clarify terms, in this paper 'self-esteem' refers to evaluative self-perceptions; in contrast, we use 'self-concept' to refer to the totality of a person's self-descriptions or self-representations, whether these are evaluative or not. While most self research accesses self-esteem our interest is in illuminating the self-concept.

Self-esteem scales: 'global' and 'multidimensional' models

In psychological self-esteem research, a *global* model has dominated. This conceptualises self-esteem as an overall positive or negative feeling about the self. However, concerns have been raised that this model is too generalised and has thus been responsible for the weak correlations and mixed findings referred to above, which are so common in the field (e.g. Marsh and Craven 2006; Swann et al, 2007). A search for more accuracy and explanatory power has thus led some researchers to develop alternative, more detailed, *multidimensional* models of children's self-esteem (Harter, 1985; Marsh, 1992; Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton, 1976), in which self-evaluations in various domains, such as physical appearance or academic abilities, are measured. Evidence suggests that results from these more specific domains are significantly related to linked outcomes; e.g. academic self-esteem is related to academic achievement (Marsh and Craven, 2006). As a result, quantitative self-esteem researchers argue that "the richest and most accurate picture" of children's self-esteem is provided by results of multidimensional self-esteem scales (Harter, 1999: 5).

Multidimensional self-esteem scales and their limitations

The question remains, however, whether multidimensional scales do in fact allow children to represent their self-esteem accurately and fully. The assumption inherent in such instruments is that self-concept structure and content do not vary greatly between children, and that therefore multidimensional self-esteem can be measured across a relatively brief set of dimensions selected by adult researchers. In addition, scale creators argue that multidimensional self-esteem scales paint an accurate picture because the dimensions included are those which are important to most children (Marsh, 1986). From a psychometric perspective, however, most self-esteem scales, including some multidimensional scales, have been critiqued (see e.g. Byrne, 1996; Wylie, 1974, 1979, 1989). In addition, if one looks to scale content, a concern – and one which some scale creators and other reviewers have raised (Bracken, Bunch, Keith and Keith, 2000; Harter, 1985; Wylie, 1989) – is that a child's self-concept may consist of

many salient factors not accessed by scales. As a result, the picture which emerges from these widely used scales may be incomplete at best.

In terms of their content, multidimensional self-esteem scales generally contain questions about physical appearance; sports/ physical activity; parent and peer relationships; school performance; and global self-esteem (see e.g. the Self-Perception Profile for Children, SPPC, Harter, 1985; the Self-Description Questionnaire I, SDQI, Marsh, 1992; or the Piers-Harris 2 Children's Self-Concept Scale, Piers-Harris 2, Piers and Herzberg 2002). Emotional and behavioural factors (e.g. anxiety, Piers-Harris 2, or conduct, SPPC) may also be included. While these dimensions are likely to be important to many children, it seems unlikely that children's overall self-concept (and hence their self-esteem) is limited to these factors. For example, subscales relating to children's activities ask about academic performance and physical activity, yet many children's active selves may extend well beyond these domains. In terms of family, self-esteem scales generally ask about parents only (e.g. SDQI) or omit family as a subscale altogether (e.g. Piers-Harris 2; SPPC); again, it appears unlikely that reflects children's family self-concept. Key quantitative researchers have themselves suggested that a deeper understanding of self-esteem and self-concept is needed and that qualitative methods are required to provide this (Byrne 2002).

Open-ended self-concept methods

Where qualitative self-concept research has been conducted, it has frequently used methods where children give open-ended responses to a prompt about the self. Many have been directly modelled on Kuhn and McPartland's 'Twenty-Statement-Test' (1954), e.g. Watkins (2003), or variations such as "Tell Me/Us About Yourself" (e.g. Brinthaupt and Erwin, 1992; McGuire and McGuire 1982). Methods such as these have the clear benefit of asking for children's own self-representations rather than relying on researcher-defined factors. However, interpreting completely open-ended responses has its own challenges. One of these is the issue of salience. Lists of undifferentiated responses do not inform researchers whether some are arbitrary, or much less significant than others.

In order to overcome such problems, some researchers have gone beyond purely open-ended methods. For example, Brinthaupt and Erwin (1992), after asking children to "tell me about yourself", asked for ratings of the importance of these self-representations. Comparing results with language and content of the most widely-used multidimensional children's self-esteem scale, the Piers-Harris Children's Self-

Concept Scale (Piers-Harris 1, Piers, 1984; Butler and Gasson, 2005), they reported just 4% overlap (Brinthaupt and Erwin, 1992). Another example is Damon and Hart's (1988) exploration of the development of self-concept (4 to 18 years). This valuable, in-depth longitudinal study used clinical-style interviews. Organising children's self-representations into four categories (physical, social, active and psychological), they found each to be present from early childhood. However, neither of these studies reported the detailed content of children's self-representations within their research categories, leaving open the question of which aspects of the self are not accessed by self-esteem scales.

Child-centred research methods

In this context, there has been significant debate about which research methods may be best suited for use with children and young people (Greene and Hill, 2005). This has emerged from the growth in child-centred research which, rather than looking to measure children's capacity in adult-defined domains, seeks to understand children's experiences from their own perspectives (Hogan, 2005). Interview or written methods are often recommended for exploring children's perspectives; qualitative research into children's self-concept has generally employed such methods (e.g. Brinthaupt and Erwin, 1992; Damon and Hart, 1988; McGuire and McGuire, 1982). Adults may favour these as we inhabit a "verbocentric" world, a culture which prioritises word-based modes of expression (Eco, 1976). However, interviews, while often valued for the rich data they may yield, are not necessarily a comfortable mode of engagement for all children; and language is only one of many modes of representation (Kress and Jewitt, 2003; Mavers, 2003). Visual methods, which are becoming more common in research, may be an effective way of enabling researchers to engage with children, as it has been suggested that children's communication is naturally multimodal (Christensen and James, 2000; Short, Kauffman and Kahn, 2000).

'Draw-and-write'

The 'draw-and-write' method has become a widely-used research method to explore children's views of a variety of abstract and conceptual themes such as technology (Mavers, 2003); time (Christensen and James, 2000); and health-related matters (e.g. Franck, Sheikh and Oulton, 2008; Porcellato, Dugdill, Springett and Sanderson, 1999; Wetton and McWhirter, 1998). In terms of self-related research, 'draw-and-write' has explored topics such as the ideal person (DiCarlo, Gibbons, Kaminsky, Wright and Stiles, 2000), self-image as readers (Kendrick, MacKay and Moffatt, 2005) and the self in the future (Merriman and Guerin, 2007), among others.

When 'draw-and-write' was first developed, it was proposed that only the written content should be coded (Williams, Wetton and Moon, 1989) – a guideline which continues to be followed by some (e.g. Nic Gabhainn and Kelleher, 2002). More recently however it has become common to include the drawings in analyses as well, since it is argued that children's drawings can allow them to describe their experiences and represent their world views (Golomb, 2002), and can be analysed for content (Di Carlo et al, 2000). In terms of the age group for whom drawings are best suited, young children are more frequently favoured; this is because their verbal and written skills tend to be less developed and researchers have argued that, by later childhood, children prefer written communication and no longer engage in spontaneous production of drawings (Gardner, 1980). However, studies have shown that when given the choice, a significant proportion of children up to early adolescence spontaneously use drawings as a form of communication (Christensen and James, 2000; O'Connor, 2007), suggesting that drawings may be an appropriate research resource with them.

Some concerns have been raised about 'draw-and-write' as a method in itself – for example, that children's perceptions of their drawing skill may limit their responses (Backett and Alexander, 1991, Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999), and that since the method is often employed in the classroom, children's responses may reflect the fact that they are subject to the surveilling gaze of adults in this context (Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2006). However children's drawings have alternatively been viewed more positively: as a free, experiential mode which most children and young adolescents perceive as enjoyable, and which has the benefit of not being subject to the disciplines of school-based writing tasks (Christensen and James, 2000). One potential advantage of 'draw-and-write' is that it offers children the choice of two modes of communication, the visual and the verbal. In addition, as a paper-based activity, it can offer children the opportunity to respond to the research question at their own pace – an engagement which may be more comfortable for them than responding to questions in an interview, in the face of the surveilling gaze (however friendly) of an adult researcher.

The Present Study

Using 'draw-and-write' – a multi-modal, creative, open-ended child-centred method – this exploratory study aims to invite children to communicate about salient aspects of their active and social self-concept, in order to explore whether the factors children choose extend beyond those typically included in self-esteem scales.

Method

Sampling & participants

Primary education in Ireland, while state-funded, is for historical reasons almost exclusively tied to Roman Catholic or Church of Ireland churches and many schools are single-sex. For this exploratory study, a multi-denominational participant group consisting of boys and girls was sought, so principals of schools belonging to the co-educational, multi-denominational 'Educate Together' group in Dublin were contacted. Participation was based on principals' consent and on a achieving a minimum participant group of 100 children. Eight schools were contacted of which three participated.

The study was aimed at children in the final two years of primary school in Ireland (5th and 6th class), 10-13 years. This gave the opportunity to explore the viability of draw-and-write with children beyond the age range often considered for drawings, and whose written skills could be expected to be well-developed. Participants were 125 children aged 10-13 years, with a male to female ratio of 6:4 (M = 11.3 years, SD = 0.69; 73 boys, 58.4%; 52 girls, 41.6%).

Materials & procedure

The categories of the self used for the study were derived from the developmental Self-Understanding Interviews conducted by Damon and Hart (1988), which generated four overarching self-description categories: active, social, psychological and physical. The 'active' and the 'social' self-categories were chosen for this study as it was considered there might be gaps in self-esteem scale content in these areas. Salient self-concept factors, with positive associations, were sought by asking for drawings of "favourite" activities and people.

Children received a set of three A4 pages, two to 'draw-and-write' about their active and social selves, and an introductory cover sheet. For the active self, children were invited to "*Draw a picture of yourself doing your favourite thing. It can be something you like to do at home, at school, or anything else…you decide!*". Home/family options were mentioned first with the intention of counteracting the effect of children completing the activity in school, amongst their peers. At the bottom of the page, children were invited to include written comments: "*Please tell me something about your picture here: what you're doing, where you are, and anything else you'd like to say*." Invitations to draw the social self were worded similarly, inviting children to draw themselves with their "*favourite person or people*".

The consent procedure for this study was 'opt-in'. Separate research information letters for parents and children described the research in age-appropriate language, to allow children to make informed consent decisions in partnership with their parents. Teachers distributed the information letters and collected returned parental consent forms. The activity took place in class with those children who had written parental consent; non-participating children and teachers remained in the classroom engaged in other activities. The researcher (the first author) introduced the activity to participants by telling them that we, as adults, did not consider ourselves expert in what was most important to children. We therefore wished to invite them to draw and write about favourite aspects of themselves. It was emphasised that participants were free to choose whether or not to complete any aspects of the activity, and that drawing skills did not matter. Children were also assured that their contributions would remain anonymous and reminded that they could choose to keep their responses private from their classmates. They were once again asked for their assent when draw-and-write sheets were distributed.

Analyses

The draw-and-write sheets were content analysed to develop a coding frame for frequency analysis (Guerin and Hennessy, 2002); drawn and written responses were both included in the analysis. The two draw-and-write topics of the active self (favourite activity) and the social self (favourite person) were retained; the full range of self-descriptions for these was recorded. These responses were then grouped into categories, representing key themes, to create a coding frame. This frame was used to code all the draw-and-write sheets. To determine the reliability of the coding a quarter of draw-and-write sheets were selected randomly; using the same framework, the second author independently assigned them to the categories created. Inter-rater agreement was 88% for the active self and 97% for the social self. Following this, frequency analyses were carried out for the full sample. Finally, differences between boys and girls were explored by carrying out chi-square tests. Alpha levels were set at 0.05 for these comparisons and standardised residuals were used to examine the nature of any significant patterns.

Results

Drawings and written comments

Participants used a variety of visual and written methods to describe their active and social selves. In terms of their drawings, the level of skill ranged from very sophisticated drawings to rudimentary 'stick' figures (see Figure 1). Almost all drawings were accompanied by various explanatory visual

representations (such as a cross-hatched square for a soccer goal, or musical notation to represent sung notes), written comments or labels. Many children simply wrote brief descriptive captions identifying people, activities, or locations, such as "we are in school" or "in the park". A few referred to meaning or emotions associated with their drawings.
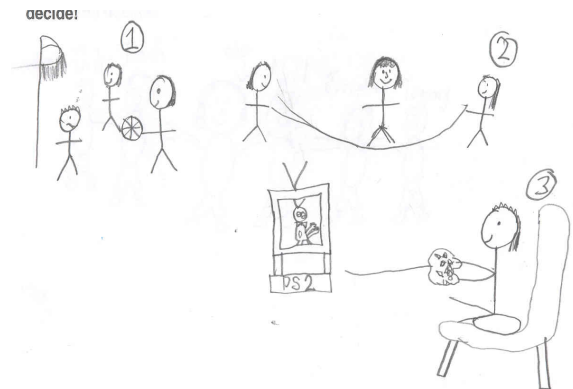

Figure 1: Simple stick figures to show basketball after school, skipping at break time, and playing Playstation at home (girl, 11)

Participant responsiveness

Overall, children appeared to respond well to this activity. Researcher observations noted a predominant atmosphere of excited anticipation among participating groups and an air of focused engagement once the activity was underway. No draw-and-write sheets were left blank and only four of the 250 sheets (1.6%) were considered to be uninterpretable. For a minority of children, some aspects of draw-and-write may have presented a challenge. Where drawing was concerned, six children (5% of participants) wrote about their perceived limited drawing skills, or not wishing to draw things. One eleven year old boy found drawing his face too difficult, despite having completed a sophisticated picture of himself on a skateboard. Two twelve-year-olds (one boy and one girl) described not being able to draw all their friends or family as there were too many of them. However, difficulties were not confined to drawing – writing also appeared to present challenges for some participants. While some children's written responses were fluent, others wrote the bare minimum with unorthodox grammar and/or spellings and laboured handwriting.

'My favourite thing to do': The active self

Children drew or wrote about a wide range of activities, 39 in total, for which 12 categories were created and frequencies calculated (see Table 1). While drawing sheets had requested a single favourite activity, three out of ten children chose to draw between two and six activities as their favourite things to do.

Table 1. The Active Self: Favourite activities drawn/named and categories created.

Category	Activities drawn/named	All (*N* = 125) %* (*n*)	Boys (n=73) % (*n*)	Girls (n=52) % (n)
Sport: Team	Football/soccer, rugby, basketball, hockey	45.6 (57)	54.8 (40)	32.7 (17)
Sport: Individual	Swimming, riding, gymnastics, diving, tennis, tae kwon do, archery	17.6 (22)	13.7 (10)	2 (12)
Non-sport physical activity	Rollerblading, skateboarding, dancing, trampolining, ice skating, bowling	15.2 (19)	9.6 (7)	23.1 (12)
Music	Playing music, singing, listening to music	14.4 (18)	15.1 (11)	13.5 (7)
Computers & computer games	Play Station, Xbox, Game Cube, Computers	14.4 (18)	19.2 (14)	7.7 (4)
Playing/hanging out with friends		10.4 (13)	5.5 (4)	17.3 (9)
Screen	TV, cinema	8 (10)	2.7 (2)	15.4 (8)
Art	Drawing, painting, painting figures and models	6.4 (8)	4.1 (3)	9.6 (5)
Reading		4 (5)	2.7 (2)	5.8 (3)
Other	Shopping, chess, pool, drama, maths, cooking/baking, individual fantasy play & unknown	8 (10)	5.5 (4)	11.5 (6)

*Some children drew or wrote about more than one activity, so the total percentage for activities exceeds 100%. Where they drew or wrote about more than one activity in one category, this was counted only once.

Physical Activities

Two-thirds of participants represented themselves doing something physically active, citing 17 different activities from football to ice skating. Nearly half of participants who drew physical activities drew traditional school-based team sports such as Gaelic games, soccer and rugby, while the other half drew alternative, non-team-sport physical activities. Some of these were more formal, such as gymnastics, while others were less likely to be subject to a team atmosphere and adult supervision, such as skipping or inline skating (see Figures 1 and 2). Significantly fewer girls than boys drew team sports as their favourite activity (χ^2 (1) = 5.98, p<.05; *R* = -1.4) and more girls chose individual sports (χ^2 (1) = 4.29, p<.05; *R* = 1.5), but overall, boys and girls did not differ in drawing a physical activity when all categories were combined (χ^2 (1) = 2.32, p>.05).

Figure 2: "This is me inline skating" (boy, 12).

Non-Physical Activities

Just over half of all children drew or wrote about salient active-self factors which did not involve a named physical activity, 21 activities in total (see Table 1). Music, computers, playing with friends and art were some of the more popular, while other activities such as baking, playing pool or fantasy-based play such as being a super hero were also drawn (see Figures 1, 3 and 4). Only one child mentioned an academic school subject (maths). While school was frequently cited in children's written comments regarding their active selves, it was not as a location for learning but rather as a place to play or talk with friends, or to play games such as skipping or basketball during break in the yard.
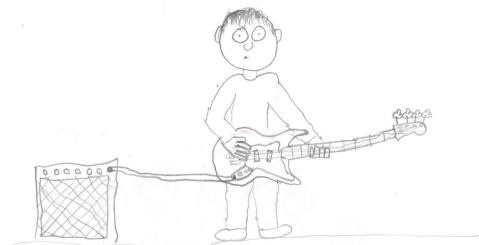

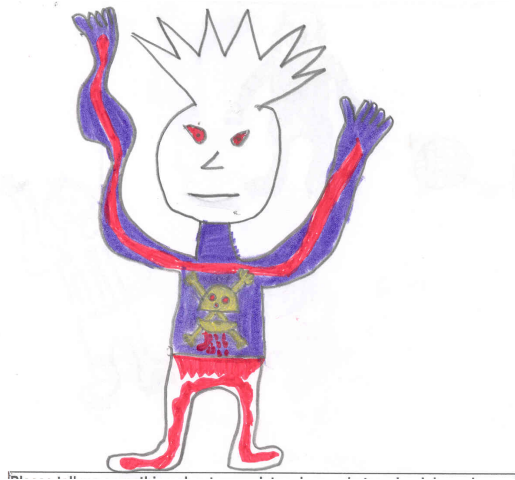Figure 3: "Playing my bass guitar in my bedroom" (boy, 10)

Figure 4: "Me being a super hero called pagama boy [sic]", (boy, 11)

Meaning of chosen activities

While almost all children simply clarified what the drawing depicted and gave a location, e.g. "*I am reading in my bedroom*" (boy, 11), a few expanded on the reasons why they favoured the activities they had drawn. These comments suggested that participants chose their salient activities for multiple reasons. Examples of these were the association of team sports with both fitness and friendship: "*Playing football because I like sports because it keeps me fit and it's an excersize I can play with my friends*" (boy, 11); art being a source of both enjoyment and relaxation: "*I'm painting because I like art because it's fun and sometimes relaxing*" (girl, 12); and shopping being an expression of peer and parental relationships, not just a consumer transaction: "*I love shoping. Not just because of the clothes but because I'm just with my friends and hanging. It's still brilliant with my mum*!" (girl, 11).

My favourite person or people: The social self

Almost all participants' favourite people were friends or family members, but some fell into neither of these categories, and not all favourite "people" were human (see Table 2).

Family and friends

Family and friends featured equally frequently as the favourite person or people drawn in this study (see Table 2). A wide range of family members were 'favourite' people, including parent(s); sibling(s); the nuclear family; and single or multiple figures from the extended family, including cousins, aunts and uncles, and grandparents. Godparents were included in the 'family' category as they were usually drawn as members of the extended family group, and many were aunts or uncles.

Table 2. The Social Self: Favourite people drawn/ named and categories created

Category	People drawn/named	All (N=125) %* (n)	Boys (n=73) % (n)	Girls (n=52) % (n)
Friend	Friends from school/ home/ club/ activities	56 (70)	53.4 (39)	59.6 (31)
Family	Parent, sibling (including babies, one not yet born), cousin, aunt, uncle, grandparent, godparent	55.2 (69)	43.8 (32)	71.2 (37)
Pet	Cat, dog, hamster	7.2 (9)	6.8 (5)	7.7 (4)
Celebrity/ Fictional	Football player, rock band, character from novel	2.4 (3)	4.1 (3)	0
Other/Unknown		3.2 (4)	5.5 (4)	0

*Some children drew or wrote about more than one person, so the total percentage for people exceeds 100%.

Although boys and girls did not differ in how often they drew a friend or friends as their favourite person (χ^2 (1) = 0.47, p>.05), girls were significantly more likely than boys to draw both friends and family (χ^2 (1) = 11.89; R = 2.4). A quarter of children (25%) specifically cited a "best" friend or friends rather than drawing a general peer group.

In their comments, a few children elaborated on their reasons for choosing family as their favourite people. They cited love: "*I love them very much*!" (girl, 12); support: "*My mum is all ways ther [sic] for me*" (girl, 11); close friendship: "*My cousin [...] is my best friend*" (girl, 12); and play: "*I like playing with my babby [sic] brother he is only 1*" (girl, 11). With siblings, relationships were sometimes ambivalent. For example, an 11-year-old girl drew her brother as one of her favourite people "*even though he's very mean to me*". There were relatively few written comments about friends and most related simply to activities undertaken together, such as talking in the school yard or going to the cinema. However, some children described the meaning their friends had for them, in terms of emotional and social support as described by a 12-year-old girl: "*my friends always there for me when I sad in school or if I have no-one to play with I wouldn't trade them for the world*".

Other favourite people – and pets

Nearly one in ten boys drew celebrity, fictional, other, or unknown figures, while no girls did. These included a television personality (Simon Cowell), a fictional teen action hero (Alex Rider), a football player and a rock band.

Finally, an unexpected finding was that 7% of participants drew a pet as their favourite 'person or people'. While some pets were drawn as members of the family, in other cases the pet was the sole favourite 'person' drawn. Some participants elaborated on the meaning of these pet drawings. One 12-year-old boy may have made a pragmatic choice in drawing his dog, as he wrote that he had found it "*too hard*" to choose which friends to draw. Other comments however suggested that pets were definitely emotionally salient for children. A 12-year-old boy drew his two best friends, his cousin and his hamster and described them as "*the people I like the most*"; an 11-year-old girl drew her cat as her favourite person, and wrote that this was because of its ability to "*understand what I say*" (Figure 5).

Figure 5: "With my cat … who understands what I say" (girl, 11).

Discussion

This study explored the potential of 'draw-and-write' as an open-ended, multi-modal, graphical method with which to invite children aged 10-13 to communicate about their active and social self-concept. Results suggest that this age group responded well to 'draw-and-write' and that there are ways in which standardised multidimensional scales may fall short as measures of self-esteem.

'Draw-and-write' as a method for exploring self-concept factors

In terms of its effectiveness, 'draw-and-write' appears to be a promising method for communicating salient, positive self-concept factors, for children in late childhood and early adolescence. This multimodal, paper-based method gave participants the opportunity to respond in privacy, at their own pace, and to focus on their preferred mode of communication, whether that was drawing, writing, or both. While some adult researchers have suggested that drawing may be a 'confusing' medium for children to use (Harden et al, 2000), this did not appear to be an issue for these participants, who chose

14

to draw with varying degrees of complexity, and whose basic 'stick' drawings were not necessarily less communicative than more sophisticated, detailed pictures. Furthermore, while adult expectations are that children in this age group have mastered writing and thus prefer the clarity of written communication (Gardner, 1980), observations of the handwriting and spellings from some participants' contributions suggested that writing may present a challenge for some children in this age group, and that offering them another mode of communication may thus be beneficial.

As drawing is an activity which usually falls beyond the confines of written and assessed school-based work, its inclusion may add to the novelty and enjoyment of a research task. Where children did choose to write, they described many factors which contributed to the salience of their favourite activities and people, indicating that written content usefully expands on visual material. The likelihood is that every mode has benefits and drawbacks, and that some will suit some children better than others – pointing to the advantage of a multimodal method. This advantage was found to extend to researchers as well as participants, since responses in one mode often assisted in interpreting the other.

Contrasting results with self-esteem scale domains

Children's responses depicted a wide range of topics that they considered important to their sense of self – many more than multidimensional self-esteem scales access, suggesting that an open-ended method paints a richer and more accurate picture of children's self-concept factors.

The active self

When accessing the active self, adult-constructed self-esteem scales focus almost exclusively on physical and academic self-concept factors. However, results from this study suggest that salient positive self-concept factors for at least half of these participants may extend much further, to include musical activities, computers and electronic media, drawing and painting, drama and other more idiosyncratic activities. Only one child in this sample drew or wrote about an academic school subject – suggesting that children's salient, positive self-concept factors may not include the school-based 'work' and achievement valued by adults and required of children in contemporary western cultures (Qvortrup, 1985). School did feature frequently in these children's drawings and comments – but as a location for sports, playing with and meeting friends, rather than as a setting for academic development.

In terms of children's physical self-concept, self-esteem scales may also underestimate the scope of children's active selves, as questions tend to focus on particular kinds of physical activity. For example, the SPPC (Harter, 1985) explicitly confines itself to questions relating to team sports, while physical activity items on the SDQI (Marsh, 1992) implicitly favour team and sports-based activities – almost all its questions refer to enjoying sports and games, being good at throwing a ball, being a good athlete or liking to run and play hard. In contrast, children's drawn and written responses in this study suggest children have a broader conceptualisation of the physically active self. Half the children who chose a salient physical activity described non-team-sport physical activities, or ones which do not involve running or ball play, such as dancing, trampolining, swimming, riding, tae kwon do, skipping or skating. As significantly more girls than boys were found to fall into this group, self-esteem scales may be underestimating girls' physical self-esteem by limiting their questions to certain physical activities.

The social self

In terms of the social self, the children in this study displayed a broad concept of 'family' in their drawings and written comments, including parents, siblings (some yet-to-be-born), extended family members, and also people to whom they may not be genetically related such as godparents. In contrast, widely-used multidimensional self-esteem scales limit family subscale content to parents (SDQI, Marsh, 1992) or even omit family as a subscale altogether (Piers-Harris 2, Piers and Herzberg, 2002; SPPC, Harter, 1985). Where peer relationships are concerned, scales prioritise popularity rather than friendship whereas a quarter of children specifically cited a single "best" friend. These findings suggest that self-esteem scales may underestimate the social self-concept of children and the social support available to children from close friends, members of the extended family and other significant adults and family members.

While the importance of family and various non-school activities to children could have been anticipated, the benefits of the relatively open-ended nature of this study were demonstrated by some unexpected results. Some of these involved more idiosyncratic aspects of the active self, such as baking, or super-hero fantasy games. The most striking of these unexpected findings however related to the social self, for which nearly one in twelve children drew a pet as one of their "favourite people". Some of the written comments suggested that children's pets are highly emotionally salient to them. Similar findings have occasionally been reported in open-ended research with children, both verbal and visual, when exploring self-concept (McGuire and McGuire, 1982), children's physically active selves

(MacDougall, Schiller and Darbyshire, 2004) and their well-being (NicGaibhainn and Sixsmith, 2006), suggesting that the salience of pets to children's selves is not confined to this participant group.

Conclusion

The results of this exploratory study suggest that draw-and-write is an easily coded method for describing aspects of the self, which children up to early adolescence appear to enjoy doing. It may thus prove to be a promising addition to the repertoire of methods for exploring children's self-concept. In response to these results we consider that further explorations of the meaning for children of their drawn and written representations are warranted, including (for those who drew or wrote about more than one aspect of the active or social self) their relative importance. In addition, given that some adult researchers are unsure of the merits of 'draw-and-write' (e.g. Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999; NicGabhainn and Sixsmith, 2006) we suggest that children's own views on the means of communication they prefer, and of the effectiveness of visual methods, should be sought. In order to address these issues, individual participant interviews have been incorporated in the next phase of this study.

This qualitative, child-centred method, in allowing children to express aspects of self-concept, has the potential to result in a better understanding of children's individual, experiential self-concept and self-esteem. While debate about the contribution of self-esteem to children's well-being and achievement is likely to continue, a fuller understanding of children's self-concept factors is needed to inform this debate. Indeed, research has indicated that if self-esteem supports are found to be of value, they are more likely to be effective by exploring each child's distinctive interests (DuBois and Tevendale, 1999), rather than being based on generalised goals, as at present. In order to achieve this, more open, child-centred methods would appear to be essential.

References

Backett, K. and H. Alexander (1991) Talking to young children about health: methods and findings. *Health Education Journal* 50: 134–137

Backett-Milburn, K. and L. McKie (1999) A critical appraisal of the draw and write technique. *Health Education Research: Theory & Practice* 14 (3): 387–398

Baumeister, R.F., J.D. Campbell, J.I. Krueger and K.D. Vohs (2003) Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness or healthier lifestyles? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 4 (1): 1-44

Bracken, B. A., S. Bunch, T. Z. Keith and P. B. Keith (2000) Child and adolescent multidimensional self-concept: A five-instrument factor analysis. *Psychology in the Schools* 37 (6): 483-93.

Brinthaupt, T.M. and L.J. Erwin (1992) Reporting about the self: Issues and implications. In T.M. Brinthaupt & R.P. Lipka (eds.) *The self. Definitional and methodological issues* pp.137-171. Albany, NY: SUNY Press

Butler, R.J. and S.L. Gasson (2005) Self-esteem/ self-concept scales for children and adolescents: A review. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health* 10(4): 190-201

Byrne, B. M. (2002) Validating the measurement and structure of self-concept: Snapshots of past, present and future research. *American Psychologist* 57(11): 896-909

Christensen, P. and A. James (2000) Childhood diversity and commonality. Some methodological insights. In P. Christensen and A. James (eds.) *Research with children. Perspectives and practices* pp.160-178. London: Falmer

Covington, M.V. (2001) The science and politics of self-esteem. Schools caught in the middle. In T.J. Owens, S. Stryker and N. Goodman (eds.) *Extending self-esteem theory and research. Sociological and psychological currents* pp. 351-374. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Crocker, J. (2006) What is optimal self-esteem? In M. H. Kernis (ed.), *Self-esteem issues and answers. A sourcebook of current perspectives* pp. 119-124

Damon, W. and D. Hart (1988) *Self-understanding in childhood and adolescence.* New York: Cambridge University Press

Damon, W. (1995) *Greater expectations: overcoming the culture of indulgence in America's homes and schools.* New York: Free Press

DiCarlo, M.A., J.L. Gibbons, D.C. Kaminsky, J.D. Wright and D.A. Stiles (2000) Street children's drawings: windows into their life circumstances and aspirations. *International Social Work* 43(1): 107-120

DuBois, D.L., C. Burk-Braxton and H.D. Tevendale (2002) Esteem-enhancement interventions during early adolescence. In T.M. Brinthaupt and R.P. Lipka (eds.) *Understanding early adolescent self & identity. Applications and interventions* pp. 321-372. Albany, NY: SUNY Press

DuBois, D.L. and H.D. Tevendale (1999) Self-esteem in childhood and adolescence: Vaccine or epiphenomenon? *Applied & Preventive Psychology* 8: 103-117

Eco, U. (1976) *A theory of semiotics*. London: Indiana University Press

Franck, L.S., A. Sheikh and K. Oulton (2008) What helps when it hurts: children's views on pain relief. *Child: Care, health and development* 34(4): 430-438

Gardner, H. (1980) *Artful scribbles. The significance of children's drawings.* New York: Basic Books

Golomb, C. (2002) *Child art in context. A cultural and comparative perspective*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association

Greene, S. and M. Hill (2005) Researching children's experience: methods and methodological issues. In S. Greene and D. Hogan (eds.) *Researching children's experience. Methods and approaches* pp. 1-21. London: Sage

Guerin, S. and E. Hennessy (2002) Pupils' definitions of bullying. *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 17 (3): 249-262.

Harden, J., S. Scott, K. Backett-Milburn and S. Jackson (2000) Can't talk won't talk?: Methodological issues in researching children. *Sociological Research Online* 5 (2) http://www.socresonline.org.uk/5/2/harden.html [retrieved April 27 2009].

Harter, S. (1985) *Self-Perception Profile for Children*. Denver, CO: University of Denver Press

Harter, S. (1999) *The construction of the self. A developmental perspective.* New York: Guilford

Hogan, D. (2005) Researching 'the child' in developmental psychology. In S. Greene and D. Hogan (eds.), *Researching children's experience. Methods and approaches* pp. 22-41. London: Sage

Kendrick, M., R. McKay and L. Moffat (2005) The portrayal of self in children's drawings of home, school and community literacies. In J. Anderson, M. Kendrick, T. Rogers and S. Smythe (eds.), *Portraits of literacy across families, communities and schools* pp. 185-204. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Kress, G. and C. Jewitt (2003) Introduction. In C. Jewitt and G. Kress (eds.) *Multimodal literacy* pp.1-18. New York: Peter Lang

Krueger, J.I., K.D. Vohs and R.F. Baumeister (2008) Is the allure of self-esteem a mirage after all? *American Psychologist* 63 (1): 64-65

Kuhn, M. and T. McPartland (1954) An empirical investigation of self attitudes. *American Sociological Review* 19: 68-76.

Leary, M. R. (2006) What are the most pressing issues facing researchers? In M. H. Kernis (ed.), *Self-esteem issues and answers. A sourcebook of current perspectives* pp. 424-429

Marsh, H.W. (1986) Global self-esteem: Its relation to specific facets of self-concept and their importance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51 (6): 1224-1236

Marsh, H. W. (1992) *Self Description Questionnaire (SDQ) I: A theoretical and empirical basis for the measurement of multiple dimensions of preadolescent self-concept. An interim test manual and research monograph.* Macarthur, New South Wales, Australia: University of Western Sydney, Faculty of Education. Retrieved from http://www.self.ox.ac.uk/Instruments/ SDQManual.htm on 27 April 2009

Marsh, H.W. and R.G. Craven (2006) Reciprocal effects of self-concept and performance from a multidimensional perspective. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 1(2): 133-163

MacDougall, C., W. Schiller and P. Darbyshire (2004) We have to live in the future. *Early Child Development and Care,* 174 (4): 369–387

McGuire, W.J. and C.V. McGuire (1982) Significant others in self-space: Sex differences and developmental trends in the social self. In J. Suls. *Psychological perspectives on the self, Vol. 1* pp. 71-96*.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum

Mavers, D. (2003) Communicating meanings through image composition, spatial arrangement and links in primary school student mind maps. In C. Jewitt and G. Kress (eds.), *Multimodal literacy* pp. 19-34. New York: Peter Lang

Merriman, B. and S. Guerin (2007) Exploring the aspirations of Kolkatan (Calcuttan) street children living on and off the streets using drawings. *International Journal of Psychology & Psychological Therapy 7*(2): 269-283

Nic Gabhainn, S. and C. Kelleher (2002) The sensitivity of the draw and write technique. *Health Education* 102: 68–75

Nic Gabhainn, S. and J. Sixsmith (2006) Children photographing well-being: facilitating participation in research. *Children & Society* 20: 249–259

O'Connor, P. (2007) `Doing boy/girl' and global/local elements in 10-12 year olds' drawings and written texts. *Qualitative Research* 7(2): 229-247

Piers, E.V. (1984) *Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale: Revised Manual*. Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services

Piers, E.V. and D.S. Herzberg (2002) *Piers-Harris 2: Children's Self-Concept Scale*. Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services

Porcellato, L., L. Dugdill, J. Springett and F.H. Sanderson (1999) Primary schoolchildren's perceptions of smoking: implications for health education. *Health Education Research Theory & Practice* 14 (1): 71-83

Qvortrup, J. (1985) 'Placing children in the division of labour', in P. Close and R. Collins (eds.), *Family and economy in modern societies* pp. 129–45. London: Macmillan

Seligman, M. E. P. (1993). *What you can change and what you can't: The complete guide to successful self-improvement*. New York: Fawcett

Shavelson, R.J., J.J. Hubner and G.C. Stanton (1976) Self-Concept: Validation of Construct Interpretations. *Review of Educational Research* 46 (3): 407-441

Short, K.G., G. Kauffmann and L.H. Kahn (2000) I just *need* to draw: Responding to literature across multiple sign systems. *The Reading Teacher* 54 (2): 160-71

Eco, U. (1976) *A theory of semiotics*. London: Indiana University Press

Swann, W.B Jr., C. Chang-Schneider and K.L. McClarty (2007) Do people's self-views matter? Self-concept and self-esteem in everyday life. *American Psychologist* 62 (2): 84-94

Watkins, D. (2003) The nature of self-conception. Findings of a cross-cultural research program. In H.W. Marsh., R.G. Craven and D.M. McInerney (eds.), *International advances in self research* pp. 375-398. Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

Wetton, N.M. and J. McWhirter (1998) Images and curriculum development in health education. In J. Prosser (ed.), *Image-based research. A sourcebook for qualitative researchers* pp. 263-283. London: Falmer

Williams, D.T., N. Wetton and A. Moon (1989) *A way in: Five key areas of health education.* Health Education Authority: London

Wylie, R.C. (1974) *The self-concept (Vol. 1). A review of methodological considerations and measuring instruments*. London: University of Nebraska Press.

Wylie, R.C. (1979) *The self-concept (Vol. 2). Theory and research on selected topics*. London: University of Nebraska Press.

Wylie, R.C. (1989) *Measures of self-concept*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.