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Intergenerational collaborative drawing: A research method for researching with/about young children

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the methodological effectiveness of intergenerational collaborative drawing (ICD). A group of eight researchers trialled this particular approach to drawing, most of them for the first time. Each researcher drew with young children, peers and tertiary students, with drawings created over a period of six months. The eight researchers came together in a 'community of scholars' approach to this project because of two shared interests: (i) issues of social justice, access and equity; and (ii) arts-based education research methods. The researchers were curious how ICD might methodically support their respective research processes.

As knowledge and theory about young children becomes more complex, researchers need responsive methodological tools to ask new questions and conduct rigorous, ethical research. This partial account describes how drawing together might perform methodologically. The data reported here draws from the detailed field notes, drawings and reflections of the researchers. Conclusions arise from the analysis of these reflections, with the authors suggesting ways in which ICD might benefit research with young children.

Introduction

Drawing is ever present in settings for young children. For some years, a number of researchers in the early childhood field have made close and rigorous scrutiny of children's drawings¹. Although research that involves children's drawings can be shaped by different conceptual frameworks, using drawing as a research method is not a simple matter of providing children with drawing materials. This paper details the experiences, encounters and experiments with a particular drawing method that was unfamiliar to a team of researchers: Intergenerational collaborative drawing (ICD) (Knight, 2011; Knight, 2012). This procedure involves adults and children drawing at the same time on a single paper surface. As a research method, ICD sits within arts-based education research (ABER) methodology (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Eisner, 1981)—arts practices are used to investigate wider education issues and subjects. Drawing collaboratively can provide an opportunity to use perceptive thinking as a stimulus for drawing.

Arts-based inquiry has gained prominence around the globe (Butler-Kisber, 2010), spreading beyond arts and design-based research and into education and social sciences domains (Eisner, 2008). Making drawings can expose 'cognitive processes, particularly creativity and the emergence of ideas' (Garner, 2008, p. 23). Potentially, drawing can be highly effective in fields such as early years education because of its appropriateness to young children and to those researching with/about them. Nevertheless, arts-based inquiry is still a fairly recent methodological development outside arts and design research, and is unfamiliar to many education researchers. Testing drawing with a group of collaborators enables active investigation into its methodological potential.

This paper sets aside old questions around quantitative/qualitative research paradigms and focuses instead on Eisner's challenge to 'achieve binocular vision' (1981, p. 9) through processes that collectively enrich knowledge. The eight academics who came together on this project were from three different universities in Australia and included PhD students, early career researchers, middle career researchers and senior researchers. They each work in the field of early years education and care and bring with them a range of interests and ideologies. Their common interests were in matters of social justice and investigating new possibilities for research methods that might be compatible with their various conceptual frameworks, and prove both effective and ethical. They conducted drawings in various settings including their homes with family members and friends, at university with their students and peers, and in childcare settings with parents, workers and children.

The project was designed to introduce the researchers to an unfamiliar but appropriate research method for investigating early childhood educational ideas and issues. Through this exposure to and trialling of alternative educational research processes and tools, the eight academics came to new understandings about methodologies and how they impact on research. Through the use of ICD, some researchers reported increased receptivity to children's ways for communicating and added to their ways of seeing social justice.

The project

The project team had varying levels of skills and experience with drawing. One researcher maintained 'I can't draw to save my life' (R1), while another was a practising artist and said 'I draw daily and consider visuals my first language' (R8). Overall the researchers were new to using arts-based inquiry.

The task was to produce drawings that would work as a means to critically explore issues around social justice, access and inclusion in the field of early childhood. It is unusual for a drawing methodology not to focus on the 'meaning' of the drawing. In this case this was not our aim. The primary goal was for the researchers to experience a new research technique. Drawings were created with children, peers, family members and university students. The aim was not to generate data on the meanings of the drawings produced, nor was it a close examination of the thoughts and/or opinions of those who were drawing. Instead, the focus was solely on the technique/s employed in conducting ICD with an aim to expose a diverse group of researchers to new ways of thinking about research activity. With this in mind, what constitutes the data in this testing is the extensive field notes, drawings, audio diary recordings and written reflections documented by each researcher. Together, these materials were collated and then critically analysed for evidence of the potential of this procedure (creating drawings together) as a research method for researchers with different prior drawing skills and experiences.

One of the problems embedded in some traditional approaches to children's drawings is that there is a perception that no instruction is necessary; that people are just somehow naturally good at drawing and so the activity therefore does not need the same level of rigorous approach attached to learning about and using other methodologies. On the contrary, to begin this project, the team of researchers were introduced to highly rigorous and systematic ways for working. The *Four purposes of drawing*, developed by Drawing Power UK (Adams & Baynes, 2006), were used as stimulus prompts for the researchers' thinking and actions. The idea of the four purposes—perception,

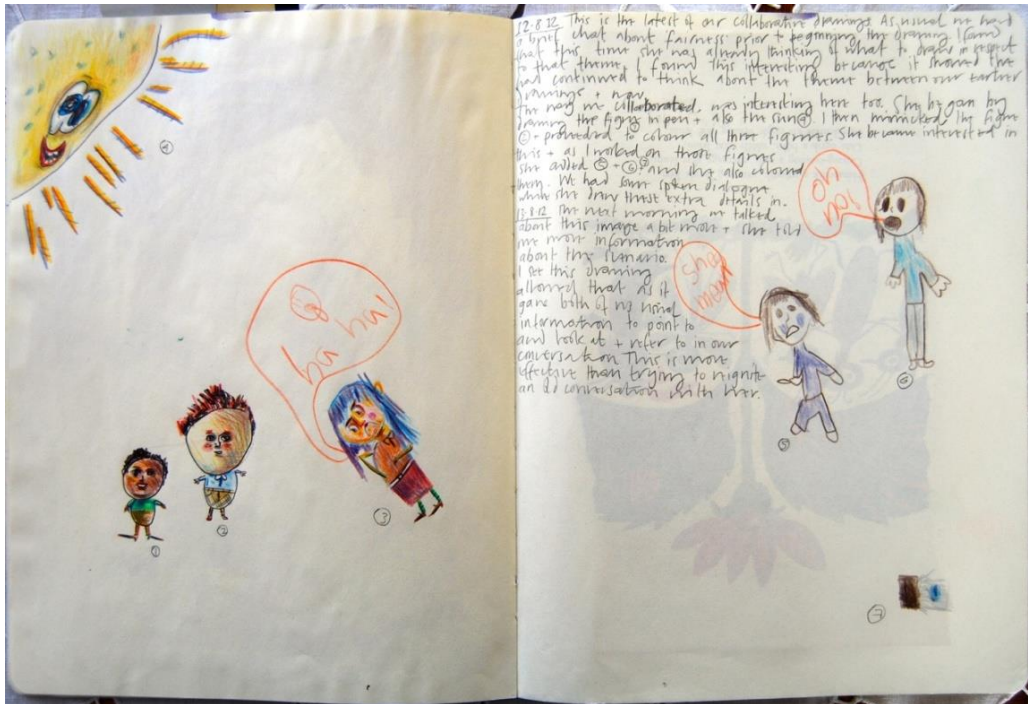
communication, invention, action (Adams & Baynes, 2006, pp. 2–3)—worked as a focus for the researchers' processes and also guided how they might discuss the process with their co-drawers. The drawings and reflections were neither generated nor analysed in the more conventional sense. That is to say, the drawings are not 'read' for meanings, use of symbols, or artistic intent. While full ethical clearance was obtained for the eight researchers and for collaborating drawers, only brief commentary made by co-drawers was remembered, as the drawings formed the primary material. The drawings and researchers' reflections offer up rich thinking about the potential methodological value of ICD and about more ethical ways of working with children. It is this thinking that is reported in this paper.

To assist with this methodological approach, four research questions were agreed upon, which formed a framework for each researcher as they recorded their reflections:

1. How does drawing (taking into account the 'four purposes') enable personal critical thinking about social justice in early childhood?
2. Does drawing, particularly collaboratively, help to communicate ideas and concepts in particular ways?
3. How might drawing facilitate possibilities for imagination and action for social justice in early childhood?
4. Is drawing an effective method for thinking, researching, communicating?

Each researcher used different ways to initiate, conduct and document their ICD experiences. Variations in materials, participants, time, space and frequency were all factors that developed in response to each researcher's context, individual conceptual frameworks, levels of expertise and experience, as well as other factors. Similar to each individual's drawings, the data sets displayed unique aesthetics and appearances, according to the researcher who drove the experience. In Figure 1, the researcher used a notebook in which she kept a sequence of drawings which were produced through an ICD process with her daughter (aged six years).

Figure 1. Drawing about bullying. Researcher eight (R8) and daughter (aged six years)



After the drawing sessions were ended, the researcher would record her thinking on the page along with the visual texts co-created. Through this particular series, they conducted a conversation, which turned to the topic of 'bullying'. Extracts from the researcher's notes include:

12-8-12 This is the latest of our drawings. As usual we had a chat about 'fairness' prior to beginning ... (R8)

I then mimicked the figure (2), and proceeded to colour all three figures ... (R8)

13-8-13 This morning we talked about this image a bit more and she told me more information about the scenario (R8).

I see that this drawing allowed both of us visual information to point to and look at ... This is more effective than trying to ignite a conversation with her (R8).

In the following section of this paper, the four questions that guided the research project are used to frame this partial account of first-time experiences of testing this method of ICD as research. The conclusions from this project draw on the thinking of the eight researchers and are offered at the end of the paper for those interested in how ICD might be an effective approach for researching with young children. The reflections provided by the researchers are not focused on the meanings of the drawings but on their experiences of engaging in drawing as research activity.

Drawing for thinking

When the focus is on perceptive thinking, it is possible to take some attention away from the style or aesthetic of the drawing. Instead, attention can be directed towards the complexity and layers of meaning that reside with the drawer, allowing the researcher to access ‘what is perceived as personally significant’ (Suominen Guyas, 2008, p. 31) to the drawer/s. For example, in Figure 1, the collaborating drawers could discuss an issue such as bullying and produce drawings around their perceptions about how or when bullying happens, rather than trying to prioritise how to convey a typical scene of bullying in a drawing (which a cartoonist or illustrator might do as part of a comic strip or picture book). In the drawings conducted on 12/8/13 and 13/8/13 the opportunity to think perceptively—foregrounding ideas and opinions rather than aesthetic considerations—helped to bring personal, external and material realities to the surface (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). This shared conversation connected to issues of social justice in early childhood, which in turn prompted richer starting points in subsequent drawings. This became a cyclic process, where the act of creating the imagery forced ideas and perceptions to grow in considered ways, and vice versa—ideas and perceptions forced the drawing to grow in considered ways. The drawings supported the co-drawers in their interpretations of the topic and also helped form the intentions for further inquiry.

Throughout the project, the acts of making drawings with others in a number of different social settings (intergenerational family, child, students, peers) featured instances of personal contemplation, as well as self-review. Similarly to other methodological investigations (see Pithouse, 2011), researchers reported that they were prompted to think through things and revisit their own conceptualisations, particularly as they shared their experiences and perceptions with the other researchers. Researcher six (R6) wrote in her reflective journal:

Re-considering drawing beyond being a pedagogical tool for research into children and development was an important challenge. When I used this new way of ICD as a research method for thinking about social justice, I found that it brought relationships to consciousness far more and in that sense it was intellectually stimulating (R6).

Here, it seems that the drawing process has led to ‘manipulation and development of thought’ (Adams & Baynes, 2006, p. 3) in the researcher and suggests that the research process goes beyond a mechanical collecting of data. In another instance (see Figure 2), it is apparent in researcher three’s (R3) notes that she has shifted from a focus on the act of drawing being the main outcome of the collaborative experience, to an appreciation of the enabling capacity of the method to draw out detail in the information about the child’s perspectives on family life.

In the case of an ICD made for this project [see Figure 2], the use of ICD as a research method gave rise to the topic rather than drawing as an art form itself ... [and] was fruitful for the researcher who was interested in gathering a broader picture of the historical, conditional and social perspectives in a child's family life (R3).

Figure 2. ICD about family life



Drawing collaboratively opened up clear avenues for verbal and visual communication between drawers. In Figure 3, the drawing produced by researcher four (R4) and two children (aged seven and nine years), was preceded by a discussion on fairness. This term was chosen as one that might prompt children to express their understandings of some aspects of social justice and inclusion. The task of drawing first focused R4's ideas about social justice, in order to introduce the task and its topic. The act of drawing together helped to continue the discussion as each drawing was created. Communication experiences can vary, but a significant impact from ICD includes the high quality of the communication. In Figure 3, the drawers have demonstrated skills with verbal texts, perhaps more developed than with the visual. The words leave little to the imagination and might communicate clearly some aspects of the children's understandings of fairness and justice. At the same time, there are challenges that arise when conducting any research with children, and communicating while drawing with others can present its own dilemmas. It is important that the context in which the drawing is produced is understood and communicated.

Figure 3. Drawing about 'fairness'. Researcher four (R4) and two children, aged seven and nine years



Throughout the project, there were a number of drawings that provided evidence that rich and complex shared thinking was initiated through the process.

Learning together

Researcher two (R2) engaged in ICD with her nephew and niece, who are university students from Cambodia studying as international students in Australia. In her reflections on the processes of producing Figures 4 and 5, R2 discusses her thinking about what she considers the catalyst for internalised ideas that clearly emerged on the page. She wrote in her notes:

The drawing process explored living situations in two different countries. When the drawing activity finished, the comparison of two drawings made the participants and researcher together rethink that the drawings represented our different lives. ... Furthermore, the two drawings show the diverse cultures of the two countries, and cultural differences are shown through the shared thinking and drawing. How international students value their life overseas was visualised. Therefore, the drawings acquired knowledge of diversity, by giving a tangible comparison of their experience of beach culture in Australia compared to their experiences from their childhood (R2).

Figure 4. ICD: Researcher two (R2) and university student one. Beach culture drawing one

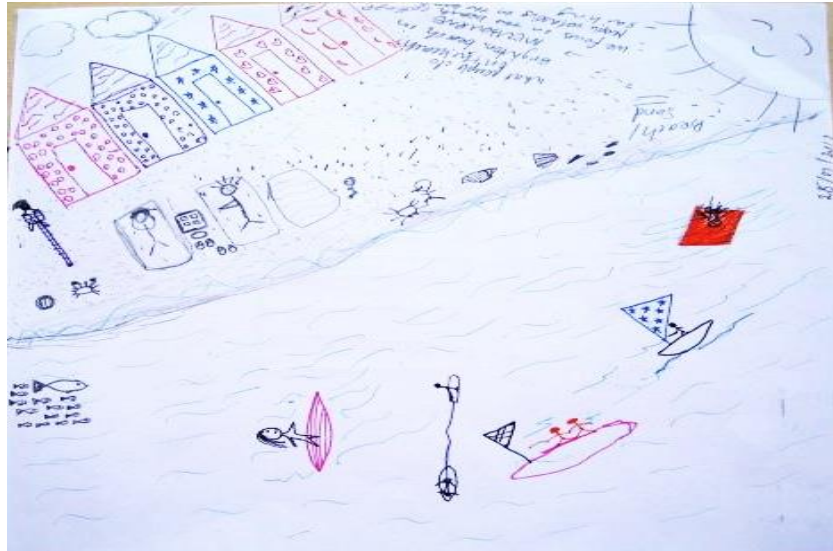
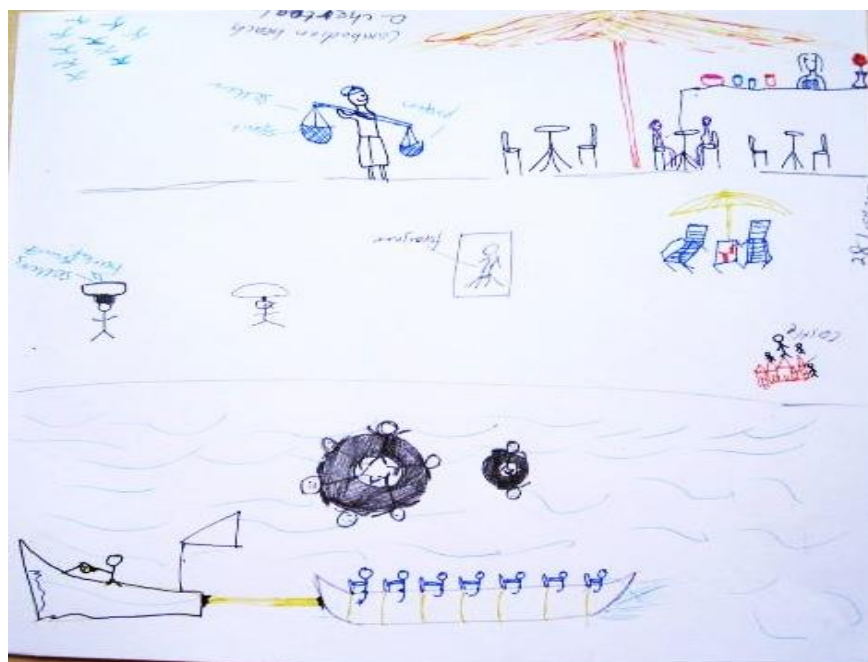


Figure 5. ICD: Researcher two (R2) and university student two. Beach culture drawing two



It was through the process of drawing and discussing with her niece and nephew that R2 arrived at expressing these ideas. Whether or not others who ‘read’ these images come to the same understandings from viewing them is important to note. Barone and Eisner (2012) suggest that ‘arts based research ... provides an image of those interactions in ways that make them noticeable’ (p. 3). The beach drawings worked to draw the attention of the drawers to the diversity of cultural experience:

The drawing shows their 'ideal beach' in Cambodia. They felt that they did not have a lot of freedom in their home country compared to Australia. Linking to the research perspective, drawing provides a platform for the researcher and the artist (the nephew and niece) to explore the meaning of life experience together. Drawing made us feel that we noticed the beach experiences are linked to cultural differences, which we had not thought of before (R2).

For those researchers who already drew regularly, the activity sometimes forced a rethinking of the purposes for drawing. They were prompted to interrogate their habitual or usual activities for creating drawings—and drawing to 'find out' was challenging. For example, researcher five (R5), an experienced and regular drawer, produced an ICD with a colleague after a difficult conversation about an issue. She turned to ICD to test the possibilities of thinking through the issue in a different way. In her notes, she maintained that the resulting drawing revealed unexpected details of the complex thinking in the discussion and appeared to encapsulate the problematic dilemma faced.

More than the drawing

Rich data generated through ICD is not simply confined to drawn images. Equally important is talking with participants, reflecting on the drawings and the drawing processes and asking participants to comment on the drawing. These are all notable moments in the procedure and highlight the credibility of the methodology. Researchers were exposed to how the act of drawing with others could make ideas, thoughts and theorisations visible, as well as aspects of their diverse experiences and histories. Co-drawers can be led to further thinking about the relationship between lived experiences, as well as what is important. Participation, reflection and analysis give voice to the meanings contained in the drawings.

In this project, the drawings sometimes became a mediating tool to support understanding of the collective ideas behind the images, which then influenced subsequent drawings. Often the children who participated were already thinking of what to draw in respect to themes, conversations, ideas and concepts that informed their previous work. On a number of occasions, the researchers noted that the drawers often sustained their thinking about concepts and could express their theorising on things encountered in everyday life between one drawing episode and the next. Drawing with others helped initiate ideas and intellectual exploration on particular themes and concepts. For example, the drawings of the beach experiences (Figures 4 and 5) crystallised shared thinking between the

researcher and her co-drawers and prompted further exploration of world diversities and lifestyle differences among people in different cultural contexts.

Drawing for action

Drawing collaboratively often helped the researcher and the other drawers explore life experiences together and then put this into action by looking at social justice in additional contexts. As an example, for one researcher, ICD prompted thinking about cultural difference and what international students think about emigration. She went on to build this thinking into her planning for further research, as well as follow-up learning experiences for all her students. Here, the familiar was juxtaposed with the unfamiliar to ‘form a bridge between the realm of the imagination and implementation’ (Adams & Baynes, 2006, p. 3)—to extend on prior thinking, imagery and possibilities; to pursue an idea further.

The four purposes of drawing: perception, communication, invention and action (Adams & Baynes, 2006, pp. 2–3) help to take drawing beyond the singular ‘art’ classification. The project brought about a realisation that drawing, whether produced by adults, children, novices or experts, contains purpose and intention that connects to many different contexts and stimuli. This richness can make ICD a highly appropriate and potent method for researching with young children, students, peers and others.

Communicating

Perhaps somewhat predictably—but important nonetheless—drawing with others was thought about as a way to communicate and bridge language barriers. For example, when R6 drew with her group of international tertiary students, they sometimes found it difficult to explain their ideas about social justice verbally, whereas the drawing helped illuminate what they wanted to say.

Drawing techniques also offered up opportunities for communication. Although many participants were adults, not all were confident about drawing, even when willing to contribute to the project. Having an emphasis on communication was useful in allaying their hesitancy. Participants’ reluctance often prompted discussions about why aspects were drawn in particular ways, or why particular techniques and/or media were used. Rather than draw something because it looked beautiful or pleasing, these drawings often worked through ideas about social justice. Responses

focused on explaining how the icons and marks, colours and materials in the drawings helped to uphold the concept behind the drawing, resulting in experimentation with media and technique to work through ideas. Arts practice—the physical manipulation of tools and the body to make marks—when thought of as corporeal theorising, ‘evokes embodied responses’ (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 102). Some of the researchers claimed to have not drawn since their own early childhoods; however, diverting attention away from skills to purpose worked to allay some of their fears and reluctance.

Drawing aided communication for the researchers and the co-drawers, in the same way that Burke and Prosser (2008) claim is important for young children. They insist that using visuals—especially drawings—with children is particularly critical for connecting with their thinking: ‘children have the ability to capture feelings and emotions through drawings and paintings while lacking an equally expressive written or spoken language’ (Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith & Campbell, 2011, p. 20). The ICD experiences in this project often saw this same effect played out. The drawing procedures helped to capture feelings and emotions, especially when the written or spoken language of collaborating drawers was developing. R5 asked one of her children to draw with her, focusing on the experience of being in an overseas country together. As they drew, what started with symbols and markers of that other culture then gradually changed to reveal something of the emotion below the surface. The daughter drew a person dragging a heavy cart through the street and this became the focus of the drawing. Previously, their communication had centred on the typical holiday responses around ‘having a good time’. The drawing revealed that together they had noticed some of the everyday life experiences of the people and had felt a range of emotions about the trip that were more challenging.

The authentic ways that drawing can communicate ideas and concepts were often observed by the researchers and noted in their reflections. Ideas and concepts were sometimes thought about before marks were made on the paper; at other times, this occurred simultaneously; and in other instances still, concepts became apparent or understood after drawing. While there appeared to be no linear system for these thought–activity relationships, to draw without thinking results in visual doodling or thoughtless work. Drawing collaboratively in response to a key research context (in this case, social justice issues) meant that the thoughts were focused and fed through into the drawing.

Researching the research

Research of any kind should lead to change; of thinking, policy, procedure or understanding. Diversity is an important feature of a robust research community and this project brought together a group of individual researchers with diverse backgrounds, experiences, approaches and theoretical paradigms. The process of ICD is driven by a desire to learn with young children, enabling communication that recognises and celebrates diversity and is ethically respectful of researching with young children—in this instance, researching about social justice in the early years.

Using qualitative methods for action relies as much on the capacity of the researcher to produce good quality research. ICD is a tool, much like a focus group or a latitudinal snapshot is a researching tool—it can be used well or badly. The method/tool is not in control of research quality, but it should help significantly to achieve high-quality findings. All the researchers noticed the research relationship as they participated in the process and were not spectators or collectors. They all believed that the process felt more ‘equal’ and less conventional as data were generated through joint activity.

Research outcomes are difficult to achieve without possibilities for action being articulated and initiated. A significant focus of this trial of the method was to consider how drawing might change thinking about appropriateness and/or usefulness of researching techniques. While the project involved drawings with others, this was also about self-study. The eight researchers supported each other in this work, forming a community of scholars (Irwin, 2008) who were new to arts-based educational research methods. The community also enabled a collective examination of ‘social justice’ in early childhood from a range of existing research and ideological paradigms.

Theorising about action through drawing was not always easy in this project. ‘The art object is ambiguous in its communicative character’ (Saorsa, 2004, p. 1) and some drawings were at once meaningful and meaningless—a way of trying to think together through a conversely more difficult ‘language’ than just using words. The drawing episodes seemed on occasion to be unmemorable, yet long afterwards, interactions with drawers could often be recalled clearly. Although the activities did not always seem profound, they brought concepts ‘to the surface’ and initiated desires to advocate for the presence of the child. Despite initial apprehensions on the part of the researchers about trialling the method, many frequently reported that making drawings provoked a desire to ‘do something’ about the issues around social justice.

The act of drawing with others seemed to spark a forward movement in thinking about options and ideas for change. In one session with a young child, the experience of drawing prompted discussion

at some depth about what the words 'social justice' might mean for young children. Researcher seven (R7) wrote in her reflections:

Drawing seems really comfortable for the child I researched with. Even though he wasn't drawing anything recognisable to me, the act of drawing seemed to help him make connections between ideas, and to allow me to identify moments when new directions for inquiry might be possible. For example, a comment about a spider being in a cage led to inquiry into who put the spider there, and who made the rules that the spider had broken. On another occasion, this could be followed up either with drawing or another method, to discuss the child's understanding of these issues of power and justice (R7).

This trial process of drawing collaboratively with others offered a glimpse of how research with/about young children can be finely tuned in respectful and just ways. Ethical research practices are crucial to contemporary research that seeks to learn about diversity and increasing complexities in the early years.

Drawing in the research space

One result of the project was the awareness of new understandings about drawing, not only as a literal space, but for its 'metaphorical and qualitative features as well' (Barone & Eisner 2012, p. 48). Such 'findings' grew through dialogues, Skype sessions, emails and sharing of visual works. In one group discussion, R1 described how one of the young children she was drawing with began to scribble all over her drawing. This initial observation prompted a lively exchange of experiences and views amongst the group. R8 was very familiar with such behaviours, which she had regularly observed while drawing collaboratively with her own daughter. For R1, these actions resonated with her sustained interests in and investigations of issues of power, resistance, voice, young children and social justice.

Issues of equity extend also to the community of researchers. For those who already used drawing to think and theorise, the opportunity to be involved in this project gave validation to those corporeal knowledges. R8 wrote about how this way of researching prompted a feeling of freedom, joy, connection and deeper understanding about research and its connection to thinking:

It was interesting for me to see others who were surprised that drawing accessed new thought. I was able to reflect on my practice and see capacities I have that I had taken for granted ... The shared experience between the researchers inspired me a lot in my own collective drawing (R8).

R6 asked her group of tertiary students how they felt about the process. They used words like 'refreshing' and 'surprising'. One student observed that he found it 'freeing' once he understood the explanation that the drawing was not in any way 'a work of art'. Another student described what she termed the 'open-ended' nature of the activity, and observed that she enjoyed it because she did not have a sense of any requirement to 'meet expectations' or get it 'right'. This, she said, helped her to think about several different things at once.

Discussion

The project shows sound evidence of the capacities for ICD to work as a research method across diverse contexts and in different circumstances. This is not to say it is without need of further refinement and development. In the final section of this paper, some suggestions are offered to address the need to ensure rigour and integrity in this innovative approach to research.

A significant realisation that emerged from the researchers' experiences and reflections was the need to actually *do* drawing in order to research its use as a methodological tool. According to Eisner (1981), participating in drawing 'is a critically important skill for those doing artistically oriented research in education' (p. 7). The act of doing drawing immersed the drawers (the researcher-drawers) in these activities and the resulting conundrums that appeared.

This recommendation that researchers need to draw produces a number of points of resistance. Some of these hesitations are linked to how researchers might feel about their own skills for drawing. The enduring romances around childhood art include beliefs that children's drawing is always 'innocent', cathartic, or innate. It is not necessarily true that children 'naturally' prefer to draw rather than speak or write. Visual practices are not primarily about saving, salving or solving; they can create messiness, they can be difficult to work through, and they can initiate problems, which might then be theorised (Vicars, 2011). This isn't always obvious, particularly to researchers who do not produce drawings themselves, but rather, simply observe them being created by others.

Debates about arts-based research prevail. Creating any visual work and declaring it as research is certainly problematic, but questions about whether anyone can properly use this drawing procedure as methodology, or whether there is a requirement that a certain degree of artistic/discipline knowledge is needed, upholds a singular definition of what art is and why it is created. To judge arts-based, research-driven drawings produced by researchers and participants against drawings produced by an experienced artist for exhibition, demonstrate a crude misunderstanding of the sizeable differences between the two forms of production and of their purposes. Visual works, in the

same way that written works do, perform many tasks and therefore take different forms and have differing levels of quality. Research-based drawings do not take the same form as the fine art drawings produced by the practised artist. However, the reliability of using research-based drawings rests upon maintaining the meanings embedded in the drawings as true to their original state as possible—and not overly interpreted by the researcher.

Drawing may be confronting for researchers who haven't drawn for some time, however this should not dismiss its credibility as a workable method. Researchers encounter new methods and new modes for data generation and collection all the time (such as web-based questionnaires, video capturing, new computer data management programs). Often researchers 'roll up their sleeves' and learn these new skills. Resistances to drawing might then connect to a deeper mistrust of the arts as being able to offer credible modes for thinking and investigating.

Drawing is no less functional than using other forms of communication to convey information. In a literal society, we are used to using and relying upon a different set of marks to record our ideas, evidences and thoughts. For example, writing is a more familiar communication mode; however, drawing also offers capacity to record evidence and thoughts. Statements about drawing not conveying as much as written work are therefore steeped in cultural convention.

A further challenge links to the ethical questions that might arise. In this project, the usual power relationships between the researchers and students, family members, children and peers was somewhat disrupted. Often the hesitance in using an almost forgotten skill shifted those power relationships fairly significantly. ICD is presented as a highly appropriate method for accessing thinking and communicating, that provides authentic (to some degree) access to children's and adults' ideas. However, it is necessary to ask whether children were aware of the research purpose, or simply were impressed or persuaded to participate because of the researcher's (unusual) interest in them? In many ways, this is a question asked by a number of early childhood researchers, using a variety of methods. These ethical concerns coincide with those of other researchers in being ever mindful of the interactions with research participants. While searching for methods that provide ever more insights into the thinking and actions of children, it is essential that the conduct of research with children and their families is as ethical and respectful as possible.

Conclusion

Thoughts are not static; they constantly shift and change. Furthermore, thinking is not a regulated procedure, but an unpredictable exchange between experiences, ideas, reactions and actions. Irrespective of age, thoughts impact and interact on/with the drawer and their drawings by the eye 'receiving feedback from the marks appearing on the page, which prompt further thought and mark-making' (Adams & Baynes, 2006, p. 3). These processes are enriched when people collaborate on a drawing and their ideas and thoughts intermingle and collide.

The act of drawing is slow, so it enables careful and prolonged interrelated thinking on a topic. When lines and marks are formed through the physical relationship between the hand, the drawing materials and the paper in order to make an image, there is time for the drawers to refine, change and shift their ideas, and to turn those ideas into theories and rationales. Drawing with others is rarely a singular experience as it is usually accompanied with discussion, questions, physical action, stories, suppositions, songs and onomatopoeic sounds. This multiple activity helps to perpetuate the reflexive oscillations between thoughts and drawing. ICD can help to visibly manifest this oscillation for research purposes as it can enable drawers to refine, question and debate their ideas and concepts. This creates rich data for interpretation and analysis.

This collective experiment with ICD to examine social justice issues brought about new critical thinking: (i) about how the process might work in research projects; and (ii) what might be shown both graphically and expressed in words in the drawings produced. The collective interpretations of the project aims were diverse and did not align with one paradigmatic theory about social justice. The investigation was incredibly rich thanks to that diversity and the method was pursued differently by each researcher. Thinking of drawing as a researching tool placed emphasis on what drawing can 'do', not what a drawing 'is', nor necessarily, what it 'means'.

ICD engaged in a way of researching that is sensitive to the communication preferences some young children (and adults) use. Through the use of this procedure, interrelationships were promoted and the method complemented the cache of research methodologies already used within educational research.

The drawings produced operate beyond the realm of casual doodle, or 'child art'. In this trial, ICD offered glimpses into the type of drawings that can be made, and these challenged essentialising statements about children's drawings. The experience helped raise consciousness of the status of varied ways of being, knowing and belonging, within an increasingly word-centric, standardised view of learning and intellect.

In the contemporary world, access and equity are major issues for researchers, children, practitioners and parents. Developing effective ways for thinking about social justice, promoting social justice and supporting socially just ways for communicating with each other are more important than ever before. For early years researchers, new approaches to drawing with children, and/or interpreting their drawings is of significant benefit, at a time when understandings, conceptualisations and theorisations aim to be as responsive as possible to the diverse needs and identities of young children.

Endnote

The project reported in this paper forms part of the activities of the Excellence in Research in Early Years Education Collaborative Research Network (EREYE CRN). This consists of a collaborative of over 65 early childhood academics across three Australian universities: Charles Sturt University, Monash University and Queensland University of Technology. The EREYE CRN network is focused on capacity building among early childhood academics and developing a strong evidence base of research in Australia through: knowledge and skills building; networking; project and publishing collaborations; and also expanding knowledge about research methods and approaches.

¹ For more on this, see, for example, Kellogg, 1959; Golomb, 1974; Matthews, 2003; & Wright, 2010.

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