

Research with young children: Exploring the methodological advantages and challenges of using hand puppets and draw and tell

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Abstract

This paper explores the methodological advantages and challenges of participatory tools used in research with young children in Ireland. Taking a child-centred approach, hand puppets and 'draw and tell' helped elicit children's expressions and meanings. Both techniques assisted in shifting the power balance between children and researchers, encouraged dialogue, created a fun atmosphere and promoted children's participation. When children are given the space, opportunity and means, and with skilled facilitation, they can clearly share their perspectives and meanings. It is important that researchers and practitioners use techniques that will facilitate and maximise young children's competencies, agency and preferences.

KEYWORDS

children, drawings, early years, participation, puppets

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, there has been a huge increase in research with children about matters that affect their lives, ranging from education, health, care, well-being and social care. The importance of conducting research *with* rather than *on* children is now widely embraced. The change is in part due to Article 12 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and new social studies of childhood. Since 1989, the UNCRC has strongly influenced the importance of listening to and

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consulting with children (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). In the same period, a paradigm shift occurred in childhood social studies led by sociologists who reconceptualised childhood as a social construction. This led to a re-evaluation of the role of children in research, with researchers viewing the child as an active participant in the research process with unique perspectives on their own lives and lived worlds (Christensen, 2004). Children were no longer theoretically regarded as objects of concern; instead, they were positioned as beings, social actors and competent co-constructors with others in everyday social relation (Sommer et al., 2010). This has led to new ways of engaging with children through child-centred research approach and use of creative participatory techniques (Coyne & Carter, 2018).

Many years ago, Alison Clark developed the Mosaic approach which was designed as a set of methods to gather and reflect on the views and experiences of young children (3–5 years old) in early childhood provision (Clark, 2005). The ‘Mosaic’ metaphor refers to the drawing together of pieces from different sources (e.g. mapping, child-led tours, photograph and, drawings) to create a complete picture of children's perspectives. Increasingly, researchers are developing and using methods that play to young children's strengths and which directly access children's own perspectives. Currently, there are a range of creative tools being used in research with children and these include, but are not limited to, cameras, videos, diaries, toys, collage, sentence-completion and puppets. Using creative participatory methods, researchers from a wide variety of disciplines have accessed young children's (younger than 6 years) perspectives on a range of topics, for example, state care (Winter, 2012), special places (Green, 2012), perspectives about ‘voice’ (Blaisdell et al., 2019), experiences of healthcare (Carter & Ford, 2013) and empowerment in preschool interactions (Almqvist & Almqvist, 2015).

Whilst there is a drive to seek young children's perspectives, there are less accounts of how researchers obtain young children's meanings through creative methods. Moreover, Punch (2002b) advises that researchers must critically reflect on the “use of ‘child-centred’ methods in order to explore the advantages and disadvantages of how they work in practice” (p323). Hence, this article adds to the growing literature on research with young children by providing a reflective account of the methodological advantages and challenges of creative participatory tools used in a study with young children in Ireland. In particular, it focuses on what it means to access children's views via a child-centred approach, using hand puppets to encourage dialogue and obtaining children's meanings through a ‘draw and tell’ method.

METHODS

The paradigmatic approach

The ways researchers ‘see’ children has a profound impact upon the way we conduct research with children. This study was conducted under the paradigmatic view that childhood is a social construction and that children are competent social actors active in the construction of their lives and agency. With regard to children's agency, we viewed children as having the “capacity to act deliberately, speak for oneself, and actively reflect on their social worlds, shaping their lives and the lives of others” (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2016, p510). Children were viewed as beings, social actors and competent co-constructors with others in everyday social relations (Sommer et al., 2010). It was about seeing children as the primary source about their experiences and about taking children's own words at face value. This shaped the way we approached children, the methods of communication which were used, and the way in which children were given opportunities to contribute their meanings for themselves.

The research approach taken was about respecting children's competencies and using research tools that were child-centred, maximised young children's competencies and which shifted the power in

adult-child positioning. The child-centred participatory approach is viewed as helping researchers to represent children's voices faithfully, by building understanding from an interactive, reflexive and engaged position (Coyne & Carter, 2018). The power differences between an adult researcher and a child can be really magnified when it involves data collection from very young children because of their age and stage of cognitive development as perceived/constructed by adults. It can be worsened when the child belongs to a marginalised group because of ethnicity, language, class and disability (Barfield & Driessnack, 2018). Offering different ways to communicate can help overcome communication challenges with children who may have limited language ability or shy personalities (Stafford, 2017). Clark notes that young children, even 3 to 4 years old, are competent and active meaning-makers in their own environment when methods are tailored to children's strengths and preferences (Clark, 2010).

It was important to use methods that would enable children to participate in their own way which led to the use of a hand puppet to ask the questions within the format of group interview (circle time) and the 'draw and tell' activity. The drawing activity was viewed as helping to introduce a play element and a mechanism by which the child competencies may be enhanced and strengthened. Talking about the drawings was seen as encouraging children to be coresearchers in the sense that they cocreated meaning about their drawings and therefore provided insights into their worlds and shared this with the researchers (Barfield & Driessnack, 2018; Darling-McQuistan, 2017). We, as in the research team, saw both techniques as representing a participatory arts-based approach that may somewhat shift but not necessarily reduce the power-differential between adults and small children.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Science Research Ethics Committee in the lead investigator's university (No 151,005). The research team adhered to best practise principles for undertaking research with children, and the child protection legislation, the Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017). Gaining access to young children is never easy due to issues around protection and perceived vulnerability, so it was important to anticipate and overcome the barriers as far as we could. The study was guided and supported by an advisory committee that was led by the Chair of the Early Years Policies and Programmes from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, members of the Children's Participation Unit and other key stakeholders. The 10 members of the advisory committee had expertise ranging from early years education, early years specialists services, services for vulnerable children, participatory methodologies, advocacy, policy and project design. The advisory committee played a critical role in advising on all aspects of the study and in helping the research team to overcome some of the potential access barriers.

The decision was made to recruit children, aged 3 to 5 years, attending either preschool childcare or junior infants class (reception class) in primary school. New environments and strange adults can be anxiety provoking for young children; therefore, it was important to access children in a familiar environment, one which they usually feel comfortable in and also with familiar caregivers. These issues are particularly important for young children who need to feel secure and who are experiencing their first major transition from home and parents. Two Directors from the Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) organisation and the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN), who were members of the advisory committee, assisted with selecting the sites to ensure that the sample was broadly representative of different communities and ethnicities. The six preschools represented a mix of rural and urban settings, community and private settings. The six primary schools represented a mix of rural and urban schools, DEIS and non-DEIS schools. DEIS is a label for 'Delivering Equality of Opportunity

in Schools' which denotes schools that receive extra supports and resources. It is a social inclusion strategy to help children and young people who are at risk of or who are experiencing educational disadvantage. The schools are usually located in communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion. Information packs about the study were distributed to the Directors and School Principals from the sites inviting them to participate and all agreed.

To establish a collaborative relationship with the key stakeholders, the research team visited each school and met with the Directors and teachers to explain the research study and obtain support. Once that was achieved, the Directors of the preschool and schools agreed to send a covering letter, information leaflet and consent form to families in which the details of the study were explained and inviting parents and child to participate and to give dual consent. Parents/guardians were advised that they had at least 7 days before they had to respond and that they could reconsider their consent at any point in the study. We asked the parent/guardian to seek their child's agreement to participate in the research, using a combined information and consent form which was an adaptation of a form developed by the National Childhood Network (www.ncn.ie). The Director of the Network, who was a member of the advisory committee, gave permission for use of the form. The information leaflet contained pictures and a short text worded for the children's comprehension level that explained in very simple terms what was involved. A smiley face chart asking children to indicate their preferred involvement by circling the appropriate figure was used to obtain assent.

As outlined above, there was a wide range of people involved in deciding the children's participation in this research including the university research ethics committee, the directors of the administrative organisations, directors of the creches and schools, practitioners/teachers, parents/caregivers and children themselves. The research team was fortunate to have considerable support from the senior directors and personnel involved in the schools; otherwise, we could have encountered lengthy delays. Navigating access through a pyramid of people with the children being last was not optimal but understandable as it reflects the safeguards that ensure that young children are protected from potential harm or exploitation in any research study (Powell et al., 2018). It was a process of negotiation, explanations, reassurance and building of relationships with school principals and teachers. Some had concerns that the research would not place excessive administrative burden on school staff and that the time needed for data collection could be facilitated with minimal disruption to a school day. Whilst there appeared to be broad agreement that involving young children in research was important for understanding their views, adult concerns had to be addressed before children could be accessed.

Prior to initiation of data collection on the day, we spoke with personnel (teachers and early years practitioners) to explain the study and answer any queries. Although both parents consent and the children's assent were obtained, we wanted to ensure that the children should have as much choice as possible over their participation so their consent was rechecked prior to each data collection activity. But that did not mean that all the children understood the purposes of our research or felt able to refuse to participate (Kirby, 2020a). All the researchers in our team were made aware that consent was an on-going process and that they needed to carefully monitor the children's verbal and physical behaviour. Children's body language can provide important cues about their preferred involvement, so researchers remained vigilant to non-verbal cues of dissent (Dockett et al., 2009). Although children usually learn to conform to adult expectations in school contexts, they can find ways to navigate this conformity through different practises of dissent (Kirby, 2020a). For example, in one preschool when the children were seated upon cushions in a circle for the puppet exercise, one little boy turned his body slightly away from the circle and curled up and went to sleep on the cushion. Similarly on other occasions, although the children had indicated that they wanted to be part of the puppet circle activity, some stayed silent throughout. So perhaps in those instances children appeared to make their own choices about their participation.

The study

The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding about young children's likes, dislikes and wishes about living in Ireland to inform policy decisions concerning early childhood services and wider provision for young children and families. It involved research with young children, aged 3 to 5 years, in Ireland to contribute to a Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families. The *First 5 Strategy* (<https://first5.gov.ie/>) was launched by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2018 and represents the first national strategy for children in early childhood in Ireland. The research team had the assistance of six early years specialists from the Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service who had at least 5 years' experience working with children from birth to six from a range of settings. They all held degrees in Early Childhood Education and Care, with several studying at Masters level during the study.

Using the participatory techniques, the questions that were asked of the children were as follows:

- What do you like about living here?
- What do you not like about living here?
- If you had a magic wand, what would you wish for?

There were 76 children (33 boys and 43 girls, aged 3–4 years) from 6 preschools and 37 children (17 boys and 20 girls, aged 4–5 years) from 6 primary schools. There were an additional 24 children in the pilot study; 16 from a preschool (9 boys and 6 girls, aged 3–4 years) and 8 from a primary school (4 boys and 4 girls, aged 4–5 years) that were colocated. The final sample in the study comprised 137 children aged 3–5 years. The names of the children cited later in this paper are all pseudonyms.

Piloting of the data collection process and tools

The purpose of the pilot study was to test out the data collection tools (i.e. hand puppet with group interview and the draw and tell activity) and the process with children. It was conducted by three researchers with children in a primary school and preschool that were co-located. Sixteen preschool and eight primary school children participated. The lead researcher (DM) had previously visited the pilot site to meet with the staff and to explain the study. In the preschool, they ensure that the children were happy to take part and were sitting where they wanted to sit took a lot of time to organise. This indicated that adequate time needed to be factored into ensuring that the children were happy with seating and location. The children seemed to understand the concept of likes and dislikes but found the idea of what to change more challenging. So the third question was changed to 'If you had a magic wand, what would you wish for'. During the 'draw and tell' activity, the researchers wrote what each child said at the margins of the drawings. Some children expressed dislike with the researchers writing on their drawings (see Figure 2), so going forward, we decided that the children's words would be recorded on post-it's (affixed to the back of the drawing) and children's narratives recorded in field notes.

In the primary school, the researchers were invited into the classroom to meet the eight children who had provided consent and whose parents had consented. Some other children who were present indicated that they would like to participate which was problematic as we did not have consent from them nor their parents. To avoid causing possible distress to any child (who may want to participate), for all further data collection, we arranged that a teacher would accompany the children (who had consented) to another room where the researchers would meet them. When the drawing activity

began, there was some conflict amongst the children over who used the washable markers (felt-tip pens) rather than the crayons and preferences for some colours. All the children preferred the washable markers and argued over colours with some unwilling to share. So for further data collection, we ensured that we provided several packs of washable markers instead of crayons. The documentation of children's comments about their drawings was less successful as two researchers forgot to record several children's responses in the field notes. To avoid loss of data and possible recall bias, the steps in both techniques were outlined clearly in a protocol and training provided, and all researchers were required to write-up field notes immediately after the activity. As can be seen from the above, the piloting of the data collection tools and process provided valuable information and changes were made accordingly.

Group interview facilitated by the puppet

Studies demonstrate that puppets can decrease children's fears of the interview process, lower anxiety levels, help put them at ease (Epstein et al., 2008) and that children often see puppets as peers and will often talk more easily with the puppet than with adults (Green, 2012). We sourced the hand puppets from a set of 'family members hand puppets' suitable for 2–5 years olds, and they had a simple design of a boy or girl with a smile, hair and two short arms. They were made of soft plush material, of various colours (orange, yellow and blue stripes), and size was approximately 25 × 12 × 2 cm. Images cannot be supplied as subject to copyright. The hand puppets were owned by DM who had purchased them for use in a primary school, when she had worked as a primary school teacher.

Before beginning each small group discussion, children were usually seated on small chairs or cushions in a circle. The intention was to minimise the power imbalance as young children may be less intimidated by talking in a group than talking individually to an adult who is a stranger to them and children particularly those 5 years and younger generally feel more safe and comfortable with their own peer group. It also replicated the small group setting (circle time) that children were familiar within schools. It was also thought that this would help establish some rapport so that when we moved to the next phase of sitting beside the children and asking them about their drawings, the children would be more at ease with our close presence. In every site, one to two staff members remained in the background as this was seen as necessary to provide the children with continuity and security.

To begin, the researcher introduced herself, described the activity that would take place and then introduced the hand puppet (called Aoife or Alvin or Rory) and explained that the puppet was from another place and wanted to hear what the children liked, disliked and would change about where they lived so that he/she could tell his parents and friends. This approach is akin to the Alien Puppet Interview (API) technique (Krott & Nicoladis, 2005). The researcher ensured that the children were comfortable and at ease, kept the group discussion focused and ensured that all children who wanted to say something had an opportunity to contribute.

In the circle puppet activity, we had usually six to eight children in each group. In the preschools, many children wanted to participate and the sample sizes generally ranged from 7 to 13 children. The exception was one preschool which was located in a small rural farming community, where we had 24 children who wanted to participate so the children were separated into three groups and each researcher took a group. The room was a large bright space with lots of colourful and child appropriate displays, so we were fortunate that we had the space to hold the puppet activity with separate groups of children. Smaller groups (of six children) were easier to facilitate in the sense of giving every child an opportunity to hold the puppet, to talk with the puppet and reduced the waiting time for the children to speak. In one setting one little boy was reluctant to give the puppet back and that was managed

carefully so that the other children had an opportunity to also hold the puppet. In the primary schools the sample ranged from five to eight children in each group. In one primary school the puppet was passed around to any child who wished to hold it and they were encouraged to express their wish if they chose to do so. Two children stayed silent, and one boy wanted a longer time to think and passed his turn on until he was ready. On another occasion three children just began a spontaneous conversation during the puppet activity which was unconnected:

Jack: You want to see my muscles (directed at the researcher?)

Kitty: They are not your muscles silly.... they are your elbows

Kitty: I am four... all of us are four. He is four, she is four

Kitty: Jack lives with me...

Cole: No he doesn't

Cole: You want to know where I live? I live in (name of place)

The children appeared to feel comfortable expressing ideas to the puppet rather than the researcher and reacted by talking excitedly and making suggestions. In every site, the children liked the puppet, became more vocal and some wanted to hold and play with the puppet. As the children directed their answers to the puppet, their replies were recorded by researchers (sitting apart from the circle) in field notes. See Table 1 for some examples of the children's replies during the puppet activity.

This type of group interview was more akin to a conversational encounter with a research purpose—that is listening to the children as opposed to interviewing them and providing them with the opportunity to be heard. The puppet proved to be a very successful means of being an 'intermediary' in eliciting young children's perspectives. Some children showed concern for the hand puppet's welfare, wanted to be the puppet's friend and protect him/her. Some of the children's expressions are outlined in Table 2.

The circle time with the puppet generally lasted about 10 min which was then followed by the 'draw and tell' activity.

'Draw and tell' activity

Visual methods such as drawings enable children to represent experiences unconfined by language or literacy and enables them to be active and creative in an activity that many enjoy. Interacting and engaging them in conversation through the use of 'draw and tell' can elicit valuable data as demonstrated in other studies with young children (Angell et al., 2015; Coates, 2002; Punch, 2002a). It is similar to the 'draw and write' technique (Pridmore & Bendelow, 1995). When the children were seated at a table and provided with an A4 sheet of paper, crayons, washable markers, the researcher explained the drawing activity and invited the children to draw what they liked, disliked and their wishes. The children were also asked to imagine that they had a magic wand and to suggest what they would change. In all sites, the children quickly engaged with the drawing activity and expressed excitement with the markers and range of colours available. None declined the drawing activity, and they did not appear to feel under pressure to draw a 'good' picture (as some drew lines or scribbles). Some children drew two drawings with many images. The detail in the drawings varied considerably with some children creating images which were very detailed as well as carefully composed and others briefly represented the persons and objects they had drawn (see examples in Figures 1–6). The children's drawings represented images of nature, people, families, houses, leisure activities, toys, play equipment and facilities, pets, objects, Christmas and their surroundings.

TABLE 1 Example of children's comments during puppet activity

Preschool children's (aged 3–4 years)	Likes	Going to the park/playground
		Watch telly with my daddy
		Play with my brother and mommy and daddy and the dogs
	Dislikes	Going to the cinema with Nana
		Hedgehogs and rockets
		Squelching in the mud
		Getting my hair washed
		Loud noises
		Slimy tyres
Change/wishes	People being angry at me	
	Sitting in the car for a long time	
	The dark	
	Spend time with my family	
	Mammy at home everyday	
Primary school children's (aged 4–5 years)	Likes	Spend time with mammy and daddy
		A bigger garden
		More toys
		No slimy things
		When it is your birthday you can get cake and toys
	Dislikes	Play soccer and climb trees
		Eating the rain. It's raining outside (opens her mouth and says yum)
		Black water, blue water, pink water
		Lego, apples, pineapples, my house
Garden, trees, birds, rainbows		
Falling down		
Change/wishes	When my brother leaves me out of games, and my sister	
	That the sweet shop closed	
	Getting my hair wet	
	When it is raining outside cause I can't go out to play	
	Noisy things and roaring	
	Not having a playground	
	Garden with swing and slide	
	More toys	
Change my house into a playground		
Change my brother not being mean to me		
More sweetshops		
Change all the houses into castles		
Someone to get rid of the spiders		
A new puppy		

Whilst the drawings were being done, or towards the end, the researchers talked with the children individually about the meanings that they themselves attributed to the drawings and this information was captured. There were always three researchers sitting with a group of children during the drawing activity. This worked well in the primary school as the groups of children ranged from 5–8 children, so the ratio was 2.5–4 children to each researcher. In the preschool the numbers ranged from 7–13 so the ratio was 3.5–4.5 children to each researcher. As mentioned earlier in one preschool there were

TABLE 2 Children's comments about or said to the hand puppet

Preschool children aged 3–4 years	Can Rory come to our school? We like painting Can Rory be in the play if he comes to live here? I would bring Aoife to my house I would bring her to the play place Puppet should stay in its bag to be safe
Primary school children aged 4–5 years	Does he like leaves? He could be spiderman He could be batman I wish for a garden for Alvin the puppet. It would make him happy He might like the schoolyard I would be sad if people were not nice to him Does she (pointing at the puppet) live in the school? There is an Aoife in my class too Someone might step on her

24 children and, on that occasion, two of the preschool teachers helped the three researchers with the facilitation of the drawing activity. So on that one occasion the ratio was about five children to each adult. Smaller ratios were more conducive to talking about the drawings with the children so that their perspectives and explanations were captured. The problem was not that children had to wait to speak about their drawings rather than the researcher had time to capture the individual child's comments about their drawing during the activity. Talking with the children helped to add a lot more detail to their likes, dislikes and wishes. The children's interpretations of their drawings were written on 'post-its' attached to their drawings (see example in Figure 1) and the narratives recorded in a notebook. Most children mainly drew things they liked or wished for and then volunteered information about dislikes verbally. Many children told little stories about what was happening in their drawing (see examples in Figures 2 and 3), and this illustrates how arts-based approaches such as drawings can act as 'doorways' allowing entry into children's worlds (Driessnack, 2005). For example, one girl said that she had drawn a picture of her Daddy and flowers as she liked seeing her Daddy and wished she could have more time with him and then went on to talk about family outings.

Many children talked about subjects such as families, homes, pets, friends and outings which were sometimes related to the drawings and other times not. As Einarsdottir et al. (2009) points out that 'if children's narrative over the drawing process records the journey of their construction of meaning, it is this, as well as the drawing itself, that will provide insight into children's understandings and perspectives' (p. 219). Asking children to explain their drawings was essential as many times it was not evident what the drawings depicted (see Figure 4). Most children gave a reason for their representations and seemed happy and surprised that adults were paying such close attention to what they were drawing whilst a few offered brief explanations. For example, one child said her drawing was a balloon, water slide and rollercoaster as these were what she liked best (Figure 5) whilst another child said his was a monster (Figure 6). This only happened with about five children who were in the younger age group in the preschools. In some situations when a child did not respond, he/she was absorbed in the drawing activity or just walked away from the table once their drawing was completed. Perhaps some children were shy, lost interest or were unable to understand the researcher's intentions. It is also quite feasible that some children found it strange to being asked about the content of their drawings by researchers (who were strangers).

The data collection lasted approximately 35–45 min in each site. We aimed to create a caring, fun and relaxed atmosphere to the data collection so the children were monitored for nonverbal signs of

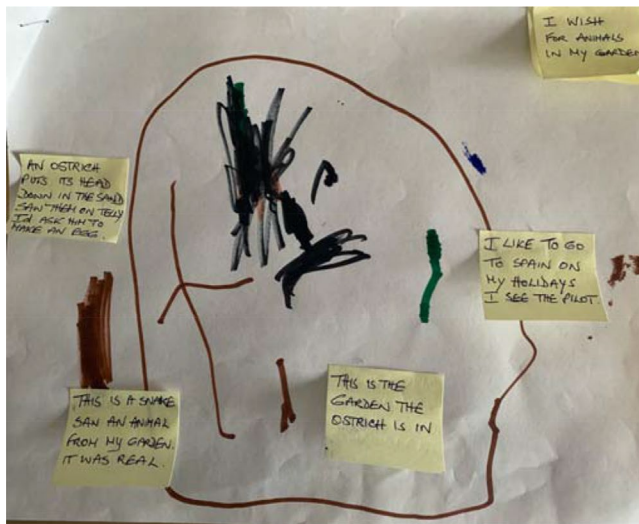


FIGURE 1 Snake, ostrich, garden by Alex aged 3 years. Example of child's replies written on post-its



FIGURE 2 Narrative of drawing by Abdullah aged 5 years. I like apples, one green and one red in my picture. An orange too. I don't like tomatoes. Here is my house. It is painted brown with a green door. That is a taxi outside Daddy's job...road and traffic lights red at the top, yellow in the middle and green at the bottom. I would like more traffic lights near my house

anxiety, fatigue, discomfort and boredom. In most sites, once the drawing activity was complete, the children just left the table and wandered off to play within the room. We did not assume that children would want to give us their drawings, so we asked their consent and most children appeared happy for us to take away their drawings. Those children who declined, we asked if we could photograph the drawings in their presence. To convey thanks and appreciation, the process ended with the children being offered some fun stickers and a certificate signed by the researchers. The children were excited and took pleasure in choosing some stickers. Each school was given a gift of chocolates as a gesture of appreciation and some soft sweets to be shared with the children.



FIGURE 3 Narrative of drawing by Taylor aged 5 years. I like playing with my dolls, my Barbies. I don't like playing outside.... No! I like tigers. I will draw tigers. I do not know how to draw tigers. I like rainbows too. I like sweets and playing in my house. I like pink footballs. I play with my dolls at my house. I don't like rain



FIGURE 4 'Just a picture' by Sophie aged 3 years. I like playing in the sand, shells and going to the beach. I love my mommy and daddy. I like balloons



FIGURE 5 A balloon, water slide and rollercoaster by Lily aged 3 years



FIGURE 6 A dragon by Leon aged 5 years

DISCUSSION

Arts-based approaches can serve many functions in a research context, and in this study, the techniques provided a nonthreatening fun medium for young children to express their feelings and views (Carter & Ford, 2014). Creative methods enable children to give voice to their experiences in ways that are meaningful to them which are not reliant on verbal competencies. Clark points out that using a range of visual tools can help researchers to ‘tune into’ the diverse ways of communication adopted by children which is important for those younger than 6 years and those with limited language ability (Clark, 2010). The children were encouraged to be active agents throughout the research process, and the researchers were flexible in their approaches so that children felt free to talk about issues important to them. It was essential that children felt comfortable, treated fairly and protected from harm. Conducting research in a familiar and safe environment, with familiar adults and peers close by, was a strategy that appeared to help the children to be at ease (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2014).

We found that the use of a hand puppet to facilitate the small group discussions assisted in shifting the power balance between children and adult researcher by giving the children more control over what they wanted to talk about, creating a fun atmosphere in which there was no right or wrong answer (since puppet was the intermediary), and opportunities to share what was meaningful for them. It was clear that the puppet created a safe space for the children to communicate in, helped the researchers establish a friendly relationship with the children, which in turn promoted children's willingness to share information. Similarly, Green (2012) have found that puppets are effective tools for initiating conversations because children see puppets as peers rather than authority figures and hence feel more comfortable and more inclined to talk with puppets than with adults. With regard to the discussion with the puppet, the information gained from the groups of children covered a wide range of issues although in less depth compared to the drawing activity. On some occasions, some children sat quietly watching the puppet and listening to other children. They may have been shy or just content for other children to talk or felt unable to speak because peers were more vocal. In one preschool with mixed ethnicities, seven of the children ($n = 11$) had begun to learn English and although they liked the puppet they expressed few words. This is a challenge in a group discussion that children may for various reasons feel unable to participate. However, the drawing activity appeared to encourage individual children to reveal more details about their likes, dislikes and wishes.

There is increasing recognition of the need for children to be coresearchers in the sense that they cocreate meaning and provide insights into their worlds and share this with the researcher and the use of drawings enabled this. Structured activities such as drawing and talking are useful for helping young children to engage more productively with the research questions using the talents which they, as children, possess. It enabled them to have more control, since it gave them an opportunity to draw as much or as little as they liked, and also gave them time to reflect on their ideas. It provided children with the opportunity to create their own artistic output, which according to Punch (2002a) promotes children's engagement, communication, control and interpretation of their own experiences. As seen earlier, the focus in the drawing activity was on listening and talking to children whilst they created their representations in order to gain insight into their perspectives and explanations (Einarsdottir et al., 2009). Asking children about their drawings and listening carefully to their discourse conveyed to them that their representations and discourse were valued by adults which is important. The children were pleased and excited to receive extended individual/adult attention in the discussion of what their drawings meant to them. It proved to be a useful technique for gaining considerable amounts of information in a relatively short period of time and complimented the data obtained during group discussion with the puppet.

However, other researchers have warned that drawings may not be a 'fun' activity for children who lack artistic competence (Punch, 2002b) and that children can be easily influenced by their peers drawings and/or may construct what they perceive the researcher wants rather than what is important to them (Einarsdottir et al., 2009). This was not apparent in our study but is a limitation of drawings in any school setting. Although the questions were predetermined, the children drew a wide variety of drawings, with some quite detailed and others more abstract. The varied level of detail reflected the age profile because as children mature and develop cognitively, their representations move from simple pictures to more complex and differentiated ones (Cherney et al., 2006). As seen earlier, most children drew images of things they liked or wished for and so information on their dislikes was obtained verbally. Studies indicate that children commonly draw what they enjoy or something they wish to happen (Merriman & Guerin, 2006). Such limitations may be avoided by using a 'toolbox' of creative tools such as play, stories, cameras and comparing responses across datasets (Clark & Moss, 2011; Gray & Winter, 2011).

Although drawing appeared to be a fun activity for most children, those who were younger (3–4 years), with less artistic abilities or fine motor skills drew images that were difficult to discern and only through talking about the drawing did the meanings become apparent. This indicates that when adults interpret children's drawings, they may make many incorrect assumptions (Angell et al., 2015). As seen earlier, it was a limitation when some children did not say much about their drawings or did not answer the researcher. But when this occurred, the researcher did not pursue questions about the drawings as it was important to accept silence as reflecting a child's wish not to respond. Research with children needs to be sensitive and respectful and Clark and Moss (2011) assert that "It is not only a question of seeing the world from children's perspectives but of acknowledging their rights to express their point of view or to remain silent. We are keen that a participatory approach to listening is respectful of children's views and also of their silences" (p21).

In the primary schools, the environment was more structured with children sitting on little chairs around large tables. In one school, when two children started to get up to walk around, the teacher (who was in the background) told them to sit back down and focus on their drawings. Afterwards, when we reiterated the importance of voluntary participation for children, the teacher said, "you have to maintain control otherwise they will not focus on the task and they need to learn how to behave in a classroom". Participation in research should always be optional, but we felt that we could not intervene at the time this occurred, so this created unease for us as researchers and

indicated how children may be unable to refuse participation in activities in a school environment. Indeed, Atkinson points out that children's agency can be both constrained and enabled by the practises and complex relations of power in schools (Atkinson, 2019). Similarly, other researchers have observed that schools are environments that are adult-led, boundary organised and consequently may influence the art-based activities, the data produced and children's opportunity to dissent (Christensen & James, 2000; Kirby, 2020a). Other reported challenges include the risk of children seeing the research as school work and feeling obliged to participate, limitation of time-tables and difficulties finding a suitable room (Punch, 2002a).

In two primary schools, the teachers expressed surprised with the children's level of engagement and how much information we had obtained whilst chatting with children about their drawings. They noted that although drawing and play activities were part of the children's daily schedule, they were unaware how much thought/meaning the drawings meant for the individual child. Their surprise may have been due to the fact that drawing in school contexts tends to be about developing fine-motor activity or realistic representations rather than exploring children's perceptions or feelings. Rose et al. (2006) notes that teachers tend to differ in their perceptions of drawing as well as their purposes with emphasis being on the curriculum primarily. Anning (2004) suggests that 'within many educational contexts, children's narratives about their drawings are not valued or understood....instead drawing is seen as a way of keeping children quiet' (p34). However, others argue that teachers do recognise that drawing can play a significant role in the growth and development of young children's thinking and education through the facilitation of meaning-making and understanding (Brooks, 2009).

Successful use of participatory techniques in preschools and primary schools requires support from key gatekeepers, adequate time and adult facilitators who are skilled in communicating with very young children. We were fortunate to have six early years specialists to assist with data collection as they were aware of the importance of a child-centred flexible approach and educated in listening and observing children. This they demonstrated by asking questions that permitted expressions, being aware of nonverbal cues that indicated a child's willingness or unwillingness to talk further, and allowing space and time for children to volunteer their meanings and understandings. When using arts-based methods, researchers should not be afraid to shape the agenda but "do so in responsive, gradual and sensitive ways according to the preferences of the children" (Blaisdell et al., 2019, p15). One member in our team had over 25 years of experience as a primary school teacher and her 'insider perspective' was instrumental in negotiating support from school personnel. Participatory arts-based methods are not a quick way of gathering data and are dependent on careful planning, adequate time and preparation especially when the research involves very young children.

Reflection on our positionality as adult researchers

As researchers, we need to be critical and self-reflective on the processes that produce children's voices, the power imbalances and the situational context that shape them and which influence representation. Although the participatory techniques we used appeared to help children to convey their perspectives, this does not mean that the children were empowered nor that power was shared or even shifted. Our aim was to ensure that the power balance was shifted towards the children, but this was limited by the school context where children's conformity to adult expectations and rules are continually enforced (Kirby, 2020a, 2020b). As a research team, we were all adult Caucasian females which may have helped ease our acceptability into the school contexts (Barker & Smith, 2001) but which may have affected our interactions with male children and children from schools with multi-ethnic populations. Furthermore, our positionality as researchers and adults (strangers to the children)

may have influenced the children's responses and coproduction of knowledge. Interestingly Holland et al. (2010) argue that although research may be labelled as creative and participatory, in many cases, it is a highly managed encounter between adult researchers and children that is driven by adult research agendas, time frames and priorities. Likewise, in our study, the research aim was predetermined, the time frame prescribed and the techniques decided by the research team. We also cannot assume that coproduction enables more 'authentic' research since children's positioning and agency are subject to similar constraints, cultural and social norms as adults (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Therefore, we see participatory techniques in terms of tactics and strategies used within complex pre-existing relations of power (Gallagher, 2008). So whilst we cannot assume that our participatory techniques were necessarily liberating, nevertheless, we believe that our techniques (hand puppets and draw and tell) helped some young children to allow us some insights into their worlds and their perspectives.

CONCLUSIONS

Although we have argued that creative participatory research is particularly suitable for researching young children as it incorporates a strengths-based approach that acknowledges children's agency and capabilities, we are cognisant that it will still only provide a partial picture of children's worlds. According to Barker and Weller (2003), there is no objective universal truth of children's experiences to be uncovered and that child-centred research methods will only "offer partial glimpses that reflect in one form the complexity and diversity of children's lives" (p52). Viewing children as experts in their own lives and using a sensitive respectful approach and techniques that promote active engagement, co-construction of meanings and understandings may lead to better data from children's perspectives. Since there is not one single method that suits all children and all circumstances, it is important to use different methods/techniques to gain insight into children's experiences.

Furthermore, researchers need to guard against the intrusiveness of their perceptions or expectations when researching children and 'tune in' to children's understanding and listen intently to their expressions. Listening is an active process which requires us to open our eyes, ears and minds to children's nonverbal and verbal communication, so we can better understand and respect the many ways in which children communicate their realities. Children are not a homogenous group, so we need to continue to develop and expand the range of participatory creative research techniques that facilitate and maximise children's cultural diversity and individuality. Although researchers continue to push boundaries and challenge assumptions, more can be done to promote choice, enhance agency and encompass the diversity of children and childhood.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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