
Pigs, Planes, and Play-Doh

Children's Perspectives on Play as Revealed through Their Drawings



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Play, an elusive concept despite the extensive literature on the subject, remains especially problematic for research focused on the perspective of children. The author discusses her study on children's perspectives about play, exploring drawing as a method for learning how young children conceptualize play within a social-semiotic framework. Her study emphasizes children's own definitions and representations of play, and her findings suggest that children look at play not as a set activity but as a kind of experience related to many different activities. **Key words:** children's perspectives on play; conceptualizing play; drawing; research methods; social semiotics

Introduction

KNOwn AS AN ELUSIVE CONCEPT with many and varied definitions, play has inspired an extensive literature. Research about it from the child's perspective, however, remains problematic. Some problems relate to the methods scholars often use to study play, such as their relying on reports from parents and practitioners about children's play or basing their conclusions on their own direct observations. These methods are limited because they can account for only what others see of the experience rather than what children think and feel about it (Glenn et al. 2013; Woodhead and Faulkner 2008). The distinction is important because adult conceptualizations of children's activities may not reflect children's actual experiences (Rogers and Evans 2008).

To better understand play from a child's point of view, researchers now sometimes turn to child-led methods and adopt a more reflexive approach to understanding children's views and experiences of play (Berinstein and Mag-

alhaes 2009; Glenn et al. 2013). A reflexive approach allows them to reexamine aspects of their scholarly practice, such as how they structure research activities or whether they allow children to share their views. Child-led methods may involve an eclectic array of techniques that give children the freedom and autonomy to choose their own methods of collecting data. For instance, children may use cameras, audio recorders, or iPads to document their own play and its contexts (Arnott, Grogan, and Duncan, forthcoming).

Drawing remains consistently popular with researchers (e.g., Driessnack 2005; Hill 1997; Thomson 2008) as a research tool. It is a familiar, easily contextualized way to understand children's perspectives on play, and it is one of children's most frequent activities (Cox 2005). Drawing is also a particularly good way to collect data because it leaves a record that can be used long after its creation (Korzenik 1995). Lindqvist (2001) argues that an underlying narrative gives children's drawings meaning, not the drawing itself. He suggests that researchers need children's descriptions of drawings to understand what appears at first glance to be more unconventional representations of play than they are. Despite these arguments, researchers often analyze children's drawings independently from the actual drawing process. An analysis of children's drawings that does not gather further information about the drawing—such as the stories children tell about their drawings, the conversations they have about them, and the sound effects they make in relation to them, for example—will not reflect the true meaning of the drawings. Researchers, therefore, have a responsibility to develop methods through which they can observe, record, analyze, and interpret the multiplicity of ways children convey meaning through the embodied act of drawing.

In this article, I report the findings of a study that explored drawing as a research tool for accessing young children's perspectives on play. The study involved two visits to the homes of eight children aged four during which I invited children to express their perspectives on play through drawing. In the study, I adopted a social-semiotic theoretical framework that understands drawing as a semiotic process children use to create and convey messages through representation and signification.

I had had three central research objectives: to develop a principled approach for analyzing and interpreting children's drawings; to create guidelines for the use of drawing as a research tool; and to gather children's perspectives on play by studying their drawings. Here, I focus on the latter objective, considering themes such as children's conceptualizations of play and the significant aspects of play

for children. By emphasizing children's own definitions and representations of play, I hope to provide a small but unique contribution to our understanding of young children's perspectives on play.

I begin with a brief discussion of how play can be a challenging concept to define and represent, and then I explore children's perspectives on play as revealed by their drawings.

Play: An Elusive Concept

As a concept, play is described and conceptualized in many ways: Sutton-Smith (1997) thought play essentially ambiguous; Cheng and Johnson (2010) considered it a hallowed concept; Pellegrini and Boyd (1993), Ailwood (2003), Harker (2005), and Lindqvist (2001) found it elusive; Moyles (2005) saw it as ephemeral; and Pellegrini (2009) called it "a controversial topic of study." When scholars discuss or experts observe play, they not uncommonly agree with Cohen (2006) that "play cannot just be; it has to have a purpose" (2). But, the purpose of play remains a widely disputed topic, and the ways in which we understand play differ across cultures and over time (Cheng and Johnson 2010) and according to a society's conceptualization of childhood (Woodhead 1998). These differences have given rise to competing definitions and characteristics in play research (Cheng and Johnson 2010; Grieshaber and McArdle 2010). The varied, and at times contradictory, uses of the term "play" can prove problematic for educators and parents, as well as researchers.

Should a researcher, for instance, consider that requesting a child to draw play may be asking the child to undertake a complex task? We could argue that play is a unique subject to draw. Should one try to represent it in its entirety as a concept or only try to represent one aspect of play—by drawing, for example, a toy or a person engaged in some kind of playful activity? The very act of drawing play inevitably calls for an array of approaches. Children's personal interests and their individual play experiences will also affect what they choose to represent. On the one hand, play forms a familiar part of most children's everyday lives. On the other, play remains an abstract concept open to many interpretation, representations, and conceptualizations.

The complexity of play suggests the subject deserves continued exploration into both our understandings of this elusive topic and the ways in which we conduct our research of it.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing may serve a pivotal role in children's communication (Thomson 2008). Children convey messages during the drawing through representation and signification—conveying meanings using signs and symbols (Hodge and Kress 1988). “Semiotics” is a theory of signification, sign production, and the interpretation of meaning as signs and symbols (often as systems of communication). The basic semiotic unit is the “sign,” which stands for something other than itself and is the means by which people express and interpret meaning in the world. Social semiotics is a branch of the field of semiotics that concentrates on the practices of meaning making and that considers how we make meaning using various semiotic resources, modes, and their affordances. It stems from the premise that signs and messages are always situated within social contexts (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). We can use social semiotics analytically by drawing on these contexts to establish how we assign meanings to our texts and use semiotic resources in our communication. Kress (1977) describes how children in particular create meaning through an array of semiotic modes (multimodality) such as color, line, text, speech, and gesture. A multimodal social-semiotic approach therefore recognizes that the communication of young children is interwoven with their surroundings.

The social-semiotic framework lets us explore children's visual communicative practices as representations of their perspectives on play in the wider culture and subcultures to which they belong. In other words, although their drawings are unique, children reflect prevailing cultural assumptions and practices through their artistic representations.

The Study

My sample included four girls and four boys, aged four to four and a half years from across central and northern Scotland. I adopted a phased-sampling strategy that enabled me to gather a pool of families through the process of snowballing. Using personal contacts, I found two families to take part in the early research stages. These two families provided details of friends and neighbors who formed the basis for the pilot sample. The six families who participated in the pilot then provided contacts for other families who then formed the final sample for the main study.

The study involved two visits to each of the homes of the eight children, during which I invited children to represent their perspectives on play through drawing. Each visit lasted approximately ninety minutes. At the onset of the visits, children wanted to show me their playroom or toys. They suggested we engage in different activities including playing outdoors or playing with building blocks, dinosaur figures, toy cars, a baby doll, or a toy tractor and farm animal figures. One child considered play with her own horse. I collected data based on their drawing, using photography, free play, and my conversations with the children. I also video recorded and then transcribed the drawing activity and corresponding discussions.

To allow freedom of choice, I provided blank sheets of paper and a variety of drawing tools—colored pencils, crayons, and felt-tip pens. Children were invited to draw their perspectives on play using a question: “Will you draw anything you can think of when you hear the word ‘play?’” I adopted the question from a study exploring children’s perceptions of recess by Angelides and Michaelidou (2009). I also asked a second, more specific question, “Will you draw a person playing?”

Each child consented to my retaining his or her drawings.

Using social semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996), I developed a four-step analytic approach (4-SASA) to provide a systematic and detailed description of the children’s representations that enabled me to interpret the children’s concepts, experiences, and understandings of play (Arnott, Grogan, and Duncan, forthcoming). I analyzed each drawing in conjunction with transcripts of the child’s recorded conversation and narratives generated by the drawing process, which I had recorded. Using my four-step approach, I first isolated signs within drawings through manual annotation. Then, informed by the children’s conversation, I documented their understanding of signs and social significance. Next, using specific categories of social-semiotic analysis (including mode, sign content, color, salience, composition, anchoring, and purpose of sign), I identified the children’s motivations and interests for specific sign production. Finally, I examined the choices that had underlaid what they included or excluded to illustrate play.

I conducted the study in accordance with the British Educational Research Association’s Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004) and the association’s second revision of the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011). All the parents and children involved in the study consented to participation and to the use of the data gathered for academic purposes. I used pseudonyms throughout this article to maintain the subjects’ anonymity.

Children's Perspectives on Play as Revealed by Their Drawings

I gathered ninety-eight drawings over the course of two visits to each child. The children produced a wide range of representations to convey their perspectives on play. These varied from drawing objects to illustrate their favorite toys or playthings to more complex representations of play scenes and abstract concepts. Central aspects of play included social interaction, amusement, autonomy, and entertainment. The play the children represented in drawings included adults, pets, specific family members, and fictitious characters.

Play as Experience

Each child had an individual way of representing play, sometimes conceptualizing play uniquely from other children. My observations indicated that

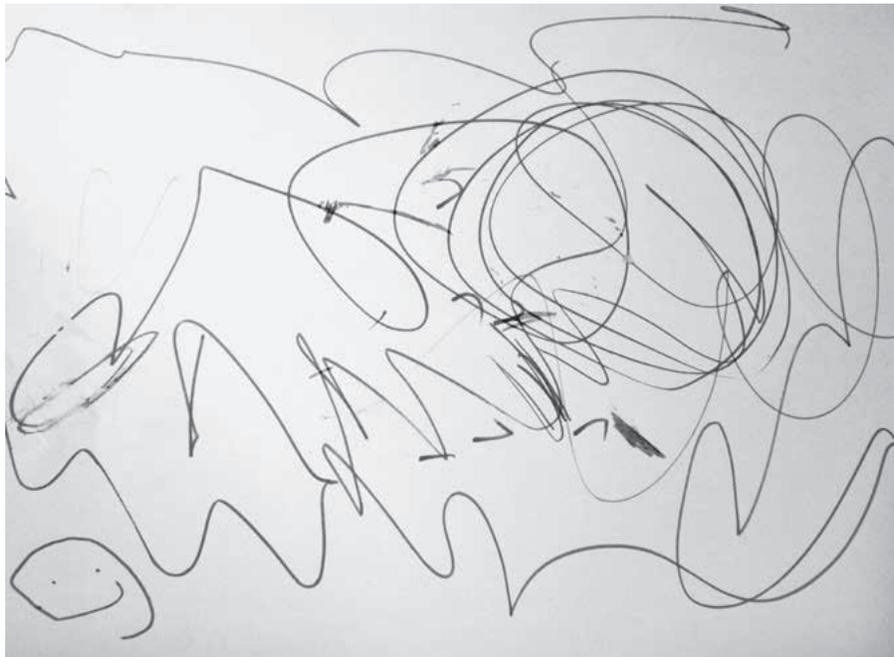


Figure 1. Charlotte's representation of play as an experience: "Done! That's me," she said, "playing with Play-Doh!"

researchers should realize that an activity some children consider play may not look much like play to an outsider. I wish to highlight the diversity of the children's depictions of play, emphasizing both their idiosyncratic viewpoints and the breadth of images they produced when drawing an abstract and broad topic.

Drawing or describing what one does with an object during play is not a simple task. For instance, figure 1 demonstrates how Charlotte represented play as an experience. She approached the blank page with no trepidation, immediately and spiritedly scribbling a swell of squiggles, loops, and wavy lines. She then declared, "Done! That's me, playing with Play-Doh!"

Upon further analysis, her approach to representing play suggested that Charlotte used the actual process of drawing to demonstrate what play looks like—or even feels like. By enacting the activity of playing with Play-Doh, she captured the spontaneous feel of play through the image and act of drawing. Matthews (1999, 2010) suggests that we should consider young children's drawings to be action representations because they demonstrate on paper the processes of interaction between thought and the unfolding events. Charlotte demonstrated the point by the meanings she assigned within the actual image and by the energetic way she drew it.

In this particular representation of play, the Play-Doh modeling material was not of primary significance. Instead, Play-Doh was a tool that facilitated an enjoyable play experience—fostering uninhibited playful, creative, and physical behavior. The children would most likely have represented Play-Doh as an unidentifiable "blob" on the page—static and uninteresting. Such an image would be the opposite of what Charlotte considers quintessentially play.

Charlotte's approach to the prompted drawing demonstrates that the ambiguity and abstraction of a representation does not signify a lack of meaning. This suggests that researchers should approach the interpretation of visual images with a sensitivity to and an awareness of children's motivations. Only then can they ensure that their interpretations fully consider children's attempts to represent play as, for instance, behavior or experience, rather than as simply a palpable illustration of play.

Adults Play Too

Lowe (2012) has claimed that from the child's perspective, "play for adults... is different" and that children "do not expect adults to play in the same way as they do" (274). McKenzie's drawing of her father and me (figure 2) epitomizes

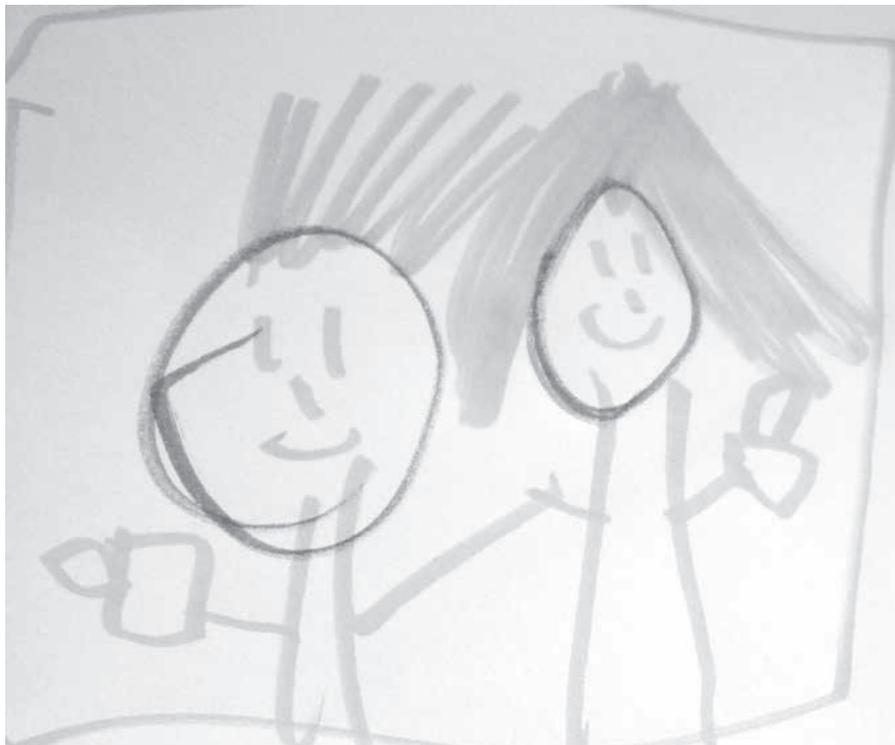


Figure 2. McKenzie represents her father and the author drinking coffee as play

a child's unique conceptualization of play and how adults fit into it. McKenzie has drawn her father and me drinking coffee and characterized it as her father and me "playing."

Based on the 4-SASA, we can see that McKenzie made the face a salient aspect of her sketch, drawing our attention to them. She used a bright green pen to frame these two central elements, possibly suggesting that faces are an integral part of identifying an individual and their disposition. McKenzie represented the emotion felt by the two figures during the play episode through a literal representation of happiness: she drew the figures smiling. The fact that the figures are holding hands denotes friendship or affiliation, further reinforcing play as a positive social practice. The figures also voice affirmations that McKenzie verbalized during her narratives with such comments as, "And you say 'Yummy coffee!'"

MCKENZIE: That's my daddy's hair. And that's you. . . . Look. And a big square with my daddy. . . . And you are playing with my daddy. And you say, "Yummy coffee!"

DUNCAN: [laughs] Are we having coffee?!

MCKENZIE: You're having coffee. Coffee is yummy [she says in a different voice], then he says, "We'll come here later . . . in 7 minutes . . . if your mum says yes." (Transcription, November 25, 2010)

Each figure grasps a cup. McKenzie has represented these cups as solid shapes placed next to the hands of the figures in—as Kress (1997) would describe it—the most apt form. Both cups have visible handles, although you cannot in reality see the entirety of an object from any particular angle. McKenzie showed the cup handles by presenting the object in its most obvious silhouette. For instance, both images in figure 3 could be mugs, but the mug on the right might

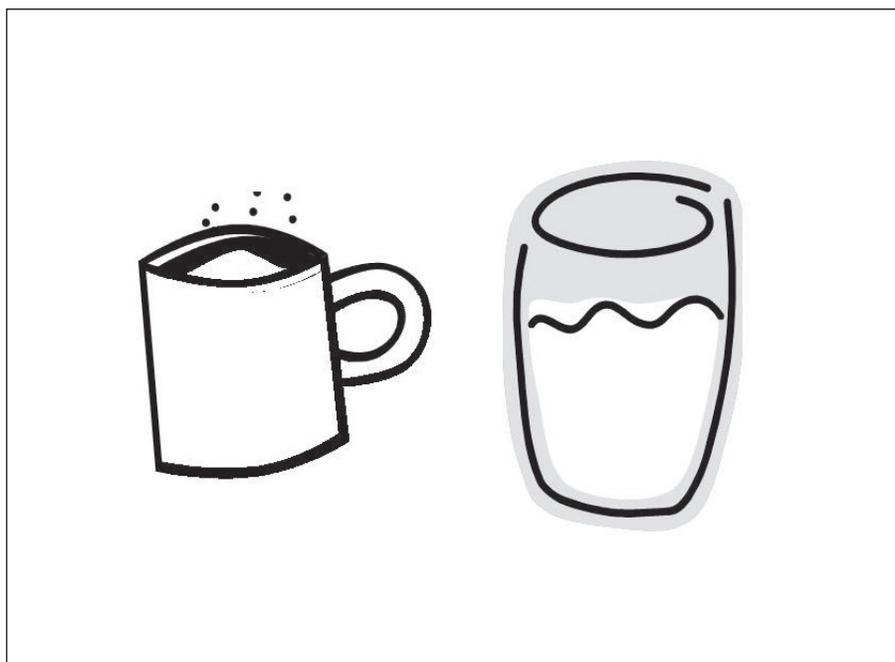


Figure 3. Example of representations of mugs

appear at an angle where the mug's handle would not be visible. As we do in speaking when we choose the most apt word, children—when communicating information through drawing—will choose a representation that they think most effectively conveys their message; in this case, the left-hand representation of a mug.

These two cups provide a tangible anchor that prompts interaction between the figures both in terms of a mutual social activity (drinking coffee) and a source for conversation (commenting that the coffee is “yummy”). Thus did McKenzie attempt to ensure the correct interpretation.

From McKenzie's perspective, adults as well as children can play, and not only with a child but also with another adult: “and you are playing with my daddy.” In her specific representation of play, McKenzie transferred the manner in which she experiences and perceives play to how she perceived adults to experience an enjoyable social activity. Informed by her many other drawings of play scenes, we can see that the central, and most significant, aspect of play for her is social interaction. If McKenzie conceptualizes play as friends engaging in an enjoyable social activity, it makes sense that she would represent the play of adults by transferring her positive experiences with a friend to an activity that she sees as part of adult culture, such as conversing over coffee. By representing play this way, McKenzie effectively conveyed a play experience that I could have had with her parents.

Other studies show that children conceptualize play as a fun activity. Hence, when activities cease being fun, they cease being play (Glenn et al. 2013). It follows that children may not necessarily view any particular activity as play and some other activity as not play. Instead, the experience of engaging in a particular activity provides the pleasure, entertainment, amusement, or satisfaction that causes children to define it as play.

How Can a Plane Be a Metaphor for Play?

On the one hand, play is a familiar part of most children's everyday lives. On the other, it is an abstract concept with many possibilities and variations for interpretation and representations. As I have mentioned, there are various notions among professionals and parents as to what play should actually look like. These adult notions about play can affect the ways researchers interpret how children represent play in drawings. In addition, some children's drawings can seem enigmatic to us and require more information than merely the image set before us.

As an example, let us examine McKenzie's plane in figure 4. Clearly, here it



Figure 4. McKenzie's representation of an airplane

is not as simple as saying "this is play." However, if we refer to her conversations about the drawing, we not only gain insight into the significance of the image, but also how this relates to McKenzie's specific play experiences.

MCKENZIE: A plane! [She then makes her hand spin around making a swooshing sound] It's like an airplane.

DUNCAN: It's like an airplane.

MCKENZIE: [makes more plane noises]

DUNCAN: Is that what the plane does?

MCKENZIE: [She makes more noises and actions of the airplane] I like that airplane noise. [She starts drawing an airplane on some paper while leaning on the floor] I go on holiday on a plane.

DUNCAN: Oooh, you go on a plane . . . when you go on holiday?

McKENZIE: I like to go on the plane to meet my grandma that are mine. [She then uses every color in the pencil case, one-by-one, to color the entire airplane]. . . . Really, really, really bright! I have yellow go down. Oh no. This pink is running out. . . . And then green. Greeeeeen. Green is the last . . . now. I haven't no colors. [She sits back from the drawing] I'm all finished. Look at my airplane! (Transcription, November 25, 2010)

In this scenario, McKenzie seemed to be thinking about the word “plane,” perhaps as the result of word association after I asked her to suggest a word that sounded like play to her rather than something that simply represented play. She first verbalized her thoughts, “It’s like an airplane,” then she developed this idea with sounds and gestures, spinning her hands while uttering a swooshing noise. Drawing as an embodied act means that the hand plays an integral role (Pallasmaa 2009) as both a tool and a symbol—in other words, as a semiotic vehicle. In McKenzie’s case, she often used her hands to symbolize the movement of objects or people, and she also used her hand as a tool for communicating through drawing. The visible consequences of a child’s meaning making—both the marks a child makes on paper and the gestures and behavior accompanying them—are the externalizations of the child’s attempts to communicate his or her perspectives. As I noted with Charlotte’s drawing, this idea resonates with Matthews’ notion of action representation (2010). If we first consider Matthews’ concept to also include children’s multimodal meaning making (Kress 1997), then we see that to interpret children’s perspectives from drawings successfully, we must acknowledge that children convey meaning through the entire drawing process.

Some may consider McKenzie’s representation of play as an airplane to be abstract and unrelated to the concept of play—merely idiosyncratic, her personal notion about the “sound” of play. Nevertheless, the drawing prompted a memory relating to her own experiences of traveling with her family (i.e., taking an airplane to visit her grandmother) and the pleasant activities in which she engaged during the flight (i.e., playing with her sister). This emphasizes the uniqueness of a child’s personal experiences of play, to which he or she may attribute different significance to different contexts and situations.

The vibrancy of the airplane’s boarding ramp makes it a salient feature in McKenzie’s drawing. She took artistic license with the boarding ramp, using color

as a semiotic resource (a way of conveying specific meanings) to create a structure that welcomes passengers and brings about a sense of occasion. It represented, in essence, a very special occasion for McKenzie. Over the course of my visits, she frequently referred to her grandmother, who resided in a different country. Clearly, the time McKenzie spent with her grandmother appeared precious her.

Following some free drawing, McKenzie states that she is now going to make a card for her grandmother, “because she loves me.”

McKenzie starts drawing another image; this time on my sheet of paper. She draws a female figure with long hair wearing, as McKenzie described, “a pretty dress.” She then decides this figure is her sister, “She’s jumping.” Then [she] exclaims, “But you can’t jump at grandma’s!” (Field Notes, November 15, 2010)

In contrast to the rainbow-like boarding ramp, the airplane remained white, reflecting the preference for realism in her drawings in Scotland, because the majority of planes are white.

As a whole, McKenzie’s drawing tells us a story, illustrating the context of an actual play episode and thus setting the scene for her narrative. In other words, this is not play, but it is the location of a play experience. Here, the context is highly significant and possibly a unique aspect of the play episode. The play itself may have consisted of activities she typically experienced with her sister, but it has gained special significance because of the atypical context and what this context, the plane, signifies—the beginning of a family vacation. Many factors contribute to children’s play experiences, and children can find opportunities to play in most, and diverse, contexts (Glenn et al. 2013).

Play Things

Plowman and Stevenson (2012) imply that anchoring play with an object is key to representing it as an image. In their research, they asked parents to send texts and photos of their children’s activities at particular times of the day: “Although this was not a requirement of the exercise, many of the text messages also referred to what the child was playing with, suggesting that the prop (e.g., a toy or a household object used as a toy) was an integral part of defining play” (8). I find it worth noting that children tend to represent play as an activity that involves an object (such as a toy or sporting equipment). By adding a toy, for example,

we can interpret the response as playing. Similarly, children themselves may consider playing with something to be a good (i.e., a more conventional or more successful) way of conveying the concept of playing.

Kress (1997) suggests that from a social-semiotic perspective, an awareness of context and audience is a necessary part of communication. This means that a child attempting to draw play will try to represent it as clearly as possible for the viewer, either by adding, for instance, a toy, or by describing the episode verbally. This may account for the fact that four of the children in my study chose to draw figures playing with a ball. Playing with a ball may indeed be one of the most universal forms of play—at any age, across the globe, and in any era. Therefore, we could consider a ball as an effective means of anchoring an elusive concept such as play, of presenting it in a contextualized and concrete form.

One specific example is Charlotte's drawing of her Peppa Pig ball (figure 5). Peppa Pig is a British animated television series about a friendly female pig and her adventures with friends and family. A vast range of Peppa Pig merchandise has branched off from the animated series—toys, stuffed animals, play sets, video games, and sporting equipment. To complete her representation, Charlotte retrieved a ball from the kitchen and then methodically copied the object as it lay beside her. At certain points during her drawing, her mother offered supportive suggestions and words of encouragement.

DUNCAN: Can you draw anything you can think of when you hear the word play?

CHARLOTTE: Well . . . I can draw a football?

DUNCAN: Okay.

CHARLOTTE: [Bolts upright and rushes to the kitchen.] That's the one I've got [throwing a ball into the living room]. A Peppa Pig one! [Charlotte peruses the images on the ball] No daddy pig . . . where is he? [Turning the ball around] I had him somewhere. . . . He's got . . . he's got a ball! The same as me!

DUNCAN: Oh yeah. They're playing with a ball as well.

CHARLOTTE'S MOTHER: So you can draw that then, . . . Peppa with the ball.

CHARLOTTE: [She begins drawing] Right . . . dark colors. . . . I'll make dad the bigger one. . . . I'm doing the same one as Peppa Pig. [She continues to draw quietly. After a few minutes she holds up the drawing] Look! (Transcription, December 13, 2010)



Figure 5. Charlotte's representation of her Peppa Pig ball

It is important to note that this is a short excerpt from a ten-minute episode of drawing, coloring, cutting, and conversation about Charlotte's representation of her Peppa Pig ball. The time and energy invested may reflect the significance to her of the ball or—more specifically—the theme. Charlotte filled the page with a large image of the ball, thus her primary interest would seem to be the object itself. Furthermore, rather than some generic ball, this ball is special due to its theme, Peppa Pig, a favorite of Charlotte's, and so the ball is even more meaningful.

Play Partners

The 4-SASA revealed that children often included representations of significant figures with whom they play. Informed by the criterial aspects of Eva's drawings, we see a trend of significant play partners appearing throughout her play scenes. The two primary play partners frequently featured in Eva's drawings are her sister and her horse (figure 6). Eva adds text to the drawing to identify the

two characters. She labels the girl on the ground as “Lucy,” her sister, and the girl on the horse as herself, “Isla,” using an arrow to link the text to the appropriate image. Lucy is a significant figure appearing in most of Eva’s drawings as well as being frequently mentioned in conversation, usually with a sense of admiration.

“My sister’s a really good drawer! She can draw horses, look.” Eva gets up and points over at the kitchen wall where quite a few of their drawings are on display. “She drew that one . . . and that one . . . and that one.” Pointing at specific drawings. She comes back over, sits, and continues drawing. [Conversation and drawing with Eva (Field Notes, January 29, 2011)]

The study considers her horse a play partner rather than a pet or “object of play” because it appears as a character in Eva’s play scenes, much like herself and her sister, rather than as something she plays with as she would a toy. In Eva’s drawings, she has given the anthropomorphic horse long eyelashes, a hint of an eyebrow, and a smile (figure 7). The horse constitutes a large and central feature of the drawing, and the orientation and gazing of the sisters both toward each other and the horse suggests an interaction among all the figures. Moreover, the eyelashes and overall expression suggests a wide-eyed engagement with the group as a whole. By considering Eva’s motivation and interest in our analysis, we see that her passion for horses have motivated her representations of play.

Eva’s desire to represent a particular emotion could be her primary interest in the drawing process as she attempted to convey a pleasurable play experience with her horse and sister. Hence, she uses the appropriate visual signs such as upturned mouths to signify smiles and happiness. In her desire to convey the messages in her drawings, Eva reiterated the visual by explaining what the cultural conventions signify.

“That’s a heart.” Eva explains as she points to the little heart shape she had drawn; almost radiating from the figure on the horse. “It means I love my sister.” (Field Notes, January 29, 2011)

Most of Eva’s drawings included these characters interacting and engaging with each other. And she further developed them through her narratives. Here Eva describes a different drawing for me.

EVA: Hmmm . . . Oh I know what I wanted to show you! [She bolts up

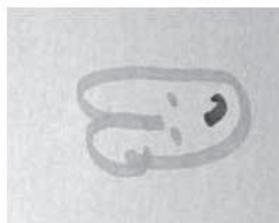
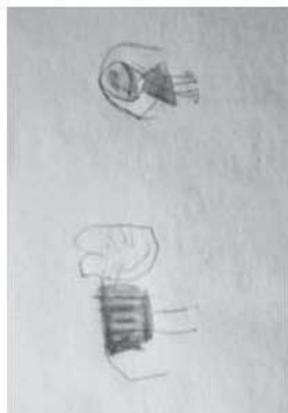
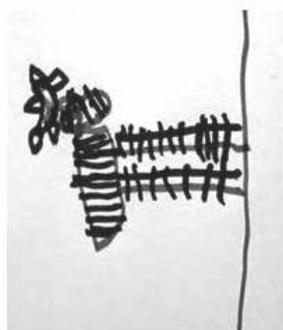


Figure 6. Eva's drawings of horses, her sister, a teddy bear, and herself at play

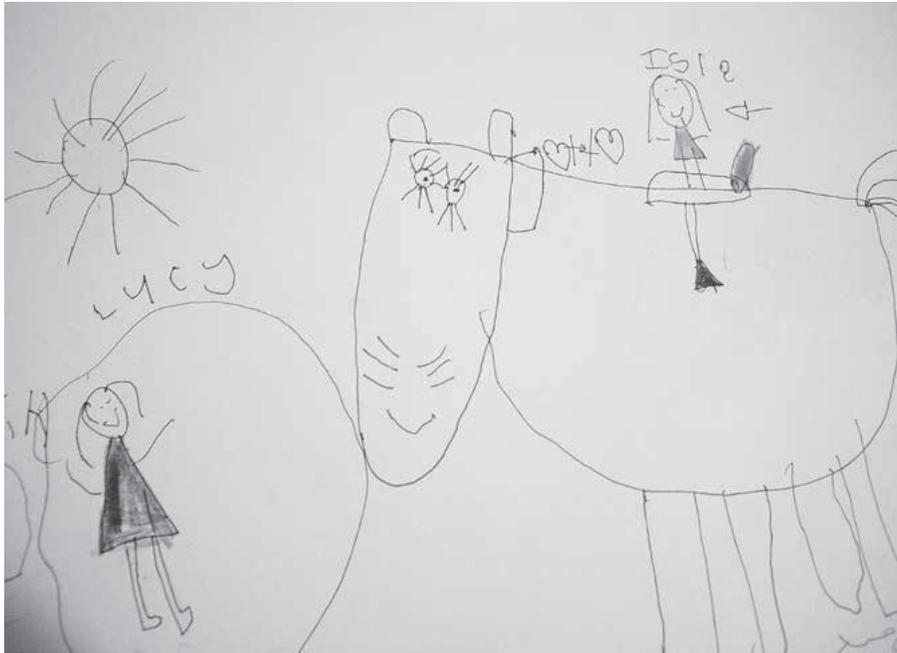


Figure 7. Eva's anthropomorphic representation of a horse with long eyelashes, a hint of an eyebrow, and a smile

from the table and scampers through to the other room and comes back with a very large picture]

DUNCAN: Wow! Did you do this?

EVA: Yeah. This is my sister . . . this is Poppy [her pony]. She's a . . . she. . . . That's the sun

DUNCAN: Uh-huh.

EVA: That's just a teddy bear [pointing at a bodiless face of a blue bear]. And that's Sandy [her dog]. . . . She's playing on the grass [pointing at each thing as she described it].

DUNCAN: Wow! That's so good [she continues to hold it in front of me so I can have a proper look]. (Transcription, February 16 2011)

Overall, Eva's image conveys a sense of joy, engagement, and animated

interaction. She may consider these to be the essential characteristics of play. The objects and items she plays with are not as important as who plays with her.

Her other drawings did not represent individual figures or decontextualized objects. For this reason, play from Eva's perspective could be considered a social practice. Eva finds it important to include more abstract features such as friendship, love, and affiliation between play partners. She represented this by using hearts, kisses, and smiling faces, suggesting that those who are part of her play are individuals with whom she has close relationships. Further informed by conversation and observation, we discover these are also individuals who live with her and spend a significant amount of time together. Again, we conclude from this discussion that the objects and items she played with were not as important as with whom she played.

Plowman and Stevenson (2012) reinforce this point, suggesting that in the absence of play props such as toys or equipment, representations of play always feature a play partner. From children's perspectives, a central aspect of play, or possibly a criterial aspect of representing play visually, is the inclusion of others. For this reason, play might be conceptualized as playing with something, either an object or a person.

Discussion

I have tried to illuminate the diversity of children's representations of play, and by doing so, to offer a glimpse of children's unique perspectives on play. Social semiotics provide a framework to consider children's signs and signification not in isolation but as a social practice. This lens proves useful for understanding children's play as revealed through their drawings and drawing process. For instance, research suggests that, from a child's perspective what defines play is not a predetermined or specific activity but the nature of the engagement (its affect, its context, the significant others, or the objects involved) in any activity and the interactions between them. My approach provided opportunities to explore what children liked to play, and at the same time, to discover how a child may conceptualize play. We must also acknowledge that drawing can be a demonstration of play itself. As a result, the behavior exhibited during the drawing activity can elucidate what children perceive as play, playful behavior, imaginary play, or what they see as amusing or entertaining. Indeed Moyles (1989) refers to drawing as a form of "intellectual play" involving creativity and innovation,

fantasy, and problem solving. This suggests a complex interrelationship between play and drawing, developing synchronously as the child masters the use of symbol systems and thought and imagination becomes visible. Through his or her process, a child masters the use of drawing as a semiotic vehicle. Once children have identified the semiotic potential of drawing, they have found a cultural tool (Cox 2005) that offers not only a means of communicating with others but also a means of making their mark on the world (Matthews 1999; Wright 2010).

If a researcher's objectives are to use data from drawing as representations of a child's perspective, the last thing a researcher would want is to misrepresent that child through over- or misinterpretation of his or her meanings. For instance, if a child draws an object flying across the horizon, is the goal to represent a generic bird or something more specific such as a seagull? Or, is it a different flying object, such as a superhero or a plane? Why has the child included the object in the drawing? Is it of significance to the child—a pet, a fictitious character from a favorite movie, or a toy? We need to look for both the intentions of the child and the personal signification attributed to the representation by the child (Wright 2007). In the next stage of understanding, we access the signification attributed by a child to his or her representation—by listening to his or her descriptions while drawing and noting the other modes of communication he or she uses to express additional meanings.

Another important aspect of using children's drawings to understand play involves their representations of abstract concepts. Many studies ask children to draw abstract concepts, as I have noted. Researchers may choose drawing as a method for expressing abstract topics because they worry about young children's abilities to articulate these views verbally. However, abstract topics may be difficult to represent regardless of the mode of communication. With this in mind, an important aspect of my research included exploring the abstract concepts as static visual representations. So, I asked children to draw pictures relating to play.

As social beings, children create representations that are inevitably embedded in the social (Jewitt and Oyama 2001). A child therefore will engage in a decision-making process guided by various aspects of his or her social situation (Kress 2010). For instance, children may consider characteristics of the audience (for example, whether an adult would be familiar with particular cartoon characters), the desire to produce an image which would be easily, as well as correctly, interpreted by another as play (something not too abstract and open to interpretation), given of course their own skills and the available resources (i.e., nothing too complex to draw). One could argue that the ease of representing

play depends on the type or element of play a child may want to depict. Asking children to draw something they did that day, or to draw their favorite thing to play, or to draw what they think play to be demands very different things from children and their drawings. Although a child may understand a subject, anything he or she depicts on paper will involve various limitations. These may include children's ability to draw certain concepts and objects: what they choose to draw; how easy a concept or object is to draw; and how they choose to draw it (style, favorite or familiar mediums, symbols or representations).

Despite these variations, children's drawings reveal past experiences, with whom they play, their definitions of play, and significant components of play episodes. Children use drawing as a semiotic vehicle to communicate and share meanings, feelings, and past events. To this end, drawing as a multimodal method allows children to create meaning in a multiplicity of ways using gesture, symbols, speech, action, line, shape, and color (Kress 2010). Subsequently, these afford more opportunities for children to express their ideas about play, as evident in the way children use not only the images drawn on the page but also the actual process of drawing to communicate experiences and significant elements of play. Children often enrich their drawings with dialogue, show-and-tell, sound effects, and role play—what Matthews (2010) terms action representation. Therefore, children may use drawing, as embodied mode, to represent play beyond the confines of a piece of paper.

Conclusion

I have shown that drawing may provide a useful tool to facilitate researchers in exploring the broad and transient concept of play, and most importantly, to explore play from a child's perspective. For instance, rather than observing children's play as an outsider who interprets children's activities according to one theory or documents them selectively, I wish to use children's drawings (images, conversation, gestures, and all other modes of meaning making generated during creations) to convey what they see as meaningful or entertaining representations of their play. Wood (2012) suggests that "we can never fully understand the complexities of play, even from the perspectives of the players themselves" (4), but I argue that by giving greater emphasis to children's own definitions and representations of play, at least we can better understand children's perspectives.

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