1 Young children making meaning at home and school

Introduction

Children's early mark making and drawing, which are the focus of this book, reflect the complexity of communication and sign systems in the communities where they are reared and educated. They also reflect the child's own feelings, interests, and sense of self and personal aesthetics.

Young children use a range of ways of communicating including facial expressions, gestures, body language, speech, socio-dramatic play, dancing, singing, manipulating objects, as well as mark making and drawing. They learn how to communicate in interactions with siblings or significant adults in the communities around them. In turn the nature and quality of these interactions are influenced by the historical and cultural contexts in which the interactions take place.

In this chapter we will explore:

- current theories about how children learn to communicate
- how children learn to make meanings and represent them in a range of modes including drawing
- how features of the contrasting socio-cultural contexts of home and pre-school/school in which they learn to draw impact on what and how they draw.

Learning to communicate

From birth the baby is a social being in his or her own right. Studies of infants and parents at home have shown how they ‘tune into each other’ through exchanging facial expressions (the first smile from a baby is a magic moment for both parent and baby), hand gestures (stroking and patting) and movements (such as head shaking and the joy of playing peek-a-boo, with all the attendant shared laughter) (Trevatthen 1995). These interactive rituals and games develop into ‘proto-language’ as the baby combines vocalizations, facial expressions and movements designed to retain the attention of their parent, carer or sibling.

It is not only people that matter to a baby. As Vygostky (1987) argued,
things are also socially significant. All human actions, including thinking and speaking, involve the mediation of some kind of object as a sign or tool. So for example, a breast or bottle becomes both a sign of comfort and a tool for nurture. Later, as the infant becomes a sleepless toddler, the dual role of tool (a cup of water) and sign (Mummy is still caring for me) is reflected in that well known cry, ‘Mummy, I want a drink’.

Schaffer (1992) called these interactions between adults and children around objects ‘joint involvement episodes’. When an adult and a child pay joint attention to and act upon an object, it can provide both a source of emotional security and a tool for learning. At the early stages of adult/child interactions the object might be a cuddly toy; but later it may become something more abstract like the play with words aligned to the finger game of Round and Round the Garden. An important point is that these episodes are based on ‘everyday’ exchanges and that wherever they occur – in home or day-care contexts – the quality of interactions around the objects is critical to the quality of the child’s learning (Anning and Edwards 1999). A second important point is that it is often the child who takes the lead in these dyadic interactions.

It is in the context of the child’s own interests that the adult can then introduce additional material, for example, a verbal label for the object the child has just picked up or an extension of the verbalization the child has just uttered (Schaffer 1996: 253).

The same object may be used in contrasting ways in the different contexts in which young children learn to communicate. For example, at home a storybook may be used as a source of comfort and reassurance for the intimate one to one ritual of a bedtime story by their parent. When they attend a preschool playgroup, children may observe that same storybook being used by a playgroup worker as a tool to keep a large group of children sitting still on the carpet whilst the rest of the team tidy away the equipment at the end of a play session.

In this book we are concerned particularly to explore the interactions of young children with siblings and significant adults in their home and preschool/school contexts around objects for mark making and drawing: scraps of paper, easels, megasketchers and felt tips, crayons, chalks and pencils.

**Learning to make meanings and to represent them**

Children in the so-called developed world are bombarded with visual information from the media. Some images are moving, as in television programmes and advertisements, videos and computer games. Some images are static, as on street and shop signs, advertisements on hoardings, catalogues, magazines and books (though some of these now include moving images in
pop up or interactive formats). Young children learn to decode these visual images in ‘joint involvement episodes’ alongside the more experienced users of these images in their families and within the communities where they live out their daily lives. Children draw on these visual resources and models offered by more experienced members of their communities of how to represent things, when they begin to make and represent meanings for themselves.

Kress (1997) made an influential study of his own young children’s journeys into meaning making. He observed and recorded episodes of his children engaged in multi-modal representations using:

- found materials to make models
- household furniture and objects mingled with toys to make ‘worlds’ in which to act out involved narratives in play episodes
- mark making media such as felt tips and paint to ‘draw’ elaborate versions of their understanding of the world around them.

He argues that ‘children act multi-modally, both in the things they use, the objects they make, and in the engagement of their bodies; there is no separation of body and mind’ (Kress 1997: 97). He calls their representations ‘the energetic, interested, intentional action of children in their effects on their world’ (Kress: 114). He also draws attention to the dynamic interrelation between what resources (such as discarded boxes, glue, paper, felt tips, small play figures) are available to children for making representations and the child’s ‘shifting interest’ and their ability to move creatively from one mode to another. For example, he observed his children using scissors to cut out their drawn representations, or to cut out images from discarded greeting cards, and using the cut out objects as three-dimensional play things in elaborate socio-dramatic play bouts. The cut out objects bridged the gap between the two- and three-dimensional world for the children. He sees young children’s play-based narratives as ‘hybrid things with language used to indicate action and narrative sequence, and drawing used to represent, to display, the people and objects in the story’ (Kress 1997: 24). His insightful analysis of the observations of his children at play allows us to marvel at young children’s flexibility of thinking and their unselfconscious ability to flick from one mode of representation to another. These are capabilities that many artists spend their working lives trying to recapture.

Pahl (1999, 2002) is one of the few UK-based researchers to have observed, with equal sensitivity and attention to detail as Kress in his home-based studies, the meaning making of young children in a nursery class. She recorded episodes of children creating layers of narrative as they represented and re-represented versions of stories in their socio-dramatic play. Objects were used with a ‘fluid quality’. A shopping basket made from a cereal packet
and strips of card for role-play in the nursery might be transformed into a
carrycot for a doll cut out from a shopping catalogue and carried home at the
end of the nursery session. She sees these experiments in representation and
meaning making as opportunities for children to explore what is ‘me’ and
‘not me’, using the models they create as ‘transactional objects’.

Pahl’s observations of young children engaged in socio-dramatic play
reflect Vygotsky’s (1995) argument that for children there is a close rela-
tionship between narrative, art and play. Linqvist (2001) comments:

Vygotsky argues that children’s creativity in its original form is
syncretistic creativity, which means that the individual arts have yet
to be separated and specialized. Children do not differentiate
between poetry and prose, narration and drama. Children draw
pictures and tell a story at the same time; they act a role and create
their lines as they go along. Children rarely spend a long time
completing each creation, but produce something in an instant,
 focusing all their emotions on what they are doing at that moment
in time.

(Lindqvist 2001:8)

Dyson (1993a), a researcher based in the USA, is a third influential
observer of young children’s meaning making and representations. She argues
that making symbols is ‘the essence of being human’ and that drawing, as one
of the symbol systems at our disposal, is one way for humans to liberate
ourselves from the ‘here and now’. Figure 1.1 draws on Dyson’s model. The
model situates the development of drawing as both a sequential and

### Figure 1.1
The situated nature of drawing within a continuum of children’s use of symbol
systems (developed from Dyson 1993a)
cumulative process. It also highlights the significance of the interrelationship between gesture, speech, play, drawing and writing for the young child.

There has been some research into the relationship between the development of writing and drawing in studies of emergent literacy (for example: Bissex 1980; Hall 1987; Dyson 1989; Kress 1997). Dyson's argument is that at around the age of 2 children begin to use drawing as an additional prop for story telling in socio-dramatic play, with others or alone, to complement the 'old, comfortable procedures' of dramatic gesture and speech. As they begin to experiment with making letter shapes, they make no distinction between drawing and writing. They use the two modes in parallel in a process of 'symbol weaving' as they begin to 'write' stories (Dyson 1986). She claims that making distinctions for children too early, between drawing and writing, detracts from young children's ability to compose stories (Dyson 1993a). We will pursue this argument later in the book.  

We are becoming increasingly aware that the organizational tool of narrative for learning has been under-rated in research into young children's cognitive development. Egan (1989) has long been an advocate of the story form as a cultural universal which 'reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience' (p. 2). Young children’s personal narratives offer tools for them to order and explain the complexity of their experiences of the world. Gallas (1994: xv) describes these narratives as 'part of the silent language that embodies thinking'. The narratives may be expressed in dramatic play, movement, song, speech, drawings and paintings.

**Socio-cultural theory**

Within the domain of what is called socio-cultural theory, there is growing interest in the effect of the cultural context on how children learn (for example see Rogoff 1990; Lave and Wenger 1991). We know that children pick up on cues from siblings, peers and significant adults in their everyday lives about what are 'appropriate' learning behaviours. A clear example of the impact of the context on learning behaviours is that before children enter educational contexts, they are the main initiators of questions. Anyone who has spent time with a lively 3-year-old knows how exhausting answering those why questions can be! As the child makes the transition into being a pupil in a pre-school setting, they discover that within the rules of educational discourse, suddenly it is the adults who ask all the questions. What is even more bizarre is that the answers to the adults’ questions are often perceived by the child to be inconsequential or downright obvious: 'What colour are your shoes today?' 'How many teddies are in the bed?' 'What shape is this biscuit?'

Such shifts in expectations of 'appropriate' learning behaviours in
different contexts impact on children’s developing sense of self – who they are and what they are expected to become – and on what they feel they can and should do. Their developing sense of themselves as learners affects their motivation, or what has been called their ‘disposition’ to learn. So if someone at home has encouraged the child to draw, supporting them in problem solving with a sense of enjoyment and fun but without putting them under pressure, and modelled persistence in activities that are unfamiliar, the child is likely to take a positive disposition to drawing activities when they enter pre-school or school contexts. We call this developing a ‘mastery’ orientation to learning (Dweck 1991). The opposite, a ‘helpless’ orientation to tackling tasks can result from an adult in the new setting undermining the child’s confidence in their drawing ability by responding negatively to their familiar drawing behaviours, or by over-correction or insensitive shaping of the child’s drawings into narrow ‘school’ versions of representations.

Young children have to make sense of the continuities and discontinuities between their experiences of different kinds of tools (such as the distinctive styles of language used by adults at home and in school), objects or artefacts (such as colouring books from the supermarket and number activity worksheets in a nursery class) and activities (such as making a birthday card for Grandma at home or drawing an apple from observation in an Early Years Unit based art lesson). Figure 1.2 depicts these sometimes complementary but often contrasting influences in home and school contexts on the child’s learning behaviours and meaning making.

Home influences on children’s meaning making

For young children at home, the rites and rituals of family life are expressions of particular family histories and their cultural heritages, the preoccupations of adults and the impact of popular culture. These three factors influence the roles and responsibilities taken by adults (main breadwinner, child carer), by children (the baby of the family, the clever one) and by significant others (reliable grandma, occasional father) within the household. Family histories will also impact on the kinds of activities seen as the ‘norm’ at home such as Sunday lunches around a table, television snack teas on trays, going to church on Sundays, watching Eastenders together. The kind of objects around the house will reflect family choices of activities: comfortable furniture in the living room, family photographs on the television, a heap of discarded papers and biros on the kitchen table. Where objects are kept will reflect contracts of what is deemed to be important for the adults and what for the children: Dad’s motorbike in the hall, a doll’s house upstairs in Jenny’s bedroom and a Meccano set in her brother Tom’s.
Figure 1.2  Home and school influences on a child’s meaning making

Community of practice at home:
- rites/rituals
- roles/responsibilities
- use of tools (language, drawing)
- use of artefacts (things)
- experience of activities (informal learning)
- access to places
- access to TV/videos/Internet

Child making sense of continuities and discontinuities

Child’s episodes of meaning making of his/her world.

Community of practice in institutional settings:
- rites/rituals
- roles/responsibilities
- use of tools (language, drawing)
- use of artefacts (things)
- experience of activities (formal (and informal) learning)
- access to places
- access to TV/videos/Internet

- oral narratives/storying/role play
- mark making/drawing/writing
- physical actions/gesture/body language
- modelling/manipulating objects
Pahl’s (2002) ethnographic study of three boys aged between 5 and 8 at home revealed the way space was contested between the boys and their parents on ‘the cusp of mess and tidiness’ (Pahl 2002: 147). Children’s meaning making moves between bedroom floor to living room floor, taking in materials as diverse as prayer beads, paper, glue, modelling, material and card. The children drew on cultural resources around them, including stories and narratives.

Pahl is an advocate for children to be given space for purposeful mess in homes without constantly being nagged to tidy up. She argues that the advantage for children of meaning making at home is the opportunities they have to move fluidly from one activity to another, often without the watchful gaze of adults. Home should be a place where children and adults are able to weave in and out of each other’s spaces.

One significant shared space for families is around the television. Marsh (2002) points out that media texts, from television, videos and computer games, provide a shared resource from which to make meaning for parents and children. She investigated the media use of 26 children between 2 years 6 months and 3 years 11 months as a follow up to a survey of a large sample of parents within a Sure Start programme area in a northern city in the UK. Sure Start is a massive government anti-poverty initiative aimed at young children and their families. She observed that the children regularly played out narratives based on what they had seen on television with the implicit support of their parents.

In many of the homes visited, the space around the television appeared to be demarcated as a space for celebrating and extending children’s relationship with the screen. Often, children’s dressing-up clothes, toys or books which were associated with television characters were situated there, ready to be taken up by the children when necessary.

(Marsh 2002: 6)

In the homes there was plenty of evidence of the children’s popular culture in such diverse artefacts as stickers, comics, games, toys, clothing, cards, jewellery, sports accessories, jokes, jingles, and even food and drink. Amongst these generalized, commercially produced, cultural artefacts children had preferences for and affiliations with specific images and objects. These preferences were often gendered.

It is to be expected that young children’s sense of self be strongly influenced by their view of themselves as boy or girl. From birth children are labelled within society on the basis of their gender. Bailey (1993) summarizes a collection of research evidence as:
Studies show that socialization into appropriate gender roles begins at birth as girls, wrapped in pink blankets, are treated quietly, talked to softly, and described as being dainty, gentle, quiet and cuddly, while boys are dressed in blue, referred to in terms of being big, strong and athletic, and handled in a more aggressive, playful manner.

(Bailey 1993: 117)

The gender values and beliefs of adults, siblings and friends with whom they come in contact have an overwhelming impact on young children’s own beliefs. Stereotyping within imagery from mass media and from the marketing of toys, clothes, activities and equipment for boys and girls reinforces these strong messages about the ‘correct’ way to be a boy or girl. These beliefs are reflected in the content and styles of boy and girl play, representations and drawings; but little research has been published into the gendered nature of children’s drawings. Exceptions are the work of Golomb and Dyson.

Golumb (1992) drew on detailed, longitudinal studies of gifted children; for example, the horse drawings of Heidi between the ages of 3 and 10 (Fein 1984) and the space world drawings of Roger between the ages of 6 and 13 (Blake 1988). She summarizes her findings:

…the spontaneous productions of boys reveal an intense concern with warfare, actions of violence and destruction, machinery and sports contests, whereas girls depict more tranquil scenes of romance, family life, landscapes and children at play.

(Golomb 1992: 158)

Dyson (1986) collected the free drawings of children attending a kindergarten over a 5-month period and recorded their dictations and talk as they drew. Overall boys chose to depict ‘explosions, battles, and displays of power and motion’ with actors and actions moving through time accompanied by dramatizing actions and related speech. Girls chose to draw ‘happy little girls and cheerful small animals’. For example, of one girl Dyson wrote, ‘As she talked and drew their hair and clothes, one might think she was dressing her dolls, rather than drawing her girl’ (Dyson 1986: 393). We suspect that a contemporary study of children’s free drawings would reveal far more influence of media imagery.

Of course, the reactions of parents to young children’s drawings are also important. Malchiodi (1998), an art therapist, points out:

Remarks made by a parent can have an impact on children’s desire and motivation to make art; even the most well-meaning parent has,
on occasion, misinterpreted the content of a child’s drawing, perhaps unknowingly discouraging the child from continuing to draw. (Malchiodi 1998: 22)

She echoes Schaffer’s argument about the importance of parents being able to ‘tune into’ their children’s preoccupations in general, but also specifically in relation to drawing as a window into their children’s social and emotional states.

Matthews (1994), a practising artist himself, is a passionate advocate of parents’ roles in encouraging their children to be confident drawers. He sees their role as partly to provide the kind of environment where children have the physical and mental space and resources to explore painting, drawing and model making. But of equal importance is for parents to provide a place ‘where children feel confident that people will take their drawings seriously, and where it would be unheard of for a child’s drawing to be dismissed as mere scribbling’ (Matthews 1994: 124). Matthew’s seminal, longitudinal studies of his own three children’s drawing development provide powerful insights into the intentional nature of all young children’s mark making and drawings and the impact of parents as partners in supporting their children’s creativity.

**School influences on children’s meaning making**

Just as family histories affect the everyday lives of young children at home, so the legacies and ideologies from the history of art education affect their lived experiences of learning to draw in educational settings (Anning 1995, 1997b). When elementary schools were established for the children of the working classes in the nineteenth century, art was seen as servicing the development of ‘skill of hand and eye’ to ensure that the nation was training a useful and productive industrial workforce. Art lessons consisted of copying pictures chalked up on the blackboard by the teacher or from instructional books, learning how to draw three-dimensional shapes and structured tasks in colour identification and pattern making (Tomlinson 1947).

Frank Cizek’s pioneering work on child art in the 1930s persuaded educationalists that children’s artwork had integrity in its own right. Much like the approach to promoting creativity articulated in the influential exhibition, The Hundred Languages of Children, of the Reggio Emilia pre-school programme in our time, Cizek’s principles were disseminated through travelling exhibitions of child art. His approach was promoted by Marion Richardson in the UK. Richardson’s approach to art education for children was quite structured. She recommended simple exercises such as pattern making using vivid materials such as powder paints and thick brushes. Yet adults were urged
not to impose their techniques and aesthetic standards on children and not to 'interfere' with children's creative, spontaneous expressions in line and paint. It was enough just to set out materials for them and leave them to explore their possibilities and 'blossom'. Influential theories about developmental stages in children's drawing such as Kellogg's (1969) compounded such beliefs. She wrote: 'In terms of spontaneous art, every child is a “born artist” who should be allowed to scribble without oppressive guidance in art education' (Kellogg 1969: 266). Arguments for ‘free expression’ in art education gathered force within the general shift towards ‘progressivism’ (Abbs 1987).

Herbert Read (1943), Alec Clegg (1980) and Robin Tanner (1989) each in turn promoted the importance of aesthetic and creative aspects of the curriculum. In the 1960s, when progressivism was the zeitgeist, the seminal report on primary education, the Plowden Report (CACE 1967) encapsulated the spirit of the times. Of art the authors wrote: ‘Art is both a form of communication and a means of expression of feelings which ought to permeate the whole curriculum and the whole life of the school’ (CACE 1967: 247). In fact, as with many aspects of progressivism, the reality in classrooms rarely lived up to the rhetoric of the progressive movement. In primary schools, art was often used as a servicing agent for ‘topic work’: for example, decorating covers with felt tip pens for project folders about the planets or making models out of cardboard of Viking long ships following a history lesson.

For young children in infant classrooms art activities were set up and introduced by the class teacher at the beginning of the school day, but if the activities were supervised at all, it was often by a volunteer parent or a nursery nurse. In nursery classes, art activities were part of a routine, daily diet of activities for all the children: an easel set up for painting in the corner, or a mark making table for children to explore media and their own ideas. In addition, children would be called across to a table usually by a nursery nurse, to complete an adult directed set task. The tasks were generally related to topics and seasonal, such as painting snowdrops in spring, printing from autumn leaves in autumn or making set piece greetings cards to take home for Easter, Mother’s Day or Christmas. Meanwhile in both infant and nursery classes teachers tended to position themselves at the ‘work’ tables in the centre of the classrooms to supervise the ‘status’ activities related to literacy and numeracy. It was made quite clear to children which were the ‘important’ activities.

Teachers were exhorted to showcase the ‘best’ artwork on the ever-growing acreage of display boards in primary schools. Displays assumed the role of ‘window dressing’ in an educational climate which encouraged parents to use choice of schools in a free market economy to ‘weed out’ unsuccessful schools for closure. At worst feeding the display imperative resulted in children spending hours aimlessly sticking small squares of fabric or screwed up tissue paper onto adult drawn outlines of bunnies (in spring), the seaside (in summer), harvest fayre (in autumn) and snowmen (in winter).
Inevitably the dominance of ‘free expression’ in arts education began to be questioned. For example, in the USA Elliott Eisner challenged the notion that development in art was simply about maturation and the unfolding of natural talents. He argued that the creation and appreciation of art ‘is not an automatic consequence of maturation, but rather a process that is affected by the type of experience children have had’ and that ‘a child’s ability is a function of what he (sic) has learned’ (Eisner 1972: 105). In the UK this argument was reflected in the influential Gulbenkian Report: ‘The task is not simply to let anything happen in the name of self-expression or creativity. Neither is it to impose rigid structures or ideas and methods upon the children. The need is for a difficult balance of freedom and authority’ (Robinson 1982: 33).

It was at this historical, cultural time in 1988 that a National Curriculum was introduced in the UK. Statutory Orders for a Key Stage One Art Curriculum, for children aged between 5 and 7, were delivered in primary schools from September 1992. Predictably, given their low status in the educational system, art and music, with physical education, were the last National Curriculum subjects to be introduced into schools. There were two Attainment Targets in the Art Orders: Investigating and Making; and Knowledge and Understanding.

Primary teachers were ill-prepared to deliver the art curriculum. A study by Cleave and Sharp in 1986 found that most Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) primary initial teacher training courses included only 20 hours designated to teaching art, and Bachelor of Education (BEd) courses between 12 and 40 hours (Cleave and Sharp 1986). Not surprisingly, when Clement (1993) surveyed 936 primary teachers’ perspectives on delivering the new art curriculum, though they welcomed it in principle, in practice they felt ill-trained and lacking in confidence in its delivery.

Despite their misgivings, most primary teachers responded well to the demands of teaching the practical aspects of the art curriculum. Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) annual reports on the quality of teaching and learning in primary schools reported steady improvements in the teaching of skills in making art across a broader range of two-dimensional media, though three-dimensional work remained under-developed. However, in the underpinning knowledge and understanding strand of the art curriculum, teachers’ lack of confidence resulted in them offering children a restricted range of artists and designers to study. Lots of children’s painted versions of Impressionist paintings were often copied from postcards on their desks. Children’s copies of Monet’s water lilies and Van Gogh’s sunflowers, for example, replaced screwed up tissue paper friezes on primary school display boards.

Matthews has consistently argued that because the National Curriculum was based on the ‘transmission or “delivery” of [these] bodies of knowledge to passive recipients, it is inevitably insensitive to children’s development’
For him the prescribed curriculum has led to children’s art ‘having to fulfil an educational purpose of a particularly limited kind’ and to ‘an encouragement of overt teaching involving an active interference, on the part of teachers, with children’s development’ leading to ‘the systematic devaluing of children’s spontaneous art’. Though Matthews makes it clear that he does not want a return to the ‘romantic’, laissez-faire approach of the 1960s, nor does he want children’s artistic development to be constrained as ‘supposed deficits in need of correction until the form of representation socially sanctioned by society . . . is reached’ (Matthews 2003: 75).

When a labour government swept into power in 1997, the new Prime Minister Tony Blair’s mantra was ‘Education. Education. Education’. The government’s concern to raise standards in literacy and numeracy in primary education drove educational reforms. A Literacy Hour was introduced in 1999 and a Numeracy Hour in 2000. Schools were set targets for testing children in Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) at 7 and 11. Results were published in league tables in local and national newspapers. The content of SATs reflected the literacy and numeracy strategy targets rather than the National Curriculum. Educational discourse was dominated by the language of targets, tests, attainment, competence, appraisal, inspection, accountability, and failing schools. In such a climate hard won gains in art education in primary schools began to be eroded. Art was allocated less and less time in the primary school timetable.

From 2000 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), in an attempt to support schools in maintaining a broad and balanced curriculum, introduced subject-based schemes of work. When art was scheduled, hard-pressed teachers often relied on ‘one off’ lessons taken off the shelf from the QCA schemes of work. Children had few opportunities to pursue personal interests or styles in school art activities, including drawing. Teachers were told that ‘children should practise their drawing skills on a regular basis’ (QCA/DfEE 2000a: 4), but the exemplars given were restricted to observational drawing. Hamblin (2002) summarizes the depressing scenario of children’s lived experiences of art lessons as:

Creativity must be expressed in specific time increments (one hour or less), noise must be kept to a minimum, work produced must not be messy, the clean-up of materials must be accomplished in approximately five minutes, work spaces are depersonalized, and the products must be easily stored.

(Hamblin 2002: 22)

A growing concern that young children, particularly boys, were suffering from ‘too formal too soon’ approaches to education (Sylva 1994; Anning 1997a) and consequently developing negative dispositions to learning, led to
a significant initiative from the government in relation to the education of young children. In 2000 a Foundation Stage curriculum was introduced for all children aged from 3 to 5, including those in the Reception classes of primary schools, before they began the National Curriculum Key Stage One. The Foundation Stage guidance (QCA/DfEE 2000b) promotes the principles of children being educated across six areas of learning: personal, social and emotional; language and literacy; mathematics; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development; creative development. However, the associated end of Foundation Stage statutory baseline assessment, before children begin Key Stage One, tests only the first three areas, that is, excluding science, the humanities, the arts and physical development.

The Standards agenda to improve literacy and numeracy attainments meant that creativity was neglected in all phases of statutory education, not just those catering for young children. Concerns were addressed that the narrowing of the curriculum was alienating many children at school, in particular disaffected and troublesome boys. In 2001 a committee (NACCCE 2001) reported on the importance of creativity in the school curriculum both for catering for the needs of a wide range of pupils but also as a marketable commodity. The report was followed up by a QCA led working party to investigate how the principles of the National Advisory Committee for Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) report might be translated into the National Curriculum framework.

Although these initiatives raise our hopes that more attention may be paid to the arts and creativity in the education of young children we still have much to fight for. The dominant messages for young children in primary schools remain that drawing is a low status, time-filling occupation; for example to while away the time in illustrating their written versions of stories, or to keep them quiet during wet play times. In art lessons, drawing is about observing and recording objects, such as flowers, fruits and museum artefacts – not things guaranteed to be of interest to lively young children! The main message is that in their drawings they must make things look as ‘real’ as possible. Peer pressure builds for drawings to conform to representational modes and children who have an ability to draw well quickly gain recognition amongst their peers. Those who find drawing difficult are offered little or no tuition to help them to improve their efforts. They quickly learn how to avoid drawing or to stick to well tried and tested stick figures, stylized houses and lollipop trees. Many adults continue to draw in this arrested, formulaic style.

In the context of pre-school settings, though children are given more freedom to explore their own agendas in the mark making areas of classrooms, constructive feedback from the adults is rare. If they carry their drawing across to show them to a busy teacher they may at best be rewarded with a vague, ‘Lovely’ or ‘Mmm, what is it?’ Their teachers are much more interested in whether they can write their name on the drawing.
But there is far more to young children’s drawing than these messages imply. In Chapter 2 we will look more closely at what we know about young children learning to draw and drawing to learn.