
Article:
Tatham-Fashanu, C. orcid.org/0000-0002-5888-1328 (2023) Enhancing participatory research with young children through comic-illustrated ethnographic field notes. Qualitative Research, 23 (6). pp. 1714-1736. ISSN 1468-7941

https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941221110186

Standard Article

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Enhancing participatory research with young children through comic-illustrated ethnographic field notes

Qualitative Research
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–23

DOI: 10.1177/14687941221110186
journals.sagepub.com/home/qrj
SAGE

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Abstract

Conducting research with young participants presents numerous challenges, particularly in terms of representation as the researcher endeavours to listen to children's voices in order to understand and portray their perspectives accurately. Since the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child established children have the right to express their views and have these taken seriously in matters that affect them, researchers have developed a variety of multimodal methods to capture the children's perspectives. The aim of this paper is to describe an innovative methodological approach to recording ethnographic observations of young children (aged four to six) through a visual mode: the cartoon. The article describes the methodology of a specific research project that explored young children's communicative practices in a super-diverse environment. Adopting a flexible approach to research and putting children's suggestions into practice led to the co-production cartoons that used the participants' self-portraits to visually portray the researcher's written observations of the children. The paper presents vignettes, evidencing how the use of self-portraits meant the cartoons were more engaging, held greater personal significance and opened up spaces for dialogue, leading the researcher to uncover deeper insights. This has important implications for any research that endeavours to listen to the participants' perspectives, but where verbal or written forms of communication are impeded.

Keywords

Arts-based methods, ethnography, cartoons, comics, children, participatory research

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Introduction

Conducting research with young participants presents numerous challenges, particularly in terms of representation as the researcher endeavours to listen to children's voices in order to understand and portray their perspectives accurately (Tangen, 2008). While early years' researchers are becoming ever more conscious of children as active social agents, and the necessity of including children's voices as a key element of their research (Brooker, 2001), questions regarding how to do this efficiently, effectively and accurately remain (Teachman and Gladstone, 2020). Thus, there is a continuing need for innovation in developing research methods that facilitate alogue between researchers and young participants, to generate rich conversations and deeper insights into children's experiences.

Aim

With the above introduction in mind, the aim of this paper is to describe how comics were used to address methodological challenges encountered during a particular ethnographic study that investigated the communicative practices of young children in a super-diverse, early years setting. The study was guided by the primary research question: How do the intersections between different socio-cultural contexts contribute to children's multimodal communicative practices in a super-diverse environment?

To achieve this aim, the next section will discuss the context of the research, after which, arguments for including children's voices in research will be summarised, followed by an exploration of existing multimodal methods in participatory research with young children. The article will then describe the process of using comics to illustrate ethnographic observations and how these enhanced the research. Finally, the article will discuss the drawbacks and areas for future development.

The fieldwork

The paper has been developed from a yearlong research project undertaken in an early childhood class in an inner-city primary school in the north of England. The project began at the beginning of the summer term in a reception class with children aged four and five. Reception is the final year of early childhood education in the UK and precedes compulsory education in year one. I then followed these children into year one and continued the research for two more terms, so by the end of the study some of the participants were 6 years old. During this period, as some children left and joined the class, a total of 30 participants were involved in the study, with 27 being present for its entirety. The class was selected as it embodies what Vertovec (2007) refers to as 'super-diversity', in other words, diversity on an extreme level of complexity, where combinations of significant factors lead to new conjunctions, interactions and interplays of variables that impact every aspect of the lives of the individuals involved (Vertovec, 2007).

The extent of the super-diversity within the class can be demonstrated through the following summary data:

1. Eleven ethnicities were represented in the class.
2. The children in the class had 'links' to 15 countries (such as their country of origin or a country in which they had resided prior to arriving in the United Kingdom (UK)).
3. The children were exposed to 14 languages other than English in the home and they had varying competences in English.
4. The children entered the country through at least six different of channels of migration, together with some who are native UK children.

The project used multiple methods: language portraits, semi-structured interviews with family members and staff at the school, photos of artefacts created by the children and ethnographic observations. The data generated by the different methods were integrated to explore how the intersections between different socio-cultural contexts contribute to children's multimodal communicative practices within a super-diverse environment. In other words, how the different activities that children participate in beyond the classroom, such as in the home and in the community, influence the way children communicate (e.g. languages) and the subject of their communication (e.g. cultural references). Ethnographic observations were the primary source of data collection and a constant guiding principle was to make the data I collected accessible to the participants, working towards 'democracy, justice, freedom, empowerment and community participation' in research (Canosa et al., 2018: 401). Constructivist grounded theory was adopted as a methodological framework that views human beings as 'agentic actors' and encourages researchers to participate, observe and ask questions, seeking to understand the participants' experiences while examining the social, contextual and temporal conditions in which the research took place (Charmaz, 2017). Constructivist grounded theory was complimented by the principle of making the data accessible as it enabled the me to co-interpret the findings with the participants. However, given the young age and linguistic diversity of the participants, I grappled with the challenge of making the research more collaborative and of including the participants' perspectives both as a matter of ethical principle and also to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings.

Why include children in research?

Article 12 of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989) is particularly relevant as it articulates children's 'right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously…' (UNCRC, 1989: Article 12) which, in effect, requires researchers to examine their conceptualisation of children and which, in turn, influences their methodology (Punch, 2002). Mayne and Howitt (2015) draw on the work of Christensen and Prout, (2002) to explain how the status of children in research ranges on a spectrum from children as 'objects' who are incompetent and lacking capabilities;

children as 'subjects where their participation is contingent upon their age and ability'; children as 'social actors' who are fully formed and actively involved in the research, to children as 'co-researchers', capable of genuine participation. Mayne and Howitt (2015) identify how research at the former end of the spectrum is conducted *on* children, then *with* children in the middle of the spectrum and finally *by* children at the latter end. In addition, Jones (2004) argues that research about children which excludes the knowledge they have of themselves could be considered 'incomplete' (p.114). In essence, children are the key informants in relation to their own perspectives and experiences, and it follows that research which elicits their views will be strengthened in terms of quality and rigour (Alderson, 2008).

Consequently, researchers, including myself, who adopt the view that children are fully formed, active social agents (such as Brooker, 2001; Christensen and James, 2008; James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 2004) should carefully plan research that highlights the *competence* of children, lessens the *power imbalance* between adult researcher and young participants and aims to capture a faithful *representation* of their voices (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Curtin and Murtagh, 2007; Robinson and Kellett, 2004). That said, it is important to bear in mind that children are vulnerable in a number of respects: typically, children do not have the same rights as adults (Masson, 2004); their physical size and relative strength is less than adults (Lahman, 2008); they hold a lower place in the hierarchy of organisations Christensen, (2004) with less power than adults (Spyrou, 2011); and they are subject to 'adult policing' (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988: 28). As a result, Lahman (2008) reminds us it is important to bear in mind that children are simultaneously '*competent yet vulnerable'* (p.285, italics in the original). As such, researchers must take extra steps to overcome the practical challenges of research with children and go beyond tokenism, thereby ensuring that children are given meaningful opportunities to voice their perspectives (McMellon and Tisdall, 2020).

As a result of the UNCRC (1989), children's participation in decision-making has gradually become more commonplace in research (Archard, 2015; Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Mayne and Howitt, 2014; McMellon and Tisdall, 2020; Purdy and Spears, 2020). Further examples of participatory research with children can be found in extensive literature reviews conducted by Reynaert et al. (2009), Mayne and Howitt (2015), Haijes and Van Thiel (2016) and McMellon and Tisdall (2020), demonstrating that the principles of participatory research with young children are recognised and applied in a wide range of disciplines. That said, more work needs to be done to ensure that participatory research methods are used in meaningful ways (Haijes and Van Thiel, 2016) and that they result in genuine impact (McMellon and Tisdall, 2020). The following section offers comic methods as an entry point to address these concerns.

Multimodal methods in participatory research

Researchers from a wide range of disciplines and theoretical traditions have recognised the importance of 'multimodality' ever since (Halliday, 1978) developed the social semiotic theory of communication. Over the last two decades, multimodality has developed prominence in the field of education Flewitt et al., (2019)). Though specific usage

of the term 'multimodality' varies, there is an underlying coherent thread: studies that seek to understand meanings that participants convey must look beyond the purely linguistic aspects and seek to incorporate bodily movements and interactions with material objects and the environment Dicks et al., 2012).

Participatory research methodologies tend to foreground multimodality, recognising how visual, gestural, kinaesthetic and three-dimensional modes play a key role in communicative practices, thus shifting the emphasis away from writing and speech (Kress and Street, 2006). Multimodal methodologies emphasise how children use a range of voices (Flewitt, 2005) and, therefore, researchers must listen with multiple senses (Rinaldi, 2001). For example, Clarke and Moss' seminal book 'Listening to young children: the Mosaic approach' (2001, 2011) encourages researchers to develop a portfolio of different methods that can be modified according to the researchers' and participants' skills and interests. Methods such as map-making, photography, video and tours of the environment can be accumulated to create a multi-layered picture of children's experiences.

Visual methods in research with children

Kearns (2012) describes images as possessing the 'power to empower and facilitate discussion' p. 27), enabling participants 'to go beyond a verbal mode of thinking, and this may help include wider dimensions of experience' (Bagnoli, 2009: 565–566). The use of visual methods in research with children and youth may also elicit different responses and richer information than research methods that depend on verbal or written language (Leitch, 2008; Noyes, 2008; Thomson, 2008; Walton and Niblett, 2012). In other words, topics pertinent to research that the adult researchers may not have previously considered may emerge through the use of visual methods (Noyes, 2008). Visual tools, such as the comics presented in this article, provide opportunity for 'a rich, multilayered and mediated form of communication' (Christensen and James, 2008: p.160). Indeed, visual research methods can be particularly useful for increasing the participation of children who are not able to provide written and/or verbal responses (Barriage et al., 2017).

Visual methods offer opportunities that are different to those emanating from speech or writing (Spyrou, 2011) and are able to capture multimodal forms of communication, for example 'body language' such as posture and gesture, as a source of visual data (Emmison and Smith, 2000). Taylor (2014) video recorded 9 and 10-year-old children, 'capturing the 'flow' of conversation between children without privileging speech' (p.4). Full permission was sought from the parents/carers and the children themselves to use material in publication, including still frames of the participants in action (Taylor, 2014) and the resultant visual data is effective in conveying the participants' multimodal communication. Similarly, Flewitt (2005) argues that the use of video footage and visual images are sometimes necessary when constructing an argument, particularly if the focus of the research is on modes of expressing that entail revealing the participants' identity, such as facial expressions and gaze.

Drawings and comics in research with children

Visual methods, such as comics are particularly appropriate when researching young participants as children become 'fluent' in the language of drawing from a very young age (Anning and Ring, 2004), and much younger than is the case for the spoken or written word. Furthermore, children use drawings in their imaginative play to mediate collaborative activities (Wood and Hall, 2011). Thus, adults working with children can garner a more complete picture by recognising that children communicate through multiple media, including drawings (Gallas, 1994). Indeed, even Vygotsky recognised art and drawings as potential 'mediating tools' that people use to convey thoughts to others (Brooks, 2009). In addition, visual aids are familiar to children as early years teachers often employ comic-like images to communicate with the children. For example, the classroom where the research was conducted used a software, 'Communicate: In Print' to create images for a broad range of uses such as the timetable, the rules, instructions for activities and vocabulary mats.

While photography and video recordings have become popular tools of visual research due to their ability to capture visual details of events (Chesworth, 2018; Moss, 1999; Robson, 2011; Taylor, 2014, 2019), the potential for drawings to express complex ideas and experiences should not be underestimated (Literat, 2013). In research, typically children are asked to draw their experiences of a particular topic that is of interest to the researcher such as perceptions of wellbeing, (Moula et al., 2021), friendship (Carter and Nutbrown, 2016), sexual abuse (Katz and Hamama, 2013), the environment (Alerby, 2000) and learning in the classroom (Lodge, 2007). However, children under the age of eight may find it difficult to produce drawings that incorporate symbols, rules and spatial organisation in order to convey meaning in a way that is useful as primary data (Barraza, 1999; Bland, 2018). The participants in this study were aged 4–6 and therefore may have found it difficult to capture their play through the medium of drawing. Thus, I established process of 'co-producing' drawings with the participants, positioning them as 'design partners' (Messina et al., 2014), where the children engaged in the creation of comics by drawing their self-portraits, informing what should be captured in the comics, commenting on the validity of the comics' content and making suggestions as to where the comics could be improved. The term 'co-production' is used intentionally as it acknowledges that I played a part in producing the cartoons in collaboration with the children (Facca et al., 2020).

An additional benefit of using self-portraits in comics is in relation to ethics and anonymity. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines assert 'the confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research' (BERA, 2018: 21). Flewitt (2005) presents options for displaying visual data of children to avoid participants being identifiable, such as blurring the focus of the photograph or sketching the content of an image. Spencer (2020) challenges the blanket assumption that all children's faces need to be pixelated beyond recognition, arguing this practice is related to the cultural politics of childhood; however, it is clear from Spencer's (2020) discussion the debate is still ongoing. It will be readily appreciated that the comic method described in this article offers an alternative way of capturing

children's body gestures, interactions with materials and movement around a space while maintaining their anonymity, through the use of self-portraits.

There is much discussion among scholars regarding the definitions of terms such as 'cartoons', 'comics' and 'graphic novels' (Earle, 2020). In this instance, the term 'comic' is used as it is an umbrella term for single panel, or sequences of images that tell a narrative (Earle, 2020; McCloud and Lappan, 1994). An extensive review of comics-based research by Kuttner et al. (2021) demonstrates how comics are used across a range of disciplines and at all stages of the research process, from data collection to dissemination of findings. Flowers (2017) used comics to extend her multimodal analysis in ethnographic education research; however, the comics were illustrated by the researcher. Galman (2009) asked pre-service teachers to draw their experiences, leading to the production of powerful self-portraits; however, the participants in this study were adults. The co-production of comics with children to illustrate ethnographic field notes outlined in the article is a novel approach of generating comics in a way that is adapted to suit the age of the participants.

In summary, this brief review of the literature has demonstrated that those working in this field argue that: (a) children should participate in research that relates to them and (b) visual images, such as comics are useful for capturing multimodal data and provide a more accessible format for children when compared to purely verbal or written modes. The comic method presented in this paper builds on the work summarised in this literature review, yet is original in its approach of co-producing comics with children and incorporating their self-portraits into these. The following section explains how the comic method developed through adopting a flexible approach and being ethically responsive during the research with children.

Methodology

The research project's aim was to explore how the intersections between different socio-cultural contexts contribute to children's multimodal communicative practices within a super-diverse environment. The research was conducted over a 12-month period with a class of 30 children, aged four and five at the start of the project. Ethical procedures in accordance with Sheffield University's policy were followed and the children selected their own pseudonyms to conceal their identities. Data was collected predominantly through ethnographic observations, followed by member checking (Lincoln, 1995) and collaborative interpretation of the data (Campbell and Lassiter, 2014). Supplementary data was collected through language portraits where children were asked to visually represent the languages they spoke at home and at school (Fashanu et al., 2019); through interviews with the children's parents about their backgrounds and communicative practices in the home; through official school enrolment documentation and through the gathering of multimodal artefacts created by the children. The data were analysed through constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) as I immersed myself in the data and applied strategies such as memo writing and constant comparison of centrally organising concepts in order to construct themes that fitted together coherently. Constructivist grounded theory holds that 'social reality does not exist independent of human action'

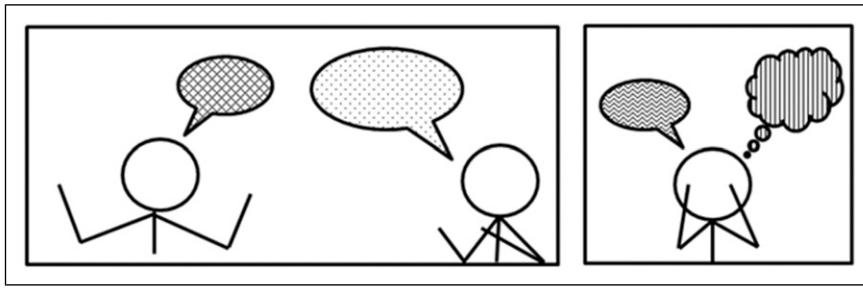

Figure 1. A section from the children's participant information sheet.

(Charmaz, 2006: 521). As such, Charmaz argues that theory is generated through the researcher's interaction with the data. The conversations that were stimulated by constructing the comics with the children led to greater clarity over how the intersections of different socio-cultural contexts impacted the children's communication, and aided the development of salient themes throughout the data analysis process.

In addition to obtaining parents' or guardians' consent, low modality comics, incorporating basic signs, icons and stick figures, were used in a story board to help explain the project when seeking provisional consent from the participants. I recognise it cannot be assumed that all children are universally able to read and understand comics, particularly given the cross-cultural diversity of visual languages and the super-diverse context in which the research took place (Cohn, 2021). Indeed, there were times when the children sought clarification over the meaning of an image; however, the use of iconic imagery, such as speech bubbles and recognisable props such as tables, were incorporated as the symbols and context assisted the children's comprehension of the comic (Aleixo and Norris, 2007). Figure 1 is an excerpt from the participant information sheet provided to the children.

The children were given the opportunity to talk through the comics with me, for example, Aman Ali, a boy from Pakistan who speaks Pashtu at home and English in school, pointed at the character on the right of Figure 1 and said 'That's me!' When asked to explain, he was able to elaborate that he speaks Pashtu and English, although the idea that one language was meant to be represented in a thought bubble and the other in a speech bubble appeared to be a little too abstract for him.

The development of comic-illustrated field notes

Open-ended, exploratory research can be more respectful of participants' voices than tightly pre-planned research as, in the former, participants can be involved in steering the project's direction (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). This approach aligns with constructivist grounded theory which advocates that the researcher try to learn about the research setting and the lives of the participants with an open mind, then going through a process of narrowing down the scope of inquiry and focussing interest on certain topics (Charmaz, 2006). In line with constructivism, when conducting research with children, uncertainty is

not only inevitable (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008), it is to be embraced in what Chesworth (2018) calls 'ethical responsiveness to uncertainty'. With these ideas in mind, I embarked on the data collection phase of the research with a loose plan, while remaining consciously open to the children's suggestions. This led to the development of the comics using children's self-portraits to visually portray my written observations of the children.

Once the research had begun, I attempted to share my observation notes with the participants and invite them to engage in 'member checking', a practice that is widely used in qualitative research to verify the researcher has represented perspectives and experiences accurately (Birt et al., 2016; Harvey, 2015; Liedenberg, Jamal & Ikeda, 2020; Lincoln, 1995). However, the children struggled to understand that my written notes were an account of the events that had just taken place and also found it difficult to connect real world events with my descriptions of these. For example, once I observed Trini, a boy of Somali descent who had a speech language delay and Ali, a boy from Iraq who spoke Arabic and, at the time of the observation, spoke very little English. The following excerpt from the field notes describes the scene:

> Ali and Trini walking around the room deciding which activity to choose. Neither uses words, instead they use a range of non-verbal communication- holding hands as they walk and taking each other to different areas of the classroom, eye contact, smiles, they look at the construction and Ali shrugs shoulders, Trini shrugs his shoulders in return, and they move on to the writing area.

The event was significant as there was no verbal interaction; however, the children were communicating clearly by using a range of multimodal resources. Once the children had settled into their task at the writing area, I approached them as asked them about their walk around the classroom, but neither Ali not Trini understood what I was trying to explain to them. Moments like this were frequent and it became clear that I would need to communicate the observations with the children through a different mode in order to make the field notes accessible to the children.

As a result, I began to sketch the observations and share these with the children at a convenient time soon after the event was recorded, but after the event had come to a natural end so as not to interrupt the flow of the children's interactions. The sketches were first shared with the children for their immediate feedback. After the children had commented on the scene, I used Microsoft Publisher to formalise the drawings into a more presentable format. This is demonstrated in the example (see Figure 2) in which Elsa and Naan, both children from Pakistani, Urdu speaking, families are playing in the classroom. Elsa is lying on a table, pretending to sleep while Naan is pretending to look after her.

After the children's play had come to an end, I shared the comic with the participants, who were then able to explain the word 'dudu' is the Urdu word for a baby's milk bottle. Thus, using basic sketches of their play provided a more fruitful means of involving the children in the analysis of the scene, which in turn allowed me to deepen my understanding of the events.

A few months after the research began, a pivotal moment occurred. I sketched a group of children playing a traditional 'elimination game' in which the person who is 'it' chants

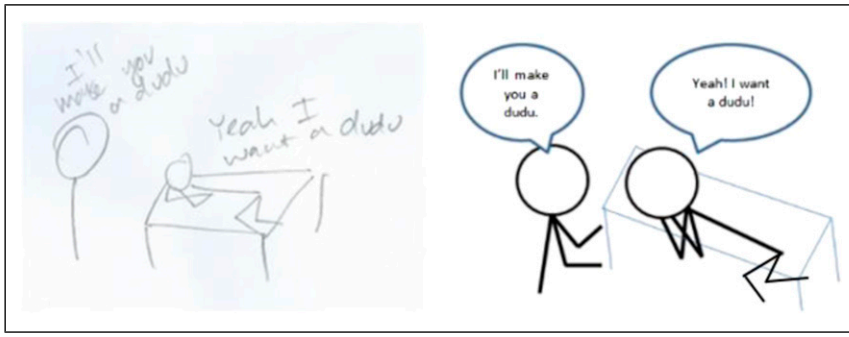

Figure 2. Comic sketch from my observations and formalised version of the comic.

'black shoe black shoe, change your black shoe' while pointing at the shoes of the others in the circle. Players are eliminated one by one if the finger points at their shoe at the end of the refrain (Figure 3). After the game had finished, I showed the sketch to the children and 'Cinderella' pointed to the stick figure that represented her and exclaimed 'that's not me!'. She then took my pencil and drew her own self-portrait proclaiming 'that is me!' (Bottom right corner, Figure 3). Cinderella made it clear how important it was to her to be able to identify herself in the image and I saw an opportunity to deepen the children's participation by co-producing the comics. I then gathered children in small groups of up to 5, gave each one a piece of paper and asked them to draw a self-portrait. I explained I would incorporate their self-portrait into the comics instead of the stick figures, such as the example below (Figure 3):

From that moment on, the children's engagement in the research deepened as it appeared they felt more ownership over the comics that contained their self-portraits and were more outspoken about how my depiction of events could be improved. The conversations generated by the comics also became richer, leading me to deepen my understanding of events, and helping to ensure greater trustworthiness as the

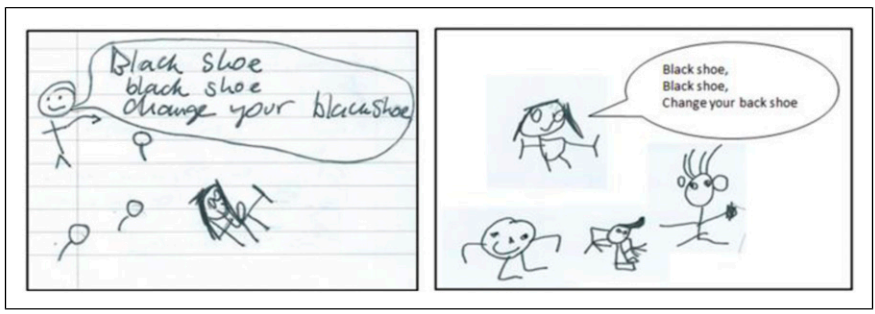

Figure 3. Cinderella's self-portrait and revised comic with self-portraits.

representations of the children's activities were more accurate, as the following examples will demonstrate.

How the comics enhanced participatory research

The following vignettes are examples of how the comics increased the children's participation and led to uncovering deeper insights into their communicative practices. The examples demonstrate how comics were used to translate the written ethnographic field notes into visual images that were accessible to the participants noting that children become 'fluent' in the language of drawing from a very young age (Anning and Ring, 2004). The resultant conversations provoked by the comics uncovered richer information and led to more accurate representations of the children's communicative practices and lives in the super-diverse community.

Making snails

The first vignette demonstrates how I was able to uncover new information about languages spoken by one of the participants through the use of a comic-illustrated field observation. In this vignette two children are playing in the construction area: Aman Ali and Naan. Aman Ali's mother and brothers moved from Pakistan to Sheffield when he was aged one in order to join his father who had been living here for 8 years. Even though his father and brothers speak very good English, his mother does not. Aman Ali speaks English at a very proficient level in school and when asked about languages in the home, Aman Ali stated that he speaks Pashtu with his family. Similarly, Naan's family is from Pakistan, although he was born in UK. He speaks Urdu at home, but speaks English very confidently with his siblings at school.

The children were constructing a snail together out of blocks in the construction area. The children were discussing their activity in a language other than English. As outlined in the methodology, I spoke to parents, children and consulted official school enrolment forms to find out which languages were spoken in the home, to what extent and by whom. Up until this point, all sources had stated that Aman Ali spoke Pashtu and Naan spoke Urdu. Thus, it struck me as interesting that the two boys were in deep conversation, but each spoke a different language to the other. I enquired if they understood each other, to which Aman Ali very clearly responded that he was speaking Pashtu. He then asked Naan if he knows how to speak Pashtu, to which Naan replied no, he was speaking Urdu (Figure 4).

The vignette was puzzling as the children appeared to be in dialogue with one another, yet when asked, they claimed to be speaking different languages. I re-visited the scene with the participants by showing them the cartoon again and asked the children to explain how they were able to play together and hold a conversation when they were speaking different languages. Aman Ali suddenly confided 'I speak Urdu as well'. That Aman Ali spoke Urdu came as a surprise as, up until this point, all the data gathered from multiple sources, including through language portraits and interviews with the parents suggested

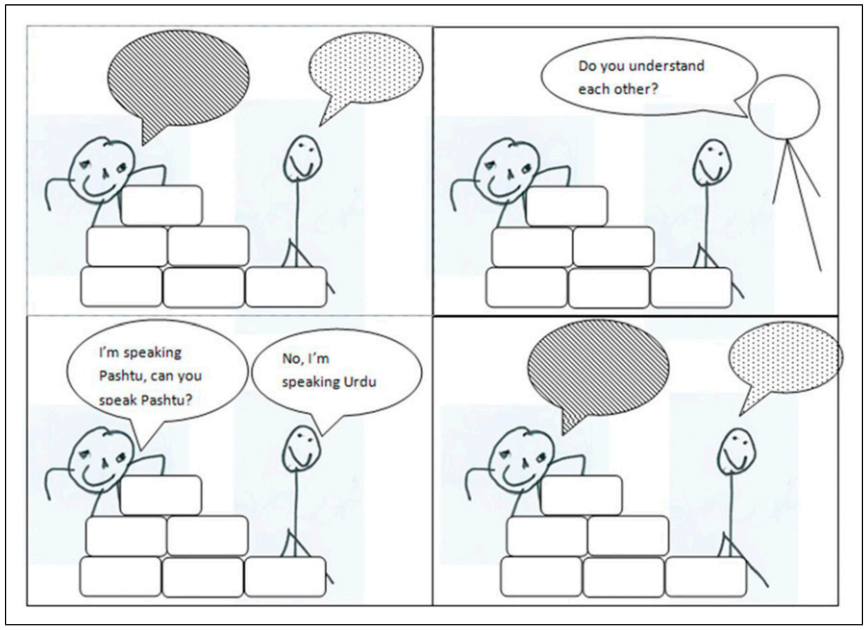

Figure 4. Making snails in the construction area.

that Aman Ali spoke only Pashtu and English, with no mention of Urdu. Proponents of visual research methods argue that the use of visual stimuli elicits different information that may not have been uncovered through purely verbal means (Noyes, 2008). That was very much the case in moments such as this where the data was enriched by the deeper conversations that were generated by the comics, and as a consequence, I was able to portray the reality of Aman Ali's communicative practices in a super-diverse environment more accurately.

This was not an isolated incident. There were several occasions throughout the research when I documented children speaking languages that had not been revealed by any other source of data collection, and were only brought to light as a result of the discussion of the comic depicting the event. This led to the construction of a theme around 'concealing home languages' (Fashanu et al., 2019), highlighting the fact that children actively choose to 'claim, downplay or simply ignore ethnic affiliations' according to the situation (Huber and Spyrou, 2012: 299). The children's concealment of home languages was pertinent to the overarching research that aimed to better understand how the intersections between different socio-cultural contexts contribute to children's multimodal communicative practices within a super-diverse environment. Crucially, the comics were the catalyst that inspired children to speak about the languages, and were it not for the comics, I would have relied upon data from the parents' interviews, the school enrolment data and the children's language portraits all of which failed to reveal the actual extent of the children's multilingual capabilities.

Doing the 'burtun'

The following vignette shows two children, Elsa and Caterpillar, who are from Pakistani families but have lived in the UK all their lives. They are in the outdoor kitchen area pretending to make tea and they offer me a cup. When they have finished Elsa said, 'I'm going to do the "burtun" and Caterpillar said that he will help, evidently understanding the word "burtun"'. The two children turned to the plastic tub and began to 'wash the dishes' with imaginary soap and water (Figure 5):

I asked the children what 'burtun' meant, and the children responded that it means 'washing the pots', and they explicitly reflected on their understanding of the word and also explained who in their family spoke Urdu (Figure 6):

With the children's permission, I showed the comic to the other participants in the study and asked what was happening. The children understood and were able to recognise Caterpillar and Elsa's play activity from their position and interaction with the objects in the comic. I then read the writing in the speech bubbles aloud and this immediately sparked a debate among the 11 Pakistani children in the class as to what the word 'burtun' means (the dishes, the pots, the washing up), which member of their family calls it 'burtun' (mostly grandparents it would appear) and whether their family called it 'burtun' or 'paandhay' (a more 'correct' Urdu term). This lead to further conversations around which family members speak Urdu (also referred to as 'my home language', 'Muslim' and 'Pakistani' by the children) and the other, non-Urdu speaking children talking about their languages.

This vignette demonstrates how the comic was used to elicit further information and instigate discussions around the research focus, exploring how the intersections between different socio-cultural contexts contribute to children's multimodal communicative practices within a super-diverse environment. The findings from this episode were relevant to a theme that was constructed around 'home and family' that revealed how the

Figure 5. Playing in the outdoor kitchen area.

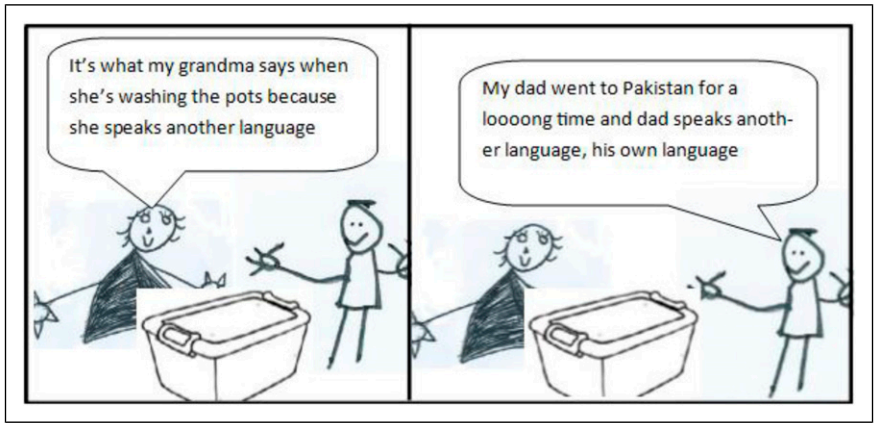

Figure 6. Burtun means 'washing the pots'.

children had complex truncated multilingual repertoires (Blommaert, 2010) and amassed funds of knowledge through participating in activities in the home environment (Rogoff, 2003).

Transforming the 'Spider-Man' gesture

As the period of research developed, I adopted the view that communicative resources are not static, external semiotic symbols, but rather that they are dynamic in that they are continually applied in new contexts with different intentions (Bakhtin, 1975; Roffey et al., 1994; Rogoff, 1995) . Therefore, a significant theme related to how the children 'transformed' communicative resources by giving them *new* meanings and applying them in *new* ways. A clear example of this was the children appropriating the 'Spider-Man-shooting-a-web' gesture for their own purposes (Figure 7):

The children perfected this movement and used it regularly in many different situations. During playtime, the children could be seen charging from one end of the playground to the other, performing the Spider-Man gesture as if they were shooting webs to the surrounding buildings to help them travel. The children also used the Spider-Man gesture as a greeting to one another as they passed in the classroom or in other spaces such as the dinner hall. The gesture also became a symbol for 'spider', so when the children were learning about insects, commonly named 'minibeasts' in Reception, they would use the Spider-Man gesture whenever the word or a picture of a spider appeared. While on the carpet, the children were supposed to be sitting quietly and paying attention to the teacher; however, the Spider-Man gesture gave the children the means to communicate subtly with each other without detection.

The origins of the gesture's use among the participants could be traced to Darth Vader, a Roma Slovak boy and Minion, a girl from Libya. Both children struggled to communicate in spoken English (Darth Vader was learning English as his third language after Romani and Slovak, whilst Minion spoke Arabic as her first language and had significant

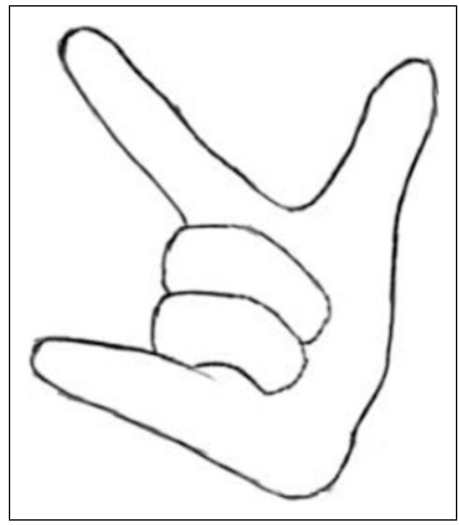

Figure 7. Spider-Man-shooting-a-web gesture.

learning difficulties as well). Towards the start of the data collection, Darth Vader and Minion were observed shooting spider webs at each other as they entered the Teaching Assistant's room. Later that day, Darth Vader and Minion were sitting on the carpet with Trini, a boy from a Somali background who had a speech language delay. Darth Vader and Minion began shooting webs at each other and Trini asked them what they were doing, to which they responded 'Spider-Man'. Jason, who was born in Sheffield yet spoke French and Swahili in addition to English, was wearing Spider-Man socks, showed his socks to Trini who then understood what the gesture was. Darth Vader and Minion taught Trini how to do the gesture and, from that moment on, Trini could be seen doing to Spider-Man gesture to friends in different contexts.

The multimodal gesture thus superseded the need for verbal communication and, as such, became popular amongst the participants, particularly those who were not yet confident speakers of English. Over the year, the Spider-man-shooting-a-web gesture spread throughout the class and continued to be used by the children after they transitioned into Year One. When a new child joined the class, he or she was introduced to the gesture and soon adopted the practice of shooting webs at other children in the class. For one child in particular, Rocky, the Spider-Man gesture was especially significant. Rocky was an Oromo-speaking refugee from Ethiopia who joined the class in the Autumn term of Year One, and who spoke no English when he arrived. As the only other person in the school who spoke Oromo was a girl in Year Four, the absence of a common language meant that Rocky was initially somewhat isolated from his peers. In addition, Rocky had no prior experience of formal rules at school and he struggled to navigate the new routines and expectations. However, Rocky understood the Spider-Man gesture from the start and he would frequently shoot webs at people in his group (which included Minion, Darth Vader and Trini) as they sat at their table in the Year One classroom (Figure 8):

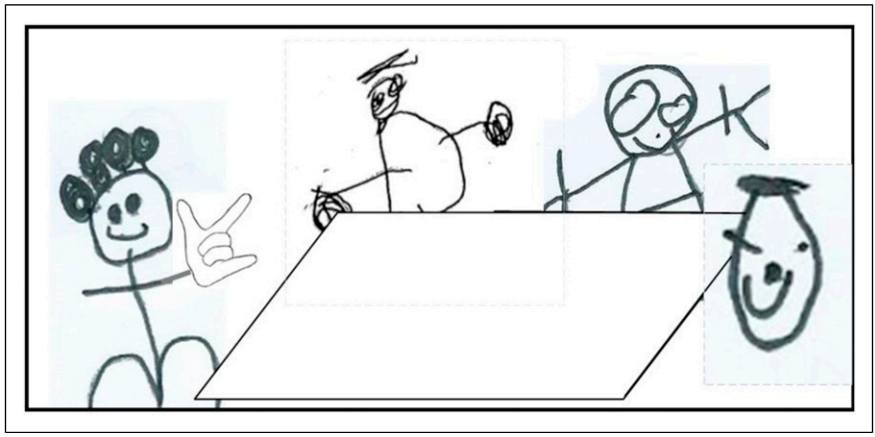

Figure 8. Rocky shooting spider webs.

Once the scene had been drawn up into a comic using the children's self-portraits, I showed the comic to Rocky for comment. At this point Rocky spoke very little English, yet he looked at the comic and understood what was being conveyed. Rocky smiled, pointed to his self-portrait in the comic and began to shoot spider webs at Darth Vader, who return the gesture and said 'Rocky my friend'.

The episode was relevant to the overarching research as it demonstrated how the Spider-Man-shooting-a-web gesture became a stable form of interaction amongst the participants, and contributed to their unique peer culture (Corsaro, 1988; Corsaro and Eder, 1990). The frequent occurrence of the gesture underscored the significance of multimodal forms of communication (Kress and Street, 2006), particularly among children who found it difficult to communicate verbally in English. Importantly, the comic enabled me to begin to open up dialogue for the purposes of member checking as the visual image conveyed to Rocky summarised what was being recorded in a way that could not have been achieved through purely verbal or written language.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how comics were co-produced with the participants in order to enhance ethnographic research around young children's multimodal communicative practices in a super-diverse, early years setting. The term 'co-produced' is used intentionally as it adopts the perspective that children are experts on their own lives (Tisdall, 2017) yet simultaneously recognises that, ultimately, I played a part in creating the comics (Facca et al., 2020). The inclusion of children's self-portraits meant the comics were more engaging and held greater personal significance for the participants. Consistent with the findings of previous visual research conducted with children (Kaplan, 2008; Leitch, 2008; Noyes, 2008; Thomson, 2008; Walton and Niblett, 2012), the comics opened up spaces for dialogue around the events that had been captured in the vignette, leading me to

uncover deeper insights that were pertinent to the research. Using self-portraits mean the children were able to identify themselves in the comics, while maintaining the participants' anonymity. Finally, the comics allowed the children to access my field notes as their format was easily understood by the children, regardless of their age or level of understanding.

Despite the many benefits of using the comics to illustrate the research observations, there were also some limitations. The first is that member checking requires some form of dialogue. While the comics greatly assisted in conveying my observations, the participants' responses relied to an extent on verbal commentary (apart from Rocky for whom a verbal a response in English was not an option at that time).

In short, the examples presented in this paper (and throughout the larger research project) demonstrate that comics are an effective tool to facilitate dialogue between the researcher and participants. However, further research could usefully be undertaken to extend this work even further and explore how the comics could assist researchers and young children who do not share a language can participate more meaningfully in member checking. The other limitation to this method is that the creation of comics was laborious in comparison to typing up observation notes. I had the luxury of spending a year collecting data; however, it is acknowledged that in reality the data collection is often more restricted by time constraints. Alternative approaches to creating the comics could be explored, for example by cutting out the children's self-portraits and using a whiteboard to draw the environment and resources, then physically placing the children's avatars in the scene. Such an adaptation has the potential to save the researcher significant time whilst also enabling the children to become even more involved in the creation of the comics; however, this approach would need to be trialled in order to test this hypothesis.

In summary, this paper has demonstrated how remaining flexible and open to suggestions from the research participants (i.e. the children) meant that the researcher was able to adapt the way data was collected from their original plan. Such as 'ethical responsiveness' (Chesworth, 2018) led to a more collaborative piece of research with increased trustworthiness in relation to its findings. This has important implications for any research that endeavours to listen to the participants' perspectives, but where verbal or written forms of communication are impeded.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number 140218037].

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