

“You Can’t Draw on Air” : Stretches and Sketches

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Abstract

The paper describes an investigation of yoga stretches with four- and five-year-olds. The teachers explored the notion of design (Forman & Fyfe, 1998) by inviting children to draw pictures of yoga stretches in order to teach others how to do the stretch. The paper includes an analysis of ways children approached the problem of drawing motion, and demonstrates the role that documentation (e.g., videotapes, children’s drawings, and transcripts) played in supporting the investigation.

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Introduction

Imagine an adult and child playing a game of catch. The adult throws the ball to the child and observes how he catches (or does not catch) it. The next time she throws the ball, she makes adjustments, such as throwing it with less force, throwing it directly at the child, or throwing it higher in the air. The child in

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turn makes slight changes to how he catches and throws the ball, perhaps moving toward the ball, rather than expecting the ball to come directly to him, or hugging the ball to his chest so it doesn’t fall. Throughout the game, the adult observes the child and modifies how she throws the ball, either to support what the child can do, or to challenge the child to improve his skills. As they play, the child improves his skills and the adult learns about how the child catches and throws balls.

In the Reggio approach to early childhood education, teachers and children are said to play a similar game (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 68). The teacher sets out provocations for the children, and then, using a variety of tools, carefully observes and documents the children’s responses. For example, teachers may take photographs or slides, tape record and transcribe conversations, collect children’s art work, make observational notes and sketches, and/or videotape children. In teaching, more than in a game of catch, it is critical to slow time down through such documentation in order to reflect on and understand children’s ideas and keep them in play. According to Gandini, by studying the documentation teachers

can make predictions and develop hypotheses about the children’s and [their] own interests, questions and understandings. [They] can examine the directions in which the children seem interested in going and how, or if, [they] think [they] can assist them. ... The curriculum is seen as emerging from the teachers’ observations of the ideas and interests of children, but is also shaped by what teachers think will contribute to the children’s growth. (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001, p.128).

Teaching, inspired by the Reggio approach is thus an informed negotiation of provocations and responses between teachers and children.

In this article, we describe a yoga investigation that took place in the context of a Reggio-influenced classroom of twenty-four and five-year-olds in which documentation is common practice.¹ Our first goal is to demonstrate and communicate the role that documentation of classroom activity can play in understanding and building on children's work and ideas. Our second goal is to analyze the children's drawings in detail in order to show the different ways the children drew motion and thereby reveal how capable young children are.

We begin by describing how the yoga investigation began. We then look more closely at one thread of the investigation that focused on one of the yoga stretches. Next we analyze some of the children's drawings and discuss the different ways they drew motion. Finally, we examine the role that documentation played in the investigation.

How the Yoga Investigation Began

In November 2000, we introduced breathing stretches at the beginning of our morning circle time. We hoped that the combination of breathing and movement would calm the children and increase their attentiveness. After learning a few stretches, the children became interested in inventing their own stretches. We let them teach us their invented stretches, but discovered that these stretches lost their centering quality. We wanted to support their interest, but not at circle time.

In late February 2001, a parent, Chivas Sandage, volunteered to teach some yoga poses and stretches first to the whole class, then to small groups of children. She and her daughter taught us a variety of stretches, including the Flamingo, the Butterfly, the Child's Pose, and the Triangle. At the end of the

sessions, Chivas gave the children time to demonstrate and teach their own invented stretches. For example, Lillian² bent forward and placed both hands on the floor. Then she extended one leg up into the air as far as she could stretch. She held this pose for a while and then brought her leg back down returning to its original place. She then alternated legs and performed the stretch again. Matthew rolled his body across the floor, balancing his weight on his arms and legs.

Around this time, we read an article by Forman and Fyfe (1998) on negotiated learning. They make a distinction between description and design. A design can be in many media, such as drawing, clay, or wire. In the case of a drawing, a design

is made in order to build something or instruct someone on how to do something. The designer needs to capture action in the marks and needs to help a new reader discern these implied actions. Somehow the "reader" must translate the marks on the paper into a set of acts in order to accomplish the desired result. ... The design also includes marks that carry a message of action and sequence that is more than a static record of the features of a stationary object. Arrows, numbers, and a row of progressive drawings are some common techniques of representing actions. (p. 244)

For example, a description would be to draw an airplane. A design on the other hand, would be to draw directions for folding a paper airplane.

The children's interest in stretches seemed like a perfect forum to explore this notion of design. I decided to ask the

children to draw a stretch in order to communicate to others how to do it. Up to this point, some children had done observational drawings of two- and three-dimensional static objects, such as leaves, seeds, and self-portraits. They also had ample opportunity to draw with markers, crayons, pens, and colored pencils during our activity times. They made birthday cards for each other, illustrated stories and created spontaneous drawings. The children differed greatly in their levels of comfort with drawing ranging from disinterest (at least at school) and a high level of frustration to frequently choosing to draw and adding many details. In some instances we saw children drawing for the first time as they participated in the yoga investigation.

Two threads emerged and overlapped in the investigation. One thread focused on the children's invented stretches. A classmate from a course on documentation videotaped me working on invented stretches with a small group, as well as one of the parent's sessions. We then showed video clips of the invented stretches to a group of children – not all of whom were involved in the videotape – and asked them to draw pictures to teach somebody how to do their stretch. In the other thread, children, in small groups, all drew the *same* stretch, a stretch with which they were very familiar.

The Volcano Stretch

Although having children teach their invented stretches was appealing, it reduced the centering quality that we were seeking. We decided to learn a few yoga stretches very well for use at circle time. In the second thread of the investigation, I decided to ask the children to draw one of these stretches, called the Volcano.

The Volcano stretch begins by standing

¹ In the paper, use of the first person singular refers to the first author, the teacher who initiated, documented and directed the yoga investigation. The second author was the co-teacher in the classroom, who with the third author aided in the preparation of this article.

² We have provided pseudonyms for the children.

with your legs together and your arms fully bent at the elbow, held horizontally in front of your chest with the fingertips touching. You then “jump out” in one movement so that your legs are at shoulder’s width (making an inverted V) and your arms extend straight out from the shoulders. Next you drop your arms to your sides and bring them up, with palms touching, in front of your chest, continuing up past your face until they are above your head. As the arms go up over the head, you also make a “shhh” sound of an erupting volcano. You then separate your hands, pushing them away from each other and bringing them back down to your sides. This circular arm movement may be repeated several times. When the arms come against the sides the last time, you jump back so your legs are together again (see Figure 1). We found that we needed to do this entire stretch at least five times to achieve the desired effect at circle time.

I thought that it might help the children to have some visual images to use. A video camera was not yet available so I took a series of photographs of the stretch at different points in the movement. A child performed the stretch and told me when to take the photographs (see Figure 1). These photographs and a full-length mirror were available to the children as they made their own drawings of the stretch.

As with the invented stretches, I asked this small group to draw pictures to teach someone the stretch.

I then took the children’s drawings of the Volcano stretch, including Figures 5b and 9, to the Pioneer Valley Teacher Research Collaborative, a group of infant, toddler and preschool teachers and researchers interested in exploring uses of classroom documentation. Members of the Collaborative unfamiliar with the stretch attempted to do the stretch based on the children’s drawings. I wished we had had a video camera. I realized too late that this would provide

the children with important feedback on their drawings. Partly because this was such a wonderful experience, my co-teachers and I brought these drawings to a meeting with a few parents and our director and invited them to interpret the drawings. This time we were prepared with a video camera and filmed their attempts to do the stretches (see Figure 2).

The parents had many questions about the drawings. “What do the squiggly arms mean?” “Is there jumping involved?” “Is that jumping up in the air?” “Is that a wave?” “Are these all the same one?” “Are we close?” “I don’t know what we’re doing with our legs.”



Figure 2. Still taken from a video of parents and director using the children’s drawings of the Volcano stretch to figure out how to do the stretch. The children later watched this video and critiqued the adults’ attempts.



Figure 1. Photographs of Sarafina performing the Volcano stretch. She told Marilyn at what points in the stretch to take the photographs. These photographs were available to children as they drew the Volcano stretch.

Next we showed small groups of children the videotape of their parents' attempts to use the drawings to reproduce the stretch. We thought the parents had grasped the basic idea of the stretch even if they did not get all the details. They started with the arms in front of the chest and then moved to an outstretched position. They also understood that the arms moved in a circular motion and are above the head at some point. The children, however, were quite critical. "They are so wrong!" one child exclaimed. They noticed many details – that the parents began the stretch with their palms together rather than just their fingertips touching, that they placed their hands on top of each other instead of touching their fingertips, that their arms were going "backwards" (i.e. the arms are supposed to come down in an arch away from the body whereas the parents brought them down in front of their bodies), and that the parents did the "jumping out" in two movements (moving first their arms and then their legs). The children also noticed that the parents' fingers were interlaced above their heads, and recognized this interlacing as part of another stretch. The children were less explicit about what the parents did right!

After watching the video, we invited the children to draw new pictures to answer the parents' questions. Our idea was that children would revise their drawings.

However, some children entered the drawing activity for the first time at this point and therefore did not have drawings to revise. These children drew the Volcano stretch for the first time, while others created a second set. Unfortunately, the school year ended before I could show these new drawings to the parents, or ask parents to draw stretches for the children to interpret.

Methods of Drawing Motion

When I asked children to draw either the Volcano stretch or their invented stretch, I was particularly curious to see how they would draw motion. I discovered that they had different methods.

The first and most common method was to create a sequence of drawings. Petra drew each of these nine figures on separate sheets of paper (see Figure 3). What I find particularly interesting about this sequence is that Petra drew the second figure first. She carefully worked on the short sleeved tunic, adding dots, stripes and a solid section. She then realized that these details did not convey essential information about the stretch. The second figure has more details, but the others may actually reflect a refined understanding of the purpose of schematic drawings, in which clothing is not necessarily relevant when communicating motion.

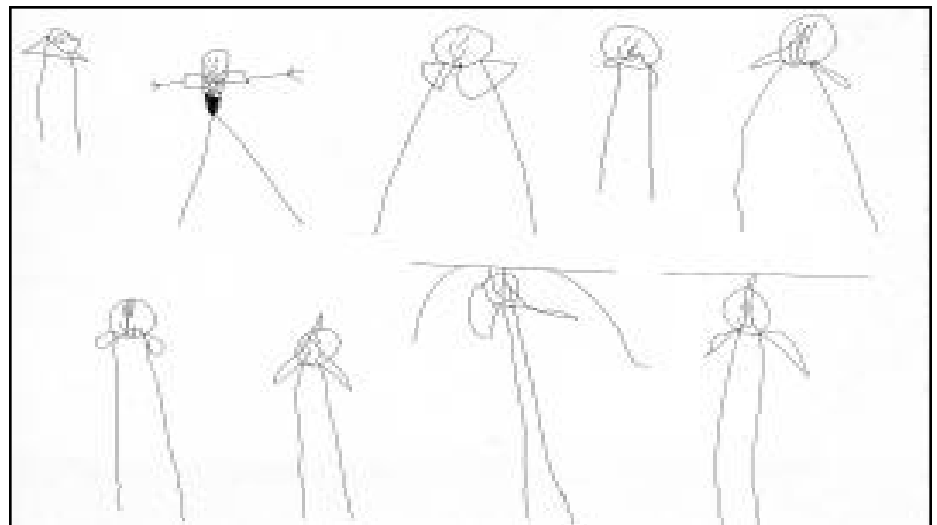


Figure 3. Petra's drawings of the Volcano stretch. She drew each figure on a separate 8.5" x 11" sheet of paper. (The horizontal lines on the top of the last two figures outline the edge of the clip on Petra's clipboard.)



Other children also made choices about which details were important to include. They also focused on different things at different points. At some points, showing the hands was not considered important and at other points it was. For example, at one point Sarafina asked, “You don’t have to draw the fingers, though, right?” When Michael watched the video of the parents, however, he noticed that they started with their hands on top of each other rather than with their fingertips touching. I reminded him of this observation while he was drawing and he redrew it to articulate the fingers.

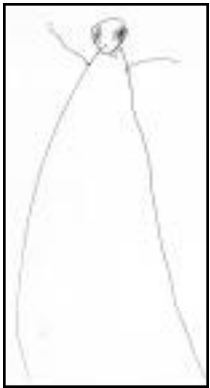


Figure 4.
Nathan's drawing
of the “jumped
out” position.

The Volcano stretch involves not only motion, but also repetition. We usually did the circular arm motion three times. After drawing her eighth figure, Petra explained that the curved lines on either side of the figure show that you put your arms down and then do it again. She then drew a ninth figure similar to the eighth one, only without the curved lines. It seems that by repeating this image, Petra expected the “reader” to understand that they would have to repeat the motion.

A second method was to just choose one moment of the stretch. Nathan drew this picture (see Figure 4). Our conversation about this picture went like this:

Marilyn: So what’s this person doing?

Nathan: Jumpin’ out.

Marilyn: Uh-huh. Is that all the parents need to know?

Nathan: No, I’m gonna put more pieces of paper on.

Marilyn: Oh, great. There’s some more paper over there.

Nathan: No, but I’m gonna do it at home.

Nathan showed me that he would add drawings on each side of this one. He understood that he had not depicted the entire stretch. Perhaps saying that he would do it at home was a graceful way to say he didn’t know how, and/or that he had had enough.

It seems significant that Nathan chose to draw this particular “jumped out” moment. For one thing, it is a moment of high drama in the stretch. Also, from my own observation, children’s spontaneous drawings of people typically depict the person standing with outstretched arms and legs. In her study of children drawing, Goodnow (1977) discovered that many children appear to operate under a principle that each object in the drawing should have its own space, and avoid overlapping spaces. When people are “jumped out” in the Volcano stretch, parts of the body do not overlap.

I was not just asking the children to draw a person, but figures doing a particular stretch. This meant drawing arms and hands in ways that were new to them. Throughout, the children focused a lot more on the arms than on the legs. Indeed, the arms are active, whereas the legs only jump out once and then stay that way until jumping back at the very end.

Some of the children were comfortable drawing the arms in front of the chest as well as the person in the “jumped out” position, but when it came time to draw the arms above the head, they said, “I can’t do it,” “I need help drawing the rest,” or “I need a lot of help with this.” Another tricky point was to draw the hands and arms in front of the face. Petra drew three figures (see Figure 3) and then wanted to stop. I asked her what would happen after the third drawing.

Petra: I can’t draw that because or else, that the hands are gonna be in the face.

Marilyn: What do you mean, the hands are gonna be in space?

Petra: Hide the face. She demonstrates what she means by covering her nose and mouth with her hands.

Marilyn: Is it okay if the hands hide the face?

Petra: Ah, no, I don’t know how to draw that.

In order to deal with this challenge, I asked another child to pose for Petra who then figured out how to draw the hands in front of the face. In addition to human models, the children also made use of photographs and video tape of children doing the stretches, a full-length mirror, and their own experiences in stretching their own bodies.

A third method of drawing motion was to incorporate all the information into one picture. Kaisha drew a stick figure with the arms together in front of the chest (see Figure 5a), and wrote THAS-ZOSTRACH (This is a stretch). I asked her to show me with her body what she had just drawn. Kaisha demonstrated the starting position, with the arms in front of the chest. “Okay, so what’s the next thing that you need to do with your body to show them how to do it?” I asked. Kaisha jumped out and then demonstrated the circular movement of the arms and made the volcano sounds. “So how would you draw this?” I challenged her, putting the ball back in her court. Kaisha then added arc lines to the stick figure in order to show the path along which the arms move (see Figure 5b). Although it



Figure 5a.
A reconstruction
of Kaisha's initial
drawing of the
Volcano stretch.

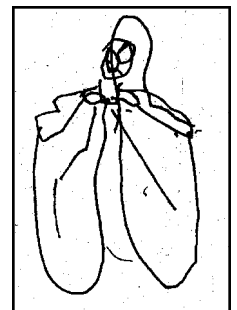


Figure 5b.
Kaisha's final drawing of the Volcano
stretch after our conversation.

George drew his invented stretch after revisiting it on the video (see Figure 6). In his stretch, he sat on the floor with his legs bent at the knee and his arms out



Figure 6.

George's drawing of his invented stretch.

behind him. He then extended one leg at the knee and released it in a kicking motion. His drawing shows one enclosed shape that represents the whole body, and two legs. One of the legs appears to be raised and has a zigzagged line coming out of the foot. This zigzagged line may not actually represent any part of his body, but rather embodies the action and movement of how his leg moves up and down during the stretch (Webster & Schwartzman, 2001).

The oldest child in our room, Steve, often refused to draw and when he did, he grew frustrated very quickly. He joined our investigation when we showed the children the video of them doing their invented stretches. He was not, however, on the video. He invented a stretch that begins with the hands, palms together, in front of the mouth. Keeping the palms together, he extended

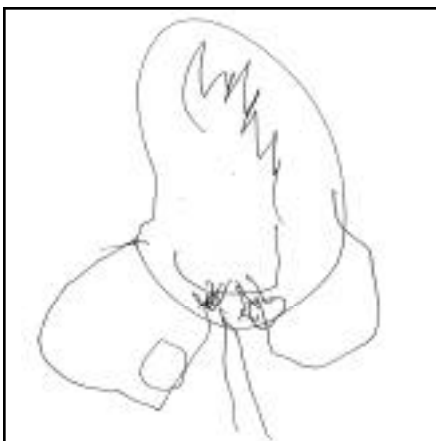


Figure 7.

Steve's drawing of his invented stretch.

the arms straight out and exhaled. He brought his hands back to the original position as he inhaled and then repeated this sequence a few times.

In his drawing (see Figure 7), Steve focused on the position of his arms and hands when they are in front of his mouth, but did not articulate the movement of his arms and hands. Although Steve called the circle on the left arm a "mistake", my classmate and I noticed the similarity of this circle to the hands and wondered if this circle was an attempt to show the movement of the hands in more than one position. I revisited the drawing with Steve and asked him how he could show the movement of the arms.

Steve: That's hard 'cause you can't have three arms! And four arms!

Marilyn: Why would you need four arms?

Steve: 'Cause in, out, in, out is hard. ... And besides they're not going to be going straight out and you can't draw on air.

It seems that, according to Steve, one way to show the motion would be to draw several stages of the stretch in one drawing and the idea of drawing several arms conflicted with his knowledge that a person only has two arms. He anticipated that a drawing of a person with multiple arms would be ambiguous. Steve also recognized the challenge of compressing a three-dimensional object into two dimensions. When the arms are extended out, they do not touch the face. This would require drawing them in the air above the piece of paper (Webster & Schwartzman, 2001).

Haylen, a much younger child with little drawing experience, did not think multiple limbs would be ambiguous. He drew a figure with four legs – the legs together and the legs in the "jumped out" position (see Figure 8).

These three methods were used either alone or in combination. Matthew (see Figure 9) drew two pictures, each depicting a discrete, static moment in the stretch. He then drew a third picture showing the circular motion of the arms.

In his fourth picture, he added the sound of the volcano, "SSSS". When we presented his pictures to adults to interpret, they often mistook the curved lines of the S to indicate a wiggling, waving motion.

Regardless of the method the children chose to show motion, they each grappled with the idea that they would not be present at another person's learning moment. According to Forman and Fyfe, a design should "instruct someone on how to do something" (1998, p. 244). I felt it was initially hard for the children to understand this notion of teaching – or drawing for – someone not present. In order to teach someone a stretch, you need to anticipate the needs of the learner. If a learner is present, you might slow down, explain what you are doing, and check that she is following and understanding what you are asking her to do. The problem of anticipating what a learner might need from an instructional drawing when you are not there to explain it is formidable. In both threads of the investigation, the children's response to the idea of teaching a stretch was often, "I'll just show them."



Figure 8.

Haylen's drawing of the Volcano stretch. The two long vertical lines at the bottom of the drawing represent the "jumped out" legs. In between these vertical lines are a shorter vertical line and a dark squiggle to the left of it, representing the legs together.

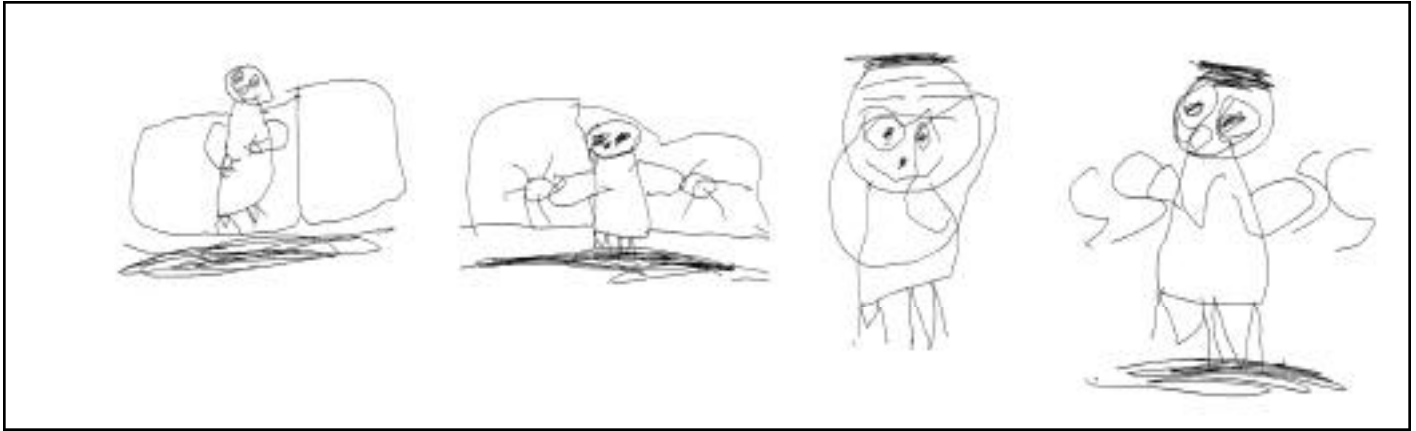


Figure 9.

Matthew's drawing of the Volcano stretch. He drew each figure on a separate 8.5" x 11" sheet of paper.

Watching the adults on the video interpret the drawings in the children's absence helped some children understand the idea of teaching someone not there. For example, while watching the video, I commented, "I wonder what made them think they were supposed to do waves." Michael responded "Maybe one of the pictures told them."

As noted earlier, the most common method the children used to teach the stretch was to create a sequence of drawings. Forman and Fyfe state: "Arrows, numbers, and a row of progressive drawings are some common techniques of representing actions" (1998, p. 244). I believe that, having read the article prior to beginning the investigation, I was expecting children to draw sequences. The day I started this project, I tried to get the children to break the stretch down into parts. I asked them "Will one picture be enough?" Many of my questions implied sequence, e.g. "So what's next?" Several of the children took up these provocations as I expected; they even made the sequences from left to right, as one would read in English. Looking closely at the drawings and discussing them with others highlighted the richness within the sequences. These discussions also helped me appreciate the other ways the children approached drawing motion. As a result, I tried to phrase

things in more open-ended ways: "Is that all the parents need to know?"

Even when one anticipates a learner's needs, there is no guarantee that the symbols one chooses to use will be interpreted as intended. Symbols, although they may have conventional uses and associations, do not carry their meanings with them. For example, Matthew used Ss to indicate the Volcano sound (see Figure 9). Several adults interpreted these Ss as wavy arm motions. George, in fact, used a zigzag line to indicate foot motion in his drawing (see Figure 6). Taking documentation from the children to adults and back again to the children was crucial both in developing our understanding of the languages of the children's drawings and in demonstrating to the children the power and problems of representation.

The Roles and Forms of Documentation in the Investigation

Documentation records a moment in time and contains details that easily fade from memory, thus enabling children, teachers and parents to revisit it and delve deeper into an investigation. For example, it would have been less powerful had we simply told the children about the parents' attempts to "read" their drawings. As mentioned earlier, we teachers felt that the parents had done rather well, but the children noticed

many details that we had missed. Watching the videotape of parents attempting to understand their drawings provoked the children to create new ones. By revisiting the documentation, and following through on the children's ideas, we helped them to generate new ideas and work to further articulate and express them. Reggio educators describe such use of documentation as a cyclical process of inquiry (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001).

Forms of documentation will vary depending on what equipment is available, the nature of the investigation and the information a teacher wants to record. If children are sitting in a circle having a conversation, a tape recorder might suffice to catch the children's ideas. Teachers might make sketches of the construction of a block structure to capture a child's process. Documentation in the yoga investigation took several forms, each of which contributed to the investigation in important ways.

Drawings By asking the children to draw pictures, particularly of their invented stretches, I was asking *them* to document their ideas. I collected and held on to the children's drawings. Sometimes they didn't finish them, so I could say, "You didn't have a chance to finish this yesterday. Would you like to do that now?" Sometimes they accepted

this invitation; sometimes they declined it. Holding on to the drawings allowed me to study them, develop hypotheses and ask children questions to clarify things I didn't understand. I was also able to share the drawings with other audiences. Discussions with others about the drawings have deepened my understanding and appreciation of them.

Photographs At the beginning of the investigation, I felt that the children needed a visual resource, so I took photographs. One child performed the stretch and told me when to take pictures (see Figure 1). I was concerned, however, that the collection of still photos might inhibit the children's own ways of representing the motion. When I made the photographs available to children as they were drawing, I specifically said: "This is one way to do it. You don't have to do it this way. ... Think about what things you think they need to know about." I also asked the children to put the photos in order, and in the process discovered that different sequences were possible.

Transcripts In addition to photographing the children, I tape recorded and then transcribed our conversations. When I had questions about their drawings, I could refer to the transcript for their exact words. In discussions with children, I could quote them directly. For example, I was curious about some of the choices Lillian had made, so I showed her her drawings, explained that I had listened to and typed up our conversation, and said I had a question.

Marilyn: And I said, "Do you want to show the hands?" And you said, "No, it doesn't matter if I don't. Because I don't need to." So when you draw these pictures to show the stretch what are the things that you need to draw?

Lillian: Everything but those.

I believe that referring to the transcript for our exact words conveyed to Lillian a

respect for her ideas. These transcripts have also been valuable for studying my interactions with the children and understanding my role in the investigation.

Video Part way into the investigation, a parent loaned us her video camera. Since yoga involves motion, it became important to use a medium that would record both sound and action. This mode of documentation served as a support to the children as they could watch themselves do a stretch and then draw it. We could also pause the video to examine something more closely. In addition, I could videotape the children as they drew and thus gain insight into their drawing process. I also think the idea of watching a video drew some children into the investigation.

Concluding Thoughts

When we first introduced breathing stretches at our circle time, we had no idea that this would spark the children's interest and develop into a rich investigation. We could have just taught them different stretches and let them teach each other their invented stretches. Because we believed in the children's abilities, however, we challenged them to do more. The children responded with a willingness to express their ideas through drawing. We also pushed them at times when they felt like giving up. In order to draw these stretches, the children tackled such challenges as representing three dimensions on paper, representing motion, maintaining proportion, deciding what information was necessary, and drawing people in new ways that included overlapping body parts. Their motivation to communicate their ideas was strong enough that we saw some children draw for the first time (in the classroom) during the course of this investigation. Others modified their use of details characteristic of their spontaneous drawings to create less elaborate schematic drawings, demonstrating an understanding of their instructional function. All of the children used drawing as a

purposeful communication.

In addition to analyzing the children's drawings, we have tried to convey the potential uses and roles of documentation in extending productive investigations. Documentation in the yoga investigation was not simply a record of activity used as mere classroom decoration, like photographs taken on a family vacation and stuck in an album. It was created and collected with a conscious sense of the *active* role such records might play in developing, building on, and understanding children's ideas. Documentation also signals respect for children's work and ideas. Gandini writes,

"All children have the potential, albeit in different ways, to learn and to develop their own ideas, theories, and strategies. All children also have the right to be supported in these endeavors by adults. ... In my view the most powerful tool for giving that support, in a way that respects them as individuals, is documentation" (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001, p. 125).

The children responded with creative solutions to our provocations, and we were fascinated by their choices. As the children and we worked together to keep their ideas in play, the children learned to communicate their ideas and we learned how children communicate their ideas. We gained more respect for the children, and I think the children understood that we respected them and their work.

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