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# Analysing Students' Drawings of their Classroom: A Child-Friendly Research Method

Anca NEDELCU<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Including students' voices in research directly affecting their life and development has been emphasised in a wide range of studies. Children's rights movement and childhood sociology have argued that young students are active participants in investigations and not merely passive recipients or objects to be studied; when adequate participatory strategies are used, children have the ability to report competently and meaningfully on issues relevant to them. However, despite this re-conceptualization of children as social actors, their opinions have not often found their way into research. Concerns about children communicative and cognitive abilities, about appropriateness and desirability of involving them directly in research have restricted their participation. The study "School as it is – research on students' and teachers' profiles and interactions", conducted by UNICEF and Centre Education 2000Â, Romania, demonstrates that children are not overlooked exactly when specialists reflect on educational matters. Child inclusive methodologies have been added for this purpose to a multi-method, multi-site research project focused mainly on depicting the real portrait of Romanian school. The present paper explores the use of students' drawings of their classroom as a child friendly research method, utilized – together with other approaches involving adults – to present "school as it is". Drawings are considered an open-ended, familiar activity for children, one of their preferred means of communication and, therefore, an effective strategy for engaging them in research. As a concrete proof of the efficiency and reliability of the method, the interpretation of students' drawings is selectively presented. The findings fully demonstrate children capacity of contributing to research, as their drawings revealed a powerful, convincing image of their learning environment.

*Keywords:* child friendly/inclusive research; children's perspectives; drawings; classroom; learning environment.

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## **Introduction: From research on and about children to research with and for them**

In educational contexts, research is developed due to a variety of reasons: *advancement of trustworthy knowledge in the field*, addressing gap in knowledge, *theory building or improving practices*; but above all, *as a cumulative effect of the previous motivations, any professional investigation in education aims ultimately to determine changes in students' learning and development. Research in education is not a goal in itself, it targets fundamentally the students; therefore, it is legitimate that investigations reflect and incorporate students' voice, as being the desirable "missing perspective"*. In the same time, this shift from research on to research with, and for children, beneficial for the entire system, might produce a significant answer to Fullan's (1991) rhetorical question 'What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?'

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition that children can be capable contributors to the veracity and comprehensiveness of the research. *Being* competent social actors, children are considered able to articulate their opinions based on their lived experiences (Harcourt & Sargeant, 2011). Children, like adults "can and do participate in structures and unstructured interviews, they fill in questionnaires, they use new media; they are involved in action-research; and, on their own terms, they allow the participant observer to join with them in their daily lives" (Christensen & James, 2008: 2).

This perspective stands in contrast to approaches where children were often seen to be short of the requisite capacity to consent and to participate to research (Abramovitch et al. 1991). In traditional approaches, they were considered vulnerable and incompetent, objects that need protection, "adults in waiting" (Kellett, 2010); according to the socialization theory, for instance, children were conceived as 'empty' and 'unfinished', ready to be filled with ideas of the society they belong, as part of the process of socialization (Waksler, 1991). Keddie (2000) seriously questioned the efficiency of such "adultist assumptions", considering them not only inefficient but harmful to children; the research focus governed by adult interests has resulted in children being perceived as "either at the mercy of or posing risk to adult social worlds" (Hood et al, 1996: 118). To these ends, children's own interests, experiences and knowledge have often been excluded from the research enterprise (Hood et al, 1996) because they have been perceived as poor informants, not able to fully understand "many of the issues which confront their daily lives" (Matthews et al, 1998: 314). Taking into account such vulnerabilities, a major change was requested, impacting profoundly the way specialists approach research with children.

This necessary process of acknowledging children under a new framework have been influenced by two major international shifts, developed over the last

decades. These two frameworks refer to the international rights-based movement within which children were granted a right to have a say and the new” sociology of childhood and childhood studies. Both perspectives grounding the new approach of children in research are highly relevant for the goals of present papers; their distinct but resonating philosophy was considered a solid fundament in designing and implementing the research to be further explored. Undoubtedly, the first perspective received extra credibility and momentum by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), especially through article 12 which stipulates that: (1) States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the rights to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child; (2) For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Compliance with this article is therefore an ethical, legal and moral imperative (Lundy, 2007); it stipulates a non-negotiable right afforded to children, that of being involved in decision-making processes on matters that concern them. Significantly, as Lundy notes, article 12 assures children of their right to express their views, which is not dependant on their competence to express a mature view, rather that they have the competence to form and express a view (Lundy, 2007). While not new in social field, this principle clearly guided many research regarding children projects (Birbeck, 2007). However a wider penetration of such desiderates in designing social investigations is still expected. While Lundy (2007: 931) considers the participatory rights offered in Article 12 of the UNCRC as an “unquestionable good”, Birbeck (2007) notes unfortunately that it has not greatly influenced research pertaining to children.

Such UNCRC principles resonate significantly with emerging socio-cultural paradigms of the “sociology of childhood”; the perspective, initiated by the work of James, Jenks and Prout and developed since by a wide range of authors (Wyness, 2000; Thomas, 2002) places on emphasis on the importance of children as ‘beings’ not as ‘becomings’ (James et al, 1998). Children are viewed as competent, in relation to experience, whereby they are recognised as being ‘experts’ in their own lives (Mason & Urquhart, 2001). They are seen as social actors (Wyness, 2000), they have rights to (agree to) participate in research as competent informants of their own experience and contribute with valid opinions as capable citizens (Neale, 2004).

This new paradigm is moving “away from the narrow focus of socialisation and child development (the study of what children become) to a sociology which attempts to take children seriously as they experience their lives in the here and now as children” (Morrow and Richards: 92). This emphasis on the competence

of children is understood in relation to experience, rather than age (Mason & Urquhart, 2001: 19). As a consequence, childhood is seen as socially constructed childhood (James & Prout, 1997), being the result of multiple interacting variables like social, cultural and historical factors.

The distance between the two contrasting paradigms of approaching the topic is significant; as Malone (2006, p.1) recounts, it starts with the miniature adult construct of childhood from seventies and eighties to arrive to the nowadays “agentic child construct”, co-participant in investigations. This process is clearly illustrated by Mason and Urquhart (2001), when describing the models of children’s participation; this conceptualization of dynamics of power that can occur when children are involved in research is presented below.

*Table 1. Models of children’s participation*

	<b>Adultist</b>	<b>Children’s Rights</b>	<b>Children’s Movements</b>
Institution of participation strategy	Agency/external statutory agency	Agency/external statutory agency	Children
Ideological framework	Positivist/market forces	Phenomenological/constructivist	Minority rights, groups struggle
Children viewed as	Passive, incompetent, developmentally incomplete, “becomings”	Actors, competent “beings”	Actors, competent human beings
Locus of power	Adults through governance and best interests, asymmetrical	Questions of generational order, symmetrical	Children, empowered
Needs identification	Normative from psychological literature	Individualised from listening to children	Asserted both as a group and individually
Method of decision making	Adults structure procedures	Negotiation between stakeholders	Children dominated
Knowledge	Adult authority	Opportunity for children to shape and contribute	Children experts on their lives, recognises and challenges adults’ power over children
Professionals	Superiority of expertise used for empowering	Facilitate through alliances	Provide resources
Children’s voice	Filtered	Reflexivity by adults and children facilitates children’s voices being heard	Challenge and unsettle adults

### **Drawing as a ‘child-centered’ research method – review of the literature**

Specialists’ discussion on involving children in research as active contributors is followed by another one, equally important: the critical reflection on ethical issues and on methodology efficiency for facilitating students’ engagement. As expected, due to the importance of the topic, concerns with the ethical and moral implications of researching children have been widely approached. Issues like beneficence, confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity, duty of care are considered very important in designing and implementing researches with and for children. There is a strong consensus over such issues, challenging researchers to assume critical and self-reflexive participation and engagement processes. “In this regard, ethical questions concerning researcher intention and justification such as ‘Why am I doing this study?’, ‘What is my relationship to the participants?’, ‘Who benefits from this study?’, ‘Who may be at risk in the contexts I am studying?’ and ‘Should I intervene on behalf of those at risk?’ are seen as critical (Keddie, 2000). The convenient answer Hood et al (1996: 119) tried is that the justification for the research - for collecting the data - should be ‘to help make children heard’.

Regarding methodology, Punch (2002) describes two opposing positions, both in need for improvement, for perceiving research with children: just the same or entirely different from adults. The way in which a researcher perceives the status of children influences the choice of methods. Those who consider children to be ‘essentially indistinguishable from adults’ (James et al. 1998: 31) employ the same methods as those used with adults, since children are seen as basically the same. Those who perceive children as being very different from adults consider that research with children is different from research with adults; therefore the investigation design and methodology have to be different as well. Punch (2002) challenges this assumption by noticing that it is somewhat paradoxical that within the new sociology of childhood many of those who call for the use of innovative or adapted research techniques with children, are also those who emphasise the competence of children. If children are competent social actors, why are special ‘child-friendly’ methods needed to communicate with them? One answer, possible a way of mediation the two mentioned positions, is formulated by James et al (1998); it suggests another perspective of those who perceive children to be similar to adults but to possess different competencies. In a synthesis realized by Punch (2002) researchers advocating this approach use methods based on children’s skills like pictures and diaries (e.g. Nesbitt 2000), sentence completion and writing (e.g. Morrow 1999), drawings (e.g. Swart 1990) or the draw and write technique (e.g. Backett-Milburn & McKie 1999). However, Punch concludes that such techniques should not unquestionably be assumed to be more appropriate for

conducting research with children; some other reasons for analyzing their efficiency have also to be taken into consideration Punch (2002).

This conclusion is leading to the idea that in approaching methodological issues of researching with children, the specialists have to be not only reflective, but also creative. Generating data with children challenges researchers to be creative and reflective over the process (Graue & Walsh, 1998). This does not necessarily mean the use of different methodologies but to adapt and transform traditional approaches to children's needs.

Using visual research methods is a functional example of adapting the investigation tools to the specificity of children. Visual methods - such as collage, photography, drawings, murals, diaries, worksheets, spider diagrams or activity table, sculptures and videos - are considered particularly beneficial when conducting research with young participants; they stimulate children to communicate their thoughts and emotions and offer children the opportunity to do something out of the experience. Some other advantages of using visual activities for research purposes are synthesised by Boyden and Ennew (1997): (1) most children enjoy the activity; (2) visual images can express complex ideas or summarise information that would need many words to depict; (3) visual images are not linear and can be taken as a whole; (4) some children find it easier to express themselves through visual images; (5) images can be used as a basis for discussion; (6) photographs and film can capture events that may otherwise be overlooked.

All visual methods share such advantages and qualities; but above all, drawings seem to benefit from an increased amount of attention, if their frequent utilization and appreciations are to be taken into consideration. As a *method that align with the current conceptualization of children as social agents and cultural producers*, drawings seem to be particularly suited for research involving children across a variety of cultural contexts. This preference for accessing children's beliefs through a drawing task is highly supported and confirmed by the literature in the field. The issue encourages different authors to advocate it by using very flattering and captivating constructions; Anning and Ring, for instance demonstrate: "when a young child draws they are offering us a window into their own developing understanding of the world and their relationships to significant people, things and places around them. Drawing also provides children with a tool for telling themselves and us elaborate stories. However, what they draw and how they draw reflect the complexity of communication systems and visual images, signs and symbol systems in the domestic and leisure activities around them. They are encultured into using a wide range of graphicacy through their everyday experiences" (2004: preface).

A similar convincing plea for children drawing is synthesised by Golomb: "drawing is a solitary activity with crayons, magic markers, or pencils that creates an imaginative representation of an aspect of the child's world. The child who



discovers the magic power he can wield over the blank page engages in a uniquely human activity that transforms his ordinary experience of the world and represents it on a new, and perhaps mythical, plane of action and thought. Unlike children's stories, drawing leaves a visible record, a tangible trace that can be examined, talked to and understood quite independently of the sequence that gave rise to it. The child's actions in play, storytelling, dance, and song are of a temporary nature; they vanish when the action has ended. However, long before the child can effectively use the written word, his drawings already make a statement that endures. To leave a mark, to make a form, to give shape, are all means of exploring and understanding both oneself and the object that is drawn" (Golomb, 2004: 164).

Equally important, the issue of children drawing is not only convincing advocated by specialised literature but it is in depth approached, from different perspective, by a wide range of studies. A great amount of research analyses children's drawings from graphic, perceptive, psychological, educational aspects. In an attempt of summarizing such studies, Cherney et al. (2006) noticed that research into children's drawings has focused mainly on three important areas: (1) the internal structure and visual realism of children's depictions (e.g., Cox, 1992); (2) the perceptual, cognitive, and motor processes involved in producing a drawing (e.g., Freeman, 1980); (3) the reliability and validity of the interpretation of children's drawings (e.g., Hammer, 1997).

Following the same line, Einarsdottir, Dockett and Perry (2009) realizes a wider but still selective inventory of researchers' interests in children drawings. Much of this, noticed the authors has centred on children's drawings of the human figure and connections between children's mental models and their pictures (e.g., Kellogg, 1969). The perspective was supported by recent studies (Cox, 1992), while other authors have been cautions that assessing realism may underestimate the symbolic content of children's drawings (e.g. Matthews, 1994). A consistent range of studies moved from psychological stance of describing drawings in terms of developmental sequences (Einarsdottir, Dockett & Perry, 2009) to increased interest in children's meaning making through drawing. By considering it as an important element of "multi-modal meaning making" (Anning & Ring, 2004) the importance of context, including social, cultural elements as well as resources available are reevaluated. Relevant for the purpose of the present paper are especially studies highlighting the benefits of using drawings as research methods, particularly in educational contexts. Einarsdottir, Dockett and Perry (2009) present an eloquent enumeration: thus, drawings can: (1) provide a context where children had some control over the nature of their engagement in data generation activities; (2) establish a non-confrontational basis for interactions, where children can draw and are not forced to maintain eye contact with researchers. This is particularly important in a school context, where existing power structures can encourage children's responses that align with teacher expectations;



(3) provide familiar tools and materials to encourage children to engage in conversations about school or preschool in a meaningful way for them; (4) encourage children to take time to respond to questions or engage in discussion as they take the time to draw, recognising that co-construction of meaning takes time and is a transformative process; and (5) recognise that some children prefer to convey their perspectives and experiences through a combination of verbal and non-verbal means.

Taken into account such advantages, a wide range of educational topics (interactions, didactical approaches etc) have been studied by means of image-based methodology; several studies were focused especially on incorporating drawings of the classroom/teacher in the classroom in the methodological choices for investigating and improving educational matters. A selective presentation is necessary, proving the history of utilization of the method; thus, in 1953, Rabinowitz and Travers asked students from two different teacher training institutions to “draw a picture of a teacher at work” and to provide an account of their drawings. After analyzing these drawings, the authors concluded that the type of program experienced by the students had marked consequences on the kinds of concepts about teaching which they developed. They found that in most cases such drawings reveal individuals own highly personal ideas about the persons and situations presented” (1953: 19), and indeed that a student often portrays a teacher who actually looks like himself (Rabinowitz & Travers, 1953: 19). This study was recalled in 1968 by Gregerson and Travers (1968); however they noticed that “relatively few studies explored the perceptions which elementary school pupils have of their classroom and their teachers (Rabinowitz & Travers, 1953: 19). In 1971, Rogers and Wright described a large scale study of children drawings of their classroom conducted by Toronto Board of Education (Rogers & Wright, 1971). Other significant examples can refer to Goodlad’s (1984) study of over 1.000 American schools or the one developed by Weber and Mitchell (2000), exploring the image of the teacher in the classroom. Both studies described a typical teacher portrayed in the pictures drawn by both teachers and children as being a white woman pointing or expounding, standing in front of a blackboard or desk (Weber & Mitchell, 2000).

### **Methodology: drawings of “my classroom”**

When designing the research illustrated within the present paper, “*School as it is – research on students and teachers profiles and interactions*”, the initiators affirmed clear positions and methodological options: children have a voice to be listened and for this, adequate approaches have to be chosen. Thus, first basic principles organising the approach of the project were referring to: (1) conducting the research under United Nations/UNICEF concern for children rights of

involvement and participation; (2) respecting ethics of research with children, especially those issues referring to confidentiality, consent, privacy, name clearance; (3) choosing methodologies consistent with a child-centred participatory research framework.

Therefore, the main concern in designing the research was selecting the methodological mix capable to “maximise children’s ability to express themselves at the point of data-gathering and to enhance their willingness to communicate the richness of findings” (Hill, 1997: 180). As visual methods are usually considered child friendly approach, the mentioned research project opted for analyzing students drawing of their classroom. This option is motivated by different reasons: first, because classroom is the first concrete social space able to illustrate the type and functionality of students and teachers “meetings”. Classroom is (still) a dominant setting for learning and a generous source of describing teachers’ axiological or methodological preferences. The second reason is referring to drawing as a research tool. As it was already mentioned, drawing is a familiar task, easy to administer in the classroom; it is an enjoyable activity that children choose both in and out of the classroom as a medium through which to communicate experiences, feelings and beliefs (Christensen & James, 2008). In the same time, other principles guiding the research and other methodological concerns have been analyzed prior to the implementation phase in order to mitigate the possible weaknesses and risks undermining study significance.

### ***Design a comprehensive, inclusive and integrative research project***

In order to produce relevant findings, the study adopted a mixed-method approach, intended to reveal “a different slice of the social world” (Denzin, 2001: 326). Mainly qualitative – the mentioned study combined a complex range of research methods: 505 questionnaires for teachers, focus groups and structured interviews with teachers and students, analyses of students’ drawings (146 drawings describing “My classroom”) and of 129 compositions describing “My teacher” (How is she/he? How does he/she look? How does he/she act?). In this way, the project valorised the advantages of using mix methods (Cojocar, 2010) and managed to ensure triangulation of not only methods and data, but also of ‘investigators’ (O’kane, 2003). The approach of integrating a plurality of voices – students, teachers, parents, field researchers - was considered an important asset for the study. The methodology was considered inclusive and integrative also because: (1) the drawing session provided free access to the activity to all children from selected classroom willing to participate, not only those ones considered by different adults “gifted” for this task, or “good in art”; (2) for equal access to resources, colour wax pencils have been distributed to each child; in this way, the activity did not excluded those with limited options and also all students have the same wide chromatic choice.

***Choose methods appropriate with children age and abilities***

Drawing was considered relevant for the mentioned research as it involved first graders, whom may have limited vocabulary and a shorter attention span (Boyden & Ennew 1997). A cumulative grid with “warnings” from literature and previous studies has been elaborated, accompanied by mitigation solutions:

- *Children possible reluctance or lack of interest/Not all children like to draw.* As Punch notes drawing may not be a suitable technique to use with all children, some of them being inhibited by a lack of artistic competence (Punch, 2002). Additionally, literature described also situations when same children were totally disinterested by the task, as in case of study conducted by Einarsdottir, Dockett and Perry (2009); children were asked to draw what they like and dislike about school; researchers noticed: “however, other children did not care much for this exercise. They left the paper blank or did not spend much time on their drawings. This was more common with the preschool children; for the school children this was a more appealing exercise”. In such cases, backup solutions have been identified by “school as it is” research team prior to field visits.
- *Children saying what are ‘supposed to say’.* Grover (2004) notes the importance of establishing trusting relationships to overcome the predisposition of the children to present what they believe they are ‘supposed to say’ in a research context (Mahon et al., 1996). For this, trust is important and must be built over time (Smith et al., 2002).
- *Children influenced by classroom teachers.* If introduced by teacher, task may be perceived as an academic one as Einarsdottir, Dockett and Perry (2009) explain: teachers and the classroom context are influential factors in the generation of drawings and conversations. When the teacher introduces the task to the whole class, children clearly identify it as an academic task, potentially open to correction or assessment. To avoid the situation when teacher consciously or unconsciously influence students, it was established that the drawing task for the research on “my classroom” to be introduced by field researchers (specialists in educational field, students at Faculty of Psychology and educational Sciences, University of Bucharest). They also conducted the process. When presenting the task, it was mentioned that “classroom” means objects and persons, including the one who is drawing, also colleagues or teacher. The activity developed in the classroom space, in order to not disrupt school routine.
- *Children influenced by peers.* Children’s drawings can be influenced by what others draw or say; to avoid this risk, students were asked to draw their classroom in a free style, in a personal manner.

- *Errors of interpretation.* Punch (2002) explains that particular care must be taken not to misinterpret the children's drawings, by imposing adult interpretations in analysis. A solution is reducing this risk is the "draw and tell" approach. This can be done by asking children in an open way to explain what their drawing meant to them and why they decided to draw those images (Punch, 2002). In this way, children can interpret the drawings themselves, with no significant interventions from the researchers. In case of our research, the "draw and tell" approach was preferred as well; children were asked to describe the drawings, while the field researcher wrote down the commentaries.

### **Findings: drawing the classroom – process and products**

For exploring the students views about their learning environment, a number of 146 drawings describing "My classroom" have been collected; the drawings were realised by first and second grade students from the five schools, located in five Romanian counties: „Constantin Cantacuzino High School”, Târgoviste, Dâmbovita County; School no.146 „I. G. Duca”, Bucharest, Boldesti Scaieni School, Prahova County, Solovastru School, Mures County, Bucsani School, Giurgiu County.

Before presenting relevant findings regarding the image of the classroom, some commentaries' have to be done: (1) Children drawings were analyzed in terms of compositional elements, the focal point being the meanings constructed by students in their pictures; there were not reflections over the aesthetic part of the drawing or on children drawing abilities. Content analyses of the drawing were developed by educationalists; (2) The goal of the paper is not to present an exhaustive frame of classroom, as depicted in students drawing but to demonstrate that it is consonant with other research studies and literature in the field; in this way it is considered that the option for drawing as a valid investigation method is confirmed; (3) Findings are presented in parallel with conclusion from other studies developed previously within Romanian educational system (see Ulrich, 2007) or worldwide. Significant similarities have been identified; the comparisons of different analyses did not reveal much cultural variation (Weber & Mitchell, 1995).

By juxtaposing images of the classroom, as children depicted it, a general conclusion tends to stand out: students learning space is still a traditional one, described by "classical" identifiers of a rigid spatial and methodological configuration. It is a space based on "talk, text, test" approach (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). The general image is highly traditional, recalling a John Dewey (1900, p. 31) description: "ugly desks placed in geometrical order, crowded together so that

there shall be as little moving room as possible, desks almost all of the same size, with just space enough to hold books, pencils and paper, and add a table, some chairs, the bare walls and possibly a few pictures”. A selective enumeration of classroom compositional elements, together with some of their characteristics can easily confirm this assumption:

The learning environment of the classroom is represented by a room (only one student draw children learning “outside”, in open air), “populated” by furniture, didactical materials and, last but not least, actors of the educational space: students and teachers. The classroom space is mainly a “chalk and blackboard” classroom. The most powerful, frequent visual element of the classroom is the “big, black” chalkboard. It is the central physical symbol of this space which has a central

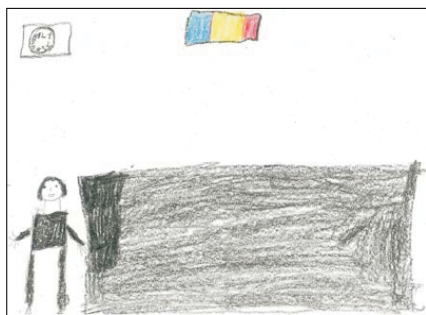


Figure 1: Blackboard dominating classroom space;  
drawing realised by a 7 years boy



Figure 2: Blackboard oversized; drawing realised by  
a 7 years boy

The blackboard suggests a clear dominance of the classical 3 R's literacy – reading, writing and mathematics; Romanian children, like their American peers (mentioned by Hall, 2008) include letters and numbers in their drawings. Hall (2008) noticed that total nearly one in five of the drawings analysed contained writing. This “text centered approach” was visible also in Romanian pictures. In the same time, they confirmed that in students' drawings, no matter the cultural background, “my classroom” means “my classroom at mathematics” (Mitchell & Weber, 2000: 51). “Numbers and maths symbols are among the most frequently used symbolic markers used by both children and adults to draw a classroom. Maths seems to be perceived as *the* school subject that speaks directly to the purpose of teaching. It's as if the ability to interpret the code/language of maths is a central part of what makes a teacher a teacher” (Mitchell & Weber, 2000: 51).



Figure 3: Students, letters, blackboard, and ...mathematics; drawing realised by a 8 years girl



Figure 4: Letters and numbers “floating around”; drawing realised by a 7 years girl

In front of the blackboard or just near it, the teacher’s table is also very visible; it is frequently supersized. It is the place for gathering symbolic objects as books, teacher bag or the big roll with children names and marks. Facing master’s desks there are students desks, set in rows, rectangular, schematic represented, almost



Figure 5: Students' desks; “my desk” is highlighted and personalised with initial name letter; drawing realised by a 7 years girl

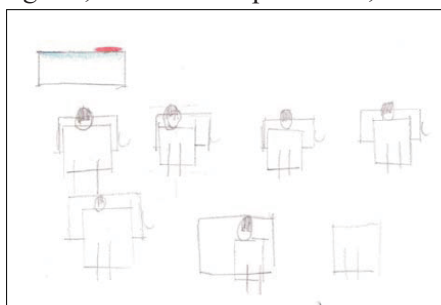


Figure 6 :Students and their desks; drawing realised by a 8 years boy

The image of students desks arranged in orderly rows (from all the drawings only one showed another physical arrangement of desks) is speaking illustratively about the didactical approaches they are accustomed with; thus, even most of the teachers from the investigated school underlined their preference of working in small groups, of using collaborative methods, drawings show the teacher often lecturing in front of the children.

Next to these elements, there is the teacher, presented in half of the drawings (while the other half the students drew themselves alone, unaccompanied by the teacher). Some drawings present only the teacher (“The students were having a



*break and the teacher was in the classroom writing exercises on the blackboard”)* and other pictures show the image of an unpopulated classroom, with no teachers and no students. The teachers (only women) are placed in front of children or their desks; their appearance is incredible similar with those described by Golumb (2004) after studying children drawings: “the teacher is drawn large in size, equipped with arms and a book, while the children are much smaller and less differentiated, at times hairless, armless, and even faceless. The large size of the teacher and the different space she occupies clearly differentiates between the status of teacher and pupils. The contrast in size and location and the proximity of like-figures structure the theme; when the major figure is centered, the visual impact of this hierarchic conception is quite effective and the meaning of the theme is clearly stated [...] Interestingly, the most important figure, the teacher, is usually drawn first, before the row of children.

Besides the classic signs elements of a classroom, students pictures include other decorative elements: flowers, the Romanian flag, paintings on the wall, clocks; additionally, as an improvement aspiration, students place in the classroom space friends from other schools, relatives or characters from cartoons or from computers games. In this way, they confirm Anning and Ring opinion that “children’s sense of aesthetics is partly culturally acquired by immersion in popular culture – Disney cartoons, videos from children’s television series, advertising, greeting cards, sport and fashion “ (Anning & Ring, 2004). From the same universe, children borrowed the word bubbles utilised in order to ‘audiate’ the silent action. They ‘articulate’ (Metz, 1974: 242) with the objects, characters and events to bring the artworks ‘alive’.



Figure 7: Cartoon heroes in the classroom next to a icon, symbolised by the “god” (“Dumnezeu”) written in a rectangle on the wall; drawing realised by a 8 years boy



Figure 8: Narrative sequences and word bubbles drawing realised by a 7 years girl

Equally interesting is the preoccupation of children of adding adornments to their drawings such as patterns, flowers and hearts; this is especially visible in girls drawings, as they seemed more interested in making their drawings look



attractive by the use of decorations and a wider pallet of colours than the boys (Hall, 2008); girls usually employ imagery that is often derived from fairytales, with kings and queens playing an important role in their drawings (Golumb, 2004), practice visible in our research as well.

Other interesting and creative presences in the classroom space are big rainbows or butterflies. The preference for butterflies seems not to be surprising, as children drew frequently butterflies (Coates & Coates, 2006). As Hall noticed “perhaps it is the symmetrical nature of these insects that is appealing to young children” (2008: 222); this would certainly fit in with Gardner’s (ibid.) argument that patterners are interested in observable regularities in their environment.



Figure 9: Rainbow in the classroom; drawing realised by a 8 years girl



Figure 10: Butterflies in the classroom; drawing realised by a 7 years girl

### Conclusions: Children, competent “painters” of their learning environment

The description of classroom drawn images produced by children, complemented by an additional analyze of these “visual descriptions” in the context of their production is not the only goal of the present paper. And, certainly it is not a goal in itself. In fact, the paper’s intention is twofold: first it has the specific task of sharing a successful story of involving children in research to those interested to visualize the portrait of “school as it is” or to develop similar investigations. Second, it tries to reflect critically about the efficiency of the approach and to validate the methodological options undertaken through the relevance and accuracy of its findings.

Both intentions are confirmed. In terms of the generation and gathering of relevant data, the visual participatory methodology utilized proved to be efficient. Children’s collaboration and engagement, their availability of verbally sharing the meaning embedded in their drawing with the field researchers indicated that they perceive the task as worthwhile activity. They were serious, dedicated “informants”, demonstrating competence as communicators, able to transmit

meaningful data. Their drawings “had the potential to evoke narrative accounts both through what is present in the image and the child’s response to what is in the image” (Ellis, 2004: 94). Therefore, children contribution was considered relevant to the whole approach, complementing findings from other sources.

The fact that children’s contribution provided additional richness to supplement other research instruments used within the investigation, like questionnaires of focus groups, leads to another importance conclusion: the need for triangulation of research methods. The methodological mix, the plurality of perspectives proved to be beneficial for the purpose of the research, essential for developing reliability and validity of the approach. As a consequence, the fact that the image children created is highly consonant not only with opinions of others actors investigated during research but also with other similar studies carried out worldwide is considered another prove of the efficiency of selected method.

In describing the impact of their research on school ground by using children drawings, Malone and Tranter noticed another additional result of their approach. Another important outcome from the research - they underlined - was the way it illustrated that research could be conducted by teachers, children, or parents at any school. By using child-centred research methods and in-classroom activities such as surveys and children’s drawings (normal activities in school curricula) we were able to encourage school staff that doing their own schoolground research was possible, feasible, and valuable. Indeed, teachers and parents are likely to have some significant advantages over academic researchers in this process, by examining children’s particular play needs and the distinctive features of their schoolgrounds over a longer period of time” (Tranter, 2003: 222). “By sharing our research and providing a set of research methods that are both participatory, child-centred, and user friendly we hope we have shown teachers, parents, and children that they can engage in their own research to address issues and concerns they have in their schoolgrounds” (Tranter, 2003: 222).

This desideratum is valid in case of our research as well, considered a rigorous research with broadly accessible findings. The image of the classroom – as an added value in itself can from this point of view the right starting point for improving the “school as it is”.

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