

Visual methods in researching migrant children's experiences of belonging

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Abstract

This paper examines drawings and mental maps made by children (used alongside with conventional interviewing techniques) as method of investigating migrant children sense of belonging. Children's visual methods have gained renewed interest as many social scientists search for methods that align with the current conceptualisation of children as social agents and cultural producers. Drawing upon a qualitative study of Migration and the Integration of Polish families and children in Scotland, I analyze children's presence and participation in processes of transnational migration, giving some empirical example of how visual methods can be evaluated as a research strategy.

Keywords: migrant children, qualitative research methods, visual methods, drawings, mental maps

Children as social agents

In this paper, I refer to the recent scholarship of human geography, social anthropology, sociology of childhood and community development that treats children as active participants in their own socialization (Aitken 2001; Barker and Weller 2003; Hart 1999; James et al. 1998; James and Prout 1997; Johnson et al. 1998; Mitchell 2006; Orellana et al. 2001; Prout 2000; Thorne 1987; Zelizer 1985; White, 2002) and explain how this approach extends upon visual research methods (with the focus on drawings). In the past, researchers regarded children as "adults in training" and their voices were not legitimated as meaningful for understanding social and cultural phenomena. Children, (especially children of minorities and immigrants) were rarely asked for their ideas or perspectives, as adults often assume that they "know better." Consequently, the words and expressions of children were rarely given much weight. This trend has slowly begun to change, as many social scientists begin to view minors, as not simply the reproducers of culture, but as "cultural agents and social actors in their own right" (Mitchell 2006:60). As children become viable participants of social research, there increasingly comes a need to develop research methods relative to the developmental level of children. For children to be able to participate in research it might be necessary to develop different non-adult cen-

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tred methods¹. This has created the need to rethink the current research methods involved in studying adults (Mitchell 2006).

There is much diversity amongst children, and many, though not all, child-centred methodologies could equally be used with adults. Punch (2002) argues that where the differences do exist these are produced by the way adults conceptualize children and children's disempowered position in society rather than from some fundamental difference between adults and children. In some ways it might be a more useful way to think about rights based approach, rather than child-centred research which might be based on assumptions about the nature of children and childhood. This would look for methods that reflect the way they experience and communicate with their worlds, ultimately reflecting the method of communication the participant is most comfortable with (Cousins and Milner 2007). Boyden (2003) suggests a need for "age-appropriate" methods that "empower children" and lead to "valid child-led data". There is a need to ask children certain kinds of questions and not others. Child-centred methodologies are not focused solely on what may be meaningful to a child participant, but what is meaningful to larger contexts of children's lives.

Conducting research with children – drawing, mapping and interviewing

I consider drawings and mental maps as an artefact as well as an intermediate technique which facilitates the process of the children's engagement with the research. Visual methods present several advantages as participatory methods for engaging children in research. Therefore, they are being used creatively in diverse social and cultural contexts to elucidate children's perspectives on health and illness (Geissler 1998), social change (Katz 1986; Stokrocki 1994), tourism (Gamradt 1995), identity (Walsh 2003; Cowan 1999), identity and consumption (Croghan, et al. 2008), time (Christenson and James 2000), place and mobility (Orellana 1999) and poverty (Sime 2008). One of the main reasons that drawings have attracted such attention for work with children is that they are widely regarded as "child-centred". Mitchell (2006) argues that visual methods are said to be "child-centred" in the sense that drawing and other visual methods may be familiar, even enjoyable to the child. Drawing is something many children do, without complex technology, at school and in play, thus its child-friendly status is valid. When drawing is familiar to the child, it can be particularly "effective in bringing out the complexities of their experience" (Nieuwenhuys

¹ Among the challenges discussed by various researchers, the issue of adult-child power imbalances looms particularly large. The relative powerlessness of children in comparison to the adults in their lives necessitates particular attention to how access to children is negotiated through parents and teachers, ensuring that children's participation is voluntary and their consent is informed in a meaningful way (Alderson 1995; Barker and Weller 2003; Orellana 1999; Sime 2008).

1996:55). Drawing is regarded as appropriate for the cognitive and communicative skills associated with being a child. Through drawing, it has been suggested, “even non literate children [have] an opportunity to portray life as it really is or has been for them” (Gordon 1998:68).

Creating artefacts (drawings) can also be a way for researchers to give voice to, and work toward reciprocity, with under-represented subjects such as migrant children (Grover 2004). The value of visual methods as a catalyst for more conventional interviewing techniques was reflected by Punch (2001) in her study of children in southern Bolivia. She describes visual methods (drawings, photographs) as one strategy in her ethnographic work which was most useful in the initial exploratory stages of the research for the investigation of broad themes and for seeking children’s definitions of the important aspects of their lives. The textual methods were used to examine those issues that children had raised in more detail, and the home visits were useful to provide a broader perspective of their social worlds. Similar to Punch research Croghan, Griffin, Hunter and Phoenix (2008) study on young consumers in two UK cities found that the visual images (photographs) allows participants to introduce new and possibly contentious topics in ways that are not possible in a purely verbal exchange. The presence of the visual image provided a platform from which interviewees could expand and introduce some sensitive issues.

To summarize these methodological considerations, researchers in diverse disciplines have sought research methods that may be particularly well-suited to working with, rather than ‘on’ children. In this regard, visual methods like drawing or mental maps have attracted particular interest as a means of understanding children’s worlds. Enabling children’s perspectives through drawing can make their knowledge and concerns visible to adults and can be the basis for involving children in identifying and solving issues that concern them. In my research among migrant children in Scotland, drawing is a strategy to collect the research material itself and to facilitate the narrative interviews, especially with the younger children. In this article I try to evaluate these drawing activities, as a ‘child-centred’, useful and informative research.

Children and Transnational Migration – research context

The paper examines the experiences of families and children of recent Polish migrants in Scotland. It is based on a project which has involved narrative interviews with 65 members of immigrants’ families, including 41 children (27 at primary school, 14 at secondary school). The study involved children (between the ages of 5 and 17). The research material was collected through individual and small group interviews as well as through the drawings and mental maps used as a research method. The study ex-

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amines the family and childhood experiences of migration and settlement in the contexts of EU enlargement and transnationalism².

Labour migration from Poland to Scotland is a process that involves new transnational practices and relationships. The primary characteristic of the transnational family is having members spread out across nation states but still maintaining a sense of collective welfare and unity. While growing numbers of studies show that concern for family reunification and the well-being of family members represents one of the major reasons for mobility, increasing numbers of families are separated by the decision to move and become 'transnational' (Bryceson and Vorela, 2002).

Transnational family patterns also characterise new arrivals from Poland who have settled and work in Scotland. Numbering over fifty thousand, the majority of these new arrivals were married men or women who supported their families in Poland with the expectation of either returning to them or bringing them over to settle in Scotland. Although many ultimately wished to return home with their immediate and extended family, family reunification in the UK invariably provide bridges into daily life that, in conjunction with children's own integration, consolidated patterns of belonging and embedded settlement (Moskal 2007)³.

Analyzing migrant children's visual maps and drawings

In order to do so to map the varied childhood experience and organization and meaning of immigrant childhood I asked children to draw maps of places where they spend time: Children drew maps from memory that helped delineate their spatial awareness, the locations of their activities, as well as sense of belonging to the particular place. Participants sometimes had difficulty constructing their maps, and this was based on a lack of spatial concepts among the children. Perspective, symbolization and other standard map qualities were very rarely observed. However, some of the children demonstrated the use of national symbols, namely the Polish and Scottish flags by the 13 and 6 years old boys (Fig. 1 and 2). The mental

² Without firm roots in their country of origin, children often come to identify with their new homeland in ways that parents may not. At the same time, children play an important role in linking nations, and keeping parents connected to their homelands. This is especially true when the immediate family is split, with some children left behind. Even when all the children of a family live in the UK, families may maintain ties with the home country because they want their children to know and value their roots; or the children themselves may ask for this connection. In helping to develop and maintain multiple connections to their places of origin and destination, children may effectively change the contexts for their own development and identity formation.

³ The data indicating the number and characteristics of migrant's families in Scotland are hard to find. There is however evidence of an increasing population of Polish children in schools throughout Scotland. According to the annual Scottish Government pupil census in publicly funded schools in Scotland there were 4677 Polish children in Scottish schools (according to the main home language survey in 2008 (Pupils in Scotland 2009)) and Polish was the most common main home language after English.

maps produced images that were very diverse in terms of numbers of elements included, and perspective take. They immediately highlighted a breadth of individuality amongst the participating children. In particular the

Figure 1. A mental map by Adrian, 13 years old: Handball ground, bicycle, school, home, friends, Poland, family

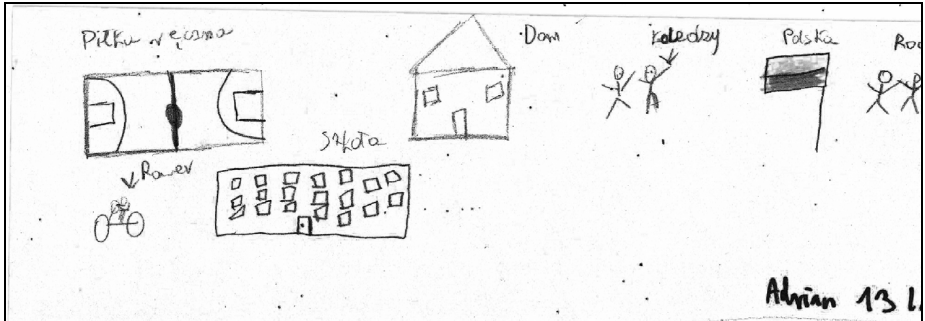


Figure 2. A tree of attachment by Kacper, 6 years old



variation in leisure spaces was apparent. For example, the some participants drew only single element map with the home (Fig. 3) or cinema (Fig. 4) as the only places to spend time in. There are some very basic and schematic maps with single line and blocks like Tomek's map (Fig. 5) with

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his home, school, playground and shop (represented by the empty rectangular shapes) connected by the lines. Tomek (14 years old) came to Scot-

Figure 3. A mental map by Jakub, 9 years old: My home, an two sentences at the bottom: 'I don't like school'; 'I like to play on the computer'

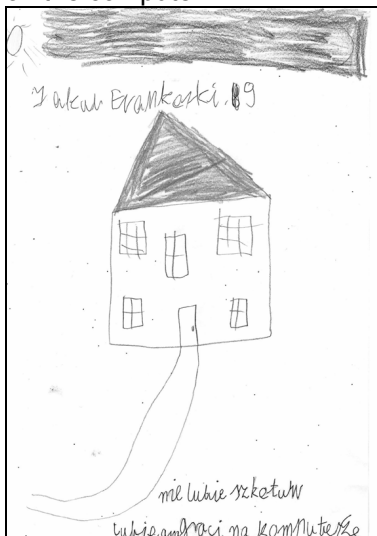


Figure 4. A mental map by Maciek 11 years old: 'Cinema World/ Wanted'

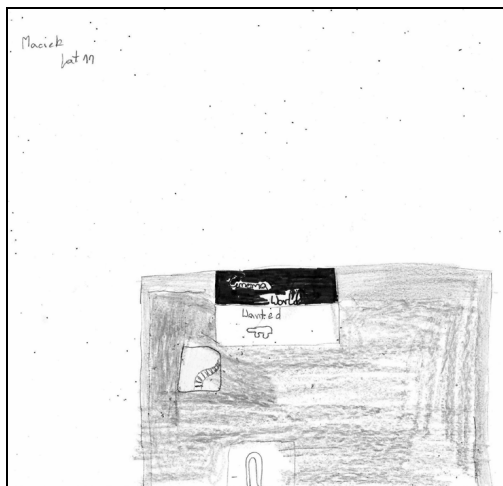
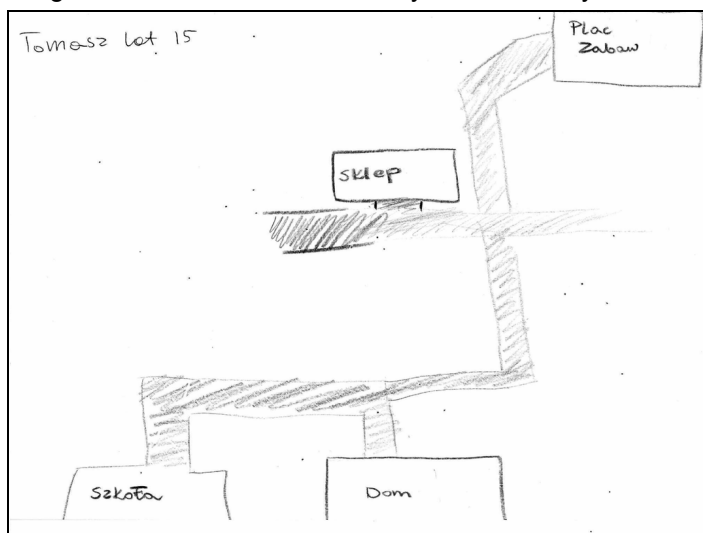
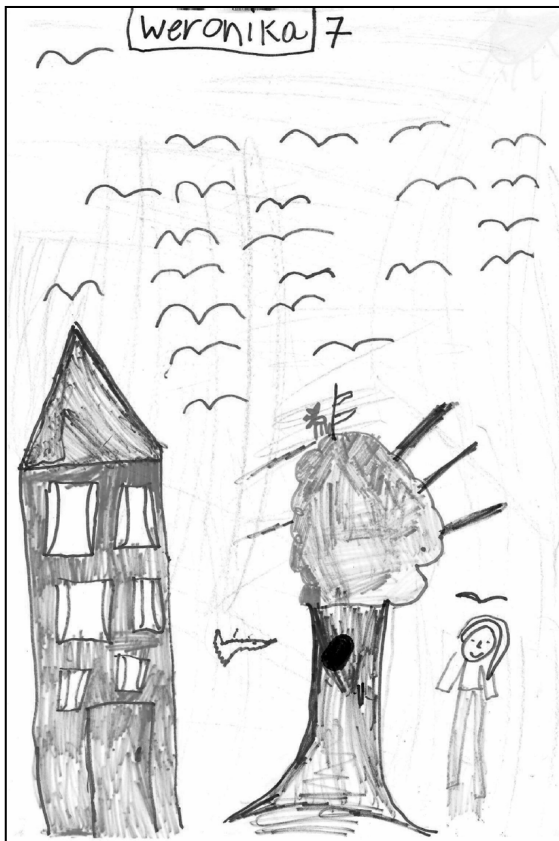


Figure 5. A tree of attachment by Tomasz, 15 years old



land seven months prior the interview with his 2 older brothers (twins 19 years old) and dad following his mum who came a few months earlier. His older sister lived in Poland. At the moment of interview he did not feel well settled in the city he lived: 'I have no Scottish friends, because of my English language is not good enough'- he said. 'I know, they play a lot football because I use to see them on the football ground'. My [few Polish] friends, stay at home and do nothing, they are slightly lazy [...]. They don't like to explore new places either or they know already some places, I don't know'.

Figure 6. A tree of attachment by Weronika, 7 years old:



Home and mum

In a second technique, children were again given blank sheets of paper and asked to create the drawings of the tree with the roots and to draw or write by the roots the things and/or the persons there are attached to. The creation of a more than one drawing was used as a way to allow children to express multiple ideas about themselves; however some children chose to make only one drawing or were tired after the first drawing. This format also recognized the researchers' observation of short attention spans in the respondents. Younger children sometimes did not understand the idea of the thematic drawings or drew some of the elements like the tree with some signifi-

cant things around them or asked for another sheet of paper to draw something quite different - whatever they would feel inspired to draw. For example, 7 years old Weronika drew her mum and big house next to the tree (Fig. 6), on the second piece of paper she drew only some houses. After the interview, it became clear that the family (divorced mother with 2 children) had a very unsettled post- migration period with the frequent changes of the living places, including the period of living in a caravan. It was by engaging in a creative manner with the children that the researcher could get an entry

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into data collection, and further simultaneously bring in more traditional interview techniques to bring out the children's voices, help the children to tell their stories, and ultimately enhance the researcher's ability to reliably interpret the data.

Figure 7. A mental map by Kasia, 9 years old: School in Edinburgh, Home in Poland, Garden in Poland, Playground in Poland

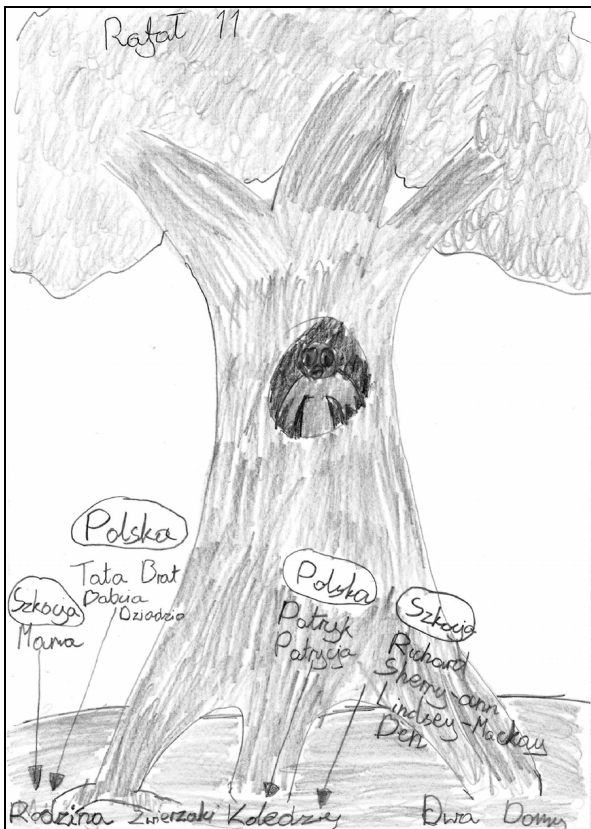


Figure 8. A mental map by Alicja, 9 years old: School, two houses: our home and home, zoo, shop and museum with the boat



The drawings clearly brought to my attention the children's ideas and concerns about their transnational experiences and practices. Four examples illustrate this. One is particularly striking: on the Figure 7 is a personal map of 9 years old Kasia who sees her world as one street along which she put next to each other the buildings and places which belong to two different worlds (countries): school in Scotland, home in Poland, garden in Poland, playground in Poland. Second, the drawing of Alicja, 9 years old (Fig. 8) shows many elements where she spends her time, including two homes, 'our home' (which is in Poland as Alicja explained later during the interview) and home.

Figure 9. A tree of attachment by Rafal 11 years old: Family – mum (Scotland), dad, brother, grand mum, grand dad (Poland); animals; friends – Patryk, Patrycja (Poland), Richard, Sherry – Ann, Lindsay-Mackay, Den (Scotland), and two homes



The third interesting example is Rafal's tree of attachment (Fig. 9); "I placed under the tree all the important people: In Poland my father, brother and grand mum and grand dad and in Edinburgh my mum. I won't place any things because the people are more important than the things. There are also my friends there in Poland and in Scotland", explained Rafal, 11 years old during his interview. "And how do you keep in touch with these people from Poland?" I asked. "Through the computer and Skype: Also with my father and brother I communicate through Skype and with my grand parents through phone because they don't have Skype".

In a further part of the interview I asked him: "Thinking about your home what do you imagine?"

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R: About which home in here or in Poland?

M: Do you feel like you have two homes?

R: Yes, I am rich men (laugh).

M: Would you like to come back to Poland or to stay here in the future?

R: I know that I would like to finish a school here and university. And to Poland I would like to come back for holidays but not to stay for the rest of my life... like in here very much, and I don't feel like going back to Poland, I don't know why, perhaps because of the school, I didn't like school in Poland'.

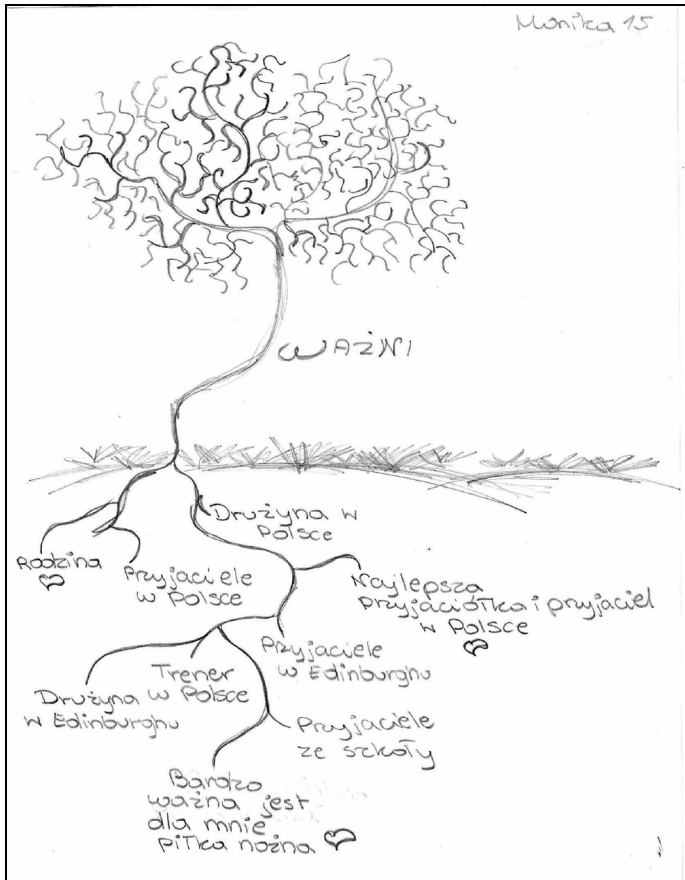
Later I have also remarked that Rafal placed two homes under his tree of attachment.

My fourth example is interesting because the interview was conducted with an older girl (15 year old Monika) who under her tree of happiness made a very elaborated scheme (Fig. 10) - hierarchy of important things which include: Team in Poland, The best friend and the other friends in Poland, Friends in Edinburgh, Trainer in Poland, Team in Edinburgh, Friends from school, 'Football is very important from me' This is showing again the participate life within two worlds.

Strict visual analyses without the ability to engage with the child seems to be difficult when we try correctly identify the images on the drawings and to identify the most important features. This is an important methodological issue, as visual data collection strategies can become so 'child-centred' that the researcher has difficulty with interpretation. Therefore, in this study, pictures were used to prompt more detailed oral information, keeping the images as the central reference point. I also ask the capable children (excluding those over eight years old) to sign the drawn objects.

In order to connect a drawing to the social life, intent and interests of its producer, the analysis of drawings should move reflexively between "the image and verbalization" (Harrison 2002:864). In work with children, embedding the analysis of an image within its producer's account of that image is especially relevant since it is often assumed that children need someone to speak for them. However, as with adults, children vary in their ability and inclination to talk about their visual productions. For example Maciek, 11 years old wasn't very talkative, on the activity map drawing he drew a rectangular building with a sign 'Cinema World / Wanted' (Fig.4). Encouraged by his classmates participating in the same small-group interview he did not want to reveal anything more during the interview that he like to go to the cinema. We might try to say something about his isolation-after-migration and lack of other social and interpersonal engagements. However, the ways in which we interpret the drawings are a continual reminder of Myers critique of ethnographers becoming visual translators who tell the viewer "what they

Figure 10. A tree of attachment by Monika 15 years old: Family, Friends in Poland, Team in Poland, The best friend and the other friends in Poland, Friends in Edinburgh, Trainer in Poland, Team in Edinburgh, Friends form school, 'Football is very important form me'



should see” and what the drawings mean (1995:60).

A drawing may sometimes express what a child cannot or does not wish to say aloud. For example, interviewing Jakub 9 years old wasn't very 'successful' either as he wasn't really interested to talk with me and he just waited for the moment I would free him and allow him to go out to play football. Nevertheless, Jakub left me his drawing with a big house in the middle and a path leading

to the house and two short sentences at the very bottom of the page:

“I don't like school”, “I like to play on the computer” when I asked him to describe the picture and to read the sentences he said that he likes to spend time at home and he has a big family. However he refused to read aloud the sentences he had written down.

My general experience was that children were generally willing to describe the elements of their drawings verbally, but rich narrative accountings were infrequent. There were few examples of the children who did not want to talk. This observation highlights more than children's differing communicative competence or the ethnographic fact that adults rarely ask for children's opinions in this community. Drawings are not a substitute for chil-

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dren's voices and the absence or muting or fragmentation of children's speak about their images means researchers need to be particularly cautious about over-interpreting their images. Therefore, I placed greater importance on using the maps and the drawings as 'catalysts for further oral discussion' to properly interpret the images. However, children are not used to interviews, so the structure of the interviews depended on particular child and its age- less structured interviews were conducted with younger children. Therefore, for individual interviews with young children, even children as young as 5 and 6 years olds the drawings were essential to provide a point of reference and to enable communication.

Concluding reflections

Two visual methods are used in the study: mapping of activity spaces and key features of the individual environment and thematic drawings. Visual methods were not used exclusively but were employed as a supplementary methods to the narrative interview and observation in the family or/and school context in order to maximize opportunities for researchers to understand the children's experiences. The combination of methods also allowed researchers to be more perceptive about the ways children expressed themselves with the visual methods.

The value of eliciting and analysing visual methods is now well established and widely used in ethnographic research among adults (Pink 2001; Prosser 1998), although surprising little of it examines drawing. As the following overview makes evident, a growing number of researchers are taking seriously Wagner's suggestion that "placing images in the foreground of our talk with children can increase opportunities for getting a clearer sense of what kids think" (1999:4). I found that asking children to draw a picture or a map related to the topic and then to tell a story to go with this is a good strategy to facilitate an interview. Particularly, a standard, lengthy series of questions and answers may not work as well for children as for adults.

My research in the Scotland provides evidence of the value of using drawing and mental maps accompanied by interviews as a research strategy among migrant children. Mitchell (2006) argues that interviews or focus groups in which children respond to questions posed by an adult researcher characterize the power imbalances while visual methods are said to offer a means of redressing or minimizing that. However, drawing is not an inherently child-centred activity, but one in which relationships of power, authority, and difference also needs to be acknowledged and integrated into the analysis. In fact, often the drawings are received as a "natural form of expression" for children and an activity that "allows children to be children." As Christiansen and James have noted, "there is nothing particular or indeed peculiar to children that makes the use of any technique imperative" (2000:2).

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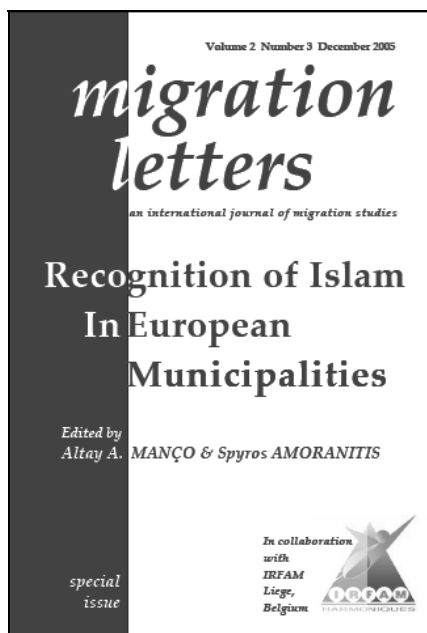
2005 Special Issue:

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Altay A. MANÇO & Spyros AMORANITIS (Guest editors)

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