

# Draw me a picture, tell me a story: Evoking memory and supporting analysis through pre-interview drawing activities

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*In interviews for interpretive inquiry or interpretive case studies, researchers hope to grasp participants' perspectives and learn about the nature and meaning of their experiences. There are many challenges or requirements for useful or successful interviews. In this paper we identify important aspects of interviews and examine the helpful contributions of using pre-interview activities. Pre-interview activities were drawings or diagrams that participants completed about the experiences of interest. Participants brought the completed drawings to their interviews and the interviews commenced with presentation and discussion of these visuals. This paper presents four studies that illustrate how the use of pre-interview activities can support participants in identifying central ideas in their experiences. In the interviews, the participants spoke at length about the visual representations they produced and in these reflections they identified central ideas or key themes in the experiences. Some drawings were a source of visual metaphors for discussing the experience and some highlighted whole-part relationships that informed interpretation. The findings contribute to conversations about how to "invite stories" rather than "request reports" from participants, how images other than photographs can serve as evocative and potent visuals to support memory and reflection in interviews, and how researchers can better or more directly access a participant's meaning.*

*Lors d'entrevues dans le contexte d'enquêtes interprétatives ou d'études de cas interprétatives, les chercheurs espèrent comprendre les perspectives des participants et de se renseigner sur la nature et le sens de leurs expériences. Les entrevues utiles ou réussies impliquent de nombreux défis et plusieurs exigences. Dans cet article, nous identifions certains aspects importants d'entrevues et examinons les contributions utiles des activités pré-entrevues. Les activités pré-entrevues consistaient en des dessins ou des diagrammes complétés par les participants et portant sur des expériences qui les intéressaient. Les participants sont arrivés aux entrevues avec leurs dessins terminés; les entrevues ont débuté par une présentation et une discussion de ces illustrations. Cet article présente quatre études qui illustrent la mesure dans laquelle l'emploi d'activités pré-entrevues peut appuyer les participants dans l'identification des idées qui sont centrales à leurs expériences. Lors des entrevues, les participants ont longuement parlé au sujet des représentations visuelles qu'ils avaient produites; au cours de leurs réflexions, ils ont identifié les idées centrales, ou thèmes clés, de ces expériences. Certains dessins étaient sources de métaphores visuelles servant d'appui à l'expérience; d'autres mettaient l'accent sur les relations partie-tout qui éclairaient leurs interprétations. Les résultats viennent contribuer aux conversations sur la façon d'inviter les participants à « raconter des histoires » plutôt que de*

*leur « demander des rapports », sur le rôle que peuvent jouer les images (autres que les photos) comme illustrations évocatrices et puissantes qui appuient la mémoire et la réflexion lors d'entrevues, et sur les moyens pour les chercheurs d'avoir un meilleur accès, ou un accès plus directe, au sens que veulent communiquer les participants.*

In interpretive inquiry (Packer & Addison, 1989) or narrative and interpretive research (Schwandt, 1994; Schwandt, 2001) researchers wish to learn the meaning and nature of particular experiences for participants. Researchers' interests might be expressed through questions such as: How has the participant experienced the topic of interest (e.g., a particular role, event, activity, or dimension of life or work, etc.)? What was the significance of the experience for the participant? For the participant, what was the experience about, how did it work, what was it like? What patterns or dynamics were central in the experience? As will be discussed below, it can be challenging to plan and conduct useful interviews. In this paper we report on how using pre-interview activities (Ellis, 2006) can enable or encourage participants to recall and reflect on experience and to identify the meaning or central ideas in their experiences. Pre-interview activities were drawings the participants completed to represent ideas or experiences related to the research topics. Four researchers each interviewed his or her own participant and each researcher had a different research topic.

### **Goals and Challenges in Open-ended Interviews**

In a review of interviewing in educational research, Brenner (2006) explained that the purpose of open-ended interviews or qualitative interviews is to achieve in-depth access to participants' meanings more directly and with less dependence on the inferences required in the interpretation of surveys, tests, participant observations, or naturally occurring conversations. Brenner stated that in open-ended interviews the researcher's intent is "to understand informants [*sic*] on their own terms and how they make meaning of their own lives, experiences and cognitive processes" (p. 357). The expectation or goal for open-ended interviews is to "give participants the space to express meaning in their own words and to give direction to the interview process" (p. 357).

Brenner (2006) identified many important accomplishments that are necessary at the outset of a successful open-ended interview. The beginning of an interview either succeeds or fails to establish "an interactional relationship in which both the participant and the interviewer are genuinely engaged in meaning making" (p. 357). Even if the interview will include a common list of open-ended questions, the beginning of an interview can be individualized to support the development of rapport (p. 363). The interviewer needs to establish rapport with the participant but in a way that maintains neutrality in questions; praising responses can unduly direct the participant (p. 364). As an interview begins, the participant seeks cues about what is expected in terms of content, length of responses, detail, and formality of language (p. 362). The interviewer must begin in a way that communicates interest in what the participant has to say and encourages him or her to speak expansively on topics (p. 357).

At the same time, the researcher must succeed in diffusing power differences, supporting negotiation of social roles, and creating a "new kind of interpersonal context," one that "violates many of the norms of everyday conversation" (p. 366). For example, in interviews, researchers need participants to do the majority of the talking and to provide lengthier, more elaborated

stories than would be expected in everyday conversations. Brenner also suggested that it is helpful for interviewers to quickly learn the participant's personal and cultural vocabulary and framework so that these can be incorporated into later questions about the general areas to be explored (p. 362).

There are a number of risks in approaches that are sometimes used to ensure thorough coverage of all possible topics of interest in interviews. Brenner (2006, p. 363) noted that frameworks or matrices such as those by Werner and Schoepfle (1987) and Patton (2002) provide structure for lists or cycles of questions but the resulting repetitive cycles of questions or repeated probing questions can cause boredom or impatience on the part of participants. Weber (1986) suggested that interviews offer participants either the risk of revealing what they do not wish to reveal or the potential benefit of gaining valuable insight into the topic (p. 66). Weber cautioned that participants may put their efforts into concealment if they experience the researcher's questions as attempts to have them reveal what should not be revealed (p. 67). Thus, if a long list of questions make participants feel interrogated they are likely to become self protective rather than eager to share their experience.

Chase (2003) has written about the value of posing questions that invite participant-selected stories rather than questions that either request reports on specific experiences or discussion of abstract ideas. To clarify the importance of inviting stories rather than asking for reports in interviews, Livia Polanyi (as cited in Chase, 2003) reviewed the example of asking a child to tell "what happened in school today" and receiving an obligatory report rather than a spontaneously told, animated story. Polanyi explained that stories are told to make a point and to transmit a message about a world that is shared with others. In telling the stories, the narrator takes responsibility for making the relevance of the telling clear or the point of the story clear (p. 13). In contrast, when participants are asked for "reports" as in questions that begin with "Tell me..." or "Describe..." the burden of interpretation of the significance of what is narrated falls more heavily to the recipient. Chase argued that interviewers should make efforts to shift the weight of responsibility to interviewees in such a way that they feel encouraged and invited to tell their stories and to take responsibility for the meaning of their talk.

### **The Special Contribution of Visual Methods to Interviews**

In a review of photo elicitation studies in anthropology and sociology, Harper (2002) observed that photo elicitation evokes "information, feelings, and memories that are due to the photograph's particular form of presentation" (p. 13). He explained that "the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information," and as a consequence, "images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words" (p. 13). Thus interviews using photo elicitation not only seem to elicit more information but a "different kind of information" (p. 13).

Harper suggested that virtually any image, not only photographs, might be useful in these ways. And Berger (as cited in Harper, 2002, p. 13) offered the observation that simpler images may in fact be more evocative than more elaborate ones:

Memory is a strange facility. The sharper and more isolated the stimulus memory receives, the more it remembers; the more comprehensive the stimulus, the less it remembers. This is perhaps why black-and-white photography is paradoxically more evocative than colour photography. It stimulates a faster onrush of memories because less has been given, more has been left out...

Harper (2002, p. 23) observed that this onrush of memories leads to “deep and interesting talk” in that “photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past” and support an “extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared.” Chiozzi (as cited in Harper, 2002) found that after introducing photographs, his participant became much more involved in the topic and that suddenly he was “overwhelmed with information” (p. 15). Earlier, Harper (as cited in Matthew & Singh, 2009, p. 66) had explained that photo elicitation approaches are based in phenomenology and the idea that experience generates reflection, perceptions, and categories for analysis and knowledge generation. Harper (2002) also remarked on the collaborative nature of interviews when two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs and try to figure something out together.

### **The Importance and Ambiguity of Whole-Part Relationships**

Hermeneutical research, or research that is self-consciously interpretive, is only taken up when something or someone that one cares about is genuinely mysterious or incomprehensible (Ellis, 1998b; Packer & Addison, 1989; Smith, 2010). The purpose of interpretive inquiry or qualitative research conducted in the constructivist paradigm is to develop a “more informed and sophisticated” understanding than that which was previously held (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 112). The new understanding should open up possibilities for the researcher, the research participants, and the structure of the context (Packer & Addison, 1989, p. 289). To transform one’s initial interpretation or understanding and gain new insight requires attention to whole-part relationships.

When Schleiermacher (as cited in Smith, 1991), introduced key ideas for philosophical hermeneutics, he identified the importance of attending to whole-part relationships in interpretation. One can only understand a *whole* in terms of its *parts*. Further, one can only understand a part in terms of its relationship to the whole. It can be relatively straightforward to recognize *what the whole is* and what the parts are when examining a piece of equipment. This is not the case with human experience. Researchers cannot confidently anticipate either the important parts of a person’s experience or the most relevant larger whole of which the experience is a part. For example, if one were studying a teacher’s experience with using technology to teach a science unit with Grade 4 students, would the pertinent larger whole be her prior experience with these students, or with Grade 4 students in general, or with science teaching in general, or with technology in general, or with teaching in general, or with her life outside of school, or with being a science student herself in earlier years? It is the pertinent larger whole that should help the researcher understand why the teacher does what she does and feels the way she feels when using technology to teach the science unit with her Grade 4 class.

It would be exhausting for researchers and participants to work with prepared interview questions that explored a very large number of possibilities in terms of what the *important larger whole* might be. Instead, researchers are typically encouraged to use grand tour questions followed by mini-tour questions to probe topics identified in a response to a grand tour question (Brenner, 2006, pp. 358-359; Fetterman, 2010, pp. 43-44). In this paper, as another approach to learning what is salient, meaningful, or preoccupying for participants, we explored the potential of having participants prepare drawings or diagrams about the experience of interest. The expectations and rationale for such pre-interview activities were outlined by Ellis (2006). The four research reports presented in this paper serve as case studies showing how

participants were able to use such pre-interview activities to recall, reflect upon, and analyze their own experiences. Through listening to participants talk about their diagrams or drawings, the researchers hoped to learn what the experiences of interest *were about* for participants. Would participants' discussions about their drawings alert researchers and participants to important whole-part relationships, or key ideas or insights?

### **Context for the Study**

In a qualitative research course, doctoral students were asked to complete interpretive inquiries by interviewing a participant about a topic of genuine interest for either their research programs or current preoccupations in their lives. Students were asked to use both pre-interview activities and prepared open-ended questions. Pre-interview activities that were offered to participants were requests to make drawings, diagrams, or other visual representations about the experience of interest. Each participant was offered several possibilities and was asked to choose one to complete prior to the interview. The expectation was that each interview would begin by having the participant present and talk about the completed visual representation. The doctoral students worked with their transcripts to complete analyses and interpretations and presented these in class.

Following these presentations, I invited interested students to write reports focusing on what happened with their use of pre-interview activities. My expectation was that we could use these reports for presentations and publications about the dynamics or contributions of pre-interview activities. Nine of the 11 students wrote these reports. All reports illustrated a number of common and distinctive benefits from the use of pre-interview activities. I clustered reports according to different key benefits that were best highlighted by the studies.

Three of the reports were included in a first paper that emphasized how the pre-interview activity can support an interview that enables the researcher to re-frame or re-consider the research question or interview process prior to commencement of a larger study (Ellis, Janjic-Watrich, Macris, & Marynowski, 2011). Two reports were included in a second paper that focused on how the pre-interview activities can be helpful when the researcher needs to have the participant recall past events from over a long period of time (Ellis, Amjad, & Deng, 2011). This third paper presents four studies that illustrate how the use of pre-interview activities can lead to participants' identification of central ideas in their experiences. In the following accounts the researchers report on how the pre-interview activities worked and how these activities contributed to insights about key ideas in the participants' experiences.

### **Researching the Experiences and Perspectives of Public School Superintendents**

*Randy Hetherington, a doctoral student in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta has focused his research program on inquiry concerning the experiences and perspectives of public school superintendents and with particular interest in the decision-making processes as they relate to accountability, human resources, and governance. To explore an interview approach for such research Hetherington asked his friend and colleague, Mario (pseudonym), to participate. Mario is a retired school superintendent who has worked for both public and denominational school systems within the province of Alberta for more than two decades. Mario and Hetherington shared a collegial relationship and an employer-employee relationship during one phase of Mario's career and have continued a professional friendship since that time. As a school principal, Hetherington*

*came to this inquiry with an insider perspective on administrative roles within a school division and with a personal desire to understand the experiences of public school superintendents in the province of Alberta. In the following account Hetherington reflects on his concerns prior to the interview and reports on the interview process that unfolded.*

As I anticipated my interview with Mario, I wondered whether, because of our shared history, Mario might mainly discuss people and events we were both acquainted with rather than identifying or clarifying his own analyses of how he had done his work. I worried that this might be the disadvantage of our long-time professional friendship and one-time employer-employee relationship. As our interview proceeded, I was pleasantly surprised to witness how the pre-interview activity supported Mario in identifying a central idea about his experience and how this central idea then became thematic in his responses to questions in later parts of the interview.

A week before the interview, I offered Mario the following pre-interview activities and asked him to choose and complete one.

- Draw a timeline, and on it mark the dates and titles of critical events that changed the way you experienced the superintendency throughout your career.
- Make a schedule of a typical day, week, or year in your experience of the superintendency using colors or shapes to code it (provide a legend).
- Draw a diagram and label it to show where your support systems for the work of the superintendency came from.
- Construct a diagram showing how you see the role of superintendent and label it with words or phrases to indicate any important connections or relationships.
- Draw a diagram that would illustrate how being a public school superintendent has changed or stayed the same.

Mario chose to create a diagram of the support systems for his work/life as a superintendent. The diagram is shown in Figure 1.

When Mario arrived for the interview he was eager to begin and especially to share the results of his reflection in the pre-interview activity. First, he wanted to talk about the experience of completing the pre-interview activity. He indicated that he was taken aback at first by the creative and pictorial nature of the pre-interview choices, stating:

Well, I must admit, Randy, that this really kind of threw me because it's so different from what . . . . I expected. I expected that you would of said oh . . . do a reflection on one of these five areas . . . . they're all valid . . . and just jot down a few areas, a few points or point form or whatever . . . but I said to Ophelia [pseudonym for his wife], 'he wants me to do a drawing or diagram . . . that's unusual' . . . at any rate . . . it was about the best I could do. Yeah, I know it's ingenious. These colors or shapes to code it I said to Ophelia, 'Oh my god how would I do that,' but you're right it changed my whole way of thinking.

**Figure 1:** Relationship Circle of Support Systems for the Superintendency

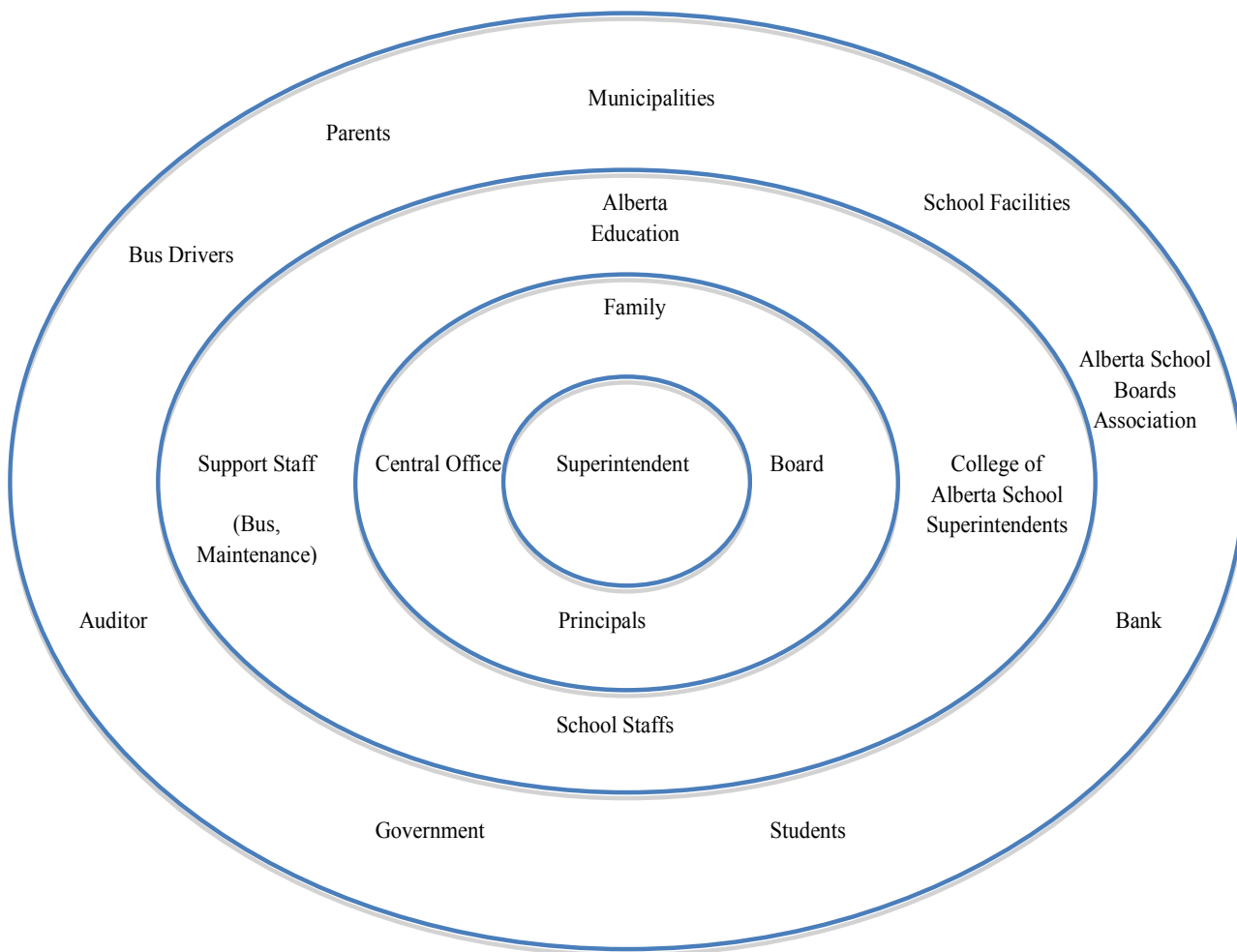


Figure 1. This is a visual representation of the hand-drawn diagram completed by Mario (Hetherington’s participant) in response to the pre-interview activity prompt, *Draw a diagram and label it to show where your support systems for the work of the superintendency came from.*

Once Mario began his explanation of the image he had created and the deeper meaning of the labels and connections he had illustrated, he seemed to recognize and state the central theme of relationships aloud for the first time. “That’s what it all comes down to you know, I mean without relationships, what have you got?” Mario went on to explain that he felt relationships served as the central organizer both for his work as a superintendent and for seeing connections among his skills, values, and supports.

Mario’s claim about the centrality of relationships was not simplistic or romantic. He acknowledged that as a superintendent “you are not one of the boys” and that as superintendents “we really are lone rangers in our jurisdictions.” At the same time he used phrases such as “walking together” and “hammering away at relationships” when expressing the view that strong collegial and professional ties along with those one builds in the community are essential for success in the superintendency.

As the interview progressed and we worked with my prepared open-ended questions, it was apparent that Mario was using the now identified interpretive framework of relationships to think about specific sub-topics. To make sense of the *parts* he kept returning to *the larger whole* of relationships as the overarching explanatory idea. Regardless of where his answer to a particular question began, it invariably circled back to an affirmation of the centrality of relationships.

Interviewer: So is that a challenge of the superintendency, that whole thing of discussions or do you think there are those out there who might prefer that? I'm sure you've met a number of colleagues in your travels....

Mario: Randy, you really hit it, you really nailed it. There are some superintendents who feel very comfortable having that power and authority. And not being challenged . . . they would like that. That's not my nature. Because you saw what I wrote on the bottom . . . of this thing here (referring again to the pre-interview drawing) . . . this is my relationships circle. That's all the superintendency is about, but that's all what anything is about.

I also found that new questions I posed incorporated the idea of relationships. On a few occasions I asked him to clarify aspects or types of relationships he had been fostering or maintaining with respect to situations being discussed. For example:

Interviewer: You have never used in our conversation today nor in my recollections of us working together, the word *win*. Relationships were never about winning on any side. You have three different sets of stakeholder relationships that affect the Superintendent. How did you experience those relationships?

In Mario's very lengthy response he spoke about several organizational relationships such as those with Alberta Teachers' Association, College of Alberta School Superintendents, and the Ministry of Education. When he discussed these he spoke not about policies, procedures, and processes, but rather about people within each organization with whom valued trust-based relationships had been cultivated and nurtured. It was implicit in his discussion that organizations were the people and were defined by the relationships they had with him and with each other. While indeed Mario's relationships with these organizations were not about winning, he indicated the strongest relationships were those where either party could say, "you're right," and move forward. Organizations, as wholes, were experienced in terms of relationships with people who were parts of these.

My interview with Mario has helped me to appreciate the value of using a pre-interview activity to support participants' reflections about the whole of their experience. Mario's reflection, diagram, and discussion of his diagram enabled him to identify a central idea about his experience of the superintendent role. Our shared awareness about the key role and importance of relationships in his work contributed to the flow of the interview, the coherence of our discussions, and my opportunity to ask meaningful questions. As an exploratory interview related to my research program, this inquiry has also alerted me to the importance of attending to or addressing the topic of relationships in future research on the experience of superintendents.



## Researching a Teacher's Experience with Technology in Classrooms

*Meridith Lovell, a PhD student in Elementary Education at the University of Alberta, is focusing her research program on how technology is being used in primary classrooms and how classroom practice and teachers' pedagogy change with the use of technology. To conduct an interview that was generally related to the topic, Lovell worked with ZN, a teacher she knew who was working as a supply teacher for a public school board after teaching in a private school for 9 years. Lovell's intention was to focus the interview on how ZN currently experiences technology use in the broad range of classrooms she teaches in. In the following account, Lovell clarifies the contribution of the pre-interview activity for learning central ideas about ZN's experiences with technology in classrooms.*

In my interview with ZN, an experienced teacher who previously taught for nine years in the Special Education classroom at a local private school and who currently works as a supply teacher for a local school board, I was interested in understanding her experience with using technology in the classrooms where she has been supply teaching. Throughout the twelve years of our friendship, ZN has always described herself as not being very proficient in the use of technology, yet she encounters technology in the classrooms where she teaches and is required to use various technologies.

Prior to the interview, I offered ZN a number of pre-interview activities to invite her recollections and reflections about her experiences with technology in classrooms. ZN chose to complete not one, but three of the pre-interview activities. The three she selected were:

- Choose and draw three symbols that characterize your experiences with technology in the classrooms where you have been teaching.
- Choose two colors to make a drawing that represents your feelings towards using technology in the classroom. Why did you choose these colors?
- Think of a time when you used technology in the classroom. Draw a picture of what this looked like.

In response to the prompt, *Choose and draw three symbols that characterize your experiences with technology in the classroom where you have been teaching*, ZN drew a circle with a slash through it, a checkmark or "positive stroke," and a downward-pointing arrow. ZN explained her choice of symbols during the interview:

When I first came to Canada, my knowledge of computer technology and the electronic media was very limited [referring to the circle with a slash through it.] The positive stroke represents how gradually I learned that using technology in the classroom enhanced a lot of collaborative teaching experiences and it became a very positive experience for children . . . . The final is going down, represent[ing] that as time went by, new innovations came to the core. Not all the teachers in the school where I was teaching were provided the opportunity to master the training . . . and I slowly found that my expertise and my knowledge with technology was lacking and, therefore, I felt a sense of fear because my confidence began to wane.

ZN's experiences had changed over time in response to her perceived lack of support and training in using newer technologies. She identified interactive whiteboards and student

attendance tracking software as the two most challenging aspects of technology.

In response to the prompt, *Choose two colors to make a drawing that represents your feelings towards using technology in the classroom. Why did you choose these colors?* ZN expressed similar ideas about growth, followed by despair. ZN's drawing showed a colorful rainbow that rose up only to encounter a black cloud. The rainbow represented her increasing confidence in and hope for her use of technology as she learned new strategies for using it in her early teaching career. The black cloud symbolized her fear and dread of using technology when she felt that her skills were not keeping pace with changes in technology. ZN explained her choice of colors:

The seven-fold rainbow is . . . the great hope and drive to learn something that was very new to me and each color of the rainbow represented to me the enormous strife I put in to pass each step. As I began to learn and master new ways to teach technology in the classroom . . . I found that as I was succeeding with each step, it became a tremendous experience for me, and that's why I liken it to a colorful rainbow because it helped to enrich children's learning in the classroom. And then, when it's pitch dark, one feels void and lack of warmth and this dark cloud to me symbolized the fear and the dread of not knowing and not having the knowledge and means with the new technology to be able to be successful with the children.

Again, ZN's reflections highlight how her experience changed over time. Without the use of the pre-interview activities, ZN's interview comments might have focused on her current experiences only, and the contrast with her previous experiences might not have been as evident.

In her third drawing for *Think of a time when you used technology in the classroom. Draw a picture of what this looked like*, ZN again chose to contrast her current experiences with her past experiences. She titled her picture, *Now and Then*. I was surprised that she did not draw a realistic picture but instead continued with using symbolic representations of her experiences. Under *Now*, ZN drew a black sky and grey ground, and under *Then*, she drew a blue sky and green grass. In the interview, ZN commented:

I think [in] this picture . . . it's pretty clear that although technology is one of the innovative tools that are used in the classroom, not all teachers may have the knowledge, and for me it's been pretty dark and dreary and scary. . . . Earlier on when I had the chance to learn and experiment through trial and error it was a very evergreen experience, but slowly the experience is becoming dreary and very scary for me.

As we moved from discussing the pre-interview activities to working with my prepared open-ended interview questions, ZN's additional stories confirmed that her experience with technology had changed over time and that, despite her initial confidence and success with technology use, she felt that she was not well-prepared to use technology in her current teaching assignments. I expect that the reflections and discussions prompted by the pre-interview activities helped to make a wide range of memories more available to ZN.

ZN has taken steps to improve her understanding of technologies that she encounters in the classrooms where she is supply teaching. One strategy that she has used is to group students so that they may serve as models for each other and for the technology aspects of the lesson, and then placing her focus on the lesson content and on her understanding of effective ways to teach students. While the students worked on their assignments, ZN circulated and observed how they

used technology. She has also asked for assistance from teachers in the schools, but unfortunately, she found that teachers were often too busy to help. ZN has also signed up for technology workshops available to teachers in the school district. Unfortunately, since she is a supply teacher, ZN is responsible for paying for a portion of this training herself. ZN explained her motivation to improve her technological proficiency, “I would love to have thorough knowledge of the new, innovative technological tools so I can be a well-rounded, successful educator, and I [can] impart knowledge to my students in the best way to help them learn and succeed.”

It was clear to me that although ZN felt that her lack of knowledge was a barrier to teaching with technology, in fact, she found effective strategies to compensate for her lack of knowledge and to improve her own understanding of technological media. The technologies available and used in her classroom have changed over the past eleven years of teaching, but she is still learning and experimenting with technology use, both because she wants to gain personal proficiency and because she feels that technological proficiency is important for students to learn. The use of pre-interview activities allowed her to reflect on her early experiences so that she could highlight the changes in her thinking about her technological proficiency and identify factors which have contributed to the change in her thinking.

Although I began this inquiry only expecting to learn about ZN’s current experiences in the classrooms where she does supply teaching, the suggestive spaces in the pre-interview activities prompted her reflections about and symbolic representations of the entirety of her experiences with technology in classrooms. Through her drawings and discussions of these, ZN explicitly identified the central ideas of growth and hope being followed by fear and dread in her current circumstances. This larger view of her experience helps me to appreciate the significance of ZN’s current frustrations and disappointments.

### **Researching the Experience of First-Year University Students**

*Janet McConaghy, a language and literacy consultant and doctoral student in Elementary Education, interviewed a student, Amanda (pseudonym), to learn what it had been like for her to attend a university far away from home and to live in residence. McConaghy was a beginning sessional instructor teaching first-year education students and she hoped that her interview with Amanda might help her develop a better understanding of the students she was teaching. In the following account, McConaghy explains her interest in this inquiry and reports on the contribution of the pre-interview activity that Amanda completed.*

In my first experience as a sessional instructor teaching first-year education students, I believe that, overall, others considered my teaching to be successful. However, throughout this first course, I began to feel unsettled that something was missing in terms of how the classes were going. Some students seemed to lack enthusiasm, and the classroom seemed to lack a sense of warmth and community. Clearly, I was not enjoying this university teaching experience the way I loved teaching young children in elementary school for most of my career. As I considered the difference in these two teaching situations, I realized that I had approached university teaching with a very strong emphasis on the subject matter of the course and, as a result, I had overlooked the words of Paulo Freire that had guided my teaching with young children for most of my career. Freire (1985) cautioned that “Our tendency as teachers is to start from the point at which we are and not from the point at which the students are” (p. 15). Is that what I had been

doing with this class? I had very little idea of where these adult students were at or what circumstances had led them to this university or to this particular class. I did not know any of these students as individual persons, with likes and dislikes, joys and fears. Nor did I know where they came from or any of their background experiences. I hoped that by interviewing Amanda, and hearing her stories, I might gain insight about the preoccupations and experiences first-year university students can have.

Amanda was a 19 year-old student who was beginning her second year at a university over 4000 miles away from her home in Eastern Canada. I hoped to learn what this experience was like for her and how she made sense of its meaning or effects. Because Amanda and I have a long-time personal relationship, we began the interview conversations comfortably and with a strong element of trust.

Amanda and I met at my home and I offered her the following choices of pre-interview activities.

- Draw two pictures: one to show what your life was like living in your home city and another showing your life after you moved away from home to become a university student in another city.
- Outline a schedule of your day/week before moving to Edmonton and another showing how it has changed or not changed after moving to Edmonton.
- Use three colors to make a drawing that represents how you have experienced attending university in a new city and living away from home.
- Draw a diagram that identifies your current support systems now that you live in a different city away from home.
- Draw a diagram or picture about an incident that changed the way you experience or understand your life as a university student who has moved away from home.

I invited Amanda to either take the activity home to complete or to stay and work on it in my home. She was very enthusiastic about getting started and chose to stay and complete the drawings at my kitchen table. I left Amanda on her own while she created her pictures. She chose the first activity of drawing two pictures about her life at home and here.

Amanda's first drawing about her life in her home city included elements or symbols to represent family members, her dog, her place of work, her friend's house, her car, and the major cities close by that she liked to visit on weekends. In the second drawing about her life in Edmonton she included her room and friends in residence, another group of friends she had met in her classes, a calendar marked September to April, and three night clubs that were close to the university.

When I invited Amanda to tell me about her drawings she spoke in great detail about what each element represented or symbolized. She also added brief stories that came to mind about events related to each of the elements. After discussing each of the components in the drawings, she placed them side by side and made the following observation about the fragmented nature of her life in Edmonton:

What I think is interesting about these things is that even though geographically these places are very spread out [pointing to her home city picture] I have them all close together because it's all part of my

life and fun. Whereas here [Edmonton picture] these places are all close together but I have spread them out because they are very different areas of my life. In my [home city] it is all meshed together; whereas in Edmonton it's like my life is in different pockets so it is more segregated.

Regarding her Edmonton drawing, Amada commented further that it expressed how during her first year in the new city “everything was in a box—in pockets. I was here for a purpose and just for that amount of time [pointing to the calendar she had drawn from September to April].”

Once Amanda noticed the fragmentation and instrumental approach to the parts of her life in Edmonton, she made even more observations to elaborate this theme. For example, in the following excerpt she notes that in Edmonton her part-time job has the purpose of making money, whereas at home the part-time job was just part of the fun of her life at home and did not feel like work:

In the Edmonton picture [pointing to the picture of her car surrounded by \$ signs], I drew the symbol of ‘money’ going to work but I didn’t in [my home city] which I think is significant and I didn’t even think of that until just now. It didn’t feel like work [in my home city].

When Amanda talked about living in residence, she identified a number of benefits and their significance for her. The first benefit was having a comfortable way of easing into adulthood:

It’s funny because this past year has sort of been finding the balance between sort of imitating being an adult and actually having the benefits of being an adult . . . . I think the most rewarding part was more the discovery. I’m a lot more relaxed. I think all these experiences here at university have helped with that. But I’d say the freedom I’ve had living on my own has really helped.

Amanda also noted how living in residence supported both her social life and studies. She stated:

I think it is definitely a balance finding when to study and when to socialize. The nice thing is living in residence was a social atmosphere. Going to the kitchen and heating something up in the microwave, throwing something in the laundry, and grabbing a bite to eat at the cafeteria made me feel like part of a big family. I think you don’t have to go out and socialize as much, so you have more time to study, and there is also zero commute time . . . . so the rest was all left to studies. I didn’t ever feel that I didn’t have enough time to study.

Once Amanda had identified the value of being able to meet her social, scholastic, and domestic needs with minimal travel or time losses, she proceeded to share stories about how other university students worked with those competing goals. She noted that a high school friend who went to university at home hadn’t made any new friends.

My friend Karen [pseudonym] lives at home and she goes to [name of university] and she drives there and straight home. She hasn’t joined any clubs or made any effort to become involved in the university. She’s not made one friend from university. She has friends don’t get me wrong but she hasn’t made a friend at university.

Amanda also told me about another student she knew back home who did join a large number of university clubs and eventually moved into a house with other students to reduce commute time

and improve her access to new friends.

Amanda's reflections and stories alerted me to many different ways university students can experience time, social life, and autonomy. I came to better appreciate how university students' living situations can affect their preoccupations, social life, study time, and feelings of connection to university life. I was also surprised that well over a year after Amanda's move to Edmonton she still spontaneously made a drawing that reflected the fragmentation she experienced in her first year. This taught me that the adjustment process of such a move—establishing a sense of home or belonging—is certainly not a rapid one. The pre-interview activity clearly provided a space and an organizer for supporting Amanda's reflections, interpretations, and recollections of related stories or memories.

I was surprised at how much just one such interview with a first-year university student could alter my understanding of possible realities for all students in my course. After my interview with Amanda I *saw* all of my students differently and knew that they each had a story of working through many things in their new lives at university.

### **Researching the Experience of Academics Who Work Internationally**

*In this interpretive inquiry, Melody Viczko, a doctoral student in Educational Policy Studies, was interested in the experience of academics who work internationally. This topic related to her broader research interests in the internationalization of educational policy processes and her own personal experiences of teaching internationally. Joy, her participant for the interview, was an acquaintance who had over 10 years of experience in academic positions in two countries. During the past four years, Joy had worked at two universities in Canada. She was a highly accomplished junior academic at the beginning of her career and had worked as an instructor and department chair in her home country before relocating to Canada with her family. In the following account Viczko relates her apprehensions in advance of the interview and reports on the welcome contribution of the pre-interview activity.*

As a new researcher, I faced my own tensions in anticipating the interview. On the one hand, I felt that learning about Joy's experiences could be beneficial for others. She was a competent, successful academic, and her perspectives might resonate with other academics. I expected that some aspects of her experience would be related to her transition processes in new universities in a new country and any challenges in finding or creating space and confidence for her contributions in her new academic communities. At the same time, I wondered whether Joy would be hesitant to speak about any uncomfortable or difficult times in her new academic contexts. I wanted to learn what it was like for Joy to re-establish her career in the new setting but I did not want to ask any intrusive or unwelcome questions about sensitive topics. Thus I worried about whether I would learn the important aspects of Joy's experience if I also endeavoured to honour her own agency and comfort in the interview. Would Joy initiate discussion about what was most salient for her if some of these experiences were painful or negative? Could I plan opportunities for dialogue about the important aspects of her experience?

Prior to the interview, I asked Joy to choose and complete one of the following pre-interview activities.

- Draw two pictures: one to show what things were like for you at the university in your home country and another to show what things were like after you began working in the university in Canada.

- Draw a timeline, and on it mark the dates and titles of critical incidents that changed the way you understand working in a university in a different international context.
- Draw a diagram and label it to show where your support systems come from in your life.
- Make a diagram that is of a place in the university in Canada that is important to you and use notes or keywords to indicate what happens in that place.
- Use three colors to make a drawing that metaphorically represents how you experience working in a university in a different international context.

Joy chose to draw two pictures to show what things were like for her at university in her home country and after she began working in a university in Canada. Before Joy began to discuss the completed drawings, I expected that she would mainly talk about her experiences at university positions in Canada. I was surprised, however, that she first talked at length about what it was like for her to be an academic in her home country.

Joy used the drawings about her academic experiences in her home country to introduce the topics of her early sense of confidence and competence. In the following excerpt, Joy discussed her sense of confidence and competence as she pursued her PhD while working at a university:

I think it was part of my personality but I had to smile and, at the same time, be serious. To show that I was young but that I could do a good job. On the other hand, I had to be friendly to professors, old professors who were there for a long period of time. I was young but very professional. I felt that although I was young, I was at the same level in terms of culture, knowledge. I could interact with them in the same way . . . . But they respected me and I was very confident.

Continuing with stories about her experiences in her home country, Joy gave examples of intensifying this awareness of her competence and confidence in positions of new responsibility. She spoke about herself as a confident, social person who enjoyed organizing productive interactions between her colleagues and students:

In [my country], I feel I had to work a lot. I had to work for 60 hours a week because I was full time at the college and I also had 20 hours as education specialist at the government, the ministry of education . . . . Everything was organized. I was a strong woman, I was respected, I knew how to work in a group. I was respected for this. I would go to a new place but I would be able to bring everybody together, students, professors.

Finally, Joy used these stories as a context for explaining how she experienced herself when she came to be an academic working in Canada. She talked about the challenges she faced and how these challenges affected her sense of being a confident, contributing scholar:

And then when I came to Canada, everything changed. Especially I think my self-esteem. I felt here [indicates drawing of experiences in Canada], this represents the barriers I had to meet. When I finished in my country, I finished my PhD, I published my book. And then I came to Canada, and it's so hard to think in another language and you think about how people would respect you if you don't have the same confidence to do things like you were used to doing in your country.

In the drawing that represented her experiences in Canada, Joy used the color, blue, extensively in the background of the drawing. Referring to this drawing, Joy stated, “The blue is the feeling. The feeling of, you feel like, you don’t have space. You have so many things to say, to tell, but you feel so small next to other people.” This statement stood in stark contrast to the way she had spoken about her complex accomplishments of bringing her colleagues together at institutions where she worked in her home country. Instead, in her new context, Joy represented herself as smaller and diminutive in relation to others around her.

As Joy continued to discuss her experiences in Canada, she frequently referred to the stories she had already shared about her life as an academic in her home country. She explicitly used the drawings as a visual referent for making the connection to who she was *here* and who she was *there*. In the following excerpt, Joy talked about feeling scared for the first time and how debilitating fear was:

I was surprised because for the first time I was scared. I was thinking that, for the first time, I wasn’t able to do something. Because all my life I was so positive. I thought I can do it. I can solve everything. I was like this superwoman that, no problem, everything I could solve. Even when they hired me at that college in [my country] . . . I was scared, but I knew that I could do it. And I did. But here, what surprised me, was for the first time, the lack of confidence. Sometimes being in a classroom, I knew that I could say something very interesting, something to make the discussions more interesting, but then you look for the words and you don’t know how to articulate. And this big mess comes to your mind and you don’t know. You have this fear inside.

Joy continued using the metaphor of feeling small or feeling big after she first introduced it in her discussion of experiences in Canada. At the conclusion of our interview she again expressed this central idea about her experience:

Yeah, but I’m saying, to conclude that sometimes I feel small. You know sometimes I felt small. Like when I talk about winning these scholarships, I feel big. I want to say that sometimes I feel small but sometimes I feel big. But the big is a small period. And then you become small [again].

Although I expected that our interview conversation would focus on Joy’s experience in Canada, the pre-interview drawings provided a space for her to determine the topics of discussion and to begin with lengthy stories about her experiences in her home country. Joy could only express her experience in Canada in relation to her prior experience. She traced the changes in her feelings of confidence and competence before and after coming to a Canadian university. To understand Joy’s experience in Canada, I also needed to learn about her experience in her home country. Only by appreciating what those earlier experiences had meant for her whole sense of being a competent and confident researcher and scholar could I begin to grasp the significance of what she said about how she experienced herself as a university academic in Canada. This was the larger whole-part relationship that I needed to learn about. Without using the pre-interview activity, the interview and analysis would have been limited by my own expectations that Joy’s experiences could be understood solely by examining her discussions about academic work in Canada.

I was surprised at how the discussion of the pre-interview activity drawings helped me to grasp Joy’s perspective quite holistically. As a consequence, when I later worked on analysis of the interview transcript, I felt more able to understand what each particular experience meant for her as opposed to simply interpreting the individual stories or vignettes through the lens of



my own assumptions or prior experiences. For me, this illustrates how the pre-interview activity can enable the researcher to trust the research process and to expect to learn why and how participants' actions, thoughts, and feelings can be understood as being reasonable and coherent (Ellis, 1998a).

### **Discussion**

In these accounts, pre-interview activities in the form of drawings or diagrams led to a number of helpful developments including: 1) the participants' apparent discovery of new insights about the experience being investigated; 2) the participants' use of metaphors to describe and interpret the experience; 3) the identification of important whole-part relationships that helped to inform interpretation; and 4) useful directions or sub-topics in the flow of the interview. These were important accomplishments for brief, one-time interviews given the challenges of learning about the complexity of people's lived experience (Schwandt, 1994).

In both Hetherington's account and McConaghy's account, the participants appeared to discover and express their insights about their experiences only after they explained their drawings to the researchers. Hetherington wrote the following about Mario's identification of relationships being central in his work as a superintendent:

Once Mario began his explanation of the image he had created and the deeper meaning of the labels and connections he had illustrated, he seemed to recognize and state the central theme of relationships aloud for the first time. 'That's what it all comes down to you know, I mean without relationships, what have you got?' Mario went on to explain that he felt relationships served as the central organizer both for his work as a superintendent and for seeing connections among his skills, values, and supports.

Similarly, McConaghy wrote the following about Amanda noticing and expressing the idea of fragmentation in her Edmonton life:

After discussing each of the components in the drawings she [Amanda] placed them side by side and made the following observation:

What I think is interesting about these things is that even though geographically these places are very spread out [pointing to her home city picture], I have them all close together because it's all part of my life and fun. Whereas here [Edmonton picture], these places are all close together but I have spread them out because they are very different areas of my life. In my [home city] it is all meshed together; whereas in Edmonton it's like my life is in different pockets so it is more segregated.

For both Mario and Amanda, looking at and talking about their drawings seemed to spark their observations, analyses, or reflective insights.

The drawings also became a source of metaphors for participants' comments about their experience. After participants used colors or images to symbolically represent ideas in their pre-interview drawings, they easily incorporated these visual metaphors into their speaking. Sometimes the metaphors served the phenomenological function of expressing what the experience was like and sometimes they also served the hermeneutic enterprise of identifying the meaning of the experience. For example, the university student, Amanda, talked about the

parts of her life being “meshed together” at home but being “in pockets,” more “segregated” in Edmonton. ZN, the supply teacher working with technology in classrooms, talked about her earlier success represented by the rainbow in one drawing and by blue sky and green grass in another drawing being replaced by the dark cloud she had drawn to represent fear and dread. Joy, the academic who works internationally, used the color blue, and drew herself as being smaller than the people around her in her Canada drawing. Joy stated, “The blue is the feeling. The feeling of, you feel like, you don’t have space. You have so many things to say, to tell, but you feel so small next to other people.” In these ways, the visual images in the drawings facilitated poetic expression of experience and specific comments about the significance of experiences.

Making drawings as pre-interview activities also gave participants the opportunity to identify either key parts of an experience or the larger whole that could inform interpretation of the experience.

- Joy used “back home” and “in Canada” drawings to introduce the idea that her sense of confidence and competence were key parts of her whole experience that were affected by the move. Although Viczko expected that the interview would focus on the Canada experience, Joy used the two drawings to clearly show that the first “part” of her academic career back home needed to be understood in order to appreciate the significance or meaning of the difference she experienced in Canada.
- Similarly, ZN, the supply teacher working with technology in classrooms, used three sets of drawings to establish that all of her experience with technology over time—the larger whole—needed to be recognized in order to appreciate the significance of her current experience. Lovell noted that she would have expected the interview to focus more on current experience.
- When presenting the pre-interview activity at the interview, the superintendent, Mario, identified and emphasized the centrality of relationships as the key part of his work as a whole as superintendent.
- It was through examining her own two drawings that Amanda recognized the difference in cohesiveness of part-whole relationships comparing life back home to life in Edmonton. The parts of her life were “meshed together” back home but were in pockets or segregated in Edmonton.

The participants seemed to select pre-interview activities that afforded opportunities for including topics that were meaningful or salient to them. When completing and discussing the drawings they highlighted wholes and parts that were important elements for understanding their experience or perspectives.

The pre-interview activity drawings and participants’ commentaries about these drawings also contributed to a productive and coherent flow in the interviews. Lovell noted that when they moved on to her prepared open-ended questions, ZN had many memories that were readily available to draw upon in her responses. Hetherington found that both he and his participant incorporated ideas about the centrality of relationships in subsequent questions and responses. Amanda’s drawings were a catalyst for a rich cycle of descriptive stories/memories followed by analysis/reflection yielding an insight followed by further stories/memories related to the insight, and so on. For Joy, the international academic, the “then, back home” stories versus

“now, at a Canadian university” stories created a structure for contextualizing responses to questions. In many different ways, the pre-interview activities led to clarification of what a topic was about for a participant and that provided a useful focus or context for the rest of the interview. As Viczko noted, the participant’s clarification about central ideas also gave guidance for analysis of the individual anecdotes in the transcripts.

### Conclusion

Just as participants’ responses to grand tour questions (Brenner, 2006) and more general open-ended questions (Ellis, 2006) can help researchers identify important topics for attention, the pre-interview activities approach illustrated in this paper has also shown potential to clarify salient sub-topics and the relevant whole-part structure of a topic for a research participant. When participants discuss their diagrams or drawings they identify subtopics or key ideas and spontaneously provide elaborative stories or comments about those without any need for repetitive probing questions from the interviewer.

One of the special contributions of the pre-interview drawings may be how they can help the interview have a good beginning in the ways that Brenner (2006) identified as being important. Starting the interviews with having participants present and discuss their drawings creates space for participants to initiate the interview by talking expansively about the recalled experiences. Beginning in this way can help to diffuse power differences while establishing the distinctive social roles and special interpersonal context required for the interview. Further, with a drawing on the table as a visual focus and with the participant ready and interested to talk about the drawing, it is easy for the interviewer to show genuine interest in whatever the participant will say, thereby encouraging lengthy responses without setting the direction for the talk. By beginning with the stories about the drawings, the researcher and participant also have a good opportunity to establish shared meaning for words and frameworks that emerge from these.

Another important benefit of the pre-interview activities is their capacity to invite stories as opposed to requesting reports. Participants are given a number of pre-interview activities to choose from and each of these are typically open-ended. For example, “Make two drawings showing a good day and a not-so-good day with [the activity of interest for the research].” In contrast, examples of questions that request reports are: “Tell me about your first day of practicum,” and “Why did you choose to become a teacher?” Because participants have made drawings about stories they wish to share, and are not simply responding to requests for reports, the point of any story—the claim or theme to be interpreted—is more likely to be apparent. This was the case in the four studies reported as each researcher presented central ideas about the participant’s experience. When participants have identified memories they wish to share or discuss with the researcher, they can make the significance of those memories more clear for the researcher.

It also was apparent that the simple drawings produced as pre-interview activities functioned as potent visuals (Harper, 2002) that evoked more memories and different memories than would have been accessed without the drawings. At the very least, the drawings served as visual organizers and anchoring focuses for telling and listening as participants referred to them to contrast complex *here and there* stories or *before and after* stories and then reflected on these contrasts. Each of the participants became very involved in talking about the experiences and ideas signaled by the simple drawings.

Using pre-interview activities such as those discussed in the studies presented can be a respectful way to invite participants to teach researchers about their experiences and the meaning of these experiences. Participants can choose memories or stories that they are comfortable to share and use personal vocabulary and cultural frameworks that make sense for them. In reflecting on the experiences or ideas represented in the drawings, participants can identify patterns, central ideas, or whole-part relationships. In this way, participants can develop their own insights about their experiences and share these meanings with researchers.

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