

Mosaic

Participatory research in the early years

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Introduction

One of the most influential participatory methodologies used both for early-childhood research and for evaluation and development of professional practice in the UK is the ‘Mosaic’ approach. Mosaic was first outlined by Clark and Moss (2001), has been further developed in subsequent key texts (for example, Clark and Moss, 2011; Clark, 2017), and is discussed and cited by many more. The approach reflects a growing research body which has embraced the new sociology of childhood (see James and Prout, 1997) and is a response to a previous, more adult-centred research and improvement discourse.

Epistemologically, the Mosaic approach offers a participatory paradigm, underpinned by socio-cultural theory: children are not *objects* of investigation, they are its *active participants* through collaboration with adults and peers. It also sets out a particular view of knowledge, not one which seeks a single truth, but one which recognizes the complexities of human lives. Mosaic provides a process through which meaning is created and greater understanding gained.

In practical terms, it has several stages. First, children and adults (researcher, practitioners, parents and others) gather evidence, then this information is pieced together for dialogue and reflection. Patterns – known as ‘mosaics’ – begin to develop, indicating, for example, a child’s interest in role play or their lack of engagement in mark-making. Children and other participants then get the opportunity to reflect further upon these findings and participate in interpretation. The importance of the final stage is paramount, not just hearing what has been said, but purposeful listening as a pre-requisite for ‘deciding areas of continuity and change’ (Clarke, 2005:33).

Clark and Moss, in their various publications, have usefully set out the perspectives on childhood which accompany this paradigm and on which the Mosaic approach itself is based. Firstly, children are viewed as experts in their own lives, able to offer their own unique outlooks. They are skilful communicators, a view which emphasizes not only the competency of young children but also the role of adults in facilitating this communication through rich, well-resourced environments. Children are also rights-holders – indeed, the Mosaic approach is underpinned by Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 1989), which state that children have the right to express their views through a range of media and have these taken into account when decisions that affect them are being made. Finally, children are meaning-makers and participants in their own learning, active in constructing their own knowledge and understandings.

This view of childhood and of children’s competencies supports what Clark and Moss (2011) call a ‘framework for listening’ within the Mosaic approach. This involves

a recognition that children communicate through both verbal and visual ways and that therefore a range of different ways of ‘listening’ to a child should be used. Verbal methods include discussions, known as ‘conferencing’; ‘tours’ of the day-care setting given by children themselves and through which they can express their preferences; and shared discussions which review relevant pedagogic documentation, such as planning or observation reports, allowing children to reflect on their learning opportunities and achievements. Visual methods include children engaging in free drawing and photography, thereby allowing communication on a symbolic level, with the results then becoming prompts for further reflection and verbal discussion.

Within the Mosaic approach, children as well as practitioners, parents, researchers and perhaps other adults participate in the interpretation of the evidence gathered. Purposeful listening guides in particular how the needs and wishes of the youngest children are interpreted and used – indeed, there is an ethical purpose behind the intent to listen to all the children, so that professional action and potential improvement can follow.

Importantly, the framework for listening offers adaptability, recognizing that each child’s lived experiences differ and that a Mosaic approach can be used in different ways to suit each context. For example, for one child, photographs might provide the basis for fruitful discussion, whilst for another, a conference with a sibling might give a valuable, different perspective. If evaluation of professional practice is the purpose, children might discuss a setting’s outdoor provision during a tour, explaining what they enjoy, which areas they like to access and why. There is also acknowledgement that interpretations of findings will vary amongst participants, giving rise to further opportunities for reflection.

Overall, therefore, the Mosaic approach offers a variety of complementary methods, which allow integration of verbal and visual information from children, together with separate evidence from parents, practitioners and others. Any or all of these can be used to build up a broad, deep picture of a child’s experiences and preferences – a multi-faceted, personal mosaic, drawn from the many perspectives gained and interpretations made, and likely to be very different for one child to that of another. Clark and Moss (2011) also highlight the importance in this process of being open to the unexpected, bringing a child’s priorities and concerns to the fore. It was this adaptability, as well as a desire to embed a listening approach within a particular early-years setting, that led to use of a Mosaic approach in the research project which is used to illustrate methodological issues in the rest of this chapter.

Principles and advantages

Reread this first section and identify the key principles underlying the Mosaic approach. What advantages does such an approach offer:

- For a research project?
- To support evaluation and improvement in an early-years educational setting?

Using Mosaic

The project (Lyndon, 2012) took place in a small, private, pre-school setting. This had just over 30 children registered for full-day care and 30 others for sessional care. The motivation

for the study stemmed from a desire to work alongside practitioners at the setting to explore how the Mosaic approach could facilitate better listening to children and so enhance its early-years practice. It offered a participatory methodology in which children's involvement was paramount and practitioners could learn from children's perspectives.

Additionally motivating was a desire to make the setting's pedagogic documentation more meaningful. A key collection of such material in UK systems is a child's 'learning journey', which is used to track development against the seven areas of learning and the three characteristics of effective learning, defined for practitioners in England in the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum guidance, known as the EYFS (Department for Education, 2017), and related advice (Early Education, 2012). While these learning journeys might ordinarily stay in a cupboard or on a high shelf, in this project they would be used to provide prompts for further discussions involving children. The project also gave an opportunity for learning to be documented with children, rather than by others on their behalf. A key consideration was that any recommendations for changes to practice which emerged from the project should be manageable and efficient: the private provider had struggled with issues of sustainability and did not have the luxury of supernumerary staffing.

My own role with this setting was long established. As an advisory early-years teacher within the locality, I had been working with these practitioners for some time and had developed respectful and trusting relationships with them. This not only meant that we had mutual aims for best professional practice, but it also formed the basis for a shared desire to explore participatory methodologies in developing practice. This approach could be seen as part of an emerging paradigm of praxeology, the study of human action, which offers a mix of 'phronesis [practical wisdom], praxis, ethics and power' (Pascal and Bertram, 2009:477). It is a reflective approach, which emphasizes the importance of practice-led enquiry and in which ethics are fundamental; by balancing power, it provides a truly democratic approach to research. In the case of this project, researcher, children, practitioners and parents all contributed to the development and interpretation of the data within each mosaic, thereby pursuing an adaptable process through which the views of the children in particular could be explored and then better integrated into practice through the staged approach.

Stage 1: Children and adults gather evidence

An initial meeting of practitioners served as a focus group to discuss how the project could be developed and to establish a benchmark of current practices. Areas of concern were highlighted, including a lack of children's input into pedagogical documentation and issues with planning and observations. There was a desire to better understand the children's views of their nursery experience, with particular reference to differences between full-time and part-time children. Parents were consulted about the project and consent was sought from them for their children's participation. In fact, parents were keen for their children to be involved and open to the idea of greater partnership with practitioners at the setting. Finally, a focus-group discussion was conducted with the children, in which they talked about why they came to nursery, what they enjoyed about it and what they thought grown-ups should do there.

The notion of 'assent' applies where participants are under a legal age of consent. It can be recognized with early-years children through observation of their body language, as well as through discussion. Children in this project were invited to participate in the activities

and were able to opt in or out, allowing them to respond to the moment, rather than contemplating their assent. In gauging this, practitioners could draw upon their intimate knowledge of the children and their longstanding relationships, which allowed them to judge whether or not a child was comfortable and contributing voluntarily in a discussion or activity.

Six children were selected, representing both genders and with an age range from two to four. They broadly reflected the diverse, ethnic nature of the setting and its wider locality and also represented both full-time and part-time attendance. Mosaics were developed around these children using observations, conferencing (parent, practitioner and child) and photography – multiple, combined methods which provided a range of data around each child. Whilst the process very much related to the six children and to the research project, the practitioners wished to go on to embed these Mosaic techniques into their wider practice, seeking to benefit all children within the setting. This usefully addressed the ethical dilemma, raised by previous researchers, that selecting a few children for research can marginalize others (Harcourt and Einarsdottir, 2011).

Observations: Narrative and coded

Observations for the project involved several prolonged periods of watching interactions, interests and responses of the children, focused largely on two questions: ‘What is it like to be here?’ and ‘Am I listened to?’ They were initially recorded in written, narrative form, as was common practice within the setting, and typically produced vast quantities of qualitative information. As a result, the task of interpretation became daunting for practitioners, striving to embed elements of Mosaic into their wider developmental practice.

The practitioners therefore collaborated in a revision of their usual observation form, using examples from Early Effective Learning (Bertram and Pascal, 2004). This programme uses observation coding, whereby activity is assigned in terms of particular elements: involvement (see also Laevers, 2003), social interaction, initiative and area of learning. Such coding enables some elements of analysis to be carried out at the point of observation and therefore reduces the need for long, written narratives. As practitioners began to use this new recording format, they found not only that it reduced the amount they were writing, but also that they could see how much more information was gathered by the coding. For instance, it was clear when children had been deeply engaged in play, when they had led activity amongst peers, and when they had preferred one particular area of learning above others. The coding also offered a succinct way of sharing the outcomes of observations with children themselves, as key points could be easily be extracted, for example: ‘I saw how long you spent playing pirates in the garden, Gabriella. Am I right that this was your idea? It looked like you were leading the game.’

Conferencing: Parent, practitioner and child

As well as providing pieces of the mosaics, observations also offered prompts for subsequent conferencing opportunities with parents, practitioners and children themselves. The semi-structured nature of these conferences enabled deeper probing into certain issues, whilst similarity in questions not only determined some broad themes which reflected perceptions of a child’s interests and development but also facilitated interpretive analysis of the data, as described by Mukherji and Albon (2015).

Aside from the expected problem of scheduling conferences with busy working parents, this element was very successful. Parents readily agreed to take part, indeed they were keen to discuss their child's interests and experiences at nursery. Their conferences lasted, on average, at least twice as long as practitioner or child conferences and all the parents interviewed expressed a desire for the opportunity to become a regular occurrence.

With practitioner conferences, a decision was taken that these should take place away from children, so that the participants could talk freely. However, this caused scheduling difficulties and even a sense of being rather rushed, as correct adult-to-child ratios needed always to be maintained in the classroom.

Conferences with children (who relished the opportunity for discussion) took place within the setting environment. An important factor here was their already established relationship with myself within the nursery context – they were already familiar with my presence, leading group work. The semi-structured conferences offered space within which the children could demonstrate their perspectives (Formosinho and Araújo, 2006). Clark and Moss (2011) cite the use of older siblings as an area for methodological study and, on a small scale, this was facilitated here as well, with some offering perspectives on the preferences of their younger, pre-verbal brothers or sisters. The views of the oldest children in nursery were also sought in order to explore and interpret further the experiences of the younger children who were the focus of the research.

To further extend these conferences, interpretations of children's learning, as documented in their learning journeys, were also discussed. For this, children and practitioners sat together and reviewed entries in the journals, with the children given the opportunity to reflect upon the evidence collected. The dialogue proved an invaluable participatory approach, especially as children's past successes could be revisited. In some instances, the interpretation of the practitioner became questioned when a child offered a unique insight. For example, a practitioner had documented one child's love of creative activities, but the child indicated that her real motivation was engaging in the same activity as her friends. This participatory element is central to the design of the Mosaic approach and highlights the importance of including the children in the exploration and interpretation of data.

Photography

Photography and visual imagery, such as map-making and book-making, play a central role in methods commonly used in a Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011), as these can provide valuable representation of children's views. Typically, children take photographs of the setting and use these to compile their own 'map' with which, in effect, they can give practitioners or researchers a 'tour' of the setting and indicate their preferences. Similarly, children can make their own books which reflect such preferences, using their photographs as a central feature. In having this control over the discussion through their photography, children can show increased communicational competence (Formosinho and Araújo, 2006).

However, as indicated earlier, the practitioners were ultimately seeking to embed Mosaic into practice for all children. Natural curiosity around the digital camera would mean that all the children would then wish to participate, and indeed ethically they would have been entitled to do so. However, developing the maps and books from the pictures required a great deal of time and one-to-one attention and practitioners therefore decided that these would not be workable for everyday practice. So instead, A3-sized 'photo-boards' were used, providing a more time-efficient process. For these, all the children took photographs in

response to the prompt: ‘What do you enjoy about being here?’. The images were printed and given back to the children, who then worked collaboratively with practitioners to develop photo-boards of those which the children selected. The pictures could be annotated or not, depending upon each child’s preference. The longest time lapse between taking photographs and the creation of a photo-board was three days, the shortest was one day.

The photo-boards then became a focus for further discussion between children and practitioners. The children were able to talk readily about their pictures and why they had taken them. Practitioners found themselves surprised, not only by the child’s competence using the technology but also by their competence in articulating their images. Some of the children organized their photographs around themes, such as ‘Friends’ or ‘Playing outside’. The children could also share their boards with their parents or carers as further opportunity for discussion.

However, the use of visual imagery in Mosaic is not without ethical tension, particularly over ownership of digital, photographic images. In the UK, these have been increasingly used by practitioners to document children’s progress through their early years. The growing ‘data shadow’ that builds around each child has been criticized (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016), and the early-years sector is now having to consider the impact of the vast quantity of data which it holds. The security needed for storage and analysis is particularly problematic. Legally, images taken by children remain their own property, as copyright laws are not affected by age (*Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988*). However, such images invariably depict multiple children and practitioners from the settings and so permissions are not straightforward (Menter *et al.*, 2011). In this research, the images remained the property of the setting, as happens for photographs taken by practitioners as part of documenting EYFS practice, and their use was thus governed and restricted by setting policy.

Methods

Stage 1 of the project described here used three methods to explore children’s perspectives in verbal and visual ways: observation, ‘conferencing’ and photography. What other methods could have been used in this project to elicit children’s preferences and experiences? What methods could be used in a Mosaic research project of your own?

Stage 2: Dialogue, reflection, interpretation

In the Mosaic approach, research methods used in Stage 1 prompt dialogue, reflection and interpretation in Stage 2, joining together the individual pieces of information to develop greater understanding of the priorities of the child (Clark, 2017). Whilst this can take place as a further, formally scheduled conferencing event, practice within early-years settings affords more regular opportunities for such dialogue and reflection, mostly on an informal basis. This approach suited the small community-based setting where the project was carried out. For instance, parents and carers were happy to engage in dialogue with practitioners as they collected their children at the end of their day, sharing their interpretations on the compilation of data gathered. Children also engaged in natural dialogue with practitioners and the use of social time facilitated this, for example during lunch.

The subsequent process of interpretation is best illustrated by a case study of ‘Gabriella’, who attended the full day-care element of the setting on a full-time basis and who had just turned four years of age at the time of the research. Her parents were relatively new to the UK, having migrated from eastern Europe, and English (in which she was rapidly becoming proficient) was her second language.

During collection of data, Gabriella and I developed quite a bond, and her willingness to participate in everything made it easy to gather evidence of her perspectives. Observations were made and recorded, using the coded format described earlier. Her resulting mosaic consisted of nine separate elements, including a strong bond with practitioners and equally strong engagement in social play. Indeed, relationships were a key element in her mosaic and she often sought out adults to talk to. Her interest in what adults were doing was common in both home and setting environments and came through in both the parent and practitioner conferences. The photo-board that Gabriella created mainly contained images of staff she liked and of friends; there were also a few images she took which demonstrated resources or specific activities.

Gabriella loved role play – this was evident in the observations, as well as in her child conferencing. Not only did she enjoy and participate in this, she was instrumental in initiating such play and supported other children in organizing their own imaginative activities. Neither the parent or practitioner conference had highlighted this interest, nor was it evident in her learning-journey documentation. Instead, these other sources had concluded that Gabriella had a preference for art-and-design activities, even though this was never expressed by Gabriella directly. Reflection on her differing perspectives enabled practitioners to consider whether what they had judged to be Gabriella’s personal preference might instead have been evidence of compliance, and to decide to offer her further opportunities to engage in and shape role-play activities instead. What resulted was an understanding that Gabriella liked creative activities when engaging in solitary play, but that her preference was for social activity, specifically that involving role play.

Stage 3: Deciding areas of continuity and change

In creating more participatory practice through the Mosaic approach, stakeholders need to believe that children have the ability to co-construct knowledge relating to their developmental and educational experiences. During the research project, the early focus-group discussions increased practitioner awareness of the different ways of actively listening to children. Indeed, a change was noted immediately, as staff began to check their interpretations of children’s speech and actions. It is this ethos within a setting, characteristic of a Mosaic approach, which facilitates a listening culture.

In fact, children not only participated in the building of their mosaics by responding to questions but also influenced design of the research itself. For example, their perspectives directly influenced development of the photo-boards: they decided how these would look, what they would contain and how they could be used. Furthermore, practitioners were also able to see how the ‘voice’ of even the youngest, pre-verbal children could be analysed, and the children in general started to be viewed as experts in their own lives and experiences, as described in Clark (2017).

As in previous Mosaic research (for example, Clark and Moss, 2005), the target children expressed through this investigation the importance of friendship and the outdoor environment. In line with the idea of purposeful listening, this finding was used to encourage

further development of the setting's use of outdoors for children's play and learning, as well as prompting further staff development on the use of 'communication spaces', areas of the setting which specifically encouraged children to engage in discussion. One unlikely example of such a space was the pirate ship in the garden area, originally designed and placed to encourage physical development, with steps and a slide. As a result of the Mosaic project, its use was developed further as a 'den' space in which children could sit and talk. Furthermore, the children had not discussed or documented more adult-led activities, such as early phonics and mathematics, but parents did express interest in such nursery activity and some requested more feedback about them, which they could consolidate in their home environment.

Indeed, the desire of both parents and children to have strong communicative links between home and nursery was generally apparent in this research. Practitioners saw themselves as facilitators of this and a key change following the research was in how they approached it, offering parents choices about what information was disseminated and giving the children physical prompts – a piece of work or an artefact – to take home, so these could become a focus for dialogue with parents and others.

Time itself also became a facilitator of more participatory practice – it was allocated for practitioners to engage in the research process and in reflection. This was not easy to arrange, as staff in busy, private, full-day care settings do not always have the luxury of time, nor often the mechanisms through which reflection can be encouraged. The EYFS (Department for Education, 2017) may offer one such opportunity for reflection through its statutory requirement for supervision of staff, involving support, coaching and training. With such time set aside, as well as an agenda for reflective practice, this and other settings should have further opportunity to consider and act upon what children have to say.

The practitioners' enthusiasm for the project also facilitated the participatory approach, although there was some initial hesitation. Their early perspective was that research was for the researcher and they themselves were mere observers of this. Staff often did not even see themselves as experts within their own field, exemplifying the low status often experienced by early-years workers (Aubrey, 2011). The researcher was seen as the point of knowledge, reflecting perhaps a traditional 'banking' model of education (Freire, 1996), whereby learners (the practitioners, in this case) are viewed as vessels, which educators (the researcher) must fill. It took encouragement and trust to develop a more participatory process in which practitioners could see themselves as 'co-researchers'. Children and parents, however, did not demonstrate this same level of reticence and showed confidence and capacity to take part in the research from the onset. I believed this to be reflective of a welcoming ethos, created by the nursery, as well as the child-centred approach underpinned by the EYFS.

During the research, established processes were challenged, as practitioners were guided away from being solely responsible for recording every element of a child's life and encouraged to adopt different ways of listening and focus on more participatory and efficient ways of gathering information. The research project ended with the staff's prior perception of a child's learning journey as documentation put together by practitioners being altered to that of a shared resource, which included the child's, parents' and practitioners' perceptions. An instance of this was that children's ownership of digital cameras as a mechanism for voice remained post-project and children began to make regular use of cameras to document their own learning. Practical ways were also sought in which the documents could be accessed jointly within the setting.

Strengths and limitations

The research project, with its use of a Mosaic approach, provided a private, full day-care setting with the opportunity to improve children's participation. This succeeded and practice altered. The changes served also as discussion points for other practitioners in other local settings through network meetings, illustrating the study's transferability through the 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) it offered of participatory processes.

A further strength of the Mosaic approach was the way in which it empowered staff to take on researcher roles and to value their own contribution to the processes of investigation. Knowledge creation was seen as a collaborative effort: staff helped to educate the researcher and *vice versa* (Freire, 1996). This change in mind-set impacted on the setting as a whole, with staff then embarking upon their own participatory initiatives, for example a springtime gardening initiative.

One purpose of the research project was to harness the adaptability that Mosaic offers and to apply it to the development of professional practice and associated documentation within the setting. The multi-modal design offered more than simple triangulation, as it was built on the premise that each piece of each mosaic would add a different perspective regarding the preferences and experiences of a child. Only by gathering information in a variety of ways could a child's true nature be understood. However, a Mosaic approach takes time. The project's original research design recognized this and there was an implicit understanding that mosaics could not be created around every child to the same depth simultaneously.

There is some criticism of participatory approaches, such as Mosaic, for taking advantage of children's 'schooled docility' (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008:506). Are children like Gabriella conforming to wider norms through their willingness to participate? Do practitioners simply select methods for participation that children are familiar with due to their setting experience? Indeed, participation does not necessarily result in free choice, as practitioners and their settings still operate within the parameters of an adult-designed, professionally dominated, statutory system. It should also be noted that our wider legal system places parental consent above the assent of children in participating in such a project. Practitioners developing mosaics must also be careful that the methods do not resort to tokenism (Hart, 1992) and that continuity and change can result following interpretation of the data.

Insider perspective

As seen in this chapter, the Mosaic approach blurs the lines between research and educational practice. In this respect, it requires understanding of the setting and of the researcher's relationships with those involved, as well as an ability to affect change. All these elements are possible, especially for the practitioner-researcher who is undertaking their research from an insider perspective, that is in a setting where they have practitioner or other involvement already. Nevertheless, key questions apply:

- In what ways does this insider perspective strengthen the research?
- In what ways might it weaken or invalidate it?
- What steps might be taken to avoid or address potential problems?

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined a participatory approach to research, Mosaic, which can be embedded into practice within early-years settings. There is no definitive list of actual methods which can be used for this approach, but Mosaic itself offers both a set of values and guidance for those wishing to undertake research or practice evaluation of this kind. Its adaptability is ultimately a strength for those who recognize the need for context-based methodologies. Ethical concerns, of course, remain at the fore, as seen in the project described, in which consent, assent and the dilemma of an increasing digital shadow created around children had all to be navigated. Some might regard a participatory approach like Mosaic as problematically blurring the lines between research and practice, but others see it as representing an exciting opportunity to develop early-years provision in robust, transparent and research-based ways within existing statutory frameworks.

Recommended reading

Clark, A. (2017) *Listening to Young Children: A Guide to Understanding and Using the Mosaic Approach*. Third edition. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Alison Clark examines further development of the Mosaic approach and cites international case studies to exemplify key points. Ethical and other methodological elements are discussed in relation to its possible use with older children and with adults.

Murray, J. and Gray, C. (Eds.) (2017) Perspectives from young children on the margins. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 25(2).

This special edition of the EECERJ, with an editorial from Jane Murray and Colette Gray, brings together ten research articles which explore the perceptions of children on the margins of society. The international collection shows how children's perspectives are elicited on issues such as poverty, racial tension and immigration through a variety of methods.

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