

LEARNING

This chapter

- have a chance to express
- become more participatory
- understand
- understand
- understand

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ch young children are able to
research and increased children's
children

DEVELOPING CULTURES OF MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Genuine listening to young children's viewpoints and ideas is now at the heart of early years research and this represents a significant advance for children and their participation within early years settings. Your research should work with the ideology of listening to children.

The agenda for increasing children's participation in their services has come from three main directions. First, there is the notion that children are consumers of services, and, just as with other consumers, children's voices need to be heard too. Second, children used to be identified as part of a family or care facility and were rarely identified as a group in their own right. Children's needs and wants were interpreted by the adults around them, who spoke for them. The third main influence on children's participation has come from the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989), discussed in the ethics chapter. The participation agenda demands a cultural shift away from working *for* children to working *with* children.

Meaningful participation requires a cultural shift by the early childhood setting from a one-off listening event to a *sustainable* participatory culture. Such a shift occurs when children's views and opinions are embedded within the principles of mutual trust and respect between children and adults. The children (and adults) need to see that their ideas are not only listened to but also *acted* on. Listening to children is only half the story. Acting on children's input is the other half. Unless action is seen to be taken, children will perhaps correctly assume that such participation is tokenistic practice.

There is a relationship between young children's well-being, including their happiness and self-respect, and a sense of connectedness to their early childhood setting when they feel that their 'voice' has been seriously listened to. Such listening is crucial to instilling in them well-being, shared values and principles, so that everyone feels understood and empowered within the early years community. Within the Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014), the Children's Commissioner's role has been increased from simply representing 'the views and interests' of children to focusing on and 'promoting and protecting' the rights of children. By creatively listening to young children, your research can actively respond to this children's rights agenda.

Good mental health and well-being, which start in the early years, partly depend on children having a sense of control, a 'voice' and decision-making powers over their learning, activities and routines. Such genuine and authentic consultation with young children can enhance children's well-being and encourage a caring, protective sense of themselves within the setting (Weare, 2015). So, participatory, inclusive and creative research can help to promote good mental health, and well-being can be promoted through creative listening. Such an understanding has recently been promoted by Public Health England (2014) and the DfE (2016), as issues around mental health and well-being become increasingly understood as important for children from the earliest age.

If, at an early age, children are encouraged to participate in decisions that affect their daily lives in their environments, and can see that such an input has real effects, then these same children are more likely to engage in participation as they get older. Engaging with children in a participatory research project may be part of a wider institutional cultural change in which inclusion and participation become embedded in the daily thinking and practice of children's environments.

What follows is a list of reasons as to why young children should be involved in participatory research projects.

PRACTICAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

- Improved levels of care and education
- Improved support to ensure individuals' best interests (e.g. enhanced learning, improved health, increased opportunities for play)
- Improved experience of services (e.g. increased emotional well-being, reduced stress and feelings of insecurity)
- Improved access to and use of services
- Improved service accountability.

CITIZENSHIP AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

- Providing inclusive practice that draws in those often excluded (e.g. young children, carers, asylum seekers and disabled young children)
- Meeting expectations for children's right to participate in decisions affecting their lives
- Empowering children through being included
- Developing the skills and knowledge to be heard and fostering a deeper self-belief in the ability to create change
- Enhancing citizenship and political education, including knowledge of children's rights, structures and services
- Increasing independence and responsibility for actions
- Increasing ownership and care for services
- Improving a sense of community and belonging.

The starting point in developing such a participatory research culture is to listen to young children creatively and respectfully.

WHAT IS CREATIVE LISTENING?

In the Reggio Emilia early childhood centres of Northern Italy, children are understood as being creative, intelligent and competent. They are understood to have multiple modes of expression, including words, movement, drawing, painting, sculpture, shadow play, collage and music. These diverse modes of creative expression are known as their 'hundred languages'.

The 'Hundred Languages' poem beautifully sums up this approach:

No Way, The Hundred is There (from The Hundred Languages of Children)

The child is made of one hundred.

The child has

a hundred languages

a hundred hands

a hundred thoughts

a hundred ways of thinking

of playing, of speaking.

A hundred, always a hundred

ways of listening

of marvelling, of loving

a hundred joys

for singing and understanding

a hundred worlds

to discover

a hundred worlds to invent

a hundred worlds to dream.

The child has

a hundred languages

(and a hundred hundred hundred more)

but they steal ninety-nine.

The school and the culture

separate the head from the body.

They tell the child:

(Continued)

to think without hands
 to do without head
 to listen and not to speak
 to understand without joy
 to love and to marvel
 only at Easter and Christmas.
 They tell the child:
 to discover the world already there
 and of the hundred
 they steal ninety-nine.
 They tell the child:
 that work and play
 reality and fantasy
 science and imagination
 sky and earth
 reason and dream
 are things
 that do not belong together
 and thus they tell the child
 that the hundred is not there.
 The child says:
 No way. The hundred is there.

(Loris Malaguzzi © 1996 Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Publishers Reggio Children; English trans. Lella Gandini, 1983, in Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1995, Ablex/Greenwood Publishing Group.)

This poem is significant for early childhood researchers and practitioners since it reminds us that listening to young children need not be limited to the spoken word. Through their emphasis on the creative arts, the Reggio Emilia centres challenge the idea that visual forms of communication are somehow inferior to linguistic communication. Pressure is often applied to children to express themselves verbally, when young children might not yet have the experiences or vocabulary to do this. Young children can competently express themselves through their play and through drawings and paintings and other expressive media. Emphasising

visual forms of communication potentially empowers children who are pre-verbal, have a language delay, or have English as a second language (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2010). Hence, listening to the 'voice of the child' needs to be a process which is open to the many creative ways whereby children can express their views and experiences.

Listening is:

- an active process of receiving, interpreting and responding to communication: it includes all the senses and emotions and is not limited to the spoken word
- a necessary stage in ensuring the participation of all children
- an ongoing part of tuning in to all children as individuals in their everyday lives
- sometimes part of a specific consultation about a particular entitlement, choice, event or opportunity.

Understanding listening in this way is key to providing an environment in which all children feel confident, safe and powerful, ensuring they have the time and space to express themselves in a form that suits them.

At the heart of creative listening to children is a constant raising of adult expectations of young children's abilities to communicate and express their desires and interests. The 'one hundred languages' of children are present and are waiting to be heard by researchers. However, early childhood researchers have to be open to these many languages in order to be able to hear them.

As adult researchers learn to work together with children, they may become more aware of children's strengths and competencies, and their skills are shown in clear and tangible ways. These experiences help to create a more favourable environment for dialogue and understanding. When children's participation in research takes place in an environment of mutual respect, it can lead to a change in attitudes and in the roles and capabilities of those children. This change can then lead to greater creativity, new ideas and a deeper understanding, not only of the issues under investigation but also of important issues in their community.

Sensitive and respectful researchers working in an inclusive and participatory way with young children constantly engage them in creative and innovative ways. Such researchers are well positioned to hear children's one hundred languages. The Mosaic approach has been pioneered as an effective way of listening to children's creative responses to their environment.

THE MOSAIC APPROACH

The Mosaic approach (Clark, 2017) is an integrated approach which combines the visual with the verbal. A diverse range of traditional and innovative listening techniques is put together to gain young children's views and experiences of their early childhood setting. The information collected through using the Mosaic approach can be used to make changes to the nursery.

The 'documentation' or recording process comprises a range of evidence, including: narrative observations; consultations with the child, the key worker and the parents; children's

drawings; children's photographs; and children's maps. These listening research techniques are participatory and inclusive, and the wide variety of triangulated evidence can be represented as a *mosaic* of evidence (see Figure 6.1).

There are two stages in the Mosaic approach:

- Stage 1: Children and adults gather the documentation.
- Stage 2: The information is pieced together for dialogue, reflection and interpretation.

Combining the narratives and images of the individual pieces of the mosaic helps the researcher develop a good understanding of the children's priorities.

Throughout the Mosaic approach, it is important that the children are involved in the interpretation of their photographs, drawings and tours. Within this approach, children are viewed as experts on their own lives, but they are not the only ones with this expertise. There is space within the Mosaic approach for a range of voices as well as the child's. Thus, the Mosaic approach is a way of listening which acknowledges children and adults as co-constructors of meaning. The multi-method approach brings together children's own views with those of the family and staff.

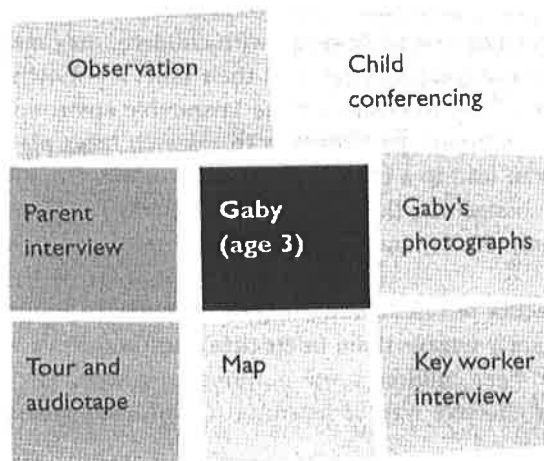


Figure 6.1 A mosaic of evidence

Source: Clark (2017)

CAMERAS AND ETHICS

Taking their own photographs provides children with the possibility of using a powerful visual language. Children using cameras to take their own pictures of their nursery setting is a relatively recent research technique. They know that photographs are enjoyable and are valued

by adults, so they will tend to enjoy taking photographs. Photographs are a powerful way for children to record aspects of their daily lives. Even very young children are quite capable of taking photographs of the events and situations that affect them. These photographs can then be printed out and discussed with the children.

Some early childhood institutions increasingly own digital cameras, computers and printing facilities. The advent of inexpensive digital cameras has meant that children can see their results instantaneously on the camera itself and the subsequent computer printouts. This rapid process helps to focus children's attention on the pictures. If there is a delay of several days between taking the pictures and seeing the results, children's interest may have been lost and they may not be able to explain why they took the pictures. Disposable single-use cameras are also successful with young children because they are less expensive than digital cameras. They are also small and light enough for the children to walk around with and put in their pockets or bags to take with them.

If your research project involves you or the children taking *any* photographs within an early years setting, you *must* ensure that you have obtained permission from the manager, the practitioners, the parents and the children themselves. Ethically speaking, it is critically important to inform all the stakeholders that the project might involve taking photographs. Parents and practitioners need to know *why* children are being given cameras and what will happen to the photographs. You must therefore let the institution know how long you will keep the photographs and when you will destroy them. If you are going to take any photographs with you for your project, do make sure the children have a complete set as well. In this respect, you will need to make two complete sets of photographs.

Sometimes institutions will be willing to let you and the children take photographs as long as these do not contain people's faces. It is ethically important that if children are taking photographs of one another, they must be told to ask other children if they are happy to have their picture taken. Some may not wish to have this happen.

CHILDREN'S PHOTOGRAPHS AND WALKING TOURS

A further inclusive participatory listening technique used in the Mosaic approach is the 'walking tour' (Clark, 2017). These visual walks offer children the opportunity to share their imaginative understandings of the environment. In some ways, a walking tour is similar to an interview on the move. However, unlike some interviews, the child is in charge of the agenda and the geographical location. These walking tours can be done with individual children or in pairs and threes. At the end of the tour, children will draw maps of their nursery onto which their photographs of important places are placed. Making maps together, using the children's drawings and photographs, is an inclusive participatory activity which can reveal valuable information about the children's perspectives on their institution.

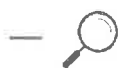
A child's photographs of their day can be used as part of their own and their family's induction process. A new child can be given a camera to take pictures of their daily routine in the nursery. They are asked to take photographs of what they like and dislike, the toys they play

with, the areas of the room they use, and the outside spaces. These photographs are then placed in a book with the child's comments as to why they took the photographs, and this book is then shared with the parents with the child explaining the photographs. Such a process of documenting and recording a child's day at nursery has proved successful with parents who are excited to see what their child does.

In addition to the children's perspectives, gathered through the processes above, parents' and practitioners' perspectives can also be collected by using interviews. Parents and practitioners are extremely knowledgeable about the children and their views should be incorporated. Questions asked could include:

- What does your child enjoy doing at home?
- What do you think your child feels about being at the nursery?
- What does your child say at home about the nursery?
- What would be a good day for your child at the nursery?
- What would be a bad day for your child at the nursery?

Sometimes the child's views will echo the parents' and practitioners' and, at other times, there will be differences of opinion. This range of evidence can be documented to provide an overview of a child's experiences in an early childhood setting.



CASE STUDY 6.1

A childminder wanted to find out more about Phoebe's perceptions of being in her house and then walking to the park. Phoebe was 3 years old. The childminder explained to Phoebe that mummy and daddy wanted to know what she liked and disliked about her house and the walk to the park:

- What did Phoebe like and dislike about the house?
- What did she enjoy about going to the park and when she was in the park?

The childminder explained that together they would be sharing the photographs with Phoebe's parents. At first, Phoebe was apprehensive about making a mistake with the camera, but when the flash worked she knew that the picture had been taken. Her self-esteem and confidence visibly rose and she was soon happily taking photographs. Phoebe confidently led her childminder around the rooms she used and on the walk to the park showed her what she liked. Phoebe's comments were noted down as she took the photographs (see Figures 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4).

A visual tour by Phoebe (aged 3)

At the childminder's house

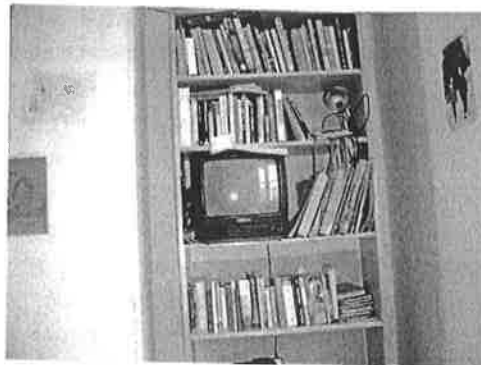


Figure 6.2 'I don't like the television 'cos it looks like an eye at me.'



Figure 6.3 'I like the books.'

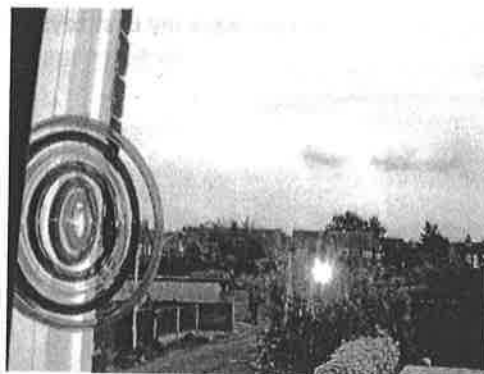


Figure 6.4 'I like looking out of the window 'cos it's all out there.'

(Continued)

The childminder felt that Phoebe was in control of the visual tour and that she was positioned as the listener and learner. Giving Phoebe the camera proved successful because Phoebe was often a quiet girl with her childminder. With the camera, however, Phoebe had been given a powerful means of visual expression and the camera proved a valuable way into her thinking and understanding of her environment. As a consequence of the pictures, some changes were made around the house to accommodate Phoebe's expressions. The footstool was moved in the bathroom so that she avoided the shelf; the television was turned around; and the childminder specifically looked for Ps in books and the environment. Until Phoebe had taken the photograph of the 'P' in the street, the childminder had not appreciated that she was so observant of such rich environmental print. Such small changes in her daily routine may at first seem insignificant, but Phoebe's self-esteem was raised when she realised that the childminder was taking seriously what she had to say about her environment. Hence, her expectations of being listened to were raised and the childminder's expectations of what Phoebe observed and how she could visually express herself were also raised. Such raised expectations can lead to an enriched and more participatory relationship.



Figure 6.5 'I like those baskets 'cos they have my best toys in.'



Figure 6.6 'I don't like the shelf because I hit my head on the corner when I brush my teeth.'



Figure 6.7 'I can see a P. That's my name!'



Figure 6.8 'I like going on Daddy's bicycle.'



Figure 6.9 'I like to hide under here and my favourite colour is yellow.'

(Continued)



Phoebe was empowered by being able to take the pictures and make a book with them. It was with great delight that she shared her book with her parents. The photographs in Figures 6.5 to 6.9 were combined with the childminder's observations and the parents' comments about what their daughter liked. This conversation confirmed that Phoebe liked to hide in places, found great delight in finding Ps for her name, and loved having books read to her. Phoebe's photographs and her perceptions were at the centre of the conversation which raised her self-esteem. The childminder was surprised at just how competent Phoebe was at using the digital camera. Her competence served as a useful reminder of how research techniques with young children need to work to children's strengths and abilities, rather than their perceived weaknesses. From such small beginnings, it is possible to see how young children's insightful comments may be used to inform changes to the existing provision or contribute to the new designs of buildings.

CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS

Children's drawings can be seen as a child's attempts to make sense of their experiences on at least three levels: cognitive, affective and linguistic. Cognitively, drawing is thought in action and is a rich way of thinking, knowing and exploring the world 'out there' via the intellect and senses. Affectively, drawing and painting are ways for children to explore and learn about their feelings. Linguistically, drawing and painting provide a space for children to develop their visual language. Drawing is young children's early writing and is seen as being as powerful as writing as a means of representation (Kress, 1997). In addition to the above benefits, drawing and painting are clearly vital to play, the imagination and creativity.

Many young children love to draw and paint, and will spend long periods of time concentrating on their creations. Consequently, drawings and paintings are an excellent inclusive and participatory research technique with which to listen to children. Drawings are self-initiated and spontaneously made by some children, and hence using children's drawings lends itself to 'non-invasive, non-confrontational and participatory research' (Morrow and Richards, 1996: 100). If you are going to use children's drawings in your research, you must gain **informed** assent from the children to do so (see Chapter 4). Drawings can be personal creations in which intimate and sometimes private experiences and knowledge are shared with familiar people by the children. The children may feel uncomfortable with you taking their pictures away for a wider audience than they were originally intended for by the child.

CHILDREN'S INTERPRETATIONS OF THEIR PICTURES

A potential limitation of using children's drawings and paintings in your research study is that you can all too easily impute to them your own interpretations: 'Consulting children by asking them to

draw can gain illuminating evidence, but many drawings are ambiguous or vague sketches, and it is better to use them together with spoken or written comments from the child, explaining the picture' (Alderson, 2008: 200). Hence, if you are using children's drawings in your research project, it is imperative that the children are given the time and space to explain the meanings of their pictures and paintings. Researchers sometimes ask children to write a short story about their picture or to write a story and then illustrate it. However, with young children, some of whom do not yet formally write, discussing with the child what it is they are drawing *as they draw it* can be invaluable. Sometimes a young child, when asked what their picture is of, might simply reply, 'a picture'. This may be because the meaning of the picture occurs during the actual *process* of drawing or painting itself.

Hence, once the picture has been completed, the meaning is lost. In case study 6.2, it can be seen that listening to children whilst they are actively engaged in the process of drawing, painting or model-making itself may provide a good insight into what the picture represents for the child. This is because

what the child really wants to do is to talk to himself in pictures, which suggests that the child weaves stories around the marks being made, each scribble having particular meaning dictating the story's direction so that the whole turns into a fantastical journey, a parallel for active fantasy play. (Coates, 2002: 26)

In case study 6.2, Jake re-creates a story in his drawing.

— — CASE STUDY 6.2 —

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA ON CHILDREN'S LIVES

The researcher used observations of play, the children's drawings and focused discussion with the children to collect her evidence with six nursery children. She wanted to know what sorts of games the children played and how these games were influenced by children's television and video stories. Specifically, in her observations the researcher listened for any television language and songs used, noted whether any television characters were adopted during role play, and how the play narratives were constructed.

In addition to observations, the children were asked to draw pictures at nursery and at home, particularly after they had been watching television. The researcher asked the children if the tape recorder could be kept on *whilst* they drew their drawings. The following is a transcript of Jake talking while drawing a picture (Figure 6.10) he made after watching the television show *Brum and the Naughty Dog*, in which a naughty dog gets stuck down a deep hole.

As Jake drew his picture, he made the following rich, detailed comments concerning his drawing:

Jake, drawing and talking: The dog's dug an either further one ... There's a tunnel here and it goes down here and there's another one here. And down here is a rabbit.

(Continued)

- Researcher: What's the rabbit doing?
- Jake, drawing and talking: There's a mole here ...
- Researcher: These are all underground creatures aren't they ...?
- Jake, drawing and talking: But the dog isn't ... the dog dug this really massive hole.
- Researcher: Why?
- Jake, drawing and talking: 'Cos he wanted to ... he was getting his bones. The mole thought the dog wanted a bone so then the mole pushed a bone down the tunnel and it came out there and the dog could eat it. The mole found lots of bones and he gave them all to the dog ... he got lots and lots and lots of bones. And last of all the massive bone and that was Clifford's bone. And last of all one of Clifford's other big bones but Clifford's already eaten a bit. He's got loads of fat bones, they look like bums!!! Last of all, the longest and thinnest Clifford's been eaten through some of them ... And there was a bone that was so big it couldn't even fit through ... And last of all but not least an even bigger bone ... The mole keeps giving him bones, look here's one coming down the tunnel into his mouth ... and then he catches it.

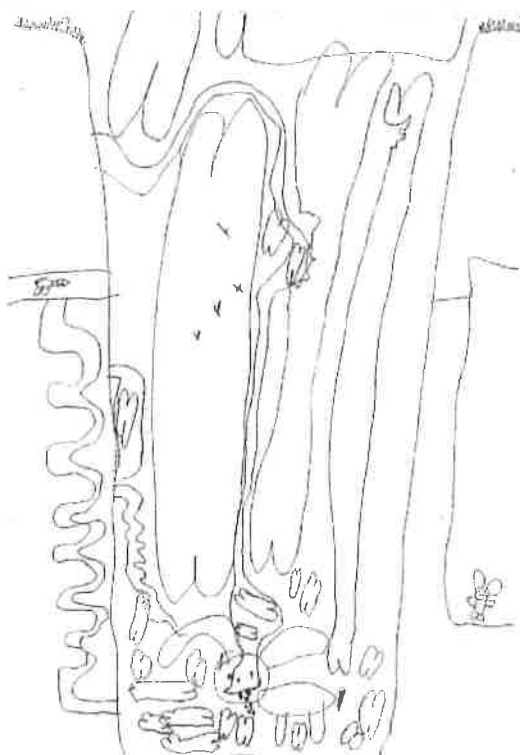
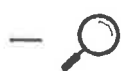


Figure 6.10 Jake's picture

Jake is clearly active in his reinterpretation of the video. The initial media plot has been creatively reworked and developed by the child in his 'storying' around the drawing. In places, the language is reflective of his book language, 'and last of all' which is said several times over. Interestingly, Jake has also used Clifford, another children's television dog character, in his intertextual story of his drawing. The rich, detailed, creative and vivid language used during the dynamic process of the drawing itself can be counterposed with the sometimes stilted, laborious and short descriptions which can occur when an adult asks a child what their picture is of.

In case study 6.3, Sarah, who used observations and focus group conversations, also used drawings to find out more about what children understand by friends.



CASE STUDY 6.3

Sarah wanted to know more about the relationship between friendship and gender. How does gender affect friendships in early childhood? One of the techniques she used was to ask the children to draw pictures of **their** friends and write down next to their pictures why they chose these people as their **friends**.

As Jacob and Harry, Year 1 boys, told Sarah about their friendships, they **drew the picture** (Figure 6.11) **together**. Jacob did the drawings and Harry wrote the **children's names**. These drawings helped the boys to focus on the conversation. As they drew the pictures, they discussed why they liked having the children as friends:

Sarah: I want you to draw pictures of your friends and tell me why you like them. Only draw the people that are your special friends since it wouldn't be nice to draw people you don't like. Is it OK to tape-record this conversation as you draw? We can listen to the tape afterwards and you tell me if what you have said is OK to write down. What do you think?

Jacob: Yes, it's OK.

Harry: Yes, just the children we like to play with.

Jacob: Charlie's got quite long hair hasn't he so it goes like this.

Harry: We like playing with Charlie because he loves rockets and I like them too.

Jacob: And they blast off really really fast. We go like this ...

Jacob gets up from the table and pretends to be a rocket 'blasting off' making rocket noises.

Jacob: I'm gonna draw someone else now. This is William because we love racing and I'm always second and we raced in our teams and my team came second.

(Continued)