

A Hundred Ways of Listening

Gathering Children's Perspectives of Their Early Childhood Environment

Alison Clark

Unless adults are alert to children's own ways of seeing and understanding and representing the world to themselves, it is unlikely that the child will ever manage to identify with the school's and teacher's ways of seeing.

—Liz Brooker, *Starting School: Young Children's Learning Cultures*

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES how young children can play active roles as researchers, explorers, and designers of their outdoor environment. It introduces the Mosaic approach, a framework for listening and responding to young children's perspectives, first developed in a study in a London preschool in 1999 (Clark & Moss 2001). The author used this approach in a study—Spaces to Play—undertaken with three- and four-year-olds, practitioners, and parents in a preschool in Kent, England, that was preparing to upgrade its outside space.

The Mosaic approach

In recent years in Europe, listening to children has become increasingly important in policy making, research, and practice; the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1990) and a new sociology of childhood, sometimes called childhood studies, have influenced

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Photos courtesy of the author.

this trend. Researchers and advocates have emphasized children's right to participate in decisions affecting their lives and viewing children as citizens and active subjects, as "beings" rather than "becomings" (James & Prout 1997). Initially, researchers focused on older children, but now younger children's perspectives are included too.

The Mosaic approach is an example of this growing interest in listening to young children (see Clark, McQuail, & Moss 2003; Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss 2005). The starting point for this approach is a particular view of the young child.

View of the child

The abilities young children display can be made visible or hidden by the lenses adults use to view them and their lives. The Mosaic approach promotes the following ways of seeing young children:

Young children are "experts in their own lives" (Langsted 1994). Children are competent beings, with a unique perspective to communicate about their own lives. This perspective does not hold that the views of adults are unimportant, but helps to focus adult discussions on children's perceptions and priorities.

Young children are skillful communicators. They use a range of visual and verbal means to communicate their points of view—the "hundred languages of children" as described by

Malaguzzi, the first pedagogical director of the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998). Adults can facilitate young children's communication by providing multiple opportunities for self-expression, including through the use of new technologies.

Young children are active participants. They can and should play active rather than passive roles in the research process. This view is linked to notions of children's rights; Article 12 of the U.N. Convention on Rights of the Child (United Nations 1990) promotes the right of children to express themselves on matters that affect them.

Young children are meaning makers, researchers, and explorers. They are actively engaged in a search for meanings. The interpretivist approach acknowledges that we should try to understand how children see the world in order to understand their actions (MacNaughton 2003, 171). Children's perspectives become the focus for an exchange of meanings between children, practitioners, families, and researchers.

This view of children is in keeping with a constructivist model of learning in which children play an active role in the search for meanings (Vygotsky [1933] 1978; Bruner 1985; Carr 2000; Ryan & Grieshaber 2004).

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Children's research tools

The Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss 2001; Clark 2004) combines the traditional adult-directed research tools of observation and interviews of family members, practitioners, and children, with participatory tools for children, including the use of cameras, bookmaking, tours, and map-making. Researchers could use one or two tools to discover children's views and experiences. However, the original London study demonstrated the advantages for children and adults in reflecting on material collected through a range of tools (Clark & Moss 2001). The name *Mosaic* refers to drawing together pieces from different sources to create a complete picture of children's perspectives.

The Mosaic approach allows children to not only research through a variety of tools but also to adopt different learning styles or use different "intelligences" (Gardner 1983). For example, during tours and mapmaking activities, children can exercise their visual/spatial, body/kinesthetic, interpersonal, and verbal/linguistic skills.

The three stages of the approach

The Mosaic approach has several interlinked stages:

Stage one—Children gather information and together adults and children begin to assess it.

Stage two—Children and adults discuss and interpret the meaning of the gathered information, a process that began in the first stage and includes children, the researcher, practitioners, and when possible, families.

Stage three—Adults and children ask and discuss the question, "What is going to change or remain the same as a result of this process?"

The Mosaic approach is in keeping with Rinaldi's concept of a *pedagogy of listening* (2001) through which children engage in *interior listening*, or reflecting on what it means to be in a particular environment; *multiple lis-*

tening, which recognizes the importance of children's and adults' voices; and *visible listening*, which uses documentation as the basis for discussion and interpretation.

The Spaces to Play study: The Mosaic approach in action

The aim of the six-month Spaces to Play study was to explore children's views about their existing outdoor environment in order to recommend practical changes (Clark & Moss 2005). Twenty-eight three- and four-year-olds were involved along with the manager [director] of the preschool and a group of practitioners and family members. The study was carried out in collaboration with Learning through Landscapes, a volunteer organization in the United Kingdom that promotes the development and maintenance of school grounds. Learning through Landscapes provided practical support, making the changes to the outdoor area.

The preschool in the study serves a diverse group of children and fami-

lies, including some who have low incomes. The study involved several children with speech and language difficulties; this emphasized the importance of including different research tools to enable all children to express their views. At the time of the study, the preschool had recently moved to a new location on the edge of a small playing field and was housed in a single story building with a small outdoor area, called the garden, surrounded by a security fence. The school had installed a soft rubber safety surface where children raced on their bikes and played on a climbing frame, while a deck served as a setting for quieter activities.

Stage one—Children's voices

What part did the children play in reviewing the outdoor space? Following two days of observation by the researcher, Stage one began as 15 children used disposable cameras to photograph what was important to them about the garden. Working in small groups, children chose their most important photographs to be

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made into books about the garden, adding their own writing.

Four children were chosen to take part in the next activity in order to include both quieter and more vocal members of the group. Working in pairs, the children took the researcher on a tour of the garden. The children were in charge of how the tours were recorded as well as the routes and the commentaries. During the tours, the children took photographs and made audiorecordings of their comments. These tours became the focus of map-making activities. The "tour guides" were joined by four other children who had expressed an interest in the activity. The children worked on large circles of paper to make maps of the garden that incorporated their photographs, drawings, and writing.

Stage two—Children and adults assess gathered information

The Mosaic approach includes time for formal conversations with young children. Previous research has shown that interviewing can offer valuable insights into the lives of some (but not all) young children (for example, Dupree, Bertram, & Pascal 2001). The researcher interviewed 20 children at the preschool about the outdoor space, individually or in pairs or small groups. The interviews took place in popular areas outside. A toy dog, Barney, introduced by the researcher, proved to be a useful intermediary for some children. They discussed how and where Barney could play, hide, talk, and watch outside.

The magic carpet activity shows children images of different environments in an imaginative way. Children sit on a rug in front of a slide projector. They are "transported" on the rug to a range of places, some familiar, such as their local neighborhood, or new spaces, such as a preschool in a

different country. This activity is used to promote further discussion among children and adults about favorite outdoor spaces. Children in this study watched the slide show in groups of eight or more until all the children in the group who were interested had had a turn.

During this stage, the researcher used the children's photographs, maps, and interview responses to create a book that the children reviewed, sharing their comments about the present use of space and possible changes. These discussions formed the basis for Stage three, during which the children and the adults made decisions about which features of the outdoor environment should remain and which should be expanded or otherwise changed.

As noted earlier, the Mosaic approach does not exclude adult voices; it begins conversations about children's lives with children's perspectives. It was important that the Spaces to Play project gather the views of the adults who would oversee children's use of the outdoor space.

The researcher carried out short interviews with the director of the preschool and three practitioners selected to include experienced and newer members of the staff, who were familiar with the children taking part in the study. The interview addressed each individual's experiences watching the children outside, their own feelings about working in the garden, and their priorities for change. Similar interviews with four parents, each of whose children were experienced members of the preschool, collected additional perspectives. The interviewer's questions were designed to tap into parents'

understandings of their children's interests and priorities at home as well as their impressions of the preschool's outdoor environment.

Practitioners and families also participated during this stage of the study in discussing and reflecting on the material gathered. Representatives from the Learning through Landscapes organization also met with the researcher to discuss and reflect on the children's and adults' responses.

Stage three—Taking listening seriously

After considering and reviewing the perspectives of the children, families, and practitioners, in Stage three all the participants identified four categories of places in the outdoor environment:

- Places to expand
- Places to change
- Places to add
- Places to keep

Places to expand included the playhouse. The combination of tools used in the Mosaic approach had shown that this shed, which was used for role play, was a source of tension between adults and children. Most of the children enjoyed playing in the space, whereas the adults regarded it as too small and noisy. The security

fence was identified as a place to change. The children's photographs had shown the fence to be a dominant feature that appeared to cage the children in. Places to add included locations for digging and spaces where adults and children could sit and interact together.

The following example shows how the material gathered by the children played a central role in the decision about a place to keep—the caterpillar tunnel.

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Example of a place to keep: The caterpillar tunnel

It had been apparent from the researcher's first visit to the preschool that the children enjoyed a caterpillar-shaped play tunnel. Staff observation data alone would have offered only a limited view of this piece of equipment. A more detailed understanding of its value was discovered by listening to the views of children and practitioners. (See "Gathering Perspectives on the Caterpillar Tunnel.")

General and personal meanings emerged from this process. Children's photos revealed the tunnel's interior to be a rare place to sit and talk in a crowded outdoor environment. The valuable information gathered highlights the role of listening in as practitioners get to "know about each child, including their individual learning styles, interests, preferences, personality and temperament, skills and talents, challenges and difficulties" (Bredenkamp & Copple 1997, 40).

to attach to the security fence, providing seating for adults and children to sit together, and installing a sandbox. Above all, the study revealed how children valued use of the outdoor space. As a result of the study, practitioners

adapted their practice to enable free-flow access to the outdoor space. Families supported this change by making a canopy to provide shade so children could use the outdoor space in bright sunshine.



The study leads to changes

Using the findings of the Spaces to Play study, the pre-school redesigned the outdoor space, leaving play features whose value had been emphasized, such as the caterpillar tunnel, and expanding, changing, and adding other spaces. The changes included designing paint boards and chalk boards

Gathering Perspectives on the Caterpillar Tunnel

Research Tool	Information Gathered about the Caterpillar Tunnel
Observation by researcher	Children used the caterpillar as a place for socializing and for physical play. They enjoyed hiding inside, talking together in small groups, or watching what was happening outside. They would also balance on top of the shape, then jump off and pretend to hurt themselves!
Cameras and book-making	The caterpillar appeared in 10 of the children's 60 photographs chosen for inclusion in their books. The children included inside and outside shots of the caterpillar, some of which included children playing on the structure. The use of cameras revealed personal meanings related to the caterpillar. One child who was fascinated by trains took photographs of each section of the caterpillar and called them carriages [cars].
Child-led tours and children's mapmaking	Children took inside and outside photographs of the caterpillar on their tours and included these photographs on their maps. The photos were reinforced by drawings of the caterpillar.
Researcher interviews with practitioners	One practitioner identified inside the caterpillar as one of the children's favorite outside places "because there aren't other places to hide." Another practitioner hesitated: "I wonder if they don't like the caterpillar. They probably like it."
Researcher interviews with children	Children said the caterpillar is a place to sit and talk to a friend ("on the caterpillar and under the caterpillar"). One child described playing in the caterpillar as the activity he would like to do more often at the preschool.



Discussion

This article has described a study involving a researcher working with young children and practitioners. However, there are several possibilities for practitioners to take forward with children in their own centers.

First, teachers can ask the question What do young children in this class or center think about their learning environment? Activities described in the Mosaic approach could be helpful in exploring with young children to discover their views of and experiences in their indoor and outdoor environments. Focusing on a classroom, for example, children could take photographs of favorite places in the room and make books of these images to share with their peers. This activity may reveal individual messages about what is significant for specific children.

There may also be more general information for practitioners about the classroom. For example, are there forgotten spaces that children did not choose to document? Questions raised by the children's material—whether positive or negative—can then become the focus of more discussion as a whole class, with groups of children, or with individuals.

Second, child-led tours could become a feature of an orientation program for new children or possibly for new members of the staff. This could take the form of an actual tour led by two confident children. An alternative approach would be to use the children's photographs, taken while they act as tour guides, to make an information package about the center. This would allow all children, including those with special needs, to contribute to the project. This idea builds on the Advisories project (Strozzi & Vecchi 2002), in which five- and six-year-olds in the Diana preschool in Reggio Emilia, Italy, were involved in telling three-year-olds about their new preschool.

Conclusion

Children and the way they live in places, build relationships, and learn are not always the primary starting point of reference guiding the various phases of school design and construction.

—Vea Vecchi, *Children's Spaces and Relations: Metaproject for the Environment of Young Children*

Making visible children's understandings of their educational settings opens up many possibilities for adults and children to discuss and explore these understandings together. These discussions can include architects, designers, and planners involved in creating new environments for young children. The critical ingredient is creating a platform for communication. Documentation, assembled chiefly by the children, makes visible listening (Rinaldi 2001) possible. This can be of particular benefit when programs need to bridge the gap between young children and professionals who may be unfamiliar with the competencies of young children.

All researchers and practitioners need to take time to listen to young children and the many meanings they bring to an environment they know well. Malaguzzi, in addition to promoting the hundred languages of children, also discussed "the hundred

ways of listening" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998). Listening to children's perspectives is an essential part of bridging the child-adult gap (Carr 2000) and providing a starting point for change.

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