

Personal reflection on research process and tools: Effectiveness, highlights and challenges in using the Mosaic Approach

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THIS REFLECTION ON USING the Mosaic Approach as a framework for undertaking research with young children contributes to the dialogue around qualitative research methodology. The provocation of social constructivist theory challenges researchers to consider and explore innovative ways to position themselves so the multiple voices of children can be heard, valued, respected and listened to. Three underpinning principles are identified and each of the methodological tools used by Greenfield (2007a) is discussed. Trustworthiness or situated validity in research is vital. It is argued that the Mosaic Approach provides an effective, flexible and authentic methodology when undertaking research with young children.

Background

Initially, a small-scale pilot study was undertaken to explore ways to research children's perspectives on what being outdoors meant to them (Greenfield, 2004). This pilot study aimed to explore what a group of six four-year-old children in full-day child care thought about being outdoors, what they liked to do outside and what else they would like to have outside. The children shared their feelings and views about their outdoor playground through the medium of photography and discussions using the photos they had taken. The study was stepping into unknown territory by using new research tools that empowered the child within the process.

The voice of children was just beginning to be heard in academic research at the turn of the century (Brooker, 2001; Robbins, 2002). The 2004 study, where children were each given a disposable camera to photograph their favourite places outside, affirmed that 'handing the camera over to the child' provided a very appropriate means of discovering what was important to the child, as Clark (2005) and Einarsdottir (2005) had found. More detailed reflection on ways to listen to children's views at that time can be found in Greenfield (2006). Two weaknesses of the 2004 study were overlooking the importance of observing children as they played outside and seeking the views of the

children's teachers and their families. The child is part of a wider context, not just a child with isolated views and behaviour unconnected to anything else. Additional research tools were sought that allowed further investigation of children's perspectives in a meaningful, uncontrived way.

The Mosaic Approach

The next research project was a much larger qualitative study on children's, teachers' and parents' perspectives on the outdoors, using multiple data-collecting tools such as touring, photography, observations, drawing, and photo elicitation. It was exciting to discover that on the other side of the world Peter Moss and Alison Clark were exploring similar research tools (Clark & Moss, 2001, 2005). The Mosaic Approach developed by Moss and Clark affirmed the use of multiple methods to research children's perceptions and views. Children's perspectives are much better understood if the researcher spends time in the setting with the participant children. This time outdoors, in the children's world, requires the researcher to use all their senses to truly listen to the children, in order to capture the many ways they have of communicating.

The Mosaic Approach relies on children being given the time and opportunity to express themselves in different ways. This acknowledges the ‘Hundred languages’ (Malaguzzi, 1996) that children may use to explore and represent their experiences, and includes giving the child space to take the lead in the research. As Langstead (1994, cited in Clark & Moss, 2005, p. 83) describes, it is about re-establishing children as ‘experts in their own lives’. The Mosaic Approach, as its name suggests, is about piecing together multiple types of data to help understand children’s views.

It became the framework for the second study (Greenfield, 2007a), a much larger qualitative, semi-participatory case study. This was conducted one day a week over 14 weeks, with 14 children aged between two years-nine months and four years-nine months, in one early childhood centre. The purpose was to explore young children’s views on their outdoor experiences as well as the perspectives of their parents, teachers and the centre owner. The research questions were:

- What are children’s perspectives of their experiences in the outdoor setting of their early childhood centre?
- What are children’s views on the role of the teacher outside?
- What are teachers’, parents’ and the centre owner’s perspectives on outdoor experiences for children and their provision at the centre?

The investigation was undertaken using a variety of the data-collecting tools (see Table 1) adapted from those used in the Mosaic Approach by Clark and Moss (2001; 2005).

The Mosaic Approach is a way of researching that is participatory, reflexive, adaptable and focused on children’s lived experience. It occurs in the setting where the children are, is embedded in practice, and provides a valid framework for listening to children (Clark & Moss, 2001; Greenfield, 2007a, 2007b). The Mosaic Approach has three stages. Stage one is the gathering of the data using multiple research tools; the second stage is the piecing together of the information for discussion, interpretation and reflection with participants; and the third stage is where findings are used for decision making and action. The Mosaic Approach informed all stages of the investigation of children’s, teachers’ and parents’ views on being in the centre’s outdoor environment. This reflection focuses on stages one and two.

Underpinning principles

In order to use the Mosaic Approach in research, it is vital to understand the three main principles that are considered to underpin the approach and are at the forefront of all research undertaken with children (Greenfield, 2006). The first principle is the belief that children have ideas, feelings and opinions worth

Table 1. Research tools used adapted from the Mosaic Approach

Research tools	Comments
Observation	Qualitative participant observation, narrative accounts, photographic observations and time-sampling participation charts (both scheduled and spontaneous)
Child conferencing/ conversations	Semi-structured interviews conducted one on one or in small groups, as well as conversations children initiated
Photography and photo novella	Digital (researcher and children) and disposable cameras (children) used to photograph important people, places, events and things
Drawing	Collaborative drawings of what children like outside
Focus groups	Semi-formal discussion with parents and teachers
Interview	Semi-formal with centre owner
Photo-elicitation	Looking at pre-selected pictures of familiar and different outdoor places and equipment
Journals	Parents, teacher and researcher kept during data collection
Touring	Tours of the outdoor setting led by children
Book-making	Children selecting photos and creating their own pages
Documentation	Centre brochure and website
Audio-recording	All conversations, interviews, focus groups recorded

listening to (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). Research with young children must be situated in the belief that children seek to understand and make sense of their world. It was hoped that the children could offer information which, in combination with other evidence, would enable the researcher to see how they perceived their centre’s outdoor environment. From this stance I positioned myself, not as the expert, but as the ‘authentic novice’, a term used by Clark and Moss (2005) to describe the researcher who is genuinely seeking the child’s perspective. ‘Handing over of the camera to children was a significant aspect of building trust and helped diminish the power difference between the researcher and children. Children can become research partners if given the time and the tools to be involved’ (Fasoli, 2003). One way this was accomplished was by giving each child their own camera, whereas all other studies to date, such as Clark and Moss (2001), Cremin and Slatter (2004) and Docket and Perry (2003), had children all sharing one camera.

The second principle is that establishing and maintaining positive professional relationships with everyone in the research setting is crucial. This principle, when kept at the forefront, ensures the researcher is always mindful that being in the children's environment is a privilege. Research, especially in early childhood centres, must always have a benefit for the children and the teachers. This starts from negotiating entry to the early childhood settings right through to the end of the project and beyond, including the publication and presentation of findings. This involves ensuring that photographs used in the research, and those made available for public scrutiny, will do no harm.

The third principle is that, throughout the data-collection phase, the research procedures should not be too tightly constrained. Appropriate and flexible activities for eliciting the children's views were used in order to enhance the validity of the findings, as well as to avoid stress on participants. This required a continual reconsideration of what strategies were needed to enable the children to remain in control of the photography, their drawing, their participation in the other research activities, and when and where they talked to the researcher. This can entail respecting and acknowledging that small children like to engage in conversations about all manner of things, which are often not related to what you, the adult, wants to talk about (Robbins, 2002). Respecting a child's choice not to participate at a particular point is vital and signals to the child that you were sincere about them talking with you on their terms. The ability to reflect on strategies between each visit to the centre and to be responsive to what was important for the children at the time was imperative (Hatch, 1990).

Discussion on research tools

Data from the planned observations (running records, time-sampling) was useful for discovering the outdoor areas and equipment used at specific times and by whom. This data provided a general picture of the usage of the setting. The findings highlighted the fallibility of equating usage with preference if only children's observations are being used to gather data. For example, a grass space in the middle of the outdoor area had the highest usage, but the actual equipment on it was not used as much as the large, moveable climbing equipment, and none of the children identified the middle grass space as a favourite (Greenfield, 2007a).

Targeted time-sequenced photographic observations of all the participant children, using the digital camera, captured a few minutes of their engagement with a particular piece of equipment or area. These photographs were formed into a photographic essay (Banks, 2001; Pink, 2001; Prosser & Schwartz, 1998). This provided useful data for inductive analysis

(Edwards, 2005) and supported and enriched the written observations (Kervin, Vaille, Herrington, & Okely, 2006). These photographs provided evidence of the stages of an action or an experience. The photographic essays, when placed alongside the transcripts' comments, contributed to ongoing understanding of a child or group of children (Banks, 2001; Prosser & Schwartz, 1998).

Child interviewing requires a great degree of sensitivity, so natural conversations and open-ended interviews (semi-structured)/child conferencing with the children were used. Patton (2002) calls them 'conversational interviews'. These are most appropriate for young children, allowing the researcher to ask the key questions when the opportunity arises and to be flexible and responsive (Gillham, 2000) to whatever is happening at the time and to whatever the child may want to talk about. Sometimes conversations were held with just one child, sometimes several children, and talking with children in small groups added richness to the data collected. Other studies have also found that small-group interviews revealed consensus views and facilitated richer responses (Gillham, 2000; Wiltz & Klein, 2001).

The framework for child conferencing used by Clark and Moss (2001; 2005), and an essential aspect of using the Mosaic Approach, provided the basis for the semi-structured interviews/child conferencing conversation. After some initial refining the following statements and questions were used:

- Tell me about the places outside you like the best.
- Tell me about the parts of the outdoors you do not like.
- Why do you like to go outside?
- Tell me about your most favourite place outside.
- What would you like to see changed or added to the outdoor space?
- Tell me about what teachers do outside.
- What do you think teachers should do outside?

Multiple copies of the framework questions (one for each child) stayed on a clipboard that was available nearby at all times. This enabled the recording of a child's answers to the questions when the child chose to engage in dialogue with the researcher. The child conferencing framework allowed flexibility to revisit the questions and their responses in an informal way when at the centre. During conversations with the children, the rephrasing of the framework questions was sometimes required, as was having conversations about all manner of things, and responding to their requests and questions.

Photographs taken by the participants and researcher were used in three ways: (1) as 'aides memoires' in the course of fieldwork; (2) as sources of data in their own right; and (3) as prompts for discussion by research

participants (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993; Kervin et al., 2006), all of which added to the richness of the written observations, the descriptions developed, discovering the children's perspectives on outdoor settings and authenticating the findings.

Photo-elicitation as a method of interviewing worked much more effectively than expected, as found by Clark and Moss (2005), Warming (2005) and Wiltz and Klein (2001). Using assorted pre-selected pictures of equipment and outdoor play settings proved to be a non-threatening way of opening up conversations and gave an insight to how the children felt about outdoor experiences not provided within the centre setting or that the researcher had not been around to observe. Each picture was numbered and recorded on a master sheet. As children indicated whether they or not they thought they liked to play with that particular piece of equipment or in that natural outdoor space, it was noted. This master sheet also stayed permanently on the clipboard. All the children made clear choices as to what they liked/disliked that stayed true during subsequent sessions. What had not been anticipated was that looking at the assorted pictures would be such a social event, a time when the children sought each other's opinions.

Some of the most satisfying moments in the study were those when the children took complete control of the data collection and the researcher became very much a participant, under their direction:—'record this', 'photograph that', 'write this', 'do that'. Most memorable were the times when two of the boys took over the role as 'interviewer' of the other children: 'Do you like this?', 'Who likes this ...?' 'Who loves that ...?'. On occasion this went on for 30 minutes. They proved to be effective interviewers of each other, and this is a research tool worth exploring further.

Photo Novella is about handing the camera over to the child. Each child having their own disposable camera to use seemed to be an empowering learning experience for all children and validated the decision to not restrict them to only a few frames, as seems to be the trend in many studies (such as (Clark & Moss, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2003). Empowering children in this way also means the researcher does not have control of what is photographed; the children are providing the data. The children were excited and proud to have their own camera. This seemed to give them a sense of real importance, and even more so when they got to use the researcher's digital camera. The cameras at the centre were for teachers' use only at that time. Photo Novella proved to be a highly effective research tool in providing another avenue for children to communicate their perspectives besides the spoken word.

Through the children's photographs it was discovered how much notice they take of the natural world. The natural elements of the outdoor environment were

the most photographed. This finding is consistent with other studies where children have taken photos of the important places and people in their early childhood centres (Clark, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2005; Greenfield, 2006). Not only did the children's photographs offer unrivalled information in understanding the children's perceptions (Brooker, 2001), Photo Novella proved to be an enjoyable experience and one that has subsequently led to children discovering a new interest and area of expertise. This project empowered the children to see themselves as competent in taking photographs. As the birthdays of several of the participant children occurred at this time, it was good to see that grandparents and parents gave cameras as gifts to these children.

Talking with children about their photographs was spread over many weeks, as they finished using their film on different days. This allowed time to be spent with individual children or naturally forming small pairs/groups looking at their pictures together and talking about them. Several parents had commented that their children talked a lot about their photographs at home. Children showed their photographs and talked about them with other children and teachers. Surprisingly, though, looking at their own photos with others did not generate as much discussion as had been anticipated. This was disappointing in some ways, but at the time there was a tension between wanting children to talk about their photos and respecting their responses such as short answers, nods, smiles and grins. In asking them to photograph the things and places they liked outside, they had indeed done as asked; it was a matter of trust that their photos were of the places, spaces and people they valued most. Certainly this assumption has been validated by the findings from the other data sources and findings from similar studies, such as those of Clark and Moss (2005) and Einarsdottir (2005). However, in hindsight, the strategy Hart (1979) used of asking the children to order their photos from most favourite to least, may well have been a more effective strategy to promote discussion.

Collaborative drawings added a valuable piece to the mosaic of finding out children's perceptions of the outdoor setting that would otherwise have been overlooked. In particular, the inclusion of natural elements in their drawings became highly significant, especially when analysed in combination with the audio-taping of their conversations while drawing. Other researchers, such as Clark (2005) and Dockett and Perry (2003), have also found there is more to gain from listening to young children's talk during the drawing process rather than afterwards.

Touring or 'walking interviews' have been used successfully in several of the studies mentioned (see Clark & Moss, 2001; 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2003) and this method was particularly useful with the younger

children. As we walked, assistance could be given with winding on the film in the disposable cameras, which was quite hard to do for some of the youngest participants, while talking about what was capturing their interest and about other things. The physical nature of walking was in line with what other researchers had found, that children like to go to the places they are talking about (Clark & Moss, 2001; 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2003).

Audio-recording was an exceptionally valuable research tool in relation to its complementary use with other tools. The children appeared very comfortable with the tape recorder and either ignored it or specifically asked to be interviewed so their voices could be played back. The audio-recorder became just another expected item like the camera and research journal.

Making books has a long tradition in early childhood education practice in New Zealand, and is becoming recognised as a useful tool when researching with young children (Clark & Moss, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2003). This tool was not part of the original research design but, as the study was drawing to a close, its use seemed an appropriate way of further listening to children and signifying that the time spent together was nearly over. Disengaging should be considered as important an aspect of the research design as any other (Berg, 2004; Bryman, 2004). Book-making provided a tangible way of disengaging from that phase of the study.

The most noticeable aspect of the book-making was that the children were so excited to see so many photos of themselves, photos that had been taken by other children or the researcher. As they created their individual pages of the book it became apparent that having pictures of themselves on their own page was very meaningful. The younger children had seemed a little disappointed that they could not find themselves in their own photos. The youngest participant asked, when looking at his photos, 'Where is Hamish?' By the provision of many copies of photographs the researcher and other children had taken, the younger ones were able to include photographs of themselves on their pages. The book became a wonderful way for the children to see themselves engaging in the outdoor setting, doing what was most important to them, 'playing'. Each child received a photocopy of the finished book and the centre was given the master copy.

Focus groups provided an informal way of interviewing the parents and teachers (Bryman, 2004). The views of the significant adults in the children's lives contributed to the understanding of the children's behaviour in the outdoor setting and of the connections between home and centre. The parent focus groups also provided opportunity for the parents to hear each other's view about the outdoors, discovering much in common. All the participant parents perceived the outdoor environment of the early childhood centre and the wider outdoors as having a highly important role in the holistic development of children.

Journal-keeping

Keeping a reflective research journal proved worthwhile and is viewed as vital in qualitative participatory research (Altrichter et al., 1993; Gillham, 2000). A book with a purple cover, with glittery green and pink butterflies, was chosen for our journal so it would be appealing to children. Right from the first day the children were attracted to the book and commented on it, asking what it was for. This provided a good vehicle for explaining what the research was about, as well as for self-reflection on the research over time. It was where things that needed to be done were recorded, questions to ask and notations about new ideas. It became the place where the small drawings by some of the children were stored, and it was useful in the data analysis and write-up phase.

The parent journal provided lots of insightful data, especially for those children who did not talk very much while at the centre, yet told their parents about what they liked to do outside when at the centre. The parent journal also provided a greater understanding of the sorts of outdoor activities the family engaged in. It was especially useful for those parents who could not attend the focus group meetings. A semi-formal interview was used when talking with the centre owner about her views on the role and value of the outdoors for young children.

Reflection on processes

Multiple roles of the researcher

The first role of the researcher was to participate by staying sufficiently detached in order to observe and analyse but needing to build trusting relationships with children, teachers and parents (Merriam, 1988, 1998). For example, it was explained to the children that it was fine if they did not want to talk at a particular time. Several children on occasion said they were busy right now and would look at the pictures or talk later, and their choice was always respected. Parker (1984), cited in Browning and Hatch (1995), warns against using adult status to coerce children to participate or respond, as the way the interviews are structured could have powerful effects on children's responses.

Second, Gold's (1958) classification of 'observer as participant' (Bryman, 2004) also fitted the researcher's role and aligned with the Mosaic Approach. Spending a minimum of three hours one afternoon a week for 12 weeks allowed the researcher to be available to the children and become 'part of the furniture', so to speak. 'Observer as participant' also allowed for observation of the natural play and behaviour of the children outside. Third, as time went on, the researcher took on an increasingly active role while maintaining

distance. This involved trying to be helpful to the staff rather than a hindrance; for example, helping to pack away the outdoor equipment at the end of the day. This role of the participant researcher is described as active membership within the setting (Merriam, 1988).

The fourth role included being a 'reactive participant' (Corsaro & Miller, 1992) when approached by non-participant children. This required responding to the children, listening to their views, letting them take a photo with the digital camera but not recording their views or retaining their photos. It also meant directly intervening in a situation only if there was physical danger, but engaging in small tasks at children's requests, such as holding a toy for a child or taking off a sweater.

The Mosaic Approach is not the easiest or simplest way to research. Having multiple roles along with multiple data-collection tools adds to the complexity of the task. It meant a far greater time commitment in order to be in the centre with the children regularly and resulted in a vast amount of data to analyse. However, by using the Mosaic Approach, the triangulation and integrity of the findings were exceptionally high.

Trustworthiness and situated validity

The notion of trustworthiness or validity stems from ensuring that the perceptions of the participants rather than those of the researcher take precedence (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). Combining visual media with participant observations enabled an in-depth exploration of what 'being outside' meant to the participants and provides triangulation. This in turn led to being able to assess and justify the extent to which the children shared a particular attitude or opinion.

The use of visual documentation made the competence and the feelings of the children more visible, trustworthy and transparent, in ways that are sometimes more powerful than the written word (Warming, 2005). Further, the Mosaic Approach provided a platform that gave greater visibility to the children's voices (Clark & Moss, 2005), and provided 'situated validity' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The reporting of the findings must privilege the participants' voices.

Flexibility and inclusion

The entire process was one of critical inquiry as the researcher dealt with whatever each day in the centre brought forth and whatever the study revealed. The initial idea of working with just 12 participants, in small groups of three or four children at a time, was discarded fairly quickly. This was after finding out that there were other children very keen to participate and also discovering that all the children aged over two years shared the same outdoor space and had free access to this space most times during the day. This

situation required engagement in some way with all the children who approached the researcher and showed an interest in what was happening. Inclusion of non-participant children called upon all my skills as a teacher and parent but was non-negotiable given the principles that underpinned the study.

Inclusion is justified through the following example of child X, who became intensely interested when the children started to use the disposable cameras. He was offered the digital camera to use, as was successful with other non-participant children on several occasions, but he kept looking for and asking where his camera was, referring to the disposable cameras. The teachers were asked if they were agreeable for a disposable camera being purchased for him to use solely for his own benefit, not for research purposes. Agreement was given, influenced by the fact that he was often excluded by the other children outside, and the teachers and researcher felt that having his own camera may support and foster his inclusion within the larger group. The research journal entry for November 2nd reads:

Child X approached me as soon as he spotted me, asking, as usual, if I had a camera for him, and I was so delighted that I had I bought a camera for him – he was absolutely rapt – huge smile, showing it to all the other children, and went off taking his pictures. He used up all the film and brought it back to me. I explained that I had to get the film developed and would bring his photos in an album next week.

He carried the album around, proudly showing his photos to everyone. Upon returning to the centre two months after the completion of the project child X ran up, a big smile on his face, and wrapped his arms around the researcher's legs. A heart-stopping moment in knowing that the decision to include him (yet not include technically), had been the right one.

Disengaging: Bringing closure

Disengaging was something that needed serious consideration. It is very disappointing that ways to bring long-term field work to a close, for both researcher and the participants, have been under-described and under-discussed in the research literature. There is a need to bring closure to the fieldwork stage of the project for all involved, particularly when young children are participants and responsive, reciprocal relationships have been established and maintained over time. Berg (2004) points out that exiting the field setting 'involves two distinct operations: first, the physical removal of the researchers from the research setting and, second, emotional disengagement for the relationships developed during the field experience' (p. 187). So creating a book with the children about our time

together not only helped bring closure, but also became part of the data collected. The book was given to the centre, but one of the children said she would not be able to look at it because she was entering school, so she and every participant child got a photocopy of the original. Giving the books to each child was an exceptionally meaningful and precious moment and felt like the fieldwork stage was well and truly over.

Analysis phase

The Mosaic Approach in the analysis phase meant that it was an holistic one that combined the study of the individuals and groups with the study of the outdoor environment itself (both spaces and equipment), and which together formed a large study of the whole (Patton, 2002). Using inductive analysis which involved discovering patterns, themes and categories within the data and creating multiple mosaics, the findings emerged (Bryman, 2004; Patton, 2002), thereby creating a summary mosaic of preferences. These summary mosaics emerged for each child, from (1) all data gathered from children and (2) all data sources (researcher observation, parents and teachers). The Mosaic Approach supported qualitative data analysis, requiring an interpretative process that began with data collection and continued until the conclusion of the research. It was a process of trying to blend together and 'make sense of the various images, sounds, and understandings' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 6).

Conclusion

On reflection it is apparent how important the more intuitive aspects of participant observation are. There is no argument that participation and listening are extremely complex and problematic concepts; and enabling children to describe what being outside meant to them, in their own way, in their own time, using so many different tools, was a demanding and challenging task as noted by Pramling Samuelsson (2004).

When working with young children, researchers need to be mindful of the reality that conversations about other things will occur. Children are often more open and trusting when the adult is honest with them. That honesty applies to the researcher explaining to the children why the research is being done and informing them that the time spent with them is coming to an end.

Challenges arose, but what was important was facing them in a flexible, adaptive way.

This paper has highlighted the importance of using a diverse range of research tools, as advocated in the Mosaic Approach. Of particular value was using Photo Novella and photo elicitation, as a means of gaining children's perspectives. The use of non-verbal research tools such as photography, drawing, touring and observation proved immensely valuable, especially

for the more reticent children. Providing children with several ways to share their views enabled the more taciturn children to register their interest (Carr, Jones, & Lee, 2006; Gollop, 2000).

The Mosaic Approach provides an effective, flexible and authentic methodology. By adapting and adding to the methods used by Clark and Moss (2001; 2005), the researcher was able to further explore other research tools that were empowering for participants and provided various ways for them to share their views. The use of multiple tools resulted in data which significantly increased the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research findings.

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