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Children's voices in the Framework for Early Learning – A portraiture study

*Mary Daly, Arlene Forster, Rosaleen Murphy, Avril Sweeney, Margaret Maxwell, Paul Brennan, Emer O'Connor***.**

Abstract

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is developing a Framework for Early Learning to support adults in working with children from birth to six years. The Framework is premised on an understanding of children as being active in shaping and creating their own lives. This perspective supports the inclusion of children's voices in decisions which affect them. The NCCA is using a portraiture study to facilitate children as partners in developing the Framework. The portraits will provide a detailed description of individual children's experiences and reflections on their time in early childhood settings and will provide an important benchmark for the NCCA in developing a national framework for early learning and development which is grounded in an Irish context. This contextualisation will help to ensure that the Framework is relevant and helpful to adults in working with children in Ireland.

Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) advises the Minister for Education and Science on matters relating to the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools as set out in Article 41-1[b] of the Education Act (Department of Education and Science, 1998). In fulfilling its remit, the NCCA is developing a national framework referred to as the *Framework for Early Learning,* to support adults in extending and enriching children's learning and development from birth to six years. These adults include parents[1], childminders and practitioners[2] in the range of early childhood settings including the home, childminding environments, nurseries, crèches, playgroups, pre-schools and infant classes in primary school.

The publication of the consultative document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning (*NCCA, 2004) and the ensuing consultation with the early childhood sector were important stepping stones in the NCCA's work in developing the Framework. The portraiture study in

[1] The NCCA uses the term *parents* to refer to the child's primary caregivers and educators. These include the child's father and mother and/or guardian(s).
[2] The term *practitioners* refers to all those working in a specialised manner with children in early childhood settings. Practitioners have a diversity of experience and qualifications ranging from unaccredited through to post-graduate level.

early childhood settings around the country represents another important milestone. Portraiture involves recording and interpreting the perspectives and experiences of participants in particular settings. This study explored what children and adults do, say and make in early childhood settings, in order to inform the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*.

The portraiture study outlined in this paper will support the NCCA's development of the *Framework for Early Learning* in a number of ways. It will help the NCCA to

- represent the voices of children in the Framework
- connect with the everyday experiences of children and practitioners in a range of settings

As children are not a homogenous group the portraiture study will not generalise about children's experiences across the range of early childhood settings in Ireland. As is often the case in qualitative research the study is focused on understanding not generalising (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1996). Therefore, the portraits will provide rich descriptions of individual children's experiences and reflections on their time in a small number of settings - what they enjoy doing, whom they enjoy being with, where they enjoy spending time, what they would like to change and so forth. These reflections will help the NCCA to develop a national framework for early learning which is based firmly in an Irish context. This contextualisation of the Framework will help to ensure that it is relevant and helpful to those who care for and educate children under the age of six years in Ireland.

This paper presents the background to the portraiture study and explains why the NCCA used portraiture as a means of understanding more clearly children's experiences in early childhood settings. It also presents the methods for gathering information from and about the children.

Background to the portraiture study

As with all its work, the NCCA is developing the *Framework for Early Learning* in consultation with the NCCA's various committee structures as well as with the early childhood sector in Ireland. The *Framework for Early Learning* is also informed by policy developments in the area of early childhood care and education such as the ratification by Ireland in 1992 of the *United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC, 1990) through which Ireland committed to a range of obligations concerning the welfare of children. Another significant policy development is the *National Children's Strategy: Our Children, Their Lives*

(Department of Health and Children, 2000), which emphasises the importance of enabling children to experience a fulfilling childhood to help them realise their full potential.

In 2004, the NCCA launched the consultative document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning.* This document outlined the purpose of the Framework, its vision and aims, its proposed themes, and the model for presenting children's early learning and development. The consultation process that followed enabled the early childhood sector to influence the ongoing development of the Framework. The findings of the NCCA's consultation with the early childhood sector were presented in *Towards a Framework for Early Learning: Final Consultation Report* (2005) which is available on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie. The findings revealed strong support for much of the thinking presented in the consultative document. Consultation participants emphasised the importance of strengthening the focus on the child as a contributor and participant in learning, the creative arts, the development of first and second language acquisition and the status of Gaeilge, and the child's care needs. Participants also re-iterated the importance of representing children's, parents' and practitioners' experiences and voices in the development of the Framework.

In designing the consultation with the early childhood sector in 2004, the NCCA had always planned to consult with children. The NCCA believed that this would be most effectively done during the development of the components of the Framework itself rather than by focusing on the ideas presented in the consultative document. The NCCA identified a portraiture study as an important vehicle for this consultation.

Why include the child's voice?

The NCCA is engaging in a portraiture study at a time when the importance and value of listening to children is increasingly recognised by legislators and policy makers both at home and abroad. Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC and subsequent legislation and policy initiatives have highlighted the importance of meaningfully listening to children, and have served to promote the importance of taking children's views seriously. Consultation with children is also a key principle underpinning the work of the National Children's Office (NCO) which was established to oversee the implementation of the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000). Goal 1 of the Strategy asserts that *children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.*

Changes in the way that legislators and policy makers view the importance of listening to and consulting with children reflect a changing attitude to childhood. Recent years have seen an evolution in traditional understandings of childhood with sociological perspectives generating a new sociology of childhood. This sociology sees children as a distinct group in society; a social group which should be understood and considered independently of adults (Devine, 2004). Understanding children as a group with rights, capacities and needs distinguishable from those of adults should not give rise to a view of children as a homogenous group. The elusiveness of a single concept of childhood is widely accepted in early childhood circles (James and Prout, 1990). Prout (2001) has noted that any one child sees and speaks from multiple, combined and intersecting positions which are created and influenced by gender, ethnicity, class and ability. Resonating loudly through the NCCA's consultative document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (2004) is the heterogeneity of children as a social group. Children have different strengths, interests, abilities and needs. Adding to this diversity are children's different cultures, languages, ethnicities, beliefs and socio-economic backgrounds. In choosing children for the portraiture study, the NCCA is trying to reflect the richness and complexity of the differing childhoods experienced by children in Ireland.

The new sociology of childhood views children as being active in shaping and creating their own lives as opposed to being passive recipients of life's experiences. Quortrup, Bardy, Sgritta and Wimtersberger (1987) call for the promotion of children as *beings rather than becomings*. Similarly, Lancaster (2003) states that children are not simply learning and practising for the future, but instead are already living and accomplishing in the present. This perspective necessitates a fundamental shift in thinking about children and in particular their capacities and competencies as participants in research such as the NCCA's portraiture study.

Facilitating active participation by children

Traditionally children have often been passive participants in research studies which explore issues related to them and therefore it was particularly important that the NCCA facilitate active participation by children in the portraiture study. Franklin (1995) suggests that due to this relative exclusion of children from participation they need to be supported by adults to achieve the status of active participants. The NCCA used Mayall's RAMPS framework (1994) to support children in the study in making their voices heard. This framework involves

- **R**ecognising the many visual and verbal languages that children use to express themselves
- **A**ssigning space for documentation and feedback

- **M**aking time to give children information that is relevant, makes sense to them and focuses on what they want and need to know to make informed decisions
- **P**roviding choice
- **S**ubscribing to a reflective practice.

Lancaster (2003) suggests that the RAMPS framework can help to promote the tilting of the balance of power in children's favour.

What is portraiture?

In their practice of research as portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) describe portraiture as *painting with words*. They speak of their search for a form of inquiry which would bridge *the realms of science and art* in order to create narratives that convey the perspective of the subjects and the meaning they attribute to what they do and say and how they behave. Portraiture is therefore a form of qualitative research enquiry which seeks to give voice to the experiences of the various research participants in a particular setting. It does this through a narrative which documents and illuminates *the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it, trusting that the readers will feel identified* (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p.14).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) present four major organising themes of portraiture to guide the portraitist/researcher in his/her work. These relate to **context, voice, relationships** and **emergent themes**:

- **Context** refers to the setting in which the action and experiences take place. The context enables the researcher to place the participants and their actions in a particular time and space and to understand and interpret what they say and do. The experience of individual children in early childhood settings is thus shaped and framed by the particular family, setting and community in which they learn and develop.

- **Voice** refers to the impression of the researcher on both the process of gathering and interpreting the data and the finished portrait. While other forms of ethnographic research are concerned with dulling the voice of the researcher, the ***I*** or ***we*** of the researcher(s) is explicit or implicit throughout the final portrait. Voice also relates to the voice of the participants. The researcher ***listens for*** the message and meaning from the participants through listening to their verbal contributions and also observing their gestures and body language which often speak louder than words. This is important for all children but is

particularly significant for very young and/or pre-verbal[3] children or children who have special educational needs who may continue to use non-verbal forms of communication as their main way of interacting with others.

- **Relationships** are the means by which portraits are constructed, shaped and drawn. It is through the developing relationship and dialogue between the researcher and participant that the portrait is shaped and co-constructed and a balance in participation is achieved between the voice of the researcher and the voice of the participant.

- **Emergent themes** throughout the study lead to the development of more discerning questions and more appropriate means of collecting information.

Why portraiture?

In considering an appropriate methodology the NCCA decided to use portraiture because it allows the researcher/s to describe the rich, complex and diverse experiences of children within the socio-cultural context of their settings. Portraiture also gives the flexibility to use multiple methods and sources of data in creating the final portraits such as observation, photography, interviews and video-recording.

While portraiture has many similarities with other qualitative research methods, it has two distinguishing features. These features were also influential in the NCCA's choice of portraiture as a methodology. The first feature is that portraiture begins by searching for what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) refer to as ***what is good and healthy*** about the experiences of the participants in the settings. This *good* forms the context of the research inquiry and a key question the researcher asks then is *what is good here?*

The second defining feature of portraiture is that the researcher ***listens for a story*** whereas in other areas of ethnographic research the researcher listens *to* the story of the research participants. Welty (1983) makes a crucial distinction between these two forms of listening. In the latter, the researcher adopts a more passive and receptive stance whereas the researcher in portraiture adopts an active, engaged position which involves participating in, identifying and selecting the story and helping to shape the story's coherence. This active engaged stance

[3] The NCCA uses the term *verbal* children to refer to those children who have the capacity to communicate their feelings, ideas and thoughts through spoken words. *Pre-verbal* refers to those children who are working towards developing this capacity, and who rely to a greater extent on vocalizations, gestures, expressions and movements in communicating with others.

means that the *self* of the researcher is critical to the way of listening, selecting, interpreting and composing the portrait.

The Mosaic Approach as a framework for creating the portraits

In designing this portraiture study, the NCCA looked at recent work in the field of listening to young children. In particular, it drew on the work of Clark and Moss (2001) in identifying methods for gathering and analysing information which would be sensitive to the strengths and abilities of children from birth to six years. This approach known as the Mosaic Approach provided the *how* of the NCCA's portraiture study and emphasised the processes of dialogue, reflection and action as much as the data gathering tools. It is based on a particular framework for listening to children. Clark and Moss (2001) describe six facets of this framework:

- *multi-method* – Goldschmied and Jackson (1994) highlight how children *speak* through their play, their actions and reactions. Recognising that children have different voices and therefore different modes of communication (pre-verbal, non-verbal and verbal), the Mosaic Approach uses a range of imaginative methods to gather and analyse what children are thinking, experiencing and communicating without relying on spoken or written words.

- *participatory* – children play an active role in sharing and interpreting their experiences, reflecting their expertise and agency in their own lives. The Mosaic Approach begins from the premise that children are competent individuals in their own right. Using a range of methods which combine the visual and the verbal, adults should be able to *view the world through the lens of children and young people* (Johnson, Ivan-Smith, Gordon, Pridmore, Scott, Chamers, and Ennew 1999).

- *reflexive* – reflection is a critical part of the interpretative process. The Mosaic Approach emphasises the importance of children and adults collectively discussing and sharing their interpretations of the information gathered.

- *adaptable* – both the techniques and the processes may be used in a variety of early childhood settings. Careful consideration is needed when deciding the suitability of different methods for children of different ages, abilities, cultures and languages.

- *focused on children's lived experiences* – children's experiences must be viewed in context and the processes through which children learn and develop are as important as what they learn.

- *embedded into practice* – the Mosaic Approach has the potential to be used as a way of listening to and understanding more clearly how children live their lives in early childhood settings, with a view to improving the quality of their experiences.

Ethical considerations

Given the young age of the children in the portraiture study (from birth to six years) and the fact that the study involved the use of methodologies such as digital photography and audio- and video-recording, the project raised particular ethical concerns. In light of this the NCCA used the ethical package developed by Lansdown and Lancaster (2001) which provides a guide for respecting three different aspects of children's contribution:

- respecting children's right to information
- respecting what children show and tell
- respecting children's right to active and shared participation in the process right up to the drawing of the final portraits.

In addition to these ethical considerations, the NCCA's work with children in the early childhood settings was informed by the principles for best practice in child protection as presented in *Children First*, (Department of Health and Children, 1999), Ireland's National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children. The NCCA also drew on the work of Hill (2005) in developing protocols for safeguarding the welfare and protection of the children and the researchers. These protocols addressed issues such as where information was gathered from the children and in the presence of whom.

In the process of arranging access and entry to the settings, the researchers provided a statement about themselves from An Garda Síochána[4]. Parents and practitioners were informed about the purpose of the study and the activities involved so that they had the relevant information to assist them in deciding to participate or not. The settings were chosen by the researchers at various locations across three provinces throughout the country. To

[4] As Garda vetting is currently limited to only a small number of those working in the early years sector the NCCA research team applied under the Data Protection Act (2003) to have themselves checked on the Garda Criminal Records Database and a letter was issued by An Garda Síochána to each of the researchers stating that no personal data had been found on them.

facilitate optimum and frequent engagement with the children and their practitioners in a variety of early childhood settings, the team selected settings in close proximity to their own homes/workplaces. Merriam (1988 p.48) proposes that 'One wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most'. The NCCA's Early Childhood Committee made contact with some of the settings on behalf of the research team or the team used settings where they already had links or connections. Informed consent from parents and practitioners was documented using consent forms. Due to the ages of the children, the issue of informed consent was especially relevant and children's participation in the study was subject to their parents' or guardians' consent. On receiving this consent the NCCA endeavoured to ensure that the children understood that they could stop participating in the study at any time and that they did not have to participate in activities or answer questions that they didn't want to. In the case of all children but particularly in pre-verbal and non-verbal children the researchers were mindful of non-verbal responses and stopped any activity if the children appeared to be unhappy or uncomfortable in any way.

Gathering and interpreting the information

The Mosaic Approach offers an integrated methodology for listening to children by combining the visual and the verbal. Clark and Moss (2001) note how methods such as photography and drawing which convey children's meaning in alternative symbolic forms, can in turn provide the springboard for thinking, talking and listening. In selecting methods for listening to children from birth to six years, the NCCA sought a balance between methods which relied solely on written and/or spoken word, and those which focused on the visual or the visual in combination with the spoken word. These methods reflect how children communicate in different ways as they move through early childhood.

The NCCA collected information during the portraiture study using the following methods:

- Observation (researcher's own perspective)
- Photography (of and by the children)
- Audio- and video-recording (of and by the children)
- Child conferencing (interview with portrait child and a friend)
- Walking tours and mapmaking (child took researcher on a tour and made a map as a means of exploring the information recorded on the tour)
- Interviews with parents and practitioners (to gain their perspectives and insights into the child's experiences in the setting).

Each NCCA researcher used a variety of methods which were appropriate given the individual child's age, strengths, interests and abilities to capture his/her views and experiences. Differences between children for example in physical, intellectual or linguistic ability or in ethnicity or culture as well as the varying constraints of working in the individual settings also influenced the choice of methods used to gather information. Collectively, the information gathered through the different methods provided the pieces of the mosaic which the researcher used to create the portraits of babies, toddlers and young children. The process of gathering and analysing the information was spiral. Information was analysed on an on-going basis with a view to identifying themes, patterns and questions that required further exploration.

What happened during each visit?

The portraiture study involved the researcher making a maximum of six visits to each early childhood setting. An outline schedule of activities for these visits is presented below.

Table 1: Outline schedule of visits

Visit	Activities
1	▪ Observe children in the setting ▪ Choose a portrait child in partnership with the practitioner (pending agreement from parents)
2	▪ Gather information on the portrait child (as member of a group/class) ▪ Interview the portrait child's practitioner
3	▪ Gather information on the portrait child (as member of a group/class) ▪ Interview the portrait child's parent(s)
4	▪ Gather information on the portrait child (as member of a group/class) ▪ Interview the portrait child with a friend/friends ▪ Interview a group of parents
5	▪ Gather information on the portrait child (as member of a group/class) ▪ Interview a group of practitioners and the manager/principal
6	▪ Share outline of the portrait with the child, practitioner, parent and principal/manager

The settings and children in the study

The NCCA worked with 12 children in 11 settings in the portraiture study. One portrait focused on two boys in their home. Collectively, these settings reflect a range of different types of early childhood setting in Ireland as well as an urban/rural representation, a range of children from birth to six years, a mix of boys and girls, private, community and statutory provision and cultural and linguistic diversity. Table 2 outlines the children and the settings involved in the portraiture.

Table 2: Profile of settings involved in the study

Setting type	Portrait child[5] and area
Private Nursery	▪ Portrait child - Cathal aged 9 months ▪ Rural area
Childminding setting	▪ Portrait child - Jayne aged 19 months ▪ Rural area
Home setting	▪ Portrait children - Seán aged 19 months and Patrick aged 4 ½ [6] ▪ Rural area
Community Crèche with Naíonra	▪ Portrait child - Amy aged 2 ½ ▪ Rural area
Community Crèche	▪ Portrait child – Harry aged 3 ▪ Urban area
Naíonra	▪ Portrait child - Zachary aged 4 ▪ Urban area
Traveller pre-school	▪ Portrait child - Louise aged 4 ▪ Urban area
Early Start pre-school	▪ Portrait child - Caroline aged 4 ½ ▪ Urban area
Montessori community pre-school	▪ Portrait child - Alan aged 4 ¾ ▪ Rural area
Infant class in junior school	▪ Portrait child – Matt aged 5 ¾ ▪ Urban area
Infant class in primary school	▪ Portrait child – Andrew aged 5 years 11 months ▪ Rural area

[5] Names of all children have been changed.

[6] The 19 month old child was chosen as the portrait child but because there were two children in the home at the time of the visits it was decided to include the second child also.

The visits to the settings took place between March and June 2006. Following these, the data gathered was analysed by individual researchers and also collectively by the researcher team, and used to compile the portraits. The portraits (draft and final versions) were shared with the children (as far as is practicable given their ages), their parents and practitioners.

The aim of the *Framework for Early Learning* being developed by the NCCA is to support adults in extending and enriching children's early learning and development from birth to six years. The NCCA sees the inclusion of the voices and experiences of children in Ireland in the development of such a Framework as being critical. The portraiture study will enable the active and engaged participation of children from as young as nine months through to six years in the *Framework*. The 11 portraits will be compiled and available on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie in spring 2007 in a publication called *Listening for children's stories: Children as partners in the Framework for Early Learning*. In addition in this publication, the NCCA researchers will reflect on and document their collective experience in using portraiture as a methodology for listening for the children's stories and will highlight the lessons learnt through the study as well as outlining how the portraiture study will inform the development of the *Framework for Early Learning.*

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