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Title: Including children's voices in a multiple stakeholder study on a community wide approach to improving quality in early years setting

Abstract

This article will explore the use of visual participatory research methods with young children. These methods have been utilised to add young children's voices to research on the impact of a quality improvement strategy in an early years' settings involved in a community-based prevention and early intervention programme. The main objective of the intervention programme is to measurably improve the lives of children (pre-birth to six years) and families through universal and targeted services in an urban community which experiences high levels of socio-economic deprivation. The quality improvement strategy included the introduction of Highscope curriculum training and onsite staff mentoring. This was a participatory project and the research questions emerged from the photographs and subsequent narratives which the children produced. Children were offered the opportunity to share their views with the researchers through a variety of participatory rights-based approaches including drawing, photo-elicitation, photography, and conversations. In adding children's voices to the programme evaluation the research can help us to understand children's experiences and produces better policy and better services and also to interrogate the adult-centric quantitative data and adult perspectives generated in the ongoing project evaluation.

Key words

Early intervention, participatory research with children, Photovoice

Introduction

This article presents finding from a participatory research project which sought to include the voices of young children in an ongoing evaluation of a community-based prevention and early intervention programme. The Young Knocknaheey Area Based Childcare Programme (YK ABC) is a government funded community-based prevention and early intervention programme in Ireland. The main objective of YK ABC is to measurably improve the lives of children (pre-birth to six years) and families living in the local catchment area through the provision of universal to targeted services, with an emphasis on interagency working, co-facilitation across services, capacity building and systems change. The national policy framework for children and young people in Ireland 'Better Outcomes, Better Futures', makes the states commitment to investment in prevention and early intervention with a clear focus on investment in the early years as a mechanism for reducing intergenerational disadvantage (DCYA, 2014). The YK ABC Progamme is a funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in Ireland and is part of the national early intervention initiative, addressing areas of child health and development, child learning, parenting and integrated service delivery. The catchment area for YK ABC Based is an urban area which experiences high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and multi-generational deprivation and is 90% ethnically white Irish. Data from the 2011 national census demonstrated that that the area experiences higher rates of unemployment and lower rates of home owner ship than the national average. In relation to housing tenure the proportion of households renting from the local authority (38%) was almost five times the national average (8%). In relation to educational attainment less than one-fifth (17%) of the adult population (aged fifteen or over) have completed any post-secondary education, compared to 44% of the national adult population.

This article explores a research project which aims to support the ongoing programme and outcome evaluations being conducted in the YKABC programme and to build on the existing data the programme has generated. In particular, it will contribute to the strand on Early Years Care and Education and the ongoing quality improvement strategy in this sector. It explores the use of visual participatory research methods with young children. These methods have been utilised to add young children's voices to research on the impact of a quality improvement strategy in seven early years' settings involved in an early intervention project as part of the YKABC Programme.

Context of the prevention and early intervention programme

There is now a strong body of scientific evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of early childhood intervention programmes in preventing delay in cognitive development and increasing readiness to learn, as assessed by reductions in grade retention and placement in special education classes (Anderson, 2003; Martin, 2010; Hutchings & Gardner, 2012). The results from longitudinal studies such as the Perry Preschool Project in the US showed that participation in a high-quality and cognitively orientated preschool programme demonstrated benefits for the child in later school competence (Schweinhart, 2004). In addition to this evidence, a number of international studies found that partnership between parents and staff increases cognitive development and academic achievements for children (Lamb-Parker et al., 2001; Ghate & Hazel, 2002; Sylva et al., 2004). A systematic review of 41 longitudinal studies involving over 3,000 families enrolled in Head Start found improvements in parent outcomes in two main areas; parent's ability to promote early learning skills and greater participation of parents in their child's later school experience (Pizzo and Tufankjian, 2004). The authors conclude from their research that Head Start systematically helps parents and that their review of previous studies strongly suggests that enrolment in Head Start has a considerable impact of

parent participation in their child's education. Successful adaptation of evidence-based programmes is a key component of the YK ABC and programmes have been implemented which based on international best practice and the best fit the local context (Kilburn & Mattox, 2016). From the outset, the YK ABC Programme had an interest in adapting the learning from successful evidence-based approaches. At the same time, the level of experience and local knowledge available within the consortium meant that any programme implementation was set firmly in the context of enhancing existing early childhood services, sustainably meeting locally identified needs and delivering within an interdisciplinary framework. Strategy three of the YK ABC programme, the Early Years Care and Education Strategy, involved investing in a supported quality improvement strategy for a community of seven Early Years settings located in the YK ABC catchment area. The chosen settings were diverse in their pedagogical approach and context, and included a Montessori centre, a primary school Early Start centre, a targeted early intervention centre, and a community preschool using a play-based approach. The quality-improvement strategy was aligned to the National Early Years curriculum and quality frameworks of Aistear and Soilta[1]. A baseline Environment Rating Scales (ERS) assessments was conducted in all seven centres prior to the implementation of the quality improvement strategy in 2015. The ECERS-3 and ITERS-R Assessments highlighted the aspects of each centre (space and furnishings, personal care routines, activities, listening and talking, interaction, programme structure) that required improvement to coincide with the implementation of the strategy's main activities. The core elements of the quality improvement strategy focused on language supports (Hanen Learning Language and Loving It training for staff), curriculum enhancement (High/Scope curriculum training and Montessori curriculum enhancement), onsite mentoring for staff and an Environment Enhancement Fund for each

[1] In 2006 Síolta the national quality framework for Early Childhood Education was introduced and in 2009 'Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework' was introduced (NCCA, 2009). Síolta aims to assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings where children aged birth to six years are present and both Aistear and Síolta can be used to complement existing ECCE curricula and approaches including those used in primary schools.

centre. The implementation of a Mentoring Programme saw weekly site visits by a specialist onsite mentor in which the implementation of curriculum content and the suggested environmental changes and teaching strategies were overseen and supported. ECERS-3 and ITERS-R assessments were conducted at each of the 7 early years centres at baseline (2015) and post-programme (2017), and focus groups were conducted with early years' practitioners and centre managers (see Buckley and Curtin (2018) for evaluation results). Post programme implementation ECERS and ITERS (2017) have shown significant improvements in many areas but in particular scores related to adult-child interactions. This paper will add the child's voices to these findings. Children's voices were included in the project evaluation through participatory research methods and this paper will focus on participatory research with 12 young children (aged 3-4 years) in one of the preschool settings. In adding children's voices to the programme evaluation the research can help us to understand children's experiences and produces better policy and better services. Including research with children in project evaluation to important in acknowledging children as being active partners and reliable informants (Babić, 2017) and can challenge adult-centric notions of childhood experiences.

Methodology

The study was guided by a children's rights framework and is informed by Article 12 of the CRC. The methodology will draw on the "Mosaic approach'" which acknowledges adults and young children as co-constructors of meaning and combines traditional methodology of observation and interviewing with participatory methodologies (Clark & Moss, 2011). The study used visual participatory research methods and drew on the Mosaic approach which acknowledges adults and young children as co-constructors of meaning (Clark & Moss, 20011). This participatory research was guided by a children's rights framework and was informed by UNCRC Article 12 (Horgan et al, 2017). Participatory and visual methods which

utilise visual and verbal research tools enable young children to document their experiences and to facilitate exchange with adults (Clark, 2011). These methods also contribute to 'researching with young children rather than on young children can redraw the boundaries between adults' and children's roles in the research process including the relationship with the research audience' (Clark and Moss, 2011, p115). The study used visual, story and picture based materials and prompts to introduce the study to children in their preschool settings. Children will be offered the opportunity to share their views with the researcher through a variety of participatory rights-based approaches including drawing, photography, and conversations (Dockett et al 2012).

The main method of data collection was photo supported interviews with the children. Children were supported to take their own photos within their preschool setting and these photos will be used as a motivation and basis for conversations with the researcher. Children were supported to take their own photos using digital cameras within their preschool setting and these photos were used as a motivation and basis for conversations with the researcher. The study builds on a growing body of research with children which utilises photographic research methods as an alternative or additional method to traditional verbal research methods (Einarsdottir, 2014). In a recent Canadian study Alaca (2017) found that PhotoVoice methodology is a very effective research tool in a study with children aged three to five years in preschool settings which supported and encouraged their expression. Photographic methods allow children to exercise power during data gathering as they choose and take the photographs themselves and the subsequent interviews and conversations with children will revolve around the images which they have photographed allowing them to direct the interview process.

This was a participatory project and the research questions emerged from the photographs and subsequent narratives which the children produced. Children were offered the opportunity to share their views with the researchers through a variety of participatory rights-based approaches including drawing, photo-elicitation, photography, and conversations. Data collection took place over a 4-week period in the preschool setting and is further explained below.

Research sample

The participants for this study were 3- 4-year-old children attending preschool. They were recruited through one preschool setting which is involved in the YK programme. The children in the research are aged under 5 years and the research process took into account their cognitive, language, emotional and social skills. The language used by the researcher and the research methods were appropriate for the children's developmental stage and the research was being conducted in a child-friendly environment which the children were familiar with. It was conducted with the support of the children's preschool teachers who work with the children on a daily basis and who have an on-going relationship with the children. These practitioners played a key role in assessing the ongoing assent and comfort of the child during the research project. Prior to data collection there was a research methods training session with YKABC staff to introduce them to child participatory research and to the methods being used in the research study. At this session the staff were also invited to review and inform the research methods. This input from the staff acknowledges their expertise in working with the children on a daily basis and informed some minor changes in the data collection sessions outlined below.

Informed consent with the children

Parental consent for their child's participation in the study was sought and all issues related to the study were explained to parents both through the study information sheet and verbally by the preschool staff in the Centre. The preschool staff assured the parents that there was no expectation that their child had to participate in the study and participation is voluntary. Informed consent was sought from the children through two steps; informing and consenting. Children can only provide their consent if they understand their role in the study and the purpose of the study. To inform the children about the study the researcher developed a picture book about the research project and which introduces the researcher and the purpose of the study in a visual and child friendly way (See Picture 1: Extracts from the p*icture book for informed consent with the children*).

Picture 1: Images from the Picture book for informed consent with the children



This follows the approach of 'narrative non-fiction' which has been established as a means of ethical informing where the researcher 'establishes the research context and purpose, rules of participation, and information in the form of a factual narrative, supported by photographs of real people, places, and events' (Mayne et al 2016). The storybook was developed in conjunction with the preschool staff to make sure it is appropriate to the children's age and cultural understanding. Once the informing step was complete consent was sought from the children verbally and children could also answer yes or no or give a thumbs up and thumbs

down sign. Additionally, children who did not want to participate were be offered an alternative activity by preschool staff and they could demonstrate their consent non-verbally by moving to a different part of the room and participating in another activity. The children's ongoing assent was monitored by the researchers and by the preschool staff who were very familiar with the children and work with them on a daily basis. Below is an outline of the research schedule for the project.

Research Ethics

The project methodology is guided by the 2011 DCYA National Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects Involving Children. One of the key ethical issues arising through this research is ensuring that specific people, settings and families are not identified and that any sensitive issues arising, perhaps relating to individual children and family circumstances, are anonymised. A strict policy of confidentiality and anonymity was adhered to throughout the research process. The research adhered to child protection guidelines already in operation in the preschool settings. There is also support available from within the YK ABC consortium including social work and psychological support should any child protection issues arise and there was a child protection debriefing with the researchers after each session to discuss any issues which may have arisen. The researcher has Garda Clearance which was obtained through UCC in December 2017.

Research Schedule and Sessions

Data collection with the children – all data collection took place in the children's preschool over a 4-week period.

Session 1- The researchers introduced the research to the children in their preschool setting and through this session informed consent was sought from the children. This was done

through a picture book about the research project and which introduces the researcher and the purpose of the study in a visual and child friendly way (see Picture 1).

Session 2: The sessions started by reminding children of the story from session 1. The researchers introduced the research themes with the children using Photo elicitation (stock photos of caregiver interactions and photos of their preschool taken by the preschool staff) (see Picture 2). This session will further familiarise the children with the researchers and with having the researcher in their preschool setting.

Picture 2: Photo Elicitation



Session 3: Talk and draw methods – the researchers conducted a talk and draw session with the children. The aim of the session was to elicit the views of the children on their everyday experiences and again to allow the children to become familiar and comfortable with the researcher in their preschool setting. The posters were used as a prompt for children. Children were given markers because they were using them for their work during that period and were enjoying using them in their preschool classroom so the preschool staff felt it would be an interesting material choice for the talk and draw as the children were excited about using markers. This was evident when the children were using them for the session and all of the children were enthusiastic about using them. Three groups of 4-5 children with their teacher

came into the room and each group stayed for 20 minutes. After they finished colouring and drawing they were invited to stick their picture onto their favourite photos which were posted on the wall from the photo-elicitation session. The children's discussions were recoded and transcribed from this session.

Session 4: Children were given the digital cameras and given some basic instruction on how to use them. They were asked to take photos in their preschool of things which they find interesting over a two-day period. The preschool staff supported them in this activity with any technical issues they had.

Session 5/6: During these sessions the children were shown the printed copies of the photos which they took and these photos formed the basis of a discussion with the children using the PhotoVoice methods. These sessions produced the main source of data for the research study. Children were given stickers to identify their favourite 3-4 photos during the session and sad faces to identify photos they did not like. This allowed the children to select their favourites and gave additional opportunities for non-verbal children to contribute their ideas. One child was interviewed at a time by one adult researcher while there may have been another adult-child pair working in another part of the room. The sessions were conducted in the parent's room of the centre. Children were asked questions such as:

- Why did you take that photo?
- What's happening in the photo?
- What is the teacher doing in the photo?
- What are you doing in the photo?
- Where are you when you took the photo?
- Did you like having the camera?

Picture 3: PhotoVoice session



Each session took 5-12 minutes depending on how much time the child felt they wanted to participate. Some of the children were more discursive than others and some children are more photos than others but most had 15-20. Two of the children were non-verbal and one of these did not want to participate in the session by himself and was accompanied by his teacher at his request.

Data analysis

The data was subject to visual and textual analysis. The conversations with the children were recoded and transcribed and the subsequent data was manually coded and organised thematically. The photographs were subject to visual analysis and were also analysed in the context of the conversations with the children. The children's selection of their favourite photographs also offered another form of coding for the data.

Findings

Themes from the children's data

The children's voices emerged through the different participatory methods and key themes which emerged from the children's visual and verbal data included peer friendships, positive child-staff relations, language and activities connected to socio-emotional regulation and the

centrality of food in the preschool setting. This section will further explore these issues and explore how the children's visual and verbal data and participatory approaches allow us to more critically understand the quality improvements strategies employed in the programme from the children's perspectives and how these methods ensure that the research is conducted with children as co-constructors of knowledge.

Peers and friends

In the PhotoVoice sessions all of the children took photographs of their friends. Photos of friends were consistently one of their favourite type of photos when children were asked to select their favourite photograph and usually the first favourite photo which they selected. They usually had multiple pictures of a small friend group (1-2 children) which were often of the same gender as themselves. Play with friends was an important part of the day for the children and a common theme in their photos and discussions. The theme of peers and friends was less common in the Talk and Draw sessions and the Photo-elicitation sessions. Carter and Nutbrown (2016; 410) argue that friendships 'are of great concern to children' and this is demonstrated by the frequency of the theme of friendship and peers in the photos which the children took and the subsequent discussion of these photos with the researchers.

Positive view of staff and staff helping children

Children drew pictures of the preschool staff in the talk and draw sessions and this allowed the researchers to capture conversation on the children's view of staff during these conversations. In the Talk and Draw sessions children predominately drew staff with happy faces. Similarly, in the Photo-elicitation session children were drawn to the images of staff where the staff were displaying happy faces. Several children said that the staff were always

happy. Other children were drawn to pictures of staff being happy in the photo elicitation session Similarly, Einarsdottir (2014) found that some of the young children in her study liked their preschool teachers the most then they were smiling and did not like them when they scolded the children. In the conversations with children there very few references or indication of negative views of the staff being held by the children. In the Talk and Draw session one child drew a sad face on his teacher and said that the teacher was sad because the children were being bold. Another child put his own drawing of his teacher on the poster elicitation image of a cross looking teachers. The researcher asked him if the teacher he drew was in trouble and the child responded "Yeah because she was being bold". She then went onto draw another picture of her teacher. Overall the data collected from the children indicated that they held very positive views of their relationship with the preschool staff.

During PhotoVoice sessions all of the children took photos of the staff engaged in activities with the children and many of the children feature their key worker in their photographs. They also commonly selected these photos when asked to select favourite photos. Children took many pictures of staff engaged in helping children so as staff sitting at tables with children or on the floor and staff setting up activities for the children. There were a small number of pictures of staff holding or hugging the children. Children often picked pictures of the staff as their favourite pictures. Children tended to take more pictures of their key worker than the other preschool workers which may emphasises the centrality of this relationship for the child in their daily routine. For example, one child who has English as a second language and was non-verbal during the PhotoVoice activities took 17 pictures of her teacher and she selected three photos of her Keyworker working with children as her favourite photos. She took photos of her key worker helping other children get dressed, and playing with other children and a number of close-up pictures of her keyworkers face.

Socio-emotional language and regulation

In all of the sessions the theme of socio-emotional language and regulation was commonly referenced by the children. Many of the children pointed to the pictures of circle time activities in the Photo-elicitation session as something familiar to them which they were happy to discuss and two children picked the circle time mat as their favourite place in the Photo-Elicitation session. For example, one child discussed picture of a child doing 'turtle' with his teacher because he had made a 'bad choice'. The preschool teacher in the session explained that the 'turtle' posture is a calming technique which is taught to the children to use when they are feeling sad or angry and is part of the regulatory strategy used by staff to support children's socio-emotional regulation. A number of children also took photos of children doing the 'turtle' and this was mentioned by four of the 10 children in their PhotoVoice interviews. Many of the children referenced the turtle and the language of 'good' and 'bad' choices in their conversations with the researchers and this language was used by the children to discuss both their reactions and other children's reactions to various situations which arose during their preschool day and sometimes at home indicating a continuity in how they children experience this socio-emotional regulation. One child spoke about 'good choices' in makes in relation to food at his grandmother's house, using language to describe events outside of the setting. For example;

> ***Child 2****: He is probably making a bad choice (boy is talking to the teacher)*
>
> ***Researcher*** *Why is he making a bad choice?*
>
> ***Child 2:*** *He probably hit Jay, and Mary (teacher) would say that was a bad choice. I make good choices every day like when I am eating in my nana's.*

There were a significant number of references to circle time and the puppets during PhotoVoice sessions and this was a dominant theme in the photos taken by the children. The puppets used for circle time were also frequently photographed by the children and children liked to talking about the puppets with the researchers. These represent concrete objects which it may have been easier for the children to discuss than the more conceptual aspects of socio-emotional regulation. For example, one child who was non-verbal during the PhotoVoice activities took a 11 of photos of his feet while sitting at the circle during circle time and a number of his photos focused on activates related to socio-emotional regulation such as circle time activities.

One child took a picture of himself making a 'bad choice' and this child was also focus of some other children's photos of a child making a 'bad choice'. In another photo he says he is angry because he misses his mum. The children appear to be able to be very familiar with the language and techniques used but the staff to support socio-emotional regulation, and this positive in the light of previous research studies which indicates that young children report a decrease in negative emotions following the introduction of regulatory strategies in preschools (Dennis and Kelemen, 2009). Additionally, Herdon et al (2013) discuss the importance of children being able to send and receive emotional messages and communicate their feelings to those around them or emotional expressiveness, and they identify children's' ability to express emotions appropriately as an essential aspect of school adjustment. The children may be demonstrating their 'emotional expressiveness' in this study through their use of 'good' and 'bad' choice language to discuss their preschool experiences with the researcher.

Indoor play

Indoor play and activities and materials connected to indoor play affordances were common themes in all the conversations and photos with the children. During the photo-elicitation session six children picked indoor spaces in their own setting and in particular they picked the sand area, dress-up area and play kitchen area's as their favourite photos.

In PhotoVoice session children took majority of photos inside their classroom and spoke about indoor play during the interviews. This is linked to their discussions on the materials which they used for indoor play which they often our a favourite sticker on.

Indoor Activities in the setting. A number of children took pictures of activities which were taking place in theirs setting on the week they took their photos. For example, there were multiple examples of photos of a musical chair activity and of staff setting up this activity. In addition, the musical chairs activity was often picked as one of their favourite photos. Children also took pictures of the teacher reading to them as a group and these photos were used to discuss the book with the researcher. One child took picture of an obstacle course and described the activity for the researchers.

Indoor Spaces in the setting. A number of children took picture of the stairs leading to the upstairs playhouse which is a private children's space but there were no pictures of children in this private space and none of the children took their camera to this space. There was little discussion in the conversations with the researchers about what children play in this space. One child refers to the 'girls sneaking upstairs' in a photo he took even though this space is free for the children to use during free play-time but it is a less observed space in their classroom.

Children seemed to restrict themselves to taking pictures in their classroom and the kitchen space and it appears they did feel free to move between the different spaces in the setting

with their cameras. Only one child took a picture of the receptionist and her desk space near the entrance to the setting and there are very few photographs of the hallway/reception area or other areas. There are no pictures of the toilets or the offices.

Materiality of setting

In the PhotoVoice sessions children frequently took pictures of materials they liked playing with such as the art materials for mask making and the blocks. Children took pictures of the dress-up materials and block areas. In the PhotoVoice conversations these pictures gave the researchers an opportunity to point to the materials and ask the children what they did with these materials and discuss them with the children. For example, one child pointed to cars in his photo and said that the children share them. Also children spoke of the teacher playing with them using the materials, for example one child pointed to a picture of her keyworker and said 'she's playing blocks'. All of the children took photos of materials that were available for them to play with and these materials were accessible to the children when they took the photos and many of the photos were of the materials being actively played with by multiple children. Almost all the children took pictures of the materials available to them during table-top activities and access to materials is central for children's experiences and understanding of play in preschool settings. Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2017) in an ethnographic study with children in preschool in Iceland found that children's 'explanations of which activities were play and which were non-play were sometimes connected to how the children used the material' (p8).

Food and kitchen space

The theme of food the kitchen space emerged in data collection with the children. In the photo-elicitation session one child said snacking was her favourite activity. A number of children took pictures of the kitchen and of the Chef and this is the only area outside of the classroom which was commonly photographed by the children, perhaps indicating they saw it as a space they were comfortable in or an extension of their classroom. They referred to helping the Chef to make cupcakes and crispy cakes and discussed the food they ate in the kitchen such as Shepard's Pie and fruit. One child predominately talked about food and the kitchen as his favourite space in the setting and he particularly liked breakfast. The kitchen space was identified as a space with strict rules enforced by the chef. Two children used their pictures of the kitchen space to discuss the rules in the kitchen and what they perceived as being allowed and not allowed in this space, for example children ae not allowed to go behind the counter where the cooker is located.

Selfies

The majority of the children took selfies (hand-held self-portraits) with the camera and some made different faces for the camera and took multiple photos of themselves. One girl took 41 selfies. Many of the children took a selfie of themselves and their friends and three children took selfies with their keyworkers. There is limited research into why young children take selfies when presented with digital cameras. In an article on the use of PhotoVoice in a longitudinal research project with young people and their families in health research the young researchers took selfies as a way of ensuring they were seen and that their voice was being heard and they felt these images gave them some control over how they were perceived (Woodgate, Zurba and Tennent, 2017).

Transitions and structure in the daily routine

A small number of the children discussed issues related to transitions and structures in their daily routine during their conversations with the researchers. For example, one child pointed to pictures of children getting ready in Photo-elicitation. One child took a picture of the 'chid of the day' and explained to the researcher that the child was collecting spoons as part of his responsibilities as child of the day. had picture of child of the day and explained the jobs they do. Some children took pictures during PhotoVoice of activities connected to transitions and also one child used the language connected to socio-emotional regulation to explain something that was happening in a photo he took during a transition.

Child 1: *That is our school where the library is, that is Sean trying to get some Lego. He was making bad choices*

Researcher*: Why?*

Child 1: *Because it was cleanup time.*

While not one of the dominant themes the issues of transitions and structures was present in some of the children's data.

Outdoor play and affordances

Overall the topic of outdoor play was not a common one in the conversations with children. The topic of outdoor play and affordances was more common during the Photo-elicitation sessions and the Talk and Draw session that the PhotoVoice sessions where the children discussed their photos. In Photo-elicitation four children picked out door play settings (not their own settings) as their favourite places or places to put their picture. Also a number of their drawings were of outside play. Only one child discussed the outdoors in their PhotoVoice session and there were few photos. The child who did discuss it talked about the

mud kitchen and planting flowers. She referred to the slide outside and pointed out the absence of swings. It is unclear if the children had the opportunity to take pictures outside and this may have influenced the lack of focus on the outdoors in the PhotoVoice conversations with the children. Previous research has demonstrated children can experience different levels of task engagement and self-reliance in indoor and outdoor play settings in preschool contexts (Kroeker, 2017) and it is important to provide children opportunities for play in both environments.

Parents and guardians

The subject of parents or guardians was infrequently mentioned by the children during their conversation with the researchers. In the Talk and Draw session one child drew picture of their mother and another child spoke of activities she did with her mother outside of the preschool. In the Photo-elicitation session one child pointed to a picture of a teacher talking to a child's mother in her preschool setting and when the researcher asked her about it the child said the teachers also talk to Daddies everyday (we had not included pictures of fathers in the Photo-elicitation session). In the PhotoVoice session only three children mentioned their parents or guardians. One child took a picture if his mother in the reception of the preschool and another child mentioned his grandmother. The child who took the picture of his mother identified as his favourite picture and the preschool staff member explained to the researcher that his mother had been in the centre playing cards with the child on the day he took the photo. This may indicate that children do not view the parent as part of their classroom setting or they were not given the opportunity to take photos of their parents during the PhotoVoice activity. Similar to the lack of outdoor photos this restricted the

conversations with children as the children tended to focus on issues that were concretely photographed.

Discussion

Friendship and peer relations was a key theme for the children in the data which they generated and this emphasis the centrality of relations with peers for the children involved. The findings in the children's data also indicate that the children had a very positive view of the staff in the early years setting and in particular they held very positive views of their key workers. Children took a large number of photographs of the staff and many of these showed the staff interacting with the children in a very positive and child centred way such as playing with children on the ground, table top activities with staff and children or hugging the children. Children also took pictures of the staff reading to them, demonstrating positive socio-emotional regulation though the use of the puppets and engaging in circle time activity with them. Children's early years are critical for development and a strong, responsive relationship between children and their careers are important in facilitating children's communication development (Brebner, 2015) and evidence from the study indicates a response child-adult relationships in the setting.

As well as the dominant themes in the children's data it is important to consider some the themes which were not dominant and how they might be used to influence future practice in the YK ABC programme. The importance of parent involvement in children's development and learning is well established in the research literature (Hilado, Kallemeyn and Phillips, 2013; Martin, 2006) and is a core part of the work of the YK ABC programme. However, the absence of parents from the data generated by the children's in their photos and conversations with the research may indicate that the children do not see their parents as being part of or present in the early years centre and there may need to be some additional work on addressing how children experience and view family-centre partnerships. Also the focus on

outdoor space in the Environment Enhancement aspect of the Early Years Strand of the YK ABC programme is not reflected in the children's data and this finding will help the early year's staff to reflect on their own practice and the use and design of the outdoor space to ensure that from the children's perspectives and experiences it is a core part of their everyday experiences in the setting.

Reflections on the child-centred participatory research methodology

The participatory research methods presented opportunities and challenges while doing this research project. The methods allowed children to generate their own visual data which the researcher used for conversational prompts and child-interviews. In cases where the children were non-verbal it was particularly important to allow children the opportunity to generate their own visual data and allowing them to select their favourite images contributed to their voice opportunities. The majority of the children said that they liked the camera activity and most very happy to see their photos printed. Some children found it difficult to pick their favourite photos because they liked them all and most children found it difficult to pick photos they did not like. The exercise was not useful in supporting children to talk about issues they did not like in their preschool and this may be due to the fact that children were not asked to specifically take pictures of objects or activities they did not like and in some ways were asking them to criticise their own work by asking them to select photos they did not like.

Some different themes emerged in the different sessions and the different methodologies seemed to influence the types of conversations the researchers had with the children. Some of the conversations in the Talk and Draw sessions were fantasy based and imaginary which was also evident in some of the conversations based around the Photo-elicitation session. In contrast the PhotoVoice sessions were based on the images the children generated themselves and these conversations were very concrete and revolved around the objects and spaces the

children had photographed the themselves. Also the images in the Photo-elicitation were picked by researchers and some were pictures taken by the preschool staff and this led to children identify slightly different areas as their favourites for example there were more outdoor photos.

A further limitation of the research is that the fieldwork research was only conducted in one the preschools school in the YK ABC programme and it is important to replicate the opportunities for child-participatory research in each of the seven participating centres and embed it into on-going programme evaluation.

Conclusions

The inclusion of child-centred participatory research in the ongoing evaluation work of the YK ABC programme is an opportunity to allow children's voices to contribute to the evaluation and also to challenge adult-centric data which may emerge from standardised tests and predetermined measures. O'Connell (2011) also writes about the role of visual data generated as a way of confirming, complementing, elaborating or contradicting data generated by other mixed methods in research The ongoing programme and outcome evaluation of the YK ABC is collecting large scale community-level data on child development using validated assessment instruments including the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ); Pre-school Language Scale 5th Edition (PSL-5) Clinical testing for all 5 year olds in the catchment area and as previously discussed the Early Childhood Environment Rating System (ECERS) external independent assessments of child care setting. The findings disseminating from the research with the children presents an opportunity to further interrogate the adult-centric quantitative data and adult perspectives generated in the ongoing project evaluation. It also allows opportunities for children's voices to shape how

practice in the programme can move forward and ensures that children remain centre to the process, for example the issues of parental involvement and the use of outdoor space in the setting need to be re-examined from the children's perspectives and in light of the children's data.

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Declaration of interest statement

None.

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Figures; figure captions (as a list).

Picture 1: Images from the Picture book for informed consent with the children

Picture 2: Image from Photo Elicitation session

Picture 3: Image from PhotoVoice session