

Inclusive or Exclusive Participation: Paradigmatic Tensions in the Mosaic Approach and Implications for Childhood Research

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Introduction

In this article, I examine the methodological issues that arose during fieldwork for my MSc dissertation. My project explored very young children's participation in research and was inspired, in part, by the Mosaic Approach. During fieldwork I was confronted with the complexity of my role as researcher, prompting a deeper examination of the thinking that had underpinned my proposed research. I concluded that despite good intentions, task-based participatory research is potentially fraught with tension between rhetoric and the reality of practice, with implications for the exclusion of children who may not participate in tasks "appropriately".

I begin this article by introducing the Mosaic approach and identifying it as a work that contests the dominant positivist paradigm in early childhood research. I then present my own research aims and describe how my project was fundamentally changed by the unconventional practices of my fieldwork site. I conclude by connecting two fieldwork narratives to an analysis of underlying paradigmatic tensions in the Mosaic literature. I particularly focus on the possibility that these tensions may lead to the exclusion of some children from task-based research despite intentions for the research to be inclusive and participatory.

The Mosaic Approach

The idea for my MSc dissertation was sparked by the well-known work *Listening*

to Young Children: The Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001). The Mosaic approach, originally developed during an 18-month exploratory study in London, was designed to investigate the daily experiences of young children in early years settings. Clark and Moss suggest that researchers work as co-investigators alongside children, using largely task-based methodological tools such as child-led photography, tours, mapping exercises, and role play.

This complex documentation is then combined with researcher observation and parent, family and staff perspectives to piece together a “mosaic” of information telling the story of individual children’s lives in the nursery setting. Clark and Moss (2001:6)envisioned that the approach could become embedded into daily practice in early years settings, serving as a “springboard for...talking, listening, and reflecting”. The authors have published widely since the original study, particularly developing ideas around the use of the Mosaic approach in the planning and evaluation of physical space in early years settings (see Clark et al., 2005; Clark and Moss, 2005; Clark, 2007; Clark, 2010a).

I was drawn to the Mosaic approach in part because of its connection to Carla Rinaldi’s theory of the “pedagogy of listening” (Rinaldi, 2006:64), developed during her work as a pedagogical specialist in the early childhood centres of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Before commencing my MSc study, I spent several years teaching in preschools that were influenced by the Reggio Emilia philosophy. This way of working with young children envisions that teachers are more than transmitters of fixed knowledge; rather understanding is co-constructed in a process shared by students and teachers (Edwards et al., 1998; Forman and Fyfe, 1998). Clark and Moss use constructionist rhetoric throughout Mosaic publications; for example, Clark (2010a:30) reminds readers that child-led photography is about “meaning making, not fact finding”.

The Mosaic approach was also strongly influenced by the principles of Participatory Action Research (Clark and Moss, 2001). Participatory, task-based

approaches came to early prominence in the field of childhood studies (James et al., 1998) and are increasingly coming to dominate research (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). These methods engage with what Loris Malaguzzi (1998:3) called the “hundred languages of children”. Task-based methodological tools deprioritize verbal communication, for example through the use of drawings or mapmaking; see Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008 for an extensive literature review on how task-based methods have been used in childhood research.

Non-verbal communication has particular relevance, of course, for research with young toddlers and babies. Prioritization of the verbal in research means that children and young people who are not fluent in verbal communication may be assumed to have ‘few or no views’ and may be excluded from the research process (Alderson and Morrow, 2011:53). For example, it has become commonplace to make children ‘visible’ in publications by using direct quotes—but this is a practice that has ‘exclusionary implications’ for children and young people who do not communicate fluently through speech (Tisdall, 2009:214).

Despite the prominence of participatory research methods in the field of childhood studies more generally, inquiry into early childhood has long been dominated by psychological research in the positivist paradigm (MacNaughton 2005; Woodhead 1998). This dominant discourse understands child development as a universal phenomenon that can be explained through neutral, scientific inquiry (Hatch, 1995; James et al.1998; Kessen, 1979; Prout, 2005). The child is seen as an unfinished “becoming” (Prout, 2005). In addition to the process of biological maturation, children must also be shaped culturally, cognitively and morally (Moss 2006). As a future adult, the child is potentially a redemptive or destructive agent, and early education models contend that the difference between the two lies in early life experiences—the “path to the whole person” (Alderson, 2000:52). Thus deviations from normal development become problematic (Cohen, 2008; James et al., 1998; Woodhead, 1998), and a scientific pedagogy has emerged, providing standardized frameworks for best practice in

the early years (Cohen, 2008; NAEYC, 2009; Walkerdine, 1984). This creates a potential “personal and professional crisis” for the early childhood practitioner who embraces constructionist ways of working that value doubt and ambiguity (Dahlberg et al., 2006:184).

Research Aims and Main Research Questions

It is important to note that my work was not a reproduction of the Mosaic Approach, or even a particularly thorough experimentation with the methodology. I was working within the limited time frame of the MSc and was researching as a student, on my own. Therefore I chose to explore only one particular aspect of the approach that drew my attention: “children about children research” (Clark and Moss, 2001:22).

Children about children research is briefly explored in *Listening to Children* but has not been significantly revisited by the authors. Clark and Moss invited five year-old children to visit the centre’s baby room with cameras to take pictures of what they thought was important for the babies and toddlers. The photos then served as a discussion point for the researchers, staff, and parents at the centre as they tried to piece together babies’ daily experiences. The authors suggest that the older children’s perceptions of what is important for babies in the centre “may be nearer than the best efforts of adults” (Clark and Moss, 2001:22-23).

I created a research proposal that sought to reproduce this technique. My main research questions were as follows:

- What, if any, differences arise between what adult and child researchers think are important things in the infant room?
- Can photographs taken by child researchers be treated as objective data sources or do they require a more interpretive, collaborative analysis between researchers and children?

Fieldwork as Disruption

The nursery where I did my fieldwork is centrally located in a Scottish city and is run by the local authority. I had a simple experience with gatekeepers, accessing the nursery through academic connections with the director. The nursery has three age-based rooms known colloquially as “the baby room” (6 months to 2 years old), “the middle room” (2 years to 3 years old), and “the big room” (3 years to 5 years old). I visited the nursery for about three hours daily for six weeks, varying my visits between mornings and afternoons. My intention was to carry out a brief period of participant observation; I would then invite older children to accompany me to the baby room to take photographs. Fieldwork would conclude with a series of informal interviews with the children to revisit and discuss the photographs.

No amount of preparation can fully prepare researchers for what they encounter in the field—researchers must always “expect the unexpected” (Bolzan and Gale, 2011). My fieldwork nursery was a surprisingly atypical environment that contested the dominant discourse on early childhood in many ways. Most immediately apparent was that while the children were nominally grouped into three age-based classrooms, the physical boundaries between these rooms were permeable, and children of all ages mixed with each other throughout the day in the classrooms and in the communal garden. Children were expected to make their own choices about their daily activities and move freely throughout the centre. This freedom of choice — the belief that children can competently organize their own time — was extended in many ways to even the youngest babies in the nursery.

Children’s control over their own time meant that I could not rely on their “schooling docility”—their familiarity with and acceptance of adult direction of their daily activities (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008:506). I could not step into the role of teacher and propose structured activities because such practices simply did not happen at the nursery. I realized that my research plan would have likely

required me to take a strong directive role in the process, organizing photography sessions and maybe even needing to put my foot down to keep children on task. This directive role was quite contrary to the complex, free flowing co-construction I had imagined would be taking place. Another consideration was that my proposed research was structured around older child participants who I thought would have the developmental ability to perform photography, rather than around the babies and toddlers who were actually sharing the relevant life experiences for my research (Christensen and James, 2000a). In this way my proposal reflected the very age and stage thinking that I had wished to challenge by using a participatory framework.

I needed to find a way of working with the children that flowed with, rather than struggled against, their daily ways of being (Christensen, 2004). I made the decision to use an ethnographic approach, but felt quite strongly that I still needed to involve photography in some way in order to maintain the legitimacy of my project. I brought the camera to the fieldwork site with only a vague idea of what I would do with it. For the first two days, I kept the camera close and worked directly with the children who were interested in it. However, I soon realized that for many children, my “helping” was actually putting them off. I then tried a more hands-off approach. When a child showed interest in the camera, I left them to get on with it. Sometimes children did want to stay close to me and involve me in the ways they were using the camera, and at other times they ran off to use it independently. In my proposal, I had identified this way of working as the “exploratory” phase: letting children familiarize themselves with the camera through play before using it in a more structured way (Alderson, 2000). In practice exploration was the approach that best fitted with the nursery’s local practices, and I never pursued my plan to make structured visits to the baby room.

In the first sections of this article, I have introduced the Mosaic approach and placed it in the broader context of early childhood education and research,

which has long been dominated by the positivist paradigm. I have also described the way that an unconventional fieldwork site provoked a fundamental re-examination of the thinking that underpinned my project. In the following section, I present two narratives from my fieldwork experience describing the nuanced ways in which children engaged with me and with photography. I follow these narratives with an analysis that raises questions about tension between interpretivist rhetoric and positivist practice in the Mosaic approach, and the implications of this conflict for inclusive childhood research more generally.

Narrative on Photography With Young Children (Rachel)

In week one of fieldwork, I was invited into a game of “tea party” with two girls, who were using blocks to stand in for “cakes” and “party lights”, stacking them on top of a low shelving unit which was the “table”. Rachel (age 2 years and 9 months)¹ came over and asked “Whatchoo doing?” Morgan responded, “We are having a birthday party...for you!” “Oh,” I said, playing along, “It’s Rachel’s birthday!” Rachel shook her head, forcefully said, “No, it’s not!” and with (outward) calm, pushed all of the blocks off the shelf while staring at me.

She walked away, and the other girls picked up the blocks, grumbling. A few minutes later, Rachel returned, going into the play kitchen area that was near the tea party location. Without saying anything, and looking in my direction, she smashed several ceramic dishes to the floor. This, as my field notes say, was a BIG DEAL, and drew the attention of the staff. After a mild scolding, one staff member started sweeping up the shards. Rachel came over to me and said, conversationally, “Somebody smashed the dishes.” I responded in what I hoped was an equally conversational tone, “So I see,” and she went off to play elsewhere.

This type of interaction continued throughout the day, with Rachel ripping the top off of the snail hut when I happened to be sitting close to it, throwing my

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

pen out of the room into the hallway, and smearing mud on my sleeve — all of which were accompanied by the announcement that ‘Somebody’ had committed these offenses. I tried to react in a disinterested way to avoid conflict, which was fairly successful. Rachel and I coexisted more harmoniously after the first day, but did not spend much time together. When I addressed her directly during play in the garden, for example, she would usually run away. Interactions needed to be on her terms.

In week five, after some wrangling with another child, she was ‘having a shot’ with the camera for the first time. I had helped her by negotiating with the other child, who had grabbed it away from Rachel. After this was resolved, I had to dash off down the hall to ask Kelly, a staff member, a question. Rachel wanted to come with me and brought the camera. She initially misunderstood our mission to find Kelly, thinking we were looking for a child with a similar name, and didn’t understand or perhaps wasn’t very interested in my explanation to the contrary. I decided to follow her lead and we embarked on a search for “Kelly”, which turned into a private adventure. We visited the music room, which was dark and quiet, and read books together—she didn’t want me to read to her, but instead chose books for me to read silently while she read different books next to me. She decided when we were finished with this and directed our next activity, going outside together to play. After this adventure, Rachel became much more comfortable with me—the experience had helped her figure me out.

Rachel brought the camera with her on this adventure and was constantly taking pictures—but she was holding the camera upside down, under her chin. She repeatedly said, “I’m going to find a picture of Rachel”, and “I’m going to take one of you”, but despite being receptive to my attempts to adjust how she was turning the camera, she always defaulted to holding it the same way. Consequently, our adventure was documented by a series of pictures of the ceiling and Rachel’s forehead.



Narrative on photography with young children (Naomi)

Naomi (1 year, 3 months) was wary of me throughout fieldwork; when I moved into her physical space she often glared at me or turned her head away, using nonverbal cues to tell me that I was not welcome. One morning in the baby room, I noticed that Naomi was watching me play with the camera with Daisy and Lilly (both age 2). I suggested to Lilly that Naomi might 'want a shot'. Lilly nodded solemnly and brought the camera to Naomi, who allowed it to be left on a shelf near where she was standing. She looked at it with some caution but eventually began pushing it around on the shelf, picking it up and putting it down. I gingerly scooted over to where she was sitting. She made eye contact and held the camera out to me. I took it, saying "For me? Thank you!" and then handed it back, saying "For you." She continued to explore the camera, pushing buttons and mouthing it, sometimes showing me the screen, which was showing the vivid blue menu page. Meanwhile, Jacob (1 years old) toddled over to us with a laminated photograph of a baby doll and left it on the shelf. When she noticed it, Naomi started pounding the shelf and babbling to get my attention. "That's a baby in that picture!" I said, and pounded the shelf a little bit, too. She pounded again and laughed. We pounded the shelf together for a moment, and then she cruised away to another activity.

Analysis: Interpretivist Rhetoric, Positivist Practice: Implications for inclusive research

I entered the fieldwork experience feeling preoccupied with my own understanding of my role and responsibilities as researcher. I also found that I

had little control over how I was perceived by other adults or the children in my fieldwork setting (Agar, 1980). I took on different roles from moment to moment; my interactions with Rachel are a good example of how I became ‘friend/mediator/entertainer’ (Davis et al., 2000:213). At other times I volunteered to help push babies in their buggies on a trip to the shop and became a “non-authoritarian adult helper” (Davis et al., 2000: 215) Overall, the children seemed to understand me as “the lady with the stuff”. In fact once I had been attending the nursery for a few weeks, some of the toddlers began greeting me by saying, “Have a shot”—meaning they’d like a turn with my camera or notebook.

The act of taking out my notebook and pen invariably drew children’s attention. I was prepared for children to co-opt my notebook during fieldwork (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008), but what I did not anticipate was the essential role played by the notebook and other objects during the process of building relationships with children (Christensen, 2004; Cocks, 2006). My willingness to let the children use my notebook and to enter into negotiations in which I did not always come out the victor seemed to lay the groundwork for trusting relationships throughout the fieldwork experience (Christensen, 2004). It was important to vary my own level of participation in social interactions based on how the children reacted to me; a detached style was appropriate for working with Naomi, for example, who took weeks to warm up to me and remained suspicious of my presence throughout fieldwork.

Christensen has described the importance of participant observation to her own research with school-aged children: it wasn’t until she had thoroughly engaged with the social practices of children on *their* terms that she could effectively address *her* specific research questions without making “unwarranted analytical jumps” (2004:171). By interacting with children in a way that resonated with their own existing cultural practices, she was able to establish a trusting social relationship with the children — and found that she could then engage more deeply with them around her specific research interests. This process of

engaging with the “detail of social interaction” formed the foundation of children’s “genuine participation” in her research (p.166); rather than relying on children’s “quiet acceptance” of her presence as an interviewer (p.169), Christensen was able to engage children in reciprocal dialogue and genuine negotiations that ultimately guided the direction of her research.

Clark (2010a) takes a different view; she contends that the participatory underpinning of the Mosaic approach is derived from the *children’s* participation in research tasks, rather than the *researcher’s* participation in children’s daily lives (2010a). Therefore, during the observation period of the Mosaic approach, the researcher attempts to remain detached from social interactions (Clark, 2010a). This contention reveals some tension between rhetoric and practice in the Mosaic approach, as a detached observation style is in keeping with the positivist paradigm in early years research in which practitioners attempt to remain objective and scientific (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

A similar tension between rhetoric and practice can be found in the way photography is used in the Mosaic approach. Clark has called for co-construction of understanding between participants and researchers rather than an ‘extraction of meaning’ (Clark, 2010b: 120). However, Clark and Moss do use photographs in a positivist manner. For example, during their investigation of an outdoor play environment, a photo count is presented as mathematical confirmation that the playhouse was important to the young children: it appeared 12 out of 60 photographs (Clark and Moss, 2005:30). This would seem to be a realist interpretation of photographs: the photographs are considered neutrally, taken at face value as telling “singular truths” about the importance of the playhouse (Piper and Frankham 2007:385).

Photography is used similarly during children about children research. The older children’s photographs of the baby room showed potties, the changing area, the washing area, and mattresses, as well as photos of children’s key

workers and parents who were present in the room (Clark and Moss, 2001:22-23). Clark and Moss determined that therefore, “washing, being changed and sleeping were all shown to be important” (p.23). Once again, this appears to be a realist interpretation as notably, the authors acknowledge that the older children “did not talk directly” about what it was like for younger children — rather they “spoke” through their photographs (p.23). This assertion that children have spoken through photographs implies that children contributed to photographic interpretation — when in reality, it appears that this was not the case. When children did speak directly about their photographs, for example in the later study *Spaces to Play* (Clark and Moss, 2005), the process added very little to realist understandings. Asked to caption their photographs, children said “this is the gate” and “this is N” (a peer) (Clark and Moss, 2005:35). As Christensen and James (2000b:164) have written, ‘children’s comments about photographs may simply be just that’ .

If photographs must bear a realist interpretation to be included as data, then photos like Rachel’s would not make the cut; they quite clearly do not communicate the “experience of the moment” (Harper, 2000:727). Gallacher and Gallagher have suggested that researchers using task-based methods risk “setting up norms of appropriate engagement”: for example, the successful performance of photography (2008:507). Deviation from those norms is in danger of being considered a failure rather than an opportunity (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). However, the richest insights may come from children acting in unexpected and subversive ways (Clark, 2005; Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Malone and Hartung, 2010). Researchers “write so rarely about the mess” (Horton, 2008:378)—but I found that it was during the messy bits that my research was at its most participative and inclusive. In the case of the Mosaic approach, the mess has been tidied up; the children who do not participate appropriately in tasks are invisible in the research.

As is common in childhood research (Lewis, 2010), the nuances of participation are neglected in Mosaic publications; readers also do not know how researchers may have guided the photography task. The result, however

unintentional, of including data only from children who have participated appropriately is that the voice of the child is in danger of being falsely represented as a neutral entity (Komulainen, 2007), disembodied from the reality of the researcher's process of selection and interpretation. This produces an image of children as autonomous agents; it is through this autonomy that children are said to have expertise in their own lived experience (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). Despite its creators' clear intention to design an inclusive methodology, the Mosaic approach has yet to address the inclusion of children who do not display what Cocks (2006: 257) has described as 'adult-centric' autonomous behaviour.

In my research — as illustrated by Rachel and Naomi's narratives — when babies and toddlers used the camera, they did not do so in adult-like ways. These very young children mouthed the camera, pushed it around, dropped it and picked it up repeatedly, engaged in turntaking with peers, gave the camera to someone, withheld it from someone, talked about taking pictures (but did not really take any), opened the various compartments, pushed all the buttons, turned the dials, watched people in the screen, looked at the flash indicator light, and listened to the simulated shutter noises. Had I narrowly defined what 'participation' in photography meant during my research, this playfulness and creativity would have been excluded, and I would have missed the richness of the relationships with babies and toddlers (Malone and Hartung, 2010).

Clark and Moss have claimed that their method can be adapted for use with children under two, with disabled children and with children for whom English is a second language (2001; Clark et al., 2003). All of these children likely challenge the appropriate way of participating that seems to be required. During my research, an ethnographic approach emphasizing participant observation offered a broader and more inclusive potential for participation than did the more narrowly defined task-based method. However, as Clark (2010b) has pointed out, researchers need to use sensitivity; the choice of methods should depend on what researchers know about a group of children. More important than the choice of methodological tools is perhaps the realization that

children's inclusive participation in research is not inherent in the use of any one of those tools (Davis, 1998).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have described my experiences as an early career researcher during a project inspired by the Mosaic approach. The unconventional practices of my fieldwork site provided an opportunity to reconsider not only my task-based research plan but also my conceptualization of very young children. Under my original plan, I would have had to take a strong directive role, and babies and toddlers would have been excluded from research except as subjects of study. Unconsciously, I had only included children in my proposal that I thought were developmentally capable of carrying out my photography task "appropriately".

In practice, however, photography became an extension of an ethnographic approach to my fieldwork. Using photography in an unstructured manner created a broader definition of participation that included playful, unexpected ways of engaging with very young children. I interacted not as a detached researcher but as participant in children's own practices of communication. Rather than focus on young children's identities as autonomous agents, I instead explored the complex nature of their competencies and vulnerabilities, as well as my own.

My research experience reflects ongoing methodological tensions within the field of childhood studies. While participatory, task-based methods have perhaps come to dominate contemporary childhood research, these methods risk defining "participation" too narrowly. In my research, the definition of participation was instead negotiated and re-negotiated through a rather messy, relational process that included those children whose way of participating may otherwise have rendered them invisible.

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