

## Listening for Children's Stories: The NCCA's Portraiture Study

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

### Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) which advises the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum for early childhood, primary and post-primary education is currently developing the *Framework for Early Learning* for children from birth to six years of age (NCCA, forthcoming). The Framework is based 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 as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1990) and in the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children [DHC], 2000). To this end, the NCCA has used a portraiture study to facilitate children as partners in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*.

The portraiture study is presented in *Listening for Children's Stories: Children as Partners in the Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2007). The study was undertaken to include the voices of children in the *Framework for Early Learning* and in doing so aims to ensure that the Framework will connect with the everyday experiences of children and early childhood practitioners in a variety of settings in Ireland. Using excerpts from the portraits, this paper identifies messages about children's early learning and development which will inform the NCCA's work in developing the national *Framework for Early Learning*.

### Portraiture

Portraiture is a form of qualitative research enquiry. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) described it as a form of inquiry which bridges the realms of science and art and involves painting with words. Each portrait is placed in a social and cultural context and is shaped through dialogue between the researcher and the research participants. While portraiture has many similarities with other qualitative research methods, it has two distinguishing features (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis, 1997). The first is that portraiture begins by searching for what is good and healthy about the experiences of the participants. While portraiture has been criticised for this emphasis on the positive (English, 2000), this positive focus was ideally suited to the NCCA's priority to bring children's good experiences to the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*. 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. Again this was very pertinent to the NCCA's work given the age range and communicative abilities of the participating children.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Given the young age of the children in the portraiture study (under six years) and the fact that the study involved the use of methodologies such as digital photography and audio- and video-recording, the study raised particular ethical concerns. In light of this the NCCA drew on work developed by Landsdown and Lancaster (2001) to provide guidance on respecting different aspects of children's contribution. In addition, the NCCA's work was informed by the principles for best practice in child protection as presented in *Children First, National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (DHC, 1999). 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<sup>1</sup>.

Due to the ages of the children involved the issue of informed consent was especially relevant and children's participation was subject to their parents'/guardians' consent. In keeping with good practice and with the UNCRC (1990), children were also asked to give consent or assent as it is known in these cases (Murphy, 2005).

Interpreting findings also posed challenges. 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 means that the self of the researcher is critical to the way of listening, selecting, interpreting and composing the portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis, 1997). This subjective interpretation of the findings needs consideration. As Dunn (2005: 98) points out, researchers need to be "*very cautious about making inferences of any generality*" from naturalistic observations. However, as Dunn also points out, naturalistic observations such as those undertaken in the portraiture study are "*an invaluable tool*" as they show the researcher "*what the children themselves are interested in, curious about and amused by*" (Dunn, 2005: 99). The completed portraits reflect the richness of the children's everyday experiences. While the individual portraits are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural context of the settings in which they were developed, and do not claim to be generalisable nationally or to represent best practice, they gave rich insights into the twelve participating children's experiences as interpreted by the NCCA researchers.

### **Study Design**

Seven members of the NCCA Early Childhood Team worked with twelve children in the portraiture study. Eleven early childhood settings were included, as one portrait captured the experiences of two brothers in a home setting. Four girls and eight boys ranging in age from nine months to almost six years took part in the study. Settings were visited a maximum of six times during the period from April to June 2006 and the range of settings

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#### **Note:**

1 See Daly, Forster, Murphy, Sweeney, Brennan and O'Connor (2007) for further information.

involved included a family home, two creches, a nursery, a childminder setting, a naíonra (an Irish medium pre-school), a Traveller pre-school, a Montessori pre-school, an Early Start class<sup>2</sup> and two Junior Infant classes in the primary school. For reasons of confidentiality, names and other identifying details were changed in the finished portraits.

### **Gathering and Interpreting the Information**

The NCCA's overarching question in the portraiture study was *What are the children's positive experiences in their particular setting?* In designing the study, the NCCA drew on the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) and used a range of methods to capture the children's experiences in their settings:

- Observation (researcher's own perspective)
- Photography (of and by the children)
- Audio- and video-recording (of and by the children)
- Child conferencing (interview with the child and a friend)
- Walking tours and mapmaking (the child takes the researcher on a tour and makes a map as a means of exploring the information recorded on the tour)
- Interviews with parents and practitioners

### **Presentation of portraits**

The portraits were presented in three overlapping age groups as follows:

- babies (birth to eighteen months)
- toddlers (twelve months to three years)
- young children (two and a half to six years).

The study included portraits of two babies, two toddlers and eight young children. Each portrait began with background information on the child and his/her setting. The child's experiences and reflections on his/her time in the setting were presented through the lens of the *Framework for Early Learning's* four broad and interlinked themes: Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; and Exploring and Thinking (NCCA, 2004). Photographs and quotations were used to illustrate some of the child's experiences.

### **Findings**

Through their everyday activities and interactions with those around them, the children in the portraiture study conveyed a number of key messages to the researchers. These

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#### **Note:**

- 2 The Early Start Programme is a one-year intervention offered in selected primary schools in Ireland in areas designated disadvantaged. The programme objective is to tackle educational disadvantage by targeting three to four year old children (in the year prior to school entry) who are deemed to be at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system. The programme is managed, funded and evaluated by the Department of Education and Science.

messages connected with the findings from the NCCA's consultation in 2004, and with the extensive literature review undertaken in developing the *Framework for Early Learning* including a series of commissioned background papers. These papers included:

- Children's Early Learning and Development (French, 2007)
- Perspectives on the Relationship Between Education and Care in Early Childhood (Hayes, 2007)
- Play as a Context for Early Learning and Development (Kernan, 2007)
- Supporting Early Learning Through Assessment (under development).

The portraiture study enabled the NCCA to 'see' the messages through the children's real-life experiences. In this way, the study will help the NCCA to ensure the *Framework for Early Learning* is relevant and helpful to those who care for and educate children under the age of six years in Ireland.

The researchers were particularly struck by the level of absorption and concentration that the children displayed when the significant adults in their lives interacted with them; when they were able to spend time on freely-chosen and carefully planned activities; and when they were interacting with peers or siblings. The portraits also vividly demonstrated the holistic nature of early learning and development; they showed for example how the children's well-being and identity underpinned the development of their thinking skills; how important it was for them to be able to communicate effectively with the important people in their lives; and how the different aspects of their experiences in the early childhood settings interlinked to provide a context for learning and development. Three of the messages listed above - the importance of relationships, play and communication - are now explored in more detail using excerpts from the portraits.

### **Relationships**

Warm and supportive relationships are at the heart of early learning and development (NCCA, 2004). The researchers observed some of the close relationships the children had within their family and between the children and the adults and the other children in their settings. They noted how these relationships facilitated the children's learning and development:

*"When his key worker picked him up, Cathal initiated a 'kissing' game with some lovely reciprocal exchanges, including laughing, giggling and delighted squeals. This one-to-one exchange within a trusting and secure relationship is important for Cathal's emotional safety and positive self-image" (Cathal, aged nine months).*

*"Patrick and Seán's mum says that no one can love and care for the boys the way she and their dad do...They make a priority of spending time with each of the boys on his own. Mum plays with, reads to, listens to and talks to them. Dad takes the boys to*

*the farm and also plays football with them in the evenings” (Patrick, aged four, and Seán, aged nineteen months).*

### **Play**

Play is a natural and universal medium for children's early thinking, learning and development and is central to their well-being (NCCA, 2004). While children learn much through unassisted play, learning is enriched and extended when the adult is involved. Play occurs in relationships between co-players, their actions and the meanings they co-construct in a particular context. During the study, the researchers observed many examples of the children at play, indoors and outdoors, in both structured and unstructured contexts. The children frequently became absorbed in the play scenarios, and appeared to thoroughly enjoy the opportunities for learning and discovery that these presented:

*“At News Time in Andrew's junior infant class, two children act as reporter and cameraman/woman. Andrew loves being picked to be the reporter ... One day, Megan brought in a spotted toy dog. 'Where did you get your dog?' Andrew asked. 'In Wales', Megan replied. No-one, including Megan, was quite sure where Wales is or how to get there. 'It was dark', said Megan so the teacher took down the globe and they found Wales and Ireland on it” (Andrew, aged five years eleven months).*

*“Caroline and Rory were at the water tray. They filled and emptied containers, poured water into the waterwheels and watched them turn. Rory picked up an orange ball and put it on top of the waterwheel. When Caroline poured water over it the ball rotated in place. They had discovered how to make it move using the water.” (Caroline, aged four and a half years).*

A number of the children in the study seemed to especially favour outdoor and physical play, as their obvious enjoyment and animation demonstrated:

*“Alan kicked a ball at a target, retrieving it and lining the ball up to kick at the same target again. He was absorbed for more than ten minutes in the activity, clearly repeating and revisiting the same activity in an attempt to perfect his aiming skills” (Alan, aged five years).*

### **Communication**

The ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development (NCCA, 2004). Throughout the portraiture study, children were observed using various forms of communication including verbal interaction, movement, gestures, sounds and facial expressions to establish and maintain social relations with others, to express and to share their thoughts and feelings and to represent and to understand the world around them.

*“When Amy dances, her whole expression changes and her sense of happiness and delight are clearly communicated.... Though her mastery of language is excellent she*

*is quite reserved but through music and dance she gets the freedom to express herself through a different medium"* (Amy, aged two and a half years).

*"Molly, Harry's Key worker, took his hand and began to play "Round and round the garden like a teddy bear", running her finger round the palm of his hand and then up his arm. When she tickled him at the end of the verse he laughed. She repeated the activity and then stopped. Harry waited for a response, and when none was forthcoming, he took her hand and put it back on his for the game to begin all over again"* (Harry, aged three years).

### **Applying Portraiture to Assessment Practice**

The Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) used by the NCCA in compiling the portraits potentially has much to offer practitioners in their work with children, particularly in planning for and assessing children's learning and development. The Mosaic Approach offers an integrated methodology for 'listening' for children's stories. This is achieved by combining the visual (photographs and examples of children's work) with the verbal (child conferencing and informal interviews with parents). Clark *et al.* (2005: 29) described the approach as a *"strength-based framework for viewing young children as competent, active meaning makers and explorers of their environment"*.

Portraits like those in the NCCA study provide a narrative account of the children's everyday interactions, experiences and activities. The portraits provide a detailed picture of children over time and have potential to illustrate progress and achievement in children's learning and development. Building the portraits is a process rather than an end in itself, where practitioners are *"researchers and assessment is research"* (Clark *et al.* 2005: 141). Portraiture involves the practitioner describing the child's learning and development in terms of what is good and healthy - what the child can do. Carr (2001: 11) described the narrative approach to assessment as a credit model which started with a positive image of the child as an active learner with distinctive strengths, abilities and interests. Similar to Carr's learning stories, portraiture enables the practitioner to foreground the child's positive learning dispositions, skills and attitudes, placing learning in a particular social and cultural context, at a particular time and in the presence of particular people and objects. It helps the practitioner to identify the child's current and future learning and development needs, and to plan ways of supporting these needs.

### **Conclusion**

The portraiture study has enlivened and enlightened the work of the NCCA in developing the *Framework for Early Learning* (due to be completed in 2008). It has reinforced messages that emerged from the literature review about what is most important for early learning and development. It has enabled children to influence the development of the Framework. The researchers listened for the voices of children as young as nine months,

as expressed through their actions, demeanour and behaviour, as well as in words in the case of the older children. By doing this, the study has helped to connect the Framework with the everyday experiences and realities of children and practitioners in a range of early childhood settings in Ireland. Finally, it has highlighted possibilities for the future use of the portraiture methodology in early childhood settings.

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