

## Young Children's Participation: Spaces to Play

Alison Clark and Peter Moss, Thomas Coram Research Unit  
in collaboration with Peter Carne and Gail Ryder Richardson, Learning through Landscapes.

### Introduction

How can young children's perspectives become the starting point for change in early years' provision? This pilot study has set out to explore with three and four years olds in a preschool their understandings and uses of outdoor provision, in order to inform change. It has used the Mosaic approach which combines the traditional research tools of observation and interviewing with participatory methods, including the use of cameras, map making and child-led tours (Clark and Moss, 2001<sup>1</sup>). Three key elements have emerged: the time and patience required to gather young children's perspectives, the value of group work, and the importance of making children's perspectives visible to adults with the power to bring about change.

This pilot project has been funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and the Carnegie Trust. Focusing on the outdoor environment, the project has been carried out in collaboration with Learning through Landscapes, the national school grounds charity. *Learning through Landscapes* is working with Kent Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership and 15 early years' settings across the county to develop accessible, replicable, low tech and affordable solutions to developing their outdoor environment. The research has been undertaken in one of these settings in Kent.

### Spaces to Play project

#### Aims and Objectives

The pilot project set out to involve children under five years-old in the decision-making processes concerned with changes to an outdoor play space, in particular looking at:

- How to listen: extending and adapting the Mosaic Approach in order to inform changes to the outdoor environment.
- How to involve practitioners and parents: exploring how to provide a participatory framework for adults and children to discuss different perspectives.

#### Case Study

The Manager and practitioners in the preschool wanted to develop the outdoor provision and had been given a small grant from *Learning through Landscapes* to begin this process. The preschool has over 80 children on its roll with up to 36 children at each session. A number of the children have special physical or behavioural needs. It serves an area of economic disadvantage.

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<sup>1</sup> Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2001) *Listening to young children: the Mosaic approach*. London: National Children's Bureau for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Together with parents and practitioners, 28 three and four year olds were involved in the pilot project, which took place between September 2003 and February 2004.

### **Stage One: gathering children's and adults' perspectives**

- Observation: a general observation was carried out of both a morning and afternoon session, then a focused observation of five randomly selected children
- Cameras: 15 children, including some with speech and language delay, were asked to 'take photographs of what is important here'. The children used single use and basic reusable cameras.
- Book making: 10 children who had taken the most photographs made individual books about the outdoor space. Two sets of photographs were made, one for the children and one for the researcher.
- Tours: four children directed and recorded tours of the outdoor space, indicating the important places. The children were in charge of the route as well as how the tour was recorded. Each pair had a camera and a small tape recorder.
- Map making: eight children worked in pairs and in a four to make maps of the outdoor space, using photos and adding drawings. These maps were made on circular pieces of paper to enable children to think about the space 'in the round'. Maps were displayed in the cloakroom area where parents, staff and children could discuss them.
- Magic Carpet: this is a new piece of the Mosaic and has been adapted from an idea by Christine Parker (20012) as a way of talking to young children about different places. Slides were made of Tonbridge town centre, the castle and park. Children watched these slides of their locality, whilst sitting in a darkened corner of the indoor play space on a 'Magic Carpet'.
- Child interviews: 20 children were interviewed about their use and preferences in the outdoor space. The questions were structured but the format of the interviews remained flexible, and they were conducted outside in a place where the children might feel relaxed.
- Practitioner and parent interviews: short interviews were carried out with the Manager, three other staff and four parents. Practitioners were asked about what they enjoyed doing with the children outside, and what they would like to change. Parents were asked about what their children enjoyed doing inside and outside at home and at preschool.

### **Stage Two: discussing and reflecting on children's and adults' perspectives**

- A selection of children's comments and photographs from Stage One were made into a book, which the researcher discussed with the children. They talked about their photographs and comments and answered questions about their views on future changes to the space.
- The book became the focus of two short staff meetings. The researcher shared the children's comments from the book and this led to a wider discussion about children's abilities, priorities and perspectives.
- The researcher and Learning through Landscapes Early Years Development Officer met to review the material. A large plan was made to summarise the visual and verbal material produced by the different research tools and emerging themes were explored.

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<sup>2</sup> Parker, C. (2001) 'When is she coming back?' in Abbott, L. and Nutbrown, C. (eds.) Experiencing Reggio Emilia: implications for pre-school provision. Buckingham: Open University Press.

### **Stage Three: deciding areas of continuity and change**

- **Places to keep: the caterpillar**

A large plastic caterpillar tunnel was regularly placed outside. It had been apparent from the first visit that the children enjoyed this strange shape. However, the use of the different research tools had emphasised just how important this piece of equipment was for the children. This was a play space not to try to change.

- **Places to expand: the house**

Observing the children revealed this to be a key resource for the children. The children confirmed this through their photographs, the tour and their interviews. Parents also mentioned the house as an important space in the preschool. However the interviews with practitioners showed that the house was a source of tension. They felt it was too small. The review with children, practitioners and *Learning through Landscapes* recognised these opposing views and raised some possible solutions. These included providing the children with building material, crates and planks to build their own temporary structures.

- **Places to change: the fence**

The children's photographs and maps emphasised how the security fence dominated the outdoor space. Close observation revealed another dimension. The gaps in the security fence were wide enough for the children to see through. Any solution needed to bear in mind the importance of leaving these gaps, so the people spotting and dog watching could continue. Three ideas under consideration are adding temporary weaving to the fence, placing paint boards on the fence and having binoculars and telescopes available for long-distance viewing.

- **Places to add: new seating and digging**

The research process identified places that could be added to the outdoor space to maximise the children's enjoyment. The first was more places for adults and children to sit together.

The second was places to dig. Observation had shown the popularity of the inside sandpit: one child included a photograph of the inside sand tray in his book of important outdoor spaces! Practitioners discussed adding a digging area as a new feature of the outdoor space.

### **Discussion**

#### **The importance of time**

Listening to young children's views and experiences cannot be rushed. The children displayed a great deal of local knowledge about their use of space and their place preferences - but this did take time and patience. Listening to young children needs to become embedded in every day practice rather than an activity that is parachuted in.

#### **Making children's experiences visible**

The use of visual tools, including the cameras and map making has made children's perspectives visible for adults to see. This included children of different abilities, including those with speech and language delay.

#### **The value of group work**

The Mosaic approach had been designed as a tool to use with individual children. However, young children quickly demonstrated that working together using this approach can be a good way of listening, sharing knowledge and exploring meanings.

## **Next steps**

### **Learning through Landscapes: Kent Space to Grow Project**

Following the completion of the research project and taking account of its findings, the Manager of the preschool has met with *Learning through Landscapes* to draw up an action plan, which will form the basis for development of the outdoor space.

### **Thomas Coram Research Unit: Spaces to Play Project**

Following the successful completion of the pilot project, a three year project has been funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation to work with young children, architects and early years managers and practitioners. This will extend the Mosaic approach to consider how young children's perspectives can be taken into account in a 'new build' and in changes to existing provision.

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<p>A book about this research, <i>Spaces to Play: More Listening to Young Children using the Mosaic Approach</i> by Alison Clark and Peter Moss will be published in the Autumn, 2004. Contact for details: <a href="mailto:a.clark@ioe.ac.uk">a.clark@ioe.ac.uk</a></p>
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