

'SEEING VOICES'

VOICE OF THE CHILD PROJECT
2021



Executive Summary



The Voice of the Child Project was initiated by The Genesis Programme under Louth LEADER Partnership's ABC Programme and funded by Louth Children and Young Peoples Services Committee (CYPSC). This quality intervention initiative had an overall aim of enhancing the participation and voice of the child in early childhood settings in County Louth in line with the Participation Framework (DCEDIY, 2021).

The research and intervention element of the initiative was facilitated and delivered by Avril McMonagle, CEO of MOSAIC Digital Solutions for Early Education (www.mosaicearlyed.com).

All early childhood services in County Louth were invited to participate in the initiative and 5 early childhood services were successful in gaining a place on the programme. The leadership and professional openness shown by the participating early childhood services is acknowledged and applauded.

A total of 288 children aged 1-5 years and 56 educators took part in the training initiative.

The project had three main components. Firstly, the extent to which the voice of the child was prevalent in everyday practice in the participating services. This was achieved by carrying out and evaluating a baseline audit as a starting point for the intervention.

Secondly, a suite of training and mentoring – specifically aimed at enabling educators to recognise and interpret children's participation and voice was provided. This included the introduction of 'MOSAIC Educator' – a professional educator app to record, support and share children's learning and development with parents.

Finally, learning and progress made as reported by participating early learning and care services was collated and presented in this report.

The main learning and benefits following the training was around increased awareness of the voice of the child, how to think from the perspective of the individual child and meaningful documentation processes.

Participant feedback strongly suggested that documentation was greatly enriched by using the MOSAIC Educator App. Central to this was being able to capture the child's voice as part of everyday practice and gave the educator a framework for recording, documenting, and sharing information in real time with parents.

Overall, participants felt that their expectations of the programme had been surpassed and would advise other educators to participate in the type of training.



**The National Participation Framework for Children and Young People Framework supports departments, agencies and organisations to improve their practice in listening to children and young people and giving them a voice in decision-making (DCEDIY 2021).*

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Background to the Voice of the Child Project

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The Genesis Programme recognised the need in County Louth to capture the extent of children's participation and voice in early learning and care centres in the county. As the Area Based Childhood Programme for Louth LEADER Partnership, The Genesis Programme sought to have this action included in Louth Children's and Young People's Services Committee Plan under Outcome 5 "Connected, Respected and Contributing to their World".

As a result of it being included in the plan, Louth LEADER Partnership was identified as the lead agency to move this action forward and funding was provided by Louth CYPSC to support this action.

A multi-agency working group was established to provide expert opinion on the initiative consisting of representatives from the following agencies:

- **Louth Leader Partnership (lead agency)**
- **The Genesis Programme**
- **Louth County Childcare Committee**
- **Louth CYPSC**
- **Louth County Council**
- **Tusla**
- **Representative from Community Based Early Learning and Care Centres**
- **Representative from Privately Owned Early Learning and Care Centres.**



MOSAIC Digital Solutions for Early Education Ltd

The research and intervention element of the initiative was designed, facilitated and delivered by Avril McMonagle, Founder and CEO of MOSAIC Digital Solutions for Early Education (www.mosaicearlyed.com).

MOSAIC Digital Solutions provides a range of digital products and specialist services to early childhood educators and early learning and care service providers. Avril McMonagle has over 25 years' experience of multiple aspects of early childhood education, research and policy. Since the launch of the company in January 2019, MOSAIC Digital Solutions has established a growing client base all over Ireland. The company flagship project is the MOSAIC Educator App which is a pedagogical tool to record children's care, learning and development in a partnership approach between the child, educator and parents. The uniqueness of the MOSAIC app is that it is framed around children's individuality, strengths and needs regardless of age or ability. The company also has an online training platform which houses a range of practical pedagogy continuing professional development programmes to ensure educators have access to practical and transferrable upskilling opportunities on an ongoing basis (www.earlyedcpd.ie).

Aims and Objectives

In line with the objective of the **National Participation Framework for Children and Young People (DCEDIY 2021)*, the overall aim of the Voice of the Child initiative was to support early childhood educators to improve, develop and enhance their practice around recognising, listening and responding to children.

The objectives for participants included:

- To enhance the voice of the child in relation to interests, needs, visibility and planning of learning and development opportunities.
- To amplify the voice of the child in everyday practice by learning and applying 'pedagogies to enable children to contribute'.
- To actively listen and respond to the child's interests, preferences and needs in the planning of learning and development opportunities.

Project deliverables included:

- To develop a range of programme administration and good practice tools
- To evaluate the educators understanding of the child's voice and the extent to which the child's voice is present in curriculum planning and decision making in the early childhood setting.
- To provide an online training and mentoring intervention with a focus on new pedagogical tools and strategies to hear and include the voice of the child in the early childhood setting.
- To assess the impact of the training and mentoring provision through changes to practice and provide an analysis of the main findings.

The Project Tools

A range of tools were utilised to deliver the Voice of the Child initiative. These included:

- Good practice tools such as policies, permission and data sharing agreements
- MOSAIC Educator for recording children's voice, learning and needs
- Online training programmes with a focus on strategies to include the voice of the child
- Templates and practice support resources
- Zoom meetings and mentoring sessions.



The Voice of the Child in Early Education

The concept of the Voice of the Child is not new to early learning and care.

The Voice of the Child in research and practice originates from Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which provides that ***'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'*** (UN 1989).

The Participation Framework: National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (DCEDIY 2021) supports departments, agencies and organisations to improve their practice in listening to children and young people and giving them a voice in decision-making. It is underpinned by:

- the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
- the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)
- the National Strategy on Children and Young Peoples Participation in Decision-making (2021).

The Participation Framework is based on the child-rights model of participation developed by Professor Laura Lundy, Queens University, which provides guidance for decision-makers on the steps to take in giving children and young people a meaningful voice in decision-making.

Making the participation framework relevant to early childhood education

Guidance specifically for early learning, care and education settings in the participation framework is as follows:

- At session level - every child should have a voice in decision-making when selecting daily learning activities, the focus and nature of these activities and how they want to engage.
- At service level - children should have a voice in decision-making on how the service is run.



'OBSERVING AND LISTENING TO CHILDREN CAREFULLY IS WHERE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION BEGINS. THE MOST IMPORTANT VERBS IN EARLY EDUCATION ARE NOT 'TO TALK' 'TO TEACH' OR 'TO SHOW' - BUT 'TO LISTEN'. THIS PRACTICE IS NOT CONFINED TO CHILDREN WHO HAVE SPOKEN LANGUAGE. CHILDREN OF ALL AGES AND ABILITIES SHOW US MANY SIGNS - WE NEED TO KNOW WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN ORDER TO TRANSLATE THE LANGUAGE OF THE CHILD'... MEANTÓIR 2021

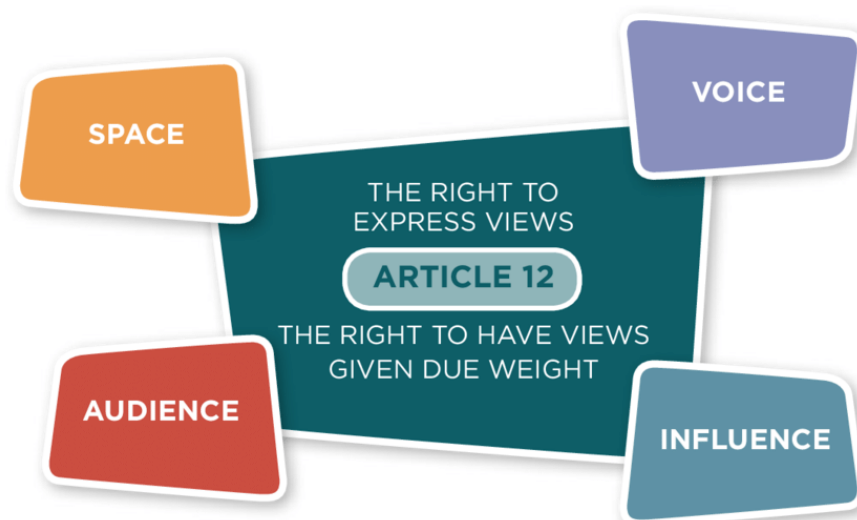
Participation and voice in early learning and care

There are a number of important considerations for early childhood education regarding participation and this can be viewed through the lens of collective guideline documents for early education. Children are seen as citizens of today rather than of the future. This principle is founded in the UN Committee on the rights of the child general comment on early education which notes ‘*children have an evolving capacity to participate in decisions that affect them ... and that adults have a key role in enabling and facilitating them in making their voices heard*’ (para.17).

The Everyday Spaces Checklist in the Participation Framework (DCEDIY 2021:20) provides guidance to educators and other adults on listening to children and young people and giving them a voice in decision-making in everyday spaces or settings.

The Lundy Model (2007) is used to provide a pathway to help conceptualise Article 12 of the UNCRC. It focuses on four distinct, albeit interrelated, elements. **The four elements are:**

Participation Framework National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making



These 4 modes of voice help us to understand the authenticity and perspective of child voice.

*'Listening to children means hearing what they cannot say'..
McMonagle, A. 2021*



In relation to pedagogical techniques for capturing voice, 4 generic types of the voice are contained in the 'Voice Box' (McMonagle, A. 2020). This classification is fundamental to our understanding of the **authenticity of child voice** and to differentiate between the different voice types and how they can be used.

1. Token Voice- assessing the child.

This includes any information collected 'on' the child rather than 'with' and including the child. This type of information has little to do with voice but portrays a judged perspective of the child. Common tools that use token voice include pre-determined checklists of child progress carried out to 'assess' the child rather than 'listen' to the child.

2. Translated Voice- interpreting interests.

This is where a child's view on a matter is researched by unobtrusive or non-participatory observations or interpretation of children's work or play. This is not carried out to 'assess' the child as in the Token Voice above, but to find out about the child's interests or perspective on something. An example here would be an educator making an inference about the child's interest following an observation, a photograph or piece of creative work.

For younger children or children who are pre-verbal, Translated Voice can be used to document gestures, sounds, facial expressions or play patterns observed. Learning stories are an ideal way to capture Translated Voice.

3. Interviewed Voice- investigating perspectives.

This is where interaction and verbal communication is used to capture the child's voice on a particular issue or matter. Typically, a loosely structured discussion or interview in simple language is used to obtain the child's thoughts and opinions. This can be carried out in pairs or small groups. Again, the learning story format can be easily used to document Interviewed Voice.

4. Partnership Voice - co-constructing and listening.

This describes participant observation and interaction where the child and adult are involved in co-construction and collaboration of a learning experience. An example could be photographs taken and described by children, collaborative drawing and creativity where the child has freedom to create from open ended materials, interactions or discussion between the educator and child which reveal the child's perspectives, understanding and choices.

Partnership Voice is also useful when writing about very young children or children who are pre-verbal. The educator uses a combination of translated voice and blends this with translated voice from observations of the child's gestures, sounds, facial expressions or play patterns. Learning stories are an ideal way to capture the co-constructed voice.

The Voice Box: McMonagle, A, 2021.

Understanding the Voice Box

Whilst the **Token Voice** can be useful in research, it should not be considered as the child's voice. Token voice is the voice of the adult speaking for children.

Translated Voice is most often used when working with pre-verbal children. The educator must learn to interpret voice through the child's behaviour and play and then infers the voice from the child's perspective. To what extent the Translated Voice corresponds with the child's actual voice depends on several variables. This includes the extent to which the educator/researcher understands child development, can empathise with, and read the child and is aware of the significance of concepts like schematic patterns in young children's play and behaviour.

Interviewed Voice is probably the most straightforward way of listening to children. However, age and ability is a factor here as Interviewed Voice requires speech abilities. Again, the extent to which Interviewed Voice corresponds with actual voice greatly depends on interview style, the questions posed and how well children understand the questions or subject matter. In addition, the extent to which voices are shaped to meet the adults objective is important when considering the authenticity of the child's Interviewed Voice.

Partnership Voice will ring bells with those aware of co-constructive practice and facilitation in early education. The sociocultural idea of co-constructed learning is central to Ireland's curriculum framework Aistear and to the quality framework Síolta. This relates to the many components of pedagogical technique that enables adults to co-construct learning in partnership with children of all ages and abilities.

This classification of voice provides a useful scaffold for educators and researchers from which to understand the **quality and authenticity of child voice**.

Each of these 4 voice types are distinct and different. A combination of all 4 types can be observed in early childhood practice. What is important is that educators understand the nature of each type of voice and when it is appropriate to use each method. This way, tokenism in both research and practice can be curtailed.

As we have seen, children's participation and voice is by now a prerequisite of policy research and planning. However, when we think of everyday early learning and care, all matters within this scope are indeed 'matters affecting the child'.

Some fundamental questions include - how much of this remains parked in policy rhetoric rather than being transferred to everyday practice with young children? Is knowing that voice is important enough? Do educators know what authentic voice looks like in practice?

The Voice of the Child initiative greatly lends to our practical understanding of these questions.

Stages of the Project

The Voice of the Child Project was completed in 6 separate stages. This section outlines each stage.

Stage 1: Development of bespoke programme tools

As with any initiative of this nature, there are a range of good practice and consent documents that need to be put in place before the project begins. This included advance information about the project including timelines and good practice documents for everyone involved.

As the first stage of the Voice of the Child project, Meantóir developed the following good practice documents for participating early childhood services and parents:

- Advanced programme outline and agreement for participants
- Participation Agreement and Project Timeframe
- Policy on the Use of Internet and Photographic and Recording Devices
- Data sharing guidance
- Parent/Guardian/Child Consent/Assent including Data Sharing consent

Stage 2: Selection of early childhood services

The consortium undertook a piece of work to select early childhood services to participate on the project. This procedure was severely restricted by the timing of the project and the ability of a wider range of early childhood services to take part. **The individuals who took part were open, transparent and courageous. They showed tremendous leadership to become change influencers for their sector.** Criteria for selection was based on other factors such as:

- Internet access
- Willingness of the whole team to participate
- Geographical spread
- Privately managed and community managed early childhood services
- Children aged 0-3 years as priority.

The participating early learning and care services

The Holy Family Community Creche, Muirhevnamor, Dundalk.

75 children and 15 educators

The Playroom Project, Dublin Rd, Dundalk.

65 children and 17 educators

Claddagh's Treasures Preschool, Claddagh Park, Dundalk.

86 children and 13 educators

Lios na nÓg, Tom Bellew Ave, Dundalk.

42 children and 8 educators

Realt na Mara Pre-school, Mill Street, Dundalk.

20 children and 3 educators.

In total, this comprised of 288 children and 56 educators.



Stages of the Project

Stage 3: Baseline assessment of practice and introducing the MOSAIC Educator App

Baseline Assessment

To monitor and assess the progress made by the project intervention, a bespoke baseline assessment to determine children's participation and voice in current practice was developed and used.

A baseline assessment of evidence of the inclusion of the voice of the child in the early childhood setting (ecs) is investigated, gathered, and evaluated.

Gathering information for the baseline assessment, involved:

- Participants completing the questionnaire
- Supplying a range of practice evidence
- Participating in a group zoom discussion session
- Recording findings.

This information was then used as a starting point for the training and professional development element of the programme.

Stage 4: Professional recording tools, training and mentoring intervention

This stage involved the targeted training element, the introduction of MOSAIC Educator documenting tools, and mentoring support.

Introducing MOSAIC Educator to participants

Each participating early childhood service was registered to the MOSAIC Platform and an electronic MOSAIC storybook was provided for each child participating on the project.

Each service was asked to appoint a 'MOSAIC Coordinator' who acted as the liaison person for all information relating to MOSAIC. MOSAIC Coordinators then set up classrooms and added children who would be participating from each class. Only children whose parents had given consent and signed permission and data sharing agreement forms were allocated an electronic storybook.

To ensure all participants had sufficient information on how to use MOSAIC, the introductory Zoom session provided a further demonstration and provided any clarifications needed as the first part of the training component.

Training and Mentoring

The training and mentoring component involved a range of topical areas to support the practical transference of child participation and voice. This involved:

- All staff members participating in group Zoom demonstration on setting up and using MOSAIC
 - Individual staff members participating in targeted online CPD programmes relating to participation and voice and planning for individual children
- Group Zoom mentoring session questions, clarifications etc. as arranged.



Stages of the Project

Stage 5: Evaluation of progress and change

To gather information for the evaluation, this would involve:

- Participants completing a questionnaire/structured interview as decided
- Supplying evidence of change
- Participating in Zoom discussion on findings
- Documenting findings.

Stage 6: Initiative Report

Compiling a practical and informative report to both map the journey and enable the repetition of the project in the future.

Challenges for the programme

The project was undertaken during level 5 Covid-19 restrictions in 2020/21. This presented a particular set of barriers to both the uptake and facilitation of the initiative from the perspective of all stakeholders as follows:

- For the lead partner and consortium group – face to face meetings were not possible and all procedures were undertaken remotely.
- For early childhood services, things had never been more difficult, with the increased demands of operating a childcare service during a pandemic and the additional time demands of participating on a project such as the Voice of the Child.
- For the researcher and facilitator, all intervention supports were delivered remotely, presenting challenges with regard to the need for personal engagement and face to face facilitation being absent.
- The availability of a stable internet connection was a huge barrier to a number of groups hoping to participate. Due to the requirements to participate in online training, to use the MOSAIC App and to access ZOOM Calls, stable internet was an important prerequisite for participation.

Despite the collective challenges presented to all stakeholders involved in the Voice of the Child project, a positive and enthusiastic disposition for the project overcame all barriers presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. This proves that where a group are open to engagement and quality improvement to benefit children - not even a pandemic can get in the way.



Interpretation of Voice



This section includes the responses to the baseline audit on participation and voice in practice. Regarding the baseline evidence cited here, it should be acknowledged that this evidence was not directly observed, but rather taken as submitted by participants.

Questions were arranged in 4 different sections framed by the 4 components of the Participation Framework:

1. Space
2. Voice
3. Audience
4. Influence.

Responses under 'Space'

According to the Participation Framework (DCEDIY 2021) SPACE REFERS TO A SPACE FOR CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS. When asked about providing space for children to express their views, participants put forward a range of ways that this is provided for in their everyday practice. All suggestions were relevant and included:

- Listening to children
- Involving children in decision making
- Using observations of children to inform planning
- Key Worker System and relationships
- Planning led by children's interests
- Enabling children to feel safe to express their views
- Creative activities.



Interpretation of Voice

Responses under 'Voice'

According to the Participation Framework (DCEDIY 2021) VOICE REFERS TO CHILDREN BEING FACILITATED TO EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS . When asked about children being facilitated to express their views and voice, a range of ways were highlighted and included:

- Children's work is displayed with their 'voice' added by the adult
- Curriculum is based on child interests
- Freedom of expression through role play, creative art, music,
- Specific time set aside for meet and greet, small group planning and discussion
- Individual learning journals
- Flash cards to or Lámh to communicate
- Open ended questions/activities
- Using emergent interest boards
- Consultation with children on everyday matters
- Small group discussions.



Responses under 'Audience'

According to the Participation Framework (DCEDIY 2021) AUDIENCE REFERS TO HOW CHILDRENS VIEWS ARE LISTENED TO. When asked what mechanisms are used to ensure that children's views are listened to, the most common responses are listed below:

- Child-led curriculum plans
- Notes for plans
- Key Worker
- Learning Journals
- Weekly staff meetings
- Observation book for manager.

Responses under 'Influence'

According to the Participation Framework (DCEDIY 2021) INFLUENCE REFERS TO HOW CHILDRENS VIEWS ARE TAKEN SERIOUSLY AND ACTED UPON, WHERE APPROPRIATE. When asked how children's views are taken seriously and acted upon where appropriate, participants said:

- Reported to Manager and acted upon within reason.
- Mostly at room level but not at service level.
- Team leader will act where appropriate.

From the baseline audit carried out, the importance of voice was largely understood. The evidence submitted in follow up to the baseline audit then aimed to validate the narrative by providing documentation examples of everyday practice.

Evidence of Voice – a Reflection

To critique how well the knowledge of voice and participation transferred to everyday practice, a variety of documentation evidence was reviewed.

There are two key areas of documentation practice that can capture the 4 components of participation – space, voice, audience and influence. This includes the educators chosen method of documenting children’s learning and progress through observations, scrapbook entries, or learning stories. Secondly, it involves the documentation of an emergent plan informed by the needs and interests of the child. All these methods were cited in the baseline audit narrative submitted by participants.

A variety of journals, observations, learning stories and scrapbook compilations were forwarded as evidence of observation practice. It was clear from the evidence submitted that significant time and effort was being put into the documentation of children’s experience in participating early childhood settings. Some scrapbook entries demonstrated diligent work in recording and use of creative work examples.

In providing a friendly yet professional critique of the examples submitted, there was a number of commonalities identified and constructive critique was provided during mentoring sessions.

In a number of cases, comments were broad based and not specific to the child. The recorded episode of learning was frequently general and lacked factual information in the observation itself. A common observation writing style was akin to a sample general observation for study purposes which had no specific direction or focus on the child’s learning achievements or key interests.

These general observations did not convey voice in any way and usually highlighted an activity topical theme being explored with the group. In order to convey a child’s voice through an observation or learning story, there needs to be a focus on the individual child- either what they can do, have conveyed through their behaviour or play or what supports they need.

Areas of practice that did not carry through on the previously stated rhetoric on the voice of the child and child centred practice included:

- No evidence of the child’s decision-making voice in observations or learning stories
- Learning stories with a child’s name on them but completed using a general observation about the whole group/theme
- Observations written from a deficit perspective about something the child couldn’t/didn’t do’
- Observations that were based on assumptions made by the educator
- Inappropriate child development checklists.



Evidence of Voice – a Reflection

A significant number of observations, learning stories or scrapbook entries had a common theme. They could be described as **'evidence of doing'**.

It would appear that some documentation was undertaken for external purposes rather than as a formative assessment method of young children's learning and development. An over-reliance on meaningless Aistear stickers on learning stories void of explanation and cut out learning goals that did not match the observation; are examples of this.

Some observations/learning stories went into great detail about the theme that the children were covering – more suitable to a curriculum plan. Again, this appeared to act as more 'evidence of doing' as the information was of little significance to the child's needs, voice or learning.

Developmental checklists were used by a small number of participants for children under 3. These generic checklists are framed from a deficit perspective of the child and are not suitable for children who have different strengths, backgrounds and abilities.

Others provided a summary of why an activity was important for child development in general – rather than keeping the focus on the individual child.

This type of documentation practice contradicts a child centred approach and negates the true reason for formative assessment which is aimed at guiding the adult to support the child's progression in learning.

The variation in writing technique and focus was further confused by the variety of documentation templates used. Not only varied greatly across the participating settings, but also within the different rooms in the one setting.



IT WAS CLEAR FROM THE EVIDENCE SUBMITTED THAT SIGNIFICANT TIME AND EFFORT WAS BEING PUT INTO THE DOCUMENTATION OF CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE IN PARTICIPATING EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS. SOME SCRAPBOOK ENTRIES DEMONSTRATED DILIGENT WORK IN RECORDING AND USE OF CREATIVE WORK EXAMPLES.



Evidence of Voice – a Reflection

Reviewing Curriculum Plans

On review of curriculum planning systems, again the issue of a variety of formats used across services and within services was evident. In general, curriculum planning systems were over complicated, not child centred and in the majority of cases, did not reflect the needs of the individual child.

It has to be said that this was in no way due to the lack of effort on the part of educators. The systems and tools being used for curriculum planning did not lend themselves to child-led planning where the voice of the child was clearly visible.

Plans were overly reliant on pre-determined themes and lacked the balance required to respond to children's emerging needs and interests. The needs of the individual child or a response to progression in learning for specific children was not visible on curriculum plans.

Rather than starting from a broad-based curriculum plan framework, there was evidence of an over-emphasis on entering pre-selected learning goals in advance. Again, curriculum plans appeared to be developed as 'evidence of doing' for external purposes rather than for the emerging needs of the child. Not only is this practice time consuming for the educator, it encourages the educator to view learning as generic for all children as opposed to waiting to see what the individual child got from each planned learning experience.

In summary, the baseline exercise exposed a discernible gap between rhetoric and practice. This was in no way due to lack of effort on behalf of educators. It was more to do with a variety of factors:

1. Lack of properly designed systems and tools to capture voice
2. This leads to a lack of consistency of pedagogical approach and planning technique across the service
3. Writing and recording techniques too general and not focussed on the individual child's needs
5. An over emphasis on 'recording of doing' for external purposes.



THE INFORMATION GAINED FROM THE REVIEW OF EVIDENCE, GREATLY INFORMED THE NEXT STAGE OF THE PROJECT - THE TRAINING INTERVENTION.



Learning to see Voice

The training intervention

Accessed through the MOSAIC Digital Solutions online CPD platform, participants undertook 4 different training programmes, followed by a mentoring session to consolidate learning and answer questions. Each training programme covered the age range from babies to pre-school children. Participants also undertook a demonstration session in how to use the MOSAIC Educator App to its full potential.

Each CPD programme aimed to bring children's participation and the voice to the fore, so that educators could make realistic and sustainable changes to early childhood practice. Each programme included practical examples, tips for implementation, templates and additional reference documents.

Following the training intervention, in order to evaluate the key aspects of learning from the Voice of the Child Project, participants were asked to comment on 3 areas:

1. Using Mosaic as a whole service recording tool
2. Training and Mentoring programmes
3. Reflecting on practice 'Then and Now'.

The graphic below identifies how the MOSAIC Educator App has the capacity to capture participation and voice under the 4 components of the Participation Framework (DCEDIY 2021). When used as a pedagogical tool, the partnership in learning design can capture the educator, child and parent voice and demonstrate children's participation as defined by the Lundy model (2007).



The Role of MOSAIC Educator in documenting and responding to children's voice



One of the most important principles underpinning the participation of children and young people in decision making is the importance of providing them with the opportunity to give their own views without adult influence. To do this, educators need a suitable recording tool. **'Resources'** (including financial resources) is highlighted as a key enabling factor that underpins the effective implementation of the Participation Framework (DCEDIY 2021:24).

To authentically document children's voices, educators need a professional recording tool to capture the many representations of voice. It is also essential that this is based on a strengths-based approach that starts with the child's reality, their lived experience, level of understanding and ability.

This was achieved by firstly providing participants on the project with the 'MOSAIC Educator' pedagogical tool, training them to get the best use from the resource and supporting its integration to their everyday practice with children.

This child centred documentation tool is designed as a personal electronic storybook that captures learning, development and care from a strengths-based perspective. MOSAIC Educator has a unique design framed around Learning Stories that start from where the child is at, summarises learning and plans for progression. The design incorporates child, educator and parent voice to enable collaborative partnerships in learning.

Framed around the Aistear's themes, aims, goals and dispositions, the uniquely designed functions on the app allow the educator to compile a storybook for each child. Each storybook is individual to the child and contains a variety of learning stories in different formats: photographs, short videos, samples of work and creations. The storybook can record the child's **choices, preferences, decisions and authentic voice** in the learning process. The electronic nature of the storybook make it an invaluable tool for reflection with the child both at home and in the early childhood setting.

The daily record section in MOSAIC Educator houses a daily care log for children under 3 or with specific care needs, an automated safe sleep check and a daily attendance register where educators can enter a date range and print attendance records for compliance purposes.

Through the interconnecting 'MOSAIC Family' App, the early childhood service and nominated family members can access regular updates and download photographs, videos, learning stories and reports. For children under 3, daily care records are also communicated directly to a parent's phone or tablet in real time.



Learning to see Voice

How did MOSAIC Educator support educators to see and capture voice?

MOSAIC Educator lends itself to a range of pedagogical approaches that view the child as an individual with a unique voice and needs. This is achieved through the creation of an individual storybook containing images, discussions, learning stories, videos and the child's creative work as an expression of uniqueness.

MOSAIC enables the educator to document children's voice using the strategies and techniques outlined in The Voicebox (see section 2). Children are afforded 'space', 'voice', 'audience' and 'influence' in these educator-child interactions and stories (section 2).

Below are some sample learning stories from MOSAIC demonstrating 'translated', 'interviewed' and 'partnership' voice recording methods. These were completed by participants on the Voice of the Child project following the training intervention.

Today Carson was playing in the block area with the wooden house. He put animals, people and dinosaurs inside. Carson called it his 'Zombie House'. He said 'I decorated it with worms and creatures because I like creatures'. I asked Carson if I could take a picture of him with the zombie house. He said 'hmm I don't know' so I asked 'is it okay if I just take a picture of your zombie house by itself so I can show your mammy'. 'Yes show my mammy and daddy'.



14:23

Complete Learning Story

Learning goals achieved:

- 1 I can interact with other children and adults by listening, discussing and taking turns in conversation.
- 2 I can speak confidently to give and receive information.
- 3 I use language to solve problems and work things out.
- 4 I am learning to share my feelings, thoughts and ideas.

Select dispositions

Confidence Interest Concentration

Imagination Independence Exploring

Learning

You can help me build on this by:

Explore Carson's imagination by setting up open ended materials. Use cardboard boxes to create more types of houses for his 'worms and creatures'.

Educator name

In this learning story using **'partnership voice'** Carson decides he does not want his picture taken. So the educator skillfully gives him an option that he can agree with. This learning story demonstrates respect for the child in asking can a photograph be taken and his decision to refuse permission on this occasion.

The child is afforded 'space', 'voice', 'audience' and 'influence' in this brief interaction.

Learning to see Voice

In this learning story example (on right), the educator demonstrates '**translated voice**'. Ada has decided that she is quite happy to have her photo taken!



I am playing outside using the chalk. I asked my friend Myleigh to draw around me on the ground using chalk. I wanted to see how big I am. Nicole asked if she could take some pictures to send my mammy. I said yes. Nicole showed me the pictures when we were finished. I said I looked so big on the ground.



I want to see how big I am

Where did it take place: Outdoor Area

When did it happen: 18 May, 2021 10:05 PM hrs

Conall you have been telling us all about your camping trip with your family and the picnics you had. We decided to extend this learning by going on a Teddy bears picnic.

Conall today you went on the Teddy bears picnic in the garden. You helped to prepare the sandwiches. First you buttered the bread all by yourself and then you added the ham and cheese. You then took your snack outside with your 'brothers Gruffalo Teddy' and had your Teddy bears picnic with your friends.



Teddy bears picnic

In this learning story, Conall shares a story that is important to him. Educator Karen listens and documents the conversation in an '**interviewed voice**' style. This discussion leads to an extended activity in response to Conall's emerging interest.

Complete Learning Story

Learning goals achieved:

- 1 I am discovering, exploring and refining my gross and fine motor skills.
- 2 I am showing increasing independence, and can make choices and decisions.
- 3 I can interact and help others.
- 4 I am showing increasing confidence and self-assurance in my learning.

Select dispositions

Purposefulness

Having fun




Responsibility


You can help me build on this by:

Conall you enjoyed making your own sandwiches. We will extend this interest and explore different food that we could make and prepare.


Educator name

Learning to see Voice

09:48   

Learning Story 

Cooper independently went into the home area and started picking up the lollipop makers from a lunch box one by one and matched them by colour. Pink with pink, blue with blue and yellow with yellow. When he had them all matched he then took them all back out one by one and put them back into the lunch box. He repeated this three times.



Look at me matching my colour's

Where did it take place: The home area

When did it happen: 14 June 2021 10:00 AM hrs



Cooper's story... in this learning story example (on left) although Cooper is pre-verbal, the story showcases his strengths and what he can do. The educator uses '**translated voice**' to interpret Cooper's perspective. She is able to 'see' Cooper's voice through his play and plans activities that will build on his learning interest.

Dispositions

Pattern

Responsibility

Concentration

You can help me build on this by:

Adding more colours, matching different objects such as blocks, magnets. Putting colours blocks into different coloured baskets. Using the pegboard making lines in different colours. Coloured shapes, red squares, green circle and so on.

Hollie's story... the educator demonstrates '**partnership voice**' in this learning story, where Holly discusses her understanding of her parents wedding.

Hollie's parents are getting married on the 11th of June and Hollie is very excited about the big day coming up with lots of conversation in both her home and pre school. Hollie explained that she is wearing a colourful dress and started drawing a picture of her in the dress she said there is "pink, orange and blue" and said "I am wearing high heels on my feet". She then started explaining that her "mammy is wearing a white dress and high heels" and she is getting her "make up done and me to cover my head" (she had a cut on her head from falling previous days before). She picked up the peach colour and said "mammy is wearing gold tan". After finishing her mother's drawing she started to draw her sister "Jess" and said she is wearing "rainbow colours" after Jess Hollie started to draw her "Daddy" she said he is "wearing a suit that's all a brown suit and white dickey bow". She explained "the wedding is sleepover and its gonna be a sunny day" and there is "music, dancing and baby shark". We discussed what food was going to be at the wedding and she said "only a picnic mat for the chocolate cake with flowers, no bench". She then got the brown colouring pencil and drew the cake with blue flowers around it. When she had all her family coloured in on the page she then coloured in a blue sky using a blue colouring pencil and green colouring pencil for the grass.



The Prettiest Flowergirl

You can help me build on this by:

To help Hollie build on this we will set up wedding invitations station in the art area with card,glitter, stickers etc for Hollie to create her own invitations, provide dress up flowers girl dresses, shirts, ties, make bouquet of flowers using arts and crafts. We will provide hair dressing and make up accessories for Hollie to explore

Learning to see Voice

MOSAIC is designed to bring together different types of data and information to showcase children's perspectives and views in a reader friendly way. Together, these components create a unique picture of strengths, interests and needs from the child's viewpoint regardless of age or ability.

Ethics is also a key consideration in the design of MOSAIC. The strength-based approach advocated through learning stories record the child perspective regardless of age, ability, culture or gender.

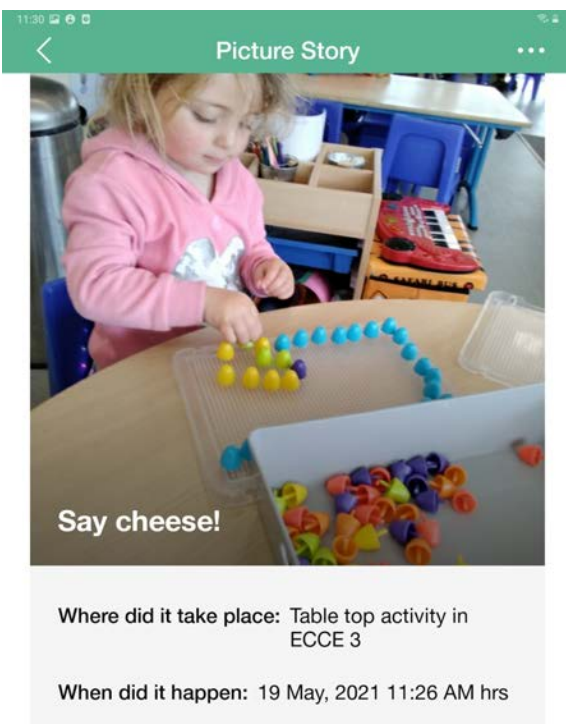
One of the most stand-out comments when asking educators about the difference MOSAIC made to their practice was around inclusion.

“
‘I WORK WITH A CHILD WITH A
DISABILITY. THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I WAS
ABLE TO INCLUDE HIM IN A LEARNING
STORY AND MAKE HIM VISIBLE IN THE
SAME WAY AS OTHER CHILDREN IN THE
GROUP’.



This comment alone sums up the importance of appropriate documentation tools to capture the voice of every child.

Meaningful partnership with parents is central to quality early learning and care and to the ethos of MOSAIC.



“
‘PARENTS ARE VERY EXCITED AND HAVE COMMENTED ON
HOW RECEIVING A SIMPLE IMAGE OF THEIR CHILD
THROUGHOUT THE DAY IS REASSURING, ALSO OUR PARENTS
ARE SO USED TO BEING IN THE SERVICE REGULARLY FOR
DIFFERENT EVENTS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR WHICH DUE TO
COVID CANNOT HAPPEN AT THE MOMENT SO FOR SOME
PARENTS THEY HAVE COMMENTED THAT USING MOSAIC IS A
WAY FOR US TO KEEP CONNECTED THROUGHOUT THESE
UNCERTAIN TIMES’...

Learning to see Voice

Overall, the response to MOSAIC Educator was extremely positive with participants strongly agreeing that it substantially saved time and reduced paperwork, made their learning stories more professional and most importantly, helped them focus on the individual child.

As highlighted later in the report, this supports one of the 4 enabling factors underpin the effective implementation of the Participation Framework – resources. **Below is what participants had to say following the introduction to MOSAIC as a resource for capturing voice...**



‘MOSAIC KEEPS EACH INDIVIDUAL CHILD AT THE FOREFRONT’

‘MOSAIC GAVE US MORE AWARENESS OF THE VOICE OF THE CHILD AND HOW WE CAN MAKE LEARNING STORIES MUCH MORE SIMPLE’

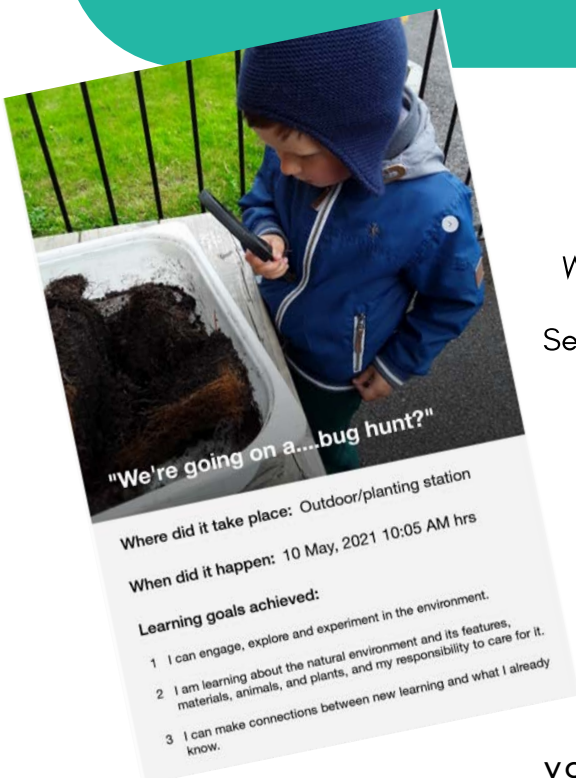
‘MOSAIC REALLY MADE ME MORE AWARE OF THE NEED TO RECORD THE VOICE OF THE CHILD’.

‘EASY TO NAVIGATE: SOME OF OUR EDUCATORS FIND USING TECHNOLOGY & APPS DAUNTING BUT THEY HAVE ALL SAID MOSAIC IS THEIR FAVOURITE DOCUMENTATION TOOL’

‘MOST OF THE WORK IS DONE AND MAKES DOCUMENTING ON A VERY REGULAR IN A BUSY SETTING LESS STRESSFUL’.

‘WE WILL CONTINUE TO USE MOSAIC – THE LEARNING STORY TEMPLATES ARE SO EASY AND TIME SAVING’

‘I CANNOT WAIT UNTIL EVERY ROOM IS USING MOSAIC- WE WILL BE ABLE TO WORK BETTER AS A TEAM IF WE ARE ALL USING THE SAME SYSTEM TO OBSERVE CHILDREN’



When asked if they would like to continue using the MOSAIC Educator App in September, 4 out of the 5 services said they would. One service did not respond.



The Training Intervention

Programme 1: Creating Learning Stories



Learning Stories are a formative, strengths-based method of assessment for learning which is particularly suitable for educators working with young children 0-6 years. Learning stories are focused on the individual child incorporating their voice, learning and progression.

The programme 'Creating Learning Stories' aimed to provide educators with the skills to frame a learning story from the individual child's perspective highlighting a positive image of the child as an active learner with distinctive strengths, abilities and interests.

Below is a flavour of the comments made by educators who completed the MOSAIC Digital Solutions 'Creating Learning Stories' programme:

“

'I FOUND THIS HELPFUL AND SIMPLE TO UNDERSTAND IT ENABLED ME TO CREATE A LEARNING STORY USING THE APP, TO BE CONCISE AND TO GIVE THE CORRECT DETAILS'.

'I BECAME MORE AWARE OF WHAT THE CHILD DIDN'T SAY. I LISTENED MORE TO THE NON-VERBAL PLAY AND TO THEIR INTERACTIONS IN THE SMALL GROUPS WHEN THEY WERE FREE PLAYING'.

'LEARNING STORIES ARE NOW CARRIED OUT MORE FREQUENTLY, IN REAL TIME AND THEY ARE QUICK AND EASY TO LINK TO AISTEAR DUE TO MOSAIC'.

'MY FOCUS HAS CHANGED TO THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD. I HAVE STOPPED WRITING 'THE CHILDREN ARE ...' WE ARE NOW ONLY TALKING ABOUT THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD. WE ARE FOCUSED ON CURRENT LEARNING AND SHARING THAT WITH PARENTS IN THE NOW. NOT WAITING A WHOLE MONTH TO SEND A COLLECTION OF UNRELATED LEARNING AND PICTURES HOME'.

'OUR LEARNING STORIES NOW HAVE MEANING AND PURPOSE'.

'LEARNING STORIES ARE MUCH QUICKER AND MUCH SIMPLER TO PUT TOGETHER NOW'.

Programme 2: Emergent Curriculum



Emergent curriculum is a method of providing curriculum that responds to children's interests and needs as they develop naturally in real time. It begins with the close observation of children for insight into their interests and needs. A core component of an emergent curriculum is the inclusion of the child's voice (see resources section for handout on the Participation Framework).

This programme explained the emergent approach in an easily relatable manner. It aimed to enable educators to plan a programme of activities that were a combination of the child's interests and the adults learning goals for the children.

Below is a flavour of the comments made by educators who completed the MOSAIC Digital Solutions 'Emergent Curriculum' programme:

“ WE ARE PLACING AN EMPHASIS ON THE CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN THE ENVIRONMENT AND CHANGING IT ACCORDINGLY. MOVING FROM A BLEND OF THEMATIC & EMERGENT PLANNING TO FULLY EMERGENT CURRICULUM’.

‘I LISTEN MORE, FOLLOW UP ON WHAT CHILDREN SAID MORE. NOTICED WHAT THEN SAID WHEN THEY WEREN'T ACTUALLY TALKING’.

‘THE PROCESS HAS HELPED US AS A TEAM TO ENSURE WE ARE ALL WORKING WITHIN THE SAME FRAMEWORK. THE PLANNING TEMPLATE HAS PROVED A BIG HIT AS IT HELPS PUT ON PAPER THE WEEKLY THEME BUT ALSO INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN'S INTERESTS AND NEEDS AS WE MOVE FORWARD AS A TEAM WE WILL BE CONTINUING TO USE THESE TEMPLATES FOR PLANNING’.

‘THE CURRICULUM PLAN THAT COMES WITH THE PROGRAMME OFFERS THE POSSIBILITIES TO INCLUDE VOICE AND INDIVIDUALITY IN OUR CURRICULUM CREATING MORE MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES’.

‘I LEARNED HOW BY LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF THE CHILD YOU CAN PLAN ACTIVITIES BASED AROUND THE CHILD'S INTEREST. I STARTED USING THE EMERGENT CURRICULUM PLAN TO PLAN MY ACTIVITIES’.

Programme 3: Schematic Patterns in Play



This programme was a must for those working with the younger age groups. 8 main play schemas are identified and explained. This programme aimed to support the educator to tune into children - especially children who are pre-verbal and to interpret their voice through their behaviour and play.

Below is a flavour of the comments made by educators who completed the MOSAIC 'Schematic Patterns in Play' programme:

“
‘AS A TEAM THIS WAS A BIG HIT, THIS TRAINING GIVES A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF SCHEMATIC PATTERNS AND HOW TO RECOGNISE THEM... HELPED US TO UNDERSTAND AND EXTEND THE CHILDREN’S INTEREST THROUGH PATTERNS OF PLAY’.CT

‘WE GOT A REAL IN-DEPTH AWARENESS OF WHAT A SCHEMA ACTUALLY IS FROM THIS TRAINING. THE EXAMPLES PROVIDED WERE FANTASTIC AND HAS ASSISTED US IN BEING MORE AWARE IN WHAT TO LOOK FOR. WE DID NOT HAVE MUCH KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT A SCHEMA REPRESENTS, GOING FORWARD WE NOW HAVE THE SKILL TO RECOGNISE A SCHEMA IN ACTION’.RNM

‘THIS PROGRAMME WAS THE FIRST TIME SOME OF OUR EDUCATORS WERE INTRODUCED TO SCHEMATIC PATTERS IN PLAY. HOW TO IDENTIFY AND PLAN AROUND THEM IT HAS GIVEN US THE TRAINING TO IDENTIFY PATTERNS AND HELP THE CHILDREN PRACTICE THEM’. HFCC

‘I DON’T KNOW HOW I GOT THROUGH ALL MY TRAINING AND NO ONE EVER EXPLAINED THE LINK BETWEEN SCHEMAS AND THE VOICE OF THE CHILD - THIS WAS MY LIGHTBULB MOMENT FOR SURE’.

‘OBSERVING SCHEMATIC PATTERNS WHEN CHILDREN ARE PLAYING- I HAD NEVER HEARD OF SCHEMAS AND THEY ARE SO CRUCIAL TO OUR WORK WITH BABIES AND TODDLERS’.

Programme 4: Seeing Voices



Planning for emerging interests and documenting children's learning and development can become an onerous and frustrating task for educators. Especially if the needs of the individual child gets lost in layers of documentation. Planning, observation and recording can become disjointed with one component bearing little relationship to the other.

The aim is to outline a streamlined and effective system that will enable educators to plan for children's emerging interests and needs and make their 'voice' visible. This programme included downloadable emergent planning templates designed by MOSAIC Digital Solutions and completed sample plans for both 0-3's and pre-school age groups.

Below is a flavour of the comments made by educators who completed the MOSAIC 'Seeing Voices' programme:

“

'TAKING PART IN THIS REMINDED THE TEAM OF THE WORK WE DO ON OBSERVING THE CHILDREN'S INTERESTS AND INCORPORATING THESE INTO OUR PLANNING EACH DAY'.

'WE SCRAPPED OUR OLD PLANNING TEMPLATE. ENGAGING IN MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS DURING PLAY INSTEAD.

'NOW WE KNOW WHAT CHILDRENS VOICE IS AND HOW TO RECORD IT'

'USING CURRENT NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF THE CHILDREN TO LET THE PLANNING EVOLVE NATURALLY AND RECORD ACHIEVEMENTS. WE ARE NOW AWARE THAT WE WERE SOMETIMES FOCUSING ON THE LEARNING ACHIEVEMENTS OF CHILDREN BASED OFF A GROUP LEARNING TOPIC... BUT GOING FORWARD WE WILL BE CONSCIOUS TO INCLUDE AND SUPPORT EVERY CHILD INDIVIDUALLY'.

'WE WILL PLAN COLLABORATIVELY AND USE OBSERVATION/ANECDOTAL NOTES TO INCLUDE CHILDREN'S VOICE, INTERESTS & NEEDS'.

'WE ARE ADJUSTING TO OUR PLANS WEEKLY BASED ON OUR OBSERVATIONS ... AND ADJUSTING PLANNING MORE AROUND THE CHILD'S INTEREST'.

Below is what participants had to say following the training intervention...

“

‘...WE HAVE COMMENTED ON BECOMING MORE REFLECTIVE WITHIN OUR PRACTICE, NOTICING WHAT ACTIVITIES MAY NOT BE WORKING, IS THE VOICE OF THE CHILD REPRESENTED IN OUR PLANS, AND HAVE BECOME MORE AWARE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF OBSERVING CHILDREN AND HOW WE CAN FEED THIS BACK TO PLANNING AROUND THEIR INTEREST AND HOW WE CAN EXTEND ON THIS TO FURTHER ENHANCE CHILDREN’S LEARNING OUTCOMES’



“

‘WE WILL FOCUS MORE ON INDIVIDUAL LEARNING OF EACH CHILD AS OPPOSED TO LARGE GROUP OR REPLICATED LEARNING. WE WILL ENGAGE WITH AND PLACE EMPHASIS ON DOCUMENTING THE CURRENT LEARNING AND INTERESTS OF EACH CHILD AS OPPOSED TO A COLLECTION OF OBSERVATIONS TO SHARE WITH PARENTS’...

Then and Now

Participants were asked to think about their understanding of VOICE AND PARTICIPATION in their practice at the end of the project – and specifically how this differed from their understanding at the beginning of the programme. A flavour of the comments made include:

“

‘I NOW UNDERSTAND WHAT VOICE IS. BEFORE I THOUGHT IT WAS JUST FOR OLDER CHILDREN. NOW I SEE VOICE EVERYWHERE IN MY ROOM – TRULY BRILLIANT!’

‘I REALLY THINK THAT SINCE I STARTED FOCUSING ON THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD MORE, CHILDREN SEEM TO BE COMMUNICATING BETTER.’

THIS HAS REALLY OPENED UP MY UNDERSTANDING OF THE BENEFITS OF LISTENING AND WATCHING CAREFULLY – MY OBSERVATIONS NOW HAVE MUCH MORE PURPOSE’



“

‘THE CHILDREN I CHOSE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE VOC PROJECT REALLY ENJOYED BEEN APART OF IT, THEY WOULD LOOK BACK ON THE PICTURES ON THE TABLET AND TALK ABOUT IT. THEY FELT IMPORTANT’

‘WE FEEL THAT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS PROGRAMME IT HAS CHALLENGED US TO REALLY INVESTIGATE OUR PRACTICE AND HAS MADE US MORE AWARE OF INCLUDING THE VOICE OF THE CHILD IN TERMS OF PLANNING AND INTERACTING TO CHILDREN.’

‘WE NOW RECORD WHAT EACH CHILD WANTS TO LEARN AND WHAT THEY ARE LEARNING OR HOW WE ARE OR WILL BE SUPPORTING THEM, NOT WHAT THEY HAVE LEARNED ON ONE TOPIC BUT WHAT THEY HAVE ACHIEVED.’

Then and Now

Participants were asked to name 3 things that they will change immediately due to participating on the programme. The most commonly repeated responses included **seeing the individual child and changing the way curriculum is planned.**

THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD:

‘WE WILL FOCUS ON CURRENT LEARNING AND PROGRESSION NOT JUST A COLLECTION OF UNRELATED PAST EXPERIENCES’.

‘CHANGING THE WAY WE PLAN - CHILDREN’S NEEDS AND VOICES WILL NOW BE VISIBLE ON OUR CURRICULUM PLANS’

‘WE HAVE THE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE TO PLAN & SUPPORT FOR INDIVIDUAL LEARNING, NEEDS AND INTERESTS’.

‘WE WILL BE MORE AWARE OF THE NEED FOR THE CHILD TO BE VIEWED AS AN INDIVIDUAL AND NOT AS A MEMBER OF THE GROUP’.

THE CHILD’S RIGHT TO THEIR OWN WORK IN REAL TIME - SENDING HOME CHILDREN’S ART WORK IN REAL TIME RATHER THAN HOLDING ONTO IT FOR END OF YEAR SCRAPBOOKS’



CURRICULUM PLANNING:

‘WE TENDED TO OVERTHINK THE PROCESS AND GET STUCK IN THE MUNDANE WAY OF DOCUMENTING PLANNING, OBSERVATIONS ETC, THIS TRAINING MADE ME REALISE - WOW, THIS COULD BE EVERYTHING WE HAVE WANTED FOR A LONG TIME, AND WE HAVE JUST BECOME EDUCATED AND CAN ACTUALLY DO THIS IN A MEANINGFUL, PERSONAL AND IMAGINATIVE WAY’.

‘PLANNING WILL CHANGE COMPLETELY AND HAVE BOTH ADULT AND CHILD INPUT RATHER THAN PRE-PLANNED TOPICS’.

‘WE WILL NOT BE PLANNING BROAD TOPICS IN ADVANCE, LETTING TOPICS EMERGE FROM CHILDREN’S INTERESTS AND NEEDS ...’

The learning and legacy

It is important to consider the **legacy** of a project such as this, as this is what will determine the potential for longer term and sustainable change to practice. Participants were asked about the learning legacy of the project for them and the change to their practice going forward.

The most common response was around increased awareness of the voice of the child and how to think from the perspective of the individual child. Another common response was consistency of approach across the whole service in that all staff would be using the same assessment and documentation system.

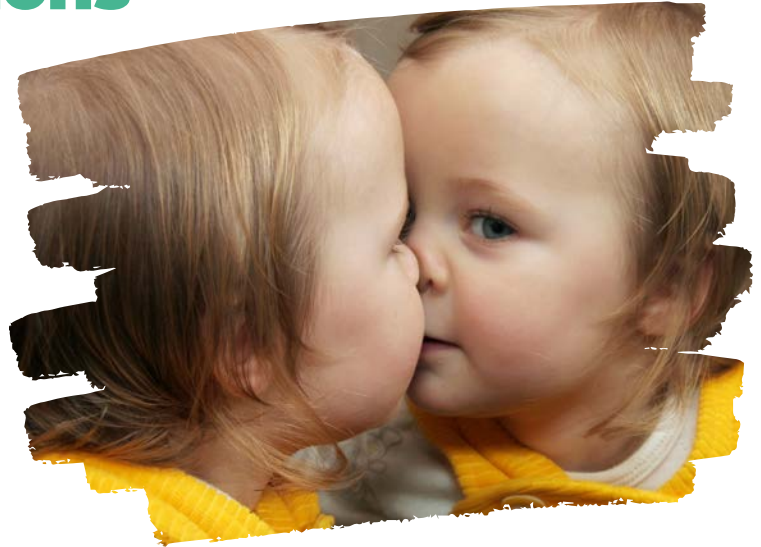


“
‘FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER I KNOW WHAT VOICE IS - IT’S EVERYWHERE IF YOU KNOW WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND HOW TO MAKE IT PART OF EVERYDAY PRACTICE AND RECORDING’.

“
‘..WITHIN RECENT YEARS OUR SERVICE HAS EXPANDED AND EMPLOYED NEW MEMBERS OF THE TEAM. DIFFERING BELIEFS AND PRACTICES HAVE PROVED PROBLEMATIC IN TRYING TO IMPLEMENT AN EMERGENT CURRICULUM WITH TEAM MEMBERS TRAINING COMING FROM VERY DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS . THEREFORE FROM PARTICIPATING IN THIS PROGRAMME ENSURED THAT ALL MEMBERS OF THE TEAM ARE VERY AWARE OF WHAT WE ARE STRIVING TO ACHIEVE MOVING FORWARD’.

- “
‘A CONSISTENT SYSTEM WOULD BE THE MAIN LEGACY FOR US AS A TEAM. WE HAVE COMPLETED PROGRAMMES THAT REQUIRE US TO IMPLEMENT NEW METHODS, IT WORKS OUT FOR A WHILE AND WE GET MUDDLED UP IN OLD WAYS AND FALL BACK. BUT FOR THE FIRST TIME WE ARE ALL EXCITED AND EAGER TO PARTICIPATE IN MOSAIC IN SEPTEMBER. WE ARE DEFINITELY MORE AWARE OF THE VOICE OF THE CHILD GOING FORWARD’.

Researcher Reflection and Recommendations



The Voice of the Child project was **innovative, brave and honest** in its approach to providing a practical intervention to support the areas of the child voice and participation in early childhood education. The project addressed the practical implementation of participation and voice in a way that related to the everyday practice of the busy educator.

The baseline audit of practice around children's voice was interesting in terms of what it revealed and was essential to ensure the programme was directed at the needs of participants. The information provided was comprehensive and mostly accurate in terms of the rhetoric behind including the voice of the child. The link between voice and children's rights was evident in responses and overall there appeared to be a clear understanding of why this area of practice was important.

Educators have without doubt grasped the importance of voice and participation. That being said, it was in the transference to practice where the rhetoric became muddled and the focus on the child became diluted.

According to ***First 5**, priorities for the next decade will be given to identifying and addressing gaps in the quality of all early childhood services and supports. There will be particular emphasis on ensuring that high quality becomes a feature of all forms of early learning and care.

The standardisation of recording systems and tools for educators, accompanied by practical training on the characteristics of voice for all children, should be central to this.

Recommendations: A framework for Intervention and Support

4 enabling factors underpin the effective implementation of the Participation Framework:

1. Organisational buy-in
2. Training and capacity building
3. Resources
4. Monitoring and evaluation.

Researcher Reflection and Recommendations

Regarding **organisation buy-in**, there is no doubt that early learning and care settings are already invested in including the voice of the child. There is a difference however, between wanting to implement something and having the appropriate tools and skill set to do so.

Early learning and care settings should invest in the professional tools to enable educators to implement this area of practice. This is particularly important in the landscape of Covid-19 has changed the way in which educators are able to communicate with parents.

A meaningful Partnership with Parents has always been an integral part of early childhood practice. Covid-19 has challenged this long-held practice. It is essential that early childhood services find new ways of communicating with parents to safeguard this important relationship.

Although there are many aspects of partnership with parents, partnership concerning children's learning and development and the importance of engaging with technology to keep children at the centre of practice in a changing world is vital.

With reference to **training and capacity building**, one of the nine key principles recommended by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) for the practical implementation of CRC Article 12 is that this process is supported by training 'adults need preparation and support to facilitate children and young people's participation. This includes listening, effective cooperation, and knowing how to engage with their evolving capacities' (para.17).

It would be difficult to find a sector that has participated in more training, continuing professional development and general capacity building. However, unless programme content reflects more than the rhetoric of including voice and participation, this will not be properly realised in practice. Not least due to the launch of Ireland's National Participation Framework (DCEDIY 2021), this is a component of early childhood pedagogy that requires consideration.

The imminent update to the Aistear curriculum framework should reflect participation and voice not only in its underpinning principles, but in its practical application. The revised version also needs to make the integration of technology much more visible- both as a documentation tool for educators and for pedagogical use with children.



A FRAMEWORK FOR INTERVENTION AND SUPPORT

4 ENABLING FACTORS UNDERPIN THE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK:

1. ORGANISATIONAL BUY-IN
2. TRAINING AND CAPACITY BUILDING
3. RESOURCES
4. MONITORING AND EVALUATION.

Researcher Reflection and Recommendations

'Decision makers both in Government and within the early childhood service are required to consider what **resources** and tools are required to enable voice and participation. The need for appropriate resources is best served by providing early childhood services with a consistent framework for documenting children's learning, development and voice.

As seen in this project, the disparity of tools and systems used by participants were sometimes at odds with the vision of individual educators and of the service. Not only were these tools and systems different across settings, but they also differed within settings leading to a completely confused pedagogical approach. This lack of a consistent recording framework and disparity in approaches can lead to weakened teamwork, inconsistency in practice and differing outcomes for individual children.

Systems for external **monitoring and evaluation** are already established. A dual inspection process is in place which is well situated to monitor voice and participation using the framework checklist.

Evidence of the level of transference to practice in early childhood settings should inform the development of future policy, services and practice in this area. Internal monitoring and reflective feedback are also essential to this process.

Finally, organisational change is possible to enable the meaningful participation of even very young children. However, this is not a one-off activity to be 'done' as part of a curriculum plan. Participation, seeing and listening to the voice of the child should be embedded in practice to the point where it becomes an instinctive process for educators.

This requires a shared vision and commitment between policy makers, training institutions, monitoring organisations, early childhood services and educators.

'Observing and listening to children carefully is where early childhood education begins. The most important verbs in early education are not 'to talk' 'to teach' or 'to show' – but 'to listen'. This practice is not confined to children who have spoken language. Children of all ages and abilities show us many signs – we need to know what to look for in order to translate the language of the child'... McMonagle, A. 2021



Conclusion

The Voice of the Child Project brought together the 4 enabling factors required to ensure the practical implementation of voice and participation for those working with very young children. Participant feedback speaks for itself. In a relatively short space of time, a focussed intervention on voice made a difference to the educators who took part, making it a valuable intervention to enable change.

However, all change requires time so that new approaches and tools gradually embed within practice and become instinctive to the busy educator. This requires ongoing support.

The key takeaways are:



THE UNIQUE CHILD

Voice and participation are recognised and accepted as a core element of early childhood practice. It's meaningful transfer to practice requires practical implementation support for educators.



TRAINING

Despite training to degree level, it is not a given that all educators have practical experience of some of the fundamentals of early childhood pedagogy. This relative short intervention demonstrated that when a focussed intervention is provided, all service change is achievable.



TOOLS AND RESOURCES

Educators require access to consistent and pedagogically sound tools to record children's learning, development and care. Investment at policy level and at service level is essential to make this happen.



ONGOING SUPPORT

The high staff turnover, mixed messages around pedagogical tools, an over reliance on 'evidence of doing' requires a system of ongoing monitoring and support around pedagogical practice.

This should sit outside primary training and be conducted as a whole staff intervention.

and the final word goes to participants on the programme..



'We would like to take the time to personally thank Avril for all her help and support to our team during this pilot programme and also a massive thank you to the Genesis Programme Team that kindly included us within this pilot programme we have thoroughly enjoyed it and believe we have grown professionally from taking part'.

'We are so grateful for the opportunity to be part of this amazing programme. We have learned so much and are looking forward to starting from the start in September. After every zoom session, we gave feedback to the rest of the team in such excited manner and never struggled to understand the information delivered. A huge thank you to Avril, who was absolutely amazing in delivering this programme. Avril really helped us reflect and critique our practice to be the best it can be'.

'As a service we have found this training invaluable, it encouraged us to bond as a team and ensured we are consistent in the delivery of our curriculum'.

'We feel that every early years' service would benefit hugely from taking part in this training programme. The early years sector has seen massive changes with regards what is expected concerning quality practice and some services may struggle without initial training. I believe that taking part in this programme will give any service the motivation, enthusiasm and skills required to ensure not only the voice of the child is recognised but also raise the standard of quality experiences being provided for the children in their care'.

'This project offers so much, we as a team personally have not felt overwhelmed during this project and every programme brought us closer to where we felt we needed to be as skilled and confident educators'.

'An excellent programme'.



Acknowledgements

A multi-agency working group was established to provide expert opinion on the initiative consisting of representatives from the following agencies:-

Louth Leader Partnership (lead agency)
The Genesis Programme
Louth County Childcare Committee
Louth CYPSC
Louth County Council
Tusla

Representative from Community Based Early Learning and Care Centres
Representative from Privately Owned Early Learning and Care Centres.

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