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Children Photographing Well-being: Facilitating Participation in Research

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Children aged 8–12 years took 723 photographs representing well-being. Another group of children categorised the photographs, identified what was missing and discussed their inter-relationships. The largest categories were 'people I love the most (friends)' (23.2%), 'activities' (18%), 'food and drink' (17.2%) and 'animals/pets' (12.8%). Children reported that the categories were all related and could be subsumed into the general category 'the way I live', reflecting their holistic integrationist perspective on well-being which in turn mirrors the whole child perspective of the Irish National Children's Strategy. The usefulness and limitations of this approach to working with children are discussed. Copyright © 2005 National Children's Bureau.

Introduction

A global commitment to improve child well-being was included in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). In Ireland, the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000) outlines three key goals: children will have a voice; children's lives will be better understood; and children will receive quality supports and services. The National Children's Strategy advocates a 'whole-child' perspective and aims to put in place the structures to facilitate both policy makers and practitioners in refocusing their work. A key action set out under the National Children's Strategy is the development of national indicators of well-being (Department of Health and Children, 2000).

This paper introduces a technique for collecting data with children aged 8–12 years and for involving children in data analysis and interpretation, and describes our first experiences with this approach. The procedures adopted were designed to facilitate children's participation in the development of the national well-being indicators. The approach chosen and developed is explicitly intended to be coherent with the overall goals and conceptual perspective of the National Children's Strategy. The research described here is designed to give children a voice in the development of well-being indicators and in doing so, to provide data that will help children's lives be better understood.

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Increasingly policy development is becoming a collaborative process through participation. Similarly, service provision and practices are being informed by the active participation of specific user groups in a consultation process using techniques that aim to give participants a voice which is heard. This is the case for policy, services and practices that impact on children in that the voice of children is being actively sought out to inform developments (Department of Health and Children, 2000; Thomas and O'Kane, 2000; Clark and Moss, 2001). Contributing to the policy making and service development process is inherently difficult, as abstract concepts that arise are often difficult for both adults and children to explain and deconstruct. Therefore, various techniques have been adopted to give potential contributors a voice.

Art as a conduit to exploration and expression of ideas and thoughts through non-linguistic communication is used extensively in the creative therapies, in the context of illness and increasingly in the exploration of health (Christensen, 2004). Task-centred activities with children, such as the use of art have been used to elucidate children's perceptions and ideas and enable them to express their views to adult researchers (Punch, 2002). Art, in a general sense, has been used as a research tool (Boyatzis, 2000) with the development of sentence completion and writing (Morrow, 1999) and the 'draw and write' technique (Williams *et al.*, 1989) to facilitate children's communication and expression of ideas about abstract concepts such as health and well-being (Portacello *et al.*, 1999; McWhirter *et al.*, 2000; Nic Gabhainn and Kelleher, 2002). Therefore, an artistic medium such as drawing or writing poetry or prose can be used as a means of expression in order to capture such abstract concepts, experiences or phenomena (Szto *et al.*, 2005). The use of art can enable a greater understanding of concepts and ideas and provide further insight.

The 'draw and write' technique is frequently employed in a school context with children asked to draw specific objects that, for example, *make you/keep you healthy*. The children are usually contained within the classroom environment and supervised by teachers or other adults, reflecting that children's lives are circumscribed by adult surveillance (Harden *et al.*, 2000). Both of these contextual parameters are hypothesised to influence their drawing (Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999; Nic Gabhainn and Kelleher, 2002). Further, individuals' perceptions of their ability to draw may limit what they depict (Backett and Alexander, 1991). However, Punch (2002) asserted in a study of Bolivian children's everyday lives that younger children expressed a preference to use drawing over writing and appeared less constrained by any perceived lack of artistic competence. Nevertheless, Harden *et al.* (2000) cautioned that some adults report that as children they found 'art' a confusing medium which they consider likely to be the case for some children today, although this does not appear substantiated by research. Drawing therefore has limitations, some of which can be ameliorated by the use of photography.

The advent of relatively cheap single-use cameras has facilitated the use of photography as a method of data collection with the additional advantage of enabling data to be generated 'by' rather than 'of' or 'from' research participants. This differentiation is important as the use of cameras by participants moves towards providing insight into the insider's view of the world, the emic perspective. This is particularly advantageous when children and young people are involved in research that has traditionally relied on information garnered from parents or other adults (Alderson, 2001).

Cameras, once children are skilled in their use, can be taken outside the school environment facilitating deeper, broader conceptualisations of abstract ideas. Further, they have the potential to be taken into an environment beyond that surveyed by adults and used to depict 'children's places' (as described by Rasmussen, 2004) if children so choose. The technique of photography is less dependent on a child's perception of their ability and the children are enabled to record images that they may not consider themselves able to draw. Punch (2002) identified that children are less likely to be influenced by their friend's depictions in the use of photography than in drawing.

The collection of image-based data in the form of photographs has been most notably used in anthropological and ethnographic studies, usually as an adjunct to other more familiar methods of data collection such as participant observation and interviews (Prosser, 1998; Morrow, 2001; Rasmussen, 2004). While the use of photography alongside other methods of data collection is increasing (Prosser and Schwartz, 1998; Punch, 1998; Morrow, 2001) photographs are still considered to be underused (Bolton *et al.*, 2001) and rarely appear to be employed alone.

Just as the use of photographs in research has increased over time, so has the role of children in research. Hart (1997) identified that this participation can range from tokenistic, to projects initiated and directed by children. The taking of photographs by children to generate data is relatively straightforward and a myriad of so called 'task focused' 'user friendly' methods of data collection often using artistic methods have been reported with the aim of facilitating the expression and active inclusion of children at this stage of the research process (Hill, 1997). The participation of children at this stage and in this way is based on the premise that children have competencies that are different from adults and that these abilities can be recognised and valued in a research context through the use of participatory, task-centred activities to generate data (James *et al.*, 1998). It is suggested that the recognition of these abilities as competencies reduces the power differential between child participants and adult researchers.

These approaches have been used most notably at the point of data collection in the research process, but the active participation of research participants, be they adults or children, is much less evident in the stages of analysis. Mayall (1994) asserted that it is the stage of analysis in the research process where power differentials are most clearly experienced. Harden *et al.* (2000) stated that the inclusion of the concept of the child as possessing competencies at the stage of data collection presupposes that researchers have the skills to analyse data collected in this way. This presents an assumption that only researchers have the ability to analyse data gathered and reinforces the power differential. The need to include research participants in all stages of the research process beyond that of data collection has been identified previously (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Thomas and O'Kane (1998) referred to children contributing to the interpretation of data, as did Christensen (2004). The inclusion of children as coresearchers in the analysis of data moves the research from tokenism to more active participation. A recognised limitation of this research tradition is that *image based researchers have not routinely explicated their research designs* (Prosser and Schwartz, 1998, p. 117). This paper aims at illustrating a broad operationalisation of the concepts underpinning the National Children's Strategy; including employing the 'whole-child' perspective to inform the research process.

Methods

Three mixed gender groups of children in two schools were involved in this study. The first two groups participated in the first phase, taking and annotating photographs representing children's understanding of well-being. A final group in a second school worked together to categorise a sample of the photographs, name and describe the categories, to consider what if anything was missing and how the categories were related to one another. This process is summarised in Table 1.

Phase 1

Introducing the camera

A mixed gender team of researchers visited the classrooms where children were invited to participate in the first phase of this study. The research objectives were to empower children to expand their own understanding of well-being, motivate children to participate and to show the children how to use the cameras. The purpose of the project was explained to the children and they were told that their participation was important and could influence government policy. Children were also told that they did not have to participate and alternative activities were provided, though none took this option. Well-being was described as 'feeling good, being happy and able to live your life to the full' (O'Higgins, 2002). Children were invited to brainstorm 'what makes you well' and 'what keeps you well' and their responses were collected on flipcharts.

The cameras themselves were distributed to each child and they were asked to write their name, sex and age on a label on the back (e.g. name: boy 9). Next, one of the researchers explained how the cameras worked, going through the whole process by taking a photograph. With a researcher by their side, children were asked to take a test photograph, with flash, and then shown again how to wind the camera on. At the same time the researchers checked the labelling of the cameras.

Table 1: Summary of process

Stage	School visit	Time frame	Activity
Preliminary	By post and telephone		Recruit schools, distribute study information, negotiate and secure consent
Phase 1: School 1	First visit	Day 1	Brainstorm well-being, explain process, distribute cameras
	Between visits	Days 1–5	Children take photographs
	Second visit	Day 5	Cameras collected from school
	Between visits	Days 6–8	Cameras developed and processed, and labels affixed to back of photographs
	Third visit	Day 9	Developed photographs returned to children, children annotate one set of photographs and return to researchers, children keep duplicate set themselves
Phase 2: School 2	Single visit	Day 14	Children group pictures together (categorisation) and give the group a title and a description Children give feedback on categories, including what is missing and discuss the relationships between categories

Children were reassured that they could take photographs of anything they liked and if they were unable to take a picture of something that they felt should be included such as a holiday, a grandparent who lives elsewhere or the seaside, they could take a picture of a photograph or brochure. They were told that they did not have to use all the photographs in the camera, and could take as many pictures as they liked. They were also told that if anyone did not want to take part, they could just return the camera unused. They were informed of the date of collecting the camera and that the researchers would be returning to ask them about the developed photographs. Finally, a letter to parents reinforcing these main procedural points and giving guidelines on how the camera worked was distributed. The class teacher ensured that the date of return of the camera was entered into the pupils' homework journals.

Retrieving the cameras from children

Classroom teachers gathered the cameras from the individual children. They were subsequently collected by researchers and returned to the research centre for processing. Two sets of identical photographs were subsequently developed and processed professionally. Labels were affixed to the back of one of the sets of pictures. Each label was left blank except for a short code to indicate the sex, age, class and school of the child.

Annotating photographs

The same group of researchers returned to the classrooms to ask the pupils to annotate the pictures. At the beginning of the session children were given positive reinforcement regarding the photographs and were told that every child took different photographs and that they were all relevant. One set of photographs was returned to pupils and they were asked to write on labels on the back of the photographs what the picture depicted. The classroom teacher assisted in identifying children who needed help in writing. Researchers who moved around the classroom provided assistance. Each child was spoken to at least once during this process, in order to check that they understood and were not distressed in any way by the activity, and to provide help if required. All children received a set of their own developed pictures and the single set of negatives.

Reducing the photographs

Each set of photographs was examined by a single member of the research team for duplicates (conservatively defined as those with the same picture and the same text). All duplicates were removed from the sets of photographs, as were those labelled 'test' or 'practice', those left blank, those labelled *nothing*, *mistake*, *error* or *I didn't mean to take this photograph/picture*.

All remaining photographs were then randomly assigned into groups of 50. Thus, each photograph from each child had an equal chance of being employed in the second phase of the study.

Phase 2

Categorising the photographs

The second phase involved a mixed gender group of children in a second school ($n = 8$) looking at the photographs and dividing them into groups, a process referred

to as categorisation. All children were drawn from 5th class (aged 10–12 years). The task of facilitating this process was undertaken by a second mixed gender research team who were more experienced in working directly with groups of young people. Phase 2 involved the division of photographs into categories and the construction of preliminary schema or models of well-being.

All group participants, including the researchers, wore nametags in order to facilitate communication. The group themselves agreed ground rules for the group session, which in all cases included observing confidentiality about the photographs and about the contribution of others in the group and showing respect for all group members. The group was briefly introduced to the concept of well-being; using the same description as was employed in the first phase as described above. Sets of 50 photographs were sequentially introduced to the group. Children worked on deciding how many categories there should be, what they should be called, and which photographs should be placed in which categories. The researchers continued to introduce sets of 50 photographs until saturation was achieved, that is until no new categories were being created. Once the introduction of new sets of photographs ceased, the group concentrated on naming and describing each category.

Finally, the group discussed whether there were any categories missing and how the categories were related to one another. All sessions were audio-recorded and the researchers took contemporaneous notes. Researchers were debriefed after each session.

Results

A total of 43 children participated in this study. In phase 1, 35 children (19 girls and 16 boys) took and annotated photographs. These children comprise two full class groups: 3rd class (age 8–10 years) and 5th class (10–12 years); no child declined to participate. In phase 2, eight pupils (four boys and four girls, 10–12 years) selected by the class teacher from a 5th class group participated.

The first pieces of data that were collected were the responses to the brainstorming. In the 3rd class group, children said: *food, sweets, vegetables, exercise, milk, water, sport, fruit/fruit juice, sleep, birthday party and washing*. In the 5th class group the children said: *exercise/keep fit, food – vegetables, calcium – milk and cheese, water – clean and drink, omega 3 and 6, orange juice*.

In phase 1, 723 photographs were annotated by children. Some of these were subsequently removed from the data set. Table 2 illustrates the number and percentage of photographs removed from the initial data set and the reasons for which they were removed. No photographs were removed because of lack of clarity or focus.

Table 3 presents the categories as determined by the children involved in phase 2. Category names and content descriptions were developed by the group themselves.

The children reported that a number of things were missing from the photographs: *Clubs, Skateboard Ramps and Skateboards, Homework (because you can get smarter so you can get a job), Help – People who help each other and people who care for others, People, Jobs –*

Table 2: Photographs removed from the data set by reason and group, by class group and gender

Gender	Boys		Girls		Both		Girls	Boys	Both
Class	3rd	5th	3rd	5th	3rd	5th	All		All
No. of photographs	235	94	221	173	456	267	394	329	723
Blank	24 (10.2)	8 (8.5)	5 (2.3)	0 (0.0)	29 (6.4)	8 (3.0)	5 (1.3)	32 (9.7)	37 (5.1)
Duplicate	14 (6.0)	1 (1.1)	16 (7.2)	8 (4.6)	30 (6.6)	9 (3.4)	24 (6.1)	15 (4.6)	39 (5.4)
Test/practice	2 (0.8)	0 (0.0)	5 (2.3)	3 (1.7)	7 (1.5)	3 (1.1)	8 (2.0)	2 (0.6)	10 (1.4)
Nothing	2 (0.8)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (0.4)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (0.6)	2 (0.3)
Mistake/error	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	10 (4.5)	2 (1.2)	10 (2.2)	2 (0.7)	12 (3.0)	0 (0.0)	12 (1.7)
Photographs remaining	193 (82.1)	85 (90.4)	185 (83.7)	160 (92.5)	378 (82.9)	245 (91.8)	345 (87.6)	278 (84.5)	623 (86.2)
<i>n</i>	11	5	10	9	21	14	19	16	35

Values are *n* (%) of total photographs taken within a column.

Table 3: The categories of photographs (*n* = 250) taken and classified by primary school children

Category	Content	<i>n</i> (%)
People I love the most (friends)	Friends, family, playing, helping each other, doing activities together, in school together, laughing together (making each other laugh)	58 (23.2)
Activities	Sport (rugby, golf, football, basketball), music, dancing, swimming, exercise, chess, toys (trains and cars), bikes, reading, running, lots of sports gear, movies, games, taking pictures, winning	45 (18.0)
Food and drink	Vegetables, fruit, cereals, spuds, butter, bars, chips, sweets, rice, turkey, bread roll, water, milk, ribena, orange juice	43 (17.2)
Animals/pets	Dogs, cats, mice, gerbil, horses, hen, hamsters, guinea-pigs, pups, birds, baby lamb	32 (12.8)
Nature and geography	Gardens, air, sky, trees, sleep, atmosphere, sparrow, flowers, leaves, hay, birds and nests, rocks, sun	27 (10.8)
Family	Mums, dads, brothers and sisters, babies, grandparents, children	21 (8.4)
House/where I live	Flowers, TV, play station, piano, cooker, windows, sitting room, toilet, beds, fireplace, kitchen, clocks	12 (4.8)
School	Principal, teachers, children, gates, playground, football pitch, basketball	7 (2.8)
Sleep	No definition or description given	5 (2)

*people working, Tablets, Clifden*¹ (because it's like my second home), P.E. (Physical Education) and Exercise.

The children found it difficult to discuss the relationships between the categories, primarily because they were *all related to each other*. They agreed that a number of pairs of categories could be considered together: 'sleep' and 'house/where I live', 'activities' and 'school', and 'family' and 'people I love most (friends)'. They also agreed that 'pets/animals' should be added to 'family' and 'people I love most (friends)' and that 'pets' led to 'nature/geography'. Finally they reported that in order to participate in 'activities' and 'school' you might need 'food and drink'. The children argued that all

¹The name of a town 50 miles away from the school.

the categories and all the photographs could be amalgamated to create a category entitled 'the way I live' (Figure 1).

Discussion

These data illustrate that children present an inclusive view of well-being and of their own lives. The photographs they took and the discussions held during the categorisation process illustrate the broadly positive, holistic and integrated perspectives they hold. Of specific interest is the primacy of relationships and the activity-based nature of their described relationships with those they categorised as 'people I love the most (friends)'. This is reinforced by the category 'activities', the second largest category. Also revealing is the relative lack of biomedical health-related photographs, despite the original responses to the brainstorming activity in phase 1. Though some photographs are classified into 'activities' (e.g. exercise and sport) and 'food and drink' (e.g. fruit and vegetables), most of these were actually annotated with text not related to physical health. For example, many of the sports-related photographs were described as representing having fun with friends or as representing a sense of belonging to a community of team supporters.

More surprising, perhaps, are the categories of 'animals/pets' and 'nature and geography', neither of which emerge as significant in most extant typologies of children's well-being (Ben-Arieh *et al.*, 2001; Torsheim *et al.*, 2001). Children described animals in terms of 'love' and 'like' and focused on the emotional aspects of their relationships with them. The physical aspects of their communities, which were categorised by them as 'nature and geography', were portrayed as providing a sense of continuity and

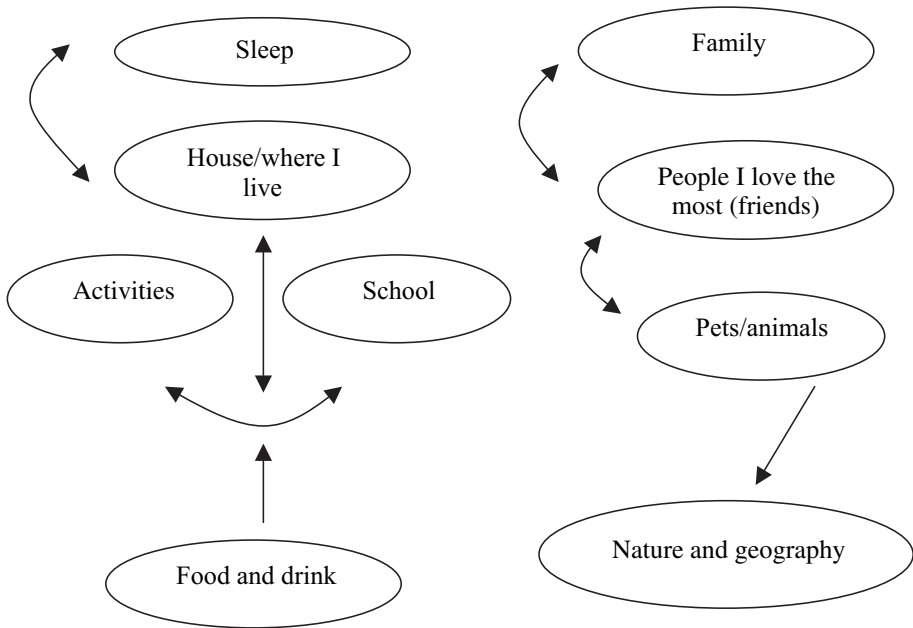


Figure 1: The way I live

security and illustrate the complexity with which they appreciate the broader contexts of their lives.

The study described here represents the initial development of this approach for enabling children's meaningful participation in the policy development process. This technique has provided a conduit through which children's voices can be heard. The process adopted lends itself to the emergence of consensus during the analysis phase of this research. However, due to the social posturing and self-censoring inherent within group settings, this process minimises the potential to fully explore and explicate the particular perspectives of specific groups of children. Thus, it may be desirable to adapt the research design so that children representing population subgroups are fully engaged in both photograph taking and analysis in relatively homogeneous groups. This may facilitate the participation of children from less dominant societal groups.

There are a number of practical steps, which need to be actively planned and timed. The support of schools and specifically of classroom teachers was crucial during the data collection phase. They were particularly helpful in enabling full participation of all children, particularly through language support. This project was described as 'fun' by fieldworkers. Indeed their enthusiasm was maintained and enhanced throughout and helped to negate practical difficulties as they arose in the classroom and the coordination of the development and return of the photographs. Teachers and fieldworkers suggested replacing the brainstorming session and use of flip-charts with time spent on quiet reflection and class feedback as this may further facilitate the participation of individual children.

In order to minimise classroom disruption, teachers suggested that once the cameras were labelled they could be collected and returned to the children at the end of the day. We also suggest focusing attention on the timing of the collection of undeveloped cameras from schools in order to facilitate the inclusion of late returns. The group processes require excellent facilitation skills, specific to the group; the ideal fieldworkers combine classroom or other formal experience working with children and an appreciation of methodological rigour. Although disposable cameras are now readily available and relatively cheap, conducting a large research project with this technique may prove more expensive than a more traditional method. However, the quality of the data collected compensates for this. In addition, being in a position to return data (photographs) and the negatives to the children explicitly acknowledges the joint ownership of the data by the children and the researchers.

In conclusion, these methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation have facilitated the inclusion of children's perspectives in the policy development process. The data received were of high quality and the participating children engaged with the data in a positive and creative fashion. Thus this approach has proved feasible and fun, and we recommend it to colleagues.

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