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"Building a better picture" – Practitioners' views of using a listening approach with young disabled children

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study of practitioner's use of In-the-Picture - a reflective, observational approach, - when delivering early intervention programmes to young disabled children. To date In-the-Picture has been used mainly by researchers to study interactions and learning between young children, practitioners and the children's parents in home and early childhood settings. Practitioners involved in this early research had expressed an interest in using the tool themselves. This project aimed to engage such potential users, support them in using the approach and gain evidence of its impact upon their practice.

In-the-Picture facilitates listening and communication between adults and children with learning disabilities. It is based upon a socio-cultural understanding of learning, seeing the parents, children, and practitioners as agents participating in an emerging teaching and learning process. It derives from qualitative grounded research method which enables the researcher to consider the child's perspective, through the use of first-person narrative observation, photography of the child's focus of attention, and reflective discussion with the child, practitioners, and family.

This study involved 10 Portage services in England, who provide weekly home visits with a focus on supporting play and communication with their child. Training was delivered to over 80 Portage Home Visitors across these 10 services. A selected sample of 20 practitioners, 2 from each service, was interviewed after 6 weeks and again within focus groups after 3 months. All interviewees used the approach in their own way, and identified challenges in its use but In-the-Picture was seen as relevant and valuable by all the participants, producing changes in thinking and practice, whilst proving flexible and simple to use. The study also exemplified how current early intervention working practices in England limit the opportunity to engage with the child's perspective and how practitioners value having the opportunity to do so.

Introduction

In-the-Picture is a multi-modal listening approach developed by researchers at the Open University in the UK to respond to the challenges of engaging with the experiences and perspectives of very young children with communication or learning difficulties (Paige-Smith and Rix, 2011). Fore-fronting children's agency is an underpinning theoretical starting point for In-the-Picture. It draws from a socio-cultural perspective which emphasises that all children, rather than being passive recipients of their surrounding culture, act as co-contributors in its ongoing production (Rogoff, 2003; Corsaro, 2005). Consequently, very young children with communication or learning difficulties can be as active in decision-making and choice-taking as their peers (Nind, Flewitt and Payler, 2010).

The combination of socio-cultural theories and thinking (Lave 1988, Rogoff 1990), with the assertion of children's right in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) and the emerging sociology of childhood has had a considerable influence on research and practice with young children (Qvortup, Corsaro and Honig 2009). Researchers have acknowledged young children's significance as participants rather than subjects and studies have shifted from a 'research on' to a 'research with' focus (Clark 2011). The increasing recognition of children as competent individuals, 'playing an active part in a search for meanings' (Clark 2017, p.23) has elevated the importance of engaging with their unique perspectives and views on their own situations and experiences (Sandberg 2017). Rinaldi emphasises that such engagement is at the core of the learning relationship between practitioner and child and that a 'pedagogy of listening' should be the foundation of early childhood practice (Rinaldi 2006). 'Listening to

children' therefore has the potential to shift from being occasional and tokenistic to being embedded in and fundamental to everyday practice (Bath 2013, Merewether and Fleet 2014, Clark 2017).

However, any intention to listen to children and seek their perspectives reveals complexities and tensions particularly for very young children or those who are non-verbal. Practitioners may be wary of finding out what children think and experience because of the consequence of then responding to such insights (Hudson 2012, Sandberg 2017). They may fear that the 'parameters of discipline and behavioural control' (Hudson 2012, p.3) may be subsequently breached. More fundamentally adult listeners may disregard the value of some children's perspectives on the basis of their maturity or capability (Bae 2010, Stafford 2012, Hudson 2012).

A 'listening to children' paradigm within research and practice can often privilege young people who communicate conventionally, in ways that readily engage the listener (Warming 2011). Studies have shown that disabled children (of all ages) are often less likely to be listened to and have their views taken into account (Franklin and Soper 2009, Gray and Winter 2011). To engage with the views of all children, however young and however they express themselves, requires attention to their diverse and intricate efforts to communicate (Pascall and Bertrand 2009, Brooker, 2011, Payler et al 2016). For example, Nyland emphasises the significance of hand gestures as providing a 'valuable window into children's thinking and learning' (Nyland et al. 2008, p.73) and Schnoor highlights that young children's vocalisations in a crèche setting represent a key aspect of their 'voice' (Schnoor 2012). However Payler, Georgeson and Wong, in their participatory study with young children with additional needs, caution that 'appreciation of the many different communicative channels available to young children with disabilities is not straightforward; often only those closest to them can 'hear' their voices' (Payler et al. 2016 p.17). When researchers have observed practitioners using techniques, such as the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001), to engage with the perspectives of young children they have found that they have had to adapt the tools they have used to accommodate the complexity of children's communication (eg: Gray and Winter, 2011; Merewether and Fleet, 2014). Other researchers suggest that it also required a commitment from the practitioners to take more time with interactions and a willingness to be flexible and innovative in order to engage with different children (Georgeson et al, 2014; Schwartz et al, 2015).

In-the-Picture also draws from the 'listening to children' paradigm upon which the mosaic approach is based (Paige-Smith and Rix 2011). The approach involves 4 elements or perspectives:

- making and recording first-person narrative observations, written from the perspective of the child (I pick up the ball...I carry it outside...I throw it to the girl and she runs away...)
- taking photographs of the child's focus of attention during play, interactions and early intervention activities
- exploring the child's responses to experiences by sharing with them the photographic record
- discussions between involved adults after observation and sharing sessions.

To date In-the-Picture has been used mainly by researchers to investigate interactions and learning between young children, practitioners and the children's parents in home (Paige-Smith and Rix 2011, Rix and Matthews 2014) and early childhood settings (Parry 2014, 2015). However, practitioners involved in past research have often expressed an interest in using the tool themselves (Parry 2015).

This paper reports on a project which aimed to engage with practitioners, in this case those working in Portage services, support them in using In-the-Picture and subsequently explore their experiences of using the approach. Portage is an educational service for families with a disabled child who is of pre-school age. It provides weekly home visits by a trained practitioner with a focus on supporting play and communication

with the child. The activities and interactions between children, parents and practitioners during these visits therefore provided rich and appropriate context for examining the research study's overarching question: In what ways does the use of In-the-Picture impact upon the practice of a cohort of early years professionals? The study did not attempt to evaluate the children's and family's experience of this practice, but rather it focuses upon the practitioner's perceptions of its impact.

Method

All registered Portage services in England were contacted through an email request circulated to Heads of Service by the National Portage Association and via a posting on their practitioner online forum. The nature of the project was then discussed with each interested service and information shared electronically. Subsequently, training was delivered to 10 Portage services in the South East of England; in total 81 Portage Home Visitors attended these sessions. A private Facebook page was also set up so that participants could share their experiences and raise any issues they may feel the need to.

The practitioner participants in each service were volunteers. The children and families involved in the research were identified by the practitioners taking part. They were already working with these families. Each family will have been referred to a Portage Services either personally or by a professional and been subject to initial assessment, but no information about the children or their families was sought. In line with Portage practice, all children will have been aged 0-4 and have had a diagnosis of an impairment associated with severe learning and communication difficulties or a significant concern raised in relation to development.

Six weeks after the initial training a phone interview was undertaken with a purposive sample (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, Tenant & Rahim, 2014). Each of the 10 services was asked to provide two Portage Home visitors (n=20) to be interviewed and attend a subsequent focus group. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. Telephone interviews were seen as being relevant both because of the geographical spread of the participants, the familiarity of the medium and its convenience to practitioners (Oltmann, 2016). They also provide a quality of data equivalent to that gained through personal interviews (Rogers, 1976: Novick, 2008), for both factual information and behaviours (Schober and Conrad, 1997; Schober et al., 2004), and attitudes and opinions (Barriball et al., 1996). There is some disagreement surrounding optimal length for telephone interviews (Christmann, 2009) with a long-established debate about whether they should be relatively short (Lavrakas, 1998) or longer (Rogers, 1976). It was decided, given the open nature of many of the questions, that prescribing a set time limit was not appropriate for these interviews. However, given the busy work-lives of the interviewees it was presumed that the interviews would not last longer than an hour. It transpired that the shortest interview was thirty minutes whilst the longest ran for just under fifty minutes. The length was governed by the amount of time interviewees spoke when answering questions, and the need for the interviewer to ask them to clarify, elaborate, specify or verify meaning.

Both researchers were experienced in the use of phone interviews to collect data, but the primary interviewer throughout was the second author, who had been in contact either in-person or over the phone with all the participants. It was seen as important to establish and build upon an initial rapport with the interviewees prior to the semi-structured interview, particularly as in telephone interviewing there is not the opportunity to develop and maintain rapport through non-verbal cues. Supportive verbal cues were also used throughout to mitigate against this lack of visual communication (Barriball et al., 1996; Cachia, M. & Millward, L., 2011). Nine of these interviews involved two interviewees and two involved one interviewee. In each of these individual or small group phone interviews the second author asked the main questions and controlled the dynamics of the group discussion; the first author took on a secondary role, listening and making notes and then joining in when invited by the first researcher, to seek clarification, to dig deeper into a particular issue or to engage in dialogue with specific participants.

After three months of using In-the-Picture a focus group event was undertaken, involving all 20 interviewees. The discussions were divided into three sub-groups with colleagues from the same service being separated. The focus groups were facilitated by the three authors, who used a protocol and general questions to guide the discussion but who also sought to encourage group discussion between participants, allowing them to control the overall direction of the conversation and share and compare (Morgan, 2012). Within the group interviews the researchers had adopted an 'investigative' role, whilst within the focus groups they played a more peripheral role; rather than being centre-stage to the conversation they enabled the inter-relational dynamics of the participants (Parker and Tritter, 2006). Each group worked through two discussion sessions with their facilitator which lasted ninety minutes. The sessions were recorded for later transcription.

The first two authors were aware that their association with the development of In-the-Picture may have constrained negative comments from the participants. Two processes were introduced to the focus group event in an attempt to counteract this possibility. Firstly, one of the groups was facilitated by the third author who had no prior knowledge of In-the-Picture or Portage; secondly, at the end of the focus groups the issue of potential bias was raised and each participant was asked to submit anonymous feedback on their experience of In-the-Picture and how they would describe it to colleagues. One group, chaired by the facilitator with no associations to In-the-Picture decided not to write down their comments but to have a discussion about their experience; this discussion was transcribed. Following the overall analysis, these comments were compared to the overall findings and no contradictory evidence emerged.

The interviews and focus groups were analysed thematically using an approach drawn from grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The transcripts were divided equally between the first two authors. Each of them then undertook a thematic analysis of the first transcript, adopting an open-coding approach, breaking apart the data and identifying concepts which represented aspects of that data. They then shared their analysis and each checked both the themes identified by the other and their allocation of quotes to those themes. A moderating discussion was then undertaken in which theme titles were agreed and clarified. This reduced the number of overall themes but identified the emergence of sub-themes. The first author then completed analysing the six focus group interviews and the second author completed analysing the eleven interviews. Again, a moderating discussion was undertaken with a view to cohere any new themes which had emerged. One new theme had emerged within the focus groups, around training. Each researcher then took half of the themes from the interviews and focus groups and began a process of comparative analysis, to double check their coherence and to seek out general properties and dimensions, clarifying sub-themes within each theme. However, the intention was not to seek saturation however. It was soon recognised that the nature of the data meant that insights and patterns rather than absolutes were the best that could be hoped for; what emerged would be evidence of diversity within Portage Home Visitors rather than inherently generalisable to the wider population of early years practitioners. Since there were two sets of data from the same participants, each quote was identified with an individual code and the number of quotes within each theme and sub-theme was recorded and their source, so as to get a sense of their potential importance across the whole population of interviewees (see Table 1).

Table 1: Themes and number of quotes and speakers from interviews and focus group (n=20)

Themes	Number of quotes	Number of Identified speakers (n=20)	Quote from an unidentified speaker at focus group
Influence on thinking	53	16	6
Giving new insight	27	13	1

Use for particular children	22	12	2
Use in different contexts	57	17	3
Issues of planning	17	8	1
Enjoyment	10	6	0
Working with families	69	17	3
Response of other practitioners	11	7	2
Different approaches to In-the-Picture	37	15	5
Ease of In-the-Picture process	39	15	4
Impact of 4 perspectives	30	17	10
Relationship to established practice	39	15	3
Over Claiming	2	2	0
Developing training in In-the-Picture	24	13	7

Ethics

Portage is a weekly home visiting service which is based upon a trusting relationship between a practitioner and the family with whom they work. Each week the family (usually one parent) meets with the Portage worker to devise developmental activities together to practice with the child during play. A whole range of activities are undertaken, frequently images are shared or recorded and discussions are held about all kinds of personal issues relating to the child. The families and their Portage worker will try out a whole range of activities for short or long periods to assess their value to themselves and their child. The issue of consent and trust is at the heart of this relationship. It is one initiated by families who request the support of the service.

In this study, the families were approached by the Portage worker who discussed the use of In-the-Picture in the same way they would introduce any other activity. All practitioners were provided with explanatory information on the project for the families and children to go alongside their established service consent processes. The decision to try out In-the-Picture was dependent upon the subsequent discussion between the parents and the worker about its possible benefits and uses. Their Portage home support continued whether they used the approach or not. As with all other Portage activities, a process of continuous consent is also in place, so that during a Portage visit the practitioner was led by the parent and child as to whether to use or continue using In-the-Picture. As with all Portage worker records any material collected was shared with and held by the family for them to do with as they wish. Observational data collected by the practitioners relating to the children (photographs, notes, pro-forma) was not retained by the researchers. However, if a home visitor wished to share images or narratives with the researchers, they had to seek and confirm additional consent.

The research was approved by the Open University's Human Research Ethics Committee. It followed the Open University policy documents: 'Ethical Principles for Research Involving Human Participants' and 'The Code of Practice for Research and Those Conducting Research' and adhered to BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011), as well as the Data Protection Act (1998).

Findings

Influence upon thinking

Sixteen of the interviewees stated that the use of In-the-Picture had an influence upon their thinking or other people's thinking. Whilst five talked about it bringing a deeper focus and eight talked about its impact upon the thinking of other practitioners or parents, thirteen talked about how it impacted upon their practice directly. They talked about how they were more likely to take the child's lead or consider things from the child's perspective.

*It's taught me to hold back more I think, and watch rather than be jumping in.
(Participant A1 Focus Group 1)*

Participants talked about stepping back, slowing down, letting the child lead and becoming more empathetic. They talked about breaking a habit of focusing upon targets and activity plans, recognising that it encouraged them to work in ways they felt should be working and as they had been trained to:

*I think for children with special needs we actually focus much less on their interest, I think that we can quite easily get trapped into the outcome focused sessions in portage sometimes. So I think it's been really helpful I think for encouraging us to be confident, to follow the child's interests because we all know that that's really excellent practice.
(Participant E2 Interview 5)*

But they also talked about it changing their mindset, becoming something in 'the back of the mind' which pops up; a tool for reflection that meant they considered practice in the moment. There was a sense too that it '*disciplines yourself in a way to actually look, really look at what they're looking at*' (Participant F2, Interview 6), so that the observer became aware of the child's perspective. Participants talked about it impacting on their understanding of the child and presumptions about their capabilities and learning; this in turn gave them greater confidence in trying something out and then seeing where it led. Twelve of the participants also talked about In-the-Picture bringing new insights. For six participants, these insights arose through reflection with parents but nine of them specifically talked of new insights about a child:

when I showed her the picture she went to my bag and was looking for the baby bag [in which toys were kept], she could get the hat out. So it showed that she had a really good understanding, which I didn't realise. Because as a non-verbal child I didn't realise, didn't know how much of her understanding there was. (Participant B1 Focus Group 2)

Examples of new insights about the child that the practitioners gained included: knowing the names of things but not how to play with them; playing more imaginatively and being more aware of what was 'going on' in their environment; discovering new items they liked to play with; revealing a sense of humour; focusing in detail upon a particular aspect of a toy; and recognizing that they sought a deeper, emotional connection. Other insights were that as a practitioner they were pushing the child too fast to achieve something and how using In-the-Picture helped them when they were 'properly stuck' in where to go next with engaging with the child. One practitioner was interested to discover that a child needed them less than they thought.

An important part of this gaining of new insights was the focus upon minutiae and the non-verbal gestures, a possible consequence of the influence participants felt In-the-Picture had upon thinking, the 'drilling down' that one practitioner felt stopped her from 'generalising' the child. This perhaps meant that practitioners saw In-the-Picture as being particularly useful in certain contexts; thirteen practitioners talked of its value in groups settings, in early years settings and at points of transition, whilst fourteen of them talked about using it when first visiting a child or to review and refresh ideas during the visiting period.

Relevance to practice

The capacity for In-the-Picture to influence thinking and practice in different contexts, perhaps gives an insight into why seventeen of the practitioners made statements that showed they believed it to be of value in working with families. Nine practitioners saw it as a way to add to families' understanding or to

explain things to them, whilst fourteen felt that it changed the way the parents played with their children, increasing their involvement with the child and with Portage.

I think it's actually a really non-threatening way to do observation with parents. And you can have that gentle reflection. And also it allows for us to pick up on the subtleties with children that maybe as a parent if you haven't had the same early years educational background that we have you might not pick it up – and that's not to put them down or anything, it's just a different set of eyes. And that's helped parents because they've realised actually their child's made loads of progress even in the last couple of months that we've been doing it. And that they're now learning to pick up on the subtleties. So it's making them feel better, empowering them in their play with their child. (Participant K2 Focus Group 1)

Overall the majority of practitioners viewed In-the-Picture as being relevant and appropriate to their established Portage practice. Seventeen interviewees made comments emphasising that the approach fitted in with what they did in their work with families and many emphasised that In-the-Picture reaffirmed some of the core principles of Portage, particularly relating to its child centred outlook:

Certainly the feedback from our service [is] that it really puts the emphasis on the child-led part of the visit, which sometimes can get lost in the structures and things, the other things that you have to go through. And that it's a really positive thing for bringing the emphasis back on that and almost making you feel justified in focusing on that. (Participant L1 Focus Group 3)

The idea of stepping back or slowing down during engagement with children which emerged as a theme in the interviewees' general impression of In-the-Picture also re-surfaced in their consideration of the approach in the context of their familiar practice. Ten practitioners highlighted that this potential change to the pace of their visits could be prompted by the introduction of In-the-Picture and several participants saw this as liberating the more structured aspects of their role:

I think that's quite an important part, that at one point throughout the sessions that we give the parents...that we actually sit back and see how far...it's those little tiny subtle things that you sometimes miss when you're doing a session because you're busy showing the parent and you might miss a real subtle thing that the child does. (Participant I1 Interview 9)

The practicalities of fitting In-the-Picture into a busy schedule during a home visit was also a key issue, being raised by nineteen of the interviewees. For the majority, the impression was that In-the-Picture readily integrated into their home visit routine because of its flexibility, but some talked about having to consciously plan to fit it in. For other practitioners, the practicalities were complicated by both parents and children's expectations about the Portage worker providing more formal, adult lead activities. One practitioner's view captured the tensions around integrating In-the-Picture into the packed demands of their day to day work; encapsulating the interconnected factors that shape the introduction of any new practice into a social environment:

(We need) permission to do it...from, well from ourselves...to say I can do this, it's justified, it's legitimate, I can take X minutes out for this. And while you're doing it the parents know you're doing this, and housing can be set aside for a moment, and the fact that they haven't got speech therapy yet can be set aside for a moment. And everything stops, and it's all about the child. This is what we're doing. (Participant G1 Focus Group 3)

The role of the four perspectives

As well as reflecting on the overall impact of In-the-Picture on their thinking and practice, the interviewees highlighted different aspects of the approach as being significant. Half of the practitioners identified making

first-person narrative observations as being an effective approach because it enabled them to be more focused observers.

I think it's really powerful writing the first-person description. And it felt different to what we've done before, what I've ever done before.....it really, really, really focuses you in much more effectively than just sitting and watching and making the odd note. (Participant E2 Interview 5)

Some practitioners linked such effectiveness to being more engaged with the child's experience during the first-person observations, an engagement that one interviewee reflected '*tapped into some emotions there...putting myself in the child's situation.*' (Participant A2 Interview 1)

Conversely eight practitioners focused on the difficulties that they had with using the first-person narrative within In-the-Picture. Reasons for these difficulties included: accommodating a less conventional approach to carrying out observations; the physical act of writing as well as watching; and changing the practitioner role during a home visit to being more passive and less continuously engaged with play activities with the child. Only one practitioner raised the potential of first-person narrative observation to make assumptions and unsubstantiated claims about the child. However, they reasoned that its purpose was not gathering objective evidence but as a reflective tool for '*building a better picture of them and a better relationship with them.*' (Participant K1 Interview 11)

Thirteen practitioners highlighted the aspects of In-the-Picture where photographs were shared as supporting engagement with both the children and parents. Examples were given where the child's reaction to the photographs added a new dimension to the interviewee's insight and understanding:

I was convinced that he won't recognise any picture, any photo he's not interested in ... and he's not interested in watching a picture of his family, not at all. But the toys that he was playing with and he chose two and it was also the way how mum engaged with him was quite wow, you know, there is more to this child. (Participant I2 Interview 9)

However, difficulties in sharing the photographs also emerged as a theme from several of the interviews. Four practitioners recounted that some children were distracted by the use of the screen to display the images and were keen to follow their own exploration of the equipment. Nine interviewees also connected the child's apparent lack of interest in the photographs with their perceived level of development, understanding or capacity to maintain attention.

The sharing of the photographs with parents particularly when combined with the observations appeared to make a more consistent positive impression on the interviewees. As one practitioner remarked:

So I think in a way we're taking such sort of deep notice of a little snapshot and you're sharing that moment together aren't you and, you know, what's the word, exploring what you've seen together, and that was quite a nice moment actually. (Participant A1 Interview 1)

Fourteen practitioners identified the reflective element of In-the-Picture as having particular significance for them as they reflected on their experiences. Participants highlighted that during their home visits the observations and photographs served as a focal point for discussion with the families and also influenced everyone's thinking about the child. In contrast some interviewees noted that the impact of the reflective discussions could be much more variable and affected by the complex dynamics of the relationship between practitioner and family. As one person observed:

I think it depends which parent you get, but I think some of the parents have just gone yeah I know that or, oh that was useful, so the discussion paths haven't been as, I don't know what word I'm looking for, revolutionary. (Participant J1 Interview 10)

It is important to recognise that the practitioners only worked with In-the-Picture for three months and in that time some participants used the process as little as twice because they wanted to use it when they started working with a new family whilst others used it three or four times a month. Within this varied level of usage practitioners also adapted and used the different aspects of In-the-Picture in diverse ways. Fifteen different interviewees described adaptations and variations that they introduced both to individual elements of In-the-Picture and to the process as a whole. Some moved away from writing first-person narrative observations and instead either described the child's play in real time by speaking out loud or by thinking the sequence through to themselves as they watched. Other participants made print copies of the photographs or typed up their observations after the event to subsequently support reflection and sharing with families. Two practitioners experimented with using video to record play before showing children and parents whilst others used mobile phones instead of tablet computers as the children were more comfortable looking at images on these familiar objects. Underpinning many of the descriptions of the variations that the practitioners put in place was a view that using In-the-Picture was an evolving process one that adapted and changed according to different contexts. As one interviewee noted:

For some families it doesn't follow the set elements in the set order, it kind of just works with them. So sometimes it's just like a narrative part and there's a reflective part and then sometimes I'll take a picture, but just, it depends a lot on the family, the day, how their week's been even, because sometimes there are lots of other factors that we need to think about when we're on a visit and it's just making it work for the family the best I think. (Participant G2 Interview 7)

Discussion

In-the-Picture would appear to offer a means of rebalancing within a 'listening to children' paradigm by redirecting the practitioners' inclination to focus on the spoken word (Warming 2011) onto 'the many creative ways that young children use to express their views and experiences' (Clark 2017, p.24) Since this study did not observe the practice discussed any claims about the child's influence are a report of practitioner perception, however from the practitioners' perspective using In-the-Picture created space and opportunity for this shift, whilst at the same time allowing some practitioners to exemplify the children's intricate communication to families and other practitioners. Interviewees specifically noted how their focus increased in relation to body language and the subtle signs they would have otherwise missed (Pascal and Bertrand, 2009). Such accounts of tuning into a range of children's communication when using In-the-Picture highlights the complexities of the listening process (Roberts, 2000) and moves it beyond being a 'technical practice that can be perfected' (Bath, 2013, p.370).

Practitioners also emphasised how their attention shifted to a child's capabilities and interests because In-the-Picture began from the child's perspective. Allied to this shift, they recognised that children were not passive recipients but were co-contributors in the ongoing production of the learning and social situations (Rogoff, 2003; Corsaro, 2005; Waller, 2010). The children's agentive participation within situations was evident in descriptions of observations and comments about the manner in which the children's identity were both revealed and reformed, through allowing them to be active decision-makers and choice-takers (Nind et al, 2010). Importantly for practitioners who are committed to family-centred and child-centred practice (NPA, 2012) it also offered potential routes to encouraging similar shifts in thinking for families, facilitating discussion and encouraging reconsideration of both the child and of familial ways of being with the child.

The trigger for these insights into the children's identity, agency and participation was the manner in which In-the-Picture enabled participants to step back. Across the research, practitioners recognised that this stepping back occurred not only in relation to how they engaged with the child and controlled the learning situation, but also with their more formal workplace practices and from their own presumptions and habits. The interviewees recognised that In-the-Picture or specific elements of In-the-Picture served as a catalyst for shifts in short term thinking about situations and individuals; the testimony of some interviewees

referred too to an impact upon their longer-term mindset. For these practitioners there was a suggestion that the 'stepping back' that In-the-Picture 'allowed other messages to be 'heard', messages that were not answers to the questions that were being asked' (Stephenson, 2009, p. 137) as they questioned their general approach and practice.

Given the relatively small scale of the sample and the short time period over which the study was undertaken it is not possible (nor sensible) to make more than general comments about the specific elements of In-the-Picture or its overall impact upon the thinking and mindset of the participants beyond acknowledging their perception of a shift. We also need to recognise the possibility that simply being part of such a study and the training it involved may have given practitioners a feeling they had a new space and time or permission to step back and reflect, as well as highlighting the need to focus upon the child's perspectives and experiences. However, this proviso has to be set against clear statements within the interviews that engaging in In-the-Picture enabled some participants to recognise that they were not working as they had been trained within Portage. At no point either, in the interviews or focus groups, did the participants point to the training as itself influencing their awareness of the importance of the child's point of view. It is worth noting, too, that in a follow up survey of the ten services one year after the first study finished seven services reported still using In-the-Picture in various ways, and of the other three, one did not respond, one reported their trained staff having moved on and only one service reported not using In-the-picture since the study. Some practitioners also said they struggled to give themselves space, regardless of the study, because of the structured nature of their services or home-visits; whilst other talked about how In-the-Picture just fitted naturally into what they did. This tension reflects perhaps upon the ways of working and identities of both services and individual practitioners, their willingness to innovate (Tangen, 2008; Clark, 2017) and the necessary commitment to take more time (Connors and Stalker, 2007; Georgeson et al, 2014). It also aligns with Fisher and Woods conclusions about changing practice in early years environments through practitioner-led research (Fisher and Wood, 2012). Although 'change is most likely when practitioners are confronted by their own and others practice', the change is most likely to be seen in 'their thinking and a sharpening of their capacity to reflect 'rather than the way that they do things (Fisher and Wood, 2012, p. 125).

Across the research, there was a unanimous recognition from participants that In-the-Picture served a useful function in the context of their practice, reflecting previous findings around Early Years practitioners interest in using the tool themselves (Parry, 2014, 2015). All those who commented on the possible use of In-the-Picture as a tool within Portage, did so to advocate for its inclusion in training, but there was also a strong theme around its potential value to other Early Years practitioners and professionals. An unexpected outcome was the absence of concerns over In-the-Picture – and in particular first-person narratives – putting words into the mouth a child. This issue is frequently raised by professionals when they are introduced to In-the-Picture, and was an issue raised during the initial training in all eleven sessions; but evidently once practitioners had undertaken the process and engaged in the 4 perspectives they understood In-the-Picture to be a tool for reflection and not an evidence base for use within a developmental framework. Perhaps, this response was informed by the practitioner's recognition of the flexibility with which In-the-Picture and the 4 perspectives could be applied. Although the practice of the interviewees was not observed, from their testimony it would appear that no two participants undertook In-the-Picture in exactly the same way, and many used it in different ways in different contexts. This would seem to reflect not only the diversity of personal, professional and service practice, but also the situations participants found themselves in, the responses of children, families and colleagues, and also the presumptions that some practitioners had about children's, families' and their own capabilities. It also reflected their personal preferences and struggles with technology as well as with the processes of first-person narratives, reflection and sharing. It may also reflect the nature of the initial training provided by the authors. During this training, emphasis was given to practitioner's owning the process, the lack of linearity in using the 4 perspectives and the variety of options available in accessing and exploring each of those perspectives.

The study set out to consider the ways In-the-Picture impacts upon the practice of a cohort of early years professionals. In-the-Picture draws from a listening paradigm with key underpinning principles including: children having their own time, activity and space; children as co-participants; and children as competent social actors (Clark, 2005; Matthews and Rix, 2013). These principles are reflected in many of the themes that emerged from the study, suggesting that the practitioners perceived themselves as listeners. Within the data there was discussion about specific changes in planning and organisation, but the primary impact about which practitioners spoke was the impact of In-the-Picture upon ways of thinking within the professional context. Often such thinking highlighted the challenges of engaging with the child's perspective but also reflected on the necessity of taking on such a commitment as a practitioner (Eide and Winger, 2005). In addition, many of the interviewees recognized that there was a distinction between their engagement with the child's perspective and being 'inside' the child's experiences. They acknowledged in their reflections on using In-the-Picture, and in particular the first-person narrative observation, that 'despite the ambition to get as close as possible to children's experiential world, a child perspective will always represent an adult approximation' (Sommer et al, 2013, p. 463). However, these shifts in thinking allowed them to more readily engage with the child's voice, to facilitate family-centred and child-centred practice and to draw upon professional knowledge which had been subsumed by an assessment and target agenda. There was a degree of surprise about both its capacity to achieve these things and the strength of the resultant insights. Consequently, the belief that In-the-Picture would be of value to the practice of many others, was not because of a specific aspect of the process or its robustness and rigour, rather it was its simplicity, flexibility and capacity to create space and engender reflection within a very brief time frame. For time-pressed practitioners, it therefore seemed to serve as a useful tool, one which could be tried occasionally or which could be built into regular practices; one that might not provide answers but was likely to suggest useful questions about the child and their participation within their developing world.

Conclusion

This small-scale study has underlined why children's agency is an underpinning theoretical starting point for In-the-Picture (Paige-Smith and Rix, 2011). A sample of 25% of practitioners trained in its use were involved in paired interviews views and focus group, to explore their experience of using the tool as they wished. The majority of them identified some challenges in undertaking the approach, the relevance and usefulness of some of the perspectives of In-the-Picture in different situations and the differences in how they undertook the process. However, all of those involved identified how the approach in some way had a positive influence upon their experiences with children, families and/or early years settings. As a study, it demonstrated the potential value of In-the-Picture and its component perspectives, but it also clearly highlighted the challenges early years practitioners face in engaging with the child's perspective within current working practices and the importance of seeking that perspective and having a means to create the space to do so.

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