

This is a draft of: Paige-Smith, A. & Rix, J. (2011) Researching Early Intervention and young children's perspectives – developing and using a 'listening to children approach' British Journal of Special Education, 38, 1. 28-36

**Researching Early Intervention and young children's perspectives – developing
and using a 'listening to children approach'**

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Abstract

Recent policy has placed greater emphasis on early intervention programmes for children with learning difficulties (DFES, 2006, 2004 a.b.). Professionals and policy makers expect parents to carry out developmentally task-based 'activities' on a daily basis with their children, which focus upon children's identified problems and 'deficits'. These programmes generally recognise the need for child-centred, family-centred activities, however there is still a focus on 'activities' for children's identified problems and 'deficits'. This approach could be considered to professionalise the parents (Rix & Paige-Smith, 2008a) and to create a 'special needs family' by encouraging parents to take on the professionals values and to work' with their children - rather than allowing them to enjoy a relationship in which they support their children's natural growth, development and creativity through typical childhood experiences (Bridle and Mann, 2000). Little is known about children's perspectives and experiences of these early intervention activities.

This article considers the current context of Early Intervention in England from the perspective and experiences of two families and in particular focuses on two young children identified as having Down syndrome. This case study research has emerged from previous research involving interviews with parents of children diagnosed as having Down Syndrome (Paige-Smith and Rix, 2006, Rix and Paige-Smith, 2008), which raised further questions about early intervention and the pedagogical relationship between the parent and the child. The research also recognised that 'early intervention' can be more than structured activities led by professionals.

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This research builds upon and extends the mosaic approach (Clark, 2004) by researching the perspectives and experiences of these two children who are participating in early intervention programmes in England. The research takes a socio-cultural view of learning, recognising that parents and children are involved in early intervention as 'situated learning' (Rogoff et al, 2001), and focuses upon listening to the child within their everyday context. The child centred pedagogical framework established by Luis Malaguzzi informs this approach by drawing on the notion of 'one hundred languages of children', in particular, the child is viewed as 'strong, competent and active' (Clark, 2004).

Ethnographic research was carried out with the two families, using narrative observations and photography in an attempt to engage with the child's perspective and experiences of learning moments. This initial data served as a source for reflective discussions with parents, and as a further way of assessing the child's perspective on play and involvement in activities. Parents and professionals were also informally interviewed (Rubin and Rubin, 2004). The findings were analysed according to grounded theory, and categories were developed relating to the child's participation in different settings, such as children's centres and the home. The research data provides a way of exploring possible approaches to the assessment of the child's perspective within the early intervention process, as well as parental participation in the process and our understanding of early intervention pedagogy.

Introduction

In this article we firstly consider the context of early intervention, and the way in which the child and the parent are positioned within this. The different models indicate how early intervention can be transient and changeable depending on how impairment, parental involvement, and children's learning has been perceived. We then discuss how the 'listening to children' approach in this article has allowed for a research methodology to develop which supports a clearer understanding of the child's experiences and perspective. We explore how we carried out the research that extends the Mosaic Approach (Clark 2001), and recognises the sociocultural context of the research situation. The research methodology section outlines how data was collected. This included a narrative description of the child's activities and reflective discussion with the parent. Photographs were used as a record to provide feedback to the child and parent about the what the child was doing, and, in particular, what the child enjoyed doing. We present the examples of the children's experiences which indicate how the research methodology informed the findings and supported the development of a listening to children approach. The ethnographic research process evolved into a way of assessing early intervention through a reflective discussion with the parent using the narrative documentation and photographs of the child's favourite objects and activities during play. This approach supported the notion of early years practice and 'democratic space' (Moss, 2008) as both the child, and the parent were participating.

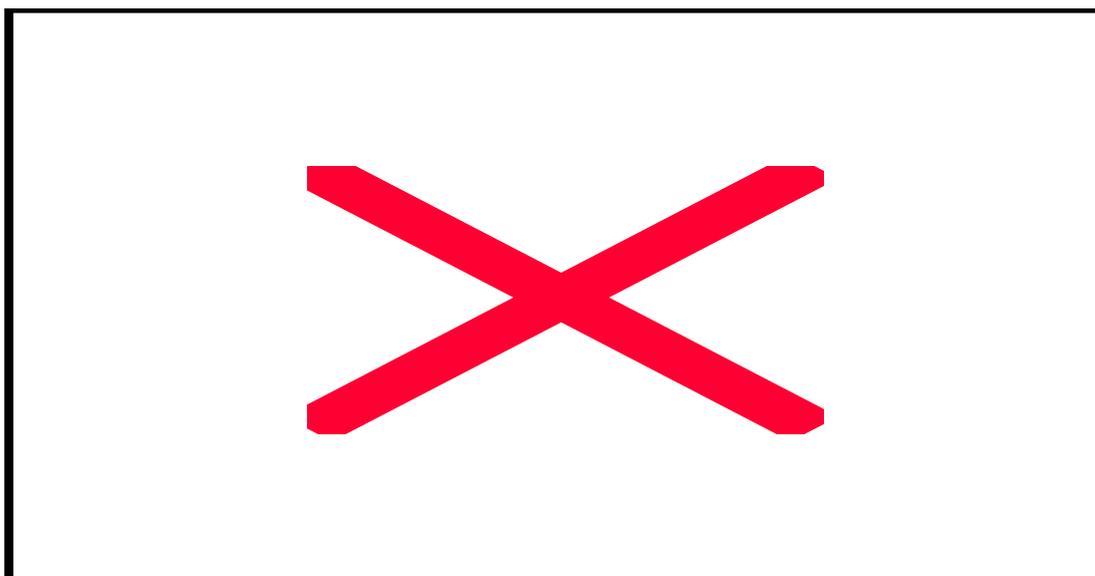
Background – the context of early intervention

Early Intervention is very much at the forefront of current policy and practice (C4EO, 2009), in particular there are significant changes in patterns of service delivery with

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reports like Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003), Together from the Start (DoH, DfE, 2003) and the Early Support Program (2004), placing the child at the centre.

Increasingly Children's Centres have become a base for early childhood intervention, and as Carpenter (2008) notes, managers and support planners need to look carefully at provision and the innovative approaches to support children. Early intervention can be seen as an in-child-deficit response to supporting a child's difficulties. As the diagram below illustrates, however, there is an assumption that early intervention is effective and the family willingly participate in the intervention. Carpenter (2008) suggests that early intervention is part of a vision, improving the life chances of



young disabled children and their families.

Figure 1: The vision for improving the life chances of young disabled children and their families through effective early childhood intervention.

Carpenter (2008) p.146

This vision clearly links to the perception of early intervention as a family centred practice where the professional comes into the home in a partnership relationship with

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the parents. Whilst partnership should ideally be based on a shared aim for parents and professionals Dunst and Dempsey (2007) note that parents may find themselves acting as advocates, information seekers, spokespersons, and public educators on behalf of their sons or daughters, and that:

‘roles become more crucial ...*for*....the parents of children with disability as they become increasingly involved in with a wide community of service providersthese roles are also crucial in the achievement of desirable outcomes in various educational settings and transitions’

(Dunst and Dempsey, 2007, p305).

For example, Truss (2008) a parent of a disabled child, collated information over a period of three years for her child's statement of special educational needs. The statement of special educational needs is a legal document that outlines the child's ‘special educational needs’. She became involved with a large number of professionals including: education officers, psychologists, head teachers, learning support assistants, SENCO's, barrister's, solicitors as well as medical professionals. Truss illustrates how as a parent she gained an understanding of the ‘SEN’ system and how it was supposed to work, and what her son's entitlements were. In this diagram she places the child at the centre – perhaps the parent could be positioned either outside the diagram, supporting the child, or at the centre with the child:

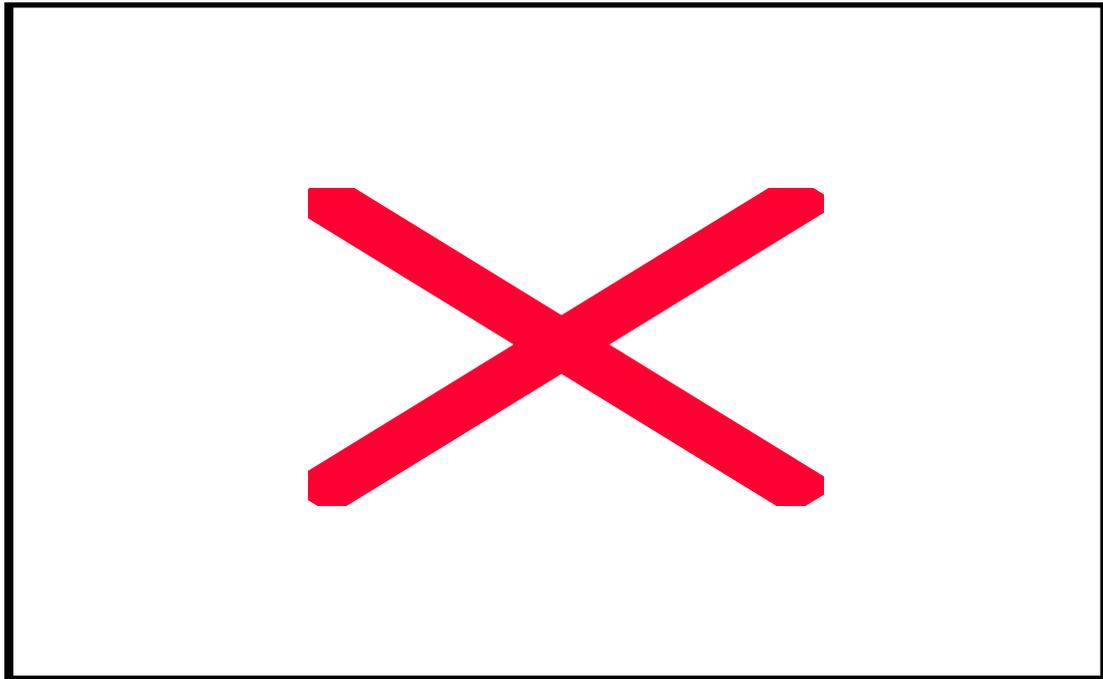


Figure 2: The three domains of the SEN system

Truss (2008) p.373

The models above consider support for the child's learning within a range that goes from the creation of a shared vision (Carpenter, 2008), to a struggle for the support that a child is entitled to (Truss 2008). Rogers (2009) accounts of parents experiences suggest they need to feel supported by professionals in order to come to terms accepting their child's disability and to feel socially accepted. In response to this Russell (2008) also the parent of a disabled child, considers the parents accounts collected by Rogers to be depressing, in contrast to the many parents she has had contact with who had moved on and adjusted to their new found situation.

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Whilst early intervention and family centred practice considers the parent as intrinsic to the child's learning, their role as the child's advocate and teacher in early intervention may be problematic (Bridle and Mann, 2000, Paige-Smith and Rix, 2006). Early intervention expects and requires the parent to take on the role of the child's 'teacher' and hence questions arise in relation to the sociocultural construction of the pedagogical experiences of the parent and the child, with professionals advising parents. Despite an emphasis upon family-centred practice it seems likely that a child-focused, deficit approach is still commonplace (Bruder, 2000). As Florian (2008, p.203) notes, despite research, inclusive education has not bought about a rejection of special needs education founded on the notion of intelligence as fixed, measurable and normally distributed. Therapeutic goals frequently require an additional focus, "designed to teach by practising small steps with the child, prompting and enabling them to see how to complete the task successfully" (Buckley & Bird, 1995, p. 2-3). At some point the professionals will focus upon the child's development in relation to social, emotional, motor, cognitive, language and self-help skills prior to identifying activities intended to facilitate the child's movement to a next step. This process cannot avoid taking a developmental view of the child even if the practitioner explores the adaptation of activities within the family setting. As Bridle and Mann recognise, "play and therapy are not the same thing" (p. 13).

Moss (2007) puts forward the idea of democratic political practice at Early Years institutions. He considers Early Years settings as places for technical practice that govern children, and where mass technologies can be applied in order to enable specific outcomes for children. Within this perspective, early intervention could be considered to be a space in which technical practice very much governs children's

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actions in order to bring about specific developmental outcomes. Democratic participation, on the other hand, allows for adults and children to participate in decision-making, supporting diversity and encouraging new thinking and practice. Moss refers to Reggio Emilia as a local cultural project of childhood that is about democratic practice and he raises the important question - how can this be encouraged ?

Democratic practice in settings requires intention and supportive conditions - this involves seeing the child and parent as competent with the right to participate. Being able to listen to the child is important. He suggests that pedagogical documentation – rather than child observation - is about values of subjectivity and multiplicity, and that the use of this method of considering practice could possibly be a way of resisting power and fostering democratic practice. Early intervention could be considered to have certain expectations from parents, requiring them to take on the role of the child's 'teacher'. This raises questions in relation to the social construction of the pedagogical experiences of the parent and the child, with professionals advising parents. Perhaps it would be possible for early intervention to become a 'democratic space' with democratic participation? By understanding more about the child's perspective and moving away from a developmental view of the child's learning it becomes possible to find out more about parent and child agency in the early intervention situation and how learning is socially constructed.

Researching Early intervention and the child's perspective:

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The research in this study focused on a listening to children approach which sees learning as a collaborative process between adults and children (Clark, 2004). This approach draws on three theoretical starting points:

- children having their own time, activities and space;
- participatory appraisal including the giving of 'voice' to children;
- the notion of the competent child.

Clark's (2004) research on children's perspectives in early years settings showed that by listening to children, they can be involved and empowered to participate in decision making in their setting. We wanted to develop and adapt a 'listening to children' approach to collecting data that was appropriate for children supported because they have a Down Syndrome label and their parents in an early intervention situation. In particular the approach wanted to tell the child's story, to include a narrative that would assist in the understanding of the child's experienced world, and the pedagogy of early intervention. The research methodology was also concerned with understanding the meanings of children (Davis 1998). As Davis asks: 'what are children's voices and how should we listen to them?' (p.425). Davis explores the importance of being reflexive about pre-conceptions, and the need to employ 'cultural resistance' between the researcher and the children's culture in order to understand the diversity of children's lives. Hence, previous research on parents perspectives and early intervention has also included an exploration of how one of the researchers personal experiences as a parent provided insights into the process of researching early intervention (Rix and Paige-Smith, 2008a).

Methodology – developing a picture and written narrative of the child's experiences:

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An ethnographic study was carried out as a way of finding out more about child agency and identity and the experience of early intervention. Two researchers went into the homes of the children, over a period of 5 months making 10 visits of one to five hours. The research methodology wanted to be able to provide a narrative of the child's experience, without being too influential on the child's behaviour and experiences, even though two researchers were with the family. There was a concern initially in being accepted and wanting to be 'useful' to the parent and child, in particular there was a concern about the parent thinking 'What is in this for us?'. The researchers were concerned about the imposition of research within the home. Hence a way of reflecting with the parent and child was developed as a part of the research situation:

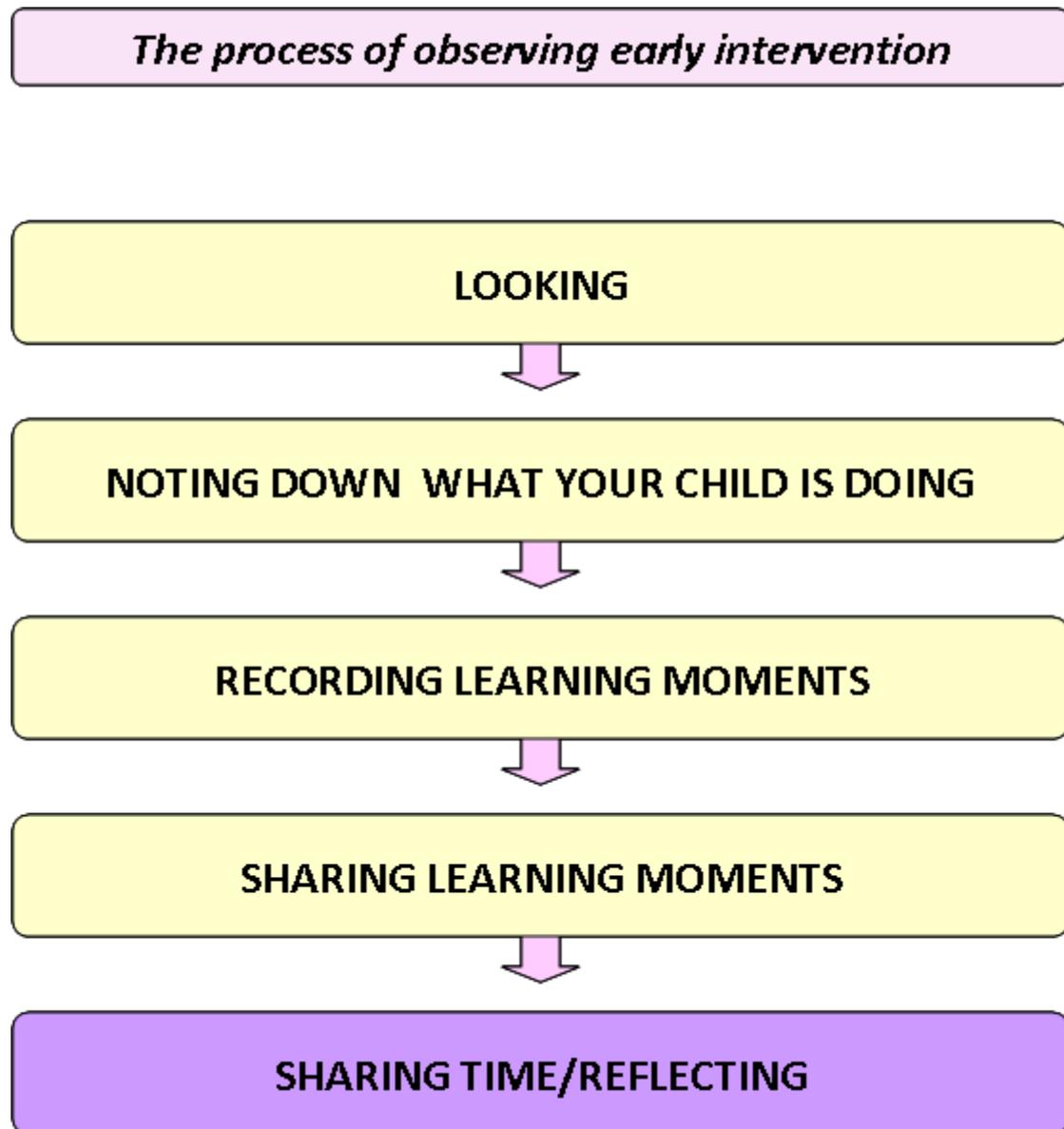


Figure 3: The process of early intervention: sharing and reflecting

This outline of the reflective process enabled us to explain in the first visit what the research would be doing, that we were not 'judging' or wanting to increase any tension around early intervention with the child and parent. These reflective conversations with the parent were recorded. Photographs were also used to reflect on the learning moments with the child and then with the parent. It was evident that at

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first the researchers were on the 'outside' of the research situation, but after two visits the child - and in one case his sibling - and parent (s) became more comfortable and accepting of the presence of researchers.

Narrative notes were made by one researcher whilst the other researcher was taking photographs and on occasion playing with the child when the child initiated that play. As we did not intend to merely act as 'observers' we interacted with the parent, except when 'early intervention' was taking place and photographs and narrative notes were being taken. The narrative notes of the child's experiences were written in the first person, in an attempt to capture the child's lived experiences. The researchers then recorded or wrote their reflections after the research sessions. The parents were interviewed informally at the start and at the end of the data gathering. Professionals involved with the children were also interviewed informally, both in the presence of the families and separately. These interviews with professionals were recorded when appropriate, or in some cases - such as with the nursery leader - notes were taken. As the research was ethnographic it involved different shared spaces such as family meal times, parent led early intervention, playing in the park, getting ready for bed, physiotherapy sessions, play session in a sensory room, speech and language sessions, home visiting from a professional, eating lunch in a café, playing in a play centre, a session in an early years centre, at the childminder, and included the presence of guests that came to stay - such as grandparents. The children's views on their experiences were also sought by giving them access to the days events through the photographic record. Their engagement with printed photographs and photographs uploaded onto a computer – including providing one child with Switches – were the

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basis for subsequent recorded discussion with the parents and between the researchers.

One of the researchers used to teach in the inner London education authority in which the research was carried out, due to this link with professionals, access was negotiated through the head of the paediatric occupational therapy service, whose team member approached the parents of pre-school children recognised as having Down syndrome. The researchers then sent formal letters explaining the project and asking if they would be interested, these were followed up by phone calls and an initial visit. The service already has close relationships with these parents as it has a baby group for parents of children categorised as having Down syndrome who meet on a regular basis. The parents in both of the families were professionals. In one family the father was the full time carer for his son aged two and a half and daughter aged nine months; in the other family the mother was the full time carer for her son who was one and a half; the mother was expecting her second child.

The data collected in the form of transcripts and written notes was analysed according to the child's perspectives and experiences. Themes were analysed within the narrative of the child's experiences using grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1998), identifying categories as they emerged from the data. The categories included individual instances that provided a window into the child's experienced world. The child's agency and identity was also considered in relation to contexts, such as during a physiotherapy session, or during the sharing and talking about photographs of favourite toys or objects. The data was also considered in terms of what the child enjoyed doing, their learning and form of participation. The initial categories

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identified through reflective discussion between the researchers during the data collection process, underwent ongoing development during this period including discussion with parents to capture their insight into the representation of the child's experience. Subsequently, open coding was used to break down the data into discrete parts so that it could be closely examined and compared for differences and similarities, for example quotes were identified which described what it was like for the child, and what were recurring experiences. This was followed by a process of Axial Coding, using categories developed as a result of discussion and from the initial Open-coding process; for example, a category developed around 'throwing' and another was 'empowering'. As categories built up, the researchers cross-referenced them, looking for relevant links between phenomena. This process involved the adding of more information from the categories, until a situation of saturation was realised; for example within the category linked to the child being empowered, there were a number of examples that fell into this category, such as:

- The degree and form of choice offered by the parents varied.
- Children waited when they knew they had a choice.
- When they had not made a choice they tended to ignore or resist the intervention
- Choice does not mean that annoyance will not follow
- Clear moments where the choice is to do the 'wrong' thing...just as moment to choose to do the 'right' thing.
- Choice is negotiated at times
- Making choices is often linked with enjoying themselves

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- The removal of choice was more in evidence in the professional settings...supported by parents.
- There was evidence of uncertainty about the right to make choices in professional settings.
- The child stopping doing something when an adult joined in was more in evidence in professional settings.
- There is an assumption that some choices cannot be left to the child.

The data was also analysed in terms of specific case study examples of the child's experiences of early intervention and child agency. As the ethnographic research process was carried out certain examples of how the child's learning was affected in different settings and circumstances and with different adults and children present became apparent. These incidences led to a deeper understanding of what it was like for the child in certain learning situations as we moved from home to early childhood centre, to open spaces, with different professionals and other adults (and children) supporting the child's learning.

The methodology in practice

The narrative observations and the photography provided a way of identifying what the child enjoyed doing and how the child learned and participated. This provided an idea of the child's sense of self and how the child controlled their environment during learning situations. Clark (2005) calls this the pedagogy of listening, noting that the power of children's voices can result in a change of adults understandings (Clark, 2005, p124). The following is a short example from an early intervention with a father, Alan, and his son, Tim:

Daddy wants me to throw a ball to the picture of the bear and I roll the ball to the bear and the bear catches it and kicks it and I catch the ball and I roll the ball to the bear and the bear catches it and then the bear kicks the ball away so then I go to crawl over to get the ball and then I crawl over to where I was before and then the bear kicks the ball back to me and then it goes to my little sister so I get the ball from my sister and then dad says 'bye bye bear' and puts the bear away. I'm still holding the bear and daddy says 'do you want to kick the ball?' And I say 'yes' and he says up up up and then he comes and I stand and he holds my hands and we are kicking the ball and laughing I'm kicking the ball and laughing and dad's holding my arms and walking me around the room. We are kicking the ball and go round the room and we are kicking the ball round the room, turn around and come back, kick the ball kick the ball and then I sit down.

And daddy throws the ball 'over your head' says dad, I lift it up high and throw 'good boy' says dad 'sit back' he says, I sit on my bottom and the ball hits me and makes me smile I throw the ball back to dad and he throws it to me 'weeeee' he says when I catch it and I throw the ball away and crawl to the sofa I crawl to the door 'bye daddy' I say. I knock on the door which is closed and there are dad's boots, dad's boots. I pick up the ball and say 'dad's boots' and dad says 'what do you want to do?' 'Have you finished with the ball?' and I do the ball finished sign[in makaton] and smile. And dad says do you want to choose cups or posting? And I choose posting.

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Tim was shown the photos after the session which consisted of 20 pictures of objects such as the ball, and dad's boots, and of him playing. He was able to name objects and actions and point at the different pictures, but he was particularly interested in the photos of the boots. The focus of the child's discourse were those things that the narrative suggested he was interested in and liked doing. The use of photography allowed for the peripheral learning to be in the foreground – the child's interest in the boots prompted his language and this could have been developed further if it was seen as a part of the 'early intervention'. When he was shown his pictures of this session in a book he used 21 different words in 9 minutes. This contrasted favourably with his language use in a formal speech and language therapy session earlier in the day, in which he had used 2 or 3 words in an hour.

As the research developed a reflective approach with the parent and the child, through the use of learning moments and photography, we were able to provide this information to the child and the parent. When the father was interviewed he recognised that he provided a structured learning environment that also included free play:

'At any given time I'm trying to work to a fairly clear agenda of input that I want to give, and that shifts the whole time, and so I'm wanting to keep to a curriculum if you like, possibly more consistently than others would be, but at the same time I do think it's a very important bit to have a lot of space and a lot of free play, and a lot of free time, and as much independence of play as possible, and I'm aware that there is a tension there.'

In relation to the use of photography, the father considered that it had a positive impact on his child's agency and identity:

'He's certainly been provided with feedback, particularly the photographic feedback of himself doing more, more than he otherwise would have been, so I think that there's been a greater push on him to think of himself as 'me'.'

The use of reflection was a way of empowering the child – and sharing learning moments with parent and child. It appeared to encourage a sense of 'me' having control over 'my' environment. It also facilitated the expression of Tim's voice. A clear consequence of attempting to take the child's perspective, for example, was Alan changing his views on his son's throwing. At the start of the research, Alan had a clear goal which was to stop his son throwing things all the time. However, across the data collection period the following meanings could be identified from the child's point of view:

- Throwing is about discovery
- Throwing is about testing how strangers will respond
- Throwing is about defiance
- Not throwing is about recognising another person's wishes and/or power
- Not throwing is about choice
- Throwing is physical activity
- Throwing is a means of expressing emotion...anger, frustration, boredom, irritation, disinterest.
- Throwing is something that you get told off for sometimes.
- Throwing sometimes gets no response
- Throwing is part of playing
- Throwing is something that parents can let you choose to do
- Throwing can be a mistake
- Throwing can be a way of getting something away from you quickly
- Throwing can be something to do with others.

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- Throwing is a challenge
- Throwing is a way of moving things
- Throwing is something that can hurt people and you have to be careful
- Throwing is fun
- Throwing is something adults do
- Throwing is a way to fill a box
- Throwing is a way to clear a space
- Throwing can break things
- Throwing is something you can control
- Throwing can be funny
- Throwing can be part of a story
- Throwing is something you can do with some things but not others

Figure 4: Child's perspective on throwing

At the end of our family visits the following discussion took place with Alan when he was asked about his perspective on his son's throwing:

Alan: I've been thinking about this cos the one area that I would not have applied the philosophy we're talking about now in would have been the throwing; and Jonty [Researcher] said a very interesting thing when he observed Tim throwing he said, 'Why are you trying to stop him doing something that he so much enjoys?', and I think that's probably right. I've been thinking about that a lot, and partly thinking of lots of more creative ways; so throwing things into the box, throwing things over the box, playing games, catching them in the bucket.

Alice: When he was in nursery with his friends ...*they were*....throwing things back into the box.

Alan: Precisely.

Alice: He threw them all out, and then they threw them in.

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Alan: So making it a much more constructive activity might satisfy us all a bit more, but not worrying about it quite so much unless obviously you see something very, very heavy sailing by his sister's head, but that's drawing a distinction between being careful enough so you're not hurting people when you're throwing, and just throwing.

Jonty: But that's not about throwing, that's about being aware of other people.

Alan: That's right.

Although at the time of this discussion not all of Tim's possible meanings related to throwing had been identified and analysed from the data collected, enough were in evidence to initiate a discussion with the father about the significance of the activity. The child was expressing a skill that he wanted to do, that was not perceived as a 'developmental target'.

A similar discussion was generated by the use of photographs with Rachel about her time with her son, Samuel. For instance, the first author took photographs of Samuel standing up staring into the washing machine as it spun round, as well as photographs of him carrying out early intervention activities with his mother, whilst sitting on the floor with his toys scattered around them. At the end of the session, Rachel was clearly pleased to see photographs of her son and herself doing so many different activities within a short time. But she also really liked the photograph of Samuel looking into the washing machine because she felt it was one of his favourite things to do. This of course can be seen as a perfect justification for the delivery of early intervention within the home; a perfect family-centred activity for a Portage worker or Physiotherapist. The significant point from Samuel's perspective however was not

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practicing his standing but was expressing his agency as shown through his interest in the washing machine.

There were a number of instances in which both children expressed skills that interested them which had not been demonstrated when being focussed upon as a 'developmental target' or when they were not being perceived as a 'developmental target' by adults around them. This enabled the researchers to consider how the child created meaning and related their situation to themselves. It revealed how the child's participation changed in different socio cultural contexts. For instance, the first author and Tim engaged in throwing bean bags at the end of his physiotherapy session whilst his father talked with the physiotherapist. Just as this demonstrated different perceptions and circumstances under which Tim's throwing was considered acceptable, it also resulted in him walking unsupported towards the bean bag. This brought him evident pleasure, which was a contrast to his prior refusal to co-operate during the session when he was instructed to crawl along the beam and to also stand whilst the therapist held his ankles. The therapist had herself mentioned that he didn't like the activity or having his ankles held. It would seem as if his agency was expressed in a positive learning context during the informal child focused play at the end of the session but in a negative learning context during most of the adult led activities. However, further research in this area would show whether this was representative of all early intervention sessions, which does illustrate the tensions that emerge from this learning situation (Bridle and Mann, 2000 and Paige-Smith and Rix, 2006).

Discussion

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The study (funded by the British Academy) has allowed the development of a way of understanding the participation of the child, and has led to democratic practice with the parent – empowering the parent and the child (Moss, 2007). It has recognised the importance of looking closer at child agency through an ethnographic, narrative lens. We were able to look at:

‘the actual processes by which children participate with other people
in cultural activity and the ways they transfer their participation’
Rogoff (2008), p.70

By taking a sociocultural approach to the ethnographic research there was shift from observations, towards guided participation(Rogoff, p.71). Similar to the ethnographic research carried out by Tenery (2005), we became more aware of the multidimensionality of the children and their families, the different roles and ways in which agency was expressed. Our knowledge base and perspective about each child developed through our understanding of the participation in cultural practices. The research methodology, through the use of different planes of focus, allowed us to consider how the child approaches the situation in relation to their purpose and meaning (Rogoff, 2008, p.70). As Gonzalez et al (2005) note, we were ‘researchers as learners’, carrying out emancipatory social research with an agenda for empowering and enabling the participants to change, through self-reflection, and to have a deeper understanding of their situations. This was carried out through the use of a reflective discourse with the parent, and the photographs being shown to the child.

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The research process revealed more than expected, in so far as it was modified to include the parents and the child, allowing them to be involved in the process and to reflect on the learning and their participation in the process. This was the result of the researcher's concern with feeling a part of the family, rather than being in the position of outside observers, judging the parent and the child in terms of 'how much' the parent was 'teaching' the child. We wanted the parent to be able to feel 'at home' with two researchers in the room, one with a notepad and the other with a camera. The challenge was to be accepted by the child and the parent, so that we could gain insight into the way in which the child was participating in early intervention with the parent.

A key part of this process was the acknowledgement that the narrative observation and photographs were not the child's truth. They were a tool for engaging with their activity; an attempt to impose their subjectivity on the research. Our interpretation of that subjectivity could well have been wrong. There were a number of occasions on which the parents were able to demonstrate that we had misinterpreted what a child had said or done. However, despite this it always opened up a route for discussion and reflection. On occasion we slipped into 'expert' mode, divulging knowledge of models of development or learning, but when in the child's activity this knowledge seemed increasingly meaningless. By acknowledging the concept of 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez et al, 2005) we attempted to see beyond the structure of a set curriculum within early intervention in order to understand more about child agency, and the discourses and shifting power that shape the child's life and how the child participates in different contexts.

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Research carried out by Beresford et al (2004) with parents and children with autistic spectrum disorders was informed by the Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2004) using photographs taken by the child. They conclude that it is important for researchers to be flexible to accommodate those participating and to ensure the project itself does not become a barrier to participation. The listening to children approach (Clark, 2004) has informed the methodology used in this study, it has been effectively developed to include a way of documenting child agency through written narrative and photography. Shared reflection with parents on their own and their child's participation has also supplemented the listening to children approach, and has been a way of involving the parent and the child in the research. The study developed a sharing of the knowledge and resulted in a dissipation of the power relationship as 'observers' in the research situation; the research became increasingly participatory with all agents involved. This however was one study with two families, and the development of this practice as a result of this study needs to be explored further.

Conclusion:

Documenting children's participation and understanding more about their agency has provided an alternative to the expert model of observational assessment of the child's developmental progress. Developed further, this approach could be a way of including the participation and agency of the child, as well as encouraging parent participation. The learning stories approach of child assessment (Carr 2004) provides an alternative to a developmental approach to assessing the child, and has been used for children with disabilities or learning difficulties (Dunn, 2004, Cullen, 2009). In order for this approach to be successful, Cullen suggests this depends on a shared perspective of

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inclusion, a vision that does not adhere to the expert lens. She suggests a co-constructive philosophy requires participants to view their contribution collaboratively. As this study has shown, it is important to consider how we view the child's experiences, and to acknowledge their right to have their agency understood and recognised in every learning situation.

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