



Using In-the-Picture to Engage With the Child's Perspective

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Abstract

This case study explores the use of the In-the-Picture approach to engage with the views and experiences of very young children and people with whom typical communication approaches are not effective. It describes this qualitative grounded 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. Four examples of research undertaken using this approach will be discussed, outlining how it has been used to explore children's experiences and relationships in the early years. It concludes with some suggestions of further possible uses for In-the-Picture.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Explain the key components of the In-the-Picture approach
- Understand the ways in which In-the-Picture can be used to explore the perspectives of very young children and people with whom typical communication approaches are not effective
- Experiment in applying the In-the-Picture approach within your own research or practice

Project Overview and Context

In-the-Picture (ItP) is a research methodology developed in response to the challenges of engaging with the experiences of young children with learning difficulties. It involves first-person narrative observation of the child in the learning context and photographs of the child's focus of interest. These are a precursor to reviewing the photographic record with the child and undertaking reflective discussions with the practitioners and family involved.

The ItP method arose from a British Academy-funded research project undertaken by Jonathan Rix and Alice Paige-Smith/Matthews between 2008 and 2009. Alice and Jonathan had been interviewing parents involved in early intervention programs since 2004, building on Jonathan's own experience as a parent involved in such a program with his son. Policy since the 1990s has increasingly placed emphasis on such programs for children with learning difficulties. Professionals and policy-makers expect parents to carry out developmental "activities" on a daily basis with their children and through early intervention to counteract children's identified problems and "deficits." Parents interviewed in these studies had found these early intervention activities to be a regular source of tension with their child and reported that their children only

engaged with activities they enjoyed and found easy to do.

Jonathan and Alice now wished to develop a research approach which facilitated listening to young children with learning difficulties in a family context. In particular they wanted to explore how children with Down syndrome participated in early intervention programs with their parents and how models of learning embedded within these programs affected these learning experiences. At the heart of their approach was a socio-cultural understanding of learning, seeing the parents, children, and practitioners as agents participating in an emerging teaching and learning process.

A key influence on their thinking was the mosaic approach (Clark, 2004). This approach had shown that by listening to children, they can be involved and empowered to participate in decision-making in their early years setting. It 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.

This approach also seeks to engage with the child’s views through visual means, with an emphasis upon photography. But Alice and Jonathan’s interest in photographs as a means to focus on children’s views was influenced too by its use in other studies (e.g., Einarsdottir, 2005; Smith, Duncan, & Marshall, 2005; Stephenson, 2009), including with parents and their children identified with autistic spectrum disorders (Beresford, Tozer, Rabiee, & Sloper, 2004). The use of narrative which is at the heart of the mosaic approach was also evident elsewhere, such as a narrative assessment model (Cullen, Williamson, & Lepper, 2005) and a learning story approach (Carr, 2001), while detailed observation was recognized as being central to listening to young children, particularly those with learning difficulties or communication impairments (Clark, 2005; Dickens, 2011; Nind, Flewitt, & Payler, 2010). The importance of reflection was also a key part of Jonathan and Alice’s thinking, drawing upon a long tradition from Dewey to Schön and beyond, in both policy and research, which focuses on reflecting upon practice (Rix & Paige-Smith, 2011; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

Research Practicalities

Given the context in which early intervention takes place (ideally woven into the everyday activities of the family, within the home, within formal support settings, and in community situations, involving a variety of therapists and early years practitioners) Jonathan and Alice recognized that they needed an ethnographic research approach. They needed to become an unremarkable part of the everyday and acknowledge the funds of knowledge that families bring

with them (Moll et al., 1992). The 2008-2009 study was undertaken with two families over a period of 5 months, with visits ranging from 1 to 5 hr, representing 33 recorded family observation periods, 19 family and practitioner interviews, and 6 recorded reflective researcher discussions.

As Jonathan and Alice were seeking to develop their research approaches in response to the child and family, they recognized that their data collection and analysis needed to be based on grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It was decided that interviews with both parents and professionals would take the form of responsive, extended conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 2004), while ongoing reflective notes and reflective discussions between Alice and Jonathan would provide the recursive influence, informing the questions and discussions in subsequent meetings. The transcripts of interviews, observations, and written notes would then be thematically analyzed at the end of the research period, identifying initial categories through reflective discussion between the researchers and, subsequently, using open coding to break down the data into discrete parts so that they could be closely examined and compared for differences and similarities, adding more information from the categories, until a situation of saturation was realized.

The need to be flexible both in seeking to engage with the child's point of view and fitting in with the family and their routines had a number of consequences. For example, the role of note-taker and photographer shifted depending on the situation and whether it was appropriate to have one or two researchers present. More importantly for the development of ItP, the researchers felt free to seek new methods of engagement. In particular, during the first home visit, Jonathan's narrative observation began to change as he attempted to see the situation from the child's perspective. He began to write in the first person, writing as if he was the child whom he was observing. In their subsequent discussions, Jonathan noted how this shift had changed his thinking, and so Alice began to experiment with the first-person narrative approach too.

There was an equivalent level of experimentation in their use of photographs too, not only in the way in which they were taken but also in the way in which they were shared with the child and the family. Photographs were taken in as unobtrusive way as possible of the activity in which the child was involved and of the objects with which they had engaged or which were in their play environment; these images were shared by looking at the small screen on the back of the camera, on a laptop, and on a tablet PC and as prints on separate sheets of papers or prints in an album. Alice and Jonathan wanted the child to have control over which picture they looked at (observing their focus of choice was a means to capture what was interesting them) and to share them at a time and place which was convenient to the family. The children were

allowed to use the buttons on the back of the camera and on the laptop to scroll through pictures; they were also provided with switches (something akin to a simplified mouse) or were given the prints to flick through. It was evident that the two children preferred different approaches and that their preference might change across time and context. It also became evident that the children were not interested in images of themselves as part of an activity, but were much more taken by pictures of the objects around them.

An Example of the Data

The use of first-person narrative observation and photography does not claim to capture an “objective” or “true” picture of the child’s perspective; it aims to offer insights into their interests. It is both a useful tool for reflection upon practice and a means of collecting data for further analysis. Consider, for example, the two observations which were taken approximately half an hour apart in a children’s center. The first set of notes was taken observing a child taking part in a group speech and language session, while the second set was taken when the child was playing with one of the researchers in the play area in the room next door:

Now the woman has the box and opens it, and there are bells, and it is in front of me, and I am not sure I am allowed to take this, and mum helps me, and I take some, and now the woman is shaking, and they’re telling me to shake, and then the woman is doing it, and I am looking but they are making me shake, so I feel the shaker in my hands, and then they tell me to stop. I start shaking but mum stops me. Now the woman is looking at me telling me it is my turn and I stop. She shakes and asks me to copy. I do, then they make me shake. They shake my hand and tell me “well done.” They keep saying “Samuel’s [his name] turn,” and the boy [next to him] is shaking so I shake, and I look at Gran and shake, and they say “its not my turn,” and then everyone is shaking, and I look at them and they tell me to shake so I do, and they say “well done,” and then they say “stop,” and they’re making me put them in the box. I don’t want to. Mum makes me do it. They say “well done, good boy.” I chew my fingers.

In this first set of observations, it was evident that the child was being closely controlled, was unsure about what was going on even when physically directed, and was being congratulated for getting things wrong. He did not seem to be enjoying himself. He did not seem to be engaging with the purpose of the activity which was learning about starting and stopping:

We’re back in this room, here are the shapes. I’m sitting on the floor, I’m banging the shapes. They make a good noise, I bang them together, and the man is helping me put some shapes back in the block. We put one in, two in and then I’m banging, and

so is he, and when I stop he stops, and this is fun and we do it again, and again, and again. When I stop he stops, and he says “stop” and when I go he says “go,” louder and quieter, and faster, and slower, and harder, and softer, and he does the same as me, makes me laugh, and then I drop the brick behind me and the man finds it. It’s in the books, so I then pull the book out. I put the book back and we start banging again, and I swap brick shapes and so does he, and we’re banging again, and he says “go” when I go and “stop” when I stop, and I do a very long bang, and he asks if I’m going to stop, and I do stop very quickly and look at him, and he stopped and that is fun.

In the second set of observations, the child was playing and setting his own agenda. He picked up on the game of start and stop which was being played with him and engaged with it, taking the lead. He was enjoying himself.

There were a number of other observations which contrasted the child’s engagement with learning in the organized early intervention situation (particularly led by professionals) and their engagement in the everyday context. For example, a child who screamed and refused to walk along a beam in a physiotherapy session, who got off the beam and walked to get a toy being held out to them; or a child who had said only 2 or 3 words during an hour-long speech and language session and then spoke over 21 words in 9 min at a Pizzeria when looking at photographs of their day.

These kinds of findings made for rich and valuable reflective discussions with parents and practitioners and impacted upon the way in which they engaged with the child. For instance, taking the child’s perspective meant that one of the fathers in the study came to realize that his attempts to stop his child throwing things were somewhat unfair. He was always worried about throwing hurting someone, but across a 6-day period, the first-person narrative observations suggested 26 possible meanings for throwing as identified from the child’s point of view. The father decided he needed to just stop one of these throwing types. Another interesting discussion point was the realization that of all the items in the child’s play environment, the thing which he most wanted to play with were his Dad’s boots (see Figure 1). Consequently, the possibility of a range of alternative activities emerged.

Figure 1. Dad's boots.



Subsequent Studies

This first study examined the experiences of two children and their parents within early intervention programs, involving 10 visits ranging from 1 to 5 hr with each of the families over a period of 5 months. The research involved different shared spaces such as family mealtimes, parent-led early intervention, playing in the park, getting ready for bed, physiotherapy sessions, an intervention session in a sensory room, speech and language sessions, home visiting from a professional, eating lunch in a café, playing in a play center, a session in an early years center, at the child-minder, and included the presence of guests that came to stay—such as grandparents. At the end of the research process, Alice and Jonathan presented their findings to a variety of practitioners and the response was the same; they were fascinated by the combination of first-person narrative observation, the sharing of photographs of the child's focus of interest, and subsequent reflective discussion. They kept asking whether they could have a go.

It was at this point that John Parry decided to use ItP. One of his areas of research interest was the social connections and friendships made between children labeled with special educational needs (SEN) and their peers in preschool and nursery settings. The potential of ItP to explore the perspectives of very young children and engage with their experiences made it an appropriate approach to utilize in this research. Previous studies in the area of young disabled children's friendships often concentrated on the part that their non-disabled peers played. By using ItP, John recognized the possibility of shifting the focus onto the choices and

contributions that the disabled child made when navigating early relationships.

In his first two studies, John examined the social connections that eight young children were making with their peers in four different preschool settings in England. All the children who were at the center of the research were aged between 3 and 4 and all had been labeled with SEN. John used the “ItP” approach to observe the social interactions between these eight children and their playmates, carrying out daily observation sessions alongside each child over a period of a week. Each session lasted for 1.5 hr to coincide with the period in their preschool when the children were engaged in free undirected activity. John utilized the key components of ItP that Alice and Jonathan had developed: recording observations using the first-person narrative, taking photographs of peer interactions, and sharing the photographs with the child at the end of the session. A familiar practitioner joined the child for the sharing element, but in addition, this session frequently attracted other children from the group who were interested in what was going on.

Reflecting on using “ItP” as an approach to gathering data, John found that the first-person narrative observations highlighted the intricacies and subtleties of even the most fleeting social interactions between the focus children and their peers. The following extracts from the researcher’s notes exemplify this:

A boy comes into the area—he has a car I am still sat at the table. I look at him and bring my toy dolphin towards him—towards the car on the floor—I am watching him push the car and I am pushing the dolphin around the floor as well—I put my dolphin back up onto the table and he pushes his car ...

A girl’s watching what we’re doing. I stand them all up in a line. The girl comes and gives an animal to me. I don’t look at her. I knock all the animals down. The girl picks up the horse makes a horse sound and drops it down on top of my pile. I hold on to lots of the animals and wiggle them around on the table.

As with Jonathan and Alice’s earlier research, the making and sharing of the visual records of the social connections the child made during the sessions prompted both anticipated and unexpected responses from all those involved. Frequently, the focus children’s real interest in the photographs were seemingly directed towards objects or toys, for example, a climbing frame, football, or train set, rather than the people present. However, the practitioners who joined in the photograph sharing felt that it was significant that these favorite activities were now frequently pursued with other children, as shown in the visual record of the observations. In addition, looking at the photographs with the children provided the practitioners with an

insight into which particular peers were more involved with the focus child. Often they were surprised at the recurrence of certain playmates in the visual record and the positive reaction of some of the focus children when they saw their friends in the pictures.

Key findings that emerged from the thematic analysis of the data from both studies included the consistent exploration of social connections with peers by the focus children, the individual strategies that the focus children used to approach others, and the significant capabilities of all the focus children to compromise and negotiate during interactions. A sub-theme that also emerged from the studies was the potential of ItP to allow practitioners to “stand back” from situations and develop an understanding of the dynamics of these intricate social interactions themselves. During feedback visits to the settings that participated in the original research, practitioners were both interested and willing to explore this potential.

Consequently, John undertook a further study examining seven practitioners’ views on using the “ItP” approach to observe social interactions between young children. Each practitioner carried out one daily observation session with their key child over a 3-week period using first-person narrative recording, taking photographs of the children engaging with peers and sharing this visual record with the child at the end of the session. Interviews with the practitioners at the end of the study revealed a consistently positive and insightful response to using the approach. The participants felt that their communication and awareness of their key child’s relationships, particularly the subtleties involved in their interactions, had developed. Using ItP had also made them reflect on their practice, especially how they used photography and observations in their setting. As one practitioner noted,

It gives you more insight ... Definitely more insight to actually what is going on with that child right here and right now and in terms of communication and interaction what are the effects of other children and adults that are around him actually have? There is something that there are so many clues and you do know that there are there but you probably don’t appreciate that so much unless you give that 100% thought or focus. That’s what ItP did for me.

The most recent study involving ItP examined seven families’ experiences of an early literacy program, Bookstart Corner, delivered by children’s centers within the homes of people experiencing social disadvantage. This involved 6 × 90 min visits to each home across a 4-week period, with family and practitioner interviews. On this occasion, the in-field researcher made written first-person narrative observation notes, but he found it hard to get the children to engage with the photographs and felt that they were too interested in the technology; for the first time, we used a tablet to both take the photographs and for showing back to the children.

It is quite possible, however, that the photographs themselves were not of interest to the children. They tended to be images of the child as part of a large group; the nature of the activity or the focus of the child was not clearly evident in the image. This underlined to us the need to be constantly reflecting upon the nature of the images we are taking and the manner in which we are presenting them.

Practical Lessons Learned

It is important to recognize that this is not a finalized approach with a strict protocol. By its nature, it needs to be flexible. ItP is about using the tools of first-person narrative observation, photographs of the child's focus of interest, and reflective discussion with participants to engage with the views of the child. In so doing, we have to engage with our own developing views as researchers and practitioners, responding to the possible understandings which emerge from the process. It is essential in working with ItP to remember, however, that our attempts to record the child's perspective are inevitably dependent on a shared understanding of context and are influenced by the observer's interpretations and assumptions about the child and the child's behaviors. The use of multiple sources of data may go some way to counterbalancing this limitation; however, we must always remember that through discussion we can create a unifying adult perspective, one which does not represent the priorities of childhood or the meanings of an individual child. We can also add in to our observations thoughts which emerge from our interpretations and interests; there is always a danger that we are not stripping back our observations to their bare bones, but inserting emotions or fears or contextual understandings which are not relevant to the child we are observing.

What is also evident is that ItP has potential as a tool for both practitioners and researchers. For example, in a discussion with a doctoral student, Linda Plowright, she suggested that ItP need not just be used with very young children or those for whom typical communications have limitations. She wished to use ItP with older primary school children, presenting them with her interpretations of their experience as a starting point for interviews.

Such potential for use in wider contexts, by researchers, practitioners, or children themselves, together with the inherent flexibility of the approach, does open up further issues.

First, the importance of utilizing the three elements of ItP—first-person narrative, making visual records, and reflection—should not be overlooked. Otherwise, there is a danger that the aim to engage with the child's perspective is taken over by other agendas. For example, in John Parry's study with practitioners using ItP, some participants were particularly drawn to taking photographs and using these purely as evidence of the child's activity. Without the

accompanying observations or reflective process, developing a richer understanding of their focus-child's friendships proved more difficult. Second, the significance of drawing on the three elements of ItP inevitably makes its use in the practitioner context more time-consuming. Any future developments of the approach in the practice arena need to acknowledge the expectations of the setting and the requirements of the practitioner role. However, taking such factors into account needs to be balanced with a recognition that some children's subtle ways of communicating inevitably demands more careful and intensive listening.

Conclusion

The capacity of ItP to encourage an exploration of relationships is significant because research into learning must focus upon individuals *in context*, recognizing the "dynamic relation between person and situation" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515) while avoiding seeing the individual as being at the center of a range of "independent cultural variables" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 49). It also has the capacity to impact upon practitioner reflection and their understanding of the child's perspective; as such, it has the potential to facilitate everyday planning and practice which is responsive to the interests and priorities of the learner.

The power of ItP is that it is simple to use yet at the same time it has the capacity to profoundly shift the observer's engagement with the child and their experiences. ItP enables the observer to recognize the child as an active participant in the learning context and to explore the nature of their agency. As an early years practitioner noted in John Parry's second study,

rather than focusing on what the child is doing I'm focusing on what his interactions are.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think In-the-Picture (ItP) states that it cannot claim to observe objectively?
2. Why can photography be used with virtually all children, regardless of their age and technological awareness?
3. How can one assess a child's interest in objects which have been photographed if they cannot talk about them?
4. What challenges would practitioners face in using the different facets of ItP to research and plan in their own setting?
5. Why should reflection with colleagues be an important part of any planning process for teaching and learning activities?

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