

# Section 1: The portraiture study

## Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) which advises the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum for early childhood is currently developing the *Framework for Early Learning*. The Framework is premised on an understanding of children as being active in shaping and creating their own lives. This perspective supports the inclusion of children's voices in decisions which affect them. To this end, the NCCA has used a portraiture study to facilitate children as partners in developing the Framework.

This document *Listening for children's stories: Children as partners in the Framework for Early Learning* presents the NCCA's portraiture study. The document is presented in three sections.

- Section One explains what portraiture is and outlines the reasons for using this methodology. It also provides a brief overview of the children who took part in the study.
- Section Two explains the rationale for laying out the portraits under the themes of Well-being, Identity and belonging, Communication and Exploring and thinking. The portraits are also presented in this section in three over-lapping age-groupings—babies, toddlers and young children.
- Section Three concludes the document with a summary of some of the highlights in the descriptions of the children's experiences of early learning and development in their respective settings. This summary draws attention to messages from the early childhood literature which the portraits reinforce. These messages inform the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*.

## Purpose

The consultation on the discussion paper *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004) highlighted two priorities in the NCCA's work in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*. One priority concerned the need to consult with children

during the process of developing the Framework, to ensure that children's voices would be appropriately represented in the Framework. A second and related priority concerned the need to ensure the Framework would connect with the everyday experiences of children and practitioners in a range of settings, that it would be sensitive to the reality and diversity of these settings, and that it would include further consultation with parents<sup>1</sup> and various professionals in these settings. To meet these two priorities, the NCCA designed a portraiture study to develop portraits of children's experiences of early learning and development in a range of settings in Ireland.

## Portraiture

### Definition

Portraiture is a form of qualitative research enquiry which seeks to give voice to the experiences of research participants in a particular setting. It does this through a story which documents and illuminates *the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it* (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p.14). The portrait is placed in a social and cultural context and is shaped through dialogue between the researcher and the research participants. In their practice of research as portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) described portraiture as *painting with words*. They spoke of their search for a form of inquiry which would bridge *the realms of science and art* in order to create stories that convey the perspective of the subjects and the meaning they attribute to what they do and say and how they behave.

The portraits in this document deepen the NCCA's understanding of early learning and development in different settings as currently experienced by the children in the study and supported by their practitioners<sup>2</sup>. The portraits are concerned with the local rather than the global. While collectively they are not generalisable to early learning and development nationally, they provide rich and generative insights into children's experiences and how these can be most appropriately supported in the *Framework for Early Learning*.

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<sup>1</sup> The NCCA uses the term *parent* throughout this document to refer to the child's primary caregivers and educators. These include the father and mother and/or guardians of the child.

<sup>2</sup> In the case of Seán and Patrick, their portrait focuses on the children's experiences of learning and developing in their home and supported by their parents.

## Rationale

Portraiture allowed the NCCA Early Childhood Team to describe the rich, complex and diverse experiences of children within the socio-cultural context of their settings. Portraiture also gave the flexibility to use multiple methods and sources of data in creating the final portraits.

While portraiture has many similarities with other qualitative research methods, it has two distinguishing features (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis 1997). The first feature is that portraiture begins by searching for *what is good and healthy* about the experiences of the participants in the settings. A key question the researcher asks then is *what is good here from the participant's perspective?* This question leads him/her to observe, interpret and document a very different reality than the researcher who uses externally imposed measures of success. While portraiture has been criticised for its failure to interrogate what it conceals (English, 2000)<sup>3</sup>, its focus on illuminating complex dimensions of goodness is ideally suited to the NCCA's priority to bring children's positive experiences of early childhood to the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*.

The second defining feature of portraiture is that the researcher *listens for a story* whereas in other areas of ethnographic research the researcher listens *to* the story of the research participants. The *I* or *we* of the researcher(s) is explicit or implicit throughout the final portrait. Welty (2003) makes a crucial distinction between these two forms of listening. In the latter, the researcher adopts a more passive and receptive stance whereas the researcher in portraiture adopts an active, engaged position which involves participating in, identifying and selecting the story and helping to shape the story's coherence. This active engaged stance means that the *self* of the researcher is critical to the way of listening, selecting, interpreting and composing the portrait.

Portraiture involves four major organising elements to guide the researcher in his/her work. These relate to context, voice, relationships and emergent themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis 1997).

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<sup>3</sup> English, F. (2000). A Critical Appraisal of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's Portraiture as a Method of Educational Research. *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 29, No. 7 (Oct., 2000), pp. 21-26

In the NCCA's portraiture study

- **context** placed the children and their actions in a particular time and space. This enabled the researcher to understand more clearly how the experience of the individual children was shaped and framed by the particular family, setting and community in which they learned and developed.
- **voice** referred to the impression of the researcher on both the process of gathering and interpreting the data and the finished portrait. Voice also related to the voice of the participants. The researcher *listened for* the message and meaning from the children through listening to their verbal contributions and observing their gestures and body language which often spoke louder than words. This was important for all children but was particularly significant for very young and/or pre-verbal<sup>4</sup> children or children who had special educational needs who relied heavily on non-verbal communication.
- **relationships** were the means by which the portraits were constructed, shaped and drawn. It was through the developing relationship and dialogue between the researcher and child, parent and practitioner that the portrait was shaped and co-constructed and a balance in participation was achieved between the voice of the researcher and the voice of the participants.
- **emergent themes** throughout the study led to the development of more discerning questions and more appropriate means of collecting information. Researchers followed the child's lead and adjusted data collection methods depending on the individual child they were working with.

## Methodology

In designing the portraiture study, the NCCA drew on the work of Clark and Moss (2001) in identifying methods for gathering and analysing information which would be sensitive to the strengths and abilities of children from birth to six years, and which would enable the Early Childhood Team to listen for children's hundred languages.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>The NCCA uses the term *verbal* children to refer to those children who have the capacity to communicate their feelings, ideas and thoughts through spoken words. *Pre-verbal* refers to those children who are working towards developing this capacity, and who rely to a greater extent on vocalizations, gestures, expressions and movements in communicating with others.

<sup>5</sup> Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education, used the phrase *the hundred languages* to convey the importance of providing children with opportunities to express themselves through many different media including play, painting, dance, music, sculpture, puppetry and writing as well as spoken word.

The Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) provided the *how* of the NCCA's portraiture study and emphasised the processes of dialogue, reflection and action as much as the data gathering tools.

### **Gathering and interpreting the information**

The NCCA's overarching question in the portraiture study asked, *what are the children's experiences in their particular setting?* A series of interview schedules (Appendix D) were drawn up to guide the researchers in answering this question. Each researcher adjusted the information gathering methods and the wording of questions depending on the child he/she was working with. The following are some of the guiding questions used to build the portraits:

1. What does the child enjoy doing in this setting? Why?
2. What places does he/she enjoy being in? Why?
3. Who does he/she enjoy being with? Why?

The NCCA used a range of methods to capture what the children were making, saying, doing, thinking, experiencing and communicating. Methods used included:

- Observation (researcher's own perspective)
- Photography (of and by the children)
- Audio- and video-recording (of and by the children)
- Child conferencing (interview with the child and a friend)
- Walking tours and mapmaking (the child takes the researcher on a tour and makes a map as a means of exploring the information recorded on the tour)
- Interviews with parents and practitioners (to gain their perspectives and insights into the child's experiences in the setting).

Each NCCA researcher used a variety of methods which were appropriate given the individual child's age, strengths, interests and abilities to capture his/her views and experiences. Differences between children for example in physical, intellectual or linguistic ability or in ethnicity or culture as well as the varying constraints of working in the individual settings also influenced the choice of methods used to gather information. The process of gathering and analysing the information was spiral. Information was analysed on an on-going basis with a view to identifying themes, patterns and questions that required further exploration.

Interviews, observations, video footage and photographs were analysed to compile the portraits. Parents<sup>6</sup> and practitioners were given drafts of the portraits during the compilation stage and their feedback and comments informed the redrafting work. A copy of the final portrait was given to the participants together with thank you letters for parents, practitioners and children (Appendix E).

## Access to early childhood settings

In the process of arranging access to the settings, parents and practitioners were informed about the purpose of the study and were given an introductory letter (Appendix A) outlining the activities involved so that they had the relevant information to assist them in deciding whether to participate or not in the portraiture study. A short information booklet (Appendix B) was also compiled to explain to practitioners, parents and children what the study involved. Once settings had agreed to take part, the researchers provided a statement<sup>7</sup> about themselves from An Garda Síochána to the Manager/Principal. Informed consent from parents and practitioners was then documented using consent forms (Appendix C).

Due to the ages of the children, the issue of informed consent was especially relevant and children's participation in the study was subject to their parents' consent. On receiving this consent the NCCA endeavoured to ensure that the children understood that they could stop participating in the study at any time and that they did not have to participate in activities or answer questions that they didn't want to. In the case of all children, particularly pre-verbal/non-verbal children, the researchers were mindful of non-verbal responses and stopped any activity if the children appeared to be unhappy or uncomfortable in any way.

The Early Childhood Team visited the settings during the period from April to May 2006, with visits to only one setting taking place in June. The Team spent time with the children, their practitioners and parents across a maximum of six visits per setting with

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<sup>6</sup> In providing feedback on the draft portraits to the NCCA researchers, a number of parents commented on how well the portraits represented their child/children. A number of the parents shared the portraits with their children.

<sup>7</sup> It was not possible to provide Garda Clearance statements to the settings as at the time of undertaking the study, garda vetting was only available to a very small part of the early years sector. However the research team applied under the Data Protection Act 2003 to have themselves checked on the Garda Criminal Records Database and a letter was issued by An Garda Síochána to each of the researchers stating that no personal data had been found on them.

visits ranging in duration from two hours to five hours.<sup>8</sup> The NCCA's work with the children was informed by the principles for best practice in child protection as presented in *Children First*, (Department of Health and Children 1999), the Government of Ireland's National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children. The NCCA also drew on the work of Hill (2005) in developing protocols for safeguarding the welfare and protection of the children and the researchers. These protocols addressed issues such as where information was gathered from the children and in the presence of whom.

In preparing to exit the settings, the NCCA shared the portraits (draft and final versions) with the children, their parents and practitioners. In addition, the digital camera/video recorders used by the Team to gather information for the portraits, were presented to the settings to support them in exploring how they might use portraiture to develop their practice in extending and enriching children's early learning and development.

## Overview of early childhood portraits

The NCCA Early Childhood Team worked with 12 children<sup>9</sup> in 11 settings in the portraiture study. Collectively, the portraits reflect a range of different types of early childhood setting in Ireland, including statutory, community and private. In addition, they represent an urban/rural mix, an age range from birth to six years, a mix of boys and girls, and cultural and linguistic diversity.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 introduce the children<sup>10</sup> who took part in the study.



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<sup>8</sup> The length of the visit depended on a number of factors including the type of setting, the age of the child, the practitioner's routine and schedule and the purpose of the visit.

<sup>9</sup> There are eleven portraits as one portrait captures the experiences of two brothers in a home setting.

<sup>10</sup> The NCCA has used pseudonyms throughout this document to protect the identity of the children, practitioners and settings who participated in the study.




**Table 1: Babies' portraits (Birth to 18 months)**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Cathal</b></p> 	<p>Cathal is nine months old and is a happy, sociable and affectionate baby. He attends a daycare nursery from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., four days per week. His favourite activity in the nursery is playing beside a wall mounted mirror. Cathal's portrait demonstrates the importance of the Key Worker relationship in providing responsive care for babies.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Jayne</b></p> 	<p>Jayne is seventeen months old and is a quiet, contented little girl who likes her own space. Jayne attends a childminding service from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., five days per week. She likes dancing to music and playing outdoors in the setting. Jayne's portrait comes from the perspective of home based childcare, where she has the opportunity to interact with children across a range of age groups in a home from home environment.</p>

**Table 2: Toddlers' portraits (12 months to three years)**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Amy</b></p> 	<p>Amy is two and a half years old and attends a community crèche that supports both the use of English and Irish. She goes to the crèche from 7.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. five days per week. Indoors Amy likes messy play, dancing and singing while outdoors she likes going on the slide and playing hide and seek. Amy's portrait illustrates her busy day partaking in free-play and in a range of child and adult initiated activities in the toddler room.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Seán and Patrick</b></p> 	<p>Seán is nineteen months old and his brother Patrick is four and a half years old. Seán and Patrick live on a farm and enjoy going for walks with their Mum, visiting the farm with their Dad, and playing together outside on their tractors or in the sand. Indoors they like to read books and to play with their tractors and diggers. The portrait of Seán and Patrick highlights the boys' strong sense of belonging to their local community.</p>

**Table 3: Young children's portraits (2 ½ to 6 years)**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Harry</b></p> 	<p>Harry is three years old and is a happy and good natured child. He attends a crèche every day from Monday to Friday, from 9.30 a.m. until 5.00 p.m. He enjoys listening to music and reading books. Harry has recently been diagnosed as having autism and his portrait demonstrates various strategies his practitioners use to support him in his learning and development.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Zachary</b></p> 	<p>Zachary is four years old and is an active and energetic little boy with a competitive nature. His parents originally came from Nigeria. He attends a Naíonra from 9.15 a.m. to 12.45 p.m. every day from Monday to Friday. Zachary's portrait describes his experiences in the Naíonra and in particular, his communication through Irish.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Louise</b></p> 	<p>Louise is four years old and is a happy, sweet natured little girl. Louise attends a sessional pre-school for Traveller children from 9.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m. Monday to Friday. She enjoys creative activities and books. Louise's portrait illustrates the importance of valuing traditions and culture in promoting a sense of identity and belonging for children.</p>

### Caroline



Caroline is four and a half years old. She is very independent and likes to take the lead. She attends an Early Start unit five mornings a week, from 9.00 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. She loves coming to school and particularly enjoys márla, drawing and colouring. Caroline's portrait is set in the context of experiences in an Early Start unit located in a classroom within an urban primary school.

### Alan



Alan is almost five years old and is a happy, articulate and confident child. He attends a Montessori community pre-school five days a week from 9.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. He has been attending the setting for almost two years and Alan's portrait presents his daily experiences in the Montessori classroom.

### Andrew



Andrew is almost six years old. He is in a multi-grade infants class in primary school, five days a week. He loves learning new things especially in maths and science, and going for bicycle rides in the forest park. His portrait illustrates the importance of building on the child's individual interests and strengths, and of integrating learning.

<p><b>Matt</b><sup>11</sup></p> 	<p>Matt is five years and nine months old. He is a happy, motivated and self-confident young boy. He is in a single-grade junior infants class in primary school. He goes to school from 8.50 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. Monday to Friday. Matt loves constructing with bricks, playing with toy cars, painting and playing chase in the playground. His portrait illustrates the importance of hands-on learning and learning through language in the infant classroom.</p>
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## Understanding the portraiture study

The NCCA study presents portraits of the experiences of 12 children in a variety of early childhood settings. It was designed to support the NCCA's work in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*. The two criteria for designing this inquiry were the need to consult with children and the need to ensure the Framework would take account of the realities of children and practitioners in a range of settings in the Irish context. In prioritising these functions of the study, it is important to note the limits and delimits of the portraiture study (what it achieves and what it does not achieve) as a piece of research. These limits are critical to understanding the link between this portraiture study and the *Framework for Early Learning*. They are outlined below:

- The selection of the **sample** of portraits was based on a number of criteria. The NCCA endeavoured to include a range of setting type from the child's own home to out-of-home settings such as crèches, pre-schools and infant classes in primary schools. The Team also prioritised the inclusion of children who collectively reflected as much as possible the early childhood period from birth to six years. The representation of cultural and linguistic diversity and special

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<sup>11</sup> The NCCA worked with Andrew and Matt, two boys of similar age and both in junior infant classrooms. Andrew's portrait captured his experience in a multi-grade setting while Matt's portrait captured his experience in a single-grade

educational needs were also important considerations. Finally, the Team planned to reflect a gender balance across the children who participated in the study. However, as the Team members were guided by the practitioners in the different settings, it was very challenging to maintain the gender balance. This is reflected in the fact that four girls and eight boys participated in the study. The portraiture study provides insights into the experiences of the twelve children who participated. As such, it was not designed (nor could it hope) to represent the full diversity of early childhood settings which children experience in Ireland today.

- To facilitate maximum and frequent engagement with the children and their practitioners and parents in a variety of early childhood settings nationally, the Team selected settings in close proximity to their own homes/workplaces, which collectively represented the diversity of early childhood settings. Merriam (1988) explained, *One wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most* (p. 48).<sup>12</sup> While the portraits present the experiences of children across three provinces, they do not represent a complete **geographical spread**.
- The Early Childhood Team visited the settings during the period of **time** from April to May 2006, with visits to only one setting taking place in June. The Team spent time with the children, their practitioners and parents across a maximum of six visits per setting with visits ranging in duration from two hours to five hours.<sup>13</sup> The scheduling of the study inevitably impacted on the age of children at the time the portraits were being developed. This explains, for example, why children in junior infants at the time of the study were almost six years old.
- The portraits themselves celebrate the positive experiences of the participants - of babies, toddlers and young children, in their settings as they experience them. As such, this focus on the positive is subjective – based on the child's, his/her parents', the practitioner's and the researcher's perspectives. It is important to note that the settings do not set out to represent **best practice**, although the reader may note elements of best practice or otherwise, while reading through the

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setting. The NCCA Team had hoped to work with a girl in one of the settings but following the recommendations by the practitioners concerned, we worked with two boys instead.

<sup>12</sup> Merriam, S. B. (1988), *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

portraits. It is important to remember, therefore, that it is the child's unique experience and voice which provided the focus of the portrait in each case.

- Seven **NCCA staff** were involved in designing and completing this study. Members of the team have worked during their careers in a variety of settings with children of different ages. They also have particular expertise and knowledge of the early years sector in Ireland arising from a range of professional qualifications as well as practical experience. The completed set of portraits is based on individual and collective analysis of data by members of the Team.
- Finally, it is important to note that the portraits presented in this study are **deeply embedded in the context in which they were developed**. Thus, the make-up of the portraits would differ depending on the type of settings selected, the social and economic conditions of the regions in which the settings were located, the period of time in which they were completed, the perspectives of children selected on what constitutes a positive experience, and the members of staff involved in the collection and analysis of data who themselves have different experiences and educational qualifications in working with very young children.

While these considerations should be kept in mind when reading the portraits, it is nevertheless the case that the portraits provide rich and generative insights into the children's everyday interactions, experiences and activities in a range of different early childhood settings in Ireland, and that they have enlivened and enlightened the NCCA's work in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*.

The next section of this document discusses the presentation of the portraits under four themes and presents the portraits themselves.

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<sup>13</sup> The length of the visit depended on a number of factors including the type of setting, the age of the child, the practitioner's routine and schedule and the purpose of the visit.