

**Dialogical Agency: Children's interactions with human and more-than-human**

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## **Dialogical Agency: Children's interactions with human and more-than-human.**

This article addresses findings about knowing rather than assuming dialogical interactions between children. Understanding the nature of relation indicates the form of children's interaction within participatory pedagogy. During a *Dialogical Approach to Observation* two-year-old children, their parents and key person practitioners<sup>1</sup> also enact participation together. The approach is based on Buber's relational ontology of dialogue between 'I and You'. Through interpreting the perceived attitude or regard for the other, the children are found to engage in *openness* before entering into *mutuality* in interactions, or not. There is evidence of *dialogical agency* in their decisions to *enter* dialogue and regard others as relevant. The *extension* of dialogue is found, beyond human interaction, to encompass materials and the environment itself. The interpretations have significance for the understanding of potential dialogical relations and for future engagement in dialogical participatory pedagogy.

**(150 words)**

Key words: Dialogical agency/ [openness](#)/ extension of dialogue/ more-than-human/ [dialogical approach to observation](#)

### **Introduction**

This article addresses understanding rather than assuming dialogical interactions. The nature of relation indicates the form of participation within participatory pedagogy.

Relation is understood through a *Dialogical Approach to Observation* that emerged through three case studies (Lawrence 2017a, b, c) of two-year-old children, their parents and key person practitioners who interpret together how children regard others. The approach is based on Buber's (1970) relational ontology of dialogue as 'in-between' the *I* and the *You*. More than any unspecific exchange, verbal or non-verbal, dialogue is a state of encounter, of *being* with the other in direct, embodied and unmediated '*I-You*<sup>2</sup>' relation with the whole person rather than acting on them in a more instrumental 'I-It' attitude. It is a mutual meeting with awareness to 'experience the other side' (Buber 2002, 114). Seen in this way dialogue depends on

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<sup>1</sup> UK educators who have a particular dedicated relationship with that child and family.

<sup>2</sup> *I-You* is the favoured translation of Kaufmann (Buber 1970). Kaufmann differentiates *Thou* for relating to God and *You* for use in direct relationships with other humans (see 1970, 14-15). This approach considers participants' relationships with each other and so I adopt *I-You*.

the *nature* of relation beyond the communication focus foregrounded in many Bakhtinian studies (White, Peter and Redder 2015), although Bakhtin builds on the voice of Buber. This study responds to Reddy's (2008) call to research perceived links from disengaged *I-It* attitudes to *I-You* relations in early childhood. The consideration of situated, dynamic, multimodal and embodied experiences also engages Merleau-Ponty's (2012) phenomenological world as 'the sense that shines forth at the intersection of my experiences with those of others through a sort of gearing into each other' (2012, xxxv). The philosophical underpinning of what dialogue is addresses 'ontological orientations to pedagogy as a relationship' called for by Farquhar and White (2014, 821). Such pedagogy clearly exists, as in Reggio Emilia, where the focus on interaction echoes both Buber and Merleau-Ponty, in being 'relational and systemic because it is capable of seeing relationships rather than related terms [...] capable of generating itself in a constant relationship with the world' (Hoyuelos 2013, 334). Rather than review pedagogical approaches, the intention here is to clarify what is meant by a Dialogical Approach.

I define the Dialogical Approach to Observation as shared attention to potential dialogical relation as participants perceive, co-construct and communicate meaning together. This involves child participants within the observed interaction, as well as the children and adults within the interpretation afterwards (Lawrence 2017b, and 2017c). This article attends to the findings about *dialogical agency* evident in the children's decisions to *enter* and *extend* dialogue, at times beyond human interaction, to encompass materials and the environment itself.

The Dialogical Approach to Observation occupies a space of its own because it: focuses on the nature of toddler-toddler relations; involves child, parent and practitioner participants in the interpretation; and allows for the potential of relation with more-than-humans, with materials, objects and the environment. It is therefore compatible with the material turn, and post-human ontologies (Taylor, Pacinini-Ketchabaw and Blaise 2012; Duhn 2015; Murris 2016) that present relational ways of being in the world beyond human-centred explanations of inter-subjective capacities. Both Buber and Merleau-Ponty (2012) respond to the call for engagement from objects, in particular the *haecceity* and materiality such as the redness of a surface. Duranti (2010) provides a distinctive starting point theorising inter-subjectivity as a state of potential for, not necessarily the accomplishment of, shared understanding. It is a preparedness for exchange or ‘trading places’ (2010, 6) similar to what Buber called ‘*a priori*’ readiness (1958, 43). Through multi-modal analysis Kendon (1990, 247) also detects ‘a commonality of readiness’ before social ‘witness’ is established (250). Gibson (1979) understands readiness or latent affordances for engagement can work in two directions from the human to the non-human and vice versa. Notwithstanding these insights, in practice the premise that an interaction *is dialogue* is seldom questioned (Cagliari and Giudici private conversation<sup>3</sup> 28<sup>th</sup> August 2017) and indeed has been considered unknowable (Friedman 1955). For Duranti (2010) the role of theory here is to decide ‘whether we *should* distinguish among different ways of being together. The empirical issue is whether we *can* distinguish’ (13) (author’s emphasis). The stance of the Dialogical Approach to Observation is that one *should* try to discern the nature of relating with the other in dialogue.

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Paola Cagliari and Claudia Giudici for this insight.

### **The Methodology of Observing Dialogue in Dialogue**

The Dialogical Approach to Observation is a methodology and also ‘an epistemology and an attitude’ (Krai 2014, 148) to research *with* people not *on* them (Schwandt 2000; Heron and Reason 2001). The interpretation process is reported more fully elsewhere (Lawrence forthcoming; Lawrence, Howe, Howe, and Marley 2014, 2017). Dialogue can be observed by one researcher alone, with innovative poly-visual methods, and including conversations with parents and practitioners (White 2015). What distinguishes the Dialogical Approach to Observation is the explicit inter-subjective (rather than subjective) potential for participants to be ‘in dialogue’. More complete relational knowing (Reddy 2008, 33) is coherent with the study of relational interaction.

Three two-year-old children, Oscar, Tia and Henry<sup>4</sup>, were the foci for case studies: one at the Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families in the English Midlands; and two in a small city in South East England. The southern setting did not have the same extensive involvement with parents but was selected because, similar to Pen Green, there was outstanding predominantly play-based provision with emphasis on child-initiated experiences. These are settings in urban environments with children from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. The observations were equivalent to at least one third of the children’s time there over 20, seven and four months respectively. The participants were in three groups of each focus child’s family with their key person practitioner (see Table 1.). Other children and their parents were involved in discussion (see Camille and her mother Susana in this article) if they had been involved in the interaction.

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<sup>4</sup> All the children’s names have been changed.

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Information</b>
Oscar	participated from 14 to 34 months (this study continued an earlier project with the same family).
Hannah, Oscar's mother	was interested in seeing ways in which Oscar communicated with other children of his age. She wanted to understand how children communicate other than verbally.
Darren, Oscar's father	was interested in seeing how Oscar dealt with sharing with children his age and sharing the adult's attention. At home Oscar only shared his parents' attention with his brother, Max, whereas at nursery there were many more children. Darren was interested in how Oscar managed with sharing in that context.
Sarah, Oscar's Family Worker [Key Person practitioner]	focused on interactions where the children had very different intentions from each other. She was curious to observe the relationships Oscar developed with others and the strategies he used to engage others.
Tia	participated from 29-36 months.
Anne, Tia's mother	was interested in seeing ways in which Tia socialised with English as an additional language to the Dutch language she used extensively at home. Tia had an older brother and, at the time of recording, a new baby sister.
Henry	participated from 32-36 months.
Rachel, Henry's mother	was interested seeing more of what Henry did in the setting where she felt he was very settled.
Jo, Tia and Henry's Key Person practitioner	was interested in the opportunity to deepen her knowledge of Tia and Henry through discussing these observations. Jo is also a practising professional illustrator. She was also interested in the role of perception in the children's experiences and in the adult's interpretations of the children's experiences.

Table 1. Participants' information.

The methodology is based on theories of multimodality relating to phenomenology. Norris's (2004) multimodal visual analysis centres on the phenomenal concept of mind, observable externally in perceptions, thoughts and feelings that people are expressing and responding to. A mode is understood as a 'channel' of representation, not always primarily spoken language (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). More than signs that accompany vocalisations, modes such as gestures, gaze, touch, posture, position and manipulation of objects, are communicative in and of themselves (Goodwin 2016). Parents, practitioners, and the researcher observed and were joined by the children to interpret in cycles of video analysis (Collier 2001). The participants encountered multiple perspectives (Tait and Lawrence 2014; EECERA 2015) partly reflecting their range of research interests (see Table 1.).

### *Data collection and analysis*

#### *Video observation*

The video observations were recorded by the adult participants. Closely positioned wide-angled shots facilitated Merleau-Ponty's (2012) co-presence during review affording the observer's and children's points of viewing.

#### *First analysis cycle*

According to their interests the participants selected episodes on the day or within the week following the recording. Episodes were framed as interactions in a sequential process (Lamb 1965) of paying attention, forming an intention and then making a commitment to a course of action. Of these attention and action were apparent to observation. This framing allowed for inclusion of the children's awareness of alternatives depending on what they paid attention to. The first viewing cycle was of the whole uninterrupted episode. The participants selected key modes for the next analytic cycle.

#### *Second visual analysis cycle (a week later)*

The participants accessed a structured detailed multi-modal (Norris 2004) transcript prepared by the researcher on ELAN software (Max Planck 2012) with annotations of the selected modes for each child running alongside the video. The participants interpreted the children's verbal and non-verbal expressions and responses.

### *Third visual analysis cycle*

Then, in the same meeting, the group returned to an open viewing of the whole video clip for evaluation of children's interactions in the context of the whole lived experience.

### *Thematic analysis*

Connections to context were also retained by adapting a phenomenological process of 'contextual' imaginative variation (Giorgi and Giorgi 2003, 246). This operated on the participants' visual interpretations to identify essential constituents (italicised in Table 2.) considered integral to the quality of the particular experience and without which that experience would 'collapse'.

### *Ethics*

Participants developed judgment in interpretations and in how relationships were conducted. Research was a space for 'a particular attitude that leaves open the possibility for ethical reflection' (Ramaekers and Suissa 2011, 98) with diverse roles and knowledge bases. Leading the research I did not assume that parents and practitioners ought to become the same. In fact a 'Pedagogy-in-Participation' approach can be a capacity building asset for working with cultural diversity rather than an imposition (Formosinho and Figueiredo 2014). Potential dialogical regard for others invigorates inclusive community in Buber's (1970) view (and Veck 2013), encompassing difference and even dissensus. It could be sustained beyond the term of a research project in the setting culture. This was indicated by the way that ethics came to belong to the participants (Lawrence *et al.* 2017). A range of reactive attitudes, 'Human reactions to the treatment of people as displayed in attitudes and actions' (Strawson 1962, 220) were demonstrated: the practitioner's consideration of



how one family's response to a video episode may affect another family; a child's response to the actions of another child. The main responsibility for the conduct of the study was the researcher's. However, the research recognised and enhanced the participants' attitudes.

The children communicated multi-modally (Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir 2016; Flewitt 2005) consent to or withdrawal from participation through gaze, walking or turning towards or away from the observer recording or from discussion with parents and practitioner afterwards. Careful on-going negotiation required responding to each family and each setting (Hill 2005; EECERA 2015). The adult and child participants were highly involved (Robson and Smedley 1996; Payler 2016) in deciding episodes and the modes to interpret. The children indicated significant experiences for them with modal intensity, particular emphasis, (Norris 2004) say by combinations of vocalisations, the tension of the arm pointing at the screen, or by re-enacting the sweep of an arm.

### **Findings and Discussion: Entering and Extending Dialogue with Dialogical Agency**

The main finding was the move into *I-You* relations. Close attention in interpretative dialogue helped identify the shifts of attitudes. The children were aware of alternatives, could have done otherwise, and therefore the entry into dialogue was conceptualised as a decision made with *dialogical agency*. The thematic analyses generated a cumulative list of constituents. In these cases Oscar, Tia and Henry made decisions with dialogical agency to enter and sustain dialogue with *openness, mutuality, attention, change* and *effort*. Table 2. sets out the constituents and

indicates some of the connections between them. Decisions were also made to *extend* dialogue with objects, environment, and others from prior experience, cultural or imagined. The protagonists made relevant by the children and the interpreting adults, for example sand or sounds, were not in themselves constituents. The *extending* of dialogue to them was the constituent.

- 1) *Openness*- as a pre-condition for mutuality. *Attention* to the other and *effort* were a part of *openness*.
- 2) *Mutuality* – occurred after the transition from *I-It* into *I-You* relations. There is engaged reciprocity. *Attention* to the other maintained mutuality and this occurred sometimes through the child exerting some *effort*. *Attention* and *effort* also demonstrated agency because the focus child was aware of alternatives that s/he could have chosen otherwise. Potential to *change* was characterised by spontaneity and improvisation when it was enacted. It was also the possibility to remain with a course of action and was part of the response to the other. Sometimes *I-You* formed the over-arching relation, a relational flow, within which there were *I-It* attitudes. Sometimes there was an *overtone* to the episode such as humour.
- 3) *Extending the dialogue in the world* – to include additional others as well as the other child such as the observer, objects, materials, space, movement or sound themselves.

Table 2. Summary of constituents of decisions made with dialogical agency in the case study episodes.

Three episodes set out these constituents in context.

### ***Episode 1 Tia with shoes: Openness to dialogue***

Tia (29 months) with Anne, her mother, and Jo, her key person practitioner, generated constituents of *attention* to the other and an *effort* to engage with the other as part of *openness* even before any entry into *mutuality*. The interaction with her shoes is summarised here.

We are outside in the playground. The dressing-up shoes Tia is wearing are very big for her but she starts walking with careful steps. Other children are sweeping sand around on the ground [Corner 1 of map in Figure 1.]. Where there is space she jumps on the spot picking both feet up at once and coming down feet together, with a ‘clack clack’ sound [Figure 2]. She is looking ahead of her across the space. With a burst of fast steps she runs right across the playground. When she reaches the paving stones (Corner 2), the shoes make a clip clop sound on the harder surface. As we look at each other I say ‘clip clop clip’ and Tia’s feet and shoes say ‘clip clop clip’. [...] Tia crosses the grass (Corner 3), approaches and stands close to Michael and bikes. She crosses to Lucy (Corner 1), and stands next to her openly watching her spooning sand. In the middle Becky stands holding up an umbrella that covers her. Tia comes close to the edge of the umbrella’s space and meets Becky’s gaze [Figure 3]. They both gaze at me. Becky looks down at the ground and then up and says ‘rain’s not coming’. Tia moves on jumping.

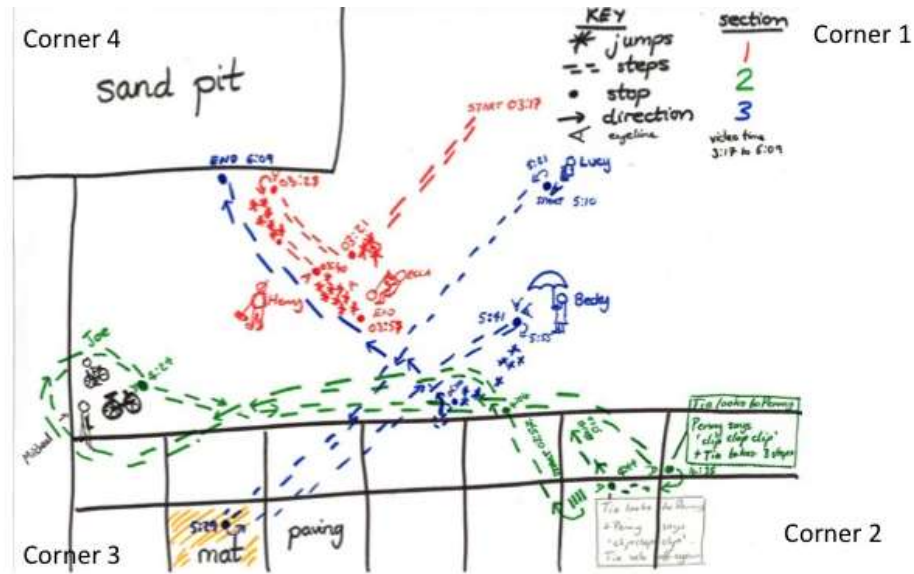


Figure 1. Map of Tia's movements in the shoes.



Figure 2. Tia jumping with dressing-up shoes.



Figure 3. Tia with Becky and the umbrella.

This episode was characterised by the flow of Tia's movements, and her experience of movement, sound, spaces and surfaces, as she went around the playground. Figure

1. maps her movements.

Jo: *(laughs)*. *Loving the sound of it.*

Anne: *Right.*

[Tia speaks in Dutch and Anne phrases it in English] *You like wearing the shoes and being with everyone outside?*

[Tia confirms, yes, in Dutch].

Anne: *Oh wow definitely!*

Penny: *and on the different surfaces different sounds.*

Anne: *Yeah eh. Trying on the grass as well, yeah [Corner 3].*

Jo: *It's like she was trying to show the others how the heels were sounding with her shoes.*

Tia's feet made the same rhythm and variation in sound as I had when I said 'clip clop clip' indicating her attention to these sounds. We could see (Figure 1.[map], and Figure 2.) that her jumps (\*) were orientated to the space as a whole. Her audience seemed to be herself within the environment, not only the children. She approached Becky with intensity and restraint (see Figure 3.).

Jo: *Tia is very aware of other people's space [...]. She hovers close to say, 'I'm here'. It's like an invitation.*

Penny: *She didn't need them to do the shoes she just needed to be with them. It's such a physical being here. You know kind of being with them.*

Anne: *Yeah. Have them acknowledge her with her shoes.*

Tia was seeking being with the other children. Proximity, embodied attention in-between the children, their physical orientation, the intensity of modes and Tia's verbal confirmation signalled invitations that they were with and *open* to encounter. Buber's (1958) and Kendon's (1990) notions of readiness to be together, as well as with Duranti's (2010) state of potential for shared understanding support this interpretation. Tia's perseverance and *effort* functioned in a similar way to Göncü's (1993) negotiation as an indicator of *openness*. Laevers (1997) identifies openness and receptivity as key factors in well-being, in turn a primary consideration within pedagogy. It is a process of being touched by people and the environment. Tia had responded to the people, space, sounds and surfaces (Merleau-Ponty 2012) outside. *Openness* therefore, had value even without the accomplishment of mutuality. The invitation of *openness* did not guarantee *mutuality*, that **would be** differentiated by the inter-actants' accepting the invitation and maintaining reciprocal engagement. *I-It*

would transition into *openness* and then into mutual *I-You* relations. The relation also made the reverse transition (see Figure 4.) as demonstrated in the next episode.

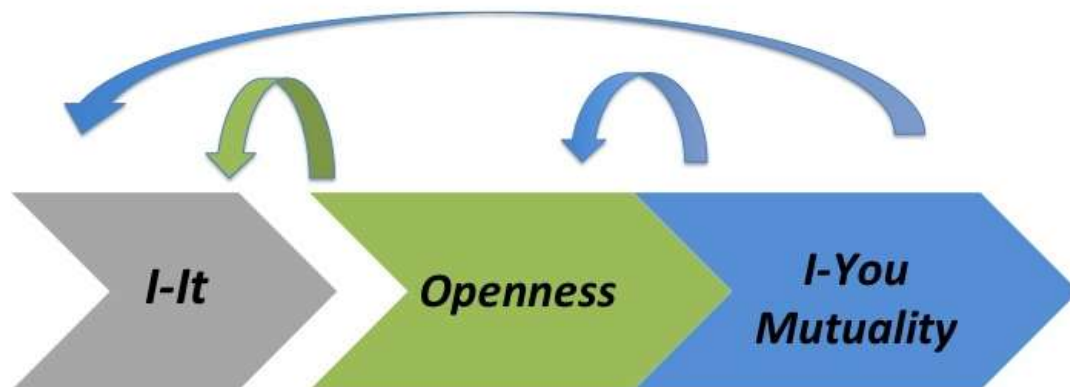


Figure 4. The transitions from *I-It* attitudes to *Openness*, then *I-You* mutual relations and back.

### ***Episode 2 Oscar with Ian, John and the CD Player: Mutuality***

Oscar (26 months) interpreted with Hannah and Darren, his parents, and Sarah, his key person practitioner.

We are next to the CD player. Oscar and John press buttons, each lifting hands back afterwards. The CD disc<sup>5</sup> door flaps open and shut. One button starts the music. The music can start and stop partly like a surprise game. Oscar gestures with hands up to his ears to check that I've heard. Oscar says 'House'. I nod. Oscar and John smile animatedly to each other, and to me, when the music starts. 'House?' asks John in querying tone when CD is quiet. Fingers coincide trying to touch buttons. Oscar's arm pushes John further away [...]. Ian arrives and the music starts. He dances smiling broadly at Oscar, John (who is standing further back) and me. Oscar watches Ian and mentions, 'Doctor'. The track ends. Ian stops, claps applause and exclaims 'House!', looking around to me. Oscar starts the CD. Oscar leans close to Ian, with an intense smiling gaze. Ian starts to jig again. John looks unsure, still distant from the CD player. Oscar approaches John, touches his chest, then he returns to the CD player.

Oscar shared operating the CD player, responding to the music, and then stopped. He was deciding how he related with John (23 months).

Sarah: *I love the way they move. The synchrony just flows.*

Hannah: *He was enjoying taking turns and then later John got in his way. That [the push away] was saying no.*

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<sup>5</sup> Hannah and Darren explained that the CD itself was one Oscar had brought from home that morning. It was the music from a familiar BBC TV CBeebies programme 'Justin's House'. Doctor Who, referred to in this episode, was also a BBC TV programme figure known to Oscar.

Sarah: *When he's choosing. The 'No' moments*

Oscar had moved from an *I-You* relation with John to an *I-It* attitude acting on him and the CD player. Oscar's cultural references, intense gaze, and close-up response to Ian (24 months) transitioned from *openness* into *mutuality*, an *I-You* relation with Ian's dancing response with the music. Through proximity and touch he later potentially sought to re-open to dialogue with John inviting him into an *I-You* relation.

Sarah: *Looks like a little containing hold, maybe he's giving him [John] a reassuring hold.*

Darren: *Oscar turned to him and gave him a bit of a cuddle to get him back into the music again [...] to sort tell him he could come back in.*

Penny: *Like opening up again.*

The interpretation acknowledged the attention that Oscar had paid to alternatives beforehand, such as allowing John close or pushing him away, as part of making his decision (Lamb 1965) to engage again. Oscar demonstrated *dialogical agency* because he exerted *effort* and could have chosen otherwise. Oscar interpreted the CD player episode while jiggling to the music saying 'more House!' indicating emphasis on the embodied *I-You* relation with the music.

*Attention to changes* of movement and sound maintained *mutuality* in two other episodes when Oscar and Camille engaged in improvised percussion waiting at the snack table. In analysis both acknowledged their experiences joined with other people's experiences too by shuffling plates on the table and grinning at us. They demonstrated decisions in embodied presence and responsiveness (Merleau-Ponty 2012). *Change* involving surprise was also identified by Buber (1970) in *I-You* relations. Trevarthen (private conversation<sup>6</sup> 24<sup>th</sup> June 2015) saw Oscar and Camille's

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Colwyn Trevarthen for this insight.

companionship ‘like a spontaneous piece of theatre’, akin to Trevarthen’s (2000) explanation of how the complex vitality of improvised music-cum-dance-cum-theatre maintains inter-subjectivity. Significantly, in contrast to Trevarthen’s (2009) emphasis on human-human relation, the potential *I-You* relations here engaged also with non-human protagonists, movement and sounds. In Tia’s episode while her invitation to the other children remained at the threshold of *mutuality*, with the shoes, sounds, surfaces and spaces there was not only openness, but arguably further reciprocity in a relational sense.

### ***Episode 3 Harry and Freddy with Sand: Extending the dialogue in the world***

In Henry’s episode with Freddy (both 34 months), their song with sand was interpreted to be *extending* dialogue to material sand grains, with movement and space.

We are in the sand pit. The sand can be heaped up on the log ends around the perimeter to cover each horizontal log surface. Henry and Freddy chant ‘Finished’ as they check each log’s heap. The mirror breaks the surface in the brick wall, like a space in the bricks. Henry scatters sand up against the mirror, so does Freddy (Figures 5. and 6.). The sand can be used as a cover, ‘Bedtime’ Henry announces. ‘Bury me’ Henry asks. Freddy can cover Henry with sand. The adult (F) starts a game to cover objects instead. ‘Bury me’ Henry asks again. Henry and Freddy return to envelop Henry’s whole body. The sand is scatter-able and we can see a cloud effect in the air in front of us. Henry and Freddy stand together and throw (Figure 7). They repeatedly sing ‘forever together’, ‘you and me’ and swing their arms and the scattered sand in the air.



Figure 5. Henry sprays sand in the mirror. Figure 6. Freddy sprays sand in the mirror.



Figure 7. Freddy and Henry make the sand song together.

The analysis, interpreted with Rachel, Henry's mother and Jo his key person practitioner, connected Henry's experience with a recent trip to a beach.

*Rachel: His daddy buried him in Falmouth [on the UK South West Coast]! So that's obviously why he's - 'Bury me'.*

*Penny: Things remind him of something. So who's making the choice, is it just that we're suggestible? [...] The provision is there, and the provision helps him make decisions.*

*Jo: I think it's like when I was doing some research for my paintings, people's interpretation of my paintings. It's what they've got in their perception that they're able to understand a painting with. [...] Everybody's got different interpretation according to what they've experienced.*

There was a reciprocal engagement of the Henry with the sand and with Freddy, as well as the possible memory of the beach and his dad at the weekend. Although Henry's experience was different to Freddy's this was an intensely cooperative embodied interaction. Both children decided to cover or 'bury' a body rather than the



adult-initiated alternative activity of hiding objects. There was dialogical agency in the selection of this preference.

*Penny: It's not for lack of adult supervision. F [the practitioner] kept saying, "Oh I don't think you want that Henry, do you. Here why don't you hide these things and bury these things instead?". He kept going back and saying, "Bury me!".*

*Jo: ... was important to him to repeat the same ritual [as with his dad] Asserting what they wanted to do. Finding hidden objects isn't the same as feeling covered by sand.*

Side by side Henry and Freddy improvised the sand song (Figure 7.). It may be one they have both heard<sup>7</sup>. It was not one Rachel readily recognised from home, but for her the focus was 'Whatever it is, they kept it going together'. Henry vocalised expressively while reviewing the video, 'together' his voice rising as the arms swung up scattering sand. It was celebratory of togetherness, and potentially that togetherness extended to the sand. Jo, as an illustrator as well as an educator, also perceived the form of the sand in the air as significant for the children (Figures 5., 6. and 7.).

*Jo: The shapes the sand makes as it rises and falls [...] seeing a large spray rising and falling.*

*It's [the sand is] part of our world we're part of that.*

*The throwing was like marking that moment in time, although they were using their voices, the ritual of throwing marked their experience that they were expressing about togetherness.*

The sand cloud was both an expression of something else, togetherness, and was involved in its own right as part of the world. Such perception and dialogical engagement with materiality has been caught in Goldsworthy's (1994) photographs of thrown red sand dispersed in the air for a matter of seconds. In two other episodes Oscar (26 months) and Layla made decisions with attention to thrown tissues, paper and fabrics, and their shapes and movements. These air-borne dialogues resonate with

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<sup>7</sup> It may be based on a track by Rick Astley, 'Together Forever' (1988), a Pokémon theme tune 'Together Forever' (2006), or a song from the film 'Frozen' (2013).

the project 'Dialogues with Materials' (Reggio Children 2011) observations of children relating with the floating responses of materials to their breath. Brief encounters yet they demonstrate Merleau-Ponty's understanding, 'To move one's body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call' (1962, 139). The children knew how to gear-in bringing their bodies and world together. Potential affordance pointed both ways (Gibson 1979) from the children to the objects and from the objects to the children. The children were in interrelation with the objects and materials (Linell 2009), they did not merely act on them with *I-It* instrumentality. In this sense looking back at the materials just discussed, the sand was noticed as it dispersed or enveloped, the shoes were listened to; the surfaces and spaces were felt.

### ***Decisions made with Dialogical Agency***

The participants' interpretations suggest these children were deciding to relate since they were aware of alternatives. The transition from an *I-It* to an *I-You* relation was the most fundamental decision made. For Buber (1970) moving into an *I-You* relation indicates free will and the capacity to make a decision for which I propose the term *dialogical agency*. The *effort* that the children exerted shaping experiences was in dynamic and complex situations with multiple protagonists, and can be regarded as even more of an accomplishment by these two-year-old children. The *I-It / I-You* boundary does not exist in a fixed ordered position. The children crossed between these relations back and forth. Participatory interpretation can, should (Duranti 2010) and did move beyond assumptions of dialogue. The findings on how children enter and extend dialogue contribute the ontological knowledge, required by Reddy (2008) about the transitions and connections between *I-It* and *I-You* relations, that can be

carried forward into practice.

### **The Significance of Understanding Dialogue for Professional Dialogue and Responsiveness in Practice**

The participatory gearing-in process enacted in the Dialogical Approach to Observation could aid the development of dialogical pedagogy called for internationally (Graham and Fitzgerald 2010; Dalli *et al.* 2011; Alcock 2016; White 2015). The emphasis on the nature of relation would indicate and support whether the pedagogy were in effect *dialogical*, in which case it would be dialogical participatory pedagogy, since it cannot be assumed that all participation is dialogical. Entry and extension contribute useful conceptualisations to participation. The findings support further dialogical experiences, observation and pedagogical development informed by praxeological processes (Oliveira-Formosinho and Pascal 2017) involving children, families and practitioners. Additionally, the extension of dialogue supports further practice and research engaged with more-than-human ontologies within which child-adult-material-environment interactions take place. It is a challenge to make agency matter (Duhn 2015). The proposed concept of dialogical agency has importance here to express relational decision-making in the world.

The Dialogical Approach to Observation places a different emphasis in seeing and different things would be seen. Educators with increasingly refined perceptions (Goodwin 1994; Merleau-Ponty 2012, Lawrence 2017a) see more dialogical agency in the entry into and extension of dialogue. As in Reggio, the working hypothesis is engaging in dialogue heightens awareness of and attunement in the adult invitations made to children (Rubizzi 2001). A secure understanding of dialogical agency is not only part of assessment, which I shall address shortly. The importance of the

dialogical research methodology is that it allowed dialogical practices to be explicitly identified and enacted in the dance of practice (Edwards 2007). However, it is without guarantees. Slep and Sener (2013, 60) caution ‘If, as dialogue practitioners, we aspire to facilitate genuine dialogue as Buber understands it, the best we can do is to put in place conditions that we think will be favourable to it, and hope’. The challenge remains to put those conditions in place. The Dialogical Approach to Observation has a role in continuing professional development since it supports the development of a practitioner’s professional understanding, and also may support the enactment of *dialogical* participatory pedagogy and dialogical culture in a setting.

For the adult participants involvement in this participatory gearing-in process renders this an on-going professional dialogue rather than a solitary endeavour. Dialogical awareness builds inclusive participatory education because the educator can meet with the learner’s lived experience ‘from the other side’ (Friedman 1955, 177), and respond to the child’s relations with the world in the world (Veck 2013). Future research could explore what would be enabled in children as dialogical interpreters of video analysis. As Forman (1999) concludes, it may help children step outside of an experience and think about how processes occur for themselves and for others. The children’s embodied interpretations support this view.

In terms of assessment a critical engagement with established discourses about free choices and free play requires practitioners to resist making immediate definite assumptions about intentions. Here lies a cornerstone of participatory pedagogy, the responsibility and opportunity for the adult to pay attention and practice

responsiveness to the aliveness of the children's choices (Else 2014). The findings do not constitute a tool for relational assessment. They indicate different dialogical and observational processes. The Dialogical Approach to Observation is complementary to and does not necessarily have to replace other approaches. Dialogical engagement counters automatic assessment habits conducted at speed with few alternatives considered 'which may detract from staff engaging in conversation with their peers about next steps for development' (Billington 2016). A slightly longer slower period of indefinite interpretation (Dahlberg and Dahlberg 2003; [Lawrence forthcoming](#)) contributes awareness of and tolerance of uncertainty while engaging with others' perspectives (EECERA 2015; Lawrence 2017a) It is more collective reflective communication as called for by Oliveira-Formosinho and Pascal (2017) that advances understanding, more subtle and complex interpretation and responsiveness.

As in all interpretation, other interpreters may take the same evidence and reach other conclusions, however, knowledge of the child and participants closest to the child are valued here and thus support a dialogical participatory pedagogy. Dialogical observation invites participants to perceive and acknowledge potential dialogical agency in day-to-day life with children.

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