# Dialogue observed in dialogue: A 'Dialogical Approach to Observation' in early childhood

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# Dialogue observed in dialogue: Entering a 'Dialogical Approach to Observation' in early childhood

A 'Dialogical Approach to Observation' proposes refreshed and enhanced interpretation of dialogue. It attends to potential dialogical relation depending on *how* the protagonists regard others. Rather than assuming any exchange whatsoever is dialogue, the nature of the observed interaction indicates it is dialogical. Buber's *I-You* ontology and Merleau-Ponty's 'gearing into' underpin the theoretical perspective and the approach is compatible with more-than-human ontologies. Drawing on evidence from three case studies this proposal reconsiders what dialogue means and how to strengthen the practical relational processes of knowing dialogue in early childhood. Dialogical processes are found also between participants during the shared cycles of visual multi-modal analysis, so dialogue may be observed in dialogue. Perceptions of dialogue are refined in a less definite in-between space during discussion. Recommendations are made for future small-scale applications of the Dialogical Approach to Observation in participatory research, and for interpretation of young children's experiences in dialogical pedagogy.

150 words

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## Introduction to the Dialogical Approach to Observation

This article proposes a 'Dialogical Approach to Observation' (DAO) in early childhood that attends to the nature of interaction and aims to refresh how dialogical processes are recognised. In this approach dialogue is defined as more than speech or non-verbal interaction of any kind thereby avoiding assuming any exchange whatsoever is dialogue. *How* the protagonists regard others would determine whether it were a dialogical encounter. The fundamental ontological structure of the DAO originates in Buber (1970) and consists of two different regards for others: an instrumental monological '*I-It'* attitude to act on the other; or, one engages with the whole person in an '*I-You*' relation, a mutual meeting to 'experience the other side' (Buber, 2002, p. 114). This is a dialogical encounter. The dialogue is the regard 'in between' the *I* and the *You*. I define the Dialogical Approach to Observation as shared attention to the

potential dialogical relation of participants as they perceive, co-construct and communicate meaning together. This involves the child participants within the observed interaction, as well as the children and adults participating in interpretation of the interaction afterwards (Lawrence, 2017a, 2017b). There is coherence between the form and focus of the DAO allowing dialogue to be observed in dialogue.

The development of the DAO is timely and distinctive, firstly as a process with families, and connected to this, secondly in a period of increasingly institutionalised childhoods, relations need to be foregrounded. While the nature of entering into dialogue has been theorised and studied before (Markovà and Linell, 1996), it has not involved families and practitioners in shared interpretation with a focus on toddler-toddler interactions. The DAO's authenticity derives from close sustained analysis with those adults closest to children, their parents and practitioners, not separately but together. Christensen (2004) regards enquiry into children's main interests at home and in the setting, 'who we are to each other' leading to 'how we relate to each other' (p. 166) as a dialogical research process. The DAO can address these transversal questions relevant throughout childhood in whatever culture. Moreover, although much has been written in the field of early childhood education about dialogical pedagogy, principles and practice (Rinaldi, 2006; White, 2015), the initial premise of what dialogue is needs to be questioned (P. Cagliari and C. Giudici[1], personal communication, August 29, 2017). The DAO effectively frames the challenge of not assuming any interaction constitutes dialogue and asserts dialogue fundamentally as a relation.

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[1] I am grateful to Paola Cagliari and Claudia Giudici for this insight.

The DAO contributes a crucial emphasis on relations at this time in early childhood. The wider context is the need internationally to develop dialogical/relational pedagogy for the youngest children (Dalli, White, Rockel, Duhn with Buchanan, Davidson, Ganly, Kus and Wang, 2011; White, 2015; Alcock, 2016a). For example, in English professional settings the marked recent increase in two-year-old children (Department for Education, 2015) is often located in establishments orientated to three to four-year-olds. The expansion has been met by calls for relevant continuing professional development to work with this younger age group (Georgeson, Campbell-Barr and Mathers, 2015). In particular assessment in early childhood is often a fixed outcomes-dominated accounting exercise, yet beyond this purpose, adults in the inner circle of the children's lives should strengthen practical relational processes of *knowing* the children through the discussion of observations (Carr, 2001; Billington 2016). Much needed research is only just beginning to counter commercially driven digital observation practices (Flewitt and Cowan, 2019). The DAO provides an ethical principles-based, theoretically grounded opportunity to focus on the nature of encounters in circumstances where the quality of responsive interactions is under-understood (Baustad, Rønning and Bjørnestad, 2018), when adults need to develop greater non-verbal literacy (Nyland, 2009; White, Peter and Redder, 2015), and take account of the educational setting as a complex relational environment (Alcock, 2016b).

The methodological essence proposed here is that the parents and early childhood practitioners, the adults closest to the children, engage together with them in participatory video analysis. This is set out in greater detail in this article with reference to episodes from case studies of three two-year-old children. These episodes demonstrate some of the dialogical processes. The original studies (Lawrence, 2017b, 2017c) were designed to research how children's decisions to initiate or sustain child-initiated play were made in dialogue but generated significant understanding of decisions about dialogue itself. They found an inter-subjective precondition of *openness* before mutuality was established, and thereby enhanced understanding of when an interaction enters a relational way of being with the other, and becomes dialogical.

Children were deciding to enter and exit dialogue. At times dialogue extended to the observer and with more-than-human protagonists, for example materials like sand, as well as experiences and actions such as sound and movement. These findings, reported on more fully in Lawrence (2019), lend support to the idea that a DAO can be seen as an approach, more than a methodology. Accordingly, this article proposes the DAO as an approach to relational knowing with a more fundamental focus than the previous studies such that children, parents and practitioners would be participants engaging with the nature of dialogue itself.

The DAO conceptualises children, parents and practitioners as part of an interrelated system with potential for dialogue between them and ideas, culture, objects, materiality and the environment. Whereas there is often an adult-child communication focus apparent in Bakhtin-based studies (White 2015; White, Peter and Redder, 2015), for Buber, whose voice preceded and influenced Bakhtin's dialogism, being in dialogue is a state of encounter, of *being* with the other. Complementing Buber, the DAO's theoretical underpinning of situated, dynamic and embodied experiences draws on Merleau-Ponty (2012) who defined the 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, p. xxxxv). He considers shared perception in viewing the scene 'together' (p. 428), being co-present before it, to be significant since in this way the world is not objectified. Here Merleau-Ponty's thinking on presence, engaging with others and their prior knowledge suggests favourable conditions for an 'I-You' relation rather than an *I-It* attitude during video analysis. The phenomenon of 'gearing' in is an opportunity for 'turning towards the other' (Buber, 2002, p. 22), for *openness* and dialogue between the participants.

Parent: *I felt like I could be open*

Practitioner: *Research really did strengthen our relationship, it did. The conversations were very different.*

Parent*: It opens up conversation*

The case study participants' comments here highlight the potential for the relational nature of engagement with each other. Reddy (2008) advocates relation as a powerful influence on perception and knowing processes. For this reason potential dialogical relations between interpreters as they analyse dialogue are significant for knowing about dialogue. A dialogical hermeneutic suits accessing the nature of dialogue in the children's encounters. The DAO is *of* and *through* interactions embedded in relation rather than individual autonomous acts. Markovà and Linell (1996) highlight that co-present reflexively interconnected activities should not be studied by methods such as coding that freeze and do not connect with the dynamics of dialogue. Relational knowing (Reddy 2008) is needed to know about relation.

***The DAO as a Participatory approach***

At the core of this approach is awareness of potential attitudes to the other, enabled through participation. The DAO combines ontology and methodology to observe and think differently about how dialogue is experienced and understood. It is ontological because of the nature of the regard for participants (Schwandt, 2000). It folds in 'an epistemology and an attitude' (Krai, 2014, p. 148) to research *with* people not *on* them (Schwandt, 2000; Heron and Reason, 2001) allowing for potential *I-You* rather than instrumental *I-It* attitudes. It resonates with Angrosino and Mays de Pérez's (2000) advocated shift away from thinking of observation strictly as a method for data

collection towards seeing observation as a context for interacting with those involved in research. In the DAO, video observation enacts a shared experience particularly conducive to reciprocal relationships with participants. Heath, Hindmarsh and Luff (2010) also highlight the potential in visual methods for 'mutual encounter' that is accomplished in and through the interaction of participants.

There are precedents aiming for open dialogical relationships with research participants (Flewitt, 2005). The role of these participants as researchers (Boylorn, 2008) in the DAO also extends their participation from the field through to the analysis. The participation of parents and practitioners values the knowledge of the child situated within his or her home and educational community (Malaguzzi, 1998; EECERA, 2015). Kabuto (2008) too calls for active parent-participation beyond interviews and observations in collaborative relationships not privileging the academic researcher, 'What we need to develop further is how perception, thinking, personal history and assumptions about the world can also be co-constructed by continued engagement with others in an intersubjective milieu' (p.189). It is an appeal for a process like the DAO.

From this point onwards the article gives an account of the case studies that inspired this approach, and then draws on these to outline the proposal of the DAO for the future.

**The case-study origins of the DAO**

In the case studies three families with two-year-old children, Oscar (observed from 14 to 34 months), Tia (29-36 months) and Henry (32-36 months)[2], and the key person

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[2] all the children's names have been changed.

practitioners (dedicated staff for children and families) agreed to participate after due consideration that the time commitment involved (BERA, 2018). All parents were working and one mother was at home with a new baby. One family was at the Pen Green Centre in the English Midlands where the researcher-setting relationship was of twenty years' standing working on a range of projects involving families (Lawrence, Howe, Howe and Marley, 2017), and two children in a small city in South East England also in a setting with an emphasis on child-initiated experiences. All the children attended rooms with children from diverse social and cultural backgrounds under the age of three in play-based 'outstanding[3]'-rated state-maintained children's centres in urban environments.

The video observations were recorded by myself, the family and the practitioners, for total times equivalent to at least one sixth of the children's time in their settings within a minimum period of two hours, at least twice a month over a period ranging from four months to 20 months[4]. The roles of some participants were sustained all the way through to dissemination (Lawrence, Howe, Howe, and Marley, 2014, 2017). The participants brought complementary research interests that influenced the selection of episodes and analysis. They are set out in Table 1.

| **Participants** | **Information and Research Interests** |
| --- | --- |
| Oscar | participated from 14 to 34 months.<br>(This study continued an earlier project with the same family). |

[3] Outstanding is the highest category for educational settings in the UK inspected by Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills.

[4]. Oscar's case study coincided with another research project that extended the family's involvement (Lawrence, Howe, Howe, and Marley, 2014).

| 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’ Research Interests.

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***Mutuality in observation and analysis***

The observations allowed for relation between children and the observer (Reddy, 2008; Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011; Tait and Lawrence, 2014; Pálmadóáttir and Einarsdóttir, 2016). This varied depending on the type of interaction. Distinctively the children's awareness of the observer was an explicit part of the research design. The camera was clearly visible to them, and they participated in interpreting the recordings. In this way the link between observer, camera and recorded event was physically and continually clear.

Merleau-Ponty's (2012) co-presence in review was facilitated by the camera position at the point of recording, generating Goldman's (2007) 'shareable presence' (p.5) in four ways: '*Perspectivity*'- closely positioned shots with a wide lens afforded both the observer's and children's points of viewing; sufficient *details* brought the viewers 'inside' the experience because the observer was *with* and not far from the children; connecting viewers through a sense of '*Being there/Being with'* the children; and the recording was uninterrupted thereby enabling comprehension 'in sync' with the meaning of events in the flow of time through 'Chronological *verisimilitude'*. The participants met after each recording session to select episodes, forty-three of which were selected for interpretation in further meetings together.

The parents, practitioners, and the researcher were joined by the children in a process of contextualised visual analysis in holistic open and detailed cycles (Collier, 2004). They are set out in Figure 1.

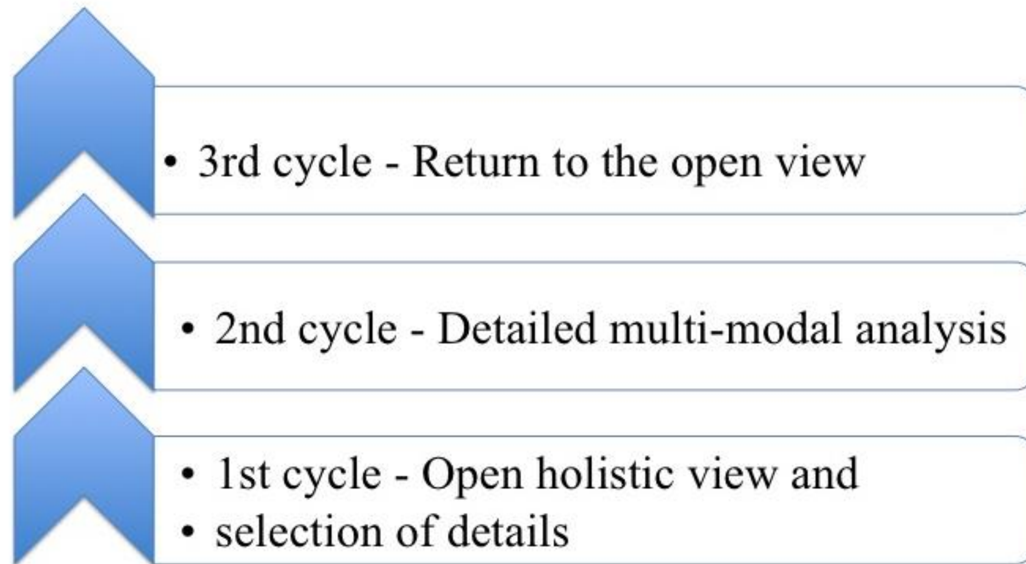


Figure 1. The cycles of participatory visual analysis

In the initial open viewings the video episode of typically three minutes duration was played from start to finish without stopping. At this stage Collier (2004) suggests attention to ‘ ‘listen’ to its overtones and subtleties’ (2004, p. 42). In our analyses the parent of each child led the discussion. As researcher my role was to represent discussion authentically, not to dominate or synthesise it. I noted each person’s interpretation and verified everyone’s intended meaning in an emergent process. This facilitated multiple perspectives (Tait and Lawrence, 2014: EECERA, 2015). Critical sequences in the episode and specific modes were identified for the next cycle of analysis. I made a detailed multimodal interaction analysis transcript of the critical sequences, typically fifteen seconds long, and our second cycle of interpretative dialogue a week later was based on this transcript. Thirdly, we viewed the entire video clip in another open viewing to see details in context and stay close to the flow of lived embodied experience of the children (Angrosino, 2007). Overall there was a ‘zoom in’

to a detailed analysis and a 'zoom out' again to the whole ecology of the child's situation.

The detailed multimodal interaction analysis (Norris, 2004) read verbal and nonverbal communication in the expressions and responses of the children. A mode is understood as a 'channel' of representation or communication. There may be multiple combinations, and spoken language is not always the primary mode of communication (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). Modes such as gestures, gaze, touch, posture, position and manipulation of objects, are communicative in and of themselves (Goodwin, 2016). The participants accessed transcription software called ELAN (Max Planck, 2012) that allowed for video to run in real time, in slow motion or in still-frames alongside annotations for each child and for each mode. Any still frame examined was re-contextualised by returning to the flow of video and this counterbalanced any inauthentic freezing, warned against by Angrosino (2007) and by Markovà and Linell (1996).

Interpreting whilst being together (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) clarified which interpretations were directly based on dialogical elements in the observed interaction and those derived from the participants' prior cultural experiences (Collier, 2004). Part of the role of the researcher was not to stop at the first interpretation that Kress argues inevitably occurs (G. Kress, personal communication, December 8, 2012). Interpreting with others was slower yet it met the challenge of Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2003) '*that we don't make definite what is indefinite*' (p.44, authors' emphasis) because in discussion there was a longer open period as participants encountered multiple perspectives. As researcher I

needed to recognise the dynamic mutable nature of the participants' attitudes, and understandings.

*Thematic anaylsis*

The multimodal analysis accessed children's expression of phenomenal experience (Norris, 2004). The thematic analysis followed steps of a phenomenological method (after Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003) starting with a holistic review of the video analysis (Step 1), then established meaning units (Step 2) from which themes emerged (Step 3). From the themes essential aspects were identified as constituents, or essential characteristics, of the interactions (Table 2.). The constituents retained participants' phrasing (*italicised*) and were not presented in only the researcher's monologic voice (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011). This represents a significant difference to Giorgi and Giorgi's (2003) thematic analysis, that seeks to eliminate the voices of participants. Instead validity, trustworthiness and authenticity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) were evidenced through high regard for their involvement. An inclusive and reciprocal researcher-researched relationship supported ontological authenticity (Flick, 2014).

**Ethical relationships**

The role of the researcher and participants' relations with each other is encapsulated by Schwandt (2000) as 'How should I *be* toward these people I am studying?' (p. 203). In Schwandt's view Buber would go even further into knowing in direct *I-You* relation with and between participants. The research supported but did not oblige such relational potential.

The ethical research relationships can be seen in terms of reactive attitudes, defined as, ‘Human reactions to the treatment of people as displayed in attitudes and actions’ (Strawson, 1962, p. 220). The display could be of *I-You* relations rather than instrumental *I-It* attitudes. A range of reactive attitudes arose in these case studies: a 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 during interpretation; or the parents’ response to a close study of their child. To be clear, the main and over-riding responsibility for ethical conduct was the researcher’s. However, we were each responsible for how we responded and we had that expectation of each other (Strawson, 1962, p. 258). We were developing judgment not only in our interpretations, but also in how we conducted our ethical relationships. Eshleman (2014) sources these reactive attitudes in principles within practice. In addition to the pre-existing culture of the setting, I argue attitudes also arise within research. Research can be an ethical space for sharing values (Ramaekers and Suissa, 2011). The ethics in these cases came to belong to the participants as part of interpersonal mutual relationships.

The use of video technology in the form of video can have ramifications through the whole research situation (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011). It could have created an ethical power differential for participants unless they had access and control. However, they were skilled at recording, selecting and communicating about their own observations. The children and parents spoke first during interpretation and this was another means of mediating perspectives, by privileging them. Participants’ perspectives were acknowledged. Power did not stay sited in individuals (Christensen, 2004), but moved to the in-between space where knowledge was generated in discussion, a dialogical space. It was important to convey this process to children and

to some extent this was enacted through participation. I continue to be mindful of the particular ethical issues involved in the dissemination of video and this requires on-going consent from the children (EECERA, 2015). The research was conducted on the basis that the two-year-old children were fully capable of withdrawing assent to recording, and to participating in discussion of the clip. Flewitt (2005) finds this to be the case with three-year-old children. Overall, on a continuum of involvement (Robson and Smedley, 1996; Payler, 2016), the adult and child participants were highly involved in making decisions, for example about which episodes and which modes to analyse. Arguably, sharing decisions respectfully can adjust the power-balance in favour of the researched (Flewitt, 2005, p. 553). Dialogue, where it occurs, constitutes conditions for awareness of the exercise of power (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010). This article represents only the relations in these cases. There could be more challenges associated with these questions and therefore careful negotiation would be required in other settings and by other researchers.

## Findings and discussion

### *Openness and on-going understanding in mutuality*

The relational ethical regard the participants held for each other during analysis was itself a finding. The reactive attitudes (Strawson, 1962) indicated *openness* to others to establish *mutuality*. In addition the participants identified refined perception and prolonged indefinite interpretation arising in dialogical processes. At times children were *extending* dialogue to the observer.

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 identified in the children's decisions made with dialogical agency

The findings from the episodes in the case studies are set out in Table 2. presenting some of the connections between constituents or essential characteristics of the interactions. They indicate how dialogue was recognised for the children. *Openness* occurred at the outset and yet did not guarantee a process of mutuality between children in the interaction. *Mutuality* needed to be maintained with *openness* to the other's experiences and meanings in the on-going interaction. Germane to this article is the relevance of these constituents in the interpretation also. Sustained *openness* was identified,

> Sarah (practitioner): *Every step along the way you* [Penny] *always said this is about all of us.*
>
> Hannah (parent): *You've sent information beforehand making sure that everybody had a chance to look through it, to have input, to take it away again and think about it. Like you really have valued it rather than it just being done because you feel you have to.*
>
> Sarah (practitioner): *We've felt like you wanted it* [the input].

The researcher did not lead the dialogue. The parents and staff found they were fully involved in making selections,

> Sarah (practitioner): *You* [Penny] *facilitated it and made it happen in terms of us meeting and having the video prepared. In terms of the discussions I don't think you even spoke at the beginning of it. You'd play the video and wait for us …*
>
> Hannah (parent): *Wait for us to see what we'd pick up from it.*

> Darren (parent): *I felt it was good that [*Penny*] let us watch the footage and pick out bits to focus on first before sharing what she noticed or thought.*

The accessibility of visual data facilitated children's participation. This included any children involved in interactions with the case study focus children. For example Camille and her mother, Susana, interpreted an episode when the focus child, Oscar, had moved an object, a ring holder pole, away from play with small sequencing rings to encourage Camille to play with larger rings together with him instead. Camille was aware of Oscar's perspective and, in turn, what he was aware of in her own experience.

> Susana (mother): *at first her expression is* [perplexed face].
>
> Camille (child): *He took it* [the ring holder pole] *away because I wanted to play with it.*
>
> [Penny] (researcher): *... and then?*
>
> Camille (child): *so I not play with it.*
>
> Susana (mother): *She could still play* [with small rings and ring pole] *if she wanted. She would go there, pick it up and bring it back, but she changed her mind. I think so because she saw Oscar playing with the* [large] *rings and she thought 'Oh I'm going to decide to play too'.*
>
> Camille (child): [nods and smiles]

Oscar also reviewed his experience and showed awareness of Camille's experience. Oscar explained the distance he wanted to place between Camille and the ring pole, and his suggested shift of attention to the larger rings.

> Hannah (Oscar's mother): *Where are you taking it?*
>
> Oscar (focus child): *'way*
>
> Hannah (parent): *Out of the way?*
>
> Oscar (child): *Yeah*
>
> Penny (researcher): *What did you want to do?*
>
> Oscar (child): [makes arms moving up through ring gesture].
>
> Penny (researcher): *Did you want to put it on your arm?*
>
> Oscar (child): *Mmm* [nods].

Camille and Oscar both decided to maintain openness in mutual play, and within the interpretation with the other participants. In other interpretative dialogues children emphasised the importance of certain aspects of an interaction by combinations of modes: vocalisations; gaze; pointing at the screen; re-enacting gestures. Norris (2004) associates high modal density (intensity of modes, and complexity of modes at the same time) with a focused action that indicates significance for the protagonist.

The entirety of knowledge within the relationship informed the particular interpretative process. For example, when we zoomed out aspects of the broader socio-cultural context, such as objects, people and places encountered on previous occasions, were considered relevant. In our discussion of Oscar drawing with another child I noted the broader confluence and potential shifts to *I-It* attitudes,

> Penny (researcher): *It's like we're not only seeing this interaction* [with Barry], *if we zoom out a bit we're seeing previous interactions that are obviously part of Oscar's experience. He looks after his experiences doesn't he?*
>
> Hannah (parent)*: He protects them*.

As we generated and connected knowledge we referred to a backdrop of understandings from the intimate shared history of participants (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) who were part of the dynamic community and ecology of the child (Malaguzzi, 1998). As well as seeing what we already knew, in the shared context we were seeing anew. Hannah, Oscar's mother interpreted and reflected,

> *'Wow', look how over the top he is with his expressions. I think I'm like that with him sometimes too. I wouldn't have said I noticed that before.*

In an episode in which Oscar was drawing with another child, Joe, (see Figure 2.) the nuanced interpretation encompassed Oscar's gaze to Joe, and to me, the observer, (see Figure 3.) but did not necessarily place these people in the fore-ground of his attention (Norris, 2004). They were not assumed to be of more significance than Oscar's chalk

marks close behind his back (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). The analysis gave a weighting to the marks he concentrated on overall. Oscar was relating to the observer, Joe, Joe’s and his own marks.

Figure 2. Sketch of Oscar and Joe next to Joe’s drawing

Figure 3. Sketch of Oscar’s gaze to the observer standing next to his own chalk marks

I return to these refined and less definite aspects of perception later. By interpreting together we were building on what each knew already. The participants absorbed and readily employed vocabulary and concepts to interpret multi-modal interactions.

> Hannah: *It builds on your knowledge. I didn't know a lot of the words, I didn't understand until we were doing it so I learned the phrases and what they mean.*
>
> Sarah: *Having the language to have the discussion about it.*

Hannah and Sarah's comments are significant because they indicated awareness of how the process furthered understanding between participants (Schwandt, 1999). Understanding in turn enhanced dialogical relationship,

> Darren: *I feel like we have got closer to Penny and Sarah as we worked together on the project. I felt like I could be open and honest without feeling silly.*
>
> Sarah: *Research really did strengthen our relationship, it did. The conversations were very different.*
>
> Hannah: *There were small parts in a long conversation. So instead of 'look at Oscar, he was doing this', we were actually breaking it down side by side. You're having those deeper conversations. Having the time to go deeper, it opens up conversation that we wouldn't have had if the research project wasn't going on.*

This constructive relational impact was noted also by Seet and Tee (2003). Participation as researchers (Boylorn, 2008) extended the pre-existing relationships. The practitioner and parent participants both appreciated the deeper thought process in the discussion such as that about Oscar's lived dialogical experience.

> Sarah: *Before we may have touched on things like relationships he was developing with other children.*
>
> Hannah: *or interests*
>
> Sarah: … *yeah, but not necessarily the cues for how he interacts with others,*
> *I don't think we'd have spoken about that.*
>
> Hannah: *and the interpersonal skills that he's using.*

We moved in-between our own and each other's experiences and evolving understanding and accomplished knowing in relation (Schwandt, 2000; Reddy, 2008) demonstrating that shared video analysis could be an appreciative co-present mutual encounter (Angrosino and Mays de Pérez, 2000; Heath *et al*., 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Together we could dialogically recognise the world (Linell, 2009) beyond our individual capacities (EECERA, 2015). I had not sought to create one way of perceiving. Buber (1970) also allows for difference in dialogue. Discussion helped maintain open minds regarding the children's experiences (Dahlberg and Dahlberg, 2003; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010) and generated understanding within relation in-between our perspectives.

***The extension of dialogue to the observer***

The children and adults moved in and out of different attitudes of relation with each other. Sometimes the children acknowledged the observer's presence and had their own presence acknowledged, even if just by the blink of eyes. Children included observers in their extended dialogue, through their own choice and initiative. Observers were part of the dialogue and part of the context. For example on occasions when Tia wanted to see the camera, I usually showed her immediately what I was looking at. Anne, her mother, commented on my presence, '*She did consider and it became part of her decision-making*'. This extension was evident when Oscar was paying attention, detectable through the proximity of his body, to his own chalk drawing while engaging in an *I-You* way with the observer's gaze. Hannah, his mother, interpreted, '*He's still got the marks in mind looking to you'*. The extended dialogue with the observer and the marks enlarged the already established dialogue with another child. Reddy (2008) and Pálmadóáttir and Einarsdóttir (2016) begin to articulate a critical discussion of the role

of relation between observers and young children. These case studies distinctively recognise researcher and child relations within video observations in terms of dialogical choices made by the children.

***Refined perception and indefinite interpretation***

The studies allowed for dynamic shifts in perception of aspects of the children's experiences and of the participants' own interpretative processes. For example in the chalk drawing interaction Hannah realised Oscar's exaggerated expression engaging with Joe and Joe's drawing. In another episode I had raised a potential *I-It* attitudinal characteristic in how Oscar '*looks after his experiences'* and Hannah confirmed this overview, '*He protects them'*. The tacit knowledge of participants was revealed on several levels. The interpreters were aware of perceptions of the children's experiences, each other's interpretations, and their own *gearing-in* to their previous experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). There were instances of seeing back across the participants' pre-existing knowledge and perceiving it anew. An interpretative movement occurred towards reviewing one's own understanding and seeing it differently (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010). This counters the expectation of Boylorn (2008) that participants as co-researchers would ignore what they are accustomed to. Rather, refined perception seems to indicate more attention to what is known during the interpretation. Arguably it was *I-You* dialogical processes of *openness* maintained in *mutuality* during the interpretation that loosened perception and allowed for revision.

For example, Rachel had been at the beach with her son, Henry. A subsequent observation of him with another child in the sand pit at nursery was interpreted through

this previous perception. She suggested that Henry brought his experience of being enveloped under the sand on the beach to his perception of the sand in the setting. The practitioner, Jo, and I made interpretations that responded to Rachel's and placed different emphases. Jo considered the play ritual of Henry being buried in the sand, and I considered the embodied experience. The dialogue opened up awareness of interpretation.

> Jo: *It's our knowledge of our experiences in the world that influence our perception of it. This may colour our interpretation of other people's perceptions. It could be Rachel interprets the experience of the play with Dad as something Henry enjoyed and would most likely want to repeat.*

Jo was interpreting how we interpreted our perceptions. Jo has become more aware overall of her own interpretative processes and of the children's dialogical processes.

> Jo: *I was already aware of how I perceive things. I'm more aware of representing how I'm interpreting how children make decisions by discussing all of this.*

As a result of the dialogue the participants had identified enhancements in how they perceived. Jo in particular was considering layers of perception and interpretation (Schwandt, 2000) set out in Figure 4. Increased visual awareness for parents and practitioners and enhanced professional vision (Goodwin, 1994; Nyland, 2009) are significant for education and pedagogical relationships. If interpretation is viewed as a skill made with increasingly refined perceptions (Dreyfus, 1996; Merleau Ponty, 2012), there is likely to be a qualitative impact both on assessment within the inner circle, such as the child, family and colleagues who are knowing the child, and assessment for the outer circle of external audiences (Carr, 2001) such as regulatory bodies.

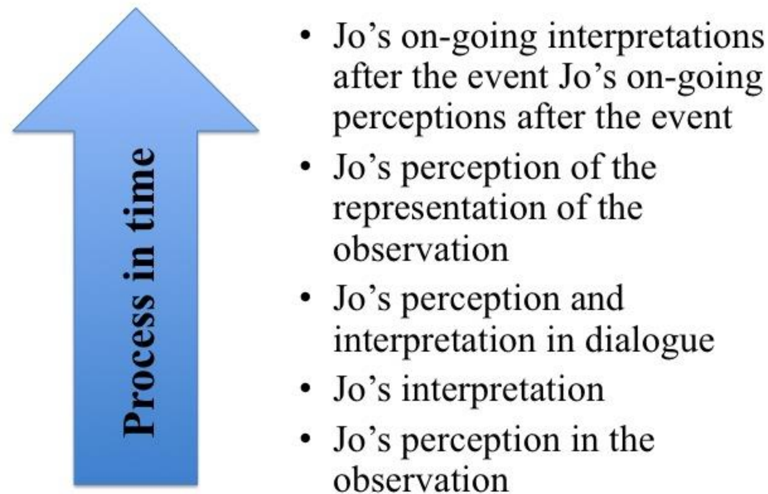


Figure 4. Jo's layers of awareness of perception and interpretation

The interpretation was also less definite during the process. We tolerated uncertainty, valued and were open to bringing together different views beyond the individual first interpretation,

> Sarah: *I think it helped me to become a lot more in tune with Oscar. I could watch it really closely with you* [Hannah] *and see how you were with him at home and how adults and children were with him in the setting.* […] *When we were doing the open views, when we were watching the video for the first time, you* [Hannah] *would maybe say, 'Oh I think he was trying to do that' and I'd say, 'Do you know I really think he was trying to do that'.*
>
> Hannah: *You wouldn't have thought about it quite so much without having everybody else's interpretation. It's not 'I'm right and you're wrong', it's 'Oh well he could be doing this and he could be doing that'.* […] *Having someone else's perspective – seeing that three to four people can have completely different interpretations.*

A longer phase of non-synthesised, indefinite interpretation (Dahlberg and Dahlberg, 2003; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010) is culturally attuned, and therefore arguably more authentic and useful than a quickly achieved definite but inaccurate result. Engagement in interpretation addresses the challenge of and benefits from diverse views (Tait and Lawrence, 2014; EECERA, 2015) since emergent understanding within the in-between space with others allows for connection to others, a zoom out in perspective, and still

maintains the integrity of the individual. This accommodating potential can be viewed as the dynamic nature of dialogue (Buber, 1970). The enhanced awareness of interpretative processes means interpretation becomes less automatic and less limited to an individual's initial thinking. There is more emphasis on the in-between space and therefore there is more potential to be dialogical. Knowing dialogue is significant because it emphasises relational rather than nondescript interaction and can support relational knowing itself.

**Conclusion and directions for the Dialogical Approach to Observation**

The case study findings acknowledge that greater understanding of dialogue is accessible through participatory practices to the benefit of children's and adults' relational knowing and being known. We accessed 'how we relate to each other' (Christensen, 2004, p.166). The resulting proposal is for the Dialogical Approach to Observation to further this understanding of young children's experiences in research, and in dialogical pedagogy. The overall recommendations are to understand how participants enter into dialogue, accessed in the nuances of exchanges in *openness* before *mutuality*, and not to presume that any interaction is necessarily dialogical.

There was no ontological guarantee that the participants would engage in *I-You* relations. There is no claim to generalise the findings. Nevertheless there is potential for recognising the nature of the regard between participants. The distinctive processes *extending* dialogue with the observer, and with the environment also extend the possible recognition of *I-You* relations (Buber, 1970) within dialogical pedagogy and more-than-human ontologies (Taylor, Pacinini-Ketchabaw and Blaise, 2012). The DAO

contributes deep understanding of *what is dialogical* in dialogical pedagogy and research involving children's relations in and with the world.

Awareness of ways of perceiving adds to other observation procedures and does not necessarily replace them. As more practitioners and families participate a substantial increase in dialogical awareness will occur in the whole culture of a setting. Of course there will be challenges in settings with less strong parental partnership than the case studies reported on here, or with practitioners with a different range of skills, experience and relational confidence. To engage with this challenge, the DAO also acts to enhance relationships (Schwandt, 1999; Seet and Tee, 2003), making its use in settings with weaker parent/practitioner relationships even more valuable.

The DAO emerged from these three case studies that involved a few participants in-depth for significant periods of time. For this approach to be accessible within the constraints of any continuing professional development, and then within practice, the next step is to design a version of the process that effectively integrates with pre-existing practitioner-parent relationships. This provides the element of sustained relations. For example it may be that initially only one practitioner and family are able to take part at a time. Even a single observation discussed in-between a practitioner and parents could demonstrate a way of thinking about how the dialogical interactions of children take place and enact the conditions for dialogical interpretation. The cycles of visual analysis (Collier, 2004) would be adapted in a manageable way. Instead of working with a multimodal transcript participants would be briefed to have familiarity with modes (Goodwin 2016) for the discussion of still frames when the video was paused. This would suit technology that is widely available.

Critically, beyond being a methodology, it is the approach to *seeing together* and *being with* other participants that is of the utmost importance because the approach is conducive to dialogical processes during interpretation and they in turn are conducive to understanding dialogical processes in the observed interaction. The findings present evidence of how dialogical processes supported the recognition of dialogical processes. Refined perception renewed personal knowledge. Indefiniteness in the shared in-between space of interpretation allowed *openness* to be maintained in *mutuality* during the interpretation. These dialogical processes loosened perception and allowed for revision of knowing about dialogue. Relation influenced perception (Reddy, 2008) enhancing and checking it. Relational awareness of interpretative processes allowed a greater tolerance of uncertainty and countered the risk of refined perception becoming too entrenched in an individual narrow way of viewing. During interpretation there was evidence of dialogical processes between the participants in the relational ethical regard the participants held for each other. The regard for each other's views and strengthened relations, emphasised the in-between space for participants and enhanced understanding of in-between in the observed interactions: dialogue observed in dialogue. Of course people may seek affirmation and confirmation in early consensus and there is a cultural momentum in early childhood education towards assessment of fixed goals for external audiences (Carr, 2001; Billington 2016), but with the DAO there is potential to move towards less rigid and more attentive, ethical and culturally responsive observation and relational knowing processes beneficial to children and adults.

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## Figure captions list

Figure 1. The cycles of participatory visual analysis.

Figure 2. Sketch of Oscar and Joe next to Joe's drawing.

Figure 3. Sketch of Oscar's gaze to the observer standing next to his own chalk marks.

Figure 4. Jo's layers of awareness of perception and interpretation.

Table 1. Participants' research interests.

Table 2. Summary of constituents identified in the children's decisions made with dialogical agency.

## Biographical Note

Penny Lawrence is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at the University of Roehampton. Penny's main research interests are in dialogical experiences, new materialism and agency, particularly in non-verbal interactions with the environment. Her background as a specialist documentary maker (BBC Producer in Broadcast Features and Documentaries) and as an early years teacher meet in expertise in observation, documentation and visual multimodal analysis of children's experiences. She has worked extensively in Reggio Emilia, Italy, running the Video Documentation Centre, and with children and families at the Pen Green Centre for Children and Families in the UK. Penny is currently preparing publications about dialogical observation from her doctoral thesis 'Observing and Understanding Decision-making in Two Year Olds in Dialogue'. Penny convenes BA and MA modules specialising in relations of children under 3 years of age.

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