



Infant and teacher dialogue in education and care: A pedagogical imperative



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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigated the nature of teacher–infant social dialogue in a high-quality education and care centre in New Zealand. Employing dialogic methodology (Bakhtin, 1986), interactions between infants and teachers were analysed in terms of the language forms used in the social event. Polyphonic video footage of two infants' social experiences and subsequent teacher interviews were coded to identify forms of language that occurred in dialogues and their interpreted pedagogical significance to teachers. The results revealed four central features of teacher–infant social exchange: (i) infants were more likely to respond to teachers interaction initiations when teachers used verbal and non-verbal language form combinations; (ii) when initiations were verbal and non-verbal combinations, both teachers' and infants' responses were significantly more likely to be also combinations of verbal and non-verbal language forms; (iii) both infants and teachers altered their responses to the language forms used by the initiator regardless of whether that was an infant or a teacher; and (iv) when teachers did not respond, they had a pedagogical rationale. Results highlight the multi-voiced and synchronous nature of teacher–infant interactions, the complex nature of communication in a formal out-of-home setting, and the pedagogical nature of teacher dialogue with infants.

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Introduction

Much is now 'known' about infant–adult communication. Numerous psychological studies, spanning more than sixty years, report various aspects of infant interaction, mostly with their mothers. These studies range from observations of infant–adult dyads in laboratory settings (Beebe, Knoblauch, Rustin, & Sorter, 2003; Kretch & Adolph, 2013) to adult identification of interactive style. Many of these studies invite infants and their caregivers to perform various tasks that demonstrate the nature of their relationship (Gibson & Walk, 1960, visual cliff; Murray & Trevarthen, 1985; Murray & Trevarthen's 1985, double television monitor experiment), while other researchers engage in interactions with infants themselves (Meltzoff & Moore's 1983, 1989, experiments with newborn babies poking out their tongues). These studies reveal infants as highly social communicators capable of using whatever is at their disposal (typically their bodies) to engage with others. What is not known, or at least agreed upon, is the significance of these social acts and, their reciprocal nature in educational contexts beyond the home.

This paper article draws on the theoretical perspectives of a Soviet philosopher M.M. Bakhtin (1895–1975) who proposed the important idea that meaning is derived from an understanding of language as a social, interactive and evaluative event. Key Bakhtinian ideas that underpin this article are located within a broad definition of dialogism, which can be loosely interpreted as the experience of language as a social event – that of subjectivities colliding with one another at a particular space and time. Seen in this light, language is not merely given or received as a deliverable trope or an isolated exchange but an act of mutual consciousness, which constantly alters the lived experience of an encounter. Germaine to this view and our research are the ideas that each person brings multiple voices to their language, that language is a *polyphonic* (i.e., multi-voiced) event, and that language is laden with volition, emotion, and ideology. As such, language has a form-shaping potential and acts as the most central means of becoming. From a Bakhtinian standpoint, how communication unfolds in the social world and gives form to the other's experience is therefore integral to the event of learning.

A dialogic approach to the study of infant dialogue, therefore, offers a means of exceeding the limitations of isolated language events and, in doing so, examining subjectivities in action (Sullivan, 2013). Oliva (2000) describes dialogism as "an interaction that values all the discourses in communication" (p. 41). Employing a

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dialogic approach to investigation therefore requires keen attention to the way participants give form to each other's experience through dialogue in its broadest sense. Based on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) the central premise of dialogism is that any language is half someone else's. Dialogism suggests that words are formed and re-formed through social interaction, through a creative process of communication, rather than as some kind of established, universal code that can be transmitted from one person to another.

A broadened emphasis on "all forms of language as they occur in dialogues" [our emphasis], (Junefelt, 2011, p. 167) and their received meanings by those involved orients the dialogic approach that underpins this study. This framework recognises various forms that language can take, the impact of others, seen and unseen, on language use and, by necessity, the organically generated nature of dialogue (Zinchenko, 2010). From a Bakhtinian standpoint, therefore, dialogue lies at the heart of infant pedagogy.

A dialogic approach to the study of infant social experience

Dialogic researchers posit the importance of studying intersubjectivity beyond dyadic encounters in laboratory settings that pay little or no heed to the social contexts in which ordinary dialogues typically take place (Sullivan, 2013; Wegerif, 2013; White & Peters, 2011). According to dialogic theory, communication resides at the centre of learning because it is a primary means of ontological engagement with everyday ideas, concepts, and problems (Lobok, 2012; Matusov, 2009). For infants, this is especially pronounced in the early stages of language learning, where the emotionally laden value of language by adults towards the infant plays an important role in the developing consciousness. As Bakhtin (1986) explains: "Just as the body is formed initially in the mother's womb (body), a person's consciousness awakens wrapped in another's consciousness" (p.138).

According to this dialogic approach, neither self (in its multiple sense according to the contexts in which dialogue takes place) nor the 'other' can be interpreted outside of social interchange (Hermans, 2008). Here the *event* of dialogue, its form and meaning shape the social experience and the nature of learning and development. Junefelt (2011) invokes dialogism to explain that "dialogues, dialogicity and different speech genres are both taught and caught" (our emphasis; p. 173) in the early years and points out the importance and potential of interactions that not only support intersubjectivity but also provide scope for alterity – a deliberate departure from shared meaning that holds deep significance for learning. Thus, an appreciation of the event of dialogue and its form-shaping potential on 'other,' in the moment of encounter, is at heart of high-quality social exchange. Accordingly, interpretation of baby babble, body movement, and subtle language forms such as a gaze is central to understanding the social experience of infants.

As Wegerif (2013) points out, the combination of contemporary neurological and psychological research into infant social experience suggests that it is no longer possible to ignore the perspective of the infant. When viewed as a dialogic encounter, social experience becomes central to learning in ways that expand well beyond the discrete influence of the primary caregiver. This is especially true for contemporary infant experience in many parts of the world where infants spend long hours with non-familial adults and peers in formal early childhood education (ECE) settings. Since a dialogic approach suggests that the infant can "see oneself from the perspective of a relationship" (Wegerif, 2013, p. 44), an investigation of the social exchange in settings outside the home has the potential to conceptualise infant consciousness as a multiple, constantly altering, event of 'otherness.'

Although dialogic theories have been applied to a small number of early childhood education research studies with older preschool children in ECE settings (Cohen, 2009; Cohen & Uhry, 2009; Dore,

1995; Ishiguro, 2010; Junefelt, 2010; Odegaard, 2007;) the current exploratory study is the first time a dialogic approach has been taken to the investigation of under one year old infant dialogues in this educational locale. Building on earlier studies (White, 2009), the current investigation seeks to understand the social orientations of young children through dialogues with others, in this case, their teachers, in which infant perspectives are interpreted through language exchanges and associated meanings.

The importance of dialogue in infant education and care contexts

There is now a general consensus in the literature that the quality of formal educational environments is greatly influenced by the teacher's behaviour, their attitudes, and skill in creating strong attachments with infants (Biringen et al., 2012; Dalli, White, Rockel, & Duhn, 2011; De Kruijff, McWilliam, & Ridley, 2000; Stephen, Dunlop, Trevarthen, & Marwick, 2003; Vandell et al., 2010). Drawing on a rich psychological, physiological, and neurological legacy, it has been suggested that high-quality infant education centres are characterised by teachers who have strongly developed emotional attunement and who are skilled at detecting and responding to infants' modes of communication (Tronick, 1989). Teachers who pay careful attention to the communication styles of infants are more likely to understand their priorities, respond appropriately (Johnston, 2011; White & Mika, 2013), and have an awareness of their personal influence within the social exchange (Manning-Morton, 2006; Test, 2006). Through such attunement, teachers are more likely to engage in dialogues with infants that facilitate high levels of intersubjectivity and lead to a better understanding of infants' learning priorities. With this knowledge, teachers can adjust their practice to best meet the individual requirements of learners (Recchia and Shin, 2012).

Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, and Moll (2005) suggest that the extent to which goals and goal-oriented actions are shared is determined by a variety of factors: age of the infant, age of the social partner, complexity of the task, and mutual understanding of what is required. According to this view, each partner's conception of the activity and its significance has an impact on the extent to which their communication can reach a shared goal. Tomasello et al. (2005) suggest that this compatibility increases with age, as infants learn to strategically manipulate their environment and their relationships. On this basis, it is asserted that very young infants, less than nine months old, engage in dyadic social experiences based on the intimacy of the adult partner who mirrors infant's acts as a means of social intercourse (Carpenter, Nagell, & Tomasello, 1998). According to Meltzoff and Gopnik (1993) while infants can create a "like me" stance, which suggests that infants are imitating others in social exchange based on observations of emotional encounters, they cannot yet take on a third-person perspective of the experience in order to respond to the intentions of their social partners. Consequently, there is a common perception that social encounters for infants under nine months of age are similar to those of apes. Tomasello et al. (2005) suggest this developmental distinction is evidenced in humans by the incapacity of the infant at this age to draw on objects in the environment as a source of intersubjectivity (Tomasello et al., 2005).

On the other hand, Trevarthen's (1986, 1996; see also Delafield-Butt & Trevarthen, 2013) work supports the view that very young infants are capable of orienting dialogues in more sophisticated ways than previously thought. Trevarthen's concepts of 'interactional synchrony' and 'communicative musicality' view infant interaction as a "precisely regulated rhythmical exchange of interests and feelings" (Trevarthen, 2011, p. 127). Such a view suggests that infants' protoconversational behaviours play a significant role in regulating adult language within the exchange. Drawing on these insights, Montirosso, Cozzi, Tronick, and Borgatti (2012)

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