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"Now you see me, now you don't": Dialogic loopholes in authorship activity with the very young

Abstract:

The genesis for this paper lies in the problematic nature of assessment practice, as a central authorship activity, for early childhood education teachers. This paper draws on dialogic philosophy to explore this challenge based on a doctoral investigation of a very young child (White, 2009) and the strategic means by which she reveals and conceals meaning through dialogic loopholes that are generated through eavesdropping tactics. The central argument made is that what can be seen and interpreted, when language is not shared between dialogic partners, is always and only an ontologic endeavour and never an epistemological truth. Seen in relation to the very young child, this tenet invites the potential to 'see' more and to move beyond narrow definitions of learning as an outcome of authorial intervention on the part of the teacher; to embrace uncertainty and difference as a central pedagogical stance; and to re-vision the infant as polyphonic hero in their own adventure plots.

i) Background

Under two year olds – infants and toddlers - are now a formal part of the education systems of several countries, with burgeoning numbers evident in New Zealand early childhood services, that is, ECE (Dalli, White, Rockel, & Duhn, 2011). Their increasingly visible location within international ECE curricula (see, for example, Australia, New Zealand and United Kingdom), coupled with a strong presence within ECE institutions, has provoked several pedagogical challenges for early childhood teachers. Not least of these challenges lie in the domain of assessment mandates that require teachers to generate summative claims about very young children. In New Zealand these are based on interpretations of perceived dispositional skills drawn from sociocultural notions of 'voice' (Lee & Carr, 2006) so that teachers can plan strategic interventions that will promote learning (Education Review Office, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007, 2009). Such an approach asserts that dialectic approaches to teaching and learning are most desirable (for a further discussion of this concept see White, 2011b).

Attempts to gain understanding of the infant or toddler, as "little other", by psychologists and educationalists alike, have traditionally been thwarted by philosophical extremes that either outrightly reject or unquestionably embrace developmentalism (that is, age and stage based perceptions of ability) as a defining construct. This position is evident in persistent calls for diagnostic assessment of children at an early age. As a result of either extreme very young children are frequently labelled, homogenised, misunderstood, or, conversely, subsumed within groups of three and four year olds in educational interpretive activity.

This phenomenon is no less true in educational research with this age group (Johansson & White, 2011). Typically, infants have been viewed as dyadic or individual rather than

subjective "clanspeople" (Bradley & Selby, 2005, p. 242) who are capable of greater levels of intersubjectivity than traditionally understood. Coupled with the recognition that adults struggle to interpret their modus operandi (Lokken, 1999) very young children are frequently represented in empirical studies as voice-less, elusive and/or unseen. Research typically claims to represent infant 'voice' based on adult constructions of language rather than shared understanding through intersubjectivity. As a result, attempts to 'author' infants and toddlers are frequently thwarted at best and manipulative at worst. Assessment activity is no exception in this regard.

In New Zealand, early childhood education teacher practice professes to overcome this dilemma by using narrative approaches to assessment, located within a sociocultural paradigm (Ministry of Education, 2004; 2007; 2009). These approaches tell narrative stories based on the employment of images and text generated by teachers who engage intersubjectively with their students. In doing so, such activity claims to capture 'voice' as a central means of 'knowing' the child from the perspectives of parents, teachers and even the young child themselves. Such pedagogical documentation is known as 'learning stories' and are seen as central to pedagogical activity. Their role in assessing the dispositions of very young child is key to the learning experiences that will subsequently be offered to the infant and toddler in ECE services and their authorship as learners by teachers (Carr, 2001; Carr, Jones, & Lee, 2005; Claxton & Carr, 2004; Smith & Carr, 2004). Elsewhere (White, 2011) I have asserted that such approaches, if unchallenged, can lead to teachers making authoritative, monologising and finalising statements about very young children based on the dubious collation of monologic voices that seek to promote authorial knowledge claims.

 ii) A Bakhtinian approach to assessment

Based on the early work of Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1981, 1990) an alternative view of meaningful assessment practice is offered through the broad notion of authorship. In this location the learner is recognised as directly and indirectly shaping, as well as shaped by, these interpretive expressions. As such, the intersubjective process that underpins sociocultural assessment is re-posited as a moral process through which the interpreter is called to account alongside their interpretation. Bakhtin's assertion that understanding another is a complex social hermeneutic endeavour supports the proposition that while the individual personality is part of a wider community, collective, context and/or culture, they ought never be fully consumed (or consummated) by it:

> Just as there are no isolated mental elements, so too, there is no such thing as an isolated personality. The personality is whole (with respect to isolated elements); the personality is not whole (with respect to the life around it, of which it is an inseparable element). Both assertions are equally valid (Bakhtin, 1985, p. 16).

Adding Bakhtin's later texts, invoking polyphonic approaches to interpretation (Bakhtin, 1968, 1984, 1986), the futility of 'capturing authentic voice' and its place in assessment is revealed

through discursive means. This is especially pertinent in relation to the very young child whom employs a variety of diverse voices (as genres) according to his or her purpose. Many of these voices do not have a place in the official discourse of assessment. Yet this paper asserts that by paying attention to the corporeal nature of infant and toddler communication, and their use of orienting strategies, an alternative route to understanding can be considered. Such a passage invites adults to engage in an interpretive process of meaning making *with* the young child rather than *about* the infant - one in which the infant or toddler shifts from an impotent position as research object to an empowered status as research subject engaged in inquiry alongside others. This approach posits that 'voice' is never a plural concept within the individual or an extractable entity. Rather the individual *in relationship with other* presents and re-presents themselves as a personality according to their intentions and desires that are strategically directed and addressed towards (and in some cases away from) other. For example, toddlers in White's PhD (2009) study employed dramatic play, free movement and humor as means of entry into the peer group; whilst entry into adult relationships was more likely to draw on the toddler's knowledge of 'planned activity' genres that were valued by adults in the early childhood context (White, 2011a). The sophisticated strategic orientation of the toddlers' engagement with each genre as a means of social efficacy illuminates an astute awareness of 'other' that is typically reserved for older children (White, 2011c).

Bakhtinian dialogism – in the context of assessment practice - recognises that "a sense of self is continuously under construction" (Bamberg & Zielke, n.d., p. 239). Dialogism, therefore, offers a challenge to considerations of individual and culture as discreet domains, since in this view both are constantly at play – for intersubjective and discursive purposes. As Edmiston (2010) suggests, "people of any age will not only make meaning together when they repeatedly address and answer one another in ongoing dialogue, but also authoring dynamically changing relational selves" (p. 209). Seen in this light, authorship is viewed as an entry into both what can (and cannot) be seen and what can (and cannot) be interpreted – by whom and for whom – in 'dialogic dances' rather than through a simplistic extraction of singular 'voice' (for a further discussion see Johansson & White, 2011). Bakhtin's metaphor of voice focuses on the combination of many voices from within, that draw from and act upon their social world (Morson & Emerson, 1990). This stance calls for close attention to the points of view held by authors to their activity, the associated ideologies they bring to the social milieu and how these are brought to bear in authored acts. In work with very young children, such a stance also draws attention to the means by which points of view can be more fully appreciated.

iii) Dialogic loopholes

Bakhtin gives cause to celebrate the essential ungraspability of human beings while simultaneously offering pathways of potential 'knowing' by paying attention to the subtle

genres in and around social acts. In the context of very young children it is possible to consider that the child can not only present and re-present herself as a complex social being – well beyond the interpretive gaze of adults around her – but she can also exercise her authorial right to invoke dialogic loopholes, as "the retention for oneself of the possibility for altering the ultimate, final meaning of one's own words" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 233) in interpretive activity. A key mechanism for this invocation is through the strategy of *eavesdropping*, described by Bakhtin (1984) as an attempt to "outguess and outwit all possible definitions of his personality others may offer" (p. 59). Eavesdropping is presented as one of several intentional alteric (that is, form shifting and shaping) acts employed by human beings to escape finalisation – a phenomenon to be avoided at all cost. Bakhtin (1984) describes this capacity as the ultimate right to claim one's *authorial loophole* by employing chameleon-like strategies in order to alter understanding and thus challenge the authorship of a developing person by another.

iv) Introducing the study

The wider study that underpins this paper sought to explore the interpreted meanings of various forms of communication within the everyday experience of an 18 month old child, Zoe, in a New Zealand Education and Care context. One-hour excerpts of filming took place over a five month period drawing on the visual experience of an infant, her key teacher and a researcher. Zoe and her key teacher wore cam-hats on their heads; while the researcher's camera operated as a pan-view of the wider context in which the infant participated. These three camera images were time synchronized and placed on a split-screen DVD and separately given to the teacher and parents to take home for independent analysis.

The DVDs were analysed in terms of the potential of Zoe's acts to create a degree of incongruity, surprise or insight. Over this period 24.15 hours of re-probing interviews took place involving the researcher-teacher and researcher-parent. Involving Zoe in analysis was more complex. Despite several efforts to invite her to view the footage, this method proved to be unsuccessful. An alternative method was devised whereby Zoe was encouraged to be physically present at all interviews where her mother was involved. Of particular significance for the insights afforded in this paper (regarding the previously unrealised potential of eavesdropping) was that these interviews were also videotaped. Footage of these interviews revealed multiple occasions where Zoe would point at the screen, engage in physical acts with her mother, retrieve objects as potential clues to meaning or use words or phrases. Many of these seemed random at the time of their delivery, but were to generate much meaning in their aftermath.

Analysis

The important dialogues that took place during re-probing interviews where the coding was shared provided the qualitative data necessary to contextualize and expand on each participant's point-of-view. A second set of coding was developed based on Matusov & Smith's (2005) discussion criteria, focusing on the style and type of discussion that took place. Taken together, the coding and discussion data comprised a means of interpreting genre through utterance as the unit of analysis (for a fuller discussion see White, 2009, 2011b, 2011c). However, it was only when links were made *between* different DVD sections, parent or teacher interviews *and* Zoe's body language during videos of parent-researcher interviewers (where she was present) *over time* that episodes of eavesdropping were generated. As my familiarity with Zoe deepened, so too did my perceived ability to create links between seemingly random acts and their overall meaning. The results portrayed in the section that follows highlight some of the insights such discoveries enabled or, conversely, disabled.

iii) Results and discussion

The toddler's employment of eavesdropping first became evident when viewing video-taped re-probing interviews between the researcher and Zoe's mother. Although this was not obvious at the time, footage subsequently revealed Zoe seemingly acting out parts of the dialogue in the background. Through such means she offered important interpretive cues that either provided significant portals to intersubjectivity or, conversely, threw adults 'off the scent'. The following example highlights this strategy:

> Lynette (Zoe's mum) and I are sitting in front of the laptop watching footage taken from the previous week. Zoe is sitting close at hand, seemingly engrossed in a puzzle. Lynette and I have both noticed Zoe's keen attention to shoes over the past week, with links to previous weeks where she has sought out the shoes of her peers and tried them on. I assert the possibility that there seems to be a pattern to her selection of shoes that goes beyond the shoes themselves. I suggest that she only seems to try on the shoes of admired older peers (in particular the highly desirable pink sparkly shoes of her four year old friend). Together we discuss the potential of shoes as a symbolic device. I suggest to Lynette "she doesn't seem to be interested in the dress-up shoes though, does she?" and we contemplate this together. At this point on the footage Zoe can be seen looking at her mother and I, then moving to the dress-up cupboard where she slowly retrieves the dress-up shoes and puts them on her feet. She looks at us intently. Unaware of her actions in that moment – since we are still focussed on the laptop screen – Lynette and I continue our discussion in blissful ignorance.

Bakhtin (1990) suggests that engagement with other through such acts is the individual's attempt to "find an axiologic position in relation to ourselves" (p. 33). Zoe's persistent attempts to draw on adult dialogues about her highlight a desire to retain her authorial loophole that expands on that position. By taking a position that rests outside of our interpretation, Zoe retains the right to 'be otherwise'. In doing so, she re-claims a part of her personality that invites an alteric view – at least to those who are willing to 'see' dialogically - and enables her to be more than our naïve interpretations allow. Through such means, Zoe could be seen to be escaping consummation while drawing on the evaluations of others as a means of testing her self-hood within the social realm. For Bakhtin (1990) this ability to remain sufficiently

outside of another's authorship while simultaneously being influenced by it is considered to be the ideal balance.

This act highlights the significant role of adult authorship on the development of self-hood through affirmation and aesthetic engagement received from adults. Indeed, over subsequent weeks it became increasingly evident that Zoe appeared to be employing eavesdropping as a device through which she might achieve intersubjectivity with adults. The excerpt below takes place following an interview between her mother and researcher in which Lynette has noticed Zoe's attention to nurturing babies – evident in her play with dolls in several excerpts of footage. In particular her mother explains in detail that Zoe uses a rocking motion with the doll and covers the seat up with a blanket as she has seen 'real' mothers do at home (that is, friends of her mothers who come to visit). Throughout this dialogue there is an approving tone to Lynette's voice, and she explains how pleased she is to see this interest from Zoe as she and her partner are planning to conceive another child soon.

Shortly after this interview the cameras are set up for filming whereupon Zoe runs around the centre squealing joyously. She approaches the researcher to put the camera on (as she has done on several previous occasions) and proceeds to act out the same episode she has just heard her mother speak of in the interview:

> Alicia (Zoe's teacher, who is Maaori) is sitting outside with a small group of children. Zoe brings the dark skinned doll to Alicia. She does this through a degree of adversity since two other toddlers attempt to take it from her and she will not be persuaded to exchange this doll for another. Once she has retained possession of the doll Zoe places it in a plastic shopping basket with a handle (remarkably similar to the car seat her mother has previously described) and rocks the basket, chanting "Rock, Rock" rhythmically. The teacher is immediately tuned into this act and joins her, holding another baby and repeating the rhythm. Another peer captures the teacher's attention and her gaze is distracted. Zoe retrieves a blanket and places it over the basket, rocking the basket again, singing softly. Her acts remain un-noticed by the teacher. Not to be thwarted she then takes the baby out of the basket and places it close to the teacher. She goes to the sandpit and fills a cup with sand, then returns to 'feed' the baby. The teacher is now attuned to the experience once more and joins Zoe in a dialogue about feeding the baby, which later develops into a process of cleaning the baby. The teacher laughs as Zoe places special emphasis on cleaning the baby's body parts using tissues close at hand. Particular emphasis is placed on the baby's bottom as Zoe repeats the word "poos" and pretends to wipe this area. A sustained interaction takes place over the next 30 minutes.

This episode does not sit in isolation to other events that had taken place over previous weeks. Zoe had already observed her teacher nurturing babies closely over this time and had gained the teacher's attention by offering the doll as an intersubjective gesture. Her attempts had been very successful in this regard. Similarly, I noticed that whenever I arrived in the centre, as researcher, Zoe would retrieve the same fair skinned doll to offer me each time. This became a ritual of encounter for us and one that we both recognised as an invitation to play. Over time our increasingly shared knowledge of the rules of such encounters, and their orientations, enabled us to engage in shared moments of joy. The following episode highlights the value of such knowledge:

> During an interview Lynette explained Zoe's increasing interest in humour. She described a game Zoe played with her dad at home after he released wind (a term colloquially described as 'farting'). In this game Zoe would try to squeeze out some wind too, after saying "Daddy part, Zoe part". The exchange would end with raucous laughter. A week after this interview Zoe was in the sandpit at the centre, and released wind loudly. She laughed and turned to look at me, saying "Zoe part". We laughed together. This joke was to become part of our subsequent relationship.

Of particular note in these eavesdropping episodes is their persistent allegiance to Rebelain carnivalesque as a genre of laughter. Based on Gogolian humour (Pan'kov, 1998) carnivalesque invokes an underground culture of ridicule, ambiguity, debasement and suspended hierarchies as a means of "sensuous engagement with the truths on offer" (Sullivan, Matusov & Smith, 2011). As Barsky (1998) states: "Carnivalesque is not simply toleration, it is a boiling cauldron of potential creativity that may either scald or nourish, but it will certainly never congeal" (p. 104). In the context of this toddler and the adults around her, carnivalesque provided a means of achieving both intersubjectivity and alterity through the potential of eavesdropping. Through this mechanism, Zoe was able to strategically employ a series of acts that reinforced or, conversely, challenged the authorship she received from the adults around her. Such agentic acts bore the mark of her personality and its imbued orientations within the social realm. Yet the meaning of these acts were simultaneously able to remain elusive to those who did not share in their significance or who attempted to define them in a finalised manner. Indeed, despite their significance, *none* of these acts warranted inclusion in the official assessment documentation that described Zoe's learning. This absence was keenly evident in dialogues that took place between the teacher and I (for further discussion, see White, 2011). As a result such insights were absent in the official discourse where attention was exclusively paid to dispositional outcomes for learning. Here carnivalesque had no role to play.

Outside of the official discourse, however, Zoe's carnivalesque strategies held tremendous potential for speaking back to adults as a member of a clan through intersubjective acts. When adults were able to appreciate the necessary relativity of this genre, based on a shared membership, there was similar potential for them to deepen their relationship with the toddler. They also began to recognise the significance of their dialogues around young children, as acts of authorship. In doing so, they came to see the subtle role of adult as catalyst rather than mediator. As a result, their intersubjective relationship with Zoe enabled them to see and celebrate her as a unique and complex personality, rather than merely a by-product of her family, the ECE setting and society.

Such celebration became increasingly possible when adults suspended their need to claim knowledge about the child and recognise the necessary ambiguity of the child as a quest for self-hood. Instead they began to appreciate personality as central to relationships – through which learning could be better facilitated because they shared a common appreciation of meaning and the complex ways through which it might be conveyed. This included paying careful attention to the potential of their own dialogues and the impact of these on the learner; to the significance of embodied acts on the part of the toddler; and to the discursive potential of eavesdropping as an underground route to self-hood. Through this route truths about another emerge as "three-dimensional" (Sullivan, Matusov & Smith, 2009, p. 329) acts that

take place *between* people rather than those that are handed down or depicted by expert adults or theories. As the teacher explained, this is a complex authorship process:

> … like, at the beginning I didn't know this child and I think now, because we've built that relationship with doing this, that I've got to know her a bit more and, sort of… um, it's almost like, like you know what's gonna happen … it's almost like a book that you have never read. At the beginning Zoe was like a book that I had never read … she was a book that I had never read and as it's gone on I feel as if I have read that book so many times and I sort of know what is in each part…but sometimes there are surprises in there…And I think, for me, the ending is always the same. It might be a different genre but the ending for me is to help her grow and learn and that's the ending I aim for her to get to no matter which genres she's involved in…

iv) Summary

The results of this work re-present the infant as master of carnivalesque – an unmediated, joyful "pageant without footlights" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 122). When given the opportunity, as was the case through dialogic activity, the infant artfully engages adults in intersubjective games of hide and seek that evade final analysis by adults. A significant feature of these games is the role of eavesdropping and the associated potential adult dialogues offer young children in their journey towards self-hood. When adults are willing to play, this presentation concludes that there are dialogic riches to be found. These riches invite a broader appreciation of the personality of another and a re-visioned approach to assessment practice as an aesthetic, creative dialogic endeavour of uncertainty and answerability rather than an activity that claims truth. As Bakhtin (1984) explains: "A loophole opens on the distant future and lends an aspect of ridicule to the relative progressiveness and relative truth accessible to the present or to the immediate future" (p. 545)

The epistemological basis for such an approach, therefore, lies in an acceptance of juxtaposition and incongruity over the need for synthesis – a phenomenon likened to Socratic 'elenchos' (Sullivan, Matusov & Smith, 2009) or to Mennipeaic discourse (Moi, 1986). In this location, the very young child can be described as polyphonic 'hero' in a strategic game of dialogic wonderment that lies at the centre of their learning and belies adult-constructed claims of reason and knowledge. Such a view signals a return to the notion of the laughing boy of Heraclitus – who outwits his co-players – and has a legitimate voice of his own within the dialogic chorus that comprises his experience. This dialogic approach provides access to generally unseen points-of-view, particularly for those who have frequently been denied subjective presence in their own learning. For those who seek to gain greater understanding of infants and toddlers, the dialogic loophole is particularly significant since authentic means of providing access to voice(s) have been elusive at best and immoral at worst – for teachers and researchers alike. Seen through dialogic eyes, the chameleon-like nature of toddlerhood can thus celebrated as a complex, ungraspable period of ontologic wonderment that resides in axiologic relationships rather than finalised regimes of truth.

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