Infant–teacher dialogue in Education and Care

SUMMER RESEARCH PROJECT

Introduction

Dialogic researchers posit the social experience beyond dyadic relationships and intersubjective encounters—to wider social space(s) of encounter (Wegerif, 2013). Seen in this light, relationships are examined by emphasizing what can be ‘seen’ by the participants, their interpretations and orientations. As Booth explains: ‘How a voice sounds is a function of where it is and what it can “see”; its orientation is measured by the field of responses it invokes’ (Booth cited in Bakhtin, 1986, p. xxvii).

Dialogic methodology is especially promising in research with the very young. Despite a compelling evidence-base drawing from psychological, developmental and neurological fields of enquiry, infant perspectives are virtually absent from investigations of their social experience.

In the present study the social experience of two under-one-year-old infants in an early childhood education setting was examined from this dialogic standpoint. The early childhood setting provided a first time glimpse of infants’ experience, through their eyes, in the context of a new social ‘normality’ in New Zealand (Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011).

Research question

What is the nature of dialogic experience for infants in an Education and Care context?

Method

Three hours of polyphonic video capturing the interactions of two infants (4 and 8 months old) and their teachers were coded using Studiescope. Since a dialogic approach to utterance is determined not only by the forms of language that are employed but also by the response in the social event, types of language forms were classified in terms of their social orientation and response. Variables were created for verbal, and nonverbal (separately and combined) initiations and responses. Data were analysed using SPSS statistical package. Interviews with teachers provided additional information.

Results

Results in Figure 1 revealed that when teachers initiated an interaction they did so most frequently using verbal-and-nonverbal initiation (113) followed by verbal alone (58) and nonverbal alone (29); (2) = 54.61, p < 0.001. When teachers initiated the interaction, the overall frequency of infant responses was significantly greater when teacher-to-infant initiation of interaction was verbal-and-nonverbal (88) than when initiation was either verbal alone (24) or nonverbal alone (22); (2) = 63.10, p < 0.001.

Results continued

Out of 159 teacher and infant interactions—where an exchange of dialogue occurs—60 involved an onlooker episode. Analysis of these onlooker episodes revealed that key infants were watching either a teacher or a peer on 51.7% (31) of onlooker occasions; conversely, the teacher was involved in discussions with other teachers or the key infants’ peers on 44.4% (29) of onlooker occasions.

Out of a total of 80 no response instances (66 when the teacher initiated, 14 when the infant initiated) 48 involved an onlooker episode—on 35 occasions infants observed peers or teachers while the remaining 13 occasions included teachers in discussion with other teachers or the key infants’ peers; (1) = 10.08, p < 0.001.

Infants’ most frequent nonverbal component of the responses (across verbal-and-nonverbal and verbal-alone responses) was interaction with artefact or food (31), followed by eye gaze (18), whole body movement (10), and emotional gesture (9); (3) = 48.67, p < 0.001.

Summary

Results revealed four central features of teacher-infant social exchange:

(i) reciprocal teacher-infant interactions were more likely to occur during play than during routine events;

(ii) verbal-and-nonverbal initiations resulted in significantly more verbal-and-nonverbal responses than either verbal or nonverbal initiations alone—regardless of who initiated the interaction;

(iii) infants did not always overtly respond to teachers’ initiations;

(iv) infants observed ‘other’ (i.e., peers and teachers) in their social environment with considerable frequency—even during interactions with the teacher—which resulted in a no-response.

These findings strongly indicate that infants and teachers alike are influenced by how each initiates a communicative act. The extent to which language forms invoke a response are not simply associated with the discrete forms infants use but also by their orientation towards or away from the ‘other’. Playful encounters between infants and adults generate greater incidence of response. Interactions during routines are less overt, nevertheless, present in intimate forms of communication—for example, touch and emotional gestures. The wider social environment (i.e., peers, resources, other teachers) plays a significant role in infant social experience and takes priority in some dialogues. For instance, onlooking is a significant feature of infants’ social experience—infants are frequently watching interactions between others. Results suggest that teachers need to always consider their dialogues with infants and with others (e.g., peers and adults). Both kinds of dialogues afford important learning opportunities for infants, even when infants do not appear to be involved.

Key References


