

Research Methods: Observing Experience in Two Projects (Parts II and III)

Abstract Continuing with the style established in chapter “[Framing: Young Children Relating and Playing](#)”, this chapter also uses a story and an event to further explain the research methods that inform the two research projects that in turn also inform this book. Both projects used ethnographic methods to investigate the experiences of young children playing and relating in ECCE settings in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Emergent themes from both projects are also addressed.

Introduction

Continuing with the style established in chapter “[Framing: Young Children Relating and Playing](#)”, this chapter also uses a story and an event to further explain the research methods that inform the two research projects that in turn also inform this book. Both projects investigated young children playing and relating in ECCE settings in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Emergent themes from both projects are also addressed.

The Two Projects

The next section of this book is Part II (chapters “[The Intersubjective In-Betweenness in Young Children’s Playfulness](#)”, “[Words Connecting Children Playfully Together](#)”, “[Becoming Selves Relationally](#)”, “[Imagining While Playing](#)” and “[Feelings Felt in Bodies](#)”). Part II draws on the richly detailed observational data from my original dissertation thesis (Alcock, 2005), and re-interprets those observations, with a clearer focus on children’s relations and emotions. This includes the playfulness that was my original research focus. More detailed explanations of that project may also be found in Alcock (2005, 2008, 2010). Part III (chapters “[A Holding Environment](#)” and “[Relational Fields and Context](#)”), of this book draws on a similar smaller project focussed on emotional relationality among infants and toddlers in one ECCE centre.

These two interpretivist research projects used similar reflective ethnographic methods to broadly explore young children playing and relating in urban ECCE

settings in New Zealand. Both studies present data and findings as narrative-like observation-based events, intended to re-present and illuminate significant themes and patterns in young children's experience of playing and relating. The project described in Part II was the larger project. Sited in three centres, it was an investigation of young children's (1–5 year olds) experience of playful (and humorous) communication. The main research question for that original dissertation was:

How do young children experience playfulness (and humour) in their communication?

The smaller project, addressed in Part III focused on the relationality of preverbal infant-toddlers (6 to 24 months-old) in one small ECCE centre. The main question for that project was:

What is the nature of the relational environment for the infants and toddlers (children under 2-years-old) in this ECCE centre where 'eco-sustainability' is an overarching philosophical principle?

As an early childhood teacher I enjoy young children's playfulness and humour, hence the doctoral focus. However my interests have shifted sideways to also include emotions and relationality in play. I've become intrigued by the interconnecting invisibly felt spaces between young children relating and playing (Alcock, 2010, 2013b). I've also become alarmed by a growing emphasis on narrow academic learning at the expense of young children's emotional wellbeing and freedom to play (Alcock, 2013a; Alcock & Haggerty, 2013). Hence this book.

Ethnographic Methods

Ethnographic methods formed a basis for observing and interpreting children relating and playing in both projects. Although these projects were not ethnographies, (time in the field being insufficient), reflexive ethnographic methods were used to observe and interpret how cultural artefacts mediated children relating and playing. Detailed observations ensured that this research retained an experience-near perspective. As explained in chapter "[Framing: Young Children Relating and Playing](#)", my observations initially focussed primarily on the mediating roles of tools, sign-sand symbols that, through activity, connected children (Engeström, 2015; Engestrom, Reijo, & Punamaki, 1999; Wartofsky, 1979; Wertsch, 1991, 1998). The feeling-tone of observed children's play was explicitly included in my written observations, which were divided into three columns: *observation*, *artefacts*, and *my interpretation-feelings*. With a focus on play, which by definition defies tidy categorisation, interpretation involved deeply reflective processes of re-visiting and re-interpreting those detailed observations. As Schwandt (2000) points out "for all post empiricist philosophies of the human sciences, understanding is interpretation all the way down" (p. 209). The events in this book re-present the observations with interpretations discussion and analyses – that add to understandings of the original observed experience.

Observing Experience

Observation is traditional to early childhood research as Tobin (1995) explains: “Since its beginnings, scholarship in early childhood education has been characterised by a belief in the authenticity of firsthand experience and knowledge” (p. 225). Experience is however more than the written words can convey, though words can also evoke experience. The events presented in this book attempt to do just that, to evoke the experience. Experience is sensation before reflection and before representation, such as words, can describe it (Jackson, 1989, 1996). Experience also evolves in response to activity and is mediated, by tools, signs or symbols (Wartofsky, 1979; Wertsch, 1991). Both of these perspectives add to the understandings of experience in this study where young children’s spontaneous body-language was interpreted as both communication about, and expression of, playful experience. Attention to children’s bodily-expressed, and sensed, vitality and aliveness, seems especially important when the research participants are pre-verbal infants and very young children (Stern, 2010; Trevarthen, 2011).

I enjoy the experience of observing children playing. Visiting a student teacher on placement recently I became intrigued by 4-year-old Jade’s gymnastics display. The student and I were sitting at the child-sized table and talking together. Jade spontaneously approached and began performing gymnastic-like moves in front of us, announcing: “See I can do this”, as she began twisting her legs and mid-body into a contorted yogic-like position. Then she balanced on one leg and flipped herself over and around. She continued her performance, but what really fascinated me were the plastic construction sticks she held and fiddled with, in the gaps between postures, when she wasn’t concentrating on twisting her own body into complex shapes. With the plastic sticks in her hands she was constructing complex shapes and patterns that resembled her own body-bending shapes. Because I was very interested in how she might respond I commented to her: “It looks like you’re making your body shapes with these sticks in your hands?” She ignored my words, as if she either could not, or did not, want to hear what I was really saying. My words did not make sense or meaning to her.

The student and I talked later and his explanation resonated with my feelings. “It was her unconscious, she was making the shapes unconsciously”. I later discovered that this student had studied philosophy before coming into early childhood teacher education. Whatever motivated Jade’s double act, constructing shapes with both her body and the plastic sticks, it felt important that we observed and respected her as a subject, a person. She had asked for our attention by creating a body-bending performance for us, with wonderfully enthusiasm. Throughout her performance Jade exuded confidence in her flexible and strong physique. The shapes and moves she re-created with the plastic construction sticks in her hands seemed to reinforce these self-feelings. Perhaps the plastic stick construction mediated her implicit and unconscious understandings of her body-self capabilities.

Jade’s story, exemplifies *perezhivanie*, (translated as emotional experience) as do many of the events in this book where children’s experienced feelings in activity

motivate their continued growth and learning. The example of Jade is particularly interesting because she was not aware of how she was recreating her own flexible body shapes with the plastic construction sticks, yet she was passionately engaged in a complex gymnastic display. Both her body and the sticks mediated her fascinatingly energetic activity and the intensity in this activity cried out for attention and extension by teachers.

Perezhivanie: Emotional Experience

The concept of perezhivanie acknowledges the primacy and unity of experience, emotion and cognition (Vygotsky 1998, cited by Van de Veer, 2001) and may be understood as an interactionist unit for analysing the interplay of thinking-feeling children and environment in activity-experience. Recently Marilyn Fleer (2013) and others at Monash University have explored using perezhivanie in investigating links between children's imagination, motivation, and learning of scientific concepts (Fleer, 2013; Quiñones & Fleer, 2011). Imagination is informed and motivated by emotions. Imagination is also a fundamental quality in abstract thinking and is integral to children's play. Jade seemed to imagine her gymnastic moves and body shapes while creating them. A teacher's interest and words, spoken with feeling and meaning, might aid her awareness and her imagination.

Jade's story, like the events that form the core of this book, re-present observations of children feeling-thinking-experiencing being playfully active, so are also about perezhivanie. While the interpretations prioritise feelings, emotions and thoughts in action, these events are also open to further interpretations. Thus the windy waterspout and the contagious laughter events included in chapters "[Framing: Young Children Relating and Playing](#)" and "[Research Methods: Observing Experience in Two Projects \(Parts II and III\)](#)" are intended to evoke further responses. It is useful for teachers to also realise this point; that interpretations, knowledge and understandings change and grow, reflecting teachers' own awareness, knowledge and experiences.

"Experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). Processes of growth and learning are based on accumulated experiences. These patterns of remembered experiences create narrative-like ways of feeling and thinking about the world (Bruner, 1986). The narrative form brings some coherence to conscious and unconscious ways of feeling and thinking. Children's experiences of playfulness and of relating are represented here narratively, in events showing children connected to each other and to social, historical, and cultural contexts.

Events

The observations that inform the events in this book have been collated as a series of narrative-like events, purposely selected to illuminate the diversity in young children playing and relating. Narrative-like structures avoid reductionism, highlighting the complexities that were present in the play, while retaining the unity in the complex activity of the event. As with frame play (described by Goffman (1974) and Bateson (1980), these events have observable beginnings and ends, though they were sometimes not apparent until the whole event was analysed. Events overlapped and were not tidy structures (Ochs & Capps, 2001). As unpredictable units of activity, events interconnect and are situated within wider social, cultural and historical contexts. This image of interconnectedness is epitomised in the metaphor of Indra's Net, described earlier in chapter "[Framing: Young Children Relating and Playing](#)".

Though the events in Parts II and III both involve children playing and relating, Part II emphasises children's playfulness, while Part III emphasises younger children's relationality (under 2-years-old).

Events in Part II usually began with children announcing, in various meta-communicative ways, that playfulness was beginning. Children used words, sounds, gaze and other bodily expressions, as well as material artefacts like water and sand in this communication. Events in Part III also began with children's meta-communicative signals expressing their desire to connect and relate with other people or things, such as finger-paint. Timing and structure of events was further influenced by routines, such as eating-times, and outside-play times. The use of meta-communicative signals continued throughout events as an integral element in the ongoing negotiation that helped sustain children's activities of playing and relating.

The events presented here offer a range of interpretations that are not exclusive. Interpretations in this book reflect my observer-writer-researcher, interests, curiosities and experience-informed understandings of young children playing (Part II) and relating (Part III). These events have also been purposely selected to present a range of situations. With story-like framing, eventstructures avoid simplistic and artificial categorising of wholes into parts. They also convey the systemic nature of activity theory.

The use of activity theory for interpreting narrative-like events enabled further in-depth analysis and understanding of children experiencing playfulness in their communication. As explained in chapter "[Framing: Young Children Relating and Playing](#)", activity theory prioritises mediated activity (events) as the unit of analysis. The research process involved identifying the motivating aim of the event (activity system), and exploring how that aim changed during the play (activity system). This process also involved identifying mediating artefacts and looking out for how contradictions motivated, and in turn mediated, the continued activity-event. Play usually brimmed with motivating contradictions. That is the nature of play.

Briefly, the components that complicate and mediate the relationships in the activity system (event) include: artefacts, rules, roles, and the community of the involved participants (children and teachers in early childhood centres) (Engeström, 1987, 1999). Mediating artefacts include tools, semiotic signs and symbols on all levels (Wartofsky, 1979), and can also include people. Artefacts can be simultaneously material and conceptual, the main point being that communication is mediated (Cole, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978), and that relationships between the components are complex, changing and contradictory. The dynamics of the relationships are in continual flux, like the usual seemingly chaotic patterns in children's play. Activity, like play, is never static. It is the activity that unites the diversity in play. The windy waterspout event introduced in chapter "[Framing: Young Children Relating and Playing](#)" epitomises these dynamic qualities.

Children at play are active. They move a lot and as systems of activity, events integrate these dynamic and holistic qualities (Cole, 1996; Engeström, 2015; Engeström et al., 1999; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991, 1998). This view of play as activity acknowledges the tensions and contradictions that motivate and contribute to the ongoing activity and the artefact – mediated experiences of children being playful together. Events present this playing-relating activity.

The following event illustrates young children relating with energetically playful activity. Together the children have constructed a see-saw-like catapult that mediates their play. The wooden plank with bottle-tops become mediating tools. These children communicate with their whole bodies; they laugh contagiously without spoken words, their laughter further connecting them intersubjectively in shared feelings of hilarity, expressed with vitality in their jumping laughing bodies.

Event 2: Contagious Laughter

ECCE Setting

Southbridge is a community-based sessional ECCE centre, with mainly 4-year old children. It was purpose-built almost a century ago as part of the development of the kindergarten movement in New Zealand. Children here have free access to the outdoors with the usual large shade covered sand-pit and a wide range of climbing equipment including big wooden boxes, ladders etc. Tucked into a corner space to one side the main centre building and right next to the outside woodwork table, three four-year-old boys have built a catapult contraption on the ground. It operates by jumping on one end of a plank of wood, which is balanced on a fulcrum in the middle (like a see-saw). When a child jumps on one end the other end flicks up in the air sending the bottle tops balanced on the other end flying. None of the children speak English as a first language, though one boy, Lau, can speak some English; Ali and Mal are recent immigrants. Lau comes from Iraq, while Ali and Mal are from Somalia, (though they speak different Somali dialects-languages). Today is Ali's

first morning session. He had previously been attending the afternoon sessions with younger children.

Ali arranges three bottle tops on one end of the plank.

Mal gives high pitched squeaks as he sees Ali do this. Mal then fetches two more bottle tops, which are lying nearby on the ground, (possibly they've fallen off the nearby carpentry table).

Lau is also watching: "Uh ooh"

Meanwhile Ali uses one leg to stamp firmly on the upright end of the plank, sending the three bottle tops flying, he laughs, Mal giggles and watches as Ali repeats the jump three times. All three boys laugh hysterically, glancing at each other and bending over helplessly, using no words.

Analysis and Discussion

Bodies and Laughter in Communication

These children were totally involved in the activity of catapulting bottle tops to see how far they could fly. They seemed connected intra – and intersubjectively by the shared activity, the rhythm in their bodies, and their gleeful laughter, expressing huge enjoyment. They laughed after each catapult, their bodies almost doubling over with glee as they looked alternately at each other and the flying bottle tops. The laughter energised and increased their motivation for this play. I had to hold myself back from laughing also. It felt contagious. I wondered if these children, with no verbal language in common, were instead using laughter as a means of communicating and connecting emotionally using voices, bodies, and the mediating catapult activity. I had observed this group of boys being very gleeful together on several occasions, so I asked the teachers how they interpreted this very playful, happy, amusing, and almost hysterical, gleeful behaviour.

Teacher Cath: "Yes, they laugh as a way of talking. That's where humour's great, because it breaks down the barriers... These children are all Muslim and all play together, yet they speak three different languages".

These children used their bodies a lot, jumping on the catapult, almost falling over laughing, and stumbling around, epitomising the energetic feeling tone described as *vitality affect* (Stern, 2010) as well as the rhythmic tone associated with *communicative musicality* (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). The three of them seemed to become one unit of wildly rhythmic activity, connected in their dancing movements by their African historical and ethnic cultures, religion and gender. Laughter, with associated body movements (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) united and motivated them instead of a common spoken language. They moved synchronously and rhythmically together as a unit, blending their jumping shifting figures with the grounded wooden catapult, and the flying bottle-tops, their figures fluidly and chaotically connecting with the surrounding ground.

From Subjectivity to Intersubjectivity

The dynamic and dialectical nature of such activity precludes the existence of any external – internal boundaries (Zinchenko, 2001). Responding to this issue of how the external world becomes the internal mind, Zinchenko (2001) pragmatically points out that: "... if internalisation is understood as a transition from intersubjective to intrasubjective, which is performed by mental functions ... Such an explanation eliminates the opposition between external and internal and, consequently, both visible and invisible at the same time" (p 137). The dialectical dynamics inherent in activity unite subject (playful child) and object (environment, including artefacts).

Subjective blends into objective and vice versa, inter- and intra- subjectively. The wooden plank as an object did become an extension of the children's bodies while the flying bottle tops also seemed to connect the children with the surrounding air space. In this way the see-saw plank with flying bottle-tops and jumping bodies mediated the blending of subject and object in this activity which also became a tertiary artefact, a play-world (Wartofsky, 1979). Artefacts such as this event embody cultural, historical, and social experiences and these children had several common cultural elements, despite speaking three different African languages.

Mediating Bodies

Artefact mediation is key to understanding communication. Mediation works in the spaces between communicators. Children interpret and learn the meanings of mediating tools, signs, and symbols from their social experiences in the world, including in play. Via engagement in activity the felt meanings associated with these tools, signs and symbols are internalised. What is initially socially known becomes personal as it acquires first personal sense and then social meaning. While my initial research focus on mediation included identifying mediating tools, signs, and symbols, I also following and interpreting patterns in children's playful activity. I worked towards understandings of children's felt experience by systematically observing and reflecting on children's playful activity including the artefact-mediated dimensions. I pondered reflective questions such as: how does this play activity affect these children? How does the external activity influence children's internal selves and vice versa? The metaphor of Indra's Net is a useful reminder to view play activity as complex systems of interconnecting parts.

Young children and adults communicate with bodies by using a wide range of signs besides words. These children communicated and experienced playfulness physically, emotionally and cognitively, in their bodies and with their catapult activity. Though this event exemplifies non-verbal, playful communication such a focus does not detract from the importance of play with language and words that was also a strong feature in other events in this study. I suggest that rather than categorising communication as either verbal or non-verbal, a research focus on the purpose of

young children's playful communication is a more useful way of understanding their communication. Verbal, non-verbal and pre-verbal ways of communicating flow into one another.

Thus mediating artefacts extend well beyond words, to include everything that mediated children playing and relating. And, though words may be the tool of tools, activity, including all movement, is prior to words. Despite his prioritising of words, Vygotsky (1986) wrote: "To the biblical 'In the beginning was the Word' Goethe makes Faust reply, 'In the beginning was the deed'...the word was not the beginning – action was there first; it is the end of development, crowning the deed" (p. 255). Activity rules in this sense.

Researcher Positioning

As an observer I moved between positions of objectivity, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity in a series of cycles that began with passively observing children being playful and humorous, while simultaneously retaining an awareness of the impossibility of total researcher objectivity. As I developed rapport with the teachers and children, those relationships also developed degrees of intersubjectivity and shared understandings.

I became increasingly aware of how I was also always part of the observed mix. This was particularly obvious when infants showed fear of me as a stranger, or I was asked by children to take a role in their play. This mixing had implications for how I interpreted observations, including what I saw and heard, filmed, wrote, and felt. Generally however, the children treated me as an adult, somewhere between a teacher and a parent, and I tried to maintain a passive responsive role using "reactive strategies" (Corsaro, 1985). Thus, I responded to child- and teacher-initiated communication, relating to children and teachers authentically with feelings, intersubjectively rather than as an objective outsider. My position as a visitor, and the process of simultaneously reflecting while observing, ensured I didn't become too overtly subjectively immersed in centre playfulness. Being there, reflecting while watching did however affect me inwardly, though I tried not to show my excitement or curiosity too much. Watching children relating and having fun was an enjoyable experience.

Participants

The children in Northbridge and Eastbridge ECCE settings were a mixture of ages, between from 6 months and 5 years, while the children in Southbridge were all 4 years old. The children in Puriri centre (Part III- chapters "[A Holding Environment](#)" and "[Relational Fields and Context](#)") that were included in the project in this book, were between 6 months and 2 years old. English was the dominant language in most

of the children's families, apart from the families at Southbridge centre. They included a diversity of ethnic and cultural family backgrounds included Somali and Iraqi refugees, and Samoan, Rarotongan, Indonesian, Chinese, and European families. Thus English was not the dominant language for all these families. Some children and parents at Southbridge understood and spoke very little English.

Procedures

Ethics and Access

Gaining access to the teachers in all four ECCE centres, in both projects, was uncomplicated. This was partly because as an early childhood teacher I understood centre systems, and also because the research foci on playfulness and relationality were perceived by teachers and parents as positive and non-threatening for parents, teachers and children.

Ethics approval involved several stages. Initial explanatory meetings were held with the ECCE supervisors, before approval for the research was obtained from the respective University and Polytechnic Human Ethics Committees. I distributed information sheets and consent forms to teachers and to parents in all four ECCE centres, as well as having informal conversations with parents and teachers. Teachers also helped to ensure that all parents received the information forms, and collected the signed consent forms on my behalf.

The informed consent of child participants was by proxy consent from parents, yet the child's interests were a foremost concern. My passive, reactive role (Corsaro, 1985) of not interrupting children's play or other activities, yet responding to children's requests and queries, caused a minimum of disruption to the centre processes. When the occasional child did enquire about what I was writing, or doing, I responded honestly, usually explaining that I was interested in children's play. The children seemed pleased that they and their play were acknowledged and respected. I enjoyed my time quietly wondering, while reflectively watching children play. While being mindful of not interrupting play, I usually asked 4-year olds if it was okay to video them. As part of the familiarisation process I supported interested children to play carefully with using the video camera. In this way any novelty value soon dissipated, though occasionally children would still ask and be allowed to use the camera, perhaps adding to their acceptance of this videoing observer visitor.

Data Generation

Tools used for gathering and generating data consisted primarily of participant observation, with the essential aid of a mini video-recorder as well as a laptop computer. Note-taking alone was inadequate for capturing the complexity and spontaneity of children playing, hence the reliance on technological aids. The equipment was not overly obtrusive being a small sized camera which I frequently simply held at waist level in order to record conversations as much as visual body language. Perfect focusing was not a priority, whereas ensuring that staff, parents and children remained relaxed was a priority. The children in all four centres were used to staff videoing and photographing, so they were familiar with the equipment and I tried to fit in as naturally as possible. This sometimes meant responding to children's questions and conversations while simultaneously videoing them. For example, in event 1 (chapter "[Framing: Young Children Relating and Playing](#)") the children asked me to count to ten while they hid, which I did while continuing videoing and feeling very much the participant observer.

The older, more verbal, children at Southbridge ECCE centre did show initial interest in the technology and when some children there expressed interest in videoing, I helped them to use the camera for one session. After that the occasional child would ask to look through the lens, then resume playing.

The research produced approximately 10 h of video from each ECCE centre, a lot of which provided contextual information. Children's ways of playing and relating were largely spontaneous and unpredictable. Hence videoing was a relatively random and intuitive process of tracking individuals and small groups of children playing.

The original typed field notes were divided into four columns: one for date, time, place, weather and such conditions; another for literal *objective* observations; the next for *subjective* interpretation; and the fourth listed the material-mediating artefacts. This list of artefacts was important in using activity theory, which prioritises the tools, symbols and signs that mediate the activity. I also kept a reflective journal and regularly wrote reflective analytic memos, as well as anecdotes told to me by parents and teachers. In this way the data generation, writing, reflecting, and transcribing processes formed the first levels of data analysis. Semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents added to the multiple methods used to generate data.

Data Analysis

The development of theory from data requires systematic processes and caution. I was wary of not defaulting to the more common observer focus on individual children rather than their interactions (Graue & Walsh, 1998). My focus was on the felt spaces between children playing and relating, including the artefacts and feelings

that filled these spaces. One way of not jumping to premature theoretical conclusions is analysis that includes context. Events go some way towards including context. The concept of the relational field as described by Donnel Stern (2013) is useful here because it emphasises the felt interpersonal dimensions of context, thus interpersonal dimensions are implicit in references to field in this book. The mix of tools (video, eyes, pen, paper) and methods (observing, interviewing, reflecting, checking out) enabled full detailed descriptive and contextualised observations of children relating and being playful.

Inductive data analysis occurred as data were generated, so that initial data generation was also the first phase of data analysis. This initial analysis accompanied the construction of a data record that included: dating, filing, and re-filing observation notes, transcripts and tapes, and making back-up copies of everything for safe-keeping. Inductive data analysis was ongoing during all phases of the research.

Theoretical analysis (the next level of analysis, Pollard, 1996) followed the same sequential order, of describing and analysing, so that analyses from each phase of the research informed subsequent phases. These analyses developed out of repeated viewings of the video footage, multiple re-readings of interview, observation and video transcripts, reflecting critically and ruminating over memos (writing more) and looking for paradoxes, patterns, gaps, and contrasts in the data (Delamont, 2002).

This analytical process was simultaneously informed by ongoing and extensive reading of related literature. Literature on play became an important resource, as did writings on activity theory and, in the more recent phases, writings from the field of relational psychology. Data and literature together provided substance for critical and theoretical reflection. This deeply reflective approach enhanced my awareness of challenges around being both an *objective* outsider and a *subjective* participant observer.

Themes around playfulness were identified from patterns and regularities, including contradictions, contrasts, gaps, and paradoxes in the data. These themes were compared across and within centres as a form of cross-checking the primary data.

To summarise, the process of data analysis moved inductively from descriptive to theoretical, though always grounded in the actual descriptive data. I was working towards balance in description, analysis and interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). While the use of narrative-like event structures was initially descriptive, with interpretation and analysis, events also became explanatory. Narrative-like events, ensured a balance of theoretical interpretation with pragmatism, in understanding and representing young children in ECCE settings playing and relating. The ethnographic style emphasised in-depth understandings of the interactive processes of children being playful. This depth allows the results to be generalised in two ways (Delamont, 2002), firstly across the early childhood centres and secondly, the results of this study may be generalised to the development of theory about young children in ECCE settings, playing and relating. In the latter case theory development is informed by activity theory and relational psychology. This research legitimates the

importance of studying everyday practices in order to understand children holistically.

Phases of the Research

The research in Part II (chapters “[The Intersubjective In-Between-ness in Young Children’s Playfulness](#)”, “[Words Connecting Children Playfully Together](#)”, “[Becoming Selves Relationally](#)”, “[Imagining While Playing](#)” and “[Feelings Felt in Bodies](#)”) was sited in three different ECCE centres and involved four successive phases of data gathering, with each phase addressing questions that had developed out of the previous phase. Questions and themes also emerged within each phase adding to the cumulative character of the research process.

The main question in the original research (Part II) was:

- How do young children experience humour and playfulness in their communication?

Related sub-questions that emerged out of the four successive research phases and have relevance to this book included:

- What mediates children’s playful communication?
- How do young children communicate intersubjectively when having fun together?
- How do pre-verbal children interact and communicate playfully with each other, with talkers and with teachers?
- How do children use narrative structures and words when being playful?
- What role do the teachers play in children’s playful narratives?

The writing of this book is yet another phase in a never-ending research process. It reflects my continuing curiosity and interest in connections between children’s emotional relationality and play.

Overview of Part III

Part III of this book is a more recent phase in this research journey. It picks up on the questions around artefact mediation, intersubjectivity, and non-verbal communication, with a specific focus on babies and toddlers relating and playing.

The main research question in Part III asks:

What is the nature of the relational environment for the babies in this ECCE centre where eco-sustainability is an overarching philosophical principle?

Sub-questions that emerged during this phase of the research process focussed on how these very young (pre-verbal) children related and included:

What *things* and people in the environment attract and distract these pre-verbal children?

(Things include material artefacts as well people.)

How do artefacts mediate and connect these pre-verbal children inter and intra-subjectively?

How do teachers and pre-verbal children communicate and connect reciprocally? (focussing on the in-between space and agency)

With time I became increasingly aware of Puriri ECCE centre as a community – a public family – nestled, matrix-like within complex networks of interconnecting systems, influenced by trends and policies operating locally, nationally and internationally. Ecological sustainability was a dominant discourse and driver in policies and in espoused teacher practices for Puriri centre.

Questions shifted towards:

How are wider sustainability values played out with babies' and toddlers' in the setting?

How are issues of sustainability mediated for babies and toddlers in this setting?

Introduction to Puriri Centre (Part III)

Puriri ECCE centre explicitly emphasised relationships across the extended community of families, teachers, the local geographical community and the wider physical environment. Puriri's relational philosophy was grounded in a prioritizing of ecological sustainability, interpreted by them to broadly include caring for self, others and the environment. This view of sustainability is congruent with indigenous New Zealand Māori world-views that emphasise the interconnectedness of all phenomena, echoed also in the metaphor of Indra's Net that underpins ideas in this book and is described in chapter "[Framing: Young Children Relating and Playing](#)".

The implications of this sustainability philosophy meant that rather than implementing key (primary) caregiving processes all staff – and to a degree some children – were included in caring for all the babies, as well as for each other and the environment. A model of primary caregiving where each child is allocated one specific caregiver, was understood as overly individualistic and not in keeping with the interconnectedness of being.

As mentioned, the central question framing the project was:

What is the nature of the relational environment for the babies and toddlers in this ECCE centre where 'eco-sustainability' is an overarching philosophical principle?

The research focus on relationality including feeling was important because sensory feelings dominate infants ways of being (Damasio, 2000; Music, 2011; Trevarthen, 2011; Stern, 1985, 2010). Emotions/feelings emerge through early relationships; attachment theory is about emotional patterns learned in these early

relationships (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Emotions are viewed in this book as “relational experiences lived through bodies; bodies that co-regulate their movements with the movements of others” (Fogel & Garvey, 2007, p. 17).

Observations focused on these very young (pre-verbal) children’s relationships. The use of video added huge detail to my observations. Video enabled me to review and revisit observations, to question and to reflect critically on the images and my interpretations.

The research methods, including ethics approval, data generation and analyses were similar to those described for Part II. This interpretive, ethnographic research approach fitted with the exploratory, open-ended and reflective nature of a research focus on the meaning-making relational experiences of mainly preverbal children (6–20 months old) (Fogel & Garvey, 2007; Renn, 2010; Shotter, 2010; D. Stern, 1985, 2010; Trevarthen, 2011; Winnicott, 1960a, 1960b, 1974).

Puriri ECCE Setting and Background

Puriri was a small, urban, privately run centre in Auckland catering for up to ten children under 2-years old. Up to 25 children between 2 and 5 years old occupied the adjoining semi-separated rooms and outside area. Wall windows and low fences ensured that the under-twos area, where this project was focussed, felt connected to the larger, noisier over-twos area, yet was also a separate and quieter space. Several of the infants had siblings in the over-twos area. Government policies in New Zealand use 2-years-old as a marker, for funding and regulatory purposes, hence the two separate, yet connected, mixed-age groups in a mixed-age ECCE centre.

As in Part II gaining access to teachers, families and children involved building relationships before, during and following the ethical approval process. This project was initiated by the manager, who was keen to investigate how their babies fared relationally without a primary caregiving system. I was approached and the research proceeded from that initial meeting. Both teachers and children’s parents were familiar with observational research, the centre having participated in several centre-based research projects.

This project also became an important part of my transition to living in Auckland having very recently moved there from Wellington. Families in my neighbourhood were also connected with Puriri centre as both past and present users. Perhaps I caught their feelings of belonging to Puriri too.

Relationships between infants, young children, teachers, families, the local community, things, and place – the ecological, environmental, sociological, historical, cultural and psychological systems within which we live – pervaded the philosophy and practices of Puriri centre, seemingly driven and sustained by the experience and aspirations of the centre owner-manager’s strongly held philosophy around sustainability.

The following short event exemplifies an ethos of care as relationality including community, while also highlighting points around teachers supporting children to

feel and express emotions. I make connections between attachment, feeling securely held and children learning to regulate emotions. Though brief this event offers many more interpretive possibilities.

Event 3: Being Left and Reassuring Grandmother

Being apart, connecting and reconnecting on a regularly repetitive basis with familiar people and places is in the nature of ECCE daily life.

Ed was crying and seeming very distressed when his grandmother left him in the under-twos area at Puriri. She sadly said “bye-bye” and told Ed that she’d be back to collect him later that day. Teacher Van held and tried to comfort Ed, talking soothingly with him, nestling him tightly in her arms against her body, but still he screamed and cried loudly. Grandmother too looked distressed. As soon as grandmother was out the door Ed calmed down physically and ceased crying. He now looked relaxed and comfortable, listening to the tone in teacher Van’s words and feeling her soothing holding arms. Manager Mary was preoccupied yet she noticing the change she asked another available teacher to go quickly after grandmother and tell her that Ed had stopped crying and settled down. Ed slid down from Van and began toddling around, exploring, playing.

Discussion, Analysis, and Wondering

This attitude of reassurance, accepting and understanding of the grandparent’s distress, as well as the child’s, was common in Puriri, as it also is in other ECCE centres. Small thoughtful actions added to creating a caring ethos, where grandmother, child, family, teacher relationships all matter.

Caring also includes teachers accepting and supporting children to feel a range of feelings, so accepting Ed’s cries, rather than expecting instantly controlled containment from upset children. In feeling physically and psychologically held, Ed was able to feel and express distress and anger at being left. In Van’s holding arms Ed was supported to safely feel the power of feelings. This self-awareness of feelings is the substance of emotional self-regulation. In physically holding Ed and accepting his distress Van held his feelings with him, enabling Ed to feel himself and to become calm. Without this emphasis on shared awareness of feelings, the concept of emotional self-regulation can be narrowly mis-understood as rigidly individualistic self-control without the feeling of emotions. Yet it is the feeling of emotions that contributes to people’s psychological wellbeing, openness and joy in living and in life.

This incident caused me to reflect further on how children also being given space to safely feel, can begin to think, recognise, understand and regulate their feelings, thus contributing to emotional self-awareness. Teachers trying to soothe and calm

crying children, as in this event, may also be unwittingly smothering children's feelings, if they don't support children to express feelings. Crying can also become contagious particularly among babies. Emotions are contagious. Angry, sad or otherwise upset children learn to regulate their emotions by feeling them and by becoming aware of the, sometimes overwhelming, feelings while also feeling safely held, so sharing the feelings safely. Ed recovered himself by coming to some sort of feeling of connectedness, with another (Van) and him-self, in this self-regulatory way.

While observation involved reflexively reading children's and teacher's bodies relating, infants can be extra sensitive to the presence and feelings of others, so I also focussed on reflectively and reflexively reading and developing awareness of my own body feeling-thoughts while observing. I too felt reassured when Ed calmed down, ceased crying and began playing.

Though I observed Ed being physically held, I could only imagine his feelings of security in feeling safely held. I made hypothetical connections between his feelings and his learning to self-regulate emotions. These links and others, emerged inductively from in-depth examination of, and rumination on, the raw observation-based data. They are also informed by reading a wide range of relevant research. One never really knows how another is thinking-feeling, however I can theorise, wonder, reflect and interpret.

While the meanings in words go somewhat towards bridging the intersubjective spaces between people, it was the calming soothing tone of the words almost sung and combined with Van's holding arms and warm body that soothed and supported Ed emotionally. Van did this intuitively. The spontaneity in her body-language initially appeared more responsively feeling-ful than thoughtful. But the feeling body is also an intuitively thinking body (Merleau Ponty, 1968). Body-language is thus an important observational focus for interpreting understandings of relationality throughout the events in this book.

Summary

Part I of this book has introduced several observed themes in young children playing and relating, including: sensory body-language, intra and intersubjectivity, artefact mediation, the relational field as context and children's relational play as interconnecting systems of activity. These and other themes are revisited throughout this book. The ethnographic research methods used in the two projects that inform this book have also been introduced.

Chapter Structure for Part II and Part III (Chapters “[The Intersubjective in-between-ness in Young Children’s Playfulness](#)”, “[Words Connecting Children Playfully Together](#)”, “[Becoming Selves Relationally](#)”, “[Imagining While Playing](#)”, “[Feelings Felt in Bodies](#)”, “[A Holding Environment](#)” and “[Relational Fields and Context](#)”)

Each chapter in Parts II and III provides a different yet complementary lens for appreciating the complexities in events of children being playful and relating. This progressive way of working with themes is one way of clearly conveying the complexity in the activity of children relating and playing. Thematic analyses should not obscure the very complex multilayered and fluid nature of the children’s activity as represented in events.

For purposes of portraying these complexities the next five chapters (chapters “[The Intersubjective In-Between-ness in Young Children’s Playfulness](#)”, “[Words Connecting Children Playfully Together](#)”, “[Becoming Selves Relationally](#)”, “[Imagining While Playing](#)” and “[Feelings Felt in Bodies](#)”) present a wide range of events grouped thematically into five clusters of related affective themes that stood out in the observations. Chapter “[The Intersubjective In-Between-ness in Young Children’s Playfulness](#)” addresses the very relational topic of inter and intra subjectivity while also emphasising the mediated nature of inter-subjectivity. Chapter “[Words Connecting Children Playfully Together](#)” focuses on the power of verbal language, of words, for young children communicating playfully. Chapter “[Becoming Selves Relationally](#)” emphasises the growth of children’s subjectivities, their developing feelings of being and becoming selves, while also communicating and connecting playfully together and with others. Chapter “[Imagining while Playing](#)” explores children playing imaginatively with links to myth, creativity and complexity in dramatic playfulness. Chapter “[Feelings Felt in Bodies](#)” returns to the very fundamental focus on feelings as felt in bodies, by focussing on musicality, rhythm, and embodiment in children’s playful communication.

The focus on bodily felt communication in chapter “[Feelings Felt in Bodies](#)” flows smoothly into Part III which focuses on very young children playing and relating, before they have many or any words.

Chapters “[A Holding Environment](#)” and “[Relational Fields and Context](#)” further explore themes that emerged in the study of babies’ and toddlers’ relationality in Puriri ECCE centre. These themes are broadly clustered as: feelings of being held in chapter “[A Holding Environment](#)” and the field as context and tone in chapter “[Relational Fields and Context](#)”. The final chapter “[Implications: Teachers Being Relationally Aware](#)”, focuses on possible implications for ECCE teachers developing understandings and awareness of children playing and relating.

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