

Reconceptualising child observation: Prioritising subjectivity

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This article puts forward a rationale for early childhood teachers observing and interpreting 'objectively', 'subjectively', and 'intersubjectively'. By 'subjectively' I am referring to the idea of teachers working with interpreting the feelings and thoughts that subjectively emerge in them while they observe child(ren). I use the term 'feeling-thoughts' to acknowledge the inseparability of thought and feeling, emotion and cognition, mind and body (Vygotsky, 1986). These feeling-thoughts are the often invisible wordless dimensions of relationships between people presented on and in our faces and bodies. We 'read' this surface body language especially faces, in other's eyes and smiles. But we can also interpret more deeply what the face and body might be saying and why. This is where interpretive, subjective observations can assist.

Background

While rearranging a course in 'infant and toddler pedagogy' for field-based early childhood teacher-education students, I have been pondering ways of enhancing teachers' awareness of their practices in relation to connecting and communicating with very young children. I continually came back to the potential of child observations for enhancing teachers' self-other awareness in relation to children, and for improving teaching practices.

'Reciprocal and responsive relationships' has become a mantra for early childhood teachers in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Research demonstrates the importance of teachers (particularly teachers of very young children) being in tune with the children they care for. Terms referring to this state include: 'attunement' and 'intersubjectivity' (Stern, 1985; Trevarthen, 2010). 'Attunement' captures the rhythm and inherent musicality in the-to and fro-dance between caregiver (mother-teacher) and infant; they seem to be connected almost as one subject. The term 'intersubjectivity' has been interpreted and elaborated in many different ways. For the purposes of this paper intersubjectivity quite literally refers to the concept of two or more people (subjects) relating together ('inter' as between) in a-power sharing- way, usually with a shared focus of attention. Intersubjectivity and attunement are qualities of reciprocal responsive relationships. Such qualities are subjectively felt in the relationships teachers develop with children. The issue for teacher educators is how to teach such relational qualities. This is where the 'intersubjective interpretive' observing methods that I will attempt to explain in this article may be useful. I intend trialing these methods in the infant and toddler course. This article also suggests some strategies for teachers becoming more self-reflexive and inter-subjective while observing children.

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Theories and values are enacted in practice, so it seems sensible that real teacher practices in relation to real children in real early childhood care and education centres should be the core foci for teacher education programmes, particularly where the course has the advantage of being field-based. Centre/field-based students in this programme work in early childhood education and care centres for a minimum of 15 hours per week while also studying for a degree qualification as early childhood teachers. Students do also undertake practicum in a range of centres thereby expanding their practical experience base as part of the education to become qualified early childhood teachers.

What's in a name?

The process of rearranging the course began with renaming it. The somewhat misleadingly titled 'The Young Child' went through the due process of programme committees to become the more informative and descriptively titled 'Infants and toddlers: Relating and playing'. Relational ways of being cannot be over-estimated. All learning is relational. Hence 'relating' in the title. Playing refers to both the activity of playing and playing as a way of being open to the world for young children (and older people too). The inclusion of play in the title is intended to convey the open-ended and creative nature of 'being' in the present, rather than over-emphasizing learning for the future, as too often happens in education. Most importantly this course involves student teachers relating and connecting intersubjectively with children under the age of three years; an age range often loosely referred to as consisting of two overlapping groups: infants and toddlers.

Our relationship as observers

Most of what we know, or think we know about young children is based on child observation. Early childhood teacher education programmes usually include observations by student teachers of children and in turn of student teachers by visiting lecturers. It is easy to be critical about 'observations'. Too often child observations have been grounded in the practice of doing 'objective' observations to children who then become 'objects' of and in the observations. In a sense the observed children lose their subjective humanity. Our observer relationship with the observed loses the subjective relational aspects; the observed, the observer and the relationship become diminished in the process of simplifying and objectifying the observation. Observation, seen in this way has connotations of surveillance, control, and lack of freedom. Observations can simply be unreliable as is borne out in the example of legal witnesses where different people see the same 'objective' incident and remember it differently. From another perspective the language of observations is always suspect because as Berger (1972) pointed out words written or spoken are not the same as seeing, experiencing or observing: "seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak" (p. 7). The observed experience is not the same as the words that may be used to describe it. Observation involves a complex matrix of perspectives, patterns and interpretations, as well as methods.

Students learn about some of the many methods for observing children in their teacher education courses (Podmore, 2006). Child observations can be quantitative and/or qualitative. They might consist of detailed descriptions of what the observer thinks s/he 'sees' with the description

written in a variety of possible ways; as an anecdote, an event, an open narrative, or a 'learning story'. Observations done over time might show patterns and trends in observed behaviours. Observations in early childhood are frequently linked to assessment of children's learning as in the learning stories methods promoted in *Kei tua o te pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004). An exclusive focus on assessment linked to learning can narrow interpretations of observations by ignoring, or over-simplifying and under-interpreting the emotional, relational, connecting, playful learning and nurturing dimensions of loving and living for very young children. These relational ways of being are implicit in the concepts of intersubjectivity and attunement.

Despite early childhood teachers' awareness of the invisible or hidden dimensions in observations, epitomized in phrases such as 'hidden curriculum' and 'making the invisible visible', child observations still tend to focus on the visible physical behaviour of individuals. Occasionally observations focus on groups of individual children. However, observations are not usually deeply intersubjective, interpretive, or detailed; they don't generally prioritise the relational dimensions in the spaces between both the observed individual child(ren) and the teacher observer(s) and the spaces between the children themselves. From a relational perspective it is important to include these psychically felt in-between spaces in our observations.

The transitional space

The space between people is sometimes referred to as the 'third space' (Ogden, 1994). It may also be called the intersubjective space. I like Winnicott's (1974) use of the term 'transitional space' because

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the space does move and change. The space is inter and intrapsychic. It is also a material space. This transitional, inter-subjective, third space of between-ness is both felt and seen; it makes up the matrix-like nature of our relationships with other people, in this case with the young children we care for and observe. The observer is subjectively positioned as one aspect within a matrix of relationships. I am suggesting that we embrace this subjectivity in our observations and develop it further, complexly and interpretively, thereby bringing child observations closer to our own observer experiences and to the observed children's experiences. Observer subjectivity in observations is to be celebrated and prioritized; this positivity might give strength to observers seemingly taking risks by interpreting what they can't see, but can feel, intuitively.

The integration of intersubjectivity with intuitively interpreted observations of children seems to be a logical development from trying to be an outside objectively factual observer. Extending, broadening, deepening, and changing our ways of seeing - observing - noticing and interpreting is challenging. We cannot escape our culturally, socially, and historically conditioned blinkers. We see what we are conditioned to notice. We observe what we are conditioned to see and consequently we tend to interpret and respond in conditioned blinkered ways.

To some extent learning stories are interpretive, however a narrowing focus on individual children's learning dispositions dominates the learning story models presented in *Kei tua o te pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004). This article is promoting more open interpretations of observations that also include the interpreted feeling thoughts of the observer and represent the observed child(ren) subjec-

tively and relationally. Observations that prioritise emotional, spiritual and cultural dimensions in and between very young children are not very common, though the ideas are prevalent in kaupapa Maori understandings of children (Pere, 1994).

This combination of subjectively observing feeling-thoughts while also relating may be particularly useful for teachers developing relationships with very young children. Feelings are felt and thought in and between bodies. Thus the phrase 'embodied cognition'. Infants and toddlers exemplify this embodiment in their very blatantly sensori-motor ways of being and feeling-thinking with their whole bodies.

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What about strategies for observing relationally?

Intersubjectivity and attunement are embodied relationships. I suggest that teachers subjectively observing - listening to - our own inner feelings in relation to the children we observe, can both deepen our observations, extend our interpretations and develop our feelings of attunement and intersubjectivity in relation to the observed children. We may also learn more about ourselves.

Infants are precocious imitators of facial expressions. Mirroring facial expressions and body actions can help infants developing feelings of self as a social being, connected yet separate. Mirroring can also be a powerful way of connecting

with very young children. Try smiling, making faces, or whatever action the infant initiates. Observe the infant's response and your feelings. Not only are you likely to be supporting the child's awareness of self as social, but you are connecting and communicating in meaningful bodily based ways. Think about how that feels? What emotions and memories are touched in you, the observing teacher?

When I allow myself to observe, listen, and relax simultaneously words seem to take a back-seat to feelings. Possibly this is because words cannot interrupt and get between my-self and other observations. I try to be aware only of the feeling-thoughts in myself and between us. I try to listen to these feeling-thoughts, while sometimes interacting and sometimes just watching, listening observing quietly, aware that in being present I am always part of the 'observation'. My presence affects how young children respond. My presence, even if I try to be an 'outside observer' always intrudes on the psychic spaces between us. My observer feelings thoughts and physical presence are part of the observational matrix.

The advice I intend giving to the students is to initially select one child who interests you and watch, without writing. Start by noticing the context; the other people and things that the child interacts with. The space, the things and the people are important in beginning to make the observation relational. Then observe the child interacting with and in the environment as closely, mindfully and intuitively as you can. Don't try to write, just watch gently. Try to think-feel about what might be going on inside this child and outside, inter and intra psychically. Look at the child's body, stance, gaze, expressions in the face and the body. Ask yourself: What might this child be

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feeling-thinking in his/her body? Guess! When you feel focused, yet open-minded, expand your awareness to include yourself. Observe your feeling-thoughts while continuing to observe the child. Reflect: What/how do I feel in my body in relation to this child(ren)? Listen to how your body feels to yourself. We feel emotions in different parts of our bodies. I often feel my emotions in my stomach. Try to listen to the child's feelings too. So you are trying to listen to your feelings while you watch this child interact and possibly 'play'.

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and yourself; don't allow the act of writing to distract your awareness. On the other hand, writing can enhance awareness. You need to find what ways work best for you trying to understand yourself in relation to the observed and trying to understand the observed other as if in your shoes.

In a sense you are trying to empathise with the child. I recently heard empathy described not as putting yourself in another's shoes, but instead as taking the other into your shoes. This rephrasing emphasizes the importance of observer-teachers reaching out to others (which in this case are the very young children they care for) and actively being intersubjective and interpreting feeling-thoughts while observing.

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