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'It's the little bits that you have enabled me to see'. Reconceptualising the voices of babies using the video interaction dialogue model with early years educators

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ABSTRACT

Grounded in Froebelian Principles, infused with Bakhtin's Dialogism, this paper draws from a larger ethnographic doctoral study to illuminate the way seven Early Childhood Educators based in England reflect on, and reconceptualise the voices of babies through engagement with a new reflective model, Video Interaction Dialogue (VID). Through a process of rewinding and slowing down time, individuals reflected on the emotional dimensions of interactions with babies to uncover how their voices manifest in practice. Conflict between personal dispositions, professional responsibility and opposing forces in the broader environmental climate occurred but, stepping back from authoritative, regulated pressures in the nursery environment promoted opportunities for new ways of thinking to emerge. Analysis of data was framed within a Cultural Historical Wholeness Approach, examining societal, institutional, and personal dimensions. Three dominating themes emerged: Reconceptualization of babies' voice and agency, Empowerment, Reaffirmed value in professional role. Fundamentally, educators embarked on a journey becoming highly conscious of their own actions enacting an increased integrity and confidence to reframe the voice of babies as a valued aspect of institutional practice.

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Introduction

As more babies and toddlers spend their time between home and early education settings the need to acknowledge them in society as active participating citizens is more pressing (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020; Burr and Degotardi 2021). Actuating the rights of children involves seeing and hearing their voices as they contribute to families, early childhood settings and communities. Discourses concerned with the voices of preschool children are well established (e.g. see Clark and Moss 2011; Clark 2017), and a movement to prioritise those of the youngest has increased impetus in recent years (Lundy 2007; Wall et al. 2019; Evans 2022). Nevertheless, embedding voice as a right of very young children in early childhood

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pedagogy is a contentious, but essential, issue facing the early childhood sector (United Nations 1989).

Calls to draw attention to babies' voices are increasing, with researchers and policy makers positioning rights as morally essential to the enactment of successful early education programmes (United Nations 1989; Scottish Government 2023; Wall et al. 2019). Ratification of voice within statutory and non-statutory pedagogical guidance is well defined internationally (David et al. 2003; Crichton et al. 2020; Department for Education 2021; Early Education 2021). In parallel, positioning children as rights holders in early childhood training and qualification programmes in England has increased prominence (QAA The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2014; Lumsden 2020). Cassidy et al. (2022) suggest there is a disparity between enacting the principles of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) in early years practice and claims this is particularly disproportionate for the very youngest child. Such rhetoric appears consistent with research identifying babies, and those who work with babies as overlooked, forgotten, and marginalised in early years policy and practice (Goouch and Powell 2013a; Clark and Baylis 2012; Davis and Dunn 2018).

Research concerning children's voice advocates for listening to the views of children although has seldom generated evidence of how voice materialises, opting to privilege the spoken word (Wall et al. 2019; Murray 2019; Boardman 2022). Literature examining how the voices of under two-year-olds materialise in everyday contexts is sparse (Johansson and White 2011; Nyland 2019). This can largely be attributed to ambiguity regarding the most ethical way to facilitate and document voice for babies (Elwick, Bradley, and Sumsion 2014), and a fear surrounding 'the indignity of speaking for others' (Bradley et al. 2012, 141). Conversely, while anxiety concerning the most appropriate methodological approach to document voice ensues, increased numbers of babies continue to be enrolled in formal day care internationally (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2015; 2020) and the degree to which their voices are responded to in practice remains unknown.

Essential to this debate is the way adults who care for babies position young children and whether they frame voice acts as a valued component of unfolding relationships and early childhood practices. With growing disparity between policy guidance and the reality of working with babies, a neoliberal agenda appears to overshadow the participation rights of babies and place undeniable demands on the workforce (Dalli 2016; Bradbury 2012). Conversely, there is a reported lack of specialist skills and knowledge preparing early childhood educators for the long hours and emotional anxiety associated with close and responsive work necessitated in baby rooms (Elfer 2006; Page and Elfer 2015; Elfer et al. 2018; Davis and Dunn 2019). Accordingly, research concerning existing professional training opportunities available that prioritise knowledge pertaining to the voices of young children is scarce.

To that end, this paper argues that it is essential that appropriate systems are established to support early childhood educators to observe how babies' voices manifest in early childhood. This is particularly pressing in a society where it is the customary for young children to spend significant time away from primary caregivers in formal childcare (Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development 2015). With access to suitable

strategies to cultivate working knowledge of babies' voice expressions, early childhood educators can increase confidence and specialist knowledge and skills to tune into babies' communications overtures, becoming greater advocates for the babies they care for.

The origin of this paper

Arising from a larger ethnographic doctoral study (Guard *n.d.*), the intent of this paper is to introduce the reader to a professional development tool, Video Interaction Dialogue which makes visible the voice initiations of babies to early childhood educators and offers scope to reconceptualise the way in which babies' voices can be seen, heard, and acknowledged in early childhood settings.

The broader study was framed around five research questions and sought to foreground how babies' voices are observable in early childhood settings. This paper does not offer scope to examine all aspects of the doctoral study. Rather, it presents findings that arose following discussion and feedback from early childhood educators who had engaged in the Video Interaction Dialogue process. It also examines its long-term potential as a model for professional reflection.

Positioning voice as a tangible feature of early childhood education

Babies make considerable effort to connect their inner being with the outer world, they seek to 'find sensory proof of a self-existence ...' (Froebel in Lilly 1967, 77) by making an impact on those around them. Interpretation of Froebel's writing claims that voice is always internally present, and babies viscerally unfold body movements to connect to the outer world, though they are reliant upon attentive, responsive adults for voice to be 'seen'. A social act of communication, rooted in a human desire to connect (White 2011), voice emerges in the context of dialogue representing the spoken and unspoken dialogue between individuals (Bakhtin 1986). It is bound within the context of relationships and always social and deliberate but can only exist when two people are ethically and morally answerable to the 'other' (Bakhtin 1986; White 2011, 2015; Cassidy et al. 2018).

Sophisticated 'acts of meaning' (Malloch and Trevarthen 2009, 1) are strategically oriented comprising, 'behaviour, actions, pauses in action, silences, body language, glances, movement and artistic expression' (Wall et al. 2019, 268) to draw attention to their presence in a particular time and space. Through social interaction, children increase awareness of their intentions and needs, and learn to intentionally orient their behaviours into social contexts (Hedegaard and Fleer 2008). As such, motive to be seen and understood through strategically oriented acts of voice places external demands on adults who are responsible for their care. While it is thought voice narratives increase complexity and intention in response to social interactions with others (Delafield-Butt and Trevarthen 2015; McGowan and Delafield-Butt 2022), White (2011) and Degotardi and Han (2020) argue these are rarely acknowledged as meaningful by adults and subsequently often overlooked or misunderstood. It can be determined, therefore, that the visibility of voice increases in the context of close interactions with others.

Examining the context for professional reflection opportunities for early childhood educators

Early childhood educators are in a prime position to facilitate participation rights of babies in nursery spaces. Extensive research maintains that the early years workforce needs to be highly skilled and proficient in establishing highly attuned, emotionally responsive relationships with babies and their families (Page, Clare, and Nutbrown 2013; Elfer and Page 2013; Davis and Dunn 2018, 2019; Elfer et al. 2018). Nevertheless, enacting effective practices to facilitate voices of the very young is often superseded by neoliberal agendas preoccupied by technical skills and performativity (Osgood 2006; Bradbury 2012; Moss 2013). Forming an accurate comprehension of voice is reliant upon contingent environments and attuned, receptive adults (White 2011; White 2015; Degotardi and Han 2020). White (2011, 74) argues that adults are highly accountable and ‘morally answerable’ (Bakhtin 1990) to babies’ elicitation of emotional acts of voice but face challenges as they attune to babies’ emotional needs. Accordingly, early childhood educators require opportunity to reflect on exchanges and see for themselves how the voices of young children unfold as a relational encounter. In support of this, Wall et al. (2019) claim that for the voice of the very young to have power and influence, opportunity for the reflexive examination of the ways in which adults conceptualise and position babies as competent social agents must be established.

Increasingly, professional reflection opportunities are positioned as a central feature of an effective early childhood workforce (Oberhuemer 2013; Salamon and Harrison 2015). There are widespread calls to accentuate the affective and subjective experiences of caring for young children in addition to the technical and procedural (Salamon and Harrison 2015; Elfer et al. 2018). Elfer (2012) has pioneered the use of a Work Discussion Model to draw attention to the ‘emotional demands’ associated with establishing responsive relationships with young children (Elfer and Dearnley 2007; Elfer 2012). Elfer et al. (2018, 902) point to a strong correlation between the emotions of educators and children’s emotional experiences calling for further professional reflection to be given ‘serious attention by policy makers’. While the value of emotionally responsive relationships between adult and child is not disputed, and advances to establish differing models of reflection are progressive (see Elfer 2012), few studies have focused on increasing the visibility of baby’s own contributions to relational encounters. There remains limited opportunity for educators to make connections between what they know about children’s emergent personalities, visible voice narratives and their own personal attitude regarding relational care with babies. Furthermore, broader institutional, cultural, and societal characteristics that shape opportunity for voice responsivity are seldom documented. This suggests sourcing strategies to support early childhood educators realise the capacity of babies is urgently required.

Engaging video as a stimulus for professional reflection

Emerging from a cultural-historical approach where video methods are seen to ‘make it possible to look at different perspectives’ (Fleer 2008a, 105); (Fleer 2014) and capture the dynamic interplay between children and their environments, this study primarily focussed on acquiring greater comprehension of babies’ voice acts in nursery. To that end, I wanted early childhood educators, to engage their valuable expertise and foster a reflective and

co-authoring role (Quiñones and Cooper 2021) to aid construction of knowledge concerning babies' voices.

A growing body of visual tools have been established with dual purpose to promote professional development and generate data for research purposes (Tobin, Wu, and Davidson 1989; Hargreaves et al. 2003; Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa 2009). I knew I wanted to draw out strengths in practice with the aim of growing knowledge and advocate for the voices of babies and those working alongside them. Consequently, several methods were considered during the genesis of this study.

Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) (Kennedy, Landor, and Todd 2010) is a strength-based intervention programme that promotes sensitive attachments between children and their parents. Alongside a trained VIG educator, parents move through 3–4 VIG cycles where they share and review micro moments of interaction in a bid to activate the parent's 'own learning process' and to foster 'positive changes' to their relationships (Kennedy and Underdown 2018, 226–227). The Marte Mao method (Aarts 2008; Osterman, Moller, and Wirtberg 2010) similarly embeds a starting point 'from one's own strength' (Aarts 2000) via a clinical-based experience. Encouraging reflection of the dialogic roots of interaction, Marte Mao engages edited video clips of everyday occurrences to promote 'supportive and sensitive components of interaction' between caregiver and child (Vik and Rohde 2014, 79).

While the Marte Mao method has made its way into professional development opportunities with early childhood educators internationally (Early Childhood Ireland 2021), and VIG offered scope to reconceptualise the undervalued role of early years educators (Fukkink and Tavecchio 2010; Goouch and Powell 2013a, 2013b), applying direct replicas into this study was problematic. Both models are rooted in an educative and therapeutic approach (Kennedy and Underdown 2018) whereas this study demanded a method to generate research data as well as promoting opportunities for professional reflection. Accordingly, any model integrated required a dual purpose of generating data for analysis whilst offering space for staff to reflect and ponder moments of interactions with babies with the objective to draw out the voices of babies as an identifiable feature of early childhood pedagogy.

Developing a new model – the theoretical origin of video interaction dialogue (VID)

Developing a new model to generate data and act as a professional development tool was never the sole intent of the main study. Nevertheless, I sought to create a research method that offered scope to capture multiple perspectives to increase the visibility of babies' voice (Hedegaard and Fleer 2008), promoted a dialogic space for staff to reflect on their interactions with babies and to unpack the interwoven dimensions of normalised practices when responding to babies' voice expression. Video Interaction Dialogue builds on the valued principles of VIG (Kennedy, Landor, and Todd 2010) and Marte Mao (Aarts 2000), situating intersubjectivity, collaboration with others and the child at its core. While the model embraces similarities to VIG and Marte Mao, it makes a distinct shift away from a therapeutic narrative to focus on work-related encounters whilst still acknowledging that emotion may be an arising aspect of discussion in a professional context (Elfer et al. 2018). The foundation of the model is further built upon theoretical strands of a cultural-

historical approach (Hedegaard and Fler 2008), Bakhtin's Dialogism (Bakhtin 1986) and the Froebelian principle of interconnectivity (Froebel 1899; Bruce 2021) which comprised the theoretical model of the doctoral study.

Rooted at the model's core was an acute awareness of the current circumstances faced by early years educators and the association between low recognition and agency (Goouch and Powell 2013a, 2013b; Taggart 2011; Davis and Dunn 2019). Those who care for very young children require time and space to learn and understand how baby's behaviours and social cues manifest in different environments (Degotardi and Han 2020). Relationships only thrive when adults understand children and children learn the ritual responses from familiar adults (Lee 2006). Therefore, creating a reflective time and space for educators to enhance their confidence was central to the implementation of the model. This builds on the important work of Elfer and Dearnley (2007) and Elfer (2012) who frame professional reflection as central to enacting responsive and emotionally attuned interactions with young children.

Facilitated by the researcher, the VID process foregrounds the plurality of the voices of babies in nursery spaces by facilitating a dialogic space for educators to view and reflect on video clip recordings of their interactions with babies. Principally, interactions with babies were rewound to examine how the interwoven dimensions of voices materialise against the backdrop of normalised institutional practices. The space drew together multiple voices, the educator and researcher as co-enquirers together reviewing the babies' contributions in the social environment. The model offered potential to be a dialogic space where staff could step out from the regulated nursery environment and away from authoritative pressures to seek new ways of thinking in collaboration with the researcher.

The VID process

A principled approach, comprising three themes and nine principles to guide its implementation, the model sought to resonate relational features observed in educator: baby interactions and embody the relational process established between the researcher and participant dyad during the dialogic process. [Figure 1](#)

Educators were invited to join the researcher for up to three dialogues which focussed on two or three short video clips or stills to review together. Prior to dialogue taking place, documented video footage was reviewed by the researcher to assess the quality, and content of clips. This was the first step in early analysis to review the micro behaviours of babies and staff documented and to ensure careful attention was paid to avoid any raw data was not presented to participants without review (Li 2014). As a strength-based programme, caution was taken to ensure viewing video footage remained 'cathartic' rather than 'disturbing' (Ledema et al. 2006, 165). This was to honour the principle to empower and grow confidence rather than judge or emphasise flaws or weakness in practice.

Selected video clips of momentary intersubjective moments between baby and educator acted as an initial stimulus for discussion. A reflexive process of 'looking and listening in' (Sumsion and Goodfellow 2012) intended to increase value between the researcher and participant relationship and acknowledge how productive dialogue between the two would co-constructed meaning (Whiting et al. 2018). Staff were invited to contribute to, or revisit selected clips as dialogue developed, leading towards

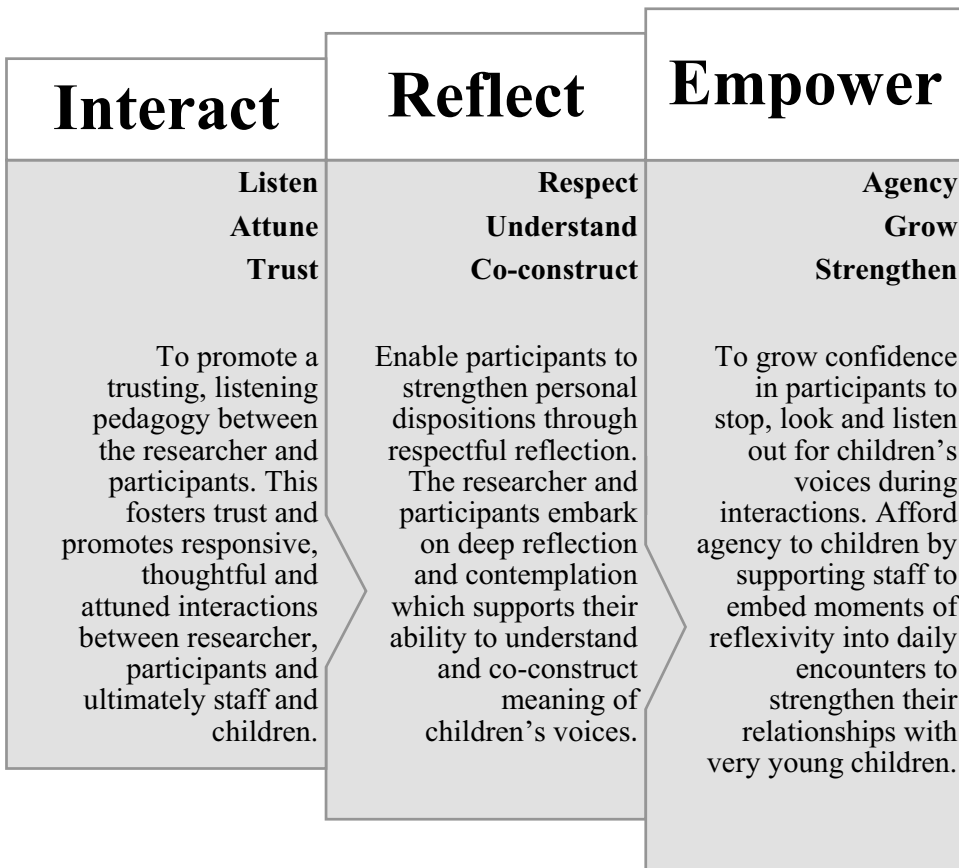


Figure 1. The three themes and nine principles of video interaction dialogue.

a collaborative analysis and 'situated practice interpretation' (Hedegaard and Fler 2008, 58; Fler 2008b). Involving educators in this way opened the possibility for them to become a 'reflective insider' (Bancroft et al. 2014), sharing the ethnographic process of research and empowering them to see what is usually unseen. In addition, it encouraged a balance in power dynamics (Whiting et al. 2018, 330) and moved participants on from feeling the process was 'invasive' towards a dialogically equal journey.

The study

The study was conducted in two individual day nursery settings in the southeast of England. Part of the same private for-profit company, they operated between 07.30 am – 18.00 pm five days a week, 52 weeks a year, offering care for babies and children aged between 3 months and 5 years. Both nurseries were registered with the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and graded as 'Good' or 'Outstanding' in their most recent inspection (EIF 2021). Regulations from The Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum Guidance mandates a one adult to three child ratio (Department for Education DfE 2021). Care was provided for babies aged 3–18 months old in purposely

designed baby rooms, with a core staff team, led by a Room Leader. Field work took place over a six-month period between 2019-2020.

Participants

Seven female early childhood educators from two nursery sites took part in the study. Six of the seven participants were qualified early years educators,¹ one was unqualified, none were Early years graduates. Breadth of experience ranged from 3 to 15 years of experience working in early years setting, although two educators were new to the settings (under one month of employment) as the study commenced.

Ethics

The research study was approved by The University of Roehampton Ethics Board in line with British Educational Research Association guidance (BERA 2018). The ethical process was layered, requiring consent to be obtained from the company, the individual settings, parents, and the educators. Participants joined the research on an entirely voluntary basis and had the right to request that they withdraw from the study at any point. While no participants chose to withdraw, two educators did leave the company prior to completing the entire VID process. They did consent for their data to remain in the study despite no longer being employed by either nursery.

Data analysis

Informed by a Cultural Historical Wholeness approach, data was analysed adopting Hedegaard and Fleer's (2008, 2009) research protocol analysis. Findings detailed in this paper arose from a combination of Hedegaard (2008) framework and Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014) where commonly occurring themes constructed new insight into the role of VID for professional development. While the intent was not to draw out data specifically regarding the VID process in the doctorate, the effectiveness of VID was a dominant theme following extensive analysis of educator narratives and forms the basis of this paper.

Findings

A total of 22 hours of video footage was recorded on a hand held video camera, during the research period and from this, 30 short clips or stills were used as a stimulus for reflective dialogue with individual educators. Seven early childhood educators based in two different day nursery settings engaged in the VID process over a period of six months. The reflective dialogue process was designed to take place three times for each educator over the research period. Two educators at one site engaged in two dialogues and another two educators at the same setting were involved only once. The variance in these occurrences is explained due to lack of staff to cover in rooms which limited if the individuals could be 'out of ratio' for the process and the two staff members resigning from post prior to the research period ending.

Reflective dialogues were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after the discussion equating to approximately 6,000–8,000 words in length (15 in total). Rich data emerged that exposed a pedagogic tension between fulfilling externally imposed organisational demands and tuning into babies' communication patterns. Whilst there is no scope to examine the variances in this paper, it is vital to acknowledge this as a significant finding from the wider doctoral study (Guard n.d) which undoubtedly contributes to the results shared in this article.

Educators commented that engaging in VID was a largely positive and powerful endeavour, reporting they valued the space and dialogue established. Consistent was the view that this process aided practice, offering a different and more purposeful experience compared with appraisals and supervisions. None of the participants felt that their practice was adequately or regularly observed nor reviewed constructively by senior leaders.

Our supervisions wouldn't look at practice... I think you are the only person I would say, who has ever observed my practice...!

Educators shared that establishing a dialogue with an individual external to the nursery offered a new way to reflect and comprehend their contributions to practice. Openness and the joining of multiple voices (the researcher, educator and baby within the video footage) led to greater understanding of what mattered to babies, and exposed conflicting demands educators faced. Educators reported they formed a deeper connection with tenets of practice, but more significantly felt skilled and confident to return to the nursery room with greater knowledge of the babies and their own professional and personal priorities.

Footage shared was often slowed down, offering a new temporal dimension to practice and initiated opportunity for deeper moments of reflection. Entering the cyclical process of reflection seems to draw inner, suppressed feelings toward the surface providing opportunity for staff to see the obvious influence they had on the babies, bringing the outer facets of these relationships to a place where staff could absorb, process and become highly conscious of the effect of their relationships and increase their levels of professional integrity.

Three dominant themes arose from data analysis and are discussed in this paper.

- (1) Reconceptualization of babies' voice and agency
- (2) Reaffirmed significance and value of their professional role.
- (3) Empowerment

Reconceptualization of babies' voice and agency

Argh... it is just so easy to lose that. This is such a small segment in such a long day, not to realise the weight of it at the time. It's fleeting. I just think it's so powerful for us as educators to feel and see like, what we do really is worth THAT. Look what he got, right in that moment. That seems to be exactly what he needs right then. And so many of those moments do happen and you just don't realise, do you?

VID supported educators to reframe fleeting moments of contact with babies and recognise active contributions babies make in the nursery environment. Educators entered the process with knowledge of babies' personality and emergent characters but witnessed for the first time how individual baby's patterns of communications intertwined with nursery activity. Significantly, staff unravelled babies' narratives and observed the lengths they would go to secure a connection with adults. Findings reflect how educators had lost sight of the importance of everyday interactions with babies. This is emphasised in the vignette presented above which indicates other priorities obscured and even superseded the social and emotional needs of the children. Through a process of slowing down, staff distinguished occasions where adult led practice dominated babies voicing efforts and they began to concede that practice does not always have to prioritise adult-oriented endeavours. Rather, there were times when babies warranted greater attention and fought to attract adult companionship engaging a myriad of cues. Staff observed a hidden dialogue rippling beneath the surface of adult driven activity and seeing this transformed their appreciation of the babies' competencies.

... she is just so clever! (laughter) I can't believe that she was able to do that, and she followed me over.

Exposing baby centric endeavours advanced educator thinking towards a weakening of the authoritative narrative they had come to belief as the 'right' or 'only way' to approach practice. Data revealed they entered a process of self-actualisation which prompted reconsideration of the value of responding to and sustaining interactions with babies. The process revisited fleeting moments of interaction where educators observed the visceral reactions of babies as adults responded to and entered moments of deep connection dialogically. The educators collectively shared that examining babies' voice in this way opened a path towards new knowledge where they could make links between voice initiations and previously held knowledge of the child. Babies' competence and agency was reconceptualised, appreciating that babies had the capability to build on previously encountered familiar and private dialogic moments.

Reaffirmed significance and value of professional role

It is the 'little' bits that you have enabled me to see. It has been so good to remind myself that those little things matter and the little things I bring, do happen, do matter. There is a lot of value in those, and I think I have probably overlooked them myself. They can be really short, fleeting things in a aery, very long day, but they build up to a much bigger thing for those children who are here for a long time.

Educators had lost sight of how valuable their own contributions to babies' nursery experiences were. As the example of data above exemplifies, characterising their involvement as 'little' accentuates the dissonance between how educators afford a sense of value to their own professional role and what they believed to be important to children. The *little things* endorsed babies' presence and mattered immensely to every child and drawing this out through the VID process was significant for all participants.

He has followed me around all day and, all of a sudden, I am giving him a smile and touch and praise, and he must think 'wow lucky me!'

Aspects of practice that had otherwise become invisible became more pronounced during dialogue. Reflections laid bare a narrative of feeling sustained interactions with babies was disregarded by colleagues and relational aspects of work with babies dismissed for other externally imposed priorities. Seeing themselves engaged with babies in contingent, responsive interactions modified educator's beliefs that their responses were important to babies, as discussed above. Reflection, with the researcher validated educators' worth as they moved through a process of realisation that their presence was needed, desired, and enjoyed by the babies.

You don't realise what an impact we are having on them, until you watch it back . . . I add value to their day, with cuddles and smiles and I am 100% I am making a difference to him there.

In turn, recognition of the significance of their presence and impact directly correlated with an advancement of self-confidence to share interpretations of voice and discuss aspects of everyday practices, which was almost instantaneous. Participants demonstrated a consistent advancement of integrity associated with their professional responsibility to respond and attune to babies acts of voice.

Empowerment

Dialogue revealed a complex web of responsibilities that obscured how they viewed their work with babies. As discussed, educators shared that they struggled to recognise how they positively impacted the lives of the children they cared for, with all reflective dialogues alluding to a lack of self-assurance regarding their work with children. As they advanced through the VID process, a consistent sense of empowerment transcended educators' dialogue which correlated with increased comprehension of the babies' voice. Visibly 'seeing' the transformation of babies' communication patterns in response to their interactions evoked a powerful reaction from participants.

You can only do so much of trying to reassure yourself that you are doing a good job or things right or wrong for whatever reason. If you were to watch this back, from start to finish, you can really see the difference being made for the children.

One educator shared her affective response on returning to her room,

Oh, it's amazing! My room leader said 'you're bubbling' when I went back in. I said to her, you don't realise the impact we are having but also the things we are missing . . .

An embodied reaction seemed to ignite something that had been lost in the milieu of hurried and pressured routine.

. . . to physically see yourself, no one can say anything to me that has more power than this . . .

While the VID model remained focussed on individual dialogue with educators, participants reported an increase of inter-staff conversation outside of the process. Communication as a team was reported to be more open with colleagues sharing new insight into babies' voice patterning. Moreover, they shared insights into their own emotions and challenges faced in the setting. Data reveals the process went beyond

the initial intention of individual reflection, resulting in an increased sense of unity as a team, without facilitation by the researcher. This indicates that VID can act as a stimulus for collaborative reflection and offers scope for sustaining more effective working partnerships. Emergent findings highlight that the rise in staff engagement directly correlates with a growth of individual assurance which resulted in feeling empowered to talk and share new knowledge collaboratively.

Confronting misaligned moments of interaction

The VID process purposely progressed over time to explore more challenging features of work with babies. As participant confidence advanced, video clips depicting moments of misaligned interaction between adult and baby were shared. This exposed the fragility of interactional moments and revealed distinct challenges early childhood educators contend in everyday practice that are examined in the main doctoral study.

I wish I had taken him with me now, seeing his little face. Oh god. Oh, he is probably thinking 'you just dumped me down, cheers'.

He doesn't do or say anything but looking at him, I know he is not okay in that moment. It's hard to see.

Unravelling the issues behind certain situations supported educators to contemplate whether they gave babies sufficient attention and question broader issues contributing to their response patterns.

While strengths were identified in the process, it also exposed challenges regarding the practicalities of implementing the model. Sourcing time and additional staff to permit educators to be released from rotas was problematic. Senior management were initially supportive of the process but as the study progressed, time was limited and physical space to conduct the dialogues was often compromised due to other factors.

Role of the researcher

Fleer (2014, 26) comments that video footage is always 'emotionally charged data' and Elwick (2015, 323) concurs, stating watching video images of babies in settings embodies 'all of one's bodily senses'. Integral to success of VID was fostering an environment where the researcher tuned into and remained highly attentive to the educators' affective reactions to the footage (Quinones 2014). Viewing footage together was a 'tactile process that captures the tone of interaction between people ...' (Fleer 2014, 27). The emotional vividness transcended the screen which brought to the surface new and suppressed emotions which were shared with the researcher.

Watching yourself is powerful. Going back in (to the room) after dissecting it with someone capable of helping you to understand is so beneficial.

Hedegaard and Fleer (2008) assert that the cultural historical researcher is an active partner alongside participants. 'Thinking together' can only transcend reflective spaces

when trust is established between speaker and listener (Wegerif 2011). Bakhtin (1990) suggests knowledge arises ‘in between’ the speaker and listener. The principles of VID carefully crafted a cyclical process to work sensitively in collaboration with participants where the researcher and educator established a genuine dialogue based on listening, trust and respect. The researcher ‘formed part of the reality’ (Quiñones and Fleer 2011) of the process, and while conscious of the study aims, drew out elements of strong practice in collaboration with individual participants to grow their confidence to embark on more challenging aspects of practice later in the cycle.

Discussion

The focus of this article has been on introducing the Video Interaction Dialogue model as an avenue for bringing babies voices to the surface of early years educator’s reflections of practice. The process of VID is revealed to be a convincing, dialogic route for the reconceptualization of babies’ competencies and offers potential to aid professional integrity and empowerment. Whilst the data set presented in this paper is small scale and does not seek to generalise the wider early years sector, findings affirm that early childhood educators value opportunities to engage in professional reflection away from the baby room. This overall finding is consistent with other studies presenting professional reflection models (Elfer 2012; Jilink, Fukkink, and Huijbregts 2018) and adds to calls for professional reflection to be urgently prioritised for all educators, especially those who work with babies (Elfer et al. 2018).

This study highlights concerns around how early childhood educators position their own contributions to practice and young children’s experiences in nursery. Typically, educators echoed a familiar discourse of experiencing disempowerment and feeling undervalued (Goouch and Powell 2013a, 2013b; Powell and Goouch 2012; Løvgren 2016; Davis and Dunn 2018). Little by the way of reflection space was established as standard practice, despite mandatory requirement to provide this (Department for Education DfE 2021). Consequently, like the babies’ hidden dialogue flowing beneath the surface of nursery activity, educators’ sense of self undulated beneath their exterior self. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin (1984, 207) claims,

... the self-consciousness of a poor man unfolds against the background of a consciousness about him that is socially alien to him. His affirmation of self sounds like a continuous hidden polemic or hidden dialogue with some other person on the theme of himself.

Bakhtin’s words explain the juxtaposition between an emergence of self-assurance against a backdrop of societal influence and babies’ reactions. Educators were initially astonished that such small events of responsiveness transformed the babies’ social interactions so profoundly. To view themselves through the eyes of the babies’ reactions was unfamiliar yet transformative. Professional validation and a belief in oneself strengthened in response to increased awareness of babies’ affective reaction and sensitive dialogue with the researcher. Implications of this finding identify the importance of professionals having opportunity to replay aspects of practice and engage in critical reflection with others.

In line with studies of a similar nature (Goouch and Powell 2013a, 2016), findings reveal educators had unconsciously shifted towards a fast-paced policy dominant

practice, which had inadvertently stifled opportunity to tune into babies' voice acts. Narratives revealed that dominant operational practices had resulted in a lost sense of perspective as to what is important to individual educators and placed undue demands on them (Hedegaard and Fleer 2008). This could be explained in several ways, including the dominance of a market-driven agenda (Bradbury 2012; Moss 2013) which diverted attention from the babies towards externally imposed practices underpinned by policy (Moss and Cameron 2020). Reflections reveal this to be a gradual, unconscious process that only surfaced in response to stepping away from practice and engaging in a dialogic reflective process. Bakhtin (1981) emphasises the difference between voices that manifest within dialogic spaces, as the authoritative and persuasive. The authoritative word is associated with a hierarchical notion shaped by power and often metaphorically distant from one's own internally driven desires. In contrast the persuasive voice originates in 'one's own world' slowly assimilates 'freely' and is applied to a process of forming 'new material, new conditions ... new contexts' (Bakhtin 1981, 345–346). Stepping out of the nursery room required educators to move away from the typical pace of daily practice, pause, and consider their own responsiveness to babies' voice initiations.

Contrasted moments of time were examined as staff reflected deeply emergent practices in the baby room. Dialogic space 'is both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement' (Bakhtin 1981, 243–244) which manifested in the way in which educators contemplated the babies' voice initiations and considered their own contributions. Space for rich contemplation acted as a 'pivot' in the flow of time (Bakhtin 1981, 244) uniting fast paced elements of practice in a slower paced situation where characteristics of voice and misaligned practices were discussed, and practices were challenged and evaluated. The dominant practices concerning a performative agenda appeared to guide institutional practices which in turn shaped the rituals adopted by staff. VID encouraged educators to question the entrenched customs and revisit their own personal values and beliefs, which were mainly located in forming relationships with babies resulting in acquiring a sense of value and affirmation in their role.

The process of becoming self-conscious is a continuous effort, for it involves establishing relationships of increasing complexity with the external world and discovering one's own nature by becoming more deeply aware of one's own actions. (Froebel in Lilley 1967, 10)

Reflecting on encounters with babies is not easy. It uncovers fragilities in relationships, deep reflection of individual dispositions, challenges social response patterns, and can reveal uncomfortable realities regarding work with very young children in nursery contexts (Elfer and Dearnley 2007). All participants demonstrated great courage as they embraced the process, despite exposing a vulnerability as they viewed video footage of themselves with babies. Froebel in (Lilley, 1967) reflect the complexity of engaging in deep reflection, inferring it should be cyclical and challenge the mind. VID invoked an emotionally heightened experience that was restorative as well as emotive for participants (Fleer 2014). The role of the researcher was imperative to ensure a deficit lens was sensitively reframed. While there were practical and emotional challenges that warrant further long-term investigation, consistent was the transformative process educators experienced, from lacking self-assurance to increasing their knowledge and expertise around the voices of babies. Experiencing space to reflect appeared to aid educators'

connection with the babies, reiterating they were knowledgeable about the children, extending deeper insight into the strategic voice orientation. This is consistent with Clark and Babylis (2012) who report that feeling connected to children increases educator confidence to act responsively and promote professional validation. Transforming perception of babies to distinctly 'capable and "clever" individuals created a sense of being dialogically equal. Viewing the video footage with a sensitively attuned 'other', not only added new perspectives to staff conceptualisation of babies, but enhanced awareness and appreciation for their own presence and involvement shaping the babies' nursery experiences.

Various studies concerning professional self-reflection via video simulated means have revealed that reflecting on one's own behaviours attributes to influence on practice with children (Fukkink, Trienekens, and Kramer 2011; Jilink, Fukkink, and Huijbregts 2018). This paper reveals a similar narrative, with educators reporting their encounters with the video footage reshaped how they approached interactions, even after one discussion. Babies' voices, although not the focus of this paper, revealed themselves 'in conjunction' (Bakhtin 1986, 146) with the researcher and video footage. It was the dialogue, underpinned by theoretically driven principles which increased consciousness of self and awareness of babies' social contributions. Davis and Dunn (2019) consider that recognition of professional self evolves over time. Evidence in this paper indicates that in contrast, professional value fluctuates and appears to be closely connected with opportunities for revisiting personal values and beliefs around the establishment of relationships with young children and is closely bound with broader societal influences. Moreover, broader cultural contextual factors contribute to stability of professional identity and if educators sense value in the activities they pursue with babies.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a new model, Video Interaction Dialogue which aims to bring babies' voices to the surface of early childhood educator reflections of practice. VID is introduced as a principled approach, theoretically underpinned by concepts of dialogic interaction, agency, trust, and respect. As White (2015, 56) argues, *teachers must implicate themselves in the dialogue, taking responsibility for what they see and hear and the way it is interpreted*. As this paper outlines, Video Interaction Dialogue offers a convincing professional tool for educators working with babies to become accountable for the way in which they interact with babies and break down broader institutional and societal influences. Professional educators should be valued and feel that the work they undertake is respected by colleagues, management and wider society. Currently the marginalisation of babies in political agenda fuels a disempowerment of those who work closely with babies in formal day care settings institutionally and societally. To be seen, acknowledged and respected is a basic human right for babies and adults. Babies and educators take on a mutually answerable role contributing towards the self-confidence and validation of the other. Shaping the context for professional reflection has never been more pressing, as examples discussed have shown early childhood educators diligently perform institutional practices whilst losing sight of their own self-worth and the voices of babies. Professional reflection is

essential to bring to the surface the hidden dialogues of educators and babies and reimagine the potential of baby room practices.

Note

1. In England, the early years workforce is typically qualified through vocational work based routes (NVQ Levels 2 and 3 or equivalent). Refer to Nutbrown 2012 and <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-qualifications-achieved-in-england/early-years-qualifications-achieved-in-england#background> for further clarification.

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