



Reflecting on the place of dialogue and the nature of adult motivations within early childhood research



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Abstract

Book review: Albon, D. & Rosen, R. (2014) Negotiating Adult - Child Relationships in Early Childhood Research, London: Routledge.

This review focuses on a number of themes highlighted within the book. Firstly, it discusses the authors' suggestion that Bakhtin can assist researchers in addressing entrenched, authoritative assumptions in an attempt to gain fresh perspectives. It moves on to consider the authors' view on how researchers might valuably reframe common research activities, in order that research with young children reflects the dialogic nature of research relationships.

Keywords

Bakhtin, relationships, dialogue, carnivalesque

Laura Tallant is a PhD researcher and Associate Tutor within the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia. Her PhD research focuses on viewing young children's humour, as it occurs in a nursery environment, through a carnivalesque lens. Further, she is interested in how a Bakhtinian perspective on young children's humour might help early childhood practitioners to support young children's experiences in nursery settings more effectively, and subsequently facilitate and enhance adult/child relationships.



Negotiating Adult–Child Relationships in Early Childhood Research offers a thorough discussion of two main approaches to ethics: the neoliberal and the technician, and explores a range of, sometimes unanticipated, situations that early childhood researchers can be confronted with when developing relationships with young children. The book presents myriad reflections on adult–child research relationships and addresses a range of topical issues, some of which have been neglected in early childhood research literature to date.

This review discusses a number of features of the book, firstly addressing the way that the book attempts to unravel entrenched assumptions often held by researchers. It moves on to explore how the authors approach Bakhtinian ideas and, in doing so, approach commonplace concepts from a refreshing angle. Finally, the prospective appeal of the book is discussed, as well as how the book highlights further gaps in current early childhood research literature.

Via what the authors describe as a 'bricolage' approach that engages a variety of perspectives and theories in dialogue with one another, the book examines what research relationships look like, and problematises 'entrenched assumptions', addressing the question of how to 'be' a researcher in early childhood research. The authors address this issue provocatively, starting with practicalities and routine ethical questions that researchers ask before entering research with young children, and moving on to consider a range of less commonly considered issues. For example, they consider where relationships fit within the research process, the influence of power relations between children and researchers, and the potential ramifications of researcher intervention. The book also moves through discussions that examine, unravel and provide fresh insight into what are arguably common-place concepts within early childhood research and practice: concepts such as observation - an everyday and perhaps taken-for-granted occurrence in many early years settings; and reciprocity, a familiar idea within the UK early years sector, particularly within family work, thanks to the influence of Brazelton et al, (1975) but one that it is possible to overlook. The authors reframe observation, challenging those who observe young children to consider it as a multi-directional 'context for interactions', instead of the more mechanistic view of it as a 'method'. They remind us that children are always observing, and that children engage in 'sensing practices' (p. 95-97), demonstrating an awareness of and engagement with 'others in the world'. The notion of children demonstrating 'sensing practices' stimulates reflection on the impact of researchers', not always successful, attempts to inhabit the role of 'least educator' in research; a position Albon and Rosen suggest as an alternative to Mandell's (1991) 'least adult' because it recognises the flaws in assuming that 'children can be duped into a belief that an adult-researcher is a child' (p. 36). With regard to reciprocity, the authors of this book valuably present it as 'researching in common cause with children'. They suggest that exploring both Bakhtin's thoughts about ethics (Bakhtin, 1981) and the ideas of answerability and relational ethics, is fundamental to developing meaningful reciprocity in relationships with children, and in facilitating the appreciation of the complex and complicated practice of realising this reciprocity.

The authors' comprehensive engagement with a range of Bakhtinian dialogic research concepts brings them, potentially, to a new audience via a wide range of examples and proposals. As well as drawing on Bakhtinian theory to present fresh perspectives, the authors disentangle everyday concepts and challenge the way researchers may approach them. For example, they suggest that instead of viewing research relationships as a collection of dyadic interactions, it may be more effective to reconceptualise them as a complex network or 'web'. This simple yet powerful imagery prompts consideration of the ways that relationships are approached within research with children. It seems possible that many researchers approach relationships in a familiar dyadic manner but may experience them, unwittingly, as a network or web, resulting in a conflict between perception and experience. Further, approaches to relationships may change as a result of an initial mismatch between perception and experience. The book encourages the reader to ask whether those conducting research with young children consistently have a clear and *comprehensive* idea of the effect that the transformative nature of research and its propensity to change people, can have upon research. That research initiates change seems to be a common consideration among researchers, whether the change is intended or not, but perhaps we may be under the misconception that we have the necessary capacity to embrace a holistic view of the relational nature of our research? Conceptualising relationships as a complex web may

enable researchers to gain a more meaningful overview of how research induces change. In essence, researchers may come to understand and appreciate the complexity of the dialogue between child participants, adult participants, the children's parents/carers, those who were present but not involved in the research, the research process and ourselves, and the influence that each of these elements has on the others. Ultimately then, we might consider, as the authors did, how the chronotopes (Bakhtin, 1981) - or Bakhtin's theory of configurations of space and time - present within research affect the web of relationships. The book prompts the question of whether it is possible to generalise findings when myriad chronotopes exist within the field of early childhood practice and education more generally. As the authors argue, the almost tangible 'porosity' of early childhood settings presents a kind of multi-contextual 'recognisability' that suggests cross-cultural settings have commonalities, an idea which may, at least in part, facilitate generalisation.

This book may be of particular interest to researchers within and outside of early childhood whose studies have adopted a dialogic methodology and have operationalised a range of concepts to analyse data. It may also be significant for those interested in the place of Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984) within children's lives and experiences. As one such researcher, the book inspired me to reflect in myriad ways and assisted my consideration of the research process through a Bakhtinian lens. The authors address all of the Bakhtinian ideas included within the book in a clear, comprehensive and thoughtful manner. The body, particularly the grotesque body and the 'lower bodily stratum', has a significant place within the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984). The authors discuss the significance of 'bodied relationships' and children's interest in and both earnest and humorous enjoyment of the body within their research. They suggest that there is a place firstly, for considering and embracing humour when thinking about relationships in early childhood research and secondly, for unraveling our response to children's actions and humour that may make us feel uncomfortable. The notion that practitioners view early childhood settings as being necessarily rational places where young children learn to become 'civilised' is a concept that the authors revisit throughout the book. They suggest that practitioners can view children as 'pre-rational as opposed to fully developed deliberative adults' (p. 103). If practitioners do view young children as pre-rational beings in a rational space, or to use Qvortrup's term (2009) as human becomings in a place that has 'become', it makes sense that children, as 'not yet' and pre-rational beings, may be expected to enjoy humour that offends adults' rational sensibilities. Potentially, this expectation could have a detrimental effect on the research relationships that practitioner researchers, and even academic researchers coming in to settings, form with young children in research. Directly related to this, it is very positive that one of the subtitles in the book is 'Bums matter' and the sub-section goes on to discuss the place of 'bums' within one of Rachel Rosen's research experiences and how children drawing attention to this area of the body in a research context made her feel 'desperately uncomfortable' (p. 46). As the authors suggest, one of the potential reasons for this discomfort is that situations such as this can be at odds with dominant discourses that frame young children as natural, innocent and pure. As early childhood practitioners and researchers we need to engage in dialogue about dominant discourses and the things that trouble us, challenge us, and make us feel uncomfortable and uneasy. We continue to ignore these things to the detriment of our relationships with young children and the value of the experiences we can offer them, and, critically, to the detriment of appreciating the scope of what children can teach us. Bernard Donals (1998, p. 117) suggests that it is 'the transition...from laughter and the overturning of sense to recognition and ethical activity, that is implicit in Bakhtin's tract on carnival'. It is for this reason that it is important for us to consider carnival and the carnivalesque carefully in research with young children, and why a book such as this that addresses these concepts in a research context is valuable. As part of the discussion on the role of the carnivalesque in their research, the authors refer to Bakhtin's concept of 'excess of seeing' (Bakhtin, 1981). They address it through their reflections on the importance and significance of corporeality in early childhood research. They ask us to consider how

children are able to view us in ways that we could never view ourselves, and to think about how this affects the research process. Highlighted, is the idea that the position of bodies within the research space has an impact on the research, a point that I think could be particularly appreciated by readers as it seems so prevalent given children's interest in bodies, yet is often not satisfactorily addressed in research with children.

As previously mentioned, the book is presented provocatively but has the scope for wide-ranging appeal. This is due, partly, to the way the authors use their own research experiences and detailed research-journal entries to highlight and facilitate their reflections on research relationships. This candid approach, along with the skillful presentation of a range of complex theoretical and philosophical ideas, appear to make the authors' reflections particularly accessible to practitioner researchers who may not know how to address the complexities of research with young children. In addition, the authors' thoughts from the field or reflections 'on action' act as a conduit between the complex theoretical ideas highlighted and day-to-day actions and interactions within early childhood research, making the book valuable for both researchers going in to an early years setting and practitioners engaging in a more praxeological process. This can be seen particularly in Chapter Five which explores the idea of 'The Educator as Researcher'. That said, the book may not be as accessible to practitioners who are unfamiliar with academic research or, in particular, unfamiliar with researching praxis as 'a grounded and reasoned, situated and contextualised practice (Formosinho and Formosinho, 2012, p. 597). Arguably, the book does speak more directly to those who are qualified to at least degree level, seeming to assume a basic knowledge of research processes and vernacular. However, that the authors managed to write a book that speaks to both academic and practitioner researchers, I think, emphasises their skill, as I have not encountered many (if any) books on early childhood research that have been so successful in connecting with both groups. This book closes the gap created by a lack of research literature for practitioner and academic researchers to an extent, however, there is still room for work aimed at both seasoned practitioner researchers *and* practitioners who are interested in research but have little or no experience of it.

This book contributes to current debates about early childhood research in a fresh and inspiring way, and addresses a wide range of issues that may appeal to audiences beyond the early childhood field, through revitalizing perspectives. It draws expertly on the works of Bakhtin making connections that prompt deep reflection. Whilst recognizing that it is not possible for a book to be all-inclusive, the book highlights a gap in research literature on Bakhtinian concepts in research with children: concepts such as double-voiced discourse (Bakhtin, 1981), highlighted by Cohen (2011) in her research into the carnivalesque nature of children's role play. Cohen emphasizes the presence and nature children's double-voiced discourses within pretend play. As yet, however, there does not appear to be any literature concerning the place, nature and implications of double-voiced discourse in the context of research with children, and I argue this may be of interest to researchers of early childhood.

Inherent within the book is the idea that in as much as Matusov suggests education 'is always dialogic' (2009: 1), so too are research relationships. Perhaps this is not news for some but, nonetheless, I think it is an exciting idea to bring to the wider early childhood research table. Ultimately, the book left me ruminating over the place of dialogue, but more specifically, 'radical and transformative' (p. 134) dialogue in reaching meaningful responses to the question of how to 'be' in research with young children. Crucially, the book also left me thinking about the significance of the motivations that underpin educators' and researchers quest for meaningful dialogue in pedagogy and research, as it seems that capturing the essence of what drives dialogue may help us to understand and appreciate our state of being 'locked within dialogic relations' (Matusov, 2009, p. 1)

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