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Coming together : Roundtable discussion on language beyond meaning

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4f Coming together: roundtable discussion on language beyond meaning

Ruth Churchill Dower, Abigail Hackett, Andrea Lee, David B Shannon

Abstract

This chapter takes the form of a roundtable conversation with different members of the editorial team and chapter authors. The discussion is framed around the following prompt questions (which are offered to readers in chapter 1 in relation to this theme).

- How can we plan for the unpredictable?
- How can we make space for things we have not yet imagined?
- How can we value opacity and resist demanding fixed meanings and clear logics?

Finally, we reflect on key messages and recommendations for action we hope readers might take away from this section of the book.

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This roundtable discussion brought together authors of some of the case study chapters in this section (Ruth, Andrea, David) with some of the book editors (Abi, Ruth, David) to share our learnings and responses across the stories, ideas, and practices in this book section. We framed the discussion around the following prompt questions (which are offered to readers in chapter 1 in relation to this theme).

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Reflecting on the chapter abstracts – what resonated in relation to your own work? What differed from your own work?

Andrea: The quote that I picked out, from Ruth's chapter, was that language, as well as representing things, includes all the 'tears, sneers and sighs' and that it's not just the words – it includes everything that the person's doing. Therefore, it might be more productive to pay attention not to what the language means, but what it does. That just really resonated with what I was trying to get across in my chapter.

Ruth: I also picked out something similar from Andrea's chapter, around the bias in educational, clinical, and social practices towards normative or typical communication styles and behaviours. That is something that has really challenged me in my research, because it's so deeply embedded into our cultures. It's almost hard to stop ourselves expecting that kind of normative series of behaviours. I was touched by something Karen Watson, Zsuzsa Millei, and Eva Bendix Petersen (2020) wrote: "perhaps we could stop creating difference as problematic and something that needs to be silenced, changed or fixed. We could interrupt our incessant speaking of 'otherness', and instead challenge 'sameness', and with that become curious, and open to the uncertainty". I loved that because something that I find so challenging is, how do we stop becoming complicit in othering practices in the ways that we are trying to write about and work with non-normative ways of being? How do we stop putting non-normative ways into this box marked 'Other' in order to be able to work with them legitimately as part of the mainstream?

Abi: This idea of valuing and celebrating all of the ways in which young children language is something that ripples through our book. We use those words a lot, I think. It can feel hard to make that case in the face of the dominance of existing frameworks. It is interesting to see, in this book section, the power of the practice and still feel a sense of grappling for the explanatory language for why this approach is important to consider.

Andrea: Those existing frameworks are so embedded in the way that we think – both the schools and the academic side of it, but also in parents' expectations. That side of it can be quite tricky.

David: Perhaps the question comes from the wrong perspective. "Why is this as important as language?" sounds like we're trying to build an equivalency. Instead, we could say – the more-than-representational aspects of language are there anyway, whether you ignore them or attend to them.

Ruth: If there's a space made for language to be perceived otherwise, and for children's bodies to express otherwise, that space provides opportunities to see different types of potentials, to see what a body can do rather than constantly measuring the body against what it can't do. Thinking back to your chapter, David, there's a need for joy as well. There's a need for something that leaves frissons of wonderful sensations in your body, that leaves those marks of potential, because it gives a way for the deficit narratives to be contested, for us to see what children can do. When that becomes a narrative which doesn't reduce children into a particular identity, it gives us hope to reimagine children's intra-actions with the world in a more meaningful way. How do we give space for those different ways of being to become a narrative?

David: I think joy is important for the reasons that you said, but also something that came out of writing the chapter with Jess and Willow was how it made behaviour better and more conducive to learning. Thinking about joy with Spinoza and Liselott Olsson, as we do in this chapter, is about giving children more capacities, more ways to express themselves, more ways to enjoy freedom of movement. Having more capacities isn't the same thing as poor behaviour, quite the opposite actually; joy in the café space, for instance, as we describe in our chapter, seemed to improve behaviour in ways that are really valuable.

Andrea: We can also look at that through the perspective of teacher morale. Those shared senses of joy that you define, David, I found interesting. Is a calm day or a day with no big issues – is that a joyful day? For some children and some staff, it might be – it is interesting to ask, how are we defining joy?

How can we plan for the unpredictable? How can we make space for things we have not yet imagined?

Ruth: So much of what we're doing with children seems to involve denying our sensations in the world. For very young children, we place an increasing emphasis on teaching self-regulation and resilience. And yet, for many children, these sensations are becoming more and more overwhelming, more and more overpowering. For instance, for some children who might have a diagnosis of selective mutism or autism, there might be a strong focus on masking, in order for them to 'self-regulate', to be able to fit within an environment and function with language. Perhaps there is also an important need for children to deregulate or to unmask; this might involve running into a big wide space and shouting and moving. Children need this balance, just to be able to cope with all that kind of extra-linguistic stuff, that is beyond language. An over-emphasis on self-regulation, and denial of bodily sensation, I think, can be quite damaging. In terms of planning for the unpredictable, there needs to be more space for that and less pressure on regulation through language.

David: With regards to that question, I was thinking about the practicalities of the classroom. How do you run a classroom in such a way that gives that time to those children who need it but also in a safe way that enables teachers to carry on doing their job? It is not always an easy balance, but one of the things in the chapter we try and think about is that sometimes, if you know a young person well, and you can tune into their needs, it gives you an opportunity to do something for them, to meet that need. I can't run them on the playground right now. But I can let them do the hula hoop for five minutes in the corner, where they're not going to knock anybody over.

Andrea: I agree, and there can be an anxiety from teachers and from speech therapists; we are hearing these messages about the need to allow for more unpredictable behaviour, but trying to fit that into ways that we've worked years and years and years, is a real challenge. Finding that balance between this is what we feel comfortable with and how we are able to work, and what we know from this new research and new theories about children's communication. It made me think about the gap between research and academia and practice. How do we bridge that gap between researchers who are finding these new ways to think about childhood and language, and how can we actually translate that into practice?

Predictability is a good example of that – if you have many children in your class, you need some things to be predictable and you can't always go with that unpredictability.

David: I think maybe there's also a risk of creating a false dichotomy between a regulated environment and an oppressive environment. Unregulated environments can be very oppressive for some children.

Abi: Going back to Ruth's description of the movement between the regulated and the dis-regulated is helpful here. Rather than thinking of one as preferable, perhaps it is more helpful to think about regulation and dis-regulation as both being necessary, and the way the one balances the other. Two sides of the same coin, that depend on each other. That balance might look different for different children, or in different settings, and not everyone working with children will have identical practice. Where is that rhythm?

How can we value opacity, and resist demanding fixed meanings and clear logics?

David: I'm thinking about how neurodivergence is sometimes framed as the absence of the ability to understand the why-ness of other people's behaviours: for instance, some of the arguments around executive functioning and theory of mind in autism and ADHD diagnoses. Yet, as we learn from Glissant, trying to understand why anyone is doing something is always an impossible and colonial endeavour anyway. In contrast, Eunjung Kim writes that we need to get away from measuring people against humanist properties, no matter how well-meaning. Maybe it is the same here for the question of why? – rather than trying to argue that neurodivergent children are neurodivergent because they don't understand the "why" of other people's behaviour, maybe we should take that as a prompt for all of us to stop asking "why?" (since we can never know anyway).

Ruth: I totally agree. It links really nicely with Sylvia Kind's (2020) work in experimenting with arts-based methods. She tries to resist asking what a child means by what they're doing, and asks instead how she can participate in their ideas. It's really hard to do this when everything in early education at the moment seems to be focused on trying to explain why something is happening, in order to fix it or change it or progress it. Mazzei and Jackson (2007) talk about thinking about silence as presence rather than absence, so how do we welcome stillness and silence as legitimate spaces for learning and for teaching? – for

teachers as well, who feel like they need to be doing all the time. How do we find space for that silence and for that stillness where we, perhaps, don't ask why, we don't look for the meaning. We don't try to interpret and seek, but just wait to see what comes through those spaces. How much more might we be able to sense, how much more attuned might we become to the environment, from this stance? Without trying to understand why.

Andrea: We've had a real shift in practice in our team, especially working with the children with autism where we are very much following their lead and working on trying to get those moments of shared communication with them. It's not about how many words they can produce or whether they can produce a sentence, but rather, are we getting that shared joy in the interaction and the communication with the communication aid?

Ruth: Are you noticing a difference in using this approach?

Andrea: Definitely, but the challenge is measuring it and proving it. Anecdotally, various members of staff are sharing stories about that feeling that you get, where you suddenly connect with somebody.

What key messages and recommendations do we hope others take away from this book section?

David: Carrying on thinking about "why?" questions, perhaps one recommendation could be don't ask "Why do you need this?" but just simply, "What do you need?". Waiting for diagnostic labels, particularly in the face of how overstretched diagnostic services are, before giving children access to provision, is problematic, so I hope that would be a key takeaway.

Andrea: A key takeaway that I would be thinking about is going back to David's point about finding that shared joy in the classroom and what we mean by shared joy in the classroom. So, if shared joy is actually just sitting quietly with that child and that's what that child needs, we need to give value to that as a measure. That involves resisting fixed meanings and the demand to measure. It involves moving away from what is easier for clinicians and teachers to measure, and instead defining what is shared joy for that child and that member of staff, and building that into their setting.

Ruth: Often something doesn't gain validity in early education until it's considered a pedagogy or an 'authorised' way of teaching, and approaches are usually expected to show how they support learning outcomes. Improvisation, the movement and sensory expression within improvisation, can be such an effective and generative force, particularly for neurodivergent bodies. Yet it really struggles to fit into that kind of template of a formulaic pedagogy where learning needs to be measured. Supporting non-lingual ways of being without reducing them to talk, requires an improvised approach. It's about looking for those ways to connect and those sparks of vitality that are emerging between the adult and the child. Improvisation is a way of moving towards those connections with children that are incredibly valuable, that do not rely on language but are full of expression.

David: I'd love it if someone read this book and thought about how they could use these provisions that are supposed to be for the one child, and make them available for all. For instance, that you can do intensive interactions as a model of improvisation with anybody, not just the child who's got it on their IEP. It is about opening up who gets to access these tools.

Andrea: I think there's something about undoing a lot of professional guilt. There's a lot of guilt that people feel if they're sitting quietly with a child, just building that relationship. You feel guilt that you're not doing anything or not achieving a goal or not doing something that is measurable or that is moving that child on. I think there is some unlearning necessary to release people from that guilt of feeling that they should be doing more all the time. I see this a lot with families as well, feeling that it's not okay to just be sitting and enjoying the time. Sometimes they feel that they should be always educating their child. Instead, we need to consider that you can still be learning about the child whilst you're doing that. It's not wasted time. What are you learning about the child in that time?

David: One final take-home might be that, across the four of us, there are things that we disagree on, and things that are complex. That kind of mess means that sometimes there will not be a clear sense of "what you should do right now", but rather it is always going to be untidy. I think that justification for things being untidy feels like it's not very present right now in schools. There are scripts and processes and an emphasis on 'best practice' in schools right now, but what we have seen from the four of us talking is that different professionals have different ideas about what could happen or what should happen. So we need to make space to acknowledge that kind of mess more.

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