



## Attuning to Children to Identify What Matters to Them

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### Abstract

*Accessing the views of young children by closely attuning to what they mean when they are expressing their ideas and thoughts are essential to effective educational practice. Although there is evidence exploring the attitudes and thoughts of young children in relation to their educational experience, (Darbyshire et al., 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Harcourt & Einarsdóttir, 2011; Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013; Theobald et al., 2011), the topic remains under researched. Few existing studies involve young children, whose language is still developing, or explore communication methods beyond verbal communication for idea expression. Many theories address children's participation and views, through listening, yet most studies employ only oral language as a one-way form of communication. Therefore, this presentation will address alternate ways of gathering insight into the views and thoughts of children during learning. This will be presented in three parts. Firstly, we will explore the concept of attunement which can be defined as "the alignment of states of mind in moments of engagement, during which affect is communicated with facial expression, vocalisations, body gestures and eye contact" (Siegel, 1999, as cited in Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009a, p. 42). Attunement is more than simply listening to children. It is about focusing on noticing the children (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010), including directing attention to their facial expressions, actions, movements, and what they do not say. Rautio (2017) elaborates that attunement offers a method "of understanding" (p. 97), and that such understanding is often absent without it. We consider some participatory methods that educators can use to attune to children beyond the verbal, and how they express ideas including body movement, expressions, and other sensorial means, e.g., visual, tactile, within an Australia pre-school setting. Moreover, we argue that closely attuning to children requires both attentive listening, and interpretation of verbal, observable, and kinaesthetic forms of communication. Deeply attuning to young children through multiple methods can be used to develop a more nuanced understanding of young children's views. To achieve close attunement, full engagement in research conversations, i.e., "hanging out," and attentive listening proved to be valuable ways of learning about what the children wanted to share. The second part of this presentation will discuss how this close attunement enabled a deep discovery of what children thought about their educational place. Through the close attuning methods, four relationships (child-child, child-educator, child-nature, child-outdoors) were elicited, and each of these themes is explored. Finally, we conclude with a discussion around the implications of these findings for education, and especially for educators and researchers.*

**Keywords:** Place, education, attunement, children's views, children's relationships, educators.



## **Paper**

The evidence exploring the attitudes and thoughts of young children in relation to their educational experience while present, is not expansive (Darbyshire et al., 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Harcourt & Einarsdóttir, 2011; Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013; Theobald et al., 2011). In addition, only a small number of these studies involve young children (4-5years), whose language is still developing, or explore alternative methods for communicating ideas that move beyond verbal language.

Theories around children's participation centre on accessing children's views and listening to them, yet most studies only examine oral language as a one-way form of communication. A further limitation of these studies is that they rarely incorporate samples of young children during early development despite the implications for accessing the views of young children through closely attuning to what they communicate.

This paper unpacks attuning to children in three ways. Firstly, we explore the concept of attunement which is more than simply listening to children and focuses on deeply paying attention to children (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010). For example, directing awareness to a child's facial expressions, actions, movements, what they say, and importantly, what is not said. The second part of this paper considers how a close attunement to young children supported the discovery of what children thought about their educational centre. Four relationships (child-child, child-educator, child-nature, child-outdoors) emerged through the close attuning methods. Finally, we conclude with a discussion around the implications of these findings for education, and especially for educators and researchers.

## **Contextualising the project**

This study occurred in two early childhood community-based, not-for-profit preschool centres operating in the most populous state in Australia, New South Wales. The perspectives of twenty children at these centres were sought by using well-established, child-friendly data generation methods, including drawing, child photography, mapping, child-led tours, and conversations (Malone, 2008; Marr & Malone, 2007). During a series of workshops, children were offered numerous opportunities to share their experiences of being in their preschool. In addition, the adults deliberately implemented periods of time where they paid close and undivided attention to the children looking beyond the words that they spoke. The design of the study positioned children as co-researchers and knowledgeable experts within their own lives.

## **What does attunement to children mean?**

Rautio (2017) elaborates that attunement offers a method "of understanding" (p. 97), and that such understanding is often absent without it. We consider some of the participatory methods that educators can use to attune to children beyond the verbal, and how they express ideas including body movement, expressions, and other sensorial means, e.g., visual, tactile, within and Australia pre-school setting. Moreover, we argue that closely attuning to children requires both attentive listening,



and interpretation of verbal, observable, and kinaesthetic forms of communication. Deeply attuning to young children through multiple methods are recommended to develop a more nuanced understanding of young children's views. To achieve close attunement requires full engagement in research conversations, i.e., "hanging out," and attentive listening which proved to be valuable ways of learning about what the children wanted to share.

The elements of close attunement undertaken in this study enabled a deep understanding of the children's views. These might have been missed had attunement not been adopted. This approach enabled a consideration of what the children were expressing beyond the verbal by noting what children were sharing through their drawings, photographs, actions, bodies, expressions, and other sensorial means. This attunement also required noticing what the children said and what was not said, what they did and what they opted out of, why children were doing what they were doing, and how they were doing it. Through the close attuning to children, information around what was important to them was able to be analysed. Children were able to share their thoughts about their preschool experiences when they were provided with opportunity, space, and means of communicating beyond the verbal. This highlights how deep and close attunement to children's communication beyond the verbal is an important method for hearing and understanding children, especially those whose language is still developing.

### **What did we learn?**

The carefully attuning to what the children had to share with us revealed four significant relationships that were common to many of the children:

- 1) *Child-child relationships*: children's relationships with other children were found to be of most significance.
- 2) *Child-educator relationships*: children valued strong connections with their educators.
- 3) *Child-natural world*: the children spoke often about the importance of time in nature and engagement with non-humans.
- 4) *Children and the outdoors*: the children valued being outside much more than the inside space.

Understandings about these four relationships were gained through children's opportunities to communicate through multiple means and with the adult researchers closely attuning to them. We found that of greatest significance was the importance children placed on relationships with each other within the centre. However, children also valued relating to the adults and engaging with natural elements, and the outdoor spaces. Given the importance of these understandings, it is essential that those who work with young children, consider how this close attuning to what matters to children might impact educational pedagogy and teaching.

### **Implications for adults**

While a significant part of many young children's daily lives takes place in centres, the opportunities for engaging with children to pay attention to their views remains a challenge for educators (Theobald et al., 2011).



One of the key contributions of this paper is its acknowledgement and recognition of the importance of adult educators deeply and closely attuning to the views of young children by using different means of communication. Oral language as a way of communicating remains a well-used practice in educational spaces, and research with young children whose language capacities are still developing is sparse. Attunement requires more than attending to children's words and adults to deliberately seek moments of engagement.

The adoption of close attunement supports children's right to express their opinion and be heard. This can be translated as agency. When educators only engage with children through verbal means of communication, they will miss opportunities to fully engage with children. This negates children's agency and their right to be listened to and heard.

## Conclusion

A deep and close attuning to children revealed insights into four important relationships. Of most significance was the importance children placed on relationships with each other within their learning environment. Children also valued relating to the adults and engaging with natural elements and the outdoor spaces. These findings have significant implications for educators and researchers, particularly those who work in early childhood education.

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