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Ethical perplexities of researching with children in uncertain times: a dialogic approach

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ABSTRACT

In this article I compare two studies, one pre- and one post-COVID-19, to consider the ethics of researching with children, especially during uncertain times. I argue that ethics are entwined with assumptions about children, 'voice', relational dynamics and representation. To reflect upon those assumptions and their ethical implications, I draw upon three Bakhtinian dialogical principles: that the self is in its nature responsive and never fully knowable or complete; that meaning-making is a complex, dynamic, situated activity; and that finalisation is deeply unethical. I propose a dialogic approach to researching with children as an ethical orientation which respects our common humanity and agency and allows for trust, sensitivity, responsive meaning-making, openness and inarticulacy. I also consider the perplexities of achieving dialogic relationships and meaningful dialogue with children, especially at times when researcher and participants may be separated physically in space and time and when methodological compromises may be unavoidable.

Introduction

The pieces of art depicted in Figures 1 and 2 were created during two participatory research projects in which children were invited to make, draw, talk and write to explore and articulate aspects of their lives that mattered to them. The clay model was created by Arthur,[1] a 10-year-old participant in a 2015 study I conducted with children who had a parent serving in the UK armed forces. The landscape was sketched by Sam, also 10 years old, during a 2020 study of children's everyday realities of enforced home education in England during the school closures in the first 'wave' of the Covid-19 pandemic (EBI, 2020). While there were many similarities between the projects – in the children's ages, their multimodal meaning-making, the time frame, and the children's exploration of the uncertainties of their lives – there were also considerable differences, not least of which, as I explain later, was the impossibility of

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Figure 1. Arthur's apple (2015).
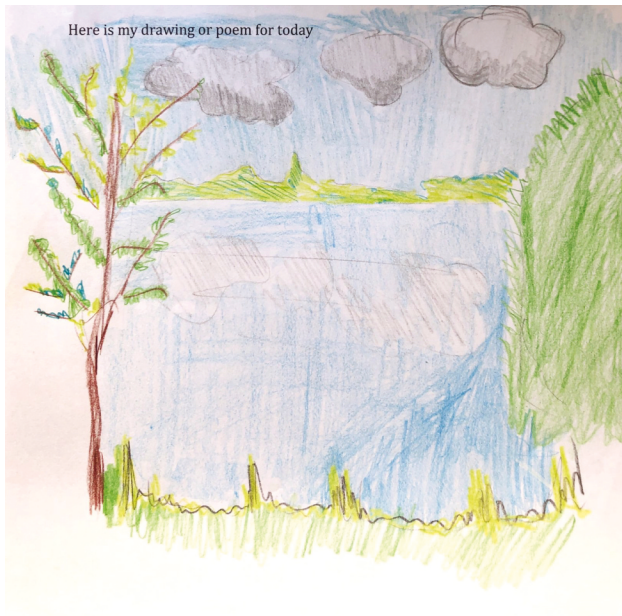
Figure 2. Sam's landscape (2020).

meeting children in person during the pandemic. My reflections on and during the two studies raised perplexing questions about the ethics of researching with children, especially in times of uncertainty. Those reflections also brought home to me, as an early career researcher, the inseparability of ethics from ontology and epistemology. This article comes out of a space of discomfort and a refusal of ethical complacency. I argue that the ethics of researching with children are deeply entwined with assumptions we make about children, adult-child relational

Figure 3. Clay apple created by Arthur (2015).
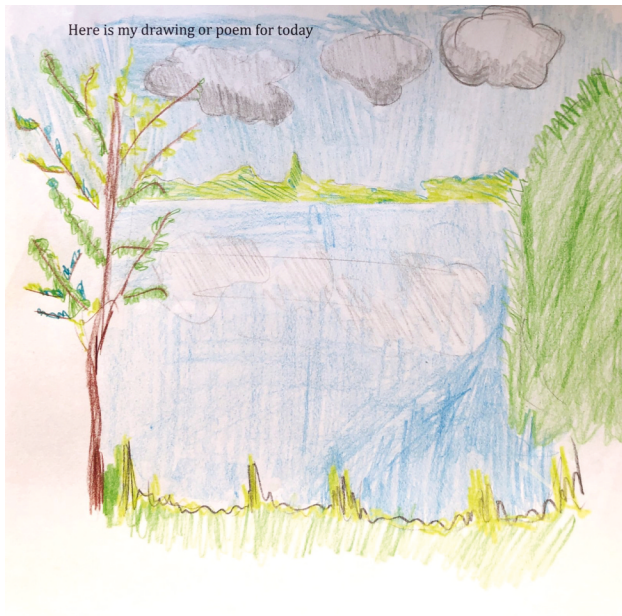
Figure 4. Landscape created by Sam (2020).

dynamics, and children's 'voice' and how, and whether, we can access it (Hammersley, 2015; Komulainen, 2007; McGarry, 2016). Bakhtinian theories of dialogism and utterance (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986) offer generative ways of thinking about these assumptions and their ethical implications. I identify and expand upon three Bakhtinian dialogical principles which I argue underpin a dialogic approach to researching with children, before putting these principles to work in my reflections on Arthur's and Sam's artworks.

The projects

Before turning to educational research, I taught for many years in a primary school with many children who – like me, and like Arthur – had a parent in the British Royal Air Force. This meant their parents were frequently away from home at short notice and for lengthy periods, and during the time I taught there, were often deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq. It also meant that the children's parents could be 'posted' regularly and this often entailed the children moving home and school, sometimes at short notice. Uncertainty and upheaval were a constant presence in the lives of the children with parents in the armed forces. During the years in which I taught in that school, I had observed the many ways in which children used and created what I thought of as cracks and crinkles in the school day – moments of transition, mild resistance, or diversions of official activity – to gently demand recognition of their everyday uncertainties, their responses to their parents' absences and the fears for their parents' safety which weighed on their minds. As a teacher I sensed that those 'affective refusals' (Truman et al., 2020) were too important to ignore. Yet, with our focus on attainment targets and curriculum delivery, there was little room for moments of reflection in the school day. Cracks and crinkles were closed up and smoothed over.

My concerns later led to the first of the two participatory literacy research projects I discuss here. This project opened up meaning-making spaces in which Arthur and eight other children with parents in the armed forces came together to attend to and draw my attention to what mattered to them and how they wished to be cared for. We met one afternoon a week for five weeks in the children's primary school, in a small room that had been made available for the project. The children knew that I was interested in what it was like to be a 'service child' in their school, but beyond this I provided little direction; I avoided direct questions and followed the children's lead, providing materials and explaining that the children could do what they liked with these. We photographed the research activity and artefacts, and audio- and sometimes video-recorded our lengthy discussions. Clay model-ling was one of several literacy practices – drawing, painting, stop-motion animation, poetry – through which the children explored and articulated what mattered to them, in remarkably sophisticated ways. Arthur created his clay apple during a moment of affective intensity (Leander & Boldt, 2013), as I discuss when I return to the two pieces of art towards the end of this article.

Unlike with Arthur, I had no face-to-face contact with Sam, although I knew his mother through a community organisation. I had mentioned that I was seeking participants for a lockdown home-learning research project, and Sam's mother had contacted me to say she and Sam wanted to take part.

This project aimed to investigate children's and parents' experiences of home education and had been designed swiftly to 'capture' the moment we all found ourselves unexpectedly living through. At that time, face-to-face research was impossible. The children were invited to create daily pages to reflect on what they did and how they felt each day, using a simple template which encouraged them to identify 'good' and 'not-so-good' things about their days. In their pages the children included sketches in many styles, digital images, photographs, emojis and writing. The parents emailed these pages to us, usually weekly, and supplemented them with their own written reflections on the week. I joined the project just as the first daily pages and diaries had started to arrive. Altogether seven families participated for varying lengths of time; in Sam's case, this was for about five weeks. From the children's images and writing, we sought insight into what they did during the school closures and what mattered to them during this time of great precarity.

These two projects had undergone the same institutional ethical procedures. These required researchers to discuss the ethics of the research in detail with a colleague, before completing and submitting for review a detailed ethics application. This dealt with matters such as power relations, the avoidance of harm, informed consent, and participants' right to withdraw. In my study with Arthur and his peers, I held the 'ethical conversation' with my Masters supervisor. Thinking beyond the 'illusion' of procedural ethics (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007, p. 316), and recognising that ethics are situated, enacted and negotiated moment by moment in interactions between researcher and participant (Ellis, 2007; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), we discussed the values that would underpin all aspects of the research, and how these values might be challenged and enacted in practice. For the pandemic home-learning project, the ethical conversation had taken place before I joined the project, but I had seen the commitments made, which took into account the unusual pressures and conditions of participating in research during a global pandemic and national lockdown.

Ethical perplexities

During both projects, I was constantly alert to ethical issues and especially sensitive to the wellbeing of the participants and to matters of interpretation and representation. I resisted the notion that 'giving children a voice' is in itself a moral endeavour (e.g. Lundy, 2007) or empowers children (e.g. Alminde & Warming, 2020; Kellett, 2011; Warming, 2011). Yet as I was analysing the children's daily pages during the Covid-19 pandemic, the distance from my participants and the lack of dialogue presented me with particular challenges. In the 2015 project, I had been physically with the participants in space and time; I had shared and witnessed their making and

sense-making, their gestures, movements, talk and objects, their verbal and physical responses to one another and myself; the entire concrete situation of 'speech communion' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 84) in which meaning is sparked. In the project during the pandemic, however, I simply received completed daily pages from a group of children, most of whom I never met, and who had no contact with one another. I also had no opportunity to respond to the children; our communication might be described as monologic and unidirectional. How, then, to interpret these diaries as they arrived in my inbox?

This analytical struggle was, of course, also an ethical one. As a researcher I was conscious that being in control of any narratives emerging from the research projects placed me in a position of immense responsibility. I found myself perplexed by questions about analysis, representation, voice, relationships and consent, and, indeed, about researching with children *per se*, but especially when researcher and participants cannot share the same physical space and time. It is these qualms and questions I explore in this article. I consider whether it is possible for researchers to make the methodological compromises that may be required in times such as a pandemic without also compromising their ethical stance. What are our ethical responsibilities to children as research participants, and especially in times when the everyday feels unusually precarious and unpredictable? To what extent can we consider artefacts such as the clay model and the landscape to capture, carry or represent children's 'voice'? I consider the ethics of analysing and interpreting children's visual and spoken utterances: how do we avoid the risks of unintentionally imposing adult perspectives, of misinterpretation, or even exploitation?

I make the case for a dialogic approach, not as an easy solution to such perplexities, but as an ethical orientation to researching with children that admits and works with uncertainty rather than relying upon a forced and untenable notion of certainty. A dialogic approach is premised upon an attitude of epistemic humility: an alertness to the fragile contingencies of our claims to knowledge and the need to conduct inquiry accordingly (Kidd, 2015, 2016a). Dialogical research (Frank, 2005) with children is a methodology of strategic uncertainty which destabilises the idea of a researcher who gathers and represents children's 'authentic' views – and thereby risks both fixing and diminishing meanings. A dialogic approach rests on creating space for relationships which respect our common humanity and agency and allow for trust, responsive meaning-making, openness and inarticulacy. Underpinned by an understanding of meaning-making as embodied, material and immaterial (Burnett, 2015; Burnett et al., 2014), this orientation to research shifts emphasis away from the idea of children using literacy practices to tell researchers *about* their lives, and towards children's and researchers' lived literacy practices as dialogic encounters, 'thinking-

feeling moments' (Ehret, 2018, p. 56), of mutual response and meaning-making. I think of artworks such as Arthur's and Sam's as multimodal utterances, which tell, among other things, of that dialogic encounter in time and space, a moment of interwoven feelings, thoughts, intentions, talk, gestures, materials and objects.

In what follows, I turn to the work of Bakhtin, not to deliver a comprehensive account of Bakhtinian thinking, but to draw out three dialogical principles which I suggest underpin this orientation to research. I then put these principles to work. Returning to the two artworks, I consider them through the lens of the ontological-epistemological-ethical positions I have outlined. I unpick some of the ethical complexities I became aware of during the two projects, seeking to address the perplexing question: can we achieve genuinely ethical dialogic relationships and dialogue in research with children, especially when we cannot physically share a space and a time?

Three dialogical principles

A dialogic approach to research rests firstly upon the ontological principle that deep within us is 'not the Id but the other' (Todorov, 1984, p. 33). In other words, Bakhtin rejects the notion that we possess an unchanging, essential inner self that we can come to know if we dig deeply enough. Instead, he argues, we form our sense of self dialogically – through our responses to others and our surroundings and our perception of their responses to us. Our sense of self is, then, fundamentally relational. Instead of being complete and authentic individuals, discrete from our surroundings, we are always in a state of becoming, in dialogue with an ever-changing social and material reality of which we are part. These ideas lead us to be cautious about notions of an autonomous, self-knowing individual, and to attend instead to the very powerful ways in which our surroundings shape our lives and our sense of who we are. The second principle is that what gives any utterance meaning – and by utterance I mean any act of meaning-making, whether through words, gesture, or, as in the examples above, image or artefact – is its emergence within a 'particular, given situation – orientation in the dynamic process of becoming and not "orientation" in some inert state' (Vološinov, 1973, p. 69). This stance leads us to recognise that research knowledge is emergent, relational and a product of fluid, situated activity – the spaces, relationships, discursive practices and material in and through which the research takes place. The third key principle is a refusal to have the last say about someone: the recognition that people always have the 'capacity to outgrow, as it were, from within and to render untrue any externalizing and finalizing definition of them' (Bakhtin, 1984, p.59; see also Truman et al., 2020). For research with

children, these three principles have important ethical implications. I expand upon each principle in turn in what follows.

'Not the Id but the other'

> The importance of struggling with another's discourse, its influence in the history of an individual's coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous. One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 348)

Bakhtin's work offers an alternative to two dominant but conflicting notions of childhood that understand children either as autonomous, self-knowing, rational subjects, with a singular 'voice', or as adults-in-the-making, excluded from dialogue about important matters until they reach the state of completion that adulthood brings (Lee, 2001). Dialogism turns the debate about children's maturity and competence on its head, calling into question the very idea of a rational, self-knowing individual. In a dialogic framing, from the very first moments of life, we are all – adults and children alike – engaged in the inescapable task of responding to and making sense of the world of which we are a part (Holquist, 2002), and the part of the world that is available to us.

For an infant, that world consists of inchoate stimuli: sounds, feelings, smells and so on. Later, children gain a sense of self and their place in the world through their constant 'reading' of visual symbols, artefacts and other cultural tools and signs, including gesture and movement. Even the spaces they inhabit – physically and online – and the way their time is structured offer powerful discourses about who they are, the culture they belong to and how to be a member of that culture. Children are not passive in this process, however, but actively explore who they are and who they might become (Dyson, 1997; Kuby & Vaughn, 2015). As children's horizons widen and they encounter new ways of being, they play an increasingly conscious role in authoring their sense of self, aligning themselves with certain opinions, discourses, and values, and rejecting others: 'our thought itself . . . is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 92).

From this theoretical standpoint, full autonomy, completedness and self-knowledge are illusions. This stance contrasts with the often-expressed idea that children are experts on their own lives (e.g. Flewitt et al., 2018; Kellett, 2011). Instead, it questions whether anyone, adult or child, can be an expert on their ever-changing lives. Individuals – adults and children alike – are far from cohesive, stable and independent beings, but are always in a process of becoming (Lee, 2001), shaped and reshaped in powerful and complex ways

by the world of which they are part, much of which may be beyond their individual consciousness.

While our lives are always uncertain, the global pandemic during which I write underscores the fluidity and indeterminacy of our existence. We are asked, for example, to obey ever-changing rules, which, politicians inform us, 'follow the science'. Yet viruses act in unpredictable ways, scientists disagree, and politicians have their own agenda. Contradictions and uncertainty abound. Although we may keep up with news reports or talk with family and friends elsewhere, our understanding of our realities in times of uncertainty can only ever be partial and fleeting. Our freedoms and choices are curbed; we depend on human and non-human others; our understanding of what is happening is fragmented, and we find ourselves unable to predict or control our near and distant futures. We 'feel our way', knowing neither what the next week will bring, nor how we will respond. In times like these, the predictability, stability and autonomy which seem to characterise our adult lives are revealed as relative, conditional and ephemeral.

A dialogic approach to research avoids the problematic presupposition that children necessarily have an accurate understanding of what has happened in their lives up to the present. It acknowledges that children – indeed, any participants – may be unable to define, evaluate and articulate their feelings and points of view clearly and accurately. They may not even hold an articulable position until asked to reflect upon it. This seemingly deficit notion is explained by Bakhtin's work, in which he argues that our sense of self and our worldview emerge from the to-and-fro between the self and the other or the self-*as*-other: from the 'reflection of the self in the empirical other through whom one must pass in order to reach *I-for-myself*' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 137). It is in encountering other perspectives that our own are thrown into relief and can be interrogated. Dialogic encounters with others and otherness – human or not – enable children to come to know what matters, gain purchase on their experiences and feelings (Rowsell, 2020; Vološinov, 1973), and imagine who they are and who they might become (Dyson, 1997). In this view, encountering a diversity of othernesses is essential to self-knowledge. This is not, then, a deficit view of children, but applies to adults and children alike. However, it is important to acknowledge that children are often presented with powerful right-wrong messages by those anxious to socialise them into culturally-approved behaviours. They may have had few opportunities to author their own responses to these (Holquist, 1983) through weighing them up against other perspectives. Thus, children's – and, indeed, adults' – utterances are inevitably multi-voiced, infused with the utterances, opinions and values of others to varying extents (Bakhtin, 1981; Callaghan et al., 2017; Hammersley, 2017; Maybin, 2013; Teachman et al., 2018).

It follows, then, that research with children often opens up new spaces for them to explore their sense of self – and that is a huge responsibility. As Kuby and Vaughn (2015) argue, 'research puts in motion the process of learning and new becoming (shifts in the identities and agency of students)' (page 438). This understanding requires researchers to appreciate that children may simply not know, and may need time to develop or clarify their ideas, contradict themselves, change their minds, and explore what matters to them in many different ways. Instead of asking children to respond to predefined questions, a dialogic approach is an expansive, meandering one; one which does not know its destination in advance, but instead allows children and researcher to come together to find ways of exploring what matters to them. This is a playful, 'wayfaring' attitude to research: 'an improvisatory movement that works things out as it goes along' (Ingold, 2011, p. 178).

Thus, a dialogic approach avoids the simplistic notion that research is the innocent process of gathering children's expert 'voices' and then taking what they communicate wholesale, at face value, to be used to inform policy and practice. If we claim to represent children's authentic voices, we fix – and therefore risk normalising and limiting – shifting, contradictory and contingent truths. We risk over-simplifying and confirming what we think we already know, and losing sight of 'the purpose of social enquiry [which] is to discomfit, to unsettle and question any taken-for-granted assumptions regarding social worlds and practice, including our own' (Hurdley & Dicks, 2011, p. 289). Recognising that meaning-making practices are 'always embodied, placed and deeply political' (Hackett et al., 2020, p. 4) requires us to seek nuanced understandings of the powerful forces and actions that shape children's lives, but of which the children may be entirely oblivious. Thus we need approaches which reject the notion of a singular, all-knowing voice.

The importance of context

The second principle is rooted in Bakhtin's argument that

> Expression does not inhere in the word itself. It originates at the point of contact between the word and actual reality, under the conditions of that real situation articulated by the individual utterance. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 88)

A common misconception is that communication is a single-voiced, one-way process (Reddy, 1993; Todorov, 1984); in other words, that one individual encapsulates an experience or emotion in a message (usually in words), and transmits the message intact to another, who then understands the experience or feeling. Rather, Bakhtin explains, meaning comes into existence only at the point of contact between people in a specific

communicative situation. To treat meanings 'as if they were things rather than aspects of relationships,' Wegerif (2016) argues, is an 'illusion' (page 5). What something means in any context – indeed, what can even be communicated – depends not only on the intentions of the person making the utterance, but also on 'a complex choreography' (Riessman, 2008, p. 117): the people present; the relationship between speaker (writer, artist) and audience, their histories and frames of reference; institutional expectations and the discursive practices and routines in any space; people's bodies and moods; what has already been said on the subject; the means of communication used by the participants – words, gestures, artefacts or images – and their expertise with these; even acoustics and materials are an integral part of the meaning-making process.

An attitude of epistemic humility recognises that, as we seek to understand what matters to children, it is important to pay analytical attention not simply to words, images or objects, but to the entire dialogic situation, constantly questioning why the child may have chosen to make meaning in these ways at this time and in this space, and using these means (Kuby et al., 2015). We also need to recognise that a researcher is not an innocent, transparent representative of a child's concerns. We can never share children's frames of reference or see through the eyes of a child; our own assumptions, memories, concerns and understandings are integral to the meaning-making process (Rogers et al., 2016) and we always – and inevitably – select, discard and distort as we try to make sense of what children tell us.

If we recognise the complexities and contingencies involved in communication, we must resist the alluring notion of shared subjectivity, the idea that we can access someone else's perspective, 'tune in' to children or get 'under their skins' (e.g. Glazzard, 2012; Sherbert, 2011; Warming, 2011). Rather, it is important to recognise that research participants choose how to present themselves to a particular audience – as competent, resilient, compliant or vulnerable, for example, – and that the audience's understanding is necessarily limited by their own concerns. Frank (2012) argues that 'People's stories report their reality as they need to tell it, as well as reporting what they believe their listeners are prepared to hear' (page 38). Thus researchers need to exercise reflexivity about the interpersonal dynamics in a research space and the powerful roles that adult researchers play as audiences of children's utterances. As Bakhtin (1986) explains, 'I try to act in accordance with the response I anticipate, so this anticipated response, in turn, exerts an active influence on my utterance' (page 95). There is a real risk of leading participants to say what we want to hear, especially in research with children, who are expected in schools to be adept at anticipating and displaying the complex set of behaviours and activities their teacher is looking for (MacLure et al., 2012).

A refusal to finalise

The third ethical principle that I suggest underpins a dialogic approach to research is a refusal to finalise. This is a position of humility that acknowledges that we can never have the last word about someone else, that 'As long as a person is alive he [sic] lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 59). Living out the view that 'all that is unethical begins and ends when one human being claims to determine all that another is and can be' (Frank, 2005, p. 966), dialogic research is a commitment to radical openness. This approach does not predetermine the boundaries of what is to be explored, seek consensus or seize upon simple truths and recommend action to be taken on a surface reading of data, but takes time to gradually build up a detailed and nuanced understanding of what matters to someone. A dialogic approach to research 'challenges and unsettles any finalization' (Frank, 2005, p. 969). It acknowledges that life is ambivalent, never single-voiced or static, and that people's struggles are rarely simple enough for simple solutions.

The very unpredictability of dialogic research also means that children may wish to explore difficult and painful issues and uncomfortable feelings – and a dialogic approach is one that does not shy away from difficult emotions but recognises them as integral to the process of making sense of our lives. In research with children, a refusal to finalise means never assuming that children's problems are simple, trivial, or have easy answers, but recognising that we can support children in making sense of these, a work they are already and always doing. This requires us to try to create safe, nurturing spaces in which to 'hold' difficult emotions and render them more manageable (Manchester & Bragg, 2013). Thus to research ethically with children requires reflexivity and ethical forethought. While it is impossible to predict what will occur during fieldwork, we can think through the values that underpin our integrity as researchers and that ensure we interact with participants in nurturing and respectful ways. A relational ethics 'recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work' (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). Dialogic research is an unhurried process: it takes time to build spaces of ethical encounter and relationships of mutual trust and dignity.

Research with children can also be enriched by the recognition that there is no one way of making meaning, and that different semiotic resources allow people to bring different truths into being. Kress (1997) describes multimodality as an 'absolute fact of children's semiotic practices' (p. 137). In creating the clay apple and image depicted in Figures 1 and 2, for example, the children chose, but were also led by, materials, colours and objects (Ingold, 2011); they made physical movements, decided what to

include and what to leave out, and interwove their artworks with written or verbal explanations. Sam's landscape makes meaning spatially (Mills & Comber, 2015), and captures our emotional imagination, while Arthur's sculpture has the added dimension of a tactile relationship with its maker and those who handle it or imagine themselves doing so. The children's verbal explanations add linearity, context and complexity to the meanings being made.

While multimodal methods are not a panacea for research with children (Bragg, 2011), these methods do, importantly, afford children time to think through what they are willing to share, and allow them to choose the modes of representation they use to make meaning. Children can explore, rehearse, refine or abandon ideas as they spend time thinking about and shaping artefacts and other texts, as I frequently witnessed in the project with Arthur and his peers. And by materialising thoughts and feelings through making, children gain purchase on these; as Maybin (2007) suggests, texts enable 'a kind of crystallisation of meaning, a "this is how things are" moment of reification, however fleeting, which provides some kind of held focus within children's continually ongoing processes of meaning-making' (page 524). Children quite literally make up their minds through making, and by providing them with the material means, the space, and a sensitive audience, researchers can support them in doing so.

Far from simply a matter of 'capturing' points of view, then, a dialogic approach consists of an attitude of radical openness, both towards what children explore and the modes through which they do so. By following children's lead, researchers can avoid the risk that children feel pressured into finalising and articulating something they are not ready to articulate – an ephemeral thought, perhaps, or an indefinable emotion. A dialogic approach requires tentative meaning-making and careful analysis of children's utterances over time, rather than seeking swift conclusions. It welcomes the coexistence of contradictions and complexities and refuses to reduce these to soundbites.

Returning to the projects

In the first part of this article, I have outlined and discussed the three core principles which, I suggest, underpin a dialogic approach to researching with children: the ontological position that humans are constantly in a state of becoming, in dialogic relationship with the world of which they are part; the epistemological position that the entire dialogic situation, not just the 'voice', is constitutive of meaning; and the ethical position that refuses finalisation. I now return to Arthur's and Sam's artworks. For each piece, I first describe the context of its making. I then put the three dialogical principles to work, as I discuss the ways in which

a dialogic approach takes us far beyond a surface reading of data and allows us to attend to the richness, nuances and complexities of children's lives, especially in times of precarity. I also raise perplexing questions about whether it is possible for researchers to make the methodological compromises that may be required in times of uncertainty without also compromising their ethical stance.

Arthur's apple

One afternoon, Arthur arrived late to the research group. He had been questioned by his class teacher about an incident during the lunch hour, and he looked flushed and upset. I sensed that Arthur did not want to talk about what had happened, and did not ask. I wanted him to feel cared-for and in control of what he said and did in this space; he could simply be there without saying or producing anything if he wanted. The other children in the group had been making clay models – hearts, aeroplanes, iPads, suitcases – and using them to explore and describe their emotional responses to their parents' absences, with their usual mixture of poignant comments, relaxed chat and mischievous banter. Observing their activity, but without joining in their conversation, Arthur took a lump of clay and shaped it silently into the apple (Figure 3). He then took a sculpting tool, stabbed the apple repeatedly and peeled away a thin section, before asking me if he could incorporate a plastic knife in his model. He struck the knife fiercely into the apple and left it there. He then began to explain it:

> So, the apple represents life, normal life, and the little holes are where it's being eaten away at by the little things that get to it and it's been eaten away at so much it can't cope and it has to become a different apple to be able to live properly, and in doing that it's just become a lifeless apple that doesn't know what to do. It gets a new skin.

At this point Arthur became tearful and after a short while resumed:

> It's because my dad hadn't really ever had to go away much, and then he suddenly had to go away for six months. I just didn't know what to do. Just broke down. There was no one to talk to about it. I just kept it in. (from transcript, 2015)

A 'thin' reading (Carnevale, 2020; Spyrou, 2016) of this artwork – one which ignores its dialogicality and takes it in isolation and at face value – could portray Arthur as a damaged or troubled child, a victim of his service family life. If we try to 'interpret backward' (Leander & Boldt, 2013, p. 33) from the apple as a text-object, we might conclude that Arthur lacks the resilience which many claim characterises children from armed forces families (Clifton, 2007; McCullouch & Hall, 2016) – or is even expected of them – and that perhaps he needs some sort of intervention programme. Arthur's distress is certainly made manifest in the cruel jabbing of the holes and the

striking of the knife into the apple, and in his words 'eaten away at', 'can't cope', 'just broke down'.

However, as Mazzei and Jackson (2012) argue, 'in a refusal to let voices speak for themselves, a more nuanced, complicated, and productive story may be told' (page 746). A nonrepresentational, dialogic reading which attends to the concrete event of the making of the apple, within the context of the entire project, allows for more complex stories. Integral to the meaning made in the moment, for example, were Arthur's mood following the lunchtime incident in the classroom, and his need, perhaps, to recover his dignity and gain a sense of solidarity from people he trusted to be sympathetic. Also woven within this dialogic encounter were the intimate space, Arthur's observation of the others exploring their emotional responses to their parents' absences, the availability and properties of the clay and the plastic knife, the tempo of the afternoon, and the interpretations of his model and words by the rest of us. Ingold (2011) makes the point that the role of an artist is

> not to give effect to a preconceived idea, novel or not, but to join with and follow the forces and flows of material that bring the form of the work into being. The work invites the viewer to join the artist as a fellow traveller, to look with it as it unfolds in the world. (page 216)

It is possible that Arthur had entered the room with no clear idea of what he wanted to talk about, but all these factors together opened up a space in which he could materialise his feelings of vulnerability, both about the incident in school and about his father's lengthy absence.

Over the weeks of the project, Arthur's images, gestures and words told complex and nuanced stories, not only of his struggles with his father's absence and the lack of certainty about his father's return dates, but also of the ways in which he coped, which included using opportunities such as the research project to seek support and actively care for himself. Taken in the context of the entire project, with all the micro-level interactions and verbal, gestural and material utterances over five weeks, the apple might tell of a profoundly thoughtful child who, by allowing himself on occasion to show vulnerability in the research group, used it as a space of nurturing relationships, a forum in which he could make sense of the multi-layered challenges and painful emotions he sometimes experienced in his everyday life. Instead of creating a finalising account of a child either possessing or lacking in resilience, a dialogic approach to research allowed us to attend both to the ways in which Arthur's life was profoundly affected by geopolitical events and decisions taken by remote others, and to Arthur's sophisticated ways of managing those challenges. Focusing on the storying, not just the story (Riessman, 1993), also allowed for a recognition that, while Arthur chose to portray his reality in one way on that occasion, he might choose to do so

very differently in another space and time. Our research also suggested a need for carefully created dialogic spaces in which children like Arthur could be supported to make sense of their lives of uncertainty.

Sam's landscape

Sam's landscape (Figure 4) was created around 6 weeks into the UK school closures in spring and summer 2020. He had labelled his image with the words 'went for a walk' and 'it was muddy'. The landscape, with its beautifully-observed shading of clouds and their reflections and the framing of a view with two trees, suggests an idyllic summer day, troubled only by a bit of mud, an interpretation supported by the soft colours created through the choice of coloured pencils. Further context was provided by Katy, Sam's mother, in her diary entry for that day, which noted that 'Sam was not in the mood for schoolwork so we went for a long walk round the lake in the afternoon', suggesting a relaxed attitude to schoolwork.

Unlike the earlier project, during the school closures it was impossible to meet the children face to face, and this brought into relief the centrality of the entire dialogic encounter to my understanding of Sam's realities. It was impossible for me to bring Sam's images into dialogue with the concrete situation of their making, with all the embodied activity, gestures and facial expressions, talking and interactions, as well as the other dynamics such as space and time that I was able to bring into my interpretation of Arthur's artwork. My entire knowledge of Sam was based on his and Katy's daily pages. This meant relying more heavily on the individual drawings and words as carriers of meaning. A thin reading of Sam's landscape and the other images suggests a carefree experience of home schooling during the lockdown. But I was left with questions I could not easily dismiss. Did Sam choose the coloured pencils to create the gentle mood of the image, or were they all he had available? What were Sam's intentions with this image – how did he want it read, and how could I honour those intentions? How was Sam responding to the research project itself?

Even in this situation, however, a certain dialogic reading was made possible by the time frame of the project and the inclusion of parents' diaries. Bringing Sam's image into dialogue with his mother's diary and the other images he created over five weeks may deepen the insights gained and tell a more nuanced story. That lockdown life was less rosy than Sam's image might suggest is intimated in his mother Katy's diaries, in which she reflected on her anxiety about Sam's emotional wellbeing. Sam was soon to move from primary to secondary school, and Katy recounted his distress at missing out on the usual transition activities, his worries about the coming move, and his fears that he might be 'weird' and unable to make friends. None of these concerns were evident in Sam's daily pages, and this was

another salient reminder of the centrality of context and audience to mean-ing-making. It appeared that, unlike Arthur, Sam did not feel the project offered a space in which to explore his emotional responses to his everyday realities.

The other images Sam created during the project were simple stick-figure drawings depicting everyday activities such as working on a laptop, playing football or videogames, or family mealtimes (see, for example, Figure 5). These are simpler and less polished-looking than the landscape. One possi-ble explanation of the notable contrast in style might be the difficulty of drawing human actors. However, Sam's mother's diary also furnishes an alternative and, I suspect, equally plausible interpretation.

In her early diary entries Katy reflected frequently on her struggles with home-schooling Sam. She described her desire to 'get him to be creative' and her feelings of inadequacy as she compared Sam's activity with 'all of the creative, lovely things other people's kids are doing'. She recounted 'getting mad' with Sam for poor quality work, 'nagging him to work', and her anxiety that he should not fall behind his peers. From her preoccupation with these concerns, I suspected that Katy may sometimes have been using the daily pages to encourage Sam's creativity, asking him to create a piece of 'proper' art for his daily page or repurposing home-schooling art tasks as his contribution to the project. This interpretation is supported by Katy's apologetic emails for Sam's weekly 'efforts'.

That Katy may have been directing his contributions raises questions about how to interpret Sam's images. Whose stories were they voicing, Sam's or Katy's? And unlike Arthur's clay apple, which had a clearer sense of audience, the intended audience for Sam's landscape was ambiguous – was it himself, his mother or the researchers? Similarly, its purpose was not entirely clear. Did Sam intend it to communicate something about his life in
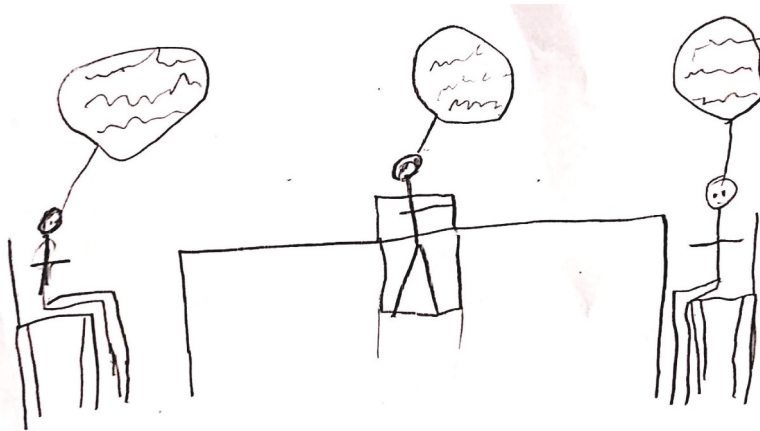

Figure 5. Sketch created by Sam (2020).

lockdown? Or was he seeking merely to satisfy his mother or class teacher? Was it a response to the beauty of his surroundings? Or a mixture of these things? Without the opportunity to enter into dialogue with Sam about his art, such questions are unanswerable. Some might suggest that Sam's stick figures were his more 'authentic' voice, while others might consider the entire dataset to be contaminated, no longer Sam's pure voice and therefore problematic (Pyer & Campbell, 2013) or even unusable. I have discussed, however, how the notions of authenticity and voice are problematic in themselves. No one's point of view is ever entirely their own, and no one's voice is ever singular or separable from the dynamics of the situation in which it comes to life. Thus the tensions about authorship and purpose that I have described are integral to the meanings of Sam's image. A dialogic interpretation might, then, tell a complex story of a mother and a child feeling their way in a time of great uncertainty and emotional strain, trying to navigate and negotiate their changed roles and relationships as teacher and pupil, and struggling with normative expectations of what 'good art' or 'being creative' should look like and what 'good' students or teachers (or even good research participants) do.

The tensions I have described also made me uneasy about the extent to which Sam was consenting independently to the research project and whether he felt he could withdraw should he wish to. Did his stick figures perhaps tell of resistance to an imposed chore, I wondered. In a face-face project, while there is always a danger of indirect coercion, matters of consent can be part of the dialogue with children, negotiated at the outset and renegotiated from moment to moment. When Arthur started crying, for example, while explaining about his clay apple, I paused the recording and asked if he would prefer to stop. He said he wanted to continue, but for some time was unable to speak. We sat together quietly for a while, before Arthur started speaking again, drawing an explicit link between the clay model and his father's absences. Thus in those moments consent was negotiated. In a project in which researchers have only indirect contact with children via parents, however, consent and the right to withdraw are even thornier matters. I had no way of sensing from Sam's embodied reactions how willingly he was involved in the project, in the same way that I had been able to with Arthur, and that troubled me.

Importantly, by asking Arthur if he wanted to stop when he became distressed, I was also able to tacitly show that I valued Arthur's dignity and wellbeing more than the continuation of the research. I was able to acknowledge and honour his feelings and show the solidarity I sensed he needed after the lunchtime conflict. My judgment on that occasion relied on picking up cues from Arthur's embodied reactions – his tone of voice, flushed skin, welling up of tears. In a project, however, in which researcher and participant are in different times and spaces, there may be no opportunity for the

kind of caring, mutual sensitivity, the vigilant, moment-by-moment tem-
perature-taking that is central to reflexive and ethical research.

Conclusion

In this article I draw on Bakhtinian dialogical principles to make the case for
a dialogic approach as an ethical response to the challenges of researching
with children, especially in uncertain times. Such an approach understands
research activity not as transmission of known information about things
external to us, but rather as a bringing-to-being of knowledge in a dynamic
encounter between people whose lives are in constant motion and shaped by
the ever-changing world of which they are part. Each research encounter is
a unique and complex dialogic event, configured by an unrepeatable inter-
weaving of affect, bodies, materials, discourses, objects, spaces and time. As
a stance of epistemic humility (Kidd, 2016b, 2016a), dialogism invites us to
recognise that truths are shifting, contingent and often inarticulable. In
research we may gain an important sense of how people feel their way
through the uncertainties of life, and what matters to them at one moment –
but to seek knowledge of some assumed stable reality or authentic inner self
is a futile endeavour.

From this point of view, participatory research with children may be less
a matter of capturing their experiences and opinions, and more about
opening up spaces in which children can be supported to explore and take
up positions on what matters to them. Within such spaces of becoming,
children develop a sense of who they are and would like to be. And when
a child's sense of self is at stake, researchers must tread very lightly. While
these are tasks with which children (and indeed adults) are already and
always engaging, it is important to remember that research can open up
hitherto unexplored spaces, particularly for younger children, who may be
unaccustomed to questioning discourses presented to them by the powerful
adults in their lives. Instead they may be expert at ventriloquating (Vågan,
2011) authoritative voices or anticipating the 'correct' answers a researcher
appears to seek, risking unwittingly claiming a reality or position that they
may never have even reflected upon. We must also acknowledge our con-
siderable role in making meaning, which includes recognising that our
interpretation is fuelled by our own histories, interests and assumptions.

We have an ethical imperative, then, to resist the temptation to create
finalising accounts or seek shortcuts to knowledge and one-size-fits-all
solutions. Otherwise, we risk advocating for policies and practices that rest
on shaky ground – and this is clearly unethical. A dialogic approach to
researching entails a commitment to openness and meandering. In dialogic
research, nothing is irrelevant: as researchers we need to pay analytical
attention not only to what is said or created, but to the entire

communicative situation in all its complexity. And by following children's lead, both in what they explore and in the literacy practices they choose to take up, we may hope to gain rich insight into how they understand themselves and their position in the world, and how they respond to the forces that shape their lives in powerful ways.

The unpredictability of researching with children requires creating spaces for dialogic relationships, underpinned by a relational ethics; spaces which have the capacity to 'hold' difficult emotions; caring spaces which recognise our common humanity, place participants' dignity and well-being at the heart of what we do, and allow for trust, responsive meaning-making and inarticulacy. This raises tricky questions, then, about researchers' care for participants when they are physically in different times and spaces. Many children's lives are extremely precarious and the spaces in which they live may be dangerous and frightening. The compromises we may need to make in times such as the global pandemic may leave us with no option but to postpone the research. Yet if we only conduct research with children in comfortable situations (and how – and who – are we to judge?), may we not be automatically excluding the very children whose concerns we most need to understand? These are unsettling questions, but ones we must grapple with as we weigh up potential harm and benefits and consider how we can abide by our values in researching with children during uncertain times.

By reflecting on Arthur's and Sam's artefacts, I have illustrated both the potential richness of research underpinned by dialogical principles and the perplexities of aspiring to achieve genuine dialogic relationships and dialogue with children when we cannot share a physical space and a time. It will come as no surprise that I offer no ready answer beyond the imperative for researchers to engage in honest, reflexive, critical – and uncomfortable – ethical dialogue. We must examine not only our methods, but also our beliefs, values and the compromises we are prepared to make, or not, if we are to conduct research ethically with children in uncertain times.

Note

1. Participants' names in this paper are pseudonyms.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Claire Lee taught in secondary and primary schools in the UK before completing an ESRC-funded PhD at the School of Education, University of Bristol in 2020. She is now an Early Career Research Fellow at Oxford Brookes University. Her interests include understanding how children develop a sense of self in educational settings, as well as matters of teaching and learning, children's literacies, power, and classroom relationships. She uses art-based and participatory ethnographic methods in her research, which is committed to creating spaces for dialogue with children.

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