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Article abstract

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Seeing the Rock: Expanding One's Vision in Community with Preschool Knowers[1]

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This paper takes a philosophically informed approach to what it means to make sense of the world. Specifically, it asks how understanding might be enhanced when we listen to young children who are labelled with disabilities. To address this question, I describe a lesson I taught as a guest teacher in which my understanding of both a rock and an activity, descriptive inquiry, were challenged and expanded through the participation of a child identified with a significant language-based disability. To explore this event and its implications for what it means to teach and know, I juxtapose Jacques Derrida, Miranda Fricker, and Jacques Rancière with each other and with my descriptions of the event.

> To be considered fully human requires acceptance into relationships in which the experiences that form our individuality are recognized as communally valuable. (Kliewer, 1998, p. 5)

> Juan was teaching me once again a lesson that I seem to have to relearn each year: When given the opportunity, listen to the children. They will show you what they know and how they learn best, and often that way is not the teacher's way. (Gallas, 1991, p. 132)

I begin with an event in which I attempted to build understanding and community with preschoolers through a process for attending closely – the descriptive review (Himley & Carini, 2000) of an object. By way of background, I primarily teach literacy methods with a focus on children aged zero through eight years old. Previously, I was an elementary school teacher, working in first and second grade, and then a support teacher for children who were struggling in a variety of ways in the classroom (see Furman, 2016, and Furman & Traugh, 2021, for more on this work). In the focal event of this paper, I had been invited into the classroom to demonstrate what I was calling a nature-based literacy lesson: a descriptive review of an object, in this case a rock. I had done a similar version of this activity many times with school-age children and adults but had minimal experience teaching preschoolers, and I was eager to expand my repertoire. I had briefly met with the teacher beforehand to discuss the lesson and then spent about ten minutes in the classroom observing before teaching that day. During those ten minutes, one child immediately caught my eye – Jamie. She was the object of focus for other adults, too – currently working with a special educator a few hours a week on pragmatic development. In the short time I was in the classroom, the child went to play a game and was trailed by the special educator, who then joined her at the game, modelling "my turn," and pointing to herself, and then "Jamie's turn" and pointing to the child.

[1] In gratitude to the participants of this special issue for your feedback, the editors who most certainly made this paper better, and Cecelia Traugh for teaching me the processes with an eye towards always expanding them.

After going through a few daily routines such as naming the day of the week, the class was turned over to me. The children were arranged in front of me in a horseshoe shape. I was seated on the floor next to the teacher at the opening of the horseshoe. Jamie was sitting next to me with the special education teacher. After the classroom teacher introduced me to the children, I introduced the rock, saying, "This rock belongs to my son, who is your age. We'd like to learn more about it. Can you help us by sharing what you see?" I then told the children I would pass the rock around, giving everyone a chance to hold it and practice passing. After the rock had made its way unremarkably through the semicircle, I introduced the next activity. "Each one of you," I said, "will help me learn about this rock by describing it or telling me what you notice. For example, I notice that the rock is sparkly. Who would like to help me and go first with telling me what they notice about it?"

My goal for this lesson was that everyone's descriptions would focus us collaboratively around an inquiry, namely learning more about the rock. As their teacher wrote down the responses, I hoped we would reveal for the children 1) how a crystallization of perspectives leads to deeper knowledge; 2) that they, the children, were meaning-makers, capable of adding knowledge to the world through close study; and 3) how spoken language could turn into print. As I had told the teacher beforehand, I anticipated that a few children would give descriptions with precise vocabulary and that most children would follow the language of those peers. For that reason, I was hoping the first child to participate would be a confident and able describer.

What happened next pulled me up short and required a quick adjustment (Kerdeman, 2017). Judging from the enthusiastic sounds the other teachers made, it surprised them as well. Responding to my request for volunteers, Jamie quickly piped up, "Me! Me!" In full disclosure, I panicked. I had just witnessed Jamie practise "turn taking" with the special educator in what seemed to be an artificial manner, and now she was demonstrating her capacity to use that skill in an authentic way. I therefore very much wanted to give her this chance, to, in fact, position her as a leader and a knower. That said, given what seemed to be her limited speech, I was also worried that she would be unable to do the activity as it was set up and this would reinforce that she was unable to do what other children could do.

Committed to finding a way to affirm Jamie but not knowing what would happen next and bracing for disaster, I handed Jamie the rock. Instead of describing it, as prompted, Jamie held the rock tightly in her hand. Again, I felt deep panic and also an ounce of promise. I wanted everyone, including the observing student teachers, to see Jamie as capable and knowing, and I felt that my response would heavily influence how she was perceived. I needed to tread carefully.

In the opening quotation, teacher-researcher Karen Gallas (1991) writes, "When given the opportunity, listen to the children. They will show you what they know and how they learn best, and often that way is not the teacher's way" (p. 132). From years of practising descriptive inquiry, I was used to looking at actions closely, seeing capacity, and finding ways that were not my original ways. Drawing on this experience, I attempted to "listen" to Jamie's movement, and in doing so, abandoned my original script. After studying what she did, I commented, "Thank you, Jamie, you are showing us something really important. You are telling us with your hands that this rock fits in your hands. What an important way to tell us about the rock." I then urged Jamie to pass the rock, which she did.

Continuing to show me the way, which was not my way, the next child flipped the rock in his hand. Having been guided by Jamie, I now more confidently studied movement for capacity and commented, "and you are showing us you can flip it." The third child in the semicircle, who I expected to speak because she had engaged with me verbally earlier in my visit, then flicked the rock. Again, in the interest of full confession, my heart sank. Despite my intrigue with Jamie's response, part of me desperately wanted my activity to return to my original path. Before I could say anything, the child sitting next to her piped in, "And you are showing us you can flick it. Pass it to me!" He then took his turn, describing the rock as looking like sugar. So, it went around the circle with most children either repeating that the rock was sparkly or passing it, and one child saying multiple times, "I love it."

A Phenomenological Approach to Reading This Event as a Teacher-Philosopher

As a teacher educator, I am preoccupied with how one welcomes all learners, and approaches each child as a sense-maker. As a philosopher of education, I am interested in both what this means conceptually and, equally important, how this ethos is translated into practice.

Supporting this endeavour, descriptive inquiry is both a philosophy and a practice, offering an avenue for both welcoming and listening to how others make sense of the world. As described in the anecdote above, through descriptive inquiry a group of participants explore a phenomenon collectively. The exercises of exploration, referred to as "processes," were developed initially with the study of teaching in mind. Most often the phenomenon explored is a description of a child or the study of children's work (Himley & Carini, 2000). Yet, the community has expanded these methods to explore other content as well: most commonly a published text or a natural artefact. While descriptive inquiry tends to be practised by adult teachers, many practitioners have also brought the work to lessons with young children (see Strieb, 1993, for a description of this).

Though the processes vary, a commonality is that the content is always explored through description, is guided by an open-ended inquiry, and is done collectively. In studying the content, the item is passed (sometimes literally) around a circle, with each person contributing with a comment. Each perspective is, in long-term practitioner Cecelia Traugh's words, "put alongside," or juxtaposed, with others (Furman & Traugh, 2021, p.152). The purpose is not to analyze or debate in the service of a truth but instead to propose that truth is multifaceted and that each angle adds a level of nuance to understanding. Further, one seeks to better understand the item of study and the people in the community simultaneously. Put differently, as each person describes and reflects back what they know about the item from their particular lens, much is revealed about the item itself and the varying ways of perceiving of those describing the object.

Drawing on phenomenological qualitative research methods, in this paper I look at one event, finding that this particular has much to say more generally about how I engage in the world (Van Manen, 2016) as a philosopher of education committed to providing children with affirmation. Replicating the go-around (of going around the circle) process of descriptive inquiry, I analyze the classroom event with Jamie through a variety of philosophical lenses. Just as the children passed around the rock to share their impressions and expand their understanding, I pass the description of this event from philosopher to philosopher.

In doing so, my argument is multifold. First, I seek to paint a portrait of hospitality, of unconditional welcoming. Second, this unconditional welcome was enhanced by a particular way of seeing the child, Jamie, with an eye towards capacity. Third, the structures of the activity, the logos, supported my capacity to provide a welcoming environment. Fourth, I conclude that in addition to holding the space for Jamie, hearing her (or listening to her), and then affirming her participation changed the way that I and her classmates (based on their responses) saw the world.

Within this phenomenological research frame, validity is measured in as much as a conclusion helps me in my teaching. As such, in sharing how I analyzed this text philosophically, I do not come to singular conclusions but judge my responses to be effective in as much as they ultimately furthered my work with the children (Van Manen, 2016). Traugh aptly describes this approach as "reading as a teacher" (Furman & Traugh, 2021, p. 154) – taking what supports my practice from a wide variety of sources and leaving behind what does not facilitate my work. Finally, it is important to note that reading as a teacher is messy, with no philosophy perfectly mapping onto practice. As I move from thinker to thinker, I therefore highlight both the ways in which a perspective helped me to think with the event and some limitations.

Hospitality

When I was faced with a child not participating in the way I anticipated, my first goal was to offer what Jacques Derrida (1999) refers to as unconditional hospitality. In this expansive ethos of welcoming, I highlight two elements. First, in unconditional hospitality everyone is welcomed. Second, hospitality is offered even when we cannot name the person we are hosting (Derrida, 2000). In other words, contrary to normative schooling practices, welcoming is not dependent on knowing (Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009; Furman, 2019).

By "naming," Derrida (2000) goes beyond one's given name to mean identify. He writes,

> Does one give hospitality to a subject? to an identifiable subject? To a subject identifiable by name? to a legal subject? Or is hospitality *rendered*, is it *given* to the other before they are identified, even before they are (posited as or supposed to be) a subject, legal subject and subject nameable by their family name. (p. 29)

Thus, to name is to know someone's surname, their race, and their legal identity, and for hospitality to be unconditional, one must offer it prior to receiving any of this information.

Elsewhere I have argued that teachers are never able to name their students fully (Furman, 2019). By this I mean that there is always some mystery when facing another. Therefore, part of being responsive is the demand that teachers always welcome all students unconditionally. Yet, teaching without any known elements is relatively rare. By this I mean, that once a teacher has spent time with a particular age group and group of students, even though they may not be able to name anyone fully, they have a pretty good sense of the students in front of them most of the time. In such instances, the child who a teacher particularly struggles to know is more of an anomaly, though one frequently faced.

Representing an extreme form of not knowing, in this demonstration lesson, I did not know anything substantive about the children before the lesson. Aside from telling me that a few children were pretty quiet, the teacher had told me little about the class. My background knowledge was largely restricted to my reading about the age group and my own son's behaviour, since he was the same age as the children in the class. This was why I had the children practise passing the object before we started describing it and assumed that many would copy each other's description. Yet, even this background knowledge was unusually limited, as my expertise as a teacher was with older children. In fact, part of my reason for doing the lesson to begin with was to become more familiar with the age group. As such, this experience proved a litmus test of my commitment to offer unconditional hospitality, as I found myself confronting unknowing – the lack of understanding – in multiple ways.

Epistemic (in)Justice

From hospitality, I will move on to Miranda Fricker's work on naming, considering how this adds an element of nuance to what Derrida affords. As discussed, Derrida calls us to welcome without naming, an ethic that has influenced me tremendously, and which guided my commitment to incorporating Jamie's participation (Furman, 2019). Yet, as Derrida (2000) acknowledges, name we do. The complete avoidance of naming is fundamentally impossible (DiAngelo, 2018) and undesirable. In fact, as humans, we are singularly classifying creatures; naming and sorting is part of acquiring language. We rely on names to be able to think and function, even as an overreliance on them impedes the capacity for fresh thought (Arendt, 1971).

Therefore, despite my desire to welcome without knowing, the moment I came into the classroom as an experienced teacher, I began naming. While I did not know Jamie's exact diagnosis, that she was diagnosed with a significant disability was apparent to me when I first encountered her, because not only was Jamie constantly shadowed by an adult, but this adult was telling Jamie exactly what to say.

Fricker (2007) argues that preconceived notions of someone's capability as a knower can lead to listening to or disregarding that person's perspective. It can even lead to the dismissal of someone's attempts at communication as nonsensical. Fricker cites multiple examples of speech being treated as utterance based on the person's race or gender. Calling this "epistemic injustice," she argues that one's identity as a knower is compromised in these encounters. Ashley Taylor (2018) has applied this theory to disability, arguing that once someone is labelled as having an intellectual disability, their identity as a knower is often compromised. An example of such a dismissal would be to assume that because Jamie did not have fluency with expressive language, she did not understand what was being said. Another dismissal would be to assume that without this fluency, she had little to contribute to shared understanding.

As I have emphasized throughout, when reading as a teacher it is important to see how a philosophy might be helpful, as opposed to reifying any particular approach. Although naming and the accompanying assumptions are often harmful as applied to children in school (Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009; Fricker, 2007), this is not always the case. Taylor (2018) explains that sometimes knowledge about disabilities can lead to an increased effort to comprehend someone's ways of knowing. For example, there were positive elements of "naming" Jamie as having a significant language-based disability, because, as a teacher committed to different ways of knowing, when I saw Jamie silently hold the rock, I was predisposed to publicly affirm her and read her action as speech. Further, having seen Jamie working on pragmatics, when Jamie held the rock, I did not assume shyness, confusion about the activity, or defiance (all common interpretations of similar actions). Instead, having seen adults speak on Jamie's behalf, I interpreted her silence as signifying a challenge that she had with participating in my activity as constructed. Thus, "naming" that she had been labelled with a language-based disability influenced my understanding of Jamie as a knower in ways that pushed me to quickly make space for Jamie's mode of participation.

In other words, juxtaposing Fricker's discussion of the nuance of naming with Derrida's eschewal of the practice, as a teacher I read that the key is not to avoid naming altogether but to commit to the most capacious of names and prepare for constant renaming. Similarly, Dana Frantz Bentley and Mariana Souto-Manning (2019) argue that in renaming children's play as story, one is actually "claiming the label of author [for the children] and sanctioning spaces for stories," and that these are "powerful actions" (p. 30). To rename Jamie's rock holding as not only speech but also intentional and thoughtful knowing also proved to be a powerful action because it affirmed her as a knower with something to add to the community. She opened our understanding, in fact precisely, because of how she came to know the rock differently.

Hearing Speech

Yet, making sense of Jamie's speech went beyond simply recognizing her as a knower. It meant radically changing my own understanding of what it means to know. As Jacques Rancière (1999) argues for those who have been systematically left out of the conversation, such as those with significant language-based disabilities, having language heard as speech is itself an act of change.

Rancière (ibid.) defines political activity as:

> whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood a discourse what was once only heard as noise. (p. 30)

Echoing Fricker's argument, Rancière argues that in situations of inequality, one is not simply ignored, but instead speech is treated as mere utterances. As he writes, one must be mindful of "the account by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech, capable of enunciating what is just, whereas some other emission is merely perceived as a noise signaling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt" (p. 23). Faced with Jamie's action, I could have called her act an utterance and discounted the response as

simply confusion believing here was someone who did not know, who held the rock oblivious to the focus of the activity. Instead, I registered Jamie's action as speech.

Returning to the notion of unconditional welcome, assuming a logos is a commitment to considering that someone is a knower in anticipation of proof. Stephanie Alberto, Andrea Fonseca, and Sandra J. Stein (2016), the teachers and mother, respectively, of a child named Jason who did not speak, write about the challenges of determining meaning: "Unable to assess Jason's comprehension in any valid or reliable way, we agreed that the 'least dangerous assumption' was that Jason's comprehension was intact" (p. 2). Likewise, assuming a logos that supported Jamie's actions as a form of participation was the "least dangerous assumption" because it positioned Jamie among her peers as a knower.

Developmental psychologist Susan Engel (1995) argues there is value in positioning someone as a knower even when, for all intents and purposes, the meaning attributed to that person is not entirely correct. Engel retells how linguist Michael Halliday heard his two-month-old child crying the evening after receiving a vaccination, and understood the cries to be the child communicating about the shot. Engel points out that while studies have subsequently proven that an infant would not remember the shot by that point in the day, what matters, she says, is that the father assumed that the infant had something to say and listened with careful concern to hear what it was (p. 27). When adults assume intentionality with children who do not speak, Engel argues, they are laying the groundwork for communication that will eventually come. With Jamie, there were signs that she comprehended, and I was committed to treating her action as speech, regardless of whether that was her full intention. In doing so, I hoped to make the "least dangerous assumption" in the moment and also potentially pave the way for increased communication.

Finally, it is important to note that classrooms are public spaces. Regardless of Jamie's initial intention, through my providing a logos and suggesting to the class that in holding the rock as she did, Jamie was contributing to common understanding, Jamie was portrayed as a knower among her peers. In fact, she was someone worthy of emulation. Given that her peers followed her form of participation, and one child named it as speech by translating Jamie's actions, it would seem that they too saw her as someone capable of influencing what we knew of the world.

The Logos of the Event

What allowed this moment to come together as it did? What is the role of the teacher and the classroom in affirming different ways of knowing? Most of what enabled this moment to transpire was laid out long before I showed up on the scene. Jamie's peers' immediate willingness to follow her lead suggests that Jamie was a welcomed member of her class, with peers who saw her as someone worthy of emulation. Put differently, Jamie and her classmates had been prepared to participate as they did in the moment in which I showed up. What this preparation was, I do not know.

On the other hand, based on the adult's reaction, something special did occur in this moment, and I would argue that the activity itself supported hospitality. Rancière (1999) argues that for disagreement to occur, a common stage must exist in which both parties' perspectives can be rendered. Mediums and materials can provide this stage, and some stages provide more entry points than others. For example, in a story about how one child drew his way into an understanding of science, Gallas (1991) writes:

> what happened in this class could happen in any class of children. Each group brings a wide range of life experiences to school, and, though we are often initially separated by language, cultural, and racial barriers, I have learned that the creative arts, rather than labelling our differences, enable us to celebrate them. (p. 131)

In Gallas's example, a range of mediums allowed for different expressions, as did the willingness of those in her classroom community to listen to different ways of knowing as they emerged.

In my event, the shared item, the rock, and the shared expression, passing and describing, lent themselves to becoming a hospitable stage. The tangibility of this item – we could all see and touch it – gave us something that was shared to which we could tether our different perceptions. Further, because of its physicality, this item lent itself to be understood through both sight and touch. This proved essential. As a point of contrast, the activities that inspired my lesson were oral descriptions of a tree (Strieb, 1993) and children's memories of what they saw around them outside (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019). In the activities that inspired me – which I have successfully organized in similar forms – the children were not given the opportunity to hold the object when asked to describe it. If I had done that in this case, Jamie might have had more trouble finding a way to physically contribute.

The teacher's role, in this case mine, was also key. Rancière (1999) uses the word "police" to describe a "more general order that arranges that tangible reality in which bodies are distributed in community" (p. 28). I, my colleagues, and cultural expectations all served as police. For example, the teachers and I determined how bodies were literally distributed: seated in a horseshoe, gathered around the teaching adult. We determined the format of participation: each child would speak at a designated time. I then set ground rules: that each child was expected to wait to speak, and to speak during their turn. We (and here more specifically, I) determined what counted as participation.

The structure of my activity, relying heavily on verbal participation, created a relatively narrow field in which the children might express themselves as knowers and contribute to our shared understanding of the rock. When Jamie entered into the activity nonverbally, I was faced with a question: Do I persist in what I was already doing and police her participation by trying to modify her interaction to conform to the predetermined plan, or do I make a change to recognize Jamie's participation? In a culture in which a teacher's recognition dictates what is seen and heard in the classroom, how one responds as a teacher has implications for what is recognized and what is dismissed. When Jamie held the rock, many eyes (child and adult) turned to me to see how I might "police" this event.

Put differently, Taylor (2018) writes that the perception of one's epistemic "capability is highly dependent on social recognition and institutional structures" (p. 5). And unfortunately, more often than not, students like Jamie are positioned as not having much to offer (Kliewer, et al., 2004; Taylor, 2018). Therefore, while Jamie's action literally stopped the flow of participation, the manner in which I policed this response influenced whether what she did was treated as knowledge-producing "speech" or disregarded as confused utterance.

Knowing and Teaching Differently

Taylor (2018) explains that work on epistemic injustice explores "how marginalized social groups – in particular, women and people of colour – are systematically excluded from shaping social meanings and generating knowledge about social institutions" (p. 4). Once someone has been dismissed as a knower, their capacity to influence knowledge construction is compromised. Taylor similarly reclaims those labelled with significant disabilities as key citizens of "knowledge making" (ibid., p.8).

Similarly, Rancière writes: "politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part by those who have no part" (1999, p. 11). As a young child with a significant language-based disability, Jamie was part of two communities often excluded from having a part. Through her participation, she "interrupted" a highly verbal activity created by an adult. In doing so, Jamie exercised epistemic agency in our research on the rock – changing how I, her peers, and her teachers saw the object in our view. Writing of the way in which a child's story changed her, Bentley comments, "I remember this story, too. Susan taught us all the correct way to twist and pull an apple when picking it. To this day, I think of her every time I pick an apple" (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019, p. 136). Jamie changed how I perceived small rocks, as I will forever now consider how a rock feels in the palm of the hand when describing it.

In responding as she did, Jamie also changed my understanding of an activity I use constantly in my practice, the descriptive review. She pushed the boundaries I used to police by shifting what it

means to know and communicate with others. I now always consider the ways one might speak without words when doing a go-around. Responding as she did, Jamie's knowing contributed to both the group's "social meanings" and our collective "social institution." In doing so, Jamie interrupted the mode of participation I had put forward and in doing so interrupted what it means to be a knower. This, in turn, created more room in my activity and made the activity more affirming for both her and her classmates, as well as for those I would work with in the future.

In contributing to knowledge construction, Jamie acted as agent and subject. Taylor (2018) defines "epistemic agency" as "having to do with one's status as an active contributor to knowledge making rather than a mere object of study" (p. 8). In addition to new understandings, one's personhood is also at stake when one is either heard or dismissed. When Jamie shouted, "Me! Me!" and then offered us a new way of seeing the rock, she claimed her right to be heard on her own terms, not by simply replicating an adult's speech.

As noted throughout, reading as a teacher is a messy process, full of questions and lacking certitude. I therefore close with a question that continues to nag at me. As quoted by Taylor, "Hehir (2002) describes the force of normalcy rather succinctly: 'In the eyes of many educators and society, it is preferable for disabled students to do things in the same manner as nondisabled kids'" (2018, p. 10, quoting Hehir, T. [2002], "Eliminating ableism in education," *Harvard Educational Review*, *72*[1]). Jamie pushed me to change the norms of participation. Yet, while I offered alternatives for participation, in recognizing her contribution, I also returned to the norm of speech: restating her physical actions verbally. This was picked up on by Jamie's peer, who then described the object on behalf of her classmate. What does it mean that I felt the need to bring us back to spoken language? What does it mean that a highly verbal peer followed my lead and translated actions to words for her classmate? Could I have affirmed Jamie's participation in another way? What might that have looked like? How might I act in future activities? It is with these questions that I persist, going forward as both a researcher and teacher to spend more time among preschoolers in the hopes that in doing so, I will improve my capacity for welcoming all learners, and at the same time expand and shift my ways of perceiving the world.

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