

# Conversational Asymmetry and the Child's Perspective in Developmental and Educational Research

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Developmental research and educational practice involve conversations between children and adults. The conversational aspects of these situations have rarely been occasions for reflection. Discrepancies between the child's expectations and the adult's intentions can lead to misunderstanding, for example, at school or during a research interview. Communication can only succeed when the interlocutors agree about the ground rules relevant to the situation. When researchers and educators communicate with children, it is advisable that they understand the children's perspective on the interaction. In this article I argue that analysing adult-child and child-child interactions are particularly informative for shedding light on children's perspectives. Methodological aspects of interaction research are discussed. An overview of my research shows that, by clarifying the rules and conventions of the interaction, adults may help children to perform successfully. My interaction studies of pretend play and of students' discussions at school demonstrate that children reflect on the rules of interaction and make efforts to construct the communication tools they need for participating as competent partners in interactions with others.

## **Introduction**

When I started as a developmental psychologist I was fascinated by the theories of Piaget (1971) and Vygotsky (1978). I still am, but I have learnt to look at their research from a different point of view. I found Piaget's work inspiring because he succeeded in combining so many aspects of child development into one coherent theory. Moreover, I was impressed by his methodological originality and unconventionality. My training in psychology introduced me to a diversity of research, mainly experimental studies with little theoretical basis and loosely connected to each other. In Piaget, I found a theoretical depth that was a relief after so much empirical work. Vygotsky who, thanks to the late Carel van Parreren, was well known in Dutch psychology before his work

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gained international recognition, was important for me because he made it possible to connect individual development and culture and to think about children in their social contexts. I was interested in anthropology and, although there is not an abundance of child studies in anthropology (Hirschfeld, 2002), I was and am convinced that child development cannot lead to sound insights unless the cultural formation of children is considered as a major theme. At that time I saw Piaget as a rationalist theorist, for whom children were thinkers who more or less constructed their cognitive structures themselves. I considered Vygotsky to be the opposite: a theorist who took thinking and acting as the result of the transmission of cultural knowledge and skills to the child. Much of my earlier work was dedicated to finding a reconciliation between Piaget and Vygotsky and to connecting the constructivist theme of Piaget with the cultural transmission theme propounded by Vygotsky (Elbers, 1986, 1991, 1994).

Like so many colleagues (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1996; Hoppe-Graf, 1989) I started to take notes when I became a father. My observations were decisively influential on my thinking about development. I discovered that young children enter conversations with adults with expectations which are sometimes at odds with the intentions of the adult. The majority of educational and developmental research settings involves talk between children and adults, but few researchers ask whether the child's and adult's perspectives actually coincide. A discrepancy between the interlocutors' perspectives may influence, or even distort, the outcomes of research. Child studies need a "communicational turn," which allows one to view educational and research settings as conversations which demand, like every successful conversation, that certain rules and principles are considered. However, as I shall show, these rules and principles are actually violated in many settings. This neglect seriously threatens the validity of developmental observations and educational interventions.

In this contribution I wish to reflect on the child's perspective and its presence in research settings and other asymmetrical situations. In the first part of the article, I shall argue that the divergence between the adult's and the child's perspectives influences developmental studies. This leads to the second part in which I shall discuss communication and the communicative demands of institutional contexts. I shall argue that, in many research situations, these demands are not fulfilled. In the third part, I develop the implications of this argument for our understanding of children and child studies in general. This part also includes a discussion of a number of methodological considerations. To illustrate my claims, the last part of the article will present some examples of my research about children's perspectives on their interactions with others.

### **Conversational Asymmetry in Practice and Research Settings**

My interest in the interaction between adults and children began with an observation of my daughter's visit to an ophthalmologist. At that time Claire

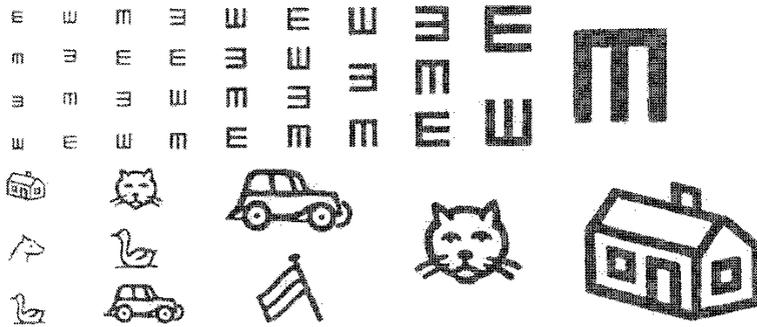


Figure 1. E-figures and pictures

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was aged 3 years 6 months and there were a number of reasons why we wanted her eyes tested. In order to test a person’s eyesight opticians usually use letters and numbers of decreasing size. Children who are not yet able to read have to say what simple pictures depict (e.g., a house, a duck, or a flag) or indicate with their hands the direction of E-figures (see Figure 1). Her younger sister Elisa accompanied Claire. Each time the optician pointed to a picture there was a long silence before Claire answered. The silences lasted so long that her sister started to give the answer before Claire had said anything, therefore, Elisa had to be taken out of the room by a friendly nurse. Even then, the pattern repeated itself: long pauses, a hesitant answer, and often an answer that was wrong. Instead of a duck, the answer was a swan and instead of a flag, a boat.

After this and several other tests, the conclusion was that Claire’s eyesight was perfectly normal. This result was not something I had expected because her performance with the picture cards had been poor. The event led me to reflect on the question of how this was possible: why did Claire find it so difficult to give the right name for what she saw on the card when she could see the pictures accurately? I concluded that the reason could be found in my daughter’s perception of the situation. She preferred a more complicated answer rather than a simple interpretation—hence “swan” instead of “duck”. Claire must have thought: it cannot be this easy, the optician’s request must require something more difficult. Her reluctance to answer had to do with her expectation that the task was much more demanding than it really was. She failed to understand that the task was very simple for somebody with good eyesight. The optician had neglected to make this clear to her.

What can we learn from this observation? Firstly, there is a discrepancy between the perspective of the optician and the perspective of the child. They enter the interaction with different expectations and the clash between these expectations explains the child’s “incompetent” behaviour. The situation is so clear to the optician that it does not occur to him to explain what is expected

of Claire. He considers his questions to be obvious and not open to different understandings.

Secondly, the child's answers are grounded in her assumptions about the objective of the conversation. Some of the rules in this situation are obviously familiar to the child, such as the rule that the adult puts the questions and the child gives the answers: the rule of the primary speaker (Hausendorf & Quasthoff, 1996). But, whereas the child thinks that the situation is for her to show how good her vocabulary is, the optician wants to administer a simple test, which does not pose a problem for most children. There is a conversational asymmetry with respect to what the interlocutors see as the aim and the nature of the interaction. The key to understanding the case is not to be found in research on cognitive development, but rather in research on communication and the way interlocutors create, or fail to create, a shared context for their interaction.

Thirdly, successful conversational performance demands that children have appropriated the rules and conventions pertinent to the relevant situation. Children have to learn how to participate effectively in various contexts. Adults can provide assistance in this process by clarifying the rules and conventions. The optician could have simplified the task for Claire by explaining the nature of the situation and the conditions for a successful performance.

This conceptualisation allows us to give alternative explanations for why children may fail in task situations—alternative explanations, that is, to the usual explanation that the child's performance shows a lack of cognitive competence. When young children have to solve a task given to them by an adult, they may sometimes fail, not because they lack the necessary intellectual skills, but because they do not recognise the rules and conventions required by the situation and presupposed by the adult. Children may have a different perspective and expect the interaction to proceed along lines that are different from that at which the adult is aiming. The asymmetry in the expectations of the interlocutors leads to misunderstandings and, on the part of the child, to failure. The adult concludes that the child is not able to solve the task, whereas the failure of the child lies in communicative, and not necessarily in cognitive, competence. Of course, this does not mean that children's lack of success in tasks can always be attributed to communicative misunderstanding. Rather, there may be a close connection between the two developmental lines of communication and cognition, but it is outside the scope of the present article to explore that issue here (see Elbers, 1991).

In the remainder of this part of the article I will apply the lessons of this observation at the optician to a practical context, the school, and to developmental or educational research settings.

Starting school is an important moment of transition in a child's life. The school is a new context for young children, for which some have been prepared better than others. Wells (1983) describes a conversation between a teacher and Rosie (aged 5 years 2 months), a student in a British classroom. Rosie, who had just started school, is shown a slide in a viewer and the teacher asks

her to answer the kind of instructional questions teachers are used to asking, referred to as “known-answer” questions. She tries to have the child give the name of the animal, which is represented on the slide, in this case, an elephant. Instead, Rosie behaves as if the conversation is between equals: she wants to talk about the human being in the picture and hands the viewer back to the teacher so that she can have a look herself. The child does not understand the teacher’s intention and does not recognise the teacher’s question as a didactic known-answer question. Wells makes it clear that Rosie’s failure to answer the teacher’s questions is not caused by a lack of language or cognitive skills, but is related to the child’s unfamiliarity with the school discourse and the specific interaction formats that are usual at school.

Jackson (1987) argues that there is a close relationship between children’s academic performance at school and their familiarity with the rules and routines of the classroom. Starting school requires the acquisition of a “social competence which allows access to the learning patterns of the classroom” (p. 74). This social competence extends into three areas: children’s familiarity with procedural and organisational routines, their use of discursive means and their appropriateness in various contexts, and in learning how to be taught and how to act in teacher-student interaction situations. Jackson also discusses the question of what happens when children come across a situation with which they are unfamiliar. The answer is that, in order to make sense of a situation, children mobilise previous understandings, which have proven useful. Children interpret unfamiliar situations in terms of formats that they have become familiar with in the past. This often leads to overgeneralisations.

A similar interpretation can be given to many educational and developmental research situations. The researcher wants to establish the child’s competencies and puts questions to the child in the expectation that the child will understand the demands of the situation. In particular, the researcher assumes that the child understands that his or her competence is being tested. The child, however, may not understand the situation in the same way as the researcher. Miscommunication then leads to the child giving answers which create a false impression of his or her competencies. This may be the case with younger children in particular, such as students in the first grades of primary school, who have had little experience with interactions involving a test of their knowledge (Elbers, 1991). They tend to interpret the situation in terms of a pattern of interaction with which they are familiar: a didactic conversation intended to teach them something.

Making the intention of the conversation explicit to children can prevent the occurrence of misunderstandings. Elbers and Kelderman (1994) gave children aged between 4 and 6 years a well-known cognitive task (Piaget’s conservation task, see Piaget & Szeminska, 1941). The task requires children to twice estimate the number of blocks in a row—first when the blocks lie in one-to-one correspondence in two lines, and later after the blocks in one of the rows have been shifted apart.

In this experiment, we made it clear to some of the children that the

intention of the researcher was to test their competence and that she was not going to help them. These children did much better than the children who were not told the intention of the researcher. What we did in the experiment was to inform children about the rules of the interaction and to explain why the researcher was asking these questions. We also made it clear to the children that the researcher would refrain from any form of assistance during the task, and that the child had to rely on his or her own skills when doing the task. The researcher told the child "I am not going to help you, because I am curious to see whether you can do the task on your own." The children who were told this performed much better than the children in a control condition in which the classical Piagetian format was used and in another experimental condition in which the children were deliberately misled by the suggestion that the researcher would help them if necessary: 49% in contrast to 16% and 19% respectively (for details, see Elbers & Kelderman, 1994).

Mulder and Vrij (1996) found similar results in an study involving memory. These researchers investigated whether explaining the rules of the interaction to children in a memory task would improve their performance. They staged an incident in the children's classroom. Afterwards the children were interviewed about the incident. The children performed best when the interviewer told them explicitly that she was not able to provide any help, since she had not been in the classroom during the incident. Moreover, in some conditions the interviewer told the children that they were free to answer "I don't know" if they could not remember. Children in this condition performed even better.

These and other experiments with similar results (e.g., Grossen & Perret-Clermont, 1994; Pratt, 1988) clearly support the idea of children's unfamiliarity with conversational rules and the effect of clarifying these rules to them. Experiments like the ones mentioned above have influenced procedures of interviewing children who are possibly victims of sexual abuse. These procedures have been standardised in recent years in The Netherlands (Commissie Seksueel Misbruik van Jeugdigen, 1994). They have resulted in instructions for interviewers such as: it has to be made clear to the child that he or she is allowed to say: "I don't know" and "I do not understand the question." Moreover, clarifying the position of the interviewer is part of the procedure, in particular the fact that the interviewer was not present during the event and is therefore not able to help the child answer questions about it (Van der Sleen, 1998).

### **Intersubjectivity and Ground Rules in Conversations Between Adult and Child**

In order to conceptualise the conversational processes between the participants in developmental and educational tasks I have borrowed from communication theory, especially Rommetveit's (1978, 1979) concept of intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity occurs when the participants in a conversation succeed in

transcending their private worlds and create a temporary common world. Intersubjectivity is a condition necessary for any successful communication and constructing and maintaining intersubjectivity is part of every communicational event. The production of an intersubjective world does not occur automatically. Communication can only succeed as the result of the efforts made by the interlocutors. They negotiate the rules pertinent to the situation, they investigate each other's expectations, they attempt to reach agreement about the relevant background knowledge, and try to establish which arguments are valid in the situation and which are not. They negotiate and make implicit agreements. Without such tacit agreements (Rommetveit calls them "contracts") communication fails or is seriously impaired.

What happens when the interlocutors do not succeed in creating intersubjectivity? The participants may not reach agreement about the conditions of the conversation because, for example, their ideas about reality are divergent (problems of intercultural communication) or because the interlocutors find different kinds of arguments valid (miscommunication, for instance in a discussion between scientists). Another possibility is that misunderstandings occur because the contract is either unclear or ambiguous: although the interlocutors think that they agree, their statements are based on assumptions that are not aligned. This was the case in the example of Claire. There was no mutual "contract" about the aims and rules of the interaction.

Rommetveit's (1978, 1979) theory assumes independent, equal partners who negotiate and make a tacit contract. However, reality encompasses differences of power and status. Interlocutors adopt various roles on the basis of these power and status differences. Examples include a job interview between an employer and an applicant, the conversation between a social worker and a client, and the consultation between a general practitioner and a patient. Therefore, I wish to extend Rommetveit's terminology to include the notion of *ground rules* for communication in an institutional context, which Edwards and Mercer (1987) describe as shared rules for interpretation and mutual understanding that largely remain implicit. Social institutions create communicative genres with specialised interaction patterns in which there is often a strict division of roles for the interlocutors. These genres have their particular ground rules. The ground rules of an institutional genre prescribe what may and may not be the subject of conversation and how the theme of the discussion is to be approached (Mäkitalo, 2002).

When young children are old enough to participate in institutional interactions, such as the transition from home to school, they are confronted with situations which are new to them and which may lead to confusion about ground rules. Research on adult-child interactions has revealed differences between spontaneous conversations between adults and children in informal situations and more formal conversations in institutional contexts. Young children perform very differently in the two contexts. They reason best in conversations with familiar people, in familiar circumstances, about familiar subjects (Elbers, 1991). The point is not so much that these persons help them

particularly, but that the partners in conversation share both the motive of the interaction and the background knowledge. When there is mutual interest and mutual understanding and when children know that they will be helped if necessary, their reasoning is often valid and adequate (Elbers, 1991; Tizard & Hughes, 1984; Wells, 1983).

A study by Hausendorf and Quasthoff (1996) makes it clear why this is the case. These authors typify adult-child interaction as taking place in an unbalanced situation. The imbalance is the consequence of the unequal conversational competencies of the interlocutors. In everyday contexts involving parents and children, the adults make themselves responsible for the success of the interaction. They apply two strategies in particular to prevent communication failure in children. Firstly, the adult adapts his or her statements to the child's developmental level: the younger or the less experienced the child, the more explicit the adult. If the adult does not act in this way, conversation will break down repeatedly or become impossible. Secondly, the adult speaks vicariously for the child when it is the child's turn to say something, but he or she cannot or does not do so. In this way the adult shows which behaviour is appropriate and desirable in the situation; he or she demonstrates how the child should or could act next time. Using these strategies, the adult creates a safe context for the child and allows the child to contribute to the conversations despite his or her immature communicative competence. The delicate interplay between the child's contributions and the adult's encouragement and assistance creates a zone of proximal development for the child. Moreover, when the adult addresses a child as a participant in a conversation, he or she shows the child that the child is able to act as a competent interlocutor. This is motivating and the child becomes more self-assured.

Conversations in institutional contexts, however, do not always offer the same opportunities for adult support. Take, for example, interviews with children in the context of an investigation of alleged sexual abuse or an oral test or examination. Here, the child has to rely on his or her own abilities and is supposed to, or is invited to, act as a competent interlocutor. Misunderstandings originating from conversational asymmetry, therefore, often have to do with the child's participation in an institutional situation which is new or unfamiliar. The child is supposed to know the interactional rules and the adult cannot or does not consider it appropriate to give the support that is normal in informal adult-child interaction.

The development of children's discursive competencies is poorly researched (Hausendorf & Quasthoff, 1996). However, this development can generally be summarised as follows. Early on we find elementary adult-child and child-child dialogues. The adult-child dialogues have the features which have been discussed above: the adult, if necessary, speaks for the child and helps the child to be a partner in the conversation. Gradually, specialised discursive genres differentiate themselves from these elementary dialogues, such as storytelling and reason by argument. When children begin to participate in contexts outside the home, they are introduced to new genres that belong to these

contexts. In the end, children learn a variety of dialogue patterns, some informal and some formal and linked to institutional contexts.

### **Researching the Child's Perspective: Methodological Considerations**

So far I have shown that conversational asymmetry may confuse the interaction between adults and children, particularly in institutional contexts where children may not be familiar with the ground rules. Rommetveit's (1978, 1979) theory suggests that it is important to study how children, in interaction with adults and with each other, contribute to the creation of intersubjectivity. This has been a central interest in my work and, in this next section, I will discuss the methodological implications of this interest.

Children are agents. They actively co-create their relationships with adults (De Winter, 1997). This view does not match up with an approach in which children are only passive objects of research. Such an approach would run the risk of ignoring the contribution children make to their own development. Therefore, research should not only be about children but also include, and give priority to, studying the child's perspective (see Mey, 2003a, 2003b). Developmental and educational research should undertake the task of reconstructing children's perspectives on the world and on social relationships and use the insights of this research for illuminating the relationships between children, researchers, and practitioners.

Talking about the child's perspective, I want to make a qualification. The aim of my research is not to just add more results to the literature on children's views of the world or children's theories of mind, however useful studies in these fields might be for our purposes. I want to know what is on children's minds rather than what is in their minds. What is occupying their attention when they are dealing with others? What do they find important and fascinating? What puzzles or confuses them? In sum, I do not just want to know their conceptions, but I also want to know what they find worthwhile and important to reflect on or to work at (what De Abreu, 2002, calls their valorisation).

Mey (2003a, 2003b) gives an overview of methods suitable for studying children's perspectives, such as interviews, observations, and group discussions. However useful these methods are, I claim that the study and analysis of concrete and real interactions are the best ways to access children's perspectives. Children's contributions to conversations and interactions make visible how they view themselves and their relationships with adults and other children. The advantage of analysing verbal interactions is that it shows not only what they know but also how they use this knowledge in their dealings with others. I argue in favour of analysing children's verbal interactions, combined with ethnographic observations. Ethnographic data are necessary for interpreting discourse and, therefore, the two approaches—interaction analysis and ethnography—have to go hand in hand (Van der Aalsvoort & Harinck, 2000).

There is no privileged context for carrying out interaction analyses. Research can include interaction between children as well as interaction between adults

and children. It can focus on case studies as well as use databases with a vast number of observations. Mostly, interaction studies will make use of a kind of recording, mostly audio- or video-recording, as a source for transcripts. The actual analysis is mostly based on the transcripts, often in combination with the audio- or video-records (cf., Jordan & Henderson, 1995).

In this research, there is also a special interest in situations which encompass more than just routine interactions, such as situations that are new to children. In unfamiliar situations, children have to create new forms of interaction and new understandings of social relationships. Situations in which there is some form of disturbance of the normal course of interaction are also relevant. These situations breach social expectation; therefore, they are the occasion for accusations, accounts, and discussions on the acceptability of behaviour. These incidents make visible what children consider normal or acceptable and what they reject or find objectionable. Data of this kind require the collection and analysis of critical incidents. However, I do not see this method as a way of quickly gathering rich data, as Angelides (2001) suggested. Critical incidents are in fact useful as sources because they reveal what is unexpected and how a breach of the normal course of action is remedied.

### **Children's Perspectives on Interaction**

I shall now illustrate my ideas with two observational studies in which I attempted to reconstruct children's perspectives on interaction. The first study was based on observations of pretend play. My children and their friends often played school and, as I was interested in the way children represent adult-child relationships, I made audio-recordings of their play. They knew that I was making these recordings, but they were so absorbed in their play that they were usually not aware that a recorder had been turned on. At the time of the recordings my children and their friends were aged between 6 and 9 years (Elbers, 1996).

These observations show a surprising fact. Although the children, in their play dialogues, represented school and teacher-student relationships, they did not enact instructional interactions. Instead, their representations of school life had the school rules as the main point of reference. In all the fragments I analysed there was a role division between a "teacher" and "students." The task of the "teacher" was clearly to lead the events in the classroom. As such, she attempted to organise classroom life and to impose discipline on the children. For instance, the "teacher" told the students to be silent because she wanted to start the lesson. The children, in their play, used two strategies for representing and enacting the rules of school. The first strategy was in playfully transgressing the rules, the second in contextualising them.

The first strategy involved the children representing interruptions in school life. They invented episodes that kept the "students" from learning. They acted out scenes in which the rules and normal practices at school were transgressed. These scenes made it possible for them to explore the consequences and

discussions following the transgressions. For instance, when the teacher wanted to start the lesson, one child told her that she was ill, or that she had to go to the bathroom. There were endless variations on this theme. Although there was no elaborate argumentative accounting, these episodes could be interpreted as ways of exploring the rules imposed by the adult world and the implications of these rules. The children playfully reflected on rules such as children have to be silent in the classroom when the teacher wants to start the lesson. In their play, they explored the conditions under which they were allowed to transgress the rules in the real classroom. In this case, the children tried to figure out what occasions could occur in which there was a reason for disobeying the teacher. Not feeling well, having to go to the bathroom, and school being finished for the day were acceptable grounds for interrupting the course of the lesson and not complying with the teacher's demand for silence.

A second strategy used by the children was to explore rules, not by transgressing them, but by making explicit that these rules were not universal, and by figuring out the circumstances in which they were valid. One example is the enacted situation in which a white bear wanted to go to school. It was made explicit by the children and their "mother" that this was not possible. The white bear was not only forbidden to go to school, but the scene also included the argument that school was for human beings, not for animals. However, there was an exception to this rule—the white bear would be allowed to go to school on Animal's Day.

I interpreted these episodes as forms of reflection-in-action, exercised by children who are not yet able to reflect on their lives in an explicit verbal way. If young children want to reflect on a situation, one way to do so is to enact that situation. In their pretend play, children borrow from their experiences as students, but their representation of school life goes further than their particular experiences. Children reflect on the rules governing classroom life and teacher-student interaction not merely by imitating these rules as they are imposed on them, but also by playfully changing them, by breaking them, or by contextualising them in various ways. In their play, they create an imaginary classroom in order to understand the rules of the real classroom.

The second observational study involved a Grade 8 classroom with 11- and 12-year-old children in a Dutch primary school (Elbers & Streefland, 2000a, 2000b). The occasion of the children's reflection on the rules of interaction was provoked by an instruction by the teacher as part of an innovative mathematics curriculum. In an otherwise traditional school setting, the teacher asked the children to work as "researchers" and "do research" in a "community of inquiry". The teacher's instruction produced a new normative context (Streeck, 1983) in which students were given some responsibility for their learning. The students were invited to make spontaneous contributions instead of responding to questions from the teacher. They had to formulate questions and argue that a particular solution was correct, instead of depending on the teacher (cf., Brown & Campione, 1994; Rogoff, 1994; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1996). The success of a community of inquiry depends on the students'

understanding of what is expected of them in the new learning situation. Normally, in the context of the traditional classroom, there is little dispute about the participants' social roles. There is no need to discuss the roles and rules because they have become routine and are neither questioned nor reflected on. However, when the teacher introduced the idea of a community of inquiry, the context of the students' work changed drastically. These new circumstances forced the participants to reflect upon their social roles and to negotiate and redefine their responsibilities. This was exactly what we saw in this observational study. Students started discussing their roles and responsibilities, the division of tasks in the classroom, their responsibilities and those of the teacher.

An example of these discussions involved the issue of collaboration itself. Children repeatedly fell into the old habit of individual problem-solving. We observed many situations in which children became aware of this and reminded each other that they should work as a group. For instance, they quarrelled about who proposed a solution first. In most instances children brought an end to this quarrelling by stating: "We are working together, it doesn't matter who found a solution." A second example concerned the role of the teacher. Once students had taken responsibility for their own learning, they did not depend so much on the approval of the teacher. However, we observed a situation in which students questioned the new rules for the classroom and told the teacher that working in the community of inquiry was not very logical. The teacher wanted them to "do research" but, the students stated, there was no purpose, since the teacher already knew the answers. The students proposed that it would make more sense if they (the students) put the questions and the teacher gave the answers.

Teacher: I shall give Marieke a hand, because she can answer this question herself.

Marieke: Oh.

Student 2: *You* should do that, Sir. (...) Sir, I thought that the idea was that you give the answer and not that she answers her own questions.

(...)

Student 4: There is no need for you to do research. We ask the questions and you give the answers.

(...)

Student 1: There is no need for you to ask, if you already know the answer.

In sum, in order to understand children's contributions to intersubjectivity I have shown that the rules of interaction are a major theme of children's attention. My observations of interaction and talk among children revealed the effort they made to become competent interlocutors. My first example was from children's play. It showed that children reflect on the rules governing their relationship with adults. A second example showed how much work children

have to do in order to appropriate ground rules that are new to them. The teacher's instruction was a simple one, but it took the students time and effort to create the roles and interactional rules for their new relationship with each other and with the teacher.

## Conclusion

Whereas developmental research and educational practice involve conversations between children and adults, the conversational aspects of these situations have rarely been occasions for reflection. It is assumed that children are able to act as competent conversational partners, for instance in a teacher-student interaction or a test situation. However, as I have demonstrated, there are often discrepancies between the expectations of the interaction by the child and the intentions of the adult. Children may be unfamiliar with the ground rules of the situation, for example, at school, in a research context, or during an educational interview. Children's failures on cognitive tasks, therefore, may sometimes be caused by their unfamiliarity with the conversational conventions and ground rules that are relevant in a particular situation. This realisation of children's difficulties with the ground rules in certain situations necessitates a communicative turn in child studies. Studying children's perspectives on interactions and their contribution to the construction of intersubjectivity in conversations is a part of this research agenda. I have attempted to show the viability and fruitfulness of this agenda by reviewing some of my studies on children's interactions.

My plea for a communicative turn in child studies implies that researchers and educators accept the centrality of conversational aspects in educational practice and research situations. We are not dealing with factors that are external to the main activity, factors that may form a hindrance and should be removed if they block the way to unveiling competence. Such a view would reduce the weight of communication to something of subordinate importance. However, communicative aspects are inherent elements of every situation. Knowledge and interventions are closely linked to discursive contexts and social practices. These practices and contexts provide the ground rules for how the interlocutors should act, speak, and reason. Studies of children's perspectives can reveal how children view their relationships with adults and with other children and how they become aware of the ground rules of interaction in various contexts.

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