Re-defining silence in unvoiced dialogues in storying-play: The sound of affects

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Abstract: This article chronicles three stories selected from a post-intentional phenomenological study conducted by the first author. The authors aim to investigate affective connections in children's silent play by addressing three research questions: (a) How do children engage in dialogue with the teacher, their peers, and the material environment without words? (b) What emotions are produced in silent play? and (c) What changes in children's affective connections occur through silence? We drew on the notion of intentionality in post-intentional phenomenology to illuminate meanings of the phenomenon for individuals about what they felt and experienced. With a focus on intentionality, we delved into the ways children meaningfully communicated with others and connected to the environment in their unspeaking moments. We also took on a posthuman notion of intra-actions to rethink silence as an inaudible yet sensible sound communicated between children and things. The prior studies showed that children's silence was a mode of expression. Through storying the silent play-stories, we offered two alternative meanings of silence—intra-active communication with people and things and inaudible inner wellbeing, in addition to a mode of nonverbal expression as identified in prior studies. The findings are significant in enriching and renewing our understanding of children's silence in inclusive ECE environments. Silence is re-defined as a mode of embodied communication and affective connections. This article invites researchers and educators to genuinely "listen" to children's stories, even in silent play.

Introduction

"Do feelings have a sound? Even silence has a sound" (Shallcrass, 2020, p. 12). This children's book excerpt serves as the entryway for the story of this research. The silence of unspeaking children is inequitably viewed as problematic: absence of speech and meaning, communication disorder, or resistance to engage (Martín-Bylund, 2018; Wohlwend, 2009). Educators who read silence as empty of knowledge might menace children's learning by moving them "from a state of emptiness to a state of fullness by reformulation and amplification" (Clay, 1985, p. 35). The perception of quiet children is connected to system inequalities that privilege speakability (Watson, 2020). Silence has been a subject of research in numerous fields. Some researchers construed students' use of silence as strategies for learning (e.g., Bligh, 2014; Shi & Tan, 2020) and challenged the silencing of children's voices in classroom practices (Yoon & Templeton, 2019) and research landscapes (e.g., Artiles et al., 2016; Mazzei, 2003), giving voice to unspeaking children from a rights-based position. Silence is not "a void to be filled, a wound to be healed, a flaw to be repaired" (Greene, 1993, p. 14). Quiet children do not necessarily have "less language" nor are "emptier of language" (Cazden, 1970, p. 35) than their peers. Rather, their silence is a possibility for learning, not an absence (Poland & Pederson, 1998). Their silence is a mode of nonverbal expression

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(Wormald et al., 2012) and a strategic response to learning (Shi & Tan, 2020).

Research on children's silence in early childhood education (ECE) settings has been emerging, albeit scant. In a bilingual (Spanish-Swedish) ECE setting in Sweden, Martín-Bylund (2018) examined Lina's mute response to her teachers who were serving porridge and water. In front of a plate of porridge and an empty glass, Lina was not eating. The teachers intermittently asked if she wanted water. Lina responded differently to the Spanish-speaking and Swedish-speaking teachers. The Swedish-speaking teacher interpreted her silence as lacking language competence and disregarded what Lina needed. The Spanish-speaking teacher, contrarily, recognised Lina's nodding and head-shaking as communicative responses and continued interacting with her. The teacher noticed Lina's concentration on the water movement from pitcher to glass and thus supported her water pouring with prompts. The author analysed silence in three dimensions: communication, strategy, and intensity. Lina used nonverbal *communication* to express her wants. Her response was interpreted as an avoidance *strategy* (e.g., avoiding being evaluated on speaking the wrong language or being forced to drink water). *Intensity* was considered to note the aspects of the environment that were sufficiently powerful to draw Lina's silent concentration; for example, the smell of porridge or the absence of water in the glass. Martín-Bylund's study influenced our analysis of silence to shift from deciphering individuals' intentions to exploring possibilities from the interconnected collective, including the environment, using a posthuman approach. Her study also added to the sophistication of our investigation through the deeper analysis of multiple aspects of silence (i.e., communication and connections with the environment).

In an Australian ethnographic study conducted in three inclusive classrooms, Watson (2018) used Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine exclusive experiences illustrated in two stories of silence. In one story, children and parents quietly moved through a situation where a child, othered by medical discourse ("*the child*"), was crying to resist entering the building. In another story, children named everyone they saw in a picture except *the child* to avoid divulging their perceptions of difference. Their silence was presented in long pauses, uneasy body movements, squirming in seats, and many "ummm's". Watson's analysis revealed "othering" effects and inspired us to notice silent moments performed by those who engaged with the othered children. These two studies primed our analysis of interactions between children and people who were verbal-yet-unspeaking, as well as possible connections with things that matter in the silent moments. Humans and things can exercise their agency to communicate in inaudible modes, highlighting that silence is relational and transformative. Children's feelings and capacities to make changes that were manifested in silence, however, were of less interest in these prior studies, leading us to focus on the affective aspect of wordless play.

In an empirical study of children's storying conducted by the first author (Li, 2022), silence was a significant manifestation across the stories shared during play. In this article, the authors selected three stories to illustrate the phenomenon of silence and affective nature of children's storying. We wondered about the affective connections in children's silent play and pursued the following research questions:

- How do children engage in dialogue with the teacher, their peers, and the material environment without words?

- What emotions are produced in silent play?

- What changes in children's affective connections occur through silence?

The inquiry draws on the post-intentional phenomenological, posthuman, and strengths-based perspectives to examine children's silent stories. With these perspectives, we delved into the ways children meaningfully communicated and connected with others and the environment in their unspeaking moments. Thinking of silence through the posthuman notion of intra-actions opened our noticing to the inaudible yet reasonable communication between children and things. By illustrating the three stories, we disrupt the inequitable understanding of children's silence. We accentuate children as communicative and affective beings. By probing affective connectedness, we offer two alternative meanings of silence—as intra-active communication with people and things and as inaudible inner wellbeing, in addition to a mode

of one-side, nonverbal expression as identified in prior studies. The findings are significant to enrich and renew our understanding of children's silence in inclusive ECE environments.

Theoretical Framing

Storying is a phenomenon of children's everyday experiences in living and imaginary worlds. Post-intentional phenomenology (Vagle, 2018), a variation, was adopted as a philosophical perspective and methodological approach to examine children's storying experiences. Husserl's (1913/1963) descriptive paradigm on the essence of phenomena and Heidegger's (1927/1962) interpretative understanding of lived experiences as phenomena focus on what things are. Post-intentional phenomenology, focusing on how things connect, is used to study the connectedness around the manifestation, in this case, the *silence*. From a post-intentional perspective, things are interconnected in unstable, changing, and fleeting ways. Silence, in this sense, is conceptualised as continually fluid, shape-shifting assemblages interacting with the world, rather than a stable essence.

This perspective aligns with posthuman thinking in which children's sense-making develops through relationships of different bodies and in ongoing intra-actions with the material environment (Somerville, 2020). Intra-actions, a concept introduced by Barad (2003), refer to co-constitutive relations between humans and nonhumans. Humans and nonhumans (e.g., materials, ethos, contexts) are intra-acting bodies, which are constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing and engaged in co-agentic ties with the world. The agency of silence is not only human-centric; things also have the capacity to "speak" *to* and *through* humans. In post-intentional and posthuman senses, we attempted to notice "unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (Haraway, 2016, p. 1) by engaging with "messy, difficult, and ethically complicated matters that merge" (Murphy, 2020, p. 27) and exposing possibilities that are "hidden as an absent presence" (Nxumalo et al., 2018, p. 443). We aimed to craft the connectedness between children and their storied worlds with us as researchers in the process of becoming and living. We also used notions of embodiment and affects to examine children's silence during storying-play. Children's silent play is conceptualised as a way of embodied storying situated in intra-actions with themselves, their peers, teachers, and environments. The wordless intra-actions were conceived as silent dialogues that encompass reciprocal listening and responding.

We took a strengths-based stance to understand silence. We affirmed the capacities of different silent storying bodies (i.e., children, peers, teachers, and things) regarding what they are able to do, be, and become, thus recognising them as agents in their daily lives (Wehmeyer & Kurth, 2021). We also acknowledged children's active, silent engagement and communication in their day-to-day experiences. The authors aim to renew the meaning of silence as strength, noticing children's capabilities and capacities in affective connections. The affective nature of silence was highlighted through children's embodied storying and play. Listening to silence from a strengths-based perspective allowed us to hear the sound of joyful resonance and to understand children differently. The wordless intra-actions were conceived as silent dialogues, highlighting reciprocity and communication.

Conceptualising the Notions of Affects and Embodiment

The terms "affects", "feelings", "emotions", and "sensations" are often used interchangeably, although differentiated by others. Affect, as a *verb*, means to influence someone or something emotionally. As a *noun*, affect refers not only to *feelings* that are overtly expressed in communicative contexts (Du Bois & Kärkkäinen, 2012) but also *capacities* that change thoughts and actions of self and others. In Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) words, the capacities to affect and be affected are the influence bodies have upon other bodies and evoked from memory, experience, thought, and habit (Massumi, 2002). The *adjective*, affective, describes something that evokes emotions or feeling-driven actions. Affects are inherent in the notion of embodiment in post-intentional phenomenology. Humans connect with the more-than-human world through gestures and movements to dynamically unfold meaningful actions (Goodwin, 2015) and to understand emotional experiences of selves and others (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; Vagle, 2018). *More-than-human* (Abram, 1996) is a posthuman term used to convey that more is happening beyond the human social realm (Murphy, 2020). Children communicate in various rhythmic and embodied ways of thinking and

feeling that extend beyond words (Alcock, 2016). For example, children follow soothing music and slowly put their heads on cushions to denote falling asleep or show emotional intimacy by hugging others. Silence is more than heard; its presence is sensed through bodies. In an Aotearoa New Zealand study, Bateman (2020) examined children's displays of emotion through their everyday stories. Humour, sadness, and disgust were affects identified in the children's verbal telling and the recipients' multimodal responses such as voice prosody, physical positioning, pauses, gaze, and facial expressions. The examination of multimodal ways of expression offered insights to probe children's affects in silent dialogue in our study.

Children's affects circulate and influence day-to-day intra-actions. Affects pass from body to body and the resonance flows between bodies and the more-than-human world (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). For instance, when a child is sobbing, another child gives a warm hug and talks calmly, and the tissue paper supports the comforting child in wiping the tears. The tissue paper becoming overly wet is a caring reminder to use a new piece. The sobbing child feels the empathetic affects and returns a hug and smile to another. The empathy spreads among the children and tissue paper. Affects are essential in determining relationships between bodies and the experiences of what bodies feel and think. The posthuman notions of intra-actions, embodiments, and affects frame what and how we read silence; leading us to focus on children's inextricable connectedness with their surrounding world and the affective experiences that might influence their relationships.

Listening to Silence in Everyday Storying

Children's affects are embodied in silence, which can be heard in their everyday storying. Everyday storying is the real-time authentic action of crafting, making meaning of, and expressing experiences (Bruner, 1990; Engel, 2005) and imaginations (Engel, 2013; Paley, 2004). Children's storying occurs anywhere, any time when they encounter, fantasise, say, act, and create something, alone or with others. Everyday stories, the chronicles of storying acts, are situated in playing, conversations, and visual creations. In this article, we focused on storying-play, a combined term used to highlight *play* as one form of children's everyday *storying* and interconnected relationships. Play is a natural storying space for children to make sense of their worlds and explore relationships, thus shaping who they are and who they will become. We adopted the notion of storying-play as a non-intrusive way to explore and listen to children's voices (in silence) in their everyday worlds.

Methodology

This article illustrates three stories drawn from a larger post-intentional phenomenological study of children's everyday storying. The study was conducted in four inclusive ECE settings: two kindergartens in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) and two classrooms in one kindergarten in Hong Kong (HK). The first author had practical experience in both geographic contexts and all authors' had combinations of teaching and research background in inclusive education with young children. The authors come from various cultural, professional, and research backgrounds, including literacies learning and leading, arts-based practice, dance and drama in the early years, Indigenous philosophy, and early childhood inclusion, inform the research process collectively and critically. Together, our diverse mix of voices lead to rich, multifaceted interpretations of the silent stories. The four settings adopted play-based learning, which represented a crucial part of the storying space, and shared a stance on embracing diversity, especially relative to varied abilities and cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The first author engaged with children (n=64), educators (n=13), parents (n=12), and the environment for 4–6 hours per day for approximately 10–12 days over 4–5 consecutive weeks in each setting. The research process followed the university's ethics guidelines by ensuring voluntary participation with children's assent and informed consent given by parents (for children) and teachers. Pseudonyms are used for all settings, children, and teachers. We followed Dahlberg and Moss' (2005) ethical thinking in the research process. We adopted a relational data-collection process by engaging with children, educators, and the environment in conversations and playing. We were sensitive in gathering storying moments by following the children's lead. For instance, when the children stated something like "Don't *look*" or avoided being followed, the researcher would stop recording; when the children extended invitations like "*Come, join us*, "*Follow me*", or "*Can you video me doing that?*", the

researcher would engage in their storying as a partner. Children were involved in the research process as active storying-players and meaning-makers. We positioned ourselves as learners by following our participants' lead to understand and acknowledge what was previously masked by cultural and linguistic bias (Arya, 2021). With a post-intentional phenomenological approach, we did not start with focal children to follow their lived experiences in silence. Simply put, we did not search for causation—to identify factors that caused children to be silent. Rather, we probed the affective entanglements within the intra-actions among children, educators, and things in the silent play, opening up possibilities that could produce or could be produced by silence.

Children's everyday stories—the happenings relative to children's doing, saying, experiencing, imagining, and creating in their daily lives—were identified through observations and interactions and documented in audio and video recordings, fieldnotes, and photographs. A total of 297 stories were gathered. Although often short and fragmented, each story consisted of *events* (settings and plots) and their flow of events that are related to or carried out by the *actants*—protagonist(s) and things in "rich multi-species assemblages" (Haraway, 2015, p. 160). Aligned with the posthuman sense, things carried agentic roles in storying. When either events or actants changed, the story was counted complete, and perhaps another story started. Each dataset also included views about children's storying that were shared in group informal interviews with teachers (one per setting) and intermittent, informal conversations with teachers and parents. Of the 297 stories, one-third were categorised as storying-play, meaning that stories were identified when children engaged, alone or with others, in exploratory, physical, fantasy, constructive, language play and rule-performed games. Thirteen play-stories were signified as "sustained silence", denoting that the protagonist was unspeaking throughout the story. We selected three stories to illuminate the affective connections in children's silent dialogues during play, using an inductive approach to data analysis. The three stories shared the assemblages[1] of *sustained silence* throughout the whole story, silence performed by *all intra-acting bodies*, *all verbal but unspeaking*, and *back-and-forth communications*; and individually illustrated the dialogic intra-actions in the form of silence with *educators* (Story 1), *peers* (Story 2), and *things* (Story 3).

Post-intentional phenomenological analysis with posthuman thinking did not involve fixed step-by-step procedures. We did not precisely identify procedures in advance. Rather, we were mindful of our languaging that was woven throughout the analysis to reflect the inherent research design based on the post-intentional frame. We brought our careful reading of phenomenological materials (i.e., datasets) into dynamic dialogues with theoretical concepts and reflexive engagement to craft children's storying experiences. Drawing on this analytic approach, we as researchers regard "dynamic intentional relationships that tie participants, the researcher, the context, broader social issues and matters, the produced text and their positionalities together" (Vagle, 2018, p. 32). Our engagements in the silent dialogues became part of the phenomenon. Hence, our roles and relationships morphed in gathering and interpreting the observational data and the writing of intra-active entanglements. These dynamics shaped our observation and interpretation, offering a possible manifold out of infinite dimensions of understanding silence. Stories 1–3 incorporated our continual reflexive engagements with the data, which were reflected in story analyses. The reflexive engagements involved documenting, wondering about, and questioning our connections, assumptions, and unexpected moments. To honour the fluid and ever-changing nature of understanding a phenomenon, we tentativised our noticing and interpreting throughout the article.

We thought with the posthuman notion throughout the analysis to highlight the relational entanglements within the intra-actions among children, eductor, and things in the silent play. Story 1 exemplifies the silent engagements between a quiet child and her teacher. Story 2 demonstrates wordless interactions between an emergent bilingual and a verbal peer. Story 3 highlights the inaudible dialogue between an unspeaking child and his nonhuman storying partners. Silence was produced not only by the protagonists but also their peer and teacher, although all were verbally competent. The silent storying-play

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[1] The concept of assemblage developed by Delueze and Guattari (1987) refers to a process of temporary arrangements or constellations of objects, expressions, bodies, qualities and territories that create new ways of functioning.

ranged from 10-20 minutes in length. We adopted an inductive analytical process, commencing with observations of specific storying instances with silence and then moving from affective experiences to general sets of propositions about those experiences. The following sections depict the setting, protagonist and intra-acting bodies, and the three stories of silence. Each story concludes with an analysis that describes the meanings of silence, children's affects in silent play, and the influence of silence has on the children and other bodies.

Story 1: Child–Teacher Dialogues

Stories 1 and 2 take place in Kākābeak Kindergarten located in an Eastern suburb in Auckland, NZ. Approximately 20 children aged 2-5 come to Kākābeak daily from 8:45 a.m. - 2:45 p.m. Except for the mat and meal times, children are engaged in free play consistent with *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), NZ's early childhood curriculum. Qian, an emergent bilingual, is a Taiwanese girl who speaks Mandarin Chinese at home and has attended Kākābeak for two months. She understands but seldom speaks English. The teachers describe Qian as happy and quiet, always laughing but not talking. Instead of joining in social play, Qian briefly observes from the side-lines and then moves to watch other groups playing.

Story 1 starts with Qian's invitational gaze and Brooke (the teacher) 's affirming response. In the morning, Qian wanders around Kākābeak, searching for exciting things to do. At approximately a two-metre distance, Qian stares at Brooke, who sits on the sandpit edge watching children play. Brooke amiably responds to Qian's stare, "*What a nice walk under the sunshine, isn't it, Qian?*" Their silent dialogues begin:

> Qian stops sucking her thumb, halts in front of Brooke, and returns with a shy smile. Qian taps her fingers on both hands like clapping, and Brooke follows. Qian keeps doing the finger-tapping with different rhythms, and Brooke mirrors her. In every mirroring turn, Qian moves closer to Brooke and her smile becomes bigger. This story tentatively "ends" with Qian and Brooke having several high-five claps accompanied by Qian's chuckle.

Intertwined Affects in Silence

Affect is housed within embodied sequences of action (Goodwin, 2000). A mix of affects—uneasiness, wondering, excitement—might have been portrayed as embodied in Qian's gazing, smiling, tapping, and approaching to engage with Brooke. In her wandering, Qian hovered around the sandpit and appeared to want to connect with someone. Her thumb-sucking unmasked her discomfort of not knowing whom and how to join. Thumb-sucking was Qian's everyday action, which might signal her insecurity in the new environment. The moment Qian connected with Brooke seemed to be a turning point for Qian to stop thumb-sucking for self-soothing.

Amid her unease, Qian showed a desire to connect with Brooke. Despite the distance, Qian's intense stare served like an invitation for Brooke to play together. In our observation, the silence in the form of gaze can speak; Qian's eye contact involved "talking" to the teacher without words and her inner self-talk. We read Qian's gaze as if she asked, "*Can we play together, Brooke?*" and said to herself, "*I hope Brooke can play with me… Should I go to her?*". Qian's wondering emotion was conveyed, to us as reserachers, in her gaze-talk. Brooke noticed Qian reaching out to her and responded with a warm greeting as an acceptance of the play invitation. The kick-off of the storying-play marked an affective change in Qian, as a smile replaced her often inexpressive face. The variations in tempos and rhythms of finger-tapping possibly showcased Qian's playfulness as her delight increased with each finger-tapping turn.

Attuned and responsive interactions without words can be vibrant, like oral communications (Delafield-Butt et al., 2020). Brooke did not know Qian's home language. Neither did she initiate verbal dialogue in English. Rather, Brooke engaged with Qian in mimicry, following Qian's flow of storying-play. At each turn, Qian first looked at Brooke as a signal to start her idea, initiated the fingers-tapping with a slight variation, and rewarded Brooke's engagement with a smile. Brooke mimicked Qian's friendly gaze, funny finger-tapping, and beaming smile as the sequence of connected responses. Gibbs (2010) termed mirroring actions "mimetic communication", also known as mimesis. The joyful interactions between Qian and Brooke were a form of mimesis, like back-and-forth conversations that served as a hinge between communication (a way of interchanging meanings) and language (codes to transfer meanings).

Silence as a Carrier and Generator of Affects

Unlike mechanical copying, bodily mimicking (of gazes, smiles, gestures, and movements using body parts) encompasses the aspect of affect. The mimicking activates what Gibbs (2010) described as the mimetic impulse of listeners-in-dialogues, eliciting the same affect within the listeners. Finger-tapping mimicry perhaps created a pleasurable sensation for both Qian and Brooke. The reciprocal interactions likely facilitated Qian's positive shift from discomfort to excitement. Her happiness seemed to be transmitted to Brooke. As Brooke indicated, she cherished the opportunity to get closer to Qian in the silent play. Joy circulated between them in this brief quiet episode that was full of meaning.

This moment of silent dialogue might have created several breakthroughs. For Qian, her silence was heard and valued. A sense of belonging was seeded, evidenced by the cessation of thumb-sucking. Their mutual bond was strengthened in this brief, unanticipated, and precious interaction. Brooke noted that this was the first time she had closely interacted with only Qian. In the subsequent weeks, Qian initiated other interactions with Brooke, giggling together as they acted silly or made funny faces and proudly showing her achievements such as solved jigsaw puzzles. Qian extended this possibility to building peer relations. A week later, Qian became a friend of several children who always played together. She used her humour as she did with Brooke to get acquainted with her peers. Laughter could often be heard within the group. Laughing together and entertaining others are ways that children get to know the funny side of situations and their peers, adding to their sense of belonging and leading to closer friendships.

Story 2: Child–Peer Dialogues

Story 2 involves two protagonists. Stella speaks mainly Cambodian and sometimes English. Stella is relatively new (2 months) at Kākābeak. Her teachers described Stella as a cheerful and chatty girl, although people barely comprehend her one-beat-long vocalisations. Jay is a Pākehā/European New Zealand boy who is verbal with a soft voice and often engages independently in block-play.

While Jay is playing alone with a big toy fire-engine, Stella sits beside him, watching Jay play. Their unspoken dialogue transitions into their joint play:

> Stella utters "*Ah?*" with her hand moving from low to high. Jay extends the tower ladder of the fire-engine. Stella moves her hand much higher, vocalising like "*Ai?*", Jay extends the ladder even taller, vertically, and tilts his head to seek Stella's affirmation. Stella returns with a smile. Next, Stella gently shouts "*Ah?*". Jay looks back at the fire-engine and turns on the siren light. Stella laughs. Then she moves her hand horizontally in the air, vocalising like "*Woo!*". Jay pushes the fire-engine forward. Stella does a hooray hands-up. The story pauses at the sound of the hand-bell ringing to signal mat-time.

Multisensory Pleasure in Silence

Stella sitting close to Jay seemed to be a way to immerse herself into the fire-engine story, respectfully indicating her presence without interrupting. Her quiet observation might reveal her desire for fun by playing with the fire-engine with Jay. Their series of actions were like dialogues, not in words but composed of *hand movements* (e.g., stretching the arm up to indicate "extending the ladder higher", moving the hand horizontally to signal "moving the fire-engine forward") and *object manipulations* (e.g., lifting the ladder, turning on the siren light). The silent dialogues also encompassed *facial expressions* (e.g., smile, laugh), *gazing* (e.g., at the teller, at the movement), and *gestures* (e.g., head tilting, leaning forward). These multimodal features in actions seemingly carried universal meaning, as Du Bois and Kärkkaäinen (2012) termed the "indexical cues for affect" (p. 435). More importantly, these cues indicated relationships, engagements, and interactions—the affective connections that need to be acknowledged.

One conceivable sentiment that Stella and Jay might have shared in their silent dialogues in actions is pleasure. Despite the language challenges, Stella endeavoured to vocalise her limited language together with hand movements to possibly make her expressions decipherable. From an assertive lens, we recognised Stella's leading the story plots by suggesting play ideas (e.g., elevating the ladder, activating the siren) using various communicative modes. The dynamic flow of the collaborative storying with Jay seemed to amuse Stella, based on her smiles and continuous play initiations. Jay's communicative

sensitivity meaningfully contributed to their story. Jay, who was verbal, joined the dialogue with silence alongside Stella. Whenever Stella initiated a play idea, Jay disregarded the possible frustration of not comprehending Stella's messages. Rather, Jay closely "listened" by intently looking at Stella's nonverbal expressions and carefully responded by operating visual effects and subsequent movements to attune to the mimed story. Jay's silent way of engaging with Stella in play can be taken as an indexical cue for affect, possibly conveying a pleasure to portray himself as a responsive fire-engine operator, to communicate in a common (embodied) language, and to collectively contribute to the richness of the storying-play with Stella.

Silence as a Catalyst for Building Peer Relationships

The story was originally two separate self-exploratory play episodes: Stella searching for an interesting activity to join and Jay investigating the fire-engine's functions. In a posthuman sense, the sensorial experiences created by the fire-engine and Jay gathered them together with Stella for evolving another co-storying moment. The strengths-based lens prompted us to see the acts of kindness that transfused through silent dialogues by Stella (respectful presence) and Jay (sensitive noticing and responding in actions), making their storied world a more belonging place. Their kind acts boosted their affinity as playmates, authoring and contributing to the storying-play. The collective storying might have intensified the children's sensational satisfaction, making this play more entertaining with multisensory effects of light and motion. Given their mindful use of silence, we read that both children recognised each other's presence, noticed mutual capabilities and contributions, and responded with allied actions. This small story marks a possible co-authorship; the two protagonists demonstrated how a strong culture of belonging could be created between young children.

Story 3: Child-Environment Dialogues

Story 3 takes place in Room Magnolia in Bauhinia Kindergarten, in which a play-based curriculum is adopted appertaining to the *Hong Kong Kindergarten Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). Located in a small suburb in HK, China, Bauhinia houses six classrooms with three grades (K1-K3) in a same-age grouping for 100 children aged 3-6. Magnolia is the hub for 17 children and two teachers, learning and playing together between 8:45 a.m. and 4:45 p.m. Cantonese is the primary language. Children have Mandarin and English lessons once a week. Yu was born and raised in HK; his parents are migrants from mainland China. One teacher describes Yu as a nice boy with communication delay who has difficulty understanding what people mean and responds slowly. Yu can but seldom talks. Another teacher suggests that his communicative incompetence created a wall blocking him from getting along with others.

The story starts with Yu choosing to make paper-springs, one of four self-selected group activities. Paper-springs are a paper craft which involves interfolding two long strips of paper to provide a springy effect. Unlike other children who make paper-spring necklaces following a teacher-made model, Yu produces a long paper-spring to use as a cardboard figure's (thereafter as "figure") extended leg. The inspiration might come from the display board where a figure is exhibited, whose body is made of corrugated paper taken from a carton box and the legs from green scrap paper. The dialogue with the figure begins in Yu's changing plots of this paper-spring story:

> Yu proudly pins his long paper-spring on the figure. The figure seems to dislike the leg because it keeps coming off. Yu makes it a long arm instead across the figure's body. While Yu is carefully checking and trimming any frayed paper edges, the figure suddenly falls off the board, hanging on the paper-spring. Yu seems to imagine a scene of the figure sleeping in a hammock. After a minute of pondering, Yu removes the figure, sways the empty hammock several times, and then replicates the hammock's movement by swaying his body. With another child's admiring "*wow*", Yu crawls through the hammock and sways alongside it. Soon after, Yu cheerfully skips toward the teacher, leading to a tentative ending of the story.

Satisfaction in Silence

The story goes beyond simply making a paper-spring; it involves a dialogic intra-action between a child and things (i.e., figure, paper-spring). Their dialogue is inaudible yet can be felt and sensed. Seeing from a strengths-based lens, we recognised that Yu's curiosity to explore and sensitive noticing of the

surrounding environment led to his connection with the lonely figure who remained on the board for two days without being visited. Yu's trimming frayed edges on the paper-spring might be a sign of caring for the figure. If the goal was to ensure the paper-spring and figure was pinned stably, the continuous dropping could be discouraging to Yu. This possible frustration did not seem to hinder Yu's engagement. His intra-action with the paper-spring arouse our *thinking differently* as in post-intentional phenomenological philosophy. With his careful "listening", Yu might have read the figure's negotiation: whether the paper-spring would be a leg or arm and whether the figure or Yu would sleep in the hammock. The figure and paper-spring form part of the assemblages like humans, coexisting in the state of becoming.

We conceived the moment of pondering as Yu's silent talk with the figure and himself. Through the falling-off, the figure might have declared, "*I don't like sleeping in a hammock*", causing Yu to remove the figure from the paper-spring. The figure's withdrawal possibly provoked Yu's self-talk, "*I like playing in a swing…why not give myself a go*". The change of facial expressions (i.e., from a puzzled gaze to a satisfying smile) embodied Yu's enthusiasm to immerse in the swinging story. His trajectory of talk in silence entailed a strong connection with paper (figure, paper-spring)—things that are little and ordinary yet meaningful to Yu.

An Inaudible Charisma of Silence

Silence speaks for a child's hidden talent. Yu's unswerving concentration and boundless creativity are embodied in the transformation of the paper-spring. Yu instilled his meaning in the task, not copying or following others. His peers' intermittent coming and going and annotations (e.g., "[*the figure] is sleeping*") did not distract Yu's concentrated engagement with the paper-spring. Yu quietly listened and thoughtfully compiled and filtered peers' ideas into the story. Yu's creativity was exhibited in his vivid plots: transforming the leg into an arm for the figure, helping the figure escape from the hammock, testing the swaying motion of the empty hammock, and immersing himself in the swinging hammock play-story. The self-directed play offered Yu a space to explore and extend the possibilities that things could act. Things, from a post-intentional perspective, are fundamental in children's everyday experiences. The paper-spring was the performative agents that elevated Yu's affective experiences. The oscillating and stretchable motions might be fun, attracting Yu to hold, bounce, and play with the paper-spring continuously. Its lengthening without breaking could reinforce Yu's sense of achievement. The swaying motion might evoke Yu's pleasant swinging memories, according to his contented smile. All these connections aroused Yu's satisfying experiences, rewarding his seriousness—the absorption in playing with the paper-spring. The silent dialogues between Yu and the paper vividly demonstrated their strengths in transforming each other into possibilities.

Yu's fascination with the paper-spring has affective influence on his peers. His creation not only gained the teacher's acclaim but also drew two girls' attention to "help" him extend the paper-spring. The girls excitedly imitated the way Yu combined short pieces of paper-spring into a long one along the paper-arm. Yu did not tell them what to do. Rather, he subtly demonstrated his enthusiasm for making sense of things in his focused play. Silence has the power to captivate others to contribute to the storying-play. A sense of satisfaction was spread from Yu to the girls who enjoyably lengthened the paper-spring alongside Yu. The peers' pleasurable participation is a form of recognition, offering an "affective approval or encouragement" (Honneth, 1995, p. 95) for Yu's and their capabilities and contribution. Through collective storying, Yu, his peers, the figure and paper-spring distribute the happiness by affirming each other's engagement and thus sustaining their storying-play together.

Discussion: Unvoiced Messages of Silence

Silences are unvoiced yet powerful messages, highlighting "hidden" possibilities in children's living and imaginary worlds. The analysis demonstrates how children enacted their affective experiences in silence through their storying-play. Based on the analysis across the three stories, we synthesised two alternative meanings of silent dialogues: as non-vocal communication and inaudible engagement and as inner wellbeing.

Finding 1: Silence is more than a one-way mode of expression; it is a form of storying, embodying children's reciprocal communication and engagements.

The silent dialogues in the three stories are characterised as inaudible communication and engagements. Silence in a communicative aspect is a manifestation within intra-actions between children, their teacher, and things. The protagonists, who said nothing throughout their stories, all engaged as active storying-players and competent communicators to imagine and make meaning of their worlds. This noticing aligned with prior studies that silence is viewed as an non-vocal expression. The three stories further accentuated the reciprocal communication, which were enacted not only by the protagonists but also their storying partners. The teacher, peers, and things intra-acted with the quiet protagonists in silent communicative modes. The children used gazes, smiles, and bodily movements to initiate and reinforce dialogic communication. On the other hand, the reciprocal gazes, gestures, and movements acted by their storying partners made the storying-play fun and connected. These non-vocal communication played multiple roles. First, it enhanced different bodies' mutual relationships in a relaxed way. The fingers-tapping (Story 1), the hand-movements and the fire engine's visual effects and movements (Story 2), and the child's, the figure's and paper-spring's movements (Story 3), which were produced in silence, created playful engagements between the children and their human and nonhuman partners. The voluntary use of silence creates a shared language between storytellers and listener-responders. Communicative mimicking, multisensory responses, and modifications based on close listening form parts of this language. Silence serves a unique function—equalising the communicative membership. Instead of performing a superior status of dominating the play with speech, the verbal listener-responders of the story can share the same-status relationship with the unspeaking children by reciprocating with interactions and valuing the different ways of embodied communication. Second, the silent dialogues revealed that children's sensitivity to their surroundings, creativity, and persistence to achieve goals and transform ideas are embodied in their storying-play. The stories showed that children often express the subtlety and sophistication of their understanding through silent modes. With a strengths-based interpretation of children's resources (Gaffney & Jesson, 2019), the protagonists and storying partners in the stories articulated their capabilities to navigate, create, imagine, and transform their worlds wordlessly. Silence is always present, calling educators to attend to the strengths in children's unspoken voices.

Finding 2: A sound of affects is created in silence through intra-actions between children and their storying partners.

From a post-intentional phenomenological perspective, we focused on how humans and things connected in silent storying-play. Noticing the non-vocal dialogues allows us to understand children's inaudible inner states. While acknowledging the presence of affects in children's social lives, we as researchers encounter the challenge of never knowing children's inner states of affects. The focus of investigating children's affects was, therefore, not to prove whether authentic emotions are revealed. Our interest was to approach children's storying worlds through their display of affects that is emergently shaped by and itself shapes the unfolding development of interaction (Wu, 2004). Children connect with the world through their affective presence. If silent children do not talk about their feelings it does not necessarily mean that they do not have the ability to express their emotions. Together with their storying partners, the children made their affective voices perceptible, albeit inaudible. For example, the connections between Qian and Brooke were made through playful finger-tapping together, creating entertaining moments. Stella, Jay, and the fire-engine jointly exhibited multisensory pleasure in the story. Yu demonstrated his idiosyncratic ideas with the figure and paper-spring with satisfaction. Happiness swells in a mix of reciprocal smiles and laughter, bodily mimicking, joint contribution, and friendly negotiation. Accordingly, silence is re-defined as inaudible inner wellbeing. The silent intra-actions are quietly processed in partnership with peers, teachers, and the environment. The play stories went beyond children doing something with things (e.g., the fingers, fire-engine, or paper-spring). Things such as fingers, fire-engine, and figure and paper-spring played the central role in the affective connections between the quiet protagonists and their silent partners.

Implications

Do feelings have a sound? We heard the sound of silence—children's joyful resonance shared in-between the child–teacher, child–peer, and child–environment intra-actions. Joy does not reside only in individual children; it has a resonant and reciprocal effect, generating to and from one another. The dialogues in silence are portrayed by a playful acquaintance, multisensory pleasure, and satisfactory achievement. Prior studies showed that children utilise joyous resources to create friendships (Karjalainen, 2020) and to maintain social bonds (Pawłowska, 2020). The three contributions from our study are: (a) The social bonding is not restricted to their teachers and peers but includes things that are meaningful to the children; (b) The joyous resources can be shared in silence, not only in verbal conversations; (c) children co-created a rhythm to maintain excitement in their play-world, not only with peers as Trevarthen (2011) suggested, but also with teachers and their material environments.

Silence's Power to Affect

Silence is contagious for a good purpose; it communicates and motivates others to reciprocate feelings. The three stories illustrated that enthusiasm, creativity, and playfulness could be transfused through silent play. Children's storying-play might sometimes appear purposeless through adults' eyes. For children, joy serves as energy to motivate themselves and others to connect with different worlds, although other affects such as discomfort or frustration might be experienced in-between the joyful intra-actions. Children's feelings are "folding into others, resonating together, interfering with each other, and mutually intensifying" (Massumi, 2002, p. 1) without words. In a post-intentional sense, these affective exchanges in storying-play are a space where children and things notice and recognise their own being-in-the-world and shape their contextual relations with different bodies (Acheson, 2008; Vagle, 2018). Silence is significant when people and things react to it together. Through collective storying in silent dialogues, children find ways to transform the obstructive affects into positive ones.

Silence also has the power to build relationships. Connected relationships can be developed in silent play. Storying never ends. In everyday storying, endings are often transitory. The endings, Qian and Brooke's high-five, Stella and Jay's pause to transition to mat-time, and Yu's walking away from the paper-spring play, are just temporary. New stories emerge from the tentative endings. Silence has influenced children's emotions at the moment of storying-play. More importantly, silence primes future relationships. Closer relationships have been germinating in silent-dialogue stories. The moments of playful finger-tapping accompanied by gazes and smiles, prompted Qian to initiate cheerful interactions with Brooke and to build friendships with other children in the subsequent weeks. The multisensory silent play of Stella and Jay created a space for them to become friends in two weeks. They naturally gathered to play together after mat-time. The silent play with the figure and paper-spring uncovered Yu's hidden gifts. Since then, Yu's peers often invited him to join their groups because they saw him differently—with creativity and perseverance. Silence has the power to affect, build and sustain friendships.

Listening to Silence Differently

Listening is a gift teachers could give themselves and their children. "Active listening necessitates generous interpretation and thoughtful response" (Yoon & Templeton, 2019, p. 61). By closely listening to children's silence, teachers can create and sustain an inclusive environment, which is composed of belonging and relationality in the intra-actions. In day-to-day early childhood practice, educators can "listen" to children's voices, shared through varied modes of communication and sensed through their intra-actions with people and things in their daily environments. This amplified sensitivity in listening can, in turn, yield asset-based interpretations of intra-actions and responses.

Silence can be heard in embodied connections experienced through multimodal processes. Verbal expression is not the only indicator to determine children's competence, participation, and affective experiences. These dispositions can be amplified through intra-actions with people and things. Children who do not engage in verbal conversations are still "part of the dialogues – watching, listening, or perhaps simply experiencing the flow of events" (White, 2015, p. 47). Their presence in dialogues needs to be

recognised. Joint attention and shared purposes in storying-play can convey a we-are-connected message, boosting children's sense of belonging.

Silence can be heard in responsive and reciprocal relationships. Reciprocal interactions, playful mimicking, and exchanging play ideas are ways to approach and engage with people and things in carefree and enjoyable ways, creating an inclusive space for relational connections. In a responsive relationship, children can explore novel or different engaging forms and jointly extend a sense of what is possible together, even in silence. The underlying principle is the "possibility of democracy" (Fielding, 2016, p. 1)– everybody has the agency to participate in and contribute to the play in multiple forms. New possibilities for mutual understanding require human's respectful heart coming to re-see each other upon everybody's (humans and nonhumans) strengths and contributions. Silence, as exemplified in the stories, is an affective gift that invites storying together, thereby strengthening relationships, current and future.

Epilogue: Appreciating the Sound of Silence

In a post-intentional phenonological sense, our relationships have been continuously evolving alongside the data collection and analysis processes and our knowledge about the contexts, leading to meaningful interpretations. There are multilateral ways to make sense of children's storying; we welcome readers' multiple illuminations based on their experiences and perspectives. Our purpose is to offer alternative ways of understanding children's storied worlds through the post-intentional phenomenological, strengths-based, and embodiment perspectives. As researchers, transforming our thinking of silence from an absence of verbal communication to the presence of embodied intra-actions is crucial. Children have a multitude of affects that offer intriguing directions to further explore through everyday storying, especially in inclusive environments. The relevance of this work for early childhood educational practices is indirect yet meaningful. We invite readers to consider silence in children's educational lives. This article showcased three play-stories as seen through a post-intentional phenomenological and posthuman theoretical point of view. More practically, the stories gave this article value in academic writing about and through early childhood education.

Silences represent the hidden voices of children. Their wordless stories disrupted the deficit mindset of seeing them inequitably as lacking competence, affect, and engagement. From their stories, children tell us, as educators and researchers, about their positive dispositions and feelings, capabilities to contribute to social play, eagerness to connect, and courage to fantasise. These stories recount our endeavours to heed the sound of silence that is sometimes inaudible, ignored, and misunderstood but always present (Mazzei, 2003) and affective. The affective connectedness is not exchanged necessarily in words but powerfully through bodies-in-interactions that are complementary to each other.

In this study, what matters is not only the telling but also the listening—"who hear the voices, what and how they hear it" (Spyros, 2016, p. 19). Children vividly modelled what storying could look like with silent dialogues as both listeners and tellers. Silence is not easily identified and requires open minds to hear and recognise. In a post-intentional sense, we contemplate various ways stories manifest in and through children being in their world and us being with children in their storying moments. This inspires educators to deeply listen to the sound of silence through hearing, seeing, and sensing (Martín-Bylund, 2018). Storying is dynamic and affective. The stories we shared are not fixed or concluded. Rather, these stories are connected to readers' cache of knowledge, thoughts, affects, and experiences.

Silence takes children's capacities seriously to express, intra-act and be fully involved in their social, affective, and material worlds. For children, silence is a subtle-yet-resonant form of literacies, like written, oral, or visual, that conveys meaning. Silence is a live multimodal text crafted spontaneously and naturally responding to everyday lives. Silence has generative power to unfold children's storied experiences and imagination, bring forth positive affects, and strengthen relationships. The silent stories reveal rich complexities and meaning, gifting us new insights about children. "When multiple children perform it at once, their silent voices are raised in unison, creating not cacophony, but symphony" (Acheson, 2008, p. 549). This is an opening to appreciate silence as a symphony of affects through children's everyday

storying.

Declarations

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