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# **From living to lived and Being-with: Exploring the interaction styles of children and staff towards a child with profound and multiple learning disabilities**

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## **Biographical note:**

Dr Ben Simmons is a Senior Lecturer at the Institute for Education, Bath Spa University (UK), and Co-Director of the IfE's Centre for Research in Equity, Inclusion and Community (CREIC). His research focuses on the social and educational inclusion of children with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD). He has published widely in this field and his research has been funded through a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship (University of Bristol 2014-2017) and an ESRC PhD Studentship (University of Exeter 2005-2009).

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## **From living to lived and Being-with: Exploring the interaction styles of children and staff towards a child with profound and multiple learning disabilities**

‘Profound and multiple learning disabilities’ (‘PMLD’) is a term used in the UK to refer to children with extensive impairments to cognitive development. The majority of children with PMLD are taught in special schools where specialist interventions are deployed to help PMLD children progress through the preverbal stages of development. Despite international calls for ‘inclusive education’ there has been very little research examining how mainstream schools provide ‘naturalistic’ opportunities for PMLD children to develop early communication skills. This paper addresses the situation by presenting a project that investigated how special school staff and mainstream school peers embodied different interaction styles towards a child with PMLD. The research utilised ethnographic methods including participant observation, vignette-writing, and on-going dialogue with teaching staff to develop interpretations of the child’s interactions in context. A novel phenomenological lens was applied to the findings to illuminate how differences in social engagement were contingent upon the framing of the body as living or lived, whether interactions were normatively symbolic or intercorporeal, and how different modes of ‘Being-with’ the participant shaped interactions. The paper concludes by discussing how models of interaction found in the PMLD field overlook the situated nature of sociality.

**Keywords:** Profound and multiple learning disabilities, social inclusion, phenomenology, inclusive education, special education, special educational needs

## **Introduction**

‘Profound and multiple learning disabilities’ (‘PMLD’) is a label given to children in the United Kingdom who are said to experience severe congenital impairments to cognition. These impairments are typically framed developmentally and children with PMLD are understood as operating at the pre-verbal stages of development (Simmons and Watson 2014). In addition to developmental delay, children with PMLD are described as experiencing additional impairments such as physical and/or sensory impairments and often have complex care needs (Carnaby 2006).

Despite international calls for inclusive education by United Nations agencies (e.g. UNESCO 2009) children with PMLD are typically educated in special schools. In England it is estimated that out of 9,000 children with PMLD, 82% attend special school, 15% attend mainstream primary school and 3% attend mainstream secondary school (Salt 2010). The dominance of segregated provision for children with PMLD appears to be a global trend, as Lyons and Arthur-Kelly (2014) note: “From an international perspective most students with [PMLD], if they have access to any school education, are educated in “special” schools or classes by “special” educators” (446).

Developmental models are at the core of special education approaches in the UK which focus on supporting children with PMLD to achieve development milestones associated with infancy (Simmons and Watson 2014). Of particular concern in the PMLD field is the acquisition of intentional or symbolic communication skills. For example, approaches such as *Intensive Interaction* aim to teach the fundamentals of communication to people considered to be operating at the ‘early stages of development as social communicators’ (Hewett et al. 2015, 272).

Given trends towards segregated or special education for children with PMLD it is perhaps not surprising that there has been very little published research on the topic of inclusive education for profoundly disabled learners. Rather than investigating practice, researchers have typically focused on professional and parental perspectives of inclusion. For example, Alquraini (2012) investigated the attitudes of Saudi mainstream teachers towards the inclusion of children with intellectual impairments and found that teachers were more positive towards students with moderate learning impairments than those with severe to profound intellectual impairments. Coutsocostas and Alborz (2010) report similar findings from their research about mainstream teachers in Greece. In the Netherlands, de Boer and Munde (2015) report that parents of mainstream children are more positive about children with physical impairments attending mainstream school than children with PMLD.

Literature that describes how mainstream classrooms support the education of children with PMLD is rare. Foreman et al.'s (2004) research in Australia compared levels of alertness between children with PMLD in a mainstream class and children with PMLD in a special school class. The researchers reported that children in the mainstream class demonstrated a longer time in desired behaviour states (i.e. they were more aware, active and alert) compared to their special school counterparts. The present author conducted research in the UK (Simmons and Watson 2014) to investigate how a child with PMLD could engage with a mainstream school classroom and the impact this could have on his emerging communication skills. The child attended a special school four days a week and a local mainstream school one day a week. Through participatory and longitudinal observation methods the research described how the participant with PMLD was more active, happy, communicatively engaged and displayed higher forms of intersubjective awareness in his mainstream school compared to the special school (particularly around mainstream peers).

This is not the space to go into detail about this study but the findings have been published elsewhere (Simmons and Watson 2014, 2015).

The limited research discussed above suggests that whilst some teachers and parents may have negative attitudes towards the idea of including children with PMLD in mainstream schools, there is emerging evidence to suggest that mainstream schools could benefit children with PMLD by providing potentially distinct opportunities for social interaction. What has not been explored in detail is how different communication partners (e.g. special school staff and mainstream peers) interact with children with PMLD. It is this gap in research that the paper addresses.

## **Research**

The paper presents research funded through a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship (2014-2017) which examined how different communication partners in mainstream schools and special schools afforded children with PMLD opportunities to interact<sup>1</sup>. Social interaction was understood in terms of direct or concrete social transactions. This paper presents the findings of this project as they relate to an eight-year-old boy with the pseudonym of ‘Harry’. Harry’s primary or main communication partners in his special school were members of staff. Interactions between Harry and other children in his special school were rare. By contrast, Harry’s primary communication partners in his mainstream school were other children and/or the special school teaching assistant (SSTA) who supported Harry in the mainstream. The paper examines and theorises the different interaction styles of children and staff towards Harry. After presenting the research methodology and findings, the paper critically examines the core themes through a phenomenological lens. In doing so it further illuminates the nature

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<sup>1</sup> The project received full ethical approval from the University of Bristol’s Research Governance Office, and favourable opinion from the National Social Care Research Ethics Committee / NHS Health Research Authority (15/IEC08/0006)

of concrete or face-to-face interactions (e.g., the different ways that adults and peers address the living and lived body) and builds theory regarding the situated nature of social interactions (e.g. in terms of the embodiment of different modes of *Being-with* Harry).

### **Introducing Harry**

Harry was the research participant for the project. He was eight years old and attended a PMLD class in his local special school in England. Harry was described in his Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) as having global developmental delay and deemed to be operating at the pre-verbal stages of development. He had a significant visual impairment, mobility impairments (he was a non-ambulatory wheelchair user) and had complex health needs which required regular medications administered through percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy (PEG). Whilst Harry was a full-time student in the special school, for the purposes of the project he attended a mainstream class one day a week for 10 weeks. A teaching assistant from the special school accompanied him during each visit to the mainstream school.

### **Methodology**

Children with PMLD present in novel ways. A complex of cognitive, sensory and physical impairments can lead to individualised or idiosyncratic behavioural repertoires. In order to develop understandings of the meaning of Harry's actions the researcher had to become familiar with Harry's unique forms of engagement with the world and mode of communication. To achieve this, a participatory methodology was developed that allowed understandings of Harry to emerge by working with him in context over extended periods of time. The methodology resembles an ethnographic approach whereby 'fine-grained daily interactions constitute[d] the lifeblood of the data produced' (Falzon 2009, p. 1). The study

utilised participant observation as well as writing observational fieldnotes / storied vignettes. The researcher's interpretation of Harry's behaviour was also deepened through formal interviews with significant others (Harry's parents and teaching staff) and on-going informal dialogue with teaching staff in school who could be consulted during observation. The following section describes the methodology which has been extensively detailed elsewhere (Simmons and Watson 2014, 2015).

### ***Pre-observation focus group and interview***

Prior to undertaking fieldwork, the researcher facilitated a pre-observation focus group involving key members of school staff (e.g. teachers and teaching assistants). The researcher also conducted a semi-structured interview with Harry's parents. The aim of the focus group and interviews was to explore Harry's interests, abilities and methods of communication by consulting those who knew him intimately. This process led to the development of an initial lens through which to interpret and understand Harry's actions.

### ***Participatory observation***

Participatory observation was undertaken in order to develop understandings of Harry by working with him in context. This involved the researcher acting as a teaching assistant (TA) for Harry one day a week in a special school and one day a week in the mainstream school over a ten-week period (20 observations in total). By acting as one of Harry's teaching assistants the researcher was able to immerse himself in Harry's routines and become familiar with both Harry's responses to and experiences of daily activities. Participatory observation helped to develop trust and rapport between the researcher and members of staff and provided opportunities for informal discussion with staff in real time. These informal conversations allowed the researcher to share and discuss his interpretations of Harry's actions, ask



questions and seek out staff members' expertise and wisdom (e.g. to resolve confusion about the meaning of newly observed or unexpected behaviours).

### ***Vignettes***

Fieldwork data was composed of "vignettes" written during periods of non-participatory observation. Vignettes are rich and prosaic renderings of fieldnotes about social interactions. They have a story-like structure and adhere to chronological flow. Vignettes are restricted to a particular place, time, and actor (or group of actors), and can vary from a few lines of descriptions to several paragraphs. When opportunities for Harry to engage in social interaction were observed the researcher would write detailed, descriptive accounts as the interaction unfolded, paying attention to who initiated the interaction and how, the actions of the interactive participants over time and contextual variables such as location and context of the interaction and the objects involved. The vignettes included micro-descriptions of Harry's changing facial expressions and body movements, which were crucial in the early research stages as they helped the researcher develop a basic awareness of how Harry expressed his emotions. The vignettes were shared with teaching staff who observed or participated in the event so staff could offer their own interpretations through informal conversations and support the researcher's emerging interpretation of the event.

### ***Data analysis***

The vignettes were analysed thematically. The first cycle of analysis involved descriptive coding in order to organise and map the data with regards to the location of interaction (e.g. special school or mainstream school, classroom or playground), the interactive partner(s) (e.g. teaching staff and/or peers), and the context of the interaction (e.g. timetabled lesson, playtime). The second cycle of coding developed nodes in order to classify the nature of the

interaction through causation coding (e.g. who initiated interaction and how, and what the effect was). The third cycle of coding developed categories out of the codes, which led to the emergent themes presented in the next section.

## **Findings**

The findings of the research are described in terms of the main themes as they relate to each type of communication partner, i.e. adults, peers or ‘mixed’ (involving both adults and peers).

### ***Special school staff data***

Analysis of data describing interactions between Harry and adults led to the emergence of three main themes: *social invariance through environmental change*, *equilibrium of care*, and *narrated bodily appropriation*. Whilst each of these themes are cross-cutting in the sense that they refer to interactions with adults in both the mainstream school and the special school, the weight of the data strongly indicates that the theme *social invariance* primarily describes the nature of interaction in the special school, *equilibrium of care* took place in both the special and mainstream school, whilst *narrated bodily appropriation* was the primary mode of interaction with adults in the mainstream school. Each will be discussed in turn.

### ***Social invariance through environmental change***

The theme of *social invariance* refers to the ways in which teaching staff were consistent and predictable in their interactions with Harry despite variation in physical location (e.g. school hall, multisensory room) and activity (e.g. music therapy, literacy). Whilst the physical environment varied over time the social environment was heavily structured with staff routinely deploying a small array of social interaction strategies. These interactions were typically dyadic in nature (they involved Harry working with one member of staff),

normative (developmentally appropriate), and functional or pedagogically-framed (the interactions were planned, aimed to foster symbolic forms of communication, and took place within the context of a time-tabled activity). For example, almost on a daily basis Harry was encouraged to express a preference (e.g. smiling at an object to express 'like' or turning away from an object to express 'dislike'). He was also asked to make a choice between two objects (e.g. by prolonged looking at preferred object or reaching out to and touching the desired object). Harry was also asked to indicate whether he wanted to continue an activity by vocalising (or rather, shouting) upon request. For example, during Rebound Therapy the TA would bounce Harry up and down on a trampoline until he laughed. She would then stop bouncing and ask him to vocalise 'more' before she would bounce again. Staff employed a range of prompts if Harry did not perform as anticipated. For example, each morning Harry would have his teeth brushed by a member of staff. If he did not open his mouth upon request then staff would issue verbal prompts (e.g. repeat or modify the question, perhaps with a change intonation). If verbal prompts failed then staff would issue gestural and visual prompts (e.g. pointing at the tooth brush, holding it close to his face). Finally, staff would use physical prompts (e.g. rubbing the brush on his lips). Whilst Harry expressed a range of emotions during these interactions (from disinterested to excited) he was largely passive in the special school under these conditions.

### *Equilibrium of care*

The theme of *equilibrium of care* relates to the ways in which staff managed Harry's personal care and comfort whilst also trying to negate some of the side-effects of care. For example, staff would toilet Harry, massage his legs to relieve aches after prolonged sitting in his wheelchair, provide nourishment and administer medication (to reduce pain and prevent epileptic seizures). Whilst the medications were deemed imperative to sustain bodily

functioning and reduce discomfort they also made Harry heavily drowsy meaning that they impaired his ability to engage with others and participate in class. Staff would attempt to negate the effects of the medication through the employment of various strategies and routines in order to arouse Harry and increase his readiness to learn. For example, they would speak to Harry, sometimes in a high-pitch, loud or dramatic tone, and tell Harry where he was. They would try to wake Harry using physical encouragement (e.g. shaking arms, massaging his feet and hands and rubbing his shoulders). Staff would remove his shoes and socks, and splash water on his feet or sit him near an open window. Harry would typically exhibit a startle response, stretch as if he has just woken up, then frown and move his body away from the stimulation.

#### *Narrated bodily appropriation*

The theme of *narrated bodily appropriation* refers to a particular style of physical interaction between Harry and adults that typically occurred in the mainstream school. These interactions had a normative dimension in the sense that they encouraged Harry to behave like other mainstream children. During the interaction Harry's body (or parts of his body) were repositioned or moved according to the contextual demands of the situation. The interactions were invariably accompanied by narration or description of what was about to happen to Harry and why. The main interactive partner during these events was the special school teaching assistant (SSTA), but there were also occasions when the mainstream teaching assistant would engage in a similar manner. For example, during numeracy the SSTA would reposition Harry so he sat upright rather than slouched, raised and turned his head so he faced the teacher, opened the palm of his hand before massaging and counting his fingers, and closed his grip so he held a pencil before moving his hand across a page to make marks. The

physical event would be narrated, meaning that Harry would be given explanation as to why he was being moved.

### *Mixed Data*

Data coded as “Mixed” involved Harry engaging with both adults and peers at the same time. Interaction between Harry and other children in the special school was almost non-existent and the theme below describes Harry engaging with both the special school TA and children in the mainstream.

### *Symbiotic agencies and becoming-specialist*

One of the aims of the research was to compare and contrast how different groups (e.g. peers or school staff) interacted with Harry. However, what became apparent during analysis of the mainstream school data was that a significant amount of data described interactions that involved both peers *and* staff interacting with Harry. This interaction was theorised in terms of *symbiotic agencies* in the sense that the SSTA assumed a role where she not only initiated interactions between Harry and other children, but facilitated and sustained interactions. Harry’s social existence was *relational* to the SSTA’s since it was the SSTA who shaped Harry’s interactions with others. Harry’s peers were taught to interact with Harry using specialist communication strategies, and what emerged from this was a group of mainstream children defined in terms of *becoming-specialist* in their interaction styles with Harry.

Central to mainstream children becoming-specialist was the dynamic role of the SSTA who initiated and facilitated interactions between Harry and other peers. The SSTA would unintentionally attract other children to Harry during care-based activities such as tube-feeding. At first children observed from afar (coded as ‘care-as-spectacle’). However, over time children would approach the SSTA and ask questions about Harry (e.g. ‘What’s

that going into his tummy?’ ‘What’s wrong with him?’ ‘Can he talk?’). The SSTA would answer questions and invite children to address Harry directly, asking them to introduce themselves and hold or shake his hand. If children did not approach Harry the SSTA would wheel Harry to a group of children and ask them to greet him and share their work. The SSTA would instruct other children on how to support Harry’s learning (e.g. help him draw by holding his hand, read to him using dramatic intonation, and take it in turns when talking to him). The SSTA would model interactions with Harry whilst ‘decoding’ his behavioural repertoire and explain to others what Harry was thinking and feeling (e.g. ‘He’s tilting his head to listen to you’; ‘that moaning means that he’s happy!’). The SSTA demonstrated strategies for waking Harry and incorporated other children into her waking routines (e.g. by asking children to rigorously wiggle Harry’s arms). Children would be praised by the SSTA if they engaged with Harry, and she would phase herself out of interactions if the children appeared to be confident and competent

### ***Mainstream school peer data***

Peer data refers exclusively to data describing interactions between Harry and mainstream peers.

### ***Continuum of communication and continuum of support***

Interactions that primarily involved Harry and other children (without adult support) were complex and dynamic in nature and could be described in terms of their placement across two continuums. First, there was a *continuum of specialist communication strategy*. At one end of this continuum children exclusively employed the interaction strategies taught by the SSTA such as bodily appropriation, narration, ‘shake-to-wake’, using verbal prompts followed by physical prompts, repeating questions and pausing for prolonged periods to provide space for

Harry to respond. On the other end of the continuum children appeared to break from the specialist strategies and engaged with Harry in intimate and sometimes more creative ways, for example using touch (perhaps ‘reading’ Harry through hugging him or holding his hand to see if Harry reciprocated thus indicating ‘more’). The second continuum was a *continuum of pedagogical support*. At one extreme children – without seeking permission from a member of staff – assumed the role of the SSTA and supported Harry’s learning, such as helping him with painting (preparing his paints, putting an apron on him, and supporting him using verbal prompts to hold and move the paint brush, and physical prompts such as hand-on-hand movement of the brush). By contrast, the opposite side of the *continuum of pedagogical support* involved children interacting with Harry without any clear intent of supporting his learning. This led to the theme of *interaction-for-interaction’s sake*.

#### *Interaction-for-interaction’s-sake*

Whilst children’s interactions with Harry could closely resemble those of the SSTA (i.e. they were pedagogically focused and utilised specialist communication strategies) a significant amount of peer-interaction data could be defined in terms of the extent to which it deviated from this mode of interaction. The theme of *interaction-for-interaction’s-sake* describes this data. During this mode of interaction children would recontextualise classroom resources in order to interact with Harry. For example, they would tickle Harry’s nose with a paint brush to gain his attention or make animals out of playdough for Harry to squeeze. They would give Harry objects of affection such as home-made friendship bracelets and cards, and daisies found on the school field. Children would regularly perform song and dance routines for Harry in the playground, try to make him laugh by pulling silly faces, and support him during lunchtime play (e.g. he would be pushed in his wheelchair during chasing games, or children

would hide behind him during hide and seek). During these interactions Harry was typically alert, excited, smiling and oriented towards others.

Children's interactions with Harry were often physical in nature and included signs of affection such as hugging as well as physical greetings such as children stroking Harry's arms or patting his shoulders whilst saying 'Hello'. Physical interactions were also playful in nature and involved on-going or sustained, intimate exchanges such as reciprocated hand squeezing and 'tug-of-war' with interlocked fingers. These games were mutually pleasurable insofar as both Harry and other children were excited during the exchanges (smiling, laughing, making eye contact, etc.). Furthermore, physical engagement allowed children to 'read' Harry. For example, children would put their ears on Harry's chest to determine if he was hiccupping or pay attention to how tense his body was during hugging. Children knew if Harry wanted to continue holding hands because he grasped his partner's hand tighter if she or he tried to let go. Children would also comfort Harry through touch, such as rubbing his arms if they saw him shiver in the playground.

Physical exchanges sometimes appeared subversive. For example, during carpet time children were required to sit down, face the front of the class, listen to the teacher and stay silent. However, whilst the children were verbally quiet, they still engaged in non-verbal communication with Harry by holding hands, rubbing his legs, touching his wheelchair, and leaning against him. If he stretched his legs out in front of him children would rest their whiteboards or iPads on him and use his legs as a work surface. Harry was particularly animated whilst on the carpet. He would watch children raise their hands, locate the source of children speaking, and become increasingly happy and vocal when touched, eventually shouting out in excitement. Finally, it was through these intimate exchanges that potentially new forms of symbolic communication emerged. Specifically, when situated in a group Harry



would consistently perform a particular hand gesture (i.e. he would straighten his arm out and open his palm) which was taken as an attempt to initiate interaction. Children would hold his hand, stroke his palm, and give him physical attention. This initiation was observed only in the mainstream school.

## **Discussion**

The previous section described an array of themes that emerged during data analysis regarding the nature of social opportunities across mainstream and specialist settings, and the ways that different social groups afforded alternative types of interaction. This following discussion introduces core concepts related to the phenomenology of sociality which are then applied to the themes. In doing so it develops insights into how the nature or style of interactions are contingent upon the framing of the body in the interaction (e.g. as living or lived), understandings of symbolic interaction, and the mode of engagement or *Being-with* Harry (e.g. as a partnership, membership, or fusion). What emerges from this discussion is the view that specialist staff engage normatively in the mode of partnership, whereas mainstream children engage intimately and cut through the partnership-membership-fusion taxonomy.

### ***Working between the living and lived body***

Phenomenological concepts of the body are radically different from the Cartesian concepts found in traditional philosophy of mind. Rather than viewing the body mechanistically or the mind in terms of rationality, phenomenology examines the *embodied* subject and the role of the body in creating a meaningful world. Put differently, phenomenology makes the distinction not between mind and body, but between the living or objective body and lived body (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008). The living body is the body described by the natural

sciences, e.g. it is the physiological body understood in terms of its structures and functions. By contrast, the lived body refers not to the simple idea that we are a mind 'in' a body, or that we command a body with our mental powers, but that the body itself is intelligent and its situation in the world affords us meaningful perception. As Merleau-Ponty describes: "Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle alive; it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system" (2002, 115). Merleau-Ponty originally described this relation between body and world in terms of "organic thought" (2002, 89) but later on developed the concept of "flesh" ("*la chair*") (1968, 250) which incorporates the social. As Moran notes, Merleau-Ponty chooses the term flesh to "explicate and negotiate the physical, emotional, and symbolic mediating spaces that allow one human being to encounter another human being" (2016, 113).

This living/lived distinction can make the themes described in the previous section more intelligible by illuminating the target of interactions. For example, the theme of *equilibrium of care* describes the ways in which specialist staff attend to the personal care needs of Harry. During these interactions Harry is largely passive as staff operate at the level of the living body. However, the management of Harry's body by specialist staff also involves counteracting the cared-for or medicated-body insofar as attempts are made to arouse Harry and fight against the adverse side-effects of medications. The living body is manipulated (e.g. wiggled and massaged) in order to awaken the lived body. The actions performed on Harry's living body are not undertaken *with* him, but are done *to* it (the living body) or *for* him (the lived body-subject). Staff operated on the flesh (Merleau-Ponty 1968) as the site of the intersection between the physical and emotional: the body was manipulated in order to awaken and arouse.

*Flesh as the site for the symbolic*

Staff operated at the level of the lived body during formal pedagogic interactions which aimed to address the emergence of intentional or symbolic communication. The PMLD field understands the ‘symbolic’ with reference to the development of intentional communication. The earliest examples of symbolic communication include proto-declarative and proto-imperative behaviours, described in terms of a child deliberately directing another person through gestural commands (e.g. pointing at an object to share the experience of an object, or to indicate a desire for the object) (Bates, Camaioni, and Volterra 1975).

Phenomenology offers a different perspective of the symbolic. Rather than conceptualising symbolic communication in terms of a cognitive act whereby a sender delivers a pre-defined message to a receiver, phenomenology examines the symbolic more in terms of a behavioural unfolding:

The sense of the gestures is not given, but understood, that is, recaptured by an act on the spectator’s part. [...] The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body and mine his (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 215).

Kruger describes such intercorporeal interaction in terms of synchronic bodily intimacy or “entrainment” (2016, 271). Entrainment occurs when individuals synchronise bodily movements, facial expressions, postures, gestures, gaze patterns, and vocalisations with those whom they are interacting. Fuchs and De Jaegher refer to this process in terms of mutual

incorporation, defined as “a reciprocal interaction of two agents in which each lived body reaches out to embody the other” (2009, 474).

Both psychological and phenomenological understandings of the symbolic are present in the research data. For example, the special school theme of *social invariance through environmental change* describes the ways in which staff consistently attempted to support the emergence of symbolic communication described by the PMLD field. Across the academic term – and despite changes to location and activity - the teaching staff aimed to develop Harry’s symbolic communication skills. Harry would regularly be asked to choose between two or more objects through prolonged looking at the desired object. By contrast, during his placement in the mainstream school the SSTA replaced this structured approach with *narrated bodily appropriation*. During her interactions with Harry, the SSTA encouraged Harry to behave like other children in order to meet the contextual demands of the situation.

Both of these themes (*social invariance and narrated bodily appropriation*) describe interactions that are embedded in normativity. Staff in the special school encouraged Harry to behave in accordance with the next stage of communicative development (i.e. by developing gestural commands). By contrast, the SSTA in the mainstream school took control of Harry’s body so his actions resembled those of other children. In other words, in the mainstream school the physical was manipulated to resemble the symbolic understood normatively without appeal to the emotional or motivational. By contrast, in the special school the emotional was appealed to in order to motivate Harry to shape his own physical responses in accordance with the symbolic norms of the school.

The theme of *symbiotic agencies* and *becoming-specialist* describes how mainstream peers mimicked the SSTA and developed specialist stance in relation to Harry, i.e., by providing learning support whilst utilising specialist communication strategies (such as encouraging choice between two objects). However, the theme of *interaction-for-*

*interaction's-sake* describes the ways in which peers deviated from this role and interacted with Harry in playful and intimate ways. Children would recontextualise classroom resources, give Harry objects of affection, sing and dance for him, and play with him at break time. Furthermore, interactions between Harry and other children were often physical in nature and included reciprocated hand squeezing and 'reading' Harry through touch. These physical interactions resemble the phenomenological concept of the symbolic insofar as they embody entrainment (Kruger 2016) or mutual incorporation (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009). Furthermore, it was in the presence of, or rather through these intercorporeal exchanges that Harry began to develop new symbolic forms of communication. When situated in a group of children Harry would consistently straighten his arm out and open his palm which was taken as an attempt to initiate interactions. Children would hold his hand, stroke his palm, and give him physical attention.

### ***Modes of Being-with***

The above discussion examined the nature of concrete social interactions (i.e. how different groups of people interacted with Harry understood in terms of the distinction between the living body and lived body). In this section the interactions are further theorised in terms of how different forms of sociality structure concrete exchanges between Harry and others. Chelstrom's (2016) analysis of the work of Gurwitsch (1979) provides a helpful taxonomy for describing different ways of belonging to a group, or modes of "Being-with" others (Chelstrom 2016, 249) which will be deployed here.

Gurwitsch (1979) describes three forms of sociality: partnership, membership, and fusion. In *partnerships* individuals share a situation and, by virtue of the situation, each embodies a complimentary role that the situation calls for so that each individual can function within the shared situation. For example, within a doctor's surgery the role of the patient is to

communicate symptoms whilst the role of the doctor is to diagnose based on the verbal patient's reports and physical presentation. The situational context gives meaning to individual roles. By contrast, *Membership* involves belonging to a particular background context whereby ways of orienting oneself and ascribing value is shared with others. The community that you are a member of (e.g. what you are born into) grounds affect and values. Being a member of a community implies that we are always-already situated in and discover in shared *human* life-world. The community shapes how members interpret and codify experiences and actions. Finally, *fusion* occurs when individuals experience being as 'one' with others or a deep sense of identity: "Feelings of being united as 'one' have a meaning for the constitution of groups as well as for the actual being together of the members of the group" (Gurwitsch 1979, 141). The feeling of being united is pre-requisite and constitutive for being together in a group and involves the kind of unity found in friendship enacted through mutually reciprocated good will.

The taxonomy of Being-with developed by Gurwitsch (1979) can be used as a framework for analysing the themes developed above. The school staff engaged with Harry through the mode of partnership insofar as they embodied professional roles. Staff operating at the level of the living body attend to the responses of the body-object (i.e. addressing personal care needs), whereas staff operating at the level of the lived body attend to the emotional and symbolic (i.e. addressing Harry's personhood). However, insofar as staff address Harry in the mode of partnership they fulfil tasks and roles which structure the ways in which they engage with Harry. For example, the role of the TA in the special school was to support the development of Harry's communications needs through formal patterns of interaction based on training in the PMLD field. By contrast, in the mainstream school the SSTA assumed a variation of her professional role in relation to the situational context (Chelstrom 2016). Without the material and social infrastructure of the special school which

was used to shape interactions (e.g., Rebound Therapy required a trampoline and at least two members of staff), The TA's actions revolve around being Harry's carer, making Harry's actions resemble those of mainstream children, and educating other people (particularly children) on how to interact with Harry. Through the influence of the SSTA, other children are drawn into a common situation with Harry and develop expertise in interpreting Harry's behaviours and supporting his learning. The more specialist the children became, the less the SSTA was needed. The specialist actions of the children can be interpreted in terms of fulfilling the role of the SSTA.

From the perspective of Being-with, it may be argued that engaging with Harry in the mode of partnership allowed mainstream children to develop knowledge about Harry by working with him in context with guidance from the SSTA. However, the informal, physical, playful and intimate interactions (described in terms of *continuum of communication/continuum of support and interaction-for-interaction's-sake*) relied upon children operating in the mode of membership insofar as they drew on their cultural funds of knowledge regarding ways of playing with Harry and demonstrating affection which were not taught by the SSTA. Furthermore, following Chelstrom who states that feeling is grounded in the community, and that the community we are born into is "meaning bestowing" (2016, 252) it could be hypothesised that children's intercorporeal exchanges with Harry were culturally codified insofar as children intuitively read Harry through the lived body. This leads to the final form of sociality understood as 'fusion' where children feel united as or 'as one'. Fusion involves an intimacy between subjects and involves the kind of unity found in friendship enacted through "mutually reciprocated good will" (Ibid.). The physical exchanges of affection, the giving of objects of affection, the excited and reciprocal physical exchanges, and the desire to not just work with Harry (as a partner) but interact with him for the sake of

interaction implies that Harry was considered not just another child but a friend, and as a friend Harry was not just part of a class but a constitutive member of a social group.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examined the interaction styles of different communication partners (i.e. special school staff and mainstream school peers) towards a child with PMLD with the pseudonym of Harry. The research found that there was very little interaction between Harry and mainstream staff or Harry and special school peers. However, analysis of the interactive styles of special school staff and mainstream peers revealed a complex picture whereby concrete interactions (engagement with the living body and lived body) were shaped by different modes of Being-with Harry. It was not simply that one group (special school staff or mainstream peers) was *better* at interacting with Harry, but that there were qualitatively distinct forms of interaction across settings. Specifically, special school staff operating in the mode of partnership targeted the living body to wake the lived body, or formally structured interactions to foster the emergence of normatively symbolic forms of communication. By contrast, mainstream peers engaged across the modes of partnership, membership and fusion through playful intercorporeal forms of interaction, and in doing so appeared to indirectly foster the emergence of new formal symbolic actions. Although the research has a limited sample, it provides a novel window on how mainstream schools may offer naturalistic forms of interaction that provide an implicit pedagogy for learners with emerging social skills. Furthermore, whilst current research in the PMLD field draws on findings in developmental psychology to identify universal patterns of interaction, the research presented in this paper suggests that a more situated account of sociality should be explored further to understand how embodied patterns of interaction are historically, culturally and socially shaped.



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