**The phenomenology of intersubjectivity and research with profoundly disabled children:
Developing an experiential framework for analysing lived social experiences**

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Abstract

Profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) is a term used in the UK education system to refer to children with congenital neurological impairments that are said to result in global developmental delay. Traditionally, children with PMLD have been educated in special schools, and research informed by experimental psychology has aimed to develop intervention strategies and assessment tools to push children with PMLD through the so-called preverbal stages of development. There has been growing criticism of the dominance of psychological lenses in the PMLD field to the extent that they construct children's identities in terms of cognitive traits (or lack of). Furthermore, the post-positivist forms of experimental research have been criticised for overlooking the lived experiences of children with PMLD.

To address the situation, this paper aims to develop and examine a phenomenological framework that can guide researchers' reflection about the lived social experiences of children with PMLD. The paper explores literature on the experiences of embodiment and relationality, and investigates how a description of the lived experience of intersubjectivity can provide a framework for making sense of, and legitimising those tacit, pre-reflective intuitions about the sociality of children with PMLD. The paper draws from the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and his proponents to develop this framework, which is "tested" through application to participatory fieldwork research data that the author is currently engaged in. The paper concludes with a discussion on the strengths and limitations of this approach.

Introduction

In the UK the term "profound and multiple learning disabilities" or "PMLD" is officially recognised by the UK government's Department of Education as a category of special educational needs (DfE, 2015). It is estimated that between 9,000 (Salt, 2010) and 14,700 (Emerson, 2009) school-aged children have PMLD. Historically, the concept of PMLD is rooted in developmental psychology and refers to students said to experience global developmental delay stemming from neurological impairments (Scope, 2013). A review of the literature in this field has demonstrated that the cognitive abilities of children with PMLD are often compared to those of the neonate or infant insofar as children with PMLD are described as operating at the preverbal stages of development (Simmons and Watson, 2014). For example, children with PMLD are understood as being pre-volitional (they lack free will or agency and cannot move with intent) (Farrell, 2004); pre-contingency aware (they do not show awareness of cause-effect relationships) (Ware, 2003); pre-intersubjective (they do not represent other people as subjects "like me", and cannot differentiate between subject and object); pre-symbolic or pre-intentional (they do not intentionally communicate meaning to others) (Coupe O'Kane & Goldbart, 1998); and stereotypic in behaviour (they display reflexive, non-volitional behaviour) (Tang et al., 2003). In addition to profoundly delayed cognitive development, children with PMLD are also said to experience a range of additional impairments, including physical impairments (Neilson et al., 2000) and sensory impairments (Vlaskamp & Cuppen-Fonteine, 2007).

Research in the PMLD field has traditionally drawn conceptual resources from behaviourist and cognitivist psychology to develop assessment tools and intervention strategies. Whilst behaviourist research has aimed to support the functional or adaptive skills of children with PMLD, cognitivist research has aimed to support children's emerging object cognition and social awareness (Simmons and Watson, 2014). Methodologically, researchers have drawn from post-positivist forms of philosophy to develop experiments anchored in behavioural observation methods (e.g. applied behaviour analysis). Criticism has been levelled at interventionist research which treats children as objects of research rather than subjects to be consulted. Proponents of the latter view have drawn from constructivist philosophy to develop assessment tools such as "talking mats" that are said to reveal the preferences (likes and dislikes) of children with PMLD (Simmons and Watson, 2017).

The current author has developed an alternative research approach to exploring the lived experiences of children with PMLD. This richly interpretivist methodology is rooted in longitudinal, participatory observation methods, working collaboratively with children with PMLD and teaching staff in context, and writing storied fieldnotes or "vignettes" about the daily lives of children with PMLD (Simmons and Watson, 2014; 2017 - also see page 8 of this paper). The aim of this paper is to build on this approach by developing an experiential framework for analysing lived intersubjective experiences. Put differently, the aim is to develop and apply a phenomenological description of what it is like to experience the other as a social being, to engage with the other as a social being, and to be experienced as a social being by the other. In doing so, it is hoped that we can deepen our understanding of the sociality of children with PMLD.

Developing a phenomenological framework for understanding intersubjectivity

A phenomenological description of intersubjective awareness may appear paradoxical: it involves articulating something which, in essence, is pre-personal or pre-thematic, meaning that it operates *beneath* thematic or reflective consciousness in order to give rise to meaningful experience (which can be the object of reflection after the fact). In other words, the phenomenology of

intersubjectivity is one that attempts to describe that which is tacitly presupposed, that which gives origin, structure and meaning to experience, and that which is not in itself directly experienced but rather *discovered* upon reflection. It is important to note here that the aim of this paper is not to discover structures of experience, but to develop a framework based on contemporary literature in the phenomenology of sociality (Szanto and Moran, 2016). This in turn can inform reflection insofar as it allows the current author to trace the emergence of experiential moments where it is simply "known" that the other (in this case, the child with PMLD) is intersubjectively aware of the current author in the context of the author's research project. It is suggested that if this tracing can be possible, the phenomenological framework can help validate or authenticate how and why the author feels that something is the case, rather than simply ascertain that something is the case because the author experienced or felt it to be so. To put it differently, the aim is to explore how the structure of the author's intersubjective awareness during engagement with children with PMLD can provide an experiential form of evidence that children with PMLD are intersubjectively aware.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of bodily intelligence

The aim of this section is to introduce Merleau-Ponty's (2002) notion of bodily intelligence and the idea of immediate, perceptual meaning. This partly justifies and paves the way for a discussion of the nature and structure of immediate *social* meaning in the next section.

At the centre of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is a concept of embodiment that challenges the simple duality between mechanistic behaviour and representational mind. Merleau-Ponty (2002) describes a concept of bodily intelligence or "organic thought" (p. 89) which does not simply involve passively receiving sensory information, but actively engaging with and seeking out the world, organising perceptual information in terms of a gestalt, or meaningful relation between the body and world, which in turns gives rise to meaning in perception. This has traditionally been talked about in terms of affordances and is similar to the work undertaken by ecological psychologists (e.g. Gibson, 1979). The world is directly perceived in terms of what it affords for interaction (e.g. the ground is directly perceived as affording walking, a door handle as something that can be twisted). Merleau-Ponty explores the emergence of this meaning in terms of the motor intentionality of our pre-objective body, described as our immediate, tacit experience of our body in relation to the world. The body schema is an experience of the body that emerges through interaction with the world. This experience is not an explicit or thematic awareness of the body-object (the body image) but a tacit, pre-personal or anonymous awareness of embodiment. Such bodily awareness relates the subjectively lived body to itself and plays an active role in movement which may be described as proprioception/kinesthesis. Thus, we are immediately aware of being hot or cold, whether we are being touched or touching, and we sense the position and movement of our body. Furthermore, our experience of the world is always loaded with motor meaning. We sense whether or not our perception of the world is optimal and move accordingly, and objects in the world present themselves as things that can be acted upon in a particular manner. This is what Merleau-Ponty (2002) means when he says that the environment presents itself in terms of "*manipulanda*" (p. 120) – objects are immediately perceived in relation to motor intentionality. Our being-in-the-world is our existence in a world of personal motor signification, or "*Umwelt*" (p. 90). It is the "impulse" (p. 90) that runs through us. Being-in-the-world does not imply that specific stimuli cause specific behavioural responses. Instead, we can act in multiple ways to achieve the same ends.

The phenomenology of intersubjectivity 1: passive experience

The previous section described Merleau-Ponty's account of bodily intelligence and how perception was immediately meaningful in terms of motor intentionality. In the next section a review of the literature regarding the phenomenology of intersubjectivity will take place in order to develop a framework regarding the structure of social experience.

- Non-inferential awareness

A key theme in the phenomenology of intersubjectivity is that experience of the other's social being is non-thematic or non-inferential, meaning that we do not typically cognise or calculate the existence of self-awareness in others. Rather, we automatically recognise it through perception of the other's actions, what Schutz (1972) refers to as "signitive apprehension" (p. 100). When observing another person "[m]y intentional gaze is directed right through my perceptions of his bodily movements to his lived experiences lying behind them and signified by them" (ibid).

The experience of others as subjects is also defined in terms of reciprocity: "the experience of others as being aware of oneself in the same ways that one is aware of them" (Romdehn-Romluc, 2011, p.136). In essence, reciprocity implies being aware of another's self-awareness.

- Being-in-the-world as minimal unit of experience

Furthermore, we do not simply perceive individuals in abstraction from their environments, but instead perceive people directly as a *power* to perform in a given situation. The basic unit of social experience is the other person as a being-in-the-world. As described earlier, being-in-the-world is a concept that relates an embodied subject to his or her tasks. The world is made meaningful to the subject in terms of how it affords particular kinds of actions, and my perception of the other is one that is situated, as Romdehn-Romluc (2011) states: "[…] I am aware of the other's body and environment as complementary parts of one whole" (p. 139).

- The observer as being-in-the-world

Part of the reason why we perceive the behaviour of the other as meaningful is because we perceive the intelligence of those actions insofar as we would behave similarly in the given context. As Merleau-Ponty (2002) notes, the self perceives the other through the body, and in doing so discovers that the other's body is "a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, and a familiar way of dealing with the world" (p. 412). In other words, as a being-in-the-world, our intentions relate the self to the world because the other's behaviour is made intelligible through the intentional actions of the self.

- Affecting the observer as a being-in-the-world

The behaviour of the other can also transform my understanding of the world:

> No sooner has my gaze fallen upon a living body in processes of acting than the objects surrounding it immediately take on a fresh layer of significance: they are no longer simply what I myself could make of them, they are what this other pattern of behaviour is about to make of them" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, pp. 411-422)

Merleau-Ponty (2002) explores this theme in relation to a child's interactions with objects. At birth the child finds him-/herself surrounded by natural objects shaped into cultural tools, "like meteorites from another planet" (p. 412). The child appropriates the objects and learns to use them

like others do "because the body image ensures the immediate correspondence of what he sees done and what he himself does" (ibid.). In doing so, the tool becomes a *manipulandum f*or the child.

Merleau-Ponty describes this experience in terms of pull and drag – the body of the other presents as a "vortex" (p. 412) which my own world is sucked into, and in doing so the world emerges as something that is shared. The behaviour of the other is thus not simply a "mere fragment of the world" (ibid) but a way of elaborating the world, or a certain viewpoint. In other words, social experience can be mutually elaborating - the experience of the other can change my experience of my world and vice versa.

- Experiential Symmetry

Symmetry is a core theme in the description of intersubjectivity. The experience of intersubjectivity is the experience of being one of many selves who share a world.

> "Our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world (ibid)". He also states: "[w]hat we do in effect is to iron out the I and the Thou in an experience shared by a plurality, thus introducing the impersonal into the heart of subjectivity and eliminating the individuality of perspectives" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 144).

Romdehn-Romluc (2011) argues that, to experience the other as a subject (rather than an object) I must experience the other like I experience myself: "Merleau-Ponty seems to understand symmetry to require that I experience myself and others as being the same sort of beings, and that my experience does not present either of us as privileged" (p. 137). On a certain level, there is a lack of self-other differentiation in experience. Koo (2016) makes a similar point - whilst each of us has numerical identity (numerically distinct bodies), my experience of others does not privilege my perspective or the other as far as typical perception of other's action is concerned. Our experience of other people are anonymous, "i.e., not geared to any particular individual at the level of generic behavior" (ibid, p. 96).

Phenomenology of intersubjectivity part 2: active experience

So far discussion has explored non-inferential dimensions of intersubjectivity. This has focused on what may be dubbed a passive dimension of experiencing other people. However, there is a dimension that is very much active, and through which originality and creativity flourish leading to a new sense of a self and other. We do not simply watch others and non-inferentially grasp their meanings – we engage and communicate with others.

- Unpredictability and shared control

When we engage in a conversation with another person, we do not know exactly how the conversation will unfold and the direction it will take (unless we are reading from a script). In fact, a key theme in the phenomenological literature concerns both joint affect and the limited control I experience during social interactions. For example, in the experience of dialogue, Merleau-Ponty (2002) says that "there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are inter-woven into a single fabric" (p. 413). This intertwining of subjectivities into a third space, or common ground "of which neither of us is the creator" (ibid), hints at not just the co-constitution of a space, but the way in which such a space influences our thoughts and actions. What is important here is the notion that the shape and meaning of interaction is co-constituted in the

moment, that our words and thoughts are drawn from us during the dialogue and that the process and content of the dialogue is shared. "We have here a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behaviour in my transcendental field, nor I in his; we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity" (ibid). We can observe the other interacting with the world, and even focus on bits of behaviour, but by interacting with the other person a shared space emerges and even a shared being emerges. As Merleau-Ponty (2002) puts it: "Our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world (ibid)". He also states: "[w]hat we do in effect is to iron out the I and the Thou in an experience shared by a plurality, thus introducing the impersonal into the heart of subjectivity and eliminating the individuality of perspectives" (p. 144). Such interactions can lead to new experiences and draw "thoughts which I had no idea I possessed" (ibid). It is only after the interaction, upon reflection, that I integrate the experience into the singular and recognise the thoughts as "mine" as opposed to "ours".

- Mutual incorporation

During social interactions there are two centres of gravity (there are two people interacting). Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009) explain that the centres of gravity oscillate between dominance and submission during the interaction. When two people interact, it is possible that the co-ordination of movements, gestures, gazes, etc. overrides individual intent resulting in a shared sense-making act. This may be experienced as the interactive process gaining its own centre of gravity: "Each of them behaves and experiences differently from how they would do outside of the process, and meaning is co-created in a way not necessarily attributable to either of them" (p. 476). Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009) 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" (p. 474). For example, mutual incorporation can be used to described eye contact which takes the form of a "fight of gazes": I may feel the other's gaze as a pull, a suction, or also as an arrow that hits me and causes a bodily tension; I may feel his gaze right on my face (e.g. when blushing with shame); I may be fascinated by the gaze or withstand it, "cast it back" etc. How I react (e.g. blushing) to the gaze of the other begins to shape his next action. This non-inferential process is immediate; it does not rely on internal representations and mental simulation of the other's anger. Rather, we immediately feel tense, angry or threatened by the impact of the gaze.

- Gesture and symbolic communication

For Merleau-Ponty, a gesture tacitly becomes symbolic when it affects the behaviour of the other in such a way that the other's behaviour becomes an extension of the behaviour of the self who is gesturing:

> The sense of the gestures is not given, but understood, that is, recaptured by an act on the spectator's part. The whole difficulty is to conceive this act clearly without confusing it with a cognitive operation. 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, p. 215).

Marratto (2012) explains that what enables a gesture to become a sign is that it comes to function as a reliable indicator of subsequent movement. This requires that the person making the gesture is able to recognise another person's movement as a sequel to the previous gesture. This happens because the previous gesture motives the gesturer's own continuation of action.

- Asymmetry and the power to reckon with the possible

While symmetry plays an important part in the experience of the other, there are also times of asymmetry. As Merleau-Ponty (2002) notes, when arguing the case for symmetry "[…] have we not, in the general confusion, done away with the Alter Ego as well as the Ego?" (p. 414). The issue here is that, two people each have their own perspectives on the world, and perceptual experience can be defined as being ego-centric, i.e. each person has their own histories, life trajectories, opinions, tastes etc. In essence, the experience of self-consciousness is asymmetrical (Romdehn-Romluc, 2011). How can our experiences be both symmetrical and asymmetrical? This apparent contradiction - the idea of symmetry and asymmetry - is understood in terms of the "power to reckon with the possible" (Romdehn-Romluc, 2011, p. 93). The physical world becomes an environment (*Umwelt*) when we make sense of it and ourselves through action, in terms of how the environment affords us opportunities to interact. However, we can choose to act or not act, we have agency and a degree of freedom. We are always already in communication with the social world, but we can also choose to shy away from it, ignore it and disengage. Because we are part of the social world we can turn away from it, and self-consciousness is this expression (Romden-Romluc, 2011). Furthermore, whilst experiential symmetry is a core feature in interaction contexts, breakdowns in symmetry can occur when unforeseen events cause us to reflect about the interaction event (Fuchs and De Jaegher, 2009). In other words, during the interactional flow symmetry can break and we are reminded of our own individual subjectivities – we may be conversing, but the other's opinions starkly contrast with our own and force us to reflect.

<u>Summary</u>

To summarise, literature on the phenomenology of social experience reveals several key themes that can be used to develop a descriptive framework. Our awareness of the experiences of others can be non-inferential or intuitive. Our intersubjective awareness is not exclusively something that we construct through explicit reasoning, but can emerge through our empathic observations of others, as well as being enacted live and in the moment (e.g. primary intersubjectivity and secondary intersubjectivity). Furthermore, our awareness of others is one that locates them as agents in a meaningful environment, hence our minimal unit of social experience is the other as a being-in-the-world. We recognise the actions of the other as meaningful because we too could behave similarly in the given environment. However, our experience is also mutually elaborative – the actions of the other can open-up my world for suggesting new modes or forms of engagement, and my actions may suggest to others new ways of engaging with their world.

Extending this discussion, to reduce intersubjectivity to passive perceptual awareness is to overlook the role of interaction in shaping our social experiences, and the structures of that interaction. We do not simply watch others, but communicate with them. Through our interactions, we partly relinquish control to the other person and construct a common ground or third space that appears to exhibit control over the interactive process itself. Through this process, the I and the Thou are further relinquished and an experience of "we" emerges. This is what is implied by the term mutual incorporation – I tacitly respond to the non-inferential gestures of the other and modify my actions in light of the response of the other. Furthermore, the experience of intersubjectivity can be connected to behavioural differentiation. My gesture becomes symbolic insofar as it serves as a reliable indicator of behaviour in other people.

Moreover, whilst the structure of social experience being described allows us to theorise a sort of shared social becoming, this social identity (the experience of the we) can also be broken down allowing our reflective selves to emerge once again. We may experience a jolt to our interactional flow, and the symmetry being described becomes dislocated, thus reintroducing asymmetry.

The remainder of the paper will explore the utility of this emerging framework. It will first describe an on-going research project and then "test" the framework through its application to project data.

Project

The data in the next section comes from an on-going, three-year (2014-2017) British Academy-funded project, led by the author of this paper as part of his BA Postdoctoral Fellowship. At this stage formal data analysis has only just begun and the aim here is not to present the findings of the research, but to present data excerpts to illustrate how phenomenology can make the data intelligible.

The aim of the research is to explore how different educational environments afford alternative social opportunities for children with PMLD (e.g. mainstream school vs. special school, peers vs. adults, nursery vs. secondary school). The main opportunity for collecting data was through methods of observation resulting in extensive field notes and vignettes. Seven children were observed in total. Each child was observed one day a week in mainstream school and one day a week in special school, over a ten-week period (twenty observations per child). The methodology has been discussed in detail elsewhere (Simmons and Watson, 2017). Three methods were central:

First, pre-observation semi-structured individual and group interviews with parents and school staff were conducted. The aim here was to explore the abilities of children from the perspectives of those that know the children best. Second, unstructured participatory observation took place. The researcher's understanding of individual children was deepened by engaging in participatory observation and acting as a teaching assistant. By supporting children during their daily routines, the researcher could develop an intuitive grasp of the meaning of children's behaviours. Data from participatory observation was in the form of detailed field notes which chronicled my interpretation of children's behaviours in context. Third, semi-structured non-participatory observations were undertaken and these provided the main opportunities for data generation through the writing of vignettes. Vignettes are rich prosaic renderings of fieldwork observations. They have a narrative, story-like structure that preserves chronological flow and offer a vivid portrayal of the events in everyday life (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013). The researcher wrote vignettes 'live and in the moment', making detailed descriptions of children's interactions with others. The researcher began by recording contextual information such as place (type of school/where in school), communication partner (peer/adult), materials, and type of interaction (e.g. play). He then described the social exchange as it unfolded, paying attention to who initiated interactions and how, and the range of actions employed by the child with PMLD during exchanges (e.g. changes in facial expression, vocalisation, body posture, head and limb movements, etc.). The process of vignette-writing created a rich, textual catalogue of data for each child documenting the range of social activities and behaviours across different contexts/times. The researcher initiated informal discussions with teaching staff who observed the same interactions in order to elicit their interpretations and negotiate the meaning of recorded behaviours. Samples of the data are given below.

<u>Vignettes</u>

The two vignettes below are excerpts of field notes written during 2015-2016. They involve Abigail who was five years old, and Alfie who was eight. Both attended a specialist PMLD unit in a special school, and went to age-appropriate mainstream classes one day a week for the purpose of the research project. In each of the vignettes I felt that I was engaged in an interaction that revealed the social awareness of the children, though this awareness could not be "proven" to be of an intersubjective nature because it escaped the frameworks employed in the PMLD field. I will now apply the phenomenological framework to the data to test whether they help make the vignettes intelligible.

Vignette 1: Abigail

> Lovely interaction with Abigail this morning! I entered the classroom and began walking to the cloakroom. I noticed Abi out the corner of my eye (to the right of me) – head up, back straight, big wide eyes as if she was saying 'Hello! Look at me!' I sensed that she was trying to pull me into her world before I could [verbally] acknowledge her presence (well done, Abi!) I turn, but before I say 'hello' she gives me a big beautiful smile which makes me smile back. My words come out jumbled (I was about to say 'Good morning, Abigail' but for some reason changed part way through in order to comment on Abi's smile, and it came out "Good-smile-gailly'. I laugh at myself (felt a little embarrassed) and Abigail laughs out loud, which makes me laugh even more. We chuckle together. TAs [Teaching Assistants] turn around and comment on what a lovely mood Abi is in today. She stares at me with bright, sparkly eyes, as if anticipating that I will do something amusing. I dump my coat and bag beside her and start chatting. She maintains eye contact and groans excitedly. I waffle a bit then see the blue spikey rubber ball on the floor (same as Caleb's), give it a shake and show Abi. The ball flashes and she turns her head to face away and remains still so I thought that I'd lost her attention. She then starts snorting as if trying to hold in a laugh. I move and sit beside her so I can see her face - her face is red, saliva bubbles froth out of her mouth and she howls with laughter! (Ha!) I ask if she's teasing me but she refuses to make eye contact. Happy moans. She then appears to phase out and rubs her nose. It's time for register so she is wheeled to the table.

The above vignette begins with a sense of being pulled or sucked into an interaction with Abi. I notice her in my peripheral vision and immediately change my direction and purpose (from heading to the cloakroom to turning towards Abi with the view of greeting her). Abi's gesture (her smile) automatically elicits a smile from me. I am surprised by her alertness and it as if she draws from me a different verbal greeting from the one I anticipated delivering (instead of saying 'Good morning' I change to compliment her smile partway through the sentence). All of this happens in a matter of seconds and we enter into a phase of shared emotions – we both laugh after my vocalisation and each of our enjoyment enriches the other. Arguably, what emerges here is a sense of symmetry – following Zahavi and Salice (2016), it appears that we were both laughing at me, that there was

interdependence, meaning that our laughter affected the other, and that the emotion was experienced as being "ours". There is a limited sense of control during the interaction, at least on my behalf, hence the surprise at both the teasing, and the initial responses at the beginning which include me adjusting my focus, direction of walking, and speech. This is perhaps the first time that I have seen Abi teasing – and certainly the first time that I felt that she was teasing me. For Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009), the meaning that emerges from social interaction is original in the sense that no single individual can lay claim to it. Rather, it is created through the interaction process itself. This is what Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009) consider to be authentic joint or participatory sense-making and give humour as an example. Humour, they say, can arise from a "counter-intentional event in the interaction, for example a mishap or mismatch. Think of a child handing over an object to her father and, because of his hesitation, quickly taking it back. In this way, a game of teasing may emerge" (p. 477). It is unclear if I am the catalyst for the teasing sequence or whether Abi is practising a behavioural sequence learned elsewhere. However, I felt that she was teasing, though she may have been simply declining the object then laughed at my presence once more.

Vignette 2: Alfie

Alfie's interaction with me is qualitatively different in nature and not based on teasing but on intercorporeal sharing of physical space and direction of movement. I am left with a distinct impression of sharing or negotiating movement.

> Alfie's TA asked me to help Alfie with his lip balm. Staff have been keen to develop Alfie's sense of agency and have been encouraging to apply his own lip balm. This involves rubbing the balm on Alfie's finger and encouraging him to raise it to his lips and apply it independently. The TA places a small pot of strawberry balm near Alfie's nose and encourages him to smell it. 'Oh strawberry, Alf! Your favourite!' No sign of nostrils moving, but he arches his back, takes his feet off the footplates and straightens his legs (was this in response to the sweet strawberry smell?). TA saw him licking his lips (I missed this). TA tells Alfie that I will be helping him today: 'Show Ben how good you are, Alfie!'. I chat to him too – tell that I'm excited to see. Happy groan from Alfie. Following TA's instructions, I rub Alfie's finger in the lip balm (his arm was resting on the tray attached to his wheelchair). I hold Alfie's forearm and slowly guide it to his mouth. What was interesting is that I *felt* him accept me our bodies appeared to negotiate bodily space. When I first moved Alfie's arm he recoiled a bit (moved his arm towards his chest briefly - startle response?) I spoke to him and he almost instantly relaxed and let me *help him* guide his arm. He was moving roughly in the right direction (from chest to mouth) and I could feel him trying to move, but he also relaxed and let me guide him at times in a sort of 'toing and froing' motion, like we were both trying to traverse some sort of motor space between his chest and his mouth, or like he was trying to incorporate my movements into his. It was like he couldn't connect the two spaces independently was happy to be steered back on track. When the finger touched his lips he licked the balm rather than rub his lips with his finger. We repeated the exercise

> several times. Teacher comes over to watch and explains that he is
> happy to open his mouth but doesn't seem to know what to do with
> the balm when it gets to his lips.

In the above vignette, the intercorporeal comes explicitly into play. For Merleau-Ponty, in the same way that the parts of my body together make a complete system, my body and the body of the other also make a complete system. I had previously observed TAs (Teaching Assistants) guide Alfie's finger to his lips and perform the same routine. As a distant rather than a participatory observer I assumed that Alfie was largely passive during the routine. However, on becoming a participant my understanding of Alfie was enriched through his embodiment. Using concepts derived from the phenomenological framework developed above, we see several key features at work. At first Alfie is largely passive – he lets me rub the balm on his finger, but when I begin to raise his arm his recoil shows me that I am not completely in charge. It is unclear whether this is a startle response, a clear "no", or something else. However, he immediately relaxes and lets me guide him. Soon enough a sense of mutual incorporation emerges (a sense of two lived bodies reaching out to embody the other). When Alfie moves his fingers towards his mouth I stop guiding, but when he begins to move off-track I gently guide him and he lets me take over the movement before picking it up again. This sense of intertwined volitions is strong and takes me back – Alfie is incorporating the trajectory of my movement into his and vice-versa. Through this a sense of a third space emerges which emanates from Alfie and I and yet neither of us are in complete control. There is a sense of my gesture becoming symbolic insofar as I can read my gesture in Alfie's bodily movements and see them as a continuation of my own (beginning with his relaxation to my words through to the ways in which Alfie takes up my suggested direction in his movements). Similarly, it may be argued that his willingness to move independently and my willingness to stop steering him is confirmation that his gesture (i.e. his volitional powers) are recognise as symbolic by my body. Whilst the feeling or awareness of the agency of the Alfie is non-inferential and accompanies an emerging sense of "we", the vignette also demonstrates that I am partly forced back into myself as a reflective subject when I questioning the meaning of Alfie's behaviours (and the efficacy of my own attempts). This was discussed above in terms of experiential symmetry and asymmetry. It may be argued that Alfie's initial recoil demonstrates his powers to reckon with the possible.

Concluding discussion

This paper has attempted to develop and examine a phenomenological framework that can guide reflection about the lived social experiences of children with PMLD. It is the first attempt at developing such a framework and is motivated by a desire to challenge deficit-based accounts of children with PMLD whilst legitimising the researcher's intuitive experiences of children with PMLD as socially aware. The strengths of the paper lie in the extent to which it articulates a novel framework for guiding reflection about the pre-personal or pre-thematic dimensions of lived social experience in order to explain how and why we immediately experience children with PMLD as social. In doing so, it is hoped that we can build an experiential evidence base regarding the social awareness of children with PMLD.

Whilst the idea of a framework is novel (at least in the PMLD field), the framework itself has not been significantly developed. In addition to the need for further synthesis of phenomenological literature on the topic (to draw out more themes), there is a need to apply the framework to more data excerpts in order to test the framework's explanatory power. Furthermore, the framework is being applied at the end of the data collection phase of a research project which, methodologically,

has involved intensive and richly interpretivist forms of working with people with PMLD in context over 10 week blocks (Simmons and Watson 2014; 2017). Given this, there is a need to theorise how the process of familiarisation and working with children and teaching staff in context shapes our experiences, and how this directly influences the experience of sociality of children with PMLD. Phenomenologically, this has been described by Taipale (2016) as a shift from typification to individuation, meaning that whilst we rely on stereotypical identities to inform our empathic relation with strangers on a daily basis, we learn to see through typified identities and develop intimate, personal knowledge through regular engagement with others. This intimate knowledge becomes sedimented in our experience and leads to an enriched and personalised empathic stance with those that we know well. How this relates to the framework has yet to be theorised and will be one area to be developed in the future.

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