

# A Mother's Intentional Use of Serve and Return Interactions: A Start to Child Participation, Decolonized Parenting, and Child-led Play

Charmaine Bonello

Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malta  
[charmaine.bonello@um.edu.mt](mailto:charmaine.bonello@um.edu.mt)

## Abstract

Amidst the large corpus of international research on the relevance and deficiency of quality adult-child interactions in the first years of a child's life there seems to be limited knowledge on how adults can build their capacity to offer high-quality interactions in homes and early years settings. Recent neuroscientific evidence presents the "Serve and Return" (SR) model to promote the "practice" of successful interactions that help build a child's brain on a larger societal scale. To this, the SR model takes center stage in the presented work to showcase the aftermath of its intentional use by one mother to promote quality interactions with her infant in Malta. This paper aims to explore: (1) the attitudes, knowledge, and understanding the mother adopts to initiate and develop successful SR style of interactions with her daughter (age: 10 to 24 months); and (2) the type of interactions that were facilitated through the mother's intentional use of the SR model over time. The work is framed within Bowlby's attachment theory, postcolonial theory, and a child's rights lens. It draws on data from a fourteen-month study: the mother's reflective journal, transcriptions of recordings interactions, and monthly video-recorded analytic discussions between the researcher and the mother. Findings locate a transformation point that led the mother to explore a more sensitive and responsive attitude, strengthen her understanding, and overcome challenges faced with SR interactions. A key result is how a bi-directional 'loop' developed and generated affordances of child-led playful interactions that maximized learning, promoted child participation, and decolonized parenting. Implications are discussed to address the need for counseling, support, and training for parents and educators and activism on quality interactions.

**Keywords:** Serve and return, adult-child interactions, child-led play, decolonized parenting, child participation

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## 1. Introduction

Fisher (2016) opens the first chapter of her book on the improvement of interactions in the early years with the following phrase: "Nothing matters more than stopping, listening, and responding positively to the young child" (p. 1). In this light, early childhood policies, curricula, programs, and scholarly literature indicate how ongoing responsive, sensitive, and warm adult-child interactions are a strong predictor of quality early childhood education and care and thriving home learning environments (Bradley, 2019; Center on the Developing Child, 2016b; Dalli et al., 2011; Gerhardt, 2004; Sylva et al., 2004; Fisher, 2016; Nutbrown, 2012; Pianta et al., 2016; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005; Trevarthen, 2009). Conversely, research shows that the absence of quality interactions at home and in early years programs threatens children's well-being and learning, derails brain and healthy development, and deprives children of their rights (Center on the Developing Child, 2016a; United Nations, 1989; Walker et al., 2011).

Emde (1989) claims that babies are born with an innate capacity to initiate, sustain and terminate interactions with others around them. Adults in a child's life may nurture or damage this innate capacity. In Head Start, an early intervention program for children from a low socio-economic background, mothers were trained to intentionally use elaborative reminiscing with their children resulting in a positive impact on their fictional narrative skills; outcomes were better than those of an interactive book-reading program (Reese et al., 2010). In the study *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY)* (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), responsive adult-child interactions - where adults guided young children into deeper levels of thinking - were identified as a characteristic of high-quality early years provision. Martin et al. (2013) explored whether supportive parenting affected a child's interest and perseverance and vice-versa. They found that supportive parenting affected a child's interests more regularly and strongly. Such significant research findings surface a critical need for adults to build a strong image of children and childhood (Malaguzzi, 1993), where children are viewed as having their minds, active participants, competent beings, and capable social agents (Dalli & White, 2017). It may be argued that the awareness and support needed for more effective adult-child interactions are essential to liberate parenting, childhood, and education and care from dominant styles of interactions that may shun intrinsic motivation to learning, effective communication, thinking, and play. But how can adults build the capacity to improve the quality of their interactions with young children?

Shonkoff and Bales (2011), report about a collaborative multidisciplinary endeavor to explain how the ‘Serve and Return’ model was created to simplify the complex science underpinning effective adult-child interactions for families, educators, and society at large. As defined by The Center on the Developing Child (2016a), Harvard University:

*Serve and return interactions shape brain architecture. When an infant or young child babbles, gestures, or cries, and an adult responds appropriately with eye contact, words, or a hug, neural connections are built and strengthened in the child’s brain that supports the development of communication and social skills. Much like a lively game of tennis, volleyball, or Ping-Pong, this back-and-forth is both fun and capacity building. (p.1)*

This academic endeavor (Shonkoff & Bales, 2011) matched my intent to carry out a study that attempts to document the aftermath of the transfer of science to practice to improve the quality of interactions through an adult’s intentional use of the SR five-step model in the daily life of a child. In my context, Malta, I felt that such a study is needed as a response to the often observed controlling interactions between parents or pre-/in-service early childhood educators and young children. Adults educating and caring for young children need liberated minds to offer decolonized or liberated parenting, education, and care rather than “controlling” or “patronizing” parenting (Canella & Viruru, 2003).

Parents are the first and the primary mediators of their children’s learning (Barratt-Pugh et al., 2022) and, as such, have an essential role in promoting high-quality interactions. This paper intends to add to the scholarship of adult-child interactions by systematically tracking down the experience of one mother who intentionally uses the SR model with her infant (age: 10 months - 24 months) over a period of fourteen months. Findings suggest that the values, knowledge, and skills required to promote SR interactions intentionally and successfully are critical for adults, across the globe, to analyze their actions, and language and unload any heavy toxic cycles spiraling down from their past. Hopefully, the generated themes support and inspire parents, in-service and pre-service early childhood educators in the complex and dynamic task of improving their interactions with young children.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 The relevance and deficiency of quality adult-child interactions in the early years

A vast collection of empirical work on the quality of adult-child interactions in the first years of life cannot be left unnoticed. Self-regulation, emotional processing, executive function, and higher-order thinking skills are developed through quality interactions and practice in the earliest years (Center on the Developing Child, 2016c; Yin et al., 2019). Gerhardt (2004) highlights how the experience of babies with their primary caregivers plays a critical role in shaping a baby’s future mental health and well-being. She strongly argues about the importance of providing babies with responsive and nurturing care in the first years of life to develop strong emotional regulation, resilience, and social skills; if not these may lead to mental health problems, behavioral problems, and challenges to form secure relationships. Traverthen (2009) is popular for his work on intersubjectivity, translated in practice as the shared understanding and emotional communication that happens between two subjects – two individuals. According to Trevarthen (2009), ‘intersubjective communication’ plays a key role in the emotions and development of a baby’s brain therefore the provision of supportive and emotionally responsive care is essential.

In the same vein, Noddings’ (2005) ethics of care theory focuses on the affective and emotional aspects of human relationships and not simply meeting an individual’s needs. Her work provides a valuable contribution to our understanding of emotional engagement that engenders a nurturing and supportive environment for growth and development and how it guides and shapes ethical behavior and moral decision-making. More recently, Page (2018) coined the term “Professional Love” to increase awareness, through her important work, of the significance of reciprocal pedagogical relationships engendered by the ongoing positive interactions that occur between a parent, a primary caregiver, and the child in early years settings. Gopnik et al. (2001) explored how infants learn about their environment and found that they are sensitive to the social and cultural context in which they learn. They also discovered how infants’ understanding is influenced by the cues they received from other individuals. Similarly, the work of the Austrian pediatrician and early childhood educator Emmi Pikler (1893-1973) emphasizes the importance of close and trusting relationships between a caregiver and a child and creating a warm, safe, and supportive environment. As specified in the work of Gonzales-Mean and Widmeyer Eyer (2015), Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber (1904-2007; a Hungarian-born pediatrician and early childhood educator) hold ‘respect’ as the cornerstone of their globally renowned work with infants. They both advocated for respect and response to young children’s needs in warm and sensitive ways that nurture attachment and promote exploration, autonomy, and agency. Recent literature keeps showing that respectful, responsive, and sensitive caregiving between an adult and a young child protects several brain regions as they shape and improve the ability to learn and succeed in academics and the quality of life (Britto et al., 2017; Luby et al., 2019). Given such evidence, it is worth exploring the other side of the coin - what literature has to say when a deficiency of quality adult-child interactions prevails.

Bowlby (1969) attests that if the secure attachment - the need to bond and feel secure with a significant adult - is not developed, children suffer irreversible developmental consequences (e.g., aggression and reduced

intelligence). The deficiency of quality adult-child interactions, at home and out of home, engenders ‘toxic stress’ (Center on the Developing Child, 2016e; Shonkoff, 2010) and adversity, which interferes with the developing brain, an unhealthy consequence that extends to adulthood (Lima et al., 2014; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005; Shonkoff, 2010; Watamura et al., 2002). It is also reported that relational factors may overcome disadvantageous environmental factors in child rearing (SCCYP, 2015). Negative experiences, such as unsupportive relationships, are not “forgotten” when children grow up; they impact the developing brain and extend to the adult years (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008/2012, p. 6). Not listening or responding to children shapes children without having an identity. One concept that unpacks oppressive interactions and relationships with children is ‘black pedagogy’. The ‘black pedagogy’ introduced by the German educationalist and author Katharina Rutschky (1977) refers to child-raising methods that are manipulative or violent. Black pedagogy is intended to induce in the child an unconditional submission and obedience to the adult (Rutschky, 1977). Victims of black pedagogy have been unheard children who grew into adults aiming for efficiency and control, adults who despise weakness. The child is conditioned to meet the needs of the parents and not vice versa.

Advances in research call for a reconceptualization and immediate action when it comes to interactions and relationships that grow within the home and ECEC environments to identify, prevent and reduce neglect in early childhood (Center on the Developing Child, 2016d). Mahoney and Perales (2005), in their research with infants, found that relationship-focused intervention (RFI) improved their rate of cognitive development (50%) and communication development (150%). Parents’ responsiveness was detrimental in fuelling children’s spontaneous activity. As specified in the review of literature by Dalli et al. (2011) early childhood centers for under-two-year-olds “should be places where children experience sensitive responsive caregiving that is attuned to their subtle cues...” (p. 3). The authors mention research that shows how sensitive responsive caregiving, grounded in the reciprocity of interactions, influences how the brain develops for future learning and nurtures emotional regulation for young children (Campos et al, 2004; Gloeckler, 2006).

The literature above reiterates the key significance of the role of the adult in promoting quality interactions in the early years of a child’s life in homes and early years settings. Honing such values and beliefs holds significant implications for adults to engender a sense of entitlement to rights from the start, particularly the acknowledgment and support of young children’s participatory rights, which are also grounded in the notion of reciprocity of respect as a fundamental human relational need (SCCYP, 2015; United Nations, 1989). Yet, there seems to be limited research on how adults come to build a capacity to initiate and develop quality interactions with young children through a successful process of intense reciprocity, responsiveness, sensitiveness, and attunement. This paper attempts to provide some answers by placing the SR model of interactions (Shonkoff & Bales, 2011) as center stage in the study presented.

## 2.2 *Why do Serve and Return (SR) interactions matter?*

Several studies refer to high-quality adult-child interactions and approaches in different terms, including ‘adult-child reminiscing’ (Neale & Pino-Pasternak, 2017), ‘Sustained Shared Thinking’ (SST) (Department for Education and Skills, 2002), and ‘Serve and Return’ (SR) interactions (Center on the Developing Child, 2016b). The SR style of interactions makes a meaningful contribution to the existing important global literature on quality adult-child interactions in the early years of a child’s life. Early childhood is a phase of rapid change in brain development influenced by experiences and relationships that mark the behavior, learning, and overall health of a child’s life (Center on the Developing Child, 2016a). The brain has the neurons it will ever have from birth. After one year, the size is doubled, and by three years of age, it has already achieved 80% brain growth (Knickmeyer et al., 2008). The first three years of life are marked as the pivotal period in which a brain produces more than a million neural connections each second. Research shows that through this time frame, the brain shapes its architecture faster through experience and relationships that promote stimulating SR interactions (Britto et al., 2017; Knickmeyer et al., 2008; Center on the Developing Child, 2016b; Shonkoff & Bales, 2011). SR interactions’ ongoing back-and-forth motion forms strong neural connections and generates secure relationships and a stress-free healthy environment from birth (The Center on the Developing Child, 2016c).

Shonkoff and Bales (2011), through a seven-year collaboration, and in an academic endeavor to translate science credibly into policy and practice, provided a memorable framework, a simplified model – the ‘serve and return’ model. The SR model was created for individuals to better understand the importance of serving and returning between caregivers and children and promote it on a societal scale. The authors explain how the SR style of interactions includes an attentive and engaging response to a child’s cue, cry, or gesture and the way this is sustained through positive back-and-forth interactions. The following five key steps serve as a model for adults to become aware of how to systematically promote brain-building through SR interactions:

- Step 1: Notice the serve and share the child’s focus of attention
- Step 2: Return the serve by supporting and encouraging
- Step 3: Give it a name

- Step 4: Take turns... and wait. Keep the interaction going back and forth
- Step 5: Practice endings and beginnings

*Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University (2016c, p. 1)*

The moment a child ‘serves’ (Step 1 - for example, points his finger) implies that the child wants to share their thoughts as s/he knows that others around him have thoughts too. This shared cognition is referred to as ‘intersubjectivity’; when read by adults and acted upon, it serves as the key to shaping relations and ideas (Trevarthen, 2009). Relational pedagogy (Papatheodorou, 2008) is similarly grounded in intersubjectivity and attunement as key aspects of sensitive, responsive caregiving. The Center on the Developing Child highlights how well-informed adults who apply such interactions create joyful moments, and support in building the foundations for future learning, and their serves and returns with children “become second nature with practice” (Center on the Developing Child, 2016c, p. 1). Such recent neuroscientific evidence, surfacing a significant impact on the brain development of young children, triggered further research interest in adult-child SR interactions unveiling its beneficial use; some of which pertain to infant settings (Zsuzsa, 2018) and music in early education (Arrasmith, 2022; Reynolds & Burton, 2016). As Dalli (2014) states, “Adults who have responsibility for very young children must understand the ‘brain story’ and base their pedagogical choices on this understanding” (p. 2).

There seems to be no research that taps into exploring how an adult’s role could be systematically understood throughout the different stages of initiating and developing SR interactions in diverse contexts and cultures; and few studies have positioned parents as co-researchers (Hackett, 2017). “Research on parenting is needed to implement the EU’s core principles of democracy, equality, and respect for human dignity and human rights, among others.” (Borg, 2022, p. 25). In an attempt to fill this gap in knowledge, and beyond the ‘brain story’, this study explores the aftermath of intentional SR moments between one mother and her daughter. The paper explores: (1) the attitudes, knowledge, and understanding one mother adopts to initiate or develop successful SR interactions with her daughter (age: 10 months to 24 months); and (2) what types of interactions were facilitated over fourteen months. The key findings intend to answer the following research questions:

- *What attitudes, knowledge, and understanding does a mother adopt to initiate and develop successful Serve and Return interactions with her daughter (age: 10 – 24 months)?*
- *What types of interactions are facilitated when a mother intentionally uses Serve and Return (SR) interactions with her daughter (age: 10 – 24 months) over time?*

### 3. Theoretical framework

The review of the literature led me to several theories that are linked to the discourse, approaches, curricula, and pedagogies around interactions between adults and young children. In the initial stages of my investigation, the study’s theoretical framework was shaped by Bowlby’s (1907-1990) theory of attachment. His theory has been influential in our understanding of the nature of an emotional bond, a relationship built on interactions in the early years of life. The theory is grounded in the premise that every newborn has an emotional need to bond with a significant adult, the primary caregiver, and generally the mother. Bowlby’s (1969) popular as well as controversial attachment theory, emphasizes the importance of consistent, reciprocal interactions during the first five years of life for the child to develop a secure attachment with the mother - essential to control feelings and cope when the mother is not present. Bowlby referred to the mother as the person innately drawn to the infant. His work made mothers feel guilty to go back to their workplace. Later Bowlby (1979) revised his theory and explained attachment behavior as:

*...any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other preferred and differentiated individual (...). While especially evident during early childhood, attachment behavior is held to characterize human beings from the cradle to the grave (p. 129).*

His work increased the awareness of how vital the quality of adult-child interactions is and that an infant needs to form a relationship with at least one consistent and reliable adult caregiver to feel safe and secure. Ainsworth (1963) work continued to reinforce Bowlby’s attachment theory. His theory is relevant to the mother-child relationship (monotropy) central to the presented matricentric-oriented study. The application of attachment theory to the presented study lies in the slowing down process of examining the responsiveness and reciprocity within the interactions experienced by a mother and her infant through the intentional use of the SR model. In line with Bowlby’s psychological theory of attachment, the SR type of interaction is grounded in the belief that positive back-and-forth interactions promote healthy brain development.

The fieldwork surfaced other types of interactions that prompted a return to literature foregrounding postcolonial theory and a child’s rights lens. It is impossible to unpack adult-child interactions as existing in the absence of colonial encounters and oppression worldwide. According to Freire (1970), a problem needs to be looked at through its historical, cultural, social, economic, and political backgrounds. Indeed, the aftermath of the analytical process of this study, situated in postcolonial Malta, led to the adoption of postcolonial theory. In this article, ‘postcolonial theory’ is understood broadly - beyond colonial times - to surface any inherited authoritarian processes promoting or hindering quality adult-child interactions. With several scholars (Baldacchino, 2018;



Cannella and Viruru, 2003; Gupta, 2013; Viruru, 2005), and also in line with my recent work (Bonello, 2022), this article challenges the dominant view of children and childhood with more socially just ways of being and knowing interactions in the early years. In the presented work, postcolonial theory offers a viewpoint that challenges unjust power relations and promotes the need to deconstruct colonial narratives in adult-child interactions through consciousness-raising (Freire, 1970).

For high-quality interactions to be experienced by young children, adults need to view young children, from birth, as competent, social, and active beings that are capable of forming their views and that have the right to be listened to. This view of children is enshrined in the United Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). The increased focus on the realization of children's rights at a global level brought about the need for parents and early childhood educators to develop the skills and expertise needed to address issues related to the quality of their interactions with young children and their responsibility to promote children's rights from the earliest years. It has been reported that interventions to improve parents' support for children's overall well-being are questioned, and its link to children's rights is identified as an under-researched area (Scotland's Commissioner for Children and young people, SCCYP, 2015). This study addresses this gap in knowledge given that a surfaced key finding called for the adoption of a child's rights lens.

#### 4. Methodology

Anchored in the epistemological understanding of constructivism, this paper will present the qualitative methodology used to track down how a mother constructs knowledge when intentionally using SR interactions with her daughter over fourteen months. Conducting a fourteen-month research study with one mother and her daughter made it feasible for me to carry out this research study then. She was recruited through convenience sampling. The mother had shown interest to be part of a research study when her child was born and knowing the mother before the research helped in experiencing a methodology of friendship (Tillman-Healy, 2003). The research study was carried out through a collaborative approach using a principal researcher and parent-researcher partnership model. This implies that the parent is an active participant rather than an object of research. The parent-researcher is a Maltese 33-year-old mother of one child (female) holding a Master's degree in creativity and innovation. The pace of the study was guided by the researcher's and parent co-researcher's personal and professional lives, accepting the risk of an unpredictable fourteen-month period of study.

The parent-researcher acted as a participant observer during video-recorded episodes (recorded by herself through a mobile phone) with her child and took field notes using a reflective journal. The purpose of the journal was to help her revisit the SR moments, reflect, and record anything significant as the journey progressed. We agreed that, if possible, the parent-researcher recorded one video clip (maximum of 10 minutes) every fortnight, capturing significant moments of SR interactions. This decision minimized the risk of having the infant's behavior change, which was vital to strengthen the validity and reliability of the data. There were times when the parent recorded one video in a month instead of two, which was fine. The principal researcher and the parent-researcher met during regular one-hour meetings (monthly, if possible) for analytic discussions on the recorded episodes. These meetings were recorded via Zoom cloud-based service and then transcribed verbatim. Twelve analytical conversations and twenty-four mother-child SR interactions were recorded in fourteen months. The co-researcher model addressed issues of power imbalances between me and the parent (Tillman-Healy, 2003).

Research ethics approval was gained from the University of Malta. A process for the child to be recruited as a participant was followed. Both mother and father were asked for consent concerning the child's participation, given that the project started when the child was ten months old. A protocol for the child's assent was developed for the video recordings. It was signed by the parent-researcher (who was in charge of video-recording) to be respected. An approach of ongoing consent, in which the young child's assent (gaining the child's agreement to participate) depends on the parent researcher's attention to ensure – through any form of expression (verbal or non-verbal) – that the child is happy to participate in any recorded interaction (Cocks, 2006; Dockett et al., 2009). The parent-researcher maintained this relational, reflexive process (Cocks, 2006) to make ongoing judgments about whether the recorded interaction should continue, be canceled, or cut short.

In sum, data generation for this paper comprised of the following:

- 12 video recordings (45-60 minutes each) of the online analytical conversations (between the principal researcher and parent-researcher). 24 video recordings of mother and child serve and return interactions (between 1 and 10 minutes each) were used as stimuli for monthly analytical discussions between the principal researcher and parent-researcher.
- One reflective journal for the parent-researcher to revisit recorded SR interactions, and reflect and record anything significant about her and the child's experience in the process.

During the analytical discussions, we (the mother and principal researcher) re-watched the mother-child interaction recordings to make meaning of what was happening. We talked about the process, how it was initiated, how it was developing, and what could be uncovered beyond the already-known scientific evidence concerning SR interactions. Data from the recorded analytic discussions and the mother's reflective journal were analyzed by

the principal researcher using the process of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) and the software ‘Taguette’ - a qualitative data analysis tool. This process allowed for flexibility when interpreting the data. The interpretations given are the researcher’s way of making sense of the mother’s experience and the interactions facilitated with the intentional use of the SR five-step model. The preliminary findings were shared with the mother as an invitation to express her thoughts and reflections. The mother affirmed that the outcomes provided an authentic picture of what she experienced. Five key themes were developed, and these will be unpacked in the following section as a response to both research questions. The presented quotations from the mother’s journal and the recorded analytical discussions are underlined by the date and age of the child.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Response to research question 1:

- *What attitudes, knowledge, and understanding does a mother adopt to initiate and develop successful Serve and Return interactions with her daughter (age: 10 – 24 months)?*

Results demonstrate that the mother’s intentional use of SR interactions considerably impacted her attitudes, knowledge, and understanding of how she interacted with her infant over time (14 months). The following theme captures a significant transformation point during the first days of implementing the SR 5-step model and its impact on the mother’s mindset and subsequent interactions.

#### 5.1.1 Theme 1: A hidden passage

The initial readings about Serve and Return interactions and then the implementation of the intended five-step dyad interactions (Center on the Developing Child, 2016c) made the mother realize that she and her daughter “are doing quite a lot already” (11th September 2020). The exciting part during this initial phase was when the mother claimed that she located a knowledge gap:

*Mother: “My daughter serves many times during the day, and I try my best always to return. What was missing was the back-and-forth until she was ready to move on. This is what I need to introduce more.”*

#### **September 2020 – 10 months**

##### **Journal**

The mother is referring to the discovery of new knowledge gained after reading about steps four and five of the 5-step model of the SR style of interactions:

- **Step 4: Take turns... and wait. Keep the interaction going back and forth**  
**WHY?** Taking turns helps children learn self-control and how to get along with others. By waiting, you give children time to develop their ideas and build confidence and independence. Waiting also helps you understand their needs.
- **Step 5: Practice endings and beginnings**  
**WHY?** When you can find moments for children to take the lead, you support them in exploring their world—and make more serve and return interactions possible.  
(Center on the Developing Child, 2016c, p. 1)

The values, knowledge, and skills underpinning both steps assisted the mother in becoming aware of how in previous interactions, she may have been limiting the opportunities for her daughter to develop self-control, self-confidence, and independence and take the lead to explore the world around her – to be empowered. The same statement also indicates how the mother explored ‘a hidden passage’ that made her establish a new goal - her mission to improve the quality of her interactions with her daughter. From this point onwards, data from the video recordings revealed how she gradually adopted a more responsive and sensitive attitude toward her child (see data from Video Recording 1 and analytic discussions below). This lived transformation motivated her to strengthen and sustain the values, knowledge, and skills required to implement SR interactions successfully:

#### **Video recording 1 – Mother intentionally using the 5-step Serve and Return Interaction Model (October 2020)**

*Under the Lemon Tree (child’s age - 11 months)*

##### **Step 1: Find her interest and share the focus**

*Child’s interest – Child pointing at the lemons in a tree*

##### **Step 2: Support and Encourage**

*Mother and child touched the lemon together.*

*Mother: “Where are we? What is this?”*

##### **Step 3: Name the person, action, or thing the child is focused on**

*Mother: “There is a small lemon. Look at this! Here is a big one.”*

*The child touched the big lemon.*

*Mother: “Wow, (child’s name)!”*

##### **Step 4: Take turns... and wait. Keep the interaction going back and forth**

*The mother and the child took turns touching the small and big lemons. As they took turns back and forth, the mother picked the big and small lemons off the tree for the child.*

##### **Step 5: The child signals when they are ready to move on to another activity. Let the child take the lead and**

**support their exploration of the world, making more SR interactions possible.**

*The child looked at the dog in the yard. The mother responds immediately.*

*Mother: "What is (the dog's name) doing? They move towards the dog.*

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher:**

*Mother: "But now that I am aware and using it intentionally, it is clear how much more can be explored with her if I just wait."*

**September 2020 – 10 months**

*Mother: "... with this approach and what I read, I learned that it does not matter if she messes; it is important for her to explore."*

**March 2021 – 16 months**

*Researcher: "You weren't always like that because once, I recall that you had told me."*

*Mother: "Exactly, exactly. That's it! I allow her to guide herself now."*

**April 2017 – 17 months**

The mother became conscious of the value of the 'wait', time for exploration and wonder, and empowering the child to 'guide herself', an increased motivation to acquire new knowledge transpired. The mother's understanding of the importance of unhurriedness within interactions links to the work of Clark (2020; 2023) and her notion of educators as learners in 'slow pedagogies'. Also, the considerable change in the mother's attitude, knowledge, and understanding takes us back to bell hooks' (2001) parenting philosophy - 'liberative parenting' - that advocate for child liberation through empowerment. hooks (2001) associates the concept of love with empowerment, where an adult allows the child to flourish and become whom they want to be rather than being shaped by adults' hopes for their future. Sustained "nurturance and care" is what constitutes "love" according to hooks (2001), and this study shows that the SR model assisted the mother in developing deeper connections of "nurturance and care" with her daughter:

*Mother: "If we looked back about 6 or 7 months ago, maybe I was not practicing it in everything. Then, it starts growing within you... you know how..."*

**July 2021 – 20 months**

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher**

Another opportunity for self-transformation surfaced as the mother intentionally sought to untie several cognitive knots while using SR. For example, over time, she questioned the idea of whether it is acceptable to be a model to her child through the SR style of interaction:

*Mother: "But then, the moment I showed her that step, then it's like she creates her own game. So there will be moments when I have to show her if it is something new for her."*

**October 2021 – 23 months**

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher**

Another example is when the mother felt concerned with allowing SR interaction to flow when her daughter showed interest in objects she would never let her touch before. Yet, this was another moment where she learned that trusting the child might prove otherwise:

*Mother: "She is not afraid, but some things might be dangerous; for example, she took out the glasses and whisky last time, but she never drops these!"*

**March 2021 – 16 months**

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher**

Eventually, the use of SR interactions unveiled a recurring concern - when "serves" were missed:

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher:**

*Mother: "Cos, for example, it's time for us to go, and she would want something... she shows interest in something. So at times, you get into such situations that it's like, do you know how you have to return her serve, yet it's not the ideal time."*

**September 2021 – 22 months**

*Mother: "So many things happen, and I often think I could have filmed her on other occasions."*

**November 2021 – 24 months**

The mother also acknowledged that to sustain SR interactions successfully, she felt the need to continue investing in extending her knowledge:

*Mother: "True, it is an evolving process even within me. Certainly, I am practicing it better than at the beginning, and I remember when I had to re-read the notes you gave me. I suppose sometimes you need to touch up. I needed to assert that I was on the right track. Because at times, do you understand? In our rushed life, you know you get..."*

**July 2021 – 20 months**

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher**

It can be concluded that, upon discovering new knowledge, the mother explored a 'hidden passage' that led to a new mission for improved interactions. Data shows that the mother adopted a more positive, nurturing attitude through ongoing reflections, strengthened her knowledge and understanding, and took conscious decisions that

put the child at the heart of interactions – even when faced with challenges.

### 5.2 Response to research question 2:

- *What types of interactions are facilitated when a mother intentionally uses Serve and Return (SR) interactions with her daughter (age: 10 – 24 months) over time?*

Data analysis revealed three types of interactions that were facilitated following the mother's intentional use of SR interactions:

#### 5.2.2 Theme 2: Interactions that engender a sense of entitlement for children's rights

The mother's initial use of SR triggered a sense of conscious decisions that allowed for interactions that became invitations rather than requirements and resulted in an empowered child who feels validated and expresses herself clearly (see data from Video recording 2 and analytic discussion below):

**Video recording 2 – Mother intentionally using the 5-step Serve and Return Interaction Model (January 2021)**  
*The Cylinders (child's age - 14 months)*

**Step 1: Find her interest and share the focus**

*The child has a blue cylinder. She is looking through it. Mum repeats what the child is doing.*

**Step 2: Support and Encourage**

*Mother: "Now you do it. Where is (the child's name)?"*

**Step 3: Name the person, action, or thing the child is focused on**

*Mother: "You are going to grab the green cylinder and do it again? Hello (child's name)! I see you!" The child smiles, showing signs of contentment.*

**Step 4: Take turns... and wait. Keep the interaction going back and forth**

*Mum waits for the child to grab the purple cylinder from the box.*

*Mother: "You are getting out the big one now! Let me see you."*

*The child puts her head in the big one.*

*Mother: "You want mum to do it now?"*

*The child smiles. Mum repeats the action talking through the cylinder.*

*Mother: "Hello Charlotte!"*

*The child laughs and giggles. Mum invites the child to do it. She does.*

*The mother waits, then she asks: "Ok?" The child grabs the green one again and looks through the hole.*

*Mum: "Hello again beautiful. Now mummy... hello hello hello. (Child's name) again. Wow, well done!"*

**Step 5: The child signals when they are ready to move on to another activity. Let the child take the lead and support their exploration of the world, making more SR interactions possible.**

*The child grabs the blue cylinder and turns to the other side. The mother follows the child's lead.*

*Mother: "Yes, a lot! I have noted how she is learning to express herself more clearly over time, even though there is no clear language yet."*

#### **January 2021 – 14 months**

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher**

Video recording 2 and the latter claim mirror Article 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) - *every child has the human right to express themselves*. It was also observed that the core principle embedded in the UNCRC, 'child participation', was rooted in the developing SR interactions. In her journal, the mother shared more examples of how she got to know her daughter better by responding to her serves and following her lead, realizing that such moments are mushrooming:

*Mother: "I've discovered she loves animals, her 1st birthday cake then had to be with cats and dogs... she served at the cake figurines, it feels like these moments are multiplying, and the fruit of this experience is truly beyond my expectations at times."*

#### **November 2020 – 12 months**

**Journal**

In this vignette, we can observe how the one-year-old child is influencing the issues affecting her life - as stated in Article 12 of the UNCRC - as her mother informs future learning experiences by actively listening to her child through SR interactions. Children need safe and secure spaces to flourish and have their rights respected. This study shows how the knowledge gained, and the intentional use of the SR model assisted the mother in upholding her daughter's civil rights to participation and freedom of expression through concrete action. Here we evidence the child's choice of 'voice' (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2016) before she can talk through the facilitated interactions underpinned by the value of Article 12 of the UNCRC - child participation.

#### 5.2.3 Theme 3: Interactions that decolonize parenting

It was striking to learn how the use of SR was facilitating another type of interaction underlined by a sense of equity in power relations. The evidence unmasked the way the mother was working through ingrained structures of oppressive parenting:

*Mother: "For me, a book has to be read from cover to cover. But this is because of our adult brain, but for her,*



*this is different. That is a struggle, that you have to let her go if she decided to stop in the middle of a book, and that it is fine."*

**September 2020 - 10 months**

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher**

**Video recording 3** – Mother intentionally using the 5-step Serve and Return Interaction Model (September 2020)

*Me, Mum, and Book (child's age - 10 months)*

**Step 1: Find her interest and share the focus**

*Child's interest - Book; Sunflower*

**Step 2: Support and Encourage**

*Mother: "Wow!"*

**Step 3: Name the person, action, or thing the child is focused on**

*Mother: "There is the sunflower!"*

**Step 4: Take turns... and wait. Keep the interaction going back and forth**

*At one point, the child served again pointing at the rabbit. The mother shared the focus: "That is a Bunny Rabbit"*

**Step 5: The child signals when they are ready to move on to another activity. Let the child take the lead and support their exploration of the world, making more SR interactions possible.**

*The child signaled to stop and opened another book. The mother allowed the child to take the lead.*

*Mother: "The book video (Video 1) - In that video, she showed when she wanted to finish, it was so clear! That's when I became aware that she knew that that serve and return was over. She removed the book then. That is when I understood the theory! I watched the video again and said, 'It makes sense'!"*

**September 2020 - 10 months**

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher**

The latter statement shows how recordings provided the mother with an opportunity to reflect, rethink and act in future interactions with her daughter. During the discussions, the mother repeatedly referred to the rewatching of the video and how this made her conscious of the way she was liberating her child and her parenting skills over time:

*Mother: "Now, when I rewatched that video, I realized that she has been doing this for quite some time. I was not aware yet that she was transferring and repeating this action to other contexts at different times. Without the intentional use of serve and return, I most probably would have guided her to use it differently instead of letting her explore and use the object in different ways. Without serve and return, I would not have followed her intentions and thoughts; I might have told her to go on the tricycle, for example. Or, for example, the washing machine recording, when she turned the laundry basket, I would have probably turned it back to its original position." (see data from Video recording 4 below)*

**December 2020 – 14 months**

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher**

**Video recording 4** – Mother intentionally using the 5-step Serve and Return Interaction Model (September 2020)

*In the Laundry Room (child's age – 13 months)*

**Step 1: Find her interest and share the focus**

*Child's interest – The laundry basket*

**Step 2: Support and Encourage**

*Mother: "What are we going to do with the laundry basket?"*

*The child points inside the laundry basket.*

*Mum: "Wow!"*

**Step 3: Name the person, action, or thing the child is focused on**

*Mother: "Are we going to play with the laundry basket?" Mum rocks the laundry basket and the child smiles.*

**Step 4: Take turns... and wait. Keep the interaction going back and forth**

*The child touches the laundry basket and beats it with the palm of her hand as if it were a drum.*

*Mum: "Oh, we are banging now!". The mother repeats the child's action, saying "Bum, Bum...".*

*The child looked at the mother with a big smile (intense moment). The child beats again and again. She turns the laundry basket and looks inside.*

*Mum: "Now?"*

*The child looks at her mother and moves the laundry basket. She puts her hand in the washing machine to take out the clothes and put them in the laundry basket.*

*Mum: "Good girl! Like Mummy, right? Where are we going to put it? In the laundry basket?"*

*Mum helps the child to pull out the clothes. The child is concentrated on the task. She smiles and takes out more clothes from the washing machine.*

*Mother: "You help me, right?"*

*The child smiles again.*

*Mother: "The clothes are cold. Look at this jacket! This is (child's name) jacket!"*

*The child wears a big smile and puts the jacket in the laundry basket.*

**Step 5: The child signals when they are ready to move on to another activity. Let the child take the lead and support their exploration of the world, making more SR interactions possible.**

*The child finds a label on the floor and moves away from the laundry basket to pick up the label.*

*Mother: "Oh see, we found something else".*

Time transpired that the use of SR interactions facilitated interactions that promoted liberated parenting and childhood (see data from the discussions below).

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher:**

*Mother: "We noted me and her father is that thanks to serve and return, we have become 'relaxed parents', if she is making a mess we say or 'u iva (oh yes) serve and return'."*

**March 2021 – 16 months**

*Mother: "She feels comfortable and joins and leaves the cooking as she wishes."*

**October 2021 – 23 months**

Through a postcolonial lens, the mother is seen as going through a process of deconstructing internalized previous assumptions and reconstructing her thoughts to inform future action. SR interactions helped the mother become conscious of the power relations involved, which allowed for a re-balancing of that power – providing affordances for decolonized interactions grounded in the principle of liberation (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2001). Suppose the adults who parent, educate and care for young children are unaware of the aftermath of inequity in power relations. In that case, interactions may continue to be colonized, underpinned by excessive power and control – making self-actualization and empowerment for children hard to reach. Alice Miller (1990) builds on the concept of black pedagogy (Rutschky, 1977) mentioned earlier in this paper. She reiterates that once parents, the unheard children who never had the opportunity to express themselves will shape their children as they wish, making mistakes in complete unconsciousness. Miller (1990) adds that this vicious circle is spiraling across generations in different shapes and forms and that this repetition compulsion can only be broken with awareness.

This study shows that the intentional use of SR interactions assisted one mother in a postcolonial context to become conscious of inherited inequity in power relations and take action for more socially just interactions. In this light, Cannella and Viruru (2003) pose a question that may challenge our thoughts and actions within the complex task of promoting socially just adult-child interactions: "How do our beliefs about childhood serve as violence against children, a kind of epistemic violence that limits human possibilities, freedom, and actions?" (p. 2).

5.2.4 Theme 4: Interactions that extend and progress child-led play

As the SR model facilitated interactions underpinned by the values of child participation and liberated or decolonized parenting, it also extended and progressed child-led playful interactions, as evident below.

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher:**

*Mother: She is trying harder to serve; before she used to do 10 serves in the day, but she is serving 25 times daily now! (Mother excited about this). All the time!; even when her Grandma was babysitting her, she told me, "You know she is pointing everywhere!"*

**October 2020 – 11 months**

*Researcher: "Do you realize that we have a 6-minute video?"*

*Mother: "Yes, we broke the record! The serve and return are taking longer now!"*

**March 2021 – 16 months**

*Mother: "Yes, when we play, she leads the way. I let her choose the toy, lead play the way she intends, and play with the toy the way she wants. She is the leader."*

**July 2021 – 20 months**

*Mother: "And now that I have watched it again, my goodness, it is so evident that she is thinking. She becomes serious; she squeezes her eyes. Then she was hearing the peacock and probably thought what that was." (see data from Video recording 5 below)*

**July 2021 – 20 months**

**Video recording 5 – Mother intentionally using the 5-step Serve and Return Interaction Model (July 2021)**

*The animals outside (child's age – 20 months)*

**Step 1: Find her interest and share the focus**

*Child's interest – The child points at a chicken*

**Step 2: Support and Encourage**

*The child: "Tittit"*

*Mother: "Chicken, well done!"*

**Step 3: Name the person, action, or thing the child is focused on**

*Child: "Titititit"*

*Mother: "Chicken, well done (the child stopped pointing)."*

*Child: "Pxixpxix".*

Mother "How are we going to call them?"

Child "Pxixpxix".

Mother "Pxixpxixpxix".

**Step 4: Take turns... and wait. Keep the interaction going back and forth**

The child points at the chickens again.

Mother: "Look, there they are. Chicken. Chicken".

Child (excitedly): "Nanaaaa".

Mother: "A peacock and a cat, do you see the cat? (the child stares in silence) Let me show you. Look how many beautiful things, interesting things, how many animals. The cat at the back, miao, miao. Call him. Can you see him? (the child remains silent). He is at the back. And then there is the peacock and the chickens".

The child remains silent for around 13 seconds.

The mother waits.

The child points again and says: "titi".

Mother: "Did you see the cat?"

**Step 5: The child signals when they are ready to move on to another activity. Let the child take the lead and support their exploration of the world, making more SR interactions possible.**

The child waves and throws a kiss with the palm of her hand.

Mother: "Say bye to the animals. Do you want to look for ducks now?"

Here we see the mother realizing that her daughter has a mind of her own and how important it is that she responds to her child's theory of mind – i.e., what Meins et al. (2002) refer to as 'mind-mindedness'. The mother also mentioned that "now there is no conscious effort" and how SR interactions gradually became "second nature" (January 2021, 14 months), as reported by the Center on the Developing Child (2016c). She added that the playful interactions were now embedded within the deeper level of emotional connectedness, or 'attunement' (Rose & Rogers, 2012), as she became more responsive, fully present, and engaged in meeting her daughter's needs:

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher:**

Mother: "Before, it seems like the interaction through serve and return was more like, by the book. Now it's like, as I said before, our conversations have become more complex... in a way, you are using it without realizing it. I know this is the basis of everything and our foundation to build!"

**June 2021 – 19 months**

Mother: "There is a huge bond between us; the knowledge helped. I am convinced that all this has brought us closer."

**June 2021 -19 months**

The latter statement ties in with Bowlby's (1969) theory emphasizing secure attachment between the mother and child, a condition that supports the child to face life's challenges and reach their full potential. This evidence of sustained attachment also mirrors Noddings' ethics of care theory (2005), placing relations and connectedness at the heart of sustained, reciprocal interactions. Conversely, inconsistent responses may engender mistrust and jeopardize the well-being and emotional resilience of the child through lifelong uncertainty (Cairns, 2002).

5.2.5 Theme 5: A bi-directional 'loop' for liberated adult-child interactions

An overall key finding of this study is how through the mother's changed attitudes, knowledge, and understanding that facilitated other types of interactions, child-led serves, and returns seemed to have developed into bi-directional child-led and adult-led SR interactions, like verbal communication, and these filtered through everything:

**Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher:**

Mother: "It seems like it's both ways. It's not like she showed interest, and then we continued like that... It's like I showed her something, and she returned. ... both ways... The truth is that it seems like the serve and return have become how we communicate. It has become like an everyday thing. She does it to me, and I do it to her often."

**April 2021 – 17 months**

Mother: "SR has become our main mode of communication; it is a very rich and multilayered relationship. She uses it to play, explore, and ask for help. It has helped both her and me."

**April 2021 – 17 months**

Mother: "Emm... it's like this thing, how can I put it? It seems it filters in everything... it's like you start applying within more things, and the more you use it, the more it filters through everything. The child has become so in tune. I am trusting my child more."

**July 2021 – 20 months**

In this light, and beyond the neuroscientific evidence highlighting the benefits of brain building through the intentional use of SR interactions (Center on the Developing Child, 2016b; Shonkoff and Bales, 2010), this study captures a visual representation of a *bi-directional 'loop'* that promotes *liberated adult-child interactions* (Note 1):

Mother: "Because you feel in a **loop**, in a way, it helped us parents to go with the flow."

### **March 2021 – 16 months**

#### ***Data from the monthly analytical discussions between the mother and researcher***

Evidence shows that the cyclical bi-directional movement - generated through the mother's intentional use of SR interactions over time - was vital in assisting the mother in enacting interactions that allowed the young child to develop her own identity and experience liberation (Freire, 1970). 'Us parents' going with the 'flow' may also be interpreted as a sign of liberated parenting.

The five themes in this section provided some answers to both research questions. Yet, the outcomes may trigger further questions. For example, would the use of the SR model assist in promoting the right start to children's rights, decolonized parenting, and child-led play across diverse cultures and contexts? Rogoff (2003) suggests that cultural processes are not to be taken for granted, but these differences are best unpacked, understood, and respected.

### **6. Conclusion**

This study sought to unmask a mother's journey as she intentionally initiates and develops SR interactions with her infant over time. In response to the research questions, the presented five emerging themes strengthened the theoretical base of this work by tracking down how this process:

- considerably changed the mother's mindset on children and childhood;
- strengthened the mother's understanding of effective adult-child interactions through a located gap in knowledge – steps four and five of the SR model;
- assisted the mother in facilitating interactions with her infant that are grounded in children's rights, particularly the core principle of 'child participation' (Article 12, UNCRC, United Nations, 1989);
- served as a wake-up call for the Maltese mother to better understand her social conditioning and how this may have been influencing who she is as an adult and the way she responds and interacts with her child;
- led to growing and extended child-led playful interactions that became second nature and filtered through everything, thus creating deeper emotional connections between the mother and the child;
- made visible a potentially helpful model (Note 1) - a 'bi-directional loop' – that underpins a mother's use of SR interactions and how this process generated challenges overshadowed by benefits for both the mother and the child.

Given these critical findings, this work also presents implications for practice, policy, and research:

- Re-evaluating interactions in early years: Addressing the need to support parents and pre-service and in-service early childhood educators to be more intentional and make conscious decisions when interacting with young children. This study's emerging 'bi-directional loop' model may be used for professional development and parental support for quality interactions. Addressing the need for high-quality interactions in the early years aligns with a core objective of the European Union (European Commission, 2021), and the Council of Europe Recommendations on Policy to Support Positive Parenting (Council of Europe, 2006) and High-Quality ECEC systems (Council of Europe, 2019).
- Decolonizing interactions: Re-examining and addressing the legacy of colonialism and longstanding global processes of domination, reshaped in the identity and cultures ingrained in the way we talk to children and interact with them. There is a need for new online and offline spaces and resources to create a dialogue among parents and educators of young children to reimagine and question interactions – to 'slow' down (Clark, 2020, 2023), work in partnership, and embrace postcolonial consciousness as "the starting point of reflection" (Barongo-Muweke, 2016, pp. 5-6)
- Future research directions need to value the importance of orchestrating actors (families, children, educators, policymakers, leaders, etc.) and arenas (early years settings and home environments) concerning lived adult-child interactions. Such research may trigger more individual and collective reflection and action that supports secure attachment (Bowlby, 1969) and an ethic of care (Noddings, 2005) for more smoother transitions and more socially just interactions in the daily lives of young children.
- The world needs more activists promoting awareness of high-quality interactions with parents and educators and how this assists in the processes of realizing children's rights in their everyday lives (United Nations, 1989) - towards liberation for all to become more fully human (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2001).

The limitations of this study are grounded in one case study focused on a mother's intentional use of SR interactions (Center on the Developing Child, 2016a; Shonkoff & Bales, 2010) with her daughter (10 – 24 months) in Malta. Yet, it may be argued that it has provided profound insights for adults who parent, educate and care for young children. One message that strongly comes across is that if we want peace in this world, we need to invest in our children before they are born. Parents and educators of young children need to understand and accept children for who they are and not for whom they want them to be. Hence, it is a must for expectant parents and early childhood educators - in partnership - to develop a shared understanding of the values, knowledge, and skills needed to promote socially just and rights-based adult-child interactions at home and in early years setting. bell



hooks' (2001) work advocates for cultures to respect and uphold children's rights for justice – because, as she firmly claims, there cannot be love without justice.

Another key takeaway from this study, detected through a postcolonial lens, is the ongoing need to critically reflect on adult-child interactions to confront unmasked oppression and support freedom across diverse cultures and contexts. In this study, the SR 5-step model served as a tool for a mother - in postcolonial Malta - to improve the effectiveness of her interactions with her daughter. The overall result was the mother's capacity to overcome initial challenges and historical forces and facilitate child-participatory, decolonized, and child-led playful interactions sustained by an ongoing reflection and action process. When interacting with young children, we need to be fully awake, and we are responsible for reflecting and asking: Whose language are we using? Whose actions are we modeling? Whose history underpins our interactions with young children? Not doing so may result in being unconsciously drawn to the refusal to become better parents or early childhood educators - like moths to an inescapable flame.

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**Notes**

Note 1. See Figure 1 below.



Figure 1. Overall key finding: A bi-directional 'loop' for liberated adult-child interactions