

Finding the Questions Worth Asking

by Ann Pelo

Teachers are eager to teach; and to teach, we think, means to talk: to question, to nudge, to instruct, to challenge. I spoke recently with educators in Halifax about the habitual ways in which we frame teaching and learning. During our conversation, a teacher named Brittany commented, “We talk too much. We think that the children aren’t learning if we don’t ask them questions. We need to talk less, and more genuinely.” Brittany hit the nail on the head. We tend to fling questions at children, one after another, a rapid-fire sequence of queries that bear little relevance to a child’s pursuits and that hold little interest for us or for the child:

*What color is that?
Which scoop holds more sand?
How many blocks are in your tower?
What letter does your baby’s name start with?*

Our intention is to teach, but our verbal quizzes reduce learning to a recitation of superficial facts.

When we reshape our intention, though, from *teaching* to *thinking*, our exchanges with children change. They become authentic conversations, and we ask our questions with the mutual aims of understanding a child’s thinking and of supporting a child’s search to make meaning — a search to *know*, rather than to *learn*.

During our days with children, when should we speak and what should we say? What principles can guide us, as we embark on a journey into conversation with a child?

Listen. Listen Some More. Listen Again.

As we cultivate the skill of asking good questions, we ought to practice being quiet, developing an ease with not-talking.

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Good questions are born in silence. They begin with the humility of listening.

As a child offers her ideas, listen with self-awareness:

*What touches your heart?
What values are ignited as you listen?
What catches your attention, leaves you curious, eager to hear more?*

When we listen with self-awareness, we bring our full selves to the conversation, we stop being teachers intent on instruction, and become companions in the project of understanding.

As a child offers her ideas, listen with curiosity. Louise Boyd Cadwell (2003) urges us to listen “for a surprise and the birth of a new idea.” This way of listening — with deep curiosity, with willingness to be surprised, with an expectation of discovery — asks us to give ourselves over to a child’s line of reasoning, to fall into her intellectual landscape as into a new and wondrous world.

A four-year-old child gazes out the window at the racketing leaves on a gusty autumn day. “Why do leaves change color in the fall?” she asks, in a voice more musing than demanding.

*Aware of the complex threads woven into her question, I join her musing: “What **is** it about fall that would spark such a change in leaves?” This is a crossroads question. Asked with the intention to teach, this line of inquiry could easily disintegrate into a directed interrogation aimed at a particular and pre-determined revelation about photosynthesis. Asked with the intention to think, however, this question opens into a cascade of hypotheses to be considered, evaluated, and integrated into insight about the mystery of seasonal transformation.*

Ana: “In the fall, more things are happening to leaves, so they’re changing. Leaves get frosty-cold in the fall, and they need to comfort themselves.”

Alex: "I don't agree with you, Ana. Color doesn't do anything. It just decorates the leaves. It just makes things pretty."

Me: "Your conversation makes me wonder: What **is** the job of color for a leaf?"

This was, for me, a new perspective from which to consider autumn's reds and golds. Curious, I listened to the children's hypotheses about the role of color in the lives of leaves.

Ana: "The color is the mommy and the leaf is the baby."

Alex: "Color says 'Okay, trees, time to go to bed,' like the color is the mommy. Why leaves change color is that the color lets them know it's fall and time for trees to go to bed and sleep through the winter. And in spring, they'll wake up again and move like the wind."

Madeline: "Sometimes they die in the dark time. They fall off the tree. When a leaf drops on the ground, it feels sad, and wants to be alive again."

Ana: "The leaf needs comfort. A hug would help a leaf. Maybe you could stay with it. You just give it comfort before it dies."

"A surprise and the birth of a new idea," yes! This leads us to another principle to guide us as we seek questions worth asking.

Speak the Language that the Children are Speaking.

In this snip of conversation about why leaves change color, the children's line of reasoning involves wild and preposterous leaps of imagination, even absurdity, and certainly bears little relation to the actual facts of leaves' seasonal changes. But the internal logic of their line of reasoning holds substantive insights into maternal care, into the longing for life, into the tender act of witnessing life's end. It is a compelling chain of thought, a way of thinking that lifted me out of the ploddingly familiar storyline about leaves in autumn and into innovative and enlivening thinking.

The common wisdom is that young children can't think abstractly, that

meaningful metaphor is beyond their reach. But children often communicate in metaphorical language.

An educator in Reggio Emilia, Veà Vecchi (2010), writes that metaphor corresponds to "an investigative attitude towards reality, to participation that allows our thoughts to open out." If *thinking*, rather than teaching, is the goal of our exchanges with children, then 'an investigative attitude' is just what we're trying to cultivate, in ourselves and in children.

With our questions, we seek to invite this investigative attitude, this outward expansion of thought. Our goal is not that a child learn the facts, or arrive at the 'proper' answers, but that she becomes a nimble and reflective thinker, a person with big ideas and with the capacity to analyze those ideas through critical and imaginative reflection. It doesn't much matter what the investigation is directed towards, or where it leads; an investigative attitude often leads to surprising new thinking, often not immediately or obviously linked to the initial query — from curiosity about leaves' autumn colors, for example, to potent articulations of what it is to be human.

Our conversations with children unfold most powerfully — and lead to surprises and the birth of new ideas — when we speak the language that they speak. When the children speak the language of metaphor, we ought to join them and speak the language of metaphor. When the children speak the language of mechanics and physics, we ought to follow their lead, and speak the language of mechanics and physics — even if it seems unmatched to the subject at hand.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER



Listen to how the conversation about the changing colors of leaves shifted to the language of mechanics, which sparked a new set of insights:

Alex: "First when it was fall, the leaves were all green. Then just a teeny bit of color — a dot of color came on the edge. It moved slowly around the leaf. It very quietly tiptoed into the middle and that's how leaves change."

Me: "Where does that first dot of color come from?"

Beck: "It came from the sky, out of the clouds. The color inside the cloud pushed hard on the clouds and then it came outside of the cloud — down, down, down. If a leaf was hanging out, it came on the edge and moved quickly along the whole leaf. It only happens if a leaf is hanging out."

Me: "What happens if no leaf is hanging out?"

Beck: "The color might just go dripping on the ground."

Me: "What happens if it goes dripping towards the ground, but there's a house or a car or a person in the way?"

Alex: "You could probably feel it. I went under a cloud before and I didn't feel color dripping onto me."

Ana: "If the color came from the clouds, then the clouds wouldn't be white. They would be color."

When we speak the language that a child speaks, and stay well-anchored in the context of the child's thoughts — no matter how preposterous or unlikely or obviously incorrect — we help the child interrogate his logic, find the contradictions in his thinking, and work to bring them into alignment. This leads to a related principle.

Join Your Attention to the Children's Attention

Educator Carrie Melsom urges teachers to "join our attention to the children's attention, rather than asking the children to join their attention to what we think they ought to pay

attention to, or to the learning goals and content knowledge that has our attention."

Before we ask a question of children, we can ask ourselves:

What are the children trying to figure out?

What theories are they testing?

What questions are they asking?

What understandings and misunderstandings are the children drawing on? Are there inconsistencies or contradictions in their thinking?

How are the children building on each other's ideas, perspectives, and contributions?

What might I ask that would be in service of their thinking?

Rather than using questions to lead a child to a particular revelation, or to direct a child's thinking towards content knowledge that we've determined has merit, we ought to ask questions that are useful for the child's course of exploration — which is to say, for the child's development as a thinker. This is what we mean when we talk about the co-construction of knowledge: thinking about thinking, in order to analyze and refine hypotheses.

Here's how George Forman (1989) describes the search for understanding that comes from authentic questioning and the effort to make meaning: "The teacher is not teaching the child to ask the teacher better questions, but to ask better questions of the set of facts," which means, ultimately, "asking herself better questions."

We can offer questions with a light touch, to invite the child's reflection on the implications of her thinking.

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Educational activist Jonathan Kozol (2000) speaks to the value of leaving ample space around our questions, rather than hurrying in with questions aimed at correction or instruction:

“Children need some reason to believe that what they say will not be heard too clinically, or put ‘to use’ too rapidly, and that the gift they give us will be taken into hands that will not seize too fast upon their confidence, or grasp too firmly, or attempt to push an idea to completion when it needs to be left open, incomplete, and tentative a while.”

As the conversation about the lives of leaves continued, the children’s thinking became tangled. It seemed to me that they didn’t see the tangles; they kept pressing forward with increasingly discordant ideas. I didn’t particularly care if they figured out the ‘right answers’ about the life cycle of leaves, but I did care that they not get clumsy or sloppy in their thinking, that they be accountable to the hypotheses they proposed, and to their own capable intelligence. So I asked questions to invite their gaze to linger on the tangles, not to suggest how they ought to untangle the cognitive knots, but certainly to suggest that the knots needed untangling.

Ana: “First a plant or leaf dies, and you give it water and it grows. Sometimes you go home and you find it dead.”

Me: “What does water do to the plant?”

Madeline: “It gives the plant help to help get the plant back up. The leaf starts to be green again and a person puts the green leaf back up. It stays there always, and if it falls you put it back on. It lays there until water comes on it.”

Me: “The person puts the green leaf back on the tree. Does it stay there always or does it fall off?”

Madeline: “When a leaf drops on the ground, it feels sad, and then it gets water and it feels happy, because it knows it’s going to grow. The baby comes out of the branch when it’s big enough and keeps getting bigger on the branch.”

Me: “What is the baby that grows on the branch?”

Madeline: “It’s a leaf that keeps growing until it is a really big one, and then when it’s dead, it falls on the ground and then someone puts water on it and then someone puts it back on the tree when it’s alive.”

Me: “Do leaves on a tree start as babies on a branch, or do they start by turning green on the ground when water comes on them?”

Our conversations with children can be incubators for thinking, for participation in the intellectual life of a community. We act with regard for children’s human dignity when we:

- Listen with our full attention.
- Learn the languages that children speak.
- Join our attention to their attention.
- Allow space and time for exploratory thought.
- Relax our urgent push to teach.

Reggio educator Carlina Rinaldi (2003) asks us to be “side-by-side with children in their search for answers. Only in this way will children return with full rights among the builders of culture. . . . Only in this way will they sense that their wonder and their discoveries are truly appreciated because they are useful.”

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