

A Manner of Speaking by Bonnie Neugebauer

"What do you like about working with other children?"

"What does collaboration feel like?"

"What is difficult about working with others?"

Similar questions were posed to young children when I asked for help in preparing for my presentation at the Boulder Journey School Summer Conference, which focused on collaborations in all the ways people work together in early childhood programs.

Chloe, eight-year-old daughter of Scott Bilstad, Creative Director at *Exchange*, shared several important ideas:

"One of the good things is . . . when we were working on a map, I like to see where everybody's house is and if I were working on that alone, I wouldn't know where everybody's house is."

"Cooperation feels sometimes hard and sometimes pretty good."

"The hard part is usually you can't figure out which game to play."

"Okay . . . Okay, what game should we play?"

"Mine!"

"No, mine!"

"No, how about this?"

"Maybe we should . . ."

"Everyone has a different idea and wants to play theirs first."

"The good part is all the other ideas that people have that I would have never thought of before. You have more ideas with other people and learn more things."

Tina Reeble from Dimensions Early Education Programs in Lincoln, Nebraska, had great conversations about collaboration:

Alex, age 7: *"We are trying to share; that's cooperation."*

Ben, age 4: *"Cooperation means to wait."*

Scout, age 4: *"It means calm down and be quiet."*

Emerson, age 3: *"We are doing big work together!"*

We need each other to help us understand more than we can know on our own.

Sometimes collaboration feels good; sometimes it doesn't.

Negotiating can be challenging because everyone has a self interest in their own ideas.

People together can accomplish bigger work than each individual can make happen alone.

Each person has to share, but also listen quietly and respectfully.

"Where are the voices of the children?" This question is becoming ever more central in our dialogues about early education and the rights of young children. As a course of habit, we are provoking each other to involve children in conversations that impact them. But seeking out children's voices and asking the questions is only a piece of the practice. We must ask questions in a way that supports the participation of children and we must be attentive to listening to all the languages in which they speak. And we must expect that they will have important and interesting things to say.

Invited into the conversation authentically, by adults attuned to asking the questions thoughtfully and listening carefully, Chloe, Alex, Ben, Scout, and Emerson each demonstrated that even young children know a great deal about collaboration. Their ideas became the best part of my presentation in Boulder.

Working effectively with others is a lifelong challenge for everyone. As Chloe says, *"Cooperation feels sometimes hard and sometimes pretty good."*

It's safe, comfortable to collaborate with people who are most like ourselves; but the possibilities are limited by your common knowledge base. Collaborating with people who are different from us in age/gender/culture/perspective/life experience . . . challenges us to learn about ourselves and to see new possibilities.

Sharing our experiences with people who have vastly different experiences is really making ourselves vulnerable. It can feel pretty uncomfortable. But connecting with someone else almost always brings rewards. This is also true when we reach across misunderstandings and try to understand another's perspective — hard and good, both.

Collaborations are certainly more work than going it on your own, but engaging with others is the power path for generating ideas, projects, initiatives, and thinking that make a difference in the lives of children. Involving children in our collaborations is an important strategy for seeing things differently. Given the authentic opportunity to be heard, children are provocative collaborators who will strengthen our work in ways we cannot see by ourselves.