

“I have lots of ideas, so many ideas you wouldn’t even think of”: thinking conversations in a nursery school

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Children are driven by curiosity to enquire about their experience and make meaning. This delightful innate disposition gives a vibrant context in which we work with young children – thinking, learning and talking together. In his book *Thinking in Education*, Matthew Lipman (2005:13) describes:

a world in which everything invites inquiry and reflective questioning, a world as provocative of thought as it is of wonder and action.

At Madeley Nursery School language develops through dialogue arising from children’s curiosities, thoughts and proposals in what can be described as “thinking conversations”.

There are many connected layers to the practice at Madeley Nursery School; it is not a linear process, but rather occurs in recursive loops. We will start with pedagogical observation.

The essential pedagogical tool - working with documentation

Documentation in the form of A3 journals is completed during and after each session, and includes written notes of conversations and actions, photographs and artefacts made by children. These journals hold the traces of children’s ideas and memories which can be revisited and used by children, educators and families. They become tangible proof for children that their

words and ideas are important. Children will often ask the educator to write down their words or they will ask to see previous documentation using statements showing reflective thinking (Lipman, 2003) that involve their re-examination of the subject matter and their metacognition.

Finn: “I have lots of ideas, so many ideas you wouldn’t even think of. I had an idea last night – a big idea – I was thinking about it.”

George: “My brain is always thinking even when I’m asleep.”

Florence: “My brain sleeps when I sleep.”

Role of the educator

The professional development of staff is essential to increasing the quality and efficacy of any school or setting. By using pedagogical documentation and reflective practice at the core of our work we are learning about the “identity of things” by “aspiring to be more refined listeners to the possibilities children offer.” (Vecchi, in Gandini, 2005:138). In this way professional development is happening every day, and educators are better able to engage in thinking conversations that support children’s enquiry and meaning-making. Notes from governor evaluations acknowledge some of the strategies used by Sue and Mo, educators and key-workers, during one session:

Sue and Mo consistently try to draw the group together in acknowledging one another’s discoveries/ ideas.

Sue and Mo continue to ask children questions about what’s happening in the moment.

Thinking “out loud” is generally encouraged and resonates with the children’s natural inclinations.

A sense of preserving the “plurality of views” is evident in many of the responses to questions in small and larger group settings.

Educators meet at the end of each session and reflect about children’s research and ideas, enabling these interests to be supported by colleagues in all areas of the environment.

The role of classroom organisation and materials

The environment has an important role in creating enriched contexts that support thinking conversations. Poly-sensorial natural materials, living things and resources that provide contrasts increase the richness of dialogue and can help to extend and elaborate children’s inquiry. These materials are provided in multimodal provision we call a multi-station or trans-contextual environment:

Multi-stations give (children) opportunities to compare and discover similarities and differences and connect their ideas and thought processes. Different materials raise different questions and variation in environments





broaden knowledge and understanding in deeper more meaningful ways. (We Think Everywhere, 2019)

This approach to planning and provision works together with the strategies of the educator to create a nursery in which thinking and meaning-making is at the heart of everything that we do.

The importance of difference

Similarly to the value of having contrasts and difference in the materiality of the environment, we must encourage and support different opinions between the children. In this way ideas change and innovation and creative new possibilities evolve.

This example occurs in the studio space which has been resourced to explore the

inside of seasonal squashes – with digital projections, paint and drawing materials at the easel, on the table and in large format on the floor, models of the inside of the human body and magnifying glasses. Children engage in these exchanges with the vitality of inquiry. The educator uses phrases such as, “Do you agree” and “Have you got another idea” to invite children to disagree.

Xander: “Like a football.”

Joel-Archie: “Like a bomb.”

Georgina: “It’s got light green.”

Jaihan: “It’s soft.”

Joel-Archie: “No it isn’t, it’s hard. It’s got teeth on the top.”

Rio: “It’s heavy.”

Jaihan: “I can’t roll mine. It’s too heavy.”

A group begin to draw around a squash.

Xander: “It’s a bumpy, bumpy, bumpy pumpkin.”

Joel-Archie: “I just need to do round it.”

Xander: “My pumpkin is falling into the water.”

Jaihan: “It’s got curly hair.”

Joel-Archie: “It’s like Granny.”

The children begin to dance in the digital projected light. Two children pull “grumpy pumpkin faces” at each other, laughing. The children ask to see inside the squash. We begin to cut it open.

Joel-Archie: “Wow.”

Jaihan: “There’s no seeds in there.”

We cut it open further.

Jaihan: "How did those seeds get in there?"

Orla: "They're dead."

Jaihan: "No it's alive, because it's got holes in."

Otto: "They're crying."

Orla: "That seed is crying, that one's happy."

Georgina: "They're all crying. I can hear it."

Jaihan: "Not that one, that one's fat."

Thinking conversations between children

In this example, the studio classroom has been resourced for children in response to their interests in mixing potions and transformation. As the children use the materials at the table and easel they talk together, their utterances zig-zagging between different forms and functions: statement, inference, preference, affirmation, elaboration, request, prediction, narration, invention, logic and fantasy in a pattern of connections (Bateson, 2002).

Nine children are working at the table. Rachel, their key-worker, is with them with a camera for photographs and video and a note book for documentation.

Ellaby: "When I squeeze my colour in this one it made two bubbles."

Charlie: "Rainbow, rainbow. Look Rachel, look, look, I made pink."

Rachel looks and inclines her head but doesn't speak.

Gabriel: "I'm making a potion water which is called medicine, it's to make the trees better. Medicines can be dangerous."

Charlie: "Wet, wet bubbles."

Gabriel: "You can't do it if you haven't got an adult with you, because then you might get it all over your top."

Charlie (pointing to a newly mixed colour): "What's that?"

Rachel: "Mmmmm – what is it?"

Charlie: "It's a dangerous one. Darker, darker."

Rachel: "It is going darker."

Jake: "I mean brown and red make slop."

(pause and laugh) "I said slop!"

Idan: "Look at all of these colours I mixed up."

Jake: "I'm going to make the best Colour Ranger ever!"

Rachel: "I love that idea of a Colour Ranger."

Hattie: "I filled that up to the top."

Florence: "I made green. No, I made brown."

Ollie: "Let's try a bit more blue."

Hattie: "I made pink."

Charlie: "I got two bubbles. Look, a dangerous one."

Gabriel: "If you had this sort of medicine it could make your belly pop and you could die."

Hattie: "I'm turning red."

Carlie: "More, more bubbles again."

Jake: "I've got a peachy colour. Gabriel made orange. How did you make it yellow? Did you use white and grey and brown?"

Idan: "This is a dangerous colour."

Hattie: "I've made green."

Idan: "Rachel, look, I've made brown."

Ellaby: "Idan, can I use some of your brown please?"

Ellaby: "Now I made brown too."

Idan: "Wow."

The educator says very little during this episode but her pedagogical decisions when planning, interacting and listening have been deliberately chosen to promote dialogue between children.

Children work around a large table or alongside at a double easel. Close proximity encourages contagion of ideas between the children. They readily borrow words, phrases, concepts and actions from each other. They invent new possibilities by conflating disparate experiences from home and popular culture with those at nursery, such as the "Colour Ranger" and test theories as they emerge ("Let's try a bit more blue").

The key-worker is alongside the children. Her attention is not taken elsewhere as she focuses on listening to the children, documenting and acknowledging their ideas and proposals with small and meaningful gestures such as inclining her head or looking between children as they interact together. It is important that the interest shown by Rachel, either through processes of documentation or with verbal or non-verbal gestures, arises from a genuine interest in the children's enquiries. The children can sense the integrity of the educator who takes their ideas seriously.

Rachel tells the children that the materials are there because she had noticed their interest in mixing and making potions earlier in the week. She shows them previously made artefacts or notes in the group journal where they have shown their interest. She reminds children by quoting them directly, attributing ideas to individual or pairs and groups of children.

This is a key strategy to model language for thinking. These observations should also include children's actions as well as their words promoting multimodal forms of expression that underpin and elaborate verbal communication, increasing complexity of thought. (Vecchi, in Gandini, 2005)



"I remember when....."

"I was curious about..... when you said....."

"I have been wondering about....."

"You made me think about..... when....."

Rachel is very aware of the power that she has within the group. She is mindful of the risk of creating a culture where the adult becomes the fulcrum of all talk (Foucault, 1980). However she is also part of the social group constructing learning together. She does not leave the children alone to get on while she does other "jobs". Her role is to listen and respond with authenticity, delicacy and playfulness together with the children (Vygotsky, 1980).

In conclusion

The dominant discourse regarding language and child development is often gloomy. The national press report the latest



publications on increasing levels of language delay citing the ills of modern life such as poverty and digital media (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018). We challenge this deficit view and challenge ourselves and others to create places that inspire curiosity and that support the learning journeys of everyone. All children are powered with the inner drive to make meaning of their world through collaboration and participation. As educators within the early years sector we can choose to build settings that are full of hope, full of ideas, full of potential and resonant with thinking conversations.

Key ideas

- ▶ The culture of the nursery is of relationships and interactions that have delicacy and integrity.
- ▶ Educators hold stories/theories of the children and can attribute them to their protagonists, supporting the overwhelming sense of listening.
- ▶ Educators understand the value of watchfulness and the significance of sensitive interventions.
- ▶ Educators provide a context that supports the plurality of children's views.
- ▶ The valuing environment is explicit and its visibility to the children is encouraged.
- ▶ The processes of pedagogical documentation hold a notion of a growing body of ideas, "bubbling up", which the children trust we will hold, understand, value and connect with.
- ▶ We create a place where the ideas present in the context can be brought into relation with one another, gently letting the plurality of theories co-mingle and suggesting possible connections to the children.
- ▶ Educators have the roles of inviter and reminder, encouraging memories in a group context, inviting more viewpoints into play.

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