

Adventuring in Early Childhood Education

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with Sightlines members past and present

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'Wondering & Imagining:

A Commentary'

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ISBN 978-0-9542827-5-2

An accompanying exhibit *Experiments and Encounters* is available from Sightlines for professional development and advocacy work.

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We gratefully acknowledge funding from the following sources:

Arts For Everyone (Arts Lottery)
for project funding.

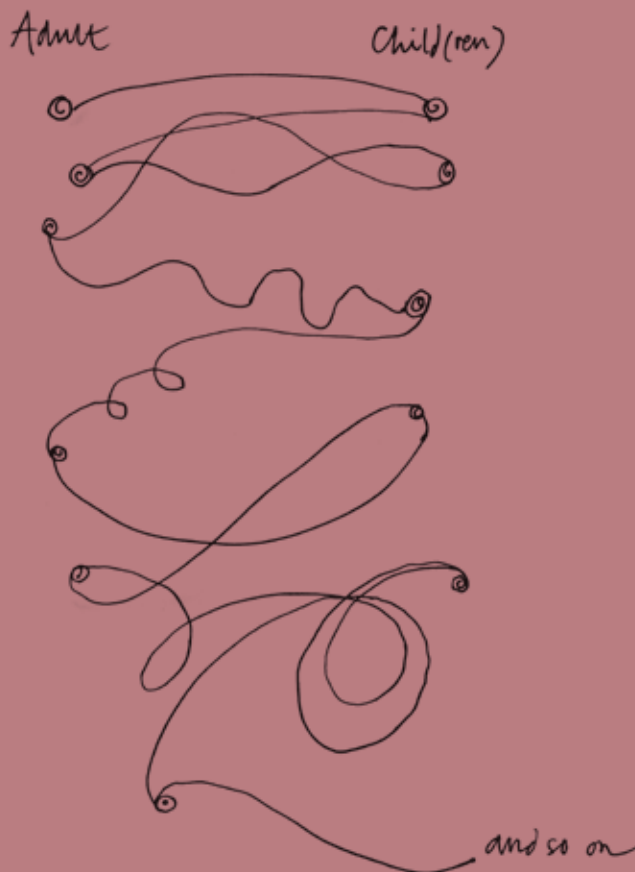
Qualification and Curriculum Authority for support to the Chapter & Verse review group.

Part One Wondering and Imagining

A Commentary

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Patterns of exchange

‘The cornerstone of our experience’, says Carlina Rinaldi, in print, on platforms, at seminars, in small discussion groups, ‘is the image of the child as rich in resources, strong and competent’. And of the child’s strengths, alongside curiosity and a sense of wonder, one of the most salient is ‘the desire to relate to other people and to communicate.’ This desire, to relate and to communicate, is not the monopoly of children in the preschools of Reggio Emilia; we have seen it over and over again in the six adventurous stories narrated above. Are there common patterns in the adult-child exchanges in these stories? What principles can we see if we look closely at these adults and children, learning in relationship?

Loris Malaguzzi emphasises the principle of reciprocity, and the on-going exchange between equals that embodies it. In talk guided by the principle of reciprocity, adult and child roles are complementary. Both children and adults ask questions of one another; they both listen and they both answer. ‘The two-way direction of interaction’ is a constant in their pedagogy, not an occasional happy accident.

Image

‘brains exchanging ideas’

5-6 year old children, municipality of Reggio Emilia.

In *Shoe and Meter* © Reggio Children 1997.

The ball game of talk

More than once, the Reggio educators use the metaphor of a ball game to advocate the particular pedagogical relationship they establish through talk:

We must be able to catch the ball that the children throw us, and toss it back to them in a way that makes the children want to continue the game with us, developing, perhaps, other games as we go along. (Edwards et al 1993:153).

The ball game of talk is the context for two kinds of play, what Veà Vecchi calls 'the play of participation and the play of communication.' (ibid:156) Carlina Rinaldi also emphasises this theme of reciprocity: 'children are very open to exchanges and reciprocity as deeds and acts of love, which they not only want to receive but also want to offer' (in Edwards et al 1993:103). The Reggio educators' principled perspective on talk is superbly illustrated in page after page of the published accounts of their 'progettazioni'; see, for example, the beautiful documents *The Future is a Lovely Day* (2001) and the awe-inspiring *Theatre Curtain* (2002). But in this country, the documentation of sustained talk that is the outcome of genuine intellectual search, that is a shared exploration of interesting themes and challenging ideas, an audible partnership of engaged and enquiring minds, is, so far, a rarity.

Indeed, we would do well to remember the important small-scale study of *Young Children Learning* carried out by Barbara Tizard and Martin Hughes over 25 years ago. Tizard and Hughes' analysis of four-year-old children's talking and thinking at home and at school led them to coin the phrase 'a passage of intellectual search', to describe a conversation in which a child is puzzling out loud over something she does not understand, seeking new information, working hard to make sense of something that matters to her, using 'a painstaking and rigorous logic' (1984: 128). Their book is full of transcribed examples of these fascinating passages of talk – but they only appear in the audio-recordings made at home. In the nursery schools and classes there were no such passages. Tizard and Hughes glumly conclude: 'The puzzling mind of the four year old has no outlet in a setting where the child's basic role is to answer and not ask questions' (1984: 255).

Sustained shared thinking

And yet early years professionals in this country are becoming increasingly familiar with the desirability of this kind of talk. The words ‘sustained shared thinking’ are often to be heard on early years conference platforms and at research seminars. This phrase, coined by the distinguished researchers leading, first, the EPPE project (Effective Provision of PreSchool Education), and then REPEY (Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years), refers to talk

in which two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend. (Siraj-Blatchford et al 2002:18).

The REPEY researchers have found that in the most effective early years settings there are significantly more of the interactions described as sustained shared thinking than in less effective settings; their report suggests that these interactions ‘may be especially valuable in terms of children’s learning’ (op cit:10).

Rethinking classroom talk

Closely related to the idea of sustained shared thinking is the possibility of ‘dialogic teaching’, the subject of a stimulating pamphlet by Robin Alexander (first published in 2004), in which he argues for the necessity of ‘rethinking classroom talk’ in the interests of children’s learning and understanding. Alexander presents the case for dialogic teaching as ‘the necessary outcome of decades of research on language, thinking, learning and teaching...by an impressive array of scholars and researchers’. He masterfully reviews some of these studies, old but by no means obsolete (the work of Joan Tough and Douglas Barnes, for example), and enriches his developing argument with other less familiar texts. His comments on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin are especially stimulating. According to Bakhtin, writes Alexander, dialogue is not one option among many in education, but an imperative. For Bakhtin,

Dialogue is essential to discourses – to a world – where meanings are neither fixed nor absolute, and where the exchange and acquisition of meaning is what education is centrally about...dialogue is about helping children to locate themselves within the unending conversations of culture and history (1981: 19).

These are grand ideas, the inspiring thoughts of a philosopher and literary critic, not an early years educator. But Alexander’s elucidation of Bakhtin’s perspective returns us to the context of the classroom, or any educational setting where language is used to convey and explore meaning. He argues that, while the educator’s questions are, of course, important in dialogue, more important are ‘the children’s answers to our questions and *what we can do with those answers.*’

Richness or poverty

The richness of what the Reggio educators call the ball game of talk, and Alexander calls dialogue, or dialogic teaching, is in stark contrast to a number of studies of adult-child interaction through talk that reveal a distressing poverty in terms of reciprocity, engagement and participation. For example, Hughes and Westgate (1998) have shown that different patterns of exchange are associated with different professional roles.

Most significantly, they found that in talk with teachers, child-initiated talk was 'largely eliminated'; the most common pattern was as follows. After an initiating question from the teacher, the child is allocated the briefest of response slots, with his or her utterance evaluated, often critically, by the teacher, before the talk shifts to another child, or topic, again initiated by the teacher. This rigid routine, described here, and elsewhere, as I.R.E. (Initiation – by teacher; Response – by child; Evaluation – by teacher), was much less commonly found in exchanges between children and other adults in their settings, especially nursery nurses and community workers. In these exchanges, the children initiated talk more often, showed a wider range of functions in their talk, and engaged in more meaningful conversation. Overall, their talk was richer in cognitive content, establishing that the poverty of the I.R.E. pattern cannot be blamed on the children's linguistic capacity or incapacity, but on the inadequacies of some of their talk partners.

What can we do with children's answers?

Exciting possibilities begin to open up here. If we want to go further and deeper in dialogue than the arid sequence of I.R.E., described above, what must we do? Alexander's response to these big questions is boldly stated:

We may need to accept that the child's answer can never be the end of a learning exchange (as in many classrooms it all too readily tends to be) but its true centre of gravity.

When I first read this passage, I copied it into my notebook, nodding excitedly. I showed it to friends and colleagues, who responded more or less enthusiastically. But the more often I returned to Alexander's words, the less certain I became that I understood them. What would the patterns of adult-child talk actually look like, if the child's answer were 'the true centre of gravity' of a learning exchange?

Finding the centre: drawing diagrams

I began to draw diagrams, trying out ways of representing the patterns of exchange I know best, looking for a way of expressing Alexander's new configuration of talk for teaching and learning.

The weakness of the I.R.E. pattern is easily demonstrated (fig 1). The units of the exchange are isolated, disconnected; the talk has no direction or purpose. The teacher's question and the child's answer do not function as building blocks of meaning. The participants are unequally involved: the adult contributes twice as often as individual children, who are pressured into searching for the single correct answer, one that will receive a glowing evaluation. The children in Reggio settings know that they are capable of more than responding to adults' questions with the right answer. Some of their representations suggest much more worthwhile patterns of exchange; one of these, in the brilliant *Shoe and Metre* project/story, shows two 'Brains exchanging ideas', a beautiful drawing of a lively, enlivening meeting of minds.

The pattern of exchange between two equal partners, the 'ball game of talk', as Malaguzzi describes it, can also be represented on the page, as we trace the flight of an idea across the space between the participants (fig 2).

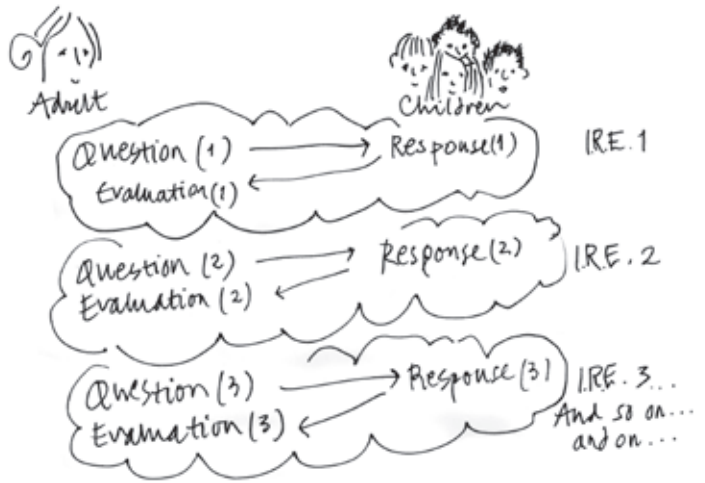


Fig 1 Initiation + Response + Evaluation = I.R.E

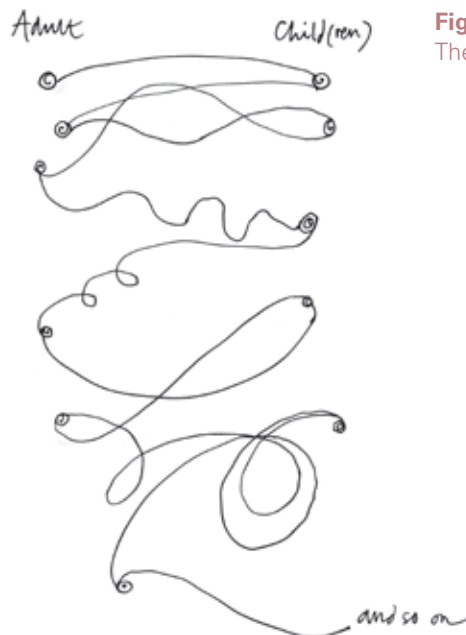
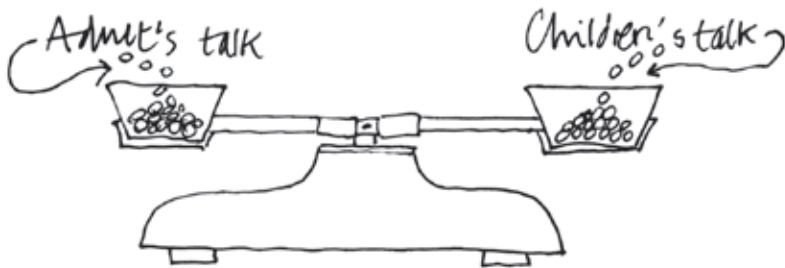


Fig 2 The ball game of talk

A balancing act?

But where is the centre of gravity in this exchange? Alexander seems to be recommending something rather different. His idea of a worthwhile learning exchange is not a simple balancing act between the two sets of speakers, adults and children. The kitchen scales model of dialogue (one for you, one for me) sharing out precisely equal quantities of words and minutes, keeping the scales level and the relationship balanced, is not what he is advocating (fig 3).

Fig 3 Keeping the balance, drop by drop



At about this point in my thinking, in the spring of 2005, as I tried to come to visual terms with what I thought Alexander was saying, I visited the exhibit Experiments and Encounters, which documented the work of the Sightlines Initiative 2001-4, in the form of a number of teaching and learning stories. Six of those stories appear here; two in particular helped me to see new patterns and possibilities.

The shape of the Powerplay story

This story (pp48-55), it seems to me, can be read as a story hinging on the word 'or', a story in which the educators, in the nick of time, paid attention to what was happening below the surface of the children's spontaneous activity. I sketched a possible structure for the story to see how the educators' choices impacted on the children's learning. At each turn, it became clear, as the educators considered what to do, they were prepared to listen to the children, who did not always respond predictably.

Through their provision of various different opportunities, the educators in this story are, in effect, asking many unspoken questions: their tentative responses to the children's answers allow for the possibility of different kinds of learning, as they struggle to see more of children's thinking, and to understand it more clearly. The educators' interventions certainly support the overall learning process, but it is the tigerboys' priorities, unpredictable and powerfully expressed, that have led them to a place of creative freedom and solidarity. Are we getting closer to the notion of 'the child's answer as the true centre of gravity'?

Fig 4 Powerplay



Finding the centre

Death, Fear and Bravado, the story from Walkergate Early Years centre (pp14-23), reminds us that the answers of young children in truly dialogic exchange may not be confined to the single language of spoken words, or to a single idea in any of their expressive languages. Maybe the children sometimes want more than the 'either/or' of the opportunities offered by the educators. Certainly in this story, the key to children's thinking is not 'or' but 'and'. The answer to every offering made by the educators is 'Yes – and more!'

Translated into written language, the dialogue in this story seems to go like this:

Adults: Can we support your dancing?

Children: Yes! *And* we will dance new dances.

Adults: Will a new environment (the beach) extend your interest?

Children: Yes! *And* we will make new discoveries.

Adults: Will new themes appear in your activity?

Children: Yes! *And* death, transformation, life, fear, bravado.

Adults: What will you do with these new themes?

Children: Talk and debate... *And*, can we dance some more? (This is Darius, with a bold request! See p.19)

Adults: Yes, of course. What will you dance?

Children: The representation of our experiences, through the agency of our bodies, our dances ('I'm a ...whale, a dead fish, a shark'.)

Adults: And with more support, will you go further?

Children: Yes! We'll do agency and authorship, originality and inventiveness.

(The educators' support is given through words, images, movement, encounters with living animals, materials, cloth, paper...)

Adults: Have you any more to say?

Children: Yes! This is my tyre, my starfish. My drawing, my painting. I speak all these languages.

Adults: And do you still want to dance?

Children: Yes! And again and again.

Or perhaps it all boils down to one question. If dance is a language, have children got anything to say? and to a multitude of one word answers: Yes. These answers, treated respectfully and attentively, given their due weight, have indeed become the centre of gravity of the learning exchange.

Children's voices in dialogic exchange

Reading and re-reading the adventurous stories in *Wondering and Imagining*, I have come to see that the possibility of reclaiming talk as 'the true foundation of learning and teaching', as Alexander urges, depends on a dramatic re-conceptualisation of the child's part in dialogic encounter, whichever expressive language is being used. The school or the setting has to be transformed from a place of instruction, where the voice of the educator dominates, and become what Carlina Rinaldi calls 'a context of multiple listening.'

In the traditional 'question-and-answer' routines of the traditional classroom, the impoverished term 'answer' defines and constrains the children's role: their task is to articulate the precise words that match the teaching intention or learning outcome concealed in the teacher's head. In dialogue, by contrast, in a 'context of multiple listening', an extended sequence of answers, both spoken and unspoken, offers children the opportunity to do so many things: to respond with detail, incident, emotion; to extend and expand the field of reference; to make comparisons and contrasts; to give alternative examples; to cite relevant stories; to apply insights, empathise and exult; to remember, connect and re-connect; to build on previous learning; to look forward to the promise of tomorrow. All of these kinds of answers (and more) are to be seen and heard in the texts and images of the stories in *Wondering and Imagining*. They prove most convincingly, that when educators go in search of a dialogic relationship, when educators are prepared to listen as well as question, the children will come more than half way to meet them.

Creative Foundation Basic Principles

Here is the invitation given to seven early years settings in 2001 to participate in the three year project, subsequent to 45 settings being offered one-year project participations over a period of three years.

Creative Foundation 2001-3: Basic principles

Using the model of the 'reflective & creative cycle', artists and educators will work together to support children in their exploration, communication and creative expression of ideas. Unique creative projects will emerge through this process, and structures, ideas, skills, media and provocations will be offered to the various groups of children who are engaged in the various project activities. Appropriate expressive media will be employed to enable children to engage with their ideas in many different ways.

Observation – artists and educators will spend time watching and learning about the children's interests, energies, ideas and inter-relationships.

Reflection and analysis – they will discuss and analyse their observations, looking for evidence of high engagement in ideas and exchanges amongst the various individual and groups of children.

Interpretation – they will make hypotheses about the nature and the particular potential of particular interests. They will also make hypotheses about possible 'external' foci that they might invite the children to become interested in, following an observation phase.

Creative resourcing – they will resource and facilitate the growth and development of the various emerging project ideas with offerings from appropriate media, organisation of space and time, and reflective, guided facilitation, which maximises the potential for the children to develop and express their ideas.

This methodology is multi-cyclical, and will necessitate regular re-visiting. Regular documentation (visual and written note-taking) is a basic tool of this process. This documentation will also provide material for exhibition, exchange with parents and others, and summative evidence/evaluation.

Project partners

In this project, and learning from the experiences of YCCTIA, this group will be individuals who

- are external to projects
- have working involvement / understanding of children's learning / development issues and project principles
- have flexibility of time.

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 13: 978-0-9542827-5-2

ISBN 10: 0-9542827-5-2

Designed by Paul Matson Graphic Design

The cover image is from a process interpretation sketch by Elaine Mason and Robin Duckett.

An exhibit *Experiments and Encounters*, from which the examples contained in this book are taken, is also available from Sightlines Initiative.

First published in the UK by
Sightlines Initiative
20 Great North Road,
Newcastle Upon Tyne,
NE2 4PS
UK

www.sightlines-initiative.com

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'Look, look! The tree's on fire!'
Gemma (4), Redesdale Primary School