After Reggio Emilia: 
May the Conversation Begin!

David Knowles Kennedy

"Rich, strong, and powerful" (Rinaldi 1993, 102); "active and competent protagonists" (Edwards 1993, 152); "connected to adults and other children" (Malaguzzi 1993, 10).

Coming from practitioners in Italy's Reggio Emilia preschools, these descriptions of young children both inspire and intimidate us. Why?

These are not words we find in many of our textbooks on young children or hear in introductions of our workshops at conferences. We are not quite used to the language. But also, perhaps they are just indirect translations of terms that Americans do use. Do they in some oblique way match our expressions "egocentric," "preoperational," "concrete learner," "heteronomous," or "needing structure"?

Hardly! And that is just what makes us nervous. How is it that a word like "egocentric" is so much less salient for Reggio practitioners?

As we enter into dialogue with the Italian preschools, it occurs to us that perhaps we have mis-

Dialoguing childhood

To the extent that it is a cultural-historical invention, childhood cannot exist without an adult construct of it. At the same time, childhood will always be something more and, therefore, something other than our constructs; its conceptual boundaries are never completely fixed. In our century this becomes increasingly obvious as the whole planet is caught up in rapid, transformative change and an exploding communications technology reveals many cultures, values, practices, and forms of childhood to our gaze.

Our exposure to the child protagonist of the Reggio Emilia preschools has forced us into a period of healthy self-examination. We can expect that, as it leads us to revise our construct of the child, it will also lead us to revise our ideas of what is developmentally appropriate in the way of practices with young children. Further, it teaches us that the developmentally appropriate can never be formulated once and for all, because it reflects the way adults construct childhood—or, more precisely, how children construct a world within the opportunities and limitations of adults' constructions of childhood.

In our discovery of the child artist of Reggio or the singing, dancing kindergartner of China in the 1970s (who does not fight

Some teacher educators have students memorize slogans, such as "Young children are egocentric."

Is this helpful? Wouldn’t it be better to encourage students to observe children and to discuss their many characteristics?

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Cultures and countries see children differently. Shouldn’t this broaden our ideas about what is “true” about children and what is “right” for them?

The Reggio model of the early childhood practitioner is of someone who is highly aware of the extent to which she as an adult constructs childhood and developmentally appropriate practice and does not consider her current construction the final word. Therefore, ongoing inquiry into childhood and best practices, collaboratively pursued, becomes a fundamental dimension of her work. The Italians sum it up with one word—interlocutorieta—which can be translated as “exchange, discourse, dialogue” with an emphasis on ongoing, deepening inquiry, rather than on any immediate resolution or conclusion (Tarini 1993, 4).

Actually this word describes not just a method of discourse but a theory of knowing: knowledge is an ongoing social construction, emerging through the interaction of a community of interlocutors, in this case, children, teachers, parents, materials, ideas, traditions. Not only is this knowledge forever incomplete, but it is constantly contested and, in fact, grows and develops through an optimal level of conflict.

The Italians evoke this optimal level of conflict with the word discozione, meaning much more than discussing—closer to arguing, but not in the American sense of potentially dangerous disagreement. Implicit in both interlocutorieta and discozione is the idea that unless we actively cultivate the disposition to give reasons for our ideas and practices and expect, even invite, others to question our ideas and practices, we are in a situation of domination. And domination is the enemy of dialogue.

Impediments to dialogue

Domination, dialogue’s enemy, can occur in several ways.

Forms of domination

One form of domination results from swallowing whole the ideas of one major theorist. In our enthusiasm, we do not see the weak side of the theory, or we invest more belief in some element of the theory than the theorist intended. Our current, major theorist is Piaget, although it is arguable whether we are dominated as much by his ideas or more by our own particular interpretations of them.

Another kind of professional domination is the mistaken notion that the knowledge base of our field has a foundation in “hard” science, in our case, psychology. Unfortunately, psychology has never been very “hard,” and, even if it were true, in this era we live in, even the hardest of sciences are recognizing their interpretive, socially constructed, and maintained underpinnings.
When both the great-theorist and the hard-science paradigms are accepted as the only authoritative ways to organize the knowledge in our field, we are encouraged to maintain a naive, objectivist view of knowledge. Above all, these frameworks of authority prevent people from talking, from learning to dialogue about their practice, and consequently from becoming empowered as practitioners.

Physicists, for example, acknowledge not only how historically determined paradigms influence their theories (Kuhn 1957) but also how the presence of the observer always changes what is being observed. Meanwhile, many of us in the “soft” sciences continue to cling to the belief that the controlled experiment, something that can be replicated any time and anywhere, is the most valid form of knowledge.

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Attitudes and lack of openness

There are two other enemies of dialogue among early childhood practitioners. The first has to do with our cultural and professional attitudes toward conflict. We tend to fear and avoid conflict, rather than embrace it as a necessary element of growth that we can learn to manage and turn to our advantage. Communal, collaborative, critical thinking implies that we hold each other’s ideas, claims, and assumptions up to the strictest scrutiny—an exhilarating process that presupposes that optimal level of conflict.

As fellow practitioners, our motto should be the biblical proverb, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens the wits of another” (Prov. 27:17). As it is, we tend to stuff conflict or turn it into emotional power struggles, thereby leaving the differences that give rise to conflict intact and unexamined.

Another barrier to dialogue has to do with our quest for cognitive closure. Unlike most four-year-olds, who because of the “flexible and incomplete structure of their conceptual framework” are characterized by “persistent intellectual curiosity” (Tizard & Hughes 1984, 128), adults tend to avoid puzzling things out. This might be because our educational system does not encourage critical thinking, or because we live in a culture that values practicality above all else, or because intelligence becomes increasingly fixed over the life cycle. Whatever the reason, when we ignore or suppress the conversation that we, as reflective practitioners, should be having both within ourselves and with each other, we inhibit the process of transformation or, in the language of Reggio, the drive to “reinvent and reeducate ourselves along with the children” (Rinaldi 1993, 111).

Reggio Emilia as a community of inquiry

The preschools of Reggio Emilia have evolved to their current preeminence because their people have set themselves the task of overcoming the impediments to dialogue. Reggio teachers understand themselves to be members of a community of inquiry. In a community of inquiry of early childhood practitioners, each of us is in conversation both with children and with other practitioners. It is basic to the nature of this conversation that our own perspectives are continually being confronted and modified by the perspectives of others. As that process of interlocutorieta goes on, we become aware of a horizon of meaning larger than any of our individual perspectives. This broad view keeps us unified and allows us to move forward as we thoughtfully, skillfully, and compassionately explore our differences.

Both “big theory” and replicable experiments are essential elements of our communal inquiry, but neither is sacred. What is sacred is our conversation, and not even the conversation itself so much as the fact that there is a conversation, that we protect and nourish it, and that we teach each other to participate in it. In and through conversation, we learn to think critically in our discipline: to identify our own underlying assumptions and implicit
theories about children, schooling, or the adult-child relationship; to recognize the fallacious reasoning that often vaguely supports bad or mediocre practice; and to clarify how children and adults are the same, how they are different, and the implications of those similarities and differences for practice.

Critical thinking about early childhood is necessary for us to engage in together if we wish to be reflective practitioners, because both our best and worst practices are grounded in beliefs or assumptions that are often unconsciously and ambivalently held—beliefs such as that children are little animals or that all human behavior and especially children’s is motivated by self-interest. These beliefs are often based either on perceived common sense or represent the confused residue of scientific theories, such as the notion that being “prelogical” in the Piagetian sense means not being logical at all, when, in fact, for Piaget, action itself is a form of logic.

It is through dialogue that we uncover, examine, discard, and develop ideas about early childhood. The process involves the kind of cognitive dissonance leading to the continual restructuring of schemes through assimilation and accommodation, which we take as our model of learning in early childhood education.

Although we support the construction of knowledge among young children, can we allow ourselves to construct knowledge about our field? To do so, we will have to overcome the domination of the big theory, a research model that appears to come from outside us, our fear of conflict, our tendency to seek closure too quickly, and then give ourselves to the discipline of dialogue.

Forming our own communities of inquiry

The conversation can start wherever we find ourselves together—whether in the preservice space of the college classroom, the inservice spaces of retreat, conference, or workshop, or the pages of a journal like Young Children. Above all, conversation must go on in our daily life together as staff of centers—whether teachers, administrators, or others.

In the joys and rigors of communal dialogue, we discover at least one secret of Reggio’s success—an image, not just of a child who is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and, most of all, “connected to adults and other children” (Malaguzzi 1993, 10), but of an adult practitioner who fits that same description. This practitioner is not a mere operative of another’s ideas or of a tradition turned protectively in upon itself but a philosopher of childhood, ever constructing, in community with other professionals, a framework for theory and practice that is increasingly mindful of and responsive to the gifts and potentialities of the young child. May the conversation begin!

References


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