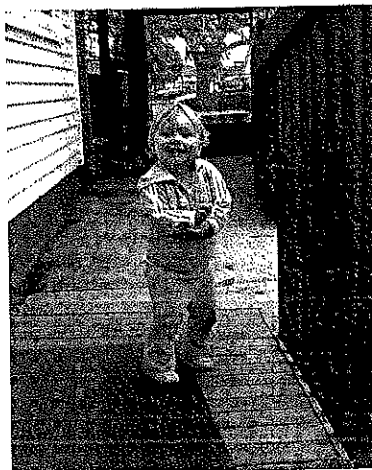


Unspoken questions

by Lorraine Sands and Karen Lichtwork
(peer reviewed)



This article is a way into dialogue about what 'wise practice' might look like when teachers listen carefully to children's intentions and discuss together the implications of pedagogical practice on the learning culture in their early childhood settings.



Kaitlin in pursuit up the ramp.

Introduction

Greerton Early Childhood Centre, through a Centre of Innovation research contract (Ministry of Education 2004), is exploring the ways we are trying to develop a question-asking and question-exploring culture. One aspect of the research project relates to the ways teachers can get better at understanding the questions that babies ask. We had been exploring these ideas for some time, before Greerton became a Centre of Innovation. However, we now have more time to reflect deeply on our documented stories about the children's learning. Dahiberg, Moss and Pence (1999, p.154) comment that "Documentation as a learning process, but also as a process of communication, presupposes the creation of a culture of exploration, reflection, dialogue and engagement." This paper is an example of this.

The following is a learning story about Kaitlin, written by Karen.

I have really enjoyed watching Kaitlin develop from a wee crawling baby into a bold and boisterous toddler who is quite confident about how important she is to the effective running of our centre, and is not afraid to make sure everyone else knows this! Kaitlin and I have been building a relationship during this time and I find I am very

enticed by Kaitlin's sense of humour and fun, being drawn into countless games of peek-a-boo. At these times Kaitlin has been a joy to behold, her beautiful face shines with laughter and mischief and I find her completely enchanting!

On Wednesday Kaitlin decided to play a new game with me. She looked me up and down with a glint in her eye, then charged at me squealing with zest, aiming to wrap herself around my legs. I carefully watched her approach, waiting for my moment to escape. Just as she made her final lunge I dodged her tackle and ran back to the place she had come from squealing with the same zest she had shown. Kaitlin beamed, glad that I had decided to join in her game. She paused briefly before launching another attack and again I ran away to a safer spot. This time however I turned to face Kaitlin head on and made ready to run and chase her. She watched me carefully and understood my change in body language. Not wanting to be caught she made a run for it. Still squealing with delight, Kaitlin raced around the whare (house), with me in hot

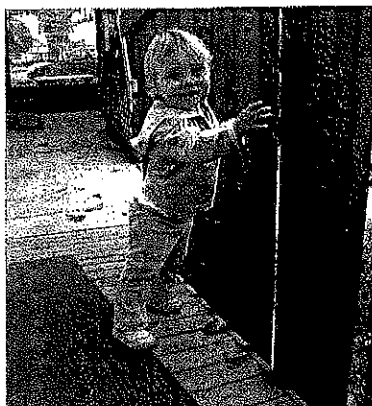
pursuit. She stopped and looked at me and I knew I was once again the target. I headed inside using my speed advantage and hid behind the play furniture. "Kaitlin, Kaitlin, I called out to her." As she made her way noisily into the room she called out to me in her fabulous loud voice "bah bah abah ah bah." She couldn't see me and decided to move through to the kitchen in order to track me down. Carefully I snuck behind and followed her, not wanting to be caught, then launched my counter attack just as Kaitlin headed out the door. I scooped her up in a giggling, tickly bundle. Kaitlin beamed and our friends who had been watching our game all laughed along with us!

Karen's perspective

During this research project I have continued to consider the concept of children's unspoken questions, reflecting in particular about how relevant this is when working with infants and toddlers who communicate non-verbally, verbally and through a growing vocabulary. This interaction between Kaitlin and myself shows our ability to communicate through raucous vocalizations, body language and a huge amount of facial expression. These coupled with a shared history of being playful together allowed our game to progress, with each of us understanding the other's intention.

One of the questions I wonder that Kaitlin may be asking is, "Can I trust you?". Kaitlin has a very strong sense of what she wants and that includes making choices about the people she wants to be around. For a long time I was not one of those people! Respect is a very important element of the relationships we build here at Greerton Early Childhood Centre and I have needed to respect Kaitlin's wishes in the past and allow her access to people she wants to

Kaitlin engages Karen in a game of peek a boo.



be close to. Over time and through playful interaction Kaitlin has come to view me as a safe person to be around, and we have begun to build a trusting relationship. Other broader questions may be asked in relation to trust and self worth: "Am I important? Do people notice me? Can I take a risk (am I safe)? How do I affect others? How can I get their attention? Am I fun to be with? Am I liked? And am I in control?"

Another question Kaitlin may be asking is, "Do you understand me?" To me this is one of the questions being explored during our interaction as I respond to and expand on Kaitlin's game while still allowing her to be in control and following her cues as to what to do next.

Lorraine's perspective

A further question in this interaction might be, "Do you hear me?" This is an encounter rich in emotional content, and we like the way Carlina Rinaldi (2006) includes emotion when she writes about the pedagogy of listening:

How can we define the term listening? Listening as sensitivity to the patterns that connect, to that which connects us to others; abandoning ourselves to the conviction that our understanding and our own being are but small parts of a broader, integrated knowledge that holds the universe together. Listening, then, as a metaphor for having the openness and sensitivity to listen and be listened to – listening not just with our ears, but with all our senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, orientation). Behind the act of listening there is often a curiosity, a desire, a doubt, an interest; there is always emotion. Listening is emotion; it is generated

by emotions and stimulates emotions. (p.65)

As the teachers at Greerton continue our research we have been challenged by notions of the teacher's image of the child, of children's views of themselves as learners, of our concepts about how learning occurs and the teacher's role in enhancing or constraining learning. Carol Dweck's (1983; 1985; 2006) views on intelligence have been influential in our reflections about the teacher's role in promoting learning. The idea that intelligence is a growable commodity, and that building competence is dependent on children's own view of themselves, has specific messages for teachers. We are very aware of the ways we engage with children, the kinds of feedback messages we give throughout these engagements and the culture we build in our learning settings. In an attempt to support self-motivated learners, the teachers at Greerton are building a learning setting that promotes learning goals rather than performance-oriented goals. This is not to say that performance, in the sense of putting in huge effort, high expectation of success and competence is not important. These are extremely important to us. It is the way we get there that has caused very considered reflection. We are not interested in supporting 'bright but brittle' (Claxton, 2004) children's self images, for children who set themselves 'learning goals' are more likely to choose 'challenging tasks and pursue them in a mastery-oriented manner' (Bempechat & Dweck, 1983, p. 247). We intend our engagements to support high interest, deep involvement, sustained persistence and articulate discussion and we think that this happens when the whole of the culture is focused on ways to achieve these goals.

If we privilege the principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) then a culture that encourages empowerment and reciprocal relationships – self-motivated learning goals – will look very different from a routine driven setting. When teachers work with infants and toddlers we rely on training, experience, sensitivity and relational knowledge to intuitively cue into their interests. This requires slowing down, engaging in the 'deep listening' that Lous Heshusius (1995, p.121) describes as 'fully attending'. This means exchanging routine with rhythm so that the things that matter get done and the things that really matter

have the time, the space and the value granted to them, enabling infants and toddlers to be deeply involved in exploring the world around them. Teachers are then able to engage in dialogue in ways that are not time managed because life is so frantically busy. They are able to slow down and enjoy those teaching and learning moments that Anne Meade has described as 'unreturnable' (1996). Teachers are able to listen and give way to the notion of not knowing the outcome, not being in charge but making space to 'quietly complicate thinking.'

Karen's perspective continued

While reading about Carol Dweck's (1983, in Dweck & Bempechat, 1983; 1985, 2006) research relating to children's mindsets I have been considering the importance of this question-asking process in Kaitlin's developing values and attitudes to learning. Dweck tells us that controlling situations undermine children's intrinsic motivation to learn. On the other hand environments that increase self-determination will enhance intrinsic motivation. I believe that the way we structure our day to respond to children's rhythms rather than to a previously set timetable is a strong factor in supporting children's question asking and intrinsic motivation to learn. The other factor that I consider to be important is the strong respectful relationships we build with children.

Consider the impact on Kaitlin's question-asking in a more controlling situation, where activities happen to a timetable and children's unique and individual interests are not as highly valued. Kaitlin may have taken the same dive for my legs and I could have picked her up saying 'aren't you sweet' and taken her off to have afternoon tea. Consider the impact if I was an unfamiliar adult to Kaitlin. I may not have taken the time to try to understand her voice and body language, assumed she was unhappy, and tried to placate her with a cuddle. Instead we were able to play a fun game, to listen and respond to each other's non-verbal and verbal language and continue to strengthen trust and understanding. Kaitlin learned that I will notice her, that she can take a risk, that she has an effect on others and can get their attention. She saw me having fun and learned that she is fun to be with and others like to have her around. She played

a game of her own choosing where she was in control and safe.

In my view infants' and toddlers' unspoken questions are essential to developing their positive attitudes to learning and 'being a learner'. I believe our strong relationships and the rhythm of our day helps to support our infants and toddlers to ask and answer questions and this allows them to "build healthy pictures of themselves as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p9).

Final comments from Lorraine

Twenty-first century educational settings must be engaging learning settings for everyone. The developing threads in our research are causing us to think more carefully about the culture of the setting we offer infants and toddlers. As we model curious exploration of our world, we place ourselves in the position of not always knowing, of making mistakes and taking risks because this is a way to build understanding, to test ideas and throw these into surprising combinations; to be creative. As the future unfolds we won't be able to rely on knowledge and skills because these skills are yet to be determined. What is important is a disposition to be a life long learner. As we collaborate with very young children in the space connecting teacher intention and child intention we build an enduring willingness to be curious, to wonder at, and to puzzle over concepts now and in a future that as yet offers only a shadowy glimpse of its possibilities. Infant and toddler settings must be places of intrigue, places of high expectation where there is a willingness to get involved in deep investigations, where children and teachers drive the learning as passionate learners finding out together about the fascinating world we live in. Teachers are in hugely powerful positions to set the climate of the learning culture. The time for active debate is now; the time to advocate for infant and toddler rights is now; the time to remove the glass ceiling on infant and toddler capacity to be learners-in-action is now; and now is the time to rethink what wise practice in our settings, informed by the principles of *Te Whāriki*, looks like.

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We are deeply involved in conversations with the teachers in our team about learning and teaching as we think about what 'wise practice' might look like in the context of early learning settings. It is this collaborative process with our colleagues that supports reflective practice and builds a culture of learning and teaching which is dependent on a community of practice that values shared understandings.

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