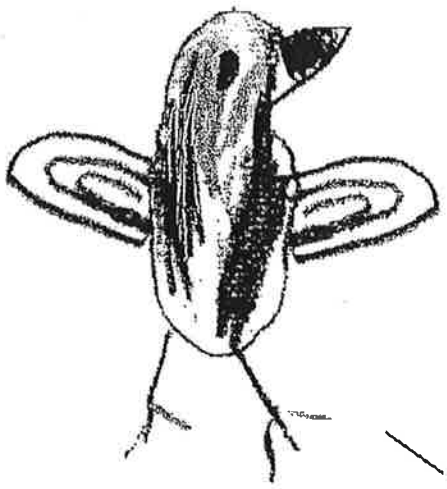

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Conversations with Children

Louise Boyd Cadwell
Atelierista/Consultant, College School, Webster Groves, Missouri

Brenda Varel Fyfe
Professor of Education, Webster University, St. Louis, Missouri

A network of teachers from several schools in St. Louis, Missouri, has been working together for 3 years to study the principles and practices of the Reggio Emilia Approach. The content of this chapter is drawn from our work with these teachers and reflections on our individual and collective experiences. We wish to express our thanks to all of the teachers, parents, and administrators with whom we collaborated in this learning process and especially to Jan Phillips, director of the College School, a private and independent school in Webster Groves, Missouri, who took the administrative lead in codirecting this project with us. And, of course, we are indebted to all of the Italian educators who have been and continue to be our friends, teachers, and colleagues.

We have chosen to focus on one particular area of our learning that has been strongly influenced by the Reggio Emilia Approach—dialogue with children. Louise begins by reflecting on what she learned as an intern for 1 year in Reggio Emilia and then practiced and further developed through her work in St. Louis. She identifies potential barriers and conditions that affect teachers' abilities to facilitate and analyze dialogues with children. This discussion is followed by a set of guidelines for facilitating good conversations.

To illustrate the process of analyzing dialogues and using them to inform emergent curriculum, we have chosen to share a synopsis of a meeting among a team of four educators who came together to study the transcripts of dialogues that had been facilitated by Louise. Brenda describes this meeting and the curriculum planning that emerged from the study of children's words. This is followed by her analysis of the process of planning for emergent curriculum and the professional development benefits for teachers who collaborate in this kind of work.

CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN

A key component of the work in the Reggio Emilia preschools is dialogue—serious talk with children about their ideas about something of importance. The group of children can be large (the whole class), medium (around 10 to 15), or small (around four to six). Teachers also have conversations with pairs of children or one child at a time. The idea every time is to explore the children's ideas.

The teacher's role is to ask good, open-ended questions that stimulate children's thinking and provoke discussion—to facilitate, orchestrate, and gently guide so that the conversation does not stray too far from the subject, so that every child has a chance to participate, so that children consider the matter at hand with all their critical and creative thinking skills. The teacher

should not fish for right answers or impart information. Rather, the teacher's role is to extend and deepen the children's thinking. This approach is a departure from the traditional idea of the teacher's role.

The motivation for placing these conversations at the center of the curriculum is to enable children to develop their critical and creative thinking ability to its fullest capacity; to promote cooperation, interaction, and negotiation among children; and to celebrate children's natural curiosity and wonder about the world and how it works (Fyfe & Cadwell, 1993). It is also a way of taking time together, teacher and child, to focus on important aspects of life and living; to examine an experience, object, or idea closely; to wonder and search together.

Carlina Rinaldi, senior consultant to Reggio Children, said recently:

> Children are searching for the real meaning of life. We believe in their possibilities to grow. That is why we do not hurry to give them answers; instead we invite them to think about where the answers might lie. The challenge is to listen. When your child asks, 'Why is there a moon?', don't reply with a scientific answer. Ask him, 'What do you think?' He will understand that you are telling him, 'You have your own mind and your own interpretation and your ideas are important to me.' Then you and he can look for the answers, sharing the wonder, curiosity, pain—everything. It is not the answers that are important, it is the process—that you and he search together. (McLaughlin, 1995, p. 68)

We have learned from the teachers in Reggio Emilia not only how important it is to listen but also how important it is to schedule time together to carefully read and understand transcribed conversations. When studying the conversations, we need to ask, What knowledge can we say these children have? What examples can we find in this conversation of their use of intuition, conjecture, logical and creative thinking? When have they made analogies and used metaphors to communicate their ideas? How has listening to the ideas of their classmates challenged them, informed them, offered them a new way of viewing the problem? What misconceptions do they have? What can we, as adults, learn from them about the way they look at and think about this subject? What might we do next with these children and perhaps a larger group with whom we could share these initial ideas to support further learning?

In the Reggio meetings, they might also analyze the teacher's participation. Were the questions good ones? Did the teacher do a good job facilitating the conversation? What about the timing of the questions? Was she or he supporting the children enough? Did every child participate? Why? Did the teacher intervene too much or too little? In this way, with the critical support of their colleagues, the teachers become better and better facilitators of this kind of inquiry.

The educators in Reggio Emilia prepare for conversations. They devote enough time and full attention to the children and their ideas in a

quiet space, giving children and teachers the respect they need. They then study the transcripts with colleagues to use children's ideas as the core of the curriculum. This is a style of working for them.

BARRIERS

It has been difficult for teachers here to move into this process. After 3 years of working together in our network, we all have a better understanding of the difficulties we face. We have identified seven barriers to incorporating quality conversations and discussion with children into our curriculum planning and daily practice.

The first barrier is fairness and equity for teachers and children (Fyfe, 1994). Is it fair to give a small group of children this kind of focused attention? What happens to the other children? Do they feel left out? Is it fair for one teacher to have the luxury of focusing on a small group of children for 45 minutes or more? Isn't she or he supposed to be responsible for all the children? If there is no coteacher, how would this ever be possible? If there is, is it fair to leave the coteacher with the majority of the children?

Teachers must agree to differentiate their work so that one can stay with a small group, while the other monitors the rest of the class. When there is no coteacher, parent volunteers or teacher aides might be used to monitor the activity of the larger group while the teacher facilitates a small-group conversation. In some cases, teacher aides or parent volunteers might learn how to facilitate dialogue among children. The fairness issue has come to be reframed. Teachers who have experienced the power of small-group conversations are beginning to ask, Is it fair to deny children the opportunity to participate in small-group conversations? How am I ever going to know what these children are thinking if I do not take the time to really talk with them?

The second barrier is noise. It is impossible to have a quality conversation if children and teachers are distracted by the noise of a busy classroom and constant distractions of other children who interrupt. To think, listen, and discuss, children and teachers need separate, quiet spaces. These are hard to come by in early childhood settings. Some teachers have shared this problem with parents and found that together they were able to develop a fund-raising plan and designs to renovate or build new spaces that support quiet, small-group activity. Others have reorganized rooms or made arrangements to use temporarily unoccupied rooms (e.g., a resource room or lounge) or, in good weather, a secluded place outdoors.

A third barrier is expectation. Traditionally, most teachers do not expect young children to sit in a small group for a reasonable amount of time to discuss ideas and theories about the workings of the world. Teachers

might think this is too much to expect of preschool children. Maybe it is even harmful to them to expect them to sit and think when they might rather play with manipulatives, blocks, or dress-ups.

Many of our colleagues have been amazed at what happens when they take the time to listen to children's ideas, seek to understand their points of view, and help children listen to each other. As a result, their former beliefs about the length of a young child's attention span change quickly.

A fourth barrier is rationale. Why do this? What value is there for children? What value for teachers? What do children and teachers learn from this kind of activity? How do you make use of this kind of information? Where do you go with it? How does it fit in with the rest of the curriculum? What happens to the skills and information teachers are supposed to teach if they are spending so much time listening to children's ideas?

Teaching is a complex activity. Emergent curriculum requires teachers to study the ideas expressed in children's conversations and actions. Most conversations are loaded with possibilities for topics or questions for further study. It is often not possible or appropriate to consider following up on every idea. Teachers must make decisions about which of these are most worthy of pursuit. This is a time when the goals and values shared by teachers and parents should be considered. It is a critical juncture for connecting our curriculum goals with children's ideas and interests.

A fifth barrier is lack of skill. It takes skill and practice to be able to lead a productive conversation with young children. It is only human to avoid situations in which one feels inept and prone to failure, but teachers need to risk failures and flops in order to learn. A sympathetic group of coworkers struggling to learn together can provide the support and modeling needed to acquire these skills.

A sixth barrier is recording what the children say. It is possible to take notes, but it is very hard to lead a conversation and take notes at the same time. A tape recorder works well, but that requires time to transcribe the tape. If there are two people, one can record, but that requires two teachers with one small group. Parent volunteers may be willing and able to assist in either taking notes or transcribing tapes.

A seventh barrier relates to the time, energy, and skill necessary for teachers to review and analyze conversations and then plan, based on this study. Finding time for this process of planning for emergent curriculum takes commitment, organization, and skill. Unless it is done, a necessary piece of the curriculum puzzle is not in place. Conversations are left behind without connection or relationship to the life of the children and teachers in the school. They become isolated events rather than critical connectors and resources for children and teachers.

Granted, these seven barriers raise complicated issues, and surmounting them has not been easy or without anxiety. Clearly, what seems a relatively simple, new way to work with young children may turn out to require teachers to rethink and change their assumptions about and expectations of children, their way of organizing their time and style of working, their way of developing curriculum and planning their days and activities (Fyfe, 1994). It requires them to develop new skills and take risks, give extra time, collaborate, and critique each other. None of these changes are simple. After 3 years, we are still struggling with some aspects of all of them, even though we have made progress together and are committed to finding solutions.

FACILITATING GOOD CONVERSATIONS

What have we learned through our attempts at having conversations with children?

1. Think about appropriate questions beforehand. Try to brainstorm with colleagues first. Think about what kinds of questions would stimulate children's curiosity, provoke and challenge them to wonder and hypothesize, invent, and compare.
2. Arrange to have the conversation in a quiet place where neither you nor the children will be distracted.
3. Choose a group that you feel will benefit from being together and that will work well together for any number of reasons. Combining interested children with not so interested children, verbal with not so verbal, can work. Pay as careful attention to the group composition as the situation allows. Some opportunities will be more spontaneous than others. A group of five seems to be an ideal small-group number when working with 4- and 5-year-olds, but this figure may vary depending on the particular children.
4. Plan in advance how you will record. Some people can write quickly and keep up with the flow of the conversation, though this task is difficult. If you tape-record, be committed to listening and transcribing the important parts of the tape as soon as you can. If another teacher can be with you, one can lead and one can write.
5. Let children know right away that you have no interest in quizzing them and that you do not know all the answers,

that instead you want to wonder and search with them, that you are interested in big ideas and you know they are too.

6. Communicate through your tone of voice your wonder, your belief in the children's capabilities to think creatively and critically, your excitement at this opportunity to talk together about important ideas.
7. Use the questions you have prepared as possibilities. Remain open to the flow of the conversation. It may go in interesting directions you had not anticipated. On the other hand, guide the conversation back to the main subject if it strays too far off.
8. Be the children's memory. Every once in a while, summarize for them what has been said, using children's names, if possible. This will help them realize you are listening carefully and that their ideas are going on record. It will also help them look backward to what has been said and move forward with new ideas.
9. When the children begin to talk to each other, debate, ask each other questions, try to stay in the background as much as possible. This way the conversation begins to belong to them, they become more invested, and they begin to learn to discuss among themselves without intervention.
10. Enjoy the conversation! Laugh together. Be amazed at their perspectives. Share some of yours.
11. Use the conversation. Share some of the things that were said that day or the next with the whole group of children. Use it again with the same group or a different group. Ask children to expand on their ideas, critique their ideas, draw their ideas, paint or sculpt their ideas—translate and transform them into different languages. Analyze the children's ideas with your colleagues to decide what to do next—further questions, further exploration, work with drawing or sculptural materials.
12. Children and adults need time and experience with this way of being together. Most children need time to understand what this is all about—that you really are serious about wanting them to think and tell you and the other children what they think and that you have high expectations of them.
13. As adults, be brave enough to critique each other's conversations with children. It will help you gain skill and confidence.

ANALYZING CONVERSATIONS IN ORDER TO PLAN FOR EMERGENT CURRICULUM

Planning for emergent curriculum is based on the ongoing observations and study of children. The study of group conversations can reveal children's curiosity; their understanding of the dimensions and relations of complex situations; their ability to create analogies, metaphors, anthropomorphic meanings, and realistically logical meanings. Our image of the child is built on this understanding of young children's capacity. If we underestimate it, our curriculum plans will fail to engage and challenge them.

Group conversations can provide a great deal of information about questions, concerns, and ideas that could be the focus of further investigation or exploration. When teachers understand these ideas, they are better able to think of ways to provoke children to dig a little deeper or rethink an idea. They are more likely to be able to connect with what Vygotsky (1978) calls children's zones of proximal development, the distance between the level of capacity that children might be able to exhibit on their own and their levels of potential development, attainable with the help of adults or more advanced peers. By understanding children's current schemas and everyday knowledge, teachers are in a better position to know how to offer children the appropriate kinds and amount of scaffolding to support and challenge them toward new levels of learning.

In the next section, we share what we have learned about the process of using conversations as a basis for curriculum planning. We thought this approach could best be communicated with an example. We do not claim that this is an example of how teachers in Reggio Emilia might plan for emergent curriculum. We have studied the Reggio Approach for several years and give credit to their influence on us, but our work is, and always will be, an interpretation of theirs.

A conversation with a small group of children was analyzed by a team of teachers. The conversation, with a little background on the experiences that preceded it, is presented, followed by a description of the curriculum planning meeting based on it.

The children and their teachers had already begun an investigation of the changes in the natural world that were happening all around them. They had taken walks outside to look, listen, and smell. They had collected leaves and examined them on the light table, then used tempera paint, water colors, oil crayons, markers, and black pens to do observational drawing and painting of the leaves. These experiences ensured that the children had common reference points for a group conversation. The teaching team agreed that it would be a good time for Louise to engage small groups of children in conversation about their observations, ideas, and theories related to this subject, so that we might better understand how to go forward with this project.

A CONVERSATION ON LEAVES

The College School, October 21, 1992

Michael—4 years, 11 months	David—4 years, 9 months
Katie—4 years, 8 months	Dan—4 years, 6 months
Meredith—4 years, 10 months	Elysia—4 years, 9 months
Devyn—5 years, 2 months	Louise Cadwell—teacher

Louise: What do you see?

Michael: This part is white and this is red [turning the leaf over]. I wonder why? That must be the skin [pointing to the underside]. This must be the body [pointing to the top]. The sticks, the little things going out in the leaf, must be bones!

Katie: You can see parts of bones on mine, too. See the things pointing out. The red is the body. Those little stubs must be the bones.

David: I found the spine!

Katie: I found the spine, too.

Meredith: I know that. Everybody has a spine.

David: It's straight. [Feeling his spine] I can feel the bumps of it.

Meredith: It's like little hills. It goes up and down.

David: Don't break it [the spine], then you can't move at all.

Katie: This part is like the leg [pointing to the stem].

Louise: Does the leaf walk?

Michael: No, it flies! I guess its flying is its walking.

Katie: And it jumps and skips.

Louise: Why do you think the leaves fall?

Devyn: Because at the end of fall they kind of curl up to sleep, because they are tired.

David: Because they are dead.

Louise: When they fall off the branches, are they dead?

Devyn: They are asleep, when they fall. They curl up so they don't get cold. The leaves fall down because they are asleep. They die. It's too cold for them to live.

David: But the tree doesn't die. Maybe it does, but not for a very long time.

Louise: How could the leaves ever turn these colors?

Meredith: They turn that way, 'cause I know why. Magic comes when it's fall. It turns the leaves to red and all colors. It gets very, very cold.

Michael: It's like Terminator. The bad guy changed to different things, like the leaves, so nobody knows who he is. It's just like putting on Halloween costumes. Maybe somebody has the power to change the leaves.

Elysia: The wind has the magic power. It makes the leaves change.

Michael: I think the more the wind blows, the more the magic goes into the leaves and changes them.

Dan: 'Cause somebody gots magic.

Katie: I know who does it; the wind and the rain and the clouds and the sun. God does it.

Michael: I knew something was going on.

The Meeting

Jennifer Strange and Joyce Devlin are coteachers of 4- and 5-year-old children at the College School in Webster Groves, a suburb of St. Louis. Louise Cadwell has been working with the early childhood teachers at the College School as a studio teacher (our version of the *atelierista*). Brenda Fyfe is associate professor at Webster University and has been consulting with the College School teachers in a way that could be compared to the *pedagogista* in Reggio Emilia. This team of four met one day to examine conversations that Louise had facilitated with two small groups of 4- and 5-year-olds from the school. We had 1 hour to focus on this task, and during this discussion, we tape-recorded and took notes as we talked. We have learned never to have a meeting without keeping minutes and distributing these minutes as soon as possible after each meeting. Too often great ideas come from such a meeting of the minds and then are lost or never followed through because time passed and memories are distorted. Amelia Gambetti impressed upon us the importance of approaching teacher meetings as well as parent meetings with this kind of efficiency. An agenda is set in advance, and minutes are kept to help everyone remember what was accomplished, planned, and promised.

We began this meeting by taking parts and reading the conversations out loud. We have discovered that by doing this instead of just reading silently, we can sometimes better capture the feeling, tone, and dynamics of the conversation. After the readings, we asked ourselves, What do these dia-

logues tell us about what children already know, think, feel, question, or wonder? We reminded ourselves to complete an exhaustive list of the children's thoughts and to be careful not to project ideas into the conversation that were not explicitly stated by the children. Only after this was accomplished would we move on to planning for emergent curriculum.

Analyzing the Children's Conversation

We began with the question "What do children know, think, hypothesize, feel?" The conversation was lively. At first we just listed single ideas expressed by the children. Then we identified clusters of ideas or themes that connected ideas, such as the fact that both groups related leaf structure or leaf behavior to that of humans. They described leaves as asleep, dying, breathing, having bones and spines, having a body and skin. They said the leaves curl up when they are cold or tired. We noted that this kind of thinking is what Piaget characterizes as the young child's prelogical and egocentric beliefs in animism. We marveled at the intuitive thoughts of these young children.

A second category of ideas related to the falling of leaves. One described the falling as skipping and jumping. Another explained, "Its flying is its walking." One child said they are asleep when they fall. Others commented that the leaves fall down when it is fall; they fall down in the wind.

A third category related to comments about magic and power and change. Magic seemed to be a quickly accepted hypothesis that could explain the unexplainable (e.g., why leaves change color). One attributed the source of change to God. Another child thought about the change in the color of leaves as a kind of disguise. He likened this to Terminator's ability to change so nobody knows who he is. He said that somebody has the power to change the leaves.

We took a little time to reflect on the questions Louise used to provoke the children to think of analogies ("What do you see?") and express hypotheses ("Why do you think leaves fall?"). We noted that children were quite willing and able to think on these levels. We also noted that this was a conversation, unlike some earlier conversations, in which children were really talking to each *other* rather than just to the teacher. We observed that Louise had asked some pivotal questions that helped the children talk to each other. Frequently through the conversations it appears that children piggybacked on each other's ideas or continued a line of thought. This was a good indication that children were listening to each other. Though a few children had little to say, the relevance of their comments indicated that they, too, were listening and involved in the dialogue. We also knew that the prior experience these children had shared in collecting, observing, and

drawing the leaves not only contributed to the ideas they expressed but probably gave them a sense of collective ownership of the topic and a respect for their own and each other's ideas.

Using Conversations to Inform Emergent Curriculum

Now we were ready to move on to curriculum planning. We knew that we needed to plan for several possibilities, possibilities that could help to make children's ideas visible and thereby help them revisit, reflect, reconstruct their thinking, and communicate this thinking to others. Although we have adopted a set of curriculum goals from Project Construct, a curriculum and assessment framework from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (1992), that guided our thinking about what is worth learning, we have tried to follow Rinaldi's (1993) advice about allowing curriculum to emerge in response to the children's needs and interests. We did not formulate specific goals for each activity in advance. Rather, we considered the ideas, hypotheses, and choices of the children and then projected possible activities that might help children answer their own questions (Forman, 1992a), test their hypotheses, and explore their ideas. We proposed ways that the project might evolve and then examined how these activities might support and integrate the goals of our curriculum.

We began with the first cluster of children's ideas: the relationship of leaves to humans. We thought that since the children talked about leaves having bones and spines, maybe we should consider helping them examine human or animal bones and spines and compare them to those of leaves. We could invite them to search for ways to look at human bone structures. We could ask whether they had ever seen pictures of their bones. This could lead to the possibility of finding real X-rays. One of the parents is a doctor; it is likely that he could help us in getting access to some X-rays. We could compare human bones with what the children have described as bones in leaves. We could ask children to then draw the "bone" structure of the leaves and the bone structures of people. This could enable us to talk with them about the discoveries or observations they would be making about similarities and differences. We would try to provoke conversation about hypotheses regarding form and function of leaf bones versus human bones. As children's questions emerge, we could encourage them to search for answers and sources for these answers (e.g., family members who know something about human bones or leaf structure; books or videos on the subject; local experts; collections of more leaves to examine firsthand; observations of leaves on trees). We could invite children to use their drawings as plans or designs for making skeletons or bone structures out of wire. This medium would enable us to think about how structures within leaves and bodies help support the rest of the structure (skin, muscle, organs). We

might ask, Why do leaves have "bones"? Our goal would be to provoke thinking and a desire to know more about the form and function of leaf structures. We would be promoting a disposition to learn and a beginning understanding of the relationships of parts to the whole, how things work, and insight into the system of relations within and among living things.

The falling of leaves was a subject that stirred a great deal of excitement and a flow of ideas from each of us. We thought that we might remind the children of their ideas about leaves flying, jumping, skipping, falling down in the wind, and curling up. Then we could give them the opportunity to look at slides that were taken when they had observed this falling of the leaves. We could invite the children to dance with us in front of the projected slides to imitate and mime how the leaves fall. We could use scarves or other dress-ups and, with the children, select music that we thought suitable for our dance of the leaves. We might use the shadow screen to play with images of leaves falling behind it. Since we know that in the past year these children have shown great interest in writing and acting out plays, this experience might turn into a performance that children might want to script, practice, and perform for others. We might suggest composing or selecting poetry or songs to go with the dance of the leaves. If leaves are still falling outside, we might go there to observe the many different ways that leaves fall, to study how leaves fall when it is windy and how they fall when the air is still. If possible, we could plan to videotape these observations so that we might revisit this experience at another time or share it with other children. We might suggest that children take sketch pads along with them so that they could draw the path of the leaves as they fall. These sketches might be used later to help us choreograph our own body movements in the dance of the leaves and the flow of our scarves.

Louise remembered that once during her year of internship in Reggio Emilia, she observed Vea Vecchi take a small group of children outside one day and heard her say, "Look at how all those leaves have fallen. Do you see how the wind has created this kind of picture, by the way the leaves are arranged? Now pretend if you were the wind, how would you arrange these things?" The children played outside making patterns and constructions out of leaves. Sometimes they would cover their creations with plastic box tops to preserve them for a while.

The rest of us thought this idea was a great possibility for an experience that both adults and children would enjoy, and it would be a logical extension of the study of the effects of wind on falling leaves. It might lead to observations of other patterns in nature. It could help children think about spatial relationships among elements of a pattern (shape, texture, color). This kind of experience could help children develop stronger awareness of their environment and the beauty and complexity of nature.

So many ideas were pouring forth. As this happened, our own questions emerged. Does the shape of a leaf affect the way it falls? How far from a

tree might a leaf fall? One teacher said that the leaves of Ginko trees fall all at once (e.g., overnight) rather than over a period of days or weeks like other trees. She went on to say, "You can go down the street one day and the Ginko leaves are all yellow; the next day they're all on the ground. It looks like it snowed Ginkos." If that is true, we thought, wouldn't it be exciting to study a Ginko tree with the children and try to predict when the leaves would fall? This observation could lead to an investigation of the many different kinds of trees in the school yard. We could try to find out whether different kinds of trees tend to shed leaves at different times, in early or late fall.

Finally, we decided to move on to the third cluster of children's ideas about power, death, and magic in regard to how leaves change color. It occurred to us that these ideas could easily be connected through most, if not all, of the experiences we had already projected. As we engaged in experiences related to the study of falling leaves, we could also discuss and observe color. Sources of information that we seek out in regard to leaf structures might also tell us something about the color of leaves and why the color of leaves changes in the fall. As we observe the Ginko tree to monitor the fall of the leaves, we will surely be noting the change in color that precedes their fall. We might encourage children to paint pictures of their theories about how leaves change color. We might encourage them to mix paints in order to match the many different colors observed. We might take walks to look for examples of leaves that have already changed color and leaves that have not yet changed, leaves that are just beginning to curl up and leaves that are beginning to decompose. We might decide together to represent these different stages through drawing, clay modeling, or other material. This would challenge the children to think about in-between states, thereby focusing more on the process of transformation. These graphic representations should enable the children to converse about their theories and consider each other's ideas.

At this point, our heads were swimming with the many possibilities of this project. We felt a need to reflect on how these experiences related to the goals of our curriculum. We had already discussed the value of several of the activities in regard to their potential for encouraging thinking about form and function, transformations and patterns in nature, and relationships of parts to whole. Though we had not yet talked about it, we could now reflect that, in all cases in which we helped children make their ideas visible (e.g., through various forms of representation such as drawing, construction, dramatic play, and movement—or any of the "hundred languages"), we were enabling them to better communicate and organize their thinking—to revisit, reflect, and re-cognize. The visible representations of children's ideas could enable them to discuss and defend their ideas with peers as well as consider each other's perspectives. We knew that if we supported children in asking and answering their own questions, we would be helping them build dispositions to be curious (e.g., about the physics of

falling leaves or the relationships between bone structure of humans and the "bones" and "spines" in leaves), to take initiative (e.g., in seeking information or testing their hypotheses), and to exercise creative and critical thinking (e.g., in developing theories about why leaves change color). Several of the experiences would help children represent ideas and feelings through music and movement, through construction, graphics, and words. Throughout this study, we would be building vocabulary and exercising the skills of discussion, debate, and listening.

We reminded ourselves of the advice that Amelia Gambetti had given us on several of her consultation visits: though we had thought of a wonderful inventory of possible learning activities, we could only go forward with them if we could get the children to agree to pursue them. In other words, we needed to plan ways to use the documentation we had already collected to entice, provoke, invite, and/or negotiate with children in regard to the proposed learning activities. At the same time, we had to keep our ears and eyes open to alternative experiences or directions for the project that might come from the children. We remembered Rinaldi's (1993a) advice in *The Hundred Languages of Children:* that all of the work we had just done to (a) study children's ideas and hypotheses and (b) discuss and record the many possible ways that the project could be anticipated to evolve was "great preparation for the subsequent stages of the project—even should the unexpected occur" (p. 102).

We ended the meeting with a plan to meet again to discuss strategies for presenting one or more of our ideas to the children, to determine the roles each team member would play in regard to facilitating small-group activities, to identify tools (e.g., camera, camcorder, tape recorder, paper and pencil, etc.) and strategies to be used to document our ongoing observations of learning, to find time to analyze documentation, and to involve parents through documentation and other forms of participation or communication. As the project evolved, we would continue to examine ways to use documentation (e.g., photographs; slides; videotape; transcripts of children's dialogues; and children's drawings, writing, paintings, constructions) to sustain children's interests and involvement in the project.

CONCLUSION

We all agree that planning for emergent curriculum is complex and time-consuming. It requires us not only to know principles of child development but to engage in an ongoing study of the particular children we teach. Children's conversations can be a prime resource for this kind of study.

We have come to learn that serious dialogue and exchange among children, teachers, and parents are critical at all levels. The guidelines offered

at the beginning of this chapter focus on our work with children, but we are now realizing that the ability to listen, discuss, debate, question, probe, consider multiple perspectives, and wonder out loud must happen in our work with all members of the learning community. The skills we develop in practicing the kind of team study and planning just described transfer to our work with parents and children. And as we get better at facilitating and participating in dialogue with children, we become better at doing this with adults. Through our efforts to put dialogue at the center of our curriculum, we are beginning to understand how to develop the "network of cooperation and interactions that produces for the adults, but above all for the children, a feeling of belonging in a world that is alive, welcoming, and authentic" (Malaguzzi, 1993b, p. 58).