

# Questions to Guide Our Work

by Margie Carter

Among the summer treasures of living in Seattle are the buckets full of blackberries that can be had in nearly any neighborhood, including our city center. Our annual harvest prompted me to create a back-to-school tradition with my grandchildren. Before Labor Day our family gathers around my just-out-of-the-oven pie. As the ice cream gets scooped up, I offer the question, "What do you hope to learn in this coming year?" We each take a turn sharing our thoughts. Coe, about to enter fourth grade, once again, rocked me with his response. "This year I've been thinking I should learn how to make use of what they teach us in school, but it isn't that easy to figure out."

My, my, he's got that right! As is often the case with gems children offer us, we would do well, as educators, to ponder what Coe is wrestling with here. What are we teaching and why is it so difficult for children to discern its meaning for their lives? Does the problem lie with them or with our teaching?

Coe's younger brother, Jesse, starting first grade, tried to help his older brother out of this quandary. "When you learn math, you'll get a better job, Coe, and that means more money. (He chuckled, pleased to offer his next thought.) And, you'll be able to count

all that money with bigger numbers." Jesse not only shows us his sense of humor, but the sense he makes of math, *and* our culture's emphasis for schooling: Education is to get you ready for economic function. This impoverished idea of education makes me flinch, just as I do with the notion that our country's economic security is dependent on continually buying more things. You might see me tearing my hair as I roar, "What is happening to our humanity? How did our imaginations get hijacked?" Jonathan Kozol (2000) captures my sentiments nicely:

"There is more to life, and ought to be much more to childhood, than readiness for economic function. Childhood ought to have at least a few entitlements that aren't entangled with utilitarian considerations. One of them should be the right to a degree of unencumbered satisfaction in the sheer delight and goodness of existence itself. Another ought to be the confidence of knowing that one's presence on this earth is taken as an unconditioned blessing that is not contaminated by the economic uses that a nation does or does not have for you."

## Asking the big questions

In my view there has never been a more important time for us to ask ourselves

what we believe the purpose of education to be. The future of American democracy may well be at stake here. Do schools and early childhood programs primarily exist to produce compliant workers for economic function? Or, is the goal to help children grow into their full potential as informed, engaged citizens eager to make a contribution to their communities? We must ask ourselves, "Do educational goals narrowed to test scores prepare children to be successful in an ever more complex world? Should early education focus solely on children's futures or does providing enriched childhood experiences give them a better future?"

The answers to these questions determine the approach to our early care and education programs. Should teachers design curriculum to remediate children's needs and deficits, or should they focus on children's inherent com-

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petencies, ideas, and questions? Can stronger policies and curriculum mandates really improve learning outcomes? Or should the emphasis be on improved working conditions, salaries, and teacher education to support the role of teachers in children’s learning? What are your views on these questions? What questions are you raising as you undertake your work, attend meetings, and champion a care and education system with meaningful outcomes?

**Strategy:**

**What outcomes do you want for children?**

Inspired by Tom Drummond and colleagues he has joined with across the country (visit [www.earlyeducationadvocates.org](http://www.earlyeducationadvocates.org)), I’ve been challenging directors and teachers to clarify the outcomes they want for children. Prompting some considerations with starting phrases

yields a provocative discussion. We are reminded that whatever mandates others have for us, we should be planning for the objectives *we* think are important for children.

**Crafting the daily questions**

When I first entered our profession I generally thought the job of teachers was to be creative in giving children the information and answers they would need to be successful in school. With more experience and clarity on the philosophical and theoretical frameworks I wanted to work with, my pedagogical approach shifted to an emphasis on processes and questions that would open up the world for children and engage them in a quest for life-long learning. Now as a teacher educator I pursue a parallel pedagogy, provoking teachers to listen carefully to children, offering questions to use as a thinking lens as they reflect on actions

to take with them.

While we continually raise the big questions about education, we should also craft the daily questions that will help us learn how to help children learn.

**Strategy:**

**Use questions as a “thinking lens”**

Thinking further about my grandson, Coe’s, musings on how to make use of what he’s taught in school, I realize that a primary goal I have in my adult education work is helping teachers learn how to make use of what we teach them. In many cases I’m sure they resonate with Coe, “It isn’t that easy to figure out.”

Rather than guidance techniques or curriculum activities, I’m convinced teachers need a method for thinking about the complexities of their work. Reading *The Power of Protocols* (2007)

When they leave our program, we want children to:	Cuando se van de nuestro programa, queremos que los niños:
Trust in...	Tengan confianza en...
Believe that...	Creen que...
Know that...	Sepan que...
Know how to...	Sepan como...
Question...	Pregunten como...

has reaffirmed my belief that teachers benefit from a structure that provides “a thinking culture.” I’ve found it useful to offer a set of questions for teachers to regularly cycle through when trying to make meaning out of what has unfolded and choosing what to do next.

For example, try consistently using questions such as the following when you discuss child observations with teachers. After a few months of steady practice with these questions, teachers will internalize them as a thinking lens for their work.

- What specific details will paint a picture for us of what you saw?
- How might different perspectives enhance our understandings of what this means? (e.g., the child’s point of view, the family’s cultural values, professional knowledge, desired outcomes)

- How can we find out more?
- What opportunities and possibilities do we see for taking action?
- What can we do to further our learning and that of the children?

**Strategy:**  
**Consider questions from the child’s perspective**

This summer I participated in a gathering to hear about the New Zealand system of early childhood education and, in particular, their approach to assessment referred to as “Learning Stories.” Chris Bayes captivated us when she suggested we consider thinking of assessment from the child’s point of view.

Drawing on the work of Podmore, May, and Carr (2001), she gave us these

possible questions in the voice of a child in our center.

- Do you appreciate and understand my interests and abilities and those of my family? Do you know me?
- Do you meet my daily needs with care and sensitive consideration? Can I trust you?
- Do you engage my mind, offer challenges, and extend my world? Do you let me fly?
- Do you invite me to communicate and respond to my own particular efforts? Do you hear me?
- Do you encourage and facilitate my endeavors to be part of the wider group? Is this place fair for us?

I find it particularly helpful to think of these children’s questions as offer-

**Assessment From the Child’s Perspective**

The New Zealand approach to assessment asks teachers to consider questions from the child’s voice as centres begin their journey of ensuring accountability through evaluation and assessment. These questions are built on the principles of their Te Whaariki curriculum which provides the framework for defining learning and what is to be learned. Their goals are based on clearly defined values and reflect the following strands.

<b>Belonging</b>	Do you appreciate and understand my interests and abilities and those of my family?	Do you know me?
<b>Well-being</b>	Do you meet my daily needs with care and sensitive consideration?	Can I trust you?
<b>Exploration</b>	Do you engage my mind, offer challenges, and extend my world?	Do you let me fly?
<b>Communication</b>	Do you invite me to communicate and respond to my own particular efforts?	Do you hear me?
<b>Contribution</b>	Do you encourage and facilitate my endeavours to be part of the wider group?	Is this place fair for us?

Podmore, V., May, H., & Carr, M. (2001). “The Child’s Questions,” *Programme Evaluation with Te Whaariki Using Teaching Stories*. Wellington: Institute for Early Childhood Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, NZ

## Practice Using the Thinking Lens with this story

### Inventing a Game

The children are immediately drawn to this interesting architectural structure in the park. They have invented a game of peek-a-boo using the structure as the setting. Every day now for a few weeks they play the same game. They run up to



the structure and peek through the various openings to look out. When they see one of the other children or their caregivers, they make eye contact and laugh uproariously. Then they move to another part of the structure and peek out of another opening and repeat the same looking and laughing behavior.

They all have adopted the same “rules” for this game. They visit the openings from the lower concrete area and then up higher on the grassy area. Sometimes they hide away from the hole and then peek around the corner, surprising the person there. Other times they reach through the openings to touch hands with the person on the other side.



ing us benchmarks to strive for. What might we see in a program as we try to assess, “Do you let me fly?” This takes me back to Jonathan Kozol who so eloquently speaks to the heart of what I see as our work:

“I urge you to be teachers so that you can join with children as the co-collaborators in a plot to build a little place of ecstasy and poetry and gentle joy.”

### References

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- McDonald, J., Mohr, N., Dichter, A., & McDonald, E. (2007). *Power of Protocols*. New York: Teachers College Press.
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