

# Introduction

*“If we have two eyes, how come we only see one thing?”*

—ANTHONY, 5 YEARS

My young friend Anthony asked his mother the above question one weekend. Anthony is always asking questions. He continually surprises and delights us with his view of the world. Anthony’s curiosity and inquisitiveness show his intelligence and potential for learning.

Unfortunately, at the time Anthony was wondering how the body works to help us see, his school experience was not supporting his curiosity. He had been in kindergarten for less than six months and his teacher had already warned his parents that he might need to repeat the year as he did not yet know his alphabet, his reading progress was limited, and he seemed disinterested in classroom activities.

## **The Problem of Disengaged Learners**

The more I thought about it, the more Anthonys from my teaching experience came to mind. These are the children who think creatively, think divergently, and challenge teachers’ ideas and beliefs. These are the children who continually ask Why? and scare teachers a little when they don’t know the answer. These children are often not enriched or excited by their school experience. They’re the children about whom teachers say, “I don’t want her in my class next year” or “I don’t know how you teach him, he’d drive me crazy!”

When Anthony’s mother, Susan, first told me about her conversation with Anthony’s teacher, I was angered by the failure of his school to value and tap into Anthony’s intelligence and curiosity. I was worried that his teacher believed he was

struggling with early literacy. I was surprised that she thought he needed to repeat kindergarten. However, I was most concerned about Anthony's disinterest in the learning opportunities provided for him at school. He was fast becoming a disengaged learner. I had known Anthony since he was a baby and this did not sound like the Anthony I knew. So what was wrong?

Anthony's teacher was focusing on a narrow definition of *effective learning*. Being a successful learner in Anthony's kindergarten class was defined by a limited set of skills and knowledge (knowing the alphabet, for example). While these skills play an important role in schooling, they are not the sole indicator of a successful learner.

Anthony had already shown he was very successful at learning. He was interested in understanding his world, and showed this by asking questions, being curious, and taking time to observe things and listen to others. One day, for example, he spent hours watching his pet guinea pigs adapt to their new environment, and told his family what he had noticed. He communicated well both with adults and his peers, and showed he could solve problems on his own when building a tower with blocks or negotiating with his siblings as they played in their playhouse. Anthony's school experience was not able to tap into his natural disposition toward learning, nor the skills he had developed during his early years. The problem was not with Anthony, but with the school.

Brittany is a different type of disengaged learner. She is quiet and complacent at school. She quietly participates in the learning experiences provided by her child care setting, often needing the encouragement of her teacher to join a new experience or to share what she is doing with the wider group. She tells me she is a "good girl" because she sits still and doesn't call out. She answers her teacher's questions only if she is confident her answer is what the teacher wants to hear, and doesn't easily take risks with new things at school. As she enters the classroom each morning, she holds tightly to her mother's hand and then sits quietly at the small table by the puzzles and waits for her teacher to come to her.

Brittany's mother is puzzled about her lack of excitement in school because at home she is constantly asking *Why?* about all kinds of things. She eagerly leads her younger sister to find worms in the garden, climbs trees at her grandparents' home, and carries her own notebook filled with drawings of people she knows. It seems Brittany has learned that school isn't about being excited and curious about the world, but is about pleasing the teacher and being a "good girl."

Initially, children such as Brittany seem like successful students. They rarely give teachers any trouble. However, scratch the surface and you find a passive learner, one whose potential is not tapped into. The Brittany's go through the motions

and don't truly engage in learning. This type of learner is just as concerning as the disengaged learners who act out their frustration or disinterest, because the Brittanys are so often overlooked.

At four and five years of age, both Brittany and Anthony are already disengaging from the quest and joy of learning. If this continues, how will either child reach their full potential in future schooling and in life? How will their knowledge, skills, and dispositions for life-long learning fully develop? They are likely to miss opportunities to learn the intellectual skills needed for successful learning, such as setting goals, reflecting, evaluating, making plans, noticing details, solving problems, and asking questions. Literacy and mathematical skills need to be practiced in order to develop and consolidate. If Anthony and Brittany do not participate in school, they won't use their new skills and understandings, which will limit their growth and development. Our world is changing rapidly with new technologies and new challenges to sustainability. The one thing we can feel certain about in the future is that to be successful you will need to be flexible, be adaptable, and above all continue to learn. This is the world Anthony and Brittany are growing up in, so it is critical they become life-long learners.

Both these children are in danger of learning they are not good at learning. Brittany is in danger of seeing learning as something less than exciting and meaningful, and Anthony could very easily begin to believe he can't learn at all. A dangerous cycle of disengagement and possibly school failure could easily begin. Either child might eventually become so disinterested in school that they choose not to participate, and eventually drop out.

What is happening in early learning environments to cause young children to disengage with learning? Young children have a natural sense of wonder and curiosity about the world. Babies continually take in every new face that enters a room; toddlers are fascinated by the bubbles in their bathtub; four-year-olds want to know the reason for everything. What happens to this natural disposition and ability to be engaged in learning when children enter a more formalized early learning environment? What kind of curriculum leads to this disengagement?

The answer is simple: a curriculum, or a learning environment, that is planned without the child in mind. A curriculum that is designed by adults who, however well-meaning, have not spent enough time discovering each child's understanding of the world. A curriculum that is designed for a hypothetical group of learners cannot fully engage the diversity of emerging theories and possible confusions any group of particular learners will contain. "One size fits all" learning programs fail to consider the diversity of learning styles in a group of learners. Within a curriculum that narrows learning to one way of knowing, children like Anthony learn

too quickly that they “cannot” learn, and children like Brittany limit their learning to comply with the curriculum. In fact, both children *can* learn. The curriculum, however, does not support them to think and learn in the way that most suits them; it doesn’t engage them in the things that most interest and excite them. And so the Anthonys and Brittans become disengaged, perhaps disruptive to others’ learning or passive participants doing the bare minimum, because the curriculum is not planned with them in mind and doesn’t help them answer *their* questions.

## **Conversations Engage Learners**

While writing this book, I kept Anthony and Brittany in the back of my mind. So much more is possible for them. I want every child to feel the excitement and reward of learning something that is important and interesting to them. I want them to learn how to be successful, engaged, and self-directed learners who continue to learn because it enriches their lives. I dream of learning settings that show children how to be learners—forever. I want all children to believe they are smart and capable, to see they have contributions to make to the world. This dream must start with the youngest learners.

Engaging the Anthonys and Brittans in their learning opportunities means planning curriculum with them in mind. There is no better way to do this than to engage them in conversations to discover what they already know, what they are curious about, and how they are beginning to understand their world. Valuing young learners’ conversations and listening to children’s ideas gives the Anthonys and Brittans a voice in the classroom. Their ways of thinking and learning are valued and respected when teachers pay attention to conversations with them. Anthony is in a new classroom now where his teachers take his questions seriously and help him explore them. Because of this, Anthony continues to ask questions and is curious and inquisitive about the world. Brittany is at a new school where the teachers take time to get to know her ideas. Brittany now has the confidence to share *her* thoughts rather than go along with the crowd.

Both Anthony and Brittany feel more connected to, and therefore participate more in, all kinds of learning experiences in their new classrooms because there is a strong connection between their experience and their conversation. When they talk about their ideas, their vocabularies grow. When they listen to the ideas of others, their thinking is stretched. Participating in conversations gives them opportunities to practice and use skills in questioning, reflecting, planning, evaluating, and making connections, which are all essential skills for learning.

Most important, because the curriculum is now planned with them in mind, Anthony and Brittany understand that their ideas are important to the adults in their lives. This ensures that they develop a view of themselves as people who have positive contributions to make to the world around them.

Both kinds of learners, and all those in between, find more purpose in learning experiences that explore their own ideas about the world through conversations. In this kind of curriculum, children are engaged and excited about learning. They are motivated to search for answers to their questions and build understanding. They will develop dispositions and skills for learning—that is, they will be learning to learn. This will provide the firm foundation necessary for successful learning throughout school and throughout life.

## **Conversations Help Teachers**

Teachers benefit from conversations that take place in the education setting too. Listening intently to young learners provides teachers with insight into children’s understandings, ideas, and confusions. Instead of a “one size fits all” curriculum—which in reality does not fit many learners, particularly the Anthonys and Brittany of the world—teachers will be able to use the knowledge gained through conversations with children to design the most engaging and challenging learning environment for them. Teachers will feel a closeness to the learners in their group—which empowers and energizes their work—and the excitement of learning along with them. When teachers commit to listening intently to young learners, they will be constantly surprised by their logic and intelligent thinking about the world.

## **Learning Environments Filled with Conversations**

Many studies of the language used in educational settings have found that the teacher’s voice is often the loudest in the room. Not necessarily the loudest in decibels, but the majority of the talking in many education settings is done by adults, not children. In learning environments where teachers do most of the talking, conversations often have characteristics such as:

- teachers control the conversation with question-and-answer drills
- conversations flow only from teacher to child and back again
- questions lead the conversation to one way of thinking about the topic, or to one “right” answer

- teachers mentally mark children’s ideas as “right” or “wrong”
- teachers control all aspects of the learning experience by only giving directions and instructions to young learners (this is called “one-way talk”)
- teachers ignore children’s ideas because they don’t understand them
- teachers do not give children enough time to think and fully explain their ideas before moving on
- conversations are rushed to fit into tightly planned schedules or the teacher’s own agenda

In this situation, how can teachers learn how children see and understand the world? How do children come to believe their ideas are important to the adults in their lives? Where is the opportunity for children to ask questions that are important to them, or to explore their own thinking? In this kind of environment, children learn that only adult thinking is important. The balance needs to change. We need to hear children’s voices more clearly in early learning settings.

What does it look like when conversations in learning environments serve to explore children’s thinking and deepen their learning? In these environments, conversations have characteristics such as:

- learners’ voices are heard the most
- teacher talk seeks to discover children’s ideas
- children talk with each other
- children have time to think
- topics connect to children’s interests, explorations, and questions
- conversations are documented and interpreted to reveal thinking
- conversation is used to stretch children’s thinking

How do teachers make this happen? It takes more than just sitting down to listen to children—although that’s a good start! The program culture must support conversations among children and between children and teachers in a variety of ways. In an early learning environment with a strong culture of conversation, teachers do these things:

- provide time and space for conversations throughout the day
- encourage conversations between young learners as well as conversations between teachers and children
- show a genuine interest in discovering children’s thinking and ideas by listening intently to them
- believe young learners are capable of intelligent and abstract thinking about topics that are important to them, and take children’s comments

seriously, asking for more information or clarification if they don't understand

- provide active and authentic experiences that give young learners something worthwhile and meaningful to talk about
- document conversations and use them to reveal learning, connect with families, develop children's learning dispositions and skills, and guide curriculum planning
- work collaboratively with one another and with children's families, seeking to learn more about the ideas children's conversations reveal

This book is about creating a culture of conversation in early childhood programs. This book will show you how to listen more and talk less, and how to focus the conversations in your learning environment on children's real interests. You'll learn how to set up your environment to promote children's conversations, and how to facilitate large and small group conversations. And finally, this book will help you document and interpret what you hear so that you can construct curriculum to engage the children in your environment.

## **Learning from Other Teachers' Stories**

I have been an early childhood educator for many years now. I began my teaching career in a small rural school in Australia. I currently serve as an education consultant in Australia and the United States. Over the past six years or so I have been thinking more deeply about how we can more fully engage all children in learning opportunities. I believe that teachers need to listen more intently to children's thinking and to explore the potential of conversations to do so.

While the seeds to my thinking were sown many years ago during my efforts to build a collaborative and democratic classroom, it was my study tour to Reggio Emilia in northern Italy that transformed my wonderings about children's thinking into a passion. During the opening address in Reggio Emilia, within the first five minutes, I felt I had come home professionally. I was soon jolted out of my easy comfort when I realized that the depth of thinking about children's learning in Reggio Emilia was actually the greatest challenge for me. The Reggio educators challenged me to deepen my thinking about curriculum design, and energized me to continue the journey of creating a different kind of schooling experience for young learners.

Through my role as a consultant, I have been given the incredible opportunity to work and learn with many talented educators. *Are You Listening?* shares with

you the ways some of these teachers have responded to the challenge of listening intently to young learners during our professional learning work together. The words on the pages come to life through the stories of staff members and students from PS 347, the American Sign Language and English Lower School in Manhattan (which has a long and proud history since when it was known as J47). I have worked intensively with this community since 2002, often consulting weekly with them. My responsibility as a consultant is to facilitate the professional learning of teachers. Through this work, the teachers and I have been exploring the meaning behind children's words and how conversations can be used to reveal their thinking. The PS 347 teachers question and experiment with different ways of listening deeply to children's ideas. They learn together, they learn from their mistakes, and most of all they continue to learn from the children they work with.

PS 347 is situated on a busy Manhattan street. It is an elementary school from prekindergarten to sixth grade, with six prekindergarten classes. In a dual-language program, children are taught about and taught in the languages of American Sign Language and English. To provide strong language models for the children, each class has two teachers: one who is a first-language American Sign Language user, and the other a first-language English user. The students include children who are Deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing. Many of the hearing students have a Deaf relative, quite often one or both parents. Therefore, the first language of these children is American Sign Language. Many early childhood settings include children whose first language is other than the primary language of a society. Your context may be different from this, but the common human experiences of communicating, being in a relationship, and learning together will bind us together as you read.

The ideas in *Are You Listening?* have been lived. They have been tried and tested in real learning situations. Other stories come from home environments, from child care settings, and from some of my young friends (I've changed their names to fictional ones). As you read, you will meet learners who are young and not so young. They have all enriched my understanding of learning and teaching, and I hope their stories do the same for you.

## **How to Use *Are You Listening?***

*Are You Listening?* begins with a discussion of learning theory. Chapter 1 discusses theories of learning and the ways in which conversation helps children learn. It also helps you explore your view of children and the ways in which this contributes to your work with children.

Chapter 2 looks at the characteristics and types of conversations that engage children's minds and support their learning.

Ensuring that young learners have a voice in their learning environment does not happen by chance; it takes forethought and planning. Chapter 3 discusses implications for the learning environment and curriculum design. I share practical suggestions for room arrangement, scheduling, organization of materials, and the most effective learning experiences for nurturing conversation.

The role of the teacher in facilitating conversations is explored in chapter 4. Through examples and stories from various learning environments, we'll talk about strategies for grouping learners, asking questions, delving deeper to search for children's understandings, and managing conversations.

Teachers need systems and strategies to support them in listening to children's ideas. Chapter 5 details structures and strategies you can use to capture children's voices for use in interpretation and planning. The nuts and bolts of how to collect conversations and how to decide which conversations are worth collecting and transcribing are included. You will also find suggestions for getting started by setting realistic and manageable goals for yourself.

This sets the scene for the next chapter, where the process of documentation is taken further. Chapter 6 shares strategies for interpreting conversations and building understandings of the emerging theories of young learners. It advocates for interpreting conversations within a collaborative process. Ways to create a culture of conversation with your colleagues and children's families are also discussed.

This book is about conversations. But what about the children in your setting who do not participate in conversations, for whatever reason? Perhaps they have a "language delay" or developing speech. Perhaps their first language is different from the primary learning language in your setting and they are frustrated in their efforts to express themselves. How can you listen to them? How can you empower their voices to be heard in your learning setting? Chapter 7 discusses the challenge of listening to a child with developing language. I use examples of real children and their teachers to explain how teachers listened to the children's drawing, play, and construction and valued their thinking as it was expressed in ways other than speech.

Finally, you will want to use the understanding and knowledge you gain from facilitating, collecting, and interpreting conversations. Your insights can be used to engage children in learning and enrich their experience. Chapter 8 discusses ways to use conversations to communicate with families, to share with children (which helps develop learning skills such as self-reflection and goal setting), and to guide your curriculum planning. Examples of ways to stretch the thinking of young

learners through their play, drawing, construction, exploration with materials, field trips, and further conversations connect learning theory to your daily learning and teaching practice.

Pedagogical conversations are critical to ensure your learning process continues after you finish reading this book. It is not only more difficult but more limiting to try new ideas in isolation. By engaging in conversation with your colleagues, you will hear alternative perspectives that can stretch your own understanding. Just as we acknowledge the importance of children learning from conversations with each other, you will benefit as a teacher from learning in conversation with your colleagues. It offers you the opportunity to develop new insights into your relationships with children and their families and your role in facilitating learning. Your ideas and theories about learning and about teaching practice (and those of your colleagues) can be challenged, confronted, affirmed, and enriched. Throughout *Are You Listening?* you will find sections called “Taking Ownership.” These activities are included in the hope you will meet with your colleagues to discuss your reading, and use the “Taking Ownership” suggestions to guide your thinking and make your reading relevant to your own context. There is a saying “Many hands make light work,” to which I add “Many minds make rich learning.”

Two aspects of my writing to note before reading: you will notice I chose to alternate the gender-specific language in chapters. I did so to support the clarity of reading, not to make any statement about gender roles in education. I use the terms “teacher,” “educational setting,” “learning environment,” and “family” inclusively. That is, the term “teacher” is used to describe all adults working with young learners in an educational setting. In my mind, this includes university-qualified teachers, teaching assistants, home-based child care providers, and other professionals such as speech teachers, social workers, and occupational therapists who may be working with children in learning settings. I have used the term “educational setting” or “learning environment” to include primary and elementary schools; prekindergarten programs within schools; private, community, and church-based prekindergarten or early learning centers; and home-based child care programs. Rather than use the term “parent,” I have chosen to use “family” in an effort to include nontraditional forms of family such as grandparents, extended families, foster parents, and other guardians.

The most talented educators I have worked with are those who view theory and research as a tool by which to view the world, children, and the learning environment. Theory isn’t just read about and discussed, but becomes a living reality as teachers connect it to the learning that happens in their setting. They use theory and research not as an end, but as a stepping-off point for developing their own

theories and beliefs about learning. They learn from other educators but always reflect on their own context and make decisions that fit with the unique lives and interests of their setting, their teaching, and their young learners. It is my hope that during the reading of this book, you will develop and deepen your own personal theories about the relationship between learning and teaching. *Are You Listening?* is my invitation to you to take ownership of the ideas you read and think about, and to integrate them with your own prior knowledge and experience, transforming them as you need and making them your own. In doing so you begin the challenging journey of reaching children like Anthony and Brittany who need, above all, someone to be interested enough to truly listen to them.