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Using Skilled Dialogue to Transform Challenging Interactions

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What is a typical family? What language can we expect children in our classrooms to understand and speak? What are the behaviors that best express respect for this family? The answers to these questions are no longer as clear-cut as they once were—or appeared to be.

It is not enough to simply know that there is diversity, or even to know the types of diversity associated with various groups. Knowing that someone may be consistently late for scheduled meetings because of their culturally based values and frame of reference, for example, can be helpful. But it likely will not lessen the frustration of the colleagues who are waiting, or change the fact that there was only one available meeting time for everyone. One person will continue to feel the need for the other to share their value of punctuality (“After all, how else can we get things done?” she may ask. “Am I just supposed to accept and indeed respect their consistent lateness?”). Something more is required.

The two-part article we have written focuses on this something more. It describes Skilled Dialogue, an approach to diversity that promotes the creation of interpersonal contexts within which the riches of diverse identities and voices—and the connections between them—can be accessed and unimagined options created. This approach emphasizes the need to transform our understanding of and relationship to the differences expressed by those with whom we interact, whether children or adults.

Part I: Target Qualities and Critical Dispositions introduces the larger framework for Skilled Dialogue, which is composed of three key qualities and two dispositions. Part II: Strategies and Implementation then focuses more directly on the specific strategies for sustaining these qualities and concretizing the dispositions.

Selected material from I. Barrera and L. Kramer. *Using Skilled Dialogue to Transform Challenging Interactions: Honoring Identity, Voice, and Connection*. Copyright © 2009 by Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc. Baltimore. And from I. Barrera, L. Kramer, and D. MacPherson. *Skilled Dialogue for Responding to Cultural Diversity in Early Childhood*, Second edition. Copyright © 2012 by Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc. Baltimore. www.brookespublishing.com/store/books/barrera-69551/index.htm

Part I: Target Qualities and Critical Dispositions

Over the past few decades, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on acknowledging and understanding cultural and linguistic diversity, especially in early childhood settings. Many resources discuss its various challenges and provide detailed information on behaviors, values, and beliefs associated with different cultural communities. In today’s increasingly multicultural world, however, individual families and children rarely fit neatly into established cultural categories.

Today most children grow up in environments that contain elements of several cultures combined in nontraditional ways (Maloney 2009; Seeley & Wasilewski 1996). A child may be American Indian, for example, but live in an urban area with little exposure to traditional practices. That same child may spend time on a reservation with his Indian grandmother as well as time on a Kansas farm with his Norwegian grandfather. Often, families themselves are multicultural communities in miniature. There may be parents with one or more root cultures, internationally adopted children, or grandparents with diverse religions or sexual orientations. In addition, classrooms and educational settings themselves can be a microcosm of our multicultural society. A single classroom could have up to 15 (or more) different cultures represented by both staff and children, making it impossible to learn all the specific details of each represented culture (which keep changing from year to year).

Parallel to this challenge is another that only adds to the complexities of becoming culturally responsive: the challenge of an increasing focus on standardized, sometimes even scripted, curriculum. Such curriculum is often validated based on research that has only minimally addressed the range of individual, social, and cultural diversities represented within the groups of children on which it is conducted. For example, samples of Hispanic children may have been included without controlling for country of origin or for how many are third- or fifth-generation U.S. citizens. Many programs now adopt such “evidence-based” curriculum without sufficient recognition of how little flexibility there is to adjust to the multiple aspects of diversity or how restrictive its attention to these aspects may be.

Finally, to further confound the issues, Parker Palmer identifies an additional challenge. His words “we teach who we are” (1998, 2) highlight the challenge posed by our own identities and roles as cultural, social, and psychological beings focusing on inspiring learning. This challenge is one that tends to be addressed much less frequently than the first two, perhaps

because it appears less objective.

“Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in the mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge—and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students or my subject” (Palmer 1998, 2, italics added). Though this was a rather radical thing to say in 1998, recent research is increasingly proving its validity. Research into emotional and social intelligence, brain and biochemical functioning, and mirror neurons, for example, is now proving that teaching who we are is much more than a simple subjective or philosophical belief (Cozolino 2006; Goleman 2006; Jaffe 2007; Rizzolatti et. al 2006).

Palmer goes on to say that “When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject—not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a [cluster] of concepts as far removed from the [children’s] world as I am from my personal truth” (1998, 2). Without addressing this third challenge, therefore, curriculum remains not only scripted but also ultimately and deeply unreal, teaching children to learn only in a similarly scripted fashion and leaving them unable to transfer classroom learning to their unscripted and often dissimilar outside world(s).

SKILLED DIALOGUE

The challenges posed by cultural linguistic diversity are thus multilayered and multifaceted. Skilled Dialogue was first developed as the authors themselves grappled with these three challenges; it was more deeply refined as we began to prepare early childhood educators. Our focus shifted from “How do I interact with people from this culture or that culture?” to “When I’m interacting with others who believe or behave in ways I find difficult to understand or accept, how can I best craft interactions that are respectful (honor their identity as well as mine), reciprocal (honor their voice as well as mine), and responsive (honor the fact that all behavior, no matter how diverse, is connected)?”

SKILLED DIALOGUE’S THREE KEY QUALITIES

The presence or absence of Skilled Dialogue can be determined by the degree to which all participants in an interaction experience their identities, voices, and connections acknowledged and honored (that is, not marginalized or placed apart from the whole). It is not unusual to hear someone say, “That person knew a lot about my culture, but I did not feel that she really heard me or even believed that we could really collaborate as equals.” Con-

versely, it is not uncommon for someone who knows very little about someone else’s cultures to establish truly successful relationships with that other person even when he does not have all the necessary cultural information beforehand. The contrast between these two perspectives is what first led us to identify the three key qualities of Skilled Dialogue: respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness.

RESPECT

The quality of respect is much talked about yet seldom defined other than as just a set of behaviors or social courtesies. From a Skilled Dialogue perspective, however, respect is much more: It is honoring another’s identity as a valued and valuable individual and as a participant in multiple social and cultural communities—rather than only as a representative of a particular culture.

To honor someone’s identity is to see that person as she defines herself, not as we define her. To do that, we must interact with the actual person, not just with our idea of that person. An “overwhelmed mom,” for example, may define herself as an American Indian, an artist, a storyteller, someone ashamed of who she is, or someone overwhelmed by the stress of needing to learn how to navigate an entirely new cultural environment—or she may well define herself as all of those things at the same time. A child who seldom speaks may define himself as a child struggling with stuttering as well as a child from a culture considered to be less socially verbal—or perhaps as only one of those. Everyone’s self-definition is multifaceted and multidimensional.

RECIPROCITY

The second quality of Skilled Dialogue, reciprocity, focuses on honoring voice—that is, on honoring the expression of identity. Used here, voice includes words and behaviors as well as products (for example, pictures drawn by a child, gifts offered by a family member). Establishing and sustaining reciprocity requires recognizing the value and validity of another’s voice to the same degree as we recognize the value and validity of our own—acknowledging that they have as much to contribute in a given situation as we believe we do.

One simple reflection of reciprocity is the proportion of time given to listening to another’s views, beliefs, and opinions. It is unfortunately too common for practitioners to talk more than the children or family members with whom they are talking. Underlying this inequity is usu-

ally the belief that “experts” and “leaders” have more to contribute than “learners” and “followers.”

In contrast, reciprocal interactions happen when we allow ourselves to be learners as well as teachers. After all, it is when we feel that we are active and valued participants that we have the greatest motivation to work with someone.

RESPONSIVENESS

The third quality important in Skilled Dialogue, responsiveness, honors the fact that all beliefs, perspectives, and behaviors are connected, no matter how contradictory they may seem. To be responsive involves entertaining the possibility of connection; it requires that we ask ourselves how another’s perspective connects with our own, rather than assuming that diverse perspectives are mutually exclusive. One metaphor for this focus on connection is to think of interactions as three-legged races. The diverse perspectives, values, and beliefs of participants in an interaction remain tied together, fueling and supporting each other much like the two legs that are tied together. Even when it seems each is pulling in a separate direction, neither is moving independently of the other.

Honoring connection requires that practitioners acknowledge problems as “ours” and not just “theirs.” The reality is that I am always contributing something to the creation and continued existence of the very problems I’m trying to solve. If I am frustrated with someone’s failure to listen, I am also, in some way, doing something to sustain their not listening. Perhaps I’m not listening to them, or perhaps it’s not really fun to listen to someone whose face tells the other person all too clearly that they are not meeting expectations. In honoring connection, responsiveness both deepens and extends respect and reciprocity.

Finally, responsive interactions focus on the people involved rather than on the identified problem. The stereotypical nonresponsive scenario is the phone helpline that simply puts your question in a preexisting category—Question #456—and then proceeds to give the prescribed answer—Answer #456—without regard for who you are or the unique aspects of the question.

While everyone agrees on the value of respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness, it is not always easy to create and sustain these in our interactions. We are not always disposed towards the other in ways that support these qualities. For example, how can I communicate respect when I believe the other person needs to change? What happens to reciprocity if I believe I need to repeatedly state my case rather than listen to the other person’s

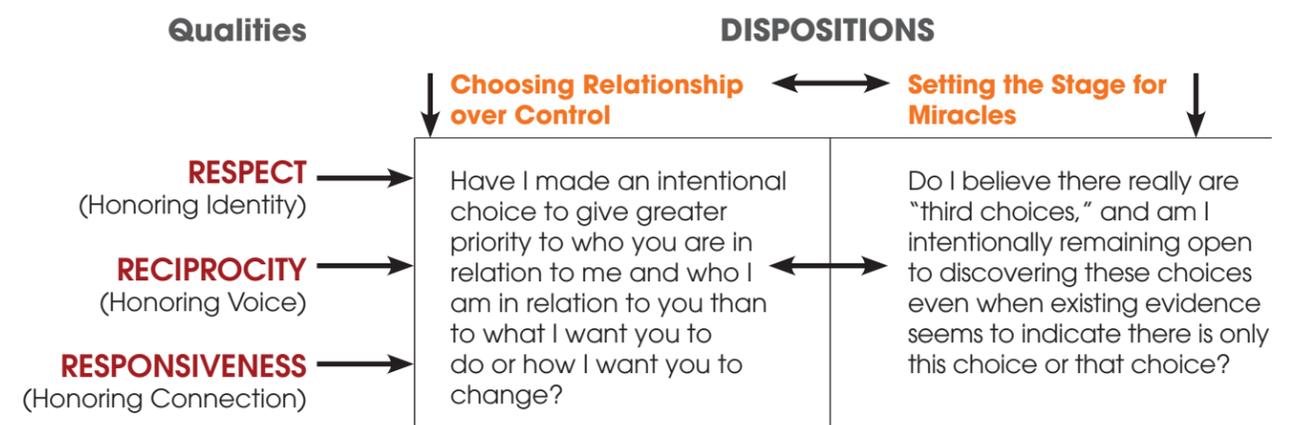
objections? How can I be responsive when all I can see is the chasm between our perspectives? In response to these questions, Skilled Dialogue encourages the adoption of two dispositions prior to the implementation of its specific strategies.

DISPOSITIONS

Early models of Skilled Dialogue did not address dispositions. As we explored interactions across diverse identities and voices over the past 10 years, however, we realized that it was not enough to simply provide specific strategies. We found that maintaining respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness involves more than just exhibiting the behaviors identified as most appropriate for working with given groups (for example, using less direct eye contact, asking fewer questions). It also involves the intentions and attitudes (that is, dispositions) that underlay those behaviors. Research outside of Skilled Dialogue supports this point. It is increasingly proven that how we do something—thoughtfully, without thought, for its own value, as a means to an end—has a significant impact on how our actions are interpreted and, therefore, on how others respond to us (Langer 2005). There is also ample anecdotal evidence: think of the difference between someone who offers to help us because they want something and someone who offers to help us out of a genuine caring for our well-being (Kahane 2004).

As we studied interactions across diverse identities and voices, two dispositions emerged as most critical to establishing and sustaining respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness: Choosing Relationship over Control and Setting the Stage for Miracles. Figure 1. Skilled Dialogue Framework shows the core question associated with each of these dispositions. (As shown in Figure 2 on p. 24, the strategies may be read horizontally, according to the

Figure 1: Skilled Dialogue Framework



quality they help establish and sustain, or vertically, according to the disposition they express. In this article, we will read them horizontally. The reason for this is that, in practice, it is more effective to “braid” the dispositions, addressing first one and then the other, rather than to try to establish either independently of the other.)

CHOOSING RELATIONSHIP OVER CONTROL

The disposition of Choosing Relationship over Control reflects our intentional choice to give priority to people rather than to our desired outcomes; that is, to pay more attention to who the other is in relation to me and who I am in relation to him than to what I want him to do.

If we choose control and limit our focus to having others do what we’ve determined is best for them, the intended changes become more important than the person we wish to change. Our regard becomes conditional on their change.

In contrast, when we choose relationship, the change we seek is not forgotten, but neither is it imposed. We dignify the person with whom we are interacting by communicating that he is more important than the change we wish for. Instead the change becomes something that we wish to inspire the other person to consider rather than a condition we impose in order for them to become “acceptable” or “competent” in our eyes.

The following 10 aspects characterize the nature of Choosing Relationship over Control:

- an assumption of equal capability to craft an effective response to the situation at hand
- a recognition that another’s behavior, no matter how different from ours, is as evidence-based as our own
- a willingness to communicate unconditional respect
- a sense of curiosity rather than certainty
- a learner’s attitude and mindset
- nonjudgmental information-gathering
- perspective-taking (that is, seeing things from another’s perspective as well as our own)
- explicit recognition of the messages we send through our words and behaviors
- recognition that even contradictory behaviors can be complementary
- a willingness to change our words and behaviors

Readers can find a full discussion of these 10 aspects in Barrera and Kramer’s 2009 book *Using Skilled Dialogue to Transform Challenging Interactions*.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR MIRACLES

Setting the Stage for Miracles is a corollary disposition that focuses on the intentional choice to remain open to creative options other than our own. This disposition moves us away from fixed agendas and outcomes toward more open-ended collaborations that leave room for another’s strengths and creativity to generate unanticipated and unpredicted changes. It insists on the possibility of “miracles”—outcomes that cannot be predicted from the existing data.

This disposition invites us to consider the possibility that a child or a parent may change even when we are certain they can’t or won’t. It asks us to allow for the possibility of such “incredible” options instead of remaining imprisoned by what we are certain can or can’t happen. Just as there is ample anecdotal evidence for the importance of dispositions in general, there is also ample evidence that unpredictable changes occur all the time. Many of us may know a child who learned to read despite all predictions to the contrary, for example. We personally know of a child with cortical blindness who initially presenting as a child with no language, no consistent responses to adults other than screaming, and no stable movement or walking. She achieved age level development in many areas within just a few years.

Setting the Stage for Miracles is characterized by the following eight aspects:

- a willingness to stay with the tension of differing, even contradictory, beliefs or opinions without trying to change them
- a willingness to let go of our stories and fixed interpretations of another’s behaviors and beliefs
- the perception of diverse perspectives as potentially complementary rather than divisive
- a willingness to identify the “gold nuggets” in another’s behaviors and beliefs
- the recognition that every negative behavior is a positive behavior in its exaggerated form
- a willingness to learn from another’s behaviors and beliefs
- a willingness to reframe and rethink our perceptions
- the ability and willingness to “think in threes” rather than dualistically in either-or’s

WHAT DOES SKILLED DIALOGUE LOOK LIKE?

Head Start teacher Camilla is frequently frustrated when working with Joey, a 3-year-old child who resists direction and exhibits highly disruptive behaviors. According to Camilla, working with Joey’s mother, JoAnne, to remedy the situation is equally frustrating:

JoAnne believes that there is nothing she can do about Joey's behaviors and that he just needs "more room." When I talk with her about the need for more structured behavioral consequences, she tells me that Joey is a spirited child and, while she can see the problems he is having in our program, she thinks that the recommended structured routines and consequences are both time consuming and impractical. "And besides," she often adds, "Joey is a bright, creative child, and I don't want to squash that. He'll settle down as he gets a bit older. My brother had much the same problems as a child, and he's just fine now."

What might adopting Skilled Dialogue's two dispositions look like in this case? Table 1. How Camilla Might Express Skilled Dialogue's Two Dispositions shows some summary responses to that question. These responses are only examples, of course, designed to give the reader the "flavor" of Skilled Dialogue in action. This still leaves the question of what strategies might support such responses.

Table 1: How Camilla might express Skilled Dialogue's two dispositions

Choosing Relationship over Control

If Camilla was disposed to Choose Relationship over Control in the case of Joey and his mother, she might do the following:

1. Remind herself that she cannot correctly interpret JoAnne's behaviors until she gathers face-to-face experiential information. For example, she cannot be sure that it indicates resistance and lack of caring without getting to know the experiential and cultural understandings that shape what "changing" means to JoAnne. Does it mean a rejection of who she believes herself to be? Or perhaps a lack of security and increased sense of incompetence?
2. Listen and ask questions to get JoAnne's interpretations and understandings of the situation
3. Verbally affirm JoAnne's competence as a learner and as a mother (that is, tell her what she is doing well with Joey).
4. Choose intentionally to find a way to bring JoAnne's strengths into the picture rather than try to control her through demands for change
5. Ask herself, "What can I learn from JoAnne?" (for example, lessons related to making decisions under difficult circumstances and/or about unconditional parenting)
6. Model the focused attention, patience, and curiosity she wishes from JoAnne.

Setting the Stage for Miracles

If Camilla was disposed to Set the Stage for Miracles in the case of Joey and his mother, she might do the following:

1. Approach the situation with the understanding that JoAnne's behaviors stems from specific experiential data and that, given that data, her choices reflect competent problem-solving skills.
2. Choose to wait before giving solutions and trying to change JoAnne's behaviors, knowing that her (Camilla's) desire to change can coexist with JoAnne's insistence on not changing.
3. Verbally affirm JoAnne's concerns and competence, and state that she is interested in expanding that competence.
4. Seek to gain insight into how JoAnne's unconditional affirmation of Joey's current behavior might actually help support desired change. For example, it might foster a sense of acceptance and fearlessness that would make it easier for Joey to try new behaviors!
5. Tell JoAnne that while it seems that only two exclusive choices are currently present, there is always a third choice—and brainstorm with her to find that third choice.

STRATEGIES PREVIEW

Skilled Dialogue offers six strategies to support the development of responses such as those shown in Table 1. These strategies compose Skilled Dialogue's third component and the concrete expressions of its two dispositions. Three strategies are associated with the disposition of Choosing Relationship over Control:

Welcoming. The strategy of Welcoming involves using words and behaviors that clearly communicate our recognition of the other person's worth and dignity, as well as our welcoming of the opportunity to interact with them.

Sense-Making. The strategy of Sense-Making focuses on trying to understand another's words and behaviors based on face-to-face interactions. It involves eliciting the other person's story, looking at the whole context, and seeking to understand how his chosen words and behaviors make sense within that context.

Joining. This strategy links differences once we have welcomed and made sense of them. It reflects the recognition that all behavior is co-constructed, that is, mutually created by our responses to their responses to our responses to their responses...and so on. It is through this strategy that we acknowledge that a given problem is "our" problem not just "your" problem.

The strategies associated with Choosing Relationship over Control are complemented by those associated with Setting the Stage for Miracles:

Allowing. The strategy of Allowing focuses on allowing diverse perspectives to exist side-by-side without trying to change them. It complements Welcoming.

Appreciating. The strategy of Appreciating deepens reciprocity through recognizing and communicating the value of another's voice and the gifts it brings to the situation at hand. Appreciating extends Sense-Making.

Harmonizing. The strategy of Harmonizing complements that of Joining. This strategy focuses on learning how to bring diverse perspectives from contradiction into harmony. It specifically aims at the development of inclusive third choices rather than exclusive forced choices where one person's identity or voice is silenced in favor of another's.

These six strategies are Skilled Dialogue's most visible aspect. Without the underlying dispositions, however, they become only mechanical behavioral prescriptions that honor solely our own identity and voice and, ultimately, disconnect rather than connect diverse perspectives. Thus, Part I has focused on the dispositions. Part II will continue with more detailed attention to the strategies.

Part II: Strategies and Implementation

What is your first response when a colleague or the parent of one of your students disagrees with you? What do you say or do when they clearly do not listen or, worse yet, listen but place little or no value on your words or views?

Do you believe that the goals you seek through these interactions can be reached collaboratively and without struggle, even in these situations?

In the first part of this two-part article, readers were introduced to Skilled Dialogue as one response to the challenges posed by conversations and interactions with those who hold significantly different perspectives and opinions. We described and illustrated Skilled Dialogue's key qualities (respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness) and key dispositions (Choosing Relationship over Control and Setting the Stage for Miracles) (see Figure 1). In this article we will extend that initial information by providing more detail on Skilled Dialogue's six concrete strategies.

THE SIX SKILLED DIALOGUE STRATEGIES

The following discussion focuses on two strategies at a time according to the quality—respect, reciprocity, or responsiveness—they are designed to promote and support. Following that, a second discussion will review these same pairs of strategies but in relation to a specific case, with examples of what the strategies look and sound like.

WELCOMING AND ALLOWING

These first two strategies focus on promoting and supporting the quality of respect. Welcoming expresses the disposition of Choosing Relationship over Control as it supports the development and maintenance of respect. Welcoming goes beyond mere greeting and social niceties. It involves “gladly receiving” another person to truly communicate “I’m glad for this opportunity to chat with you; you are worth my time and attention.”

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for teachers to greet a parent and then immediately move into their predetermined agenda (for example, “Good morning, Mrs. Tate. As you know, we need to talk about Roland’s recent behavioral issues”). This type of greeting clearly expresses the intent to control the interaction, saying in effect “I’m so glad you’re here to meet my priorities as your child’s teacher!”

The strategy of Welcoming instead focuses on a genuine greeting that

communicates that we are glad to see the other person not simply because she will help us fix an identified problem but because we look forward to interacting with her (for example, “Good morning, Mrs. Tate. I am so glad that you have taken the time to stop by so that we can chat about your son. I know that it can’t be easy when there are still two younger children at home, and I’m looking forward to hearing what you have to say”). While time is always at a premium, such welcoming is always worth taking a few additional moments.

Welcoming’s sister strategy—Allowing—is designed to sustain and extend welcoming. Welcoming can be quickly if unintentionally sabotaged, if our next move is to move on to our intent to change the other person (for example, “. . . I know that it can’t be easy when there are still two younger children at home, and I’m looking forward to hearing what you have to say. As you know we need to talk about what you need to do at home to help Roland with his reading.”)

The strategy of Allowing emphasizes Welcoming through the simple making of time and space for the other person to express her views prior to advocating our agenda. This step is important no matter how contradictory or counterproductive her perspectives may seem (for example, “I know you are my son’s teacher and really care about his learning, but I just don’t see how I can help. My hands are already full”). Allowing deepens our welcoming of another’s diverse identity in its own right and expresses our disposition toward Setting the Stage for Miracles. Through the respectful listening that is its hallmark, Allowing communicates that we are open to developing positive outcomes based on combined strengths rather than only achieving predetermined outcomes in predetermined ways.

Allowing others to be and say who they are is essential to the creation and maintenance of respect. Sometimes, Allowing may take only a few minutes. Other times, it may consume all or almost all of the time we’ve set aside. An example would be allowing Mrs. Tate to follow her own trend of thought even when it might seem off-track in view of our agenda (“Well, you know, Mrs. White, it is really hard to find someone to stay with the two younger children. But it’s also really hard to bring them with me. Just the other day, I tried to take them with me to my doctor’s appointment . . .”). In this type of case, it is important to allow the additional time, perhaps saying something like “It looks like we’re going to need more time to discuss this situation” or “It’s really important to me to hear all you have to say, perhaps we could meet again in a few days (or next week) to continue our discussion.” While it might seem that this is “wasted” time, it is really time used



to establish respect as the base for subsequent interactions. It will also make the teacher more credible when she subsequently expresses her concerns to this parent.

The underlying message of *Allowing* is something like “Your views and opinions are as important as mine, and I want to make sure you can express them to the same degree I believe I should express mine to you.” This message both builds and sustains respect as it leads into the next two strategies. These focus on establishing and sustaining reciprocity, an often overlooked ingredient of respectful collaboration.

SENSE-MAKING AND APPRECIATING

The strategies of Sense-Making and Appreciating work together to extend respect (honoring identity) into reciprocity (honoring voice). Sense-Making focuses on deepening the expression of *Choosing Relationship over Control* by establishing and sustaining a commitment to truly understanding another’s perspective, both cognitively and empathically.

It is important to seek to understand how the beliefs, values, perspectives, and behaviors that we find difficult to accept make sense from the perspective of the person exhibiting them. All too often when we say “I would never do that if I were in their shoes,” we remain firmly in our shoes, merely walking over to where we think the other is standing! We don’t consider that, if in fact we were in another’s shoes, we would not be ourselves; that is, we would not have the same set of life experiences that we do. We would have a completely different evidence base for our actions and beliefs. Sense-Making seeks to discover this evidence base in order to foster both understanding and empathy.

Sense-Making requires radical perspective taking: the ability to consider another’s behaviors and values from within their particular personal and social contexts rather than from within our own. This does not mean that we need to approve of another’s beliefs, values, and behaviors or that we need to turn a blind eye to their potential or actual negative impact. It means that we need to keep an open mind and allow ourselves to understand that those beliefs and behaviors make sense to the other person and are not simply the result of ignorance, incompetent life skills, or misguided conclusions they should change, if they only knew better (that is, were more like us!).

For example, it is possible that the parents with whom we are interacting have learned, through direct and perhaps bitter experience, that the only way they can have any power in relation to persons in authority is to express themselves loudly and aggressively. Perhaps they have learned that once they



express agreement with these people, all attention to their views disappears and they are dismissed as co-decision-makers. Somewhere, in some way, they may have learned that the behavior they are exhibiting now made the most sense and worked the best for them. That behavior, therefore, will not change until new evidence is introduced—and judging them as neglectful, uncaring, or incompetent will not result in such new evidence. It is common for behaviors to often be exaggerated until they are appreciated, like turning the volume up on the television until it can finally be heard.

Once we establish a point of view from which diverse behaviors make sense, it is easier to appreciate their strengths and become open to how they can become an important part of the solution, not just the problem. Appreciating, Sense-Making’s corollary strategy, expresses our commitment to *Setting the Stage for Miracles* by explicit acknowledging the value of others’ behaviors in relation to the achievement of our goal (that is, seeing them as resources rather than obstacles).

Appreciating requires that we actively seek ways to recognize and explicitly acknowledge the value of another’s diverse beliefs, perspectives, and behaviors within the context in which they occur, even when we simultaneously recognize their limitations in other contexts. It is context, after all, that largely defines the meaning of behavior. In one context, for example, laughter can lighten the mood in an interaction; in another context, it can be understood as rude and have a negative impact. Appreciating invites us to think creatively. What if a parent disregards our suggestions regarding at-home literacy activities with their child? How might we come to appreciate that behavior as a positive rather than a negative? Admittedly, this noncompliance (not reading to their child) may have little value within the context of our educational concerns (supporting literacy development). Within the context of the parent’s concerns and environment, however, it might have great value.

Within that context, its value might be more readily discernible as a behavior that, for example, affirms the parent’s identity as someone who can speak up and take care of himself, or perhaps as a behavior that allows the parents time they wouldn’t have if they followed our suggestion. Perhaps its value might lie in limiting potentially negative interactions where the parent would feel shame or anger toward their child. Maybe its value is at a more social level, gaining recognition for that parent as a parent who teaches their child to defend him/herself instead of just reading (as it might be perceived!) or in its reinforcement of the parent’s power and autonomy in an educational system within which he has never been heard.

Learning to Appreciate diverse behaviors, beliefs, and perspectives in this fashion does not mean discarding the value of our own. It does mean letting diverse behaviors, beliefs, and perspectives come into equal footing with each other, with the eventual goal of leveraging the strengths of each in such a way that one need not be compromised in favor of the other (see discussion on Joining and Harmonizing).

An additional aspect of Appreciating is its invitation to reflect on how another's beliefs, perspectives, and behaviors could be of direct value to ourselves, not just to the other person. For example, given the situation just described, we could learn that there are times when we too should not comply with what others ask of us. Are there not times, in fact, when we do exactly that? Might we not be doing that in this exact situation, refusing to comply with the parent's request to listen and appreciate the value of their perspective?

JOINING AND HARMONIZING

As we strive to make sense of and appreciate diverse behaviors, we start to honor what connects us (that is, we become truly responsive). Honoring the fact that we are connected and all behavior is co-constructed is the focus of the last two strategies: Joining and Harmonizing. Once respect has been communicated through Welcoming and Allowing and reciprocity has been established through Sense-Making and Appreciating, Joining and Harmonizing define the quality of our response to another's diversity as connective rather than divisive or polarizing.

The first of these strategies, Joining, deepens the expression of Choosing Relationship over Control by capitalizing on the reciprocity that opened the door to an authentic "we're different yet still in the same room" perspective (see the discussion of 3rd Space below). Joining asks us to acknowledge that no behavior or perspective is independent of any other but rather emerges from a shared context. It acknowledges the truth of the saying that a butterfly beats its wings one place and a hurricane happens across the world just at a much smaller and localized level. It does not assign the responsibility of the identified problem to only one person, and it requires that we take seriously not only the specific "problem" or interaction, but also the "the network of relationships within which [these] exist, the physical and social environment in which [they] exist, and the boundaries that [we] must respect" (Isaacs 1999, 342).

In using the strategy of Joining, we reflect on how we are not simply innocent bystanders in our interactions. Our own experiences and interac-

tions play a role in the identified problem. For example, when observing an active child, one person might see a hyperactive, disruptive child while another might see a curious, lively child. Is it the child or the observer who is different? The answer is yes to both questions because the context the child shares with each adult is distinct.

Joining with another's perspective does not mean that we cannot or should not seek to encourage different behavior. It does mean that we must simultaneously seek to encourage different interpretations and responses on our own part. For example, it is not uncommon for me (Barrera) to suggest to my graduate students that they start to picture a child or parent as a resource instead of a problem (that is, join with them as partners now rather than waiting for them to change first). At least several times a year, students report back that the behaviors that had bothered them so much have just gone away without any other active intervention.

It is within this wider scope of shared interaction, environment, boundaries, and relational networks that the strategy of Harmonizing comes into play as unexpected and unpredictable outcomes—"miracles"—start to emerge. If Joining refers to the acknowledgment of a common context, then Harmonizing refers to the integration of the diverse elements in that context, like individual notes played into one chord. The strategy of Harmonizing focuses on establishing "3rd Space," a conceptual and emotional space within which seemingly contradictory realities can not only co-exist but can also integrate to form a larger reality that capitalizes on the strength of both with no need for compromise (for example, blue + yellow = green).

DEFINING 3RD SPACE. From a 3rd Space perspective, there is never a need for an either-or choice; there are always at least three (or more) choices. Paradise gives an interesting example of this in an article on Mazahua mothers and children in which she describes a form of interaction she terms "separate-but-together": "They (mothers and children) are together while each at the same time is involved in his or her own separate activity" (1994, 160). This "separate-but-together" type of interaction can serve as an example of a third choice that neither negates the previous two choices of "separate" and "together" nor forces a choice between them.

From a 3rd Space perspective, boundaries serve not only as distinctions, they also serve as points of contact that, like poles of a battery, generate constructive tension when connected (Palmer 1998).

The idea that two or more diverse perspectives are complementary is core to the 3rd Space perspective that is the essence of Harmonizing.

The following analogy further illustrates both 3rd Space and Harmonizing. Imagine two actual rooms next to each other in physical space. From a singular space perspective, there is literally only one room: the one I'm in. I believe that my room (that is, view, value, belief) is the only one that exists. I cannot see or imagine anything different, or if I can, I judge them to be nonexistent or without value. If I am told about them, I do not accept them as "real". Real events and interactions only take place in "my" room, and I am absolutely certain that my beliefs and values are the only true ones.

From a dualistic space perspective, I realize that there are two different rooms (that is, views, values, beliefs). I accept other views as real but exclude them from my room. Interactions take place in one OR the other room (for example, my way or your way, either this or that, right or wrong); there is no common space. From this dualistic perspective, practitioners could understand that another's values and beliefs were different from their own—perhaps even equally valid—but they can respond in only two ways. If they felt strongly that the differences needed to be resolved, they would seek to reach agreement (that is, one or the other would have to concede, or each would compromise to a greater or lesser degree). If they felt less strongly about the need to reach agreement, they could simply let both sets of beliefs remain side by side, separate but equal. In either case, the full strengths of at least one of the perspectives involved would not be fully leveraged.

In contrast, Harmonizing affirms the reality that diverse perspectives can be integrated. It poses an answer to the question: "If we are in separate rooms, how can we both end up in the same space without moving?" This question challenges us to realize that it is not our respective positions (that is, rooms) that keep us from occupying common space, but rather the wall we have erected between them. Harmonizing seeks to lower or dissolve this wall to bring diverse perspectives together in a way that the unique strengths of each can be accessed and mined (that is, create a single room that encompasses and integrates the previously separate rooms into one space). This final strategy is one that cannot be individually imposed but must be collaboratively co-constructed. More specific examples are given below.

ILLUSTRATION OF SKILLED DIALOGUE STRATEGIES

The Skilled Dialogue strategies we've just discussed could be illustrated through a variety of scenarios: practitioner-parent, practitioner-child, practitioner-co-worker, or practitioner-supervisor. For purposes of this article we will illustrate the use of these strategies through the scenario presented in the first part of the article (This scenario first appeared in Barrera et al. 2003):

Head Start teacher Camilla is frequently frustrated when working with Joey, a 3-year-old child who resists direction and exhibits highly disruptive behaviors. In Camilla's words, working with Joey's mother, JoAnne, to remedy the situation is equally frustrating:

JoAnne believes that there is nothing she can do about Joey's behaviors and that he just needs "more room." When I talk with her about the need for more structured behavioral consequences, she tells me that Joey is a spirited child and, while she can see the problems he is having in our program, she thinks that the recommended structured routines and consequences are both time-consuming and impractical. "And besides," she often adds, "Joey is a bright, creative child, and I don't want to squash that. He'll settle down as he gets a bit older. My brother had much the same problems as a child, and he's just fine now."

There are, of course, multiple ways in which Skilled Dialogue's strategies could be applied to this case. The following discussion illustrates one such application (see also Table 1).

WELCOMING AND ALLOWING.

These first two strategies are perhaps the clearest indications of the degree to which we are willing to adopt Skilled Dialogue's dispositions. For example, are we sufficiently willing to choose relationship over control that we can extend a genuine welcome to the other person even when we might anticipate a challenging interaction? In Camilla's case, how could she extend such a welcome? She would use words (for example, "I'm glad we could meet") and gestures of welcome (for example, leaning forward slightly as she speaks). Such words and gestures, though, are both context and culture-specific, differing depending on where the meeting takes place and the culturally based values and practices of each person involved. Though seemingly simple, our

initial messages can have a powerful impact on the outcomes of our interactions.

Welcoming blends easily into Allowing, which expresses Camilla's commitment to Skilled Dialogue's second disposition, Setting the Stage for Miracles (that is, remaining open to the possibilities of positive outcomes other than those we have identified and set as our goal). In Camilla's case, she can demonstrate Allowing itself in two ways, one more visible than the other. The first, more visible way would be for Camilla to listen without trying to direct or control the conversation as well as in her use of words such as "I see," or "Tell me more." A second, less visible way in which Camilla can practice Allowing would be to use internal listening rather than internal dialogue (for example, concentrating on everything JoAnne is saying without thinking, "There she goes again, making excuses instead of listening to what I'm suggesting"). Though not as visible to JoAnne, Camilla's internal dialogue would still communicate itself through nonverbal cues such as facial expressions or a tense body position.

The use of Welcoming and Allowing does not, of course, end after the first few minutes of an interaction. Camilla would continue to monitor her use of these strategies but could begin to move on to the next strategies once she believed she would continue to communicate respect.

SENSE-MAKING AND APPRECIATING.

The expression of Choosing Relationship over Control continues with the strategy of Sense-Making, a strategy designed to communicate empathy through several specific points: (a) I am interested in you, not just in my ideas of you, (b) I believe that you are doing/believing X for a good reason, and (c) I want to see this situation through your eyes so that I can better understand what I sound like to you and what you have to contribute to our solution. Camilla would use words that communicate these points (for example, "I want to be sure I understand your thinking about this").

Intertwined with Sense-Making, the strategy of Appreciating makes explicit the strengths and potential contributions of JoAnne's perspective and behaviors. Statements such as those shown in Table 2 ("I really appreciate your persistence") lay the groundwork for the partnership that is necessary to true responsiveness. The first meeting between Camilla and JoAnne may well end at this note, depending on how well it is going and how ready JoAnne is to realize that Camilla both respects her and is willing to create a reciprocal partnership. It also depends on the actual length of time that has transpired. Typically, approximately 30–45 minutes is an appropriate length

of time both in terms of available time and ability of both parties to stay engaged at a meaningful level. A second reason to stop and then continue later is that the next two strategies can be a bit more challenging both to the practitioner and the other person with whom they are meeting.

JOINING AND HARMONIZING.

These last two strategies cannot be effectively implemented unless both respect and reciprocity have been firmly established. The first, Joining, culminates the expression of Choosing Relationship over Control through recognizing a common shared context. It explicitly acknowledges the similarities in the differences between values, beliefs, and perspectives and, simultaneously, the differences in the similarities. That is, it "joins" without erasing differences. Statements such as those shown in Table 2 are only some examples of how Joining can be verbally expressed. Other statements might include "Even in our differences, I can see that we have a lot in common. We are both interested in what's best for Joey, though we're coming at it from different perspectives" or "I think the best response in this situation is to partner with each other, joining the strengths of our individual abilities and viewpoints." In this case, Joining would invite Camilla to take responsibility for her part in the current shape of the interactions between her and JoAnne. It is in this way that the quality of responsiveness begins to be established.

Harmonizing can then follow, though perhaps not immediately, as Camilla moves to express her intent to integrate and leverage JoAnne's individual viewpoints with her own. Given that Harmonizing tends to be a relatively unfamiliar activity as compared to Welcoming or Appreciating, it may be necessary for Camilla to provide JoAnne with more concrete metaphors, such as those discussed earlier in this article (for example, blue + yellow = green, two different notes played at once as a chord) as well as provide time for the idea to settle in and be understood.

Harmonizing occurs most effectively when both parties identify the third (and fourth or fifth) choice collaboratively rather than one person giving it to the other. It can therefore be a good practice to have previously created a climate of third choices (for example, always offering three alternatives in a given situation, never framing choices as either-or alternatives). Assuming that Camilla has indeed been doing that in her interactions with JoAnne, she could now say something like "We've talked about our two different perspectives in this situation: your desire to allow Joey's behavior to continue without adding much more, if any, structure—and my wish to start

to introduce more structure. Both perspectives have positive aspects. Instead of choosing between them, let's think about how to capture the strengths of both. After all, both autonomy and community participation are critical skills for all children. It might take some time to figure out how to do that, but I think it would be worth it."

During that meeting or at a later meeting, Camilla might then begin to scaffold JoAnne's thinking (for example, "Let's see, you want to support and maintain Joey's creativity and spontaneity, right? And I'd like to support his social skills so that creativity and spontaneity don't come at the price of his ability to work with others. Is that about how you understand it?").

An initial third choice might involve telling Joey's mother something like "OK, Joey does need both creativity and the ability to work with others, as we've discussed. Let's start by splitting responsibility. You will continue to help develop and support Joey's spontaneity and creativity at home; here are some possible resources you might want to explore. I'll be responsible for developing and supporting his social skills here at school. It will be sort of like bilingual education: you'll use one behavioral language at home, and I'll use a different one here at school. After a while, perhaps we can observe how we each do that and start to mix them up a bit." This choice would bring Joanne into partnership with Camilla, dignifying her actions and reducing the pressure to change them. As the respect and reciprocity created through this choice increase, the likelihood of JoAnne mirroring these back to Camilla and becoming responsive to her views also increases.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Our field-based research shows that Skilled Dialogue promotes greater collaboration and increases the achievement of desired outcomes in a variety of situations. Teachers and other staff using it with parents and families report an increased ease of interaction and more cooperation. Practitioners using it with colleagues and administrators report enhanced communication and respect with less tension.

Skilled Dialogue is a process that requires both patience and practice. It also takes a significant amount of time and energy (both cognitive and emotional). It should be used primarily in situations where simpler and quicker approaches are less suitable or have been tried without success. Its dispositions and strategies are almost always present in situations that go well, even though we may not be conscious of them.

In situations where diversity presents minimal or no significant challenges and interactions proceed smoothly, Skilled Dialogue dispositions and strategies are most likely already present—though, again, perhaps not consciously. In situations where diversity does present significant challenges and interactions are not proceeding as desired, only one person needs to know Skilled Dialogue to change that interaction for the positive. Because behavior is always interdependent, any change in the behavior of one person will almost always change the behavior of the other person in the interaction.

Some of our most successful applications of Skilled Dialogue have occurred as a result of using it as a self-reflective tool before or after interactions. In this mode, we ask ourselves how well (or not) we expressed the dispositions: Did we use all the strategies? Were we able to make sense of the other person's behaviors in a way that allowed us to appreciate it even as we truly disagreed with it? Did we explicitly communicate that appreciation? Following our reflections, we explore how we might improve on our interaction, thus changing our behavior, which will tend to change the other person's behavior even when he is not aware of our reflections.

Skilled Dialogue's greatest benefits can be as a tool for the promotion and sustaining of respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness when these do not occur spontaneously. For example, in a situation where I am highly angered because of someone else's actions, it can be useful to think about how those actions make sense to them in their context (for example, "Oh, I think I get it. They said what they said about me because they felt they needed to protect themselves and that behavior has worked for them in the past. I can appreciate that kind of fear; it can be a useful signal that we're out of territory we consider safe."). Neither Sense-Making nor Appreciating mean that we believe (a) that the behavior was justified, (b) that the behavior is a good behavior, or (c) that we should reinforce or reward it. They simply mean that we can understand it and recognize its value within a given context.

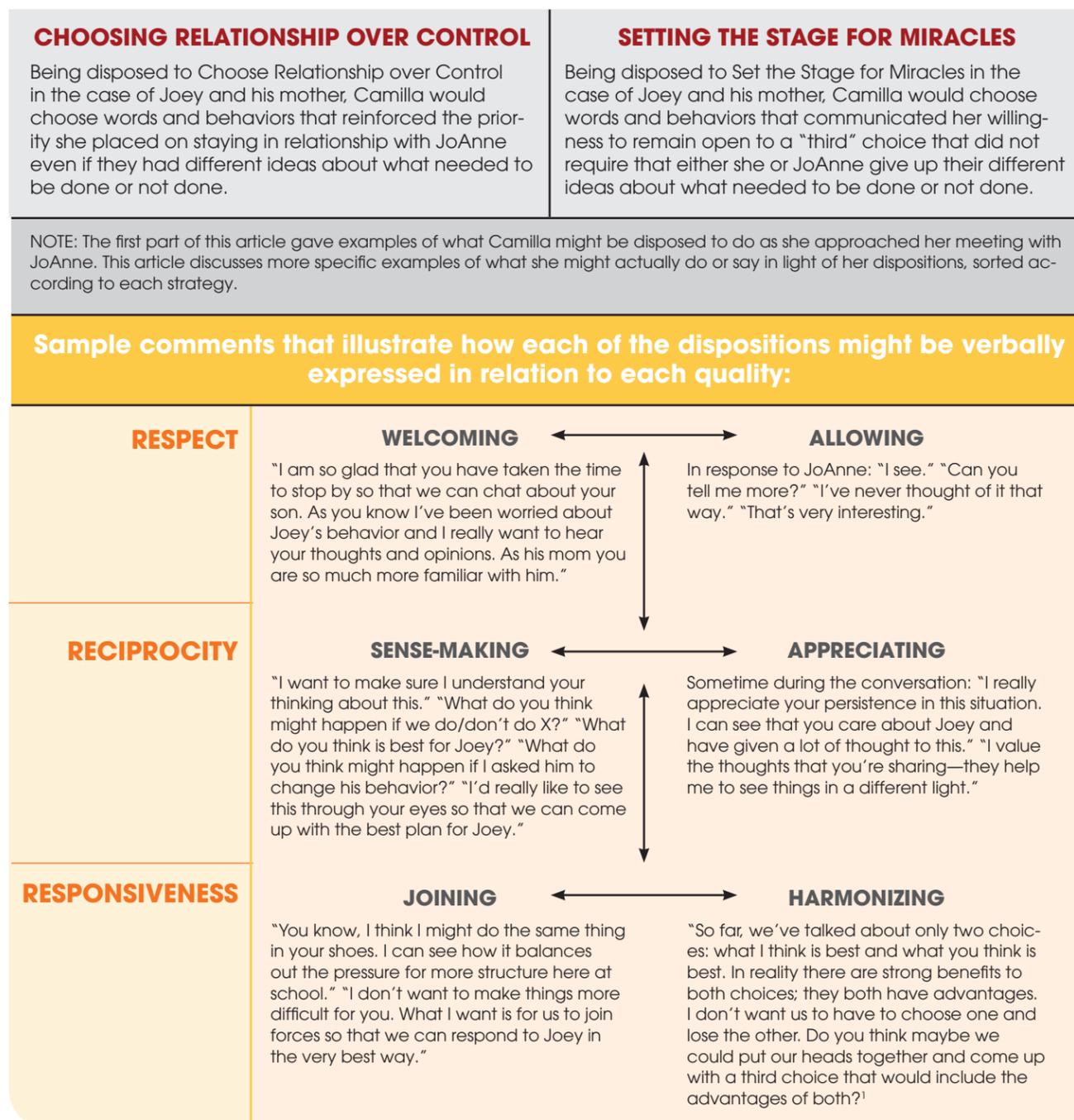
At the same time it is important to act to protect children and other individuals who may be being harmed or at risk to be harmed. Calling Child Protective Services when abuse is suspected, for example, must always be done. Doing so while simultaneously working to create an environment of respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness will have more positive results than doing it while judging the parents as unworthy of our respect. (Readers interested in additional discussion of this aspect of Skilled Dialogue are referred to Barrera et al. 2003.)

Never use Skilled Dialogue in situations in which you do not feel physically or emotionally safe (for example, with a person who is being verbally

abusive) or in situations where reciprocity cannot be established (for example, where you need to compromise what you believe is really important).

For more on Skilled Dialogue, read the *Using Skilled Dialogue to Transform Challenging Interactions: Honoring Identity, Voice, and Connection*, which contains lengthier discussions and provides many more examples.

Figure 2: What the strategies might look like in relation to each of the dispositions



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