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How do they make it?

Posted by **Bethica Quinn** on December 18, 2014 at 8:23am

Hola todos! This week, I want to share a conversation which happened at the lunch table. This conversation stood out for me because the children were grappling with big questions, and they were listening carefully to each other in the process. I do not have photos to share because I did not take any, but you can imagine the scene: six children sitting at the table with me, food being served, and one child poses a question to the group. Below is my transcript of the conversation in Spanish and English, and then a few thoughts about how we support this kind of thinking:

Mateo: Como se hace esta comida?

Mateo: Pero como se hacen las personas?

Cruz: Se hacen en los estomagos de las mamás.

Mateo: No, pero como se hace la fruta?

Lucía Inez: Se hace en la planta.

Tori: Si, no tienes que hacer la fruta, solo crece.

Mateo: Pero como se hace?

Cruz: Siembras una semilla, y luego pones agua. Y mas agua. Y crece la planta.

Mateo: No, pero como se hace la fruta en la tienda?

Tori: Llega en un camion.

Xavier: Se hace con una chakalaka.

Cruz: Con chocolate!

Mateo: Pero como se hace el chocolate?

Maya: Mi mami me dijo que tienes que mezclar y mezclar.

Mateo. No, asi no se hace. Las personas de la tienda hacen el chocolate.

Maya, Si, mezclan y mezclan.

Xavier: Con una chakalaka.

Tori: El chocolate tambien viene en un camion.

Lucía Inez: Pero si no hay un camion, el arbol puede crecer… a la tienda.

And now, in English:

Mateo: How do they make this food?

Mateo: But how do they make people?

Cruz: They make them in the mothers' stomachs.

Mateo: No, but how do they make fruit?

Lucía Inez: They make it on a plant.

Tori: Yeah, you don't have to make fruit, it just grows.

Mateo: But how do they make it?

Cruz: You plant a seed, and then you put water. And more water. Ans the plant grows.

Mateo: No, but how do they make the fruit at the store?

Tori: It comes in a truck.

Xavier: They make it with a chakalaka.

Cruz: With chocolate!

Mateo: But how do they make chocolate?

Maya: My mother told me that you have to mix and mix.

Mateo. No, that's not how they do it. The people at the store make the chocolate.

Maya, Yes, they mix and mix.

Xavier: With a chakalaka.

Tori: The chocolate comes on a truck too.

Lucía Inez: But if there's no truck, the tree can grow... to the store.

As you can see, there was a lot of thinking going on at that lunch table! Mateo wanted to ponder the BIG existential question: where does everything come from? He kept shifting his questions, it seemed to me in an effort to keep the group from getting too satisfied with easy answers. He also seemed to be asking about the role of human agency, as opposed to natural abundance, in creating the good things we all enjoy. The other children were more than happy to take this trip with him and engaged in exchanges of knowledge and theories about the origin of things. This exchange made me think as well, about the role of the adult in supporting children's thinking and communication. Here are some thoughts:

1. I did not include my own words in the transcript. If I had, it would have been at least twice as long because I had a very important role in the conversation: the glue. I repeated each of Mateo's questions to the group and asked individuals, "What do you think about that?" I also repeated children's answers and asked for responses. Without my participation, I doubt Mateo's initial question would have received much response, since he did not direct it to anyone in particular and the other children were more engaged with their plates than with him at the beginning of the conversation. Providing conversational 'glue' is an important adult role since children do not always have the specific communication skills (use people's names, make eye contact, rephrase your idea

or question if there is no response, pass the turn taking around the group) that allow them to have extended conversations even when, as in this case, they are clearly cognitively ready to do so.

2. There is another adult role that I consciously did NOT take on in this conversation: that of information provider. It is too easy to shut down a conversation by overwhelming children with our superior knowledge of the facts. As these children showed, they actually do know quite a lot about their world. They also stand to learn more by sharing their knowledge, coming together to an understanding of where the gaps are, and researching the pieces they lack than by being told the answers... more on this process later.

3. I want to highlight Xavier's contribution to the conversation and the children's response. He spoke twice, each time about a 'chakalaka.' I thought maybe I had not understood him and asked him to repeat himself. I also asked him what a chakalaka was. This was a place where I got stuck on my own desire for clarity. However, the children were wiser than I was. They took Xavier's contribution at face value and included him in the conversation without demanding a specific definition of 'chakalaka.' Cruz decided that the word reminded him of chocolate, and Tori thought it was a kind of truck, and all of them were OK with that duality. Their openness reminded me of what I just said in number 2 above: the journey is more important than the destination. Xavier is a valued member of the group, he was thinking and communicating about the question under consideration, and his contribution was given the respect it deserved by his peers.

4. And now, back to the process of inquiry: Here is another thing that adults can do to support children when they are engaging in this kind of thinking. We can 'hold the thread' of important questions and ideas in order to bring them back to the group later and continue the investigation. In this case, I am planning to hold this thread across the winter break and bring it back in January. If there is still energy in the group around Mateo's big existential question, we will open an investigation of where things come from and how they get made, and see where it will lead us....

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Anelise Dandler · December 18, 2014 at 11:08pm

Thanks for sharing this Bethica. This episode highlights why we love Las Olas! I was sitting in the background (kitchen) during this conversation and observed and heard Bethica's role during this whole exchange and was fascinated by the magic. And inspired...

I love the word 'chakalaka'!

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