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I Want To Know Why

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Cover Page Footnote

*Please note names of childcare providers have been changed.

I Want to Know Why

Virginia Casper and Rebecca J. Newman

I want to talk about my initial reactions to the work—my emotional reactions. I know these are framed by my past experiences—including culture and privilege. It's not that I'm a different person in different settings, but I need this space to say some things that I might not be ready to say in the larger meetings—a way to find language for competing thoughts and feelings. — Rebecca

Rebecca shared this at her first supervision session. Rebecca was an early childhood coach and Virginia was her mentor coach; they worked together as part of the Guttman Center's project designed to support early care providers (see Brickley, this issue; Hancock, this issue). At this initial meeting, Rebecca was eager to roll up her sleeves and discuss with Virginia her first visits with providers. On some level, Rebecca sensed that Virginia would understand and validate her message. Although she expressed a need for privacy, neither of us knew that these conversations would result in a collaboration that would eventually become public through this article.

Our first meeting was followed by a provocative and generative learning relationship that led to new ideas. This article chronicles the somewhat circuitous path we took—telling each other stories of practice and exchanging curiosities, emotions, and at times unanswerable questions—that helped us learn and grow as we worked together to develop Rebecca's ability to support early care providers and Virginia's ability to support Rebecca.

Mentoring Child Care Coaches

We were involved in an innovative project seeking to positively impact the lives of infants and toddlers by working with early childhood providers in historically underserved neighborhoods. Using a community-based model, the philosophy of the program was to first seek out the strengths and needs of a given community and its early childhood professionals to shape a true collaboration.

Virginia is an experienced teacher and infant-toddler-family professional. She was in her second year working as a mentor coach in this program and had served in various roles in the Graduate School at Bank Street College of Education for over 30 years. One of her strengths was her many years of early care and education work both in the U.S. and abroad, which gave her an expansive perspective and a resistance to generalizations. She was intrigued by Rebecca's candid opening in the first session and excited to work with whatever material and insight Rebecca brought.

An experienced preschool teacher, Rebecca was new to her job as a coach, the team, and the College. She immediately sensed that this institution was different from the agencies and programs where she had previously worked. Her strengths were her very deep passion for work with young children and families, her honesty about her reactions to new ways of thinking, and her ability to see the world from the child's perspective. Beyond writing formal notes for the program, Rebecca also kept a journal of her work experiences and her reactions to them.

The program where they met was designed to offer an integrated curriculum of coaching visits and coursework over a five-month period. Rebecca was one of two coaches working with the second cohort of the program. This entailed visiting them for half-day periods in their family child care home or child care center, attending bi-weekly Saturday course sessions, as well as supervision and team meetings.

The program design presented Rebecca with several tasks within a five-month time frame: build rapport and join with early care programs, assess areas of strength and areas for growth and enhancement, and partner with providers in order to improve their program's quality. While Rebecca had done early childhood consulting and home visiting work in the past, when she entered her first home-based program, she quickly realized that the intimacy and informality of a home—not often present in center-based programs—posed a special challenge.

Most of our project members were white women working in child care centers in a predominately African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Latinx neighborhood. The director organized a series of intensive in-service workshops for the staff in which readings and discussion on systemic racism were interwoven with personal experiences. The goal was to push everyone to think more deeply about the meaning of the work in its cultural context. For Rebecca, for whom this kind of professional examination was new, much of this learning was profound. One learning that stood out was the fact that most issues of race and class would not be solved immediately, despite good intentions and hard work on her part. The workshops helped her unpack the term “accepting non-closure” (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Rather than seeking resolution, as she had tended to do in the past, Rebecca began to prioritize holding key questions in her mind, with an understanding that the answers would evolve in the years to come. After one of these workshops, Rebecca wrote in her journal:

What types of feelings might my presence evoke in the community /programs I am entering into? What history am I bringing with me? How do I allay a person's fear and concern? What issues around race am I NOT thinking about enough, and why?

Rebecca used her initial supervision session with Virginia to make sense of her first impressions of the sites she was visiting. She observed numerous loving and caring interactions indicating the caregivers' emotional responsiveness, attunement, and joy in their interactions with the children. Here is one from circle time:

Ms. Jane and Ms. Ariel sing and clap with the children. The children and providers make eye contact and smile at each other as they wiggle their bodies. Ms. Jane leads the children as they stand up and hold hands in a circle. The youngest child in the group leaves her space in the circle to run over to sit in Ms. Ariel's lap. Ms. Ariel brings her closer with one arm, and turns to me to say “She's my baby. She looks for me.”

Reflection: I observed true joint attention while watching them sing together and hear each other's voices. This is not always the case in child care, as singing together can too easily become mechanical

and rote. The children and Ms. Jane were feeding off each other's cues, and in this case, holding hands seemed to symbolize their community. Ms. Ariel was tuned in, functioning as a co-regulator for the youngest child in the group. I wonder how she feels about being a source of security for this child.

Virginia took great pleasure in the way that Rebecca bubbled over with thoughts and feelings about her observations and how to make meaning out of them. Rebecca made clear to Virginia that she wanted to be able to feel free to “think out-loud.” Yet she had distinct feelings of vulnerability from being a new staff person in an environment that she was just beginning to figure out and therefore wanted full confidentiality. Rebecca had experienced different supervisory styles in the past, and right away, she found the supervision with Virginia to be less prescriptive. Virginia was not aware of Rebecca’s previous supervisory experiences at the start, but within a few sessions, Rebecca made it clear that “this is different!”

Outdoor Time and Space

By the second session, it was clear to Virginia that Rebecca felt torn between some of the caring and thoughtful practices she observed and others that she wasn’t clear about. At the forefront were Rebecca’s observations about outdoor time and space, most specifically in the home-based child care programs. Below are two of Rebecca’s observations and reflections from early on in her coaching work.

Observation of an outdoor space #1

The yard is small (about 15 ft by 15 ft) with a fence surrounding it. The fence has some decorations. There are a few small basketball hoops about two-feet high, a toddler seesaw, and a small toddler play structure with a slide. On the other side of the fence, there are neighborhood cats. Three children wave to them occasionally.

Reflection: These toys seem left over from when there were younger children in the program. This is now a mixed-age group of preschool children trying to make use of this small space with toddler toys. They jump off the play structures. They run in small circles. Do they get the release they need? I see and appreciate that the providers prioritize giving them this time, even a few minutes outside. I just wish there was more space for them.

Observation of an outdoor space #2

The play space seems like an alley. It is about the length of a driveway and roughly 15 feet wide. A covered sand table sits in the corner, and some tricycles are available.

Reflection: This is not what I expected. The size of this space makes me wonder how it is used. I also wonder how often it is used. I’m glad the children have a space to go to, though.

Overall Reflection: I am glad to see that these two programs have an outdoor space of some kind. So far, it seems as if infant, toddlers, and preschool-aged children in some of the programs I’m visiting are spending their days without going outside—either to a backyard or park, or neighborhood walk.

In our first reflective supervision sessions we worked together to unpack the issue of lack of outdoor play and the unstated expectations Rebecca might have about outdoor play spaces. Rebecca was aware that she was having some strong feelings. Why was she being triggered? Through the animated back and forth it became clear that Rebecca entered her role as a coach with years of early childhood education and practice that assumes young children need regular outdoor exploration to facilitate positive development.

It's something I feel all children should have... and I've seen the developmental benefits over time. Some of my most joyful moments in the field have been spent with young children running outside, digging our hands into the dirt, creating artwork with sidewalk chalk.

The lack of outdoor time raised the pivotal question, “I want to know why.”

Understanding Why

Rebecca was at the beginning of the coaching cycle, so it seemed too early to ask the teachers about their use of outdoor time. Virginia asked what she imagined the reasons might be and Rebecca generated two possible theories based on her first observations.

The first theory was that perhaps for some practitioners, the developmental benefits of being outdoors might not be as apparent as, for example, the benefits of worksheets. Rebecca mused that worksheets, which were plentiful in the child care programs she visited, might appear more concrete than outdoor play and more important in terms of measurable developmental gains. The use of worksheets in family child care homes must be contextualized within provider and parental concerns about their children being academically prepared for school and having a better chance in a system not designed to recognize their achievements. This idea led to a conversation about another possibility—an often-mentioned teacher worry—that children’s parents would have objections to their young children spending time outside (e.g., because of cold weather, lost mittens, the possibility of skinned knees or getting sick). Kimbo and Schachter (2011) have outlined these kinds of concerns.

A few weeks later, Rebecca followed up with one provider regarding outdoor play. The provider shared that one of the children was asthmatic and her family had requested that she not go outside. Although Rebecca knew about the prevalence of childhood asthma in areas of poverty, it was not a factor that initially came to mind. Virginia was jolted into remembering her own experiences working with children with high asthma and lead exposure. Over the years, non-white families in low-economic neighborhoods have experienced residential segregation and other social stressors related to poverty and inequality, which increase the already poor environmental conditions that impact children with asthma, such as proximity to car fumes, cockroaches, and lack of air conditioning. Here Virginia was able to provide information to Rebecca and debrief her on this urban scourge (DePriest & Butz, 2017).

Another dynamic that Virginia raised was the important difference between family child care programs and center-based programs. In family child care, the main practitioner is often also the director. In center-based programs, a separate director has the opportunity to serve as a buffer between a teacher and a family about programmatic decisions, such as different ideas about going outside. But in family

group care, if a family decides to withdraw a child because of differences in child-rearing beliefs and practices, the practitioner/director feels the economic effect on her business in an immediate and visceral way. Parental concerns and desires around activities like outdoor time and school readiness figure strongly in the practitioner/director's mind.

And finally, Virginia asked if the local parks were appropriate sites for infant-toddler exploration. This was a question to which there was as yet no answer. An article on outdoor play in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Young Children (Spencer & Wright, 2014) states:

The goal [of outdoor play] is to increase play and physical activity for children by being intentional in the design and use of quality outdoor environments.... All the materials and equipment in the play space should be age appropriate for the children who use it, to ensure safety and maximum skill development.

Reviewing the article together, Virginia and Rebecca noted that the photographs indicated a more suburban environment in the sense that there was space and grass to explore. Only one photo appeared to show a city backyard, with pots and pans hanging creatively on a fence. In addition, the article seemed to make assumptions about the need for access to "quality outdoor environments and equipment." This generated a conversation about outdoor play in different cultures and communities around the world. Virginia wanted to broaden the scope of the dialogue and pointed out that in the Waldkindergarten in Switzerland and Germany for example, children are outdoors playing most of the day (Mills, 2009). This appears to be true regardless of social class and urban versus rural environments, although in the United States, the outdoor play movement has been more of a middle-class phenomena (Louv, 2005).

As the sessions progressed, Rebecca came to realize that she was reacting both to the lack of outdoor time and to the fact that the outdoor spaces were different from what she expected. She said to Virginia, "I had a working model of a play space, and what I saw was not it."

Having an "Experience"

For Virginia, this was a pivotal moment. She had seen from the first session that Rebecca's initial impulse as a coach was to "improve things." Here and abroad, Virginia had seen practitioners with virtually no traditional early childhood materials create exciting and creative play spaces for children across a range of ages. Virginia remembered a short but powerful moment from her work in South Africa's child care environments (crèches). She wasn't thinking deeply about why, nor did she mean to imply that the behavior she described should be practiced in other places. It just seemed to come out, as sometimes happens when you're in a supervisory role:

While approaching from a hill, I noticed the crèche I was about to visit, as well as about 50 elderly women sitting under a large tree a few hundred feet from the crèche. The crèche was housed in a long cinder block building with dusty patches of dirt around it. A young child about 2 years old suddenly appeared at the doorway. He looked both ways slowly, as if crossing a street, and proceeded to walk along the building wall. He looked down and grabbed a stick and, after making some marks with it in

the dirt, picked up some small stones in his other hand. As he rounded the first corner it dawned on me that he was simply taking a walk and his plan might be to go around the building, which was exactly what happened. He stopped by the outhouse out back, seemingly for a peek, and as a bird flew by overhead, he looked up and dropped the stick. He continued walking and looking, and after a total of about five minutes, came back to the doorway where his walk began. Before taking the big step to re-enter the building, he dropped the pebbles.

In their discussion of the story, Virginia said, “he was having an ‘experience.’”

Virginia’s use of the word “experience” annoyed Rebecca. She had heard this word a lot since coming to Bank Street. Although she was a former preschool teacher, this concept was relatively new to her. She wrote in her journal what she was soon able to say to Virginia face to face and then articulated publicly.

Why can’t I say lesson or activity?

Later she wrote:

I knew “experience” was the word I was being encouraged to use in this particular early childhood culture, but I didn’t totally grasp the significance of it. As I reflected on the beautiful simplicity of this story from my coach, however, I began to think more deeply about what an experience truly means; the child connecting to what he is doing in a simple yet developmentally enriching way.

A week or two later, Rebecca observed a group of young children playing with play-doh. She saw a toddler who simply picked up small pieces of play-doh and rolled them between his fingers. Out of her mouth came, “He is having an experience!” A week or so later, she wrote this reflection in her journal:

In retrospect, this is the moment when so much came together for me. I kept thinking that the children needed more and better materials and bigger outdoor spaces. I was concerned that they didn’t have what I thought they needed. At Bank Street, I was being exposed to a new way of thinking about development and curriculum. Concepts were building on each other. Perhaps I couldn’t fully grasp this concept of an “experience” until I had a framework through which to view it.

I think Virginia’s story was also key in another part of my development.... It showed me a different way a child can experience the outdoors. Clearly, large, safe outdoor spaces are ideal, but a lot CAN happen in a small yard or an alley. I see too, how over time, my shift in looking at development differently is having a ripple effect on the providers.

These pronouncements thrilled Virginia because the “parallel process” (where the work and ideas in one situation can be utilized in another) was quietly at work and in ways she might not have imagined, or in ways of which she was not always conscious. Rebecca always came in excited to talk about multiple ideas, so over time, Virginia made a transition in her role with Rebecca toward a quieter, more collaborative stance. Virginia found herself telling a story here, asking a question there, based on the moment, and thinking about Rebecca’s work in-between sessions. The process—like the writing of this piece—flowed, even through disagreements, which became more tolerable as the relationship deepened.

Stepping Back

On day one, Rebecca took a risk by “spitting out” some big ideas and frustrations. Virginia welcomed Rebecca’s urgent narratives and her energetic curiosity. Perhaps most important, Virginia didn’t judge Rebecca’s initial observations, some of which were quite critical of practice. There was something honest and authentic about what Rebecca brought that another supervisor might have tried to contain or harness more quickly. A sense of safety and surprising delight developed as we discovered our similar sense of humor and irony.

As they began to feel safe, Rebecca and Virginia were able to develop a trusting relationship relatively quickly, and with that, a sharing of minds and differences of opinion. For example, Virginia shared an infant-toddler light “curriculum” she loved that came out of a more privileged setting. Rebecca expressed misgivings about its relevance in the programs she served, wondering how teachers would be able to apply it in their environments. Virginia heard Rebecca’s concerns but took the opportunity to be direct about something she thought was important. She said, “It’s not really about the providers following this curriculum, it’s more about seeing an example of a big idea that can be built on over time.” And that turned out to be exactly what Rebecca became able to support teachers doing.

During the last coaching session of the cohort, the children in a group family child care had their first experience with water play. Although this program did not have a water table, Yudelka, the program director, had gone to the local grocery store and bought different-sized foil tins filled with water, which the children explored with joy. Reviewing the morning, Yudelka spoke with excitement about the “simplicity” of water. She noted, “There’s so many things you can do with water. It’s so flexible.”

Reflection: This has been another exciting, illuminating session for me. I can see key concepts building and coming together: themes of developmental experiences and making use of everyday materials in significant ways. I will hold the word “flexible” in mind as a symbol for this.

Trusting the Process

Virginia saw that Rebecca was going further in probing all the various ways that development can unfold. This and her newfound sense of simplicity and clarity of purpose transferred to the providers as they began to experiment making soap suds at the water buckets and rolling play-doh between their fingers. We have written about a few of the interactions that may have prompted some of these changes, but we will never know about all of them or how one leads to another over time. That marks the acceptance of non-closure and trusting the process.

Our narrative is not a study, but aims to provide a sense of some of the changes one coach went through during a period of intense work with a coach mentor. To date, there is not enough research that explores how early childhood coaches change their practice as a result of the mentoring they receive, and there is an even greater paucity of literature for coaches working with infant-toddler practitioners. Much of the research tends to focus on whether coaching models have the desired impact, which

is of course important. In our work, for example, we saw how certain tenets of coaching research supported the usefulness of combining coaching with coursework (Moreno, Green, & Koehn, 2014) and the dangers of an “overly prescriptive and compliance-based approach to coaching (O’Keefe, 2017).

But this story illustrates an equally crucial point. It is clear that coaching family child care providers, those who are often marginalized in the early childhood workforce, requires that coaches themselves have strong support and opportunities to process what they see and how they interpret caregivers’ talk and actions, especially when they come from different class and ethnic backgrounds and assumptions. The need for extensive time, thought, and caring is verified here in a way that we believe continues to reverberate through the relationships that these caregivers continue to have with the children, families, and other adults in their everyday lives.

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