

Supporting Program Change with Book Studies

An Interview with Julia Koumbassa

by Margie Carter

It's a common story. A teacher or administrator gets inspired by some new thinking and enthusiastically tries to implement changes in their center. Sometimes this goes well, sometimes not so much. Guiding organizational change is a professional field of its own and there are many resources you can turn to at your local library, online, or with a consultant. In the world of early learning, the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University has pioneered training for our field with its Taking Charge of Change™ program. Still, most administrators and teachers know little about managing change and they are more typically guided by enthusiasm or a crisis that needs addressing.

While some are enthusiastic about new ideas, many teachers don't welcome

requirements for ongoing learning and change. Perhaps they haven't had positive educational experiences in the past. In some programs teachers outlast a revolving door of new directors, curriculum, or assessment mandates imposed without any genuine meaning. The work can be stressful and exhausting and — let's be honest — salaries aren't always livable, so a second job may be required to make ends meet. When you've figured out an approach and routines that get you through the day, why would you welcome someone trying to make changes?

To be sure, guiding a program through change requires attention to relationships and the strengths of each staff member, along with an alignment of support systems that include time, resources, and opportunities for leadership and collaborative decision making. When I hear teacher or administrator stories of success and pride in the change process, I'm always eager to tease out the principles for others to learn from.

An Interview with Julia Koumbassa

Some years ago I met Julia when she was an administrator of a campus child development center in Washington state.

We had the good fortune to reconnect last year at a conference where I got to hear more about her journey of making changes at the campus-based program she now directs in Michigan.

Margie: Julia, is it possible to give a short summary with background into your work at the center and how you entered into this process of making changes?

Julia: As a new director at my center, I quickly got to know my team as a group of passionate and dedicated educators who were in a profound state of disequilibrium as a result of many recent changes, including the merging of two programs with very different missions. I discovered quite a variation in beliefs, ideals, and practices from classroom to classroom, including my own aspirations for the program. I also recognized the extent to which educators' sense of identity was tied to their roles in the classroom. I knew I had to tread lightly.

Margie: I think you are describing a very difficult process, coming to a program with your own aspirations for changes, while trying to respect the history, different perspectives, and comfort levels people have with change. Can you say a bit more about your aspirations in wanting to see changes in the program?



Margie Carter is a long-time contributor to Exchange. She has worked as a teacher, administrator, college instructor, author, and consultant. Margie and her co-author Deb Curtis have written a 2nd edition of their book, *Learning Together with Young Children*, referred to here as a focus of study by Julia's staff.



Julia Koumbassa began her career in the field of early childhood as an infant caregiver 20 years ago. Since then, she has worked as a teacher with multiple age groups, a college instructor, and has been serving in a director role for the last 13 years.



Educators discuss the assigned chapter in small groups.

Julia: My own practice had become deeply rooted in the ideals of the Reggio Emilia Approach (reflective dialogue, child-led learning, family engagement). While I sensed a desire for change, I knew Reggio could be a scary word for practitioners not familiar with the approach. I also recognized that, since the HighScope Approach was developed in our region, this approach was deeply embedded into the curricula of teacher education programs, our state's program quality assessment initiatives, and consequently, in teaching practices. Foremost in my mind, though, was wanting to build a sense of community while also really seeing the value and the beauty of the work that we do with children and families each day. And I wanted to do this through an exploration of best practice in early childhood education. After all, this was our common ground. This was the passion that we all shared, despite our differences in philosophy.

Launching a Book Study

Margie: I was so interested, and of course pleased, to learn that you

decided to launch a study of the book Deb Curtis and I co-authored, *Learning Together with Young Children*. I'm curious why you chose this text.

Julia: I chose this book because it offers a philosophy and pedagogical approach, based on research and extensive teacher experiences, rather than promoting a specific curriculum. It allowed us to explore the fullest thinking in child-centered practices without the label of a particular curriculum, which I feel leveled the playing field and removed some of the fear of Reggio that I sensed our teachers had. Of course, knowing your work as authors, I recognized that many of the practices outlined in the book were rooted in the Reggio Emilia approach. So I saw it as a way to ease into those ideals.

Margie: Can you tell me more about what the book study process looked like?

Julia: Our plan was to explore one chapter at a time at each of our monthly meetings, but we found that some chapters required more time to dissect and some took less. So, we adjusted as we went, sometimes spending two or three months on a chapter. As a facilitator of

these discussions and explorations, I found the questions and activities in the book to be very helpful. Some months we asked teachers to complete the activities, along with reading the chapter, before coming to the meeting. We also made agreements to hold one another accountable for some of the practices in the book by which we were particularly struck.

Margie: What a smart idea. It's so easy to read a book and get inspired, but then not translate that into any action. Can you say more about how you approached these agreements as an accountability system?

Julia: I think this is where our shared decision making came in. We explored together how we could hold one another accountable and how we wanted to apply what we were discovering to our current teaching practices. We printed certain passages from the book and posted them in the classroom as reminders. Some educators also had them out at team meetings as a reminder

Developing a Common Language

Julia: During and after our book study, I did see shifts in teaching practices within our program. Most importantly, while developing mutual understandings, we developed a common language and started to become a community.

Margie: Unpacking the common language our profession has typically used is useful to see if it reflects what we really believe. For instance, we often hear terms like "behavior management," "free time," "classroom rules." What do each of these suggest that we think about children and the teaching and learning process? What terms can we agree come closer to representing who we want to be as a community? This sounds like the process of "co-constructing knowledge" in terms of really deepening understandings for your shared work.

Julia: Yes, and having a collective learning experience, such as a book study, can really be a catalyst for unpacking some common language, while also developing some new vocabulary.

Leading a Learning Process

Margie: I'm wondering if you recognize any changes in how you saw yourself as a leader in this process?

Julia: There were definitely days when I questioned my own efficacy in leading change. So I really had to practice taking a step back to see the big picture and to remind myself that sometimes brief discomforts lead to positive, long-term outcomes. I also had to remember to slow down and be present with the process, to forgive myself for mistakes, and to accept myself as a human.

Margie: I'm smiling here because your description reminds me of things teachers have said about trying to work with children. Remembering that the process is a good part of the learning

and to slow down and give that as much attention as any outcome we're after.

Julia: And just as we see with children's growth, adults' journeys of growth and development are individual and unique. I had to learn to recognize and be accepting of each individual journey of understanding, including my own. I also feel that it was important to be flexible. I may have had a plan for each chapter of our book study or our change journey, but sometimes we decided to spend more time on one area, causing us to adjust our plan.

Margie: And isn't that need for flexibility parallel to our work with children as well? I think this is why many people have liked the term "emergent curriculum" as their approach. But this term has sometimes been misunderstood, thinking it means that the teacher never plans, but just waits for something to happen with the children that we can call our curriculum. Your emphasis on the importance of flexibility really goes to the heart of the matter.

Julia: We still struggle with this one. I have seen it as a pendulum between teacher-directed and child-directed approaches. As we began our study and interest in emergent curriculum, we swung all the way over from the teacher-directed to the child-directed side. Through a process of trial, error, and reflection, we realized this was not effective, either. Now, I see teachers working hard to get to the middle.

Suggestions for Book Studies

Margie: For people wanting to consider doing book studies as a community-building and professional learning experience, do you have any suggestions to offer?

Julia: Most of our discussions about the book were done as a large group (about 35 people), with some insertions of small group work. If I were to do this book study again, most of our work would be done in small groups. In fact, we now have weekly dialogue groups at our center, in which we dissect articles, videos, share case studies, and continue



Educators reflect and vision together at a program retreat.



Photograph by the authors

with our tradition of an annual book study. We have found that our work in small groups has been more meaningful and engaging, allowing us to refine our practices and understandings of the Reggio Emilia approach more deeply.

Margie: I understand the value of that for professional development and forming relationships with a small group, but wonder how that would address your desire to develop your whole staff into a community. Perhaps the process could include both small and large group work?

Julia: It does. While we meet in small groups every week, we also come together as a large group on our in-service days, which occur about once every other month. We also hold what we call “wing meetings,” where all of the teachers from each age group meet together.

Margie: Have you continued to work in similar ways after this initial book study?

Julia: Yes, we regularly refer back to *Learning Together with Young Children* when we are posed with a challenging

situation or are questioning an area of practice. The year after completing our first book study, we engaged in a year-long process to develop a program values statement. The foundation that the book study provided and the relationships that were cultivated during that time really made the process of developing the values statement more meaningful and successful. We also then had common beliefs on best practice and a shared language to contribute to the process.

Because it was such a positive experience, we have continued the tradition of an annual book study. In fact, this year we began a study of another one of your books, *Reflecting in Communities of Practice*. One of our local Reggio-inspired groups, Michigan Inspirations, chose this book for their study, so we saw this as an opportunity to extend the community that was built within our program, to our greater community of early childhood professionals. Now, I think our educators are able to see beyond just the work in their own classrooms to a more global view of our profession.

Margie: It sounds like you’ve made impressive strides in your efforts to move your program forward. The change process is always sure to have ups and downs, but I imagine you could easily spot some of the tangible outcomes of your efforts.

Julia: I think that the experience of a book study has transformed educators’ attitudes about their work and their own identities as early childhood educators. Instead of spending our time together complaining about the messes in the kitchen, we engaged in deep discussions about our teaching practice. This was a huge shift for many of our staff and, I think, caused them to understand their value and worth as professionals. I often hear teachers comment that “the old me would have stepped in right away, but now I pause first and really think about my intentions.” At the end of the year of our first book study, one of our teachers (a 30-year ECE veteran) said to me on her last day before retirement, “THIS is the kind of program I want to retire from!”

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“As part of the book study culmination, educators wrote their favorite quotes or ideas from the book on ribbon and wove them into a frame, which still hangs in the U-M North Campus Children’s Center.”