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Teachers as Leaders and Activists

An interview with
Paula McPheeters
by Margie Carter

I recently heard Julie Olsen Edwards describe good leadership in the early childhood field as consisting of compassion, critical thinking, and courage. She described how great we are at the compassion part, but lamented that we haven't developed more in the critical thinking and courage arenas. She gave a provocative example of the absence of the critical thinking component when people come into the ECE field wanting to just focus on helping kids and not wanting to deal with the larger world. "But if you care about children," Julie says, "you have to care about their families. And caring about families means you have to care about the conditions in which they live, the context which shapes their lives and parenting."

Following this line of thinking suggests that early childhood leaders must see themselves as activists, which Julie Olsen Edwards proudly does. In my early years in the ECE field, many of us saw ourselves that way: eager to make the wider world a better place through our work with children. Now you hear more people in the field embracing the identity of professional than of activist. While I certainly promote the idea of early childhood education as a profession and strive to help people

understand what that means in terms of their conduct and interactions, I realize I haven't been emphasizing the points Olsen Edwards makes about using our compassion to fuel our critical thinking and courage into activism.

I'm eager to dialogue with teachers who recognize that what they do out in their communities impacts who they are in their work with children. Passionate gardeners, bicyclists, and recyclers often bring those activities into their work with children, seeing this as a way to help children learn to be good stewards of the earth. When teachers get involved in some community work that seeks to make the world a better place, they provide important role modeling for children, families, and peers.

My dream is that every early educator finds inspiration to become an activist around a social issue you feel is pertinent to children now and in the future. As Julie Edwards suggests, this may flow from your compassion, but it may also require sharpening your critical thinking skills. Seeking to inspire others with your actions requires you to mobilize courage, but also your humility, and a willingness to respectfully engage with others who may have a different point of view. This is what Parker

Palmer (2011) calls 'Healing the Heart of Democracy.'

A Dialogue with Paula McPheeters

Getting to know Paula McPheeters, an early childhood teacher and activist in Tucson, Arizona, renews my hope for the promise of exceptional teaching combined with courageous community activism. Paula's classroom is a warm, welcoming place for children, families, and visitors alike. You can easily see how the children know they belong, and are respected and empowered to make the classroom their own.

Some years ago when Deb Curtis and I first visited Paula's room, Paula prepared the children with the news that some authors would be visiting and put out a copy of our book, *Designs for Living and Learning* (2003), along with some sticky-notes and pens, suggesting they find



Margie Carter is a long-time early childhood educator, inspired by teachers who see themselves as activists. She and Paula McPheeters share a strong commitment to social justice. To learn more about the Tucson Children's Project

and their upcoming conference, visit www.tucsonchildrensproject.org/. For more information about the group Margie works with, Harvest Resources Associates, visit www.ecetrainers.com or find them on Facebook.



something in the book they wanted to talk with us about. Indeed, we barely got in the door when several of them rushed to us with the book. We were disadvantaged as English-only speakers, but their enthusiastic welcome and engagement in a literacy project needed no translation. Over the years I've watched Paula and her colleagues at the Tucson Children's Project bring forward the voices of the children's families through their Hopes and Dreams project, and learned of her ongoing activism in the wider community.

MC: Paula, you seem to embody what Julie Olsen Edwards describes as an early childhood leader. Tell me what has influenced you to see your work in the way that you do.

PM: Thank you, Margie. The children and families in my classroom are a great influence and inspiration. They've taught me much about hope and determination, conviction and sacrifice, courage and generosity — and most of all love. I'm indebted to them. Defining children and families through their strengths is so important.

I'm inspired by — and honored to rub shoulders with — amazing people who are committed to critically important work, organizations such as The Tucson Children's Project, our South Tucson Casa Maria Soup Kitchen, the Day Laborers Organization, Samaritans, No More Deaths, and others.

In your recent interview with early childhood educator Julie Olsen Edwards, she explained that if we care about children, it's our responsibility to care about the context in which parenting happens and to examine the factors that shape their lives. I agree! Many of the children and families I work with don't have access to basic human rights: adequate housing, health care, living-wage jobs, food security, etc. Why does a student's family not have adequate



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housing? Why is it that a parent working 40 hours a week cannot afford adequate housing? Why does a young student not have health care? Why is it so many families are unable to afford fresh fruits and vegetables and unprocessed food?

Poverty is not the fault of those who suffer from it. The fault lies in the system of oppression. Our wealthy nation has the means to reverse these injustices, but doesn't. Why not? There's much to transform: the unjust system of power; the unequal access to resources; the systematic oppression of marginalized groups to benefit and strengthen the dominant class groups based on the belief that some social groups are superior to others; colonialism and the struggle of colonized people to defend their rights and identities. If I believe change is possible, I must act. So I join others in my community who are participating in efforts to build a just world.

Leaving Water in the Desert

MC: You've chosen to be active within and outside the educational arena in your community, but I imagine you see this as all part of your role as an educator. I remember reading about your arrest with a group of others for leaving water in the desert. Tell me about that.

PM: During my almost 25-year teaching career in Title I public schools, I've come to know children and families who crossed the desert in search of a better life for their children. That compels me

to participate in humanitarian organizations whose mission is to respond to the crisis on the United States/México border and uphold fundamental human rights. Everything is connected by the greater context, and that is certainly true in the educational arena.

Yes, Margie, I was charged with a crime for leaving life-sustaining water in the desert, as were my 12 companions. Summer temperatures in our southern Arizona desert can easily exceed 110 degrees. July 9, 2009, was a searing hot day when I left sealed jugs of purified water on the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. A woman's body had been found nearby two days earlier. Unbelievably, it's illegal to leave jugs of water on the Refuge to reduce suffering and death in the desert; we were cited for 'littering.'

Secretary of the Interior Kenneth Salazar heard about the charges and requested that representatives of the Tucson humanitarian aid organizations travel to Washington, DC to share our perspective on the humanitarian crisis in the desert. I accompanied five others representing No More Deaths, Samaritans, and Humane Borders to meet with him. Having found numerous artifacts in the desert belonging to babies and children, I chose to share about the crisis as it relates to children.

Charges against the 13 of us were eventually dropped, but little else has changed since 2009. Fewer people are crossing the desert, but the death toll is higher now than in the past ten years. It has come to be called 'the decade of death.'

MC: Do you talk about that with the children you work with, or keep that part of your life separate?

PM: Yes, I talk about what is near and dear to my heart with folks, including my families and students, because it's a

part of my identity. I'm always eager to learn about the passions and identities of others. We call my classroom the Hopes and Dreams Room and all of us share our thoughts and concerns in this space.

Fearing Changes in Demographics

MC: I know you work in a state that has been steadily eroding multicultural education. Given your own commitment to social justice, how do you find a way to work in this context?

PM: Perhaps because Arizona is at a demographic tipping point and people of color make up 40 to 50 percent of the population, the dominant power base fears losing its political monopoly. The increase in the Latino population will soon translate into significant political clout. The Census Bureau calculates that by 2040 the non-Hispanic population will be 50.8% of the total population in the United States. Most of our elected officials in Arizona are white, non-Hispan-

ic, and many are non-college educated (<http://chronicle.com/article/Degrees-of-Leadership-Arizona/127815/>). They are purging Latinos, physically and spiritually. An example of spiritual purging is the recent dismantling of the highly successful Mexican-American Studies Program in the Tucson Unified School District. I am personally familiar with the program because my daughter, of European-American descent, was in the program and had a wonderfully rich learning experience. I highly recommend the documentary "Precious Knowledge" to folks eager to learn more.

"The physical purging takes place by way of deportations and Senate Bill 1070, the 'Papers, please!' law, which denies Mexican-American communities and families the basic rights of freedom of movement and security. It is people of Mexican descent in the U.S. who suffer from racial profiling as they are marked as not belonging due to their accents, the cars they drive, and the

composition of their families," reports C. Alejandra Elenes, in a piece she wrote for The Feminist Wire titled "The Heart of SB1070: Racial Profiling." (<http://thefeministwire.com/2012/07/the-heart-of-sb-1070-racial-profiling/>)

In response to our broken immigration system and the social disruption and the institutional mistrust created by the passage of SB1070, our Hopes and Dreams Room parents, past and present, lead "Know Your Rights" meetings which are part of our Support and Protection Network. I encourage parents to take leadership roles. Parents now run the parent meetings in the Hopes and Dreams Room. The meetings are open to everybody in our community. Together we listen to the concerns of other parents and community members and develop meetings around those issues. For example, last school year families and I spent a great deal of time working together in our community garden. There was much talk about food security or lack thereof. A few weeks later two parents led a dynamic parent meeting titled, "Food Politics from an Indigenous Perspective."

Supporting Parents as Leaders

MC: You and your colleagues have created an exemplary Reggio-inspired early childhood program as part of an elementary school in your community. I remember some years ago you not only worked with colleagues to keep the school from being closed, but inspired the principal and teachers to adopt a similar philosophy and pedagogy in the elementary grades. And now your school is on the chopping block again. What have you learned about how to mobilize parents into standing up for great schools such as yours?

PM: Our continuing dream, guided by the world-renowned Reggio philosophy and its principles, is to engage students in deep, meaningful, exciting, and robust learning. Saving our school building,



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although ours is historic and almost 100 years old, isn't enough.

Ochoa celebrates its 90th anniversary this year. We faced closure in the past and now face it yet again. We know from experience that our Ochoa parents, families, and community allies are powerful advocates. Together we speak up; together we speak out; together we make positive change. Together we organize relentlessly!

Ochoa families value the Reggio approach, its focus on inquiry-based projects, and our intense belief in the capacity of children, families, and teachers. Over 750 people attended our recent TUSD candidate forum in South Tucson. Ochoa Community Magnet School families have a growing awareness of the corporate interests underlying proposed educational reform. Valuing creativity, innovation, and critical consciousness, they don't

want their children subjected to narrow test-driven curriculum. Parents with deeply-held beliefs in the capacity of their children have chosen to opt out of the mandated tests; they're keenly aware that high-stakes tests are strangling the heart and soul of learning and teaching.

Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Approach, proposed a Charter of Rights encouraging people to think



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Humanitarian Acts

by Paula McPheeters

In the Hopes and Dreams Room, we often share our thoughts and concerns. One morning when Jesus brought his grandson into our room, he was very excited to share the news about a recent act of heroism. He told us that an undocumented young man named Manuel Cordova was crossing into Arizona with the hope of finding work to support his four children back in the state of Sonora, México. It was Thanksgiving Day, almost dark and the temperature was dropping, when Manuel came upon a nine-year-old boy named Christopher wandering alone, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt. The boy, his mother, and their dog had been headed on a camping trip near Peña Blanca Lake south of Tucson.

Their van had overturned and Christopher's mother was killed. After wrapping the boy in his coat, Manuel began to build a campfire to fend off the cold. He fed Christopher food he carried in his backpack for the journey. Hunters arrived. The Border Patrol was called. And Manuel was immediately deported. My student's grandfather, Jesus, exclaimed, "Thanks to Manuel saving this boy's life, maybe now we Méxicans will be seen as humanitarians, not criminals!"

Full of excitement, we wondered what we could do to express our gratitude. Jesus said he would travel to Manuel's village and personally deliver our thanks. We decided to send Manuel letters of appreciation and the children dictated one. Each family wrote a letter, which was added to a journal. A clay heart made by one of the children was glued onto the deep-blue cover of the book. The students wanted to give Manuel's four children their favorite book, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See*, signed by each of them. A certificate proclaimed Manuel Cordova an honorary member of the Hopes and Dreams Room.

Following up on the children's passion, we began a campaign to collect socks and shoelaces, donating them to No More Deaths and Samaritans that provide new socks for people as they come across the desert with blistered feet. The Border Patrol removes shoelaces from the shoes of people they capture; once deported, people have a challenge walking without shoelaces to secure their shoes. My four and five year olds learn a great deal about numbers and counting, as bags of socks and shoelaces arrive, and we keep track of donations. Math for social justice is highly motivating!

carefully about the rights of children, families, and teachers. Around that idea our Ochoa studio teacher developed and documented a long-term project called “Considering the Rights of Children, Families, and Teachers.” It will be shared at the upcoming North American Reggio Emilia Alliance winter meeting, titled “Walls into Bridges: Transforming Challenges into Opportunities” on January 25–26, 2013. A day-long learning tour on January 24 will take participants to the U.S./México border wall, the desert where so many of our sisters and brothers have crossed, and to a meeting with humanitarian aid representatives from No More Deaths and Samaritans. I hope many early childhood educators from around the country will join us.

References

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