Innovation or Standardization?

An interview with Arlae Alston by Margie Carter

In October 2012 Betty Jones and Louise Derman-Sparks delivered a keynote address in which they raised the question, "Has professionalizing the ECE field been a help or hindrance to where we want to be?" We were reminded of the efforts that were hard won over many years to arrive at agreed upon standards, accreditation criteria, and professional ethics. However, when conference attendees were asked if they are pleased with where we are as a profession and where we seem to be headed, the responses revealed plenty of discomfort. The discussion focused on the need to distinguish standards and standardization, a subject I've written about in the past (Carter, 2006; 2011). Yes, we want to hold ourselves accountable to standards, but we don't necessarily want standardization.

A typical teacher or administrator doesn't see a strong connection between required compliance documents and actual improvement in the quality of their work. Rather, the general sentiment is that completing documents leaves little time for the things that matter most, for instance, deeper relationships with children and families, thoughtful reflection on curriculum planning, advocacy efforts to improve public policies, and education reform. And the belief that the blurred distinction between standards and standardization is preventing innovation in programs.

Arlae Alston and Margie Carter share a strong commitment to seeing that children in low-income families get the very best care and education. Each in her own setting works hard to bring joy into the challenging work of early childhood education. They share a strong desire to be respectful of our profession's history while encouraging innovation and critical thinking.

I'm heartened when I meet early educators who are thinking outside the box even in bureaucratic systems like state- and federally-funded programs. Meeting Arlae Alston, who works in an Early Head Start program in California, brought me such hope. She and her team have created an exceptionally beautiful indoor and outdoor environment for children and have planned routines like a carefully choreographed dance. Nothing felt rushed, and the adults were truly present with the children, enjoying their company, supporting their efforts, and celebrating accomplishments. I could easily see they were meeting and surpassing all the Early Head Start standards, while bringing creativity and a unique identity to their program.

A Conversation with Arlae Alston

MC: Arlae, thank you for being such a terrific role model for how to work within a large regulation-ridden bureaucracy without becoming a cookie-cutter, look-alike program. Tell us about your journey with this. What has influenced the way you approach your work? Have you had struggles with those who monitor your classroom and find something very different than what they are used to?

AA: I have been in the ECE field for many years now. Three years ago I joined the Early Head Start family. I wanted to work for Head Start because of the population that they serve (low income) and because I wanted to provide a beautiful and safe place for children and families. At the beginning I felt lost and confused. I did not understand the many standards that Head Start has. I felt as though I couldn't provide the environment that I know I should provide for children and families with all the standards we have to adhere to. This was very difficult and painful for me. I felt as if I was hijacked: inserted into a world of rules, regulations, and standards. I felt as if what I knew about children and environments no longer applied to the rules. Night after night I read those standards. I not only wanted to become familiar with

them; I wanted to understand the meaning behind them. Deep inside I knew there was a good intention behind these standards. I engaged in conversations with teachers who had been working for Head Start longer than I had. I called my managers with questions about the standards; they were happy to answer all of my questions. I went back to the books that I had used as a student. I was on a quest, not only to comprehend the standards, but also to make sure that my classroom reflected them as well as my philosophy. This is when I was able to create environments for children that were both beautiful and meaningful to them.

When you enter my classroom, you will see lots of natural elements (plants, rocks, feathers, water) and you will also see that the classroom is divided into areas (blocks, science, manipulative, pretend); these meet some of our standards.

When I look back at this incident in the box below, I feel very proud of our field. Families are busy trying to make sure that their needs get met. We live in a society that forces parents to take two or three jobs, leaving no time to go out to the park. It is our job to provide those experiences for children. It is our job to get to know the standards, regulations, and rules. While I could do without some of those, the reality is that we need to follow them in order to obtain our funding.

MC: Your learning environment has so many unusual, beautiful materials, both indoors and in the play yard. I love all the ways you include rocks. As you said, most people are worried about toddlers having access to rocks, but you've incorporated them as a central learning material in your environment. Such innovation!

AA: My big message of late is you can do the standards and provide this beautiful natural environment for children. When we pay attention to what children are interested in and working on, we are more likely to offer materials that are meaningful to them. This beautiful environment can be done without having to spend a lot of money.

If you look around our classroom you will see rocks, leaves, branches, shells (we live near the ocean). Things come from the natural environment, and I go to thrift stores and garage sales. It is important to me to stay within our classroom budget. I found some stacking rocks at our local bookshop. Children are into not only collecting things, but also stacking them up. Through stacking the rocks, children are working on eye-hand coordination; math concepts (1-2-3 or small, big); gravity; problem solving; cause and effect; and the list goes on and on. I keep asking my team, "What's the intention here?" If you walk around our classroom, we'll tell you a story about every single thing that's set up in the classroom.

There was a time when a monitor came into my classroom and could not understand why I had heavy rocks in the environment. She was concerned about children throwing them and getting hurt. She was also questioning the placement of the rocks. She felt that rocks only belong outside. I found her concerns valid. As I was listening to her concerns and complaints about the rocks, I had to take a deep breath. Inside I felt angry and discouraged. Here I was, after countless nights of reading the standards and doing my best to follow them, and I felt as if I was in trouble. I was angry that she could not see how much learning was happening in my classroom through those rocks (language development, social interactions, large-motor skills, safety, math concepts). After taking a deep breath, I asked her to pick up a rock (by now children were outside); she looked at me puzzled, but did pick up the rock. I asked her how it felt. She answered, "Cold and heavy." I said, "There is some language." I asked her to try to stack the rocks up. She did. I asked her to try to throw the rock. Again she looked confused, but did. I responded to her just like I would to a toddler, "It looks like you want to throw something, here is a ball. Rocks are heavy and can hurt if they hit somebody." After this I asked her how she felt about this experience. She let me know that she had never thought about rocks in this way before. When she left my classroom, she thanked me for the experience and she let me keep my rocks.

Talk about Intentions

AA: When licensors come to my program and have questions about these 'very unusual' teachable materials, I can talk about all of the learning happening. This brings me to the importance for teachers to be able to speak about our work. We are professionals and as such we need to be able to not only explain our philosophy, the intentionality behind our curriculum, but also what children are learning through it all: we need to be able to talk about why we do what we do. We have put in an incredible amount of hours not only into our own schooling but also in training, workshops, and everything else we are required to do. It is our responsibility to stay fresh on the latest research and information about children's development.

There's a thought behind everything. It's so much more than just stacking rocks on the table. I keep asking my team, what's the intention here? It can't just be because it's pretty. Everything has to have intentionality.

MC: Yes, when I was with your team, I noticed how much you all enjoyed working with the children. Teachers were engaged, rather than bored or disconnected from the children. A monitor might be able to check off everything you are required to have in the environment, but that doesn't necessarily trans-

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ARLAE ALSTON

late into engaged learning for the children or the teachers.

AA: The environment has to be meaningful to the group of children and to the teachers. It is okay for teachers to add in materials that are meaningful to them as well. For instance, lately I have been into the Zen influence. I am working on slowing down and taking the world in slowly and peacefully, just like toddlers do. With this in mind I brought in a small water fountain. I added rocks and a small plant next to it. Toddlers enjoy feeling the cold water running through their fingers; they like to splash it and taste it. They also enjoy rocks. Mixing water and rocks provides many opportunities for learning (language, fine-motor skills, cause and effect, self-help skills). It is important for teachers to be comfortable in their classrooms as well. For most of us our classrooms are our second homes. Not only do we spend a lot of time there, but we also invest a great deal of ourselves into preparing an optimal environment for children and families. Our classrooms need to feel and be organic. When teachers feel some ownership of their classrooms, they are more likely to be happy, present, and able to celebrate every moment, discovery, or even struggle that a child or family might bring into their classroom.

A Place for Families

MC: When families dropped off or picked up their children, they seemed eager to hang out. Even the one or two who seemed rushed or hesitant found your environment a bit irresistible! Early Head Start has regulations about involving families, but you have been really innovative with this.

AA: Yes, Early Head Start (EHS) has standards around involving families. Many of our families come to us feeling beaten up by life. With our team, we talk about how to help families feel this is a place for them; like that song Tom Hunter and Bev Bos sing, "We've been waiting for you." We not only want them to feel wanted in our program, but to be welcome as whole human beings.

One of the things that we do is primary caregiving. We assign four children to one teacher. In this way a family shares with one teacher rather than two or three. This creates a sense of security and consistency, not only for the child, but for the family as well. When we receive a new family into the program, we post a welcome sign on the door that lists all of the family members' names. In the classroom we have some adult-size furniture to make sure families are physically comfortable. We ask the family to make a family collage (we provide materials and at times print out pictures if needed). This is useful to the child and sends the message to the family that they are important in our program. We hold them, not only in our minds, but in our hearts as well. Everyday at drop off and pick up time we schedule time to check-in with our families. These check-ins are not only about the children, we also ask the family about themselves, being genuinely interested in what they have to say about their lives. We invite them to come into the classroom to do projects with the children. At parent meetings we make sure there is space for them to socialize and to share their ideas for how to implement the curriculum.

We come to the table as allies. There is always time to listen to each other and to compromise when needed. There are times in which we let go of some of our rules to be able to meet a family's needs.

A Strong Teaching Team

MC: You clearly have worked hard to take Head Start's idea of parent involvement to a new level. I also see a

remarkable cohesiveness among your teaching team.

AA: It is important for teachers to be able to work together in a cohesive way. Our teaching team is composed of four teachers. Two of us work the morning program and the other two, the afternoon. We share one office, the classroom, teaching materials, storage rooms, and kitchen. We are in each other's presence more than we are with our own families. Therefore it is important to get to know each other.

We have an agreement to assume the best of each other. It is normal to want to blame others for things that go wrong in the middle of a busy day: "I can't believe she did not clean up her messy activity! Now I have to clean it and lunch will be late." We believe that this kind of attitude only hinders the team — and therefore the classroom, children, and families. Instead, we use our meetings to talk about the things that are going well in the classroom (curriculum, physical space, maintenance of the building,) and what is not working. Rather than place blame on each other, this is time to ask for clarification: "I noticed you didn't clean up yesterday and I was late for lunch. I wonder what happened." In this way we open up communication, allowing for dialogue and understanding. Because we work so closely, we are destined to get into arguments and have conflicts. Our team understands this. We joke, "You can't go over it. You can't go under it. You have to go through it." We see conflict as an opportunity to get to know each other and to grow together. By assuming the best of each other, we are able to not only care for each other, but to inspire each other as well.

MC: Thanks, Arlae, for showing us how you can bring to life the best intentions behind all the Early Head Start standards. You and your team have demonstrated how to bring a creative, rather than a bureaucratic, mindset to our ECE regulations. In doing so, I think you've expanded the way to think about and demonstrate what quality looks like.

Reflections

Arlae has shown us how to bring to life the best intentions behind all the Head Start standards without falling into bureaucratic thinking. She has also reminded us not to limit our thinking about quality by just adhering to status quo definitions. How timely, given a possible national initiative for universal preschool. I hope each of us, whatever our work setting, can move the ECE agenda away from standardization toward innovative thinking and practices. Our children and teachers deserve nothing less.

References

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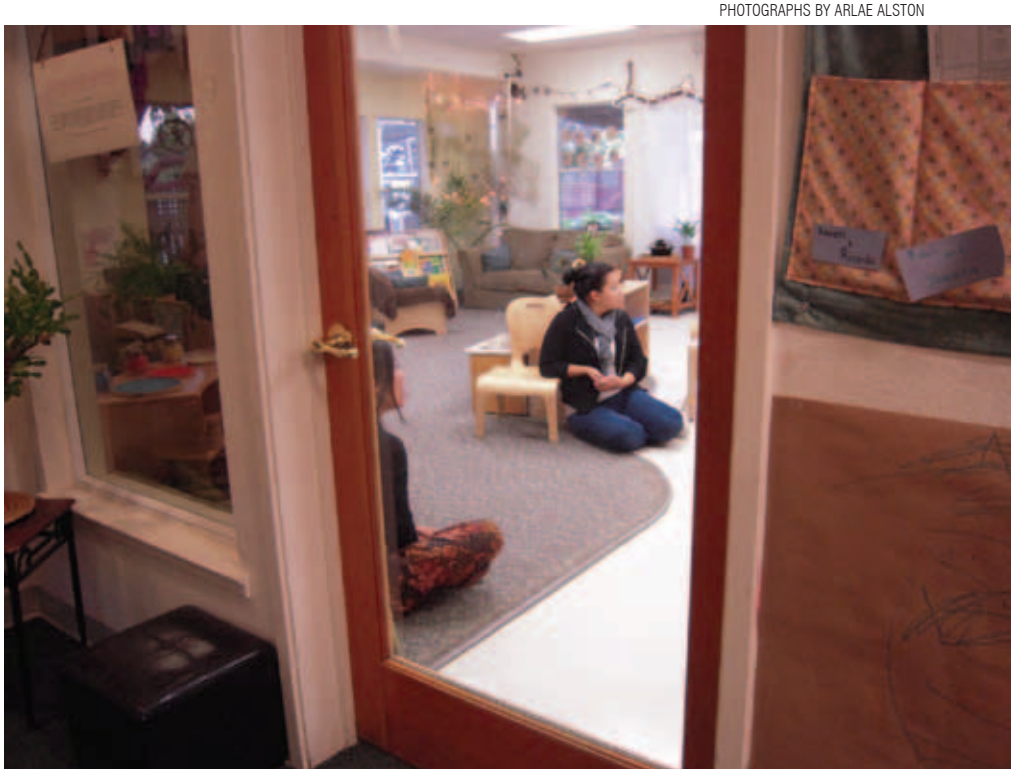

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Hammering Pumpkins

by Arlea Alston

At the beginning of the summer we had volunteers from the program HOPE come to garden with the children. One of the things that they planted together were pumpkins. Children had an opportunity to move the soil, plant the pumpkins, and water them. Through the summer and the beginning of fall, children took care of the pumpkins: continuing to water them, pulling weeds, and talking and singing songs to them. They got to witness how the pumpkins grew from flowers into pumpkins.

Once the pumpkins were ready to harvest, children helped cut them. Throughout the fall and winter children had many opportunities to get to know pumpkins: cutting them open to see what is inside, painting them, washing them, rolling them, and tasting them, both raw and cooked.

We even threw the pumpkins, and hammered them. I was not sure how the hammering was going to go. I had seen this idea in a book and I liked it. I knew this group of toddlers knew pumpkins very well. I also knew that they enjoy hammering, and I felt they were ready to be introduced to real hammers and nails. I was a bit nervous about this activity, but excited at the same time. I talked to my team about the idea ahead of time and they loved it.

We used the three pumpkins that the children had planted. I decided to do the hammering activity inside the classroom at the big circle table. I covered the table with a tablecloth and placed the three pumpkins on it. Beside the pumpkins I set three hammers and scattered some nails around them. Prior to the children's arrival, I hammered a few nails into the pumpkins to model the possibility. The children noticed the activity as soon as they arrived.

Ismael was the first one at the table. He immediately knew what to do and started to hammer some of the nails that were already in one of the pumpkins. With some help he stuck in more nails and continued to hammer. This activity lasted for three days. Children talked about the holes in the pumpkins; they learned about the nails being sharp at the end and having to be careful with them and the hammer. They also enjoyed sticking their fingers in the holes and feeling the slimy insides. They did early math by counting the holes and nails. The activity provided opportunities for early literacy: new language such as nails, hammers, metal, and pounding, and the rhythm of the hammer nailing those nails.