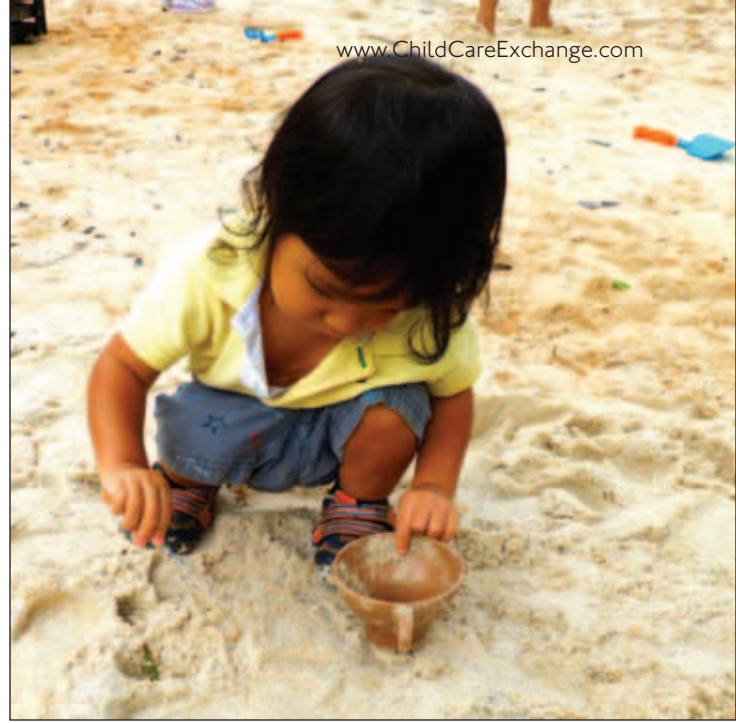


Starting from Scratch

Creating Your Dream Center

An interview with Rukia Monique Rogers
 by Margie Carter



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How many times have you thought “If only I could start from scratch and open my own center”? Financial resources, real estate realities, and business know-how are often huge barriers for the typical early childhood educator to bring this fantasy to life. Sometimes I wonder, though, if starting a new center really is harder than trying to turn around an existing center where you haven’t been able to make the changes you long for. Both approaches seem rather daunting. While most of us will stick with trying to improve existing centers, I’m impressed by those who boldly step out and open a new center. Hearing a firsthand account might help others who’d like to give it a try.

A Conversation with Rukia Monique Rogers

I first meet Rukia some years ago when she worked as a preschool teacher in Atlanta. As a gift to honor her finishing early childhood classes, her mentor



Margie Carter and Rukia Monique Rogers share a strong passion for expanding current ideas about quality in programs for young children. They take to heart the challenge from educators in Reggio Emilia who remind us that children aren’t

just future citizens, but today’s citizens with rights we must take seriously. To learn more about their work, visit www.ecetrainers.com and www.thehighlanderschool.com.



teachers gave her a copy of *The Art of Awareness*, one of the books I co-authored with Deb Curtis. When Deb and I came to her center to do a presentation, Rukia took the opportunity to introduce herself. Over the next few years I made visits to Rukia’s classroom and delighted in her wonderful interactions with children. Deb and I featured her on the cover of a later book, *Learning Together with Young Children*, and Rukia then contributed a story to the second edition of *Reflecting Children’s Lives*.

Each time we were together, Rukia talked about the dilemmas of trying to improve an existing center to get closer to her dreams about what children, families, and staff deserve. I remember seeing her in tears at a center during our study tour in New Zealand saying, “This is my dream.” And she returned home to create a new center from scratch.

MC: Rukia, it’s amazing to me that you found a way to get over all those road blocks to opening your own center. At several junctures you could have given up and let go of your vision. But every step of the way you kept your eyes on the prize, doing your best not to compromise the clear set of values you

wanted at the heart of your center. Your choice to name your center after the Highlander Folk Center in Tennessee says so much about the legacy you wanted to carry on.

RMR: I would like to think of the creation of The Highlander School as part of an ongoing story, a story that began as a dream for every child citizen to live into his or her fullest potential. The Highlander School draws on the rich and vibrant culture of the southeast part of our country and honors the Highlander Folk Center of Tennessee, founded in 1932, to educate and empower adults for social change. Students such as Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and others flocked to the school, as it served as a safe haven for dialogue and nonviolent resistance to social injustices. Our hope and illuminating dream is that our Highlander School will embody this same spirit of freedom and cultivate a community of learners who are thirsty for knowledge.

With sincere humility, I’ve often described myself as the ‘inheritor of this dream,’ a member of the first generation born after the Civil Rights Movement, reaping the benefits of the unrelenting work that my mother, family, and so many others fought for. Their persever-

ance was deeply rooted in hope and a desire for a better future for their children. Equity in education was viewed as a cornerstone to progress. With this inspiration, the roadblocks in opening the school, although frustrating, seem small and manageable.

MC: You once mentioned to me that so few people in our country today, even in the south, know of the Highlander Folk School and the role it played in the Civil Rights Movement. Naming your school after it will help keep that history alive. As part of that process, I love how, from the beginning, you reached out to those in the community about opening your center. What did you learn from that?

RMR: The process helped me learn about the perspectives of other educators, families, and members of the community, which helped me to clarify the school's values. I also learned about essential resources available to a new school. Members of the community became invested in the success of the school, enthusiastically providing guidance and advice. For example, prior to submitting an application for a small business loan, a local banker suggested I

work with a small business development program at a local college (available nationwide). For months and without any charges, my assigned counselor and accountant worked with me each month on clarifying my cash flow projections. Very often early childhood educators do not have accounting as our strength, so these sessions proved to be invaluable.

In creating and shaping the school's core values, the families' perspectives, their hopes and dreams were, important for my learning. These initial conversations (which actually began in 2007) helped me to hear about how important a holistic approach to learning was to them. They wanted a new approach to the typical way centers address food and nutrition for young children. Their insight taught me about slow food, and the farm-to-school movements and helped to shape our commitment to providing seasonal food and working with local farmers.

Learning the Construction Ropes

MC: Being responsive to families is part of our early childhood culture, and you took it to another level, Rukia. But what about the parts of opening a center that are less familiar to early childhood edu-

cators, like working with architects and contractors? From your experience in remodeling an existing building, do you have advice for others to keep in mind?

RMR: Oh, I have lots of advice with regards to remodeling!

Due Diligence: Prior to purchasing a building or entering into a rental contract, make sure to perform your due diligence. It is so important; go to your local government agency that regulates zoning and let them know your intentions. You want to ensure that you are able to remodel the property and use it to provide care for young children (even if you are taking over an existing program).

- Does the property have the proper zoning?
- Are you in a historic district that may impact the type of remodeling that can be done?
- Is there a moratorium on adding or making changes to commercial properties in your area?
- What type of permit will you need?
- How long does the process take?

This is essential information that you will need to know and consider.

The Design: Lella Gandini reminds us that the space is the most visible aspect of the work and values of a school. Begin to sketch your vision for the space.

- How will children and families encounter this space?
- How many children do you plan to have in the space?

It may be challenging to implement everything you want at the beginning, but write and sketch your vision with short- and long-term goals in mind. Selection of an architect is essential! The expertise of an architect will give visible life to hopes and dreams for the space. Share photos of your vision or together

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visit another school that inspires you. Make sure you share with the architect your local rules and regulations with regard to child care centers. The architect will help you design a space within your budget, generate drawings in order to obtain the permit, and meet with the community if necessary. You may want the architect to act as the project manager and help to select the contractor, negotiate contracts, and oversee the construction (which might be wise if the project is extensive). Depending on the role of the architect, expect to pay the architect 7% to 15% of the overall cost of the project.

Selecting a contractor and negotiating a contract: I remember once hearing two children debate how a city is built and buildings are made.

Edward: "God created some of the world and Jesus created the rest. The city is God and Jesus."

Sebrina: "What do you mean when you stated that God created some of the world and Jesus created the rest?"

Edward: "Actually God built all the world."

Sarah: "No that's not true! Builders made the city. God only made bushes and the trees. God makes the world and humans, not buildings! People make buildings!"

I've often thought about this exchange and it's brought a smile to my face during this long and tedious process. The contractor or builder is going to take your vision and design and make them a reality. His or her craftsmanship is important. Don't be shy about investigating your potential contractors. Ask for references: Are they timely? Responsive to calls? Find out their relevant education and take a look at their other work. Make sure that the contractor has worker's compensation insurance for all sub-contractors in case of an injury.



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In generating a contract, you want to be clear and concise with regards to cost, completion dates, insurance, finishes, and so forth. The cost of the project should be clear, as well as how funds are allocated for your finishes, such as the plumbing and electrical fixtures or countertops. You might have wanted recycled marbles countertops, but the contractor had laminate in mind!

If you make changes to the plan and decide, for example, that you would like to relocate the bathroom, the contractor will give you a 'change order,' which means additional costs. Make sure the design you and the architect generate is what you want. The contractor is only going to follow the plans.

General contractors will often have multiple projects going on at the same time. Make sure you have agreed on a completion date with some room for contingencies. You'll also want to stipulate fees if the project is not completed on time.

Importantly, the contract should state who is responsible for obtaining Builder's Risk Insurance for the project. This protects you from burglary or damages during construction. Your contract should also include at least a one-year warranty. Have an attorney look over the final contract.

The Cost: When it comes to the cost, any-one remodeling should set aside at least 10% of the overall cost of the project for contingencies.

Breathe, relax, and have fun!

Budgeting for Staff Development

MC: Financing a remodel could easily gobble up all your resources. But you allotted money for staff development right from the start. You built into your budget an initial three weeks to work with your newly hired staff. That is so impressive. Can you share your thinking about that and how you spent your time with them?

RMR: Yes, we had three weeks before the children even started! Often, when sharing the details and philosophy of the school with families, I'm guided by the thinking of Parker Palmer who says, "Good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." While a lot of thought and energy has been invested in the space, the most important investment of time and energy is with the teachers. It is the teachers who are in that space with children and families and they have an enormous amount of power. I wanted our initial time together to set the stage for a community of learners, with

time to cultivate relationships and develop ourselves as reflective thinkers. The first few days we discussed our identity as The Highlander School and what the staff wanted us to be known for. We unpacked the history of the Highlander Folk Center and the philosophy of the educators of Reggio Emilia. We spent one day at the Dr. Martin Luther King Center here in Atlanta considering how his work and life could impact our work with young children. We engaged in experiences that helped us to think about our own approaches to learning, our biases, and how to bring forth our individual identities as well.

First and foremost in my thinking was how to create a sense of belonging. I wanted us to play with big ideas about our future and our hopes and dreams for young children, not just the logistics of how to make bleach bottles (although we got to that later)! We dove into the cycle of inquiry and observation-based planning. We played with materials that might be offered to children to explore their possibilities for discovery, invention, and learning. I believe it was you, Margie, who once stated that we as an industry don't often provide teachers with the time or space to think and ponder and reflect. I wanted us to have that precious time.

Expanding Current Ideas about Quality

MC: I know that as you worked with your teachers to expand current ideas about quality, you also had to take on some of the limited thinking that licensors and regulators can bring to centers. We know they have the best of intentions to keep kids safe, but they sometimes forget to think of other aspects of quality and what we need to be offering children. Your story about tree roots is a good example.

RMR: Yes, working with regulators is where I've discovered our image of the child and values often collide. I'm promoting an image of children as competent and trustworthy. We have to believe and help them live into this. We have trees in our yard, which is wonderful, but I've had several consultants tell me that Georgia's licensing rules and regulations say that trees roots have to be covered so they are not tripping hazards to children. One consultant suggested I paint the roots white so the children would see them better. In my last exchange with the school's new consultant, I shared with her how this would be a contradiction of our values. We want children to be aware of nature, to care and appreciate it. If we place too much soil or paint over the roots of the trees, they will suffocate. Honestly, these can be some daunting conversations. Our state allows large group sizes and ratios for very young children, which in my thinking, creates a barrier to quality with less emotional and physical safety for the children, but licensors often focus on things like tree roots as safety hazards.

I keep in mind that my licensor and local agency consultants have the best of intentions and building relationships with them is absolutely key. In some ways I see parallels between what we're trying to do at our center and the history of the Highlander Folk Center where they had to keep fighting for the rights of citizens. I'm trying to fight for the rights of children — today's citizens who deserve to have rich childhoods that include things like healthy food and relationships with the natural world, as well as being with people of different ages and cultures.

MC: You also have been very articulate about the value of mixed-age groups and have gotten creative about how to bring that value into your center programming. Each time a regulation stops us from doing what we think is best for

children we have to double our advocacy and our commitment toward being innovative. Thanks, Rukia, for being such an inspiring example. You are truly expanding the Highlander legacy.



The Values of Mixed Age Grouping:

An excerpt from the Highlander School Parent Newsletter
by Rukia Monique Rogers

Some of my fondest memories were discovering the wonders of my childhood side by side with my uncle and aunt, who were three and six years older than me, and scores of neighborhood children, for our play was filled with the construction of go-carts, tree houses, fishing, scavenger hunts, marbles, double-dutch, games, and countless investigations. This play was the palette for creativity, prosocial behavior, and shared knowledge.

The modern child care center has come to replace the extended family and neighborhood units that I enjoyed as a child as did many others, as many children are spending most of their waking hours in schools and centers. I recognize the vital role that early childhood programs now play in the lives of young children and their families. With great intentionality, The Highlander School seeks to create the time, space, and experiences in which children will encounter and sustain deep relationships with peers that reflect a range of ages, development, and the wonders of childhood.

Lilian Katz (1995), an early childhood educator and pioneer, explains:

“Although humans are not usually born in litters, we seem to insist that they be educated in them. The time that children spend in groups in schools and child care centers, particularly for preschoolers, amounts to replacing families and spontaneous neighborhood groups as contexts. More and more children are deprived of the information and models of competencies that once were available to them in natural mixed-age groups.”

Understandably, the notion of mixed-age groups can cause anxiety for many parents because it has become an uncommon practice. The questions they ask are valid. Will my child fit in? Will his/her needs be met? Will my child have friends? Will it be overwhelming?

Research suggests there are tremendous benefits to mixed-age grouping for children, not only for younger children, but especially for older ones. Some benefits are:

Children and their development are viewed on an individualized basis. In a same-age setting, often the tendency is for the adults to hold expectations that children’s development is the same. Lessons and plans are focused on the whole group instruction, regardless of an individual child’s development. An older child may be socially immature, but a mixed-age group setting provides time for his or her social skills to flourish. On the other hand, a younger child may have an interest and competence in spatial relationships beyond that of many children his or her own age. A mixed-age group setting ensures opportunities for this child to explore the interest at deeper levels and to have peers that share this interest.

Peer modeling and cognitive development. Younger children benefit from the presence of older and more experienced peers to introduce and model complexity to their play and new skills. This is consistent with Vygotsky’s ideas (1978) of peer modeling, collaborative learning, and scaffolding. Likewise, older children benefit from these experiences as their knowledge transforms and deepens. For example, four year olds may understand the process of washing their hands or making strawberry jam, but creating an instructional book for a younger child challenges them to write, represent their knowledge, and create a sequence for the process.

Support cooperative relationships and social participation. Research has shown that children in mixed-age groups exhibit less competitiveness and more cooperative participation. Younger children actively participate in complex experiences that they would not normally be expected to engage in. And older children working with younger children learn empathy and develop more positive self-esteem and leadership skills.

By attending the Highlander School, children have a chance to participate in a style of learning that has been the model for early care and socialization around the world and across the centuries. Mixed-age groupings for young children can create an optimal learning and nurturing environment that reflects the natural family and the interwoven relationships of an intimate community.



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