Nurturing Innovation Beyond Compliance

An interview with Elidia Sangerman

by Margie Carter

"We are, at this moment in the United States, so deeply invested in the idea of psychometric and 'scientific' justifications for our educational practices that we seem to have forgotten that there could be any other justification paradigm. We seem to have forgotten there could be any other way to hold ourselves accountable."
Steve Seidel, 2008

What do we want to hold ourselves accountable for?

How can we have shared standards without standardization?

I'm excited to see that policymakers, regulators, and early education professionals across the United States are expanding their thinking about what constitutes quality experiences for children in group care and early education settings. Getting beyond the idea of minimum licensing requirements is a big step. Researching, identifying, and codifying the components of best practices has been a substantial undertaking. But why has so little of that process involved the thinking of actual practicing teachers?

As a profession we are at the critical juncture where we must ask ourselves some big questions:

- How can the outside pressure for measurable outcomes support the vision and intentions we have for our early childhood programs?
- What do we want to hold ourselves accountable for?
- How can we have shared standards without standardization?

Any early childhood program with public funding is now subjected to an ever-growing number of quality rating scales and monitoring visits. While I want us to hold ourselves accountable for what we are doing and why, I'm not sure the current approach is serving us well. In fact, from what I'm seeing and hearing, it is becoming quite a burden and not necessarily helping teachers think more deeply about their work. Creating the documentation for required child and program assessments can easily become a focus in and of itself, distracting teachers from their actual engagement with the children and their families, subsequently sucking away the joy of the work. Bureaucratic thinking can so easily take over in interpreting the goal of compliance, pushing aside creative thinking about the environment, materials, and activities for children's learning. So when I see people focused on innovation and not just compliance, I'm eager to learn how they think about quality and how they

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move forward with bigger ideas for their work.

An Interview with Elidia Sangerman

Over the last five years Elidia Sangerman and I have crossed paths in our work to promote high-quality, culturally relevant early childhood programs. During this time I've watched Elidia, in her roles as a teacher, director, and mentor, think through the kinds of experiences children, families, and staff deserve. She's become a passionate advocate for meaningful relationships and joyful learning. To my mind, she is doing what Steve Seidel suggests is often neglected — deciding for what and how we want to hold ourselves accountable.

Elidia has challenged herself to go beyond complaining about required assessment tools and invent ways to make them more relevant and less stressful for teachers. With exposure to the New Zealand approach to writing Learning Stories as a formative assessment, Elidia set her mind to, as she calls it, 'arrange a marriage' between the Learning Story approach and required assessment tools.

MC: I love the idea of arranging this kind of marriage, Elidia, especially because I see you always start with building a relationship in whatever task is before you. Can you describe a bit how you began thinking about bringing these different approaches together? If we continue the marriage metaphor, perhaps you can describe the 'engagement' process.

ES: Through my experience as a preschool teacher, I always struggled with not only finding the time to perform and document assessments of children, but also with the lack of intentionality in using the gathered data we get from these assessments. I also struggled with the lack of time to reflect on my pedagogical practices as a teacher. I was given time to complete the assessments and checklists but no time for reflection on my work. The process wasn't very meaningful for me as an educator; we did the assessments, but how did that relate to what we did after that? In reality we would store the data and never see it again because we were so worried about the next due dates for demonstrating outcomes.

MC: This description you are offering is the story I've heard again and again across the country. People feel discouraged and disempowered by this process, not encouraged to grow from it. But somehow your experience compelled you to make it meaningful, not just move forward like a compliant robot!

ES: Yes, as an educator working with mostly low-income families and children of color, I felt stressed with so many mandated tools, but also disturbed that we had to use tools with children whose culture was far from connecting to the assessments. Instead, I wanted to pay close attention to children and engage with them through play and conversations, and also engage with my own journey as a teacher. I also learned that for most of the families I worked with, understanding the assessment documents and checklists was difficult due to the lack of English or child development language the assessments use. Many times families did not understand ECE terms and vocabulary or why the child was expected to be at a certain developmental stage.

Lastly, in a typical publically-funded classroom, assessments are changed frequently and teachers are continually required to be trained with a new tool when they are barely getting used to the old one. It seems to me the tools are so similar that they don't offer anything significantly different, but rather just measure children the same way, which for some, still isn't culturally appropriate.

MC: So you had a good idea about what didn't seem to make sense: multiple assessment tools that added stress, not more understanding or deeper engagement for you or the families. And, you wanted to stay true to your commitment to culturally relevant programming. What started you down this path of seeing that a 'marriage' was needed?

ES: When I began my journey at Sound Child Care Solutions I started learning the deeper concepts and implementation of the Reggio approach. I read articles and books about the New Zealand Learning Story approach to formative assessments and was fascinated by the idea of telling a child's story of learning, development, and relationship to their own learning, in addition to the teacher-child relationship component. Then I thought 'this sounds like early childhood education DEVELOPMENT' not only for the child but also for the teacher and the families. I learned that evaluating children and writing documentation does not have to be one way. Neither does it have to be stressful for teachers, unclear for families, or so irrelevant for the children. If this is true, why not try engaging both concepts to make meaning for families, children, teachers, and funders?

MC: Sometimes it takes exposure to a truly different approach to see how to shift your own thinking about what is possible. In the opening chapter of her first book on *Learning Stories*, Margaret Carr (2001) describes her initial assumption about the purpose of assessment: it was to *sum up* a child's knowledge or skill from a predetermined list. Then she embraced an alternative model of seeing the purpose of assessment as *enhancing* learning which evolved into the Learning Stories approach. When you are focused on summing up, rather than enhancing learning, you don't typically

grow as a teacher, nor do you always understand how to help children grow. I think the marriage you are trying to make is between summative assessment, which is looking for desired proscribed outcomes, and formative assessment, which is striving to understand and adjust the teaching and learning experience for both children and teachers.

ES: When I started working as a center director at Sound Child Care Solutions, I got the opportunity to mediate our assessment implementation strategies with the approach of writing Learning Stories and documentation in a way that provided an opportunity for the teachers and the children to learn, grow, and mentor each other. This raised hope for cultural democracy, not just for the teachers, but also for the children and the families who deserve to participate and gain empowerment through their knowledge about pedagogy related to their children.

We created Communities of Practice for professional development where our teachers had time to reflect on their pedagogical practices and processes. I think it is more than critical for any educator to have time to wonder, to question, evaluate, to think, and observe the process of learning and teaching, especially when we have mandated assessments that are not relevant to children in their classroom. The teachers then become consciously aware, knowledgeable, and empowered with new learning opportunities. Teachers start thinking critically; they look for new ways of being a pedagogical leader. They engage in a reflective process and become a collaborative team. For this to happen, a program has to make an investment of time, money, and values. Teachers must feel and know that the work they do with children "is valuable, is validated, and it is visible." (I took these words from Theressa Lenear when I interviewed her for my thesis.)

MC: It's so easy for teachers and administrators to get stressed out over using these assessment tools, especially when they are on the eve of getting a monitoring visit. How do you mediate that stress for them and continue their experience of empowerment?

ES: This approach of 'arranging a marriage' brings hope and meaning to the lives of children and the journey of the teachers. With that said, when monitors come to visit, teachers know that they don't have to pretend being the best teacher for *today*. Teachers know they are innovators in the classroom; they own what they are learning with children. Teachers have the capacity and the knowledge to explain the concept of the 'arranged marriage.' Yes, the assessments, checklists, and lesson plans are an important concept to track some aspects of the development of children, but they should not be the core value of the classroom. We use the assessments as tools, as guides, but we are aware that for many children these assessments are irrelevant because the children have their own cultural identity and their own unique way of learning; many have not had the experience needed to meet these expectations.

I want our educators to use a reflective lens to evaluate who and where children are from the minute they walk into the classroom. I believe this can happen through closely observing and finding learning stories to share. The checklists cannot be our only fountain of information about a child's development. Writing stories of children invites an opportunity for teachers to reflect and plan where we might take children from that point, how the family plays a role in this process, and what we as teachers need to learn to better teach these children.

One of the components I love about the Learning Story approach is that it encourages teachers to think about their relationships with children and how they are learning from children. Making that component part of the writing process helps teachers become more reflective, always trying to find a child's strengths and deeper meaning under what they are observing in children. When teachers acknowledge their own delight, curiosity, or puzzlement in studying an observation, they almost always find a more meaningful story to write. As a result, the teacher engages in a journey of transformation, where pedagogy is part of a teacher's conscientization. Freire (2000) refers to this process in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

MC: I've really appreciated hearing you talk about the importance of encouraging teachers to be innovative, rather than just trying to be in compliance.

ES: When we try to be in compliance, we often forget about the bigger goal of education. I encourage teachers to be brave in the sense of taking risks as innovators, trying new ways of teaching and learning, taking a different perspective rather than ignoring or hoping others will innovate first. I believe being an innovator is also being an activist for children and it is a rigorous job. If you settle with what you have, you lose the opportunity to create organic roads and critical ways of thinking.

MC: Your message here is so important, Elidia.

ES: I believe teaching is social justice work because most of the schools in the United States use assessments to evaluate children's performances. While we do need a way to evaluate the teaching and learning process, when teachers are mandated to maintain fidelity to these assessments, more attention is given to the numbers than to the children. Teachers worry whether their scores are meeting the outcomes and then pressure children to assimilate to the learning styles of the assessment tools, ignoring

who the children are in their own cultural identity. We stop ourselves from thinking about innovating and nurturing children's imagination. Then, we as educators or institutions become the oppressors of children's rights. If we undermine these aspects of the teaching and learning process, we marginalize children as well as great teachers who really want to make a difference in the lives of children.

I urge teachers to be brave and confident with their knowledge and experience. Advocacy for children is needed, taking the risk to be an innovator even when it becomes painful. The teacher's voice can start making children feel valuable, validated, and visible. The teacher and the child's relationship can provoke change to create new learning, new questions, and new thinking.

MC: Thank you, Elidia. You have ignited a fire in me and I hope in our readers.

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