

Expanding the Notion of Quality Outcomes

An interview with Kofi Darku, Director, Early Care and Education with Metro United Way, Louisville, Kentucky

by Margie Carter

As quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) continue to grow across the United States, what are we learning about how these efforts are working? Beyond the quantification of how many early childhood programs are involved and how their scores are improving on rating scales, what substantial and sustainable outcomes are being achieved?

- Are directors feeling more confident in their ability to work with their staff to keep quality moving forward?
- Have they acquired more specific skills in creating a business plan to continually improve their environments, wages, and working conditions, which encourage staff stability?



Kofi Darku and Margie Carter share a strong desire to expand thinking about quality in ECE. Both have been strongly influenced by the pedagogical concepts of Paulo Freire, along with those of Loris Malaguzzi. Kofi Darku's 15 years' experience in education, primarily in early childhood, provides insight for effective expansion and improvement of high-quality early childhood practices in the Greater Louisville region. Prior to joining Metro United Way in 2014, he worked for 55,000 Degrees, Greater Louisville's education attainment movement.

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- Is there an enhanced awareness of how to offer pedagogical leadership with support systems for ongoing staff development?
- Are teachers more engaged in their work, taking initiative to keep learning and improving the program?
- Is more teacher leadership and collaboration emerging in the center?
- Is there evidence of more job satisfaction and excitement about making ECE a career?

Apart from improving individual programs, our quality improvement efforts have to address the larger issues of working in the early childhood field. If we fail to do this, we will not have a career-oriented professional workforce, and we will ultimately fail our children.

I've been keeping my ear to the ground hoping to hear stories of more innovation in agencies responsible for these quality improvement systems. There seems to be strong agreement that mentors should be part of the process; but I'm curious to know how these mentors are being oriented, what they see as their task, and how they are being guided to work with directors and

teachers. Are they primarily focused on raising scores on rating scales or is the role of the mentor designed to pursue any of the important outcomes in the bullet list above?

In the last few months I've been in email dialogue with Kofi Darku, Director, Early Care and Education with Metro United Way in Louisville, Kentucky. I've been quite taken with his honesty about what they discovered when they took a step back to evaluate their progress. Really listening to their centers' staff and refocusing how they were designing their work is leading to some new possibilities.

A Dialog with Kofi Darku

MC: Kofi, what have you been discovering about working with collaborative partners and using mentors to improve quality in your region?

KD: Since its inception, Metro United Way's Excellence Academy early learning centers have incorporated a valuable collaborative partnership with our local Child Care Resource and Referral Agency, Community Coordinated Child Care (4-C), to provide expert mentoring and coaching for our centers' staff, including the center director as well as teaching staff. While this element of our approach

remains consistently strong, and in fact has expanded to other shared services within some of our centers, we have learned that perhaps our initial focus was too limiting. For example, because our mentors were held accountable to a specific list of tasks and objectives, it tended to drive their interactions with teachers and other staff toward a goal of compliance. We've come to recognize that we need a strategic partnership with each other — all of us as a network focused on common goals — where we address challenges together from a mutually created vision, and we consider this a significant step forward to innovate needed change in our region's early childhood system.

MC: You are describing something that I think is quite typical in most quality improvement programs where the focus is on the standards first and the people secondarily. Hooray for your decision to develop a shared vision and begin to shift how you have been operating! I believe that for real change to happen, mentoring has to go beyond technical assistance aimed at compliance. Effective mentoring provides the opportunity to put learning in the context of a relationship. I think this is far more motivating for program staff and also parallels where we want the teachers to put the focus as they support children's learning.

KD: We wanted the variety of relationships established throughout our early learning centers to help our teachers feel a firm layer of support as they built their professional capacity, but we've discovered it is much more beneficial overall than that. Building a love of learning, which then builds stronger communities, starts first with the teachers in our classrooms and expands throughout our network of the Excellence Academy participants because of these significant relationships we help nurture.

MC: I'm impressed by your responsiveness to your teachers and directors.

You haven't just decided to give them more time, but to rethink how to guide your mentors to promote reflection and initiative, not just compliance.

KD: Yes, and that's a learning process for all of us that we're excited about. Metro United Way and 4-C are working together now to innovate how our mentors can maximize their time with teachers if we expand our notion of quality outcomes. For example, previously we viewed quality mentor/teacher interaction as defined by the highest number of tallies on the performance checklist — also known as the 'grid.' We are now considering tracking performance according to 'break-throughs' teachers have, rather than a quantity of specific 'things' tracked. We hope this change will lead to more depth and greater sustainability in the outcomes we want to see.

MC: Sometimes I hear assigned mentors say things like "Oh, this center/these teachers are so bad, we never see them try to initiate anything interesting for the children." I'm curious about their image of the teacher in those settings. Just as with children, when teachers aren't showing you their best selves, what are you doing to get to know them, find their strengths, and engage their passions? What kind of mentoring really brings forth teacher motivation to see the children and their work in a new light, as opposed to just getting in compliance?

KD: We believe mentoring that motivates teachers to engage in their work and encourages them to see the exciting potential in all children — so that they can then encourage the child to explore and learn — is based on four main things:

- Consistency
- Mutual respect
- Knowledge- or value-added practice
- Constructive and applicable feedback.

Consistency means 'ongoing' or happening on somewhat of a regular basis; mutual respect simply is the notion that the mentor shows respect for the teacher she is mentoring, who in turn finds the mentor's insight and feedback helpful so that each of them believes the other is bringing something valuable to the table.

The knowledge- or value-added practice means the mentor brings something to the relationship that allows the teacher to add value to her practice or helps her build knowledge. An example that addresses both of these is when a mentor helps the teacher understand that a section of the classroom environment (i.e., the block area) can be arranged to better facilitate timely clean-up at the end of free play. The teacher's new understanding that her environment arrangement can provide specific, desired classroom outcomes becomes valuable knowledge and how she will continue to apply this knowledge adds value to her practice.

And finally, but importantly, constructive and applicable feedback is demonstrated when our mentors always consider and acknowledge the teacher's context. Feedback, even if it may be critical, is always delivered constructively so the teacher can see how to use it positively and build upon it.

MC: Yes, and this goes back to how you prepare your mentors to work with directors and teachers, both in disposition and with skill development to give feedback in a way that empowers teachers.

KD: Our Excellence Academy approach focuses on mentoring that inspires teachers to work beyond compliance by focusing on their strengths, acknowledging their accomplishments, and highlighting their unique value to our network of early learning centers and to our shared teaching community overall.

So our focus on strengths through respectful relationships hopefully inspires our teachers with a similar type of positive motivation we want for the children, themselves, as they learn.

MC: Yes, it promotes thinking, not just compliance, and helps cultivate the teacher leadership we need to see more of in our field. Can you describe how you are working with your mentors to use this approach?

Productive Mentoring

KD: Most of my professional early childhood experience has been in programs that are inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach. Implementation of a Reggio-inspired approach usually results in a shift in the way the program sees or works with children. I believe productive mentoring involves mentors who have experienced a shift in how they see and support teachers; this means that successful mentors meet teachers where they are, and are committed to professionally growing with them going forward. So, when mentors see their work from this viewpoint, teachers are more likely to start seeing and working with the children in this way as well. After all, it's hard to expect inspirational outcomes from children without expecting inspirational outcomes from teachers, too. So I believe that how you love and respect the children is reflected in how you love and respect the teachers, especially if you want to achieve successful, productive mentoring. I think this reflects a bit of Paulo Freire in my beliefs.

MC: Ah, Kofi, Freire is one of my heroes and his pedagogy for adults has had a strong influence on how I have worked with teachers and administrators. And you are talking about the importance of discovering who people (adults and children) are, treating them with respect, and seeing your role as a learner as well as teacher. I think you

are also addressing how we need to act with integrity, aligning our thinking and pedagogical practices with our beliefs. Do you have a sense of what helps mentors make that shift in how they see teachers and their role with them? (And, perhaps, even making a shift in how they see children?)

KD: Freire's writings really made an impression on me as well and I certainly use what I learned from him when I'm focusing on how to support productive human interactions. We're proud that our collaboration with 4-C has strengthened our focus on shared vision and values to make our community's children successful, because we know that our work with each other and within our Excellence Academy network is truly transforming the lives of both teachers and children. As we incorporate the Reggio Emilia approach, it is helping our mentors shift how they see teachers, how they see their roles, and how they encourage teachers, which is relevant as well in how teachers see their children and motivate them in their creativity and exploration. We'll continue our focus on this aspect of mentoring so that we can evaluate and enhance it on an ongoing basis. Center-specific in-service training will likely be an important tool in this process because we recognize the importance that all of us understand and support this shared vision and how we will achieve it.

Work that Transforms Lives

MC: These recalibrations seem so important, Kofi. I think having a sense of our work in a larger way really brings out the best in all of us. In this work, what do you think helps mentors meet teachers where they are: encouraging a sense of agency and ownership over the change process for themselves?

KD: I think we're seeing true passion and joy emerge from our mentors and teachers because they're seeing results,

even though, in some ways we are perhaps in the early stages of this journey. With that comes a sense of both individual and team empowerment that motivates us all. I hope we can interact with each other to achieve our goals by thinking something to the effect of, "Though I don't know about this person's life outside of this center, I've been invited into their life inside of this center. I'm curious about their teaching practice in this room, why they became a teacher, and who this person is in general. I'm choosing to learn about these things now, along with how we can work together going forward, because I know we're all committed to the success of every child."

From this perspective then, our mentors are really focused on listening, which routinely confirms if they accurately understand what the teacher is saying, and rely more on asking questions (when circumstances permit) than giving answers when there is problem solving at hand.

MC: These are powerful ideas that I can picture on a card for each mentor to carry: things to keep in mind before you meet with a teacher, things to keep in mind when meeting with teachers. If each quality enhancement organization oriented their mentors in this way, I think we would start to see more innovative practices and outcomes.

KD: Thank you, Margie. We're proud of our Excellence Academy program that is executed through a strong innovative collaboration that joins Metro United Way with 4-C for positive results and progress achieved so far in our early learning center. A community of connected people — with the passion, expertise, and resources needed to get things done — is at the heart of what Metro United Way represents.



Rosetta and the Rabbit in the Rain

by Lisa Branstetter, Excellence Academy Mentor and
Alissa Mwenelupembe, Executive Director,
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Mentoring in the Excellence Academy is not only about improving quality for young children. It's about challenging our own assumptions about education, about quality, and about each other. The process of mentoring requires teamwork from the mentor, the director, and the teacher. Without deep conversations, reflection, and an open mind the process breaks down. Together we have seen great changes, but more importantly, we have become a team.

Alissa: When I began my work as director at St. Benedict, Lisa had been mentoring the teachers (including Rosetta) for about a year. There had not been much progress. Lisa would have conversations with the teachers and we would all agree what they should be doing in the classroom. We would sigh with relief that this time it would work. It almost never did. "Two steps forward and three steps backward" was our motto, and it definitely showed in our program.

Rosetta was one of the teachers whom Lisa worked with regularly. While many of the teachers grumbled when they saw Lisa walk in the building, Rosetta seemed genuinely interested in working with her. Rosetta was a good teacher. She had worked at the center for some time and kept a clean, safe classroom. She seemed interested in learning about best practices, but was very stuck in doing things the way they had always been done. Lisa and I would talk with her about trying something different, she would agree, and then it would go back to the way it had been done before. We started to wonder what we were doing wrong. Why weren't the teachers and the classrooms changing?

Lisa: As a mentor, it never ceases to amaze me as to what form the catalyst will be for deep-seated change towards a rich child-centered early childhood teaching philosophy. It has been my experience that a catalyst can come in the form of a visit to an inspiring classroom or seeing the result of replacing an old plastic toy bin with a natural basket. In this case a rabbit holding an umbrella in the rain became the agent of change for a 'traditional' preschool teacher with more than 20 years experience.

During a regular mentoring visit, I walked past Rosetta's two-year-old classroom and noticed the "April Showers" teacher-made display on the classroom window — a rabbit holding an umbrella with rain falling all around it. A bit frustrated that an important concept had not yet taken root — making the children's work and learning be the main focus on display — I decided to have a little chat with Rosetta. Sitting outside the classroom on an old wooden bench, we began to compare and contrast the differences between the traditional and the child-centered approaches to teaching. To add to our discussion, I said to Rosetta, "As an example, let's take the display on the window here in front of us; who created that?" Rosetta proudly replied, "I did!" After a moment, I asked her, "Why did you do that?" She sheepishly replied, "Because that is the way I have always done it."

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Photographs by the authors



Rosetta and the Rabbit in the Rain *continued*

At that moment, I knew Rosetta's entire philosophy of early childhood education came under examination and shifted. She now had a new filter for examining every activity, display, and classroom material. From that point on, our dialogue became a series of incredibly rich teachable moments. Our conversation continued with, "How could you take the notion of April Showers and place the children in the center of the learning?" I asked Rosetta to take a peek outside, as a gentle rain was falling from the sky, then she replied, "We can find some umbrellas and take the children outside to play in the rain!"

Alissa: That day was a turning point in our lives at the center. The growth that I have seen in Rosetta is amazing. In the past she was focused on meeting minimum licensing standards, now she has really moved forward and focused on what the children deserve. Her classroom is full of beautiful, interesting things for children to explore. Glass jars contain fresh flowers on the classroom tables, the children's artwork is purposefully displayed around the classroom, and the playground is an ever-evolving masterpiece of loose parts. Rosetta reads voraciously and is constantly asking for suggestions of new titles. She shares with the other teachers what she is reading and learning. She is a walking billboard for the work of the Excellence Academy and is proof that this kind of mentoring works.

Lisa: That day not only did Rosetta take her children out into the rain, she took pictures and documented the learning. She keeps both the picture of her rabbit holding its umbrella and her pictures of the children playing in the rain displayed on her classroom wall as a reminder to never go back to her old ways of teaching because, as she says, "Really, what rabbit have you seen walking on two legs holding an umbrella?"



Photograph by the authors