

Are We Suffering from TTWWADI Syndrome?

An interview with Lisa Lee

by Margie Carter

"Many people in education suffer from TTWWADI. It is the mindset that develops as people form habits — That's The Way We've Always Done It. TTWWADI becomes a powerful force that prevents change; people continue to do things the way they always have been done without ever examining the original decision to do something a particular way. People just accept the preexisting mindset because it is the path of least resistance. Ted McCain said, 'Conventional wisdom is that it takes great strength to hold on to something. In my view, it takes the greatest strength to let go of something you have done the same way for a long time'" (Berg, 2012).

The term "TTWWADI" was first introduced to me in New Zealand during a presentation by Lorraine Manuela with one of our study tour groups. We laughed when she told us what it meant,



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and though we weren't familiar with the term, we knew the concept well. Doing some Internet research, I see this term has been part of our United States' school principals' discourse for almost a decade now. In early childhood, it seems we are missing out on the best progressive thinking going on in the school reform arena. I worry about this, especially in our efforts to create quality enhancement programs. What innovative ideas are we considering? How are we promoting innovation, excitement, and sustainability, rather than perpetuating the TTWWADI syndrome? For instance, have those charged with creating quality enhancement programs been seeking the input of practitioners?

Do they consider how conventional approaches might be limiting new possibilities? Where can we find people and organizations, in Jason Berg's way of thinking, who mobilize the strength to cast off TTWWADI thinking and attempt something new?

A Dialogue with Lisa Lee

Over this past year my coauthor and colleague Deb Curtis has been working with Preschool for All (PFA) in San Francisco and telling me I need to interview Lisa Lee, who is stepping outside of conventional approaches and developing some creative approaches to quality



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Lisa Lee is the Program Officer with First 5 San Francisco Children and Families Commission. With over 35 years of experience as a teacher, director, and trainer in the field of early education, she supports the implementation of San Francisco's

Preschool for All Program and its developing Quality Rating and Improvement System.

improvement work. Lisa subsequently contributed her thinking about working with rating scales for the second edition of *Designs for Living and Learning*. Not long after I had the opportunity to meet this wise woman in person. Lisa is astutely navigating bureaucratic systems with her expanded vision of what quality looks like.

Margie: Lisa, I'm not sure whether you are familiar with the TTWWADI phrase, but you certainly seem to be attempting some new things with your leadership at Preschool for All. I love how you equate the work of quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) with overcoming inequity. You recognize the challenges and struggles programs have and surround them with love and a sense of possibility, while insisting on changes that will make a difference.

Lisa: This is an exciting time to be an early childhood educator. Never before has our field been more in the spotlight by so many wanting to do well by our youngest children. And I am humbled by the changes that are unfolding and impacting our field as we strive to achieve common standards and structures for both support and accountability in our profession.

We know more now than we have ever known about how to support the development of children. In addition to NAEYC's or NACCRA's accreditation standards, we have a growing chest of 'valid and reliable' tools for measuring quality. These tools are a huge leap for our field. At the same time, there are lessons that we are learning about how best to use the tools and the information we receive from them. Any tool holds potential to be effective or limited in its usefulness. A hammer can't be used to drive a screw into a wall. The CLASS or the ERS tools provide us with information snapshots from a specific perspective and cultural bias. I love good tools — I want everyone to have access to the

benefit they can provide — and there is no doubt in my mind that the early childhood educator is the greatest, most versatile tool in the ECE box. Having spent many years in the classroom, I wear my bias and respect for educators proudly.

Margie: I'm struck by how you don't just strive for good scores, but insist on providers and teachers feeling empowered and emboldened to make improvements.

Lisa: Here's an example: When we first started to use high stakes ERS assessments over eight years ago, we came face to face with both neglect and the neurotic. Data revealed environments and programs that had been neglected and underfunded. We saw programs grasping for the "7" score without consideration for community contexts and beliefs. Teachers had sleepless nights and illness before their assessments. They experienced frustration, anger, and depression when they received their reports. Resentments built between assessors and educators, programs and funders. We didn't need an admonition on TTWWADI. Our city was not going to "throw out the baby with the bathwater." Tools for measuring performance and quality were not going away. And we took a risk to make it better.

Lao Tzu said, "When the best leader's work is done, the people say 'We did it ourselves.'" I am proud that in our city many people from all levels collaborated to change the way we as a community implemented, thought about, and communicated about assessments. Everyone was engaged in the learning and discussions. We visited other communities that liked their assessment processes. Directors, teachers, and providers were invited to sit next to assessors to adjust national indicators of quality for local community context and culture. Not only did we examine our

assessment processes, we looked at what happened before and after assessment. We addressed the sensitive fact that without adequate training upfront on the tool people felt policed. We owned the reality that providers borrowed and staged without adequate resources to create rich and safe environments. We tried to respect that people felt that in order to 'score well' and 'survive,' they did things that were contrary to their values. In hindsight, we could have had an 'of course' club for all the things we 'should' have known, but didn't.

In QRIS systems and life, you don't get to excellence without making mistakes and learning from them. In the lessons learned, our continuous quality improvement investments improved and became more proactive. When we realized that the use of the tool was becoming the dominant lens for how some teachers began viewing our environments, we pushed ourselves to create an innovation that promoted reflection and valued other ways of thinking. We engaged master practitioners, coaches, and long-time innovators like Deb Curtis to bring different perspectives to how we looked at environments. This thinking led to the creation of an environmental design collaborative, an enthusiastic group of teachers and coaches who now partner with teachers for 'makeovers' — using a visioning and reflective lens process with amazing results. Their work connects best practice in the environment directly to the experiences of children. This group of innovators shows us every day both how to live with standards and strive for more. They remind us to value things that aren't as easily measured, things like creativity, empathy, resilience, aesthetics, and curiosity.

Engaging in the Change Process

Margie: I sense your urgency about the changes that are needed in our field, even as you affirm all that is good. You

don't behave like a bureaucrat with mandates to please funders or politicians, but rather lead with deeply held values and an analysis of how quality for children is profoundly connected to issues of equity.

Lisa: Sometimes I feel totally immersed in the change. As one of the persons responsible for our city's QRIS system, sometimes I feel like I'm swimming as fast as I can. But, in truth, I think we are all just putting our toes in a fast-moving current.

As you ask me to think about all of this in a TTWWADI context, you are inviting me to pause and reflect. You remind me of how important it is to have these conversations. I know this because my mind goes down a rabbit hole of questions, trepidations, hope, and possible adventures.

I am filled with hope that change is upon us. The wise words, "If we do things as we have always done, we will end up where we already have been," play in the back of my mind. I feel the urgency for change, both because I have been doing this work for over 30 years and because I believe that we can and must do better to fulfill the promise of excellence in education for all. Change is necessary to address our own tolerance of mediocrity. Change is essential to close the opportunity gap that exists for so many children and their families. And change is necessary to close the opportunity gap that has existed for many in our workforce.

I am both challenged and grateful for the research, the new tools, and the data that are essential to make wise choices. When we measure the state of quality as we are attempting to do, we gain the capacity to make inequity visible. As we work

to continuously improve, we must seize the moment to make it better. In the best conditions, we can be shaken from our TTWWADI mentality to do things differently. In the best conditions we can also stand firm with TTWWADI, when maintaining the best of what we do — such as culturally sensitive, relationship-based caregiving — is undervalued.

I totally understand why some people just want to stick with TTWWADI. Who wouldn't feel paralyzed by the questions! Who wouldn't feel trepidation when teachers talk about the growing static that keeps them from being present with children? Who

wouldn't want to put on the brakes when we have evidence that what is validated as high quality may not equate to excellence in teaching or improve readiness outcomes for all children regardless of cultural or economic circumstances?

I can't speak to the motivations of others. For me, I look at the inequities in our

system and ask myself, "How can I not respond?" I recall why I chose early childhood and consider the 'awesomeness' of the teachers and caregivers I have been honored to work with, and I push myself to respond well. I get to gratitude. I get grounded in values, and from that appreciative-inquiry place, then I get to work.

In my work, I try to pause often. I call upon wisdom that has long inspired me and that is around me. I'm grateful to those who have contributed to my own thinking of transformational change and leadership — like Paulo Freire, James Burns, and Margaret Wheatley, to name just a few. And I am most grateful

Change is necessary to address our own tolerance of mediocrity.



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for the voices of teachers, providers, parents, and directors who bring the essential perspective from those at the center of change.

All change is stress inducing, even change that leads us to something better. As I think about what we introduce into the lives of teachers and children, I think about the nature of that stress and how we live within that stress as a community of learners and kind-hearted people.

In times of complex change, I want to be a reflective leader and to cultivate reflective leadership around me. I want to encourage us to take risks, to have conversations that bring multiple perspectives, feelings, and insights to the policies and practices we are establishing. Paul Coehlo has said, "What does the world want of me? Does it want me to take no risks, to go back to where I came from because I didn't have the courage to say yes to life?" These fundamental questions, push me to say "yes" to excellence for children and teachers, to embrace new research, and to risk new ways of doing things that will transform teaching and learning. How could I do anything less?

Measuring Things that Matter

Margie: You are such a reflective leader, Lisa. I'm inspired by how you don't

let external rating and assessment tools define who you are or whether you've reached your definition of quality. But at the same time, you insist on accountability toward that bigger definition.

Lisa: My question is how do we rise above the assessments that we use? What can we use to measure those things that we value most? We measure a lot of things and I don't want to lose sight of the things that are important to our children that are harder to capture. Ratings and assessments are helpful tools, but they don't tell us everything. They don't tell us about readiness outcomes for children. They don't provide data to track cultural identity development or language loss for dual language learners. They don't tell me about the disproportionate exclusion of children of color. High QRIS ratings don't always equate with excellence in teaching. And, importantly, they don't tell me about the well-being of teachers and the community we will become in the process.

As we walk this path, I am behooved to find out about the painful lessons and pitfalls of the school reform movement, which you referred to earlier. They raise questions and point to ways to do things better as we walk this Race to the Top path, as we live in this age of accountability. Will we use data respectfully and responsibly? Can we avoid blaming teachers for outcomes that are much more correlated to system design than what they do with children every day? Are we measuring things that matter and are we not measuring things that matter more? Will teachers leave the profession, burnt out not only from low wages, but by high-stakes assessment anxiety, documentation overload, frustration with 'best practices' that have little regard for community contexts and the educator's reality? Can we ethically continue to pour new and significant resources into infrastructure of QRIS measurement and improvement efforts and their emerging industries, when teachers and teaching



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continue to be woefully underfunded across this country?

How do we know that the 'help' is helping? Is there a buzz in the room? Are teachers rested and relaxed? Do they have a greater or lesser sense of voice in the conversations? Is there a greater sense of efficacy — not about mastering the tools — but in what happens to the child? How do we build support systems that build competencies, but that do not sacrifice well-being? How do we design QRIS so that that continuous quality improvement can be inspiring, energizing, and respectful to our teachers?

Holding Ourselves Accountable

Margie: Our dialog keeps cycling back to the question of what, in this pressure cooker era of accountability to others, do we want to hold ourselves accountable for? This question requires serious soul searching on the part of all of us, especially leaders of organizations.

Lisa: I love your question. There is nothing more important than knowing what results we want to achieve at the end of all our efforts. Margaret Wheatley said, "There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about." At the end of the day, I want to know that I did what

was in my power to make good on our community's promise of a high-quality education for all children, with an unwavering commitment to close the gap that exists for children who are furthest from opportunity.

And, I am accountable to our early childhood educators to do my part in a way that lifts all of us up, as a community, to this higher purpose. We must all step up and say that I am responsible, with humility and gratitude, for what we get to do. At this time, and in this moment, we can do nothing less.

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