

Redefining Parent Engagement

An interview with Mary Jo Deck

by Margie Carter



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This summer I read a terrific little book by Michael Gramling (2015), *The Great Disconnect in Early Childhood Education: What We Know vs. What We Do*. I highly recommend it to anyone trying to figure out why publicly-funded ECE programs have not successfully addressed the achievement gap for children living in poverty. In the foreword to the book, Elizabeth Jones points out:

“The gap between rich and poor children in America hasn’t narrowed, as promised; it has widened. Public funding backfired. Preschools funded for the poor are caught in the canned curriculum and testing mania. The



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Mary Jo Deck, MS, currently works in North Carolina as Community Engagement Specialist with Smart Start of Buncombe County, which includes facilitating the PhotoVoice project. A seasoned early childhood education consultant,

Mary Jo founded Staurolite Resource Group, a firm dedicated to supporting systems change through the development of personal and organizational learning. She has directed both small, private parent cooperative model preschools and large multi-site Head Start programs. Currently a North Carolina C Environmental Educator, Mary Jo’s current passion is focused on playing and learning in the outdoors.

preschool experiences of privileged children are more likely to be developmentally appropriate (building on what all recent research now verifies) than are preschool experiences of young children who start out behind — and fall further and further behind.... Early intelligence grows through choices and complexity and self-esteem and negotiating with others — not through memorizing prescribed lists of facts.”

Along with his mates at Defending the Early Years (DEY, see References below), Gramling outlines some key problems that have led to the current trends in ECE, especially those programs targeting children in low-income families.

Much to the detriment of young children, the establishment of school readiness standards has caused the early childhood profession to:

- equate instruction with assessment.
- confuse child development with early learning.
- substitute early information for early experience.

Examining Bias

While I think many early childhood professionals recognize these problems in publicly-funded early childhood programs, Gramling’s adds a call to examine the bias, and often-times blaming tone, inherent in the parent education component of these programs. He reminds us that for parents in poverty, “much of everyday life is consumed with trying to figure out how to accomplish simple daily tasks that people with money take for granted.” And Gramling reminds us that these challenged parents, often seen as deficient, actually provide excellent role models for resourcefulness, critical thinking, and problem solving.

I’ve been eager to find efforts that counter this deficit view with a re-conceptualized notion of ‘parent education.’ There are voices challenging this bias on social media. Searching the web you will discover a variety of terms to replace ‘parent education’: family engagement, family involvement, family partnerships, and parent empowerment.

We have professional literature reminding us that when families are involved in their children’s schools, children are more likely to succeed. But



PHOTOVOICE

Shenekia McDaniels: The shoes are this week's theme. That was the picture that I took; I put a clock in the middle, because I never have enough time. I took a picture of everyone's shoes who depend on me putting my shoes on properly. Everybody puts their shoes together except for Kalia; I only found one of them, but I said I am taking this picture because I don't have time to come back for this. So, that's a little clock, my son's shoes, my niece's shoes, and my momma's shoes who all depend on me putting my shoes on properly.

parents will often tell you that the tone embedded in the call for parent involvement is frequently off-putting, rather than inspiring parents to bring their funds of knowledge to help shape their child's education.

Changing how we traditionally approach our work with parents is a challenging and complex task, especially given the ever-growing inequities and mistrust across the economic and racial divides in our country. What are some of the structures, supports, and strategies that show promise for strengthening the agency and voice of families in poverty?

A Dialogue with Mary Jo Deck

At the end of an informal social gathering with early childhood professionals in North Carolina, I found myself next to Mary Jo Deck who was describing her NC Shape work project with Smart Start of Buncombe County, funded to promote healthy weight in young children and help families lead healthier lives. Mary Jo described using "PhotoVoice" for this project, a qualitative research method designed to

capture individuals' voices and visions about their lives, the community, and concerns through photographs taken by participants. PhotoVoice projects (see References below) often bring together specific populations who are marginalized or who don't have a strong voice. I was vaguely familiar with this work in another context, but had never come across it in our field. In the course of my late-night probing, Mary Jo eagerly described the adaptation of this approach for her Smart Start project:

"Participants in a PhotoVoice project are equipped with cameras and work on a weekly photo assignment that is meaningful for them. The groups meet for 4-6 weeks to share and discuss the photographs they have taken. All sessions are led by a trained facilitator and notes are transcribed and reviewed later by a team for research purposes. At the end of the project, participants decide how to present their stories and identify an actionable community change.

MC: My immediate thought is that the PhotoVoice project is a terrific way to level the playing field and avoid some

of the disempowering aspects of other approaches to helping low-income families.

MJD: Yes, I think it starts with the idea that we can begin to listen, to ask parents questions about their roles as parents and their needs for specific assistance in that role, and acceptance of where they are now. For this project, we have partnered with the Positive Parenting Program to explore a variety of issues and challenges of parenting. Our participants are primarily parents with children at The Asheville City Schools Preschool. It is an ethnically diverse group of women: some are single mothers, some are married, some live in public housing, some have one child and others have four children.

In our six weeks of photo assignments we explored:

- the many challenges to keeping your children healthy and safe.
- how long and tiring the days are.
- how moms felt judged and stereotyped.
- how living in poverty makes it all harder.

MC: As you describe these themes that emerged, I'm thinking you must have introduced this project in a different way to get to the real issues in the parents' lives. Quite often programs focused on families in poverty predetermine what help they think parents could benefit from, rather than creating a way for the parents to name that for themselves.

MJD: We began thinking about this with exposure to a webinar highlighting the classic elements of PhotoVoice. At the time, we were working on community needs assessments and knew that we wanted a more genuine conversation with parents in order to inform

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Sarah Copeland: I took a picture of the snacks that my son enjoys eating and the snacks that I try to get him to move towards. *How is that working for you?* Not great. We have outside impacts, for instance the brownies and PopTarts came from my mom. The Girl Scout Cookies came from the neighbor's child who came over and said, "You have to buy Girl Scout Cookies from me," and then the Sponge Bob snacks are something we use sparingly, or at least I attempt to. And then the apples and bananas are the things I try to get him to eat as often as possible.



programming and policy, and how to empower parents to be active participants in decision making.

As we talked with a variety of diverse community programs about their own approaches to genuine parent involvement, it became clear that most struggled to fit parents into roles and activities that matched their own program needs. This is very different than honest dialogue.

Working together with Deanna LaMotte of the Positive Parenting Project and the Preschool, we met with a large group of parents, shared our purpose, and explained the project. This included the number of people to be involved, how to use a camera, how many weeks the project would last, and an agreed upon schedule. A very important part of the orientation was the clear articulation of the central fact that the story is the parent's story told through photographs, and parents own it and decide what they want to do with it.

MC: As the process unfolded, I imagine you discovered the difference between being a parent educator and being a facilitator of a group of parents.

MJD: Oh, it is very different! Listening allows you to really hear and understand that the experience of parenting has

some universals, and that race, education, and economics are powerful dividers. The PhotoVoice process, with the camera or without, offers an open-ended opportunity for parents to talk openly about their lives, share with one another, and educate us. What participants choose to photograph not only brings a theme and detail of a story to the group, but then it frames the conversations and questions that result, offering a clear guide to additional issues that the group has in common.

As the conversations weave in and out of stories and feelings, parents will share what they need, what works and what doesn't. We laugh and share common experiences. For instance, one of the elements highlighted was a series of photos of routine household responsibilities. There are laundry pictures, laundry baskets, both woven fiber and plastic, overflowing; socks and shirts hanging out of dresser drawers; and sinks piled with dirty dishes. This was totally spontaneous, and four of the six women recorded it. I still remember seeing the first laundry basket photo and I laughed aloud!

MC: What a bonding experience that must have been, between the women themselves, but also between you and them. To be a facilitator in a setting where one already has more power and privilege — perhaps through education, skin color,



PHOTOVOICE

Polly Bolding: This is a piece of clothing that my child loves, but I'm worried about someone seeing her in these horrible, falling apart leggings and having them think that we are not setting appropriate limits or paying attention to how she takes care of herself or looks. At the same time, she really loves these leggings and I am not sure if I want to have a power struggle about the leggings. Or I guess I am not confident about that limit because she likes wearing the leggings and a part of my mind thinks, "It's not a big deal"; but the other part of my mind says, "Well, what if other people think it is a big deal?"

or more financial security — requires that we unlearn some attitudes and behaviors if we are to be allies, partners, and true collaborators. What have you learned about this?

MJD: I am honored to be a part of this open and honest conversation. We must dispense with our preconceptions and stereotypes and ask and listen. Listen longer. I believe that sharing the stories builds a bond, a community of parenting. When we name the subjects and objects, for example, grocery shopping with young children with a crying incident and the resulting looks and stares of disapproval from other shoppers. If we pull back the curtain of shame or embarrassment or unease, then we can collectively address what we want to do about it — perhaps finding ways to prevent a temper tantrum in the cereal aisle of the grocery store.

I believe that honesty and willingness to be vulnerable and ask for help, along with the power of shared experience and mutually creating an identified plan of action, is the basis for hope.

MC: Any final thoughts you'd like to share with our readers?

MJD: Over the months of this project there are several clear lessons that will continue to impact our work of community engagement. The first is that really giving parents a place — a kitchen table is the description that comes to mind — to share their own stories and needs and dreams for their children is a way for them to discover their own part of the universe of parenting and find their uniqueness and special gifts in that role. Participants in the PhotoVoice project own what they have shared, they decide how and with whom they want to share their photos and their words, and they discover there is individual personal power there.

Another lesson is that PhotoVoice allows and supports a genuine sense of the shared experience of parenting in which children grow. There were times when each of us held our breath as one mom talked about a particularly painful experience, and we didn't really know how to respond except to listen and nod and know that all we had to offer was the sense of shared understanding. Issues of racial prejudice and economic disparities are powerful negatives that were brought into the conversations. When this happened, suddenly our own biases about these realities were exposed and our preconceptions become empathetic awareness. Then there were other moments when both individuals and the group laughed aloud for long moments when we recognized ourselves in the situation.

All along the way the sharing was powerful. And allowing the stories of these everyday occurrences to inform and guide genuine parent involvement and create a bridge of universal understanding was an important and real benefit. We've been

able to put our PhotoVoice exhibit of the parent voices on our website. (Details for accessing it are listed below in the References.)

Perhaps the final lesson to acknowledge here is the opportunity for each of us to be personally changed by the experience. We can move to a new understanding and acceptance. With an honest letting go of some 'standards' about parenting, we enter a place of honoring the work of raising the future generation.

As a result of the success of using the PhotoVoice project to redefine parent engagement, we have received support from the Asheville City Schools Foundation to continue using PhotoVoice with parents, teachers, administrators, and children to explore racial equity. This relates directly to the Gramling reference at the beginning of this article: looking at the benefits of parent involvement when we create opportunities for families to construct a role and have a voice in publicly-funded preschools.

References

Defending the Early Years:

<http://deyproject.org/recommended-reading-and-resources/>



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PHOTOVOICE

Shenekia McDaniels: And then there is the fish tank; I thought, "Look at the fish. They look so free and they have no care or worry that they're trapped in this little box." (People laughing.) So I thought, "That's kind of what being in poverty is. It's like you're swimming around. You're making it look good, but there is a limit to where you can go because of what you need to come out of there, and the needs and the assistance to get out of the position that you're currently in."

**PHOTOVOICE**

Shenekia McDaniels: That's my son climbing the stairs; just like it is a climb up, you really have to work hard and so many things — so many connections — have to be made to climb out of poverty. So many resources, so I thought, "Okay, the steps can be the resources that you would have to use in order to get yourself up out of poverty."

Gramling, M. (2015). *The great disconnect in Early Childhood Education. What we know vs. What we do*. St Paul: Redleaf Press.

Photo Voice:

www.photovoice.org/

Smart Start of Buncombe County Guidebook: *Keeping our children healthy and safe and the challenges of parenting: A Photo-Voice Exhibit*. Online:

www.smartstart-buncombe.org/images/linkeddocs/photovoiceguidebook.pdf