

Growing Ourselves as Leaders

A Conversation with Annie White

by Margie Carter

Persuasive leadership is a leader's ability to move people from their current position to a position that they don't currently hold. **Persuasive leadership** requires a leader to not only make rational arguments, but also frame ideas, approaches, and solutions in ways that appeal to diverse groups of people with basic human emotions.

Over the last few decades, our early childhood field has championed the importance of nurturing new leaders in our profession at the local and national level. Can you name people who inspired or mentored you into a commitment to early childhood? Do you consciously strive to do the same for others around you? With so much at stake for children, we shouldn't be casual about developing leadership in ourselves and others. It's time to clarify our intentions and aspirations. We need leaders determined to ensure children's right to learn through play; leaders bold enough to question and revamp some habitual ways of thinking; and leaders strong enough to call out elephants in the room. Let's grow leaders who are savvy negotiators and innovators.



Dr. Annie White is an Assistant Professor with the Early Childhood Studies program at California State University Channel Islands. She worked for 20 years with the Head Start program and taught early childhood education courses at California community colleges. Dr. White has conducted research on the Learning Story approach with Early Head Start, Head Start, state-funded preschool programs, and homeless shelter child care centers.



Margie Carter is an author and early childhood consultant moving into semi-retirement. She champions growing innovative leaders for the early childhood field and delights in seeing that garden grow and mature. To learn more about the Inspire Study Tours to Aotearoa New Zealand, see NewZealand/Aotearoa, March 18–25, 2018 or contact elianaalias@comcast.net.

Perhaps the real test of our identity as leaders is seen in whether or not we step up to challenges. Do we call out and work to replace policies or practices we don't believe are good for children, families, or teachers? How do we mobilize our leadership skills to offer a different vision of what is possible? Impactful leaders have to be risk takers, systems thinkers, collaborators, and tenacious in finding a way around barriers. Where might we turn for inspiration and sustenance?

The story of how Dr. Annie White took herself seriously as a leader offers food for thought. We take up that story before she was known as Dr. Annie.

Moving Along a Career Path

Working with Early Head Start Annie began to see a career for herself. She applied herself to assuming more responsibility, moving into roles within educational services, where she became a content area expert working to ensure compliance and helping to develop monitoring systems, provide trainings, and support teachers to set and reach goals. Annie decided to continue her own

education, striving to be a scholar practitioner with a doctorate in educational leadership. Beyond getting an advanced degree, she was genuinely seeking deeper understandings for the dilemmas she was facing in Head Start. She was intent on figuring out how to support change and growth and began exploring a wide range of research in early education, leadership, and change theory. She progressed in her role with Head Start and actively sought opportunities to use her leadership skills to help advance the organization.

An Unsettling Learning Encounter in New Zealand

At a different stage in life and leadership, Margie Carter was winding down her career as a reflective guide on study tours designed to allow global educators to learn from the exemplary early childhood system and centers of Aotearoa, New Zealand. Each year she found ways to strengthen the design of these study tours for deeper dialogue, reflection, and the development of plans to translate inspiration into action. Suddenly, there was Annie, registering for the Inspire

For more information about study tours to Aotearoa New Zealand for first hand exposure to the Learning Story approach to assessments, contact institute=hilltopcc.org@mail254.atl101.mcdlv.net

Study Tour, not once, but twice, and then for a third time — this time for an intensive week of re-conceptualizing early education and professional development with provocations in Aotearoa. Annie began to speak of shifts in her own thinking, as well as in her Early Head Start organization. She describes it this way.

Annie: Encountering the high trust model of the Aotearoa New Zealand, system, the bi-cultural approach of their *Te Whariki* curriculum, and Learning Stories as an approach to assessment really shook me up. In fact, I’d say that in particular, for my context in Head Start, the inspiration of the Learning Story approach led me into profound grief over what has happened to our assessment practices in California and across the United States. I was concerned with teachers’ morale as child assessment practices consumed their focus on academic outcomes for children of low-income families. Teachers were drowning in a tsunami of pressure from pushed down K–12 high-stakes testing for accountability. Something got lost in translation. Surely this wasn’t how it was intended to be!

Margie: You know, Annie, the evacuation guidelines posted for tsunami warnings in Aotearoa, New Zealand, always advise people to move to higher ground (see story on next page). I’ve watched you ethically do that — move to higher ground.

Annie: Upon deeper reflection I was deeply saddened to discover that even with a good heart and good intentions for addressing mandated assessments, I had helped put into place some burdensome practices that were not really supporting teachers to focus on their relationships with children and families. Here’s a specific story that helped me see that playing the role of cheerleader was not an authentic way of supporting a teacher in distress.

Margie: I really appreciate how diligently you worked to translate your learning into your California context. You had a vision of another possibility but you didn’t try to get this mandated as the new direction or requirements for your program. Leadership planning has become part of the guidance offered as our study tour week comes to a close: choose something that inspired you and offer it as a provocation for discussion in your program; then issue an open invitation for others to join in considering this inspiration for your organization. In your case, Annie, you returned to work to share how inspiring you found the Learning Story approach and basically launched a participatory research project so that everyone was invited into the leadership process for making changes (White, 2015; 2017). You applied what you were learning in your graduate

education studies about growing leadership based not on positional power, but rather on collaboration between teachers, home visitors, parents, and key management staff.

Annie: I worked to find the leadership in everybody, which meant I had to let go of the time frame for my agenda and just relax about the amount of time it takes for everyone to get engaged. In the process, several things converged to help shape the pilot project we developed. I developed a formula for tallying the number of hours that our teachers were required to spend with our current approach to meeting assessment requirements. This became powerful data to talk about contradictions between what we say we stand for (meaningful relationships as a context for a child’s learning; engaged, attentive teachers; parent engagement with our work) and

Supporting a Teacher in Distress by Annie White

One day I visited an EHS center to monitor the child development requirements, which included looking at child portfolios with written anecdotal observations on “sticky notes” used as evidence to rate the child assessments. The portfolio is given to the parent upon departure from the program and includes all the written child observations by the teacher. To my dismay, I found a teacher sitting at a small table during nap time, looking miserable. The children were sleeping, so I was able to speak with her quietly. She tearfully shared that a parent whose child was leaving the program said when she picked up the portfolio she would remove all the sticky notes and just keep the photos. I thought of all the precious hours the teacher spent writing the observations for the child’s portfolio. No wonder she was so upset! The portfolio was tangible evidence that represented her hard work. What could I say to genuinely console her? I left feeling deflated and sought the perspective of the site supervisor. I learned this was not an anomaly, but was happening across the program. Teacher after teacher shared similar stories. Talking to parents, I learned parents felt the sticky notes were not personal enough to be of value. I realized something had to change, and it had to start with me.

I knew I had to learn more in order to become a leader with more integrity between my beliefs and actions. I needed to better understand how Aotearoa, New Zealand, rejected a deficit model of assessing learning and moved their entire system to a formative assessment system through the Learning Story approach. I returned to NZ to share about my dilemma and sought others who were facing similar constraints with their assessment practices. Additional study tours allowed me to focus on Learning Stories as both an assessment approach and a professional learning tool.

what actually happens in practice by programs.

Here's the data from my program, with an overview of our context.

Here's what we are asking of our teachers: 1,680 observations completed in a nine month period along with all their other responsibilities, the most significant of which is building a strong relationship with each child and family.

Assessing and Deepening Family Engagement

I found it valuable to have additional pertinent research to help us reflect and inform our practices (see Research Resources below). For instance, discovering their work in my doctoral studies, I made contact with researchers who studied the perceptions of education within a Native American community in the Midwest (Robinson-Zanartu & Majel-Dixon, 1996), and obtained permission to adapt their survey and have it translated into Spanish for our EHS population. Getting clarity on how we understood goals for education seemed important before undertaking the larger issue of changing how we approached accountability for school readiness. From this survey, we came to understand that teacher and parent perspectives and values for school readiness differed. This led us to question how we approached school readiness goals and objectives.

In Head Start, we pride ourselves on family engagement, but in actual fact, there was limited involvement with parents in gathering observations for the assessment process. Rather, teachers were completing assessments based

solely on their own perspectives and parents' voices were absent. Recognizing the need for family engagement in the assessment process opened the door for more interest in the Learning Story approach, which includes multiple voices: the child, teacher, family, and professional resources. The organization sought to adapt the Learning Story approach based on the cultural context of our program.

Margie: And just as you deepened your understanding of the Learning Story process by writing Learning Stories at home about your granddaughter, it was brilliant that you started engaging people across your agency, including the policy council members, in sharing stories and photos about themselves as children. You uncovered what is truly meaningful and engaging as a result of

this participatory research and generated excitement and a desire to try this approach.

Shifting the Organizational Culture and Lens

Margie: In Aotearoa, we saw many educators write Learning Stories directly to the children and this often enticed a parent, grandparent, or auntie to acknowledge directly to the child something they appreciated.

Annie: Yes, and while not a requirement in New Zealand, in the U.S. I found that reframing the writing and meaning of an observation as a story written directly to the child quickly helped us to shift our understandings and organizational culture. While we were still required to use our state assessment tool, the DRDP,

Tool for Persuasive Leadership

A Formula for Computing Time Required for Child Assessment Data Collection

Developed by Dr. Annie White

Identify teacher to child ratio (i.e., 1 teacher to 10 children) = _____

Identify # of children each teacher responsible for assessing = _____

Identify # of calendar days to complete first assessment = _____

Multiply # of assessment measures/indicators from assessment tool X # of children in line 2 = _____

Use # from line 3 divided by # working days for first assessment period (includes only paid working days. Due to labor law, exclude weekends/holidays) = _____ observations per day

Identify # of hours of program per day = _____

Divide # from line 5 (observations per day) by the # from line 6 (# of hours per day) = # of observations per hour = _____

Multiply # of required assessments per year (i.e., Head Start requires 3/year) _____ X # from line 4 = _____ for total of observations completed by teacher per year

Note: Results vary by assessment tool, State and Federal or program requirements. Some assessment tools allow for more than one measure/indicator per observation.

and for some, TS Gold®, or HighScope COR Advantage®, we were able to shift the lens and not have this as the primary driver.

Observant teachers know their kids, know how to provide for their learning, and recognize goals and objectives. It is the tedious process of documenting evidence that begins to overwhelm and lose meaning for them, stripping authenticity and real-life context from the process. Using Learning Stories as contextual evidence in conjunction with state assessment tools makes the process less daunting and far more meaningful. The narrative invites the families into the story, thereby creating cultural and home connections. This is significantly more valuable than just an assessment score.

Margie: Formative assessment as narrative stories may initially sound like a burdensome task, but I’ve found when they are given the time and coaching support, teachers really enjoy and benefit from the process. When encouraged to reclaim their voice and put into the story their knowledge and indicators of their relationship with the child and family, teachers get a spark of delight reignited in their work. Many begin to grow as leaders.

Annie: Absolutely. I’ve begun taking some of these teachers with me to share in presentations about the Learning Story approach. Some have even received support to go to New Zealand themselves to further enhance their leadership development. When teachers know that they are supported to speak their truths, call policies or practices into question, and seek out more meaningful and innovative avenues to meet requirements, they move beyond their fears and some of the misconceptions created by a culture of fear.

Growing attention to the positive outcomes we were achieving in our work with Learning Stories led to interest in

presentations from California’s Department of Education, Region 9 Head Start Association, Zero to Three, the National Association for the Education of Young Children Professional Development Institute, and the Program for Infant Toddler Care Partners for Quality. To my surprise, I was recruited by California State University Channel Islands to apply for a faculty position. This proved another defining moment in growing myself as a leader. Head Start was my home and community, and I had always planned to focus my career and stay with the Head Start organization. I realized now that I wanted to propel my leadership beyond just one agency, because teachers in all publicly funded programs are drowning in these assessment tsunamis. It was a time of grief as I mobilized my courage to seize another opportunity. The university has given me tremendous support to expand my work with Learning Stories, within our Early Childhood Studies Program and beyond. I’ll be returning to Aotearoa with an expanded leadership team to continue research and this work of evacuating ourselves from dangerous assessment tsunami zones. We don’t want to be first responders, but rather a widespread safety net, ensuring that assessment practices shape positive experiences and identities for children and teachers.

Research Resources

Carter, M. (2010). Using Learning Stories to strengthen relationships. *Exchange*, 196, 40–43.

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White, A. (2015). Creating new pathways for dialogue: Engaging families in school readiness (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved: ProQuest Dissertations

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White, A. (2017). Creating new pathways for dialogue: Collaboration of diverse voices. *NHSA Dialog*, 19(1) 60–88. <https://journals.uncc.edu/dialog/article/view/495/640>

For more on Learning Stories: www.elp.co.nz/learning_stories.cfm and <https://tomdrummond.com/looking-closely-at-children/examples/>

