

# Infusing Our Daily Work with Democratic Ideals

An Interview with Rukia Monique Rogers and Nicole Allsop

by Margie Carter

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*"To save man from the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction."*

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Martin Luther King Jr.

*The Purpose of Education*

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Margie Carter is an author, consultant, and long-time contributor to Exchange. She currently focuses her work on supporting new, diverse leaders in early childhood education.



Nicole Allsop is a wife, and mother of three. She has more than 20 years of classroom experience working with children in early childhood education. Through the years she's worked in a number of different programs including Montessori, Head Start, NAEYC accredited, and Reggio inspired.



Rukia Monique Rogers has worked with young children and their families for over 20 years in a number of ways, including work as a preschool and toddler teacher, a studio teacher and curriculum coordinator. Rogers is the founding director of the Highlander School in Atlanta, Georgia.

In the U.S. we honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with a national holiday, numerous statues and street names, but how do we honor his legacy, inspiration, and courage in our educational practices and daily living? Dr. King spoke and wrote about education for a democracy, racial and economic inequalities, non-violence, and creating a beloved community. His thinking couldn't be more pertinent for our country today and in many ways, more distant from our lives. Is the great American democratic experiment coming to an end? Or can our ideals guide us into better decisions in the troubled waters of our country?

For educators to stay hopeful in these challenging times, we must rise above the daily details that consume our time and energy and ask ourselves some big questions. Our answers can be anchors for policies and everyday practices.

■ What if we viewed the goal of early learning as furthering the ideals of democracy? How might we go about our work?

■ What teaching practices cultivate the ability to sift and weigh evidence, to become discerning learners and citizens?

■ If we aspire to a responsive and emergent curriculum approach, how do we acknowledge and engage with current events shaping the airwaves in a way that mobilizes our courage and creativity?

■ How do we heed the words of Wendell Berry: "Be joyful even though you have considered all the facts?"

Big as they are, I suggest that exploring such questions fosters more intentionality in our daily work. When we don't work with intention and a sense of deeper purpose, we might as well be spinning in a gerbil wheel. It will be hard to sustain the notion that our work makes a difference, not only in individual lives, but in making the world a better place. I take heart and learn from early childhood educators who approach their work in this way and I know it's not easy.

An interview with Rukia Monique Rogers and Nicole Allsop

Rukia's name may sound a bell for you as she is featured on the cover of both the first and second editions of *Learning Together with Young Children*, and in the intervening decade between these publications opened her own program, the Highlander School in Atlanta. I inter-

viewed her about opening a new center in “Starting from Scratch,” (*Exchange*, Nov/Dec 2013) in which she described a bit about her dream for her center and the history of its name.

“I would like to think of the creation of The Highlander School as part of an ongoing story, a story that began as a dream for every child, citizen to live up to his or her fullest potential. With sincere humility, I’ve often described myself as the ‘inheritor of this dream,’ a member of the first generation born after the Civil Rights Movement, reaping the benefits of the unrelenting work that my mother, family, and so many others fought for. Their perseverance was deeply rooted in hope and a desire for a better future for their children. Our school was named to honor this collective movement and after the Highlander Folk Center of Tennessee, founded in 1932, to educate and empower adults for social change. Students such as Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and others flocked to the center, as it served as a safe haven for dialogue and nonviolent resistance to social injustices. Our hope and illuminating dream is that our Highlander School will embody this same spirit of freedom and cultivate a community of learners who are thirsty for knowledge.”

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*“Learning in a democracy  
is more than just memorization.”*

Rukia Monique Rogers,  
*founder, Highlander School, website*

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During our periodic phone calls, Rukia has shared her dismay over continued racial tensions, inequity and a desire to open up deeper conversations about social justice among members of her school community. Indeed, two of the

core values guiding the Highlander School are democracy and a sense of belonging, equity and social justice. She and her staff seem to be the perfect people to turn to for examples of how a small, community-based early childhood program can take up the big questions I offered above. One of the Highlander teachers, Nicole Allsop, joined us for this conversation, saying, “I’ve known Rukia for years and have always admired her passion for early childhood education. I was very proud of her vision for Highlander and excitedly followed the school’s construction journey through Facebook. As a woman of color, I was overjoyed when it opened and to see her dreams for the school come into fruition.” Over the years Nicole has moved with the children from the infant room all the way to the multi-age classroom. I value her perspectives on these big dreams Rukia has for the Highlander School.

**Margie:** I know this is a really big question, but let’s dive in with your big thoughts: What if we viewed the goal of early learning as furthering the ideals of democracy? How might we go about our work?

**Rukia:** I’d start by saying that viewing our work as furthering the ideals of democracy would require us to transform the way we view educators, our work and the policies that govern early learning programs. It would require us to be unwavering in our mission to create spaces and communities of young children, their families, and educators, where our relationships and connections are central to our work; spaces where the child’s voice is robust and powerful, and our emphasis is not on school readiness but on empathy, collaborative work and valuing different perspectives.

**Margie:** Your vision is so strong, Rukia, way beyond just providing quality child care. And rightly so, especially given these times when our democracy seems

so in peril. It’s incredibly challenging to hold this vision amidst the daily realities of budgets, diapers, no substitute teachers, and broken tricycles.

**Nicole:** So true! Every day we each have to find a balance between what we believe in our heart and then all the unexpected things that happen each day. I can honestly say that I fell in love with Highlander the moment I stepped through the front door. Not only was the space physically beautiful, you could feel the energy, the love, and respect for the children throughout the building. After working for years at schools which seemed massive by Highlander’s perspective, I was excited by the opportunity to experience working with such a close-knit community of children, parents, and educators. I wanted a place to learn and grow. Here at Highlander I am learning every day. Rukia challenges us to grow and stretch. This is what I prayed for but I didn’t know what it was going to look like.

**Rukia:** Educators hold an incredible power. Our work must be the embodiment of our understanding of children as our youngest citizens and our classrooms a reflection of democracy.

**Margie:** Here you immediately offer us some provocative notions, Rukia, different from how I hear most people in ECE speak. You suggest educators hold incredible power in our classrooms, but many act and talk about how powerless they feel. And you say our work has to embody the notion of children as our youngest citizens, when most people refer to children as “our future,” often with acknowledgment that they are also today’s citizens. Nicole, how do you understand these two ideas (the power you hold in the classroom and children as citizens) for your role as a teacher?

**Nicole:** I grew up with elders saying children should be seen and not heard, that a child’s place is to be obedient and

out of the way. This was fairly typical in our community.

**Rukia:** Obedience was fostered for survival and took on a life of its own.

**Nicole:** My personal parenting style and teaching experience has taught me differently, that the voice of children is rich and full of life and ideas. Children have so much to teach the world and as adults, we must be willing to open up and listen. As early childhood educators we possess the power to either embolden the child's voice or discourage it. I think that is deep and powerful.

**Rukia:** And there's a direct correlation between how you've grown up and how you teach. It will be really hard to do it differently without reflecting on who the teacher is in the classroom. This is the idea of Parker Palmer's: "Who is the self that teaches?" In helping teachers to rethink their image of the child and see them as our youngest citizens, we must help educators to reclaim their voice, their citizenship, and explore who is the self that teachers?

Our professional development is designed to connect educators to themselves and their identity. We explore materials and use them to give voice to who we are and represent ourselves. And these experiences take place in a natural world, such as in the mountains. We deserve opportunities to reconnect to our deeper selves and to the natural world, which leads to soul searching and connection with others.

**Nicole:** Being on the receiving end of this in-service, I was so excited to share in these experiences and to find out about others. Something so simple as learning how important art is to Stephanie. I brought materials to share about my mother's passing. Taking time to really reflect, to learn more about ourselves and each other, definitely connected us all deeply. We learned it's

okay to bring all of who you are to our work at the Highlander School.

**Rukia:** Yes, we want you to bring your full self every day. In thinking about the ideals of democracy, I recognize that we are all economically challenged when we work in ECE. A staff that is primarily women of color knows their voices are typically shut out in the world; someone is always dominating them. I don't want them to be viewed as poor black teachers, but rather see themselves as full of power they can exercise. This awareness accounts for how I push the teachers because I see them as incredibly competent and capable. Women of color in the south have always raised white children. How do we shift how we see ourselves and how others see us as powerful educators? I push teachers to write, make the children's and their own thinking visible.

### Becoming Discerning Learners and Citizens

**Margie:** This conversation about viewing teachers and children as important citizens with a voice brings me to another big question. What teaching practices cultivate the ability to sift and weigh evidence, to become discerning learners and citizens?

**Nicole:** It starts with being open and actively listening, really listening, and understanding someone's point of view, and in our work, especially the children's point of view. Becoming a discerning learner means to extend to ourselves—to know yourself and why you react the way you do.

**Rukia:** Many people don't question what or ask why. That's not discernment. With the children, we don't want to just offer information to consume, but rather, create a democratic space for us to collectively engage in inquiry, to wonder, probe, and challenge. To nurture children as active citizens. In our

pedagogical practices, our adult role is also to be provocative; wrestle with the normalization of things that are biased or unfair. For instance, a young boy in our program said he really wanted to take a ballet class, but couldn't because that's only for girls. We talked as a team and the teachers came back with different images and provocations to shake normalization of gender stereotypes. We must support children's natural curiosities, their questions about the world and their critical thinking skills. We want to support their quest to be lifelong learners. We are not just paying attention to skill development, but to their quest to be connected with each other. For example, we've developed traditions of gift giving and messaging between the rooms. When the older children were planning a gift for the infant room, they were prompted to position their bodies on the floor to understand a baby's perspective of the room and world.

**Margie:** What a concrete example of deepening understandings that to live out democratic principles we have to seek and care about the perspectives of those who are different than we are.

**Nicole:** Yes, and unlike how some programs view a writing center, our messaging area is not just for literacy but as means to be in relationship with each other. The children often call their writing "love notes."

**Rukia:** Extending this idea, when we found a newborn kitten on our play yard it became clear the children had deep empathy for it. They recognized this was a kitten without a mother and home. Soon they wanted our message system to include a place for the kitten.

### Mobilizing Courage and Creativity

**Rukia:** As educators working with democratic ideals, our practice must shift and focus on the "we" rather than "me." Thinking and doing what is best



or better for the larger community rather than only the individual.

**Margie:** We've talked about holding democratic ideals as we go about our days with children. I find that a challenging task with so much unraveling in the world. Which brings me to that next big question, if we aspire to a responsive and emergent curriculum approach, how do we acknowledge and engage with current events shaping the airwaves in a way that mobilizes our courage and creativity?

**Nicole:** Again, it starts with simply stepping out into the community. We see people in need in our community daily. I remember leaving late one evening, the weather had turned and it was going to be a very cold night. A guy approached the school and asked permission to rummage through the dumpster to look for a tarp. We see homeless people every day, but truly, how often do we really see them and do something meaningful? I remember going back inside and telling Rukia. Together we ran about the school looking for a blanket, some food and any other supplies we could find. By the time I got back outside the man was gone so we left a bright yellow bag and a note on the front porch for anyone in need to please take the bag. That really got me thinking about what our role and responsibility in supporting the community. It got us to thinking of ways we can help those less fortunate right outside our door.

**Rukia:** Our discussion helped us clarify that active citizens not only engage in service but create an exchange, such as writing a letter to humanize a person who has less materially, but no doubt has much to offer otherwise.

**Nicole:** You hear people talk about an "empathy curriculum." Can you have empathy without real relationship? You are better equipped to empathize if you have relationship with people are different. We have to start being bold and

willing to step up and step into our role as active members of a society, pushing for change, doing our part, a part to do better.

**Rukia:** In a time when our nation seems so divided, my work with young children gives me hope in humanity and fuels my courage to look beyond our current days and future months. When we look around and see so much homelessness we should be asking, "Is this the world we want to live in, where people don't have shelter and food?" The current events are a call to action for us to actively engage, to stand for what we hold dearest in our hearts, to reevaluate our practices and values as early childhood educators. How do we use our power to address implicit biases, racism and inequity in our society?

**Nicole:** Yes, if we are teaching children that they have voice, and to stand up, we need to assert ourselves as adults, be role models.

**Rukia:** After the election, we were inspired to forge new relationships with other educators in our community to learn what policies were at stake, meet with our representatives, and create greater dialogue within our school. We see ourselves not just as caretakers of children, but as viable participating citizens in our community.

**Margie:** I think you both are demonstrating the idea Wendell Berry challenges us with: "Be joyful even though you have considered all the facts."

**Nicole:** We have to look beyond the struggle, the doubt, the fear. Be questioning and see the bigger picture. It's not a matter of, "What can I do," but rather, "What must I do?" Then we must have the willingness to do that in spite of the doubt. You do it because it's the right thing to do and it must be done. We commit to offering a helping hand to those in our community. If not us, then who?

**Rukia:** Joy rejuvenates the soul, fuels our activism and reaffirms our belief in our power to change our current situation. To fall in despair will numb, disempower, and neutralize us as citizens. Harriet Tubman reminds me, "If you hear the dogs, keep going. If you see the torches in the woods, keep going. Don't ever stop. Keep going. If you want a taste of freedom, keep going."

## References

Margie Carter (2013) "Starting from Scratch." An interview with Rukia Monique Rogers. (Exchange, Nov/Dec)

Parker Palmer (2017) *Courage to Teach*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

