

# Learning from Aotearoa New Zealand

by Margie Carter

I'm living with some professional disease these days and I wonder if that's true for others. Last February, in search of expanded thinking, I led a group of 20 early childhood professionals on a study tour to Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). Our group included two Canadians and two Aussies, with everyone else from the United States. While we knew we had much to learn from the overall system of early childhood education in NZ, I tried to keep our focus on three particular aspects that seem to hold promise for infusing new ideas into our teacher education and professional development efforts in the United States:

- Strengthening relationships to strengthen culture and community
- Seeing the environment as a reflection of values
- Understanding documentation as a pedagogical tool

To be sure, the trip was intensely engaging, both emotionally and intellectually,



Margie Carter lives in Seattle and travels widely to speak and consult with early childhood programs. In their book, *Learning Together with Young Children*, Margie and co-author Deb Curtis feature more examples from the New Zealand early childhood system. To find out more about the March 2011 and February 2012 study tours Margie will be leading to New Zealand, visit [www.ecetrainers.com](http://www.ecetrainers.com).

and had a profound impact on each of us. As one delegate, Debbie Lebo put it:

"I learned what early childhood programs can look like when educators and administrators constantly commit to reflecting on, articulating, and living their values. Every speaker and every center visit was a provocation for deep thinking about my vision for children, families, early educators, and professional learning. . . . Now that I know that this way of working with young children exists somewhere, I can't pretend it doesn't. Because I've now seen the way it can be, I'm already changed."

Upon our return to busy work lives at home, I continued to gather reflections from our delegates, hoping we could cull out insights for further examination to inform our work going forward. I'll no doubt write more about this in the future, as will others; but for now, here are my ruminations.

## A high trust, social justice model

In the first presentation of our study tour, Chris Bayes, an officer with the Ministry of Education, offered us a phrase that left our American jaws dropping. "We operate as a high trust model." It didn't take long for our eyes to brim with tears as we began to witness

the way an emphasis on relationships, rather than regulations, resulted in some remarkable standards for quality. And, as is true with the outstanding schools of Reggio Emilia, it's important to understand the historical and political context that gave rise to the New Zealand early childhood system and the Te Whāriki curriculum model that guides their educators. New Zealand mobilized the political will to not only apologize to



Photograph taken at Awahiri Whana by Margie Carter

the indigenous Māori people, but to create an educational agenda for bicultural development to redress the original Treaty of Waitangi.

The bicultural nature of the Te Whāriki national curriculum is a recognition of those Treaty obligations, not only for Māori well-being, but for the honor of Pākehā (New Zealanders of non-Māori ancestry). I encourage you to visit the Ministry's web site ([www.educate.ecce.govt.nz](http://www.educate.ecce.govt.nz)) to read the history and components of Te Whāriki. It is unlike any of the curriculum models we have in the U.S. Te Whāriki has become a source of inspiration for the development of early learning frameworks and curricula across Canada and Australia. I wonder if this document became required reading in our teacher educator programs, not to mention state-convened stakeholder committees, would it spark a new trajectory for our approach to defining early learning outcomes?

Further ruminations: If we adopted a 'high trust model' between our regulatory bodies and early childhood services, between administrators and teachers, families and educators, educators and children, what would have to change, in our minds, our standards, and our relationships?

### **Strengthening relationships to strengthen culture and community**

Diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand's population extends to an ever-growing number of new immigrants, especially peoples from the Pacific Islands and countries all around them. Our study tour delegates were particularly impressed with how the Ministry of Education has extended the concept of 'developmentally appropriate practice' to a recognition of multiple 'domains of appropriateness' as we witnessed the wonderful community and organic cultural extensions at a Pasifika center. We were reminded, once again,

that it is the way relationships and communications are conducted rather than the number of different colored dolls or multi-cultural books in a center that strengthens cultural awareness, identity, and community.

Beyond all the words in our teacher education and professional development work, how do we foster positive cultural identities and strong cross-cultural relationships? What form of education or training will help us really hear when we listen, propel us to embrace multiple truths about 'best practices,' and live as engaged members in a local and world community?

### **Seeing the environment as a reflection of values**

In Aotearoa New Zealand we were privileged to visit seven different early childhood centers, each with a unique environment that made it easy to see what they valued and how they viewed children as enormously competent and trustworthy. Their outdoor environments were clearly as important in their thinking as their indoor play and learning areas. In many cases, weather permitting, children could choose to spend the bulk of the day outside (and many did) for there was so much to engage their curiosity, active bodies, relationships with each other, and with the wonders of the natural world. And need I say we didn't see obese children?

The social-emotional environment also reflected a clear set of values and image of children. We found ourselves awestruck by the absent practice of herding children through continuous transitions on a daily schedule. As a result, we saw little sign of stress, distress, aggression, or exhaustion. What if our teacher education work emphasized ways to organize predictable routines for children while minimizing the number of transitions for them? Ever since reading their chapter in the second edition of

*The Hundred Languages of Children*, I've longed to see some college classes and professional conferences take up the reconceptualizing work suggested by the words of Carol Brunson Phillips and Sue Bredekamp (1998):

"Perhaps no other cultural trait is so pervasive an influence in practice, professional development, and policy, as is the concept and use of time."

I can imagine a significant transformation in our U.S. educational settings if we unpacked the way we view and spend time. The same would be true if we considered other possibilities for desired, measurable learning outcomes, such as those outlined in the Te Whāriki curriculum. I so want this kind of unpacking and re-conceptualizing work to become a larger part of our teacher education and advocacy work in the U.S.

### **Understanding documentation as a pedagogical tool**

A cornerstone of the professional development system launched by the Ministry of Education in Aotearoa New Zealand is promoting a view of teachers and directors as researchers, not in an academic sense, but in fostering an empowering identity and daily practice. Teachers are encouraged to see their curiosities, dilemmas, and even weaknesses as something to be practically studied as 'action research,' rather than as something to be quickly addressed with a new technique. We had a presentation by two owner/directors of child care centers who mentor other center leaders in actively researching unexamined values and practices compromising their desire to provide the best possible experiences for children. Until recent budget cuts, the Ministry was actually awarding grants to centers to undertake worthy research projects to advance their quality.

As part of her presentation, one university professor offered examples of teacher



education activities centered around studying their documentation, not only to write learning stories as assessment evidence, but to research possibilities for their pedagogical work with children. In our visits to centers we found teachers intellectually engaged, eager to discuss their documentation with us, and in search of new perspectives and insights. One of our delegates, Rosemarie Vardell, herself a professor, reflected:

“Probably most important for me was seeing a version of ‘the vision’ — what it would look and feel like to have programs that are grounded in culture and excellent teaching practices. I’m also looking for ways to offer teacher research grants like the Ministry offered in New Zealand. This struck me as one way to

validate those teachers who are continually striving to offer the best teaching/learning experiences for children.”

### Persistence in resistance

Of course things aren’t perfect in New Zealand and there are programs requiring intervention on the part of the Ministry. But they have figured out some things that should make us sit up and take notice, stand up and shout: Another world is possible and I pledge to make it so!

One of the phrases coming out of our reflections on what we learned in New Zealand was the importance of persistence in the struggle for what we know to be fair and just, along with resistance

to settling for anything less. As delegate Debbie Lebo summed it up:

“While higher standards carry the hope of improved quality in early childhood education, some U.S. programs feel so much pressure to meet the rising standards that they are using more and more scripted, pre-packaged curriculum materials that claim to be ‘teacher-proof.’ Quality early childhood programs must instead invest in teachers’ abilities to be reflective, thoughtful decision-makers. And while reflection can be looked at as a responsibility for early childhood teachers, it can also be looked at as a right of early childhood teachers.

Teachers have the right to time, support, and opportunities for ongoing reflection and dialogue.”

I sense that our study tour to Aotearoa New Zealand has fueled the determination of each of our delegates to resist any excuses to settle for the ‘dumbing-down’ policies and practices that are besieging children and teachers in our early childhood centers. Seeing again what colleagues in other countries have accomplished with their clear vision, critical thinking, and uncompromised persistence has filled me with gratitude and a new sense of possibility.

### Reference

Phillips, C., & Bredekamp, S. (1998). Reconsidering early childhood education in the United States: Reflections from our encounters with Reggio Emilia. In Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G., *The hundred languages of children*, Second Edition. Greenwich: Ablex Publishing.

Photograph taken at Tots Corner by Margie Carter



