What happened to intelligent judgment?

by Margie Carter

"Bureaucratization is a state in which employees work increasingly by fixed routine rather than through the exercise of intelligent judgment. With bureaucracy, narrowness in thinking emerges. There is a proliferation of hard-and-fast rules and fixed procedures — wrongly thought to contribute to efficiency and quality control. . . . All organizations, even small ones, have a natural tendency toward stagnation. This includes a tendency to lose sight of their original goals, a tendency to begin to serve those who operate it rather than those it purports to serve."
(Richard Paul & Linda Elder, 2002)

We all know the dilemmas of accountability to a bureaucracy, a growing reality with increased standardization and regulations in the early childhood field. Everywhere I go I hear early childhood leaders complaining with examples of the nonsense they feel subjected to in documenting their adherence to particular requirements. Trying to maintain a sense of humor about it, program coordinator Joan Newcomb said,

"I propose that any agency requiring anything more of a child care center be required to file an environmental impact statement about their requirement. Having returned to the world of child care after 10 years in a school, what strikes me most is that everyone's time is absolutely saturated with requirements from overlapping agencies. This morning, I ran out of brain cells for doing our accreditation process so I added up the required papers; the number of items counted, checked, tallied, or otherwise dealt with is 4,726. The number of pages of paper generated is 2,250. It's time to realize that 'less is more.' Every requirement we must meet takes away an opportunity for action in another area. At the end of the day, I am grateful I get to go home and cook potatoes, so I can do something real."

Considering an environmental impact statement (EIS)

Joan isn't alone in feeling that these valuable tools created to identify best practices are diverting attention away from their own intelligent judgment about how administrators and teachers spend their time. Besides giving us a good laugh, her suggestion of filing an environmental impact statement about requirements is something that we should consider as an exercise. A quick web search led me to a description of the four parts of an EIS:

- An introduction with a statement of the purpose and need of the proposed action.
- A description of the affected environment.
- A range of alternatives to the proposed action. (Alternatives are considered the 'heart' of the EIS.)
- An analysis of the environmental impacts of each of the possible alternatives.

I wonder who we might find to undertake an appreciative inquiry research project to consider how increasing standards, regulations, and assessment tools are impacting centers. Anecdotal stories from administrators and teachers are certainly begging the question. Rather than motivating them to engage in deeper reflection, our rating scales are often experienced as an imposition on programs, something they must endure and 'get through' in order to secure funding. To be sure, there are cases where this imposition is necessary because quality is substandard and center managers must be held accountable for needed improvements. But, in so many cases, hours spent focused on docu-

Margie Carter is coauthor of *The Visionary Director: A Handbook for Dreaming, Organizing, and Scheming in Your Center*. She extends gratitude to all ECE directors who keep on keeping on, in spite of formidable challenges. To learn more about the "From Administrator to Innovator" Institutes and Study Tours she and Harvest Resources Associates offer, visit www.ecetrainers.com.

menting our accountability to standards actually decreases the possibility for quality improvements through genuine reflection, self-examination, and the exercise of intelligent judgment. Focusing only on ratings and requirements narrows our thinking and exemplifies our tendency toward stagnation that was referred to in the opening quote: programs lose sight of their original goals and start serving the standards, rather than having the standards serve them. Stories from the quality rating assessors themselves beg us to look at the evidence they see. For instance, Ann Hentschel, says,

"When you delve into the content of these early learning standards, accreditation criteria, and environment rating scale tools, their focus is to illustrate best practices for early care and education. The creators of all these various standards and assessment tools genuinely had the interest of young children in the forefront of their mind. I recall the first time I read the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale — Revised (ECERS-R) being simply delighted that the authors had captured in very concrete terms the essence of my work as a preschool teacher. I often felt my work as a teacher of young children was somewhat subtle, this notion of allowing children to learn through play. The ECERS-R was a tool that I could share with colleagues and parents to help articulate the rationale for my practices.

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> Ann Hentschel

"The challenge for programs today is how to embrace standards and assessment tools using your own intelligent judgment. There is no point in dedicating hours pulling together hundreds of pages of documentation, snapping thousands of photos for portfolios, or purchasing the latest and greatest materials simply to show quality for a day while the assessor or validator is visiting your program. If your end goal is simply to earn that STAR rating or quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), then you've missed an opportunity to connect up these tools with the quality you are offering in your daily practice.

"It seems to me the real magic transpires when a director gets very clear on her own vision for her program and links that vision up with aspects of these standards and assessment tools:

- "How can we change the frame so the tools are working for us rather than our jumping through hoops for them?
- "How do we dig deeper into the intention of all these criteria as a means for reflecting on our current work?
- "As an assessor, I often ask the question 'why?' Why is it important for children to have . . . [whatever criteria is being requested]?"

Considering possible alternatives

We all value the intent of rating scales, standards, and accreditation criteria. But if we come to general agreement that something like 4,726 forms/items to be counted and 2,250 pages of documentation have a negative impact on the work of administrators and teachers (not to mention trees and conservation of the earth's resources), then what are the alternatives and their impacts? I find these two areas of an EIS most intriguing. I think alternatives involve a shift in how these tools for enhancing and measuring quality are viewed and how they are used. I'm eager to hear some rigorous discussion about this across our profession. Any serious consideration of the environmental impact of our existing assessment systems and proposed alternatives must have the voices of quality-striving program administrators and classroom teachers in sharp focus.

Alternative: View standards as a platform rather than a goal.

In my mind, standards become a problem when they are viewed as goals in and of themselves, rather than as tools for reflecting on the vision for quality we are trying to grow in our programs. Good scores on a rating scale can be a source of pride, but the real issue for ongoing quality improvement is: How do we make standards and rating scales a source of reflection, a launching pad for continual examination? Whatever our scores, we must give serious consideration to whether we really believe children, families, and teachers are getting what they deserve in our programs.

In citing the *Cost, Quality & Child Outcomes Study* of 1995, Robert French (2010) chides us,

"Where is our sense of urgency, consequence, and outrage about the reality that most young children in out-of-home arrangements attend under-resourced programs, for the most part staffed by ill-prepared, badly paid, often demoralized teachers and administrators?"

In the years following this study, the primary approach to addressing this urgent situation has been more standards and rating scales — but quality hasn't grown beyond the mediocre. French

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further cites a Carnegie Foundation publication's candid thumbnail appraisal, "As research keeps raising the bar on what children need to thrive in preschool, the nation's child care programs look worse and worse" (Hines, 2001, cited in French, 2010).

What does intelligent judgment suggest here? What rearrangements, inventions, and transformations must we undertake in earnest? Beyond the regulations, what do we want to hold ourselves accountable to? How can our quality assessment tools provoke deeper reflections about quality and a commitment to providing the support systems and resources needed to bring it about?

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Alternative: Be willing to take your 'ones.'

Ann Hentschel offers this example of using intelligent judgment: "I wonder if there is a way to change the way we look at all these standards and assessment tools? As most of you know, the Environment Rating Scales (ECERS-R, ITERS-R, FCCERS, SACERS) are based on a scoring system from an inadequate score of 1 to an excellent score of 7. Debby Cryer, one of the authors of the scales, is fond of saying, 'You should be willing to *take your ones*.' These scales were designed as a self-assessment tool and are called a 'scale' for a reason. The intent is for each program to choose which areas are of value to them and focus their energy on being excellent in those particular areas. Somewhere along the way, we've gotten hung up on this idea that we are supposed to achieve perfection in all areas rather than reflecting on the components that are of most value to us. I really appreciate Richard Paul and Linda Elder's quote on intellectual judgment when they say: 'This includes a tendency to lose sight of their original goals, a tendency to begin to serve those who operate it rather than those it purports to serve.'

"I've recently met up with a former colleague in California. She seems to embody this notion of intelligent judgment. Here are a few ways she uses the tool as a means to support her programs goals:

- "She *takes her ones* in the area of outdoor playground safety because she values preschool children climbing trees, pulling themselves up on large boulders, and exploring the natural world with all of its potential safety hazards.
- "She is intentional about the wide selection of books on the shelf for the children and the variety of nature/science materials accessible for them to explore.
- "She dedicates team meetings to conversations about the intent behind certain items in the scale, such as a private space set aside for one or two children. For example, she'll ask her teachers: *Why is that important? What do children gain from such a space? How might they create such a space in our classroom and why would they do it?*

"I appreciate how my colleague found a way to stay in touch with her original goals for children, trusts in her own core knowledge and beliefs for children, and embraces the aspects these various standards and assessment tools offer to buoy up her own practices to improve quality."

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Use your intelligence, use your voice

I appreciate the humor Joan Newcomb uses to focus our attention on a serious problem, Bob French's call for a sense of urgency and outrage, and Ann Hentschel's demonstration of the use of intelligent judgment. On the following page Molly Butler and Michelle Crawford offer a concrete example of their efforts to mentor for reflective teaching with the ITERS-R. Each of these early childhood leaders takes up the challenge offered by Richard Paul and Linda Elder to avoid the dangers of lockstep routines, which allow narrow thinking to emerge. Can we bring all our intelligent voices to the table to find alternatives to bureaucratic thinking on behalf of ongoing quality enhancement in early childhood programs?

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Mentoring for Reflection Using the ITERS-R

by Molly Butler and Michelle Crawford

In our work as infant and toddler teacher mentors, we use the ITERS-R to assess our mentees' environments and practice. We use the ITERS-R at the beginning and the end of our mentoring cycle to develop strengths-based action plans and to assess our progress on those plans at the end of the year. In between ITERS-R assessments we work closely with the teachers to bring the child's perspective into every aspect of the classroom to inform their practice. We hope to develop thoughtful, intentional teachers whose passions for babies and passions for teaching can be merged to create an individualized environment that nurtures all involved in the classroom 'family.'

In an attempt to merge the tools of our mentoring, we have developed a simple list of questions that can be used to deepen teachers' understanding of the goals of the ITERS-R. By asking these questions about each ITERS-R subcategory we are refocusing attention on the reason for the criteria, rather than just looking at the score.

The idea that you can combine performance measures with reflective practice while training teachers became clear during one mentoring session with a toddler teacher named Tanya. Several weeks prior, we had assessed her classroom through the use of the ITERS and found that interactions were an area of challenge: Tanya would frequently become frustrated and the children had little guidance in their play. One afternoon was particularly difficult. Children were climbing on the furniture, chewing books, running around, and screaming with wild abandon. Getting frustrated with the children, Tanya kept telling the children, "Get down! Stop running! Books don't go in your mouth!" Even though Michelle and Tanya had been working together for a few months, at that moment Michelle realized that Tanya was seeing the classroom and the materials exclusively from her perspective as teacher. Knowing that interactions are so important with young children, Michelle and Tanya started having conversations about what children are really capable of doing. At first it was tricky, but by simply refocusing her perspective, the classroom and the children began to look completely different to Tanya. Michelle had guided her to reflect on what she herself knows about the frustration of being stifled and she was able to see that was the children's experience of being stifled by adult rules that don't match up with their own developmental needs.

Mentoring experiences, like the one with Tanya, have taught us the importance of marrying the ITERS-R and reflective practices with the mentoring process to improve the quality of care and create more satisfying environments and spaces for both children and the adults who care for them. Here are questions we use to provoke an understanding of the child's perspective.

ITERS Sub-scale	Questions from the child's point of view
Space and Furnishings	How do I feel in this room? Is it my size? Am I surrounded by softness? Is there a place for me to get away? Does this space show me that I matter?
Personal Care Routines	Am I safe? Do I know what to expect? Do you believe I can do things on my own? Are you respectful of my needs? Do you personalize my care?
Listening and Talking	Can I hear your voice and does it scare me? Are your words simple and descriptive, helping me learn about my world? Do you play with language and make it fun? Can I experience books using all my senses?
Activities	Do I get to interact with nature? Are all my activities intentional? Are my materials open-ended with multiple functions? Do my activities represent my family and me? Do I look like I enjoy the activities? Are activities set up so I can be challenged, yet successful?
Interaction	Are you teaching me what I can do? Do you encourage my exploration of self and others? Do you comfort me when I'm sad, angry, happy, etc? Are you my pillow? Do you allow me to explore my feelings? Do you help me understand the effects of my own actions?
Program Structure	Is my day predictable? Do I have to participate in group activities? Can I choose my own play? Do I feel rushed? Are my movements limited by equipment?
Parents and Staff	Do I have a consistent caregiver? Are my parents connected to my classroom? Do my teachers talk to each other?