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Searching for Innovators

An Interview with Louise Stoney

by Margie Carter

I'm continually searching for innovative people in our field who are 'in the thick of it' trying to expand current notions of quality beyond a focus on regulations and rating scales. I look in the trenches for those working directly with children or managing an early childhood program; I seek out folks in big systems who aren't trapped in bureaucratic thinking; and I talk to teacher educators working in a variety of settings such as community colleges, training organizations, or independent consulting services. It fills me with hope, discovering folks who are piloting new possibilities and challenging us to move beyond the limits of our current thinking. I'd like to spotlight some of these voices for *Exchange* readers by sharing some of the dialogs we've been having.

Innovator:

Louise Stoney, Alliance for Early Childhood Finance

As the co-founder of the Alliance for Early Childhood Finance, Louise Stoney is



Margie Carter and Louise Stoney have a fierce passion to see early childhood program directors move out of isolation, discover their best skills, and work in leadership teams to achieve an expanded definition of quality

and a work life that feels not only possible, but rewarding. Find out more about Margie's work at www.ecetrainers.com and Louise's work at www.earlychildhoodfinance.org.



immersed in finding creative new finance and business strategies for our field. Her *Exchange* article "Shared Services: A powerful strategy to support sustainability of ECE Businesses" (Stoney, 2009) is an important read and offers a window into not only the value of shared services, but also a look at how an innovative mind works. My thinking has greatly benefited from our dialog.

Margie: Louise, I immediately resonated with your statement, "State ECE leaders have begun to craft industry-wide standards (such as professional development systems and quality rating systems), but the ECE industry has yet to create the infrastructure and supports individual programs and providers need to not only comply with these standards but to operate efficiently." This is a point I have been trying to make in my writing and consultation work. In my *Exchange* article "Assessing quality: What are we doing? Where are we going?" I tried to name this elephant in the room. The early childhood field seems to think that implementing more standards and rating scales will improve quality and outcomes for children. Rarely do you hear the idea that to sustain quality, teachers must be provided with more off-the-floor time to plan and to talk through the complex tasks of understanding the teaching and

learning process. My question is this: Without such provisions, how can we genuinely professionalize our field so as to attract, retain, and support reflective teachers who understand the *Why* behind any standard and seek to translate theory into practice?

Louise: You are right. I think it's important to acknowledge that accountability to standards and implementing effective practice are different things; people often speak the words *standards* and *results* in the same breath, but it's a very complex dance. Yes, we need standards; they provide an essential framework for the field and define — in very general ways — the inputs that help produce results and the costs associated with those inputs. Documents, checklists, and rating systems are ways to ensure standards are met, so I understand they are needed. But supporting early learning is far more complex.

Margie: And isn't supporting early learning what everyone says they are concerned about these days? How do we link that idea with an expanded notion of quality? My experience in assessing quality leads me to look more closely at an organization's budget and program infrastructure to see if they have established a foundation for quality improvement beyond a score on a rating scale at any

given moment. I look for evidence that teachers and directors have the time and motivation to maintain a focus on self-assessment, reflective practice, and continuous improvement in early learning experiences for children. In reading about the Alliance for Early Childhood Finance, I see your work as trying to help individual programs take a careful look at more sustainable fiscal systems, but you are also trying to tackle the larger systemic issues of financing a viable ECE system. We just don't hear enough from folks trying to tackle this.

Louise: Isn't it interesting that our experiences, which are totally different — you working with teachers and directors, me working with finance and policymakers — lead us to the same place?

Margie: I'm incredibly drawn to Shared Services as a solution to addressing quality through more viable business practices, but I think finances are only one part of the administrative equation for quality. Would you agree that in early childhood settings we are so accustomed to living within our meager means that we've downsized our thinking about quality?

Louise: That's what I mean about arriving at the same place. I think your emphasis on supporting teachers is just right, and it's a key outcome that I'd like to see from the shared services' work. Until recently the shared services 'movement' was largely focused on the financial bottom line — because along with support, teachers need better wages, access to health and retirement benefits, and so forth. And garnering the resources to pump into staff means streamlining the funding we spend on administration. Yes, you can raise more money. But only up to a point; you've really got to be wise in how you spend that money. There is no margin for error in an ECE budget. You've got to shave every cost you can, and smart administration is where I think we can find those

cost savings. Often, I see centers that appear to be fiscally stable and have a well-compensated director but you still see classroom staff with lousy wages and little or no benefits.

Margie: Amen, sister!

Louise: Another big part of the problem is what I call the 'Iron Triangle' of ECE finance (Stoney & Mitchell, 2011). The three points on this triangle are full enrollment, full fee collection, and having rates that cover your costs (or raising third party funding to fill the gap). Everyone focuses on the third leg — the rate — but to remain fiscally viable an ECE program has to stay full and collect every dollar that is owed. And achieving this goal isn't easy. You've got to stay on top of it all the time and you've got to fill out the paperwork correctly and on time, apply for every grant you possibly can. Basically, an ECE program really needs a sophisticated fiscal office, which is way too expensive for a small, independent, stand-alone center.

Margie: So here is that quality dilemma again. Programs need sophisticated business practices but also an administrator with people skills, pedagogical understandings, and the wherewithal to develop an organizational culture that reflects his or her values on how to achieve quality.

Louise: The more I worked on ECE finance the more I felt that the field was setting directors up to fail. It is such a complex job and ECE directors work so hard, but they just can't do everything well. It's not humanly possible. So the tendency is to focus on what you can do, what gives you energy, and just hope that the other pieces fall into place. We all avoid doing what we don't do well; it's a survival strategy. I think that's what happens with fiscal management in ECE; directors avoid the problem or reach for simple solutions like continually pushing on public reimbursement rates. Many

directors just don't want to look at business management as part of the solution because it shines a light on what they don't do well. But if you can't shine a light on it — and diagnose the problem — then you can't intervene. So I keep trying to come up with ways to help directors feel more comfortable about not being good at everything. I would like them to see that being clear about what they don't like doing and don't do well, and figuring out a way to partner with someone else to do that piece of the work is a sign of profound strength rather than an admission of weakness.

Restructuring to Take Quality to a New Level

Margie: You are reminding me of the remarkable process London Bridge Child Care Services in London, Ontario, Canada went through some years ago when they came to a similar realization. Their goal was to take quality to a new level, and they started by centralizing administration across their 14 centres. They assumed this would just naturally free up time for the directors to focus on new quality and curriculum practice. But they learned this wasn't enough. To transform themselves they needed to do two additional things:

- Design a strong leadership development program (which turned out to be an 18-month-long effort, with inspiration drawn from business, philosophy, art, and child development theory)
- Work with their centre directors to assess what they *were* skilled at and what they really enjoyed and then begin to redefine their roles and responsibilities.

Some went into the central office to focus on the administrative duties, while others stayed in centres with different responsibilities, focusing on the people in the program, supporting families, mentoring teachers in their ongoing development,

and shifting the learning culture of their centre. I encourage anyone who wants to see what shared services and an expanded vision of quality can accomplish to consider participating in a study tour to London Bridge!

Business and Pedagogical Expertise

Louise: I don't think I could have engaged in this dialogue 10 years ago. Back then I was still convinced the answer was more money. It wasn't until many years of successful work on ECE finance that I realized the problem was more complex. After watching all my good work have so little impact with the small, community-based programs I cared about so much (sometimes it felt like pouring water into a sieve), it dawned on me that if we didn't focus on strengthening the ECE industry as a whole, we were going to continue to

waste our precious resources — human and fiscal. That was the dawn of the shared services work. But I, too, have learned that change is a multi-faceted process. And you just named a key component, which I think you call pedagogical leadership, right?

Margie: Yes. Part of the equation is getting more business-savvy administrative practices in programs, but equally important is getting more pedagogical expertise in the leadership so that someone is keeping the organizational culture focused on the teaching process among the children, staff, and families. This is because we are not only an industry, but a profession focused on teaching and learning. You talked earlier about the iron triangle of ECE finance. In addition to this triangle we need an intersecting one that focuses on our professional endeavors, on the people in the program, not only supervising to ensure they are in compliance with standards, but mentoring the teachers in their own learning, and creating an organizational culture that partners with the children's families. In our book, *The Visionary Director* (Carter & Curtis, 2010), Deb Curtis and I describe this as a triangle framework for directing a program that brings your vision to life. We urge people to think of quality in this expanded way. I'm wondering how your thinking is moving forward when it comes to the role shared services can play in expanding thinking and actual practices related to quality.

Louise: I think that the work you are doing is the next frontier for the shared services movement. Reflective practice is key to early learning and — as you point out — it requires time, leadership, and discipline. You have identified several important steps in that reflective process: a focus on observing children; creating an organizational culture that encourages and supports observation; establishing protocols teachers can use to analyze their observations and use them to guide practice; involving teachers in communi-

ties of practice so they can share ideas and learn from one another; and strong pedagogical leadership, that makes time for reflective practice and facilitates the process until it becomes second nature. I don't know how an ECE director can possibly engage in that important work when they are the only leader in a center and responsible for everything. But if centers come together and share leadership and create new business models and management structures, they can free up time as well as administrative funds that can be shifted into expanding program quality. They can re-structure leadership roles to ensure fiscal sustainability and more significant pedagogical leadership.

Margie: Shared services also offers promise with regard to bridging the divides we experience across race, culture, and class in our communities. For example, Sound Child Care Solutions (SCCS) (a Shared Service Alliance in Seattle, Washington) has expanded the idea of quality to include this goal.

Currently six centers located in diverse neighborhoods throughout the city — large and small, faith-sponsored and employer-sponsored, low-income and

How Shared Services Improve Quality

- Assures professional fiscal management
- Offers the economic strength of a larger organization so very small businesses can weather economic ebbs and flows.
- Provides more career opportunities and better working conditions, wages, and benefits for staff.
- Creates opportunities for pedagogical leadership, including teacher mentors, coaches, communities of practice, and focused time for staff to reflect and plan.
- Lowers costs from economies of scale in business functions like payroll, banking, janitorial, benefits management, and services.

For more information visit:
www.opportunities-exchange.org

How Pedagogical Leadership Improves Quality

- Keeps organizational culture focused on strengthening relationships and being a community.
- Provides resources, time, and protocols for teachers to meet and engage in professional development.
- Questions, provokes, and encourages teachers to learn alongside children.
- Engages families in the learning community, while someone else collects fees.

For more information visit:
www.ecetrainers.com

middle-class — are members of SCCS and see themselves as part of one organization, each center having its own unique identity. Their alliance allows all centers to tap multiple public and private funding streams which would not otherwise be possible at the individual sites, and the economies of scale provide stability as well as some cost efficiencies. Furthermore, SCCS takes pedagogical leadership seriously. A mentor teacher is now available to all staff who now have opportunities for coursework and professional development, and can apply to participate in a monthly community of practice across centers to develop their leadership in pedagogical guidance for their program.

Moving in a New Direction

In challenging and uncertain economic times like the present, many people and organizations are reluctant to step outside of what is familiar and most common. In my mind, these times present us with an

opportunity for innovation that could take us beyond anything we have yet imagined as possible for high-quality early childhood programming. Innovation sometimes involves bold, radical steps and in other cases, plotting a course with incremental steps that lead to new realities. As Jim Rohn said, “When you know what you want, and want it badly enough, you will find a way to get it. You cannot change your destination overnight, but you can change your direction overnight.”



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Resources

- London Bridge Child Care Services: www.londonbridge.com
- Sound Child Care Solutions: www.soundchildcare.org
- Opportunities Exchange: www.opportunities-exchange.org

Growing Pedagogical Leadership at Sound Child Care Solutions



- We practice detailed observations in order to see children's lively minds, to honor children's interests, and also to identify learning outcomes that can be entered in CC-Net.
- We learn ways to put our observations and documentation into 'reference books' for the children so they can see themselves as thinkers, revisit vocabulary, and learn from each other's ideas.
- We practice writing learning stories from our observations and teachers' thinking about each event and invite a dialogue with the children's families and other teachers.
- We explore how to provide expanded leadership in our centers.

While all staff have personal mentors, they can also apply to join our 'pedagogical leaders project.' Those who participate get release time to meet monthly to consider new possibilities for simple materials such as playdough, buttons, and cups.

- We play because it re-connects us to the joy of learning through play.
- In playing we discover that the way we offer children materials can encourage or discourage sustained interest and ways to meet our learning goals.
- We uncover things to consider in our planning, documentation, and assessment process. We identify vocabulary to use with the children.



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