Hearing the Voices of Our Teachers

An Interview with Kristie Norwood by Margie Carter

"Recovering the voice of the teacher — usually a woman, increasingly a person of color, often a member of the working poor — is an essential part of reconceptualizing the field of early childhood education. . . . The question, 'What can these teachers tell one another and the world about teaching and about children?' has largely been ignored in favor of more distanced questions, such as 'How shall we explain what these teachers ought to know and what it must be like for them?'"
— William Ayers (1992)

With the ever-growing list of expectations, skills, and content early childhood teachers are now required to master, I'm hearing more and more stories from those discouraged about their work. They feel that everywhere they turn, someone is telling them more they need to do and what training will make them a better teacher. It's not that anyone resists opportunities for more professional development. Rather, most of the trainings they are required to attend don't really engage teachers or seem relevant to the everyday challenges they face in their work. If they don't just up and leave their positions, many seem to be losing heart for their work and just going through the motions of doing what's required.

I encounter many other teachers who give no indication of what's on their minds. They seem to have lost their voice, looking instead for someone to tell them what to do and how to think. I often wonder how to tap into the initial desire they had to work with children.

- How have we failed to keep that excitement alive?
- Are there changes we could make that would keep teachers tapped into their deeper longings about who they want to be in the lives of children?
- How can we invite and nurture their sense of agency and voice to become stronger?

As I talk with other teacher educators, mentors, and administrators, I'm always listening for stories of teachers who have somehow overcome lethargy or habitual practices that don't keep them deeply engaged in thinking about their work and administrators who are finding innovative ways to spark new insights and a desire for more meaningful dialog among their teachers.

A Dialog With Kristie Norwood

I met Kristie Norwood some years ago when I first visited the remarkable centers of the Chicago Commons Child Development Program where she is an education coordinator. We have stayed in touch over the years and more recently have begun conversations about areas of her work, which include reflective practices, specifically in the area of observation/documentation/planning, innovative leadership, and fostering meaningful relationships.

Last May, I led a group of administrators on a study tour there. At one point I was studying a piece of documentation posted on the wall when Kristie approached me with a question: "Do you see anything new or different in our documentation than you've seen in earlier visits?" Our initial exchange around this question has led ongoing dialog about her work to bring forth and strengthen the voices of the teachers who work at Chicago Commons.

Margie: Reading the documentation on this latest visit, I was struck by the inclusion of the teachers' thinking. This is something I've been encouraging. Often there is resistance because teachers have been taught that they should be objective and only describe the

Margie Carter and Kristie Norwood share a strong passion for bringing teachers' voices center stage in the early childhood profession. To learn more about the May 2012 Harvest Resources study tour to Chicago Commons in collaboration with the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, visit www.ecetrainers.com.

details of what they see. I wrote about this earlier in an *Exchange* article (Carter, 2010). Documentation here has always included children's words and ideas, but I'm so pleased to now see what the teachers are thinking, too. How has this shift occurred?

Kristie: Initially there was a singular focus on the children. In American culture, we are used to imposing our views and ideas on children. Reggio provided us with a different way of listening to children. We heard their ideas and interests. As a result, we became very one-sided in only looking for the voice of the child.

When reviewing documentation with my teachers, I began to wonder about their voices. I was meeting with a team and combing through the documentation to uncover the children's interest. In the middle of the meeting, I asked the teachers, "What are you interested in?" They could not answer for themselves. They kept referring to what the children were saying and doing. I knew that their voice was integral to the process of learning and documenting the learning process. So, I kept asking questions about their feelings, their interests, and their goals. I asked them to reflect on what the process was like for them. I wanted them to take time to really dissect the process of learning. We know that learning is happening on a cognitive level, but what about the emotional level? I really wanted teachers to own the experiences, not just through the children's eyes, but through their own.

Margie: Have you found this a challenge for teachers?

Kristie: Absolutely. It was almost as if the teachers felt guilty for talking about themselves. Teachers were used to reflecting on the children. We spent many meetings combing through photos and written documentation. Teachers observe continuously to get to know each child in the classroom. However, they were not used to seeing their own interests and goals as teachers in the equation. It was almost like they didn't feel it was right to add their voices to the documentation. I think that these emotions were underscored by assessment tools that require 'objective' observation. Teachers are told not to add their ideas. They need to record what they see and hear; not how they feel about it. Here I was asking them to recount the experiences, not just based on what they saw and heard, but how they felt and how it affected them as teachers.

Teacher Subjectivity

Margie: You are bringing up a whole area I think our profession has to re-examine, this idea of being objective. I think that's not only impossible, but it robs our teachers of their passion and voice. The mantra around being 'objective' is well-intended, in that we want to insure that we are 'fair' to children. We don't want to put on them any negative bias we might have or jump to conclusions about who they are and what they aren't able to understand or do. On the other hand, the educators of Reggio have taught me to be blatantly biased in favor of looking for the competency in each child. When we encourage teachers to acknowledge their own interests and feelings, they become more self-aware and are able to use their subjectivity in an honest, productive way to foster a strong image of children. I think the key here is to encourage teachers to become curious about what they are hearing and seeing, even if they don't like it. It's a shift in your mind that then leads to a shift in what you write about in your observations.

Kristie: I think you're dead on. I believe that objectivity does not have to mean neutrality. For too long, we have asked teachers to separate their hearts from their hands in observation. This is not productive. We must encourage teachers to see with different eyes. In shifting our mindsets, observation becomes a part of a running dialog in the story of a child's life. Then the purpose changes from what this child *can do* to who this child *is*.

Documentation as an Ongoing Conversation

Margie: When we hear a teacher's voice in their written documentation, the reader finds herself wanting to have a conversation with the teacher. To me, this is one of the most exciting things that can happen. Too often documentation gets filed away or stuck up on a wall, losing its potential to provoke more exchanges and further insights. Have you found that when there is a stronger teacher voice in your documentation stories, that parents or other staff members seek out that teacher for conversation?

Kristie: Most times parents ask questions anyway. Visitors and other staff become intrigued by the documentation and begin to seek teachers out. I think that most times it's the documentation without the teacher's voice that generates questions. When I read documentation, I find myself asking questions that only the teacher can answer. Most times the resulting conversation gets added to the documentation as teacher reflection.

Margie: Oh, I love that idea of documentation being added to as conversations and new thinking emerges. This reminds me of the idea that documentation should be seen as a process, not a product you put up on the wall. It can always evolve further.

Kristie: Actually, when Lella Gandini visited our programs some years ago she talked about this. Documentation must be revisited, reanalyzed, and questioned further. There should be no finish. Displays can have a finish, but documentation should be living, evolving, and ever-changing.

Margie: I continually encourage teachers to use their documentation in conversations with the children. In New Zealand many teachers write learning stories in the first person directly to the child. When a child hears a teacher say, "I saw you do _____ and it reminded me of _____. I wondered what you _____ ," you can immediately see their pride and eagerness to talk more about the experience. When teachers share their thinking process, their curiosities, their own experiences as part of describing an observation with children, genuine conversations of mutual interest can happen and their relationship is strengthened. Have you found a way to encourage this with teachers here?

Kristie: The way we encourage it is by listening and continuing to ask. I tell teachers that I'm asking questions because I'm genuinely interested, not because I'm trying to trip them up or prove a point. Just like children become more open over time, the same is true for teachers. We encourage teachers to share their ideas, hopes, dreams, and interests. We reinforce that we all live in our centers, it's not just the children's space. The teachers' voices are valuable. We give value and presence to their voices through their documentation throughout the center.

Voices that Don't Sound Like Our Own

Kristie: I also want to talk about encouraging voices that don't sound like our own. What do we do when the voice is not in unison? We have teachers who come from different experiences and backgrounds. What about the teacher who feels like I did initially? Karen, one of my mentors and the program director at the time, allowed me the space to share my point of view. That's one of the things that helped me change. She never shut me down. She was open to me and asked that I extend the same in kind.

Margie: What kinds of things did she say that encouraged you to be comfortable with sharing what was on your mind? We all need to learn how to encourage that.

Kristie: At the end of one of our team meetings she asked me, "So what are your thoughts?" I began to share my point of view. My point of view was definitely different from everyone else's around the table. As a matter of fact, I was not convinced that the Reggio approach was valuable with our minority population. However, she never interrupted me. She let me talk. I remember her smiling and saying something like, "Okay, we'll see. Keep coming to the meetings."

Margie: It is so important to hear different points of view, but you are right; sometimes we create an atmosphere that suggests there is only one right way of seeing things. I think gathering multiple perspectives is the closest we will get to this idea of 'objectivity,' meaning there are many possibilities.

What Can Teachers Tell the World?

Margie: The quote from Bill Ayers that opens this article has such a provocative question: "What can these teachers tell one another and the world about teaching?" I don't think we consider or encourage that.

Kristie: I think the quote speaks to teachers being a major player in their own profession. It's about empowering teachers to own their own learning, extending themselves to each other and the world. I see it as a grassroots movement to reclaim what it means to be in this process of 'educating' our youngest children. How long have we allowed everyone else to tell us what that means?

Margie: You are reminding me of something I found from Sheila Dainton (2005) about this whole idea of reclaiming our teachers' voices. In her essay, Dainton railed against this term 'informed professionalism' and what she thought that implied and dictates to teachers. She says, "Can we really call 'delivering' someone else's thoughts, ideas, strategies, and lesson plans 'informed professionalism'? Is the current emphasis on performing and attaining, rather than on learning and achieving something that an 'informed professional' could willingly sign up for?"

Dainton's comments remind me of a government official I once heard speak at a conference advocating for 'teacher-proof curriculum.' To, me this is another example of saying who the teacher is, what he thinks doesn't matter. Your work here has tried to counter this mentality.

Kristie: At Chicago Commons we say, "We have to give to teachers what we expect them to give to children" — respect, trust, seeing who they are is all part of what is given. Our program director and education specialists have many discussions about our image of the teacher. We ask teachers, "What do you think you need to be successful?" We have discussions about how they see themselves. Then we make plans together about development and trainings. I think our entire profession needs to ask, "What is our image of the teacher?"

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PHOTOGRAPH BY MARGIE CARTER

Calling Forth the Teacher's Voice

Kristie Norwood meets with Chicago Commons teacher Wanda Santa

Today was the first day that I observed in our new Outdoor Classroom. Teachers Wanda and Sybil from Room 8 were with the children, engaging and interacting with them while I documented. I noticed children running, climbing, crawling, and jumping freely. They also closely investigated the leaves, worms, and rocks on the playground. I also noticed that Wanda seemed to be very anxious. She was constantly asking, "Are you okay?" She walked right alongside the children and didn't give them much space to explore independently. I was eager to hear how she understood this experience for the children and what was influencing her behavior.

After the observation, I met with Wanda to discuss what we could learn from the experience.

Kristie: Tell me about this experience from your perspective.

Wanda: Children were enjoying the environment and able to explore with more space and freedom. They were going up and down the hill and crawling in the grass. With one little girl, I showed her the green leaves, but she didn't want to touch it. But when I showed her the brown leaves she crumbled them. I think she was responding to the touch and the sound.

Kristie: I noticed that you seemed to be anxious. What was the experience like for you?

Wanda: I had anxiety about watching them for safety.

Kristie: What can you do to reduce your anxiety?

Wanda: Trust the children like they trust me and stand back.

Kristie: What have you learned about yourself?

Wanda: I need to wait for their cues before I invade their space. I need to trust them.

Kristie: What are you hoping for yourself?

Wanda: To be more relaxed. I really want to overcome this anxiety about being worried about their safety. I saw today that they can manage themselves and move freely throughout the outdoor environment.

Kristie: On an emotional level, what was this experience like for you? How did you feel?

Wanda: It's hard. I saw them going up and down the hill and it made me afraid that they were going to fall.

We continued our dialog and talked about how children were not focused on the equipment (trikes, swings) outside. They may have gone to them, but they did not stay for more than a minute. The equipment was no match for the exhilaration of running down a hill. They showed us what delights them and their competency.

I asked Wanda if she had this self-awareness about her feelings before we met. She said no. She just thought it was a good experience. We talked about the importance of reflecting with yourself, as well as the children, in mind. It's necessary to focus on the children, but the teacher must be included. She agreed and said that she would use this idea with her assistant teacher.