

How are Our Teachers Learning?

An interview with Christie Colunga by Margie Carter

"Having a degree in early childhood education can be a factor in a teacher's effectiveness, but a degree alone does not guarantee teacher competence. The quality of the higher education program — that is, how well it prepares new teachers, for example, by grounding them in knowledge of child development and academic subject areas and providing opportunities to practice new teaching skills — may be a more critical factor in a teacher's ability to influence children's development and learning in a positive way than having a degree, per se."

Marilou Hyson, et al.

Though I don't move in the academic research world, I try to stay informed about research on how to improve teacher understanding and performance in early childhood settings. Research in the 1990s told us that teachers with a college degree led to improved quality in early childhood programs. Research in the last decade is calling that finding into question, suggesting quality is far more complicated than that. Teacher preparation is quite uneven as Marilou

Hyson and her colleagues outline for us in their 2001 research report (2009). Factors contributing to this variability, especially at the two-year college level, include:

- an inadequately-prepared and under-resourced faculty to support a wide range of non-traditional students who are significantly challenged by work, family, and financial responsibilities
- an overreliance on adjunct faculty, limiting leadership potential within the college to impact needed curricula changes
- a lack of reliable high-quality field placement sites with collaborative supervision to guide students with feedback on how to apply what they are learning in their classes to practice.

No longer adjunct faculty at my local community college, I've continued to watch and dialog with faculty struggling against the odds in these settings. Teacher educators, along with children's teachers themselves, are often focused on "covering the curriculum" rather than uncovering who their students are as learners and finding the key to engage their thinking around both content and context. Too few teacher education efforts cultivate in their students the disposition to be critical and imaginative thinkers. Nor are student teachers adequately prepared to under-

stand children's learning in different domains or how to analyze their observations of children's play for planning.

A Dialogue with Christie Colunga

In my mind, it takes courage, skill, and an instinct toward innovation to develop teacher education programs that nurture a caring heart and a questioning, lively mind. This is a mighty undertaking for under-resourced instructors, especially if they are isolated adjunct faculty. How reassuring to meet those who make a way out of no way, building strong relationships with students and colleagues and moving out of conventional ways of educating the early childhood workforce.

For more than a decade I've had the opportunity to watch Christie Colunga rethink her own college teaching and the kinds of courses and programs her community college could be offering the early childhood community. Over the last decade, Christie has led a process whereby faculty, program coordinators, and an advisory group clarified their operating conceptual framework and program mission. As a result, their course offerings have shifted from a focus on the transfer of knowledge to the co-construction of knowledge and the use of inquiry among the faculty and in their work with students.



Margie Carter enjoys working with and learning from innovators in early childhood who are trying to take quality to a new level. She and Christie Colunga share a passion for actively engaging the hearts and minds of educators,

helping them to see a bigger purpose for their work and deeper significance in what children are doing in their play.



Christie: This was a very arduous, important, and intellectually-engaging process. Our group identified:

- Our program vision as: to change the landscape of early childhood education.
- Our mission: to teach, guide, and advocate.
- Our goal: creating a vibrant learning community.

In this process we sought to articulate our identity through our philosophical foundations and a view of ourselves as educators with a need to become innovators in a state with low national rankings on indicators of child wellbeing.

Margie: What a great insight! Doing more of the same won't work. You need to become innovators.

Christie: Our current charge is to ensure we are 'living' the conceptual framework and to make the actual document visible. We believe our work should be transparent. We want to 'think out loud,' if you will, with the college students, college community, and wider community. And, on the other hand, we are working on listening as part of our own professional development as a faculty and among students.

Our conceptual framework very much represents our thinking and is the measure by which we practice our work and select our projects. The conceptual framework will be revisited and revised on a three-year cycle. As Reggio Emilia prompts us to consider our image of children, we see our conceptual framework as our opportunity to consider our image of our early childhood teacher education program.

Margie: I've listed in these boxes two ways we could be thinking about preparing teachers (see sidebar on page 20). In watching you over the years, I see you are moving between the two of them, staying closely aligned with NAEYC but also pursuing ideas that suggest some different approaches. How would you describe this?

Christie: We have been struggling with the dynamics between these two paradigms and have only recently been able to name the struggle as our dilemma. We felt it for a long time and were intuitively searching to be able to articulate the tension. We plan to examine the dynamics around this thinking as a part of our ongoing conversations.

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Shifting the Focus

Margie: Can you describe some of the shifts that have started to happen as a result of your taking this conceptual work so seriously?

Christie: Shifts in what we do with students have really come from shifts in my own thinking and the discussions I ask our faculty to take up together. We are now focused more on how both children and adults learn and make sense out of their experiences. Our courses include more experiences designed around noticing and discussing what children are doing and incorporating increased engagement with reflection, including using tools like the Thinking Lens™ to guide our reflections. We offer active and shared learning experiences that create starting points for developing relationships with each other and the possibility of creating relations between prior knowledge and inspiring practice.

Margie: Developing relationships with each other as learners is key. How else will students learn the value of collaborative work and become willing

to engage in honest dialog with other educators?

Christie: I've been struck by the different kinds of dialog I see at our professional development conferences in the United States, compared to Canada and New Zealand. The level of thinking in those places seems so much deeper because they are willing to disagree with each other as a way to furthering understandings, not to defend their turf. In our country we view standards as a set of regulations that will bring quality. Canadians use standards as a tool to investigate the meaning of quality, something to promote study and dialog. In the U.S. we think we'll be a good program if we adopt standards. I've come to believe it doesn't work that way. So, another change in our work since visiting other places is actually practicing having conversation around our work with each other. We want to be better about conversing about our practice and selecting more precise and descriptive words to frame our thoughts.

Margie: I think this comes back to the second part of your earlier statement when you spoke of creating experiences for your students that create a relationship between their prior knowledge and some inspiring practice.

Christie: Yes. We try to look for experiences that have the most power to prompt deeper understanding of ourselves and our practice. I want our students to question the status quo. Here's an example of how I try to get them to rethink accepted practices around creating environments for children.

I begin our ECH271 — Arranging the Environment course with a focused study of Southwestern design books. We are located in the Phoenix area, and these books include the architecture and adornments that reflect our local community. In pairs, students pore over the 'coffee table' books, noting the elements of design that engage, delight, and

Reconstructing Teacher Education Curriculum

William Ayers (2004), retired professor of Education at the University of Chicago and prolific writer, offers additional ideas on teacher education: "Preparing teachers of judgment and thought, of care and compassion, requires we reconstruct our teacher education curriculum to include the following components:

- Autobiography — being aware of oneself as the instrument of one's teaching.
- Inquiry — being curious and pursuing the 'why.'
- Reflection — thinking rigorously in order to act.
- Critique — challenging what is unfair and unacceptable.
- Community — combining insights and energies with others.

satisfy them. We then begin the creation of a Venn Diagram by listing all of these precious elements. (I make sure we have plenty of time to engage in this process.)

After our compilation of desirable design elements, we review catalogs from traditional early childhood vendors and list the characteristics of what is being sold for floor coverings and furniture. Characteristics of those furnishings are listed in another part of our Venn Diagram. In the middle of the diagram we list the overlapping elements in order to identify what we want in our optimal early childhood setting, selecting the elements that fit with our vision of the ideal space for children. Additional quotes by Anita Rui Olds on the use of color and the Children First video from Community Playthings pretty much gets the mind and spirits moving so that we can reframe our work on environments around what we desire and deserve. We use *Designs for Living and Learning* as our text, so students continue to be inspired.

NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation

The NAEYC/NCATE standards include six core standards that define what well-prepared teachers should know and be able to do. A seventh programmatic standard describes requirements for field experience and clinical practice.

Standard 1 — Promoting child development and learning (understanding multiple influences such as cultural and linguistic contexts, individual variations and styles, and influence of media and technology).

Standard 2 — Building family and community relationships (e.g., developing respectful, reciprocal relationships with families).

Standard 3 — Observing, documenting, and assessing to support young children and families (knowing about observation and documentation; using assessment responsibly).

Standard 4 — Using developmentally effective approaches (understanding relationships and interactions as foundational, using a range of appropriate, effective teaching practices, engaging in reflection to promote positive outcomes).

Standard 5 — Using content knowledge to build meaningful curriculum (understanding content knowledge in academic disciplines, along with inquiry tools, own knowledge, and resources to implement and evaluate curriculum).

Standard 6 — Becoming a professional (upholding ethical standards and guidelines, engaging in collaborative learning and advocacy, and integrating critical perspectives).

Standard 7 — Early childhood field experiences (observing and practicing in at least two of ECE age groups and settings)

Source: http://www.naeyc.org/ecada/files/ecada/file/Standards/NAEYC%20Initial%20and%20Advanced%20Standards%203_2012.pdf

In this class and others that I teach, I've shifted my questioning of students to focus on: "How are you thinking differently as a result of this experience, discussion, or reading?" I'm encouraging them to be reflective and engage in metacognition, rather than trying to give some answer they think I want to hear.

Creating Community Partnerships and Service Learning

Christie brings an innovative, 'can-do' mindset to her work and has launched a number of projects in collaboration with early childhood organizations in her community.

Christie: Community partnerships broaden all of our perspectives and increase access to the thinking and evolving policies in the field. I collaborate on grant writing and co-host a variety of seminars and conferences with other early childhood-focused organizations. Offering college credit in conjunction with these projects keeps participants engaged with the content in meaningful ways for longer periods of time after an individual seminar or project is over. Offering college credit also supports the faculty member's understanding of the concepts shared. For example, after hearing about the New Zealand Learning Stories approach to assessment in a professional development seminar, students

enrolled in the concurrent college class wrote learning stories as a class assignment. There is an extended connection between theory and practice that does not exist in attending these types of forums without ongoing conversation.

One of our most rewarding experiences has been to use the concept of service learning to help students participate in co-curricular experiences. *Co-curricular* is the term we use to describe out-of-the-classroom experiences that accompany course work. The co-curricular part is out in the 'real world' so it is most likely very powerful because it *IS* real. We embed opportunities to serve and learn about life in the early childhood community as frequently as possible. Our students have received credit for helping to paint furniture, packing and moving classrooms, and assisting at a number of conferences they would otherwise not be able to travel to attend.

As we become more adept at moving students into transformative experiences, we are seeing a shift in our teaching. We have done this with study tours and short internships: Getting beyond the four walls of the college classroom and out into inspiring programs is a strategy we are actively exploring.

Margie: Tell me a bit about how your thinking has developed as a college instructor over the last decade. I know you've had bouts of frustration, but you always seem to rise above discouragement into a new idea to move things forward. What keeps you going?

Christie: Certainly there is deep gratitude to the educators of Reggio Emilia for their enduring commitment and foundational work. Understanding that our work must comprise decades of commitment is reassuring and helps to keep the focus. I think there is a sustaining energy that is created when the types of experiences we noted in this article occur. Studying with others the thinking and operationalizing of

programs such as Hilltop Children's Center in Seattle and the Opal School in Portland is a useful and enlightening endeavor. Most recently, getting outside the United States and studying the thinking from Aotearoa/New Zealand and Canada has been a welcome antidote to feelings of frustration. I like challenges. I like to see if I can take a concept or notion, use it, and then get better and better.

Right now I am focused on getting better at moving into the heart and intellect of authentic teaching and learning. There is that tension between the known and unknown that is uncomfortable, yet provocative. I see many possibilities for continued change in our teaching at the college. Being with others on this journey is what gives me hope. Our program should serve as the center of a vibrant early childhood community. If the community isn't vibrant, then we need to work on making it so. In terms of our practice, we follow Ghandi's words: "Be the change you want to see."

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Nurturing Pedagogical Leadership: A Community of Practice Project launched by Paradise Valley Community College by Christie Colunga

As a part of our work on the study of teaching and learning we created an opportunity to understand and engage in developing reflective pedagogical practices. Following the reflective teaching model and study sessions outlined in Curtis, Lebo, Cividanes, and Carter (2011) *Reflecting with a Thinking Lens™*, we launched a year-long investigation that involved:

- offering materials that spark curiosity and exploration
- documenting the details of engagement
- studying the details with a teacher-researcher mindset, using a protocol
- writing learning stories

To announce our Pedagogical Leaders Community of Practice project, we distributed a formal application and strongly encouraged potential members of the wider early childhood community to join us. We committed to:

- Reading and discussing a book
- Meeting monthly
- Exploring materials over an extended period of time
- Studying our documentation together, and
- Sharing our work in a public forum.

Our Pedagogical Leader Coordinator went into programs to model the gathering of documentation and support teachers who were members of the project.

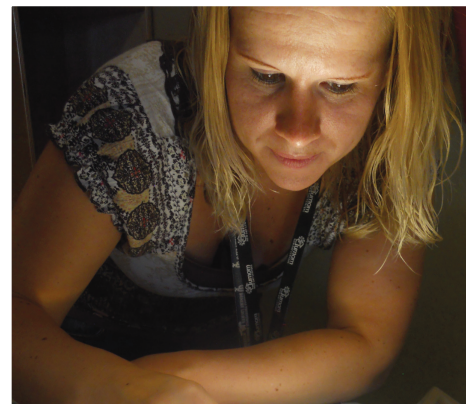
The engagement in our Pedagogical Leader Community of Practice was certainly uneven the first year with the most consistent attendance being that of our college staff and a committed educator.



While the children explore the materials, Sabrina gathers documentation to bring to the pedagogical leaders community of practice group to study together with the Thinking Lens™ protocol.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SENA CEKLCIC

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Teacher Sabrina explores the materials she will be offering to children.

As children use the materials she herself explored, Sabrina has more insight into what they might find engaging.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SABRINA LLOYD

This experience developed into a powerful professional opportunity for the college staff and an unprecedented forum for educator voices. The process put the focus back on considering children, developing our own theories, and becoming increasingly articulate in talking about our work. One of the most active participants told us that writing learning stories was the best professional development experience she has ever had.

Our Pedagogical Leaders Community of Practice will continue for another year in two new forums. First, our Pedagogical Leader Coordinator, Sena Ceklic, will work side by side with educators in student internship placement sites. Our intention is to practice dialogues with each other that can be used as a foundation for developing conversations with student interns. Second, Sena will use the Pedagogical Leader Community of Practice process with participants in one of our community-based professional development grant-funded projects.

We have seen the power of this process and will keep reinventing ways to make it available for ongoing professional development. I see these experiences as the critical ones for the college or university to play in the community.