



Celebrating Teachers and Their Work

by Margie Carter

The more I work with teachers in early childhood programs, the deeper my gratitude grows for their efforts to stick with this difficult work. Most spend many unpaid hours in and out of their classrooms organizing, planning, getting further training so as to provide the best quality care and education they can. They often do this while continually helping to train new staff, working second jobs to make ends meet, going without health insurance, driving an unreliable car, and postponing their own parenting to avoid further economic stress.

The work and skill of child care teachers is generally invisible in our society. Even parents who see them every day take teachers' efforts for granted, often adding insult to injury by requesting that they babysit for their children on the weekends. The handful of parents who do acknowledge respect and gratitude to their child care providers are, in the words of Lilian Katz, "transients" — by the time they understand the issues involved in providing quality care, their children move on to school and they lose sight or interest in advocating for the early childhood profession. Can we really feel like celebrating under all these conditions?

The temptation is to try to cover up this discouraging situation with banners, balloons, and banquets to celebrate the work of the teachers within our programs. To be honest, I hope that as we consider alternative celebrations for the children in our programs we are also rethinking what we do for the teachers. We face many of the same pitfalls in our current practices of teacher celebrations as we do with those for the children — assuming everyone values the same celebration, celebrating nothing for

fear of leaving out or alienating someone, cheerleading with a celebration hype that has more stress than real meaning for teachers.

Recognizing What Teachers Need

To be sure, budget limitations severely constrict how we tend to shape teacher celebrations. We write notes with happy faces and buy flowers, balloons, a program logo t-shirt, and maybe even a wrist watch to recognize special efforts, teacher birthdays, or anniversaries of employment. These tokens are all within our price range. Some programs pair teachers up with secret pals to spread around the task of remembering to do something special for weary staff members.

While these gestures are commendable, they don't often engender what I associate with a true feeling of celebration — deep delight or meaning, exhilaration, a sense of pride or self-esteem, or the marking of history, continuity, connectedness, and renewal that comes from time honored ritual. Again I'm reminded of admonitions from outgoing NAEYC president Lilian Katz in her writing about efforts to create self-esteem in children. She takes to task the shallowness of emphasizing success at trivial tasks or compiling self-celebration Lists — "All the Good Things about Me." As others have done, Katz points out the distinction between praise and giving specific feedback and rewards.

The truth is, we need to give teachers more to celebrate. They need paid time for reflection, for planning and meeting together. They deserve regular feedback, coaching, and ongoing opportunities for



○ paid professional development. I'm sure they would feel like celebrating if they had the resources and support staff they need — regular custodial services, secretaries, pedagogista, public and mental health consultants, not to mention adequate salaries, benefits, and a career path that went somewhere.

We need to hear more from teachers about what kind of celebration would really mean something to them, would truly honor who they are and the accomplishments and contributions they've achieved. It would help if we got over our fears of singling out individuals for recognition and, in fact, formalized some "master teacher" mentoring programs, such as those underway in California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and North Carolina. Testimony from teachers involved in these mentor teacher programs indicates this is a source of tremendous personal and professional recognition and strength for them. And tandem with any meaningful recognition or celebration of teachers' work must be budget planning that provides tangible rewards far beyond the accolades we typically see.

○ Celebrations That Truly Recognize Teachers

How do we provide a place in our programs, indeed in our communities, which honors the work and contributions of teachers, one which really translates into an internal sense of celebration for a teacher, or a public recognition which is meaningful to the individual as well as the child care profession at large? Consider how Lella Gandini and Amelia Gambetti speak of celebrating the work of children. What if teachers got that kind of continued recognition, affirmation, and attention called to their questions, their thinking, projects, and accomplishments? What might it look like?

○ I picture walking into a program with documentation and displays of teachers' lives and work, side by side with that of the children's. This would bring about genuine recognition — and also a sense that our programs are really about human development, not just child development. It would serve to connect the daily lives of the children and their teachers — and also build community with the parents as they see the teachers for who they are, as opposed to faceless baby-sitters or lifeless nannies.

✓ Strategy: Document and Broadcast

A few years ago, Betty Jones and I had a dialogue about directors modeling attentiveness to and documentation of children's play (**Child Care Information Exchange**, September/October 1990 and January/February 1991). Strongly influenced by the power and meaning of the documentation and displays in the Reggio schools, last year I decided this idea was not only a useful training strategy but also a genuine way to celebrate what teachers are doing in their classrooms.

I began taking photographs and writing anecdotal stories about the wonderful learning environments teachers were creating, their masterful coaching of children in resolving conflicts and acquiring skills, efforts at teamwork with colleagues, and building partnerships with parents. I put these on staff or parent bulletin boards in centers and developed some into traveling display panels to take other places. My hope is that we can arrange some installations of these displays at our local R&R, in downtown bank lobbies, and shopping malls. More than one teacher came to me with tears of gratitude that someone had actually recognized and valued their work to the point of making the effort to have it more visible to others. This work further enhanced my ability to celebrate what teachers are doing. It is news I want to broadcast, seeds I want to spread around.

✓ Strategy: A Book of Celebrations

Wouldn't it be nice if teachers could actually take the time to reflect on and document an insight they gained, a skill they mastered, a hurdle they climbed over? (Why is this sort of record only kept in baby books?) Building on Byrd Baylor's book, **I'm In Charge of Celebrations**, I could imagine dedicating a portion of staff meetings, or a place in the staff room, for creating pages for a personal book each teacher might compile to have a record of what they deemed memorable and worth celebrating year after year.

Teachers put so much creativity into the service of children. They deserve to have some of it dedicated directly toward themselves. Books of teacher celebrations not only give personal touchstones for marking their human and professional development but also help build the collective memory of our early childhood education community.

✓ **Strategy: Give Ongoing Feedback**

Despite the data indicating the importance of giving ongoing feedback to teachers, they continually complain that they rarely get it. Typically I hear things like “My director’s way too busy to even notice what I do.” “The only time I ever get feedback is when there’s some problem or criticism.” “She says I’m doing a great job just to make me feel good, but it doesn’t mean that she actually knows what I’m doing.” “How am I ever going to get better at teaching if someone doesn’t actually give me feedback?”

We need to get past our worries of making someone feel uncomfortable with our observations and feedback. AND we must stop making excuses for not taking the time to do it. Directors have to build this into their schedules and deem it as important as doing the payroll or USDA reports.

Thoughtful, focused feedback means so much more to teachers than general praise. It lets them know what we think without having to guess or worry. It gives them something concrete to consider. And it’s especially great when they regularly hear us offer specific recognition of a skillful interaction, an effort at a difficult task, or a risk taken.

✓ **Strategy: Budget for the Full Cost of Care**

To provide quality care, teachers need paid time for planning; discussions with colleagues, consultants, and parents; and ongoing professional development opportunities. We have a valuable resource from NAEYC on learning to budget for these types of things which constitute the **Full Cost of Care**, the title of this resource book. Until we muster the necessary determination to drive this budgeting campaign forward without apology, our ability to provide a meaningful celebration of and for teachers and their work will be limited. Let’s get on with this task, stopping to celebrate our successes, but not settling for anything less than what we really need.

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