

Building a Community Culture Among Teachers

by Margie Carter

"A true community is a place where every person belongs and is known, valued, and supported. It is a place where ideas, skills, and feelings are shared as members work cooperatively toward common goals." — Judith Leipzig (1994), faculty, Bank Street College

"A community is a place in which people face each other over time in all their human variety, good parts, bad parts, and all the rest. Such places promote the highest quality of life possible, lives of engagement and participation." — John Gatto (1992), 1992 New York State Teacher of the Year

"I don't really know or understand how to be a member of a community, how to collaborate genuinely, or how to move through conflict with a certainty that we will all arrive at a place of better understanding. These things are not in my bones, because they have been missing from my culture and education. . . . We will need to develop new skills and dispositions as we place ourselves in (this) unfamiliar cultural territory." — John Nimmo (1994), faculty, Pacific Oaks College Northwest

The term "creating community" is about as common as "multicultural" in our professional vernacular. We all long to be part of a community. Yet on these fast-paced, highly transient, and diverse streets of our lives, how do we really walk this talk? And, if "culture" is a term to describe how people live, what's the relationship between this term and "community"?

I love the sentiments expressed in the above quotes from Judith Leipzig and John Gatto; but, if I'm really honest, I think most of us live what John Nimmo is expressing. A real experience of being raised and

acculturated in community has been missing from most of our lives for several decades now. We are primarily shaped by the media and commercialism. Just longing for community doesn't mean we know how to create it or live in it, especially with people who might be very different from ourselves.

In pockets here and there, many of us valiantly struggle to develop the elements of a community culture described in this issue of **Beginnings**: shared values and resources; a common language and group identity; traditions and a sense of collective history as we live together, care for one another, and mediate our conflicts. These efforts are of the utmost importance and, if widely practiced, could indeed change the dominant commercial culture of this country. In the speech quoted above, John Nimmo goes on to remind us, "We must realize that culture is not static, but open to both transformation and transmission. We are not only the objects of culture, but also the subjects."

A few years ago, in one of her "In a Manner of Speaking" columns in **Child Care Information Exchange**, Bonnie Neugebauer posed the idea of our child care programs becoming the new neighborhoods in our lives. I was quite taken with this idea and — with her later article describing the schools of Reggio Emilia as part of a culture that truly values children — I can begin to imagine how this might look. These pages of **Beginnings** offer more wonderful ideas to build on. For these images to take shape in our programs, we need a shared vision among the staff *and* some concrete experiences to move with. How can we live this vision as a taste on our lips, a commitment in our heart, and skills in our hands?



✓ **Strategy: Staff meetings as circle time**

We know that a good circle time with children builds a sense of belonging and a shared early childhood culture. And we see activities throughout the day that create this sense of respect and community when individual children are invited to talk about themselves, encouraged to make choices, share their ideas, and work together on projects. Why not see our staff meetings as having the same goals?

Ellen Booth Church (1994) reminds us that “the circle has been used from ancient times until the present to represent the coming together of people on equal ground.” Rather than filling the time with announcements, scheduling details, and the authoritative voice of the director, can’t we use our staff meetings for genuine sharing, reflection, and collaboration? This might involve changing the idea of who’s in charge, finding other means to take care of business, or creating an atmosphere that is physically comfortable, emotionally safe, and full of active listening.

Circle time is most effective when there is a welcoming leader, some thoughtful planning, and an opportunity for everyone to be acknowledged. Music and playful moments counterbalance serious stories. If our staff meetings have a different cultural feel to them than this, we might need to orient the group to a new set of routines and guidelines, just as we do with a new classroom grouping each year.

Begin by developing some agreed upon ground rules for behaviors, communications, and decision making. Take the time to draw in all the ideas and voices about this. Post these agreements and review them regularly in the early months of this effort. Consider devoting some training to group facilitation skills so that responsibility for staff meetings can be rotated, allowing for individual styles to reflect the emerging group culture. Have a future meeting agenda posted with space to add ideas for discussions and who will plan for them. Be sure each meeting includes some elements of the other strategies listed below.

✓ **Strategy: Share stories, symbols, and pictures**

To build a staff culture, we need to know: Who are we? Why are we here? What are we together? Devoting at least 15 minutes of every staff meeting to this self-discovery will lay the foundation for this building process. Share childhood memories on various topics — tell us a funny story about your

family; talk about a time you were naughty; did you have a favorite toy, book, or song?

A great resource for specific strategies on drawing out people’s stories and using them for community building is **Telling Your Stories** by Donald Davis (1993). Personal stories help us get a fuller picture of each other. Bringing in actual photos or objects from our childhoods makes it all the more vivid. As we hear more about each other’s lives, we discover how we are alike and different. We weave threads that tie us together in collective memories.

Tell the story of how you got your name. How did your family treat a common cold? What celebrations were important to you? The stories may not always be pleasant and that should be acknowledged as well. Whenever I do these activities, I suggest teachers choose a memory that will enhance their learning, not stir up emotional blocks. I remind them to keep their ears and hearts open to their colleagues, while being sensitive to confidentiality when it is needed. Shared stories and pictures are a vital part of any culture.

✓ **Strategy: Display the lives and work of the staff**

We are quite conscious of the need to create classroom environments which reflect the identities of the children and families present, and we must remember to include teachers, the cook, and bookkeeper as well. In **The Hundred Languages of Children** Tiziana Filippini comments, “We have tried to create the school as a system in which everything is connected.”

The Reggio experience has alerted us to the value of documenting the life of a school. This process not only serves to validate individual and group experiences, but enhances and stimulates our collective memory. Elsewhere, Elizabeth Jones and Gretchen Reynolds (1992) remind us of the same thing: “In all cultures, people who share experiences create metaphor — stories, songs, dances, and visual images — in order to remember their experiences, give them new meaning as and build community through their sharing.”

If we are to create an inclusive staff culture, the lives of individual staff members should be represented throughout our centers. Walls and bulletin boards

dominated by commercial displays leave us invisible to ourselves and each other. Instead, we might see textiles, objects, photographs, and different languages symbolically reminding us of the people who make up our staff. Likewise, documentation of things discovered or experienced together will remind us of who we are as a collective body.

As we begin to experience ourselves as an evolving community, this can have a ripple effect. When we hear others mourn the loss of or romanticize communities from other times or places, we can counter this despair and victim blaming by sharing what we've created. Let's keep before them the challenge of honoring individual and ethnic diversity while we seek a common community culture. As people committed to social and economic justice for all, let's make this *our* contract with America.

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*Margie Carter lives in Seattle, Washington, where she teaches college classes, coaches teachers and directors in early childhood programs, writes, and produces videos. She is an avid gardener as one might guess from her new book, **Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice**, available from Redleaf Press.*