

# Changing Our Attitudes and Actions in Working With Families

A dialogue between Deadru Hilliard and Ann Pelo facilitated by Margie Carter

Teaching in separate child care programs in Seattle, Deadru Hilliard and Ann Pelo first met each other through their staff trainer, Margie Carter, and later as representatives to the newly formed child care union in Seattle. Both teachers have been drawing inspiration from Reggio Emilia for their very different settings — Deadru's program of low income families, primarily African American, and Ann's center of affluent, primarily European American families. Margie suggested they visit each other's classrooms and parent meetings and start a dialogue together to share their journeys and explore how this process looks in such contrasting settings.

Deadru: When I first started in this job at Martin Luther King Day Home Center, the child care field was unfamiliar to me. I listened to co-workers talk about the negative parts about what families do and don't do, and that was my model. So, I went for a couple of years doing what everybody else did, complaining that there was no response from the parents, that they did this, and they did that.

At the same time, I wanted a change. I remember saying to myself: How can I do this differently? This meant relearning everything, every part of what early childhood education was going to be like for me. So, I just started with the small things within the classroom. And that meant changing my energy, first from how I responded to children and how they responded to me, because I think that's the first

part of it, with the children in the classroom. I started to pay attention more. Then, when I talked to the parents, I asked what it is that I could do for them.

As I noticed parents being more open to asking me about different things, I discovered we had a connection and then I started paying attention even more. Okay, now I see they are paying attention to me. Okay, how can I do this? What is going to work for the parents that I serve, because they are not well-to-do parents. Some struggle just to eat, so I need to be mindful of that as well. I started finding ways to say to them, we should really value what your child is doing.

When I started to do that, for some of them, it was kind of eye opening. It's not that they didn't value their child. They were just too hurried. So once I slowed down, they slowed down too. In different ways I communicated, just watch me and we're going to do this together, because at the same time, I'm still learning too. It's gotten a lot better from where we were. A lot of parents are paying attention now and I like that.

Ann: I love your description of changing your practices and then seeing the impact that has on the relationships that grow with families. In years past at Hilltop Children's Center, I felt pretty protective of myself with parents and protective of the classroom as my space; the place where I can create a particular culture, a particular ambience and



Deadru Hilliard has been teaching at Martin Luther King Day Home Center in Seattle, Washington for the last ten years. In addition to her goals in working with parents, she has been specializing in giving children a wide range of literacy experiences, in the classroom and at home.



Ann Pelo has been teaching at Hilltop Children's Center for ten years. She has been featured in a number of teacher education videos and has co-authored the book, *That's Not Fair: A Teacher's Guide to Activism with Young Children*.

aesthetic classroom that reflects me. I guess I expected children to check their families at the door somehow.

I know for a lot of years I kept waiting for parents to change what they were doing, wanting them to start reading memos, or asking about things in the room, or showing an involvement I could recognize. Then I realized I needed to ask, what am I doing that's closing that door for them and holding them at a distance? And then, from that starting point, I recognized that they care passionately and deeply about their children.

It's so liberating not to be stuck in that place. Like you described, I, too, came into the culture of teaching where we sort of bad-talked parents, grumbled and said little things in the hallways and hoped they didn't hear. That's so disrespectful! How can we really bring our whole hearts to their children if that's the energy we bring to them or about them?

### **Moving Beyond Limited Roles**

Deadru: It was really eye-opening to just start honestly asking what am I going to do differently. If I'm going to be here, what am I going to do differently and how am I going to involve myself in their lives? You know, they're already so busy and so if I'm just there saying, "You need to sign this, do this, read this," that's not being a part of what they need me to be. I try to show I care about them, apart from just being a parent. When I don't see them or their child is missing, I make a call. Of course, I ask about the child, but at the same time, I need to ask about them too. So, that's how I know it's changed for me. And I know I feel the change in them, as well, because of what they get from me.

Ann: Yes, it's about having a relationship with families that's really authentic and genuine and that I hold dear to my heart, rather than, for example, it being a job responsibility to have a conversation with a family. Your description of entering into their lives is that authentic relationship. I've also had to shift what I do, so that I'm inviting them into my life in a more genuine way, not staying in these limited roles of parent and teacher. Once that starts happening, then there can be a real relationship.

Deadru: And it feels really good. You know that is happening when they are able to relate things that they wouldn't talk to anybody about, whether it's personal or private. The fact that they are able to do that says a lot. And me being able to do the same thing with them.

So the relationship has grown way past the teacher or parent role.

Ann: I keep thinking of this quote from Reggio that I'm not sure I can quote exactly, but it says something like, "In the alliance between parents and teacher, the child is fully known." That has become my mantra this year. Alliances don't have boundaries or turf or this formal sort of dance. They have this more intimate, juicy, genuine flavor.

In the last few years I've shifted to early fall parent conferences with a focus on learning from families about their child. This year, I asked them something new: Are there things you want to know about me? I wanted to clarify that I don't just expect to be a recipient of their sharing, but expect to offer things about my life as well. It was very powerful to hear parents ask me questions. I felt the shift happening in myself, right there in those conversations. My last little self-protective shield was gone. This year I also started inviting families to do things with me, like go see the salmon run or come to a bonfire at the park or see the Christmas boats come in.

Deadru: I think when you have those experiences together, parents are able to be more invested in what they want to see happening in the classroom. Part of what I have been seeing is the more I allow for opportunities to be together, whether it be to talk about school or just generally about our lives, the more they feel invested. I try not to miss those opportunities throughout the day. If I haven't seen a parent for a few days, I send a note home. Sometimes parents get so busy, it's hard for them to stay connected if they aren't seeing you. But I have to be mindful and observant, and send a note home, and not just say, "This is what your child is doing, but how are you doing?"

Ann: It feels important to name the work we are doing as community building in a pretty revolutionary way. It's not just about providing a service of child care but, in fact, it can be about becoming a community with each other. That doesn't necessarily mean that we hang out together all the time. We just have to think bigger than our current roles. There has always been this tension for me at Hilltop in my relationship with families. While we share so much in common in terms of our middle class background, and white privilege, there is this very huge current economic divide between us. Their attitude and reality is one of so much entitlement. I've felt some tension around that, some resentment of their wealth, a nagging sense of my own inadequacies with my lack of wealth. It's all complicated because they're paying significant money for the teaching that I do with deep passion and love for their children.

I'm finding I have to really shift to get bigger than that tension. It doesn't have to leave me protective or resentful. In fact, we can have a tender relationship.

Deadru: Yes, I think about the money sometimes, but I also think about what I'm getting back. It's not in dollars, but wealth in another way. I know the realities of the families that I serve, growing up underprivileged myself; but having enriched experiences with my siblings was wonderful. I can relate to a lot of their struggles. For the children who pass through my center and my care, there is a different type of wealth that I am trying to give them right now. I try to keep that in mind, especially when I find myself saying, "Why are sports figures or athletics valued more than teachers? Why are they making all that ungodly money? We're good at our profession, too, you know?" Sometimes I just get angry about that. Yeah, they're good at what they do and they bring in the crowds; but we bring in children and we bring up children and we do good service. I just can't see the balance of that. This is backwards in this country.

Ann: And I want my families to want for all children what they want for their own children. That's a piece of the work I want to do with them, to help cultivate in them an awareness of a bigger sense of the world of childhood and to help them to grow into a different sense of advocacy and responsibility as parents, something bigger than and deeper than their particular child.

## Creating a Welcoming, Engaging Environment

Deadru: Last week we talked about changing our attitudes. I know part of it for me was having a different feeling about the classroom itself. Not only getting it to a place where children and families feel they have some ownership for it, but I have to do my part also as a teacher in that ownership. All the feelings come together in that way. Part of it is just the way we greet one another. Saying, "Hi, how's your morning going?" Making it more personable, greeting them, talking to them about concrete things that are happening with their children. Making sure that my parents are introduced to everybody who works throughout the building — from the toddler teachers to the office manager to the milk man. They know everyone.

You've seen our room with big, stuffed chairs in all the areas. Parents are more than welcome to come in and rest, put up their feet; but at the same time, observe and watch children play and work in different areas. Another way

we tried inviting parents in was to put the sign-in area across the room, away from the door. We've tried different things to see what worked to get a better relationship going with the parents. We want them to come just a little further in. Sometimes when they come in a little further, children take them even a little further by inviting them into areas: "Come see what I did over here." And it doesn't necessarily even have to be their child. It may be another child who invites them in a little more to see what's going on.

Ann: We've aimed for some of the same sorts of things you've talked about, trying to create a space that feels more like home than like school, so that the families feel like they have a place there. It's again an invitation to be their full human selves, and not just stop at the door and drop their child off, but come in. At the end of the day, I'll often try to point them toward something their child did, or often their child will do that same thing. "Come, see my Lego structure." "Come, see the new things we have in the drama area." "Come, see the clay thing that I made that is still drying." So we're starting to have families really come in and cross over that threshold and start feeling the room's a place for them to hang out.

We've done two new things with the environment this year: asking parents to bring framed family photos to put around the room, to keep families visible and present and acknowledged as part of our community during the day. And then, something I learned from a Reggio-inspired teacher in Boulder, was to use part of a parent meeting to have the families paint personalized teacups for their children. These are little gifts, surprises made for children by their families, a way for parents to be tangibly present in the children's daily lives in the classroom.

Deadru: I'm always looking for how the room can say, "Come see what we are doing. And come do it with us."

## Helping Families Get Connected to Each Other

Ann: The ways we display documentation are a key piece of making the physical space a place for community. I encourage parents to read the documentation area we call the curriculum board, with an understanding that there won't necessarily be something about their particular child there every day. I remind them it's really useful for them to read this anyway because it gives them a flavor of the culture of our classroom that their child is spending his or her days in. This is an avenue for them to understand their child and their child's experience at Hilltop. It

also then gives them a connection with the other children and a sense of who they are, which builds community and a deeper investment in the program.

I document a lot about relationships and community for the curriculum board, pointing out the ways in which children are making connections with each other. And I try to make sure to include things on the curriculum board that involve parents, whether it's a big gathering that we've had, or an interaction that a parent had when she was hanging out, perhaps reading a book to a group of children. I put the spotlight on the relationships that parents are growing with each other and with their children. This idea that the Italian teachers of Reggio use of "parents as protagonists" has really impacted me. That doesn't mean they are just involved, or just participating, but actively shaping the life of the classroom.

Deadru: I've changed our fall parent meeting a lot. I told the parents to bring in photos and stories to leave for their children. I had a couple of reasons for this. I think the environment needs to reflect everybody who spends a great deal of time in the classroom, from the teachers to the students. Also, I think my families still see me as the facilitator of their communications. I'm working with them slowly, trying to move them towards being there, being part of one another and owning the classroom together, and not feeling like I always need to be a part of their knowing one another.

At the same time I know it was a big step for them to bring themselves into the classroom in that way and to want to share. They all had these large photos of themselves showing their lives. You were here, you saw that. It was nice to see them just sharing with each other, "Oh, you did this." "I've done that." This was a way for them to connect. I'm trying to first start where they are and then move slowly away from being the facilitator.

Ann: I saw you do something that night that was so powerful and so subtle, so masterful. You really held parents accountable to what your project was. There were families who said, "Oh, I didn't know we were supposed to bring photos." You didn't let them off the hook. At first, I was really startled and I couldn't imagine telling them they still had to do this project. I could feel in myself this urge to make it okay, saying it was good enough to just show up. Then I realized, no, that's not going to move anybody to this next place of feeling really invested in the classroom. A sense of ownership doesn't come without that accountability piece. No, I actually expect more of you than to just to show up.

Deadru: Yes, I actually expect much more of you. So, I'm even giving you this to take home and finish.

Ann: And you've already demonstrated that they can expect more of you, just like you can expect more of them. This reminded me of what we know to do with children, and there you were doing it with families. You didn't allow a minimal level to be okay. But, in fact, you let them know that you really do expect them to be involved.

Deadru: Not that it was even my expectation. But, that it was the children's expectation. That's part of parents investing in how their children belong there. Part of that project with the parents was because I wanted the children to be able to see part of themselves from outside, here in the classroom. One of those ways was with pictures of their parents and writing down stories of those pictures.

Ann: It was such a community building piece! We don't have family story boards like that, but we give parents simple pages to fill out for a family book for our room. Having that presence in the classroom is so powerful. And when families read this book about all the other families, and then use that to directly connect with each other, I can step out of the role of facilitating their relationships with each other, the way you were describing earlier.

### Learning From This Dialogue

Ann: Talking this last couple of weeks has helped me reflect on and articulate what this change process has been for me. In talking with you I get this new perspective on it, get to think about why I am doing such and such and if it is working or not working. You were commenting when we first sat down today, that after we talked last week you became more aware of what you were doing. And that's how I felt, too. In this dialogue we are getting to deepen our own understanding about what we are doing and see our work in new ways or with new awareness.

Deadru: Putting it in the forefront of our minds. That has certainly happened. I'm starting to feel some validation. To know the same questions exist in different settings. For each of our rooms this is something we have been wanting to build and strengthen. I have just been watching it grow and watching parents grow in it as well. To start to hear validation for it as well, that's a nice change.

Ann: And it's validating for me, knowing that there's another person out there with the same convictions and goals in working with families. I know I'll continue to learn from this dialogue.