



MARGIE CARTER lives in Seattle where she teaches at Pacific Oaks College NW. She travels widely to speak and consult with early childhood programs. She is co-authoring a new book on environments with Deb Curtis.

Mobilizing New Leadership

This past summer I spent some time re-reading a few of the professional books that have inspired me in recent years: William Ayers, *To Teach*; Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*; Robert Fried, *The Passionate Teacher*; Deborah W. Tegan's chapter "Passion and the Art of Teaching" in *Teaching and Learning: Collaborative Exploration of the Reggio Emilia Approach*, edited by Victoria Fu, Andrew Stremmel, and Lynn Hill; and Jacqueline Grennon Brooks and Martin G. Brooks, *The Case for Constructivist Classrooms*. One book seemed to lead to another in the above order; from their titles you might get a sense of the ideas I was pursuing. I'll share some quotes to encourage you to visit these books yourself.

This reading spurt started as I returned home from the last Leaders in Action Summer Institute sponsored by the Center for the Child Care Workforce (CCW), and my mind was buzzing with the powerful voices that were there. Because CCW announced it was no longer able to continue as an independent organization, a doubt was cast over the future of these marvelous summer leadership institutes. With others I found myself reflecting on what made these institutes so remarkable and wondering how we could be reproducing this experience in our professional development efforts around the country. Identifying some key concepts and experiences led me to revisit these books, and the common threads they suggested provoked more discussion and reading. I hope to spark further dialogue among all of us around these ideas.

Getting Teachers, Providers, and Directors to the Table

It is well documented that the quality of care children receive is intricately linked to the education, compensation, and working conditions of their caregivers. With this in mind, a number of state initiatives are underway linking further training with salary enhancements. While these efforts represent hard work by advocates in those communities, missing at the decision-making table where these initiatives are crafted are the very people who spend their days with children — teachers, providers, and directors. When you hear these people speak, it is clear that a liveable wage must be our starting place, not a goal that is reached after years of experience and more education. They are also clear about the kind of learning experiences and working conditions that help them get better at their jobs. Why are these voices not heard? Why does their leadership remain untapped?

Several things stood out for me at the CCW Leadership Institute, making it a unique professional development experience. The first was the prioritization of teachers, providers, and directors as participants, with recruitment efforts and a special scholarship fund for them to attend. Another was the organization, format, and pedagogy used. It so obviously worked well to bring forward smart minded, powerful voices. There was not only a clear commitment to cultural diversity, but an openness among people to talk about the tough

issues of race, power, and privilege. And most striking was the passion and courage of the people present to take risks, seek out new knowledge and skills, overcome barriers, and step forward with their leadership. I can't honestly say I see this in most of the seminars or college classes that I teach. It was this contrast that sent me searching out things I've read in the past about the role of passion in teaching and the conditions which call up passion and learning, for the adults as well as children, in educational programs. Couldn't we be making that happen more often? Wouldn't that be one way of mobilizing more leadership and power for our profession?

Taking Time to Reflect and Raise Questions

There is an extensive and ever growing body of literature about the importance of reflective teaching and collaboration. I found a striking similarity between the thoughts of the author/educators I revisited and what I saw and heard at the Leadership Institute. For instance, Parker Palmer says, "The most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching — and living — becomes." Jacqueline and Martin Brooks connect the idea of reflection with being a constructivist teacher saying, "The pathway to becoming a constructivist teacher meanders through our own memories of school as students, our

professional education, our deeply held beliefs, our most cherished values, and our private versions of truth and visions for the future.”

Ayers takes this notion into how we should be structuring time for teachers. “Teaching is an eminently practical activity, best learned in the exercise of it, and in the thoughtful reflection that must accompany that. This reflection should be structured into the teaching day, and should be conducted with peers, and with more experienced people who can act as coaches or guides, and can direct a probingly critical eye at every detail of school life.” And Deborah Tegano identifies teacher passions as emerging from collaboration and reflective dialogue. “Generally speaking, our educational system makes no formal provisions for bringing teachers together for in-depth discussions about children’s learning. Yet, when we do, we find elements of passion and renewal in the voices of teachers who experience the depth of true collaborative, reflective dialogue. Potential and creativity, flexibility, and change are inherent in collaborative dialogue.”



SAMPLE STRATEGY:
Build self-awareness into all training

Most professional development opportunities are centered around learning something new about a topic. Equally important is learning to be self-aware about our own experiences, feelings, and thoughts about the topic at hand OR a topic on our mind. Before we can integrate any new learning, we have to know what we are attaching it to or distinguishing it from. For focused dyad dialogues or reflecting writing, try posing these questions:

- Describe a time in your life when a big change occurred. What were your fears? What brought you comfort?

- What in your life has influenced you to avoid taking risks or to see yourself as a risk taker?
- What do you think are the primary influences in your current self-concept? What insights does this give you about your work with children? About taking leadership or becoming an advocate?

Have a full group discussion about things that were uncovered in these reflections and how this relates to leadership qualities members of the group may have or want to cultivate, with children or other adults.

Julia Townsend, a teacher at the Leaders in Action Institute remarked, “I just never feel better about myself than when I’m here. It is the most supportive environment I have ever been in. You can do and say anything without being afraid. Nobody else does that when they plan a conference. I’m more comfortable asking questions that I wouldn’t ask in a different environment. There is not only an emotional commitment, but a financial commitment to teachers and providers with scholarships. And back at home, I can now speak up and go to those decision-making tables without being interrupted or disrespected.” How can we create this kind of experience in an ongoing way for our caregivers and teachers?

Using a Constructivist, Empowering Pedagogy

The early childhood field has long heralded constructivism as a suitable approach to building children’s cognitive development. Why have we been less focused in our teacher education and leadership development efforts? The Brooks offers some guiding principles for a constructivist pedagogy with adult learners, including posing problems of emerging relevance, structuring learning around primary concepts, and seeking and valuing points of view.

They remind us that, “Constructivist teaching practices help learners to internalize and reshape, or transform, new information.” Participants at the Leaders in Action Summer Institute were a testimony to how that works.

Serena Spearman said, “Here I can see that I’m more than just a little family day care provider. I’m a leader, a mentor, and foremost, a teacher with a degree in my community. I worked hard for that. What I’m finding is when we put a name on ourselves like *babysitter*, it stabs me. It’s a stigma. Now my goal is to help family providers educate themselves so they can believe in themselves and be all they can be.”



SAMPLE STRATEGY:
A place where I belong

To consider how an environment fosters or defeats a sense of belonging, have people go on a scavenger hunt around the building to find something that represents such things as the following:

- Something that sparks a curiosity
- Something that connects you to other people
- Something that makes you feel respected
- Something that insults your intelligence

The examples that get brought to the group discussion help us get to know each other better as well as to construct an understanding about how to set up environments for children or adult learners so that they feel powerful, eager to learn, and ready to take action.

Forging Relationships of Integrity and Respect

Parker Palmer says, “Truth is an external conversation about things that matter;

conducted with passion and discipline." At the Institute this quest for truth about practices in our profession took the form of animated discussions, not shrinking away from intense feelings or conflicts, and calling for help, new insights, and support in climbing over barriers. Verna Aggie, a provider, described the experience this way, "We put our differences together and come together to share a common cause to help build and support each other. We see we have the same commitments."

SAMPLE STRATEGY:

Listening on the edge of our seats

Participants at the Leaders in Action Institute were encouraged to continually *listen on the edge of our seats* in order to truly hear each other and open ourselves up to each other's wisdom and experiences. This was especially important as we faced the ongoing legacy of racism and dynamics of power and privilege. This involved taking risks and taking action to check out assumptions, get past fear and pain, and as Serena Spearman put it, "Hold each other up."

SAMPLE STRATEGY:

Arrange chairs to represent power

One of the ways to show respect for differences is to plan learning activities that go beyond verbal linguistic skills or ways of understanding the world. Gather a set of four or five folding chairs and put them in a pile. Ask people to take turns rearranging the chairs to represent what power means to them. The visual impact of this can communicate some powerful understandings and lead to some ideas participants want to take home and put into action.

Including a variety of ways to explore ideas together is especially useful in leveling the playing field. Many child care workers don't think of themselves as

academically savvy and are easily disempowered in professional development settings. When we try to get issues of race, power, and privilege out on the table, hesitation, fear, or defensiveness can take over. But as Parker Palmer says, "We can get into the circle that is already within us by abandoning ourselves to the yearnings that run just behind, or ahead of, our fears." People are longing for relationships of respect and integrity and with the promise of that, will take risks they might otherwise avoid. As Marcelina Johnson explained at the institute, "Everything I do the first time is hard . . . Once you do it the first time, you can always say, 'I did it before, I can do it again'."

I personally want to keep the images of these powerful teachers, directors, and providers alive in my mind to remind myself how important it is that we have these leaders shaping the initiatives to come. Remembering Robert Fried's words inspired us to gather a photo guidebook of the Leaders in Action Summer Institute, "The passionate teachers I have observed are able to develop a culture that forges relationships of integrity and respect, one in which people know they are engaged in important work together." My dream is that this kind of professional development culture will become commonplace across the country and that it will mobilize an unstoppable new cadre of leaders for high quality early care and education.

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To learn more about Margie Carter's work and the videos and books she has co-authored with Deb Curtis, visit their web site at www.ecetrainers.com.

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