

Building Democracy, One Child At a Time

Ideas for training staff

by Margie Carter

At the end of an engaging presentation about an in-depth project a group of children had undertaken trying to figure out how to catch the moon, a director sitting next to me leaned over and whispered her delight, "Think what our country would be like if all children were encouraged to think like that!" I had to smile because I was feeling similarly.

These children were clearly fully involved and thinking outside the box and their teacher responded with respectful enthusiasm, offering multiple ways for them to explore this ongoing interest. They were encouraged to challenge each other with questions, invent ways to test out their theories, and tell the story of their experiences to their classmates, families, and visitors.

Whenever I see children actively engaged in pursuing their questions and ideas, I am reminded how much more is possible than is typical in our early education programs. Why, instead, do we more frequently see the kind of teaching that John Gatto refers to as "dumbing them down"?

The discussion which followed this lovely story of the children's extended project included some disquiet on the part of some Head Start staff in attendance. Faced with increasing mandates for specified curriculum and outcomes, along with endless paperwork requirements, they felt very disheartened about being able to find time for these kinds of

projects with children. The tension finally broke when someone named what they were all feeling. "There's a game we have to play in Head Start now. No getting around it." Nods all around. "Yes," I offered, "no doubt true, but the real issue is, what else are you doing that you don't see as a game? What do you think these children really deserve and how are you pouring your hearts, minds, and time into that?"

We have all sorts of reasons why our programs aren't what we want them to be. For Head Start the most compelling reasons may be the proliferation of regulations and paperwork, while child programs struggle with lack of resources and few teachers who see this work as their career, let alone their life's calling. Still, I've seen both child care and Head Start programs move beyond these difficulties, inventing engaging experiences for the children and teachers, ones that keep their hearts soaring and their minds growing.

What makes this possible? At the risk of sounding overly simplistic, I think it has to do with the vision the director has for the program and the kind of leadership she or he offers, along with the infrastructure and organizational climate that gets developed. Directors who focus on these things typically overcome barriers they encounter, viewing them, like Tom Peters suggests, as speed bumps, not road blocks along the way.

We live in such fragile times. So much conspires to take our dreams away. Our personal lives, our programs, indeed, democracy in our country — all seem quite precarious. That can fuel despair, OR it can fuel determination. For me, this is the biggest gift I've received from the Italian educators of Reggio Emilia. Their hard, hard work of building a dream out of the ashes of a war-torn country emerging from fascism should humble all early childhood educators in the United States. A half century later, we ought to get past our "yes, buts . . ." and draw this kind of inspiration from them. We could see our work as they did, building democracy, one child at a time.

This could be the most important lesson we draw from Reggio, way beyond creating beautiful environments or stunning documentation. Today educators from Reggio Emilia ask us probing questions and give us big challenges to think about. They talk about the rights of a child, rather than the needs of a child. They ask us to focus on the identity of our program, not just the budget and regulations.

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How do you see your work?

My writing partner and colleague, Deb Curtis, talks with tremendous passion about her return to teaching children. After twenty-some years of doing teacher education, her decision to take this new career path is a marvel to me. When she tells stories of how she negotiates all those big feelings of distressed children or their parents, how little money there is in her program, the long hours she works making her classroom be what children deserve, I sometimes wonder how she does it. "I can't ever die, there's so much to learn! Being with these kids brings me hope for humanity," she says. "With each interaction, each plan of what to offer them, I think of my job as growing a democracy. I really do. That keeps me focused on my intention, even when things get bumpy."

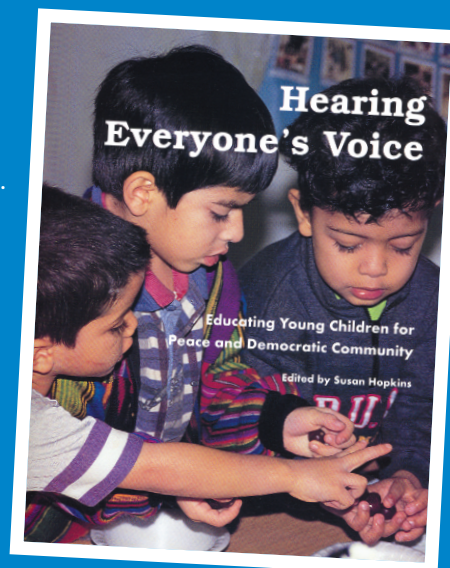
I find this an awesome notion, seeing our work as building democracy, especially in these fragile times. I'm reminded of a story about Dr. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana who tirelessly worked to decolonize Africa during the same period as the founders of the Reggio schools. At one point some of Africa's freedom fighters came to him in desperation requesting more help for the fierce struggles ahead. His response was, "You are right, we need more help. Let us recruit more teachers to work with the children. Our future depends on more teachers, not more troops."

This understanding of homeland security from Nkrumah and Reggio educators should sharpen our thinking, along with our determination to offer children the experiences and skills that will ensure the future of democracy in our country. Approaching our work in this way offers not only more job satisfaction, but more meaningful engagement with the caregiving, teaching, and learning process.

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Strategy

Get clear about the connections

Not just a lofty idea, democracy is strengthened or weakened by concrete things that we do each day. Are we clear about the connections between our practice today and how these children will lead us into a peaceful and productive future? Spend some time with your staff considering these questions:

- What are we doing to give children the message that they deserve the very best, the deepest respect, and a full set of possibilities for their future?
- How are we helping children translate their self-doubt into confidence, their fear of differences into genuine curiosity, their desire to belong into eagerness to make a contribution?
- What can we do each day to help children practice negotiation skills,

collaborative decision making, and non-violent conflict management?

- What approaches to curriculum will engage children's enthusiasm to participate, nourish their minds, and cultivate them as critical thinkers rather than parrots?
- How are children getting experiences with a democratic process when they are with us? What are they learning about a commitment to liberty and justice for all?
- What kind of role model is each of us offering?

How do you see democracy?

I recently read a statistic that astounded me, even though generally speaking, I'm aware that few people in the US really vote in our elections.

"In the 2000 election, more than half of eligible women voters age 18 to 34 didn't go to the polls. That's roughly 15 million women. Of those, 11 million didn't bother to register, and 4 million registered but didn't vote." (Nicole Brodeur, "Bringing women into the power circle." *Seattle Times*, April 11, 2004)

When I think of what a female-dominated field the early childhood profession is, I'm struck by how much power we have to turn this statistic around. In many countries, indeed, historically in the US, people have died for the right to vote. How can we be so complacent about participating in this process? Many say it's because they feel powerless, which I take to mean, they don't think their little vote makes a difference.

Is this the message we want children to get? Is this the way we can ensure strong democracy? Busy as all of our lives are, we have to make time to research the candidates and make thoughtful decisions about where to place our vote. Hopefully, we're smarter than just to rely on the daily newspaper, not to mention paid political ads. We have to do a little digging, debating, and sorting out of whose interests are served by particular positions and policies. We have to be willing to dialog with people whose ideas differ from our own.

I had a disturbing discussion with a young waitress who told me this upcoming November would be the first election where she could vote. She told me she didn't really know much about politics so she was just going to vote for the person her parents endorsed. I suggested she do a bit more homework than that, learning about the candidates, what they stood for and their track records and make her decision based on what she really thought would be best for the country. She shrugged her shoulders. "That's more work than I want to do."

This reminded me so much of responses I've gotten from some students in my early childhood classes who've told me, "It's too hard to think about all these variables, Margie. Just tell me how to handle this child . . . what curriculum activities I can do . . . or what I should say to this parent."

As Deb Curtis often says, "We've gotten this crazy idea that hard is bad. We want everything to be quick and easy. Working hard at something can be very rewarding and it's something you usually remember with fondness. Now tell me, when was the last time you remember with fondness the last hamburger you had at the drive-through restaurant, compared with a delicious meal you planned and cooked for your family or friends?" Perhaps it seems easier to do what someone tells us and harder to think about the contribution we might make, but what are the consequences of a society that puts a priority on *easy*? Which of these notions are we trying to encourage in children? What kind of role models are we offering them with our lives?


Strategy Setting an example

Many of us remember a teacher or parent exclaiming, "Do as I say!" If you routinely saw contradictory or hypocritical behavior, you may have wanted to reword that sentence. Do you mean, "Do as I say and not as I do?" Children typically learn more from our actions than from our words. What kind of role modeling are we offering about the importance of thinking, analyzing, and being involved in keeping democracy strong in our country? Do we model passivity and fear, or advocacy and risk taking? Our individual and collective behaviors, along with our program policies and organizational culture, set an example for how we think people should govern themselves.

Here are some ideas you might consider:

- Hold staff and parent interviews and orientations in groups, with representatives of current staff and families offering their ideas and questions about being involved with the program. This involves people in a dialog process rather than a marketing experience, perhaps producing more thoughtfulness on assets and weaknesses and the possibilities for real contributions. Hold exit interviews in the same fashion. Investments like this might be the most effective advertising strategy you could devise.
- Involve your program in your community, looking for meaningful ways for the children to contribute to what is going on around them. Could you offer your facility for community events to further those connections?
- On Election Day, arrange your staffing patterns so that teachers can get to the polls during the day. Stay open extended hours, encouraging parents to get to the polls before going home.
- Make a personal commitment to getting five people to the polls who might otherwise not vote. Make this a focus of conversation between you, the children, and their families.

If you're wondering what else you might do, individually or as a program, check out MoveOn's book, *50 Ways to Love Your Country*. With compelling personal stories from ordinary citizens around the US, including teachers, this book offers, in Arianna Huffington's words, "a user-friendly how-to guide for fixing our broken democracy."

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