

Investing in Our Teachers

Ideas for training staff

by Margie Carter

Recently a director remarked to me, “If I had one year with a stable staff who really worked well together and truly enjoyed the kids, I would think I’d died and gone to heaven.” To me, this captures both the frustration and the longing many of us have in our early childhood programs. For those who haven’t forsaken our dreams, the continual frustration we experience can turn to dismay. Wanting to avoid discouragement, we may, instead, don a happy face to convince ourselves or others that we are satisfied with what we have accomplished. It is wonderful, for instance, to achieve NAEYC accreditation, but how do we interpret the study reporting that quality often plummets after the self-study process is completed? Does the accreditation plaque on our wall speak to a deep yearning within us or a significant turning point in our programming? Do our successes reflect the courage of our imaginations?

While I definitely think we should celebrate our progress and accomplishments in creating high quality programs, it is hard to feel satisfied when a bigger dream tugs at our heart. Perhaps this is why many people let their dreams die. Who wants to go to work disheartened every day? As Marcy Whitebook says, “I suspect that most of all we have trouble as a field because we are so used to settling for what we can get, and *coping creatively* with too few resources that we don’t ask the fundamental questions about how child care ought to be. We don’t raise enough challenges. We forget

to dream. Imagine the child care of our dreams, not just the child care that’s good enough” (Carter & Curtis, 1999).

When we lower our sights and shrug our shoulders, trying to be *realistic*, the tell-tale signs of powerlessness begin to hold us hostage. Settling for the current situation dulls our enthusiasm and ultimately diminishes our efforts. Whitebook goes on to say, “First and foremost, we have to have a vision. Without one, it is mighty hard to reach a destination and easy to get where we never intended to go.”

I’m one of these people who believes that once you have glimpsed a different way of being, it is impossible to continue business as usual. I want to offer this window of possibility to directors and want them, in turn, to provide that experience for their staff. This doesn’t mean more work to do and further exhaustion, but rather, working differently. I return again and again to the words of David Whyte, “The antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest. The antidote to exhaustion is whole heartedness. It is those things you do half heartedly that really wear you out” (Luden, et al., 2002). I think this is the idea underpinning the director who says heaven for her would be one year with a stable staff who really work well together and truly enjoy the kids. What she’s really talking about is a staff who collectively work with wholeheartedness.

What would engender teachers who work together with their whole hearts? How is the notion of wholeheartedness different from romanticism, or alternatively workaholicism? The metaphor of a community garden project comes to mind. (For a glimpse of this, I highly recommend Paul Fleischman’s little book, *Seedfolks*.) We carve out the plot, till and nourish the soil, sow the seeds, weed, fertilize, cultivate patience, and learn to savor the process as well as the harvest. This may involve visiting demonstration gardens, getting advice from master gardeners, and investing in new tools and technology. In other words, we develop the long view and make an ongoing investment.

Plot, soil, and seeds

I want our programs to be carving out a plot that feeds the soul. We have far more to offer than just keeping kids safe, entertained, and learning the rules of school culture. Our programs could be providing an experience of belonging to a community, a deep sense of joy in learning, and a desire to create a world that is equitable and democratic. What soil will produce a

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bounty of imagination and skill to make it so?

Because we can't pay them much, our teachers need to experience something significant enough to want to stick around. We need to create a culture of hope, a sense of possibilities, an eagerness to inquire and learn more. Whatever the external factors, we all have the power to shape the immediate environment around us. If you do this thoughtfully in your role as a director, you'll find that your program can transform the sense of powerlessness and isolation that prevails in the lives of caregivers, teachers, children, and families. Your leadership toward that end has the potential to call people to a different way of being in the world, not to mention shaping the next generation with a set of values and experiences that bring hope, generosity, and a lasting global peace.

Seeds: Invest in imaginations

When recruiting, orienting, and supervising teachers, what concrete strategies do you use to grow their imaginations? Are you focused on job descriptions, standards, policies and procedures or do you give attention to messages, interactions, and training that encourage imaginative thinking and envisioning an extraordinary way to be working with children and families? Ruth Beagleholz talks to her staff like this: "The vision I form each day I come to work is to provide a sanctuary of peace and freedom from the pain of the streets for teen mothers. A sanctuary of acceptance without judgment where each teen's story is her own. A place of healing and change." She invites, indeed, insists that each staff member form a vision for their days with the children and their mothers. She models this in the way she cares for the teachers, taking time in meetings to honor their commitment with rituals such as a *healing-the-healer* ceremony where they light a candle and

wash each other's feet, acknowledging all the steps they have to take and how much standing up they have to do for their philosophy.

Michael Koetje uses precious staff development time and funds to take his teachers to innovative stores. He opens staff meetings playing musical recordings with inspiring lyrics, reads quotes, passes out art magazines.

What seeds are you planting to grow active imaginations? How would you describe your investment in this area?

Fertilizer, weeds, tools

Seeds usually won't grow if they aren't fertilized and weeds begin to invade your garden. For instance, you may have worked hard to institute staff meetings, but how are they being used? Is time spent only making announcements, reviewing schedules, tending to logistical details or required trainings? Your weeds may be growing clutter and shabbiness in the environment, staff disgruntlement, or passivity. Take time to get to the roots of these problems so they don't overpower your fledgling sprouts.

Tools: Tend to the roots

Wendy Cividanes describes her program's fertilizer in this way: "We are fortunate to have staff meetings every week in our program, short as they are. For a while we didn't realize how our time in these meetings could be better used for staff and community development. After we surveyed the teachers we came up with a much more meaningful use of our time. Now only the first week of the month is devoted to center business. The second and third meetings are staff choices where people do a variety of things, from requesting workshops to working on improving some aspect of our mission within their time. The last week of the month our

staff comes together to work on creating documentation displays. We help each other with the writing and visual layout and simultaneously feel more connected to what's happening in our different rooms."

Karen Haigh outlined her director goals for staff development in team meetings this way: "I want to create a climate where people become confident and excited about learning. I want to help them become more reflective in their work, to set goals, and be able to explain why. Finally, I want them to share their thinking and hear other perspectives. In addition to our own viewpoints, we have begun to make sure we think in terms of three perspectives at each of our meetings: the child's, the teacher's, and the parent's. Sometimes the administrative perspective is needed as well."

Are you primarily focused on the seeds or the weeds in your program? Sometimes all the director's time gets spent trying to *remediate* problems and healthy new sprouts aren't even noticed. Do you tend to see the roots of problems as centered in particular people or have you examined aspects of your organizational climate that may be propagating weeds?

Investment and the long view

In describing how she is conceptualizing her new mentoring role, Ann Pelo says she has framed the focus of her time this way: "I want to become the person I longed to have support me in my years of teaching in our non profit child care program. I didn't need a supervisor as much as I needed someone to think with, to show me how to transform myself and my practice" (Carter, 2004).

Indeed, the teachers Ann has worked with over the past year describe what a difference it has made to have a pro-

gram invest in them by providing a mentor. It has not only improved their practice, but their sense of the contribution they have to make to the program and the profession as a whole. One teacher described the staff as being called to a higher vision for themselves. Another testifies that he is a different person in the world now that he has been shown and held accountable for a different way of being with children (Carter, n.d.).

With the scarce resources of time and money, early childhood programs must take the long view when it comes to investing in our teachers. We have to get past the notion that we can't afford *the luxury* of something like mentors for our staff. The real question is, can we afford not to make this investment? Pelo reminds us that our efforts to cultivate teachers who are attentive, joyful, and responsive is not only a call to protect those very same natural qualities in children; but it is ultimately what feeds our souls and keeps us in our child care jobs.

In his very timely book, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*, Paul Loeb quotes the advice of Reverend Victoria Safford who tells us to "plant ourselves at the gates of hope," even in times or situations that invite pessimism, because "with our lives we make answers all the time" (Loeb, 2004). Surely we can live in heaven for more than a year. We can make it a daily practice.

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