

# Global Leaders for Young Children: Stepping Forward to Advocate for Early Childhood

by Joan Lombardi

The idea for a leadership program that would work across borders in our efforts to advocate for young children and their families first emerged during the World Forum in Acapulco, México in 2003. It was at that event, among so many leaders from throughout the world, that the call to improve our skills and build more public awareness of early childhood issues buzzed through the conference rooms, spilling into the hallways, and out into the sunshine.

The World Forum seemed to provide a natural opportunity to bring together a smaller group to share and learn more intensely about public policies affecting early childhood development. What emerged is not just a leadership program, but rather a new dimension in the growing movement to improve the life chances and overall development of young children throughout the world.

This seed of an idea began to grow through the commitment of resources and support from the IBM Global Work/Life Fund, and through collaboration between the World Forum Foundation and The Children's Project. Within months, the overall goals of the initiative were drafted and a selection

process was established for identifying potential applicants from a number of countries throughout the world. Criteria for selection included: experience working with young children and families; leadership potential in advocating for young children, particularly those at risk; and a strong commitment to learning across cultures and improving conditions facing young children.

Each participant selected was invited to attend two World Forum events over a two year period and in turn agreed to plan and implement a small project with other Global Leaders from their country to raise awareness of key issues and promote quality early childhood services. Participants were also asked to prepare and present a summary of the early childhood policies and programs in their home countries.

It was with great anticipation that the first class of seven Global Leaders representing South Africa, México, and Hungary came together at Working Forum Belfast in November 2004. They came from government positions and kindergarten classrooms, from community-based organizations and from the private sector. From those first moments of introductions and greetings grew

hours of laughter and friendship; connections and encouragement; ideas and possibilities for change. It was the first class that experimented with how to best create a format to share ideas about early childhood policy and advocacy, and refined the goals that now form the basis for the Global Leaders Program:

- to become more effective advocates for young children and their families
- to develop a better understanding of the global early childhood movement, and how to use the lessons emerging in other countries in our work at home
- to gain a greater appreciation and understanding of other cultures and the importance of diversity and tolerance as core values in early childhood development
- to gain a better sense of who we are, how we relate to others, and how we can continue to learn and grow as individuals and as members of our community
- to become more effective change agents in our communities and countries for quality early childhood development services

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## Voices of Global Leaders

*“Being a Global Leader means that I am an advocate for children . . . I see it as a very big responsibility and yet a humbling one because I feel there is so much to learn to become an effective advocate. This has been a tremendous learning experience. I will apply what I learn in my country . . . What I have learnt will not only affect my professional life, but my work with children, as a mother, a teacher at our church school, and as a trainer . . . I have really changed my view of children. The experience has changed my life.”*

*“ . . . it means the possibility to get in touch with people working and caring for children . . . the responsibility I have as a Global Leader is to advocate for children and represent them in as many ways as possible . . . My heart has been touched by many profound stories . . . everything that happens in my own country becomes more relevant . . . ”*

*“ . . . through meeting other Global Leaders, we get additional information, a sense of urgency, and a vision for how we can address these problems . . . being a Global Leader . . . means (you) assimilate a knowledge base from all over the world and use it in local and national contexts.”*

*“ . . . it is a great opportunity that I can meet so many outstanding ECE leaders from different countries, and exchange ideas and share experiences which are valuable to bring back home . . . it means more responsibilities need to be taken for our children and the world . . . it means you belong to a new community, where you find new friends.”*

*“It is a way to articulate, mobilize, strengthen, and focus on what is being done in ECD. As a Global Leader, I receive tremendous support from the global network. I get a view from my partners around the world.”*

*“I feel supported and I feel that I need to support those around me working in this field. This is a two-way street. That is what the responsibility is about. I feel responsible to myself becoming an advocate. I feel responsible for children that I am working for and for other professionals as well.”*

*“At the World Forum, as a Global Leader, I feel I am around people who love children and want a better world for children. I know there are so many people concerned about ECD and that has touched me . . . if we want to make an impact, we need to focus on poor children.”*

*“ . . . I was particularly excited that my advocacy would be supported and I could be more serious about that work. It is an enriching experience to learn about the situations in other countries, their strategies to address them, and to plan our own. This opportunity of Global Leadership will enable me to reach out to a large number of people in my country — India.”*

*“Every moment was a mind blowing experience for me . . . I realized the concerns were nearly the same — attitudes, cooperation, etc. I was not alone. I was not from a country that was alone in dealing with ECD issues.”*

*“ . . . We have been given the strength from global interaction to not only make a difference but also to be able to work and live the difference. Globally we all have similar issues and are working on strategies to change and improve ECD. The process will now become quicker as we can use each other’s experiences and knowledge as a working base . . . it has given me confidence to believe in what we are doing and this will impact our work and will make us a force to be reckoned with within our countries and globally for the benefit of ECD and children worldwide . . . ”*

Once back home, this resourceful group of leaders put their energies and ideas to work to create projects that included trying out public awareness materials in a community in South Africa, creating a web site to connect early childhood organizations in México, and planning and writing about effective transition activities for young children moving from kindergarten to the primary grades in Hungary.

By the time the 2005 World Forum on Early Care and Education took place in Montreal, 12 new participants from

India, China, Brazil, Poland, and Kenya joined the initial class of Global Leaders. Through two days of in-depth presentations and discussions of early childhood systems in each country, followed by full participation in all the World Forum sessions, something very special emerged. Participants reported that they were gaining new insights into the importance of early childhood development; they were seeing that the issues in their home countries were similar to those in other countries. They felt less isolated. They were encouraged by each other. They were gaining new perspectives about other cultures. They were hearing new ideas that they could take home and try out. They felt respected.

They felt new energy. They felt a renewed commitment to make a difference for children throughout the world.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The first class of Global Leaders has now moved on, but their friendship and ideas will stay with us as we move the program forward. The new class is already planning new projects and finding creative ways to improve and expand services and build public awareness about early childhood development. The World Forum Foundation is grateful for the continued support provided by The IBM Global Work/Life Fund and Community Playthings.*

For more information about the  
Global Leaders Project  
or the World Forum Foundation,  
visit  
[www.WorldForumFoundation.org](http://www.WorldForumFoundation.org).

The World Forum Foundation's Global Leaders are pictured  
on the front cover of *Exchange*  
and are identified on page 2 of the Table of Contents.