What Could You Be Thinking?

by Margie Carter

Thanks to the tireless efforts of advocates, a growing body of research, and grim statistics on school achievements and dropout rates fueling No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the early childhood arena is finally coming into the spotlight and being taken seriously by policy makers, funders, and K-12 educators. We should shout "BRAVO!" on the one hand, and be acutely vigilant on the other. Will all this attention, dollars for quality enhancement, and pre-kindergarten programs take us where we want to go? Or will teachers and children drown or swim away, their spirits unable to survive the tsunami of paperwork, assessments, and standards designed as accountability systems? Does this approach to quality improvement and assured learning outcomes deserve so much time and money? Or should these resources be aimed at improving working conditions, salaries, and a responsive pedagogy to engage teachers and children in learning?

Across the country early childhood program directors and teachers are begging for a listening ear and some strong leadership to address their concerns. They pour out their tears, frustration, and stories.

"I've been in this profession for 30 years, devoted to accreditation and proud that we always exceed the standards. Going through the new accreditation process has been the worst year of my career."

"To get our portfolios together we pulled lead teachers out of their classrooms for a couple of months just to get all the required documentation in place. During that time I think we compromised the quality of children's experience with us, ironically trying to prove we met those quality standards."

"The assessors barely spent any time in our classrooms because they were so focused on our paperwork. We could have downloaded documentation from the web and they wouldn't have even known the difference. When they are right there in our center, why is the paperwork more important than what's going on right then?"

"What a slap in the face to not get any acknowledgment of all our hard work. How is this supposed to keep our staff motivated to improve? If our funders didn't require it, I would never subject my staff to this experience again."

There are equally painful and outrageous stories coming from directors subjected to rating scales that hold out the promise of merit money as they go through their state's new QRS systems.

"They're so focused on their numbers, they don't even see the quality of relationships in our program. Isn't that worthy of merit, even if we don't have six stuffed animals?"

I've been to a lot of these programs and many I would be pleased to enroll my grandchildren in. Then there are stories of state funded pre-K programs offering better salaries and thus attracting all the degreed teachers (as well as income-eligible families) away from the well established, community-based early childhood programs, effectively decimating them with what Roger Neugerbauer (2007) aptly terms, 'friendly fire.' And once they get to

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these school-based pre-K programs, teachers are mandated to focus on preparing children to become part of the elementary school culture. With confusion and aching hearts they come asking:

"How do we best serve these children who won't be ready for rigid structures and long blocks of time in seat work? Is it strategically savvy and ethically sound to subject young children to this approach in hopes it will get them ready for school and high stakes testing?"

My question is:

What happened to committing ourselves to transforming schools so they will be ready to provide engaging and meaningful learning for kids, with liberty and justice for all, replacing what Jonathan Kozol (1992) calls "savage inequalities"?

Developing thoughtful teaching practices

To be honest, I'm appalled by the growing clamor for a 'teacher proof' curriculum, suggesting that teachers be given a schedule and script to deliver lessons to children. The notion seems to be that we can't trust our teachers, that all children learn at the same pace and in the same way, and relying on the expertise of commercial curriculum developers is the best investment of our dollars. I couldn't disagree more.

It's true that many teachers in early childhood programs have limited education and know-how in providing for children's learning. But instead of carefully orienting and mentoring them in how to think through the complexities of the job, we give them checklists and techniques, and expect them to meet an ever growing body of requirements with no additional time, salary, or support. Carol Brunson Phillips (Day) and Sue Bredekamp (1998) further remind us:

"Too many teachers in the United States work in programs that do not have a well conceptualized philosophy and organization; they are expected to make do without one or to make it up as they go along."

Former teacher-philosopher John Gatto (2002), chides us not to dumb children down with our curriculum. Our early childhood professional development efforts must take up this challenge as well. I find teachers get very excited by philosophical discussions, especially when they are tied to how the ideas translate into everyday interactions and planning.

Strategy: Clarify your values and philosophy

Spend time in your staff meetings exploring the values and concepts you want guiding your work. I often give teachers a simple chart to work with and, as we talk over a series of meetings, we fill in words and phrases in each column to capture the essence of our agreements. To complement our own ideas, we discuss extracts describing related educational philosophers, for instance, Maria Montessori, John Dewey, Asa Hilliard, Maxine Greene, Lisa Delpit, Paulo Freire, Albert Einstein, Jerome Bruner. My goal is to help teachers see that they are more than technicians; they, too, can think philosophically and that this has great significance for their work. I want their time together to explore a meeting of their minds, rather than recipes or quick-fix techniques. As they struggle with their challenges, I want to offer them ways to construct a new sense of themselves and their work.

Developing intellectual vitality

Over the years Lilan Katz has offered us some important clarity on fostering desirable dispositions and engaging children's minds. She reminds us to tease apart the notions of intellectual vitality and academic success, saying that we tend to overestimate children academically and under estimate them intellectually. Katz (1998) suggests that rather than just focusing on children's behaviors, we

Children deserve	Families deserve	Staff deserve
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Meeting Up with Children's Minds

Before I leave on a speaking trip I always seek council with my young grandsons. As Lilian Katz suggests, our minds meet on matters of mutual interest. My grandsons and I are each preoccupied with ideas about what it takes to be a good teacher and how schools can best offer children what they deserve. I especially turn to Jesse and Coe when I find myself tied in knots over how to offer something useful to directors, teachers, and teacher educators. They readily offer me reflections on their experience. Together we have learned to be more critical thinkers. Listen to their insights in the following discussion we had toward the end of the school year when Coe had just turned seven and Jesse was ending preschool, anticipating kindergarten in the fall. I asked them what they had figured out so far about good teaching.

Coe: To be a good teacher, don't just give information from a book, but from your experience, something you are excited about. Kids like to know teachers' opinions, not just hear them read from a book. Some teachers really need different techniques.

Margie: What do you mean?

Coe: Like, they should change their style.

Margie: I'm thinking that a teacher's techniques and a teacher's style could be different ideas. What are you thinking?

Coe: Well, a technique is probably something just for one time and a teacher's style is how you always are. Basically I think teachers should make a list of what you don't do so good and what you do good. Then ask us to look at the list. Ask us what you should change and what you need help with.

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Jesse: I think it's all about what kids play about. From watching. They could figure out how to teach if they would just watch.

Margie: Watch who?

Jesse: Us, you silly!

Coe: I think he means that what kids play when they are young relates to what they want to do as a grown up.

Jesse: Yeah. I want to grow up to be a teacher that teaches how to make real things. You have to start small and keep getting more complicated. Not by ourselves, but to be a team.

Margie: Say more about what you mean.

Jesse: I'll ask questions like, "What pieces do we need?" That makes you learn like a team. Sometimes friends even get split up because that makes them smarter. I've been watching teachers to see what makes them good. Then I add my ideas. If kids are really good at everything, move them up to real things, not stupid ones. Even if they might be young, they might still be able to do real things.

would do well to meet up with their minds.

"A program has intellectual vitality if the teacher's individual and group interactions are mainly about what the children are learning, planning, and thinking about, plus their interest in each other, and only minimally about the rules and routines."

I'm pleased that our early childhood profession has historically placed a strong emphasis on social-emotional development, but fear we are in danger of neglecting that arena with our growing focus on academic standards. I'm eager to have us take up Katz's idea of intellectual vitality as we seek to strengthen learning and successful outcomes for children and their teachers. What shifts does this suggest in our practices?

Consider the professional development offerings you typically see at a conference or have at your center. Do they propose intellectual engagement with children's minds, or are they primarily focused on behavior management and strategies? The primary emphasis of in-service training these days is on how to implement a particular curriculum, use an assessment tool, or follow some health and safety procedures. If we are to help them engage children's minds, teachers need us to engage their minds as well.

Strategy: Use documentation as a thinking tool

In the U.S. our use of documentation is increasingly focused on demonstrating compliance with standards. Rating scales and assessments are no longer experienced as valuable self-study tools to motivate us toward desired improvements. Instead, these quality assurance documents

have become stress and anxiety producing high stakes report cards, taking our time and attention away from the important work of creating support systems for the teaching and learning process we want children and teachers engaged in.

Contrast this with what the Italian educators of Reggio Emilia call "pedagogical documentation," where teachers and their support staff work with the children and their families to study observations and traces of what has been unfolding so that they can learn from this documentation and consider what to offer next. Documentation is thus a "thinking tool" for them, a tool for seeking different perspectives, for revisiting what they value, and negotiating the complexities of learning to live as active citizens in a democracy.

In my opinion, one of the best tools we have to engage adults in meeting up with children's minds is to observe, document, and study children's pursuits, conversations, and ideas. This will prompt teachers and in turn, children, to become critical thinkers. Discussing documentation with colleagues, with the children themselves and their families, provides a scaffold for learning to ask the kind of questions that provoke deeper thinking. It leads to a program culture of intellectual vitality. Apart from a few quick lessons on how to adapt to school culture, what greater gift could we offer children in getting them on the road to academic success?

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