

## **The Real Power of Mentoring**

### **An interview with Ijumaa Jordan by Margie Carter**

As I follow the literature on quality enhancement efforts across the U.S., those including a mentoring aspect appear to be the most promising. But mentoring programs vary greatly from state to state and some are more carefully designed and systematic than others. In many cases the mentor's role is tied to degree or certification completion related to a higher education institution. Some state QRIS systems are offering mentoring with a focus on providing technical assistance to get teachers in compliance and moving up scores on their rating scales.

My interest has been to look at the promise of side-by-side mentoring within early childhood programs, aimed at promoting reflective teaching practices. In my view, teachers need support to closely observe what is unfolding with the children in their group and to think through possible responses and future plans. As an early childhood mentor my goal is not to get the teachers to respond the way I would, but to have them consider *their* goals and values, along with early childhood knowledge, as a reference point for deciding what to do. In some cases they might benefit from seeing how I might respond to something that comes up, but only if they hear my thinking underpinning an action and consider this in light of their own thinking. I want to promote self-reflection, not imitation.

In recent years I've also focused my mentoring on getting teachers to be intentional in their use of power with children. So often teachers feel powerless in relation to all the expectations and standards others have for their work. In trying to live up to these expectations, they can easily lose track of their own sense of agency. Justin Menkes (2011) describes the term "sense of agency" as the degree to which people attribute their circumstances and the outcomes they experience to being within their own control. When they don't feel like things are within their control, teachers easily neglect their power to act with their own integrity and intention. This often leads to strongly exercising power over children when presented with challenging behaviors. Most teachers see behavior management as an expectation that comes with their teaching role, to control the group

and keep everyone on task. I'm eager to see mentors offer teachers a way to see children's challenging behaviors as a form of communication and help them find ways to avoid power struggles.

### **A dialogue with Ijumaa Jordan**

Over the years of knowing her, I've had a number of conversations with Ijumaa Jordan and watched her mentoring in action. I'm struck by how carefully she observes and listens and tries to find specific details to explore with her mentees. Rather than seeing herself as an expert, Ijumaa approaches her mentoring work with genuine curiosity and an eagerness to understand. This isn't to say she avoids bringing up difficulties or concerns, but Ijumaa does that without judgment. When she raises concerns she does it in the context of exploring how her mentee is experiencing what is going on, what her values are, what he's striving for. In this way she can point out any contradictions that might be apparent and offer other perspectives to consider.

**MC:** Ijumaa, I'm always excited to watch you in action. You approach your mentoring work as an effort to co-construct knowledge with your mentee, rather than telling them the "right" way to do something. Has your approach to mentoring changed over the years or has this always been how you've worked?

**IJ:** My approach has changed over the years. When I first started mentoring, it wasn't by choice; I was assigned to mentor a student teacher, Tracy, in my classroom. I asked my supervisor what I should do, and she told me to help this Tracy learn to be a good teacher. I had no idea how to do that and it must of shown of my face because then she suggested I start mentoring by watching the student teacher's interaction with children, then meet with her and give her feedback and suggestions on how to improve. I mentored like that for the first half of the semester, until Tracy confessed in our meeting she felt nervous most of the time because I was watching her and she never felt she was doing anything right. All I could do was give a weak apology and asked her to give me some time to think of what else we could do. I was super professional but went crying to my mentor, Sharon, who was an experienced lead teacher telling her that I was a failure and was worried I'd discouraged Tracy from becoming a preschool teacher. My mentor helped me

understand the importance of building a relationship with a colleague vs. bossing around a student teacher. I restructured our time together so that we focused our observations of children's interest to plan activities and spent time getting to know each other. I shared part of my journey in becoming an educator. I got to know Tracy's professional aspirations and her strengths and based on these we began to plan together. Since Tracy was a talented artist and we worked together to create some art experiences for children.

Looking back on this first experience I had as a mentor I learned:

- Mentoring is about supporting people in developing into the educator they want to be versus the educator I think they should be.
- Mentoring should be about seeing the best in an educator's practice to support seeing themselves as competent and knowledgeable.
- Mentoring requires the mentor to be aware of their power and how to use it in a way to build relationships. Real growth and change happens when people have their own sense of agency in their work.

### **Considering the cultural context and how power is used**

**MC:** I know your mentoring work takes you into a variety of settings. When you work cross culturally, do you do anything differently or is your approach basically the same?

**IJ:** In all the work that I do my approach is to look at the cultural context of the situation I'm entering. Some groups are more formal in their interactions. They will address me as Ms. Jordan, and expect me to use titles as well. I try to gather that kind of information before our first actual mentoring meeting. Sometimes beginning a relationship over the phone or email is ok, but sometimes people want to meet face to face before starting the relationship. Flexibility is helpful in a mentoring relationship because each person is different even when the topic is the same. What I would say doesn't change in any of these contexts is my being authentic and vulnerable. People want real connections with other people. As a mentor, I find it valuable to share stories of mistakes I've made and the lessons I've learned from these mistakes. This demonstrates an example of taking responsibility and being resilient through disappointment.

**MC:** How do you think about power dynamics in your mentoring work? I know that many people expect a mentor to be the expert and know “the right” thing to do. It’s tempting to jump in and offer strategies, or model how to do things. But I’ve never seen you do that. I know you always try to promote self-reflection, but that can be tricky when a teacher is basically still trying to get you to tell them what they should be doing.

**IJ:** It’s true, people do expect you as a mentor to come in and tell them the right thing to do. That’s the way it’s typically been done. But what I’ve notice happens when some one comes in and just tells or persuades educators to do something, is that it may work for a bit, but the impact fades. What has greater impact is when educators change their thinking and this new thinking changes their practice. When I come into a program as an outsider expected to be an expert, I try to be transparent and explain my mentoring process before working with teachers. I also acknowledge that it may feel strange at first because sharing the power in the relationship and using self-reflection is a new practice.

**MC:** I’ve especially appreciated hearing your stories of working in the rural areas of Mpumalanga province in South Africa. Talk about working cross culturally and stepping into a totally different context! Your careful attention to how you use your power really resonated with me. I’ve often introduced teachers to Eve Trook’s descriptions of 3 kinds of power when trying to help them see what they are doing with children. Trook (1983) says we use **power on** when we are trying to prevent, stop or change something. We use **power for** in behalf of another person’s power through our planning, coaching, and scaffolding. When we use power with, we are sharing power side by side with curiosity—allowing, even enjoying, rather than guiding another’s behavior or action.

In your stories of working in South Africa, you seemed to be moving between **power for** and **power with** in your mentoring of teachers. I’m guessing they expected you to be coming in as an expert telling them what to do.

**IJ:** Since mentors feel that pressure of time and high expectations, I think it can be less work and time if you just come along with detailed instructions on what the teacher is doing wrong and how to fix it. My teammate, Hadiyah and I were forthright in saying “Yes, we have lots of theoretical and practical knowledge to share with you and we need

to work together to see if it will fit your cultural needs.” We started off with the message that each of us has vital information and skills to share in order to accomplish the work we need to do. Actually working side by side in the classroom with teachers made a huge difference in their willingness to work with us. The first day in the classroom I always choose to work as an assistant to the teacher and try to get to know the children. I also observe and gather examples of good teaching practices that I share with them when we meet to make a plan for the rest of our time together. I begin our relationship showing that I see them as a competent and knowledgeable educator.

**MC:** To my mind what you’re describing is a way of thinking through how you want to use your power with your mentee. Is that typically on your mind?

**IJ:** Yes, how I use my power with my mentee is always in the forefront of my thinking in how to navigate the relationship. My role is usually a temporary one, I see myself as providing a way for educators to develop their thinking and their practice that doesn’t require me micromanaging them. Their practice has to reflect their values and ideas or it’s superficial. I do bring a certain level of knowledge and skill to teaching and I share that through giving a different perspective or provoking deeper thinking about child development, education, and play. I want to use my influence as “power for” and discover together with my mentee the joys of working with children.**MC:** Your story of helping Vinny see some possibilities with Longo and Sindele’s interest in books is very instructive in how you thought through your use of power.

**IJ:** Vinny, a teacher in the Mpumalanga province in South Africa, and I had worked together the previous year and she was happy to have me back in her classroom. She wanted more ideas about how to “teach” her toddler children 18 months to two years. Vinny has a curious mind and always had questions for me each time we met. We had in the previous year had done an exercise where we analyzed pictures of children’s play during which. I discovered that Vinny was a keen observer and very curious about how child development could be seen in play. She appreciated the various child development books and articles I shared with her. I knew I could use Vinny’s view of me as “an expert” to exercise power over her, but that is not my way.

**MC:** You are so intentional in your mentoring approach, Ijumaa, which is just how we want teachers to be in their work with children. This parallel teaching process you have created demonstrates the real power of mentoring!

[facing page with photos]

### **What are Books For?**

By Ijumaa Jordan

One day working side by side with Vinny, a teacher in Happy Homes in the Mpumalanga province in South Africa, I noticed two of the toddlers, Longo and Sindele, had discovered the books we brought for the classroom. We expected them to sit down and “read the books” but instead they held the books in front of them and making what sounded like engine noises. I saw Vinny move towards them and I said, “ Let’s watch and see what they are doing.” Observing a little longer helped me realize that Longo and Sindele were pretending the books were steering wheels. When they began to drive around the classroom with them, Vinny wanted to stop them from using the books in that way out of concern that the books would get torn. Resources such as books are few and hard to replace, so I understood her concern and wanted to honor her desire to have the children take care of the books. I was also delighted to see the symbolic play that was unfolding and wanted the children’s ideas to be encouraged.

Since it was time for outdoor play I had a little time to figure out how to be respectful of Vinny’s values around classroom materials and support her in seeing the children’s point of view in using the books as props for their play. I also kept in mind that if I had advised Vinny to just let the boys play with the books in that way, she would have gone along with it. I wanted to model ways to have power with children.

I decided to offer the children cardboard circles. I made a plan with Vinny that I would make the circles and put them out as one of the play choices without giving the children any instructions. Then together we observed what happened. Sindele and Longo picked up the circles and immediately used them as steering wheels. After a few minutes we needed to make more because other children wanted to join in the play.

Vinny and I talked briefly about what happened and she was really happy that she didn't have to stop their play and enjoyed their play with simple materials. I expressed to Vinny my relief that what I offered turn out so well and that our observations of children's play can help us in offering materials that enhance the play.

As we watched Longo and Sindele take up the cardboard circles and turn them into steering wheels for their vehicles, I realized I was also trying to help Vinny she how she could use her power in behalf of the children's interests. Imagine if she had just pounced on them with rules about how books should be used. Imagine if I had just pounced on her about not respecting the children's ideas! In all my mentoring I want to treat the educators as I hope they will treat the children.

### **Bios**

Margie Carter and Ijumaa Jordan share a strong interest in helping teachers develop a strong sense of agency and integrity in their work with children. Both have graduate degrees from Pacific Oaks College and have been strongly influenced by faculty there in how to teach adults with attention to issues of power, privilege and culture. You can learn more about their work with Harvest Resources Associates by visiting [www.ecetrainers.com](http://www.ecetrainers.com).