

Innovation or Standardization?

An interview with Arlae Alston by Margie Carter

In October of 2012 I heard a keynote address co-delivered by Betty Jones and Louise Derman Sparks in which they raised the question, “Has professionalizing the ECE field been a help or hindrance to where we want to be?” They reviewed some ECE history and efforts to get public recognition that our jobs aren’t just babysitting or traditional women’s work not worthy of decent wages, but encompass a body of research, theory, and expertise underpinning what we do. We were reminded of the hard won efforts over many years to arrive at agreed upon standards, accreditation criteria, and professional ethics. But when conference attendees were asked if they are pleased with where we are and seem to be headed, the responses revealed plenty of discomfort, along with all the complexities we had to consider.

The clarity many agreed up was the difference between standards and standardization, a subject I’ve written about in the past. (Carter, 2006, 2011). Yes, we want to hold ourselves accountable to standards, but we don’t necessarily want standardization. Some felt they held higher standards for themselves than what is scored on a rating scale. All felt that if professionalizing our field was intended to force salaries into a professional ranking, our efforts have failed miserably. Many people who work in early education are forced to have a second job to make ends meet. Every year there are more expectations and requirements, but not more professional recognition, compensation, or better working conditions.

A typical teacher or administrator doesn’t see a strong connection between all the required compliance documents they are responsible for and actual improvement in the quality of their work. Rather, the sentiment is that completing all these documents leaves little time for the things that matter most, for instance, deeper relationships with the children and families, thoughtful reflection on curriculum planning, advocacy efforts to improve public policies and education reform.

It occurs to me that perhaps the blurred distinction between standards and standardization is preventing innovation around how programs could express the ways they are holding themselves accountable to standards and perhaps even surpassing them. I’m so heartened when I meet early

educators who are thinking outside the box even in bureaucratic systems like Head Start or state funded Pre-K programs. Meeting Arlae Alston who works in an early Head Start program in California brought me such hope. She and her team have created an exceptionally beautiful indoor and outdoor environment for children and have planned their routines like a carefully choreographed dance. Spending a day in their program I watched each teacher position herself to greet the children and families so that everyone received a personal welcome. As the morning moved along I witnessed one of the teachers seamlessly slipping away from the group to set up the next experience, be it eating, a group gathering, cleaning up, or putting out new materials. Nothing felt rushed in their schedule and the adults were truly present with the children, enjoying their company, supporting their efforts, and celebrating accomplishments. I could easily see they were meeting and surpassing all the early Head Start standards, bring creativity and a sense of unique identity for their program.

A Dialogue with Arlae Alston

MC: Arlae, thank you for being such a terrific role model for how to work within a large regulation-ridden bureaucracy without becoming a cookie-cutter, look alike program. Tell us about your journey with this. What has influenced your thinking and the way you approach your work? Have you had struggles with those who come to monitor your classroom and find something very different than what they are used to?

AA: I have been in the ECE field for many years now. Three years ago I joined the Early Head Start family. I knew very little about Head Start at the time. I wanted to work for Head Start because of the population that they serve (low income) and because I wanted to provide a beautiful and safe place for children and families. At the beginning of my career at Early Head Start I felt lost and confused. I did not understand the many standards that Head Start has. I felt as though I couldn't provide the environment that I know I should provide for children and families, with all the standards we have to adhere to. This was very difficult and painful for me. Suddenly I felt as if I was high jacked and inserted into a world of rules, regulations, and standards. I felt as if what I knew about children and environments no longer applies to the rules. It was not until I decided to sit down at home to read the standards. Night after night I read those standards. I not only wanted to become familiar with them but I also wanted to understand the meaning behind them. Deep inside I knew there was a good intention behind these standards.

Therefore I engaged in conversations with teachers that had been working for Head Start longer than I had. I found myself calling my managers with multiple questions about the standards (they were happy to answer all of my questions). I went back to the books that I had used as a student. I was on a quest, not only to comprehend the standards, but also to make sure that my classroom reflected them as well as my philosophy. This is when I was able to create environments for children that are both beautiful and meaningful to them.

When you enter my classroom, you will see lots of natural elements (plants, rocks, feathers, water) and you will also see that the classroom is divided into areas (blocks, science, manipulative, pretend) this is to meet some of our standards. Even though I am working well at meeting the standards and staying true to my philosophy, there was a time when a monitor came into my classroom and could not understand why I had heavy rocks in the environment. She was concerned about children throwing them and/or getting hurt. She was also questioning the placement of the rocks. She felt that rocks only belong outside. I found her concerns valid. As I was listening to her concerns and complaints about the rocks, I had to take a deep breath. Inside I felt angry and discouraged. Here I was, after countless nights of reading the standards and doing my best to follow them, and I felt as if I was in trouble. I was angry that she could not see how much learning was happening in my classroom through those rocks (language development, social interactions, large motor skills, safety, math concepts). In all honesty I wanted to scream at her but I knew better. I do believe that she came into my classroom with good intentions.

After taking my deep breath, I asked her to pick up a rock (by now children were outside); she looked at me puzzled but did pick up the rock. I asked her how it felt. She answered, “cold and heavy” I said, “there is some language” I asked her to try to stack the rocks up. She did. I asked to try to throw the rock, again she looked confused but did. I responded to her just like I would to a toddler, “It looks like you want to throw something, here is a ball. Rocks are heavy and can hurt if they hit somebody” After this I asked her how she felt about this experience, she let me know that she had never thought about rocks in this way before. At the end she left my classroom thanking me for the experience and she let me keep my rocks.

When I look back at this incident, I feel very proud of our field. Families are busy trying to make sure that their needs get met. We live in a society that forces parents to take two or three jobs leaving no time to go out to the park. It is our job to provide those experiences for children. It is

our job to get to know the standards, regulations, and rules. Some of those I could do without and the reality is that we need to follow them in order to obtain our funding.

MC: Your learning environment has so many unusual, beautiful materials, both indoors and in the play yard. I love all the different ways in which you include rocks for the children to engage with. As you said, most people are worried about toddlers having access to rocks, but you've incorporated them as a central learning material in your environment. Such innovation!

AA: My big message of late is you can do the standards and provide this beautiful natural environment for children. It comes from observing the children (we do the California DRDP so we have to write down observations). When we pay attention to what children are interested in and working on, we are more likely to bring materials that are meaningful to them. This beautiful environment can be done without having to spend a lot of money.

If you look around our classroom we have rocks, leaves, branches, shells (we live near the ocean), things come from the natural environment, and I go to thrift stores and garage sales. It is important to me to stay within our classroom budget. I found some stacking rocks at our local bookshop. Children are into not only collecting things but also stacking them up. When I saw those rocks at the bookshop, I immediately thought about the children in the classroom. I also thought what opportunity this was to bring natural elements while not only supporting children's interest but standards as well. Through stacking the rocks up children are working on, eye-hand coordination, math concepts (1,2,3 or small, big,), gravity, problem/solve, cause and effect and the list goes on and on. There's a thought behind everything. It's so much more than just stacking rocks on the table. I keep asking my team, what's the intention here? It can't just be because it's pretty. Everything has to have intentionality. If you walk around our room, we'll tell you a story about every single thing that's set up in the classroom.

Talk about Intentions

AA: When licensors come to my program and have questions about these "very unusual" teachable materials, I can talk about all of these learning happening. This brings me to the importance for teachers to be able to speak about our work. We are professionals and as such we need to be able to not only explain our philosophy, the intentionality behind our curriculums, but also what children are learning through it all. We have put in an incredible amount of hours not

only into our own schooling but also in trainings, workshops, and whatever else we are required to do. It is our responsibility stay fresh on the latest research and information about children's development.

Even with licensing we need to have these conversations. I keep talking to other teachers, you need to be able to explain, "Let me tell you about this glass over here with the bells; this is what children learn." We need to go back to our books and do our reading. We are professionals and we take these classes and do our homework and it's important that we be able to talk about why we do what we do.

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MC: Yes, when I was with your team, I noticed how much you all enjoyed working with the children who were using the different materials you offer. Teachers were engaged, rather than what I sometimes see as a bit bored or disconnected from the children as they play. A monitor might be able to check off everything you are required to have in the environment, but that doesn't necessarily translate into engaged learning for the children or the teachers.

AA: The environment has to be meaningful to the group of children and to the teachers. Yes, we provide children with this beautiful environment, and it is okay for teachers to add in materials that are meaningful to them as well. For instance, lately I have been into the Zen influence. I am working on slowing down and taking the world in slowly and peacefully, just like toddlers do. With this in mind I brought in a small water fountain. I added rocks and a small plant next to it. Toddlers enjoy feeling the cold water running through their fingers, they like to splash it and taste it. They also enjoy rocks. Mixing water and rocks provides with many opportunities for learning (language, fine motor skills, cause and effect, self help skills). As you can see by bringing in these objects I was able to provide a meaningful experience to toddlers while holding a great interest of mine. It is important for teachers to be comfortable in their classroom as well. For most of us our classrooms are our second homes. Not only do we spend a lot of time there, but we also invest a great deal of ourselves into preparing an optimal environment for children

and families. Therefore our classrooms need to feel like the comfort of an old pair of shoes. Our classrooms need to feel and be organic. I believe that if teachers not only feel comfortable but also have some ownership of their classrooms, they will more likely to be happy, present, and able to celebrate every moment, discovery, or even struggle that a child or family might bring into their classroom.

A Place for Families

MC: And I could see that when families dropped off or picked up their children, they seemed eager to hang out. Even the one or two who seemed rushed or hesitant found your environment and welcome a bit irresistible! Early Head Start has regulations about involving families, but you have been really innovative with this.

AA: Yes, Early Head Start has lots of standards around involving families. In fact one of the things that I most enjoy about working for EHS is the belief that families are the first teachers of their children. Many of our families come to us feeling beaten up by life. For some of them this is their first time in childcare and others have had prior experiences that have been both good and bad. With our team, we talk in meeting after meeting about how to make this a place for our families to feel this is a place for them. How do we make them feel like that song Tom Hunter and Bev Bos sing, “We’ve been waiting for you?” We not only want them to feel wanted in our program but we want them to feel welcome and hold as whole human beings. We put a lot of thinking into how to do this.

One of the things that we do is primary care giving. We assign four children to one teacher. In this way a family only has to share with one teacher rather than two or three. We believe this creates a sense of security not only for the child but also for the family as well, not to mention higher levels of consistency. When we welcome a new family into the program on their first day we receive them with a welcome sign at the door that reads all of the first names of the family members. In the classroom we have some adult size furniture to make sure families are physically comfortable. We ask the family to make a family collage (we provide materials and at times to print out pictures if needed). This is intended to be useful to the child and it also sends the message to the family that they are important in our classroom as well. It tells them that we want to make sure that we as a community talk about them even when they are not in the

classroom. We want to hold them not only in our minds but in our hearts as well. Everyday at drop off and pick up time we design time to check-in with the families. Our check-ins are not only about the children but we also ask them about them. We are genuinely interested in what they have to say about their lives. We invite them to come into the classroom to do projects with the children. At parent meetings we make sure there is space for them to socialize and share any ideas to implement in our curriculum.

One of the most important things that we do is we see all as equals. We do not see ourselves as better than the parents just because we have Early Childhood Education background. We come to the table as allies to them. Yes, we do have resources and tools to provide and even then they decide what is best for their families. We see our relationship to the families as a partnership. Even when in disagreement, we hold each other as humans and we go through those disagreements. There is always time to listen to each other and to compromise when needed. There are times in which we let go of some of our “rules” to be able to meet a family’s need(s).

A strong teaching team

MC: You clearly have worked hard to take Head Start’s idea of “parent involvement” to a new level. But I also see a remarkable cohesiveness among your teaching team, something that is not always the case in early care and education.

AA: I am a believer of the statement, “It takes a village to raise a child”. As teachers we would not have a job if it were not for the families and children. Life would be more challenging for families if it were not for childcare places to care for their children. It seems to me that we need each other’s expertise to be able to raise healthy children. I have talked about the importance of providing a welcoming place for families. It is also important for teachers to be able to work together in a cohesive way. Our teaching team is composed of four teachers. Two of us work the morning program and the other two the afternoon. We share one office, the classroom, teaching materials, storage rooms, kitchen, and many more things. Most of the time we are in each other’s presence a lot more than we are with our own families. Therefore it is important to get to know each other.

In our team we have an agreement to assume the best of each other. It is normal to want to blame others for things that go wrong in the middle of a busy day, “I can’t believe she did not clean her

messy activity! Now I have to clean it and lunch will be late.” We believe that this kind of attitude would only hinder the team and therefore the classroom, children, and families. Instead, we use some of our meeting times to talk about the things that are going well in the classroom (curriculum, physical space, maintenance of the building, etc) and what things are not working out. Rather than place blame on each other, this is time to ask for clarification, “I noticed you didn’t clean up yesterday and I was late for lunch. I wonder what happened?” In this way we open communication rather than shame or accuse. This allows for dialogue and understanding. Because we work so closely and most of the time we are very passionate about our teaching, we are destined to get into arguments and have conflicts. Our team understands this and rather than to shy away from conflict we face it. We joke around by saying, “you can’t go over it, you can’t go under it, you have to go through it” We see conflict as an opportunity to get to know each other and to grow together. By assuming the best of each other, we are able to not only care for each other but to inspire each other as well. We believe that we all have differences that benefit the teaching team but most importantly the families and children that we care for.

MC: Thanks, Arlae, for showing us how you can bring to life the best intentions behind all the Head Start standards. You and your team have demonstrated how to bring a creative, rather than a bureaucratic, mindset to our ECE regulations. In doing so, I think you’ve expanded the way to think about and demonstrate what quality looks like.

[facing page]

Hammering pumpkins

By Arlea Alston



At the beginning of the summer we had volunteers from the program HOPE come to garden with the children. One of the things that they planted together were pumpkins. Children had an opportunity to move the soil, plant the pumpkins and water them. Through the summer and the beginning of fall children took care of the pumpkins, they continued watering them, pulled the weeds around and they even talked and sang songs to them. They got to witness how the pumpkins grew from the flowers to the pumpkins.

Once the pumpkins were ready to harvest children helped cut them. Through out the fall and winter children had many opportunities to get to know pumpkins, cut them open to see what is inside, paint them, wash them, roll them, taste them, both raw and cooked.

We even threw the pumpkins, and hammered them. I was not sure how the hammering was going to go. I had seen this idea in a book and I liked it. I knew this group of toddlers knew pumpkins very well. I also knew that they enjoy hammering and I felt they were ready to be introduce to real hammers and nails. I was a bit nervous about this activity but excited at the same time. I talked to my team about the idea ahead of time and they loved it.

We used the three pumpkins that the children had planted. I decided to do the hammering activity inside the classroom on the big circle table. I covered the table with a tablecloth and placed the three pumpkins. Beside the pumpkins I set three hammers and scattered some nails around them. Prior the children arriving, I had hammered a few nails into the pumpkins to model the possibility. As soon as the children arrived they noticed the activity.

Ismael was the first one at the table. He immediately knew what to do and started to hammer some of the nails that were already in one of the pumpkins. With some help he stuck in more nails and continued to hammer. This activity lasted for three days. Children talked about the holes in the pumpkins; they learned about the nails being sharp at the end and having to be careful with them and the hammer. They also enjoyed sticking their fingers in the holes and feeling the slimy insides. They did early math by counting the holes and nails. Also early literacy was involved not only by providing new language such nails, hammers, metal, and pounding, but also by listening to the rhythm of the hammer nailing those nails. This year children got to know pumpkins in a very holistic and meaningful way.

References

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