

Changing Ourselves, Changing Our Programs

by Margie Carter

In the mid-1960s Bob Dylan's song, "The Times They are a Changin'" thrilled me. In the mid-1970s one of my favorite albums was called "The Changer and The Changed." For those of us eager to see social change in our country, these songs speak of that historical period where a new sense of possibility and hope was in the air. Some 40 years later, with so much trouble in the world, I strive not to be jaded while continuing to search for signs of hope and new possibilities. In our early childhood profession there are plenty of examples, even amidst all the bad news. I've seen inspiring examples of beleaguered directors taking to heart the late Jim Rohn's message, "When you know what you want, and want it bad enough, you will find a way to get it." Perhaps those who feel stuck or defeated haven't gotten that fire inside of them about what they believe children, families, and teachers deserve. Perhaps they feel powerless and are waiting for someone else to make things better.

Another favorite song, one by Sweet Honey in the Rock, has as its chorus, "We are the ones we've been waiting for." Or, as Michael Jackson sang, "I'm starting with the man in the mirror." So many reminders that there are significant changes we have the power to make. Thoreau said, "Things do not change; we change." And Gandhi's life was modeled on his frequently quoted words, "Be the change you want to see in the world." Einstein said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. . . . No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it. We need to see the world anew."

The changer and the changed

I'm fascinated about this notion of 'the changer and the changed.' Having change imposed upon us can be difficult and we can become resistant. On the other hand, having an inspirational encounter can excite us about making change. When people initiate some new actions, what drives that change? How do they become changed in the process? Many of us have worked tirelessly to professionalize the early childhood field, to set standards for quality, and to educate policymakers and the public about the importance of children's early years. We've made some definite progress, despite our dismal failure to get overall financing and decent salaries addressed. Current trends indicate that the focus for change in the early childhood field is centered on quality rating scales. How are these trends changing us?

Inspiration that helps you see yourself and the world anew can be a big instigator of change. Visits to the schools of Reggio Emilia, New Zealand, Sweden, and programs inspired by these philosophical and pedagogical approaches can provoke a radical re-examination of how we understand quality. Those who go on study tours to these places discover a different narrative about who children are and what they deserve. They witness different ideas about curriculum, assessment, and the teaching and learning process. Debbie Lebo describes how a study tour to New Zealand helped her re-imagine other possibilities for defining quality:

“I learned what early childhood programs can look like when educators and administrators constantly commit to reflecting on, articulating, and living their values. Now that I know that this way of working with young children exists somewhere, I can’t pretend it doesn’t. Because I’ve now seen the way it can be, I’m already changed.”

So when you’ve been changed in this way, how do you return to the reality of your daily work and take up the role of the changer? From my own experience reading, listening to, and observing others, here are some thoughts I’ve gathered.

Change your view of yourself

Change the story you have about yourself, rejecting the idea that you can’t go beyond regulations, there aren’t enough resources, “they won’t let me,” and all the limiting things you tend to tell yourself. Start seeing yourself as powerful, rather than powerless. Jim Rohn was fond of saying, “We generally change ourselves for one of two reasons: inspiration or desperation. . . . You cannot change your destination overnight, but you can change your direction overnight.” To me this implies you start seeing yourself as a leader, whether your job is that of teacher, administrator, or consultant.

Rather than feeling alone, start seeing yourself as part of a cadre of what Loris Malaguzzi calls, “an on-going story of men and women, ideals intact, who realize that history can be changed, and that it is changed by making it our own — starting with the future of children.” Seek out others interested in innovative ideas and other possibilities for defining quality; meet regularly to support and challenge each other. Tell yourself this is one of the most important aspects of your job. Together, build an expanded narrative about what quality looks like.

Before you start rushing around trying to ‘fix’ things, work on fixing anything that might be broken in your leadership. The amazing thing about changing yourself is that it usually leads to others changing.

Change your organizational culture

If you focus most of your communications, written or verbal, on issues of compliance, what does that suggest you value most? What role models are you providing for what you want teachers to focus on with children? If you don’t work on your organizational culture, it will surely work on you.

Robert Kilman suggests that “Culture is to the organization what personality is to the individual — a hidden yet unifying theme that provides meaning, direction, and motivation.” How would you describe the current personality of your organization? Is it gloomy, animated, disgruntled, or collaborative? The stories that people focus on in your program play a big role in shaping your culture. And when you start to change those stories from liabilities to assets, you’re engaged in transformative leadership. Howard Gardner suggests: “Stories are the most effective ways of changing minds. What leaders do is put aside or reject the old story, the story you have grown up with. Leaders say, ‘No, it’s a different story. You may not like it initially, but it’s a better story in the long run, and you have to go with it and here is why. . . .’”

Stories in your center’s culture must shape unambiguous expectations about what it means to be part of your learning community. You can grow stories of how the children, families, and other staff deserve to be treated, how problems can be opportunities for learning, and how proud you are to spend your days engaged in such meaningful work. As a program leader, you can literally assess the kind of stories in the airwaves of your building. Are they about children’s misguided behaviors or the remarkable things kids are doing? Do teachers and parents talk about each other with curiosity and an eagerness to understand each other’s perspectives or is the talk basically grumbling? Get yourself out of your office with a listening ear and pick up some new stories to tell: “Today I saw Abdul passing out paper and markers to several children around him. He seemed eager for them to join him in some activity. He was quite social, using very few words. I wonder what was on his mind. Have you seen actions like this before? Children are ingenious in figuring out how to engage others around them. “Even though she was late again today, Ellie took the time to not only sit and do a puzzle with her daughter, but acknowledged that she’s having trouble leaving work with extra projects piling up. She’s struggling with that work/life balance, just like we all are.”

How you conduct meetings, focus time for professional development, and celebrate together all make up your organizational culture. You can use these vehicles as an expression of your values, your creativity, and your commitment to people working as a caring community. If people feel they belong, they can move on to an expanded sense of what matters. When you intentionally work on your organizational culture, it will work its magic on you. What would it be like to work in a place where joy was in the air?

Change your environment

In addition to focusing on the social-emotional environment that makes up your culture, you can begin making small changes in your physical environment that will influence how people feel in the space. These don’t have to be new or expensive purchases.

Turn off those overhead fluorescent lights. Put lamps around and notice the difference.

Tone down and coordinate the colors you use on the walls, floors, and furniture. Begin to add furnishings that de-institutionalize the feel of the place.

Add some plants, neutral-colored rugs, and soft seating and you'll find the overall noise and stress level goes down pretty quickly.

Move away from commercially-produced posters, displays, and feature the work of the children on the walls, not only final products, but stories and photos of the process they are engaged in.

Declutter, declutter, DECLUTTER! We are such pack rats in early childhood. When in doubt, throw it out or recycle it to another place or for another purpose. Put all those notices you are required to post in attractive frames and others in a nice three-ring binder on a table next to a chair. Store materials in uniform containers to create more cohesion.

The remarkable thing about small changes in the environment is that they start a wave of bigger changes in how people think and act in it.

Change your approach to staff development

The first book Deb Curtis and I wrote together was entitled *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice* (1994). Over a decade later it is still a pertinent, valuable book. However, I've changed how I talk about the work. I try to get directors and teachers thinking more about pedagogy than curriculum, focused more on learning than on teaching. Today I use the term 'professional development' for most of the ideas in *Training Teachers* and I recommend early childhood administrators change how they allocate resources for staff development.

Many directors focus their limited dollars for staff development on what Wendy Cividanes calls 'drive-through training' or one-time workshops that meet training requirements. While these may offer some valuable technical assistance, they are a far cry from the kind of assistance teachers need to think through the complexities of their work. When you shift your focus to ongoing professional development for reflective teaching, everything changes. Not only do the teachers learn more about learning, but so do the children. Sonja Shoptaugh calls this 'professional development day after day in the classroom.'

How might you change your allocation of resources and the focus for professional development in your program? Some approaches I've seen directors take up include the following:

Choose a focus for a year of study together. Study not only professional resources, but your own practices to uncover some unacknowledged perspectives, values, and stories that tend to shape our actions in a particular area. (Possibilities could include seeing children as competent, superhero or weapon play, mathematical learning in block play, understanding cultural influences on behaviors, or deepening relationships with families.)

Ask for volunteers who would be interested in focused mentoring in reflective practices so that they could become mentors for others in your center. Use some of your staff development funds to hire a consultant who can jump-start the process.

Send some teachers on a focused study tour to other centers known for inspiring practices. Have them, in turn, develop an action plan for sharing what they learned and leading your center into making some changes.

Change your administrative support systems

Once you make a change in your organizational culture and shift your approach to professional development, you will likely find the need to make some changes in your administrative practices. You'll want to steadily revamp your budget, staffing arrangements, and allocation of time to more closely align with your vision and values:

Explore the possibility of some professional conferences or consultations on organizational development. Finding new ways to organize administrative responsibilities can open up new possibilities for further changes.

Consider joining with other early childhood programs in your community to develop a 'shared services' model, where some back-office tasks can be combined to free up time to focus on your program. For more information visit www.earlychildhoodfinance.org.

Build capacity for pedagogical leadership. Study more about distributed leadership, which is different than delegating tasks. Every teacher deserves to be mentored by a pedagogical leader, someone to keep them probing for deeper understandings about the teaching and learning process.

Start with the man in the mirror

Michael Jackson's song "Man in the Mirror" gives us a powerful message: "If you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make a change. . . . It's gonna feel real good."

Be the changer and the changed. Imagine something that does not exist and bring it into being.

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