



Leadership Challenges in Publicly-Funded Preschools

An interview with Luz Casio

by Margie Carter



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Even with expanded national attention to the importance of early childhood education and multiple state initiatives funding preschool, it is still a very challenging time to work in the early childhood field. After some initial excitement, we ‘old timers’ wonder if perhaps things were better before people recognized the value of our work. That recognition hasn’t significantly increased wages, only the stress and requirements (Carter, 2014). I’m trying to stay hopeful, but I don’t think we’re getting close to the results we want. In some ways, we’ve created mounting problems and have lost the reins of our profession. It’s a complex story with competing perspectives.



Margie Carter is the co-founder of Harvest Resources Associates (www.ecetrainers.com) and the co-author of numerous books and early childhood videos. As she moves towards retirement years, her professional work is focused on highlighting and supporting the inspiring work of new leaders and uplifting the voices and leadership of teachers in the field.



The mother of three bilingual and bicultural children, Luz Casio has over fifteen years of experience serving as a Dual Language ECE Consultant with infant, toddler, and preschool Step-Ahead, ECEAP, and Head Start classrooms.

She has served as a faculty member with the Center for Linguistic and Cultural Democracy, and has been a curriculum developer, program supervisor, and center director in guiding the learning, development, and skill-base of her diverse classroom of students. As a bilingual, bicultural educator, Luz has championed critical pedagogy and equity in education at the local and state level.

Among those on the frontlines, you’ll find a growing consensus. For teachers, publicly-funded programs come with so many mandates that educators are losing their sense of agency and satisfaction in their work. Time to build deeper relationships with the children and their families is being replaced with school readiness goals. Rather than tools for gaining understandings of who each child is as a learner and how her play pursuits can guide curriculum decisions, documentation and assessment have become extensive recordkeeping tasks to meet requirements. Professional development opportunities are less about deepening understandings and meeting professional learning goals and more about training to implement yet another set of accountability standards.

For children in low-income families in publicly-funded programs, extended blocks of time to learn through exploration and play pursuits are disappearing, replaced by more regimented activities to address ‘the achievement gap.’ Culture and language are approached as artifacts and lessons, not lenses and experiences for learning. Learning through play experiences is more common in programs with children from higher-income families, but even in these settings, ‘academic achievement’ is guiding curriculum goals. Shouldn’t we be measuring opportunities for meaningful learning before we try to measure

achievements? I favor those who talk in terms of opportunity gaps, who remind us that we will need equity before we can move to equality, and who believe that children are today’s citizens, not just tomorrow’s.

Oh, how I admire those who cleverly navigate these turbulent waters, strongly holding on to what they believe about children’s rights and ways of learning, while negotiating all the red tape of a publicly-funded early childhood program. Especially important are those taking leadership to meet not only the countless requirements, but to guide their program with an expanded view of quality. One person who has inspired and taught me a great deal about this is Luz Casio, Director of the Refugee and Immigrant Family Center (RIFC) in Seattle, Washington.

An Interview with Luz Casio

Luz is a quiet, gentle leader, holding high standards for those in her center and doing the painstaking work of bringing out the best in them. She is as deliberate about her own learning as she is about the children’s and teachers’. Collaboration is not a buzz word for Luz, but an active process of building relationships and creating the conditions for trust and respect to flourish. She models risk taking and advocacy, working with passion and determina-

tion. She uncovers the important questions that need to be asked and creates systems and structures for the work that needs to be done. Luz views professional learning not only as a process of mentoring individuals, but also as the development of a shared vision and a learning team to achieve collective goals and tasks. This is a good cultural fit for her community, and an expression of Yrjö Engeström's 'expansive learning theory,' that I first learned about from colleagues in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ord, Mane, Smorti et al., 2013).

Margie: Perhaps the first thing to describe, Luz, is your work in the context of a shared services consortium, which holds so much promise for growing early childhood centers (Carter, 2011; Stoney, 2009).

Luz: Yes. When you work under typical conditions as a director, you rarely find time to dream, to imagine a program that goes beyond current definitions of quality. Shared services means you have an administrative team to share the work and expand the vision of what is possible. In Seattle, our shared services consortium, Sound Child Care Solutions (SCCS), offers centralized administrative functions so that a center director's time can be spent on people and learning. Centers who share our values join the consortium, and SCCS also opens centers such as the Refugee and Immigrant Family Center (RIFC) where there is an unmet need in a particular community.

Margie: What impressed me right away with your leadership, Luz, was how you focus on your values, not only regulations. This is quite a challenge in a program such as yours with multiple funding streams and accountability to different bureaucratic systems.

Luz: I was part of the original leadership team at Sound Child Care Solutions that developed and refined our core values. Then came the challenge of bringing them to life every day in our program. Among the overall SCCS values at RIFC, we focus

closely on four values in our administrative work, designing our environment, and developing our curriculum for learning. Here's how we describe these values at SCCS.

■ **Social Justice:** We value cultural democracy, overcoming bias, and undoing racism, and we believe that children and adults can only thrive in a world where inequities are noticed and actively challenged.

■ **Collaborative Relationships:** We value mutual respect, reciprocity, and collaborative decision-making among children, families, staff, and educators, and we believe this builds strong and equitable communities.

■ **Intentional Practice:** We value pride in our work, innovation, and going beyond conventional ideas of quality experiences for children, and we believe that creates a sustainable quality of life for ourselves and generations to come.

■ **Joyful Work:** We value playfulness, purpose, and passion, in the classroom as well as in the office, and we believe that adults can draw inspiration from children's lively minds.

Margie: I love how you describe your own learning process as you moved into different roles in ECE, from being a teacher, program coordinator, administrator, CDA instructor, coach, and now a new director role.

Luz: When I first started working as an administrator I found myself somewhat impatient. I thought everyone was supposed to be ready to do a good job. I felt, 'We are wasting these precious years of children's brain development!' Then I learned that I needed to transfer



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all I know about working with children to working with adults. They need a nurturing environment, recognition for their different stages of development. They need structures, modeling, and mentoring. I needed to be more compassionate. Like with children, I don't just see who they are now, but see what they can become.

From Supervisor to Pedagogical Leader

Margie: I know that each of the different public funders you have require your teachers to be trained on different curriculums, rating scales, and assessment tools. I'm impressed with how you take a more proactive role in offering professional development and college degree opportunities for your teachers.

Luz: I try to be more than a supervisor and offer pedagogical leadership. When I hire new teachers, I look for flexible minds, openness to change. Then we create many layers of training to develop



Photo by Holli Margell

a community of learners with the children. I want to build the dispositions and brain muscles of reflective practice. I stress THIS is the MOMENT. We want to develop joyful learning.

In our orientation at the beginning of the year, I tell the teachers, “These are your tasks. How will you organize them?” I don’t assume teachers know how to do this. As teachers grow, I have them mentor others, showing examples of how they practice their values, get organized, and meet requirements.

We give new teachers sample journals, portfolios, schedules, and photo books to explain the thinking behind the design of our environment, about the intent of the environment, including understanding aesthetics and visual literacy. We demonstrate how to include the voice of the children and their families in our documentation and learning stories.

Margie: And I’ve seen some of that joyful learning in your staff meetings. With your pedagogical leadership you make sure that your teachers see the seriousness of the deeper purpose of their work, but remind them that this includes a playful spirit. And you always point out how they can learn from studying their observations of children. I love walking around your

center with you. When the children are there, you nudge me to notice something delightful going on with a child. As you point out documentation and posted learning stories, you mention things you are curious about or appreciate as an expression of their identity. You’ve created an organizational culture that promotes learning at your center. How would you highlight some of the key elements of your pedagogical leadership?

Luz: As a director:

- get teachers at your side.
- create an ambience for community.
- be a mentor.
- help them get to know themselves deeply, focusing on their strengths, what they are good at, and love.
- point out how things align with values.
- provide a consistent focus for learning.
- get everyone organized so you are not playing catch up.
- always do appreciations.
- remind your teachers that when the monitors come to assess, you want them to see staff expressing your

values in practice, not worried about the paperwork.

Negotiating with Accountability Standards and Systems

Luz: Along with our values, we integrate three approaches to planning for children in our program: Inspiration from Reggio Emilia, Soy Bilingue, and with our funding requirement to adopt a ‘research-based’ curriculum, Creative Curriculum and TS GOLD.

We have many grants and contracts with requirements, but we stay focused on our values and learning in a more human way than just assessments. I stress this is not about assessments, but about a critical time of life where brains are developing and a love of learning can be developed.

Together we learn about how to see children, the role of the environment and the teacher, and we focus on relationships. We want children to drive the classroom and what we do. Assessment happens in a more organic way. Nothing goes into a child’s journal without some observation notes and the teacher’s reflections. In the journal are learning objectives listed to guide teachers and parents in recognizing them. Selected parts of the child’s portfolio are merged into TS Gold.

With families, it is not our role to tell them what to do, to judge them. We work with them in the same authentic way and always have them at our side as partners in working with the funders.

When people come to monitor us, they can see right away this is a high-quality program, even though we often do things differently than what they expect to see. When they express any concerns about accountability standards I always ask, “What is the

intention of collecting this data? How can you help us be more authentic as we do it?"

Margie: Such smart questions. You are helping not only your teachers, but your monitors be self-reflective, not just focused on compliance. I'm so impressed with how your thinking about outcomes goes beyond what your funders are looking for in the assessment tools they use.

Luz: Yes. Related to our values, we have outcomes we want to hold ourselves accountable for.

Along with our own desired outcomes, I should mention that our children's scores

Photo by Heidi Margell



Outcomes for children:

- Growing in trust and confidence from being in a culturally safe, joyful place.
- Being curious and loving to learn.
- Developing a strong identity as a learner and as a member of a culture and community.
- Going to kindergarten with a photo book about their strengths and 'funds of knowledge' so they are seen and known right away by their new teachers.

on assessment tools demonstrate we have *no achievement gap* for the children of low-income families that we serve. We have room to grow, but I know we are on the right track.

Margie: It's clear to me that this is because there is no opportunity gap for the children in your program to play, learn, and to experience living with cultural democracy. It makes sense then that there is no achievement gap. Thank you for your inspiration, Luz, in not losing track of your vision as you cross-

walk the demands of a publicly-funded program. You've highlighted the key components of your leadership and the kind of outcomes they make possible.

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Outcomes for teachers:

- Seeing children's strengths and competencies rather than deficits.
- Having a new sense of curiosity and purpose in their role as teacher.
- Gaining confidence in using observations and writing meaningful learning stories.
- Finding their own voice and leadership style.
- Enjoying their work and imagining a career in early childhood education.
- Becoming an advocate.

Getting to Know This Child Booklets

At the Refugee and Immigrant Family Center, we are committed to getting to know each child fully. As a new child begins our program we begin to observe, document, and plan with these questions in mind.

- Who is this child as a member of a family/culture/community?
- What curiosities, interests, enjoyment does this child have?
- How does this child try to become a friend, and what friendships are emerging for this child?
- How does this child approach learning something new? Attempt to solve problems?
- Why are you delighted to have this child in your group?

As we study our documentation, we uncover some of the answers to these questions and feature them in learning stories that we share with the child's family and with the children in our program. When it's time for a child to head off to kindergarten or perhaps a different preschool, we assemble highlights of this documentation into a Getting to Know This Child booklet for each to take. Our goal is to help the child's new teacher see who this child is, his or her special qualities, family strengths, learning process, and acquired school readiness skills. We see this as a gift to both the child and the teacher and a tool for the child's family to use as her advocate.

Getting to Know



Aldo Delgado Rojas
2014.2015

What I did in Pre-School...

Aldo attended Southwest Early Learning Pre-school for 2 years. He had three teachers Teacher Deyanira, Teacher Jamie and Teacher Javie also his "Tio Javie" he had 19 classmates.

Through his time at Southwest Early Learning (SWEL) he attended school with some of his really good friends Alder, Abdulahi, Annika, Payton, Shilo and Wiley. He has been friends with Payton since he was a born.



What I was like in preschool...

Aldo has an active and creative imagination. Aldo has started using a wide range of terminology and vocabulary words to express his thoughts and needs. That goes well with his enhanced skills of how he approaches learning. He can work independently, but enjoys working or playing in group project/settings. Towards the end of his last year in preschool, Aldo showed consistency as a leader in the classroom. When it came to helping others, Aldo was capable in assisting his peers.

How I played with others...

How Aldo played with others... (Social-Emotional)



Aldo learned how to be a self-sufficient leader in the classroom. He was able to interact well with his peers, sharing and negotiating were not his strong suits. However, with help from the teacher he was able find ways to take turns and talk through social issues. Aldo was able to regulate and manage his own feelings well at times with the help of an adult. When it comes to solving social problems he can do so with minimal assistance, he can participate cooperatively and constructively in a group setting.

Communicating with others... (Language)

Aldo has been learning the last couple of years the ability to listen and understand increasingly complex language. He can follow directions of one to three steps (at times with reminders). When it come to communicating with his peers he can use language to express thoughts and needs by using conversational grammar and engaging in conversations. He communicates well with both adults and peers (prompting maybe needed). He can hold a conversation with several exchanges and keep you very amused with his thoughts.



How I communicated with others...

My brainpower...

Inside Aldo's Brainpower... (Cognitive)



Aldo gained the ability to be attentive and persistent in class. He stayed engaged during Learning Group (small group) by demonstrating positive approaches to learning (if interest was there). Aldo can come up with great ideas when it came to solving problems. His ability to engage in sociodramatic (pretend play) play was one of his favorite thing to do in the classroom and outside, and making elaborate marble track mazes(refer to learning story).