

She Turned the Chicken

Cultivating a Culture of Care Within an Early Childhood Setting on a College Campus

by Cecilia Scott-Croff

As directors, administrators and managers of early childhood centers, leaders dedicate their days to manage multiple tasks (Bruno, 2014). Directors lead fearlessly, tirelessly and often at the expense of their personal health, relationships and work-life balance. In the changing landscape of early child care and education, the growing needs of families, queries from funders, curriculum questions, administrative deadlines, teacher mentorship, dwindling funding and unexpected visits from licensure, the work of early childhood administrators

has become increasingly more challenging. Directing a children's center is an exhaustive amount of work. Moreover, directors play a huge role in shaping the quality of early childhood programs (Bloom, 1992).

With a focus on data, assessment and standards, administrators begin to forget about what really matters: children (Pelo & Margie, 2018, 2020). For

many of us, it is time to reflect on why we entered the field in the first place. Self-care, as identified in research, involves the simple joy of being present, and unfortunately for many directors, engaging interactions with families are far and fewer between. We must bring our full selves to our relationships with children, families and colleagues (Pelo & Carter, 2018). This article highlights the following themes:



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Teachers adapt to children's choices and preferences. Here, one child requested a storybook at the table while other children played.

leaders as initiators of self-care; how one campus-based child care center and its college community are implementing self-care on campus; and the complex role of early childhood leaders and essential characteristics for change agents.

Self-Care: Understanding What You Need as a Leader First

I had a little time in between meetings one day. I had many tasks to complete, yet I had serious hunger pains. I decided to head to the center's kitchen and prepare my lunch, chicken breast with vegetables. I placed my raw chicken in a pan to sauté and headed back to my desk. As I prepared lunch, I continued to place calls, meet with parents and engage my team. After some time, I looked up from my desk to hear, "Cecilia, I turned your chicken."

I had forgotten I was preparing lunch. I scurried back into the kitchen to finish, then made my way back to my office. I placed my lunch on my desk, paused and smiled. It was in that moment I was able to reflect and appreciate why I love the environment I work in. There is so much complexity in the work, yet sheer joy of knowing the center practices a "culture of care." Research indicates that a culture of care is educating professionals on different cultures within a student body. It is also equipping educators with an equity-based and growth mindset. This includes empowering professionals to seek out supports and resources that enable their students to succeed (Memurtrie & Berrett, 2018). It is also taking care of each other and understanding your colleagues' and students' needs. For decades, Maslow's (1965) hierarchy of needs has informed us of this same concept. He articulated that if children are hungry, tired or worried about external things, this will greatly

Overview of the Center and Mission

Borough of Manhattan Community College Early Childhood Center Inc., has been providing state-of-the-art high-quality early childhood education services since 1984. The center's mission is also to provide a variety of services and learning opportunities for the students; placement for early childhood internships, student observations, volunteerism, parent workshops and referrals. The program is universally designed and accommodates the diverse needs of all children, and consists of six classrooms with broad, angled windows, which bring natural light in from outdoors. Interior windows enable light to pass, staff to easily interact and visitors to easily experience the children's work. The center has three interconnected playgrounds.

On a daily basis, children engage in various activities that stimulate their cognitive, physical and social-emotional development. Such activities include sensory stimulation in the form of music with our music education consultants, and gross and fine motor and stimulation through engagement in child-directed play. There are 102 languages spoken by members of the BMCC community. The top 10 languages include Spanish, Mandarin, Bengali, French, Creole, Arabic, Russian, Albanian, Cantonese, and Urdu. Children in the center love being exposed to a range of languages and cultures.

The early childhood center's curriculum is an eclectic emergence of children's experiences, impressions, thoughts, ideas and rich culture. The center offers five levels of programming: pre-school, school age, evening, weekend services and a family child care network; it also hosts a universal pre-kindergarten for all program for 4-year-olds. During the academic year, BMCC's center serves up to 150 children, ages 2 to 6, seven days a week. Through the center's expansion in 2006 to include weekend services for pre-school and school age children, the center serves an additional 35 children ages 3 to 12 years old. Currently, 42 percent of the center's student population attends classes evenings and weekends. More than 85 percent of the center's families live below the federal poverty lines. Our blended funding model allows student-parents to pay an average fee between \$5 and \$35 weekly.

Facilitated by our licensed mental health counselor, we offer a biweekly morning social group, in which parents gather to discuss various topics, such as class schedules and childrearing. This project helps parents communicate and reach out to each other for support. Parents are also offered in-house training in the areas of child abuse and maltreatment, CPR, and mental health first aid. Through our existing partnerships, additional support in the form of clothing, food and household appliances are provided to help families in need.

The early childhood center is licensed by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Office of Children and Family Services, and is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Head teachers are certified by the New York State Education Department and hold master's degrees in early childhood education. Assistant teachers hold associate degrees and the child development associate credential.

influence their ability to learn (1965). It is important to address students' needs outside of the classroom. Educators must also address their own needs as well, in order to help students to succeed.

Creating a Community without Judgment

As it relates to college students, at Borough of Manhattan Community College there is an intentional movement on campus to create an environment of care (Wilks, 2018). On campus, our college students' needs are met inside and outside of the classroom. Issues such as food insecurity, transportation, financial literacy and tax preparation are a part of a long list of ancillary yet critical services available to students. Moreover, there is a considerable number of faculty and staff dedicated to the health and wellness of students. BMCC has created a Designing for Success model that addresses food insecurity, financial literacy and other life-affecting circumstances (Wilks, 2018). The goals of Designing for Success are:

- Improve retention to double degree completion rates and increase successful transfer and baccalaureate attainment.
- Improve learning through culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy and support.
- Expand career development leading to meaningful work with family-sustaining wages.

Another goal is to achieve equity in these outcomes in a college community in which all members can thrive. When students' needs outside of the classroom are addressed, they are more productive in the classroom. My work in higher education requires me to collaborate



During center time, teachers embrace small staff-to-child ratios, as well as developmentally appropriate activities. Teacher engagement is evident in this caring community.

across disciplines on campus. This includes cultivating relationships with academic and student affairs. A nationally accredited model, the Early Childhood Center at BMCC (Scott-Croff, 2016) uses the project approach, informed practices and strong parental interactions, as well as the Piagetian (1954) and Vygotskian (1965) framework. The center's work has influenced this family-friendly campus community (Leonard & Flink, 2020). Every day, small random acts of kindness shape the hearts and minds of our community. The work of the children's center requires intentionality, reflection and advocacy (Dombro, Jablon & Stetson, 2011). We understand intrinsically that educators must be present and connected to extend children's learning.

Resilience

As a leader for more than 25 years, I have, unfortunately experienced a range of challenging circumstances. I have endured the deaths of young children and parents, high turnover of

staff, the death of staff, and the myriad fiscal challenges of operating a high-quality program. Yet there is strength in community. BMCC Early Childhood Center continues to expand its community partners. Children have the benefits of the following: (1) pedagogical practices that promote critical thinking skills; (2) a play-based curriculum grounded in the latest research; and (3) individualized care and a universally-designed program that continues to refine its approach to inclusivity.

How does this affect my role as a director? Again, I refer to the colleague who turned my chicken. As a director, I would be unable to make it through the many challenges the work requires without such a caring group of educators. Whenever things get a little too tough, I am able to walk inside a classroom and spend time with our children. This allows me to tackle the next challenge. Author Brené Brown talks about being vulnerable; it is okay to ask for help. As directors, we sometimes think we can do it all, but there is no shame

in vulnerability or needing help, or feeling uncertain (Brown, 2015, 2016).

Reflections for Leaders in the Field

Holly Elissa Bruno's approach informs us to "find comfort in the little things and joy in the unexpected." With this in mind, paying it forward and committing to the mentorship of others is important for early childhood leaders.

First, do not forget to reminisce and recognize the simple joys of children (Pelo & Carter, 2018). During an era of data-driven systems and huge accountability to secure funding, we must not lose sight of why we came into the field or what is important for children.

Collins (2001) uses the term for "the greater good in his work." As educators, we must remember meaningful interactions with children and understand that the importance of how we show up with children is what matters. As leaders, we must be disciplined in our thoughts, reflections and actions. It is important to set aside our egos and do what is right for children and the greater good of a team. Discipline, humility and bringing together the right people are key.

Second, recall frequently why you entered the field (Pelo & Carter, 2018). Pelo and Carter encourage us to examine equality and equity. Continue to tell our stories and own them. Teachers are natural storytellers. Those stories, they go on to say, require educators to peel back the layers of our own experiences as children reflect on how they shape our thinking, our actions and narrative. Rethinking and reassessing why we entered the field keeps us grounded as educators and allows us to appreciate how far we have come. Brown tells us, "Vulnerability does not know victory or defeat, it understands the necessity of both; it

is engaging. It is being all in" (Brown, 2015). As educators, we have to be all in.

Third, there is no "I" in team (Drucker, 1992). Terrell, Terrell, Lindsey, and Lindsey (2018) echo these sentiments in graceful leadership and challenge leaders to understand the importance of grace. They describe this as leadership with intentionality and compassion. Leadership is not a single-handed act. One must assemble an incredible group of disciplined, hardworking, like-minded individuals who view reflection as part of their daily work.

As it relates to college students, the Pygmalion Effect (Bosier, Wilhelm & Hanna, 2014) informs us. When educators expect more of students, they do better. As educators in early childhood settings, leaders expend a lot of energy working with families. We must be cognizant that it is important to take better care of ourselves to be of service to children, families and our teams. Sometimes doing what is best for children and families may not help balance your budget (Bloom, 2011). Leaders taking care of themselves is the best gift they can give their staff, children and families (Terrell et al., 2018).

Self-Care as an Ongoing Mindset

Lastly, Hadfield and Pecorino note that the art of practicing self-care includes:

- Taking the opportunity to engage or connect with uplifting colleagues.
- Engaging in physical activities such as taking a walking break.
- Paying attention to the signals and resting when your body shows signs you need a break.

- Re-energizing and refreshing every day through meditation or some form of stillness.
- Committing to spending less time on social media and starting our day off with meditation, a warm cup of tea or simply quiet reflection.
- Spend time with families and friends and lastly, get comfortable with the uncomfortable and allow yourself to say no to occasional obligations.

Self-reflection is a humbling, yet powerful technique that helps leaders (and anyone else) improve their performance. It is during these times as leaders, this practice helps us maximize our skill sets. When we take these opportunities to practice self-care and mindfulness, this allows us to continually reevaluate, reexamine and reflect upon the goals and missions of our programs and the practices that inform our day-to-day work as leaders. This strengthens our competencies as leaders. With this in mind, I call upon leaders to engage the art of self-care daily. These approaches allow us to bring the very best of ourselves to our work. Reflection is the vehicle that has sustained the early childhood center over the years and has allowed the center to toil tirelessly through any challenge: 9/11, Hurricane Sandy and COVID-19. As a center, we endeavor to serve as a caring community and beacon of hope for student parents and their children.

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