The Visionary Director
Other Redleaf Press Books by Margie Carter and Deb Curtis

The Art of Awareness: How Observation Can Transform Your Teaching
Designs for Living and Learning: Transforming Early Childhood Environments
Learning Together with Young Children: A Curriculum Framework for Reflective Teachers
Spreading the News: Sharing the Stories of Early Childhood Education
Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice
The Visionary Director

A Handbook for Dreaming, Organizing, and Improvising in Your Center

Second Edition

Margie Carter — Deb Curtis

Redleaf Press
www.redleafpress.org
800-423-8309
To Maryann Ready, who offered me my first experience of working in a program with a visionary leader who put the ideas throughout this book into practice.

—DC

To Denise Benitez, who has taught me to find my breath and let it guide me through challenges; Denise has served as an extraordinary role model for teaching.

—MC

To Paula Jorde Bloom, who has worked with tireless imagination and diligence to offer directors foundations and structures to build and support their visions.

—MC and DC
We cannot neglect our interior fire without damaging ourselves in the process. A certain vitality smolders inside us irrespective of whether it has an outlet or not. When it remains unlit, the body fills with dense smoke. I think we all live with the hope that we can put off our creative imperatives until a later time and not be any the worse for it. But refusing to give room to the fire, our bodies fill with an acrid smoke, as if we had covered the flame and starved it of oxygen. The interior of the body becomes numbed and choked with particulate matter. The toxic components of the smoke are resentment, blame, complaint, self-justification, and martyrdom.

The longer we neglect the fire, the more we are overcome by the smoke.

——David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused*

I say—

Where is your fire?

You got to find it and pass it on
You got to find it and pass it on
from you to me from me to her from her
to him from the son to the father from the
brother to the sister from the daughter to
the mother from the mother to the child.

Where is your fire? I say where is your fire?

——Sonia Sanchez, “Catch the Fire”
The Visionary Director

Foreword to the Second Edition by Paula Jorde Bloom  xvii
Foreword to the First Edition by Marcy Whitebook  xix
Acknowledgments  xxiii

Introduction  1

How Can Directors Become Leaders?  2
Imagination and Activism Are Key  3
The Director on Fire  4
Using This Book  6

Chapter 1

Guiding Your Program with a Vision  9

Searching Your Heart for What’s Important  10
Imagining How It Could Be  12
Fortifying Yourself with a Vision  13
Rethinking What We Need  19
Distinguishing a Mission from a Vision  21
Cultivating a Vision  25
Going Beyond Managing to Leading  25
Looking for Models  26

Principle
Create a Process for Developing Your Vision  28

Strategy
Regularly share memories of favorite childhood experiences  29
Represent childhood memories with found objects or art materials  31
Use children’s books to unearth childhood memories  31
Use children’s books regularly in staff meetings  31
Get to know families’ dreams  35
Reinvent the idea of quilting bees  37
Seek the children’s ideas  37
Put images and words together  38
Develop a vision statement together  38
Represent pieces of your vision with blocks  41

Practice Assessing Yourself as a Visionary Leader  41

Chapter 2

A Framework for Your Work  45

Looking for Tips and Techniques  46
Learning about Balance  49
Taking Bright Ideas from the Business World  52
Considering a Triangle Framework  54
The Roles of Managing and Overseeing  55
The Roles of Coaching and Mentoring  56
The Roles of Building and Supporting Community  58
Consider How Different Directors Respond  59
The Scenario  59
Rhonda’s Approach  59
Donovan’s Approach  60
Maria’s Approach  60
Analyzing the Three Approaches  61
Using the Triangle Framework  63
Building and Supporting Community  63
Coaching and Mentoring  64
Managing and Overseeing  64
Practice Using the Triangle Framework  65
Scenario 1: New Director Dilemma  66
Scenario 2: Messing with Michael  67
Practice Assessing Yourself  69
Chapter 3

Your Role in Building and Supporting Community 71

Creating an Environment That Nurtures Community 74

**Principle** Make the Center Feel Like a Home 75
**Strategy** Incorporate elements from home-design magazines 75
Explore professional architecture and design resources 76

**Principle** Give the Program the Feel of a Real Neighborhood 77
**Strategy** Use homebase rooms and make time for children to roam 78
Set up larger programs as villages 78
Design space to resemble a neighborhood 79
Use natural shapes and soft lighting 79
Use the beginning and end of the day 79

**Principle** Involve Parents and Staff in Considering the Space 80
**Strategy** Assess how a space makes you feel 80
Explore the environment as a child might 82
Create “a place where I belong” 83
Create the skeleton of a grant proposal or the inspiration for a work party 84

Planning Your Community-Building Curriculum 86

**Principle** Use Time Together to Strengthen Relationships 86
**Strategy** View staff meetings as circle time 87
Learn about listening 88
Set ground rules, share feelings, and develop facilitation skills 89
Use a fuss box 89
Make tear-water tea 90
Become storytellers 90
Create visual stories of your life together 91
Refocus parent newsletters 92
Principle Grow Community-Building Curriculum from the Lives Around You 92

Strategy
- Rethink daily routines 93
- Grow curriculum from family life 94
- Grow curriculum from teacher passions 96
- Find curriculum in your wider community 96
- Connect people to one another 97

Working with Differences and Conflict 101

Principle Acknowledge and Respect Differences 103

Strategy
- Create a representation of a community 104
- Explore different values 105
- Name your assumptions 107

Principle Explore and Mediate Conflicts 109

Strategy
- Explore different communication styles 109
- Design a conflict resolution process 112

Cultivating New Roles, Dispositions, and Skills 114
Practice Assessing Yourself 115

Chapter 4

Your Role of Mentoring and Coaching 117

Coaching versus Managing Staff 120
What Do Adult Learners Deserve? 123
The Golden Rule Revisited: Treat Adults as You Want Them to Treat Children 126

Principle Give Thoughtful Attention to the Environment 128

Strategy
- Plan a nurturing environment for the adults 128
- Provide time and resources 130

Principle View Teachers as Competent Thinkers and Learners 131

Strategy
- Reflect on a teacher 132
- Expand your focus for coaching 132
- Compare your view with their view 133
Principle  Emphasize Dispositions as Much as Skills and Knowledge  135
Strategy  Identify how dispositions look in practice  136
          Discover with dots  138

Principle  Know Your Adult Learners  138
Strategy  Play True Confessions in Four Corners  140

Principle  Provide Choices for Different Needs and Interests  143
Strategy  Think of something you have learned as an adult  144
          Train with multiple intelligences in mind  145
          Uncover and cultivate passions  146

Principle  Promote Collaboration and Mentoring  148
Strategy  Practice active listening, informally and formally  149
          Set up a peer-coaching system  149
          Build collaborative and mentoring relationships  150

Principle  Cultivate Observation as a Skill and an Art  152
Strategy  Learn to observe in many ways  153
          Become a community of observers  154

Principle  Create a Culture of Curiosity, Research, and Storytelling  155
Strategy  Cultivate deep listening  155
          Use a Thinking Lens for reflection  157
          Launch a research project  158

Principle  Approach Coaching with Inquiry  160
Strategy  Develop questions to guide your own observations  161
          Practice responding to Cassandra  162
          Use questions to promote inquiry  162
          Practice with stories  163
          Adopting the Mind-Set of a Coach  168
          Practice Assessing Your Approach  169
Chapter 5

Your Role of Managing and Overseeing 171

Managing to Make Your Vision a Reality 172
Cultivating the Organizational Culture You Want 173

Formulating Long-Range Goals to Support Your Vision 176

Principle Create a Continuous Cycle of Evaluating and Planning 177
Strategy Conduct regular program evaluations 177
Develop a clear understanding of the planning process 178
Take time to plan the planning process 180

Principle Refuse to Adopt a Scarcity Mentality 181
Strategy Move your budget toward the full cost of care 183
Invest in your staff 184
Be generous with your nickels and dimes 186
Involve others in expanding your nickels and dimes 186
Adopt a business mind-set when big funds are needed 187

Creating the Experience of Community with Your Systems 187

Principle Use Relationships and Continuity of Care to Guide Your Decisions 188
Strategy Design rooms that work for infants and toddlers 189
Expand the age group for preschool rooms 190
Have teachers loop with the children 190

Principle Involve Staff and Families in Active Exploration of Standards 191
Strategy Form task groups 191
Create games to enliven discussions of standards 193

Principle Seek to Counter Inequities of Power and Privilege 195
Strategy Seek feedback from all stakeholders in your community 196
Expand your approach to communication 196
Make diversity and antibias work part of your orientations 196
Formulate personnel policies and systems to encourage diversity among staff 197
Designing Systems to Provide Time for Reflection and Problem Solving

**Principle**
Use Child Assessment Systems That Enlist Teachers’ Excitement

**Strategy**
Design forms that encourage curiosity and delight
Use Learning Stories as an approach to assessment
Provide time for collaborative discussion among teachers

**Principle**
Involve Staff in All Phases of Evaluating Their Job Performance

**Strategy**
Supplement checklists with observational narratives
Plan the cycle of supervision and evaluation
Experiment with different forms
Acknowledge the power differential in the evaluation process

**Principle**
Plan Training to Reflect Your Vision of a Learning Community

**Strategy**
Develop individualized training plans
Expand your approach to program-wide training
Provide many ways for achieving training goals
Acknowledge and celebrate progress toward your training goals

**Principle**
View Time as a Building Block

**Strategy**
Use colored dots for analyzing how time is spent in your program
Reclaim time on behalf of your vision

**Principle**
Design Meetings around Community Building and Staff Development

**Strategy**
Devote staff meetings to enhancing teacher development
Choose a focus for your professional development for the school year
Reallocate your professional development dollars for a mentor teacher
Making Good Use of Your Power and Influence
Practice Assessing Your Organizational Climate

**Chapter 6**
Bringing Your Vision to Life

**Put Relationships Center Stage**

**Principle**
Focus on People, Not Paper

**Innovative Practice**
Invest in initial encounters
Host community-building orientations

Sample provided by iActiveLearning.com, all rights reserved.
Principle  Make Communication Meaningful  229
Innovative Practice  Invite families to participate in communication systems  230
Use interactive technology to enhance communication  231

Principle  Bring and Keep People Together  232
Innovative Practice  Institute continuity of care  232
Plan family meetings to build relationships  233
Hold group family conferences  233

Principle  Invite Meaningful Contributions to Solve Problems  235
Innovative Practice  Enlist excitement to build an infant/toddler playground  235
Invite the village to raise the children  236

Build Reflective Practices  238

Principle  Invest in Your Teachers Right from the Start  238
Innovative Practice  Interview candidates in small groups  239
Create systems for reflection in your orientation process  239

Principle  Reconceptualize Professional Development as a Daily Experience  240
Innovative Practice  Develop teachers as thinkers, not technicians  241
Design clear accountability systems  242
Provide side-by-side mentoring  243

Strengthen Connections to and Care for the Natural World  244

Principle  Use Meaningful Experiences to Build Shared Values  245
Innovative Practice  Create a field guide for the center grounds  246
Plan family field trips to explore the local natural environment  246

Principle  Call for a Curriculum That Focuses on the Natural World  247
Innovative Practice  Launch a program-wide science and nature study  248
Become a designated wildlife habitat  249

Principle  Use Family Interests and Expertise to Grow Your Vision  250
Innovative Practice  Form a family club with a mascot  250
Learn about farms and gardens  250
**Principle**  Keep Thinking Bigger  251

**Innovative Practice**  Design an outdoor classroom  251
Raise funds in ways that reinforce your vision  252
Reach out to the community to grow your vision  252

**Take Charge of Standards, Outcomes, and Assessments**  253

**Principle**  View Standards and Rating Systems as Tools, Not Rules  255

**Innovative Practice**  Expand the definition of desirable outcomes  255
Form work teams for different accreditation focus areas  257

**Principle**  Develop Systems to Hold Yourself Accountable to Your Values  257

**Innovative Practice**  Untiming the curriculum  258
Design your own forms and checklists  258

**Principle**  Expand Your Thinking about Assessment  259

**Innovative Practice**  Find resources and inspiration outside your borders  259
Remember to Nourish Yourself as You Nourish Your Vision  261

**Afterword**  263

Larger Institutional Quality Improvement Efforts  264
McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership  266
Aim4Excellence  272
Pennsylvania Keystone STARS Quality Rating System  276
Alliance for Early Childhood Finance  279
Examples of Administrative Restructuring  282
Sound Child Care Solutions: A Consortium of Centers, Better Together  283
London Bridge Child Care Services Inc.  287
Chicago Commons Child Development Program  291
Hilltop Children’s Center  294
Staff Recruitment, Stability, and Retention  296
Men in Early Childhood Education  297
Old Firehouse School Staff Stability Plan  299
Promising Approaches to Professional and Leadership Development  303
United Way Bright Beginnings (UWBB): Cohort Model for Professional Development  304
Harvest Resources Associates: Resources for Early Childhood Professional Development  307
Appendixes 321

Assessment and Evaluation Tools
Appendix 1 Assessing Systems 322
Appendix 2 Ten Dimensions of Organizational Climate Assessment Tool 327
Appendix 3 Model Work Standards Assessment Tool 328
Appendix 4 Program Administration Scale (PAS) 333
Appendix 5 Teacher and Director Evaluation Materials 336
Appendix 6 Sample Licenser Self-Evaluation Tool 339

Planning Tools
Appendix 7 Strategic Planning Form 342
Appendix 8 Calculating the Full Cost of Quality Care 343
Appendix 9 Continuity of Care: Barriers and Solutions 348

Staff Development Tools
Appendix 10 Conference Attendance Planning Form 349
Appendix 11 Observation Form for Visiting Other Programs 351
Appendix 12 Conflict Resolution Samples 354
Appendix 13 Writing Learning Stories 357
Appendix 14 A Thinking Lens for Reflection and Inquiry 359
Appendix 15 Use the Thinking Lens to Analyze and Write Learning Stories 360

References 361
Resources 365

Print Resources for Growing a Vision 365
Print Resources for Building and Supporting Community 366
Print Resources for Coaching and Mentoring 367
Print Resources for Managing and Overseeing 368
Web Resources 368
Foreword to the Second Edition

In the world of publishing, booksellers often use the term “shelf life” to capture the window of opportunity for marketing a new book. Shelf life is both an indicator of the timeliness of the content of a book and a realistic projection for book distributors to gauge sales. Most books have a pretty short shelf life, one to two years. A few, like the Holy Bible or Qur’an, have a timeless message that ensures an audience forever. A few others, like Oprah’s Book Club selections, ride a wave of healthy sales and multiple reprints over several years.

In the early childhood education arena, there are a handful of classics that embrace a timely message and merit regular updates and reprints. I believe *The Visionary Director* has earned a rightful place in that esteemed category of professional essentials. For this reason, I was pleased to learn that Margie and Deb had decided to write a new edition of their book to ensure it would remain available for directors across the country.

In my work supporting early childhood administrators at the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, I have seen firsthand the power of *The Visionary Director* in the hands of directors. One of the initiatives we sponsor at the center is a year-long leadership training program called Taking Charge of Change. The goal of the program is to help directors see themselves as change agents and empower them to create care and education environments that are active learning communities both for children and adults. *The Visionary Director* has been a required book in Taking Charge of Change since it was first published a decade ago. More than any other professional resource available for directors, I have felt this book has the transformational power to help our participant directors visualize what excellence means in the context of their programs and turn their dreams into concrete strategies for program improvement.

Being a center director has never been easy, but it seems the increasing demands of the accountability movement—quality rating...
systems, accreditation, performance standards, credentialing—have created even greater pressure on program administrators. I believe the lopsided focus on school readiness and outcomes has had the unintended consequence of stifling directors’ creativity and innovativeness, dulling their dreams and aspirations. Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for standards and accountability. In fact my colleague Teri Talan and I wrote the Program Administration Scale (PAS) as a guide for measuring early childhood leadership and management practices. But even the PAS will fall short as a blueprint for improving program quality if directors can’t elevate their leadership mandate beyond just complying with standards. More than ever before, the central message of *The Visionary Director* is needed to help directors avoid feeling overwhelmed by traditional bureaucratic approaches to quality improvement and the new tensions around standards and outcomes.

Visionary directors give voice and unleash the passions of their teachers. They understand that the heart of their enterprise is nurturing collaborative partnerships with families. And most of all, they recognize their enormous potential as advocates for social change. These are the qualities we need in every early childhood director. *The Visionary Director* is an inspiring resource to help directors embrace this higher calling.

Paula Jorde Bloom, PhD
Michael W. Louis Endowed Chair
McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership
National-Louis University
Foreword to the First Edition

Even after a short time in our field, it would be relatively easy for most people to list what's wrong with child care programs in the United States—poor salaries and benefits, too few materials, damaged equipment, unmanageable adult-child ratios, extraordinarily high staff turnover, a dwindling pool of reliable substitute teachers, gaps in language and culture between programs and the children and families they serve, and not enough training that meets our day-to-day and on-the-job needs. Every day, we witness the direct results of drastic neglect and underfunding of our child care system. We're pretty good at agreeing on the problems.

Over the last two years we have been working at the Center for the Child Care Workforce to conduct a series of trainings with center directors and teaching staff called “Taking on Turnover.” Participants are quite forthcoming when we ask them to describe their problems at work. It’s when they’re asked to conjure up a vision of a good child care workplace—and to set priorities to bring the vision to life—that the trouble often begins. Perhaps tensions arise among directors, teachers, and aides about where the solutions lie or what should be addressed first. The process of creating change in any kind of organization can be painful and slow. But I suspect that most of all we have trouble because as a field we are so used to settling for what we can get, and “coping creatively” with too few resources, that we don’t ask the fundamental questions about how child care ought to be. We don’t raise enough challenges. We forget to dream.

Imagine the child care of our dreams, not just child care that’s good enough. Imagine if people working with young children received adequate professional preparation, opportunities for ongoing professional growth, and earnings equal to their investment in their careers. Margie Carter and Deb Curtis invite us to imagine and dream, and they assist us in the process. They help us see how settling
for the current situation dulls our enthusiasm and ultimately diminishes our efforts. Ultimately, they invite us to create an environment in our programs where the adults, not just the children, continue to learn, grow, and use their imaginations to guide their work, family, and community life. And they offer an array of strategies toward that end.

Why does using our imaginations matter so much? On the most basic level, this is a critical task. Our current work environments, more often than not, fail to attract and retain highly skilled teaching staff. The most recent follow-up to the National Child Care Staffing Study found that only one-third of the teaching staff in a sample of centers rated higher than average in quality had remained in their jobs for at least five years. Such high turnover signals inconsistent care for children and demoralization for staff and parents.

It is a steady combination of using our imaginations, enhancing our skills, and mobilizing our collective will and political clout that will move us beyond the basics to create child care programs that really nourish and strengthen children, families, and staff. If we are to address the real issues in our programs and the early childhood field and, as Deb and Margie suggest, have our work influence the larger social change required, it is essential for us to reach a common understanding of goals. Otherwise, we will pull ourselves in opposite directions, leaving no one with a sense of accomplishment or satisfaction. We can start on a practical level. For example, if we can agree on how much paid planning and preparation time the caregiving and teaching staff really need, we can take steps—even if they are small at first—toward implementing a policy that’s closer to our goals. But first and foremost, we have to have a vision. Without one, it is mighty hard to reach a destination and easy to get where we never intended to go.

I came to child care in the early 1970s, a time when envisioning alternatives was the name of the game. For myself and many of my peers, child care held the promise of the future. As I phrased it then, child care was the key to women’s liberation and the path to a more just world. A good child care system, we reasoned, would enable women to help support their families and feel secure in knowing their children were well nurtured. Children would be helped to reach their full potential. Our society would recognize child care and other forms of traditional “women’s work” as highly skilled professions. It was probably a good thing that I didn’t know how formidable the barriers would be to realizing this vision, or I might have never
begun! Although I have been exceedingly frustrated over the years at the slowness of progress in improving our child care services and jobs, I still find nourishment and direction in that early vision of child care as a service that supports parents, nourishes children, and rewards practitioners for the complexity of their work. Indeed, it is this shared vision that has helped me and others get through the hard times, put disagreements in perspective, and, most important, keep reflecting on how best to do our work.

In the 1990s developing the Worthy Wage Campaign has served as another vision to guide our efforts to create quality, affordable programs for families and fair and decent employment for child care teachers and providers. The goals and growth of this campaign parallel the picture Margie and Deb paint on these pages—all that can happen when people germinate a vision together and roll up their sleeves to make it happen. The underlying idea of the Worthy Wage Campaign is to engage everyone involved or affected by child care in understanding that a skilled and stable workforce is the cornerstone of a good child care system. But stabilizing and adequately compensating the workforce only addresses the basics of what we really long for. Our dreams reach far beyond. The Worthy Wage Campaign aims to build a critical mass of people who begin to see issues about affordability and compensation in child care as political, not just personal issues. As people become engaged in seeking solutions, they will see the connections that ultimately suggest a vision and demand for larger social change. The vision of the Worthy Wage Campaign has not only sustained many of us “old-timers” but generated a new generation of advocates and activists willing to take on the challenge of improving child care jobs and services so that we can move a step closer to our dreams. For those of us working on child care issues over the last quarter century or more, the most heartening development is this group of new folks committed to refining and carrying forward the vision.

In this book, Margie Carter and Deb Curtis help take the “envisioning” process out of the realm of tasks that sound too overwhelming and impossible to begin, let alone complete, and in their inimitable way, they make it not only manageable but creative, inspiring, and playful. They are guided by a vision of child care that acknowledges the importance of both child and adult development, recognizing that adults, too, must be acknowledged as individuals, respected for their points of view, and challenged gently to see things in new ways. Their vision affirms the right and responsibility that we have as
adults to make the world a better place, and they remind us that this vision underlies why many of us chose to work in child care in the first place. *The Visionary Director* offers us an essential tool for affirming and renewing our commitment to child care and to meeting the challenge of nurturing our society’s future.

Marcy Whitebook  
Codirector, Center for the Child Care Workforce  
May 1998
Acknowledgments

To the directors, caregivers, and teachers who have lent their stories to this book we extend sincere appreciation. They represent programs large and small; diverse and homogeneous; serving middle-class, upper-class, and poor families; private, parent cooperative, or sponsored by Head Start, government, corporations, school districts, or colleges; and located across the United States and Canada and on U.S. military bases in Europe.

Special thanks to Laila Aaen, Amy Baker, Pauline Baker, Sabina Ball, Ruth Beagleholz, Diana Bender, Sarah Bishop, Julie Bisson, Ron Blatz, Cathy Burckett-St. Laurent, Caren Burgess, Wendy Cividanes, Marcela Clark, Jim Clay, Christie Colunga, Dana Connoly, Anne Marie Coughlin, Ellen Dietrick, Lisa Dittrich, Linda Duerr, Kathleen Gonzales, Leanne Grace, Mary Graham, Charlene Grainger, Bill Grant, Karen Haigh, Pamela Harris, Leslie Howle, Joy Humbarger, Susan Dumars Huvar, Kathryn Ingrum, Barb Janson, Jennifer Kagiwada, Linda Kern, Michael Koetje, Becky Krise, Carmen Masso, Laura McAlister, Meg McNulty, Paula McPheeters, Paul Moosman, Leslie Orlowski, Paige Parker, Ann Pelo, Jan Reed, Alice Rose, Caron Salazar, Teresa Senna, Margo Shanye, Linda Skibinski, Alicia Smith, Dorothy Stewart, Teri Talan, Alicia Tuesta, Mayela Visconti, Marlys Vollegraaf, Julie Weatherston, Wendy Whitesell, Carol Anne Wien, Ellen Wolpert, Angela Woodburn, Adina Young, and Billie Young.

While many of us have removed ourselves from the day-to-day work of leading programs, these folks remain on the front lines pursuing their vision with great tenacity. We see them as inventors, craftspeople, cultural workers, and artists.

Thanks to Jeanne Hunt and Lonnie Bloom, who put up with us once again as we abandoned them for another big writing project, and to Beth Wallace, who served as a fine editor in our revisions work. For this second edition, we appreciated the behind-the-scenes work of the people of Redleaf Press, especially Carla Valadez, Laurie Herrmann,
Kyra Ostendorf, Andrea Hanson, and David Heath. We continue to extend gratitude to Bonnie and Roger Neugebauer of Child Care Information Exchange for publishing the articles that were later incorporated into this book. They have spent the last thirty-some years bringing ideas and directors’ voices together and have expanded their efforts to create a global community of early childhood educators.

We want to again thank Marcy Whitebook and Rosmarie Vardell for their exceptional leadership and contributions to the Worthy Wage Movement and the first edition of this book. Though the Worthy Wage Movement has sadly faded away, the work to address equitable compensation remains an ongoing call to action, as does crossing racial and cultural barriers to support the expansion of the leadership and advocacy base for our profession. We extend our deep appreciation to those who take up this work in earnest, especially our new partners at Harvest Resources Associates, Wendy Cividanes and Debbie Lebo. Please stay in touch with us by visiting www.ecetrainers.com, where you will find ongoing discussions and examples of what we are up to.
Most directors of early childhood programs find themselves working in a climate of ever-increasing regulations and standards, brought to life by mounds of required paperwork. Many come to their positions with little administrative experience to prepare them for the awesome task of trying to run a quality program with less than adequate resources. They may have a handful of promising seeds, but before long they are stretched too thin, frantically patching the holes that continue to appear in their watering can. We wrote a new edition of this book because we believe early childhood program directors more than ever need to systematically develop their leadership and organizational systems in relationship to a clear vision and set of values. Otherwise they will easily lose their moorings and their hearts for this challenging work. If directors are to be successful and satisfied with their work, they need not only skills and expertise but a way to get a handle on their jobs and a replenishing source of nourishment for themselves. Their professional development must not only include the skills of administration, business and finance, supervision, and human relations, but also the arts of dreaming, designing, organizing, and improvising.

Since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1998, the early childhood field has seen a number of exciting efforts aimed at enhancing the skills and leadership potential of program directors. We welcome these efforts and list but a few examples in the last chapter of this book. These examples address what we have intuitively understood and what research now confirms: the director’s leadership
is the primary nutrient for growing a quality program. We hope that this book will contribute to the ability of directors to summon the resources and skills to be visionary leaders for their programs—to “find the fire and pass it on.”

**How Can Directors Become Leaders?**

It’s easy for directors to feel helpless and victimized under conditions that include an ever-growing body of standards, required measurable outcomes, and a faltering economy. There are so many factors that seem out of control. While this feeling of helplessness is understandable, we also know that directors seldom claim the leadership potential their position offers them. Instead, they let the limitations and pressures of the current conditions constrict their imaginations and creativity. Under the “be realistic” or “meet the standards” banner, directors tend to stay focused on how things are, rather than on a vision of how things could be. They hope that somehow more checklists and accountability systems will “fix” the problems of trying to provide quality in a service that is underfunded, undervalued, and operating with an inadequate workforce. All too often, however, this added paperwork simply increases the barriers to quality instead of helping directors surmount them. It is unusual for early childhood program directors to imagine a different course or use their leadership to pursue a different vision. Our hope is that *The Visionary Director* will spur you into developing the leadership to pursue a new vision of early childhood.

Whatever the external factors, you have the power to shape the environment around you. If you do this thoughtfully in your role as a director, you’ll find that your early childhood program can transform the sense of powerlessness and isolation that prevails in the lives of caregivers, teachers, children, and families. Your leadership toward that end has the further potential to influence larger social change, as Valora Washington quotes in one of her own articles:

Transformation of the social order often begins with an act of imagination that elevates a startling dream of change above the intimidating presence of things as they are. Further, if such dreams are passionate and clear, and if they can call a great many people into their service, they may ultimately give shape to the future. (W.K. Kellogg Foundation 1996, 3)
This is the message you will find in the pages of *The Visionary Director*, along with numerous strategies to move your program in that direction. While we have been discouraged to hear many directors describe their vision for their programs in narrow terms, such as improving their playground or getting accredited, we have also been heartened to meet others who have bigger dreams for the role their programs can play in reshaping the communities where they reside. Some have made significant changes in transforming the organizational culture, physical environment, activities, and interactions that shape quality in an early childhood program. Others have taken steps toward creating a community of dreamers who are on the road to making changes.

**Imagination and Activism Are Key**

If you see yourself as the developer of an organizational culture, your leadership will extend beyond managing an early childhood program. As you create a culture of safety and respect, alive with a sense of possibilities, your program will attract staff and families longing to be involved in this kind of community. And if your policies and actions go beyond lip service to diversity, you create the potential for using that diversity to transform the fear, alienation, and despair that are so pervasive in our wider community.

Cultivating imagination is as critical to a director’s success as acquiring skills. So much in our world conspires to take away our dreams. With all the tasks you as a director need to accomplish, it’s easy to get consumed by the daily details, neglecting your heart and mind. New energy comes when you step outside your “to-do” lists, make time for activities that call forth your creativity, and do things that intellectually stimulate and nurture you. It’s equally important to
involve yourself with people and efforts working on behalf of social change, inside and outside the early childhood profession. Some of the most promising efforts in the profession have come when directors begin linking up with others for support and action.

The Director on Fire

It’s not uncommon to hear the words *program director* and *burnout* in the same breath. Our goal in writing this book is to help you avoid burnout by setting your heart on fire. We’ve come with kindling that has proven reliable. You can fan the flames with the beating of your own heart. On these pages you will find the spark of a guiding vision for directors of early childhood programs. We have seen what a difference it makes when directors give attention to shaping an organizational culture of collaboration and excitement. Rather than just running a program, this kind of director is creating a learning community and spurring others into activism on behalf of social change in the world. You will hear the voices of directors like this throughout these pages.

Over the past ten years we have encountered an expanding number of directors who have worked with a fierce fire in their hearts and sparked big dreams among the teachers, children, and families with whom they work. Those who have created lasting results have started by forming a strong organizational system to underpin their dreams. We’ve seen those who haven’t taken this step lose heart, lose their valued staff, and ultimately lose even their own health and well-being trying to single-handedly keep their program on course with their vision. With this as a backdrop, our revisions in this edition of *The Visionary Director* include a stronger emphasis on creating organizational structures and systems to support your vision.

The prevailing approach to quality enhancement suggests that requiring more standards, documentation, and training will improve outcomes for children. Apart from the salary issue, what about the foundational elements of a structure that provides more time and space for teachers to plan, organize, think, meet, and talk about the complex tasks of caring for and educating groups of young children? Our experience suggests that organizational budgets and infrastructures contain the elements that indicate program quality. In this edition we offer ideas for organizational structures to orient new teachers to the program philosophy, pedagogy, routines, and culture.
This can’t be a one-shot run-through of regulations with the director, but a process over time with the director or a designated mentor helping new teachers fully integrate and learn how to think through the daily complexities of caring for and educating young children in group care. In today’s climate, an organizational system must be in place to mentor teachers to see how standards and outcomes that reflect the director’s vision of an expanded definition of quality can be met in the course of daily routines and planning. Directors must work with their budgets to create an organizational structure that provides teachers time to meet together in teams to discuss what is unfolding, build meaningful relationships with the children’s families, and pursue professional development goals for themselves.

We once heard Carol Brunson Day speak of strengthening the power of children to develop through their culture. This not only influenced our thinking about the role of ethnic culture in shaping development, but also inspired us to imagine the kind of early childhood program culture that would support the power of the staff and families to develop. There are no quick fixes with this approach. It is steady, patient, improvisational work. You have to invent it as you go, shaping your program around the events and lives that come through your door each day. The Visionary Director offers a framework for thinking about and organizing your work. In these pages we suggest principles and strategies to cultivate the kind of thinking and activities that support a vision of early childhood programs as learning
communities. We believe the dreams and inventions you draw from these ideas will surpass any specific formulas or directions we could offer.

Using This Book

The chapters of this book focus on a conceptual framework and self-directed activities to help you develop your own understanding and possibilities for working with the framework. Chapter 1 offers our vision of early childhood programs as the new neighborhoods of the twenty-first century, poised to transform the cultural ills of our society with genuine, mutually respectful, empowering relationships. Included are lessons from African proverbs, organizational development theory, and our own childhood memories of life in a neighborhood or community. In chapter 2 we propose thinking of a director’s work as a triangle, carefully balanced on all sides. Here you get a taste of “systems thinking” as it pertains to developing the culture of early childhood programs.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 offer more details about working from each side of our triangle framework, with principles and strategies to consider. For this edition we have added a new chapter 6, with four composite stories of directors working to bring a particular vision to life in their programs. Here you will find detailed examples of how to translate your values into innovative practices for your center.

At the end of this book there is an afterword with snapshots of promising initiatives around the country, appendixes that offer sample forms for some of the strategies we describe, and lists of references and recommended resources.

What you will not find on these pages is help with budgeting, fund-raising, or financial management. We know there are other valuable resources to assist you in these areas, and we have included some of these in the Resources section.

The Visionary Director focuses on the strategies to light your fire and the vision to help you clear the smoke. For the ideas in this book to become part of your approach to directing, you will need practice making them yours. Each chapter of this book concludes with a practice activity for further reflection on the ideas just discussed. It might be tempting to skip over this section, but we advise you to reconsider. We encourage you to use this book for more than inspiration or reference. Make it a workbook that you return to on a regular basis. For over a decade, administrators have sent us stories of how studying this
book as part of a directors’ support group or class has helped them apply the principles and strategies to their work. You could be one of those people. May we all stay strong and live with joy, intention, and gratitude.
Before you begin reading our ideas about being a program director or supervisor, take a minute to consider yours. Which of the answers below best match your thinking regarding the purpose of an early childhood program? Check the box that represents your highest priority.

☐ To provide a service for parents while they work
☐ To give kids a head start to be ready for school and academic success
☐ To enhance children’s self-concept and social skills as they learn to get along in the world
☐ To ensure that children have a childhood full of play, adventure, and investigation
☐ To create a community where the adults and children experience a sense of connection and new possibilities for making the world a better place
☐ __________________________________________________________________________
    (add your own words here)

We start this book where we hope you will start—describing what you see as the primary purpose of your work. There is no right or wrong answer in the choices above. Your view of your work may encompass some version of each of these ideas. Most likely you go through your days with a general sense of purpose. We recommend taking the time to be specific about your purpose and vision because your image of an
early childhood program shapes the way you guide your program, consciously or unconsciously. Your vision plays the same role in your program as your breath plays in your body—distributing the life force of oxygen throughout your system, exploring where things are tense and need some attention, and providing a rhythm for your muscles to do their collaborative work.

How often do you pay attention to your breath? Right now, for instance, have you noticed how you are breathing? As you read these words, does your breath feel rushed, tight, or even hard to detect? Are you aware of where your breath is in your body? Take a minute to check this out. Likewise, consider how frequently you do your job as a director with a vision flowing through your mind. Developing a regular awareness of your breath in your body cultivates mindfulness for all parts of your life. Similarly, when you move through your days with a vision of how things could be, you’ll approach directing tasks and decisions in a thoughtful manner.

You may have come to this book searching for answers, for solutions to the stresses and strains of directing an early childhood program. We suggest you start your search by finding your breath, not only because this is literally a good thing to do, but also because this action symbolically represents the essence of what this book has to offer. With all the pressures surrounding a director’s job, no doubt you barely have time to catch your breath, let alone read a book. This means you probably spend most of your time reacting to how things are, rather than developing new ways of being. Consider the smoker who relies on cough drops to soothe a scratchy throat and neglects to find support for changing habits and healthier living. This is akin to directors who rely on management tips to survive instead of taking stock, reorienting their approach, and claiming their power to create something different.

**Searching Your Heart for What’s Important**

When it comes down to it, looking for quick answers and formulas to run a child care program is like turning to diet pills and beauty products to improve your health. It’s just not that simple. To be sure, it’s important to acquire skills and learn the how-tos of developing a well-functioning management system, and a growing number of resources can help you with this. *The Visionary Director* suggests something books on supervision rarely discuss:
• finding the heart of what brought you to the early childhood field
• remembering the vision you’ve had for how it could be
• drawing on this vision as you move through your days
• creating an organizational culture and systems to support your dreams

As you take time to find your breath, literally and metaphorically, you will begin to discover deeper longings that live in your body, such as

• a desire for meaningful work that makes a difference in the world
• time for joy and laughter
• a place where you have genuine connections with others
• a community where you feel safe, have history, and enjoy a sense of belonging

When you embrace rather than ignore this longing, it can shape a vision that guides your work as fundamentally as your breathing guides your body.

Around the country, directors are attending conferences, seminars, and classes in search of ways to improve their work. We’ve discovered that although at the surface this appears to be a search for some quick ideas, a much deeper need often brings them together. Directors long for a place to unload the heavy burden they carry. The reality of their work is often different from what they imagined it to be. People usually come to the work of directing early childhood programs eager to make a difference in the lives of children and families. Faced with the current conditions, many directors are aware of a lot of “if only” feelings lingering below each breath—if only we had more money to pay the teachers, if only we could improve the facility, if only there weren’t so many regulations and so much paperwork, if only we could offer more scholarships, if only we could just get parents more involved, if only people understood the importance of this work.

Beyond the need for a steady paycheck, most of us seek jobs in early childhood care and education because it is work with real meaning and real people, and it offers the possibility of making a difference in the world. Yet all too quickly external pressures and the demands of this work make us lose sight of our original motivation. Budgets,
regulations, reports, perturbed parents, and shrinking substitute lists soon overwhelm our hearts and minds. There is hardly time to get to the bathroom, let alone to that stack of reading to be done and papers to be filed. Before long, we find ourselves moving from crisis to crisis, too frazzled to remember all those time-management techniques and exhausted down to our bones. The original dreams we brought to our job can easily fade or seem totally out of reach.

This book is meant to rekindle a sense of new possibilities. Rather than help you get better at working with how things are, *The Visionary Director* offers you a framework and beginning strategies for transforming the limitations of your current mind-set and conditions. At the heart of this book is a vision of early childhood programs as active learning communities both for children and adults. It’s easy to talk about your problems and the things that bother you in your work, but too often directors neglect to describe how they would like their work to be, the specific elements of their vision. It’s a challenge to let your mind spin out new possibilities when you are so used to adapting and accommodating yourself to how things are. Breaking out of these confines can stir up old longings and remind you of how little you’ve settled for.

**Imagining How It Could Be**

The vision we have for early childhood programs replaces the institutional feel of items from an early childhood catalog and the lifeless description of standards with materials from the natural world that keep us in touch with the life cycle of living, growing, and dying and with the interdependence of living things. The walls are adorned not with commercially produced displays, but with images from the lives of the people who spend their days there together. There are a variety of interesting textures, colors, and things to discover and investigate. Inviting smells of food and flowers overtake the odors of stuffy rooms, urine, and disinfectants. Natural light and soft-light lamps create comfy places for people to enjoy each other’s company. Staff members and children have a place for their things, their meetings, and the tools they need for their work and play, as well as a quiet place for when they need a break away from each other. People build genuine relationships across differences in age, economic class, gender, and culture. They actively listen to and learn from each other, show their passions, feel safe in expressing disagreements, and negotiate problems with remarkable creativity. Mutual admiration and appreciation flow between the staff, children, and families. No one shies away from hard
work and challenges, as they have come to understand that these can deepen people's connections with and commitment to one another. Respect from others translates into respect for oneself and a desire to make a contribution in righting the wrongs of the world. The way people learn to listen, talk, play, think, negotiate, value, and care for themselves and each other in these early childhood programs spills out to other lives in the surrounding community. People have a taste of a different way of being and are no longer willing to settle for the inadequacies and injustices of how things are.

Our intention in writing *The Visionary Director* goes beyond trying to make your job easier, though we certainly hope it does that. We believe early childhood programs are in a pivotal position to foster relationships that can heal the rift all people feel between themselves and others and between themselves and the natural world. We can address issues of bias and inequality in our thinking, actions, and structural arrangements. Early childhood programs can give the children and adults involved an experience of empowerment, of democracy in action, so that they have the will and know-how to make this a priority in our country. On the whole, most early childhood programs haven’t been developed with this vision. They’ve been focused on the more limited goals of keeping children out of harm’s way or getting them ready for school. There is so much more we could be reaching for, seeing the connection between our work and larger social change. That vision could mobilize enormous energy and turn us into a force to be reckoned with.

If I hadn’t maintained my vision of how this place could evolve, I could not have stayed in this job as long as I have. It’s your vision that gets you through the very rough times.

—Paul

**Fortifying Yourself with a Vision**

In visiting directors around the country, we’ve found that those who actively work with a bold vision create programs that stand out from the grim statistics on mediocrity in child care. Think of your vision like the breath in your body. The more attention you give to it, the more it fortifies you. When programs are led by directors who breathe a larger vision into everyday tasks, people feel more alive in their bodies, and their spirits lift with a new sense of hope. This is one of the greatest antidotes to burnout.
Ante los horrores que veo que ocurren diariamente pido por un milagro. Un milagro para que nunca más se le dé una paliza a un niño, que nunca más los niños sean golpeados ni abusados. Vivimos en una época en la que la violencia es aceptada como algo normal. Debemos cuestionar las golpizas y humillaciones a los niños así como las expresiones violentas de rabia y frustración de la misma manera que cuestionamos el tratamiento sexista y abusivo a las mujeres.

Cuando tuve la oportunidad de abrir un programa de cuidado infantil para madres adolescentes, sabía que la realidad de esas injusticias no se podría evitar en nuestro programa. Sabía que me agotaría muy rápidamente si no tenía una visión clara. Quería crear un lugar donde la gente pudiera participar en la lucha por la no violencia y en terminar con esa conspiración silenciosa que acepta, por ejemplo, darle una golpiza a un niño porque no quiere ponerse los zapatos. La clave para comprometerse a practicar la no violencia se basa en comprender el desarrollo del niño y aprender a tener paciencia.

La visión que tengo cada día cuando vengo al trabajo es ofrecer a las madres un santuario de paz y de liberación del dolor de traer de afuera. Un santuario donde se acepten sin juicios las historias de cada una de las adolescentes. Un lugar de recuperación y cambio. Cuando las adolescentes vienen a nuestro programa, deben aprender que está mal ejercer la violencia hacia otra persona. Todas estas madres han vivido bajo la violencia la mayor parte de sus vidas. Ellas tienen que aprender a hacer las cosas de una manera diferente, aún cuando todavía no sean capaces de hacerlo. Nosotras les decimos, “No las vamos a juzgar y ustedes no van a mentir ni quedarse calladas acerca de lo que les sucede. Pueden enojarse o pueden odiar lo que les pasa, pero siempre sin violencia.” Ese es nuestro lema.

Es tan difícil y tenemos tantos contratiempos. A veces me canso y me pregunto a mí misma, “¿Cuántos años más de todo esto?” Y, sin embargo, este es el trabajo que me hace sentir que puedo influenciar y ejercer un cambio. Y así lo hacemos. Cada año vemos como estas jóvenes madres se hacen más fuertes. Observamos como comienza a aparecer la esperanza seguida de la compasión. Aprenden a apoyarse las unas a las otras y nosotras vemos cómo cambian su manera de ser. Creo firmemente que luchan por ese cambio porque buscan tener esperanza para sus hijos.

—Ruth
With all the horrors one sees in our popular culture, I have a dream. If I could create one miracle before I die, it would be to stop children from being spanked, hit, or abused. We live in a culture where violence is normalized. We must question the cultural edicts that condone spanking and the humiliation of children, just as we must question the abusive and sexist treatment of women and the expression of frustration or anger in the form of violence.

So when I had the chance to open a child care program for teen mothers, I knew I couldn’t divorce the politics of the wider injustices of the world from our program. Without a clear vision to focus on, I knew I would burn out very quickly. I wanted to create a place where people would take on this struggle for nonviolence and step out of this conspiracy of silence around such things as spanking toddlers for not wanting to put on their shoes. The key to making a commitment to nonviolence is through understanding child development and through learning patience.

The vision I form each day I come to work is to provide for teen mothers a sanctuary of peace and freedom from the pain of the streets. A sanctuary of acceptance without judgment, where each teen’s story is her own. A place of healing and change. When teens enroll their children in our program, they have to buy into this notion that violence toward someone without power is wrong. All of these mothers have been living with violence most of their lives. They have to want to do it differently, even if they aren’t able to yet. We say to them, “We will not judge you, and you will not lie or keep silent about what’s going on. You can be mad, you can hate what is happening, but no violence.” That’s our mantra.

It’s so hard, and we have so many setbacks. Sometimes I get so tired, and I ask myself, “How many more years can I do this?” Yet this work is what makes me feel like I can have some influence, create change. And we do. Every year we see these young mothers get stronger. Hope and compassion emerge. They support each other, and we watch them change the tide. I firmly believe that ultimately people will fight for change because they want hope for their children.

—Ruth
Over the years, we’ve asked directors to describe the vision that is guiding their work. To our surprise, many have a limited response. Some talk of a new playground, more scholarship dollars, or an active substitute teacher list. We see these responses as goals or items on a wish list, possibly indicators of a dream not yet fully articulated. A surprising number of directors point to NAEC accreditation, Head Start Program Performance Standards, or scores on an Environmental Rating Scale (such as the ITERS, ECERS, or PAS) as their vision. To be sure, we have great respect for these guideposts and have used such things for many years in our own work. But as we begin to look around at the classrooms that only follow these standards, and when we assess the focus of the curriculum and interactions between the staff, children, and families, our hearts sink. Somehow the idea of a vision for a program has been reduced to a set of goals, standards, and regulations—lots of paperwork, checklists, and rating scores.

Our concern about vision begs other questions. Where are the heart and vitality in these programs? What gives these programs life? Who spends their days here, and what are their hopes and dreams? How are they learning to be citizens in a democracy?

In the early years of developing programs for young children whose mothers worked all day, the vision was to create a home away from home. Teachers and directors took inspiration from the philosophies of early nursery school and kindergarten educators, as well as child psychologists—people such as Caroline Pratt, John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and Jean Piaget. The supervisor’s focus was on providing meaningful play experiences for children, not managing complex programs with multiple demands. Time, history, and economic, political, and educational trends have brought us to a new place.

Over the past thirty years, the early childhood profession has come of age. Early childhood caregivers and teachers have now become a full-fledged workforce with standards, a code of ethics, a shared language, definitions of core competencies and best practices, and a huge selection of conferences and resources. An ever-expanding body of research-based knowledge includes professional development and accreditation systems. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, along with the emergence of state-funded prekindergarten programs and the 2007 reinvention of the NAEC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria, has brought the field to a crossroads. Indeed, Stacie Goffin and Valora Washington (2007) describe the first decade of the twenty-first century as a defining moment for the field’s future with a tremendous
amount at stake. These leaders have outlined adaptive leadership challenges for the early childhood field that resonate with our belief that the profession urgently needs a clear vision about its purpose, identity, and responsibility. Rather than leave this work to some outside experts, we believe program directors can take responsibility for growing a vision right where they are, joining with others in shaping the profession’s future.

Can directors develop a vision that holds strong standards for their work without homogenizing their programs or standardizing childhood and curricula? Carol Anne Wien asks the question this way: “Are teachers able to find meaning in their work, to find relevance to children’s lives and love of the world and its ecological diversity, beauty, pattern, and texture? How do teachers sustain themselves through mechanistic, competitive, production-driven processes?” (2004, xv). In early education policies in state governments across the United States and in the direction professional organizations in early care and education are moving, quality improvement seems tied to an ever-expanding set of requirements and expectations placed on teachers. Wien states her position clearly: “The use of prescriptive processes in education is misplaced because humans, who include intention, ethics, and creative joy in their ways of being, cannot be reduced to machines carrying out someone else’s prescriptions for teaching” (152–53).

Visit a newly accredited early childhood program in any region of this country and you will likely find any number of thick binders documenting how they meet the criteria defining best practices. On the one hand, we feel proud to be part of a cadre of people determined to see that young children in group settings are educated and cared for with accountability to high standards. But for all their good intentions, we get the impression that most of the folks who are developing these new standards haven’t recently been directing a program, let alone been responsible for a classroom of active young children. We want to ask some additional questions. Do directors experience current quality enhancement initiatives as worth the amount of time and focus they require? Are new standards improving working conditions and salaries and supporting responsive pedagogy to engage teachers, children, and families in learning together? Do new resources infringe on or enhance the vision teachers and directors are building?

We welcome the efforts of publishers and companies to provide early childhood educators with better equipment, multicultural materials, curriculum frameworks, and child guidance strategies. On
the other hand, when we visit exhibit halls at conferences, we fear our profession has lost sight of the need for a vision to guide our work. Many early childhood educators seem to have fallen prey to strong commercial interests and misguided pressures to prepare kids for school at younger and younger ages. How has this happened, and what does it mean? Recognizing the importance of the early years has become a mandate for instruction in “readiness” activities, overtaking the view that children are born ready and eager to learn and their childhoods are to be respected. The prevailing outlook on children, families, and teachers is that they are deficient and need to be fixed with educational products so they can further serve the nation’s larger economic agenda. Desired outcomes then focus on children and adults becoming consumers, not creators, of culture and knowledge.

So, for instance, in large and small programs, for-profit and non-profit, from Florida to Alaska, and on U.S. military bases around the world, accredited child care and Head Start programs are all starting to look the same. Most are furnished with items from the same early childhood vendor catalogs and have the same bulletin board displays and curriculum plans posted on the wall. Criteria and standards, originally developed as guidelines for quality-care hallmarks and educational benchmarks, have now become narrowly interpreted rules to enforce. Though they pay lip service to the concept, most programs are missing the heart of a caregiving partnership with families. We see teachers offering parents dutiful communications about whether their children ate, slept, or had a good day. Most of these daily report forms end up stuffed in the bottom of a bag or on the floor of the car because they convey little about what families really want to know about their children’s time spent away from home.

Children spend more of their waking hours in these programs than with their families. What families really need are snapshots (descriptions and photographs) of how their children are developing and making friends, what they are doing and thinking, liking and avoiding. A daily form with perfunctory information doesn’t make up for what families are missing. Because parents often lack the experience to find significance in their children’s play, they add to the pressure teachers feel to provide them with traditional signs of their children’s academic progress. They like to see art projects, worksheets, and checklists indicating what they think of as school readiness. Teachers striving to be developmentally appropriate get frustrated with these requests. Requirements for formal assessments of children’s progress often feel disconnected from the daily life of the classroom.
Caregivers and parents want assurances and appreciation from each other. Often both groups feel unsatisfied with what they get.

Meanwhile, from the children’s perspective, life is getting more crowded, rushed, and regimented into scheduled, short blocks of time. Children spend too little time outdoors, in the world of real work, or with meaningful relationships and a sense of community. They rarely get to be alone, to play for as long as they like, or to be with children who are not their own age. Caregivers and teachers come and go, and no one takes a special interest in children for long or gives them a sense of history or belonging. Most of the adults in their lives seem obsessed with whether children know their colors and numbers. Talk of getting “big enough to go to school” sustains little hope for engaged interest or meaningful learning.

Early care and education programs are a daily fact of life for children and families in the United States. On the way to work each morning, most parents leave their children in the care of someone outside their families, usually in settings that look far more structured and institutional than where they spent their own childhoods. Some children are fortunate enough to be in quality family child care, but before long, the provider goes out of business or parents move their children into a preschool setting they believe will help the children be ready to succeed in school. Well-meaning parents focus on their young children’s education in a narrow sense, not considering the larger picture of their childhoods and the real experiences needed for success in life.

Rethinking What We Need

It is estimated that young children today spend approximately twelve thousand hours in group care and institutional settings before they even get to school. This means that children are spending the bulk of their childhoods in our programs. Childhood in the last few decades looks different from what most people reading this book remember. Growing up in a neighborhood; roaming freely on the block; climbing trees; playing street games; making creations with logs, stones, or found junk; having regular family gatherings; playing with children of all ages as the neighbors watched out for everyone—these are things of the past. The experience of participating in the daily life and meaningful work of the community is less and less available to young children. Instead, most children today spend their days in programs with large groups of children the same age, isolated from
their families and the real world, surrounded by institutional walls and chain-link fences, playing with single-purpose plastic toys, and spending time with underpaid, often unresponsive or disgruntled adults. As Jim Greenman (1992, 22) asks, “Is that what we want for the one childhood allocated to our children?”

—I want every room in our program to be one I would love to put my own child in. Each new baby I enroll in our program I personally take into my arms and say, “I will do my best to see that every day you are loved by someone here. In every way possible, we will find ways to let you know how special and important you are to us.”

—Laura

Early childhood programs are microcosms of the larger world. Often they are devoid of spirit and meaningful connections, plagued with crumbling infrastructures, and distressed with lives on the brink. Staff, children, and families are filled with stress and assaults to their physical and mental health. To cope, we become desensitized and think of this way of living as “normal.” Living with an unacknowledged but nagging discrepancy between how things are and how they could be easily leads to cynicism or depression. We lower our expectations to avoid deep disappointment. Any vision we may have started with gets sacrificed in the name of saving our sanity.

Visit any early childhood center and you will find that everyone needs more support. Scratch the surface and you find a profound need for a place to be nurtured and appreciated. People desire more than reminders to have a good day. They yearn for fuller connections with others and more meaningful daily exchanges. Why don’t needs assessments acknowledge this human longing for connection as people’s most vital need? This acknowledgment would be a wake-up call that educators could respond to with commitment and know-how. The early childhood profession knows about nurturing human development. Within its control are buildings where people of different ages and, in many cases, different cultures come together each day with the potential of real interchanges of ideas, needs, skills, and resources. Everyone comes together with a clear focus on children. Everyone acknowledges that these children are the future. They represent
people’s hopes, promises, and deepest longings. Ask yourself this question: Am I using this daily opportunity to its fullest potential?

The often-quoted African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” is an important reminder. But perhaps in this consumer-oriented, technologically advanced, fast-paced culture, it will take a child to raise a village. When people genuinely come together around their hopes and dreams for children, a sense of possibility can be rekindled. This goes far beyond providing a service or a school readiness program. Early childhood centers can play a central role in recreating the new village, the new experience of neighborhood for daily life. They can become places that respond to the longings for community, meaningful relationships, a sense of belonging, and an exuberant experience of learning about the world. This is a real vision you can have for your programs, not just words on paper. Your actions, your policies, and the pulse of your organizational culture can reflect and embody this dream.

**Distinguishing a Mission from a Vision**

The early childhood profession gives periodic lip service to the idea of having a vision, but it is uncommon to find much time or space devoted to this topic in literature or professional development offerings. More typical are discussions of appropriate practice, standards, regulations, and rating scales. Though these certainly may be part of one’s vision, they are not usually discussed in this context. With all our profession’s emphasis on the components of quality child care and best practices, specific mention of working within a larger vision is usually missing. Is this because we don’t understand the concept or role of a vision in our work, or are there other explanations?

Many early childhood programs have something written on paper about their purpose. Often this is in the form of a mission statement outlining their intent to serve children in need of care, to treat them respectfully, and to meet their developmental needs. But directors hired into programs are seldom asked how they would like to see the organization’s purpose brought to life. Mission and philosophy statements are occasionally posted in programs and are usually found in handbooks or the organization’s literature. Rarely do these statements make their way into the hearts and minds of the staff or in any way become a guiding vision for program environments, policies and procedures, or daily decision making.

A mission statement is usually about purpose, but it is seldom about a dream. Typically, a mission statement tries to address a problem...
with a statement of services. A vision, on the other hand, goes beyond how things are to describe how we would like them to be. In the words of Susan Gross (1987, 25–26), a vision is “what the world or society or an environment or community would look like if that purpose were realized.”

There are a number of reasons why the early childhood field has focused more on the delivery of services with educational outcomes and has neglected to project a larger vision. As the field has grown beyond the part-time nursery-school model of providing enrichment experiences for children and has battled the notion that full-time child care is just babysitting, the bulk of attention has been on learning how to use curriculum and assessment tools and developing an agreed-on body of professional knowledge and ethics. The primary focus has been on the child’s learning experience, and secondarily on parent involvement. While a growing emphasis has been placed on staff qualifications and training, with more and more job requirements, little attention has been given to the working conditions and resources caregivers and teachers need to do their work well. If we projected a picture of the work environment and professional support that is really required, we’d have to admit how woefully inadequate our programs are.

The members of our profession are predominantly female, and in a world where resources are controlled by predominately male priorities, we struggle to be taken seriously. To get the recognition and support they need, women tend to do what is expected of them—color within the lines and play the game according to the rules. In early childhood care and education our message is often, “We are doing such a good job with children; please give us more recognition and resources.” If we spoke the bigger truth and acknowledged that most of our programs are mediocre at best, we’d feel like failures. Politically, we’d be shooting ourselves in the foot. Most of us early childhood professionals prefer to confine our sights to what seems possible, rather than face the pain of what Langston Hughes called “a dream deferred.” Thus we strain under multiple stresses and minimal resources, and our workforce continues to turn over at a disturbing rate.

As children and their families come to us increasingly needy, with their family life and communities under assault from commercial interests, media culture, violence, economic downturns, poverty, and racism, we frantically put our fingers in the leaky holes. We have failed to mobilize a vision that would hold back the floodwaters, let alone dismantle the dike and build a new structure that would universally meet the needs of children and families.
Peter Block reminds us in *The Empowered Manager* (1987, 107) that

a vision exists within each of us, even if we have not made it explicit or put it into words. Our reluctance to articulate our vision is a measure of our despair and a reluctance to take responsibility for our own lives, our own unit, and our own organization. A vision statement is an expression of hope, and if we have no hope, it is hard to create a vision.

Are there places in our profession where a larger vision is central to the discourse and is actively generating hope? The early care and educational systems of the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, and of schools in Sweden and New Zealand show us a vision of how programs could be if we genuinely dedicated ourselves to the lives of children. These schools take the view that children are today’s, not just tomorrow’s, citizens and deserve our careful listening and attention for what they offer us in the here and now. In the United States, alongside the standardization movement, programs inspired by the Reggio approach have been diligently demonstrating a different vision of the teaching and learning process. When you visit a program that is deeply studying and translating Reggio ideas for their settings, you are immediately struck by the intentionality, intellectual vitality, and collaboration that is inherent in the Reggio approach. Directors guiding their programs through this exploration are less buffeted about by external requirements and standards because they are confident about the vision they stand for. Their hearts and minds are focused on a philosophy and pedagogy that promote critical thinking, and they continually examine the assumptions they work with.

The heart of the Reggio model includes not only an image of children who are creative and capable, but a culture that is family-centered and attentive to sensual pleasure, reflection, intense discussion, and collaboration. Schools following this model have grown from a vision of social justice in the politics of the Italian town for which they were named. The adults have created early childhood programs out of the real lives and values of children. If we are to draw inspiration from these Italian schools, we can’t simply imitate their culture but need to find our own way. It helps to study how this approach has been interpreted in other countries, such as Sweden and New Zealand, and in states and provinces across Australia, Canada, and elsewhere. Researching these examples helps us understand values and principles and avoid a superficial adaptation. We learn to
dive under the profit-driven popular culture of America and bring forth the values and practices we know nurture children and family life, such as having relationships with real people rather than television personalities, slowing down to notice and celebrate how the light changes with different seasons, and taking time to create lasting traditions and memories. The challenge is to create a program culture with systems and structures that supports these values and practices.

I work in an inner-city setting that is often stereotyped because it is riddled with all the problems of poverty. It’s easy to have low expectations and become immobilized by the difficulties. But if you want to find them, there are still many possibilities for the people who live in these communities.

From the beginning of my directing work here I knew my challenge was to go beyond just meeting the standards, which is what most people reach for as a goal for an inner-city program. I had a driving belief that children, families, and staff members all have the potential to continually learn and grow. With this in mind, I began to think in terms of instilling a sense of hope as a primary goal. Most inner-city child care and Head Start programs don’t get access to progressive, visionary ideas. The focus is usually just about needs, deficits, and survival. My search for a way to change this led me to the schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy.

At Reggio, I found an extraordinary set of infant, toddler, and preschool centers founded by a small group of determined people after their country had been ravaged by war. Over the years, they got their municipal government to fund these programs. At first I was hesitant to try to use Reggio as a model for our programs. Reggio Emilia and the inner city of Chicago are so completely different. I knew we would have to invent our own way, and I questioned whether we could.

I had to learn how to focus on opportunities and not obsess over the barriers and obstacles or allow ourselves to get stuck there. My dream is to create a different example of quality for others to see, especially in programs such as Head Start and subsidized child care. Rather than seeing our children as just needing more social services, we have begun to recognize that despite the hardships in their lives, these children come to us with ideas, interests, and curiosities that we need to help flourish. Reaching our vision is an ongoing process, and we are figuring it out as we go. I don’t think it will ever end. There are peaks and valleys, but we are continuing to move forward.

—Karen
Cultivating a Vision

How much of your time as a director is spent nurturing hope and giving a sense of possibility to those in your program? Are there ways in which you are cultivating a vision as part of your regular conversations, parent orientations, and staff development efforts? The Visionary Director contains ideas on how to move in that direction. Throughout this book are snapshots of the many different ways directors are making this happen. As you hear their voices, let them strengthen your ability to guide your program with a vision and deepen your desire to be part of this spreading movement to turn early childhood programs into genuine caring and learning communities.

---

Go back to why you’re doing what you’re doing. I don’t mean going back to the regulations. Don’t be outer-defined. Do not allow the regs to define who you are. Do not allow any outside forces to define who you are. Allow for the possibility that the regs may actually catch up with your vision. There will be a flicker of fire that’s very exciting.

—Dana

Going Beyond Managing to Leading

Guiding early childhood programs with a vision requires more than management skills. A manager is focused on the people, problems, and tasks at hand, using technical skills to address them. Beyond that, working with a vision requires developing oneself into a leader who inspires others to participate in and expand the vision. Of course, early childhood directors who are leaders attend to management concerns, but they also bring these concerns into a group focus through vision building, what Peter Block calls “convening, valuing relatedness, and presenting choices” (2008, 85). Leaders create management systems and structures to support a visionary organizational culture. Linda Espinosa, who embodies these dimensions of leadership, says, “Leaders are those who provoke or nudge or elevate others into thinking, feeling, or behaving in ways they would not otherwise have demonstrated” (1997, 97). Growing yourself as a leader goes hand in hand with growing a vision.
It’s pretty easy to be a star if you are a hard-working director with aspirations. You can create some innovative things in a program and then move on to the next phase of your career. I strive to be a leader, not a star. A leader plans for what stays when they leave. The big difference between a leader and a star is in the size of a person’s ego. I know that as I provide leadership, people won’t always love me and be happy. But I’m trying to build an institutional structure that will outlast any focus on me.

—Laura

A vision can’t be handed down like a mission statement or a memo. The ground has to be prepared, seeds have to be planted, and tender shoots have to be protected from destructive pests and early frosts. This requires what Sharon Kagan and Michelle Neuman call “conceptual leadership,” which they say is “more about how we think together about the field’s destiny and the role that early care and education must play in a democratic society” (1997, 59), a theme echoed by Stacie Goffin and Valora Washington (2007). As conceptual leaders we continually step back and look at the big picture. We need a working knowledge of systems thinking, human development, pedagogy, and group dynamics. Where can we find models to adapt for this kind of leadership in our field?

Looking for Models

Surprisingly, it is outside the field of early care and education where we find the most literature and training with an emphasis on leading organizations with a vision. For the past thirty years, the vision of workplaces as learning organizations has been advancing in the business sector, but it is only occasionally found in early childhood programs. Corporate consultants and CEOs have been influencing the direction of for-profit business using ideas that seem intrinsic to the early childhood field: ideas of human development and the processes of teaching, learning, and teamwork. Yet it is the business world that has taken off and prospered using these concepts. Since the 1990s, a proliferation of corporate business management books, trade journals, and now Web sites and blogs have been discussing ideas that should be the foundation of the work in the early childhood care and education field—build from people’s strengths,
acknowledge contributions, develop shared visions, do systems thinking, see empowerment as the key to success, provide for and reward collaborations, and celebrate often. Shouldn’t these concepts be filling our literature, conferences, and professional development seminars? The corporate world has created a vision and mobilized a workforce around a strong sense of purpose, ultimately to enhance profit margins. What are equivalent actions we can use to become powerful in the world?

One voice in the field, Child Care Information Exchange, has consistently tried to bring the lessons of the business world to the field of early childhood care and education. As early as 1987 they featured an article by a business management consultant alerting us to the way organizations become powerful. Here’s a taste of what Susan Gross has to say in her article “The Power of Purpose” (1987, 25–26):

What we mean by purpose is the end or result at which an entire organization is aimed. Purpose is the organization’s driving force and reason for being. It is always translatable into vision—that is, an image shared by the organization of what the world or society or an environment or community would look like if that purpose were realized.

For early childhood programs, Gross is describing something different from uniting a center around the self-study for NAEYC accreditation, as important and rewarding as that might be. She is suggesting using our imaginations, not our checklists, to define dreams that linger with us as we move through our days of stress, chores, meetings, and to-do lists. Her point has to do with how we cultivate our hearts, make connections with other people, and create a desire to reach for something better. Gross goes on (25):

The most potent ingredient in organizational effectiveness is a clear sense of purpose shared by every member of the organization. Organizational problems, including nasty interpersonal conflicts and wrenching internal schisms, can literally begin to dissolve when people in an organization rediscover the depth of their common vision.

Susan Gross and other people in the business world are reminding us that vision is central to organizational effectiveness. Another business management consultant, Peter Senge, in his seminal book about systems thinking and learning organizations, The Fifth
Discipline (2006, 9), explains that the very definition of leadership in an organization is tied to working with a vision:

If any one idea about leadership has inspired organizations for thousands of years, it’s the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future we seek to create. . . . When there is a genuine vision (as opposed to the all-too-familiar “vision statement”), people excel and learn, not because they are told to, but because they want to. But many leaders have personal visions that never get translated into shared visions that galvanize an organization. . . . What has been lacking is a discipline for translating vision into shared vision—not a “cookbook” but a set of principles and guiding practices.

To develop yourself as a leader, you need to work with a clear set of principles. Each chapter of this book offers principles that are valuable for early childhood programs, and strategies to bring them alive. Below is the first principle—the foundation of your work to come.

**Principle**

Create a Process for Developing Your Vision

A vision for an organization can’t be just one person’s idea. As a director, you may have the initial inspiration for your program's purpose, but for these ideas to grow, you must steadily invite the interest and involvement of others.

Because many early childhood program directors are inexperienced in working with a vision, they may be uncertain how to talk about it and bring their vision into focus for others. We recommend developing a vision-building process that is regularly revisited and invites people to reflect, engage, and challenge each other to connect their values and beliefs to their daily lives.

Vision statements grow by involving people in activities that help them name what they find most meaningful and memorable from their own family lives, and together examining real-life examples using stories, poems, and other media. These two approaches can help determine the values and concepts that are important to people's lives and could become a part of your vision.

Collaboratively developing a vision takes time and involves many twists and turns. The following pages contain strategies that
have proved useful as directors have developed their leadership skills in guiding the process.

**Strategy**  Regularly share memories of favorite childhood experiences

Whether our childhoods were generally positive or negative, most of us have some favorite childhood experiences to share with others. When adults take on teaching jobs in early childhood programs, the primary memory bank we draw on is a school setting. But deep within us are other memories that fill us with warmth, giggles, and sensory details we love to talk about. These can become frequent discussion starters to generate ideas about the activities and relationships that are valuable for children.

In the initial process of working with a staff to build a common vision for the program, it’s useful to devote a large block of time to some specific storytelling about childhood memories. This gets people in touch with a vital set of experiences that have lasting meaning for them. Devoting precious staff development time to this sharing communicates the priorities of the program and the value that is placed on people’s own lives as a rich source of learning. It also sets the tone for creating a “storytelling culture” in the program.

The way you launch an activity of sharing childhood memories among your staff depends on your assessment of who they are. Getting to know your staff will help you determine how to set the stage and introduce the activity. If you have a large staff, you may need to allow more time or you may want people to share their stories in pairs or small groups. If people are hesitant to talk in a group, bringing in some objects and pictures can help spark people’s memories. When people have good listening skills and feel at ease with talking in group settings, this activity usually runs smoothly. If one or two people tend to dominate the discussion, you will need to monitor the time and structure of the activity so everyone has a turn. If you have a group that seems hesitant to talk about themselves, you might do better to keep the talking in pairs or have them make some written lists.

This idea might be introduced during a meeting by asking the staff to separate into pairs and having each share a favorite memory from childhood. Acknowledge that some may have had difficult childhoods, but nearly everyone has something special they remember. Tell the group you will give each pair about ten minutes for sharing. After the first five minutes, alert them that it’s time for the
second person to share. When you reconvene the whole group, ask for reflections on what they heard. Rather than having them repeat stories, ask them to name the themes they heard. This process of analyzing and drawing out the meaning of the stories is where “ah ha’s” happen. Many people have memories of endless hours playing outdoors without any adult supervision. Others remember playing with kids of all ages in the neighborhood, eating peanut butter sandwiches out on the steps, turning found objects into toys or inventions. As you list these kinds of themes—endless hours outdoors, no adults around, making mischief, make-believe—consider which are currently available to children in your program. Obviously you can’t do some of these things, but can you find ways to create similar memories for children today?

Discussions like this are the tender shoots of a growing vision. As the months go on, you can further develop this aspect of your organizational culture by devoting ten to fifteen minutes of each staff meeting for continued storytelling. What you want to cultivate is a climate in which stories are everywhere in your program, reflecting a genuine enthusiasm and engagement with what is happening. This initial story-sharing practice will lay the groundwork for giving attention to the details of children’s conversations and their play. It will further the respect and appreciation staff and families have for how stories offer a window into who they are and how they think.

Sometimes it helps to suggest a specific focus for a childhood memory, such as remembering a time when you took a risk. You can experiment with free-form sharing, letting anyone who is ready have a turn to speak, or you can just go around the room, giving everyone a turn. Use these questions with any childhood memory activity to generate the components of a child- and family-centered program:

- What were the themes in the stories you heard?
- If you were going to give this story a three- or four-word name, what would it be?
- Which of these themes would you like to be part of the children’s and families’ lives in our program?
- How can we simulate some of these experiences within the confines of our safety regulations?

One director we know wanted to build a playground that would provide children with opportunities for risk taking and adventure. She
used childhood memory activities to raise funds and design a playground built for risk and adventure in her program. In meetings with her staff, child care licensers, local businesspeople, and parents, she asked them to recall their fondest memories of being outdoors. Their memories included lots of sensory elements, such as water, dirt, and even prickly bushes. With fondness, most of them recalled favorite hiding places, taking risks, and doing things their parents might not have allowed had they been around. After brainstorming lists like this, the director suggested they compare their experiences with the lives of children in full-time child care today. The contrast was striking enough that she was able to mobilize the support and resources to build a playground that simulates many elements of these childhood memories. It is designed around nature and adventure, with more money put into landscaping than plastic, immovable climbers. For a fuller account of this inspirational story, see our book *Reflecting Children's Lives: A Handbook for Planning Child-Centered Curriculum.*

**Strategy**  
**Represent childhood memories with found objects or art materials**

We’ve also found that caregivers and teachers respond well when asked to use open-ended materials such as toilet-paper rolls, wire, and blocks to represent their favorite memory or a favorite place they remember from their childhood. This often generates creative thinking and playful interactions, reminding people of the spirit of childhood.

**Strategy**  
**Use children’s books to unearth childhood memories**

If you have a group that is slow to participate in sharing memories and stories, you might want to launch this activity by reading a children’s book that captures some aspects of your vision. Some books that work well in launching childhood memory activities are listed in the strategy that follows.

**Strategy**  
**Use children’s books regularly in staff meetings**

There are a number of reasons to read children’s books in staff meetings and workshops. One, of course, is to help unearth childhood
memories, as described previously. Overall, we need to improve the way we typically use picture books with children. Books are usually given to children as a holding pattern, a way to keep them occupied during transition times, with little support for any real interest in the books. Often a requirement is to put them away when the teacher is ready for the next activity. Story reading in many early childhood programs often happens in large groups at circle time, with repeated reminders to sit quietly and not interrupt. This habit is counter to much of what we know about helping children become lifelong readers and book lovers.

To explore a child’s perspective on books, ask the staff to share their favorite childhood book memories. They most likely will share stories about curling up with a book and a flashlight under the sheets or in the closet, or sitting outside on the steps or under the trees. Or they may remember being snuggled in the lap of a family member, perhaps at bedtime, with few distractions and ample time to talk about the pictures and share wonder and related experiences. Sharing these memories and regularly using picture books in staff meetings can alert you to changes you might want to make in using them with children.

If you model book reading or invite teachers who are expressive to do this, reading books in staff meetings helps cultivate good story reading voices and listening habits. Books are also a terrific way to jar people’s memories of what things are like from a child’s perspective. Stories told from a child’s eye not only are useful in consideration of issues like child guidance, but often provide an opportunity to dream a little and to remember the kind of environment and experiences that create close relationships, a strong sense of identity, and the wonder and magic of learning in the company of people who love you. Choosing picture books with childhood themes nudges you to explore their implications for your program. They are great vision-building tools.

A good story to start with is *On the Day I Was Born* by Debbi Chocolate (1995). The text of this book is simple but uses engaging language to accompany the rich texture of the illustrations. The child in this story talks about being wrapped in a soft cloth, being adored by his family members, and making his father stand tall and proud. Read the book with expression, as you would with children. You can read the book all the way through or stop after a few pages. Use the following questions for discussion of the themes in this beautiful book:
• How does our program reflect the feelings of the child in this book?
• What is our softness curriculum? Can you describe specific things we do that make children feel they are wrapped in a soft cloth?
• Do we convey to the children and their families that they make us feel proud? If so, how?

Another book that helps teachers explore the specific components of childhood that their programs should provide is *Roxaboxen*, a true story by Alice McLerran (1991). It is filled with images of children engaged in meaningful, self-directed play that involves all the goals you have for block and dress-up areas, for nature and science activities, and for physical, social, emotional, and moral development. Together as a group or in pairs, ask staff members to reflect on questions like:

• When the children in our program grow up and think back on their time with us, will it be with the same fondness and meaning that *Roxaboxen* offered? If not, how can we make it so?
• What are the elements of childhood portrayed in *Roxaboxen*, and how can we recreate or simulate them in our program?
• What are the jewels that children find in our program? Are there enough to go around?
• Where in our program do children experience the sensation of riding fast like the wind on a pretend horse?

*Miss Tizzy* by Libba Moore Gray (1993) offers another wonderful picture of how children and adults could spend time together. Many aspects of a vision for early childhood programs becoming genuine caring and learning communities are in this book. Miss Tizzy is part of a neighborhood and engages children in predictable routines and unexpected treats. She shares herself fully with the children and involves them in meaningful work and joyous play. In her care, the children learn to make a contribution to the neighborhood and ultimately to Miss Tizzy herself. To guide the discussion of this book, ask staff to reflect on the specific things Miss Tizzy does with the children that make her so wonderful. Consider questions such as:
• How do we connect children in our program with nature in the spirit of Miss Tizzy with her garden and cat and songs to the moon?
• What special things from home do we bring to work to share with the children?
• What risks do we take in sharing ourselves with children, like Miss Tizzy having a house and garden that looks different from everyone else’s or being willing to sing even when she is slightly off-key?
• How do children in our program experience a similar sense of neighborhood when they are in our care?
• How do children in our program learn to make a contribution to those around them?

Sylvia Long (2000) has adapted the traditional “Hush Little Baby” lullaby into a delightful book that demonstrates how you can better align your values with traditions. She introduces the book with the story of how she grew up with this lullaby and wanted to pass it on to her children. But when she listened more carefully to the lyrics, she realized they didn’t represent her values. Each verse of the original song suggested comforting a child with an offer to buy something. Long’s new lyrics offer comfort to children by connecting them with the natural world and with music by showing the child a hummingbird or pointing out the evening sky. You can “sing” the book to the group and then ask them to write a verse or two of their own.

Each of these books generates wonderful discussions and provides twinkles and tears for your eyes. They help you remember how childhood can be and inspire everyone to move in that direction. If you spend much time in the children’s section of a library or bookstore, you will likely find other books to use in your vision building. Consider children’s books not only for meetings with staff, but also for gatherings with families, board meetings, or even hearings with licensers or legislators.

Having tried this strategy of reading children’s books, many directors have shared exciting results. In one program, some of the staff were so inspired by *Roxaboxen* that they put all their plastic, commercial toys in storage and replaced them with open-ended materials from nature, such as driftwood, rocks, shells, and old wooden boxes and baskets. The quality of play among children that followed was unlike anything they had seen before. When shelving
units and furniture needed replacing, they began shopping at garden stores and IKEA, instead of using the traditional early childhood educational supply catalogs. The atmosphere became more relaxed, and parents started lingering more at drop-off and pickup times. Soon they began to find parents snuggled with children on a wicker love seat looking over children’s artwork or favorite books, while others helped add finishing touches to a fort made of bed-sheets and driftwood pieces.

Since we read *Roxaboxen* to a group of licensors, several of them have remarked that they now regularly read children’s books in their office meetings. A family provider called and told us her licenser had a sudden change of heart after rereading *Roxaboxen*. She decided the huge pile of dirt in the backyard didn’t really constitute a health and safety hazard. In fact, she thought it might be an exciting playground if the children were given some natural props and simple tools like sifters, pails, shovels, and rakes.

**Strategy: Get to know families’ dreams**

Each family enrolling a child in an early childhood program has hopes and dreams for their child. This is easily overlooked as schedules and fees are negotiated. To coax these aspirations out of families, put something in your application form that asks about their hopes for their child as they form relationships with caregivers and teachers. During home visits, interviews, and orientation sessions, respectfully raise questions that get to the values and longings they have for their children.

Make families’ values and dreams for their children visible to the staff and others in concrete ways, such as bulletin board displays that feature different families every month. Put interviews and photographs that tell a family’s story in your newsletter or in a homemade book for others to read. To make this welcoming for everyone, be sensitive to issues that families may feel awkward disclosing, such as the configuration of their home life, economic circumstances, or health. These strategies and your sensitivity go a long way to create an inclusive environment that acknowledges that all families have strengths, just as all families struggle. The Tucson Children’s Project (see Afterword) is an inspiring example of how a program used families’ hopes and dreams to advocate for respect and support in the larger community.
Nuestra labor comenzó cuando descubrimos que había pocas opciones para las familias que necesitaban programas bilingües. Mi esposo y yo teníamos una visión. Habíamos decidido que el español sería el primer idioma de nuestros hijos. Queríamos un ambiente que valorara la cultura puertorriqueña. Otros padres de diferentes culturas o grupos étnicos también querían tener esas oportunidades para sus hijos; nuestra dedicación a estos valores nos llevó a un compromiso y un sentido de comunidad.

Descubrimos que nuestra visión no es estática y que ha sido moldeada, modificada y puesta a prueba por los niños, maestros y agencias reguladoras con los que nos relacionamos a través de los años. El interés mutuo de los participantes por el bienestar y la supervivencia del programa ha sido el impulso que nos ayudó a realizar lo que nos habíamos forjado. Hemos hecho grandes cambios en el ambiente físico, en nuestro currículo, en nuestras políticas, en superar los problemas económicos y todavía nos mantenemos como una agencia independiente y privada. Esto nunca hubiera sido posible sin el sentido de comunidad que hemos forjado en nuestro Centro.

—Carmen

Our journey began because there were very few options for families looking for bilingual programs. My husband and I had a vision. We were really determined to maintain Spanish as the primary language for our children. We also wanted our children to be in an environment that validated their Puerto Rican heritage. This vision was shared by many other parents across racial lines. They too wanted a program that would provide these opportunities for their children. Our commitment to these issues created a bond and sense of community.

We have discovered that visions are not static. Our vision has been molded and put to the test by the many children, parents, staff, and regulatory agencies that have been involved over the years. The vested interest of all the participants in the survival and well-being of the program has been a very powerful force in accomplishing what we have. We have made major changes in our physical environment, curriculum, and policies. We have overcome financial hardships and have managed to remain an independent and private agency. This never would have happened without the sense of community that has emerged at our center.

—Carmen
**Strategy** Reinvent the idea of quilting bees

Bring people together for meaningful tasks that aren’t always about cleaning, painting, and repairing. Entice them with an enjoyable and useful activity, such as organizing their family memories into scrapbooks and photo albums. With busy lives, this is something most people don’t make time for. They are usually grateful for the opportunity to rekindle memories at this type of bookmaking party.

Suggest that families and staff members bring photographs, special mementos, or just their memories to create visual stories about their lives. Offer a variety of colorful background papers, magazine pictures, stickers, and old greeting cards. Get a frame shop to donate a supply of recycled mat board or foam core. Provide glue, markers, scissors, and other tools for making bulletin boards or homemade books.

Offer initial ideas to get people started. They could create a book or display board around the topic of family history, favorite memories, holiday celebrations, or special accomplishments. Not only do you end up with visual stories of people in your program, but as they work on these projects together, staff and families learn about and from each other, thus building a caring community.

**Strategy** Seek the children’s ideas

We so often do things on behalf of children while neglecting to get their direct input. Part of your vision-building process should include ways to solicit the perspectives of children on what they value most in their time with you. Try asking them to draw their favorite places or activities in the center. Play a variation of the “I spy” game, asking them to offer responses to statements such as:

- I spy something that makes me feel better when I’m sad.
- I spy a place to go when I want to feel powerful.
- I spy my favorite place.
- I spy something that reminds me of something we do in my family.
- I spy a tool I want to be able to use.
Strategy  Put images and words together

We have offered you a vision of early childhood programs as learning communities that can serve as the cornerstone for larger social change. Take some time now to gather your own thoughts and reactions to this idea. If your program was to move closer to this vision, how might this look in your particular setting? Remember the words of Sylvia Ashton-Warner: “Dreams are a living picture in the mind generating energy” (1972, 87).

Try to imagine the feel, the look, the sound, and even the smell of such a place. What words would you use to describe this picture? Jot down some phrases that describe how the environment would influence the interactions and activities of children, staff, and families.

Now look over your list. Do any of your words match your image of a school? Are they similar to any elements in your current program? Go through the list again. Can you identify three things you could do, with negligible impact on your budget, that would reflect some of the elements you pictured? Perhaps your list would look something like this director’s list:

- soft music and seating in our entryway—set up tape player and wicker love seat by sign-in table
- chocolate-chip cookies baking—have potpourri or scented candle for interim
- small groups of parents talking about weekend plans together
- monthly toy and clothing exchange for families
- community garden in a section of our play yard
- hosting ESL and citizenship classes for the community—call Refugee Alliance to discuss and offer space

Strategy  Develop a vision statement together

After you have spent time with some of the previous strategies, you will be ready to create a public declaration of the vision you are trying to build. When the ground has been adequately tilled and fertilized with activities such as those previously discussed, invite people to collaborate on writing a vision statement. With help from the accumulation of notes from your childhood-memory sessions and input from staff, parents, and children about their values and what’s important to
them, invite people to collaborate on writing a vision statement. Here are some possible approaches to use.

**Create a three-column chart like the one below.**
Working in three different groups, one group for each column, have people begin to generate words and phrases for their column. Then bring everyone back together to compare what each group came up with, and begin to build sentences from these bones for your vision statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children deserve</th>
<th>Families deserve</th>
<th>Staff deserve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Ask people to look over the other lists and visual representations created in earlier activities.**
Begin to put these words into concept groupings, perhaps through word webbing; encourage people to brainstorm specific images to add more detail. During this process, suggest that they think of the special things they already experience in the program, and then add more ideas about what else they would like to see.

**Ask for volunteers to record what is being said.**
Assemble all the selected words, phrases, and sentences, and choose some opening phrases to capture concepts to include in your vision statement.

**Have small groups flesh out short paragraphs for each opening phrase.**
It might take a couple of sessions to come up with a statement that sounds pleasing to everyone, but keep at it. The process itself continues to feed the vision.

Here’s an example of a vision statement created by a program in Seattle:

---

*Sample provided by iActiveLearning.com, all rights reserved.*
At today’s teacher meeting a teacher led us in singing the John Lennon song “Imagine.” After singing, we took some time to reflect on the program of our dreams. What would it feel like for teachers? Children? Parents? Inspired by Margie and Deb’s books, I asked the teachers to use as many sensory and emotion words they could think of to describe their dreams. Then I handed out strips of paper and asked them to fill in the blanks:

Imagine a school where teachers . . .
Imagine a school where children . . .
Imagine a school where families . . .

We then gathered into small groups to organize the small strips onto large sheets of paper to create poems. One teacher volunteered to take all three poems and synthesize them into one poem. I was so thrilled with the results. The poems were amazing! I’ve tried visioning exercises before, but it was always difficult to get people to see beyond the details to the big ideas. The “Imagine” framework allowed them to think in a different way.

—Ellen
Strategy  
Represent pieces of your vision with blocks

People need to see examples of what your vision looks like on a daily basis. After some initial time spent identifying and working toward a vision, get your staff focused on how they see this shared vision in action. Bring a pile of blocks and sticky notes to a staff meeting. Ask people to look over the components of the vision again, and then think of an example they’ve seen lately. Have them write a story (a brief description) on a sticky note, put it on a block, and then place the block so as to begin to build a foundation that represents the vision. As the foundation gets built, have each story read aloud so that the examples are visible to everyone. You might even find a way to display this block foundation on a table with a sign for parents and staff members to continue to add more story blocks as they see the vision coming alive.

Practice Assessing Yourself as a Visionary Leader

Management consultant Carl Sussman once suggested that the typical early childhood environment does not cultivate the kind of risk-taking behavior that is needed to conceive and carry out an expansive vision (1998). Inherently, the work of taking care of children involves patience, consistency of routines, the utmost vigilance over safety and health, and gentle, accepting, nurturing behavior. Perhaps because of this, many of us in the early childhood profession have a temperament less inclined toward risk. In fact, most directors associate the idea of risk with liability and strive to keep everything safe, literally and figuratively. But if you are to be a leader and move your program toward a larger vision, you will need to cultivate yourself as a risk taker.
I didn’t always know this. The learning took years. But once I learned how to make army regulations work for us rather than letting them work against, I felt powerful and helped the people who worked with me feel empowered.

Yes, we do have to be 100 percent in compliance with army regulation 608-10 in order to maintain our Department of Defense certification (the army equivalent to state licensing). But what I’ve discovered is that somehow rules get “made up” that are not and never were in the regulation. Why this phenomenon of making-up rules occurs in early childhood programs might make another whole story. Maybe we make them up because we’re inventing our profession as we go. Maybe we do it because we’re scared of inspections. Maybe it’s because we have such different levels of understanding about best practices for early childhood programs. It could be a combination of all of these.

For example, when I was a preschool teacher there was a “rule” among the child development centers and family child care homes in our community that said the children must wear their shoes at all times, even during naptime, because there might be a fire drill. Does that make sense to you? Did you ever try to sleep comfortably wearing your shoes? Did you grow up never being allowed to go barefoot? It made no sense to me, but we did as we were told by our directors and kept the children in shoes.

So how did we work through this in my program? We began to question the rules—the ones that didn’t make sense to us. We began to expect inspectors to “show us where it says that in the regulation.” We learned that the army regulation actually stated the intent for each rule. When we found that out, we began to work with rule makers to develop plans and solve problems. Our goal was to meet the intent of the regulation rather than continue to comply with arbitrary rules. We began to feel that we were in control of the rules, not that the rules were in control of us. We began to feel powerful. We began to think for ourselves. We became thinking people caring for our nation’s children. We began to be creators rather than followers of regulations that didn’t make sense.

—Kathleen
Take a minute to assess yourself. Do you see yourself as a risk taker? A visionary? Are you satisfied with how things are in your program, in your profession, and in society at large? How close to your dream are you? Which one of the following statements feels most like you?

- I avoid taking risks and tend to put my head in the sand when it comes to big changes that are required.
- When I feel something really needs changing, I’m willing to stick my neck out.
- I’m always ready to challenge the status quo, to speak up or advocate for something that obviously needs changing.
- My program is pretty close to how I want it to be.
- I have a list of changes that need to be made if our program is going to meet our profession’s definitions of quality.
- My vision for our program goes far beyond what is typically discussed in our professional literature. I have big dreams and am willing to work to achieve them.

Getting the most out of this book will require you to take some risks. Lay aside any skepticism or list of “yes, buts.” Approach the coming chapters as a dreamer, making notes about what appeals to you, what you’d like to try. Let your mind stretch to spin out possibilities, your spirit fill with courage and determination, and your heart draw strength from your breathing. It’s possible to change how things are when you remember and recommit yourself to how they could be.
Chapter 2

A Framework for Your Work

The job of directing an early childhood program has many faces. Whatever your intentions on any given day, the ebb and flow of events at your program places consistent demands on your time. Consider how your time has been spent over the last few weeks, and place a check in the box below that most closely represents how you have felt.

Currently, most of my time at work is spent as:

☐ an air traffic controller
☐ a welcome-wagon hostess with the mostest
☐ a midwife
☐ a police chief
☐ __________________________________________________________
   (add your own images here)

When you begin the work of directing an early childhood program, you may have a strong sense of purpose and be clear about your vision. Perhaps the first chapter of this book has sparked some new awareness for you, and your mind is full of ideas. But consider this scene, which is no doubt a familiar one for you:

On the way to work this morning you've been thinking about the growing vision you have of your program becoming a caring and
learning community for all involved. There are signs that many of your teachers are understanding the significance of their work in the larger context of changing the culture of consumerism and violence that surrounds us. Parents, too, are beginning to recognize the contrast between how vibrant it feels at your center and the environments where they live and work. They see how much people at the center seem to enjoy each other’s company and help each other out. You feel inspired and resolve to work on behalf of this vision, knowing that it will make a difference in the lives of the children and adults.

Walking in the door, you learn that one of your teachers has called in sick and no substitute has been found. A parent approaches, impatient to speak with you before she heads off to work. In the back of your mind you notice the payroll accounting begging for attention so checks can be cut by the end of the day. On your desk you find a long to-do list that must be accomplished before your board meeting this evening. The glow of your morning thoughts fades as you face the pressing issues of the day.

In scenes like this, how do you keep hold of your dreams as you move through your day? Do you have strategies that keep your head above water, your mind focused, your sight clear? Your work life as a director is so encompassing, so filled with squeaky wheels and daily crises, that it’s easy to lose sight of where you want to be going. Building and sustaining your vision takes more than your imagination or a head full of dreams. You need a structure and systems to help you organize the tasks that lead to your vision, one that keeps you acting intentionally in your planning and responses. Directing with a vision requires a conceptual framework and a practical grasp of effective tools to meet the multiple demands of this complex work.

**Looking for Tips and Techniques**

When you seek out resources to help you in your work, what is usually on your mind? Are you looking to acquire particular skills such as budget development, time management, or delegation of tasks? This know-how is obviously important for program managers, and you need a number of other competencies to be an effective supervisor. For example:

- recruiting, orienting, supervising, and evaluating staff;
- marketing and advocating for your program with parents, potential funders, and policymakers;