ARE YOU A **Provocateur**?

Sharon Easterling, DVAEYC Executive Director

Have you ever noticed that once a new word crosses your path, all of a sudden it seems to be everywhere? So it has been with me recently with the word *provocation*, and it’s more active voice, *provocateur*.

As I have searched for new ways to explain what high quality early childhood education looks like (in contrast to what it’s not), I’ve stumbled again on that wonderful term from Reggio inspired classrooms. The idea is that as teachers, we can create environments that invite children to lose themselves in inquiry and exploration. A collection of unusual gatherings from a beach walk might be offered as an invitation to learning — a *provocation* — that leads to a treasure chest of activities: naming shells, classifying types of shells, stories about the beach, mapping oceans, sand projects, and on and on. From an initial provocation flow new ideas and new directions we may never have imagined.

At the recent NAEYC Institute for Professional Development, *provocateur* seemed to be the “secret word”. Our theme was “The Early Childhood Profession We All Want: What it will take to get us there”. Sessions explored strategies for moving our profession to one that is highly skilled, respected, and compensated. Time after time, those who made bold statements—“all lead teachers should hold a bachelor’s degree” or “it’s time to speak boldly about compensation and the real cost of quality”—were referred to as provocateurs.

I believe our field needs many more provocateurs—those who invite us to think boldly and deeply about our work and how we move forward as a profession.

- Play-based learning – People ask how we can close the achievement gap if we let the children play; this new DVAEYC study group is reflecting on the how and why of play-based learning.
- Race Matters – With Black Lives Matter, we’ve been reminded in the most chilling way that issues of race and class in America are very present; this study group will build deep, trusting relationships in order to explore how these issues impact our personal and professional lives.
- Workforce Transformation Initiative – In partnership with the Public Health Management Corporation and Montgomery Early Learning Centers, we are exploring all the ways we can support a larger, more skilled, and better paid early childhood workforce.
- P-3 collaboration – DVAEYC will convene several networks of PreK and primary grade teachers to explore developmentally appropriate STEM curriculum, school readiness and other critical issues—together.
- Pre-K in Philadelphia – As DVAEYC Executive Director, I have been appointed by Mayor Nutter to serve on the new city Commission on PreK; there is unprecedented interest and commitment to early learning in the city, and the field must provide leadership for this new venture.
- Keystone STARS 2.0 – The bar on quality has been raised without providing adequate resources to those who agreed to meet higher standards, and much has been required that doesn’t yield better child outcomes. Let’s work with new OCDEL leadership to make it better.
- A Day without Daycare – Could we all agree to share the same professional development day across our region, or even state, just to remind everyone of the vital role child care plays in our economy? Just sayin’…

Is your heart beating a little faster? I hope so. I also hope you’ll consider joining one or more of these provocative efforts to make the world a better place, for early childhood professionals and ultimately, for the children and families we serve.

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**Action Day, May 12**

Early Childhood Action Day in Harrisburg was kicked off this year with a pep-rally emceed by PennAEYC director Jodi Askins. It was a star-studded cast: Our new Secretary of the Department of Human Services, Ted Dallas, vowed to listen to the voices in the field; Governor Tom Wolf reiterated his passionate support for investments in early childhood education; and Pittsburgh AEYC director Michelle Figlar was introduced as the new Deputy Secretary of the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL).

Participants then fanned out in the Capitol to visit their legislators—who have gotten an earful about early education, as small groups of advocates have been caravanning to Harrisburg from all over the state every day the legislature has been in session this year to present the ECE case. Action Day closed up with a rousing rally in the Capitol rotunda. While the crowds were smaller than in years past, our impact just keeps growing.

**Action Day at Home: Children as Heroes**

**Jacob Kerner, Parent Infant Center**

Leading up to Action Day we were talking all about heroes in the Peanut classroom at the Parent Infant Center. They were identifying different heroes and talking about why teachers were heroes, and I led a discussion on how kids are heroes and how they can become heroes. They came to the conclusion that they were becoming heroes because they were coming to school each day.

Each of the Peanuts made their own artistic expression of themselves as a hero—and dictated their thoughts about why it’s important for them and every kid to have an experience like they are getting at school so everyone can become heroes. We put it all in an envelope, walked to the mailbox together and mailed the package to our State Representative, Jim Roebuck.

We got a call the other day from Representative Roebuck’s office asking how many Peanuts there are, and we are eagerly awaiting what happens next.

It was quite a good experience. I was able to lead up to it and engage in appropriate practice. They got to talk about and express artistically what they get out of school and why everyone should have that experience—and they were really into it!

**Action in Philadelphia**

**Pre-K on the Ballot**

The Philadelphia Primary Election was a win for pre-k. A ballot question supporting the formation of a universal pre-k commission received the most positive votes of any ballot question in Philadelphia history. The City’s next step will be to select members for the commission that is charged with developing a plan to implement and fund pre-k for all 3- and 4-year-olds in the city. Congratulations to everybody who contributed to this victory!

**Early Childhood on the Mayoral Agenda**

At a press conference at Children’s Village in early June, Democratic Mayoral Nominee Jim Kenney pledged, if elected, to support Mayor Nutter’s plan to improve and grow early learning programs, and to make early learning a top priority of his administration.

Catherine Mikalic at the Green Byrne Center created this display in their main hallway for Action Day at Home. Parents, children, staff and families were invited to write what they loved about school, and check out the facts about early care and education in the city and state on the right hand side. After Action Day, we sent the notes and a letter to the local legislators to remind them to support early childhood initiatives!
Family child care homes are often the choice of low income households, based on affordability, accessibility, and familiarity. These home-based providers often face the greatest challenges in terms of physical space, materials and professional development. Family child care can be an isolating occupation with a provider working long hours, often as the sole caregiver for four to six young children.

There are 811 registered family child care providers in Philadelphia and 97 in Delaware County alone, caring for over 4000 young children; not surprisingly, the great majority are neither in Keystone STARS nor accredited by the home-provider counterpart of NAEYC.

A 2014 federal audit of 20 government-subsidized child-care facilities in Pennsylvania found 17 of them had serious health and safety hazards, administrative violations, or performed incomplete background checks. The audit targeted 20 of the state’s 1,570 “family” child-care facilities. The facilities were not selected at random but were intended to be a representative sample of facilities statewide.

Yet Philadelphia has one of the largest concentrations of high quality accredited family child care providers in the country. Since 2008, DVAEYC has assisted over 60 family child care providers improve the quality of their services, and it is worth noting that in Philadelphia, all but one of the accredited providers achieved this credential with support from DVAEYC.

Moving forward, DVAEYC is continuing to explore ways to best support this important sector of our field: facilitating communities of learning; supporting the cohort of providers that are experimenting with Head Start participation; pursuing the possibility of an Early Head Start collaboration; and laying the groundwork for a new family child care alliance, to lift some of the burden of administration and paperwork off of these hardworking early childhood professionals.
Growing the Pool of TA Consultants

A lively cohort of ten experienced early childhood leaders has been gathering at the DVAEYC office regularly since March, working to become certified to provide Technical Assistance to home- and center-based child care programs in Southeastern Pennsylvania. This nine-month pilot project includes a training institute, learning circles, “shadowing” opportunities, technical assistance and practicum experience.

Under the guidance of DVAEYC’s Lou Warren-Gromes, participants have been sharing and expanding their knowledge and expertise, and learning more about current research, trends and mentoring strategies.

Essence Allen

I like the collaboration with other providers, and getting some real-life information on how we differ from program to program. You tend to see yours as the only way, so it’s a real eye-opener. I like the model of working through best practices and collaborating instead of the top-down approach—offering ideas that we know will work in that context (whether group, family, or center) with feedback from those actual providers, instead of passing down written standards without dealing with obstacles that programs actually experience.

Everyone is not on the same page around what early childhood should look like: the expectations that we have as quality programs may not be the same in the program on the corner. In order to help others implement best practices, you really have to humble yourself and take people where they are. You have to be open-minded and know that everyone is not ready for change, that growth with this person might take a while. Everyone’s program can look different, but we always have to ask if it is compromising the well-being of the children we’re serving.

We need to be able to apply what we’ve talked about, then come back with the problems and issues we’re experiencing. We still need to be mentored ourselves, and get continuous professional development because things are always changing. I’m always trying to see what other collaborations are doing. Are there others facing the same problems, or other practices that people are doing that can be utilized?

Nature Study Group

Over the year we’ve met at a nature preschool, a nature center with kid trails, a newly designed and built outdoor classroom, and a nature-based program. We’ve talked about The Goodness of Rain by Ann Pelo and participated in International Mud Day in June. We’ve been enriched by participants from nature centers, The Franklin Institute, Philadelphia Parks and Recreation, CHOP, the Free Library of Philadelphia, and The Please Touch Museum. The Nature Study Group keeps going strong in its second year, even without DVAEYC staff support.

Coaching and Being Coached

Mary Ellen Mannix

I remember the challenge of communicating to a first time mom about the lunch time experience of a very young child—that there were tears, that the child was okay, and that the insights the mom had shared at drop off helped. It was tricky. Reflection was necessary to put three sentences down that conveyed what happened as well as the caring behind it.

This is one of the toughest art forms to get down as a preschool teacher. Many of the children are still learning language. Many of the families are new to parenting and receiving input on their child from a teacher.

Recently I read a Facebook post from this mom saying that she had saved many of my daily notes: “Cleaning out old emails in my school account, and I found this little gem. Perfectly sums up my child. Many thanks to Mrs. Mannix”. This particular one struck a chord because it was a tough time for the family. Thankfully, the note conveyed that her child was deeply cared for within our classroom.

How did I get here? How did I understand how to write a note to a mom that mentioned their child having a tough day while also conveying kindness and caring? How did I discover that children follow directions better by modeling than by telling them exactly what to do? When did it click that they really don’t have to be looking at you to be listening? There are so many of these very subtle skills that create a successful relationship in early care and education—and I did not learn any of them on my own. It was through the coaching, mentoring and technical assistance of others who had walked before me that I was made aware of these things.

I joined the inaugural Technical Assistant Consultant Cohort with DVAEYC and SERK in hopes to pay it forward to the next generation of teachers and administrators. Since March, a group of early learning professionals from all corners of the Delaware Valley—with combined experience of upwards of 250 years!—has engaged in deep discussions led by Lou Warren-Gromes about how to connect, collaborate, coach, build relationships, support, encourage, share knowledge, listen, cry and laugh with other early childhood professionals to assist their professional growth and expertise. While being a TA requires understanding the intricacies of our quality assurance systems, knowing how to connect the standards to the practice and having the ability to explain its worth, it is mostly about being there for someone else.

Helping children to stretch, learn and take on new challenges requires those of us around them to stretch, learn, and be challenged too. Alone we are limited in our potential to help a child reach theirs. When the TA and the teacher receiving TA approach each other’s strengths and weaknesses with respect and kindness, together we can understand and do more for the children.

We are only halfway through our studies. I have learned so much it is hard to imagine what we will uncover next. But I look forward to the collaboration, and can’t wait to be back in a classroom, sitting in those small chairs again!

Study Group on Play-Based Learning

Kim Farmer

For our first meeting, Peg filled the room with “invitation” centers full of different types of loose parts, and she allowed us to pick whatever we decided we wanted to play with and just explore. Then we talked about how important it is for children to have those kinds of experiences, and to make them very inviting—like arranging them on a pretty cloth, or having a rich variety of materials—and allowing the children time to explore.

An assignment from our first meeting was to look for places to play—and I’ve already begun collecting loose parts.
It Can’t Just Be Us…

Tyrone Scott II
DVAEYC Community Services Program Manager

All of us in the early education world—whether a mother educating her own child, a Head Start director working through federal standards, an assistant teacher helping toddlers learn alternatives to biting, or a professor at a higher education institute explaining emergent curriculum to future kindergarten teachers—know that the first few years of life set the foundation for success. Unfortunately, we also know the struggle of explaining the importance of high quality early education to others.

We share a vision, a passion, a hope for a future where the general public values early childhood as much as sports, movies or Twitter followers. But we also know the struggle of explaining the importance of high quality early education to others.

We have one more session, but I would do it again. It really energized me. We are making a difference one child at a time.

Race Matters and Building Cultural Competence,
A DVAEYC Learning Circle

Our newest DVAEYC Learning Circle is just getting off the ground. We envision it supporting us as we move forward on three fronts:

**How are our programs actually doing in practice?** To what extent have we settled for the outward signs (pictures on the walls that show diversity, attention to a minority culture at special events, etc.) while missing the harder work of understanding and responding to how a child’s perceptions, assumptions and actions are affected by culture and identity? How can we improve our practice?

**How is our understanding growing?** What can we learn about how issues of race, culture and identity play out in the field of early childhood? What is the newest research and thinking?

**How are we doing personally, with our children, our parents, our colleagues and other adult peers?** What have we learned? What are we pleased with? Where can we see our growth? Where do we struggle, make mistakes, and hide? What do we want for ourselves in this area?

If you are interested in participating, please be in touch with Ta’Mora Jackson (tamora@dvaeyc.org) or Pamela Haines (pamela@dvaeyc.org).

WPECE is a Drexel collaboration that seeks to create an education support system for students and families in the neighborhoods of Mantua, Powelton Village, West Powelton and Belmont. The initiative includes parents, caregivers, schools, Pre-Ks, Head Starts, childcare centers, community stakeholders, and social service and educational agencies, including DVAEYC. The most interesting partners are the “community stakeholders.” Unlike many other initiatives, WPECE does not just invite community members to hear about plans being made for them, or invite community members to hear experts speak about early education. WPECE uses engaged families—family ambassadors—to spread the message of high quality early childhood education.

Currently, twelve adults in WPECE engage their peers in a way that experts cannot, building on the connection of neighbors who share a common culture. These family ambassadors not only engage friends and neighbors about high quality early childhood education but, like those of us in the field, take workshops to build their knowledge base; between the dozen ambassadors, 36 workshops have been attended. This leads to the perfect combination of passion, relatability and knowledge. Family ambassadors have shared resources with the community, including books and toys. They have assisted in programming, like kindergarten registration drives. They have excited their neighbors about the notion of universal preschool, collecting over 500 signatures in support of a pre-k ballot initiative.

I like to think that we in the professional of early childhood education do a wonderful job of expressing our passion for young children — but it can’t be just us. We need the community to share our passion and to spread it in a natural, organic way. The family ambassadors are proof positive that partnering with “real” people in the community will bring the best results.

**Funding for this multi-year initiative is made possible through support from the Lenfest Foundation, the State Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) and the William Penn Foundation.** The WPECE Family Engagement program is a partnership with People’s Emergency Center. You can follow WPECE on Facebook.

**Caroline’s Book Club**

Sherry Bohm, Director, Gutman Learning Center

I liked focusing on one book, 101 Principles for Positive Guidance with Young Children: Creating Responsive Teachers, on ideas of how to deal with behaviors that are different, challenging, of concern, or that just need a little bit more than our typical way of handling a child. I found it inspiring. Caroline helped us think about watching our words—and how that leads to watching our actions. The whole discussion was upbeat and vibrant, and it made us realize that we are making a difference one child at a time.

No matter how experienced we are, we should be constant learners. We had readings and homework, and brought that to the sessions. Our group of six regulars included directors, lead teachers, and part-timers, with different experience in different types of schools. We could really learn from each other, and get new ideas of applications of theory that look like they’re working.

We have one more session, but I would do another book. It really energized me.
Early Learning

What’s Play Got to Do With It?

On March 20 and 21 over 1500 early childhood professionals came together at the Pennsylvania Convention Center in Center City to play and learn during two days of professional development and networking. Attendees experienced more than 60 different workshop sessions, including a stirring presentation from Governor Wolf during Friday’s plenary session; got to interact with more than 50 vendors and exhibitors like PNC Grow Up Great and SERK; and left the conference feeling excited and impassioned about the importance of play in early learning.

Save the date—April 1-2—for next year’s conference!

Becoming political for the children

Betty White

My first love for early childhood came with teaching a nursery class in church. I went on to teach—in the Camden public schools, in Christian day schools, then the School District of Philadelphia. After teaching first grade for nearly nine years, I did teacher PD, was an academic coach, then became at Title I Fund Monitor responsible for assisting our region staying in compliance with the Title 1 rules and regulations; during this time I also served as a monitor for the Pennsylvania Department of Education dealing with compliance issues in the Pittsburgh Public School District.

After retiring, I was ready to be back in the classroom where I started. I taught preschool at Lincoln Day and, after having knee surgery, started volunteering as a substitute pre-school teacher and literacy support teacher. What a wonderful experience! You just see so much growth in the children from the beginning to the end of the year. It’s amazing.

Coming from an elementary background, I started taking DVAEYC courses and attending the yearly conference to help support my knowledge base to be an advocate for young children. As an advocate I need to keep learning so that my activities and actions will be based on solid education principles and practices.

I’m always learning something new at DVAEYC programs, learning in a context that says, “Hey, we respect that you know something and you have something to give.” Everyone has always been prepared, knowledgeable, and open to learning from their audience. DVAEYC does an incredible job of raising the standard for what goes on in the classroom. There needs to be a similar effort with the parents, since they are the children’s first teachers, and if we work together, we can do the best for the children.

Could DVAEYC train center staff on how to reach parents, set up some special PD for the parents, or have some sessions where the parents could come in and work with the kids and see how they learn?

I am really excited about the Early Childhood Commission that was just authorized in the Philadelphia primary election. As an advocate for children, I’m concerned that there be diversity, that educators are a part of the commission and not just politicians. From my work with Title 1 and No Child Left Behind, I’m concerned that lawmakers shouldn’t be making educational decisions. Educators need to be invited to the party to make the education decisions, while politicians make the financial decisions. I’m setting up appointments to talk with my legislators about these issues.
I will be 72 in December, so I think I’ve got five more years to work as volunteer. A Spanish-speaking friend and I decided our children weren’t getting a “second” language early enough, so we’re starting a Spanish club in an early elementary school next fall. I’m hoping that lots of other preschool educators can give a few hours to support our children in these ways. We have all these retired educators out there, withering on the vine. How about partnering with young people who are just starting out in the field, asking how they are doing, sharing what has worked for us? We have all this experience; for some people it would enrich their lives by becoming more involved again.

This summer I’m doing a little volunteer project for DVAEYC. I want to reach as many centers as I can in my neighborhood in South Philadelphia to talk about becoming part of the STARS system, and let them know that DVAEYC can help them make their program even better. If we can get some of these neighborhood centers up to become involved in STARS we are insuring that preschool is not babysitting, and if a child doesn’t have good preschool education for our children. Everyone has to learn a “second” language early enough, so we’re starting a Spanish club in an early elementary school next fall. I’m hoping that lots of other preschool educators can give a few hours to support our children in these ways. We have all these retired educators out there, withering on the vine. How about partnering with young people who are just starting out in the field, asking how they are doing, sharing what has worked for us? We have all this experience; for some people it would enrich their lives by becoming more involved again.

My philosophy is that any lives I come in contact with I want that contact to be positive—if I’m touching your life for six months or even just an hour. I’m not really a political person, but children are important, and their educational foundation is important, and for them I will become political.
DVAEYC welcomes an AEYC sister as the new leader of OCDEL!

Michelle Figlar, Executive Director of the Pittsburgh AEYC for the last ten years, and an accomplished leader in the field of early education, has been appointed the new Deputy Secretary of OCDEL.

In addition to leading the 1500-member Pittsburgh AEYC, Michelle has served the ECE field in many ways: co-chairing Pittsburgh’s Blue Ribbon Panel on Early Childhood Education, serving on the Pennsylvania Early Learning Council as well as the Early Learning PA and Pre-K for PA Campaigns. She has also had experience as an adjunct instructor for the University of Pittsburgh, a program manager for the Cleveland Office of Early Childhood, a Head Start director, a preschool special education teacher, and a VISTA volunteer.

Michelle brings a strong advocacy background, direct experience in many of the programs that OCDEL administers, and a fierce passion for the field. We are delighted to welcome her to this new role, and look forward to working together to improve conditions and raise quality for children, parents and everyone who works in early childhood.

Nature Preschool Update

The Nature Preschool project is moving forward. Smith Playground is entering a capital campaign to raise funds for construction; DVAEYC is building out the professional development component of the project; and the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education, host of the Schuylkill Center Nature Preschool, is exploring options for administering the program. We’re looking toward 2017 for a launch!