

# A Conversation between Teacher of the Year **Kimberly Oliver** and **Bettye Caldwell**

*EDITOR'S NOTE:* The NAEYC Annual Conference sparks many stimulating conversations about current trends and developments in early childhood education. Kimberly Oliver, the kindergarten teacher from Silver Spring, Maryland, who was named 2006 National Teacher of the Year, spoke at the opening session of NAEYC's 2006 Annual Conference in Atlanta.

During the conference Kimberly talked with Bettye Caldwell, a past president of NAEYC. Bettye worked for many years as a program director, university educator, and researcher. She is best known for emphasizing the importance of the first three years of life and for urging a productive integration between early child education and child care.

Here is Kimberly and Bettye's conversation:

**BC:** Kimberly, it's wonderful to have you here at the NAEYC Annual Conference. It's a great honor to be chosen Teacher of the Year for the whole United States. Those of us in early childhood education are especially thrilled to have a kindergarten teacher recognized this year.


**KO:** Thank you for inviting me to speak at the conference. It truly is a pleasure to be here with so many early childhood educators focusing on what's important to young learners. It's an honor to be selected as National Teacher of the Year, representing the teaching profession in America. There are many, many teachers who work hard and diligently every day, and often times they don't get recognized for their work. I'd like to thank educators for the work they do and to let the general public know what we are doing in American education—particularly what we are doing in early childhood education and what we can do to address the needs of children in the early grades.

**BC:** It is important to recognize those teachers who work with younger children; they are often overlooked. Tell us a little about where you teach, how long you've been there, and where you got your training.

**KO:** I'm a kindergarten teacher at Broad Acres Elementary School in Silver Spring, Maryland, part of the Montgomery County Public Schools system. I've been teaching kindergarten there for the past seven years. Broad Acres has full-day kindergarten with a reduced class size of 15. I was an undergraduate at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, and I went to graduate school at Wilmington College in Delaware.

**BC:** Was there any one professor in the early childhood field who drew you in and inspired you?

**KO:** You know, I think there were many professors who had an impact on me. I recently had the opportunity to go back to my alma mater, Hampton University, and speak at the opening convocation. I saw many of my former professors and met with the education department. One professor in particular, Janice Cawthorn,



had a huge impact on me and helped to advise me and guide me through those years. [Janice Cawthorn is director of the Hampton University Child Development Center.]

**BC:** Well, I know your former professors must be tremendously proud of you and your having received this recognition. I have a feeling that being Teacher of the Year is not unlike being Miss America; you give a lot of speeches and go to many places.

**KO:** It has been compared to the role of Miss America, only I have the opportunity to represent teachers. During this school year, I am not in my classroom teaching, but I'm expanding the classroom walls by teaching the world about my students. There are over 150 Teacher of the Year events scheduled for this school year.


**BC:** That's a wonderful concept: expanding the walls of your classroom. And of course a good teacher is always learning. In terms of curriculum, it's amazing how it has come to be a controversial topic. When I got started in the early childhood field—let's say more than 40 years ago—the prevailing idea was that young children should be left pretty much on their own. And then there were a number of us who said no, there has to be careful planning. Young children need free play, to be sure, but there needs to be as much planning as you have for any elementary or high school class. Now, a lot of people are concerned that kindergarten has become too academic, too structured. What are your thoughts on that?

**KO:** You know, it's interesting because I entered the profession in 2000, and that's about the time when the tides were changing, with kindergarten becoming more rigorous and more academic. I actually entered a school system where the main focus was on early success of students. My school was just transitioning to full-day kindergarten and a more academic curriculum that was back-mapped. The third-graders had to pass certain assessments, and all the teachers played a part in helping the students reach this goal. We back-mapped the curriculum, thinking about what we need to do in second grade to make sure our students reach that goal. What do we do in first grade, in kindergarten, and in pre-K? We do have a very rigorous kindergarten curriculum. What I didn't know when I began at Broad Acres was that there was a lot of controversy in the school system because a lot of people did believe that kindergarteners should have that free play time and their days should not be too structured.

I taught the kindergartners in my classroom using the curriculum. I taught them how to read. They worked on their math skills. They had fun and they learned and they still had time to play. By the end of the year, their growth was incredible.

I think early childhood education is really about being hands-on. We know that children learn best through play and by having opportunities to interact with other children. I give my students opportunities to work in both small groups and large groups. And I give them one-on-one attention when possible. They have opportunities to actively engage in learning by working in centers, by playing, by using the various classroom resources—such as games, puppets, and props—that help them learn.

**BC:** For years NAEYC has promoted teaching young children in ways that are developmentally appropriate. Among other things, that includes plenty of hands-on manipulation and small group work.



**KO:** Believe me, we need to honor who the children are as individuals and give them the opportunity to learn in their own learning style. We need to offer multiple paths to mastery and achievement and for children to demonstrate what they know.

**BC:** I do some writing that involves answering parents' questions, and do you know what the bulk of their questions are about? I would say that 60 percent is along the lines of "My daughter goes to kindergarten next year and she doesn't know her ABCs and can't count to 20." I always write back and say, "She'll learn that in kindergarten." Do you get that kind of reaction from families too? Are they worried that their children aren't starting kindergarten with enough knowledge?

**KO:** I find that families are always worried about whether their children will be ready to start school, and I always encourage them to work with them at home. Reading with their children every day is really the best thing parents can do for them. And if children are ready to learn the ABCs, and if they are ready to count higher and higher, then let them do it. Have fun with them. Play games.

But we take children wherever they are and move them along from there, whether that's with the kindergarten curriculum or the first grade curriculum. We help children get to where they need to be and beyond.

**BC:** Well, it's marvelous to have that kind of rapport with families, because they do need reassurance on that score. I'm sure parents are thrilled that their children are in your classroom. You said something a moment ago about taking children where they are and then moving them along. How thoroughly and effectively is your kindergarten integrated into your elementary school?

**KO:** Broad Acres Elementary School has children in pre-K through grade five. We do a lot of collaborative planning in vertical teams. For example, pre-K, kindergarten, first-, and second-grade teachers meet to jointly review their objectives and discuss their students' needs. Third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers also meet.

**BC:** Can you describe a reading class in your kindergarten?

**KO:** During a 120-minute literacy block the children read, write, listen, speak, and work in centers. Sometimes they work in large groups, and sometimes I work with a small group of students. There are a lot of second-language learners in my classroom. Out of 15 students last year, only one spoke English as her first language. So our literacy block covers the whole spectrum. We read aloud, have shared readings, implement writer workshops, and do guided reading. We do all of those things that are incorporated into a balanced literacy program.


**BC:** Did those 14 children learning English as a second language move on to first grade?

**KO:** Yes.

**BC:** That's a wonderful testimony to your teaching.

**KO:** Broad Acres is unique in that 90 percent of its students qualify for free and reduced meals. Approximately 75 percent speak English as a second language. We are constantly addressing the language and vocabulary issue. Staff regularly come together to discuss these topics because we know that our entire student population needs that focus. We have had to become experts on them and to continue to educate ourselves.

Every year during an articulation meeting with the first grade teachers, we sit down and talk about the kindergartners and what they learned this year. We discuss what the first-graders will be like. We talk about their reading skills and our hopes and dreams for them.



**BC:** How do you manage the different paces at which children learn? If you've got 15 children, with two or three learning at an accelerated level and some who are progressing at a slower pace, how do you involve them all?

**KO:** As I said earlier, I like to take children where they are and then move them to where they need to be. I work with children both in small groups and through one-on-one instruction. I try to make time for both teaching methods every single day.

There are students of varying levels in our classroom, so I think about how to support them with their particular needs—whether they are above, on, or below grade level. But ultimately the goal is to get everyone to that grade level target and beyond.

The key to small group instruction and meeting individual needs really starts with assessing each child. In Montgomery County Public Schools we assess students formally three times a year. In the beginning of the year we gather data on what our students can do already. We use that data to guide our instruction. I form small, flexible groups in my classroom. For example, one group might work on letter sounds while another group reads independently. I know the children in these two groups have different needs, so I'll work with them and help those children who are already reading independently to become more fluent readers. I work with them on comprehension, on understanding what it is they are reading. And I'll work with the other group on letter sounds. While I work with one small group, the other children might be working independently at literacy centers around the classroom. One group might be at the writing center, writing a letter to someone. Another might be at the Read to Perform a Task center, where children need to read the directions (using a combination of pictures and print) before moving on to the next task.

**BC:** Does your school ever retain a child in kindergarten? This is often a critical issue for families. When it's recommended that their child be retained, some parents get very upset. And yet at the same time, other parents want their child to be held back. Maybe the child is physically small and so on. It's a hard decision. What is your philosophy on retention, and how does your school handle such decisions?


**KO:** We look at retention on an individual basis, considering the needs of the particular child. I had one student who enrolled in kindergarten in early February. He came from another country and did not speak English. He really needed to experience a full year of kindergarten, and the best choice we made for him at that time was for him to return to kindergarten for another year. I was his teacher again, and he had a wonderful experience the second time around. He was ready to move to first grade and, as far as I know, is doing very well.

**BC:** Are any of your children ever sent out to work with a special education teacher? Or is all the supplementary work done within the classroom?

**KO:** Most of the children receive services in the regular classroom, if possible. I was actually the inclusion teacher last year for kindergarten and had an opportunity to co-teach with our special educator. That was a wonderful experience for me, being able to collaborate with another teacher so closely for all of our students.

**BC:** Could we talk a little bit about children's social development?

**KO:** In kindergarten we really work on everything, as we should. We look at the whole child and take a holistic approach to see what it is children need—and that includes support for social skills. We're working on how to work in a group, how to work in a community of learners. If a student doesn't really know how



to approach other children during playtime, I might go with the child and teach him or her how to ask other children to play. So it really runs the whole gamut, from what is appropriate school behavior, to interacting with peers, to just having a really good overall experience for the whole year.

**BC:** Tell us a little bit about how you handle behavior problems.

**KO:** I focus a lot on classroom management, especially in the beginning of the year. I make sure the children understand my expectations for their behavior and also make sure they know what the consequences will be. I spend a lot of time talking about what it is that we do and what it is that we don't do. When a child does make a mistake, I let him know that everyone makes mistakes and explain the consequence. Maybe I will follow up with the child's parents. I really like to include families in the classroom management system. I ask parents to talk at home with their child about expectations. After we've done that and have agreed on the ground rules for our classroom, it usually just takes a little bit of reminding about what those rules are.

**BC:** Do you have a lot of contact with your families?

**KO:** I do, fortunately. We are a community school, and most students walk to school. I have opportunities to chat with parents either in the morning or in the afternoon while they are picking up their children.

**BC:** I have always felt that one thing every teacher needs is a good principal. The leadership of the whole school can affect what may happen in the individual classrooms. In your school, do you have this kind of support? Is your principal interested in your goals and what you are doing?


**KO:** I definitely believe that we need strong leadership in schools and that principals set the tone for the school and the climate for teachers. I've been fortunate to work with excellent principals who are dedicated not only to the students but also to the teachers.

**BC:** Let's discuss further what you said about formally assessing the children three times a year. I always loved the special education concept of the IEP [Individualized Education Program], and I always wondered why we don't do that for all children. But it does sound like you are doing that type of detailed assessment and planning for all of your children. Are you following an outline that the whole school or the whole state uses?

**KO:** We use a countywide curriculum that is based on our voluntary state curriculum. I think the curriculum allows teachers to work with all the students. Everyone will not be doing the exact same thing at the exact same time because each classroom has different children with different needs. The curriculum allows the teachers to assess their students' needs and to do what is best for those students.

**BC:** There are many challenges in teaching English as a second language. Tell us a little about your approach.

**KO:** Our students come from all over the world. The school population is predominantly Hispanic, but we have children who speak Vietnamese, Creole, French, and Arabic—you name it. A lot of the children have older brothers and sisters who also attend Broad Acres, so they may have learned some English from their older siblings or from watching television. But we also have children who just came to this country and may not speak any English on the very first day. There are options for differentiation in the curriculum, but I think a lot of it comes from collaborating with other professionals.



I am fortunate in that I can plan my lessons collaboratively with teachers at my school every week. We have a set two-and-a-half-hour time for collaboration when we plan lessons, write assessments, and look at student data to discuss and determine what to do if a child is not making progress toward objectives. We meet with teachers of different grade levels so we can have consistency and continuity throughout the entire school. We have study groups and read professional texts. We talk about what we are reading and the implications for our school and for our community.

I had some training in working with English-language learners and children with different needs, but I think that one thing we definitely need to improve on is not relying solely on teacher preparation programs. We also need on-the-job training for teachers. There really is nothing like having your own classroom and your own students. There is nothing like being responsible for determining how to meet students' needs and how to implement what you've learned in college classes. I think we can do a better job of providing support for teachers, giving them ongoing professional development to help them meet student needs.

- BC:** It sounds like your school had a philosophy of no child left behind before that became a national motto. There is considerable opposition to the No Child Left Behind policy. Many teachers feel that it's too mechanized and too standardized and does not allow for the individual differences that you talk about.
- KO:** I feel that nobody can argue with the intentions of No Child Left Behind—that every child should receive a quality education and that every child should have access to outstanding teachers. That really is my hope for all children. I feel that we are on the right track. We have the right goals. But I also think that we can never go back to a time before No Child Left Behind. We have this initiative that has raised the bar for students and set a standard. Now I think it is up to us as educators to tweak and refine it and to make it work for us and for all our students.
- BC:** What are your plans for the future, Kimberly? Where do you see yourself going?
- KO:** I see myself going back to my classroom and doing what I enjoy: teaching. The other day I thought how ironic it is that I usually teach my students about the world and this year I have the opportunity to teach the world about my students. I really think it's a worthwhile endeavor, but I miss the children.
- BC:** Thank you so much, Kimberly. We again congratulate you on being Teacher of the Year and for bringing a focus on early childhood into the Teacher of the Year domain. That's very important, and we wish you continued success and fulfillment in your career.