

**Jenna: Tell us a little bit about yourself and how this school year is going for you.**

**Joangelee:** My name is Joangelee Hernandez. I have been working for CentroNía for 8.5 years now. I started off as a Pre-K teacher and I am now the Program Manager in the main building in Columbia Heights in Washington DC.

It's been a great year. This is officially my second year running the program. What made this year different, and one of the things that I've been really excited about is we have male representation in all the pre-K classrooms. That's something that I always wanted to do, you know, to knock off the stereotype [that there aren't males in this field].

We've hosted different events that have to do a lot with creativity. We've done some new experiments and things with the teachers, promoting family engagement, that is a little bit aligned with what you do [at Inspired Teaching]. I've pushed teachers a little bit out of their comfort zones of the events that they do every year, or things that they've never done before.

So far it's been a lot of work in the planning part, but then when the event is happening, it's like, "Oh! Wow! This is going great! This is nice. We can do it again next year."

So we've tried a lot of these things this year. It's been really good.

When we were going over at the monthly events in one of our meetings, we went over April the month of you know, Earth Day and all that. We always recognize Earth Day [in simple ways] maybe the children do a recycling activity in the classroom and that's it. But I wanted to try something different, especially because this year I observed that in many of our pre-K classrooms, we had a few kids that were obsessed with things about science. So I proposed the teachers do a pre-K science fair.

At the beginning, it was a very abstract concept. I didn't want to make it too structured. I wanted them to basically improvise. I told them to lean into whatever their kids wanted to do related to science. This could include art with recycled materials that is shown to people during the event or experiments they could explore with the families that attend.

It was so spontaneous. Some of my most timid, shy teachers (who are so quiet in the classroom I always have to remind them to speak up) - when they were doing activities they flourished at this event! They were all messy and guiding activities with the parents and I was like, "That's how I want to see you in the classroom!" It was very exciting.

I didn't expect so many people to attend but they did and it was something that they're not used to. My teachers were like, "OK, we'll do this science fair. But you haven't told us exactly what will happen and how it will happen. But I decided I wasn't going to stress over this one. I explained, "You guys are going to create the space to talk about science with the children and you'll see what happens from there." It was way better than anybody expected. It's definitely something that will happen again.

**Jenna: I'm noticing in what you're sharing there one of the things that we think about when we talk about improvisation in the classroom: the idea of knowing your goal. Your goal was to create more conversations and more experiences with science. But then I love that your teachers had the flexibility and freedom to figure out how they might go about doing that.**

**Joangelee:** Oh yes, even the way they presented it varied. I have some teachers who decided to do the experiment right there with the families that were there. But others held different experiments in the classroom and then their students presented the experiment at the event. The children looked like tiny college students with their boards and what happened and the pictures. That's something I did not expect at all. So it was very nice.

**Jenna: What are some ways that you embraced an improvisational mindset for yourself this year?**

**Joangelee:** It's the same thing that I said when we were in the Institute. I feel like I most aligned with "Embracing Mistakes."

I've been a perfectionist since I was born, I think as I got more responsibilities in the program that got worse because it's not just that I have to comply with the expectations for me, but now I have to set an example for everybody. And my first year was very hard. The transition was just too much for me because I wanted to be perfect for everybody.

I had horrible burnout after that first year. I learned the hard way, like always. And after that I was like: You know what? everybody makes mistakes. It's not that I'm gonna stop caring about everything, but I definitely need to realize that I'm human."

So things are not always going to go as expected, especially when you're trying to come up with so many different things. What's happening in the classroom? How are the teachers? How are you going to plan the events that you want to do with the families? Everybody has their own problems and agendas and situations. So embracing mistakes has been the most beneficial mindset shift for me.

The other one about saying “Yes! And...” is also important.

I feel like I've applied that more in my relationship between the families and school. As someone who's running the program, I'm trying to be a little bit flexible. I also want the teachers to feel comfortable.

So though I have my own ideas, I tell them: “If you want to try something out in your classroom, just reach out to me and maybe we can meet in the middle. Or, maybe I love your idea more than I like mine and we can try it out. And if it doesn't work, we pretend that it never happened! If it doesn't go well, then next year we can try it like we did before.”

This approach has actually made things more fun than before.

**Jenna: You mentioned early on that you were doing more with the relationship between families and school. Are there some things you tried this year that you'd recommend other people try too?**

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~~And~~ This year I've tried to make it more natural to have the families in the classroom. So maybe they want to try something or show us something and we invite them to come over and do the activity in the classroom with the children.

This helps the parents feel more comfortable, more trusting of the environment. This helps the teachers stop worrying about if parents are trying what they're recommending at home [because they are able to model for them in the classroom.]

**Jenna: It sounds like you're creating a space where both your staff and your families have opportunities to build more empathy for one another.** Like they understand each other's context in a different way.

**Joangelee:** Yes, you know when COVID happened, everybody got into their classroom, everybody was in their space and not being with anybody else. And I've always said teachers are very territorial. I still am very territorial myself! I was like, this is my space and everything is going to be perfect here.

And the teachers, it's been very hard to get them to start interacting as peers with each other. This is my third year in this position. Two years ago, they wouldn't even talk to each other.

It's like, "This is my classroom. Your classroom is your problem. I'm not gonna stress about your situation because I have my own challenges in these four walls." And now I'm finally seeing them again like "Hey, do you need this? Do you have this material? Well, let me borrow this for my evaluation and I'll bring it back." But it took three years.

So it's, it's little by little. I don't expect them to be best friends, but you know, at least they're trying together. I'm very pleased with that.

**Jenna: It's a big shift to go from being the implementer to being the one who is creating the space for other people to implement.**

**Joangelee:** You know, people have to get used to the style. Each teacher has their own style, the administrators have their own style too. And at the beginning, I know for my teachers they were wondering: "What is she thinking or what does she want with this? I don't get." And now they're at the point where they [trust me] and know, "She eventually has something in her mind. So let's just try this first part and we'll get to see [what she's asking us to do]." Eventually, they like it. Most of the time, at least. And they're like, "Oh! This was fun! I get it! I get it now!" We've got this dynamic now where it's like, "I trust you. I trust whatever it is you're trying to do."

**Jenna: What are some things you feel like you've done to build that trust?**

**Joangelee:** A lot of times I compare how consistent you have to be with children, to how consistent you have to be with teachers. If I tell you, "I'm gonna support you with this student this particular day because one teacher is going to be out." I will be there in the classroom that day helping you with my friend because you're one teacher short.

If you have an emergency and you need coverage I say, "Let me see what I can do. I'll try with the coordinator to get someone for your classroom because you need help."

You know, I think it's mutual support and I'm very realistic with them. Sometimes they ask me a question or for help and I have no idea or I tell them, "I totally forgot, you know, I forgot. I'll get back to you with that." Because in the end I was in the classroom too. So I get it.

There have been staff changes as well because, you know, there's been a full reset of the program. There were things in the past that were too traditional, that were not good. So to

let us move forward or try things differently we had to make changes. And little by little we've seen the impact.

**Jenna: What do you think is a compelling argument for why a teacher would take three days out of their summer to engage in the Institute?**

**Joangelee:** Well, if I had to convince other directors to authorize their teachers to go or directors or coordinators, managers, whoever to go themselves, I'd say, "We have so many compliance things that we have to follow. So many regulations, so many expectations, so many reports, and people get focused on all that paperwork and the administrative part, even the teachers, you know, you want them to have their planning and you want them to do the observations and plan in teacher conferences. But they forget that all of that is based on what happens in the classroom when they are interacting together. And sometimes teachers are so overwhelmed with what they have to meet or what they have to present at the end of the month and things like that, that they don't actually pay that much attention to what the kids want.

I think it will make it easier to comply, collect evidence for the reports, and everything if the teachers start enjoying their time with the Children from the first day. If they do that, everything else that they need will show up naturally. And three days is not that much.

You cannot send everybody. I would love to, but it's impossible. But you can definitely be strategic about it, maybe send a Lead that gets along with everybody. That way you can get them to naturally share what they learn without having to intervene too much.

They'll share their experience and their influence with other teachers.