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Bonnie Neugebauer  
Child Care Exchange  
17725 NE 65<sup>th</sup> St. B-275  
Redmond, WA 98052

Dear Bonnie,

I am writing to nominate an extraordinary person for your emerging leader award. I have known Iris Ponte for almost 15 years – first as a graduate student at Eliot-Pearson, then as a post-doc researcher providing the evidence that natural playgrounds enrich children’s play, then as a board member of the innovative early childhood center Iris founded and directs, and most recently, as a consultant to Iris’s wonderful project in southwestern China where, under her leadership, her team is building a “Play Garden” for a major foster village in the region. Along the way, Iris and I have worked closely on two book projects – the first was the book Children’s Play and the Developing Imagination The second was the book Behavior and Classroom Management: Integrating Discipline and Care. From personal experience, then, Iris is most deserving of an emerging leader award.

Well beyond my personal experience, Iris has proven herself to be a leader in the field. Her list of fellowships and awards is impressive for someone not yet 40. Furthermore, her applied research interests cover a wide range of topics related to the well-being of young children – as well as a wide range of cultures and contexts. She is an expert in areas having to do with adoption, East Asian approaches to early childhood education, and accreditation processes for American ECE programs.

Iris also leads by initiating new programs. Her own early childhood program (Henry Frost) in Belmont, Massachusetts, is an obvious example. She has also started a professional development program in Mumbai, India, and plans on starting another one in the foster village where the new playground is being built.

The new playground in China grows out of her work at Eliot-Pearson to establish the benefits of a “natural playground”. The new playground or “Play Garden” is a huge undertaking. Furthermore, since China has become so urbanized and congested that young children there often do not experience the simple joys of playing with natural materials, Iris’s “Play Garden” will hopefully provide a model for others to imitate, a model that may well start a progressive movement that will benefit far more children in China than the children in the foster village -- all because of Iris’ leadership.

Let me add what all who know Iris are apt to first mention about Iris, namely, her energy and character. Many, including myself, have said she has a gift for energizing. No matter what the project may be, when Iris starts or joins a project, the energy level rises significantly. Furthermore, she has a gift for giving – giving to others whatever is needed to make things better. That energy and giving nature has been at the heart of her leadership; it is why so many have followed her in the past and why so many will follow her in the future – because they know that in following Iris, they are going to be doing good, not just good academic work, or good teaching, or good whatever – but also doing good in the larger sense of making life better for others.

When Iris was a graduate student at Eliot-Pearson, among the over sixty graduate students in our Department, Iris was the clear leader – the person who was everywhere organizing students and faculty alike – so that we functioned better as a community. She did this always with a smile that made others smile as well. It was extraordinary – and it accounted for the fact that at her dissertation defense, more people showed up – faculty, students, outsiders - than at any defense I had ever witnessed before or since. People simply wanted to show their love and gratitude for Iris. Happily, that didn't end with Iris moving on. She has continued to a force of nature when it comes to moving others to innovate and work for the benefit of young children. I hope, then, that you will give her every consideration and decide to give her this well-deserved honor that should also become a support for her ongoing work to do good.

Sincerely,

W. George Scarlett, Ph.D.  
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