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Creating a Living Vision and Mission for Your Program

by Billie Young

When faced with budget cuts, do you have a defined set of values to guide your decisions?

Do new board members struggle to articulate your center's mission and how it helps build toward your aspirations for all children and families in your community?

How can parents understand "what you are all about"?

Are potential funders able to easily know whether or not your agency is a good fit with their own vision and mission?

How do you know if staff share your organization's values and beliefs and are dedicated to your unique mission?

These questions and many more can be answered by an agency's statement of vision, mission and values. Vision statements are aspirational, they unite us in a common purpose and describe an ideal, big picture future. An organization's mission defines its purpose and reason for being, describes who we are and what we do in service to help achieve the vision. Values or beliefs statements define the shared core principles that drive the agency's culture and priorities. Together, these statements describe the agency's identity—who you are, why you do what you do, and why it matters in the long run.

Through my strategic planning and board work with agencies, both large and small, I have found three common problems with agency identity statements:

1. Some agencies do not have all three parts: vision, mission and values statements. They most likely have a mission statement, but might lack the broader, long-term vision or not have formally worked through values clarification

Defining Your Center

Your mission, vision and values become the organizing principles around which personal and organizational energy coalesces and we become one community moving together in the same direction.

OUR MISSION

informs us of our common purpose, what matters each moment, hour and day we work together.

OUR VISION

informs us of the ideal place we want to be, set in the future.

OUR VALUES

guide and shape our decisions and actions as we act on our purpose to achieve our vision.

(Garrett Demarest, Organizational Development and Leadership Consultant)



Billie Young has worked on organizational change and development on local, state, and federal levels and delights in linking people to resources and new ideas.

with stakeholders. Strategic planning and budget development are reliant upon this full, three-part clarification of agency identity.

2. These statements are not “alive.” Rather, they sit on a website or in agency documents, but staff, management and board members do not really understand them or have not integrated them into their work. A lack of agreement on values and beliefs can result in inconsistent curricula across classrooms or heated tensions over budget priorities.

3. Vision, mission and values statements may be outdated, incomplete or irrelevant, given changes in agency funding, programming, population served and staffing. Revisiting and updating these foundational documents are important as a unifier and to ensure that all key stakeholders are still on the same page as you consider new opportunities and potential changes in direction or priorities.

Developing or updating agency identity statements can be a rewarding experience for staff, board members, parents and other stakeholders, who often relish the opportunity to have meaningful conversations with each other that result in clarity about who “we” are, why we exist and the values that drive our passion for this work. So, where to begin?

Getting Started

First, establish your motivation for launching agency identity work. What do you want to accomplish and for whom? Do you want to attract new families to your program, enlist volunteers or funders, recruit more diverse board members, and/or unify staff across multiple sites or programs? How can you convince staff and board members, who may be reluctant to do this formative work, that creating or reinvigorating your identity statements

is vital to your agency’s success and is time well-spent?

Second, map your approach to crafting your identity statements, taking into consideration the size of your organization. If it is small, you may be able to involve your entire team in all aspects of development; if your agency is large or has several programs or locations, you may want to start by forming a small working team of four to six people to help structure your process. Include a range of stakeholders—board members, staff, parents and volunteers—to guide the process. If you have funding, it can be helpful to engage a consultant to facilitate the process, or you might find a volunteer with planning expertise from your local United Way or volunteer bank.

Third, have your planning team consider any existing statements of vision, mission and values. Is anything missing? What needs updating and re-considering? Develop a plan for how to involve others. For example, some agencies use a half day retreat to bring all of the key players together to draft the statements; others use surveys or focus groups for all key players, seeking broad input for a retreat that involves a few representatives from each stakeholder group.

Survey tools such as Survey Monkey are useful ways to get input from large groups and to facilitate development of statements. For example, you can ask survey respondents to react to sample mission statements, identifying those that are most aligned with your agency, or to look at your current mission statement and list those things that are still relevant and those that need to be updated or changed. Then, using this input, the working team or retreat participants can draft a mission statement for broader consideration. Ask survey respondents to list the three values or beliefs that are most important to them in relation to your agency. This allows

you to compile a list as a starting place for a retreat or work team meeting.

Groups can get bogged down by word-smithing and there are usually a few people for whom crafting the exact wording is very important. One way to address this need is to keep the planning group focused on the concepts that are most important, and then have a smaller group of strong writers tackle finalizing the language using input from the larger group. You might want to get feedback on your new identity statements from funders, volunteers and parents currently enrolled in your program and incorporate their relevant input into your final statements.

The next step is having all key stakeholders endorse and adopt the final mission, vision and values statements. Board members, management, staff, parent policy council members—all need to “own” these statements of your shared identity. Reaching this level of agreement and clarity deserves a celebration and can be a launching pad for strategic planning.

Finally, develop strategies for publicizing your identity statements and keeping them alive with staff and key stakeholders. They can be featured prominently in your social media, brochures, and presentations. Orientation for new staff, volunteers and board members should include review of these statements and of course they can be included in board, staff and parent handbooks.

Articulating your agency’s vision, mission and core values requires an investment in time and energy that pays huge dividends over the long run. This work builds shared identity and trust and fuels passion for achieving your agency’s goals.

Rene Denman, executive director of the Toddler Learning Center on Whidbey

Island, Washington, has found that, “We use all of this in so much of our work. We created a TLC board member book, employee handbook, professional development position, office manager position and more with our vision, mission and goals in mind.” During budget and planning meetings, feasibility studies, grant writing and conversations about TLC’s future, Denman asks, “Does this ask meet our vision/mission statement? Does it advance our mission/vision? Will our funders get behind it? Do we have the capacity?”

Core Values

The heart of your agency, the foundation for collective vision and shared mission, is in your core values. They are the things you believe in most passionately. They are what you stand for and they help you to make decisions, set priorities and achieve your mission. These core values sometimes take the form of belief statements or guiding principles, but their essence is the same. The chart below compares value and belief statements as two sides of the same coin.

Identifying the values that you share and that guide your work can be done in several ways. Some directors use meetings of staff, board and/or parents to brainstorm lists of values and beliefs. Other strategies include suggestion boxes, surveys, focus groups, or posters that invite input. Whatever your strategy to get input, it is important to narrow down the list of values to four to seven that best describe what is at the heart of your value system. In addition to your agency’s core values, you will have sets of values around specific aspects of your program, such as child assessment, celebrating holidays, classroom design, curriculum development and stakeholder engagement. While you may have multiple values guiding agency work, your core values statement should be brief, memorable and deeply meaningful.

Sound Child Care Solutions of Seattle has seven core values: engaged learning, collaborative relationships, joyful work, social justice, shared accountability, intentional practice and sustainable community. Each value is elaborated to clarify meaning. For example: Engaged learning—We value curiosity and reflection for adults and children, and we believe this leads to a journey of life-long teaching and learning.

Judy Summerfield, executive director of SCCS, uses values to “set the stage for why we do the work and how we do it.” Values are incorporated into her hiring. Candidates are given a set of the values and asked, “What do you think of our values and which of these values resonates the most with you and why?” Two SCCS site directors created a staff handbook, *Manual for Shared Accountability and Sustainable Community*. Staff are asked to focus on specific values as part of fall orientations. Parents are engaged in discussions about values as a way to better understand school and family cultures. In fact, SCCS is so committed to living their values and integrating them into their “way of being” that their 2018 fall leadership retreat had as an agenda

item, “Budget Discussion: Highlighting Our Values.”

Tiny Tots Development Center of Seattle has undoing racism as one of its guiding principles. They keep that value alive by using the question, “Why are people poor?” as part of staff hiring, and it gives them great insight into the character of the candidates they hire.

Once you have agreed on your core values, it is time to go big picture and to dream about your vision for the future.

Vision Statements

A well-crafted vision is aspirational. It unites an organization in a common direction, describes an ideal future, reflects core values and provides the larger context for agency mission statements. It is the big picture dream for which you aim, and is generally broad and long-term. Vision statements answer the question, “Where are we going and what will it be like when we get there?” It can include all children and families, for instance, not just those you serve. Vision statements should be concise and easy to understand.

Core Values and Belief Statements	
As a Value statement: We value...	As a Belief statement: We believe...
the role of parents as their children’s first and most important teacher.	parents are their children’s first and most important teacher.
the dignity, worth and uniqueness of each child, family member and colleague; each deserve respect and attention.	each child, family member and colleague is unique, and has dignity and worth that deserve respect and attention.
the ongoing search for excellence through learning, experimentation and feedback.	in ongoing learning, experimentation and feedback in our quest for excellence.

The vision adopted by School's Out Washington, a non-profit organization is:

"We are working towards a Washington where all young people have opportunities to thrive and reach their full potential, regardless of race or income."

Toddler Learning Center developed the following vision statement:

"All families on Whidbey Island with children birth to three years of age who may have developmental delays will be identified and will receive the support, available resources and services needed to enhance their child's optimal growth and development."

When I visited New Zealand as part of a study tour in 2010, I was impressed by its national aspiration (or vision) for children:

"To grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society."

Each of these vision statements sets the stage for defining how the agency defines its specific mission and what it can contribute toward the ultimate achievement of their broader vision.

Mission Statements

Agency mission statements are more specific. Your mission statement describes how you will help to accomplish the vision: what you will do, how and for whom. It sums up your purpose, and says "who we are and what we do." Effective mission statements reflect the values and vision of the agency, are informative, inspirational, and realistic. The table on the right shows example mission statements from young children.

Angelia Maxie, executive director of Tiny Tots, finds that the mission statement is the focal point for the work they do. "For staff, it is important that they have a deep understanding of why we do what we do and how we do it. We call it the "Tiny Tots Way." She believes that the mission and values are important for parents, children and funders. Clarity about and commitment to their mission and values are "the reason Tiny Tots now has three generations of children who attend and staff who were students." Over the years, Maxie has learned that, "Our funders have come to trust that we are the product that we state in our mission, and therefore, they have confidence to support our organization."

Tiny Tots' mission statement was developed by its founder, Helen Hicks, more than 40 years ago. In 2016, a retreat with staff, board members and parent representatives updated it with an eye toward honoring Hicks' intent but still capturing the current mission. The new statement is reflected in the above graphic.

Updating mission statements regularly is critical to keeping them relevant and "alive," as agencies change leadership, acquire new funding for new programs, expand or contract and even change whom they serve or geographic reach. Identity statements should also be revisited before long-term or strategic planning, because they form the context for setting goals, outcomes and strategies.

Mission Examples

Agency Name	Mission
Sound Child Care Solutions	To educate children for life with child-centered, high quality, anti-biased, early childhood education with excellent business practices.
Denise Louie Education Center	Denise Louie Education Center promotes school and life readiness by providing multi-cultural early learning services to children and families, especially those who need our services the most. We will respect and preserve each child and family's individuality, cultural heritage, and home language. We will promote personal and social responsibility with integrity and love in an environment defined by social justice and peace.
Tiny Tots Development Center	Within one of the most diverse zip codes in the United States, our mission is to provide stimulating and enriching programs to prepare at risk, low-income, culturally diverse children infant to 13 years old for kindergarten readiness and beyond, through curriculum, activities and community partnerships that also invite the engagement of parents and guardians in their role of primary caregivers.

Putting it all Together

Executive Director of TLC Rene Denman integrates her organization's identity statements into grant writing, work with the board of directors and for public awareness.

"I love that the mission statement emphasis is on collaboration to support early services. The statement is understood as written within TLC and the board of directors. However, I have found that it is not strong for public awareness. On the other hand, our vision statement is a strong public awareness tool and I find myself using it more often, or at least making sure we insert it when writing grants or strategically asking ourselves if an 'ask' aligns with our vision i.e. universal developmental screening project."

The TLC board of directors reviews the mission/vision and goals one time per year and as part of budget discussions. During the annual staff training, staff look at their vision, mission, beliefs, and principles. Denman then reports on agency progress toward meeting the goals set during their strategic planning process. As director, she asks board and staff during feasibility studies and fundraising efforts, "Does this 'ask' advance our mission/vision? Will our funders get behind it?"

It can be dangerous to assume that everyone is on the same page in your organization. In our increasingly diverse world, parents, staff, volunteers, managers and board members may hold divergent views of who your agency is, why you exist and what the values are that guide your work together. Taking the time to ensure shared understanding and common purpose can be a catalyst to improved communication, deeper trust amongst members of your organization and renewed energy to sustain excellence.

Additional Resources

BoardSource: <https://boardsource.org>

The BUILD Initiative:
www.buildinitiative.org

For more information about the agencies included in this article:

Denise Louie Education Center:
<http://deniselouie.org>

Sound Child Care Solutions:
<http://soundchild.org>

Tiny Tots Development Center:
www.tinytotsdc.org

Toddler Learning Center:
www.tlcwhidbey.org



Toddler Learning Center Whidbey Island, Washington

Vision:

All families on Whidbey Island with children birth to three years of age who may have developmental delays will be identified and will receive the support, available resources and services needed to enhance their child's optimal growth and development.

Mission:

TLC Collaborates with families, caregivers and community to provide best practice early support services in a nurturing environment.

We Believe...

- Parents are their child's first and most important teacher.
- Each child who comes to TLC brings their own strengths.
- As members of the early intervention team, families are the major decision makers regarding their child's services.
- The first three years of life are a critical time which offers promising opportunities for growth in all areas of development.

The Kind of Professional Learning Early Educators Need

by Nonie Lesaux and Stephanie M. Jones

Across the country, states, cities and towns are focused on creating plans and policies to improve quality and increase access to early education programs for our youngest learners, and with good reason. High-quality early education is a recognized pathway to equal opportunities for all children. Yet, the truth is that early education programs today are extremely uneven, with only two in 10 children having access to a high-quality early education experience. The success of early education initiatives rests on their quality, which itself rests on the educators on the ground. In other words, in order for these ambitious early education plans to succeed, we need to place much greater emphasis on transforming systems of professional learning and support for the early education workforce.



Nonie K. Lesaux is the academic dean and the Juliana W. and William Foss Thompson professor of education and society at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.



Stephanie M. Jones is the Gerald S. Lesser professor of early childhood development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Well-trained and well-supported early educators are the cornerstone of high-quality classrooms filled with children who are primed to learn. Yet, early education leaders—be they state commissioners, agency directors, nonprofit executives, center directors, school principals or policymakers—often do not have the core knowledge needed to drive effective quality improvement. Today, 46 percent of early education leaders report the need for more knowledge of child development, and 37 percent report the need for more knowledge of supervision and management.

Unfortunately, all too frequently, the design and delivery of typical professional development inhibits meaningful growth and improved practice among early educators. Single day, one-size-fits-all workshops remain the most common format for supporting today's educators and school leaders to develop new pedagogical knowledge as well as instructional strategies and approaches. The content is most often organized around sharing the latest regulations and health and safety requirements, but this model is too low-intensity to actually make a difference. There are too few opportunities for active learning, application and

constructive feedback to bring about instructional change and improvement.

Consider, for example, that early education leaders are expected to have a good grasp of the science of early learning and development and the knowledge of the educator competencies that drive high-quality early learning—and then, they also need the leadership, management, and administrative skills necessary to lead inclusive and highly effective organizations that reflect a commitment to the adult learning and early learning that will drive quality improvement.

It is a difficult balance, and while many early education professionals feel enormous pressure to improve the performance of their staff and organizations—while at the same time ensuring daily work adheres to federal and state regulations—gaining access to meaningful, integrated, job-embedded professional learning that speaks to their staff's needs proves to be a challenge. Ultimately, learning opportunities must take into account early education leaders' busy, and often stressful, daily professional lives and demands. What early educators really need is exposure to new ideas, innovations and tactics in

a way that is convenient and flexible and that allows for instructional change and improvement.

To get to this meaningful change and make good on the promise of early education for our youngest citizens, it is the job of state, community and local leaders to put in place the structures and opportunities for professional learning that enable early educators to master the competencies essential to creating high-quality learning environments. In our research, we have found that the most effective approaches to professional learning are not necessarily about curricula and standards, or the latest assessment of child learning, but rather, are focused on core knowledge about learning and development, as well as adult well-being.

So, what does this look like? Here—as part of our work in the Saul Zaentz Professional Learning Academy, designed to bring executive education to early education leaders—we focus on two strategies that embody this approach: coaching and professional learning communities.

Coaching

Across almost all sectors, most high-performing individuals have a coach or mentor of some sort. Coaching, loosely defined as one-on-one instruction that is ongoing and has a specific set of goals, can be highly effective when implemented in the right way. Coaching has become an increasingly popular and effective professional development tactic in the field of early education. A study conducted in Washington state found that when coaching was offered to early childhood educators, the teacher turnover rate was lower and program quality ratings improved. What we need to do next in the field is to describe what is meant by coaching, and how to bring its key features to scale. In our research, we found coaching to be most effective if it

has two core elements: ongoing observation and hands-on participation in the classroom, which includes individualized, reflective discussion and feedback. As an ongoing support structure, the coach makes regular classroom visits. However, instead of simply observing and offering feedback—which all-too-often is negative—the coaching visits focus on getting to know the educator’s day-to-day experiences, plans, growth areas and pressure points, in order to better support and promote their professional growth.

Regular and effective coaching can also serve as a bridge between off- or on-site group-based sessions and classroom practice. In the classroom, the coach scaffolds and trouble-shoots strategies built from core knowledge learned in group sessions. Importantly, as in many other fields where coaching is used for talent development, it is not simply a tactic we turn to when something is wrong or when there is a need for formal evaluation. It is also not a structure that should be tied to accreditation or licensing. Quite the opposite, it is most effective when it is deployed as ongoing support to enhance adult learning and well-being.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities typically comprise of small groups of educators—often pairs of teaching teams—meeting regularly with a skilled facilitator or leader. Group meetings and/or workshops such as these are an ideal setting to build core knowledge of teaching and learning, to plan strategies for the classroom and to reflect on prior work. Ideally, the structure and content of the meetings are part of a long-term plan with clear objectives guiding each session that build on each other over time. These sessions are an opportunity for interactive and engaging discourse that fosters collaborative problem

solving and community building, which enhances adult well-being and diminishes workplace stress and burnout. A 2010 report found that the creative and supportive conditions of PLCs reduce loneliness in the workplace by creating a shared responsibility for students, instead of the pressure resting solely on an individual teacher. These communities should be held on-site and organized around a cycle in which educators collaboratively reflect, plan, problem-solve, and take action.

Consistent with trends in many other sectors and workplaces, and to address early education leaders’ time constraints while recognizing their needs and goals as lifelong learners, learning opportunities can also occur through facilitated experiences that are entirely online. In the last 16 years, corporations have increased their use of e-learning by 900 percent, and according to recent data, 98 percent of organizations plan to use e-learning by 2020 to train their teams and teach employees new skills. As in other sectors, we expect early education leaders to also benefit from online learning—an experience that is accessible, inclusive, affordable and doable.

As we work to improve quality and increase access to early education, a core element of quality improvement must be a transformative model for adult learning and professional support. There are several different ways we can support teachers, including online education, coaching and professional learning communities. As states, communities and educators work to improve professional learning, one thing is certain: We need meaningful change in order to do the very best for our youngest learners.

Transformational Coaching

Move Beyond Goals and Action Plans to Foster Continuous Quality Improvement

by Constant Hine and Robin Levy

Transformational coaching is an approach in which coachees learn to practice self-reflection, and to question and examine the perspectives, values and beliefs influencing their behaviors and habits, which consequently determine their outcomes and results. Coaches model these skills in their interactions with coachees, emphasizing a learning partnership that integrates supported experimentation and ideation of professional practices. Transformational coaching recognizes that goal setting and action planning are important, and that new actions are needed to generate different results. It also recognizes that goal setting and action planning alone are usually



Constant Hine has over 38 years' experience in the field of early childhood as a classroom teacher, adult educator, coach and consultant. She is a nationally recognized, dynamic and inspirational speaker and author including her newest book, "Transformational Coaching for Early Childhood Educators" from Redleaf Press. She received a master's degree in teaching/ECE from Nova University, Florida. Since 1988 Hines' company, Horizons In Learning, has offered professional development services to early childhood professionals, leaders, coaches, agents of change, teachers and care-givers throughout North America. Hines specializes in transformational learning, coaching, and leadership that engages professionals to make lasting, deep and sustainable changes. She developed the GROOMER Framework for Change™, a mental model for coaches, leaders and agents of change to use to facilitate the change process. This framework is a relationship and inquiry-based transformational coaching approach to support sustainable habits of reflection, problem solving and lifelong learning.



Robin Levy has been in the field of early childhood education for 30 years in a variety of roles including: licensed family child care provider, classroom teacher, large center director, coach, consultant, adult educator and social and emotional development specialist. With a master's degree in educational administration and policy from the University of Denver, as a Buell Early Childhood Leadership Program Fellow, and with extensive experience using various coaching models, Levy specializes in transformational learning, intentional coaching and leadership strategies that engage professionals to make meaningful, profound and sustainable changes which foster continuous quality improvement in early childhood programs and agencies. Levy is a "coach's coach" working to broaden and deepen the skills and mastery of coaches and mentors (regardless of their actual title or role) using the GROOMER Framework for Change™, an approach for facilitating ongoing professional development using a continuum of intentional facilitation strategies.

not enough to achieve sustainable results and lasting behavioral changes. Transformational coaching, therefore, examines the deep underlying reasons and motivations grounded in personal values and beliefs that are behind a coachee's behaviors and habits.

Reflection is the heart of transformational coaching. Because reflection facilitates the change process and grooms change skills in a meaningful and intentional manner, it supports the achievement of sustainable "sticky" change. Transformational coaching allows the coachee to learn and use reflection as a professional practice to cultivate new habits and, consequently, sustainable change. Additionally, this approach uses an appreciative coaching methodology, empowering the coachee to be self-responsible. It transfers power to the coachee to leverage reflection, attitudes and change skills. From their internal vantage point, the coachee is empowered to become a proactive critical thinker with greater abilities to accomplish desired or new goals and to implement actions more independently over time.

Transformational coaching focuses on what's holding behaviors and habits in place and what values, beliefs and emotions are contributing to current practices and outcomes. By exploring what is holding habits in place, the coachee can see more clearly what changes might be needed to achieve new desired results. In talking to early childhood coaches across the country, we repeatedly hear that coachees do not seem motivated to do what they already know how to do. Often coachees may not really want to make changes to their practices, which are often indicated by data gathered from observations, assessment and/or evaluation tools used to identify quality indicators of performance. This type of scenario often drives coaches to try, unsuccessfully, to inspire coachees to make changes to meet compliance expectations, instead of helping them explore their intrinsic motivation and desire to grow as a professional.

A key component of the transformational coaching approach is to explore and shift the motivational incentive from an external expectation for compliance to an internal desire for professional growth and change. Cultivating intrinsic motivation sets a foundation and mindset for a culture of continuous quality improvement, helping shift the mindset of both coach and coachee from compliance, which accompanies and may permeate Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) efforts, to a mindset of continual change and growth—embracing an attitude of lifelong learning.

The role of the transformational coach, therefore, is that of a change agent, a thinking partner, facilitator of thinking, and sometimes an accountability partner. A coach's role is to empower people to learn how to reflect and how to thoughtfully make data-driven decisions to improve their practices, solve their own professional problems, and be responsible for their own learning by learning how to change. The intention of this approach is to groom the coachee's ability to change and learn about any content with skill and, hopefully, some grace and joy. We see this approach as a way of "getting better at getting better" (Young, 2017). Fostering continuous improvement is often more important for a coach than simply being a content expert, with the ultimate goal of promoting real change and growth over time.

In the more traditional transactional coaching approach, the focus is often specifically on external results and outcomes (Terrell and Hughes, 2008). The coach often completes an observation of the coachee to identify the needed changes in practice, provide feedback based on the observation, assist in creating goals based on the feedback discussion about the intended changes to be made, and then work with the coachee to develop an action plan to meet those goals. The coach as an expert is often embedded in transactional coaching, in that the coach uses a consultative/technical assistance facilitation strategy, frequently giving advice or suggestions and taking a lead in setting goals and action plans. This approach can sometimes leave the coachee with a sense of needing to "fix" their practices, which can be disempowering and uninspiring, and can create a dependency model in which the coachee habitually turns to the coach for the answers, rather than generating creative solutions for themselves.

By empowering the learner, transformational coaching is more aligned with a constructivist approach to learning. It emphasizes the importance for the coachee to increase

reflection skills, learn through trial and error, and experiment and refine their practices. Additionally, it goes deeper than transactional coaching by emphasizing and examining the underlying values and beliefs that hold ineffective practices and stagnant results in place. Finally, transformational coaching identifies barriers and challenges that may need additional targeted action plans to ultimately achieve desired results (Hine, 2019).

Typically, few people become an early educator for the pay. Most often early educators experience a sense of calling, purpose, and even mission to work with our youngest citizens, in order to have a positive effect on future generations. As coaches, when we actively listen to early childhood educators, we can hear their passion, desire and vision, and we can help them witness, tell and develop their own professional learning story. Increasingly these internal motivators are concealed by the demands of our systems and programs. This often leads to stress and burnout, conflicts between internal motivations and program expectations or industry standards, and frustrations in trying to meet the needs of children and families in a society with increasing individual risk factors and systemic challenges.

We know caring for and educating young children is demanding work, but when it is aligned with an inner desire to contribute and make a difference in the lives of those young children, along with the needed skill sets to meet the demands of the industry, it is deeply rewarding. Transformational coaching can help align a coachee's intrinsic motivation with a deeper understanding of and correlation with the quality indicators coaches provide and use as guidelines for quality professional practices.

Creating intentional professional practices is like cultivating a garden: we must prepare, plant, water, weed and harvest. Co-creating a trusting and respectful coaching relationship represents the soil preparation essential to future outcomes for both educators and the children they serve. Adopting an attitude of curiosity, nurturing growth, honing specific practices and facilitating the desire to change are part of planting the seeds. Each professional practice is an individual seed to grow. As with gardening, one cannot produce a new plant any faster than its own growth process allows. External pressures such as bugs, droughts or weeds create obstacles and barriers to steady growth, so consistent weeding and nurturing are necessary habits to develop. The tool of reflection, watering the soil with encouragement, tending the soil of relationship, and weeding out ineffective behaviors and negative thinking

"Coaching, you see, is not telling people what to do; it is giving them a chance to examine what they are doing in the light of their intentions."

– James Flaherty, "Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others" (1999)

through transformational coaching are foundational for the cultivation process. Cultivating embraces action research and happens over time, ensuring that lasting, “sticky” change will grow from the efforts devoted to the cultivation process.

Experimentation and refinement based on collected data are also part of the transformational coaching cultivation process, because when new ideas are implemented, learning opportunities from trial and error or unexpected consequences often appear. Making perceptible change requires tolerating the discomfort of not getting it right and not getting quick results, because real growth and change take time. The skills required to cultivate a garden include tolerating the discomfort of practicing new skills, changing small daily habits, identifying and weeding out barriers and obstacles, and using data to inform refinement. Harvesting is done by the coachee as they glean the fruits of their learning, including new professional habits and the tools to plant their own future gardens. And, it is the coach’s role to be a partner or co-gardener with coachees—the people we support. It is also the coach’s responsibility to tend to their own garden and growth along the way.

Because a coach’s role is that of co-gardener and change agent, they help coachees tolerate the discomfort and vulnerability of going through the change process, which includes practicing, experiencing failures, trying things out for the first time, taking risks, not knowing what the results are going to be, and taking what might seem like insignificant small steps. It is these repeated small steps, however, that create sustainable change and foster the adoption of effective consistent habits for early childhood professionals. For a coach to be steadfast in their role as co-gardener, they need to continuously reflect, learn, practice and change. The coach must understand and empathize with the feelings of discomfort and vulnerability associated with the change process and creating new habits. Furthermore, the coach needs to be very clear about their own perspectives, values and beliefs that influence their actions or habits as a coach.

Transformational coaching as a professional development strategy provides a unique opportunity to help early childhood educators rekindle their purpose for coming into this field in the first place. It can help them clarify their deepest determination and desire to make a difference in the lives of children. Additionally, when supporting early childhood professionals to commit, create and practice habits that foster high quality practices and interactions, success will only be

achieved if the programs and systems in which they work also endeavor to achieve sustainable results and align with quality professional practices at a systemic level. Information and teaching alone do not change behavior; change requires reflection and practice. This is true for the coaches’ own transformation and deepening of their intentional coaching and professional practices.

Because relationships are the container for all learning, the coaching relationship is a unique opportunity to not only hone professional skills, but to also foster lifelong learning and broaden perspective and impact the efficacy of early childhood professionals. This happens one step at a time, to help professionals continue to “get better at getting better.” Igniting passion, purpose and dedication in people is essential to foster a culture of continuous quality improvement in our early childhood field.

Transformational coaches are in a unique position to develop relationships that help ignite those passions and support early educators to thoughtfully grow throughout their journeys as early educators. Coaches can also support programs to provide meaningful support to their staff, in order to successfully provide quality services for children and families—a goal we all hope and strive for but can only accomplish together.

“Simple daily disciplines – little productive actions, repeated consistently over time—add up to the difference between failure and success.”

– Jeff Olson, The Slight Edge

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No learner left behind: Prioritizing staff's professional development needs

by Rachel Robertson and Staci Hitzke

As early childhood educators, we are in the business of teaching and learning:

- We understand and value the earliest of experiences, the relationships between teachers and learners, and the environments in which time is spent.
- We nurture curiosity, wonder, and engagement.
- We consider individual needs, ensuring the skills practiced and the



Rachel Robertson has had the privilege of teaching young children and the adults that work with them for over 20 years. She is the author of numerous articles, the *Deployment Journal Series* (Elva Resa), and *Prove It: Achieving Quality Recognition for Your Early Childhood Program* (Redleaf Press). She currently presents workshops nationally, continues to write, and consults with a variety of early childhood programs and organizations on quality and professional improvement initiatives.

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Staci Hitzke has been an educator of young children and the adults who work with them for over 18 years. Her years in early childhood education served as a springboard into adult education training and development.

Staci has vast experience designing and implementing organization-wide training programs that develop employees as they learn, achieve, and succeed. She is a sought after trainer and speaks both nationally and regionally.

development opportunities offered are meaningful and appropriate.

- We take pride in each step our learners make on their own, supporting their self-reliance and autonomy as they begin to trust their own decisions and make positive choices in the world.
- We expose learners to a variety of materials and experiences, addressing all learning domains.
- Additionally, we foster teamwork and compassion in an effort to develop social and emotional abilities that will serve our learners well throughout life.

Adult learners

As you read the preceding list it is likely that visions of infants, toddlers, or preschoolers danced through your mind. And they should, our dedication to their learning should be paramount. But what about the adults in our programs, the teaching staff who foster compassion, nurture curiosity, and provide developmental experiences; aren't they learners too?

It's true that adults learn differently than children. They have real-life experiences, strong preferences, time constraints, competing priorities, and varied objectives.

But, they also share some similarities. Adults may not throw tantrums while lying on the floor and pounding their fists, but they do express their unhappiness. Their unhappiness affects work performance and participation in work events. Adults don't typically fall asleep in their plates of spaghetti, but they do require their basic needs taken care of before they can learn. Additionally, they crave variety, challenge, and success. This became crystal clear for Courtney, a second year director, while attending a training on teacher development:

"My teacher training prepared me to work with children and families. But when I became a director, I never learned how to teach staff. Now I realize that almost all the techniques I used to assist children in learning — reinforcing desired behaviors, positive feedback, opportunities to practice, hands-on learning — will also work well with my staff."

Courtney's complaint is a familiar one. Many directors have risen to their positions from the ranks of teacher, but have not been taught how to work effectively with their staff by building on their skill in individualizing our approach for each learner and drawing on the power of social connections to reinforce and extend learning. So how do we change that?

After all, most of us are in this profession because we are passionate about children. The responsibility of managing and training adults is secondary. But, if we take a step back and consider the bigger picture, it becomes apparent that training the adults who work directly with children is the best way to make a positive impact on the children.

The center director as learning facilitator

We often hear two comments regarding staff meetings: “How can I spend so much time on professional development, I have too much to tell them?” and, “I try, but they don’t listen to me. They need to hear it from someone else.” While both statements are legitimate concerns, they are not roadblocks. The first step to solving both is to consider yourself as a facilitator of adult learning. If you are not leading a staff meeting as an *adult learning facilitator*, your approach, and ultimately less than desirable results, will reflect this.

Consequently, it is necessary to accept your staff as a group of learners and your responsibility in furthering their learning. Your growth as a facilitator of adult learning will ensure increased learner development.

How adults learn

While in many cases learners need the same things no matter their age, knowing and understanding the fundamentals of adult learning will help differentiate your approach to ensure your staff needs are addressed appropriately. The learner should be the focus of all professional development. Therefore, understanding what makes learners tick is essential. Successful adult educators know:

- Adults learn because they want or have to.
- Adults have different learning styles.

- Adults learn best in an informal atmosphere.
- Adults learn best when practical application is encouraged.
- Adults see themselves as self-directed and responsible.
- Adults bring a wealth of experience to the learning setting.
- Adults learn best when they can relate learning to what they already know.
- Adults have ideas to contribute. (Biech & West, 2004)

As you plan, offer, or recommend learning experiences for your staff, use these principles as a guide for what will make the most impact.

Staff meetings

Typically, your most accessible opportunity to support staff development is staff meetings. Much can be done to ensure that staff walk away with more than a checklist of dos and don’ts.

- **Set a learning objective for each meeting.** An objective helps define your agenda, your content, and your delivery methods. ‘Introduce staff to new licensing policies and ensure compliance,’ will require a different approach than ‘Improve room arrangement in all classrooms.’ Not every component of each meeting will meet the objective, but a significant amount of time should be dedicated to that goal. When planning, also consider how to measure progress and success. All considerations — why this objective, how to meet the objective, what progress looks like — should be shared at the staff meeting and followed up on as appropriate.
- **Environment considerations.** Just as with children, it is important to consid-

er the environment in which learning will occur. More than learning from their environment, adults are affected by their environment. An uncomfortable chair, the janitorial crew vacuuming in the hallway, and a rumbling stomach will act as a powerful filter, blocking much of the learning.

- **Learning styles.** When planning content and determining delivery methods, ask yourself if all three primary learning styles — visual, auditory, kinesthetic (hands-on) — are being addressed. If new content or ideas are only delivered through lecture, your visual and kinesthetic learners will not learn as well. For example, when Gloria, a new teacher and kinesthetic learner, first read the evacuation procedures she didn’t quite understand them. But, when the director demonstrated and had Gloria practice the procedures, it flipped the switch for Gloria and she “got it.” Adding charts, pictures, videos, and opportunities to practice increases learning and guarantees everyone’s learning style has been addressed.
 - **Provide variety.** Fresh faces and ideas stimulate new thinking, so occasionally invite a guest speaker. There are many free resources for this: parents, school districts, community education resources, resource and referral agencies, etc. Bringing someone in is not a sign of defeat, but rather a sign of respect toward your staff and how they learn.
- Additionally, consider asking staff to lead a training session. Perhaps preschool teacher Mike recently attended a local workshop on effective block play and would like to share his new learning. Or, the toddler teaching team can share their insights from implementing an innovative new clean-up strategy. Allowing peers to teach each other encourages accountability and helps augment the new

concepts in the learners' and trainers' minds.

- **Honor the process of learning.** One typical mistake is simply informing adults and expecting changed behavior as a result. That thinking is contrary to all we know about the learning process. Granted, "Label your spray bottles" is a bit easier to learn than "Encourage emotional development in infants." However, the more you honor the process, the better the results will be.
 - *Introduce the topic or concept in various formats:* discussion, observation, hands-on practice, pictures, video clips, or guided reading. Each of these serves a purpose and provides information for all types of learners.
 - *Allow time to practice:* Whether simulated or in the classroom, practice is integral to the success of any new learning.
 - *Expect a time of trial and error:* If staff are worried about 'getting it right' more than learning, they will change for the wrong reasons and not internalize the information. For example, if you provide learning on process art, expect to see varying levels of progression at first rather than dramatic center-wide change. Don't lower your expectations or give up; act as a guide — mentoring, coaching, and providing feedback.
 - *Achievement:* When new learning is internalized, it is demonstrated naturally. This stage will not occur during the staff meeting, but can be acknowledged and discussed at the following meeting. Ask follow-up questions regarding successful progress and areas of opportunity. Each learner might have a different insight to share, further cementing the concepts in your adult learners' minds.
- **Follow-up.** Once the meeting is over, the objective doesn't disappear and

learning isn't guaranteed. Pre-plan follow-up methods to continue supporting the application of new skills. Discuss expectations and follow-up methods at the meeting so all staff understand what to expect: a checklist, classroom observations, evidence of learning in the classroom, an audit of the environment, or one-on-one meetings are all examples of good follow-up methods. Experiment to find what works best for you, your staff, and each topic.

Other training opportunities

Staff meetings aren't your only opportunity to train staff. Consider ways your staff training "to-do" list can be addressed outside of staff meetings:

- Could a routine memo work that staff are required to sign?
- Can you create an engaging notice board in the staff lounge?
- How about a positive reinforcement activity that rewards staff for reading and completing activities? (For example, remembering to take garbage out mid-day, following the new parking lot policy, or turning their supplies lists in on time.) Monopoly® money could be awarded and redeemed in a snack/prize basket. Or a group marble jar could earn staff a free-lunch Friday.

Additional training opportunities exist as well:

- Some of the best training occurs on-the-spot. Whenever you see a teacher in need of guidance and support, help them 'in the moment' rather than waiting for a staff meeting. Be mindful of appearing condescending, instead use phrases like "try this" or "what about?" Better yet, become a role model yourself. Jump in and lead a preschool story time, or facilitate

a smooth transition from indoor to outdoor play.

- Many people like checklists; they help define expectations. Yet it may be more fun to creatively develop a blackout bingo board or a three question classroom quick check form. Items on either tool might include covering outlets, meet-n-greet a parent, washing hands upon arrival; basic quick points of observation that are essential to quality care. Attach incentives to these activities and they will get done much faster.
- Create a hot spot. Sometimes center directors go on information overload creating memos, newsletters, bulletin boards, and more. No one knows where to look or how to prioritize what to read.
 - Deem one bulletin board the 'spot' where all information is important and a must read/do.
 - Occasionally add a memo that includes an incentive inspiring staff to read the information regularly. For example, post a memo closing with "When you finish reading, see me for a sweet treat."
 - Provide articles, videos, web sites, books, and more in a staff area, encouraging staff to seek out needed and reliable information.
 - Empower staff to seek out local conferences, workshops, etc. and provide recognition for attendance.

Becoming a skilled facilitator for your staff's learning is an investment with long-term pay offs. As staff learn and develop, the children will reap the benefits. The opportunities provided for your adult learners will impact everyone; whether by enhancing staff's skills, motivating them to try new approaches, or providing a fresh perspective, these small moments have the potential for long-lasting and large impact.

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A Call for Transforming Professional Learning

by Debra Lebo and Ijumaa Jordan

Recent years have seen a huge growth in attention to and funding of early childhood teachers' professional development. In the midst of these reform efforts, we find it shocking to see how little attention is being given to teachers' actual *learning* processes. In our work, we see that most professional development offerings are fragmented two- or three-hour workshops delivered with teachers as passive recipients of others' knowledge. Content includes tricks and tips to help educators fill out assessment tools, one-sided sharing of information needed to fulfill new standards, or crafty make-and-takes. There is very little time and funding dedicated to supporting teachers' intellectual and emotional lives. There is no consistent, regularly scheduled time for teachers to reflect, think, and analyze their practice. In the rare instances when coaching is offered



Debbie Lebo has over 25 years' experience working with children in a variety of settings: as an infant/toddler and early childhood educator, a hospital Child Life Specialist, and a child care director. Based in the

Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, she is an adult educator with Harvest Resources Associates, offering education, resources, and consultation that actively engage early childhood professionals in reflective practice.



Ijumaa Jordan shares a strong interest in helping teachers develop a strong sense of agency and integrity in her work with children. She has a graduate degree from Pacific Oaks College and has been strongly influenced by faculty

there in how to teach adults with attention to issues of power, privilege, and culture.

to teachers, the focus is often remedial: technical assistance for quick-fixing teachers' unsatisfactory practice, rather than any investment in the ongoing process of teacher reflection and transformation.

Professional development is often focused on children's compliance or teachers' *own* compliance with new standards and regulations. A low image of children, teaching, and teachers is at the root of this learning model. Reforms that work from this low image of teachers are even more damaging considering the high percentages of early childhood professionals who are women of color living on poverty-level wages (Kashen, Potter, & Stettner, 2016). Perpetuating these patterns of systemic oppression is not likely to improve teaching practice in our field. This kind of reductionist education focuses on fixing deficits in participants' teaching practice, or dispensing a prewritten list of tips for managing problems with children, families, or colleagues. Our associate Kelly Matthews describes many professional conferences as a "supermarket dash" approach to learning: teachers find themselves running around the store of the conference, filling their carts as quickly as they can, with little thought to what they really need or even want. Another colleague, Wendy Cividanes, sees much early childhood professional development as "drive-through

learning," like a drive-through window at a fast food joint: quick and easy, but rarely nourishing. Whatever you call it, this model of professional development persists in the face of abundant research that it doesn't lead to lasting positive change in teaching practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Jensen et al., 2016).

In this article we offer provocation for transforming teachers' professional learning from current approaches. Whether you're an early childhood teacher, administrator, consultant, teacher educator, or have another role in the field, you hold some power to use your leadership to transform professional learning in your context. Throughout the article, you'll have some opportunities to pause and reflect using the Thinking Lens[®] protocol (Curtis et al., 2013).

Clarifying Your Values Around Professional Learning

The first and most important step toward changing how professional learning is offered is to be clear on the learning processes and outcomes you value most. If your vision is limited to meeting basic licensing regulations or Quality Rating and Improvement System standards in your program, you are not likely to strive for much more than compliance. But if your vision of quality teaching and learning also includes enthusiasm, curiosity, high engagement with children,

deep reflection, innovation, and initiative, you should be reaching for more than an outdated approach to professional learning.

We are dismayed by current educational trends that view teachers as compliant technicians, passive consumers of scripted lessons, teacher-proof curriculums, and one-size-fits-all methods and materials. We want to counter this trend with a core value that believes teaching is highly-skilled work involving constant in-the-action reflection and decision making. We believe that unless and until early childhood teachers are respected in their role as powerful change agents, it is unreasonable to expect much change in the quality of their teaching practice.

Transformational professional learning is driven by a strong, positive image of teachers as capable and eager to learn, and makes meaning not only of standards, but their role in the complexities of the teaching and learning process. Teachers:

- deserve to be intellectually and emotionally engaged in their work, to study things that interest them, to engage in conversations on issues that are important to them, and to be recognized for their existing experience, knowledge, and skills.
- have a right to professional learning that stems from their assessment of their *own* teaching practice.
- thrive in learning settings where they share stories about their experiences with children, ones that engage their curiosity, passion and joy, and experiences that lead them to confront, explore, and revisit ideas that challenge them. Using a disciplined protocol for this sharing, with someone assuming the role of facilitator, keeps the learning focused, relevant, and inclusive of diverse perspectives.

This atmosphere for collaborative learning is likely to develop in a community of practice model. Our vision of a community of practice is built on the idea of a small group of people who share a passion for what they do and meet regularly in order to deepen their professional knowledge and skill (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Contrast this with the professional development model where an outsider delivers a scripted workshop of pre-developed content for teachers to passively absorb and regurgitate for a certificate. Sadly, the latter approach is what we see being used to roll out nearly all of the new curriculum mandates that have been introduced in our field in recent years. While we appreciate the importance of teachers learning the ins-and-outs of these new standards and practices, our point is that teachers deserve professional learning models that help them to *make meaning* of this information, help them integrate new requirements into their current beliefs and practices, hold them accountable to their own learning goals, and support them as leaders in change processes.

Identifying the core values that you hold around professional learning is a key step in transforming how you offer professional development. Examine your mission statement, philosophy statement, or other program documents to clarify core values. As you consider the core values you want to guide your work, you might ask yourself some questions like these:

Know Yourself:

- What does high quality professional learning look like to you?
- What makes professional learning meaningful and lasting?
- How do you see teachers as learners?

- What do you believe teachers deserve in their professional development?

Assessing Your Current Practices to Align with Core Values

Effective early childhood professional development stems from an understanding of the complexity of teaching and learning with young children. Reflective early childhood teachers continuously observe, document, and study children's unfolding learning, their own actions and responses, and the role of the physical and social environment in the learning process. If this kind of responsive, reflective teaching is the goal, professional learning opportunities must be designed to support it. This means giving teachers ample time and resources to make connections between theory and practice, to share their observations and experiences, and to talk through their own thinking and responses. In addition to meeting in a community of practice, we believe teachers need to have daily opportunities, embedded in and out of their time with children, to reflect on their understanding of children's play and learning.

Do teachers in your program have opportunities to work alongside a trusted mentor, to share and discuss their own observations, to reflect together on others' documentation, to work with materials, or engage in structured analysis of photos, field studies, or readings? And if they do have these opportunities, are they sparked by provocations that bring teachers excitement and joy, challenge their thinking, and stir their curiosity and interest?

Sharing personal beliefs and practices in this way is not common in our field. It:

- requires a meeting of the heart and the mind, a forum to reconnect with the *wonder-full*, sometimes puzzling perspective of children.

- calls for vulnerability and courage on the part of teachers, and a supportive setting where they can voice what they know and what they don't yet know.
- requires enough time to explore the beliefs that underlie actions, look for details, and explore different perspectives.
- requires focus, including the use of a disciplined protocol, especially when time is limited. A protocol can help guide reflection by helping you clarify your thinking, keep you from straying off-topic, and consider perspectives that you might otherwise overlook.

Practice by re-reading the previous paragraph and reflecting:

Know Yourself:

What idea above particularly touches your heart or mind, and what value does that idea tap into?

Taking Action to Create Change (or to Transform Practice)

In our experience, early childhood leaders who truly value something find ways to bring their aspirations to life. For instance, we've met early childhood leaders who have taken actions such as:

- pooled their limited professional development dollars with another center to launch community of practice projects.
- tapped into human resource funds as to set up learning communities.
- diverted money that was set aside for travel to large conferences to set up study groups in their own programs.
- convinced community conference planners to spend their money on a project to launch local learning groups.

In all of these cases, leaders have expanded their vision of quality and professional learning far beyond a focus on standards and mandates. Not surprisingly, they usually find they've managed to meet and then exceed required standards on their way to something greater. If you find yourself ready to make a commitment to action, but are unsure of where to start, you might consider hiring (or encouraging your administrator to hire) a skilled consultant with experience in helping early childhood programs clarify their vision and establish learning communities. Invest your money wisely in professional learning projects that support your program's larger purpose and develop leadership capacity so that teachers gradually take on more ownership and responsibility for their own learning.

Imagine...

- the possibilities for transforming professional learning in your program by establishing communities of practice.
- teachers' learning tied directly to their daily work with children.
- teachers working side-by-side with a trusted mentor, sharing documentation or results of field experiences or analyzing videotapes of children's learning with colleagues.

The aim of professional learning would not be to impart content or to get teachers to think and teach in a particular way; instead, the aim would be to help teachers reflect on and articulate their own practices and beliefs, to help them focus on the details of children's competence and learning, and to bring their practice in line with their own and their program's values. When teachers are respected in this way, we have found they rise to our highest expectations both as teachers and as learners.

Practice by reflecting in the following way:

Consider Opportunities and Possibilities

After reading this article, what could professional learning look like in your setting? What is the first step you could take to bringing that idea to life?

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Becoming a Self-Mentor

by Paula Jorde Bloom

Paula Jorde Bloom holds a joint appointment as Michael W. Louis Endowed Chair of the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership and Professor, Early Childhood Education at National-Louis University. This article is based on her latest book, *From the Inside Out: The Power of Reflection and Self-Awareness*.



Socrates summed up the secret to a meaningful life in two simple words — “Know thyself.” Self-awareness means knowing your needs and values, your strengths and limitations, your passions and your idiosyncratic quirks. It means having a deep appreciation of what makes you a unique specimen on this planet. On a deeper level, self-awareness means knowing how you react in different situations and accepting full responsibility for your feelings and actions.

Having a better understanding of oneself is the first step to having a better relationship with others. This is because self-awareness provides a window to expand our understanding about other points of view and perspectives. While the importance of self-awareness is readily understood by most people, achieving it is easier said than done. Even Benjamin Franklin acknowledged this when he wrote in his *Poor Richard's Almanac*, “There are three things extremely hard: steel, diamonds, and to know one's self.”

The reason self-awareness is so difficult to achieve is that it involves an ongoing assessment of our assumptions, beliefs, values, and mental models that shape our behavior and guide our actions both at work and in our personal lives. The goal of this kind of reflection is not merely to see who we are and better understand ourselves today, but to envision what we might become tomorrow. It is a life-long process — a journey of self-discovery, meaning making, and identity shaping. It is the journey of becoming a self-mentor.

Why self-awareness is so important

The importance of self-awareness is based on George Kelly's construct theory, first published in 1955, and his notion that every person is a psychologist. Kelly believed that people's common sense ideas and their own theories about life and relationships are

enormously rich sources of knowledge about human affairs. The central thesis of his approach is that we do not merely react to events; we are in charge of what we do in the world and have the potential to recreate ourselves.

Two other social psychologists have been influential in promoting the self-awareness movement of personal psychology. In his 1987 book *Beginning with Ourselves*, David Hunt calls the approach *inside-out psychology*. He contrasts this to the outside-in approach which leaves human affairs to the experts. The same year, Donald Schon published his seminal work *Becoming a Reflective Practitioner*. This book, as well, gave credence to the idea that achieving professional competence is a dynamic process involving continual inquiry and renewal.

Being self-aware is at the core of what Howard Gardner refers to as *intrapersonal intelligence* or what John Mayer, Peter Salovey, and Daniel Goleman refer to as *emotional intelligence*. They describe self-awareness as the capacity to be introspective and examine thoughts and feelings. This includes:

- affective awareness — knowledge of one's feelings, attitudes, moods, and outlook;
- ethical awareness — the ability to set one's principles and moral priorities;
- self-regulation — the ability to monitor one's thoughts, actions, and behavior; and
- metacognition — the ability to be aware of one's thought processes.

Self-awareness also means having a clear picture of our internal motives; those things that drive us to say what we say or do what we do. Peeling away the layers of our motivations is not always a comfortable process, but it is a necessary step if our goal is to

become an authentic leader known for personal integrity. Central to this process is gaining absolute clarity about what we perceive our purpose is in life and how we define success.

Becoming a reflective practitioner

The capacity to reflect and engage in candid introspection is at the core of achieving self-awareness. Reflective practitioners think creatively, imaginatively, and, at times self-critically about what they are doing. Individuals who use a variety of reflective approaches have a better awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses and can better understand, monitor, and adjust their behavior in personal and professional interactions.

The most common type of reflection is referred to as *reflection-on-action*. This is simply a replay of an experience to review, revisit, or recall what has happened — kind of like replaying a videotape. *Reflection-in-action* refers to a kind of out-of-body experience where we watch ourselves act and simultaneously reflect about the decisions we are making. A third type of reflection is referred to as *reflection-for-action*. This is a predictive process for forecasting how we will use what we have learned from reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. It involves consciously adjusting our behaviors based on our reflections (Saban et al., 1994).

The content or substance of reflection also goes through a change as individuals gain mastery in their profession. They are better able to surface the gap between their *espoused theories* (what they say) and their *theories-in-action* (what they actually do).

Using self-assessments to build self-awareness

There is certainly no shortage of formal and informal self-assessment tools to help build self-awareness. Some are quick snapshots — a questionnaire that can be taken in ten minutes and scored independently. Others are quite lengthy and must be administered by a certified psychologist or trainer.

At the risk of oversimplifying, self-assessment instruments can be divided into two broad categories of awareness building: prescriptive and descriptive. *Prescriptive* assessments compare a person's traits to

those of a model teacher or administrator and diagnoses the individual's strengths and weaknesses in relation to that ideal. *Descriptive* instruments, on the other hand, are the ones that say, "This is your type, your style, your preference. It is no better or worse than any other, just different."

The goal of engaging in self-assessment is obviously to improve professional practice and job fulfillment. When we use the term *professional practice*, we're really talking about *competence* in whatever role the early childhood educator holds. The goal of self-assessment then is to surface a greater awareness on the part of the practitioner of his/her strengths and talents as well as knowledge and skill areas that need to be improved. We can think of this as moving to progressively higher stages in learning from *unconscious incompetence* ("I don't even know what I don't know"), to *conscious incompetence* ("Oh my, I have so much to learn"), to *conscious competence* ("I am keenly aware of what I know and how it impacts my performance"), to *unconscious competence* ("I am on automatic pilot").

From reflection and self-awareness to self-mentoring

It is one thing to be self-aware, to acquire information from reflection and formal and informal self-assessments, and quite another to apply that information into concrete behavioral changes. No doubt about it, the most effective professionals hold a transformational view of human growth and change. They see themselves as active agents in describing, interpreting, and shaping their behavior. In other words, they are self-mentors.

The great Roman philosopher Cicero is credited with saying, "No one can give you better advice than yourself." That is really the premise of self-mentoring. Self-mentoring is essentially self-directed learning. It means intentionally developing or strengthening those aspects of who you are and who you want to be. Self-mentoring requires that you not only get an accurate picture of your real self — who you are now — but also a strong image of your ideal self — the person you aspire to become.

One vital aspect of self-development, stresses Richard Boyatzis, a leader in the self-directed learning movement, is striking a balance between what it is about

Having a better understanding of oneself is the first step to having a better relationship with others.

Self-mentoring means cultivating your own professional growth through reflection, networking, and seeking out appropriate resources.

yourself you want to preserve, and what it is you want to change. His research shows that people who successfully change in sustainable ways cycle through the following stages:

- Creating an image of an ideal self: Who do I want to be?
- Coming to terms with the real self: Who am I? What are my strengths (where my ideal and real overlap)? What are my gaps (where my ideal and real differ)?
- Crafting a learning agenda: How can I build on my strengths while reducing my gaps?
- Experimenting with and practicing new behaviors, thoughts, and feelings to the point of mastery.
- Developing trusting relationships that help, support, and encourage each step in process.

Self-mentoring strategies

Aldous Huxley once said, "There is only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving, and that's your own self." Self-mentoring means cultivating your own professional growth through reflection, networking, and seeking out appropriate resources. The process clearly requires motivation and self-discipline. Here are a few strategies to consider.

Observe the behavior of individuals you admire. Effective leadership is both an art and a science; leadership behaviors can definitely be learned. If there is a person you admire for their listening skills, study the precise behaviors that exemplify good listening. Observe the person's body language and the specific probing questions they ask.

Talk to individuals you consider to be experts in the field. Don't be bashful. If there is a person you admire for their knowledge in a specific area, contact the person and ask for his/her advice and resources to build your own expertise in this area.

Read, read, read. Subscribe to journals and magazines that enrich your understanding of different topics of interest. Don't limit yourself to professional journals, either. Some of the best wisdom you can get will be from literature in the fiction section of your bookstore. Most important, though, don't just read things that reinforce your point of view. Read articles and books that challenge your assumptions and promote a contrary point of view.

Pursue formal coursework. While demonstrated competence will get you promoted to higher levels of responsibility in your job, it is probably the formal

Getting Started

What's really important to you? What do you value most?

How do you define personal success? When have you felt most successful?

How have you used your knowledge, skill, and special talents to make a difference in the world?

When have you felt most energized and excited about work? When have you felt most depleted and discouraged about work?

Is there something you've always longed to do, but never quite had the courage to do?

How do you handle adversity?

Have you achieved a reasonable sense of balance in your life between your personal and professional pursuits?

Would people consider you to be a compassionate and kind person?

Do you know how to regulate your emotions or do your emotions get in the way in your interpersonal relationships?

Is it hard for you to relax and enjoy the present moment?

Are you quick to blame others when things don't go well?

Do you often find yourself comparing yourself to others?

What do you want more of in your relationships? What do you want less of?

How would you describe your most favorite co-worker? How would you describe your least favorite co-worker? How are these individuals different? How are they like or not like you?

What legacy do you want to pass on?

degrees or certificates you hold that got you the job in the first place. Consider taking formal courses that will help you attain the degrees, certificates, and certifications that will enhance your vita and open doors to new opportunities.

Take risks. Be bold and audacious and stretch your comfort zone. Challenge yourself to try new things and risk the awkwardness of not being perfect at something.

Cultivate a diversified portfolio. Don't just focus on the bolstering of your intellect; your emotional, physical, and spiritual sides are just as important. A balanced life has diversity and coherence.

Be open to feedback. Listen fully. Be open to receiving any message — compliment or criticism — as helpful data in understanding yourself better.

In sum

Socrates was right! The quest for excellence begins with an inner quest to discover who we are — our passions, values, talents, personal resources, and even those foibles and annoying habits we might prefer not to acknowledge. The insight that comes from self-awareness will help you appreciate the unique gifts you have to offer your organization and the importance of surrounding yourself with others who complement (and not necessarily compliment) your unique skill set and personality.

The job of becoming a self-mentor is really about developing the disposition of life-long learning and self-

transformation. It means becoming fully aware of what you really want in all areas of your life and being able to invent new possibilities to unleash your passions. It is about taking charge of your life and taking responsibility for your choices.

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The job of becoming a self-mentor is really about developing the disposition of life-long learning and self-transformation.

It's a process! Becoming self-aware and reflective is a process that leads, according to Bloom, to self-mentoring. Where are you in this process? Where do you need to focus your attention? Answering these types of questions is a good place to begin.

Strategies galore! The list of self-mentoring strategies opens the door for action. Start at the beginning of the list and see how many of these strategies might work for you.

Getting started: Bloom proposes that becoming a self-mentor emerges from self-awareness and reflective practice. Use her list of questions (p. 56) as a starting place for getting started on your journey.

Using Beginnings Workshop
to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht

You Are What You Write: Improving the Quality of Your Written Communication

by Rachel Robertson

Good and plentiful communication often lands high on the list of priorities for families participating in child care programs. Conversely, poor and scarce communication often lands high on the list of reasons parents leave a particular child care program. In my experience as a director, families indicated that they'd like *better* communication; my response was to produce *more* communication. "Oh, they must want a weekly newsletter or updated staff bios!" I would think. Looking back I see that what I produced was unnecessary and ineffective. What parents wanted was more detail, more relevant information, more access. Overall, they wanted more effective communication, not just more of it.

Written Communication

There are many types of communication to consider when meeting families' needs. While in most situations, verbal communication is preferred, we



Rachel Robertson has had the privilege of teaching young children and the adults who work with them for over 20 years. She is the author of numerous articles and books, including the *Deployment Journal Series* (Elva Resa), *Prove It: Achieving Quality*

Recognition for Your Early Childhood Program and Healthy Children, Healthy Lives (Redleaf Press). She is currently the Director of Education and Development for Bright Horizons Family Solutions.

can't ignore how critical written communication is in our field. Clearly, in many cases, it would be easier if the communication we had with families was face-to-face. We would have the opportunity to listen, answer, and clarify on-the-spot to ensure that families' needs are met and questions are answered. But for a variety of reasons — to accommodate varied schedules, to ensure communication has a lasting impact and shared understanding, to share information with a large audience at once, to keep important records, to follow licensing policies, and so forth — written communication is the ideal method. However, this presents a challenge to many in our field. Written communication skills are not part of most child development certificate or degree programs. Family Communication 101 is not required in any state pre-service training. I have often heard ECE professionals say, "I am not good at writing." Yet, as providers, producing good quality communication is an essential part of our role.

Well, what is quality written communication anyway? Understanding is the first step toward improvement. Quality written communication has multiple components:

- **It answers the reader's questions.** The writer must clarify the relevance and importance of the content so the reader understands how the information impacts them.
- **It provides details.** Readers should be able to learn what, why, how, when, and who (as applicable) from your communication. If they have to track you down to ask you further questions, you haven't done your job as a writer.
- **It is easy to read and understand.** Spelling, grammar, and punctuation count, as does word choice. A well-intended note can be misinterpreted easily if words are not chosen carefully.

The Importance of Good Writing Skills

Beyond the need to improve the quality of written communication as a means of communicating with families, improving writing skills is a worthwhile professional development goal. As early childhood educators and business leaders, we should not settle for average or good-enough writing skills. According to a report by the National Commission on Writing (2004), writing skills are stopping many from succeeding. Bob Kerry, President of New School University in New York and chair of the Commission states:

“Writing is both a ‘marker’ of high-skill, high-wage, professional work and a ‘gatekeeper’ with clear equity implications. People unable to express themselves clearly in writing limit their opportunities for professional, salaried employment.”

The report estimates businesses lose about \$3.1 billion annually to remedy errors caused by writing mistakes.

These statistics are important for all professionals, but perhaps even more so for educators. A professional in another field might get away with a few communication mix-ups; but educators are, and should be, held to a higher standard when it comes to clear, concise, and accurate communication. As early childhood educators and leaders there are many reasons, beyond sharing information with families, why you should pay attention to and brush up on your writing skills. Here are a few:

- **Many of your customers are professionals, and, in turn, expect the manager of the program to behave like a business person and hold staff to high standards.** Whether they bring it to your attention or not, they notice things like misspelled words, ineffective use of language, and excessive commas. They might give you a free pass thinking, “Oh it’s just my child’s child care program.” But is that what you want? This is your chance to set yourself apart and be an ECE professional.

- **Educators can’t be content experts in everything.** I would be distraught if I could only call myself an educator if I knew all about grammar, early learning, and rocket science. But I should, as an educator, have a healthy respect for all learning. Communication skills should be universally respected and valued by all educators, rocket scientists or not.

- **You are what you write.** Your written communication is a permanent record

of your thoughts, ideas, and attitude. It is important to not leave that to chance, but to ensure that the words you write carry the meaning, tone, and attitude you intend. Consider your written communication as a personal advertisement. With a few misplaced periods and poorly chosen words, you can inadvertently advertise that you are unaware or misinformed, even if it isn’t true.

- **Effective communication is an important component of positive relationships.** Whether to families, to other staff, or in your personal life, being able to express thoughts and expectations effectively will increase the quality of all of your relationships.

Everyday Examples

Child care staff use written communication all the time. Consider these common forms of daily communication in a child care setting:

- e-mail
- posted notices
- newsletters
- daily notes
- curriculum plans
- daily schedules
- event flyers
- staff biographies
- incident or “ouch” reports

Each of these forms of written communication presents an opportunity to demonstrate the quality of your program and require writing skills. They also, unfortunately, offer an opportunity for you to reflect poorly on your program if they are not well written. But where do you start? Simply by reflecting on some of these everyday examples found in your program and analyzing them carefully is a great place to begin. Or use the following examples to identify how and why the written communication could improve.

Let’s look at a Daily Note, Staff Bio and Illness Notification as examples.

Daily Note 1

We played with ice cubes today and made predictions to. Jordan had a hard time with his friends all day. He didn’t enjoy playing with them. Did something happen at home?

Analysis: Daily Note 1. There are a few problems with this note. First of all, it did not answer the question: so what about ice cubes? It also subtly blames the child’s behavior on his parents. From this note, parents will think their child had a bad day all day. If that’s so, the teacher should discuss this with the parents face to face. Finally, the word ‘to’ at the end of the first sentence should be ‘too.’ The way it is written gives the impression that the sentence is incomplete and requires the reader to re-read the sentence and decide what is missing or assume there’s been a mistake: a position we don’t want to put a customer in.

Staff Bio 1

Hi! My name is Alejandra. I work with the two year olds. I love scrapbooking my dog Boomer and watching football. My dream is to open my own center. I love children. I hope to learn as much as I can here.

Analysis: Staff Bio 1 makes it sound like Alejandra is just here practicing on the kids until she can get out and start her own business. In addition, by forgetting a comma after the word scrapbooking Alejandra has claimed to like scrapbooking her dog. This may mean she likes to scrapbook pictures of him or it may mean she actually scrapbooks directly onto him. Either way, it’s probably not what she meant; she likely meant to add a comma there and share that she likes scrapbooking in general, not just related to her dog.

Illness Posting 1

Two cases of strep throat in this classroom.

Common symptoms: sore throat, nausea, headaches, fever, and rash.

Analysis: Illness Posting 1 presents sensitive information in an impersonal way and creates unanswered questions like: What should be done if a child exhibits these symptoms?, And, what is the program doing to eliminate germs?

Daily Note 2

We discussed water today. We froze ice cubes and predicted how fast they would freeze and how fast they would melt. Please see our chart on the door for our results. During choice time, Jordan primarily chose solitary activities.

Staff Bio 2

Hi! My name is Alejandra. I work with the two year olds. I love scrapbooking, my dog Boomer, and watching football. I love children and am thrilled to spend time with your child; both teaching and learning myself. I plan a long career in this field and am honored to work in this program.

Illness Posting 2

We have had identified cases of strep throat in this classroom.

To ensure your child's health, we are maintaining a clean environment and asking you to watch for common symptoms: sore throat, nausea, headaches, fever, and rash.

As you can see in these three examples, small changes can make a significant impact. Carefully constructed messages

can help us communicate to families that we value their children, children learn through play, we treat children as individuals, and we take our work seriously.

Simple Solutions

You probably don't have hours to devote to reading effective writing texts or grammar reference guides. Don't worry. The good news is that there are some quick tips that can help you make big improvements. Consider the preceding examples of everyday written communication. Small improvements and a new perspective was all that is needed. Set yourself apart by following these simple tips (for managers and teachers):

- **Err on the side of caution in all email.**

Assume every email you write will be printed and distributed to thousands of people (an unlikely, but possible scenario).

- **Do not scratch things out or cross them out in written communication.**

If you make a mistake, start over.

- **Say what you mean and mean what you say.** Be sure word choice is high on your list of priorities. "We worked on dittos today" is a message that would (and should) alarm parents. However, the teacher may have created a letter matching game for her preschoolers and erroneously called it dittos. This lapse can cause a lot of harm. Many parents wouldn't point that out, or even be aware, of how this message affected their perception. But over time, enough communication like this would convince parents there is inappropriate instruction occurring in the classroom when the opposite could be true.

- **Consider the delivery method.** An important message should be hand-delivered and include a verbal component. On the other hand, a reminder about bringing extra clothes probably

doesn't warrant an urgent message sent to a parent's work email.

- **Know the difference between proofreading and editing.** Proofreading is for content and message; editing is for grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Read written communication at least twice with these different goals in mind. Trying to do both at once guarantees mistakes will be missed.

- **Read everything you write backwards.** This way your brain doesn't automatically fill in meaning and allow your eyes to skip mistakes.

- **Ask a colleague to read your text and tell you what they understood.** If the message they understood is the one you intended, then you can be confident in your work.

- **If staff members struggle with grammar and punctuation, have a contest.** Whose newsletter is mistake-free? Who catches the intentional typo in a memo in the staff lounge? Having fun while heightening awareness will make a big difference.

- **Have a proofreading policy.** Make it clear that no written communication should be shared with families unless it has been edited and proofread. A published author wouldn't dream of sharing his work unedited. There is no shame in needing editing support; it's just another method of ensuring professionalism.

- **Read everything through the eyes of the intended reader.** Will parents understand the words you use? Is it written with their perspective in mind? Do you make any assumptions in your communication? Reading this way will help you fine-tune your critical eye.

- **Consider the language and communication methods of the cultures served by your program.** Not all

communication methods work for all families. Having a one-size fits all approach is typically unsuccessful. Using clear and precise language and communicating expectations from the beginning will help avoid misinterpretation. Better yet, ask families upon enrollment what communication methods work best for them. Allowing them to identify their needs will allow you to better accommodate the diversity in your program.

- **Create writing teams or assign lead writers.** There are many reasons why a particular teacher may have more difficulty with written communication than others, perhaps English is their second language or they have a challenge such as dyslexia. Pairing teachers together will help some further develop and hone their writing strengths, while providing support for teachers who need additional writing guidance. Maybe one teacher per classroom is in charge of classroom written communication or teachers could work together to write something such as a newsletter article. Just like you would ask the teacher with musical skills to develop a music program or assign a Spanish-speaking teacher to create labels or dual-language photo books, you can certainly assign important writing tasks to those with the strongest skills in that area. Of course, make sure the teachers who have writing challenges have a chance to shine and use their unique strengths in another way and still have opportunities to develop their writing skills.

Conclusion

Writing skills are becoming less and less common and therefore, more valuable. Just as a successful author does with subtle nuances in a well-written book, you will be able to build trust, credibility, and loyalty by delivering high-quality written communication to fami-

lies. Ferdinand Brunetière is quoted as saying, “A good writer is simply one who says all he wants to say, who says only what he means to say, and who says it exactly as he meant to say it” (Sanderson, 1906).

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Suggested Resources

Websites

Ask Miss Grammar:
www.protrainco.com/writing-editing/grammar.htm

Grammar girl:
www.grammargirl.com

Dictionary:
www.dictionary.com

Books

Lederere, R., & Dowis, R. (2001). *Sleeping dogs don’t lay: Practical advice for the grammatically challenged*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin.

Sabin, W. (2004). *The Gregg Reference Manual*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Truss, L. (2003). *Eats, shoots, and leaves*. New York: Gotham Books.

Helpful books

- A Thesaurus
- A Dictionary

Educator-to-Educator Professional Development

by Mary Muhs

You wear many hats every day. You wear the hat of a leader, director, manager, accountant, human resource professional, counselor, advocate, chef, housekeeper, cheerleader, model, repairperson, salesperson and many others. You are also an educator of educators. Yet, while all these roles can pose their own unique challenges, incorporating professional development opportunities into an early childhood program is often one of the biggest challenges. Because each educator in your program is unique and brings to the table their own education, experience, morals, values and expectations, you have your work cut out for you. How can you help each one of the educators in your program meet requirements, challenge themselves, and ultimately fulfill their own potential?

So Little Time

Within the early childhood education field, there are a myriad of requirements differing from state to state and program to program. State legislation places basic requirements on initial education and experience, while Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, developed in each state, provide requirements for educator credentials along with required annual training or continuing education requirements. While credential requirements and continuing education support a higher level of program quality, these requirements may place a burden on administrators, who must ensure their

educators complete requirements on time. Additionally, each educator is an individual. Just as we look to children's individual development, we must also see our educators as needing unique and individualized support and training, in order to become their very best. No two educators are the same and continuing education needs to be deep and wide in topic, level and applicability.

- Topics need to fit the requirements, yes, but also need to challenge educators' interests, curiosities and practices. For example, while we all need health and safety training on an ongoing basis, we also need to stay on top of brain development research, including how it affects our daily expectations for children.
- Educators also have their own interests and areas for improvement, such as learning new strategies for working with children exhibiting challenging behaviors.
- Finally, educators need continuing education to challenge their current practices, which may mean challenging long-held beliefs or habits. One example would be to provide training on attachment theory for educators who may practice a cry-it-out method for infants. Challenging current practice does not require change, but it can encourage new thinking, while enriching and strengthening relationships.

So how does an administrator provide all of this continuing education while still operating a highly successful early childhood education program?

An Educator-to-Educator Model

In 2014, public school teachers developed Teach to Lead[®], in order to show that teachers are valued in their expertise and experience, and can develop education policy and practice to improve children's learning. Now, through a partnership with the U.S. Department of Education, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and Teach Plus, Teach to



Mary Muhs
Exchange Leadership Initiative
ExchangePress.com/leadership



Mary Muhs has been in the early childhood education field for over 30 years. She is the department chair for early childhood education with Rasmussen College. Muhs earned a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education Administration from National Louis University and is a Doctoral Candidate in Early Childhood Education with Walden University. Her experience extends from working with infants through preschool, center leadership and administration, training, mentoring and coaching adult educators in the field. In 2018, Muhs was selected as an Exchange Leader for *Exchange Magazine* and was a featured subject matter expert in the Exchange Press Turn Key Video Series, "The Heart of Infant and Toddler Care." Muhs is also the published author of "Family Engagement in Early Childhood Programs Quick Guide" with Redleaf Press. She is a strong advocate for high quality education programs for both adults and children.

Lead® is supported by 174 diverse organizations from across the education spectrum, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the Council for Professional Recognition and many state organizations (Teach to Lead, 2019). Ultimately, the goal is to incorporate educators' expertise, education, experience and drive to educate and support one another in policy and practice. Could this idea become a means to supporting early childhood education programs by implementing comprehensive educator-led professional development?

Educators providing training or professional development to others in early childhood education is not a new concept. Many states already offer comprehensive training and trainer approval processes for continuing education or coaching and mentoring systems for quality improvement. Instead of relying on all professional development to be delivered by the administration or outside resources, developing an internal process for educators to teach their peers may provide much more than a time-saving solution for administrators. It may also provide empowerment, validation and leadership opportunities for those educators looking to share their experiences with their peers. An educator-to-educator professional development model can create:

- a community of practice where open and creative communication and learning can take place across age groups and programs;
- a culture of ethical and respectful inquiry with educators seeking best practices;
- a collaborative team of educators working together to create the best environment for children to grow and thrive;
- an opportunity for educators to develop an identity beyond their immediate position, so that their experience is valued and celebrated through sharing with others; and
- an internal leadership development system in which educators can lead from wherever they are, and whichever position they currently hold. Leadership is more than position.

No One Right Way

You may already be working or familiar with systems that follow the educator-to-educator understanding, such as professional learning communities, mentorship or coaching, peer coaching and training. Each opportunity offers collaboration, a focus on continual quality improvement and a focus on children learning.

- Professional learning communities consist of an entire group of educators and usually crosses age groups. The group works on a shared vision and set of expectations for children, designing experiences together and learning from one another. The focus is on what works, what does not, and improvement needed for the sake of children's growth and development. For an early childhood education program, a PLC might include educators from infants and toddlers or from twos and preschool to help improve the transition for children between the age groups. The group can work together by bringing research on attachment, along with examples of what has worked well and what has not, to discuss ideas for future improvement on the communication, timeline and preparation needed for these milestone transitions.
- Mentorship and coaching offer an educator (mentee) a chance to improve their practice, knowledge and skills while being supported by a more experienced educator (mentor/coach). Often, mentors support new educators, but it does not have to be that way. A mentor or coach can support another educator of any level. The key is that the mentor and mentee establish a relationship of trust, collaboration and communication. This is not a chance for the mentor to tell the mentee what they need to do differently, but instead to help the mentee discover areas of improvement, and in turn, support their efforts toward making changes to improve practice. Mentors can offer training, inquiry, research, discussion and modeling to support their mentees' growth. For an early childhood education program, a mentor might be an educator who has been with the program for some time and has been looking for a way to share his or her experience with a new educator or for an educator new to an age group.
- Peer coaching is similar to mentorship and coaching, but the mentor or coach is, instead, a colleague or peer, often in the same or similar role. Working with a peer can provide a less intimidating means of support. Peer coaching is also a great way to develop collaboration amongst team members. A peer coach might be a newer educator completing an educational degree program, who can mentor or coach another educator who needs inspiration after many years in his or her role. A peer coach may also be an educator who finds that she has become an expert in developing engaging and provocative play invitations, or other types of classroom activities and wants to share her expertise with others in the program.
- Trainers, workshop facilitators or presenters often come from outside an early childhood education program; however, it does not need to be that way. Instead, work with

your educators to discover their areas of interest, research or expertise. Every educator has an area of their practice in which they excel. Work with that educator to develop a short training or workshop they can share at meetings or during rest time. Start small with new presenters and encourage them to branch out when they are comfortable. Developing your own training team can not only validate your educators' experience and knowledge, but also provide opportunities for them to share that knowledge with their colleagues.

Making It Work

Since many educators do not have experience with group facilitation, coaching, mentoring or training, it may be necessary to start by talking about a few best practices when it comes to working with other adults. Consider these practices to make the most of your educator-to-educator professional development model (Margolis, 2009).

- Use humor to reduce nervousness and level the playing field.
- Increase buy-in by framing ideas as being easy or easily adaptable.
- Validate educators' current practices or work and build on it.
- Represent yourself as a lifelong learner.
- Include examples, documentation and visuals of children's work in action.
- Refrain from talking too much; like children, adults learn by doing.
- Restrain yourself from sharing too much information or asking too much at one time.
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage conversation and sharing.
- Relate educators back to their own practice as much as possible.
- Collaborate to create simple actionable steps for continued improvement.

Early childhood education administrators have many choices to make every day, and many hats to wear. Designing opportunities to include your program's educators in professional development may give you more time to wear other hats or perhaps share a hat or two with them, as well.

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Webinars: A Healthy Ingredient in Your Program's Professional Development Diet

by Fran Simon

Change comes slowly to early education. In some ways, this slow evolution has helped the field retain some of the best approaches, but in other ways it has been an impediment. However, the age of the internet has kicked off one change that has revolutionized the options for consuming information: delivery of professional development online. In fact, webinars, which are only one type of online delivery method, have become ubiquitous. A slew of colleges, companies, and organizations offer an irresistible feast of information specifically for our field! Increasingly, webinars are becoming part of life for early education, just like they have risen to prominence in other industries. It is exciting and captivating to have so many easy-to-access options for learning. This trend, like all other advancements, is also controversial.

I have a difficult admission to share: Just between you and me, I have serious concerns about webinars for professional development in early care and education. Even though I am obviously a major proponent of the medium, in my opinion, nothing should ever totally replace ongoing, live experiences offered in person. However, webinars can be incredibly powerful if used with careful planning as a part of what I call a healthy professional development diet.

Admitting there is anything less than wonderful about webinars is almost shameful for me because, for the past eight years, I have produced and hosted a series of webinars specifically for early educators presented by some of the most accomplished experts in early education. And, despite my concerns about webinars, I will continue to offer the webinars for as long as I can. In fact, the webinars are my passion. Literally *nothing* gives me greater joy because the webinars enable me to connect experts with learners so they can share knowledge with the hard-working professionals who directly work with children and families all over the world. Without this powerful medium, hundreds of thousands of early educators would be deprived of the opportunity to encounter the insight and inspiration offered by leaders and experts who

would otherwise be inaccessible. To me, webinars are about expanding access and doing my part to build capacity.

What Is a Webinar, Anyway?

Just to be clear: Webinars are live presentations presented through the internet and accessed by computers and mobile devices. They are often recorded so participants can watch when it is convenient. Webinars offer great promise because they are so accessible, are relatively affordable, and allow presenters to collect a lot of data about learners' level of engagement. The systems used to deliver webinars offer excellent functionality to engage learners and replicate live, in-person learning experiences. Webinars are like very large conference presentations because presenters do most of the talking and participants have some (limited) opportunities to communicate with each other and/or the presenter. Often, in a conference presentation and in webinars, the presenter shares slides, websites, videos, and speaks with participants.

Be Intentional about Using Webinars

To be successful using webinars as part of the overall professional develop-



Fran Simon
2015 Exchange Master Leader
www.ChildCareExchange.com/leadership



Fran Simon, M.Ed., is a business development consultant, subject matter expert, and webinar provider to companies, non-profits, and publishers that serve the early childhood sector. She is a coauthor of *Digital Decisions: Choosing the Right Technology Tools for Early Childhood Education*, the founder and producer of Early Childhood Investigations Webinars and Consultants Directory, and is a Master Exceptional Leader in the Exchange Master Leader Initiative.

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ment plan, you, as a supervisor and/or the learner, must be intentional about how they are used. Let's take a deeper look into what you can do to mitigate the pitfalls and take advantage of the benefits.

First and foremost, without planning and intention you will not derive as much benefit from webinars as other types of professional development. Many webinars, especially those offered by third-party providers, might be used as 'drive-by training' that's offered once, out of context of scaffolded learning experience. Your role is to use framing, reflection, assessment, coaching, and mentoring to ensure the webinar experience is meaningful.

Drive-by training is *dreadful*, so this is my number one pet peeve about my series. However, I believe that offering thousands of early educators access to concepts, theories, and actionable ideas presented by experts who typically can only be seen and heard at conferences or in college classrooms is an important method of building capacity. So, I forge ahead and consider my webinar series 'appetizers' in the healthy professional development diet. The way I see it, webinars — whether offered by third-party entities or by your own organization — can be the foretastes of content that tease participants' appetites and set the table for deeper learning. The important part is that participants can learn from experts who might otherwise not be accessible — no matter where they are located.

Incorporating Webinars: The Healthy Professional Development Diet

The purpose of this article is to provide you with a new lens through which to intentionally plan professional development and sort out strategies to incorporate webinars. The main idea is to offer

professional development that is intentionally balanced by delivery, method, content, the staff's needs as a whole, and the individual needs of each of the staff members. While it is common to think about content for professional development (PD), supervisors and administrators don't often consider balancing professional development by method of delivery. A balanced professional development diet includes continuing education that includes formal training, on-the-job experiences, coaching, mentoring, readings, reflections, self-assessments, or other extensions, conferences, networking, peer-to-peer experiences, and online learning. In an ideal healthy professional development diet, all of the delivery mediums, whether online or in person, should be blended to meet the needs of learners and the budget of the program or the learner.

The adjacent chart illustrates an example of what a balanced diet might look like for the staff as a whole or to an individual staff member. Bear in mind that no two plans would be the same due to time, funding, and resources, but the chart is a visual for your consideration.

As you can see, this intentional approach to planning professional development emphasizes on-the-job experiences, coaching, and 'face-to-face' onsite or offsite formal training experiences, but also incorporates both webinars or synchronous (at the same time) and asynchronous (self-paced) e-learning. In the fictitious example above, almost 20 percent of the plan is online learning. While that is a lot of online learning, it is a reality that online learning is often more affordable and accessible than other types of professional development, so administrators might plan to use a lot of online learning experiences due to budgetary restraints.

But, caution! What you cannot see on this chart is the context in which any of these strategies are being used. For

example, every type of professional development experience should include some type of 'framing' experience before the training to provide context, and some form of accountability and oversight after the experience. This might mean staff members would complete reflections forms, learning assessments, implementation plans, and/or participate in follow-up debriefing sessions in which they share what they have learned with other staff members. It is not enough to just attend or send staff to any formal training experience because they must have a specific number of hours without providing some context for why they should attend, the intended expectations, and a plan for the outcome. Just like children, adult learners retain and apply information from formal training when they have opportunities to reflect on and test their knowledge. Certificates are not enough to ensure participants learned anything. While certificates are important for ongoing workforce development and career lattices, they only prove attendance, not participation or retention, unless required before the certificate is issued. This is where supervisors' expectations and oversight come into the equation. The big idea here is to look carefully at the needs of the staff in your program as a group and individually to determine what ideal means in your context.

Let's look at an example of how one administrator applied the Healthy Professional Development Diet approach to using webinars in his program (see sidebar).

Use Your Media Literacy Skills to Pick Credible Webinars

Not all webinars are created equal in terms of intention, content quality, presenter qualifications, and context. Webinars are so ubiquitous that they sometimes are hosted and presented

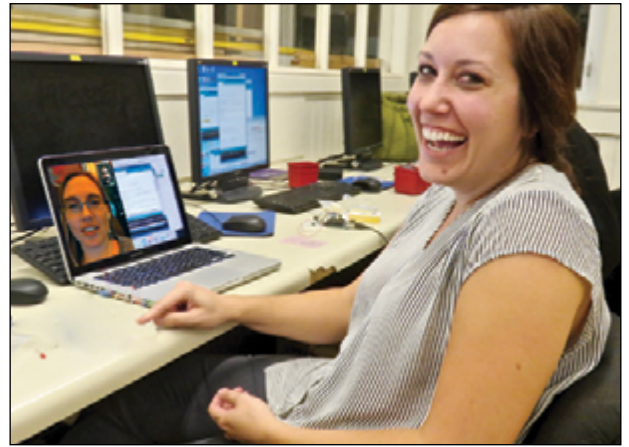
by companies with hidden agendas and presenters who are not qualified. Without careful vetting, participants might think they are learning from experts, but in fact the webinar might be a cleverly designed product pitch delivered by a presenter who is not really an expert on the subject. It is important to research the source of the webinar and the presenters' qualifications.

There are also reasons to worry about the participants' level of engagement in webinars. While it is easy and possible to offer engaging experiences on webinars if the hosts and presenters know how to use the software well, unfortunately, many webinar producers don't use the powerful tools for creating engaging webinars. The results are often boring, uninspiring, and irrelevant experiences. Look for webinars that include open-ended questions to participants, polling questions, video vignettes, web cams, and opportunities to ask questions of the presenters. Require staff members to complete a Reflections Form and share their newly acquired knowledge with others in your organization. Help them plan to use what they have learned or follow up with more resources.

We know that the best learning experiences include as much interactivity between the learners and the presenter as possible, including breakout discussions and hands-on learning. While these activities can be replicated in smaller webinars, they are difficult to offer in very large webinars.

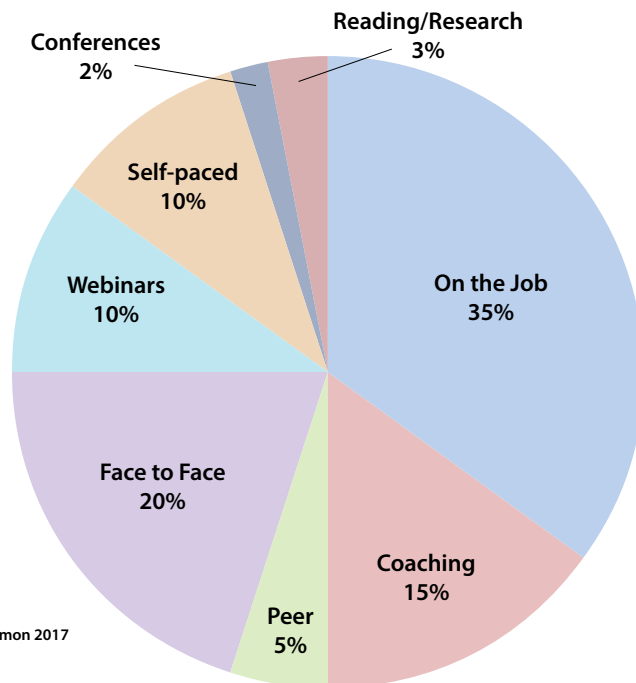
Summing It Up

Embracing the concept of a healthy professional development diet helps educators work around the pitfalls and take advantage of the primary benefit of webinars: spanning time and distance affordably and efficiently. Using the same level of intention you use with children in your program, you can take advantage of the power of webinars for continuous quality improvement.



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Example: Healthy Professional Media Diet



Sam is the director of a multi-site child care program that serves children ages two through five in an underserved community in Boston. Through observation, he noticed that the teachers were spending, on average, less than ten minutes per week on experiences designed to facilitate learning in math. He determined the teachers needed inspiration and formal training to bolster their ability to help children learn mathematical concepts. He researched training opportunities and identified a webinar on basic strategies for early education math experiences being presented by a national expert. The description indicated the webinar would provide actionable practices teachers could implement immediately to improve math exploration in their classrooms. He planned objectives for a new six-month long initiative to improve the staff members' understanding of math concepts called the "Path to Math" campaign. The plan included:

- a program-wide Path to Math Kick-off Rally (meeting) in which he announced the initiative, laid out objectives and expectations, and assigned a Path to Math self-assessment and simple readings to be completed prior to the webinar.
- a required Reflections Form to be completed after the webinar.
- three math learning lab sessions in which staff worked together to set up and practice the concepts and activities described in the webinar, brainstormed their own ideas, and planned individual "projects" that required they implement some of their ideas, observe and record the outcomes, and share the results in the final lab.
- small group coaching sessions with Sam and a math expert.
- a Path to Math Family Celebration for families to attend and participate in activities with their children.

Once the plan was laid out, staff members were all required to participate in the webinar. Some attended the live session in a group watching in the conference room along with Sam, and some watched the recorded webinar, so it was possible to cover all the classrooms without a substitute.

By the end of the six-month campaign, the teachers in Sam's programs were excited about facilitating math experiences and balancing their comprehensive program with all content areas. The teachers who participated in the program mentored new teachers as they refined their ability to integrate math in their classrooms, and the learning experience was sustained for years.

Sam used a similar approach for other topics. He took care to ensure that online professional development experiences were balanced with more traditional approaches and that teachers always had objectives and follow-up for every webinar, live formal training, video, or e-learning experience.

communities of practice for professional development

by Margie Carter

If you were to design a professional development system to significantly improve the practice of early educators, what components would you include? This is the challenge for many early childhood organizations including Head Start, AEYC affiliates, child care resource and referral agencies (R&Rs), and state Quality Rating Systems (QRS/QRIS). With our plethora of conferences, online classes, and workshop offerings, what have we discovered is most effective in moving our teachers beyond techniques into more reflective practices? I have my own thoughts about this, but I'm always eager to learn more.

Teaching adults has been the primary focus of my professional work for several decades. Early influences shaping my teaching included the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and those adapting his work around the globe, my involvement in the HighScope Training of Trainers program, and graduate studies at Pacific Oaks College under the mentorship of Elizabeth



Margie Carter is a teacher educator and mentor who travels widely to speak and consult with early childhood programs. The ideas are expanded in the books she has co-authored with Deb Curtis, especially the second edition of *The Visionary Director* (in press).

Jones. I carry a strong belief that we have to educate and care for teachers in a manner consistent with how we want them to treat children. This has led me to experiment with teacher education strategies based on social constructivism and critical inquiry, and, with Deb Curtis, to co-author a first book together, *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice* (1994).

In recent years I've been following some of the growing literature focused on promising professional development practices to keep harvesting ideas for my own growth and to better respond to inquiries that come my way. My sense is that most of the study and reporting on this topic is in the K-12 arena, and until recently, most folks in the early childhood field have been just too busy doing the work to keep abreast of studies on successful professional development efforts with teachers in the higher grade levels. While I don't consider myself to be systematic or thorough in tracking these efforts, I'm eager to glean and apply what I can.

Sustaining a focus over time for constructivist learning

In studying the effectiveness of their training of trainers work, the HighScope

Foundation (Epstein, 1993) identified key components which lead to more intentional teaching. One of these seems to counter the typical smorgasbord offerings of most conferences and in-service training venues. HighScope research suggests that having a sustained focus over time leads to deeper understandings and improved teacher practices. Their study of effective teacher training also supports the basic tenets of constructivist learning which Marlowe & Page (2005) summarize in the following way. Constructivist learning is about:

- constructing knowledge, not receiving it;
- understanding and applying, not recall;
- thinking and analyzing, not accumulating and memorizing;
- being active, not passive.

Whether or not we use their particular curriculum, making use of HighScope's findings on effective teacher training causes us to rethink the typical way we organize professional development conferences and in-service programs for teachers. Even for pre-service teacher education Lilian Katz (2009) says,

There is reason to believe that a program organized around a coherent single theme or unified approach to teaching will have

a deeper and more enduring impact on graduates than a teacher education that offers students a wide range of alternative approaches.

In partial alignment with this notion, many early childhood conferences have ‘tracks,’ with workshop offerings focused around a topic such as administration, curriculum, policy, and so on. However, within these tracks there is seldom a unified approach and attendees still experience a smorgasbord of scattered offerings.

I experienced a significant departure from a typical conference as a guest speaker at the University of Wyoming which I described in an early *Exchange* article, “Rethinking Conferences” (Carter, 2006). Watching participants work with a focused topic in the same small groups with a facilitator over three days convinced me that this was one of the most effective formats for spending our professional development dollars, not to mention our time. In recent years, with Deb Curtis and our associates at Harvest Resources, we have adapted this focused institute format for most of our work. Talk to anyone who has participated and you’ll hear a story of transformation. Again, the elements of this format are aligned with what I have been learning about effective approaches to professional development. After seeing the success of these elements in an institute format, we’ve gone on to shape most of our consulting work with the same components.

Forming communities of practice with critical friends

Whether in an institute setting or ongoing training work with an organization, one of the most useful components is organizing teachers into ‘professional learning communities (PLC).’ PLC, also referred to in the K-12 literature as ‘communities of practice,’ can be groups from the same workplace, but it is helpful

to have additional participants from other places to broaden perspectives. There are benefits to having folks who work with the same age group form a PLC, with other benefits ensuing when diverse age groups are represented. Beyond networking, the purpose of these communities of practice is to engage in a disciplined dialogue to uncover the possible significance of their documentation of children’s play and learning, and the implications for their teaching.

For this to be a valuable professional development experience, someone needs to play the role of facilitator, or what has been called a ‘critical friend.’ The word *critical* here refers to ‘an essential’ person, not someone who criticizes. *Critical friends* are peers or mentors who ask probing questions that enable those involved to gain fresh insights into their work. A quick search on the web will lead to numerous examples of learning communities with critical friends (see Resources). By focusing collaboratively on specific work, a group can engage in authentic dialogue about a compelling question or issue that relates to children’s play and work and learning while also reflecting on their colleagues’ own practice. Participants also consider how the insights and observations brought out in this substantive conversation may impact their own future instruction or practice (Hudson & Gray, 2006). Hudson and Gray offer numerous examples of learning communities with critical friends.

For our Harvest Resources institutes we recruit local emerging leaders from the community to serve as facilitators for a small PLC. We offer these individuals four hours of training prior to the institute so that they can learn and practice the way to be a critical friend. If you are a mentor working side by side with teachers in a program, you can form learning communities in a similar way.

Strategy: Ask teachers to reflect on how they view themselves as learners

Facilitators guide each person in their group to consider how they best learn as a member of a group. They nudge participants to challenge themselves not to be habitual, but rather to try stretching themselves into some new learning behaviors. Facilitators can also ask each person to name something they have to offer the group, a strength or experience that could be a contribution as they work together. Finally, facilitators should consolidate what has been said into a summary of possible agreements the group could make as to how they will support each other’s learning, and work toward group consensus on this.

Strategy: Create a nurturing learning environment

For a group of people to truly function as a learning community, they need to feel physically and emotionally comfortable so that they can take risks and work through the disequilibrium that often accompanies new learning. Conference venues are often sterile or, in some cases, over-stimulating. Even small changes in the environment and attention to details can create an experience of being cared for. Adding some natural items, some tabletop or floor lamps and attractive cloth demonstrates the value of setting up an environment that supports learning. For instance, Kisha Williamson-Champion offers from the work she and her committee did to transform the environment for one of our Harvest Resources Institutes (see examples on pages 22-23). You can also demonstrate ways to care for our global environment by making sure there are recycling set-ups at venues and advance reminders to bring personal coffee mugs and water bottles.

Developing a protocol for learning from documentation

Teachers in most programs today are required to observe and gather documen-

tation on children's activities. However, most find this just an additional requirement and don't consider it to be genuinely useful in their day-to-day work with children. I've found that when I demonstrate ways to gather and study documentation for planning, teachers find it more meaningful and are better

able to use documentation for their own learning. Still, they rarely have much time or mentoring in this process of pedagogical documentation, and they benefit from some specific guidelines and questions to use for reflecting on their documentation.

A valuable resource for me in becoming more helpful as a teacher educator was reading the little book *The Power of Protocols* (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003). While this book focuses on professional development for teachers in older grades, it is very adaptable in our early childhood work

Transforming A Conference Room Environment by Kisha Williamson-Champion

Many times the experience of a focused institute can be thought-provoking and overwhelming mentally, theoretically, and spiritually. While the leaders and facilitators are ensuring that the participants are engaged and stepping out to take a risk in their own learning, it is important to have a physical environment that is nourishing.

The physical environment must support adult learners with their desire to step away from or the need to process the institute experience alone; this is the reason for cozy (thinking) spaces.

Universal learning: Transforming the physical environment to promote adult learning opportunities

The outcome that is experienced by changing the physical environment:

Establishing an environment where the adult learner can 'stop' and take a moment to reflect, relax, or rejuvenate the mind, body, and soul.

How we did it:

The conference center gave us free access to furnishings that they no longer used and kept in a storage room. They also allowed us to use furniture from the entry and side hallways that are a part of the room's décor and not visible to the public. A stage, podium, side panels (curtains), and extra chairs and tables were also made available to us.

Along with the items provided by the conference center, the institute planners utilized:

- several pieces of fabric (ranging from ½ yard to 5 yards)
- 5-10 house plants of various sizes
- several baskets (medium and extra large)
- natural items such as seashells, twigs, rocks, leaves
- wooden masks
- gourds and other natural instruments
- framed artwork
- table and floor lamps
- clay pots
- large decorative books of photography (Goldsworthy, Ansell Adams, Ernie Barnes artwork)
- area rugs
- decorative room dividers

If this feels like too much, start smaller and make it simple (see chart).



Figure 1: Mixing furnishings from conference center and personal items makes for a cozy learning environment.




to study our documentation to inform teacher learning and planning. With helpful examples, the authors build a case for the role of facilitator and the value of protocols saying, “The kind of talking needed to educate ourselves cannot arise spontaneously and unaided just from talking. It needs to be carefully planned and scaffolded.”

The term protocols isn’t a common early childhood term, but we certainly use protocols for sanitizing toys and tables, changing diapers, and report-

ing accidents or issues of concern. So why not protocols for thinking through what we see children doing in order to respond in ways that enhance their learning? Deb Curtis and I have been experimenting with “A Thinking Lens” to serve as a protocol for teachers to learn by reflecting on events that unfold with the children. Rather than telling teachers what to do, we offer a specific set of questions to guide their thinking. Once they internalize these prompts, the thinking lens becomes second nature to their daily work, like washing their hands.

In several Canadian provinces and in New Zealand we’ve encountered beautiful early learning frameworks — something akin to a thinking lens — Ministries of Education have developed for teachers. Reviewing these tools from other countries reminds us that as valuable as our U.S. standards and monitoring tools might be, they primarily serve as compliance, rather than thinking tools for teachers. I long to see our R&Rs, QRS/QRIS initiatives, and other American ECE organizations make this shift in their approaches to quality enhancement. What if we gave admin-

<p style="text-align: center;">For example, if you had the following items</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Transformation of environment What these items can become</p>
<p>Less than 10 items can get you started!</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Three (3) cushioned chairs (comfortable chair, love seat or other oversized furnishings) 2. One (1) indoor/outdoor rug 3. Two (2) silk plants (tree type or tall are best, but not required) 4. Eight (8) swatches of fabric (1/2 yard to 5 yards) 5. A grouping of Natural Items (leaves, rocks, shells, etc.) 6. Medium-sized baskets OR baskets that can stack inside one another (as many as you need) 7. Two (2) folding chairs (smaller sized) <p>ALL items can be substituted with similar objects.</p>  <p>PHOTOGRAPHS BY KISHA WILLIAMSON-CHAMPION</p>	<p>Select a corner in the conference room to transform.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Place the rug at an angle on the floor. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lay a large piece of fabric in the middle (this creates a layered effect.) ■ Place one chair in the middle on the shortest side of the rug. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drape another piece of fabric across the chair (similar to how a throw would be placed). ■ Put the other chair diagonally across. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cover the seat portion of this chair with another piece of fabric (to give the chair depth). You can also wrap the back of the chair in another fabric that is similar in color, print, or style, BUT does NOT have to match exactly. Allow the fabric to flow onto the floor. You can face the chairs to the group OR away from the group. ■ Position the silk tree (if a plant, use a chair/podium covered with fabric to increase the height) between the two chairs. ■ Set one folding chair next to a cushioned chair at an angle. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cover the chair completely with one piece of fabric — this is a makeshift table. • Put basket and natural items on ‘table.’ • Consider using other items to create a decorative table setting. ■ Place a stack of baskets (various sizes, SIMILAR shapes) on the bare side of a cushioned chair (this will give an additional layer, adding depth to your presentation). <p>In another part of the room repeat these steps, except this time use one cushioned chair and the largest piece of fabric (or 2 pieces together) as a rug (unless you can get two indoor/outdoor rugs).</p>

istrators and teachers a framework that includes a set of questions to routinely ask themselves to provoke their thinking about best practices standards and desired learning outcomes?

Developing teacher voices

I believe a primary goal for our professional development work should be developing teachers' confidence, voice, and integrity. Over the years expectations and requirements placed on teachers have significantly grown without a parallel growth in their compensation, planning time, or opportunities for professional development. Sadly, all too often what passes for a professional development opportunity is really in-service training on how to implement some new requirement, curriculum, or assessment tool. Ideas from experts and 'the research' are intended to strengthen teachers, but they often disempower, taking away their confidence. I concur with the sentiments of Bill Ayers (1992) when he says:

Recovering the voice of the teacher, usually a woman, increasingly a person of color, often a member of the working poor, is an essential part of re-conceptualizing the field of early childhood education. . . . The question, "What can these teachers tell one another and the world about teaching and about children?" has largely been ignored in favor of more distanced questions, such as "How shall we explain what these teachers ought to know?"

When I consider this critique in light of Parker Palmer's mandate for teachers (1998) — Good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher — I feel compelled to continue to transform my teacher education work.

How do we help our teachers consolidate their identity beyond the often self-effacing term 'day care worker' or reassuring notion of having 'the most important job in the world'? I believe facilitated professional learning communities are part of the answer. Teachers regularly coming together with critical friends to examine their work with a disciplined protocol will ultimately come to identify what they believe, what they know, and what they want to learn in order to work with integrity.

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