EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

PART ONE

Written by Susan Harper-Whalen

Just as there are common themes of knowledge and abilities that transcend the various levels, roles, and settings within the early childhood profession, there are also common themes related to ensuring an effective process of professional development regardless of level, role, or setting. ~ NAEYC

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered whether the early childhood training you offer is effective? Would you like to be reassured that your efforts 1) really matter to the participants and 2) have a positive impact? After all, we each hope that the time spent preparing and presenting training sessions, workshops, and classes year after year is worth the effort. We hope we are helping participants obtain the information and skills they need to make life better for young children and their families, and for themselves.

In 1993, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published a position statement entitled *Conceptual Framework for Early Childhood Professional Development.* This document, describes nine principles of effective professional development. These principles provide a research-based framework for early childhood trainers to improve the effectiveness of the training and professional development experiences they offer.

This newsletter is the first of a two-part series that examines these principles in detail. This issue introduces four of the nine principles, describes their significance, and provides multiple suggestions for using each principle in training. As you review the information, you may wish to identify the principles you understand and use consistently, read carefully through the ones that need more attention on your part, and select one or two to target for your own personal growth and professional development.

PRINCIPLE ONE

Training is most effective when learning is viewed as an ongoing and lifelong process.

<u>Description:</u> Learning and mastering new knowledge, skills, and dispositions takes time, sometimes a whole lifetime. Trainers and program directors, as well as practitioners, must view and embrace lifelong learning as an essential component of quality practices. The traditional "one-shot" approach in which learners attend a brief, single-event training session that does not include follow-up, departs from this principle in two ways. First, it does not provide an adequate learning experience for promoting the learner's growth and change. Second, it establishes the inaccurate expectation that a brief encounter with new information is a viable formula for learning and change. You can help participants move toward a realistic view of the learning process by talking about the developmental nature of learning and by building ongoing learning practices into your training calendar.

<u>In Practice:</u>

~ Offer series training. Design training that promotes reflection and learning over time by offering a series of sessions on the same topic, with time to try out new ideas between sessions. When training is limited to a

single session, such as a conference presentation, provide follow-up reading on the topic and suggest activities that guide the learner toward using the new practice in their program. Also, put your contact information on handouts along with a genuine invitation for participants to contact you with further questions.

~ Promote learning as a lifetime journey. During training sessions, speak directly about learning as a lifelong process. To do this, you might introduce participants to the Stages of Learning identified by Lilian Katz (from Adult Learning I) or describe the reason you chose to offer the training in a series rather than a "one-shot" event. In addition, effectively model and support the disposition for lifelong learning, briefly describe your own long-term growth and learning on the topic, and provide information about ways participants can continue to learn about the topic (recommended reading, other workshops, programs to observe that use the practices being discussed, etc.).

> *[Teachers] come with carefully constructed protective cocoons through which any new or different interpretation of reality must pass. Experiences that do not come with great force into and through that screen end up adding more layers to the cocoon. Experiences that have enough depth and duration and intensity to challenge the prevailing interpretation are therefore those that education for transformation seek to develop.* ~ Pedagogies for the Non-Poor, 1987

PRINCIPLE TWO

Training is most effective when grounded in a common theoretical framework and offered in a systematic way.

<u>Description:</u> Trainers within a professional development system must work together to articulate a common early childhood philosophy that is grounded in theory and research. This core philosophy must be consistently reflected across the system—by trainers and guest presenters as well as in library materials and resources. Without this common core, there is no standard for selecting and delivering quality training. The result may be workshops that do not reflect current knowledge or a training menu that presents contradictory knowledge and skills. When this occurs, participant outcomes include frustration and confusion rather than learning.

Training must also be offered in a planful way to intro-

duce and build on core knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions over time and through many topics and training activities. In this way, individual training sessions are woven together to create a cohesive training system that allows participants multiple opportunities to engage in the full cycle of learning—moving from awareness and exploration to trying out and using a new idea in their program.

Finally, trainers must also encourage individual child care providers and programs to develop and articulate their own professional philosophy. When providers and programs have a clear philosophy grounded in professional standards, they are able to self-select training that is cohesive with their beliefs and needs.

<u>**In Practice:**</u>

~ Develop training that follows state and national guidelines. Within your agency, advocate for clear alignment of training goals with professional standards. Include reference to these standards in your professional philosophy and on recruitment literature about your session. Provide participants with easy access to professional standards by including state and national web sites on handouts and copies of these documents in your resource library.

~ Avoid a "scatter-shot" training approach. As you develop a year-long training calendar or plan an extended course, carefully examine individual topics in relationship to the "big picture." An effective "big picture" reintroduces and explores core principles over time. For example, if family-centered practice is one element of your shared theoretical framework, you should see at least one session focused on working with families in your plan.

Of equal importance, you should see evidence that working with families is being explored and reinforced in other sessions. This means you might see that a session on guiding behavior includes suggestions for partnering with parents when challenges arise, and the session on creating effective learning environments describes strategies for helping parents feel welcome and comfortable in the program. When topics are planned and revisited, participants become familiar with and try out new practices, get more information, build on existing knowledge, and try again.

~ Encourage providers to develop/articulate a professional philosophy that is responsive to state and national

guidelines. This is an exciting and meaningful topic for a training series. Providers often benefit from a guided process that supports them in articulating a professional philosophy that reflects their program's uniqueness while still responding to state/national standards and current research about best practices. The series might involve participants in reflecting on and responding to the following questions relative to children in their group: How do you believe children learn? What do children need to learn? What is the teacher's role in this process? How does the program fit within the context of the family and community? What theory/research supports your position?

~ Help programs develop a shared vision and implement consistent practices. Early care and education programs with two or more staff members must have clear, shared beliefs and an understanding of the practices that do and do not fit within that established framework. This shared understanding should be reflected in written policies and program handbooks as well as evident in day-to-day routines and activities in the program. Providing training that is based on a common theoretical framework increases the likelihood of continuity and consistency in daily practices with children and families.

PRINCIPLE THREE

Successful training responds to each participant's background, experiences, and current needs.

Description: Systematic training must be responsive to the interests, strengths, and needs of early childhood professionals in the community. Adults need educational opportunities that respond to them as individuals with unique learning styles, stages of learning, and program perspectives. Each session, as well as the training menu over time, must address a range of learning preferences and provide opportunities for active and passive learning, group and individual activities, open-ended and didactic teaching methods, self-directed and instructor-directed options, etc. When applicable, effective training includes information specific to various age groups and program types (child care centers, Head Start, family child care homes, infant/toddler programs, etc.). "This principle is particularly important for employed individuals who are often investing scarce resources—both time and money—in training and may feel cheated or frustrated when there

are few apparent links to their needs" (NAEYC, 1993).

In Practice:

~ Provide a variety of learning activities within a session that address a range of learning styles. Evaluate individual sessions as well as the scope of training offered to make certain you are providing "something for everyone." You need not attempt to embed all possible learning preferences within one short session. A brief session should use two or more different teaching/learning strategies while a year-long calendar should offer a full range. Above all, recruitment materials should clearly describe teaching strategies to allow participants to choose according to their interests and learning style preferences.

~ Address a range of developmental learning stages. It is safe to assume that participants in a training session will include every stage from beginners to experts! Even when sessions are specified as appropriate for individuals at a "beginner" or "advanced" level, participants within the identified stage will represent a range of skill and experience. Plan for this inevitability. Welcome participants and acknowledge their range of experience and knowledge. Invite contributions and questions, state what participants at each stage (beginning, intermediate, advanced) can expect to gain from the session, and provide resources representing a range of complexity and depth.

~ Use stories/examples and provide resources that are relevant to a range of early childhood age groups and program types. Often, learning outcomes for training are relevant to infant/toddler teachers as well as preschool staff and address the needs of family child care homes as well as center-based care. However, it is common for a trainer to approach a topic from the perspective of his or her own experience—meaning that the stories, case studies, and handouts refer to preschool-aged children in center-based programs because that is what the trainer knows best. Make an effort to eliminate this type of bias from your training. Consult your colleagues if you need to expand your focus. When you plan a session specific to the needs of one age group or program type, be sure this intent is clearly stated on recruitment materials.

> *The very definition of the word present is "to bring . . . to make a gift to." That implies a giver (a presenter) who's tuned in to what the recipient (the audience) wants.* ~ Lani Arredondo

PRINCIPLE FOUR

Effective training provides opportunities to translate theory into practice.

<u>Description:</u> This is a well known fact that deserves repetition—it is very difficult to translate new ideas into everyday practices! The leap between knowledge and implementation can create a significant barrier to growth and change in the early childhood field, particularly if it is not acknowledged and addressed. For example, after participating in a professional development series about inclusion, a learner might be able to articulate a philosophy of inclusion but that does not necessarily mean he or she is ready to practice a philosophy of inclusion. Trainers must engage the learner in activities that connect training with what they do all day in their own early childhood program. Professionals need to hear, see, and try out examples that illustrate how a new concept looks in practice. "Without clear linkages between theory and practice, students may reject new knowledge as 'book learning' or an 'ivory tower' approach and instead rely on experienced practitioners' information and strategies 'that work in the real world'" (NAEYC, 1993).

<u>In Practice:</u>

~ Provide examples of new ideas in practice. There are a number of ways to help participants visualize what a new skill might look like in their program. Offer realistic examples of using a new idea in practice. Show a video that demonstrates a new skill. Tell your own stories (When I added notebooks with a pencil on a string in three areas of my program, I was able to more consistently write down my child observations.). Model new skills (I want to demonstrate appropriate lifting techniques before you complete the lifting activity).

~ Allow participants to "try on" new practices during the session. Once you have identified learning outcomes for your session, plan activities that allow participants to <u>practice core skills during the session</u>. Role play, debate, play games, complete case studies, observe, and lead discussions. When participants have "tried on" new ideas, they are more likely to understand the concept, feel somewhat confident in using the skill, <u>and</u> try it out in their own program.

~ Promote and support the use of new skills after the training session(s). Provide a series of workshops on the same topic to allow learners sufficient time to try new ideas, reflect, and return for more learning and guidance. Help participants develop individualized action plans that identify their learning needs—What do I need to learn, value, and practice to reach my goals? What kind of time and support will I need? How will I know when I have reached my goal?

Provide incentives for using the new practice. During training, include research that documents the effectiveness of a strategy in improving outcomes for children and staff. Provide participants with an attractive "notice to parents" that describes the training and the core practices learned. Visit the program or make a follow-up phone call to the learner to support and celebrate the ongoing learning process.

~ Embed mentoring when possible. Mentoring is one of the most valuable teaching/learning experiences in our field. When it is impossible for you to teach <u>and</u> mentor participants, look for other options. Participants in extended training sessions often develop strong connections and can be paired for peer support and mentoring during and after the training. Encourage staff from programs to participate in training together and coach them on how to use peer mentoring in their program to reinforce their learning.

~ Provide guided self-evaluation tools. Provide materials during your session to promote reflection and self-evaluation. In addition, develop self-assessment tools that providers can take back to their programs to monitor their own progress. Guided self-assessment tools provide 1) a clear statement of the skill(s) to be implemented back in the program (use the skill-based learning goals you established for your session); 2) an explanation of what the skill "looks like in practice" to establish criteria for self-evaluation; and 3) a guided rating scale for scoring progress, such as "yes," "in process," and "not yet". In addition, the tool needs to include an Action Plan that helps the learner to plan "next steps" using the results of their self-assessment. Next steps might include: "mentor others" when the skill is a strength or "find more information" to improve the practice if a skill is not yet evident.

CONCLUSION

National trends in early childhood professional development have had a significant impact on early childhood

practice in the past ten years. Trainers must meet the demands of state professional development systems as well as the needs of adult learners. NAEYC's principles of effective professional development give trainers a comprehensive standard for guiding the creation of training sessions. Trainers should know about these principles and conscientiously use them to inform their training practices.

Ensuring that training and other professional development activities achieve a high level of effectiveness is everybody's responsibility and everybody's gain. Trainers, child care professionals, young children and their families all benefit from training that is designed to make a difference.

RESOURCES*

* Conceptual Framework for Early Childhood Professional Development; a Position Statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1993). NAEYC: Washington, DC.

LOOKING FOR WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR TRAINING SKILLS?

The Early Childhood Project sponsors Adult Learning Principles and Practices for Early Childhood Trainers. This regular training consists of:

~ Adult Learning I: a six-hour class session offered each spring and fall in various communities in Montana.

~ Adult Learning II: a six-hour class session offered during the summer in Bozeman.

~ Adult Learning III: 3 hours of directed self-study.

For details about a session in your area, contact the Early Childhood Project at 1-800-213-6310.