

# 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



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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-

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