

# Developing Competent Teachers

## Status Report on Teacher Training in the United States

by Roger Neugebauer

I dare suggest that there is 90% agreement among early childhood professionals in the United States that the skills and attitudes of teachers are critical to the quality of care that children receive. Yet, as you survey the landscape of the delivery of professional development, it appears that there is 0% agreement on what are the most appropriate skills and attitudes, and what are the most effective approaches to instill these skills and attitudes.

In this two-part series, I will share the investigations of *Exchange* on the status of teacher training in the United States. I analyzed existing professional development initiatives from three perspectives:

- What training is mandated by governing bodies?
- What training is preferred by early childhood professionals?
- What training does research indicate is the most effective?

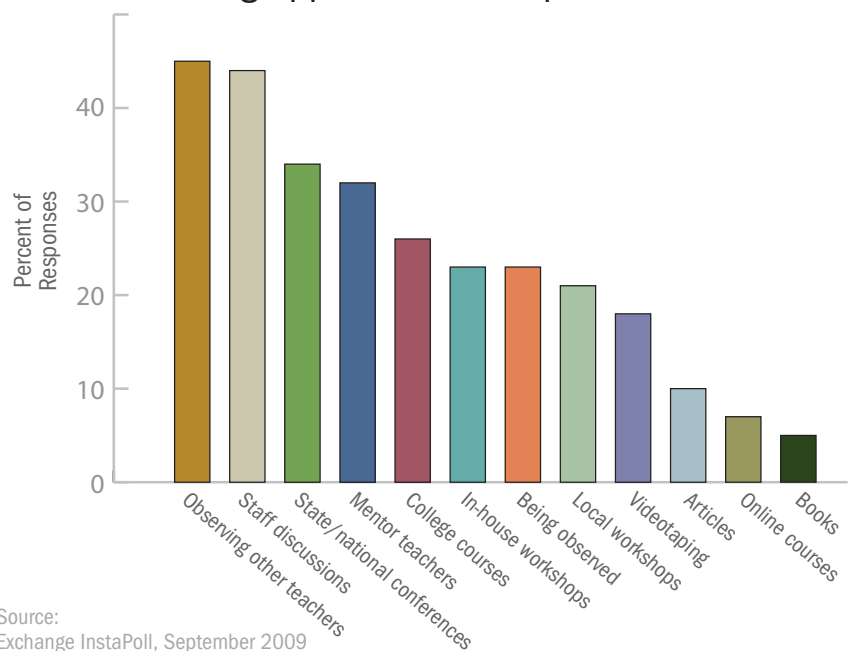
(Note: Throughout this discussion, a key point to keep in mind is “what level of excellence can we expect from teachers paid at or near the minimum wage?” But this is the subject of an entirely different article/book/campaign.)

In this article I will provide an overview of the forms of training and the content of training. In Part 2 (appearing in the September/October 2013 issue) I will give an in-depth analysis of how training is currently provided in the U.S. and the current preferences of early childhood professionals, based on your feedback.

### Forms of Training

A report commissioned by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), “Professional Development in Early Childhood Programs: Process Issues and Research Needs,” identified five forms of training, four of which are in common use in early childhood settings:

Table A  
 Preferred Training Approaches for Experienced Teachers



Source:  
 Exchange InstaPoll, September 2009

- **Formal education** — primarily in two-year colleges, but also available in high schools, four-year colleges, and graduate programs.
- **Credentialing** — state operated programs to provide and document required training for teachers, frequently through Registry initiatives.
- **Specialized on-the-job inservice training** — training overseen by center directors or education specialists on staff, but also secured through conferences or community workshops.
- **Coaching** — primarily in the form of mentorship arrangements, but occasionally in the form of outside experts brought in to provide specific guidance and support to teachers.

In the fall of 2009, *Exchange* polled its readers on what types of training they considered to be most effective for experienced and inexperienced teachers (see Tables A and B). Overall, the forms most preferred fell into the coaching ('mentor teachers,' 'being observed,' and 'observing other teachers') and inservice ('staff discussions,' 'in-house workshops,' 'national and state conferences,' and

'local workshops') categories. Formal education ('college courses') ranked moderately high. Interestingly, 'online courses' were viewed as effective by less than 8% of all respondents. The NIH report, which reviewed a great number of research projects, offered these insights:

- "... a recent, comprehensive review of seven large-scale studies . . . found little relationship between teachers' level of education and overall classroom quality or academic outcomes for children.
- "A recent meta-analysis found that specialized training does in fact improve the competencies of early childhood teachers, including their attitudes, knowledge, and skills. More effective trainings aim to assure opportunities for trainees to practice key skills in the training setting. Behavioral rehearsal (practice and role playing) of new skills and individualized feedback are often recognized as important phases of staff development efforts."

Finally, there is wide variation in what the 50 states (and the District of Columbia) consider to be appropriate training. In some states and with some funding streams, certain levels of formal education are starting to be required for at least lead teachers (whereas in the past, a high school diploma or equivalent was the basic requirement). On an ongoing basis states typically require a set number of hours of training for teachers. But how teachers can meet these required hours varies tremendously. In some states, teachers can qualify using online training — in others online training does not count. In some states, training must be provided by approved trainers, in other states most documented training will qualify.

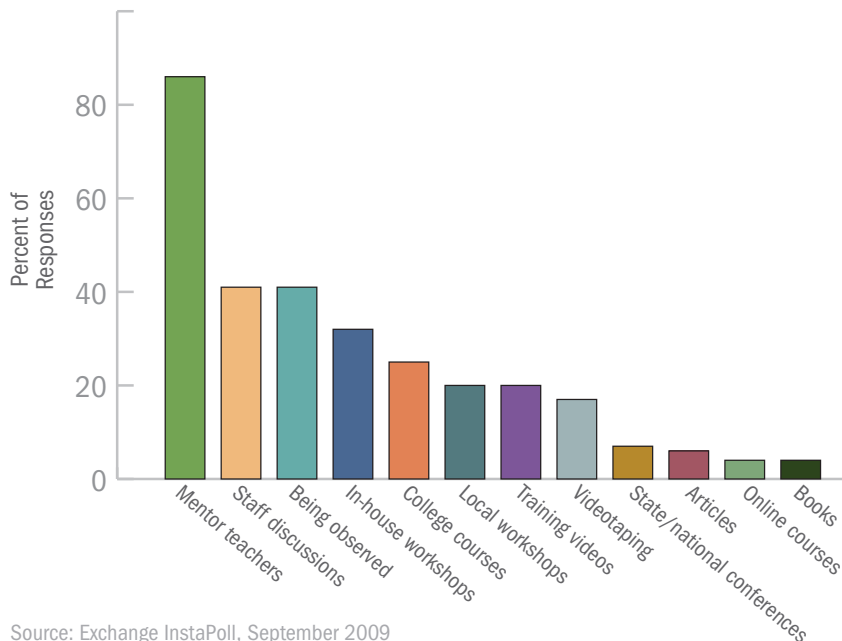
### Content of Training

In the summer of 2010, *Exchange* surveyed its readers about what they considered the "highest priority teacher training topics." Here are the topics that were rated the highest by those surveyed:

- Challenging behavior — 41%
- Assessment of children — 26%
- Scaffolding children's play — 19%
- Children with special needs — 18%
- Professionalism — 18%
- Parents with challenging behavior — 18%
- Teamwork — 18%
- Developmentally appropriate practice — 17%
- Conflict resolution — 17%
- Connecting children with nature — 17%

Table B

### Preferred Training Approaches for Inexperienced Teachers



Source: Exchange InstaPoll, September 2009

These preferences indicate topics that must be considered in order to address the daily challenges of providing high-quality service for children and parents. In other words, these topics flow out of the day-to-day life in a center.

By contrast, in many states the topics that are required for ongoing training relate more typically to what is required to meet the minimum health and safety needs of children — first aid, nutrition, medication administration, playground safety, and sick child routines. (Note: In the 2010 survey of high-priority training topics, nutrition was selected by only 4% of participants, health procedures by 3%, and safety procedures by 2%.) In recent years, the momentum gained in mounting credentialing programs has been pushing state requirements in the direction of the broad spectrum of child development needs. Findings in the area of brain research are causing states to take a closer look at the developmental value of exploration, play, and child-centered learning. At the same time the intense pressure to promote school readiness through early childhood settings is moving the delivery of academic skills to the forefront. These varied, and in some cases conflicting, pressures are resulting in significant and varied trends in the updating of state training requirements.

## Taking a Closer Look

The landscape of teacher training in the United States is undergoing significant changes. Technology is starting to have an impact as video training tools and online training are gaining in popularity. States are taking a closer look at the forms and content of training. And, parents, researchers, funders, and politicians are all weighing in on what should be the goals of early childhood education.

To assess how these changes have impacted the use and regard for different forms of training, *Exchange* will be surveying its readership to update the 2009 polls. We invite you to share your views by going to [www.childcareexchange.com/issue](http://www.childcareexchange.com/issue).

In addition, we will be conducting state by state research on training requirements and pathways.

All these findings will be presented in “Status Report on Teacher Training in the United States — Part 2,” in the September/October 2013 issue of *Exchange*.

