

The Cohort Approach as a Form of Professional Development for Teachers

by Kasondra Brown



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To influence and inspire those who daily touch the lives of children and families is complex work. As a mentor-consultant, I have been invited to lead a group of dynamic teachers who bring a variety of gifts and talents of which I am honored to share as a model of professional development. Being entrusted with their professional development has compelled me to give attention to my own values and intentions. In my current role I am challenged to 'pass the baton' to those who currently dedicate themselves to children and families in child care settings.

The passion to build teachers' capacity has caused me to ask myself, "What legacy do I want to leave this generation of teachers? How can I build relationships and form a kinship among this group of dedicated professionals?" It is this challenge that fuels the work I am committed to.

United Way Bright Beginnings (UWBB), a partnership established in 2002



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between ExxonMobil and United Way of Greater Houston, is an innovative early childhood initiative and quality improvement program in Houston, Texas, that is continuing to change traditional child care. We value the importance of building strong communities starting with our youngest citizens, in early childhood classrooms. Since its inception, UWBB has supported and strengthened the education of children from birth through age five (Rollings, et. al, 2014). Our efforts are centered around the professional development of teachers of young children.

The foundation of our professional development model is the cohort approach. This approach is used throughout the program and involves the deliberate use of inquiry into and reflection upon lived experiences to activate inherent human potentials (Aaen, Clark, & Parker, 2003). Our work with teacher cohort groups is built on the following beliefs:

- Early childhood teachers deserve extended time to reflect and study with focus and intention.
- Teachers need individual support, as well as opportunities for collaboration.
- Participation in a learning community challenges them to take intellectual and emotional risks (Ball, 1996).

- We honor teachers' right to deepen their learning in community with others (Brockington, Brown, McClellan, & Jeter, 2011).
- A diverse group of educators can offer their individual contributions to our shared journey toward quality care and engaging learning opportunities for children.

Classroom teachers who consistently show potential and leadership abilities are recommended by their director to participate in these groups. There are currently three Teacher Cohort groups subdivided by the ages of the children they work with, primarily: Infant, Toddler, and Preschool Cohorts, led by a mentor-consultant who serves as a liaison and facilitator.

So what is a cohort? A popular online encyclopedia defines a cohort as an educational group working together through the same academic curriculum. In our case, that curriculum is the implementing of best practices and quality learning experiences for young children. Our hope is for teachers to desire being a part of a learning community where their opinions matter, where their learning is safely nurtured without judgment, and where they feel empowered by being viewed as a professional. Our professional develop-

ment framework of the cohort structure is based on the understanding that early childhood teachers deserve extended time with their peers for reflection and research (Ball, 1996). Often, teachers are expected to buy-out time from their own lives to create written plans and gather materials needed in their work. The time allotted for these peer gatherings is an important investment that produces dividends too valuable to measure monetarily.

The cohort approach did not come about overnight. The cohort approach with teachers developed from a dissatisfaction with large-group training sessions where the speaker leads from the front of the room, while often losing the active participation from those seated in the rear. The context of the cohort structure is to offer small-group meetings and trainings to a core group of teachers who then serve as facilitators for larger sessions. In their role as facilitators, cohort leaders keep their small groups focused and involved during larger conferences. The cohort structure itself has strong theoretical support, and can be applied in the same method as the concepts of continuity of care and primary caregiving in early childhood settings. The cohort structure lends itself to offer a consistent framework for teachers in building long-term relationships with their mentor consultant, gives attention to the social and emotional benefits of collaboration with their peers, offering personal testimony among an empathetic group of familiar professionals.

One of the goals of the cohort model is to expand teachers' work with children by allowing time dedicated to focused research and planning of learning experiences. An example of such planning includes engaging meetings where cohort teachers visit each other's classrooms. It begins with the collaboration of the team of mentor-consultants to intentionally select a host site and inviting cohort teachers to attend. By accept-

ing this invitation, visiting teachers arrive prepared with cameras, electronic tablets, laptop computers, and with open minds and hearts to contribute to the experience, which lie ahead. Pre-arranged meeting time and space is provided by the director for the host teacher to spend the day meeting with invited teachers. During this time together, the group led by a guest speaker, plans and decides how to offer meaningful learning experiences to the children. This time is designated for teachers to explore materials and experiences they plan to offer the children. It is important for teachers to study and closely notice the details of materials before offering them to children.

Teachers are encouraged to fully immerse themselves in the experience, to breathe deeply, and to slow down long enough to take in the moment. We welcome the unconventional methods of intensive study where teachers take risks and explore with their hands in paint, clay, and soil. Teachers deserve time to play, experiment, and truly laugh-out-loud! The purpose is to build capacity for learning in the teachers prior to expecting them to implement teaching and learning with children in the classroom. Following their morning session, the host teacher invites the group to observe and interact with children in the classroom. In the course of their time with children, teachers observe, take photographs, and make written notes for use in the afternoon session where all participate in creating collaborative documentation they will display upon completion. I enjoy capturing the great sense of accomplishment on the faces of teachers that come to the awareness and acceptance of not being limited to a ready-made curriculum.

Based on evaluation results, UWBB teachers appear very engaged in these small group trainings led by mentor-consultants. These sessions provide

hands-on activities and are focused on what teachers could implement in the classroom. Trainings are specifically tailored for the various developmental stages of the children cared for by the cohort leader. These sessions also provide teachers with opportunities to share practices they currently utilize in their classrooms, as well as to solicit new ideas from other practitioners (Rollins, et. al, 2014).

Benefits to the Child Care Center

Gone are the days of directors reminding teachers to maintain their state-mandated training requirements. An additional goal of the cohort approach is to create a shift in teachers from a climate of resistance to a climate of enthusiasm toward continuing education. Quarterly cohort meetings and site visits secure opportunities for teachers to meet and often exceed yearly training requirements for professional development. These opportunities also create a climate of accountability where teachers make a commitment to being responsible for the quality of their own professional development. When directors are included in the pedagogical development of their staff, there is no uncertainty about whether or not the training chosen by staff is in-line with the center's philosophical values. Directors can have confidence that teachers will receive professional development opportunities designed to deepen their study, where they are not gravitating to trainings that may lack depth out of



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social media as a means to stay connected. Their self-motivated networking has gained momentum and serves as a useful tool for sharing ideas for classroom implementation. They respectfully use this technology as a method of extending their friendships and a way for team building. Teachers are able to offer each other useful advice and suggestions on effective strategies and meaningful experiences they offer to children.

of offering infants a wide variety of items — not necessarily store bought, but open-ended materials that are in the natural environment. The joy that I have received from watching our children grow and accomplish their amazing discoveries is very rewarding.”

Benefits to Self

In addition to heartfelt testimony, many cohort leaders have demonstrated their leadership potential by aspiring to further their education. Many have received CDA certifications or have enrolled and are currently pursuing degrees in Child Development or related fields. By participating in cohort groups, teachers are provided a highly-intensive and purposeful study of theoretical influences in the field of early childhood. In many cohort teachers, these influences have sparked a view of higher education as being an attainable professional goal. It is no surprise that participation in a supportive learning community has empowered teachers to pursue and accept opportunities for growth.

In several cases, the cohort approach has impacted teachers’ personal lives. These groups of kindred companions have often provided support during personal tragedies and triumphs. One such triumph that frequently occurs is when teachers make the shift to a heightened awareness in their own teaching practices and how their dispositions affect other aspects of their lives, especially their own parenting skills and views of families as partners. Teachers were asked to describe the impact that UWBB has had on them. One teacher’s response was, “It has helped me at home; I have three boys as well. UWBB has helped me in teaching and has changed my point of view — not only at work in the center, but at home.” Another teacher stated, “It has [impacted] the way I see children. It’s not just sitting back and watching them, it’s actually getting involved. The children are learning from their own

avoidance of challenging themselves with deeper thinking.

Benefits to Peers

When teachers participate in cohort groups, they are asked to serve as a model to their peers and co-teachers. Co-teachers are affectionately called, ‘sister cohorts.’ Cohort teachers are expected to share skills and strategies with their co-teachers. This forms relationship building and supports the pedagogical process where neither teacher is working in isolation. Many have chosen their weekly planning time as an opportunity to share side-by-side curriculum planning. Others have been invited to lead a portion of their staff meetings to share their expertise with the entire staff team. During large-group training sessions, cohort teachers sit near their sister cohorts and facilitate discussions during the allotted time for planning for future opportunities for future classroom implementation. Adult learners are often more apt to share and actively participate when they are among others they are familiar with. In contrast, having a cohort teacher facilitate group learning also keeps the group focused when they stray off course *because* they are among others they are familiar with during large sessions.

By extension of the learning community, many cohort teachers have made use of

Benefits to Children and Families

By far, one of best benefits to participation in cohort groups is the impact on children and families. By individually and collectively exploring deeply held values and intentions, cohort teachers have improved their teaching and caregiving practices (Rollings, et. al, 2014). Teachers have given a close examination to their image of children and have transformed their style of teaching from a deficit model to one of seeing children as capable and competent. When teachers view children this way, they provide a learning environment of trust in children and a partnership with families to influence their child’s development. The cohort approach has enhanced and improved teachers’ observation skills as a means of designing curricula that is not teacher-led, but a collaboration of teachers, children, and families.

One way of including families is by thoughtful documentation displayed throughout the child care center for families to notice and offer written feedback. Frances Machac, a four-year participant in the Infant Cohort group states, “Since becoming a cohort leader, I have grown professionally; not only helping the infants in my care accomplish their developmental milestones, but also in my way of preparing for my day with them. I have learned the value

experiences and I'm learning from them as well" (Rollings, et. al, 2014).

Benefits to the Community

United Way Bright Beginnings has benefited by investing in the professional development of teachers who have blossomed into educators who represent the trademark of quality we hope for. The key goal of UWBB is to build capacity in child care teachers and directors by providing strong and continuing professional development (Rollings, et. al, 2014). Numerous teachers who participate in the program as cohort leaders have had their work featured in early childhood books and journals. These leaders also have been able to successfully articulate the program values and represent centers that serve as model programs for guests and tours. On several occasions, cohort leaders have been requested to offer testimony of the impact of the cohort approach to national audiences. During the course of the UWBB program, this model has served as a beacon for other programs throughout the city and has incited national studies by other similar quality improvement programs.

As a mentor-consultant, embarking upon this shared journey with such a group of dynamic educators has heightened my awareness of being an influence of change. In response to my original questions, "What legacy do I want to leave this generation of teachers? How can I build relationships and form a kinship among a group of dedicated professionals?" I am honored to be a part of this evolving model of the cohort approach. I have noticed remarkable changes in the teachers I coach and mentor, as well as a change within myself. It has afforded me the opportunity to totally disassemble the image I may have originally held of what it means to be a 'good teacher' to reconstruct my thinking and practices to a more organic view of what compassion-

ate teaching is. What an amazing opportunity to witness the transformation of a profession from the former view of a teacher as a blank canvas to the view of a teacher as a work of art.

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