

Professional Development for Reflective Teaching

An interview with Paula Evans-Fitch and Kim Nave

by Margie Carter



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It has never been more important for teachers of young children to explore ways to examine and improve their own practice. The steady drumbeat from federal, state, and local education officials is to prescribe curriculum, teaching, and evaluation models for early childhood programs. . . . Teachers are often treated as technicians whose competency is measured by how well they match expectations based on narrowly focused criteria. Teacher research is a way for teachers to systematically examine and improve their own practice. It is a way for members of the early childhood education community to reassert their professional autonomy.

— J. Amos Hatch (2012)



Margie Carter is an early childhood consultant and coauthor of numerous ECE books, including *Reflecting in Communities of Practice*, which this article draws on. To learn more about this workbook and the offerings of Harvest Resources

Associates, including study tours to New Zealand, visit www.ecetrainers.com.



Paula Evans-Fitch has been in the early childhood field for nearly 30 years. She is an innovative and knowledgeable practitioner when it comes to curriculum development, environmental design, and provisioning of unique materials for

children's learning. Many of her ideas are featured in *Designs for Living and Learning with Children* by Deb Curtis and Margie Carter as examples of best practice. Paula currently works part-time as a toddler teacher and part-time as the educational leader at The Learning Center in Palo Alto, California.



Kim Nave is currently a Preschool Co-Director/Assistant Head of School at Ventana School in Los Altos, California. She has a BA degree from Pacific Oaks College in Human Development with an emphasis in Early Childhood Education.

Her professional journey includes many years of teaching, mentoring, directing, and consulting in the field of Early Childhood Education. Kim is very passionate about cultivating community, inspiring educators, and placing children at the heart of our educational process.

Teaching young children is complex work. Every day teachers face many challenges — ongoing chores of care-taking and clean-up, planning and providing an engaging curriculum, communicating with families and coworkers, and responding to the ever-growing pressures for outcomes, assessment, and documentation to demonstrate children's learning. These pressures compete for teachers' attention, making it difficult to keep the joy of being with children at the heart of our work. Teachers can turn to the many resources available to learn about guidance techniques or use a published curriculum to help with planning. But to truly share meaningful experiences with children, you must learn to become a reflective teacher.

Reflective teaching doesn't just happen. In fact, in today's climate, professional

development in the early childhood field seems to be dominated by short, fragmented, one-shot workshops on a variety of topics, delivered by experts who offer strategies and techniques outside the context of daily teaching and learning with children. These are often offered by local Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (R&Rs) or a conference sponsored by a state or local affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). In publicly-funded programs such as Head Start or state-funded pre-K programs, specific training is often mandated with regard to assessment tools, and the focus is usually on 'how to do it' rather than 'how to think about it.' But, as Parker (2007) puts it, "Rarely, if ever, do we ask the 'who' question — who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form — or deform — the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world?"

A good part of the work I do with my colleagues at Harvest Resources Associates (HRA) is focused on supporting reflective teaching, and concentrating on "Who is the self that teaches?" We firmly believe that teachers deserve to head into work each day feeling fully absorbed in and enthusiastic about learning — the children's and their own.

We want teacher educators, coaches, mentors, and administrators to look beyond checklists of teacher competencies and to encourage dispositions of curiosity and engagement. At a time when so much energy is focused on educational standardization, compliance, and prescription, we want to stand up for teachers' rights to exercise creative, critical, and reflective teaching in their work. We are eager to find those who will stand with us and invent new ways to spend limited professional development dollars truly supporting teachers' engagement in reflective practices.

In the early childhood work environment, time is precious. Teachers and administrators rarely have time to sit and reflect on their work, alone or with colleagues. When time is set aside for professional development (PD), educators often feel pressure to cover many topics in a short period of time with no real depth of focus. In a professional development approach that promotes reflection, time for thoughtful study and dialogue is moved to the top of the to-do list. Whether setting aside ten minutes of planning time or an hour a week, educators who commit to focused reflection experience immediate and long-term benefits. Rather than focusing only on rules, problems, and complaints, teachers become more excited and engaged in their work, more enthusiastic and thoughtful about the materials and experiences they offer, and more focused on and delighted by the children's learning.

So how does one learn how to facilitate this kind of reflection and what structures can be put in place to support it? Here's an example, with others to be found in *Reflecting in Communities of Practice* (Curtis et al., 2013).

A Dialogue with Paula Evans-Fitch and Kim Nave

After attending one of our HRA "From Administrator to Innovator" Institutes in Canada and participating in a study tour to New Zealand, Paula Evans-Fitch and Kim Nave proposed to the Palo Alto Advisory Committee on Early Care and Education (PAACECE) that their allocation of funds for ECE professional development be devoted to creating Communities of Practice to support teachers in developing reflective practices.

Although it is possible to be a reflective teacher on your own, reflecting with a group of colleagues offers a richer experience of camaraderie, multiple perspectives, deeper learning, and shared enjoyment of your work together. While there are some differences in the practices, the term *communities of practice* (COP) is often used interchangeably with *professional learning communities* (PLC). Etienne Wenger (1998) describes a community of practice as "a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly over time." Early childhood administrators, consultants, and coaches can create support systems to make this possible for teachers. That is exactly what Paula and Kim set out to do.

Margie: As I understand it, your idea behind this bold proposal was not only to support teachers in deepening their reflective practice, but to grow a new tier of ECE leadership in your community. So often people who are seen as leaders have long since left the practice of working with children, usually before reflective teaching was even in our vernacular.

Kim: Yes, rather than using funds to provide a speaker to inspire them, we took the opportunity to empower skilled teachers who we already have working in Palo Alto with hope that their knowl-

edge and leadership would grow and influence other teachers and the schools directly.

Margie: What did this action grow out of and how did you design the project?

Kim: As a follow-up to attending the Administrator to Innovator Institute and a New Zealand study tour you sponsored, we engaged your HRA colleague Deb Curtis as a consultant to grow reflective practice work in our school. I was talking with Deb about some funding that was available for leadership training, but I wasn't sure how we could utilize it in a way that would grow inspiration, self-confidence, and relationships with one another and between schools in our community. Deb shared your workbook, *Reflecting in Communities of Practice* (Curtis et al., 2013), and we found that it fit perfectly with the idea we were forming.

Paula: We pitched the idea to the PAACECE committee in this way, designed as a PD course description:

The committee approved the funding and we were off and running!

Margie: With this description, I can see your intent to promote both reflective teaching practices and the development of leadership skills to support Communities of Practice.

Kim: Yes, exactly. The committee wanted the participants to be committed to this journey so they required interested teachers to complete an application. We also asked for the director/supervisor's commitment and support of participating teachers as well. We circulated a flyer for recruitment, along with a *Teaching Young Children* NAEYC journal article (Carter et al., 2010) describing what reflective practices look like. We stressed that participation should be a choice, not a requirement, and recommended that at least two people from a

center should apply so that they can support each other in bringing their learning and leadership back to their programs and the wider ECE community.

Margie: So wise. I think offering clear explanations and expectations generates more possibilities for meeting your goals. Apart from the outcomes expected from the study sessions with the workbook, were there any outcomes that surprised or especially pleased you?

Kim: We discovered that by hosting our COP meetings at the various schools of participants, we opened the door to partnering with each other and sharing the successes and inspirations in our programs. We grew the idea that the work we do can be shared between schools. This thinking made a shift in the way our directors and teachers view fellow schools, which encouraged our schools to be

less competitive and more collaborative. It promoted the idea that the city of Palo Alto values educators and children and wants us to be unified in the quality we

provide for young children and their families.

Paula: In preparing the agenda for each session in the workbook, we practiced

reflecting on things such as our values, what makes an aesthetically beautiful environment, the kinds of learning materials that engage children, and practices that support deeper thinking in children and teachers. What was most profound for us as facilitators is that leadership and inspiration not only came from us, but everyone in the group. Participants shared that during this six-month journey, they were reinvigorated and this practice brought more meaning to their work. Many of their directors thanked us and shared the visible changes they had witnessed as a result of the COP work. Maria Abilock, one of the participants said, "Thank you for

Courtesy of Paula Evans-Fitch and Downtown Children's Center



Leadership development in a Community of Practice is a 6-month training session geared for skilled educators in the Palo Alto community to develop practices in their schools that will support reflective early childhood teaching. It will allow educators time to build a community of support and collaboration with other Early Childhood professionals in Palo Alto.

The facilitators, Paula Evans-Fitch and Kim Nave, will lead the group through a series of 10 study sessions outlined in a workbook called *Reflecting in Communities of Practice* (each participant will receive a copy, along with a stipend and meal during our meeting times). The role of the facilitators is to:

- keep the group process moving forward.
- offer clarification on issues or confusion.
- offer individual attention to members.
- summarize ideas generated at different junctures.
- facilitate group dynamics.
- point out breakthroughs in understanding.

Following the workbook, each Community of Practice (COP) session will have an agenda and include a reflection, investigation, activity, and proposed field study for the members to bring to the next session.

In addition to the sessions, the facilitators will go out to schools as consultants and work with the schools on environments, learning stories, documentation, or staff training. Each program will get two hours of consultation and COP members will decide how they would like that time to be focused.

The kind of talking
needed to educate
ourselves cannot arise
spontaneously and
unaided just from
talking. It needs to be
carefully planned and
scaffolded.

(McDonald et al., 2003)

starting me on this journey. I have more places to travel, but now I have a map!”

Facilitating COPs for Leadership Development

Kim: This was the first experience Paula and I had leading a group like this, let alone any type of consulting work. Although I was driven to make this happen, I found myself apprehensive about taking on the responsibilities of a facilitator. I learned quickly, with the help of the workbook, that the role of a facilitator is not to be the expert. Many times leaders propose their own experience as a model for the work presented, but in reflective teaching, our goal is to help others think about what they do and come to their own conclusions. Our emphasis was on reflecting back a description rather than making a judgment or proposing a solution to the ideas/observations/concerns the teachers provided. This methodology took us to a deeper level of understanding of our work and those we work with. We found that we were co-learners with the participants and over time found ourselves developing our own leadership styles. I think we ended the first year of this project with great outcomes. We all became deeper thinkers, developed higher levels of

commitment to this profession, and found support for our educators beyond our own schools.

Paula: I knew stepping into the role of facilitator for the COP would be an incomparable opportunity to grow and learn, myself, in the pedagogy of reflective teaching. As a leader, my approach was to create a trusting environment for teachers to think and learn together, to encourage collaboration while promoting openness to others’ experiences and perspectives, and to think more deeply about the ‘why’ of our work with children, families, and colleagues. Through this leadership approach, teachers gained a deeper awareness of their own values and philosophy and the skills needed to bring reflective teaching to their programs.

Margie: What you’re describing sounds very related to what Hatch described in the opening quote of this article: “asserting the importance of helping teachers examine and improve their own practice as a way to claim professional autonomy. Your COP work is such a counterpoint to most current approaches to quality improvement, which often mandates curriculum and assessment tools to use and robs teachers of their sense of professionalism and agency, not to mention engagement and excitement about their work with children.

Paula: Our COP work brought together beautifully a diverse gathering of educators through infant/toddler, preschool, and school-aged programs, including play-based, parent cooperative, faith based, Montessori, and nursery schools. Together we explored how to research our work with children and families, our environments and materials, and the joys and challenges of our work, all with differing perspectives and viewpoints. For me, the important aspects are the ways reflective teaching strengthens our image of the child, helps us identify our values, informs/transforms our teaching

practice through observation and reflection, and creates a shared language that can bridge philosophies.

Spending PD Dollars Wisely

Margie: When I looked at your budget, I was amazed at what you were able to offer: stipends for participants, books, program consultation, and even food, for less than \$400/person, plus a \$500 stipend that goes directly to the educator. I could imagine R&Rs undertaking this as a significant part of what they offer to ECE communities. Has the obvious success of this approach to professional and leadership development helped secure its ongoing support and funding?

Paula: We were able to offer another six-month program of communities of practice in 2014-2015 and are hopeful we can start a third for 2015-2016. Even without the same level of funding, we will figure out how to be more creative with our budgeting so we can continue building a community of support and collaboration within the Palo Alto Early Childhood Profession through Communities of Practice.

Margie: You know, it occurs to me that if programs pooled their annual budget for PD and contributed it to a project like this, they would not only get outstanding professional develop-

A learning community is not just a place. According to Paula Jorde Bloom (2003) it is also:

a state of mind.

a philosophy of teamwork.

an opportunity for multiple points of view.

a way to yield greater dividends than sharing facts or information.

ment for their teachers, but it would come with the books and a stipend for attending. Quite cost efficient, not to mention rewarding, for participants and programs alike. Our profession talks a lot about reflective practice and the need for leadership development and you've demonstrated a concrete way to move that endeavor forward.

Paula: Reading the feedback we got showed us how valuable and essential this COP work is. Participants identified new skills gained while working in their COP, for instance, "I've gained the ability to think about what I am doing and question it, asking myself questions like, 'Why? Is it my belief, value, comfort level? Is this something that I have been told to follow or have I taken this on as my own?' When we asked, 'What have you learned about yourself through this program?,' we were heartened to hear statements like the following:

“Thank you
for starting me on
this journey.
I have more places to
travel, but now
I have a map!”
Maria Abilock

■ “I have learned that I AM a reflective teacher, capable of leading my colleagues in the reflective direction that we need to go.”

■ “I have a tendency to doubt myself and view myself as inadequate when presented with new ways of doing things and (therefore) feel some resistance and also fear to try them. I have to remind myself I can change in small steps, and that there are many things I do well.”

■ “I learned that I am not a risk-taker teacher. I tend to be an enforcer of rules. However, I am working to modify this image.”

■ “I can be a more thoughtful teacher, which brings more depth to my work and meaning for the children.”

■ “I have learned that I have a very challenging but important role in making a difference in the lives of every child under my care and their parents.”

Margie: These statements certainly bring me back to Parker Palmer (2007) reminding us that we need to pay attention to and nurture “the self that teaches.” He talks about how good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher, and I think your project really supports that idea.

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Our Experience of Working in Communities of Practice

by Melissa Momand, Director, Downtown Children's Center (DCC)

Since embarking on the journey of reflective practice, both my professional and personal lives have changed. I reflect constantly on conversations and interactions and am more mindful about what I say to children, staff, and families. I have learned to ask myself more questions ("Why?" is one of my favorites!). My program has come a long way in terms of team communication. We have learned how to be reflective in our thinking and teaching, as well as how to have difficult conversations and move forward professionally. Over the past few years, teachers in my program have learned how to ask more questions of themselves and to truly reflect on their own vision and philosophy and bring it to life in our program.

Gaining ideas from various books on reflective practice, as well as the hands-on experience of being part of a Community of Practice, we have done different activities to dig deeper into our philosophies. One of the activities we have done (and continue to do about twice a year) from the *Reflecting in Communities of Practice* workbook is examining the values and concepts influencing our program by filling out the chart on what we believe 'Children Deserve, Families Deserve, Staff Deserve.' This has helped us to truly think about what each of these groups of people deserve in our program. By writing it down and discussing it, we become committed to making those statements true. One of the wonderful things we have discovered is that the changes don't happen overnight, but gradually and in a very natural way. By incorporating reflective practice into our daily routine, we have become a more cohesive team and I am excited to see where reflective practice takes us next!

