

A Call for Transforming Professional Learning

by Debra Lebo and Ijumaa Jordan

Recent years have seen a huge growth in attention to and funding of early childhood teachers' professional development. In the midst of these reform efforts, we find it shocking to see how little attention is being given to teachers' actual *learning* processes. In our work, we see that most professional development offerings are fragmented two- or three-hour workshops delivered with teachers as passive recipients of others' knowledge. Content includes tricks and tips to help educators fill out assessment tools, one-sided sharing of information needed to fulfill new standards, or crafty make-and-takes. There is very little time and funding dedicated to supporting teachers' intellectual and emotional lives. There is no consistent, regularly scheduled time for teachers to reflect, think, and analyze their practice. In the rare instances when coaching is offered

to teachers, the focus is often remedial: technical assistance for quick-fixing teachers' unsatisfactory practice, rather than any investment in the ongoing process of teacher reflection and transformation.

Professional development is often focused on children's compliance or teachers' *own* compliance with new standards and regulations. A low image of children, teaching, and teachers is at the root of this learning model. Reforms that work from this low image of teachers are even more damaging considering the high percentages of early childhood professionals who are women of color living on poverty-level wages (Kashen, Potter, & Stettner, 2016). Perpetuating these patterns of systemic oppression is not likely to improve teaching practice in our field. This kind of reductionist education focuses on fixing deficits in participants' teaching practice, or dispensing a prewritten list of tips for managing problems with children, families, or colleagues. Our associate Kelly Matthews describes many professional conferences as a "supermarket dash" approach to learning: teachers find themselves running around the store of the conference, filling their carts as quickly as they can, with little thought to what they really need or even want. Another colleague, Wendy Cividanes, sees much early childhood professional development as "drive-through

learning," like a drive-through window at a fast food joint: quick and easy, but rarely nourishing. Whatever you call it, this model of professional development persists in the face of abundant research that it doesn't lead to lasting positive change in teaching practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Jensen et al., 2016).

In this article we offer provocation for transforming teachers' professional learning from current approaches. Whether you're an early childhood teacher, administrator, consultant, teacher educator, or have another role in the field, you hold some power to use your leadership to transform professional learning in your context. Throughout the article, you'll have some opportunities to pause and reflect using the Thinking Lens® protocol (Curtis et al., 2013).

Clarifying Your Values Around Professional Learning

The first and most important step toward changing how professional learning is offered is to be clear on the learning processes and outcomes you value most. If your vision is limited to meeting basic licensing regulations or Quality Rating and Improvement System standards in your program, you are not likely to strive for much more than compliance. But if your vision of quality teaching and learning also includes enthusiasm, curiosity, high engagement with children,



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deep reflection, innovation, and initiative, you should be reaching for more than an outdated approach to professional learning.

We are dismayed by current educational trends that view teachers as compliant technicians, passive consumers of scripted lessons, teacher-proof curriculums, and one-size-fits-all methods and materials. We want to counter this trend with a core value that believes teaching is highly-skilled work involving constant in-the-action reflection and decision making. We believe that unless and until early childhood teachers are respected in their role as powerful change agents, it is unreasonable to expect much change in the quality of their teaching practice.

Transformational professional learning is driven by a strong, positive image of teachers as capable and eager to learn, and makes meaning not only of standards, but their role in the complexities of the teaching and learning process. Teachers:

- deserve to be intellectually and emotionally engaged in their work, to study things that interest them, to engage in conversations on issues that are important to them, and to be recognized for their existing experience, knowledge, and skills.
- have a right to professional learning that stems from their assessment of their *own* teaching practice.
- thrive in learning settings where they share stories about their experiences with children, ones that engage their curiosity, passion and joy, and experiences that lead them to confront, explore, and revisit ideas that challenge them. Using a disciplined protocol for this sharing, with someone assuming the role of facilitator, keeps the learning focused, relevant, and inclusive of diverse perspectives.

This atmosphere for collaborative learning is likely to develop in a community of practice model. Our vision of a community of practice is built on the idea of a small group of people who share a passion for what they do and meet regularly in order to deepen their professional knowledge and skill (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Contrast this with the professional development model where an outsider delivers a scripted workshop of pre-developed content for teachers to passively absorb and regurgitate for a certificate. Sadly, the latter approach is what we see being used to roll out nearly all of the new curriculum mandates that have been introduced in our field in recent years. While we appreciate the importance of teachers learning the ins-and-outs of these new standards and practices, our point is that teachers deserve professional learning models that help them to *make meaning* of this information, help them integrate new requirements into their current beliefs and practices, hold them accountable to their own learning goals, and support them as leaders in change processes.

Identifying the core values that you hold around professional learning is a key step in transforming how you offer professional development. Examine your mission statement, philosophy statement, or other program documents to clarify core values. As you consider the core values you want to guide your work, you might ask yourself some questions like these:

Know Yourself:

- What does high quality professional learning look like to you?
- What makes professional learning meaningful and lasting?
- How do you see teachers as learners?

- What do you believe teachers deserve in their professional development?

Assessing Your Current Practices to Align with Core Values

Effective early childhood professional development stems from an understanding of the complexity of teaching and learning with young children. Reflective early childhood teachers continuously observe, document, and study children's unfolding learning, their own actions and responses, and the role of the physical and social environment in the learning process. If this kind of responsive, reflective teaching is the goal, professional learning opportunities must be designed to support it. This means giving teachers ample time and resources to make connections between theory and practice, to share their observations and experiences, and to talk through their own thinking and responses. In addition to meeting in a community of practice, we believe teachers need to have daily opportunities, embedded in and out of their time with children, to reflect on their understanding of children's play and learning.

Do teachers in your program have opportunities to work alongside a trusted mentor, to share and discuss their own observations, to reflect together on others' documentation, to work with materials, or engage in structured analysis of photos, field studies, or readings? And if they do have these opportunities, are they sparked by provocations that bring teachers excitement and joy, challenge their thinking, and stir their curiosity and interest?

Sharing personal beliefs and practices in this way is not common in our field. It:

- requires a meeting of the heart and the mind, a forum to reconnect with the *wonder-full*, sometimes puzzling perspective of children.

- calls for vulnerability and courage on the part of teachers, and a supportive setting where they can voice what they know and what they don't yet know.
- requires enough time to explore the beliefs that underlie actions, look for details, and explore different perspectives.
- requires focus, including the use of a disciplined protocol, especially when time is limited. A protocol can help guide reflection by helping you clarify your thinking, keep you from straying off-topic, and consider perspectives that you might otherwise overlook.

Practice by re-reading the previous paragraph and reflecting:

Know Yourself:

What idea above particularly touches your heart or mind, and what value does that idea tap into?

Taking Action to Create Change (or to Transform Practice)

In our experience, early childhood leaders who truly value something find ways to bring their aspirations to life. For instance, we've met early childhood leaders who have taken actions such as:

- pooled their limited professional development dollars with another center to launch community of practice projects.
- tapped into human resource funds as to set up learning communities.
- diverted money that was set aside for travel to large conferences to set up study groups in their own programs.
- convinced community conference planners to spend their money on a project to launch local learning groups.

In all of these cases, leaders have expanded their vision of quality and professional learning far beyond a focus on standards and mandates. Not surprisingly, they usually find they've managed to meet and then exceed required standards on their way to something greater. If you find yourself ready to make a commitment to action, but are unsure of where to start, you might consider hiring (or encouraging your administrator to hire) a skilled consultant with experience in helping early childhood programs clarify their vision and establish learning communities. Invest your money wisely in professional learning projects that support your program's larger purpose and develop leadership capacity so that teachers gradually take on more ownership and responsibility for their own learning.

Imagine...

- the possibilities for transforming professional learning in your program by establishing communities of practice.
- teachers' learning tied directly to their daily work with children.
- teachers working side-by-side with a trusted mentor, sharing documentation or results of field experiences or analyzing videotapes of children's learning with colleagues.

The aim of professional learning would not be to impart content or to get teachers to think and teach in a particular way; instead, the aim would be to help teachers reflect on and articulate their own practices and beliefs, to help them focus on the details of children's competence and learning, and to bring their practice in line with their own and their program's values. When teachers are respected in this way, we have found they rise to our highest expectations both as teachers and as learners.

Practice by reflecting in the following way:

Consider Opportunities and Possibilities

After reading this article, what could professional learning look like in your setting? What is the first step you could take to bringing that idea to life?

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