Drive-through training

by Margie Carter

During a recent conversation, Harvest Resources associate Wendy Cividanes coined the term "drive-through training." We were exploring the best way to spend the precious professional development dollars available to programs. I recalled my early days as a director when I invented 'training in the stalls,' a weekly posting of quick tips for my teachers as they used the restroom in our center.

I look back on those days with mild embarrassment. My intentions were good, but my professional development system and pedagogy fell short. I struggled with how to help my teachers improve their interactions with children, how to plan more meaningful curriculum activities, and how to find more resources that would help me help them. Finding the work of Lilian Katz and later, Elizabeth Jones, was like winning the lottery, filling me with excitement, and ultimately keeping me in the early childhood field with a career as a teacher educator. Several decades later the work of an early childhood director has become decidedly more complex. As Wendy and I talked we acknowledged there are evermore professional resources these days, but they are accompanied by increased requirements and mandated outcomes. If only directors had more financial resources and more time, perhaps they could translate these expanded expectations into a meaningful in-service professional development program for their teachers. "No wonder they opt for drive-through training," Wendy exclaimed. "I still resort to fast food on those days I'm headed home with my kids after a particularly stressful week."

Wendy's great sense of humor is equal to her great insights. As we explored her metaphor, we could easily see how our field's approach to staff training reflects our drive-through, fast-food culture. Year after year directors send their teachers to workshops to get some quick refresher techniques. Wendy remarked:

"With conferences or R&R offerings, you order what you know from a fixed menu. You are rarely offered any significant new selection. There's a safety and a comfort in this familiarity. It's easy and requires little effort on anyone's part, which is a relief, because directors and teachers have so much to juggle. The dollar menu is especially enticing. Even if you're not excited by what's on it, the price is right. You rarely stop to think about how satisfying or nutritional your fast food meal is. You're just grateful you got that requirement taken care of, and now you can move on to other things."

A couple of years ago Kay Albrecht and Bev Engel (July 2007) wrote a compelling article suggesting our profession needs to move away from a quick-fix mentality. It's a challenge because we live in such a fast-paced world with a message of "convenient, quick, and leave it to the experts" marketed to us at every turn. In Wendy's metaphor of drive-through training, I'm reminded that a home-cooked meal requires an investment of time and thought that feels out of reach for many of us. But deep down we know there's sustenance available to us when we take the time to consider what we'd really like to have, and the pleasure of sharing it with others. No doubt this is the appeal of the 'slow foods movement' with its call to bring us closer to our sources of real food and meaningful relationships.

I think directors and teachers, too, are beginning to sense a longing for something more satisfying and nutritious as they seek out professional development offerings. This brings me back to Lilian

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Katz and Elizabeth Jones, never ones to promote quick fixes, always calling us to the deeper meaning and more significant outcomes when we dive into the complexities of our work with children.

Complex work requires reflective teaching

We can't grow effective teachers on a diet of drive-through training. The work of feeding the hearts and minds of young children is multifaceted, requiring constant negotiation of the intricate intersections between theory and practice. This is why my 'training in the stalls' approach of the past looks so shortsighted to me now. These days I talk more about reflective teaching than teaching techniques.

What will guide teachers as they navigate the minute-by-minute decisions they must make each day? I harken back to reading John Dewey (1916) when I was a young student of the 1960s preparing to be a teacher. Dewey captivated me with the notion that effective teaching involves paying more attention to how children learn than to what you want to teach them. I think this is part of what Lilian Katz (1998) highlights when she describes early childhood programs in Reggio Emilia compared to ones in the U.S. Today I've come to believe that if we focus our professional development efforts more on the learning and less on the teaching process, we'll get more useful reflections (along with mental nutrition and emotional sustenance) on the part of our teachers.

Strategy: Build a culture of kid-watching

Rather than focusing your professional development on topics, focus on observing children. This involves more than observation workshops, though those can be helpful. Create an organizational culture that asks questions about the interesting things children are doing and saying, what these might mean, what engages our minds as adults. When you provoke curiosity, you grow reflection. Teaching-focused teachers work with predetermined learning outcomes and a set of lessons aimed at addressing those. Their teacher training often emphasizes this and typically doesn't call for closely observing children, noticing their relationships and connections, listening to their questions and emerging theories, or analyzing the patterns and themes in their play pursuits.

Reflective teachers view their role and approach their work differently. They are focused less on teaching and more on the learning process children (and themselves as teachers) are engaged in. I've always loved the way Elizabeth Jones and Gretchen Reynolds (1992) describe the roles teachers can play with children to support their growth into master players. When teachers see themselves as stage managers rather than directors, mediators rather than regulators, they continually reflect on what they are seeing and what the children might need in the way of scaffolding to deepen learning.

Reflective teaching requires time and discipline

To become more reflective, teachers need more than periodic meetings or trainings. They need time and a methodology to continually examine the teaching and learning process so that they can make decisions based on thoughtful considerations. While it's essential for directors to provide daily coverage for 'teacher prep time,' reflective teaching requires the bigger challenge of steadily carving out the financial and human resources necessary for teachers to meet with each other on an ongoing basis for dialogue about the children's pursuits.

When teachers talk with each other about what they see the children doing with each other, the environment and materials, they get new ideas about what else to offer. Without time to meet and think together, teachers miss the value of hearing different perspectives and expanding their own learning. Likewise, without a methodology or protocol to guide their discussions, teachers often miss the depth of insight that comes from thinking through questions together.

Strategy: Create protocols for dialogue

With the limited time ECE program staff have to meet and discuss children's pursuits, I've become a strong advocate for teachers using a protocol to focus themselves in disciplined discussions about their work. Joseph McDonald and his colleagues (2003) have written a persuasive little book describing the power of protocols for teachers. A web search generates many examples of teacher protocols and your program can invent your own, identifying key questions and a simple process to use in analyzing what is unfolding in the dynamics of teaching and learning with young children. I've come to believe this leads to what Sonja Shoptaugh (2004) names as professional development that takes place day after day in the classroom.

Strategy: Develop a budget for communities of practice

Rather than focusing on drive-through trainings, I suggest early childhood administrators concentrate on involving their teachers in 'communities of practice,' also referred to as professional learning communities. Many professions have undertaken this idea of bringing folks together in specialty groups, and the idea has been catching on in the education field. I've read some notable research about using communities of practice as a professional development approach with science teachers, where the focus is on studying the thinking process of children as they learn scientific concepts. This seems akin to Dewey's notion of focusing on the learning more than the teaching.

My experience of engaging early childhood educators in communities of practice who study documentation of children's conversations and activities has convinced me that this is one of the most powerful professional development approaches we can offer. Teachers can form communities of practice across centers and schools, or among themselves as a program staff. Judy Helm (2007) shares her thoughts about this in a past issue of *Young Children*, and I'm eager to hear more discussion of this in our field.

In my experience, the key to making communities of practice an effective approach for professional development is providing the time and a protocol for the study process, whether it be monthly or weekly. And teachers need someone to serve in the role of a pedagogical leader, facilitating the study process until it becomes second nature, like learning to sanitize tables, change diapers, and conduct a fire drill. When early childhood directors do the gradual, painstaking work of making this a budgetary priority and develop the pedagogical leadership to guide the process, professional development will become embedded in daily practice and drive-through training will become a thing of the past.

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