

Ideas for training staff

Mix and Match: Books, Videos, and Active Learning Strategies for Staff Development

by Margie Carter



STRATEGY Training with multiple intelligence in mind

We tend to appreciate the pace and complexities of the learning process when it comes to children, but our needs for competent caregivers and teachers often has us approaching staff training with less patience. We order and distribute books, videos, and training modules hoping the content will somehow make its way into the minds of those who need it. Time in staff meetings is spent reviewing policies and regulations, and teachers are periodically visited by supervisors bearing checklists and rating scales. This is often what we call our *staff training program*.

I've done my fair share of these activities as a director and a staff trainer. Early on I tried this because I didn't know what else to do; and even when I gained a better understanding of adult learning, I fell into this approach when I got strapped for time or too stressed out to invent something more suitable.

Studying and trying to apply the ideas of adult educators such as Paulo Freire, Elizabeth Jones, Eleanor Duckworth, bell hooks, and Jacqueline Brooks has led me to better results in my staff training. Because I continue to develop books, videos, and checklists as training tools, it's obvious that I

think they are valuable. However, I still worry about their use in in-service training, knowing how easily these materials lend themselves to what Freire calls "the banking method" of education — an effort to make deposits of knowledge in people's heads with the goal of making quick withdrawals. If you find yourself muttering, "How many times do I have to remind her?," you may have strayed into the group of directors trying to be *bankers*.

In contrast to the banking method of education, we have some good research data on the components of effective staff training published by the High/Scope Foundation. Key elements include providing a focus over time, actively involving training participants, providing time for reflection, giving hands-on practice, and following up with observation, feedback, and opportunities for peer exchanges.

With these elements in mind, how can we use books, videos, and checklists in ways that help child care staff deepen their understandings and improve their practice? Here are some strategies to mix and match as you develop an in-service training plan with a focus over time.

The book *Frames of Mind: Multiple Intelligences* by Howard Gardner (Basic Books, 1983) first brought us the term *multiple intelligence*, now frequently shortened to *MI*. There are increasing numbers of books about teaching and learning with the multiple intelligence theory, many of which can be adapted for in-service training in early childhood education.

In general, I think keeping the concepts of MI in mind will enhance our teacher development efforts. Gardner outlines seven kinds of intelligence: spatial, logical-mathematical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, kinesthetic, and verbal-linguistic. Finding or creating an MI self-assessment checklist for staff to complete alerts them to these different learning modes for children, themselves, and their co-workers. You can simultaneously focus on an early childhood topic and explore the concept of multiple intelligence by having teachers share their understandings using the different modes of MI.

Several examples come to mind. Try investigating the concepts in the book *The Good Preschool Teacher* by Bill Ayers (Teachers College Press, 1989) by setting up MI learning stations where staff share what they understand. For spatial intelligence, ask them to draw or paint a representation of the qualities of a good teacher. For logical-mathematical intelligence, give them the task of creating a step-by-step diagram or description of the qualities of a good teacher. Interpersonal intelligence can be explored by working with a partner or small group to brainstorm a list of the qualities of a good teacher. Ask those with strength in intrapersonal intelligence to work alone to reflect on a good teacher they have had, considering the qualities that made this teacher so effective. Kinesthetic intelligence might involve building a 3-D model that represents the qualities of a good teacher, while those with musical intelligence can create a rap about these qualities, and your verbal-linguistic staff writes a short story about a good teacher and reads it aloud to someone.

Whatever your training focus, you can adapt this activity and use it over time to deepen understandings. Other good combinations include learning stations to explore toddler social-emotional, sensory, or motor needs in conjunction with resources such as the video *Time with Toddlers* produced by Margie Carter (Kidspace, 1991), the *Caring for Infants and Toddlers* series by Diane Trister Dodge, Amy Laura Dombro, and Derry Gosselin Koralek (Teaching Strategies, 1991), or the infant and toddler videos and training modules from Far West Laboratory. Good books to use on this topic include *Multi-Cultural Issues in Child Care* by Janet Gonzalez-Mena (Mayfield Publishing, 1997), *Trusting Toddlers* by Anne

Stonehouse (Toys 'n Things, 1990), and children's books such as *The Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown (Harper, 1942) and *Mama Do You Love Me?* by Barbara Jooose (Chronicle Books, 1991).

As you move between these resources, don't be concerned about repetition or duplication. As long as you keep things lively and meaningful, you will provide a variety of opportunities for staff to construct their understandings in the way that works best for their learning process. Sometimes do the learning stations first, followed by a section from one of the recommended videos. On other occasions, summarize part of a reading as it relates to the video or something uncovered at one of the MI stations. Space permitting, you could even leave the learning stations set up long term in your staff room with ongoing opportunities for self-directed learning.

STRATEGY **Deepen cultural sensitivity**

In the introduction to her book *Multi-Cultural Issues in Child Care*, Janet Gonzalez-Mena reminds us that cultural sensitivity has as much to do with our interactions as it does with what we put on the walls and plan in our curriculum. This emphasis is also stressed in the video *Essential Connections: Ten Keys to Culturally Sensitive Child Care* (California Department of Education/Far West Laboratory, 1993), and these two resources are a good match to use in different ways over an extended period of time.

Both the book and the video have scenes of teachers uncovering different cultural frameworks which guide their thinking and actions. This is an important exploration

process for your staff members as well. As you use extracts of the book or prepare staff to see the video, spend time asking them to share how things were done in their family with regard to things discussed such as health care practices, meal preparation, sleeping arrangements, and approaches to discipline.

You can conduct this activity in a way that connects teachers to another valuable resource, *Alerta: A Multicultural, Bilingual Approach to Teaching Young Children* by Leslie Williams and Yvonne DeGaetano (Addison-Wesley, 1985). Information from the stories teachers share can be listed in short phrases under one of three columns on chart paper, according to Alerta's concepts of the *what*, *how*, and *why* of culture.

Most of what people say tends to fall into either the *what* or *how* column. For instance, treating a cough would be put under the *what* column, while rubbing ointment on the chest or coining the back would be listed under the *how* column. Raising questions about the *why* of these practices is where less obvious information and insight are uncovered. This usually results in new understandings and respect, if not agreement on how things are done in different cultures. You can then return to the Far West infant and toddler training modules and Gonzalez-Mena's book, each of which offer strategies for negotiating cultural conflicts when they occur.

STRATEGY **Explore the elements of childhood as a source for planning**

Good children's books provide great insights into child development themes and things to consider in planning our environments and curriculum. Along with the following

activities, you can use children's books to reinforce the ideas in the two companion videos, *Children at the Center: Reflective Teachers at Work* and *Setting Sail: An Emergent Curriculum Project* produced by Margie Carter (Harvest Resources, 1997). For best results, show the videos a number of times using different training strategies to introduce and follow up the viewing.

Several children's books highlight the central ideas of these videos: *Roxaboxen* by Alice McLerran (Puffin Books, 1991), *Miss Tizzy* by Libba Moore Gray (Simon and Schuster, 1993), and *Leaving Morning* and *Tell Me a Story, Mama* by Angela Johnson (Orchard Books, 1992, 1989).

Following a reading of any of these books, ask teachers to identify the elements of the story that would improve our child care programs. Have staff members think back to their own childhoods for examples of similar elements. Almost always, the elements teachers identify parallel the sections of these videos. These include learning environments and curriculum themes that provide for active bodies, adventure, safe risk taking, and feeling powerful; the way time is organized and relationships are developed to foster self-esteem and a love of learning; and the components of seeing children as individuals and members of families and cultures.

These videos and recommended children's books can stimulate interest in reading additional teacher education books about emergent curriculum, the project approach, and the Italian schools of Reggio Emilia. The *Children at the Center* video was specifically designed to complement *Reflecting Children's Lives: A Handbook for Planning Child Centered Curriculum* by Deb Curtis and Margie Carter

(Redleaf Press, 1997), but you can easily interweave excerpts from any of the following books with these videos: *The Play's the Thing: Teachers' Roles in Children's Play* by Elizabeth Jones and Gretchen Reynolds (Teachers College Press, 1992); *Engaging Children's Minds: The Project Approach* by Sylvia Chard and Lilian Katz (Ablex Publishing, 1993); *Emergent Curriculum* by Elizabeth Jones and John Nimmo (NAEYC, 1994); *Bringing Reggio Home: An Innovative Approach to Early Childhood Education* by Louise Boyd Cadwell (Teachers College Press, 1997); *Windows on Learning: Documenting Young Children's Work* by Judy Harris Helm, Sallee Beneke, and Kathy Steinheimer (Teachers College Press, 1997); and *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* edited by Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini, and George Forman (Ablex Publishing, 1993).

For caregivers and teachers to become thoughtful and skilled in their work with children, they need numerous opportunities to explore and reflect on a defined body of ideas and their own experience of childhood as well as caring for children. This requires something other than a smorgasbord approach to in-service training. When we take the time to connect valuable resources to each other and to our staff, understandings deepen and expand. The children develop a love of learning and positive sense of themselves and so do the adults.

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