



Defining Our Approach To Staff Development

by Margie Carter

Recently, the community college where I teach sent those of us who do off-campus *field instruction* a questionnaire regarding our areas of expertise and our approach to on-site training. I chose to ignore my knee-jerk irritation with more paperwork and welcomed the opportunity to revisit my thoughts on the subject in light of my current practice at child care centers. Because I think and write about staff development continually, describing my ideas wasn't difficult. However, as I re-read and considered the sentences which quickly poured out, I discovered a different emphasis and language from what I probably would have said a few years ago. I think this is a result of examining *what I think* in light of *what I actually do*.

If you keep at it, teaching adults reveals a developmental process, just as it does for those who directly teach children. The combination of ongoing reading, dialogue, trial and error, skill development, and continual self-reflection keeps us learning and growing. In between the bouts with headlice and search for substitute teachers, there are always old and new ideas to visit, mentors and models to re-examine, and adjustments to make in one's approach. I'm reminded of what Brazilian edu-

cator Paulo Freire called "praxis" — the practice of reflection on theory and action.

Identifying Influences on Our Thinking

Freire has been a major influence on my thinking about adult education, though I first encountered his work in a study group on issues of social and economic justice. Then came Joanna Macy, Betty Jones, bell hooks, Lilian Katz, Eleanor Duckworth, and Lisa Delpit whom I also read and re-read as I began devoting myself to teacher education and the development of an empowered child care work force. In recent years, I've been learning from the work of Peggy McIntosh, Carol Brunson Phillips, Lily Wong Fillmore, Loris Malaguzzi and the educators of Reggio Emilia. Assessing who and what is influencing our thinking is an important step in reflecting on our development. (I've found it's a good question in interviewing job applicants as well.)

Answering this recent questionnaire made me curious about how directors would identify influences on their thinking about staff development. I wondered how they saw their role with caregivers and teachers, and, in spite of all the demands of their job, if directors are able to

formulate a conscientious approach to growing their staff. Do they also find time to read and seek out ideas to keep themselves inspired and growing? Here are excerpts from several of the most memorable quick conversations I had in search of answers to these questions.

Michael Koetje, *Martin Luther King, Jr. Home Day Care Center*: I see my role as a buffer to keep bureaucratic stuff off the backs of my staff so that their work life can be a little easier. I try to make sure they get some time to rest, to do things they enjoy. It's not easy to create a program you really want. You can't make changes overnight.

My approach is to take a chance on people, take them in, work with them, pay them decently, and believe in them. You add things to people's emotional bank accounts which you can build on later. If you treat staff right, they'll turn around and treat others right. I let people make decisions and then back them up, even if I would have done it differently. People want to do the right thing. If we hire them to do the best possible job, we can't turn around and not treat them in the very best possible way. We can't be mediocre in what we offer them and then insist they do more than a mediocre job with kids.

Ideas that influence me come mostly from business magazines.

I read Stephen Covey and Tom Peters all the time, also *Fast Company* and *Inc.* For a real break, I go to *Underwire* on the Internet. They remind me to keep a sense of humor and not let things get out of perspective.

Karen Scoville, *Learning Garden, Bright Horizons Family Solutions*: I think our primary job as directors is to figure out people's passions and where they want to go. We need to get them excited about envisioning a career path for themselves. They need to see there is so much happening in our field; there are so many possibilities. Our smaller management group is gleaning resources from the wider profession. You really get energized when you have a group to think and plan with. I've always been a follower of Jim Greenman's ideas and now they're even more immediate. Does it sound crazy to emphasize going with people's passions? It's what I now think really makes a difference.

Leslie Howle, *Hilltop Children's Center*: Things have really changed from my early years at this center when it was hard to motivate teachers to go to a class after work hours. Now our teachers are teaching classes for other teachers. Staff development is about empowerment. When we create the right environment and working conditions for staff as they work with children, families, and their peers, teachers awaken to a passion for their work and their own need to understand human development. Questions emerge from our work with children and we discover what we need to know as we discover what they need to know. It's an ever-receding horizon.

At Hilltop, we continually challenge ourselves to address these questions

individually and as a group through discussions in staff meetings, workshops and classes, and in conversations with parents and our staff trainer. Reading Betty Jones, John Nimmo, Margie Carter, and Deb Curtis has inspired the way I work with teachers, along with Stephen Covey who has taught us the best way to be a humanistic manager. I am inspired by the teacher collaboration that takes place in the schools of Reggio Emilia.

Years spent studying with Sufi teacher and psychologist Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan have taught me to always work with people in a positive, caring way, and to see them with my heart as well as my eyes. Murshida Vera Corda, the artist who originated the famous *Vera* design line in the '40s, has also influenced me with her pioneering work with the Marin County Seed Schools.

Fortifying Our Approach

It was very heartening for me to hear these directors' viewpoints. Amidst the time constraints and challenges of their jobs, they have found ways to keep themselves moving in the world of ideas, beyond building maintenance, fundraising, and recruiting job applicants. What I glean from watching and talking with effective directors, along with my own experience, leads me to suggest a few strategies to keep us on track in our professional development efforts.

STRATEGY

Discover your questions and ask them frequently.

In her statement above, Leslie Howle says, "Questions emerge from our work with children and we discover what we need to know as we discover what they need to know. . . . At Hilltop, we continually challenge ourselves to address these questions individually and as a group through

discussions. . . ." Over time, I have seen staff meetings move from being a series of reminders, announcements, and scheduling details to thoughtful discussions that feel like the best of graduate school. For example, when someone raises a concern about a child or a curriculum project, rather than a quick discussion about techniques or activities, they probe with questions to discover the child's point of view and what the family might contribute. These questions lead to deeper considerations of what the children and the teachers know and still need to learn.

It's not always easy to find our own questions for learning. We've been schooled to pay attention to other people's questions. A turning point in these meetings was when they began asking, "What are you curious about with this child, or in this project? What do you think the child(ren) might be curious about?" Helping the teachers come to see themselves as researchers was a quantum leap in their development. It became contagious in their interactions as a team and with the children's families, and thus the quality of the whole program rose significantly.

STRATEGY

Build in time and systems for thinking about the learning process.

Systems organize the many responsibilities you have as a director and shape the way staff members feel about the workplace and about themselves. Indirectly, they are a pedagogical tool, along with the specific coaching and mentoring strategies you employ. For instance, you can create procedures, paperwork, and accountability systems that foster reflection, collaboration, and active participation, rather than ones that emphasize meeting the requirements, checking off boxes, and not asking

why. Whatever forms and assessment systems you require your staff to use, design them to promote thinking. Consider the following ways to make room for collaborative thinking:

- Rotate teacher and/or substitute schedules to give teachers regular time to meet together.
- Include time in regular staff meetings for sharing highlights of an observation and collaborative hypothesizing.
- Post or circulate examples of collaborative discussions for teachers to learn from each other.

Inherent in this approach is the notion that people should participate in developing systems that they will be responsible for following. This is related to what director Michael Koetje said above about empowering staff to make decisions. I think it also has the potential to unleash the kind of passion Karen Scoville refers to.

STRATEGY
Form a book or study group with others.

While working full time it's hard to find the discipline, let alone time, to really study someone else's thinking or experience. Even when I carve out the opportunity, I really only engage with or integrate the ideas as I talk with others. Forming our first neighborhood directors' group in Seattle provided me with that experience as we discussed articles and books we were reading and ideas that were influencing us. It was a support group that strengthened us beyond just blowing off steam, problem solving, or sharing tips on low cost supplies. As a larger directors association formed in our city, a handful of us continued in what I now understand was a little study group together. It moved us from just sur-

viving to thriving. Today, when directors tell me they have been benefiting from my articles and books, I smile, sometimes with tears in my eyes. I encourage them to team up with others to discuss these, knowing this focused study will develop the ideas and strategies much further.

STRATEGY
Write out and periodically revisit your definition of staff development.

I no longer work as a child care director, but rather with directors and staff as a trainer, consultant, and college teacher. Without those management and supervisory responsibilities, I have the privilege of approaching staff development in a focused way. Whatever our definition of staff development, I strongly believe that we must provide for and educate teachers in a manner parallel to what we want them to be doing with children. If you took this as a guiding principle, how might your description differ from those of the directors above? Or from the one I jotted on my college questionnaire:

With caregivers and teachers, I see my role as helping them learn more about themselves, children, and the influence of values on best practices. I strive to help them better understand why they and the children do and think as they do, and find the most appropriate and satisfying ways of being together. I use a variety of one-on-one coaching strategies and workshop/staff meeting activities to encourage thinking about teaching and learning for the children and themselves. My approach always addresses culturally relevant, anti-bias issues; child-centered perspectives; building partnerships with families; and caring well for the caregivers.

With supervisors and directors, I work to promote thinking, skills, and systems which enhance their roles of managing

people and resources, coaching and leadership development, and building a community around a vision. I lend my listening skills; my experience, perspectives, and resources; and my belief in people's ability and desire to work toward their dreams.

Consider the strategy of writing out your current thinking. Writing may take more time than talking or even feel more intimidating, but it's a very useful tool for consolidating your thinking. I'd love to see what you come up with. We are all inventing this work as we go and have so much we can learn from each other.

Margie Carter lives in Seattle where she had her second seven year calling as a child care director. She travels widely to speak, consult, and invent staff development strategies. Her newest book with Deb Curtis is *The Visionary Director: A Handbook for Dreaming, Organizing, and Improvising in Your Center* (Redleaf Press, 1998).