Steps to a "Reflective Practice" Model of Teacher Development

Effective strategies to help teachers grow

by Dave Riley

While early childhood educators have embraced Developmentally Appropriate Practice in our work with children, we have been slower to adopt such practices in helping early childhood teachers to grow.

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Our field's methods of teacher education and training still lean toward direct teaching (e.g. classes and workshops) and observational learning from models (e.g. mentoring programs), rather than methods based on the teachers' own actions and understandings. Most staff development is *curriculum based,* rather than based on *how teachers learn and grow.*

This critique is not new. Betty Jones neatly captured this idea when she wrote that ". . . people who are going to become teachers of young children should be taught in the same way I hope they will teach. Katz (1977) has called this the Principle of Congruity — that adults be treated according to the developmental principles they must follow in working with young children" (1986, p. xi). With this congruity in mind, Jones and Katz have long promoted an experience-based approach to staff development. In their views, one of the keys to helping teachers grow is for them to have a relationship with a trusted confidant, another early childhood professional with whom they can create a continuing conversation about their understandings of early childhood practice. "Focus on the teacher's understandings of the situation," writes Katz, as her first principle (1984: 4).

In the past, this opportunity for reflecting on one's practice was sometimes provided by one's early childhood center director. But with the increasing complexity of our programs, many center directors and program managers today find they have too little time to regularly observe in classrooms and talk reflectively with their staff. So, when the state of Wisconsin (USA) asked us to help child care centers improve their quality, we set out to define and practice this reflective practice method of technical assistance. Building from the ideas of Jones, Katz, and others, we have worked to define the *specifics* of a developmental model of technical assistance. In this article we will describe the core elements of our model, and also share some beginning evidence that the model is working as we had hoped.

Elements of our training model

Jones has suggested that people who are good at helping teachers grow ". . . have access to expertise — their own or borrowed — but they draw on it sparingly. Instead, they look for the knowledge that teachers are already using and reflect it back to them, making teachers' own stories, rather than established authority, the starting point for learning" (Jones, 1993: xviii-xix). In our project, we adopted the same basic methods as Jones and her colleagues: "Facilitators of teacher development support teachers' growth by observing children in their classrooms, scribing their observations in words and pictures, and engaging in conversations in which teachers' and observers' perceptions are shared" (Jones, 1993: xx).

Our training specialists visit each classroom once each week or two. They observe for 15 to 45 minutes, then talk

with the lead teacher outside the classroom for 15 to 30 minutes. Creating the staffing ratios to make this meeting possible is the major hurdle to this method of training, usually requiring an "overflow" staff member. But it is essential, since we want our discussions with teachers to be about what we observed just minutes before.

Our model of training is relational, objective, and self-exploratory. It is consciously related to evolving intervention models in other fields, most notably the home visiting intervention model used by the Minnesota attachment research group (Erickson & Egeland, 1999). Our general aims are to help teachers see themselves more clearly, to learn to talk about their practices more effectively, and to reflect more on what they are doing and why they do it that way. We seek these aims through the following six core practices.

We build a trusting relationship

Our model only works if there is a trusting relationship between our specialist and the teacher. Only within a trusting relationship will the teacher share her understandings, her doubts, and hopes for her classroom. With trust, she will be able to take risks, to experiment with new ideas and practices.

To develop trust, we start by using objective, written observations of the classroom, and we "Focus on competencies already acquired" (Katz, 1984: 72). Of course, this is where we would start even if building trust was not our intention, because adults (like children) grow outward from their current abilities, so we should always start with current abilities and strengths.

The first time we gave this kind of feedback — entirely positive — to many teachers, they were amazed and relieved when it became clear that we were seeing them doing things well. Some teachers were so relieved that they gave our specialists tearful hugs after their first meetings!

We point out excellent practice (shaping effective practice)

We are all familiar with the practice of "catching a child being good." This same strategy is surprisingly effective in helping teachers grow. Often, highly-skilled early childhood teachers don't see what it is they are doing that is working. Sometimes, they learned it so long ago, that they do it automatically, without thinking. Other times, they have learned something unconsciously and, therefore, are not yet self-aware of their own skill.

Psychology uses the term "behavioral shaping" to describe this practice. It means to focus attention (or other rewards) upon slow improvements in behavior, so that the behavior slowly evolves over time.

For example, in one infant classroom we observed that the teacher only talked with the babies once during the entire observation, while diapering. So, we wrote and discussed that observation, describing how the baby watched the teacher's mouth attentively, holding her body still, and then when the teacher paused the baby squealed and squirmed her body, in reply. We went on to note how important this is for babies, even those who cannot talk yet, that those who get this kind of early language interaction will learn to talk earlier, and their vocabularies will grow more quickly.

By focusing our observation on this one single occurrence of "effective practice" we were shaping the teacher toward doing this more often. We didn't have to tell her, "You don't talk with the babies enough."

Piaget taught us that new abilities and understandings always grow from current abilities and understandings. So we start with the teacher's current performance, respecting and honoring her current abilities, and build from there.

We provide conceptual labels for effective practices (moving from the concrete to the abstract)

We believe that through their own experience in the classroom many highly-skilled teachers have learned *concretely* how to effectively lead a group of children. But many of these same teachers, including some of our best, have not gone the next step, *to understanding their practical and "intuitive" skills as specific instances of a larger, more general construct.* They cannot explain very well to others

Figure 1
Elements in Our Training Model

- Build a trusting relationship with the teacher.
- Shape effective practices.
- Provide conceptual labels for effective practices (go from concrete to conceptual).
- Generalize effective practices to other parts of the program.
- Explain the "whys" of effective practice, with reference to knowledge from child development and ECE.
- Through a continuing dialogue, encourage the teacher's self-exploration of her understandings of ECE practice.

(including parents and new staff aides) what they do, or why they do it, which is a severe limitation. Nor can they generalize their intuitive skill to other situations very easily.

For example, consider the teacher I described a minute ago, who we were shaping toward greater language interaction with babies. Eventually, at later visits, we will introduce some conceptual terms to help her remember and think about what she is doing, such terms as "reciprocal interaction" and "receptive language ability" and "language elaboration." Such technical jargon is difficult to teach in a workshop or college classroom, where it is an abstraction, but can be surprisingly easy to teach when attached to the teacher's own behavior. We use our observations of the teacher to build from the concrete to the abstract, conceptual level.

Montessori was the first (and Piaget the best) at pointing out how children learn things *concretely* at first, and only later do they learn the same things *conceptually*. We believe teachers develop in the same way.

We help teachers generalize effective practices to other parts of their program

Becoming aware of an unconscious ability is how you bring it under conscious control, where it can be perfected and extended to other settings. Providing labels for a teacher's concrete, existing skills helps the teacher think of her skills more conceptually, so she can apply them more consciously.

Once a teacher goes from a specific skill or practice to understanding its "general form," then she can apply it to other parts of her practice. She has moved from a solution to a specific problem to owning a general problem-solving tool. For example, the teacher in our example above, who became aware of the importance of language interaction with infants, will be likely to not only increase that interaction at the changing table, but also to generalize her behavior to other parts of the day (perhaps next to feeding time).

We create a linkage from the teacher's current practices to the conceptual /research base of our field

The next step, after providing a conceptual label, is to add some background knowledge. Here is an example: A teacher of infants might have learned to engage in reciprocal, verbal interaction with babies while diapering them. This is excellent practice. But that same teacher might not understand WHY it is excellent practice: because such language interaction leads to earlier language acquisition, vocabulary growth, and social skill (learning turn-taking) in young children. Because the teacher doesn't know the "why," she is ineffective at "interpreting" or explaining her program to parents or new staff.

When we provide this broader knowledge about our field, linked to the teacher's own practice, *we reward the teacher with a deeper understanding* of her own significance in the child's life, and of her professionalism. She is more likely to perform with excellence when she understands *why* one practice is better than another.
She is also better able to train new staff, and to educate the public (e.g. parents) about the research-based knowledge that really does undergird our profession.

We help the teacher explore her own understandings of effective practice

The best teachers are seekers, always experimenting, bringing their whole life to bear on what they do in the classroom. The most important service we may provide for some teachers is to engage in *co-exploration* with them: repeated, thoughtful, heart-felt discussions of what we are doing, and why, and what else we might try. With the very best teachers, in particular, our most useful role may be "helping teachers name what they know" (Carter, 2000).

In fact, while our model is very useful with staff at all levels of experience, we think it is especially useful for working with highly experienced and skilled teachers. One might think that such teachers don't need our assistance, and in many ways they don't. But, it's also true that every teacher — and in fact every professional and every craftsman — needs to feel like *they are growing*, needs to feel the excitement of new possibilities. If you ignore this, then your best teachers will begin to stagnate, and you may lose them.

Our model aims to engage these staff *in a continuing discussion of the meaning and possibilities of our practice,* with the starting point being direct observations of what the teacher is actually doing. This is the way to personal growth.

A work in progress

Six months after we began to work with 23 programs in this fashion we used an anonymous, self-report questionnaire to solicit feedback from all the program directors (n = 23) and three teachers from each center (n = 69).

When we asked each teacher if the training specialist had helped them feel differently about their jobs, a surprising one-quarter (27%) agreed with the strongest statement about job commitment: "Because of my meetings with [named training specialist] I am far more likely to remain in the early childhood field." Their written comments were consistent with this finding.

I was looking to leave and told her . . . . She then told me of my good job performance and that it would be a loss if I left.

[The specialist's] support is very encouraging that what I'm doing is very important.

I now know how important I am to children.

In conclusion

As we gained experience with our method of technical assistance, we became increasingly aware that this training role was not truly new. Most of us, in our formative years in the early childhood field, benefited from just the kinds of reflective discussions our project has emphasized, sometimes with our peer teachers, sometimes with trusted directors who took the time to really observe us.

Much as our aim with teachers is often to give words to their unconsciously performed skills, we have come to view our training model as providing a formal statement of the kinds of skills that great directors have always used to help their teachers grow. Just as early childhood teaching excellence is a learned skill, not an inborn instinct, we believe that great directors and training staff make use of observable interpersonal skills, which can be learned. Some of the program managers even told us this, in their written comments.

I learned from [specialist] to take a step back when observing my staff interacting with the kids. She observes many positive interactions between teachers and children that I don't pay enough attention to.
(Program Manager)

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