What Is Our Practice?

Ideas for training staff

by Margie Carter

In the last few months I've had the experience, which surely has happened to you on occasion, where the same word keeps coming up in every conversation I have. My friend sighs and tells me she can't get her daughter to *practice* the piano, even though she begged her parents to buy it. A colleague complains about her organization saying, "they don't *practice* what they preach." My Yoga teacher reminds us that without a *home practice,* we aren't really getting the benefits we're after. A neighbor tells me he's not running the marathon this year because he's so *out of practice*. And, would you believe, my five-year-old grandson has taken to explaining that he doesn't want the dinner I prepared because, "I haven't *practiced* eating this, so I don't really like it."

These seemingly disconnected conversations have made their way into my musings about early childhood professional development work. I think my ears have perked up around this word *practice* because I've been watching Ann Pelo in her new role as Mentor Teacher at Hilltop Children's Center design a staff development program to enhance what she calls their center's *teaching practices.* In the dictionary, the word *practice* is both a verb and a noun, and I've watched the first lead to the second in this carefully formulated mentoring process Ann has been developing.

Practice as a Verb: to do or perform often, customarily, or habitually; to be professionally engaged in; to perform or work at repeatedly so as to become proficient; to train by repeated exercises.

Practice as a Noun: actual performance or application of what [they] advocate in principle; the condition of being proficient through systematic exercise (*Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th Edition, 1993).

Systematic exercise

I recognize that my own college teaching and consulting work usually lacks anything resembling "systematic exercise." Most of us engaged in preservice or in-service teacher education feel compelled to cover important content, with a wide range of concerns that fall under topics such as "child development," "curriculum planning," or "working with diverse families." I always try to be practical and link theory with concrete applications; but the truth is, the difference between "practical" and *practice* is significant. Even a teaching practicum or internship in the field lacks the rigor or systematic exercise that leads to the kind of teaching proficiency we really need in our programs.

I'm not talking about teachers learning techniques or a little bag of tricks to draw on, though those aids certainly have their place. Rather, what teachers need is repeated *practice* with a methodology that helps them think through and respond to the myriad encounters offered by the work of teaching. We can't just hope teachers will become self-reflective, competent and collaborative *practitioners*, we have to show them what's involved in this *practice* and give them regular, repeated opportunities to *practice* these activities.

At their first in-service workshop this past fall, Ann told the staff that her professional development plan for them would involve a variety of interesting ways to continually *practice* a cycle of observing for details, collaboratively analyzing their documentation, and planning next steps from their discussions. "We're going to *practice* this over and over again until it becomes as natural as breathing to us," she told them. And, indeed, for each successive month's all staff meetings, Ann has creatively designed a set of exercises to take the teachers through this cycle. In between these all staff gatherings, she follows up with further *practice* during team meetings and side-

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by-side mentoring with teachers at work with children.

The results of this *practice* are impressive. There is a new vitality and animation among the staff. They exhibit more curiosity about the children, child development, each other, and the teaching process. Teachers see how rewarding it is to harness some intentionality and discipline to improving their teaching. Watching them, I can see it doesn't seem hard or stressful to do this, as I suspect they assumed or feared it might be. On the contrary, the *practice* of being intellectually and creatively challenged is clearly fun, even exhilarating at times.

Systematic exercise doesn't have to be dry or boring. Ann has designed activities which are at once rigorous and playful, offering a consistent methodology with lots of room for individual expression and contributions, along with new forms of collaboration. I've been videotaping the process and encouraging Ann to write about her Mentor Teacher work so that others can learn from it. In the meantime, here are some principles she has been using, along with examples of strategies.

Guiding principle:
Parallel for the teachers what you want them to do with children

Few teachers come to our programs having experienced the kind of teaching we want them to be offering children. In fact, most of them were never in full time child care programs themselves and their model for being with young children is either based on babysitting or elementary school teaching — neither of which helps them assume the *practice* we are after
in today's early care and education. Teachers need to gather their own set of experiences with the activities of self-initiated play, deep investigation, and the social/emotional/intellectual engagement that leads to genuine competency and a love of learning. As teachers begin to construct their own knowledge about the teaching and learning process, they will begin to provide these rich experiences for children.

Strategy
Practice a teaching practice useful for adults and kids

Ann started this first school year of teaching adults after 14 years of developing her own intentional teaching *practice* with three to five year olds. She intuitively began doing for the teachers what she *practiced* with the children: creating an inviting learning environment, making journals for them, explaining her values and intent and how that translated into what she had brought for them to explore. She created a structure for them to learn more about each other and fostered their growing connections. With a variety of engaging activities, she helped them *experience the purpose* of mastering particular early childhood content and skills. As she did with children, Ann modeled possible things to try, coached people through uncertainties, shared examples from her own learning process, offered ideas through metaphors and stories, and wove in acknowledgements of what she saw each staff person contributing.

Guiding principle:
Create a methodology for mastering new learning

A series of disconnected staff meetings throughout the year may get some content covered, but it doesn't help teachers develop their craft. Rather, they need a carefully designed and sequenced set of experiences to *practice*, akin to learning to play a music instrument, mastering a sport, becoming a writer, astronaut, surgeon, or woodworker. In the context of clear expectations — this is the process all our teachers must be engaged in — the *practice* needs to embrace different preferences, styles, and cultural perspectives. Everyone here must be a close observer of children, and how you communicate and respond to what you see must be thoughtful; but you must do it in your own way, building on your special gifts, cultural values, and life experiences.

Strategy
Define and practice the key elements of reflective teaching

To identify the elements of her mentoring program for staff, Ann called on her own experiences of learning to become a thoughtful teacher, and drew inspiration from her study of the Reggio Emilia approach and adult learning from a constructivist pedagogy. She translated her own teacher longings for provocative questions, supportive coaching, time, and structures for collaborative discussion into a plan that would give teachers consistent, yet varied, experiences of these elements until they found a way to make it their own *practice*. Activities adapted from *The Art of Awareness* (Curtis & Carter, 2000), observations of children from their classrooms to study, readings, poems, writing experiences, opportunities to represent ideas with different materials, and revisiting documentation of their own efforts in this process were all woven into systematic exercises, reflection, and discussion. This approach moved them through *practice* as a verb, into a professional *practice,* the "actual performance or application of the principles they were learning."

Guiding principle:
Make this practice a priority

Many things seem to conspire to get a mentoring program like this off track. There are always other things vying for attention during precious, limited time for team meetings and all staff gatherings. Teachers are out sick, substitutes are in short supply, and the budget is always precarious. Still, with the zeal of

a missionary and the tenacity of a spider, Ann has pressed forward, set the bar of clear expectations higher than excuses, and insisted on follow-through with the *practice.* In four short months there is visible evidence, not only of improved teaching practices, but of a new excitement about learning and professional development. As they continue to try to address salary and benefit issues, the organizational climate has steadily grown toward becoming a place people can't imagine leaving. The demands and stresses of child care are being met with the knowledge that not only are children having great fun while they learn, but the teachers are equally engaged in this process for themselves. I'm reminded of remarks by David Whyte, as quoted in *Fish! Tales: Real-Life Stories to Help You Transform Your Workplace and Your Life* (Ludin, 2002):

"The antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest. The antidote to exhaustion is whole heartedness. It is those things you do half heartedly that really wear you out."

Strategy
Make systematic mentoring a budget priority

Like most child care programs, Hilltop Children's Center struggles to maintain a high quality program. Even with accreditation and a core of stable teachers, there are still continual comings and goings of teachers, budget crises, and facility problems jeopardizing the steady accomplishments they have garnered.

But rather than accommodating themselves to the ever possible potholes of mediocrity on the road, they decided to do something bold — to dedicate some of their precious reserve funds toward piloting a mentor teacher project. It has been a stunning booster shot, hopefully providing long term immunity to ho-hum child care. Even if further funds aren't found to continue this systematic mentoring, the teachers have rigorously *practiced* reflective teaching, and internalized a *practice* that appears to be contagious and self-perpetuating. The program culture has been infused with new vigor and sense of possibility.

Your practice

Do you think of your program as having a systematic professional development *practice*? If so, is it achieving the results you want? *Practice* doesn't really make perfect, but getting systematic with a mentoring program holds great promise for moving early care and education a lot closer to what Webster calls "the condition of being proficient" or "actual performance of what we advocate in principle."

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