

Creating Frameworks for Reflective Teaching

by Margie Carter

The new NAEYC accreditation standards for teacher preparation and practices are creating quite a stir. This is a wonderful opportunity for us to more closely examine and debate what we think will enhance more thoughtful, engaged, and effective work with young children in our programs. From my point of view, we can't just keep heaping more requirements on directors and teachers without putting support systems in place to make the additional work of higher standards realistic and reachable. Without this support, what will motivate people to take on the additional work? Even more critical, what will make this huge extra effort sustainable as a part of an ongoing practice, not just a temporary surge on behalf of preparing for an accreditation visit? How will directors and teachers learn to do the necessary reflection that is underneath a strong professional practice when their own education and experience hasn't prepared them for (and with) this approach?

The task of creating organizational policies and systems that promote and support reflective teaching is multi-faceted and seldom enumerated in early childhood professional literature. One of the best overviews I've found comes from Carol Brunson Phillips and

Sue Bredekamp (1998) which I described in an earlier *Exchange* article (2006). In my opinion, if the early childhood profession would take up *in earnest* the eight areas they cite, we would dramatically transform our organizational systems and professional development practices for a new level of quality. Likewise, the series of articles on professional development in July 2007 issue of *Young Children* give us more challenges to digest and implement. If we were to take up Judy Helm's (2007) notion of "Building Communities of Practice" or Kay Albrecht and Bev Engel's (2007) challenge of "Moving Away from a Quick-Fix Mentality to Systematic Professional Development" I suspect we would see an expanded understanding of what it takes to prepare teachers for reflective practices. Meanwhile, what steps can directors and teacher educators take to guide program staff to become more reflective?

Connecting reflection to inquiry

As I consider what Helm describes as building "communities of practice" for our early childhood settings, I'm aware of how much guidance is needed to really learn and plan from

the study documentation. This guidance and learning doesn't just happen because it's part of an accreditation criteria. It requires using meeting time for inquiry and persistently asking questions to get at both the children's and the teacher's thinking. How do you currently use your staff meeting or professional development hours? Do you give teachers regular practice in becoming reflective? One of the best tools for this is a set of questions to consistently use in thinking through the complexities of their work. You might even think of this as an inquiry protocol to implement.

One example of a protocol can be found in the article, "Using Documentation for Professional Development" where Amethyst Peaslee, Inana Snyder, and Patricia Casey (2007) give us examples of questions a facilitator can ask when working with teachers to learn and plan from their documentation:

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- What happened?
- What prior knowledge have the children applied or drawn from?
- Is there an underlying developmental concept at play here?
- What strategies, approaches to learning, or problem-solving techniques did the children use?
- What are the implications for our teaching practice?

Using a consistent inquiry protocol

When teachers are offered a methodology for examining aspects of early childhood knowledge and its application to their work, they can repeatedly use it to explore and clarify what they want to have happen. In our first book, *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice*, Deb Curtis and I described the “five examinations framework” we developed for all our early childhood education classes. Our goal was less about covering volumes of content and more about giving teachers practice with a way of thinking through how to apply the content they were learning. Whatever the topic we were teaching, we had our students go through this inquiry process:

- *Examining our own filters*
(What experiences and conditioning do we bring to the teaching situation?)
- *Examining the environment*
(How is the environment influencing or prescribing the context?)
- *Examining child development*
(What indicators are operating here?)

- *Examining issues of cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness*
(What assumptions, biases, or limiting factors are at work?)
- *Examining teacher roles and strategies*
(How can we be more responsive and skillful?)

We went on to applying the Five Examinations Framework as a thinking lens for teachers in our workshops, consulting, and side by side mentoring. See the box below for an example of how we used this framework as a protocol to develop questions for reflection on designing learning environments.

Creating a protocol as a “thinking lens” for teachers

As Albrecht and Engel suggest, teachers need to move beyond a “quick fix mentality” if they are to be genuinely responsive to children and families and if their curriculum is to be authentically responsive to their interests. Repeatedly using the same set of questions as protocol or “thinking lens” develops both a disposition towards reflective teaching and the skills of critical inquiry. Nearly 14 years later, in our newest book, *Learning Together with Young Children*, Deb Curtis and I have expanded our thinking and now work with teachers to internalize the following questions as they watch the unfolding events of their classroom, in the moment, or later when studying their documentation.

- What details stand out that I can make visible for further consideration?
- What in my background and values is influencing my response to this situation and why?
- How might issues of culture, family

background, or popular media be influencing this situation?

- Where do I see examples of children’s strength and competency?
- How do I understand the children’s point of view in this situation?
- How are the environment and materials impacting what’s unfolding and what changes could be made?
- How are teacher actions impacting this situation?
- What learning domains are being addressed here and what other learning domains could be addressed?

- What theoretical perspectives and child development principles could inform my understandings and actions?
- What values, philosophy, and goals do I want to influence my response? Rather than waiting for teachers to come up with a way to make meaning and respond to what they observe, we can give them initial support in the form of a protocol or framework to use. When teachers are guided with questions for thinking, rather than just given techniques to try, they are more likely to grow in their confidence, skill, and effectiveness as teachers. Isn’t this what professional development should be about?

References

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Using the Five Examinations Framework with Classroom Environments

(use these questions with floor plans or photos of the classroom environments)

Examining our own filters

- Are you aware of the kinds of environments in which you feel most comfortable?
- What indicators do you have about how children, families, and teachers feel in the environment you've created in the classroom?

Examining the environment

- What are all the aspects that should be considered when assessing how well this environment works for all who spend time there?
- How does the current environment you've created reflect a set of values and influence various situations such as fostering pride and responsibility?
- How does this environment address desired outcomes? (i.e., the children self initiate and focus, collaboration is promoted, clean up is an enjoyable part of the curriculum)

Examining child development

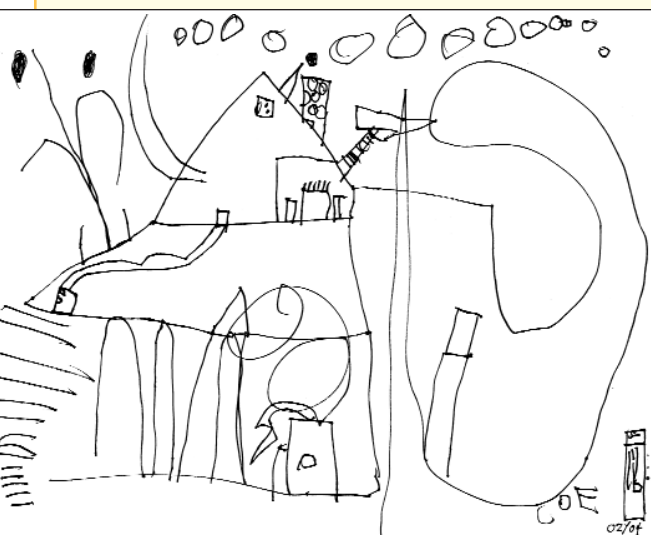
- How do children of different ages and stages or learning styles respond to aspects of the environment?
- What changes in the environment could better support your values and the way children develop an understanding of the world and their role in it?

Examining issues of cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness

- Are all the children of your group and their families reflected in the classroom environment?
- How might you reflect more of the diversity of how people in the wider community live today?
- How do you want to help shape the distribution of power and privilege through your planning of the environment?

Examining teacher roles and strategies

- What role would you play in the environment while children are at play?
- What coaching, support, or additional resources might scaffold the children's learning?



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARGIE CARTER

Practice Using Questions for Reflections on Your Documentation Stories

Because I know that his family is remodeling their house, I have been trying to bring in more building toys for Coe. The Glowco® blocks were a big hit today. Coe immediately began building with them.

Coe: I'm gonna make this for real, you know, when I grow up.

MJ: That means you're an architect. You're designing a building to be constructed.

Coe: I'm serious. I'm going to build this for real when I grow up.

MJ: I believe you. You know how to make plans and carry them out. It's a fantastic structure, Coe. If you want to remember your idea of how to build this, you might want to draw it. That's what architects do. They make architectural drawings. Your clip board is on the desk if you want to use it.

Coe: I'm gonna make this for real. I know how to be an architect AND a builder.

When I looked more closely at Coe's drawing, I saw he had some of the Glowco® shapes, but he had gone much further with his ideas in his drawings.

Coe described each of the details on his drawing. I asked questions about the parts that were of particular interest to me. In the bottom right corner I recognized the representation of the grandmother chiming clock that he could see across the room behind his structure. It is a new addition to our house, and the children love counting the chimes and helping me wind the clock each week. They are particularly fascinated with the swinging pendulum.

I'm so curious as to why he put this in his drawing. What was he thinking?

As you study this documentation, consider these questions:

- What details stand out that I can make visible for further consideration?
- What in my background and values is influencing my response to this situation and why?
- How might issues of culture, family background, or popular media be influencing this situation?
- Where do I see examples of children's strength and competency?
- How do I understand the children's point of view in this situation?
- How are the environment and materials impacting what's unfolding and what changes could be made?
- How are teacher actions impacting this situation?
- What learning domains are being addressed here and what other learning domains could be addressed?
- What theoretical perspectives and child development principles could inform my understandings and actions?
- What values, philosophy, and goals do I want to influence my response?