

intentional and embedded professional development

Four steps to success

by Sandra Duncan

Recently, much attention has been focused on the importance of intentionality when working with and teaching young children. Intentional teachers “act purposefully with a goal in mind and a plan to accomplish it” (Epstein, 2007, p. 4). In the intentional classroom, there is a synergistic partnership between the children and teacher. Although the teacher is actively involved in creating supportive environments and learning experiences, children in an intentional classroom also play an active role in the learning process. There is a purposeful balance between child-guided and adult-guided experiences. This balance is accomplished through a variety of teaching strategies that best encourages each child’s development and acquisition of knowledge. Just as our profession is becoming more purposeful and inten-

tional about choosing the best strategies for promoting children’s learning and development, so should we exercise the same level of intentionality when creating professional development programs for early childhood practitioners.

Intentional professional development

In order to be intentional about professional development, it is important to design training programs that reflect what we know about adult learning. Much of what we know about adult learning mirrors what is known about best practices in children’s learning. For example, both child and adult learning is most effective when:

- Learners actively participate in relevant and meaningful experiences.
- New knowledge is constructed from current knowledge.
- There is sufficient time given for practicing new skills.
- Opportunities are provided for reflection (Knowles, 1973; Sparks, 1994; Wolfe, 2001).

There are four key steps to creating a successful and intentional professional development program.

Step 1:

Understanding staff needs

Early childhood teachers use authentic observations and informal assessments of children to inform their curriculum planning. Through listening and observing, effective teachers understand children’s needs and interests so they are able to plan experiences and activities that are relevant and meaningful. Likewise, directors and/or trainers should also gather staff information to help inform the development of staff training. A survey or needs assessment is one way to gather this type of information.

In writing the survey, it is important to include questions that address the needs of the entire staff. This is challenging because there is no typical staff — each staff’s composition is unique with diverse teaching experiences and varied educational backgrounds and individuals who are operating at different levels of professional development. One way to address this challenge is to consider Lilian Katz’s (1972) four levels of professional growth — survival, consolidation, renewal, and maturity — since there are different training needs associated with each level of growth. For example, a teacher who is in the survival stage may be more interested in training that in-



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volves learning about day-to-day routines or managing children's behavior while a mature teacher may be looking for new ideas, teaching strategies, and increased responsibilities or challenges. Be sure to include questions that would address the needs of each level of professional growth; this will inform your training program's objectives and learning experiences.

Another way to determine staff needs is to have informal conversations or brown bag lunches for small groups of teachers. This idea is especially effective if you explain Katz's four levels of professional development, ask teachers to determine their level, and intentionally plan conversations that meet the needs of a particular level of professional growth.

Step 2: Engaging teachers in the planning process

As early childhood practitioners, we understand the importance of children's choice or self-initiated activity. A child-initiated experience is "an activity wholly decided on by the child and is the result of an intrinsic motivation to explore a project or express an idea. In doing this the child may use a variety of resources and demonstrate a complex range of knowledge, skills, and understanding" (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2008, p. 9). When children initiate exploration, they express more interest and increased motivation to learn through their experiences.

Similarly, research on staff development suggests that teachers are more actively involved and committed to learning when they are engaged in the planning process (Hanover Research Council, 2008). Research also suggests that aligning the program's training objectives to learners' needs or challenges, interests, and levels of expertise and/or knowledge is an effective strategy for developing staff training programs (Chen & Chang, 2006). Being actively involved in the planning process means that teachers are given

opportunities to decide what they want to know, why it is important to them, and where and how they will acquire the knowledge. This approach is similar to the classroom K-W-L Approach where teachers find out what children know, what they want to know, and finally what they have learned.

The K-W-L Approach provides a course of action for creating professional development programs based on the teacher's interest, acquired knowledge, and pedagogy. This approach can also be used as a way of engaging teachers in the planning process. After discovering topics of interest and/or problematic areas through a survey, needs assessment, or informal conversations, the director and/or trainer leads a discussion with an individual or a small group of teachers who have expressed interest in similar topics and are operating at the same level of professional growth. This discussion focuses on what the teacher(s) know and what they want to know. Also decided is how and where learning will occur,

such as attending conferences, reading books, researching the Internet, enrolling in a university course, partnering with a mentor, and/or observing and interacting with others. To ensure accountability, the learner and trainer/director should be jointly agreed upon 1) learning objectives and goals, 2) timeline, and 3) receivables such as portfolio, journal, artifact, presentation, photograph, and/or evidence of teacher reflection.

Step 3: Practicing new knowledge

As early childhood educators, we believe that children best construct knowledge through self-initiated, active interactions with the environment. We also know that children need time to practice their language, theories, and relationships. Likewise, research suggests teachers learn best through active involvement in the classroom environment. An effective strategy of professional development is training that is embedded into the teacher's day in the classroom (Sparks, 1997). Job-embedded training should directly connect to the K-W-L Approach so classroom learning

Levels of Professional Growth and Possible Survey Questions

Professional Growth Level	Challenges of Level	Possible Survey Questions
#1: Survival	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surviving Daily Routines and Transitions Improving Classroom Management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are your challenges in child guidance? Where could you use some help in classroom management?
#2: Consolidation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing Knowledge Base Strengthening Specific Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What intrigues you about child growth and development? What specific skills are important for you to learn?
#3: Renewal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decreasing Personal Enthusiasm Gaining New Ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What topics of interest would you like to explore in more depth? Are there new teaching approaches or strategies that you would like to learn?
#4: Maturity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced Professional Growth Search for Insight and Increased Responsibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are you interested in helping others with professional development and in what way? In what areas do you feel most competent? Can you think of ways to share your knowledge?

experiences are intentional and goal-driven. As with children, teachers need adequate time to practice new skills. Job-embedded training should not be a one-time, isolated experience. Rather, it should be viewed as continuous and ongoing by encouraging teachers to view their daily experiences with children as opportunities to learn. The K-W-L chart, therefore, should be a living document for each teacher.

Step 4: Reflecting on experiences

According to Dewey (1933), reflecting on one's experiences is as important as the experience itself. Much can be learned by taking a reflective perspective. Reflection "helps teachers make meaningful conclusions and observations about their teaching practices which, in turn, shapes and molds their behavior" (Duncan, 2008, p. 4). But, in order to be effective, reflection must be intentionally embedded into the professional development program — which brings us to the final step in the K-W-L Approach. Reflecting on classroom experiences encourages teachers to consider relationships, underlying causes, and assumptions. In the finicky eater situation, the teacher learned that families also influence children's eagerness to try new foods. Through reflection, the teacher was able to assess the situation and make intentional decisions on ways to encourage children to eat vegetables at lunch.

Conclusion

Successful professional development can only be achieved when the learner is intentionally engaged in the learning process. When teachers are given opportunities to help determine their training curriculum and educational path, they become more invested, involved, and committed to the learning process.

K-W-L CHART

Teacher: Miss Smith Professional Growth Level: Consolidation
Topic of Interest: Finicky Eaters

What Teacher Knows	What Teacher Wants to Learn	What Teacher Learned (Reflection)
Several children will not eat their vegetables at lunch. Children need to eat a variety of foods to be healthy.	How to get children to eat a well-balanced meal. How to encourage children to try new foods, including eating their vegetables.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I learned how to introduce new foods to children by using a three step method of 1) introduce, 2) investigate, and 3) intake. I learned that children are more apt to eat their vegetables when they are involved in the preparation. I learned there is a strong connection between children's eating habits and their family, so parenting education is important.

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