

Take Charge

of Your Personal and Professional Development



Carla B. Goble and Diane M. Horm

As the instructor gathered up books and materials one evening after a community college teacher-inservice class, one student lingered and then came up to the front of the room. She said, "My director made me take this class, and I really didn't want to have to go to school, especially at night. I work all day, and it is difficult for me to find time to study." Then she brightened, saying, "But I have learned new things in this class, and I like being here where I can talk to other teachers like myself. In my classroom I've started using the positive guidance strategies we're learning, and I already see such a difference in the children's behavior and learning. I only wish I had known all this before—earlier in my teaching. I could have been a better teacher and avoided some mistakes."

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omments like these are not uncommon. Although a reluctant student at first, the teacher in the scenario recognizes the benefits of professional development as she learns new, effective teaching approaches. Her program's director, like many a counterpart, responded to the increased call for higher levels of professional development for early care and education teachers by "making" the teacher take college classes. Many state licensing agencies and prekindergarten, Head Start, and Early Head Start employers are becoming

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more aware of the growing body of research (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns 2001; Barnett 2004) that supports the benefits of professional development for early childhood educators, early childhood education programs, and, most important, young children.

The need for professional development is universal, whatever a person's profession. Professionals must continually enrich their knowledge and increase their sense of professionalism over the course of their careers so as to implement current research-based practice. Relative to early care and education, NAEYC emphasizes that "it is through caring, committed, and competent early childhood professionals that young children and their families experience the excellent curriculum, the appropriate teaching strategies, the thoughtful assessment practices, the supportive services, and the effective public policies" evident in high-quality early care and education settings (Hyson 2003, 1). To deliver this range and type of high-quality services, early care and education staff must complete ongoing professional development.

Early childhood professional development brings to the forefront the significance of the early years for children's learning and development and highlights the central role early childhood educators play in children's successful outcomes. The purpose of this article is to help early childhood teachers recognize the importance of their professional development and to encourage them to be proactive about their own personal and professional growth and development.

The early childhood education profession

Like the field of nursing, early childhood education has changed and evolved from a job or occupation into a professional field and career. Similarities between the two fields include increased education requirements, differentiated levels of staffing with corresponding levels of education, and expectations of lifelong learning and professional development (NAEYC 1993; Parkin 1995; Gerrish, McManus, & Ashworth 2003; Cameron, Armstrong-Stassen, & Out 2004). More than 20 years ago, Lilian Katz (1987) identified attributes in the early childhood education field that are inherent in any profession: a code of ethics, a specialized body of knowledge, standards of practice, a professional organization, district associations, and at least one professional credential.

The work of Feeney and Freeman (Feeney 1995; Feeney & Freeman 2002; Freeman & Feeney 2006) explores early childhood education as a profession and documents the changes and challenges as new dimensions of professionalism have been added. Freeman and Feeney (2006, 16) ask early childhood educators to consider "what opportunities today's leaders may pursue to increase this professionalism." Mitchell (2007) points out improved public perceptions of early childhood education as evidence that progress has been made in professionalizing the field (see "The Importance of Professional Development for Early Childhood Teachers").

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The Importance of Professional Development for Early Childhood Teachers

Teaching young children is serious work that requires high-quality, dedicated, professional teachers who see the importance of what they do and are eager to increase their effectiveness, knowledge, and skills.

- **Research findings** indicate that "quality encompasses a broad array of knowledge, skills, and behaviors" (Early et al. 2007, 575). The researchers say further that "by definition, teachers who provide instruction that leads to positive child outcomes are high-quality teachers."

- **A report by NCEDL** (National Center for Early Development and Learning) on connecting professional development to child outcomes "revealed that it is high-quality interactions between children and teachers that are the active ingredients through which pre-K programs foster the academic, language, and social competencies of children" (2008, 4). The report further says, "Improving teacher-child interactions requires continuing and consistent professional development opportunities"

- **A study** on the relationship between teaching behaviors, college education, and child-related professional preparation (Berk 1985) found that early childhood education teachers with two- or four-year college degrees offered more direction and suggestions to children and were more responsive and encouraging than teachers who did not have college degrees. Teachers who had child-related, college-level professional development emphasized oral language development almost three times as much as did teachers with a high school education.

Growing professionally

Professional development is more than taking a college class or attending a workshop. Just as children's development encompasses more than the old "nature versus nurture" debate, the growth of teaching competence involves more than just believing that *we* can make decisions that impact our own professional development and teaching quality. Wittmer and Petersen tell us that becoming a professional "requires courage, commitment, and caring" (2006, 358). They add that to be "a reflective, theory-based professional is to reflect on your vision for children and families, professional philosophy, ethical values, and professional plan (your vision for yourself.)"

Knowledge development. Because professional development is connected to developmentally appropriate early childhood teaching and children's development and learning, early childhood teachers should take charge and actively seek and complete ongoing professional development. Essential first steps are identifying your personal characteristics and then assessing your professional knowledge, skills, and behaviors. Upon entry and throughout a career in early childhood education, give thoughtful attention and planning to your personal development and the demands of the field—the necessary knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

To maximize your professional development opportunities, it is important to set goals, plan for and seek profes-

sional development opportunities, map a career path, and acquire ongoing knowledge and skills. Be sure your professional development path is designed to advance both personal and professional competencies and, most important, to prepare you to be the best early childhood teacher you can possibly be.

Personal development. Laura Colker (2008) asks what it takes to be an effective early childhood teacher and identifies a dozen personal characteristics: passion, perseverance, willingness to take risks, pragmatism, patience, flexibility, respect, creativity, authenticity, love of learning, high energy, and sense of humor. Analysis reveals that the characteristics are clustered in the social-emotional domain. These dispositions or temperament variables were self-identified by 43 early childhood practitioners in interviews by Colker. Her survey focused on a discussion about how the teachers chose early childhood education as a field and why early childhood care and teaching was a good career match for them as individuals.

To further their personal development, early childhood educators can use the attributes listed by Colker (2008) to help pinpoint personal strengths as well as characteristics that may require modification. Teachers can modify their own style



and develop new ways of relating to and interacting with children and others. Talking with other teachers about patience or having a sense of humor, keeping a personal reflection journal, and developing healthy outlets for stress are some strategies to consider. Enlisting the help of a mentor, coach, or role model who exhibits the desirable personal characteristics is a potentially helpful method for making changes in one's own personal practices and habits.

Professional development. Freeman and Feeney (2006) recommend that to progress in the early childhood education profession, teachers need to recognize the distinctive features inherent in the educator role. As early

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childhood education practitioners, we can consider how these distinctions can guide “the creation of a unique professionalism that honors our field’s particular ways of working effectively with young children and their families” (Freeman & Feeney 2006, 16). The field of early childhood education has particular ways of approaching and addressing programming for young children, including partnering with families (Briggs, Jalongo, & Brown 2006).

The core values and specific features of early childhood education include, and go beyond, the personal qualities noted by Colker (2008). They are specialized knowledge, philosophical foundations, research-to-practice applications, and ethical guidelines (NAEYC 2005; Feeney 2010).

Taking charge. An important step in taking charge of your own professional growth is to develop a statement defining your early childhood education professional philosophy and to know what’s expected of an early childhood education professional. This is essential not only for your own understanding of how and why you teach young children but also to be able to communicate to families and others how children develop and why you use certain teaching practices.

1. Write out your philosophy.

Wittmer and Petersen (2010) explain the purpose and use of a professional philosophy: “A professional’s philosophy statement includes what you believe about the rights of children, goals for children, what children need, how they learn best, the definition of *quality* in programs, and why it matters for children and families” (p. 380). Early childhood educators should review their philosophy statement often and, as they learn and grow professionally, make changes

that reflect new knowledge and understandings. The philosophy statement should be kept in a professional portfolio (Priest 2010) that documents not only your professional development activities but also your advances in knowledge and skill. Learning and professional development are lifelong, and Wittmer and Peterson remind us, “Developing a philosophy is a process rather than a product. It is ongoing and professionals should rewrite it often in their careers as they grow in knowledge and experience. Professionals can use their philosophy statement to reflect on their values and stay true to their principles as they progress in the profession” (2010, 380).

2. Know what’s expected of a professional. The field of early childhood education has identified specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are inherent in the preparation of high-quality early childhood teachers. These professional attributes include six broad

standards that “promote the unifying themes that define the early childhood profession” (NAEYC 2009, 2). The standards and key elements (pp. 11–17, www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/ProfPrepStandards09.pdf) can be used as a guide to plan and track your professional development.

These core standards are used in NAEYC accreditation of associate degree programs and NAEYC recognition of baccalaureate, master, and doctoral programs in National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accredited schools of education. The standards describe what well-prepared students (at associate, BA/BS, and graduate levels of professional preparation) should know and be able to do, and thus outline the scope of our field’s professional knowledge and skills. Progression through the various levels of formal education deepens one’s knowledge base and expertise in these core areas.



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Types of professional development

As you develop an NAEYC standards-based plan for professional development, it is important to recognize the various forms of professional development available. Purposefully select those tailored to your short- and long-term career goals.

Formal professional development opportunities bearing academic credit are available through colleges and universities in the forms of certificate programs and degrees, such as associate, bachelor, and advanced graduate degrees. Some two- and four-year colleges work together to ensure career pathways beginning with CDA preparation, going on to the associate degree, and then a bachelor's degree.

These pathways are created through partnerships called *articulation agreements*. In some communities, articulation agreements do not exist. Where they are in place, it is important to recognize that they may vary in the number of credit hours that can be transferred from the two-year to the four-year college. Thus, it is valuable to meet with academic counselors from both institutions to make certain that credits are recognized and will transfer.

College credits from specialized early childhood and child development courses are applicable in meeting CDA renewal and state licensing requirements as well as degree requirements. Continuing education units, known as CEUs, are also available for some workshops and other professional development seminars. These can be applied to CDA renewal and child care licensing and requirements, and as documentation of training required by programs.

Teachers may use a variety of methods for self-study and informal professional development, depending on their individual learning style, needs, and circumstances. Examples include reading professional journals and books; viewing professional mul-

timedia presentations, taking online courses, and participating in staff meetings and in-house workshops; receiving reflective supervision and mentoring by more experienced practitioners; discussing issues with peers and supervisors; visiting and observing in other classrooms; and using professional development websites as well as attending professional development institutes and conferences.

Several online resources can help you develop and plan your own professional development (see "Online Resources for Professional Development"). Head Start's Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website provides descriptions of various types of professional development opportunities as well as tips and strategies. The Child Care and Early Education Research Connections website links early childhood curriculum to research. Membership in NAEYC provides professional publications and opportunities for professional development and for linking with other early childhood professionals at national, state, and local levels. NAEYC publications *Young Children* and *Teaching Young Children* make many articles and resources available online.

Conclusion

The quality of an early childhood program is directly related to an individual teacher's professional development. By designing and completing a professional development plan, early childhood educators ready themselves for each step on the professional development ladder. The process enhances their own personal and

professional development and assists them in effectively meeting a broad scope of demands in today's evolving early childhood education profession. Most important is the empowerment that comes from taking charge of your own personal and professional development. You will become the best qualified educator you can be for each child whose life you touch and change during the course of your career as an early childhood educator.

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Online Resources for Professional Development

Child Care and Early Education Research Connections. This site provides comprehensive, up-to-date, easy-to-use resources from the many disciplines related to the field of early childhood education. www.researchconnections.org

Council for Professional Recognition. Here are resources for the Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential as well as other professional development opportunities and materials. www.cdacouncil.org

Early Childhood Educator Professional Development Program. This U.S. Department of Education website provides professional development programs for improving the knowledge and skills of early childhood educators who work in communities with high levels of poverty and who teach children of families with low incomes. www.ed.gov/programs/eceducator/index.html

Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. The Office of Head Start offers lists of professional development opportunities, tools and resources, information on professional organizations, and links to other websites for early childhood educators. <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/Professional%20Development>

National Association for the Education of Young Children. NAEYC's online Early Childhood Professionals pages provide resources for improving professional practice and links to resources for self-study, courses, training sessions, and professional development specialists. www.naeyc.org/ecd (see also www.naeyc.org/yc/pastissues and www.naeyc.org/tyc for online articles)

National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center. The Child Care Bureau offers this national clearinghouse and technical assistance center to provide child care information resources and services, state and territory information, federal information, research, and other tools and resources. <http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov>

National Professional Development Center on Inclusion. The NPDCI works with states to offer professional development to support inclusion. Resources available include information for families, early intervention providers, schools and administrators, and early intervention agencies. <http://community.fpg.unc.edu/npdci>

The National Registry Alliance. This private, nonprofit, voluntary organization maintains state early childhood and school-age workforce registries and professional development leaders; also provides information, briefs, and conference information. www.registryalliance.org

Index of Advertisers

Anti-Defamation League/27	NAMC North American Montessori Center/37
A+ Child Supply/25	Pacific Oaks College/41
A Theme Learning Center Box/40	Pearson/PsychCorp/19
ClassesOnline4U/35	Rada Cutlery/47
Concordia University—Saint Paul/7	Rourke Publishing LLC/17
Contemporary Forums/96	Simple Simon/Moneris Solutions/53
EZCare Online Software/81	The Source for Learning/back cover
Hatch Inc./71	TeachingStrategies/3
HighScope/97	Walden University/5
Kansas State University/31	Western Governors University/15
Music Together/51	World Forum Foundation/inside back cover
NAEYC Resources/inside front cover, 8, 55, 67, 73, 76, 104, 105, 109, 110, 111, 112	World's Finest Chocolate/77