Guide for Evaluating Professional Development: Opportunities in Early Childhood Education

BY CARL J. DUNST

Throughout their professional careers, early childhood educators attend many workshops and training activities to improve their skills and to keep up with new and innovative ways of educating young children. But how do you tell if the workshop or training was effective and worth your time and effort?

Professional development specialists differ considerably in how they conduct workshops and other training opportunities. No one wants to waste their valuable time attending a workshop or training opportunity that is not going to improve knowledge and skills that will be helpful in work with young children. Karyn Clarke, a professional development specialist from Australia, recommends that people seeking professional development opportunities do so from a consumer awareness perspective (Clarke, 2008). A consumer awareness perspective of professional development involves an informed evaluation of whether a workshop or training opportunity was worth the time and effort and had positive participant benefits.

This article includes guidelines for evaluating the worth and likely benefits of early childhood professional development opportunities. These guidelines can be used to decide if a workshop or training opportunity is likely to be beneficial to an early childhood educator, or if a workshop or training session

ECEBC Leadership Initiative participants, fifth cohort, present at a Leadership Institute.

that was attended included practices that professional development specialists recommend (e.g., Zaslow et al., 2010) and that research (e.g., Snell, Forston, Stanton-Chapman, & Walker, 2012) indicates ought to be incorporated into early childhood educator training. Early childhood educators can also use the guidelines to ensure a workshop or training opportunity provides experiences to improve knowledge and skills.

The guidelines are based on findings from a review of studies of adult learning methods (Dunst & Trivette, 2012; Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 2010) where the results from the review were used to develop a research-based approach to professional development (Dunst & Trivette, 2009). The professional

development approach includes (1) methods that a trainer uses to introduce and illustrate an early childhood practice to a learner, (2) a learner's use of the practice and his or her appraisal of the experience, (3) trainer-facilitated learner reflection on and self-assessment of mastery of the practice, and (4) trainer-learner identification of new learning opportunities to improve and sustain the use of a newly learned practice. Each of these "steps" includes a number of methods and strategies that are designed to *actively* engage a learner in *all* aspects of a workshop or training opportunity.

Checking Out Professional Development Opportunities

On page 10 there is a checklist for what to look for when selecting

training opportunities or evaluating whether professional development opportunities include elements that would make them effective. The checklist includes a series of questions that you can ask yourself to decide if a workshop or training event is going to be worth your time, or if a training event you attended provided you with the opportunities to truly learn and ideas to use. Highly effective training opportunities will yield a preponderance of YES responses to the checklist questions.

Introduce and Illustrate

Professional development specialists (PDS) who offer effective training fully describe, explain, and provide multiple examples of what a practice looks like when used by early childhood educators. The more clearly the key characteristics of a practice are described and illustrated, the more likely a learner will understand the "active ingredients" of a practice. PDS should provide learners a detailed list or a checklist of the key characteristics of a practice to facilitate learner understanding.

Multimedia presentations or real-life demonstrations need to be used to illustrate the use of a practice. Photographs generally suffice for illustrating practices such as arranging classroom environments, but videos or the "real-life" use of a teaching method would be necessary to demonstrate how to use instructional practices. Effective professional development includes innovative ways of illustrating and demonstrating the use of practice (e.g., real time, remote video feeds of a teacher using a practice).

PDS recognize the fact that early childhood educators bring a wealth of knowledge and skills to training sessions. Incorporating the experiences of early childhood educators into the introduction and illustration of a practice is an excellent way to encourage active learner participation in a training activity.

Apply and Appraise

Effective professional development includes opportunities for early childhood educators to use a practice and assess the consequence of their experiences. Role-playing and live simulations are two ways PDS engage early childhood teachers in learning to use a practice. Depending on the practice and the location where the training takes place, PDS can use a simulated classroom setting for learners to have an opportunity to learn to use a practice.

There is, however, no better way for someone to learn a practice than to have a teacher use a practice in authentic, "real life" settings with PDS coaching and feedback. This can now be easily incorporated into professional development using real time observations and feedback using iPads, iPhones, Skype, ooVoo, or other video communication devices and software to have two-way conversations between a trainer and early childhood educator.

An important part of effective training is ensuring that learners are engaged in the appraisal of their experience using a practice. What was done? What worked? What did the children do? What didn't go so well? Optimal benefits are more likely to be realized if PDS facilitate learner appraisal of their use of a practice as part of training to provide opportunities for teachers to hone their ability to not only use a practice but to learn to evaluate the consequences of using the practice.

Reflection and Mastery

Proficient use of a practice is facilitated by learner reflection on and understanding of how well a practice had positive benefits with young children. Atkinson (2012) described reflection as thinking deeply about the use of early childhood practices and how reflection contributes to deep understanding of the practices. The more deeply a person understands a practice, the more he or she will likely master use of the practice. As noted by Cahen and Superle (2009), the "purpose of professional development...is to help people learn new ways of teaching and being with children, *to take time to reflect* about these ways, and to then make significant changes" (p. 1, emphasis added). Effective professional development includes trainer-facilitated discussion of the importance of becoming a critical and reflective early childhood educator (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Trainer-facilitated learner reflection and self-assessment of mastery of a practice is accomplished by having a learner use a checklist or some compilation of the key characteristics of an early childhood practice to facilitate deep understanding of a practice (see e.g., Roper & Dunst, 2006). Effective training includes any number of ways to promote learner understanding of the key characteristics of a practice through learner self-assessment of mastery. Trainer-learner joint reflection on and discussion of the practice and its application to the learner's early childhood classroom is one way this can be accomplished.

Ongoing Learning Opportunities

Cahen and Superle (2009) describe the importance of incorporating

repeated and ongoing learning opportunities into early childhood professional development to not only enhance and reinforce proficient use of a practice but to also provide opportunities for a practice to become a routine part of early childhood education. The use of many, if not most, early childhood practices cannot be learned on a single occasion. Effective professional development is spread out over time and provides early childhood teachers multiple opportunities to use a practice with young children in their classrooms.

PDS incorporate discussions of how to obtain ongoing feedback and support on newly learned practices by establishing learning communities or communities of practice after training has been completed. Gray (2009) describes one such initiative as part of an Early Years initiative. These types of efforts can go a long way toward sustained use of newly learned practices (see also Buttkus, 2013).

Conclusion

PDS who obtain learner evaluations of their workshops or trainings provide participants an opportunity to be informed consumers of the learning opportunities. PDS who receive "high marks" from the majority of participants who attend a training would have conducted a workshop or training with a high degree of fidelity. Checklists like the one on page 10 have been used to evaluate trainer use of research-based professional development practices (Dunst, Trivette, & Raab, 2013) where high learner ratings of the use of the practices have been found to be related to increased use of the early childhood practices that were the focus of training in the ear-

ly childhood educators' classrooms (Trivette, Raab, & Dunst, 2012).

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Professional Development Checklist

This checklist includes methods and strategies professional development specialists recommend and research indicates be part of workshops, training opportunities, and other types of ongoing professional development to improve teachers' use of early childhood education practices. The checklist can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of a training activity attended by early childhood educators.

Did the professional development specialist conducting the training . . .	Yes	No
Introduce and Illustrate		
1. Describe the practice in detail and provide multiple examples of the practice?		
2. Provide the learners a checklist of the key characteristics of the practice?		
3. Use photographs, videos, or other multimedia tools to illustrate the use of the practice?		
4. Demonstrate or illustrate how to use the key characteristics or active ingredients of the practice?		
5. Use learner experiences to illustrate the use of the practice?		
Apply and Appraise		
6. Use role plays, simulations, or other exercises to have learners use the practice?		
7. Provide the learners real-life opportunities to use the practice?		
8. Engage the learners in multiple opportunities to use the practice during the training?		
9. Observe or have the learners record the real-life use of the practice?		
10. Engage the learners in evaluation of their experiences using the practice?		
Reflection and Mastery		
11. Use a performance checklist to have the learners self-assess mastery of the practice?		
12. Engage the learners in discussions about the use and benefits of the practice?		
13. Facilitate the learners' in-depth reflection on their understanding of the practice?		
14. Use real-life teaching moments to promote the learners' deep understanding of the practice?		
15. Promote an understanding of the importance of becoming a reflective teacher?		
Ongoing Learning Opportunities		
16. Jointly identify with the learners ongoing opportunities to improve their use the practice?		
17. Incorporate ongoing learning opportunities into the training over repeated occasions?		
18. Provide the learners opportunities to identify different ways of using the practice?		
19. Provide opportunities for the learners to receive ongoing feedback on their use of the practice?		
20. Engage the learners in discussions of learning communities to support ongoing use of the practice?		