# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: ONGOING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council's (NRC) 2015 report, Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth to Eight, offers recommendations to build a high quality early childhood workforce with the knowledge, preparation, and support to promote children's development and learning. As the report notes, "Preparation programs, training, mentoring and coaching, and in-service professional development are all critical direct mechanisms for developing and sustaining the knowledge and competencies of professionals." This brief summarizes what the report says about professional development and learning teachers gather during teaching practice.

## ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Even when teachers have a bachelor's degree (BA) and a state teaching license, ongoing professional development is important to help teachers grow. Professional development and training often supports teachers' knowledge, instructional approaches, and teaching specializations. Ongoing teacher professional development can take many forms. For example, professional development may come in the form of job-embedded training, distance education, or off-site training. Professional learning is most effective when it is intentionally planned, scientifically accurate, and offered to all professionals who work with children, regardless of setting.

## ACCESS TO AND EXPECTATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Many early childhood educators face different expectations for professional learning, conflicting resources, and varying levels of access to these opportunities. Not all states have well-defined professional learning systems to make sure early education professionals have access to high quality opportunities. Early childhood educators working in school-sponsored and Head Start programs are more likely to have learning opportunities during work hours and are more likely to be paid for those hours than teachers working in nonprofit and private early childhood programs—which typically have limited resources.

**Recommendation 6:** Support the consistent quality and coherence of professional learning supports during ongoing practice for professionals working with children from birth through age 8.

(IOM & NRC, 2015)

## CHARACTERISTICS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The report notes that the Professional Learning Association published several key characteristics of professional learning. These characteristics are built on the idea that effective professional development requires participants to be committed to improvement. This means that trainees need to be open to professional learning opportunities and that these opportunities should be relevant and useful to teachers on a practical level. Professional learning needs to meet the individual needs of teachers as learners—recognizing that not all teachers will need the same things. The report provided several characteristics to the professional learning community to increase teacher effectiveness, listed below.

Opportunities must

- Take place in learning communities where people are committed to self-improvement

- Have skilled leaders who develop teachers' capacity to learn and provide support systems for learning

- Offer resources that are prioritized, monitored, and coordinated

- Use data to plan, assess, and evaluate the opportunity's effectiveness

- Integrate theory and research into the learning experience

- Provide and sustain support for implementing professional learning

- Follow educator performance and student learning standards

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES AND TOOLS

Professional learning that is "ongoing, intentional, reflective, goal-oriented, based on specific curricula and materials, focused on content knowledge and children's thinking, and situated in the classroom" is effective (IOM & NRC, 2015). In addition,

different professional development opportunities, including workshops, mentoring, and learning communities, can improve teacher practice. To meet the key features of effective professional learning an opportunity must focus on

- content knowledge,

- pedagogical knowledge and learning trajectories, including goals, developmental progressions, and instructional approaches,

- active learning, including preparing, conducting, and evaluating experiences for children,

- common classroom-based challenges,

- specific curriculum materials and allows teachers to implement, evaluate and reflect,

- in-classroom coaching,

- "sustained and intensive" opportunities that are interconnected,

- Tie professional learning to the science of adult learning,

- equity and diversity concerns about access and participation, and

- practical barriers to professional learning (e.g., economic, institutional, regulatory)

Professional learning should focus on instruction, reflect research on the importance of early childhood relationships, and provide support in developing positive relationships between teachers and children.

## LITERACY

Research suggests the best way to support teachers' literacy instruction is through many different approaches. These approaches might include trainings about specific curriculum materials and intensive, ongoing in-class support provided by a knowledgeable coach. Stand-alone opportunities tend to be less effective.

## MATHEMATICS

Effective professional learning that supports math instruction often focuses on what teachers know about the content, curriculum, and the way children learn. Programs that connect teachers to each other and to coaches with expertise in children's mathematical development can be effective. Like literacy instruction, one-time isolated efforts are not typically very effective. Combining workshops, in-school supports, and modeling are more successful.

Effective professional development related to math instruction includes research-based approaches that support teachers' work and children's learning by describing the way children learn. Two programs designed to support early childhood math instruction have received a good deal of attention and demonstrated effectiveness—Building Blocks Learning Trajectory (BBLT) and Technology-enhanced, Research-based Instruction, Assessment, and professional Development (TRIAD). These approaches combine what teachers know about math learning and appropriate instructional practices.

## USING TECHNOLOGY FOR INSTRUCTION

In surveys, early childhood teachers highlight the need for professional development focused on appropriate and effective ways to use technology. This professional learning needs to take place in areas with "access to high quality software; be embedded in curricula; combine learning formats; and, include information about its benefits….and opportunities for practice, feedback, and sustained assistance"

(IOM & NRC, 2015). The Early Childhood Comprehensive Technology System included several features that resulted in positive outcomes for children and families (in multiple domains), and increased technology skills among teachers. This system integrated technology with classroom curriculum, assessed children with moderate to severe cognitive challenges using team-based technology, and provided ongoing technology training for teachers with on-site instruction assistance.

> **Recommendation 3:** Strengthen practice-based qualification requirements, including a supervised induction period, for all lead educators working with children from birth through age 8.
> (IOM & NRC, 2015

## COACHING, MENTORING, AND SUPERVISION

Coaching, mentoring, and supervision require a relationship between a practicing teacher and other early childhood professionals. There are, however, important differences in how they support professional learning. Although the terms "coaching" and "mentoring" are often used interchangeably, it's important to note that coaching focuses on groups of teachers while mentoring tends to be one-on-one. Likewise, while supervision may imply mentoring or coaching, it is often within a different role in teachers' lives. For example, supervision may come from an employer or other manager, rather than a peer, and may include evaluation that influences a professional's employment status. When early childhood professionals are evaluated in relation to their employment, they are unlikely to be open and sharing with their coaches or mentors.

Coaching and mentoring are both collaborative strategies for improving early childhood instruction. They are used to improve overall quality of instruction, but can also focus on specific content areas. Research points to coaching's potential to increase teacher knowledge and improve practice. While research shows that teachers' instructional quality often improves following coaching and mentoring, it has not been very good at identifying

what makes coaching successful. However, research has identified challenges to effective coaching, such as teachers and coaches finding time to meet, teachers' hesitating to trust or engage with the coach, and coaches focusing on immediate needs and not long-term teacher needs and goals.

> Educators can engage in self-reflection by examining their assumptions, identifying and weighing options for instruction, and planning their approach and putting it into action.

## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

An important element of coaching and mentoring are the opportunities they provide for educators to reflect on their practice. Educators can engage in self-reflection by examining their assumptions, identifying and weighing options for instruction, and planning their approach and putting it into action. While some teachers may be less willing or able to make changes, and some programs may limit reflection time, overall this process increases teachers' openness to new programs.

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Professional learning communities are collaborative groups that often include educators and administrators. Effective learning communities have been linked with improved participant outcomes, including higher attendance and greater interest in learning. These communities have several features in common—shared values and visions, collective responsibility for children's learning, collaboration focused on learning, reflective professional inquiry, openness and partnership, inclusive membership, and mutual trust and support. In addition, effective communities include teachers in multiple classrooms working with administrators and children of multiple ages. This helps support consistency in teacher expectations and supports continuity of children's experiences over time.

Professional development for practicing teachers is critical to building and maintaining high quality instruction and learning opportunities for children. Research suggests the most effective strategies are intentionally designed, aligned with curriculum, and allow teachers to reflect on their practice. Yet early educators have different expectations and access to ongoing professional learning. Often, elementary school teachers and preschool teachers in school-based settings have greater access to these resources. Teachers in other settings frequently have less access and a greater need for on-the-job training, since they are less likely to have completed a formal training program before they began teaching.

## CONCLUSION

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council's (NRC) report *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth to Eight* lays out expectations for what teachers of young children should know and be able to do to effectively support all children's learning and development. These expectations are based upon a wealth of research on in-service professional learning. This brief provides only a summary of chapter 9. Readers are encouraged to continue learning from this chapter in full.

## REFERENCE

Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC). 2015. *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation.* Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. http://www.nationalacademies.org/hmd/Reports/2015/Birth-To-Eight.aspx.

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