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## Professional learning communities for early childhood teachers

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Professional Learning Communities for  
Early Childhood Teachers

By

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Early Childhood Leadership

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Science in Education

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2014

## Professional Learning Communities for Early Childhood Teachers

Kristen Scotese

### Abstract

This study describes research related to professional development, mainly professional learning communities. The author created two professional learning communities within a child care in Queens, New York. Each group consisted of three head teachers from various cultural and educational backgrounds. Throughout the eight weeks that the professional learning communities met teachers reported that through the discussions held in the meetings they better understood some principles of education. Teachers also reported fusing what was discussed in the meetings into the curriculum they used in the classroom. This study implies that professional learning communities can be beneficial to early childhood teachers.

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## Introduction

As a former teacher I remember the feeling after an invigorating staff discussion or staff development. I was inspired and my brain was fully engaged to try something new in my classroom. At a school where I was employed early in my career staff development took place once weekly. Often an external source would come in and educate us on various early childhood topics. We would be lectured about a certain topic, shown slide shows and encouraged to try the activities in the classroom. I often would attempt to carry out the activities in the classroom and make slight advancements in my practice but my excitement would eventually fizzle. I realized there was no follow through or discussion from leaders or peers about the professional development.

I continued my career and would often take it upon myself to meet with colleagues to further discuss past staff development activities. This would help me grasp the concepts and further push me to continue to utilize what I learned in my classroom. However my colleagues and I were just scratching the surface of much deeper possibilities. I always wanted someone to push me further, to encourage my passion to deepen children's learning in my classroom. I signed up for professional development courses outside of work. I felt that it was my own job to invigorate my own passion for early childhood and discover new ways of working with the children in my care. Not all teachers encompass the motivation, time, or money to attend professional development on their own. Early Childhood leaders must find a way to invigorate passion in the teachers who reach children everyday in

classrooms. Early Childhood teachers are one of the most important influences on a child's life and it falls upon leaders to make sure they are caring for our children beyond expectations.

As I embark on my journey as an early childhood leader many questions arise on how to support teachers in furthering their teaching career within and beyond daily tasks. How do leaders hold teachers motivation to continue to educate our early childhood students? How do we keep teachers up to date on current trends in education? How as a director, can I inhibit a culture of not only student development but teacher growth as well?

I am currently a director of Happy Child Care and Learning Child Care in Queens, New York. We are one of five locations owned by the same owner. At my site there are twenty-five staff members providing care to one hundred and ten children ages six months through twelve years. Both facilities, housed in one building, are open to children from 7:30AM to 6:00PM. The school is racially and ethnically mixed reflecting the neighborhood. The community is predominantly made up of White, Hispanic and Indian children. About seventy five percent of the children receive free or reduced tuition.

The only staff development the staff receives are during staff development days, which take place about five times throughout the school year all of the owners five schools come together totaling about one hundred staff members. Typically they are split into two groups, one is for those who need CPR and first aid renewal and the other one changes depending upon the year and interests of staff. The

topics are anything from parental involvement or behavior management, to briefings on new health laws or new programs we are initiating in the schools. Professional development days like this may be necessary and helpful, however daily ongoing professional development is also needed on a regular basis at my school. Therefore I decided to engulf myself in literature regarding professional development, particularly professional learning communities. The following is what I researched, explored and discovered about this topic, my school, my teachers and myself in the process.

## **Stages of Teaching**

All teachers start their careers without knowledge or experience in the classroom, usually focusing on the day to day of teaching. They must get to know the ins and outs of classroom management, lesson planning and parent communication. It takes time and individual professional growth to become an expert teacher. Described below are the five stages of teaching as Berliner (1988) illustrates them in *The Development of Expertise in Pedagogy*.

Stage 1- The Novice teacher: Rational and a follower of rules to a T, never questioning what he is told. The novice teacher lacks control and observes experienced teachers and practices trial and error.

Stage 2 - Advance Beginner: Knowledge is building up through experience and affecting behavior. Teachers realize that rules can be bent in order to better motivate children.

Stage 3- Competent Teacher: Conscious decisions are made. Attainable goals are made. Teachers can read students abilities quickly and know how to carry on curriculum according to students needs. Teachers feel responsible for students learning.

Stage 4- Proficient Teachers: Intuitive and recognizes patterns quickly. The proficient teacher knows when a lesson is going off and deliberately will decide to choose a different way of teaching for the day. They are able to make quick decisions based on the intuition they get from students.

Stage 5- Expert Teacher: A rational. They know what to do at the right time and it comes natural to them. They go with the flow.

We must understand how a teacher grows before we can understand how professional development will help them. In order for a teacher to grow from Novice to Advanced Beginner they must gain experience for themselves. How can growth be encouraged from Novice to Expert? Professional development can enhance teacher abilities and therefore their growth. Much growth can come from learning from one another and teacher collaboration. Teachers can discuss trends in knowledge and expertise of teaching as well as take the time to observe peers in the classroom. This type of collaboration will help to develop teaching in the classroom in an effort to enhance student learning.



## **Professional Development The past**

In the late nineteenth century many were making the efforts for schools to become more factory like with a top down agenda. The administration would identify the one best way for all the teachers to work. They would train them and then teachers would be accountable for their work according to the one and only way they were trained. The thinking was done for the teachers they just had to implement. School districts became uniform and standardized (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Years later many schools are still following these procedures. They adhere to policies put into place from the administration and the government and teachers are often just carrying out curriculum and teaching for student achievement on standardized tests. Professional development that is carried out pertains to training on a curriculum that a small group of administrators have chosen. There is very little thought process on behalf of the teachers. However our world has changed drastically since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore so must our school systems.

Formal professional development days are still popular in the United States where teachers participate in activities unrelated to instructional practice. (Elmore, 2008). They are meant to meet the largest possible audience and focus on topics not specific to anyone's needs, but overall lectures on educational topics. Much of the current staff development in schools is direct teaching. An expert comes in, trains teachers in new practices, and then teachers give feedback at the end. But where is the continuation of learning? Many would argue that in this type of setting where

there is no follow up, few teachers continue to use new practices past the first week back in the classroom. We must begin to support the learning centered view of professional development.

## **Professional Development: The Why**

First and foremost our concern is that of student development. As Dennis Sparks (1997) writes, “High quality staff development is essential if all students are to achieve at high levels” (p. 18). In order to accomplish this we must have teachers with extensive knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice and the expertise to put that knowledge into practice. With constant studies of best practice and societies growing knowledge of education that means constant discussion between professionals is imperative to the growth of the educational institution. Young children’s well being and ability to achieve their highest potential is linked to qualified early childhood educators. (Torquati, Raikes, Huddleston-Casas, 2007).

In order to advance the education of our future we must support their educators. The ones who are teaching our youngest must be strong in their knowledge and application of child development and the only way to do that is through professional development. “Helping our teachers to succeed and enabling our children to learn is an investment in human potential, one that is essential to guaranteeing America’s future freedom and prosperity.” (Teaching at Risk: A call to Action. P. 11). Quality teachers are necessary in helping the young overcome struggles that many face in our current economy, such as poverty and lack of effective parenting. The size of classrooms, standards, family education and income

all effect children's learning patterns but most of all the quality of the teacher is directly related to children's learning. (Teaching At Risk, 2004).

There are endless reasons for professional development. A few of the goals are to advance student learning, explore options and gain new perspectives and ideas to implement in the classroom. Through professional development teachers can learn new methods or approaches to advance our teaching, acquire knowledge and skills that transfer to or apply to a reformed curriculum. The reformed curriculums can be independently carried out through new approaches by applying these learned practices. (Lassonde, C. & Israel, S., Pg. 6)

The capacity to improve schools already resides in schools. If leaders and teachers agree on the common commitment to change that is all that is needed. Many times schools use the excuse for lack of outside resources, however all you need is passion and conversation to spark the positive change that many schools need and it starts with professional development (Lezotte, 2005). School leaders must realize there is a great amount of potential in teachers that must be tapped into through professional development.

There is so much emphasis on state reform, curriculum, standards and teaching to the test that individual schools become lost in the shuffle. Schools have to take charge and realize what is best for the children in their care. As Richard Dufour (1991) puts it, "It should be self evident that the quality of personnel is of central importance to a school and that enabling individuals to improve their effectiveness is the key to any meaningful school improvement" (p.59). The

improvement of faculty and their developed understanding of teaching will bring the improvement of student education.

Richard Elmore (2008) states, “Instructional improvement requires continuous learning” (p. 67). Collective learning must be guided toward knowledge of instruction. Learning must be valued both as an individual and a group activity. Individual ideas must be brought to a collaborative table in efforts to grow an entire community versus a community in isolation. Richard Dufour (1991) argues that the very purpose of staff development is to encourage teachers to see things from another perspective and approach teaching differently. This is often done through new techniques or methods introduced through professional development. However staff must be willing to participate in order for change to take place.

Staff development is needed in order to create and foster successful schools. Therefore the programs must be purposeful stemming from the goals of the school. They should connect teachers and have them start thinking deeply about teaching through the schools vision. The teachers must challenge themselves to think about what they are doing and how they can make it more successful for students. Furthermore a sense of collective responsibility (Elmore, 2008) must be attained for student learning. It is not just about your set of students, but that of the entire school should be of concern to all teachers. Discussion of beliefs and practices and putting said beliefs to practice while becoming open to suggestions and criticism of others are imperative to teacher improvement, student improvement and overall school improvement.

## **Professional Development Days Take Away**

So what about those three times yearly when we close the building to the students and teachers come together for staff development? It is nice to see all the teachers talking and getting to know one another on a more personal basis, but once the actual professional development piece starts, the lecture begins or we start to brainstorm child development theories on large pieces of chart paper, is there any learning going on? Do teacher and children benefit in the long run from this type of staff development?

Structures for ongoing community development are not as prevalent as they should be in American schools. The most common form of development is the in service day which happens 3- 5 times throughout the school year and does not leave room for any intellectual community in the long term (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001). The in service days focus on new policies and procedures, tweaks in the curriculum or assessment systems. Rarely do you see staff in deep discussions with colleagues they work with on a daily basis.

One shot generic workshops or when outside experts come in for in service training who are unaware of your schools and students specific needs are insufficient professional development for staff.

“Long term professional development opportunities engage teachers in the learning process, build from their current knowledge and practices, help them examine their beliefs with intent to transform practice and allow them

to explore authentic and personal questions as they develop answers.”

(Lassonde & Israel, Pg. 7)

These one-day trainings don't even begin to go into any depth. They simply coast on top of school issues giving guiding principles of what to and what not to do. There is no clear set of priorities stemming directly from on school site issues.

According to Dufour et al. (2005), “ There is now general agreement that the most powerful staff development is job- embedded – teachers learning together as part of their routine work practice” (p. 248). A constant professional development like this creates an overall school community conducive to constant learning. Teachers as students work together in a constant effort to broaden their horizons.

One study concluded that successful implementation of innovation requires a minimum of two to three years (Portner, 2005). However other educators argue that an improvement project requires a three to five year commitment in order to have a chance to succeed (Dufour, 1991). Any school that is beginning a change project must realize that there needs to be a long-term commitment. Results do not occur overnight or at one-shot professional development days. It takes a strong and dedicated team to start up a project, endure through the long process of transformation and reach the results they worked so hard for.

## Shifts in Staff Development

As all educators are expected to continue individual improvement and schools are to support teachers in that there must also be organizational improvement along with that. There must be clear goals for staff development not deemed by the state but deemed by the school itself and based on research. Job embedded training must be implemented on a continuous basis. Teachers can utilize one another's strengths and become stronger as a school team (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). There will always be experts who can come in and create a workshop for staff, however what about the experts that work in the classroom everyday, the teachers? They must be given credit that they are experts in their own way. Administrators should welcome the opportunity for them to share their strengths in house.

Sparks and Hirsh (1997) define job embedded learning as, "linking learning to the immediate and real life problems faced by teachers and administrators" (p.64). It is an extremely powerful way of learning because when there is a challenge there can be immediate changes done to alleviate the situation. Staff development in this case should be the responsibility of all adults in the school. They are not responsible for only their own development but that of their colleagues as well.

Professional Development, otherwise known as staff development, in essence is to develop staff. However we want staff to be developed in ways that improves their students learning. Therefore we must tailor professional development to

current trends in specific classrooms and students. Effective professional development gets teachers thinking about what practices their current students would benefit from (Elmore, 2008).

## **Collaboration**

Teachers must learn from one another and create opportunities for themselves to express and share each others qualities (Caruso, 2007). Not only will they be able to express their strengths but they will learn from colleagues strengths and at the same time will build the overall school community for learning.

Part of staff working with one another can increase staff morale and decrease staff turnover.

There are ways that supervisors can directly address the social and emotional needs of staff and strive to develop their emotional competence. Helping staff find positive meaning in the work, recognize and manage their emotions and feel a sense of connection with their colleagues are steps that can lead to caring, healing and responsive early education environments (Caruso, 2007, p. 162).

Through dialogue, communication and open discussion with their peers teachers can grow not only as a teacher but as a person as well. The job of the educational institution is to support the whole person, not just the teacher. Sometimes teaching can be more emotional than one would expect and there is a lot more that goes on in the classroom than just reading and writing. Many times teachers need to discuss



their emotions in order to realize how to get past certain situations and through dialogue with another teacher in their institution a bond can be formed and trust in the community can develop.

Excellent schools are those in which teachers have empowerment, autonomy and freedom (Dufour, 1991). We must give teachers an environment in which they feel comfortable to share and experiment with their own ideas in a professional manner. Still holding them accountable for state standards and a high level of education for children but giving them the freedom to educate their students based on their student's current needs. Teachers must be made aware of certain boundaries however empowering them within boundaries will lead to school wide success.

A strong school community is not that of strong classrooms independent from one another. It is a combined effort to educate children and our teachers need to start realizing that. "Strong professional communities in schools that promote collective responsibility for student learning and norms of collegiality among teachers are associated with higher levels of student achievement" (Stoll, 2007, p. 93). Learning is a collaborative rather than an individual activity for both student and teacher. Educators learn more with others who have the same struggles. Research has shown that schools with strong teacher communities show an increased amount of cognitively challenging tasks coming from the teachers. (Borko, 2004).

Collaboration has to be something continuous and active. As Hal Portner (2005) describes collaborative- doing is when people in a community of dedicated people come together to enrich one another through direct and active participation. “There is a power in such collaboration. When we practice collaborative- doing, we share in our programs vision and goals.” (Portner, 2005, p. 33).

According to *Teaching at Risk: A call to action*,

“Collaboration could, for instance, take the form of weekly “cluster” discussions, organized by grade level or subject area and led by a designated team leader. The goal should always be to share effective, research-based techniques that can be cycled back into classroom teaching to improve student learning” (p. 12).

Sustained collaboration will flourish in communities in which autonomy and responsibility are held to high standards and individual skills and abilities are shared. Collaboration will always achieve higher results rather than individuals working alone (Schomokerp, 2005).

Teacher collaboration can be a form of collaborative problem solving. Teachers can bounce ideas off one another and deeply think about the issues at hand. Teachers who have already discussed ideas with others are more likely to take ownership of their decisions and follow through.

While collaborating with other teachers one must remember that there are several acceptable ways to respond to situations and be open to the ideas of others. As Lilian Katz (1995) outlines in “Helping others with their teaching”, paying attention to others understanding of situations at hand is crucial. Let them talk it

out and make sense of it as they share. This helps both parties acquire knowledge and insight, which can be further thought about and developed.

Linda Darling- Hammond shared results from the National center for Literacy Education, “It found that in schools where educators report that professional collaboration is routinely practiced, trust among all educators is high, and new learning about effective practices is shared much more rapidly” (2013). Therefore, small teams of teachers who support one another results in greater student achievement, positive interpersonal relationships and increased support among teachers. The self-esteem of individual staff members increases as well. When discussing things with fellow teachers it became a shared responsibility to work out problems together and teachers were never just alone in the classroom (Dufour, 1991). They collaborated in an effort to enhance an entire community of students learning.

## **Professional Learning Communities**

Professional Learning communities are the process of change from teachers in isolation to teachers in collaboration. According to Dufour et al. (2005), professional learning communities must ensure that all students learn and teachers must work together to improve their classroom practice. Deep thinking is promoted from teachers questioning one another in a collaborative effort for student achievement. Participants in professional learning communities must focus on results and how to increase student learning.

Dufour & Eaker (1998) outlined the characteristics of professional learning communities. There must be a shared mission, vision and values. All members of the

community are in agreement and passionate about these principles. They all must have a collective inquiry, an enthusiasm to question, experiment and design new methods. The group must be action oriented and believe in experimentation. They agree that learning occurs when action occurs and the best way to decide if something works is experiment. There must always be continuous improvement with a never-ending thirst for learning. Professional learning communities must be results driven. The reason for professional learning communities in schools is to improve student learning.

Teachers that are a part of professional learning communities must remember that as a part of this group they are both the student and the teacher at the same time. There must be openness from everyone in the group to share their perspective and respect that of the other participants regardless of their title and position in the larger community.

Professionals can focus on many things during the learning community time together however they must always remember to deeply think about the impact they will have on children's learning, how we can assess their learning and how teachers hold themselves accountable.

Teachers are most likely to learn from one another in their current teaching setting. Through disciplined professional collaboration, which is frequent and continuous teachers, can benefit from one another and most importantly improve student achievement. (Schmoker, 2005). Participants must realize that all teachers come from different scopes of education and walks of life. We all have a vast amount of knowledge to bring to the group and the level of differences must be respected. "Learning from colleagues requires both a shift in perspective and the ability to listen hard

to other adults, especially as these adults struggle to formulate thoughts in response to challenging intellectual content.” (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001, pg. 45)

“Through membership in a community of learners, [teachers] acquire ways of thinking and ways of being that are essential if they are to be effective advocates for children and families for who they work.” (Freidus et al., 2009, p. 187) The teachers are learning from one another in meetings through discussion applying what others have said or what they have brainstormed throughout the conversation and are trying out new ideas in their own classroom. This is the big idea and the hope is to have it come full circle. After they try it out in their classrooms they are to bring it back and reflect with their professional learning community to further the development. Freidus et al (2009), also describes how teachers who belonged to communities of learners experienced a boost in confidence and were more likely to face challenges within the classroom without fear. They took any issues to their team and knew there would be support and mentoring throughout.

As Dufour et al. (2005) discusses, “[Professional learning communities] require a staff to find common ground and to exert a focused, coherent, consistent effort over time” (pg.11). Professional learning communities will take time to become deep and thoughtful professional development that schools desire.

As part of the Professional Learning Community, Schomaker (2005) notes that leadership for schools must be utilized in the transformation of professional development to Professional Learning Communities. The instructional leader now becomes the

learning leader in an effort to provide teachers ways of working with one another to improve their own instruction. The leaders job is to monitor, discuss and guide teachers to greater student achievement.

Being a part of professional learning communities is to work with colleagues to put into practice what we already know. It is an opportunity for teachers to offer support to one another, find challenges to be solved and facilitate a cohesive professional vision. Many teachers are aware of practices and have sufficient knowledge but lack the motivation to put it into practice. Through professional learning communities teachers can support one another through difficult aspects and challenges that arise during the school year.

There are many positive outcomes of collaboration among groups of teachers and professional learning communities. Beginner teachers will learn an abundance from the veterans, while the veteran teachers will have a sense of leadership and continuing their professional development on an ongoing basis. There will be less isolation amongst teachers as they will be able to seek advice from one another in an open space. Teachers will gain a sense of satisfaction among teachers as they realize that we can better not only just students in their classroom, but in supporting other teachers can better the entire school (Villani, 2005).

## **Professional Learning Communities in Action**

According to Margaret and Gregory Johnson (1999), using teachers as resources, collaborating with one another takes weight off of administrators. Administrators of course must make sure to support and facilitate the collaboration

in order to make sure the outcome is a highly effective learning experience for teachers. Administrators must foster relationships built upon clarity, directness and honesty amongst each other and teachers.

A collaborative work environment is necessary for successful school improvement. However merely an invitation from administrators to collaborate is not enough to ignite the change within schools that we need to see. Administrators must think deeply about how to create teams made up of individuals who will collaborate well with one other.

Honesty amongst peer collaboration is crucial and creating an environment of no judgment is imperative. Honesty takes courage and candidness but in order to reform behavior this is necessary. In the end it will help to create a clear picture of behavior and is the first step to change. As one must be honest in a professional learning community they must also be open to the perspectives of others. Listening to others in the community deepens thinking and understanding of the situation by all parties. (Sparks, 2005).

Working with others must be collaborative, therefore there must be a cohesive vision in which all are aware of and agree upon. As a member of a community one must feel belongingness and acceptance. One way to do this is allow all to participate in the process of making goals and meaning for their professional learning communities. Openly discuss what all would like to achieve through participation in this learning community. “Both interdependence and a common goal are essential to developing collaborative teams and a culture of sharing.” (Dufour, 2005,

p. 240). Smart goals can be helpful in the process of development. Smart goals are strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results oriented and time bound. Goals must be focused on achievement and the process of improvement rather than just sharing work (Schmoker, 2005). While introducing the professional learning communities be open and accepting to the fact that participants may be hesitant to a new form of professional development. Set the precedent for the professional learning communities as inquiry based and let staff share their own assumptions of professional learning communities with one another in a discussion with the whole group (Dufour et al. 2005). "Know the difference between a short conversation about something specific and an in depth discussion related to student learning or a topic of choice" (Pelletier, 2006, p. 13). Encourage staff to share and discuss the level of depth of conversation.

In an effort to create the most effective professional learning community there are a few things that must be made clear first: Key elements to create this professional learning community must be identified. The learners (the teachers) and the facilitator (the director or supervisor) must be one board and the context in which the development occurs must be set. (Borko, 2004). As Dennis Sparks (2005) notes, professionals must clearly state their intentions, beliefs and values. All participants can formulate these views and share them in an open and accepting community of professionals.

Professional Learning Communities are about changing the culture within a school. It is not an easy task and takes time to alter former understandings, beliefs,



expectations and long held habits. There needs to be a shared need among teachers to encourage, and grow from one another. Leaders or facilitators of the community must constantly promote trust amongst members.

As a Learning Community, the leader as well as participants must determine many factors, which are based on the individual institution they are in as well as their individual interests. For example, length of group meetings, number of people in the group, roles within the group, group agendas and group interests. The development of a group identity and norms for interaction create a sense of communal responsibility. As professional development is crucial to teacher growth and student learning it should be built into the workday and part of the responsibilities of teachers. Time for collaboration must be fused into the school day (Dufour & Eaker, 1998), making sure that the transitions are smooth.

Administrators task must be to carve out time for teachers to begin to collaborate. Group members must assume responsibility for peers growth and development

Peter Senge (2000) delves into trademarks of professional learning communities. There must be reflective dialogue where all participants speak openly and reflectively about all issues. A unity of purpose must be clear and all members understand that there is a collective sense of responsibility for all students. There is a collective focus on student learning and openness to improvement. Teachers must be ready to share and be up for critical review. Feedback is critical to improvement. A community of trust and respect must be fostered so that teachers

feel comfortable expressing opinions and sharing mistakes for the purpose of improvement.

Teachers use the time for professional learning to discuss accounts of classroom experiences, and problems within their teaching practice (Stoll, 2007). Not only should the conversations bring up issues, but also they should elaborate, re-conceptualize and generate principles of practice to diffuse issues at hand.

## **The Change Project at Little Learners Child Care**

Professional development at my child care center is contained to the professional development days set aside where experts on a topic come in and share their findings about certain educational topics. Before, after and during these professional development days teachers come to me dreading having to sit through another long boring day of lectures. Especially the senior teachers who had expressed that the development topics run on a loop every couple of years. I often receive feedback that teachers are disappointed with the lack of successful professional development held at our school. As I began research on this topic I found that a key to professional development is the consistency and at Little Learners there is no consistent ongoing professional development for the teachers. As teacher professional development is crucial to the development of the classroom, school and community, I will be requesting six head teachers to help me explore professional learning communities.

Due to the amount of time that we are open, 7:30AM – 6:00PM, and that my research suggested embedding professional development into the school day, I did not want to ask teachers to stay late or come early. I could not pull all six teachers at the same time, therefore I decided to invite the three infant and toddler head teachers to work in one group and the three preschool head teachers in another. I felt that this would be a good place to start in order to foster a sense of community among the same age groups, they are also each groups on different floors of the building and perhaps there will be a closer similarity in what they want to discuss.

## **Infant and Toddler Professional Learning Community- Members**

Amanda, the infant teacher, is an African American female in her early 20's. She began her career as a toddler assistant teacher three years ago. She graduated college with her degree in business but decided child care was where her real passion lied. She now is a head teacher and has obtained twenty-one college credits towards her masters in early childhood education. One toddler teacher, Kate, is from Bangladesh and in her late forty's. She has been working in childcare for eleven years with this company and has only worked with infants and toddlers. She has her Masters degree in economics from Bangladesh and has nine college credits towards her masters in early childhood. She would like to continue her education, but time and money hold her back. She is a mother to two children of her own. The other toddler teacher, Nancy, is from Albania and in her late 30's. She has been working in childcare for thirteen years in many different states and has been with Little Learners Child Care for 5 years. She has her Masters degree from Albania in Secondary Science Studies. Although she loves working with children her deeper passion is for science and she is unsure if she will stay in the child care field. The variety among backgrounds and personalities in the group creates a lot of different ideas and beliefs about early childhood.

Stages of teaching according to Berliner (1988):

Amanda- Stage 2

Kate- Stage 2

Nancy – Stage 1

## **Preschool Professional Learning Community - Members**

The first teacher, Karen, is in her early 50's and has her Masters from Bangladesh in education and currently has twelve credits in early childhood education in the United States as her Masters from her country translated into a Bachelors in the US. She has been teaching at Little Learners Child Care for twelve years and before that taught in Bangladesh. She is a single mom and has three children of her own. The next teacher, Sara, is an African American female in her 30's. She has her associates in early childhood and is working towards her Bachelors with three credits left. She has three children of her own all under the age of six. She has been working at Little Learners Child Care for six years and teaches the young threes. Anna is Pakistani and in her early 40's and a single mom with two children. She has her Bachelors in Education from Pakistan and has six credits toward her masters in early childhood. She has been teaching at Little Learners Child Care for three years and was an assistant teacher for seven years in New York as well as California. She was promoted to a three-year-old head teacher last month.

Stages of teaching according to Berliner (1988).

Karen- Stage 3

Sara- Stage 3

Anna- Stage 2

Infant, toddler, and preschool teachers are all deserving of professional learning communities. Unfortunately due to teacher scheduling it was impossible to get them all together on a weekly basis. I am interested to discover the similarities and differences in these two groups as they have teachers in various stages of teaching. It will also be interesting to see the varying degrees of conversation between the groups.

## **Professional Learning Community Process**

The Professional Learning Communities meet a total of eight times. The length of the meeting would be thirty minutes with leeway of fifteen minutes to wrap up any closing thoughts. The groups would meet once weekly. The Infant and Toddler teacher group would meet on Monday's and the Preschool group would meet on Fridays because we have an extra floating teacher on those days. Ideally it would have been more beneficial to meet for more than a half hour, however due to teacher coverage and teacher schedules it was impossible.

The groups were each given three surveys (Appendices S, T, U) at varying times throughout the eight weeks to gauge the journey of the professional learning

communities. They were given out at the end of the first meeting, the end of the fourth meeting and the end of the eighth meeting. These were meant to track the group's progress and engagement level in the community. The surveys were kept anonymous and consisted of short answer questions and agree or disagree questions. The surveys were provided to gauge whether participants were enjoying, learning, growing and utilizing what was discussed in the group within the classroom.

The initial survey was meant to provide a basis for the work we would do together over the eight-week span. As the facilitator of the group I decided to make a loose agenda for each meeting as to maintain a schedule and keep us on track for all of the goals we wished to meet. All of the meetings began with icebreaker questions. Icebreakers help group members become acquainted, ease tension and allow one another to begin building trust. Icebreakers lead to a free exchange of communication and a clearer sense of communication. (Chulup & Collins, 2010). In an effort to create a sense of trust and community a different icebreaker question was asked at the beginning of each meeting and all shared as much as they wished.

Each meeting also included classroom debriefs. This was an opportunity for any member to share classroom concerns or questions stemming from the past week that they felt their peers could help them with. This would foster the overall goal of community collaboration to help all students achieve. The idea was that teachers would give one another ideas to solve various issues that came up within their classrooms. The meetings also included questions and comments at the end of

each session. That is why I allotted fifteen minutes at the end to be used to wrap up the meeting where members could bring up things that they felt needed to be clarified or somewhat further discussed. The bulk of the meeting would be left for discussion of how we can further develop student learning in our school. I utilized articles, resources and real life experiences to get the teachers talking and hopefully deepening their thinking about our students. For the remainder of this paper PLC will stand for professional learning community.

### **Infant and Toddler PLC Meeting 1** (Appendix A)

Meeting number one opened with an icebreaker of how each of them received their name. With the diverse backgrounds of these teachers we learned a lot about Kate's culture. Her first name is her father's last name and all of her sisters have the same first name. All of us were intrigued by this tradition from her culture.

I continued the meeting explaining the purpose of the group and briefly describing my research. I explained the process of our work and all participants seemed eager to be involved. After I asked each if they were willing to participate, they all agreed. We then worked together to create group norms. Unfortunately I was the only one to come up with the ideas for group norms. The teachers agreed with creating an atmosphere conducive to growth, practicing active listening, engaging in conversation and being as open as possible with your feelings, thoughts and strategies with others in order to broaden everyone's horizons. Amanda said in a jokingly manner, "I don't know how honest I can be if my boss is sitting right here."



I let them know that I was here as a colleague to help them grow and learn as a group and that I wasn't to be thought of as a boss in this atmosphere.

There were no questions or comments so we finished the session by filing out the first survey (Appendix S). The teachers were asked to fill it out without putting their name and to be as honest as possible as it would shape our group and my research. I left the room so that there was confidentiality.

## **Infant and Toddler PLC Meeting 2** (Appendix B)

The icebreaker seemed to loosen the group up and create a thoughtful atmosphere. This time we spoke about one item we would bring to a deserted island; Amanda asked if her whole class was coming or just her. Then she laughed and said, "matches." Nancy said she would bring, "my favorite book, Robinson Crusoe, it might even help me on the island." I found laughter throughout the group and personalities really coming out.

I had generated a concise version of all of the professional development survey results so that all participants knew the groups overall thoughts and what everyone felt we needed to work on. Similarities and differences in their answers and I briefly went over some other professional development resources that they could use in order to make sure all bases were covered. Kate said the resources would be helpful as she could utilize those at home at her leisure.

We went into classroom debriefs and discussed a parent from Amanda's class who had been complaining about every little thing. This affected each teacher since

the child was dropped off right at opening time and they all had had some sort of encounter with the parent. We talked about how she approached the teachers and what she was upset about and the ways in which we could answer her. Then we thought about the reasons why she complained so much. I asked questions like are her complaints valid? Are they a stretch? Her complaints were valid and each time the teachers fixed the first complaint there was a new one. However no other ever parents complained.

I brought up whether she wanted to send her child here or not, was she perhaps feeling guilty about placing her young child in group care with people she barely knew? A spark clicked in Amanda. "So this was the mothers way of dealing with putting her child in child care instead of staying home with him?" Could we offer him what his mother could one on one at home? Nancy responded, "I guess all we can do is be as pleasant as possible and show her that we treat her child with as much love as all the other children."

Then we transitioned to talking about what we would be discussing for the sessions to follow. We came to an understanding that planning activities for infants and toddlers to work into the curriculum and our lesson plans was to be the focus of our group. Nancy said, "I love toddlers more so than I ever loved preschool, but I feel I repeat my activities over and over. There has got to be more that I can do with them." I brought up the importance of repetition with children and she went on, "Oh, of course I know how important it is, but I feel that my overall loop of activities needs to be broadened. The other teachers agreed. To wrap up the meeting I gave

teachers the article, “School Readiness for Infants and Toddlers? Really? Really!” By Sandra Peterson to get them to start thinking about the importance of what they do in the classroom everyday.

### **Infant and Toddler PLC Meeting 3** (Appendix D)

The icebreaker was about the best gift they have ever received. The teachers talked mainly about family, either something a parent or one of their children had given them. They eagerly listened to one another’s personal stories. This week classroom debriefs were short with just a question about a new policy about emergency evacuations.

We dove into a discussion about the article, “School Readiness for Infants and Toddlers? Really? Really!” By Sandra Peterson. Amanda had read it, Kate had skimmed it and Nancy had said she hadn’t had time to read the article. Amanda said it was intriguing and solidified the fact that our jobs were as important as she believed. Nancy asked, “Then how come the rest of the world doesn’t value our work?” There was a long pause and then Amanda said, “It’s true that our country doesn’t care as much about infant teachers as they do professors, but I don’t think it will always be this way. I mean you know we did the NAEYC accreditation and now there’s quality stars. I hope that soon we will be recognized for our importance but right now we need to understand our importance for the children we work with and I guess that’s all we can do.” I agreed adding that many other countries have

recognized the importance of early childhood and we must educate others in our country.

I brought up supporting and protecting the brain to create a physical foundation for learning. Kate chimed in, "I always show the children positive things and stay happy around them no matter what's going on at home. That's my job, to support their smiles." Amanda brought up the importance of always talking to the children and how every year when she goes through ITERS (Infant Toddlers Environment Rating Scale) that she remembers that she always has to explain the situation to her infants. "When I pick them up I say, 'ok Charlie it's time to change your diaper' instead of just picking them up. It's part of their brain and language development."

This discussion continued and I really felt like there was a good conversation going. Everyone was participating to some extent and getting ideas from one another. Kate was taking notes that she said she was going to relay to her assistant who was new to our community. I felt that we had to start with a ground discussion about positive educational beginnings before getting into any deeper conversation. I was surprised at how much they had to say about the article. The group could have talked about this topic for more than a half hour, but our time had elapsed so I asked them all to bring a copy of one of their lesson plans for the following weeks discussion.

## **Infant and Toddler PLC Meeting #4** (Appendix E)

This icebreaker deemed itself more difficult than any other thus far. The time it took the ladies to come up with a good quality about themselves was the longest of any other icebreaker. Nancy said her punctuality and that she is so responsible, Kate said her way of nurturing others and Amanda said her sense of humor.

This meeting was going to be about lesson plans and how we can make ours better. We started out with a discussion of the purpose. Words like organization, preparation, development and setting up the week were discussed all relevant to the children in our class. Nancy brought up how even though she uses the same overall topics each year (animals and family for example); her lesson plans are different because the children in her class are different. This was a great topic to bring up as now that I have been working there for a year I have seen lesson plans to be too similar from the previous year. If we use the same plans over and over teachers will get bored and not have the same passion nor develop them specifically for the children under their care. Kate confessed to this. Nancy brought up how it is important to cater to the specific children in her room.

Amanda admitted that sometimes she feels stupid talking to herself over and over. "Infants don't talk back, rarely they smile even, but I keep talking regardless." Well, this sparked up quite the conversation and laughter between the teachers, and then the discussion of importance of language no matter how silly one may feel, the children are learning from teachers constantly talking. Nancy said that it was really

hard for her to keep up a conversation throughout the day essentially with herself. Sometimes feeling like she is just repeating herself over and over

We pulled out key words from our lesson plans. Discuss, create, explain, explore, demonstrate and pretend were ones that came up multiple times. These were words came up every week throughout all of the lessons. With only about 5 minutes left I wrapped up the session by giving out another article, "Planning Environments and Materials that Respond to Young Children's Lively Minds and giving out the Professional Development Survey 2 (Appendix T) to get feedback about how they felt our PLC was going.

I felt that this was a very successful meeting and overall the discussion was useful to all the teachers. The teachers were really comfortable in our group and were bringing up topics that needed to be discussed. I enjoyed the honesty that was coming from all of them and I felt that there was great growth that could come from these teachers participation in the group. I felt that this was a positive sign towards the PLC's success.

## **Professional Development 2 Survey Results**

The results from the Professional Development Survey 2 were what I expected. Mostly in the 1-5 (disagree to agree) there were mainly 4's. With all 5's to the statement, 'it is helpful to discuss what is going on in the classroom' and 'it would be beneficial to meet more often.' There were two 2's to the statement 'I share what is discussed in the PLC with my assistant teacher.' This got me thinking

about how to get assistant teachers more involved in the future. One response to 'what is the PLC lacking 'was time. Teachers all responded to the questions of the PLC being helpful to their teaching practice as a yes and said it was creating a positive teacher community of collaboration and learning from one another.

These results made me feel extremely confident in this community of professionals. They all seemed to enjoy working with one another as well as accepting of one another's thoughts and ideas. Although they did not always agree there was definitely respect for all in this community.

### **Infant and Toddler PLC Meeting #5** (Appendix F)

I briefly shared the positive outcomes of the survey and how I hope that we can continue to be a productive PLC. The icebreaker was to choose a song that described them. This proved to be a difficult icebreaker and I told the teachers to think about it, but to please provide me with the song within two days.

We briefly went into classroom debriefs where Nancy wanted to discuss some difficulties she was having with her assistant teacher. She stated that while the assistant teacher was good she literally had to tell her every little thing that needed to be done. The assistant teacher did not take the initiative and it was extremely frustrating to Nancy. I opened it up to the other teachers to see if they had any advice. Kate said she had once dealt with an assistant like that and had felt the same way. Ultimately that assistant was fired. I asked if Nancy had confronted the assistant about it and she replied no that she didn't want to make it awkward as

they work together all day. This took us into a discussion about how sometimes situations have to become uncomfortable in order to be resolved and we can't be afraid of awkward encounters because we have to remember it is for the good of the classroom. Amanda said that she could approach her and explain that it is time consuming for Nancy to have to tell her every day what to do so if she would take the initiative it would be a better flow for the children. Nancy said she would try this even though she was apprehensive.

I brought up the article and Amanda said she thought it was so funny how the article brought up the fact that children are attracted to the simplest things such as how they are more interested in the box that the colorful, elaborate and expensive toy came in. She said she wanted to bring more natural items and household items into the classroom to see how the children would explore with those. I added that recyclable items that parents could bring in would be great to add to the kitchen and block areas. Kate brought up how when I went in to her classroom earlier that week and said that I would like to see the teachers in the block area more often. She said she had talked to her assistant about it as to why they didn't go in there more often and they said after they build a tower four or five times they just do not know where to go from there. Amanda said, "Oh yea, sometimes I just get bored myself and don't know what else to do." I said, "Well what can we do as a group to change this?" Silence, but I let the silence sit for a while, and then Amanda said, "what about like cue cards for like areas in the classroom?" Kate said, "Yea that could be helpful for my assistant and me too." This was a good place to stop and I asked the teachers to



think about which areas of the classroom they would like to develop cue cards for next weeks meeting.

I felt so encouraged after this meeting. We had found something concrete, a goal, to develop for the classroom and through one of the teacher's suggestions. Although I had had many ideas of where we could take this I really wanted it to come from a teacher. I really feel that this community of teachers listens to one another and works well together. After this meeting I feel confident that PLC's are worthwhile!

## **Infant and Toddler PLC Meeting #6** (Appendix G)

As usual the icebreaker was fun and we got into a discussion about an incident that had happened in Kate's room earlier in the week where a little boy had fell and ended up needing stitches. We went through protocol for situations like that and how we can avoid them in the future. I brought it up because I felt like we all need refreshers about first aid as accidents can happen at any time.

Then I posed the question of what the teachers would like to make cue cards for and exactly how we could fuse it into the curriculum. I asked the teachers to come up with one area each and if we had remaining time we could continue beyond those three. We took some time to look at lesson plans and notice the least that each teacher develops in her lessons. Kate noticed she rarely expands on block area play, Amanda requested gross motor play, and Nancy only uses the water table once weekly and needs to further her activities within it.

We explored why these were areas of weakness and Nancy said she just dislikes water play because of the clean up. I acknowledged her honesty and then added that we must recognize that and overcome it for the sake of the children's explorations. Amanda said she uses the gross motor room the least because she doesn't know what to do with the infants in there. She sees the toddlers playing so freely and engaging themselves and struggles to know what to do. Kate mentioned that she gets bored and doesn't know how to engage the kids in block play.

We started on water play coming up with a list of what we can do with water. Boats, babies, bubbles was what first came to mind and then silence. I asked everyone to take a minute and write down some things they have done or would like to try in the water. Nancy came up with washing their own toys to get rid of germs, sinking and floating with objects, and big versus little and how the splash can be different using force. Amanda said adding food coloring to water and seeing the difference, pouring from different sized objects, using sponges, washcloths and household items like strainers. Kate came up with using straws to blow bubbles in cups, and large ice cubes for water play. We continued this and came up with a lengthy list.

To wrap up this session I asked everyone to start thinking of ideas for blocks and gross motor play. Again I felt very confident after this meeting and everyone was participating beyond what I ever anticipated.

## **Infant and Toddler PLC Meeting #7** (Appendix H)

As usual we started with an icebreaker this one was about senses which took us into a discussion about how sense of touch, sight, and sound are vital to our classrooms and how we can incorporate those into our cue cards. I asked if there were any classroom debriefs and brought up if Nancy had had the discussion with her assistant teacher. She said she had, but not in as much detail as we had discussed, and it did make things more awkward for the rest of the week, but the assistant did start taking more initiative and then following week things had been going well.

We dove right into block play and each teacher was throwing down ideas that I wrote into a list. Using people, cars, ramps and supplies from home. Adding different textures. Making trains, roads and tracks and switching supplies through the classrooms. Adding speed bumps, tunnels, and arches while using all the vocabulary we know. We talked about teaching vocabulary and that even though they are not responding to us they are soaking it all in. We created a long list in a short matter of time.

Then we started on gross motor play. This was the most difficult because growth happens so quickly in the first two years ability seemed so different for all age groups. So we broke it into infant and toddlers. For infants we talked about tummy time, exercises and assistance in crawling and walking. We ran out of time so I asked teachers to continue this thought process throughout the week so that we could have a jump start for our next and last session.

## **Infant and Toddler PLC Meeting #8** (Appendix I)

The icebreaker for our last session was very thought provoking, if you could change one thing about the world what would it be? Amanda immediately said, “That the world would understand the importance of our profession and not disregard early childhood.” Kate said, “war, I wish war would stop.” Nancy said, “that there wasn’t so much crime, but that leads back to positive early childhood encounters.” We all agreed that our work with young children is crucial to making the world a better place.

We jumped into toddler gross motor play and came up with walking, jumping, running, hopping, throwing and balance. After a quick discussion and list making I wanted all the teachers to create their own cue cards on index cards for each area that we had discussed this way they would each have one in their classroom that they could easily refer to during lesson planning, but also during spontaneous play.

As we all created the cue cards I thought it would be a good time to play the songs that each teacher had chosen to describe themselves in an earlier icebreaker. This was a fun way to wrap up our time together. Although they did not finish writing all the cue cards they did throughout rest time during that week. At the end they all filed out a Wrap Up Professional Development Survey.

I was absolutely thrilled with the accomplishments of this group. Although I would not say any of them are friends outside of our school I honestly felt a strong

workplace bond. They always help one another and cover one another when needed without questions. I feel that they all grew from our work together and will take our discussion back to the classroom and in their work with their children.

## **Preschool PLC Meeting #1** (Appendix J)

Meeting one opened with an icebreaker of how each of them received their name. There was a pause at the beginning so I started and then everyone else felt a little more comfortable. Everyone listened to one another respectfully. Everyone participated and elaborated on their own story more than I initially thought they would.

I continued the meeting explaining the purpose of the PLC and briefly described my research. I explained the process of our work and two of the three participants seemed interested, the other one, Sara, seemed disengaged looking down at her papers and not making eye contact. After I asked each if they were willing to participate and they all agreed.

We then worked together to create group norms. I asked the teachers to first come up with some norms but after about 30 seconds of silence I started with some ideas. They were to create an atmosphere conducive to growth, practice active listening and to engage in conversation with one another. Then Anna chimed in with, "oh, good one" and Karen with, "I agree." I added that we must be as open as possible with our feelings, thoughts and strategies with others in order to broaden everyone's horizons. The teacher who initially appeared to be uninterested, Sara,

participated adding that we should acknowledge that there might be more than one correct way of doing something and to limit defensiveness when hearing out others ideas.

Anna said she was excited to take part in this professional learning community as it was her first year as a head teacher and she could use the extra support. We finished the session by filing out the first survey (Appendix S). The teachers were told the survey would shape our group and my research and to be honest in their answers. I left the room so that there was confidentiality.

## **Preschool PLC Meeting #2** (Appendix K)

This icebreaker seemed to be troubling to Anna and Karen who had never been posed with the deserted island question. Sara understood and said she would bring a lighter for fire. I had to restate the question for the others to fully understand, but they could not think of anything so we moved on. I generated a concise version of all of the professional development survey results so that all participants knew one another's thoughts and what everyone felt we needed to work on. Similarities and differences in their answers and I briefly went over some other professional development resources that they could use on their own time.

All members said things were going well in their classrooms. We then went over the survey results and noticed that there were many areas of development we wanted to meet. Anna brought up assessment and observation and said, "I do two observations per child a month, but at this point, I just do it because I have to. I

know there's a reason for it, but there's eighteen kids and I only have one lesson plan and then two observations per month and there's just never ever enough time." This set off a chain reaction to Kate who felt the same way. Sara didn't say anything just shook her head in agreement. I took this as a sign that we should start with observations and assessment and see where that goes.

After this meeting I felt like the teachers really wanted to be apart of the group except for Sara. I hope that she wanted to be a part of the group, but I was not sure yet. I let them know that I would be giving them the NAEYC standards assessment guidelines for them to look over before the next meeting.

### **Preschool PLC Meeting #3** (Appendix M)

The icebreaker about the best gift ever received got the teachers talking about parent appreciation. Karen said a parent gave her a letter that meant so much to her. Karen and Anna got into a discussion about how our work is more valuable than any monetary gift and how much verbal appreciation means to teachers. Sara continued to nod her head in agreement and said once she received a Best Teacher Certificate that meant a lot to her.

Since I knew we were not going to be able to reach all of the vast professional development areas that they felt they needed to work on, I thought it would be a good idea to give them some more resources. I created a list of online resources as well as some local early childhood resources that they could use on their own. They seemed excited to hear about these resources, but also brought up that everything

takes time, which they have little of. We then went into a brief discussion about the things they don't have time for, but I quickly guided the group back on the topic of early childhood.

I opened up the discussion about the NAEYC standards assessment guidelines. I asked what they thought of the article and was met with silence. I went on to ask what the point of assessment was and Sara responded, "To identify any concerns that we have for children and to make sure they are on the right path for success." I paused for a while to see if anyone else would say anything. Then I added that observations should help guide our planning for children and our classroom. Met with more silence I continued to guide them through the chart of NAEYC Standards and I got nodding heads of agreement along the way.

Then we talked about objective versus subjective observations and how easily and fast we forget to be subjective. Sara brought up a story about during her first parent teacher conference she described a child's behavior as good and the parent said, "Well, what good means to you is not that same as me." We then went around the group describing various children in our classroom subjectively and then objectively. Karen had some trouble identifying subjective versus objective and it was definitely something I want to work with her further on in a private meeting.

I felt that the topics discussed were productive for the teachers involved. Everyone participated to some degree and we all became more aware of the standards that NAEYC lies out for us as far as assessment. I was frustrated with the lack of participation at the beginning however and felt that Sara knew more than



she was willing to share or speak about. Karen and Anna were actively listening, but I knew that they had not even skimmed the article and was a little distraught. I felt a lack of support from the group for one another's understanding of the material. I still felt that more background information was needed as asked them all to read, "Beyond Outcomes: How Ongoing Assessment Supports Children's Learning and Leads to Meaningful Curriculum" by Diane Dodge, Cate Heroman, Julia Charles, and Jessica Maiorca.

### **Preschool PLC Meeting #4** (Appendix N)

The meeting opened with the icebreaker, which we went through pretty quickly and no one asked follow up questions. During classroom debriefs Karen brought up her frustration with pacifiers still coming to school from three of her parents. She said she has already told them all not to bring them to school and the parents still do so regardless. I asked the group what she should do and Anna said maybe a letter should come from the administration requesting not to bring them. I said that was a good idea, however it might also be more helpful to educate the parents as to why we are requesting that pacifiers do not come to school and the damages they can cause to older children.

Then we talked about the article, "Beyond Outcomes: How Ongoing Assessment Supports Children's Learning and Leads to Meaningful Curriculum" by Diane Dodge, Cate Heroman, Julia Charles, and Jessica Maiorca. Since asking for feedback did not work at the last meeting I asked more of a specific question; if they thought mandated state outcomes from preschool were appropriate? Sara

responded that she thought it was good to have some sort of standard to reach towards, “at this age children are growing and changing so fast I don’t think standardized testing would be appropriate, but more of a broad spectrum would be helpful.” Karen replied, “I’m scared for children. Whatever happened to playing and enjoying learning?” Sara said, “Well it’s not like we are taking that away from them we are just adding standards for teachers to be aware of what children should be able to accomplish so that teachers can better guide them.”

After a long silence Anna said she really liked the quote, “[assessment is] knowledge that opens the door to learning about each child and to planning meaningful curriculum.” She said she often gets wrapped up in day to day tasks that she forgets the importance and meaning of assessment. I brought up how each of our observations connects to objectives children should be meeting and asked how often we think about that? All the teachers agreed that only when they are planning do they think of this, but as Sara said they have to begin to think about this throughout the day during play and learning times. I asked each of the teachers to bring in one observation per child and find the objective that it meets and bring this to the next meeting. I left them with the Professional Development Survey 2 (Appendix T).

After this meeting I felt like we were making some head way and that observation and assessment was the best topic for this group. However I felt that the group members did not completely get along or want to hear one another out. There was a clear difference of opinions and not much cooperation to hear one

another out. I hoped that as our journey continued we could practice active listening with one another and develop a stronger learning community.

## **Professional Development 2 Survey Results**

The results of the survey showed what I believed to be true, one survey consisted of 2's and 3's with 1 being disagree and 5 being agree. The other surveys were mainly 4 with a couple 3's. This was somewhat disheartening as I felt it was a conflict of personalities and did not know how to resolve the matter. They had all chose 4 for taking something back to the classroom, which was positive. In the short answers one teacher wrote that it is refreshing to rediscover something she learned a long time ago, observation. Another teacher felt that she would like to visit the other teacher's classrooms to see different types of teaching strategies. I still felt as if we were not all on the same topic and needed to figure out a way to bring them back to observation and assessment and encourage them further with this as a group.

## **Preschool PLC Meeting #5** (Appendix O)

During classroom debriefs Anna brought up how helpful this has been and how she is looking forward to parent teacher conferences coming up soon. She feels confident that she has a better understanding of assessment and its purpose. Karen brought up an issue with her assistant that sparked a lot of feelings among the group. "My assistant had not been helping out as much as she used to and when I ask her to do something and its not done and I confront her she says she forgot." As

a group we all talked about how this has happened to each other before. We discussed strategies to help her approach the assistant in a sensitive manner.

Everyone took out their observations of the children in their class and they each read them aloud one person at a time. We talked about the different standards that each met and what would be the next step for the child. I asked, "How as teachers can we support this child to meet the next standard?" Closer to the end of the meeting Sandra asked, "how can I possibly do this for each child every week or every two weeks and add it into my lesson plans. " Karen responded and said, "Well I don't think we have to do each child's specific needs in all domains every week. All children will learn from the lesson plans we implement each week and we will still work with children on a daily basis but we can't possibly put it all in writing each week, but we know what we're doing. Right?" I agreed with her and added that we use our observations to create a picture of a child and this is developed over time throughout the various domains.

I wanted to incorporate what they had responded to in the surveys I asked them to go into each other's classroom over the course of the next week and observe a child they are unfamiliar with and connect this to an area of development. This was meant to help them practice observation in an unfamiliar environment and also to stimulate a sense of community while getting a chance to experience how another teacher handles her classroom.

After this meeting I felt somewhat better about the group they heard each other out this meeting and showed more support for one another. Being that it was

already meeting #5 I was still concerned because we hadn't made as much progress as I would have liked. I hoped that spending a little time in each other's classrooms would help build a feeling of unity and a greater depth to our PLC.

## **Preschool PLC Meeting #6** (Appendix P)

During classroom debriefs teachers asked many questions about parent teacher conferences. Sara had brought the form to share with us because she was concerned about how to word the conference properly with one child's parents who have been known to take things the wrong way. Anna told her be sure to start with the positives. Sara shared that there was only one real negative in which the child runs around the classroom uncontrollably when the parents are there, but throughout the day he is well behaved and follows instructions. We brainstormed ideas to help Sara and decided to make it a goal for him to be calm at drop off and pick up times.

The teachers seemed very excited to share their classroom visits with one another and myself. The teachers did not share any constructive criticism with one another they only had positives to say. However, Sara did mention that it is impossible to get a clear picture of a child with just a half hour in the classroom. This showed that through the two written observations per month we can't possibly have an understanding of the child, but because the teachers are there for eight hours a day with children have a clear sense of the child's curricular needs day in and day out.

I wanted the teachers to deeply think about the children in their classroom and create a detailed lesson plan for those children including individual planning for individual children. I asked the teachers to read “Which Way Should We Go From Here? Some Thoughts About Early Childhood Curriculum” by Stephanie Feeney.

## **Preschool PLC Meeting #7** (Appendix Q)

Classroom debriefs included a discussion of the preparation of parent teacher conferences. The teachers shared about certain objectives for various children in their classrooms and asked their colleagues and myself if they felt that they were appropriate.

We dove into the article and Anna brought up why we teach children the curriculum that we do. She believed it was because teachers thought that children were ready for the topics that teachers presented. Karen added that it was important for teachers to create opportunities for children to explore.

After this I asked the group to create a web of objectives they felt that their class was lacking, utilizing observations that they had done over the past month. For the remaining time of the meeting the teachers worked on this web and utilized one another for ideas.

## **Preschool PLC Meeting #8** (Appendix R)

The ice breaker for this meeting seemed thought provoking, if you could change one thing about the world what would it be? Sara opened up and said, "That people wouldn't see color, like the color of your skin." Anna said, "Like the kids." Sara said, "Yea even more for the kids. I just want the best for my kids and I feel that color still puts them at a disadvantage." Karen said, "People not caring, especially parents, if you make a child you should be willing to nurture and be concerned for that child. I find too often parents give the excuse they don't have time to come to conferences, but then how will they learn about their child's growth in school." Anna said, "I agree."

I posed a challenge for the group for the last meeting, I wanted to choose one of our class webs and create a lesson plan for one of the classrooms for the following week. I put their names in a bag and chose Anna's therefore we would work on Anna's class. I had Anna read to us the observations from the weeks passed and she told us she was planning a lesson on seeds for her three year olds. The teachers really came together for this last meeting and worked collaboratively. For instance Sara said, "Well in this observation Elizabeth seems to be having trouble jumping. Why don't you use the book 'Jumping Bean,' that's what it's called right? I have it in my room you can borrow it. Anyways you could use this in the gross motor room as an activity one day to encourage jumping and teach about planting." Together we came to a really well thought out lesson plan with Anna needing to finish it up a

little on her own before the next week. We wrapped up by taking the final survey (Appendix U).

I finally felt like this group of teachers was making some head way and working together to dig deeper and it was the last meeting. But PLC's is something I will continue in the fall and perhaps there will be deeper thinking now that we have established a community.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the eight meetings I felt that there was clear progression for most of the teachers involved. Before we started there was a lack of community in both of the groups. No real discussion about what we did all day in any capacity. Although all of the teachers were working day in and day out, creating lesson plans, writing observations, meeting with parents, there was something clearly missing and that was teacher collaboration. What was created through our professional learning communities was a sense of belonging, conversation about early childhood and development of the beliefs and understanding of how to enhance student learning.

I saw extreme growth in the infant and toddler teachers. I felt that there was a learning bond that was created and they can now depend on one another for more than just bathroom breaks. We got into discussions and forums about the importance of our work which they formally had not discussed before and is of utmost importance. We discussed how as teachers we are important and necessary



in our ever-changing world being the first teachers that these children meet. One of the most important things these teachers got out of this was just talking about issues with one another. Taking the time to talk things out and using colleagues to assist in this process is helpful.

The group ended up coming up with a task for themselves to have something to take back to the classroom and use during center time in areas they felt they were weak. They all worked together to create an end product and felt successful being able to utilize it. I felt that since one of the teachers came up with the idea it was much more meaningful than if I had given the teachers a task. All the teachers felt confident that this was something that would enhance their lesson plans, their teacher and their students learning.

The preschool group had a slower start. Not all of the teachers seemed to be in agreement and were not exactly accepting of one another at the beginning. It was not until about the sixth session that all participants felt more comfortable. Although we were not exactly thinking deeply, I do feel that we set up a good base for what can be further developed in the future. I also feel that each of the teachers did gain knowledge and rejuvenation from the topics and discussions.

The elements that went into our weekly meetings, the icebreaker, classroom debriefs and questions at the end, proved to be helpful and something that the teachers looked forward to in the meetings. The icebreaker was a way of making teachers feel comfortable and get to know one another on a personal level beyond our link of early childhood educators. I particularly felt that with this group of

women they needed something beyond education to bond them. Evidently the icebreakers often took us back to the topic of early childhood education and conversations about our students past and present and experiences in the classroom. I knew from private discussions that classroom debriefs were helpful for all the teachers. Often times teachers are going through the same troubles, they just need an opportunity to bring it up in front of other teacher in order for them to work it out out loud.

The articles prompted discussions but we only had time to scratch the surface of what was laid out in the articles. It was a good place to start, but going forward and continuing this process is necessary in order to deepen these teachers thinking. I also think that using articles for background knowledge is essential for a deeper understanding of what needs to happen for children to learn. Since many of these teachers have not taken many courses on early childhood it becomes my responsibility as a supervisor to somehow educate them on the needs of children.

The infant and toddler PLC members created a connection rather quickly with one another whereas the preschool PLC members had a more difficult time hearing each other out. I feel that this was simply due to personality clashes as well as personal levels of comfort and openness. In time I feel that this is something that could be worked on and by the preschool PLC meeting #7 members were more interested in what one another had to say than in the first meeting.

I think that when we come back to school in September for our professional development day I would like both PLC's to present what we did to the rest of the

staff. I would like to as a whole staff, twenty five members, come up with how we can create PLC's for head teachers and assistant teachers in some capacity. When the team comes up with the ideas, as the infant and toddler PLC did the outcome is the greatest. Therefore I want to work with staff at our large professional development meeting to decide how we can make PLC's a common phrase in our community. Starting this process at the beginning of the year will give the teachers ample time to explore all areas of strengths, interests and weakness. A great way to end the school year would be for all of the groups to share what they learned and how they grew from their PLC's at a professional development gathering.

As a leader I feel that I have grown throughout this process. I recognized silence and was able to let it sit, a previous weakness for me. Letting silence sit gave the teachers a chance to think and reply without my thoughts interfering. I have also realized that it is possible to make time for professional development weaved into the school day. I also released control as a leader and practiced being a colleague within the atmosphere where I am a supervisor. I feel that after this experience I will to give control to PLC's within my school and make drop in appearances to make sure they is productivity, but won't need to sit in on all of them.

My hope is that the teachers gained a better sense of community amongst colleagues and feel as if they can learn from one another. It is important not only to reach out when in need but also to reach out on a regular basis and discuss education in general. Overall I feel that professional learning communities are an

effective way form of professional development to encourage inquiry into the field of early childhood education while continuing to make positive strides for students.

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Appendix A

**Infant/ Toddler Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 1 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* How did you get your name?

*Purpose:* Change research project

Journey with your colleagues over time – once a week for ten weeks

During this professional learning I am not evaluating you, I am learning and growing with you.

Discuss issues related to teaching, the classroom, students, parents and anything else that the group wants to discuss.

*Group Norms:*

There will be a few surveys and questionnaires that you will be asked to fill out in order to monitor this change project.

*Questions or Comments*

*Survey:* Be honest. I will not be sharing this with anyone. Its purpose is to help better tailor our time together to your specific needs.

Appendix B

**Infant/ Toddler Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 2 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* Island

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Professional Development Survey Results:*

Similarities in definitions

Participation- Introduce the Quality Stars Scholar Application

Email lists

Conferences/ Speakers

Libraries/ Museums

*What will we explore?*

At the end of this session we will decide on what we would like to focus on for the next 8 sessions.

*Decisions*

*Questions or Comments*

*Article distribution:*

*'School Readiness for Infants and Toddlers? Really? Really!' By Sandra Peterson*



## Appendix C

# Professional Development Survey Results

### Definitions of professional development

- Growth as an educator
- Professional growth as an educator
- Growth and development of skills and different knowledge

### Participation in Professional Development

#### Large Impacts: Courses and workshops, Degree Program

Everyone would like to participate in more professional development

Some level of need: Teaching Students with special needs, Knowledge and understanding of age group, curriculum, lesson planning, school policies and procedures.

#### Individual Goals: Create good relationships with children and parents

Become more knowledgeable and well rounded.

Broaden professional knowledge and fulfill all children's needs.

#### Assistance to reach goal: Colleagues sharing their ideas and thoughts.

Sharing of knowledge.

Sharing experiences.

#### Group explorations:

Planning activities for infant and toddlers.

Planning for infant and toddlers.

Partnership with families and different organizations.

Appendix D

## **Infant/ Toddler Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 3 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* What is the best gift you have ever received?

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Feedback from Article*

Initial Thoughts

One thing you agree with/ Disagree with

Most important area of development?

Take backs to the classroom

*Questions or Comments*

*Activity:* Next weeks lesson

Appendix E

**Infant/ Toddler Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 4 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* Name one thing you like about yourself?

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Lesson Plans:*

What is the purpose of lesson plans?

Share out lesson plans

Similarities

How can we improve lesson plans?

*Questions or Comments*

*Activity:* Infant/ Toddler activities –read article, Planning Environments and Materials that Respond to Young Children’s Lively Minds

*Professional Development Survey 2*

Appendix F

## **Infant/Toddler Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 5 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* What one song describes you?

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Feedback from Article*

Initial Thoughts

One thing you agree with/ Disagree with

Most important area of development?

Take backs to the classroom

*Questions or Comments*

*Activity:* Look into your old lessons and see where you need to expand the most on.

Appendix G

## **Infant/ Toddler Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 6 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* What are you most afraid of?

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Activities for children in several domains:*

Domains reached the least by teacher influenced activities.

Discuss and reach consensus about plan for going forward.

What can we develop that all teachers can use in the classroom?

*Questions or Comments*

Appendix H

**Infant/ Toddler Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 7 Agenda

*Icebreaker: If you had to give up one of your senses, which would it, be?*

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Create cue cards for teachers to use in varying centers:*

*Continue to plan for Gross motor play, Water Play, Blocks ->  
creating cue cards to promote complex thinking*

*Questions or Comments*

Appendix I

## **Infant/ Toddler Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 8 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* If you could change one thing about the world what would it be?

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Create cue cards for teachers to use in varying centers*

*Professional Development Wrap Up*

*Thank you*

Appendix J

## **Preschool Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 1 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* How did you get your name?

*Purpose:* Change research project

Journey with your colleagues over time – once a week for ten weeks

During this professional learning I am not evaluating you, I am learning and growing with you.

Discuss issues related to teaching, the classroom, students, parents and anything else that the group wants to discuss.

*Group Norms:*

There will be a few surveys and questionnaires that you will be asked to fill out in order to monitor this change project.

*Questions or Comments*

*Survey:* Be honest. I will not be sharing this with anyone. Its purpose is to help better tailor our time together to your specific needs.



Appendix K

## **Preschool Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 2 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* Desert Island

*Professional Development Survey Results:*

Similarities in definitions

Participation- Introduce the Quality Stars Scholar Application

Email lists

Conferences/ Speakers

Libraries/ Museums

*What will we explore?*

At the end of this session we will decide on what we would like to focus on for the next 8 sessions.

*Questions or Comments*

*Article:* NAEYC standard for assessment

## Appendix L

# Professional Development Survey Results

### Definitions of professional development

Learning in early childhood education including proper training and proper activities for children.

Help teachers learn and refresh memory of professional skills.

Learning strategies to help reach goals and learn new ideas

### Participation in Professional Development

Large Impacts: Courses and workshops, Research on education topics

Everyone would like to participate in more professional development

Some level of need: student observation and assessment, classroom

Management, knowledge and understanding of age groups, student discipline

Individual Goals: Want to be a good teacher. To develop fun and creative lessons for my students, finish degree in early childhood and build positive relationships with children and parents.

Assistance to reach goal: Utilize director, Brainstorm together, Use coworkers experiences to further discuss all areas.

Group explorations: Build new ideas on how to encourage children to utilize all centers. Learn more about art and how to incorporate different art styles into my art curriculum. Discuss ideas about all areas of development and strategies in the classroom.

## Preschool Professional Learning Community

*Spring 2014*

Session 3 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* What's the best give you have ever received?

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Student Assessment:*

Initial thoughts  
Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?  
NAEYC Standard for assessment

*Observations*

Objective vs. Subjective Records

When observing children it is tempting to interpret their behavior in terms of "good" or "bad," "pleasing" or "displeasing", etc. It is important to describe or record objectively what the child does or says without interpretation. Accurate records are more usable for later interpretation.

A Subjective Record

Mary is playing with Jane. They are not playing well together because Jane keeps pestering Mary. They play only a short time before Mary goes to play alone. She does not like to play with Jane.

An Objective Record

Mary and Jane are building a block house. Jane knocks over the house. Mary puts it up again. Jane knocks it over a second time. Mary says, "I'm not going to play anymore." Mary goes to the doll corner, picks up a doll, and rocks it.

*Questions or Comments*

*Activity:*

Beyond Outcomes: How Ongoing Assessment Supports Children's Learning and Leads to Meaningful Curriculum by Diane Dodge, Cate Heroman, Julia Charles, and Jessica Maiorca

Appendix N

## **Preschool Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 4 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* Name one thing you like about yourself.

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Feedback from Article*

Beyond Outcomes: How Ongoing Assessment Supports Children's Learning and Leads to Meaningful Curriculum by Diane Dodge, Cate Heroman, Julia Charles, and Jessica Maiorca

Initial Thoughts

Things you agree with/ Disagree with

State standards for preschool: Will enhance student outcomes?

Take backs to the classroom

*Questions or Comments*

*Activity:* One observation on each child. Handwritten connected to an area of development.

*Professional Development Survey 2*

Appendix O

## **Preschool Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 5 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* What one song describes you?

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Observations*

Share observations

Are they objective?

What are the observations telling us about the children?

How do these relate to areas of development?

How can we translate these observations into something positive for the children?

*Activity:*

Visit each other's classrooms during center time and observe the children. Correlate observations to areas of development. Take notes to discuss at next meeting.

Appendix P

## **Preschool Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 6 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* What are you most afraid of?

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Classroom visits:* Positive feedback for teachers

Any constructive criticism?

Observations: Similarities/ differences of different teachers  
views

*Curriculum Planning:* Based on observations

Create a detailed lesson based on observations from last  
week.

*Article:* Which Way Should We Go From Here? Some Thoughts About Early  
Childhood Curriculum by Stephanie Feeney

<http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200609/FeeneyBTJ.pdf>

Appendix Q

## **Preschool Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 7 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* If you had to give up one of your senses, which would it, be?

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Feedback from Article*

Which Way Should We Go From Here? Some Thoughts About Early  
Childhood Curriculum

Initial Thoughts

Things you agree with/ Disagree with

Take backs to the classroom

*Curriculum Planning*

Interests/needs of children -> Create a web

Look at observations

Appendix R

## **Preschool Professional Learning Community**

*Spring 2014*

Session 8 Agenda

*Icebreaker:* If you could change one thing about the world what would it be?

*Classroom Debriefs*

*Planning leading into lesson plans*

Look back at NAEYC Standard for assessment

Short term goals for individual children

Incorporating them into the lesson plan

*Create a lesson plan together*

*Professional Development Wrap Up*

*Thank you*



## Professional Development Survey 1

*Professional Learning Communities in Early Childhood*

*Spring 2014*

1. When you think of professional development what comes to mind?

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2. During the past year, did you participate in any of the following kinds of professional development activities, and what was the impact of these activities on your development as a teacher?

Participation?		<i>If yes to participation, What impact?</i>		
Yes	No	<i>No impact</i>	<i>Some Impact</i>	<i>Large Impact</i>

Courses/ Workshops

Education  
Conferences and  
Seminars

Degree Program

Online Training

Visits to other  
schools

Teacher networks

Research on  
educational topic

Mentoring/ Peer  
observation

3. In the last 12 months did you want to participate in more professional development than you did?

Yes

**OR**

No

3b. If 'Yes' in the previous question, which of the following reasons best explain why you did not participate in more professional development than you did? Please mark as many choices as appropriate.

I did not have the pre-requisites (e.g. qualifications, experience, seniority).

Professional development was too expensive/I could not afford it.

There was a lack of employer support.

Professional development conflicted with my work schedule.

I didn't have time because of family responsibilities.

There was no suitable professional development offered.

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

4. In your opinion, how can your and the schools professional development be improved?

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5. Thinking of your own professional development needs, indicate what level of need you have for each category.

Please mark one choice in each row.

No need at all

Some level of need

High level of need

Curriculum

Student  
observation and  
assessment

Classroom  
Management

Knowledge and  
understanding of  
age group

School Policies  
and procedures

Teaching students  
with special needs

Student Discipline

Teaching in a  
multicultural  
setting

Parent  
communication

Lesson planning

Team building  
with colleagues

Other:

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6. What are some goals you have for yourself as a teacher?

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7. How can your colleagues assist you in these goals?

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8. As part of a professional learning community with your fellow infant/ toddler teachers what are some areas of your teaching career that you would like to explore during our time together?

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*Thank you for taking the time to fill this out. At any time throughout our journey together if you think of any other areas of development you would like to explore please do not hesitate to share them with us.*

Appendix T

## Professional Development Survey 2

### *Professional Learning Communities in Early Childhood*

*Spring 2014*

Please check off on a level of 1-5 if you agree or disagree with the statements about the professional learning community (PLC) we have created.

1	2	3	4	5
(Disagree)				(Agree)

The PLC is meaningful.

The PLC is worth my time.

The information discussed in the PLC is helpful to my teaching practice.

I feel comfortable discussing my thoughts with my group.

Other members of the PLC share valuable thoughts.

The team is benefitting from the discussions.

I am benefitting from the discussions.

It is helpful to talk about what is going on in my classroom with my fellow teachers.

I enjoy getting to know my fellow teachers better.

I share what is discussed in the PLC with other co workers (assistant teachers).

I would like to receive more literature or articles having to do with the context of the discussion.

I would be beneficial to meet with the PLC more often.

I have tried something new in the classroom that I discovered in the PLC.

What is our Professional Learning Community lacking?

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Do you feel that Professional Learning Community is helpful to your teaching practice? Why or why not?

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Do you feel that the Professional Learning Community is helpful to the team?

Why or why not?

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Appendix U

## Professional Development Wrap Up Survey

### *Professional Learning Communities in Early Childhood*

*Spring 2014*

Please check off on a level of 1-5 if you agree or disagree with the statements about the professional learning community (PLC) we have created.

1	2	3	4	5
(Disagree)				(Agree)

The PLC is meaningful.

The PLC is worth my time.

The information discussed in the PLC is helpful to my teaching practice.

I feel comfortable discussing my thoughts with my group.

Other members of the PLC share valuable thoughts.

The team is benefitting from the discussions.

I am benefitting from the discussions.

It is helpful to talk about what is going on in my classroom with my fellow teachers.

I enjoy getting to know my fellow teachers better.

I share what is discussed in the PLC with other co workers (assistant teachers).

I would like to receive more



literature or articles having to do with the context of the discussion.

I would be beneficial to meet with the PLC more often.

I have tried something new in the classroom that I discovered in the PLC.

Overall, do you feel that the Professional learning community helped you increase skills in the classroom? Why or why not?

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If we continue professional learning communities, how do you feel we could enhance the meetings/ the take back to the classroom?

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