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Honoring Knowledge and Experience: Highlighting Caregiver Voices in a Professional Development Curriculum

Margie Brickley
Bank Street College of Education

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Cover Page Footnote

The professional development experience would not have been possible without the dedication of Robin Hancock, Virginia Casper, Allison Tom-Yunger, Lara Seligman, Rebecca Newman, Yakeisha Scott, Cecilia Traugh and many others who have contributed along the way. Sincere thanks to all the caregivers and community members we have learned from and alongside.

Honoring Knowledge and Experience: Highlighting Caregiver Voices in a Professional Development Curriculum

Margie Brickley

Infant-toddler care, family child care, and training programs for those working with very young children and their families have much in common. The misconceptions, biases, and lack of resources they suffer from often seem insurmountable.

Professional development can address some of these issues, but too often, the approach is to offer one-off workshops on a variety of topics—art activities one month, environments the next. Each workshop is usually led by a different practitioner with their own philosophy of child care. There is rarely a through line of theory or practice that participants can grasp to build their own practice. The sessions can be lecture based or hands on, but most seem to start from the perspective that the participants are there to be “filled up” with new knowledge.

So what happens when a team of people join with a community to create a professional development program from a strength-based perspective? At Bank Street College of Education in New York City, an opportunity evolved, with funding from the Guttman Foundation, to create such a professional development experience for people working with young children and their families. Participants included family child care providers (people who care for a group of young children in a home-based setting) and child care center-based staff working with infants and toddlers. (The Guttman Center program is described in more detail in the article by Dr. Robin Hancock in this issue.) The model includes professional development course sessions as well as coaching.

Working in and with the community in the East New York neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, Dr. Hancock, Dr. Virginia Casper, and I were able to develop a meaningful experience for people who take care of infants and toddlers,¹ the child care providers who nurture young children (and their families) while laying down a developmental foundation that we believe can last a lifetime.

The process involved community input. Dr. Hancock, who directed the project, and the curriculum development team held focus groups in the community, had discussions with individual caregivers, and spoke to experienced directors and community members to gain insight into the needs and interests of the child care providers who would attend the professional development courses.

The professional development experience was created by incorporating the community-identified needs into sessions that focus on development, observation, relationships, and context (the lived experiences and location—social, geographical, and temporal—of the children, families, and caregivers). Dr. Casper

1 I use the terms caregiver and child care provider, acknowledging that they are imperfect words to describe those that work with very young children and their families.

and Dr. Hancock contributed activities and an invaluable set of checks and balances, as we wanted to always be elevating the voices of the caregivers and honoring their knowledge and experience.

The philosophical underpinning at Bank Street, in both the children's programs and the graduate school, is the developmental-interaction approach (DIA). Nager and Shapiro (1999) describe the DIA philosophy as one that "focuses on human development, interaction with the world of people and materials, building democratic community, and humanist values" (p. 5). The DIA emphasizes the connection between a child's emotional (and social) world and their cognitive world. Teachers are "expected to be attuned to what the child [brings] to the classroom" (p. 17) and build a curriculum based on that information along with their knowledge of developmental themes. There is also an emphasis on connections and communication with families. This approach was central to building the professional development course and the coaching model.

In the Bank Street Graduate School of Education, teaching about the DIA includes modeling it in courses and in the supervision of students' fieldwork experiences. Some of the key principles include differentiating learning to meet individuals and groups where they are; using reflective practice to deepen understanding of self and others; learning collaboratively; explicitly addressing implications of race, gender, oppression, power, and equity; and using an inquiry-driven process in which questions emerge from practice (Blum-Stefano et al., 2019).

The curriculum for the course also reflected the more than 30 years of experience Bank Street has in working with graduate students in the Infant and Family Development and Early Intervention Program (the "Infancy Program"). The instructors—Virginia Casper, Allison Tom-Yunger, and Lara Seligman—were well-versed in the Bank Street approach to adult education.

In the Infancy Program at Bank Street College, the faculty's way of teaching is to engage caregivers in a process that encourages curiosity, builds resources, and increases self-awareness. The approach models a parallel process of having a respectful, nonjudgmental, compassionate mindset as we work with the caregivers that mirrors the way we would like them to work with children, families, and colleagues. At the core is a relationship between the instructor and the caregivers that allows everyone to take risks and offers the caregivers support as they grow and change.

Intellectually, caregivers are challenged to make sense of what they are learning and incorporate it into their practice, rather than to just adopt an existing model. The use of the DIA as the philosophical underpinning of our work means that the caregivers come to a deep understanding of development and also learn the importance of context. The context includes the place and time in which the approach is being used; the environment, materials, and activities the caregiver chooses; the particular group of children and families in the program; and, of equal importance, the caregivers themselves.

The constant connection between theory and practice allows caregivers to build a working theory of how children learn, what families need, and who they themselves are as caregivers of young children. In

this approach, theory informs practice, and practice is a critical source of information for the creation of theory. Practice becomes the source of understanding as participants develop the arts of observation and description of both children and practice itself.

One central tenet of this work is to trust the process. The instructors and coaches must believe that by setting the stage, offering opportunities for meaningful dialogue, and engaging in a learning relationship with participants, they create conditions under which the caregivers will get what they need when they need it. Important issues will be raised and examined, and this is where true learning and change occur. This approach creates independent and interdependent thinkers who can move forward to support each other's learning through an ongoing network.

The professional development curriculum is based on the premise that the child care providers come into the course with knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and values. The course and coaching are designed to honor those experiences and build upon them. Each session includes opportunities for participants to share what they know and to consider how they came to that way of thinking about children, families, or early childhood education. For example, in one session, a participant shared her background in science. During the coaching sessions that followed, she was encouraged to think about how she could bring that background into the environment and curriculum for the children in her family child care home (Newman, coaching notes). This echoes the DIA model where a child care provider is sensitive to what a child's interests and experiences are and incorporates them into the curriculum. By seeing this modeled with a participant and engaging in class discussions about it, the caregivers were able to experience for themselves what this practice would feel like for children and families.

Each session also includes multiple access points. A mixture of discussion, small-group work, hands-on experiences, video presentations, and activities such as observing a focus child allows the child care providers to engage with the material through their strongest mode of learning and also reinforces concepts by giving the participants many opportunities to apply what they know. The knowledge is co-constructed by the participants, the instructor, and the coach.

The curriculum is a living document, subject to change based on the needs and interests of a particular group of participants as well as the strengths and interests of the instructors. This creates a dynamic professional development experience where all members of the community are active participants in guiding the learning agenda.

While the curriculum is always evolving, there are core experiences that are cornerstones of the professional development experience. A relationship-based caregiving lens, supported by tenets of Emotionally Responsive Practice (Koplow, 2002), was used to ground our work with infants and toddlers. Developmental understanding and family engagement were identified as areas that participants wanted to continue to become more knowledgeable about during the program. Additionally, sessions and activities were designed to increase self-awareness and build on existing strategies for handling stress that allow caregivers to be available to children and families.

One of the goals of the program was to have participants bring their whole selves into the professional development experience—that is, to feel that they could be authentic and share their life experiences, knowledge, culture, and language with the group. An opening activity, given to us by Lesley Koplow and the team at the Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice at Bank Street, was to have the participants, the instructors, and the coach each create a quilt square that symbolically represented them. Each person told the group the story of their square. The squares were then combined to form a quilt that was displayed at graduation. The instructors noted: “The squares are so personal and memorable. Themes of family and faith/spirituality were present. Some participants depicted their own children and children they teach/care for on their squares” (Tom-Yunger & Seligman, class session notes).

Of equal importance is the ability to feel the depth of the relationships in relationship-based care. Later during the professional development experience, the participants engaged in a “love memory” reflection created by Dr. Casper. She invited them to

Imagine someone who means a lot to you—perhaps one of the most important people in your life, even if they are not currently alive or even if they live far away. Keep your mind open to whatever image comes. This person could be an adult or a child. Imagine someone you love(d) deeply.

The participants were asked to recall their sensory memories—the touch, smell, sound, and appearance of that special person. This activity allows participants to (re)connect to their own loved ones in the way that the children in their care love their special adults. The exercise helps them realize how babies can miss a loved one, even if they aren’t yet able to have a full picture of that person in their mind. (Sensory memory and cognitive representation begin to integrate in the second and third year of life.) The instructors and participants noticed the parallels to the work with infants and toddlers and their families:

One participant spoke about caring for her father and his hesitance this week to go to an adult day program. Once again I was struck by the ease in which some participants share such personal stories. This led into a conversation about parent support with saying goodbye. How parents don’t want their children to see them leave and they often stay at the center or home-based daycare for a while. We recognized how the child, teacher, and parent not knowing when the parent will be saying goodbye can be dysregulating for everyone. This will be an important connection to make at the beginning of Session 6 (what it was like for the participants to say goodbye to their own children) so that participants can connect their experience to what the parents they work with might be going through. (Tom-Yunger & Seligman, class session notes)

Another area that the instructors, participants, and the coaches collaborated on was observational skills. Practicing observations and paying attention to children, materials, environments, and interactions became a foundation for talking about development in a deeper and richer way than it is presented in an “ages and stages” approach. Many participants were already knowledgeable about development through experience and/or previous coursework. Shared observations provided common experiences for discussions about children and how those children moved in the world. This led to each participant choosing a focus child and learning more about who that child was at that moment. For this activity,

we used a modified version of the “Hello My Name is...” format designed by Catalano (2002). Here is an example:

One participant selected her focus child (2 years, 11 months) because she thought he would be a challenge. She identified that parents have concerns about their child’s language. She explained significant shifts in how she interacts with her focus child and how these shifts have made a significant difference in her relationship with the child, how she understands him and how he relates to her. She explained that her focus child would often cry and while she used to notice it she wouldn’t think about why he was crying. By focusing on him she started to pay attention to why. The participants also identified that since she has been paying closer attention to him and being more responsive to him that he is seeking her out more in times of distress and times of playfulness. She says that she feels connected to him and that he is more connected to her now and that she is also noticing more language. (Tom-Yunger & Seligman, class session notes.)

These examples of the process the participants engaged in highlight the emotional nature of working with infants, toddlers, and their families. For example, many times during the day a baby will cry to communicate their needs. Our brains and bodies are programmed to respond with a sense of urgency to an infant’s cry. In that moment, we need to stay calm and available to that baby—not an easy task when our brains are sending out a message to quickly find a solution. Caregivers who may become stressed may not be able to access their strategies to calm themselves. However, it is essential for the caregiver to remain composed as children in this age group are coregulating (i.e., the caregiver is a partner with the baby, helping them return to a calm and regulated state). Without those strategies, a caregiver may feel helpless and have a type of flight, fight, or freeze response. The response might include “ignoring” the baby (in reality, babies cannot be ignored), blaming the baby or other children or adults, or becoming frustrated. When these experiences occur day after day, week after week, the stress can become a health risk or cause good caregivers to leave the field. In fact, in our first cohort, several of the child care providers shared that they had been thinking of closing their family child care programs or changing careers.

During the professional development experience, caregivers were asked what their strategies were for reducing stress. The group was able to identify techniques that had been successful for them in the past. By acknowledging the stress, highlighting the strategies they already have, and having an open discussion about the reality that everyone has these feelings, participants were able to take a problem-solving stance. The instructors built on those existing resources by offering the brain-based “help now” strategies outlined in Miller-Karas’s Community Resiliency Model® (2015). Quick strategies to reset the brain and calm responses can be a lifeline for those stressful moments that are a part of the everyday life of an infant-toddler caregiver.

Through experiences that encourage reflection and deepen understanding of self and the appreciation of their importance in the lives of children, activities that build on existing skills, and the development of a systematic way to apply their knowledge to their work, a participant, in the words of one graduate, can “become a student of [their] own practice” (Sherease Alston, personal communication, June 10, 2017).

Almost all professional development programs strain within the confines of the fixed number of sessions, limited time, and the amount of content to be shared. By activating the experiences and knowledge the caregivers bring, professional development becomes an additive process whereby strategies are shared, revealed, and discovered. This process continues after the program, but requires support and ongoing interactions with caregivers. In this program, a professional learning community was created, and each new cohort became part of it. The cohorts identify topics (e.g., small-business assistance, working with children with developmental variations, and connections between play and learning) that require additional professional development, and Dr. Hancock brings speakers who can address those issues into the community.

It is fitting to end with the words of a graduate of the professional development experience. Kadeen, who is now beginning her graduate studies at Bank Street College where she will continue this process with a new community of people, spoke at the graduation of the last cohort:

During my time with the program, I learned to be more mindful of the children's emotional capacities and their coping methods as well as my own. To take care of myself so I could give of myself to the little people who counted on me. Like these children, I learned more about who I was and could be as an educator and all-around human being. (Kadeen Jones, graduation speech, 2019)

Highlighting the voices of caregivers is essential in ensuring that, if possible, participants in professional development programs are able to bring their whole selves to the experience and build upon what they already know. Coming from a secure base created from their own knowledge, child care providers are able to listen to each other and reflect upon their work. Together they weave a tapestry of old and new ideas that will enhance their interactions with children and families.

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About the Author



Margie Brickley is Director of the Infant and Family Development and Early Intervention Program at Bank Street College of Education. She teaches courses in development and assessment as well as advising graduate students in fieldwork. She has worked with infants, toddlers, and families in child care and early intervention programs. Margie designed the professional development program described in the article.