Iowa Distance Mentoring Model for Early ACCESS

Review of Early Childhood Professional Development (EC PD)

Current Status of PD in the Early Childhood Field

Early Childhood Professional Development (EC PD) offers opportunities and promise as an agent of policy and practice change. With higher standards for accountability and expanded demand for effective professionals, the need exists to facilitate opportunities for both evidence based and efficient professional development across all early childhood programs and agencies. A growing number of agencies and communities are employing comprehensive planning efforts to improve the quality of their early childhood care and education systems. The cross-sector coordination of services and supports contributes to positive child and family outcomes while expanding the knowledge base for early childhood professionals and consumers. Programs with specific practices that are grounded in agreed upon and valued philosophical principles also provide guidance for intervention decisions and promote consistency for early intervention providers in their day-to-day interactions with children and families (Winton, 2006).

However, PD also faces challenges for implementation as an effective EC intervention. Common PD practices often include superficial training approaches without follow-up. Evaluation is often limited to satisfaction and knowledge acquisition measures, instead of observational performance data (Snyder & Wolfe, 2007). Lessons learned from the past two decades of research on adults as learners (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) offer valuable insights to guide current EC PD principles and practice components. Leading PD experts and accumulating empirical evidence suggest that decontextualized PD activities have minimal impact on practices, organizational changes or child outcomes (Ridgley, Snyder, McWilliam, & Davis, 2011). While much has been written about the limitations of traditional “stand and deliver” training workshops, Joyce and Showers (2002) point to the efficiency of a relationship between training and coaching in which a set of operations is designed to present information, build knowledge that improves skills, practice, and achieve mastery.

Coaching provides contextualized opportunities for increasing EC professionals’ use of evidence-based intervention (Diamond & Powell, 2011; Hsieh, Hemmeter, McCollum, & Ostrosky, 2009). While promising results are emerging in classrooms, less is known about the coaching in natural environments or with non-professional intervention agents such as parents. Further, while the general strategy of coaching is embraced widely, the “how to’s” or the specific coaching strategies, sequence and generalization approaches have limited research to guide widespread adoption. Second-generation PD research on specific components such as dynamic, interactive strategies, individualized, performance-based coaching and technology-supported features are increasing in use to promote implementation of evidence-based practice with children and families. Peer mentors or partner learning also shows promise to strengthen the social connections within learning (Marturana & Woods, 2012; Winton, 2006).
**Principles of Effective Professional Development**

Effective PD integrates the systematic application of adult learning and active participation with instructional design features that foster accurate and consistent knowledge and skills utilization (Snyder & Wolfe, 2007). The following key principles are included:

- **Adult Learning:** This theory integrates the importance of adults’ interest, readiness, and need to learn, prior experience, and motivation into a flexible process for teaching and learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012).

- **Active Learner Participation:** PD “consumers” should actively participate in making decisions about their goals and the strategies for addressing them in order to identify meaningful outcomes and to foster a sense of ownership and self-directed learning (Bransford et al, 2000).

- **Sustained Over Time:** Change involves comprehensive and long-term approaches that are flexible to address the varying levels of knowledge, skills and dispositions of the consumers, and revised as policy and practice evolves (Tout, Metz, & Bartley, 2013).

- **Instructional Design and Diversity of PD Formats:** The design and format of PD should match the outcomes to be achieved, e.g., one-time workshops introduce knowledge but are not likely to result in practice change (Snyder, Hemmeter & McLaughlin, 2011). Design and formats should also address the urgency of need for information/feedback and be available to learners “just in time”.

- **Situated Context:** Context is important for adult learning and participation. PD that is integrated into day-to-day work experiences helps make direct connections between learning and implementation of new skills (Ridgley, Snyder, McWilliam, & Davis, 2011).

- **Social Collaboration:** Individuals within organizations who participate together foster a dynamic culture of change within their organizations and across others that supports children and families. There is also a social component to learning. Many learners benefit from membership in learning communities, contribute to others learning through sharing and mentoring, and value feedback of peers with common values and program goals (Winton, 2006).

- **Evaluation:** Measuring impact of PD extends beyond the participants and includes those they work with including children, caregivers, and coworkers and those they work for, their agencies at the local and state levels. PD that allows participants to identify discrepancies between current and desired knowledge and their performance as related to specific, measurable competencies (Miller & Stayton, 1996) supports self-assessment and reflection important for a deeper understanding of the content and mastery of the practice.
**Core Components of EC PD**

Professional development benefits from the use of an implementation science (IS) framework. IS can support PD interventions through the systematic use of implementation teams, formal bidirectional communication systems, assessment of each stage of implementation, and use of continuous improvement cycles (Tout, et al., 2013). PD intervention components are the infrastructure needed to support practice and sustained systems change (Metz, Halle, Bartley, & Blasberg, 2013). The Iowa DMM professional development “umbrella” includes the following five components:

1. **Clearly Defined Evidence-Based Framework**
   Well-defined and organized evidence-based PD practices improve mastery (Dunst & Trivette, 2009). Trivette, Dunst, Hamby and O’Herrin (2009) conclude in their research synthesis that the more components included (i.e., introduction, illustration, practice, evaluation, reflection and mastery) the better the results. Effective implementation bridges the gap between research and practice (Downer & Yazejian, 2013).

2. **Collaborative, Cross-Sector Policy and Practice Content**
   An integrated PD system is supported by training across EC sectors at state and local levels including entities such as early childhood professional organizations, Institutions of Higher Education, Early Head Start, Early Care and Education. Content scope and level varies but is aligned with articulated values and competencies of the participating system (Tout et al., 2013).

3. **Diverse, Evidence-Based, Sustained PD Formats**
   A variety of dynamic PD formats can address diverse learning needs and preferences (e.g., independent self-paced and group contexts, peer partners, technology supported, use of culturally responsive examples and materials to share content and support practice). Degree of participation in and perceived value of PD activities by participation depends on the level and timing of PD services available (e.g., materials, interactive website, coaching, etc.) (Whitaker, Kinzie, Kraft-Sayre, Mashburn, & Pianta, 2007).

Coaching as an individualized PD shows promising results in increasing early educators’ application of evidence-based practices ranging from adopting a curriculum (Bierman et al., 2008), to use of specific instructional practices that promote child outcomes (Diamond & Powell, 2011; Hsieh et al., 2009).

4. **Technology Supported PD**
   Web or technology assisted PD provides options for diverse learners to access. Early findings from research on technology-supported EI PD suggest it can be effective in both synchronous (e.g., video conference coaching, bug-in-ear, etc.) and asynchronous (e.g., multi-component online learning platforms featuring annotated video examples, narrated presentations, etc.) elements (Brown & Woods, 2012; Marturana & Woods, 2012) using a systematic framework that promotes development of knowledge, observation of practice, application with feedback and self assessment. Use of job-embedded formats can promote learning while supporting implementation (Ridgely et al., 2007).

5. **Multi-Level Assessment and Evaluation**
   Measurement of PD is a multicomponent process with impact at many levels. Observational data is needed to measure the effects of PD (Odom, Cox, & Brock, 2013) at the individual level. Regularly scheduled opportunities for self and partner reflection builds early interventionists’ capacity to provide effective family-centered services (Watson & Neilsen Gatti, 2012). Fidelity data is needed to determine if the training on and the intervention itself were delivered as intended (Powell & Diamond, 2013). Overall program implementation provides feedback for continuous improvement.
References


