

Literature Review for the Virtual School Readiness Incubator Strands  
and the  
Enhancing Leadership and Business Practices: A Professional Development Series for  
Early Care and Learning Directors Component  
Strategy 2: Objectives 4 and 6  
Virtual School Readiness Incubator Project  
The Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida

June 2007

This report is funded, in part, by the Office of Postsecondary Education, U.S. Department of Education as part of the Virtual School Readiness Incubator Project. The content of this report does not necessarily reflect the views or policies or imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education.

## *Overview*

In 1965, less than 20% of 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in preschool. By 1999, 60% of 3- and 4-year-olds who had not entered kindergarten were in a child care program (Horton & Bowman, 2002). Current statistics indicate 76% of 3- and 4-year-old children receive care outside the home, and the majority of those children (58%) receive care in center-based programs such as Head Start, preschool or early care and learning settings (Espinosa, 2002). The expansion has caused an increase in public spending and an increased concern about program quality.

Given the recent rise in state-funded prekindergarten programs, improving the skill sets of child care center directors is of paramount importance if we are to improve teacher practices that result in increased school readiness outcomes. Many state-funded prekindergarten programs include contracts with private providers and public schools that currently meet only state and local licensure requirements and entail minimal director training. The overarching issue of providing *quality preschool programs for all young children, particularly those who are at risk*, can be addressed through the validation of strategies to improve directors' knowledge, skills, and application capabilities in both leadership and through research-based instructional practices. The Enhancing Leadership and Business Practices (ELBP) professional development series for child care directors is designed to address the following significant findings that emerged from the review of research:

- Enrollment in prekindergarten is increasing;
- Prekindergarten program quality is currently mediocre to poor;

- High-quality prekindergarten programs result in improved readiness outcomes and long-term benefits;
- Funding high-quality prekindergarten programs is more cost effective than other educational interventions;
- Most states currently require only minimal licensing and training standards for both child care directors and teachers; and
- Quality leadership makes a difference, and professional learning opportunities for center directors can improve their leadership skills.

For children of poverty, the need for high-quality early learning environments has never been greater (Espinosa, 2002). At-risk children enter kindergarten educationally disadvantaged when compared with their middle- and upper-class peers (Klein & Knitzer, 2006; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). Pianta et al. (2005) reported that program quality was lower when a) more than 60% of the children were from low-income households, b) teachers were neither degreed nor trained in early childhood education, and c) beliefs were less child-centered. Low levels of program quality coupled with fewer opportunities to develop critical school readiness skills results in a "readiness gap" between children from low-income families and their more affluent peers (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000). Children who enter kindergarten behind their peers are likely to remain behind (Neuman & Celano, 2006). To close this readiness gap requires reform efforts to raise the academic achievement levels of at-risk children. High-quality early educational experiences enable children from low-income families to be more successful in school and in life when compared to similar children who do not attend high-quality programs

(Winton & Buysse, 2005). Children achieve more when they have teachers with more education and training closely tied to knowledge about early childhood and child development (Klein & Knitzer). Eliminating the readiness gap can be addressed not only through K-12 school reform efforts, but also by improving the learning environments in the nation's preschool programs. In a cost-effectiveness study the economic return for high-quality preschool intervention was higher than for any other youth-centered intervention (Heckman & Krueger, 2003). High-quality, comprehensive preschool programs that focus on child and family services are effective in promoting favorable outcomes including school readiness for at-risk children (Barnett, 1998; Guralnick, 1997; Karoly et al., 1998; McCall, Larsen, & Ingram, 2000; Sawhill, 1999; and Zigler, 1998, all as cited in Gilliam & Zigler, 2000). Magnuson and Waldfogel (2005) noted that increasing preschool enrollment of 3- and 4-year-old children from low-income families, most of whom are either African American or Hispanic, and increasing the quality of care in preschool settings could narrow "the black-white reading gap at school entry as much as 24 percent and the Hispanic-white reading gap as much as 36 percent" (p. 188).

Families need access to high-quality, out-of-home early education and care. Child development from birth to age five is critical to a child's lifelong well-being. High-quality child care is a major determinant in resolving our national education problems (Nishioka, 2000). There are children who come to kindergarten without the skills they need to be successful, many of whom have not received developmentally appropriate learning opportunities. Children who attend higher quality child care centers perform better both cognitively and socially (Nishioka).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation Standards (1998) address four areas of focus that ensure the quality of children's daily experiences in early childhood programs while promoting positive child outcomes. The areas of focus include: a) *children*—relationships, curriculum, teaching, health, and assessment of child progress; b) *teaching*—teaching staff; c) *partnerships*—families, community relationships; d) *administration*—physical environment, leadership and management. In order for children to be ready for kindergarten, they must be provided with a foundation that guides them academically, socially, and emotionally (Landry, 2005).

The Enhancing Leadership and Business Practices (ELBP) Professional Development Series for Early Care and Learning Directors incorporates the NAEYC standards, the Early Learning Coalition of Duval's (ELC) Quality Rating System (QRS), Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards (ISLLC), and current research in training for early care and learning directors. The professional development program consists of eight research-based director competency areas that include the following: a) increasing and sustaining meaningful family involvement; b) creating and sustaining high-quality learning environments; c) choosing and using high-quality learning tools; d) creating and sustaining high-quality interactions; e) choosing and using assessment tools and accountability; f) learning to lead; g) choosing and supporting high-quality professional development; and h) running an effective small business. The program design supports the goal of the Early Learning Coalition of Duval that all Jacksonville

early learning programs will provide high-quality care and early learning services that result in demonstrated positive readiness outcomes for all children.

To better serve young children, the needs of early care and learning teachers and directors must be addressed. The Enhancing Leadership and Business Practices (ELBP) professional development series was developed to reinforce the vision of what high-quality early care and learning programs look like, and provide practitioners with the tools needed to make the common vision a reality in all early care and learning centers.

Successful leadership can play a highly significant and frequently underestimated role in improving children's learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). The ELBP logic model (see Appendix A) was designed for practitioners to replicate the series in different environments and with many types of programs by disseminating field-tested, research- and standards-based best practices to the larger community.

In this literature review, each chapter includes an introduction, research findings, and implications that provide directors with a solid support infrastructure to improve both early learning environments and readiness outcomes for young children.

The following guiding principles were derived from the research regarding best practices in an early care and learning center:

- In order to close the achievement gap, all children, particularly those at risk, should have access to a high-quality, early care and learning program.
- Professional development for directors must address how to assess the instructional and emotional climates and provide opportunities for teachers to

develop new skills and strategies related to positively impacting student outcomes.

- Professional development for caregivers must move beyond the minimum credentialing requirements to include an emphasis on improving both the instructional and emotional climates of the classroom.
- Current research indicates effective early care and learning programs have the following eight domains related to the director's ability to:
  - Increase and sustain meaningful family involvement;
  - Create and sustain high-quality early care and learning environments;
  - Choose and use high-quality learning tools;
  - Create and sustain high-quality interactions;
  - Choose and use assessment tools and accountability;
  - Learn to lead;
  - Choose and support high-quality professional development; and
  - Run an effective small business.

Training for directors must address the above-mentioned content domains to enable them to engage in continuous improvement of their centers.

## Learning to Lead

### *Introduction*

A high-performing early learning program requires effective and knowledgeable leadership. Current research completed by Leithwood, Seashore Lewis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) indicated that the effects of leadership are second only to classroom instruction when examining school-related factors that contribute to children's learning. Research has consistently found that overall administrative practices are crucial for ensuring high-quality outcomes for children (Bloom, 2005). Strong leadership and management create an environment for high-quality care and education by:

- Ensuring compliance with state and federal regulations and guidelines;
- Promoting fiscal soundness, program accountability, effective communication, helpful consultative services, positive community relations, and comfortable and supportive workplaces;
- Maintaining stable staff; and
- Instituting ongoing program planning and career development opportunities for staff as well as continuous program improvement (NAEYC, 2006).

Bloom (2005) defined leading as the process of influencing others to achieve mutually agreed-upon goals. In order to promote a high-quality program, leaders must understand the functions and styles of leadership. The functions tell what one wants to happen as a result of their leadership. Leadership style addresses the way leadership is carried out (Gupton, 2002). Leadership style is greatly influenced by one's values and beliefs about how people grow, develop, and change. Effective leaders encourage staff to

be self-sufficient and interdependent. This enables colleagues to contribute and draw upon each others' talents. A leader's actions are a model for the people following him or her.

### *Findings*

Recent changes in federal and state regulations have forced the early childhood education community to focus on developing a learner/leader framework. Murphy (2003) described a learner/leader framework that included the following actions: a) promoting an academic learning environment; b) establishing positive expectations and standards for students and staff members; c) maintaining high visibility throughout the day; and d) promoting continuous learning. Consequently, directors of early childhood programs must move beyond providing only custodial care and promote a true learning community for children, staff, and families. By maintaining a three-pronged focus that addresses the needs of the organization, the individual, and the established learning goals, a balanced learner/leader framework will be established. A balanced learner/leader framework requires directors to a) develop both staff and student potential; b) become leaders of learning; c) win the support of stakeholders; and d) model values and attitudes consistent with the school vision (Porter, Reynolds, & Chapman, 2005). The balanced approach to educational leadership is critical to improving the quality of early care and learning programs.

Educational leaders responsible for leading effective programs need to be able to create and operate an environment where staffs have high expectations for students, staff, families, and the community. Research completed by Louis, Anderson, & Whalstrom

(2004) indicated that the success of school leaders in building high-performing programs depended greatly on how well they interact with those within their organization and the community at large. Effective leadership of early childhood programs includes managing services, resources, and materials while consistently providing leadership that inspires and energizes staff and community members who want to see children succeed (National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2006). The NAESP identified six standards that characterize leadership for early childhood learning. The standards detail what leaders should know and be able to do in order to support early childhood education and improve the schools that serve them. The standards are: a) embrace high-quality, early childhood programs, principles, and practices as the foundations for education throughout the school community; b) engage families and community organizations to support children at home, in the community and in pre-K and kindergarten programs; c) provide appropriate learning environment for young children; d) ensure high-quality curriculum and instructional practices that foster young children's learning and development in all areas; e) use multiple assessments to strengthen student learning and improve the quality of programs; and f) advocate for universal opportunity for children to attend high-quality early childhood education programs. Early care and learning directors have a responsibility to the children and families they serve to promote high-quality programs that reflect best practices in leadership, instructional practice, and business management.

Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe and Meyerson (2005) identified four leadership characteristics that impact school improvement. Leaders must provide: a)

vision, an understanding of what goals are to be accomplished; b) monitoring, by examining what is being accomplished with respect to the vision; c) planning, how goals will be accomplished; and d) the use of performance indicators, examining identified targets to determine if progress is being made over time to achieve the vision. These characteristics are invaluable in leading an organization through the program improvement process.

In order for instructional leaders to be successful they must support student learning. Duke's (2006) research on school improvement identified several critical elements of improving academic achievement. The elements included providing at-risk students with prompt assistance, promoting teacher collaboration, using student assessment data to make decisions regarding resource allocation, student needs, curriculum effectiveness, and the leadership of the organization (Duke). The actions of the director and the staff set the tone for entire center improvement process. Therefore, it is imperative for early care and learning directors to be more than managers, they must be agents of change working on behalf of children and families.

Leaders influence their school culture by building a vision, stimulating innovation, and encouraging performance. Gupton (2002) found program quality depended greatly on the leader's ability to set directions for the organization, including goals, mission, and vision and keep them in the forefront of the school's attention. Additionally, the more the school's instructional goals and objectives were tailored to meet the needs of the school's specific population of children, the more likely those students were to achieve academic success (Gupton).

A positive culture is also critical to the success of any educational institution. Although culture exists outside of conscious awareness, it shapes everything within the center. “The culture provides points of order and stability in the booming, buzzing confusion of everyday life” (Bloom, 2003, p. 14). Bloom described culture as it pertained to early care and learning centers as a reflection of shared values, norms, history, traditions, climate, and ethics. The organizational climate of a center was described as the “personality of the entire center” (p.14). The culture of an early care and learning center can be positive or negative. Children, families, and staff are all affected by the quality of the culture. A positive culture and climate create a work environment where students are able to learn, teachers are able to teach, and families are respected and valued.

Educational leaders are charged with the task of being not only managers of people and objects, but visionaries and motivators for where the organization should go. High-quality programs require a strong commitment from leaders to ensure that children, staff, and families are provided with every opportunity to be successful in today’s society.

#### *Implications for Early Care and Learning Directors*

- Provide direction by developing a shared understanding of the vision, goals, and activities.
- Be visible and approachable by staff, families, and children throughout the day.
- Develop employees through motivation, shared decision-making, and a positive work environment.

- Provide instructional guidance to teachers and staff.
- Focus on data to develop and implement an aligned center improvement action plan.
- Encourage and support family involvement in all center activities.

## Increasing and Sustaining High-Quality Interactions

### *Introduction*

Positive teacher-child interactions enable teachers to support children's academic development while promoting both social and emotional skills (Landry, 2005). Positive interactions among teachers, children, families, and administration are critical for improving early care and learning programs. Improved child outcomes are related to the emotional and instructional climates reflected in teacher-child interactions (Pianta, 2003).

There is also growing evidence that the quality of infant and toddler care is linked to children's cognitive and language development (Burchinal, et al., 2000). Espinosa (2002) reported in a National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) policy brief the following recommendations regarding high-quality interactions.

- Children should be respected, nurtured, and challenged. They should have warm relationships and opportunities to interact and communicate with adults and other children in their classrooms.
- Children should have ongoing opportunities to learn important skills, knowledge, and dispositions related to all the domains of learning.
- Children should make meaningful decisions throughout the day related to creativity, interactions, and exploration.

In addition, NIEER (2003) made recommendations regarding critical attributes of teachers that include the following: a) teachers have frequent, meaningful interactions with children by engaging them in meaningful conversations, involving them in class discussion, and using open-ended questioning techniques; and b) teachers communicate

respect for the families and warmth for the children, e.g., demonstrating knowledge about the cultures and languages of the children. Early childhood administrators play a key role in ensuring those interactions occur by visiting classrooms frequently and interacting with children, staff, and families.

The National Institute of Child Health Human and Development (NICHD) study (2004) identified two structural aspects which affect the quality of interactions in early care and learning settings. Classrooms with a lower adult-child ratio were more likely to have teachers with more education and training and were more likely to be rated as sensitive and have better overall classroom quality. Another 3-year study of 89 children provided evidence that children in classrooms that met low child-teacher ratio guidelines had higher overall communication scores over time (Burchinal et al., 2000). In addition, results indicated that children's cognitive and language development tended to be higher when they attended a higher-quality early care and learning class.

The quality of both child-parent interactions and child-teacher interactions is significant to the development of a child's social skills (Elicker, as cited by Pianta, 1997). High-quality teacher-child relationships (as reported by teachers) protect children from risk factors. Pianta, Stienberg, and Rollins (1995) reported that children who have supportive relationships with their teachers are retained or referred for special instructional support services less often than children who have conflicts with their teachers. Child and adult interactions can be encouraged when there is a warm and caring environment.

Directors need to be able to articulate the importance of teaching and learning while demonstrating their commitment to high-quality learning experiences through their interactions with teachers, families, students, and community members (Gupton, 2002). A primary role of any leader is communication. Effective communication requires speaking and writing clearly, understanding what others are saying and feeling, and actively listening. It is critical to the success of the program for teachers to have respectful, collaborative relationships with children, staff, parents, and professionals. Creating an environment with a professional and positive culture and climate can help improve the overall quality of all interactions.

The emotional environment, attitudes, and interactions of all staff affect the overall quality of an early care and learning center. In order to avoid misunderstandings and confusion, clear expectations regarding employee duties must be communicated by the director. Teachers' job descriptions and duties should reflect enjoyment of working with children and accomplishing the mission and vision of the center. When expectations are communicated and maintained job satisfaction and group morale are enhanced.

#### *Implications for Early Care and Learning Directors*

- Create a learning environment that promotes a productive, positive, and caring climate in which every child can experience improved readiness outcomes.
- Address the quality of interactions between teachers and children, recognizing the impact of warm and supportive interactions on student achievement.

- Shape a positive and professional culture and climate.
- Demonstrate/model behaviors consistent with the norms, values, and beliefs of the staff, children, and families served.
- Reduce barriers to communication by speaking and writing effectively and using active listening skills.
- Leadership is critical in the area of positive interactions because a positive, welcoming, climate can affect all aspects of an early care and learning program.
- Use tools such as surveys and observations to assess climate and culture.
- Develop a plan for recognizing and rewarding staff accomplishments.

## Choosing and Using High Quality Assessment Tools and Accountability

### *Introduction*

Assessment tools are among of the most important aspects of understanding and supporting children's development. Used correctly, assessment data document program effectiveness, identify staff development needs, and facilitate planning for further instruction. In addition, assessment can assist with program evaluation and accountability. Epstein, Schweinhart, DeBruin-Parecki, and Robin (2004) recommended the following policies for NIEER regarding assessment: a) involve teachers and parents in the assessment process so that children's abilities can be understood in various contexts and cooperative relationships among families and school staff can be fostered; b) develop systems of analyses so that test scores are interpreted as part of a broader assessment that includes a wide variety of materials; and c) provide training for early childhood teachers and administrators to understand and interpret standardized tests and other measures of learning and development with an emphasis on the precautions specific to the assessment of young children.

### *Findings*

In a joint position paper, NAEYC and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE, 2006) recommended using ethical, appropriate, valid, and reliable assessments to measure young children's strengths, progress, and needs. Additionally, early education programs should be:

...evaluated for program goals, using varied, appropriate, conceptually and technically sound evidence to determine the extent to which programs meet the expected standards of quality and to examine both intended and unintended results. (pp. 1-2)

Early care and learning centers, like K-12 public schools, are under increasing pressure to demonstrate effectiveness in achieving student learning outcomes. While there are legitimate concerns regarding standardized testing, assessment is a necessary component of a high-quality, early education program (Epstein et al., 2004). Assessment provides early educators with tools to screen students who may be at risk or need an intervention, to plan instruction for individuals and groups of children, to identify program improvement areas and staff development needs, as well as evaluate how well a program is meeting goals and needs of children. Comprehensive assessments that include a multi-method approach can accommodate measurement of the many dimensions of a child's skill and abilities. Such assessments include standardized tests, observations, portfolios, teacher ratings, and parent ratings. Assessments for preschool children must be used appropriately in order to meet their developmental needs. NIEER developed the following criteria essential to producing meaningful data and preventing unnecessary stress for young children.

- Assessments should not threaten a child's self-esteem, make children feel they have failed, or penalize children for what they do not know.

- Information should be obtained over time, or if time-distributed measurements are not feasible, unusual circumstances in the situation or the child should be noted to avoid invalid, single-encounter results.
- Information should be gathered from one content area through multiple resources, and the length of the assessment should be developmentally appropriate (no longer than 35-45 minutes).

Measuring children's progress and using assessment results when planning for instruction will improve classroom learning opportunities. When used properly, assessments and their results provide teachers and families with information that will help inform their child's academic and social development.

Quality early education programs must provide children with opportunities to develop their intellectual, social, and emotional skills and abilities. In order to do so, the early childhood educators must have the tools to assess students' emotional and cognitive needs. Early childhood educators use screenings, formal, and informal measures to assess student growth and learning. A screening provides teachers an initial, broad assessment of a child's preparedness for age-appropriate instruction. An example of a screening assessment used in early childhood education is Get Ready to Read! by Rigby Educational Group. All kindergarten children in Florida are screened during the first 30 days of school using the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS). According to Florida Statute 1002.67, Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) providers risk losing funding if student assessment scores on the FLKRS are below the state-mandated level.

The most commonly used assessments in early care and learning centers are

informal assessments. Informal assessments include teacher-made tests and checklists, observation records, and anecdotal records.

Some early learning centers use formal assessments with young children. Formal assessments are standardized; the interpretation of results/scores is based on norms from a comparison group of children. There are many formal assessments that are developmentally appropriate for use with young children. The Test of Early Reading Ability, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (TERA-3) and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) are used to measure children's pre-reading skills. Ages and Stages questionnaires are parent-completed, child monitoring systems based on age that provide information on communication skills, gross and fine motor development, problem-solving abilities, and personal-social skills.

As the level of accountability rises in early childhood education, the need for valid and reliable assessments increases. Therefore, it is imperative for early care and learning directors to have the knowledge and skills needed to choose assessment tools that their teachers can use to measure children's knowledge, skills, and abilities appropriately.

In addition to providing outcome data, formal and informal assessments provide teachers with information that will help them plan instruction to meet the children's needs. The Alphabet Letter Recognition Inventory (ALRI) is commonly used in a large urban district to help preschool teachers identify clusters of letters that preschool children are unable to identify with accuracy. The impact of using this assessment (and others similar to it) in early childhood programs relies heavily on the degree to which teachers

are willing to change their instructional practice based on student data. For example, if a child is unable to recognize the letters A, D, F, and G but is proficient at recognizing B, T, R, and P, he/she should receive more intensive instruction on A, D, F, and G. There is more demand for early care and learning centers to improve children's school readiness outcomes. High-quality programs must address the learning needs of their students.

Assessments like the ALRI should be used to close the gap between what children know and are able to do and the instructional opportunities provided by preschool teachers in a developmentally appropriate manner.

*Implications for Early Care and Learning Directors*

- Use reliable and valid assessments.
- Train staff on appropriate testing materials and procedures for working with young children.
- Assessments should measure children's real knowledge in the context of everyday activities.
- Assessment should include open-ended questions and examine performance over time rather than only once.
- Use a combination of formal and informal assessments to gather students' performance data over time.
- Use assessment tools to guide instruction.
- Use assessment data to plan for professional development.
- Use assessment data to assist in identifying children who may need an intervention.

- Use program evaluation techniques to determine the effectiveness of the program related to student outcomes and program goals included in the center's improvement action plan.
- Share evaluation results with stakeholders.

## Increasing and Sustaining Meaningful Family Involvement

### *Introduction*

Family involvement is positively related to indicators of student achievement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Both home-based behaviors (helping with homework) and school-based behaviors (participating in class activities such as field trips) are associated with lower rates of retention and drop-out. Current research supports the belief that parental attitude, behavior, and activity related to children's education influences student learning and success at school (Hoover-Dempsey, et al.). Because of the critical role families play in supporting student achievement and development, high-quality early education programs should provide opportunities for families to connect what students are learning at school with rituals and routines at home.

Family involvement in a high-quality early education program can be obtained in many ways. Head Start, a federally funded early care and learning program for at-risk children, defined parental involvement as “the experiences and activities offered by their program, including volunteering, attending workshops, and participating in policy-making activities” (Parker et al., 1999, p. 414). Head Start family activities included providing families with information about age-appropriate behavior, strategies to increase children's learning at home, behavior management techniques, and services that were available throughout the community.

### *Findings*

Research also indicated that participation in family involvement programs resulted in enhanced parent-child interactions. Families who participated reported

feelings of greater parent competency and better understanding of child development and parenting strategies which led to more positive interactions with their children (Parker, et al., 1999). Research completed by McCoy (as cited in Parker, et al., 1999) indicated parents who were more “involved” and who supported their child’s learning tended to spend more time in at-home learning activities and take a more active role in facilitating their child’s learning processes .

Additionally, research indicates a need for schools to develop effective family involvement programs (Chen, as cited in Young, 2007). NAEYC (2005) supports building parent-teacher partnerships to foster children’s learning and acknowledges that the home environment greatly influences what goes on at school (Christian, 2006). Therefore, meaningful family involvement is a critical factor for high-quality, early education programs.

Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders & Simon (1997) examined family involvement by using a framework with six domains related to family and school connections. The domains are as follows: a) parenting—providing clothing, safety and food; b) communicating—communications initiated by the school, e.g., newsletters, memos, report cards, phone calls, conferences, and home visits; c) volunteering—parents providing assistance with fundraisers and at events like assemblies, performances, and sporting events; d) decision making—parents serving on committees and councils and PTA/PTO membership; e) collaboration with the community—business partnerships, health services, recreation, and other services provided to the school by community businesses and groups; and f) learning at home—parent’s ability and commitment to

provide assistance in the child's academic, social, and emotional growth while at home. Epstein et al. reported that learning at home was the most important domain that impacted improvement in student achievement.

In today's society, many children have working parents who must balance the needs of their children and while working. While this is an obstacle for families, it does not lessen the need for them to be involved in their child's education. Consistent and frequent positive school-to-home communication helps parents feel more comfortable at school, more self-confident, and more likely to become involved in school activities (Comuntiz-Page, 1996). In order to meet the needs of children, families must be understood in several contexts. Families are diverse, have different cultures, economic status, and religious beliefs. In addition, there are blended families, families of divorce, and homeless families that also represent the diversity that exists among families. When encouraging families to participate in school activities, one must recognize and respect the importance of diversity.

#### *Implications for Early Care and Learning Directors*

- Provide families with multiple opportunities to connect what their children are learning at school with rituals and routines at home.
- Be sensitive to the diverse dynamics of families.
- Provide opportunities to for parents to be involved during the instructional day such as volunteering, helping with a class project, etc.

- Communicate with parents in a variety of ways, e.g., monthly newsletter, a family event board, a Web site or e-mail to promote an open exchange of ideas and/or concerns.
- Develop and communicate expectations for family involvement, e.g., policy statement in a family handbook.
- Provide frequent opportunities for family education.
- Involve families in developing policies and programs of the center.
- Provide information and referrals for available community services to all families.

## Using and Choosing High-Quality Learning Tools

### *Introduction*

A special focus on curriculum and teaching strategies in early learning programs is important for two reasons. First, although young children are born ready to learn, many low-income children fall behind early and remain very much behind their peers in reading and mathematics. Success in narrowing the achievement gap depends on providing young children with specific opportunities to acquire knowledge, skills, and abilities to prepare them for kindergarten (Klein & Knitzer, 2006). The term curriculum is defined as what to teach and instruction is defined as how to teach curriculum. The purpose of curriculum is to affect students by initiating learning opportunities to enable all children to attain skills and knowledge and to change values and feelings (Frede & Ackerman, 2007).

When choosing curriculum, educators must first determine what should be learned. NAEYC and NAECS/SDE (2003) provided the following guidance when determining what curriculum should be utilized.

Curriculum is more than a collection of enjoyable activities. Curriculum is a complex idea containing multiple components, such as goals, content, pedagogy, or instructional practices. Curriculum is influenced by many factors, including society's values, content standards, accountability systems, research findings, community expectations, culture and language, and individual children's characteristics. (p. 3)

In addition to hiring prepared and knowledgeable teachers and providing appropriate materials and classroom environments, early learning program directors must evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum utilized to ensure learning goals are being attained, Choosing a curriculum that reflects the values of teachers, children, and families in a center can positively impact school readiness.

### *Findings*

When examining the research on promoting language and literacy development specifically in early child care, several key points emerged. The National Research Council Report (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) noted that no single teaching method or approach worked for all children; therefore, teachers needed to develop a repertoire of research-based teaching strategies. NAEYC and NAECS/SDE (2003) published the following position statement for a high-quality intentional preschool curriculum.

There is a shared responsibility to implement a curriculum that is a) thoughtfully planned, b) challenging, c) engaging, d) developmentally appropriate, e) culturally and linguistically responsive, f) comprehensive across all developmental domains, and g) likely to promote positive outcomes for all young children. The curriculum should be designed for active involvement by children in the learning process, recognizing that young children learn through play, active manipulation of the environment, concrete experiences, and communicating with peers and adults. It should provide a variety of activities and materials to encourage behaviors appropriate to the each child's age

background, stage of development, and individual needs (including children with disabilities). (p. 2)

Teachers should determine what each child knows and understands and should use that information to plan appropriate and varied learning opportunities (Stipek, 2006). Teachers need to have clear learning goals, plan activities carefully to achieve those goals, assess children's learning regularly, and make modification when activities are not helping children learn. Additionally, NAEYC and NAECS/SDE (2003) identified six characteristics of a high-quality, intentional curriculum. The characteristics are as follows: a) research-based, b) emphasizes teachers and actively engaging with children, c) includes attention to social and regulatory skill, d) is not teacher proof, and e) requires new ways to measure classroom quality, teacher effectiveness, and student progress. These findings provided a road map to understanding what curriculum characteristics influence the quality of early education programs.

Program standards describe characteristics of classrooms and curricula that vary from state to state. The purpose of standards is to provide children with a coherent educational experience. Currently, Florida has *Birth to Three Standards*, *School Readiness Performance Standards for Three-, Four-, and Five-Year-Olds*, as well as, *Voluntary PreKindergarten Education Standards* that are all used to describe the kinds of development and learning that should be taking place (Shore, Bodrova, & Long, 2004). There are program standards, that describe characteristics of classrooms and curricula, and child-outcome standards, that define expectations for children's development and learning. Child-outcome standards are comprehensive and include content standards and

performance standards. Content standards define what children should know while performance standards detail what children should be able to do (Shore, Bedrova, & Long).

The goal of using standards is to improve the likelihood that early learning programs will boost school readiness and lay a solid foundation for later achievement (Shore, Bedrova, & Long, 2004). Teachers should be able to align curriculum and classroom assessments with the standards. In order to do this, teachers must be able to align the content in the child-outcome standards and provide educational experiences that reflect the content, e.g., knowledge, skills, abilities. Positive impact can be made when the alignment is also made with assessments and changes in teacher practices are made to meet the various needs of individual students. Utilizing standards appropriately in early childhood education is a critical factor in improving school readiness outcomes for children entering kindergarten.

Early care and learning educators have a responsibility to provide the children they serve high-quality instruction. Utilizing a research-based curriculum that addresses children's affective, cognitive, and psychomotor abilities increases the likelihood of improved readiness outcomes. Knowledge of child development, appropriate learning materials, and how to utilize content and performance standards are critical to improving young children's readiness to be successful in kindergarten.

#### *Implications for Early Care and Learning Directors*

- All teachers should receive training on the purpose and application of the Florida early learning standards to guide curriculum decisions.

- Curriculum used in preschool classrooms should be developmentally appropriate, research-based, and should align with the domains of development.
- Benchmarks from the Florida standards should be used to plan appropriate learning opportunities for children.
- Learning opportunities for young children should address content standards (what children should know) as well as performance standards (what children should be able to do).
- Teachers must be aware of what children should know and should be able to do in relationship to their age/grade.
- Knowledge of child development should be applied to lesson planning.
- Multiple opportunities should be available for children to practice new skills.
- Cross age-group planning opportunities should be made available to teachers to reflect on instruction.

## Creating and Sustaining High-Quality Early Care and Learning Environments

### *Introduction*

Approximately 73% of children from infancy through 3 years of age whose mothers are in the work force receive care outside the home from someone other than a parent (Landry, 2005). This large proportion of young children experiencing early care and learning is directly linked to the increase in the percentage of women working outside the home. Landry cited data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2000) regarding the percentage of mothers employed as follows: a) 53% of married mothers with infants, b) 59% of unmarried mothers with infants, and c) more than 60% of mothers with children under age 3. Espinosa (2002) reported that 76% of 3- and 4-year-old children receive care outside the home, and the majority of those children (58%) receive care in center-based programs such as Head Start, preschool or early care and learning.

The quality of early care and learning environments has traditionally been measured through two widely-used instruments—the Infant and Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) and the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS). Both scales include structural and process indicators of quality. Structural indicators include space and furnishings, supervision and evaluation of staff, and education and training of teachers and staff. These structural qualities are important in moving the early care and learning culture from a custodial care orientation to an educational intervention orientation. To enable young children to enter kindergarten with the social and academic skills essential to success, process indicators must be measured as well. Process indicators, such as interactions, learning opportunities, and activities, are reflections of

the climate and culture in individual classrooms and the center as a whole. While the ITERS and ECERS scales address process indicators, in-depth assessment of the quality of interactions and learning opportunities requires the use of assessments specifically designed to provide individual ratings of teachers' interactions. Such assessments include classroom observations of all teachers.

The role of the teacher in providing a warm, nurturing environment has been well-established in research on effective practices in early education (Landry, 2005). The following sections address how the physical environment and effective teaching methods can be enhanced to ensure that teachers are supported in their efforts to provide quality instruction that focuses on positive social-emotional and academic outcomes for young children. Additionally, these sections provide descriptions of indicators of high-quality programs. Developing a shared vision of the characteristics of a high-quality program can enable early care and learning/early learning directors and teachers to assess their centers and make changes in their environments to move them toward the vision.

### *Findings*

#### *Emerging Critical Process Quality Features*

<b>Fidelity of Implementation</b>	<b>Emotional Climate</b>	<b>Instructional Climate</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balance of teacher-directed and child-selected activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sensitive, warm teacher-child interactions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cognitive development</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using student data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsive feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbal stimulation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum across all domains</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit instruction in key skills</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Across all</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behavioral and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language</li> </ul>

classrooms and teachers	emotional regulation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of time and materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactions among children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literacy</li> </ul>

*Physical environment.* The physical environment of a classroom for young children must be carefully planned to support their early learning and development. This means that the setting provides for the child's needs for safety and security, as well as the needs for intellectual stimulation that challenge individual growth and development (Landry, 2005). Landry also identified the following factors and components that must be considered when planning the physical environment.

- Traffic patterns
- Materials placed at the children's level
- Organized storage
- Adequate equipment and supplies
- Clearly delineated areas
- Coordinated placement of centers
- Small-group and independent work areas
- Large-group areas (p. 62)

In addition, the classroom must be kept clean, pique the children's interests, and be aesthetically pleasing. To accommodate the learning interests of young children, research has identified seven types of centers that should be included in the physical environment. The centers are as follows: Pretend and Learn Center, Writer's Corner, Library and Listening Center, Construction Center, Math and Science Center, Creativity

Station, and ABC Center (Center for Improving the Readiness of Children for Learning and Education, 2002, as cited in Landry, 2005). The above-mentioned considerations can promote an environment that provides effective transition from the home to the traditional school environment. To maximize the effects of the planned environment, it is essential that teachers implement management strategies that enable the children to take responsibility for maintenance of and interaction within the environment. Management charts are one method for involving children and establishing predictable routines in classroom management. Examples of management charts include rules charts, helper's charts, attendance charts, learning area planning charts, and daily schedule charts (Landry).

Classroom practices are essential to implementing a high-quality program. For the state's most vulnerable children to benefit from preschool, early care and learning experiences must be designed to enhance the children's ability to make the most of the educational opportunities provided. Therefore, assessment of the classroom environment must include both the physical structures and the process structures, i.e., the materials, adult-child ratios, compensation, and adult-child interactions, to name a few.

*Classroom climate.* The teacher sets the tone for the experiences provided in the classroom. The ECERS has been used in two studies to give an estimate of the process quality in early care and learning settings. One study, conducted in 1998 at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), reported that assessment of early childhood settings in nine states revealed the following ratings of process quality: 8% were rated "*poor*," 53% were rated "*fair*," 30% were rated "*good*," and 9% were

rated “*excellent*” (NICHD, as cited in Espinosa, 2002). The other study examined full-day early care and learning centers in four states. The average of the ECERS ratings was 4.26 on a 7-point scale, and only 24% had ratings in the “*good*” to “*excellent*” range (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999, as cited in Espinosa). These data indicate that improving classroom climate should be a focus for improvement in overall center quality.

Espinosa (2002) suggested that the process indicators to be addressed include the following: a) positive teacher-child relationships; b) equipment and materials available within the classroom; c) ongoing communication that includes listening, talking/responding, and encouragement of reasoning and problem-solving use; d) opportunities for engagement in a variety of activities, such as academics, block play, art, music/movement, on a daily basis; e) promotion and acceptance of diversity; and f) involvement of parents/family members in center program. Attention to improvement of process indicators can improve the overall climate of the center and the quality of interactions within each classroom.

Pianta (2007) stated that although legislation and policy call for high-quality early education programs, assessments of program quality rarely involve direct measures of instructional and social experiences of children in early learning classrooms. He advocated for classroom observations that can provide valid information about the educational experiences of young children. Currently, measures of group size, staff credentials, size and space of facilities, amount and types of materials available to students, and length of day are most often used as proxies for what is educationally important to offer young children. These proxies are used to drive program policy and

design. Pianta expressed that “teachers’ implementation of instruction through their interactions with children is a critical and typically underemphasized aspect of early childhood program quality” (p. 3). He contended that observing what happens in classrooms is essential in determining program quality.

Effective teachers of young children engage them in specific interactions that appear to predict gains in academic achievement as follows: a) explicit instruction in identified key skills, b) sensitive and warm interactions, c) responsive feedback, d) conversation and verbal stimulation, and e) a classroom setting that is not too structured or regimented (Pianta, 2007, p. 3). These interactions are particularly beneficial to at-risk children. In the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCELD) study of 11 state-funded prekindergarten programs (NCELD, 2005, as cited in Pianta, 2002), the researchers found that in approximately 25% of the classrooms, high-quality interactions of emotional and instructional support could be documented. Pianta (2007) indicated that based on the classroom data “exposure to gap-closing classroom quality, although highly desirable from nearly every perspective imaginable, is not a regular feature of early schooling and even less likely for children in poverty” (p. 5).

In addition, La Paro, Pianta, and Stuhlman (2004) indicated that improving quality is linked to the overarching issue of equity and access to quality programs for all children.

*The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Care and Learning and Youth Development: Findings for Children Up to Age 4½ Years* (NICHD, 2006) was designed to measure the following aspects of child development:

- Cognitive and language development

- Social behavior
- Emotional development and relationships with mothers
- Health and physical growth

The study examined regulated (structure) features and process features. Positive care giving was cited as emerging as one of the “strongest and most consistent predictors of children’s development” (p. 10) and early care and learning quality. Positive care giving was defined as “sensitive, encouraging, and frequent interactions between the caregiver and the child” (p. 10). Data collected were used to estimate the percent of positive care giving provided in early care and learning settings to 1½- to 3-year-old children. Most early care and learning settings provided care rated as “fair” (NICHD, 2000, as cited in NICHD, 2006). The researchers also reported that analyses were made to identify links between early care and learning quality and child development outcomes. The following outcomes were reported: a) cognitive function and language development in children aged birth to 3 was better in higher-quality early care and learning settings; b) language used by the caregiver was the feature of quality most predictive of cognitive and language development in children up to age 3; and c) greater school readiness at age 4½, as measured by standardized assessment of literacy and mathematics skills, could be predicted based on the quality of early care and learning (NICHD, 1999; NICHD, 2000; and NICHD, 2002; as cited in NICHD, 2006). Positive care-giving indicators included the following:

- Shows a positive attitude, e.g., smiles, encourages, upbeat
- Has positive physical contact, e.g., hugs, comforts

- Responds to vocalizations, e.g., answers questions, comments on child's activities
- Asks questions, e.g., open-ended questions
- Praises or encourages
- Teaches
- Tells stories and sings
- Encourages development, e.g., assists with walking, puzzles, center activities
- Advances behavior, e.g., encourages interactions with other children, sharing
- Reads, e.g., involves children with books, differentiates between pictures and words
- Eliminates negative interactions, e.g., models positive interactions and behaviors

based on the above-mentioned findings of the NICHD studies, it appears that emphasis on quality of the classroom environment must include measurement of the quality of interactions provided by the classroom teacher. This will require observations and data collection in every classroom of an early care and learning center.

#### *Classroom Observation Instruments*

The ITERS and ECERS are two instruments that are widely used in assessing early care and learning settings for quality of classroom environments and overall center quality. Currently, the ITERS-R (revised edition) is used in infant-toddler classrooms and the ECERS-R (revised edition) is used in classrooms for children who are 2½ to 5 years of age. Both instruments have 7 subscales: Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Listening and Talking (ITERS-R) and Language-Reasoning (ECERS-R), Activities, Interaction, Program Structure, and Parents and Staff. The indicators within

each subscale address factors that are developmentally appropriate for children in the respective age groups of the ITERS-R and ECERS-R. Indicators are ranked on a 7-point scale as follows: 1 (*Inadequate*), 3 (*Minimal*), 5 (*Good*), and 7 (*Excellent*). Both scales represent a broad definition of the classroom environment that includes spatial, programmatic, and adult and child interpersonal indicators (Harms, Clifford, & Crier, 2005; Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2006).

J. J. Arnett (personal communication, April 23, 2007) developed an instrument to assess interactions in early care and learning settings. The Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS), completed during a 45-minute observation period, consists of 26 items that comprise 4 subscales. The 10-item Positive Interaction subscale addresses the teacher's communication, enthusiasm, and involvement with children. The Punitiveness subscale is comprised of 8 items that assess the teacher's harshness, hostility toward children, and degree of control in interactions. The Detachment subscale (4 items) was designed to provide data regarding the teacher's time spent on activities that do not involve children and the emotional and behavioral remoteness from the children. Lastly, the Permissiveness subscale includes 4 items that assess the extent to which the teacher avoids or delays intervention to stop students' misbehavior. Arnett's scale was developed for his dissertation and has been widely used in research, including several national studies of early care and learning quality.

The Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) includes three observation protocols: Literacy Environment; Classroom Observation and Teacher Interview; and Literacy Activities Rating Scale. The ELLCO was designed for use in

prekindergarten through third-grade classrooms and takes 1-1½ hours to complete. The Literacy Environment checklist (15-20 minutes) is to be completed when children are not present and prior to the Classroom Observation and Teacher Interview portions of the assessment. Areas examined using the Literacy Environment protocol include the book area, book selection, book use, writing materials, writing around the room. The Classroom Observation protocol (20-45 minutes) focuses on the General Classroom Environment and Language, Literacy, and Curriculum. Indicators in both areas are ranked on a 5-point scale, ranging from *Exemplary* (5) to *Basic* (3) to *Deficient* (1). The Teacher Interview protocol requires approximately 10 minutes to complete and is to be conducted after a 30- to 40-minute classroom observation that includes literacy instruction. Questions target curriculum approach and planning, use of technology, planning for language/literacy instruction, diversity, family communication and involvement, and evaluation and assessment. The Literacy Activities Rating Scale also takes approximately 10 minutes to complete. It is designed to examine book reading and writing (Smith, Dickinson, Sangeorge, & Anastasopoulos, 2002).

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) Preschool (Pre-K) Version was developed for use in prekindergarten through third-grade classrooms (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2005). The focus of the instrument is on what teachers do and how they interact with students in the classroom, i.e., the emotional and instructional climate of the classroom, not the physical and structural features of classroom quality. Interactions are grouped into four domains as follows: Emotional Support (positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives),

Classroom Organization (behavior management, productivity, instructional learning formats), Instructional Support (concept development, quality of feedback, language modeling), and Student Outcomes (student engagement). An observation cycle using CLASS consists of a 20-minute observation period followed by a 10-minute coding period. A minimum of four 30-minute observation cycles must be completed prior to lunch time. A classroom observation is expected to begin at the start of the school day and last approximately 3 hours. The observer focuses on the who, how, and what of the instructional period. Dimensions are rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from *minimally characteristic* (1) to *highly characteristic* (7). The observer must make judgments about the extent to which the indicators for a dimension have been observed. The CLASS has been used extensively in national studies to assess the quality of early education classrooms.

The National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) Pre-kindergarten Study (Winton & Buysse, 2005) included a section on measuring quality in pre-K classrooms. The authors reported that their findings were “somewhat disappointing” in that they could not report that state-funded pre-K programs are consistently of high quality (p. 4). The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) and the CLASS were used to assess program quality. The ECERS-R average score of 3.86 was lower than the average score reported in other large studies, such as the Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes (CQO) study and the FACES study of Head Start classrooms. The CLASS average rating of Instructional Climate was 2.47, and the Emotional Climate average rating was 5.22 on a 7-point scale. The authors suggested

that the low rating on Instructional Climate was indicative of the non-instructional tasks, such as giving directions and assigning routine jobs, that take precedence over student engagement in learning activities that promote both concept and skill development. Additionally, analyses of the data revealed that incidents of children interacting with the teacher or adult were coded in less than one-third of the observations. In fact, the most frequently coded interaction was “routine activity setting, no teacher-child interaction and no child engagement” (p. 24), representing 15% of the time. Another 10% of the time was coded as “meals/snack, no teacher-child interaction, and no child engagement” (p. 24). Experiences that focused on pre-academic experiences involving interaction with the teacher occurred on average 3% of the time. These findings represent the reality of what is happening in prekindergarten classrooms; unfortunately, the findings do not indicate that instructional practice reflects what research delineates as effective in improving student outcomes, especially for at-risk children.

Pianta, Howes, et al. (2005) reported that their analysis of the NCEDE (2005) data gathered in 238 classrooms in six states revealed that program and teacher attributes were statistically significant predictors of observed quality. Additionally, they reported that program quality was lower when a) more than 60% of the children were from low-income households, b) teachers were neither degreed nor trained in early childhood education, and c) beliefs were less child-centered. These findings regarding program quality have implications for policy makers as more states are providing state-funded preschool programs with the goal of enabling disadvantaged children to be more

successful in school. Further, King and Luebchow (2006) reported that according to the New America Foundation:

[T]here is a federal role for harmonizing decentralized state, local, and private early care and education programs horizontally across jurisdictions and vertically across grade levels, particularly when it comes to teacher quality. All children deserve a quality teacher in grade school and PK, no matter their geographic or economic background. (p. 14)

Isaacs (2007) reported that research has documented the “positive child outcomes and long-term social benefits” (p. 5) of high-quality preschool programs that provide comprehensive services to at-risk children and their families. Yoshikawa (1995) also noted that “the costs to government of providing quality early childhood programs are balanced against the value to society of increased productivity and decreased social problems” (p. 69). Gilliam and Ripple (2004) reported that their review of state-funded preschool programs revealed high variability in areas such as guidelines, accessibility, monitoring, classroom quality, and availability of comprehensive services. Additionally, Gilliam and Zigler (2000) pointed to the importance of formally measuring both program implementation and program quality. However, their meta-analysis of evaluations of state-funded preschool programs revealed that few states address program quality. Assessing program quality is particularly important when one considers that many states contract with private providers to implement preschool programs.

Program quality is closely tied to both the instructional and emotional climate of the individual classroom. By pairing instruments that assess both structural indicators and process indicators of quality, researchers have gained a broader perspective of what happens in classrooms for young children. Through assessment of quality indicators, the cost-effective investments in comprehensive preschool programs discussed by Isaacs (2007) can be realized.

The research on program quality has provided insight regarding the instruction and interactions that can yield positive outcomes for young children, especially those who are considered at risk. Program quality, especially teacher-child interactions, must be addressed if early care and learning centers are focused on continuous improvement. The following implications derived from the research can guide efforts to provide high-quality learning environments for young children (Espinosa, 2002).

*Implications for Early Care and Learning Directors*

- Respect, nurture, and academically challenge children in early care and learning settings.
- Provide opportunities for children to acquire knowledge, skills, and abilities in all domains of learning.
- Include children in decision making and ensure that there is variety in learning opportunities.
- Recognize and respect the cultural diversity of the children and families.

- Provide opportunities for children to participate in variety of settings and activities to accommodate individual learning needs and to promote self-regulation and social skills development.
- Provide opportunities for children to learn the pre-academic skills essential to school readiness, such as alphabet recognition, phonemic awareness, concepts of print, and mathematics concepts.
- Focus on positive interactions that promote oral language development and vocabulary.
- Involve parents/families in all aspects of the program and communicate regularly with them.
- Provide a learning environment that is well-equipped with appropriate materials and equipment to accommodate the learning and development needs of all children.

## Creating and Sustaining High-Quality Professional Development

### *Introduction*

Early childhood teachers have the great responsibility of educating and nurturing the youngest members of society. The National Research Council (2001) report found that teacher education and preparation are critical to the quality of an early childhood program (Karp, 2006). Research compiled by the Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB, 2001) indicated student achievement gains were made when an investment in highly qualified teachers was made. A study completed by the Center for Childcare Workforce (2002) found that 33% of early childhood teachers and 12% of assistants held a bachelor's degree or higher in 1995 (Hale-Jenkins, Knopf, & Kemple, 2006). FACES 2000, a study of Head Start program quality, found that teachers with higher levels of education and more years of teaching experience were more likely to have knowledge and positive attitudes about early education practices, which in turn affects program quality (Zill, Resnick, Kim, O'Donnell, & Sorongon, 2003). Concerns involving staffing, qualifications, and teacher training were identified as critical policy issues states must address to establish quality prekindergarten programs (Children's Alliance of New Hampshire, 2004). Unfortunately, "Spodek and Saracho (1990) concluded that early childhood teachers as a whole are less educated and not as prepared for teaching as any other group; and yet may have more influence on children than teachers at any other grade level" (as cited by Karp, p. 226). In order for children, especially those from low-income families, to begin kindergarten with the skills needed to be successful, children must be provided with well-trained and prepared teachers.

## *Findings*

To improve classroom quality, Pianta (2007) suggested that teacher training focus on child development and knowledge and skills in interacting with young children. Quality practices can be improved through direct training methods, including mentoring and coaching with constructive feedback based on observations. Additionally, he suggested that classroom quality can be improved through models of best practices that can be presented via videotapes of teachers of young children whose skills in providing both instructional and emotional support have been documented. Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, and Howes (2002) indicated that training and education are mechanisms that can be used to promote better quality in early childhood classrooms. The study of 553 infant, toddler, and preschool center classrooms examined the association between classroom quality and both the highest level of formal education and whether the teacher had attended training at the center, in the community, or at professional meetings. The process and structural quality of each center was assessed using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS), and Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS) as well as parent surveys and interviews of the on-site director and teachers. The results of the study indicated that both the level of formal education and attendance at professional workshops are associated with higher quality classrooms.

Tout, Saslow, and Berry (as cited in Early et al., 2007) examined the connection between classroom quality and early childhood teachers' education. "They concluded that higher levels of teacher education, especially education that focuses on early childhood

development, were linked to higher quality, but there is insufficient research supporting a specific cut point”” (Early et al., p. 276). Early et al. completed seven studies related to early childhood classroom quality and teacher education and found that teachers’ education alone will not adequately improve classroom quality or child outcomes. Furthermore, effective early education programs should include professional development that supports teachers’ interactions with children.

Currently, studies are being completed using an evaluation of planned variation in teacher support provided through video conferencing, videotaping, and Internet-mediated feedback. The pilot study, MyTeachingPartner (MTP; Pianta, Kinzie, et al., 2003) involves teachers videotaping themselves implementing lessons every 2 weeks, then sending the tapes to a consultant who edits and provides feedback and posts the video on the teacher’s private MTP Web site. Bryant et al., 2002 (as cited by Pianta, 2006) found that many in-service trainings for educators utilized a classroom-focused model led by an instructor who provided knowledge and information to participants with little to no follow-up on actual implementation of strategies. Unfortunately, this traditional approach does not provide the support many teachers need to improve teaching practices. Pianta suggested teacher-child interaction be the core curriculum in early education and professional development initiatives.

NAEYC (2003) addressed the need for common knowledge and abilities shared by all early childhood professionals in a position statement, *Conceptual Framework for Early Childhood Professional Development*. The document listed eight key elements that define what early childhood educators should know and be able to do: a) demonstrate an

understanding of child development and apply this knowledge in practice; b) observe and assess children's behavior in planning and individualizing teaching practices and curriculum; c) establish and maintain a safe and healthy environment for children; d) plan and implement a safe and healthy environment for children; e) establish supportive relationships with children and implement developmentally appropriate techniques of guidance and group management; f) establish and maintain positive and productive relationships with families; g) support the development and learning of individual children, recognizing that children are best understood in the context of family, culture, and society; and h) demonstrate an understanding of the early childhood profession and make a commitment to professionalism. To effectively implement these elements in the classroom, early childhood educators must have access to meaningful professional development.

NAEYC also outlined nine principles of effective professional development. The principles addressed the need for professional development to part of an ongoing process that is grounded in theory and philosophy and implemented in structured and systematic way. They also noted the importance of providing professional development experiences that are more personal to the learner's background and context. Additionally, providers of effective professional development experiences have an appropriate knowledge and experience base and use an active, hands on-approach and stress an interactive approach that encourage students to learn from one another. Effective professional development experiences should also provide opportunities for application and reflection as well as allow for individuals to be observed and receive feedback on what has been learned.

Providing high-quality professional development to early childhood educators supports teachers' professional growth and improves public understanding and support of high-quality early education programs.

*Implications for Early Care and Learning Directors*

- Provide learning opportunities for all staff to grow professionally.
- Recognize the importance of promoting a program that expects all staff members are life-long learners.
- Provide teachers with information regarding training opportunities in the community and encourage their participation.
- Stay abreast of changes in practice and expect the same of all staff members.
- Facilitate regular training sessions for staff in relationship to what they should know and be able to do.
- Follow NAEYC Professional Development guidelines.
- Recognize the value of diverse workforce by creating a work environment in which all staff is comfortable.
- Ensure that professional development offerings are designed to increase teachers' understanding of child development and interactions that promote both a positive instructional climate and emotional climate.

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