

National Professional Development Center on Inclusion

Helping states achieve an integrated professional development system that supports high quality inclusion



What Do We Mean by Professional Development in the Early Childhood Field?

Almost everyone recognizes the importance of having an effective early childhood¹ workforce in programs that serve young children and families. Less clear is how to ensure that all early childhood practitioners have the essential knowledge and skills they need to be effective. Increasingly, policy makers are turning to professional development as the solution to adequately preparing practitioners or helping them improve their instructional and intervention practices. This focus on effective practices is associated with the goal of improving child outcomes as part of the standards and accountability movement. However, strikingly little scientific research exists to indicate exactly what approaches to professional development are most likely to enhance practices. Perhaps even more unsettling is the realization that there is no agreed-upon definition of the term professional development in education or related fields.

This document presents a definition and conceptual framework for professional development in early childhood. Defining what is meant by professional development is intended to guide efforts aimed at ensuring that the early childhood workforce is highly qualified and effective in working with young children (birth through 8) and their families.

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¹ Early childhood represents a disparate collection of professions that includes early care and education, early childhood special education, early intervention, infant and child mental health, psychology, social work, medicine, public health, and the allied health professions, among others.

Why a Definition of Professional Development Matters

Current early childhood professional development efforts at national, state, and local levels are fragmented at best. Professional development opportunities can range from a single workshop to a semester-long academic course, offered by a medley of different professional development providers and varying widely with respect to the philosophy, content, and format of the learning experiences. Recently, a variety of approaches such as *technical assistance, coaching, consultation, mentoring, and communities of practice* have gained prominence as key components of early childhood professional development. However, there is little agreement on what each of these approaches means, how and when they can be used to enhance professional development, and if they are actually effective in improving professional practices.

Reaching consensus on the meaning of professional development in early childhood will (a) facilitate the coordination and integration of professional development across various sectors of the early childhood field, (b) highlight the need for a common set of professional competencies and standards for a diverse group of practitioners, and (c) assist in distinguishing various professional development approaches and matching learning opportunities with the characteristics and needs of the learners. Furthermore, defining professional development is necessary to evaluate its effects on improving professional practices and producing positive child and family outcomes. Without a shared understanding of what is meant by professional development, it is difficult, if not impossible, to compare various professional development programs or determine which components are most effective, for whom, and under what conditions.

Assumptions Guiding the Definition of Professional Development in Early Childhood

The National Professional Development Center on Inclusion (NPDCI) reviewed the literature as the first step in developing a definition and conceptual framework of professional development to guide its work with states. This review led to six key assumptions about professional development:

1. The term professional development encompasses all types of facilitated learning opportunities, for example, those that result in college credit or degrees as well as those that generally are less intensive and do not yield credits or degrees; those that occur largely through formal coursework and those that are more informal and situated in practice.
2. The early childhood workforce constitutes a group of professionals who are widely diverse with respect to their roles (e.g., teachers, teaching assistants, care providers, paraprofessionals, disability specialists, consultants, technical assistance providers, family support providers, administrators); organizational affiliations (e.g., Head Start, child care, pre-kindergarten, preschool, and public school programs); qualifications, education, and experience; and racial, ethnic, socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic characteristics. They serve diverse young children who vary widely in terms of their abilities, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, culture, and language.

3. Families of young children are essential partners in all aspects of early education and intervention, including professional development. Families can play key roles as both recipients and providers to enrich professional development for all learners. The role of families should be acknowledged in planning, delivering, and evaluating professional development, even though the term *professional* is used in the definition.
4. The role of *learners* in professional development is to *actively engage* in learning experiences that lead to the acquisition of professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions and the application of this knowledge in practice.
5. The roles of *providers* in professional development are to *organize and facilitate* learning experiences that respond directly to problems in practice.
6. Conceptualizing professional development as three intersecting components (the “who,” the “what,” and the “how”) can be used as an organizing framework for planning and evaluating professional development. Although a comprehensive system of professional development must take into account a variety of other factors such as access to learning opportunities and incentives to participate, the “who,” the “what,” and the “how” may be viewed as the core of a professional development framework aimed at promoting highly effective teaching and intervening.

A Definition of Professional Development in Early Childhood

The definition of professional development for early childhood proposed by NPDCI is as follows:

“Professional development is facilitated teaching and learning experiences that are transactional and designed to support the acquisition of professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions as well as the application of this knowledge in practice. The key components of professional development include: (a) the characteristics and contexts of the learners (i.e., the “who” of professional development, including the characteristics and contexts of the learners and the children and families they serve); (b) content (i.e., the “what” of professional development; what professionals should know and be able to do; generally defined by professional competencies, standards, and credentials); and (c) the organization and facilitation of learning experiences (i.e., the “how” of professional development; the approaches, models, or methods used to support self-directed, experientially-oriented learning that is highly relevant to practice).”

A Conceptual Framework for Professional Development

To show how the definition of professional development can be applied to creating, implementing or evaluating effective early childhood professional development efforts, NPDCI offers the following conceptual framework (see Figure 1). Those who plan and implement professional development can use the conceptual framework first to think through each of the core components of a professional development program (the who, the what, and the how) and then to consider how these elements relate to each other. Policies, resources, organizational structures, access and outreach, and evaluation constitute contextual variables that must be taken into consideration in designing professional development.

The “Who” of Professional Development. The emphasis on the learner or the “who” of professional development is a reminder that practitioners, who vary widely with respect to their qualifications, professions, experience, race, culture, and ethnicity, serve children and families who are themselves diverse in many respects. Professional development efforts must consider the characteristics and organizational contexts of both the providers and the learners.

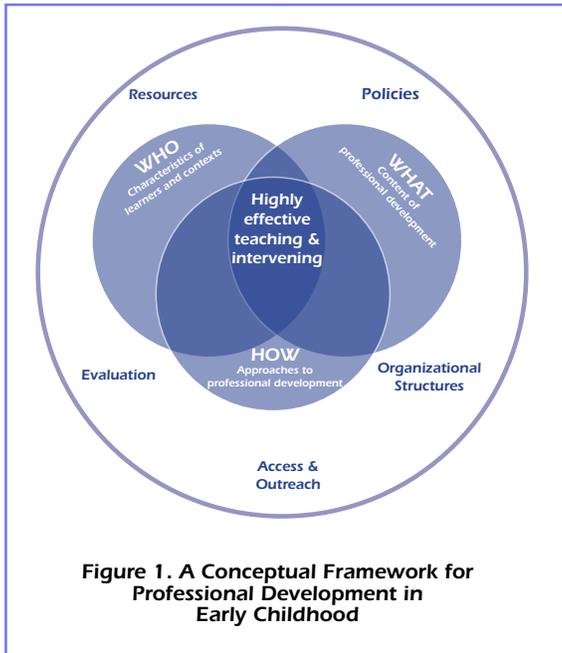


Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework for Professional Development in Early Childhood

The “What” of Professional Development. The emphasis on the content or the “what” defines the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will be the focus of the professional development program. To help determine exactly what constitutes foundational knowledge for particular education or intervention practices, professional development providers can turn for guidance to professional competencies and standards, quality program standards, and expected outcomes for children and families. The “what” of professional development should help both providers and learners understand new approaches to teaching and learning, what a practice looks like in applied settings, the purpose of a particular practice, which program guidelines and standards relate to the practice, and what evidence exists to show that it is effective.

The “How” of Professional Development. The emphasis on the organization and facilitation of learning experiences or the “how” can help identify the most promising professional development approaches. A small, but growing, body of empirical evidence suggests that professional development is more likely to be effective and enhance teaching and

learning when it has the following elements:

1. Professional development approaches are focused on professional practices and consist of content-specific rather than general instruction.
2. Professional development is aligned with instructional goals, learning standards, and the curriculum materials that practitioners use in practice.
3. Learning opportunities are intense, sustained over time, and include guidance and feedback on how to apply specific practices through methods such as coaching, consultation, or facilitated collaboration (e.g., communities of practice, teacher study groups).

Applying the Definition and Conceptual Framework to Organize Professional Development (An Example)

One state² used the “who,” the “what,” and the “how” components as a way of organizing professional development to enhance early childhood program quality as part of their quality rating improvement system (QRIS) initiative. The goal was to ensure that regional consultants and technical assistance providers acquired the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to work collaboratively with practitioners to make overall improvements in their classrooms and to strengthen their inclusive practices for children with disabilities and their families.

²This is an example of what a state might do, based on actual professional development activities across a number of states.

The “Who”

The primary audience for the professional development consisted of those who provided consultation or technical assistance to direct service providers (e.g., teachers, child care providers) in an effort to improve the quality of early childhood programs and services. The results of a statewide survey revealed that most quality consultants and technical assistance providers had either a bachelors or masters degree and experience teaching or administering early education programs. The vast majority had no formal education or experience working as a consultant or technical assistance provider or in supporting quality inclusive practices for children with disabilities and their families.

The “What”

The state developed professional competencies to define effective consultation and technical assistance services in conjunction with its accountability and program improvement efforts. The competencies defined what quality consultants and technical assistance providers should know and be able to do and were useful in identifying the content of the professional development. The primary content areas included:

- Strategies for collaborating and communicating with early childhood teachers and providers based on effective models of consultation and technical assistance,
- High quality early childhood practices and specialized instructional strategies (including tiered approaches) that were matched to children’s individual needs and that supported professional-family partnerships,
- Information on program quality standards and the state’s QRIS criteria, including provisions related to serving children with disabilities and their families, and
- Knowledge and skills related to measuring and documenting both general program quality and quality inclusive practices.

The “How”

To ensure that quality consultants and technical assistance providers acquired core knowledge and skills and had the support they needed to implement high quality technical assistance services, the planners developed a standardized and centralized approach to professional development. Intensive professional development institutes were designed to ensure that participants understood program quality standards, recommended early childhood practices (both general and specialized), methods of documenting program quality, and effective models for working collaboratively with early childhood practitioners in a variety of programs and settings. To provide ongoing support, planners also established a community of practice in which participants were encouraged to observe and reflect on one another’s technical assistance practices as a method of refining and improving these practices.

Conclusion

Applying a definition and conceptual framework as a way of organizing professional development could be useful to others who are committed to creating an integrated early childhood professional development, a necessary step in addressing the need for a highly effective early childhood workforce. ■

The concepts presented in this document were the result of a collaborative effort. Family members, practitioners, researchers, policymakers, state and local programs administrators, higher education faculty, and representatives from advocacy and professional organizations provided input and feedback. This collaboration, which we refer to as knowledge exchange, is integral not only to the success of NPDCI's work, but to the field as a whole. An effective professional development system is best created through the collective wisdom of everyone involved in working with young children and their families. We invite you to join the conversation on our website at <http://npdci.fpg.unc.edu>

Professional Development Resources

POSITION STATEMENTS OR CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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National Professional Development Center on Inclusion

Helping states achieve an integrated professional development system that supports high quality inclusion

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The National Professional Development Center on Inclusion (NPDCI) works with states to create a system of high quality, cross-sector professional development to support inclusion of young children with disabilities in early childhood settings. NPDCI offers states an integrated, facilitated sequence of planning and technical assistance to develop, implement and monitor a plan for professional development and inclusion, along with tools and products to support state efforts. NPDCI is devoted to collective learning and system improvements in professional development for early childhood inclusion.

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Visit <http://npdci.fpg.unc.edu> for more information.

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