

## Nourishing Our Practice

by Elaine Ferguson, M.Ed.

Fall is a significant time in our lives, many of us consider this when the “new year” begins. This is probably tied to the fact that this was when many of us started a new school year. It brought the challenge of new learning, applying old knowledge and our ability to deal with it. It brought new relationships in learning, people, places and environments. This is what many Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) students are experiencing as they start their studies and return to classes. It is what novice early childhood practitioners are experiencing as they start their first job. It is what seasoned early childhood practitioners are experiencing with a new group of children and a new year. It is a time to look forward to putting into practice the plans we developed for this time of year. At some point we have reflected on the theory we have learned and our experience with effective practice and we planned our approach for the “new year”. We have reflected with colleagues, reviewed our ECEC texts, found new resources, consulted mentors etc. in our desire to provide a positive learning environment for the children- experiences that will be fun, stimulating and provocative. In doing this we are incorporating theory and practice.

How many of you have observed a master teacher and wondered - “How did she know that?”- A child is on the verge of erupting and she walks over beside the child, doesn’t say a thing and maybe touches the child on the shoulder, or smiles..., and the child calms down. All this has happened in a split second. This is practice knowledge –she has knowledge of the child, the context of the situation- what are the other people, the room, the atmosphere and the child himself contributing to the situation? What has worked in the past? How was the child when he arrived? What has happened since then to the room, atmosphere, others, the child? All this is considered and she chooses an action... which may or may not work, but she tests it, and this time it worked. After that moment she reflects on why it worked/didn’t work and adds this to her practice knowledge to use in another situation.

The core of knowledge for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has a *theoretical* component and a *practice* component. When we study ECEC at college we deal primarily with the theoretical component of ECEC- social, emotional, physical, cognitive, aesthetic/spiritual growth and development, and in our ECEC field practice, we apply what we learn about this to children through observing, planning some activities, reflecting, etc. with a variety of groups of children and programs, our fellow students and the ECEC faculty. Once we graduate, get a job and are responsible for the program for a group of children, the practice component of our ECEC knowledge develops and grows as we apply ECEC theory to our day-to-day practice.

Novice or seasoned, wherever we are in our career journey, our practice deals with situations that involve a number of contextual factors. These factors are our *client*, (a child or family); *others*, (early childhood practitioners, children, families, staff, stakeholders such as licensing, early interventionists etc.); the *environment*, (a classroom, work situation, or home); the *atmosphere*, (emotions, events, expectations); and *ourselves*. Our practice in these situations is informed by what we know about these factors and our experience to date. It is our practice knowledge.

Karen VanderVen defines practice knowledge as

- “Knowledge of a wide array of interventions, how to access them, select one and anticipate possible outcomes;
- knowledge of informational theory which takes context into account when making a decision and acting;
- knowledge of viable “rules of thumb” which draw on your own perceptions and learning; and
- *artistry.*”<sup>i</sup>

So what do we need in our quest to master and enrich the practice part of the ECEC core of knowledge?

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**Professional needs:**

In my 40+ years in the early childhood field I have found that for early childhood practitioners to thrive in their practice it comes down to meeting three basic needs.

- **Belonging**- we need to be part of a group bigger than ourselves or our place of work; to engage in activities as part of the sector; to be part of a worthwhile career;
- **Voice**- we need to speak out about our practice; hear ourselves in the messages about our practice; and be involved in forming the messages to improve our practice; to be confident that our comments, concerns and considerations are valid, recognized and heard;
- **Safe reflection**- we need a safe place where we can speak of our dreams, realities, fears etc without fearing recrimination. A place where we can test new insights, and regardless of the outcomes learn new ways to practice.

When all three of these conditions- belonging, voice and safety are present, a collective approach develops and growth and development is more likely. Wherever we are in developing our practice knowledge we all must find ways to meet these needs for our practice to thrive.

How can early childhood practitioners provide for these needs? How can we contribute to meeting these needs for ourselves and for our colleagues?

**BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS:**

*“...the recognition of the strengths, gifts, talents, and assets of individuals and communities is more likely to inspire positive action for change than an exclusive focus on needs and problems... focus energy on how each and every member has contributed and can continue to contribute, in meaningful ways to community development. Focusing on uncovering the merits of all members...”<sup>ii</sup>*

To **belong**, you must develop and build collegial relationships. Collegial relationships are based on honour, respect and modesty.

levels are one of the ways that the sector and its

- *Honour* is the demonstration of respect, an outward show of appreciation and acknowledgement of another person’s skill, experience and knowledge. It is a celebration of their value, their contributions and their being.
- *Respect* is recognizing the value of what a person brings to a relationship and how it enriches the life of each person in the relationship. It recognizes that one’s life- one’s knowledge, skills and relationships are enhanced by interactions with other individuals.
- *Modesty* is a lack of pretentiousness. It is recognizing that all have something to learn and all have something to teach. It recognizes that each person is an expert on their context, their work and their skill. It is the part of us that interacts with the other person’s experience to develop new insights and learning. It appreciates the wisdom of an infant and the learning that we gain through observation and interaction with that child. It generalizes this experience to all our relationships with children, colleagues and families. Reflection requires modesty, being reasonable in our expectations, and always expecting to be surprised at how much we have to learn and how much each and every person in each of our relationships have to teach us.

**SUPPORT AND RECOGNITION:**

To use your **voice** you must find opportunities that support and recognize what you and your colleagues contribute to each other, your clients, society and yourself. The contributions made to children, families and communities by early childhood practitioners are valuable and are to be supported and recognized. Support and recognition of others and by others strengthens our profession and increases support from our communities. Opportunities such as conferences and seminars; networking activities; professional conventions; and recognition events such as awards and celebrations result in a more confident and competent human services workforce. Joining and being active in your professional association increases your voice and belonging.

Awards and recognition activities to honour and recognize individuals and programs on a number of

Your practice is refined by asking yourself - what was it

members are celebrated in Nova Scotia. The Caring at Work Awards are awarded by peers to peers; the ECLC Awards of Excellence in program and practice are juried awards; and the 20+ ECCE Service Awards to programs operating more than 20 years. Child Care Awareness Days during the month of June is a time when centres across the province bring child care into their communities; their communities into their programs and join their communities in celebrating the value of child care in their community. These activities support and recognize the valuable work done by early childhood practitioners and programs both within and outside the sector.

### REFLECTIVE PRACTICE:

To have a valid **voice** in speaking about your practice you must be a reflective practitioner. You must know what you do, why you do it and how you can do it better. A reflective practitioner uses reflective thinking to re-examine the current practices of our profession. By applying reflective thinking to your practice you demonstrate reflective practice. How can you do this?

- You use *questions* to extract and select information. What do I need to know?
- You *analyse* to identify components of a situation, consider how elements are linked or interact and recognize personal beliefs, emotions, or biases with regard to a situation.
- You *plan*- elaborating on what you know now to explore the possibilities in the future... "If I do this now then this might happen and if that happens then this might happen..."
- You *evaluate by reviewing* the elements of the situation, giving the good points and bad points, the advantages and disadvantages, the values to apply.
- You *evaluate by reconsidering* the situation and modifying the plan if new information or an element of the situation was not previously considered
- You *evaluate by deciding* what you will do.

about the client, the others, the environment, and the atmosphere that contributed to the situation? What would I consider next time? What do I want more of? The practices of questioning, analyzing, and planning allow early childhood practitioners to re-examine their current practices. When evaluation allows you opportunities for review, reconsideration, and deciding, often there are new insights and understandings that are integrated into your practice. Reflective practitioners achieve excellence in their practice. A reflective, caring early childhood practitioner is one who creates and makes sense of change by using reflective thinking for personal evaluation and growth. They create new insights and integrate them into their practice and improve the quality of their practice. They share their insights with colleagues, clients and the community.

### CONTINUOUS GROWTH AND LEARNING:

To test new insights you must take part in opportunities for continuous growth and development- **safe** places where you can dialogue with colleagues To value the growth and development of children, youth and families you must value your own growth and development. Continuous growth involves relevant professional development opportunities- study groups, reading, mentoring, conferences, workshops, courses, networking etc. Being a professional involves taking steps in a continuous growth cycle, a cycle fueled by reflective thinking to identify needs, research and design strategies, test the strategies, evaluate them, and start the cycle again with new insights and refined practice. There is always something new to learn.

Novice or seasoned, wherever we are in our career journey, we are motivated by our needs of belonging, voice and safety and we feed these needs through building relationships, support and recognition, reflective practice and continuous learning. By taking care of our professional needs, we provide an increased quality of practice that will contribute to the growth and development of our sector.

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**Connections Journal 16.1 November 2012**

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ISSN:0843-6304  
Mailed under Canada Post Publications Mail Sales Agreement # 40052845  
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