

Evaluation Report:

**The Social Validity
of Early Literacy Professional Development
in Child Care Settings**

Prepared for the University of Minnesota -
Center for Early Education and Development (CEED)

September 2005

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The Social Validity of Early Literacy Professional Development in Child Care Settings

Summary

Supporting child care providers (home and center) in their efforts to boost children's early literacy is more likely to be successful when the support comes in a form that "works" for the provider, and fits with what that provider both needs and wants. Based on conversations with a range of child care providers and others in the child care system, the following themes offer guidance for any such support:

1. Home settings are unique.
2. Practical realities matter.
3. Behavior trumps literacy.
4. Provide a roadmap.
5. Culture is critical.
6. Connections count.
7. Make it real and make it fun.
8. Value and variability.

Background

The University of Minnesota-Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) received funding from the Bush Foundation to evaluate various aspects of the Minnesota Early Literacy Training Project (MELT), with a particular eye toward finding innovations that can be brought to scale in ways that will improve the developmental outcomes of young children.

One aspect of that evaluation is to probe the social validity of early literacy professional development activities in child care settings. This report focuses on those findings.

What is being evaluated is the capacity of professional development programs to effectively promote early literacy growth and development in child care settings. Primary focus is on the MELT (Minnesota Early Literacy Training) project - a relationship-based professional development model of training and coaching using SEEDs curriculum designed to improve the ability of child care providers to boost early literacy skills in children. Particular attention is being paid to North Minneapolis, where many children are at risk for entering kindergarten without the early literacy skills needed for ongoing school success.

Purpose of evaluation:

- To determine if early literacy professional development is providing what child care providers need, want and care about - and if those efforts are sustainable.
- To help identify issues and enhancements that could improve providers' ability to boost children's early literacy skills.

Evaluation process

Barb Nicol, president of Barbara Nicol Public Relations, managed and implemented the evaluation process. Barb is a public relations and project management consultant with firsthand knowledge of the early literacy efforts targeted toward child care providers in Minnesota.

Steps in the evaluation process:

- ✓ Meet regularly with overall evaluation team
- ✓ Conduct background research on social validity and early literacy efforts in child care settings
- ✓ Develop social validity evaluation framework, interview list and questions
- ✓ Schedule and conduct interviews (phone, on-line and in-person) with 27 people familiar with early literacy training; interviewees represented child care providers (home and center), center directors, trainers, coaches, training coordinators and training developers. Interviews were conducted between May 9, 2005 and September 15, 2005; see Appendix B for complete list.
- ✓ Review and summarize notes from interviews
- ✓ Organize findings from interviews and research into themes
- ✓ Write evaluation report
- ✓ Present findings to full evaluation team
- ✓ Disseminate report to other interested parties

Overarching evaluation questions

- ◆ What do child care providers need and want to improve their ability to boost children's early literacy skills?
- ◆ Do providers find value in promoting early literacy skills? (i.e., do they care?)
- ◆ What will help them continue to use what they learned? What will get in the way? (i.e., is it sustainable?)

Eight major themes from the interviews and research

(see Appendix A for more detailed notes)

1. **Home settings are unique.** While there are common characteristics of home and center settings, there are unique aspects of home child care settings that affect the ways in which those providers are or are not able to support early literacy development (see "Characteristics unique to family child care", below). Special consideration is needed to effectively serve home providers.
2. **Practical realities matter.** More attention should be paid to the practical realities of child care, and the resulting limits or opportunities it presents. For example (see also "Characteristics unique to family child care", below):
 - Young children's attention spans and desire to be "moving" limits the amount of time that can be spent on a specific activity
 - There is little or no planning or prep time for providers
 - Working with children 1:1 or in extended small groups can be impossible
 - Families receiving MFIP subsidies may not bring their children to child care regularly or at consistent times, as transportation and required job searches can be a barrier
3. **Behavior trumps literacy.** Children's behavior is an ongoing challenge for child care providers. Methods that link early literacy development and behavior support would be of great benefit to provider (a "two-fer"). In addition, some children arrive without having had any type of child care experience, and need extra support simply becoming accustomed to child care routines prior to being able to really engage in any early literacy activities.
4. **Provide a roadmap.** Providers greatly appreciate being given a specific framework (lesson plans, curriculum), within which to operate. Even though they will tailor it to meet their situation, not

having to invent it from scratch helps tremendously. Lack of planning time makes it challenging to find ways to incorporate all they learned in a meaningful and consistent way, and a roadmap of some type helps overcome this barrier.

5. **Culture is critical.** A culture that supports the importance of early literacy is central to success. If the director really “gets it”, he or she will provide resources and time to support early literacy. It will become part of the center’s (or home’s) culture, in terms of hiring, expectations, motivation and leadership. Treating providers as professionals and teachers matters as well; people often rise to what’s expected of them.
6. **Connections count.** Most providers love new ideas – both from within their centers (home providers are very isolated in this regard) and from other centers. Finding ways to support sharing, networking, reflection and planning would help support sustainability of early literacy efforts.
7. **Make it real and make it fun.** Training that is hands-on and classroom or home specific is the most meaningful, as providers can see what they’re learning in action, with their kids. While theory and research are important as context for why early literacy efforts matter, providers are more likely to continue something they’ve experienced firsthand. And if the kids are having fun and enjoying what they’re doing, the days go more quickly and more smoothly – and everyone is happy.
8. **Value and variability.** Providers who participate in early literacy training do so because they recognize its value and importance for their children. However, the background, skill levels and knowledge of providers varies tremendously, thereby impacting their ability to incorporate and sustain the efforts in a comprehensive and consistent manner. Also, those who don’t take advantage of training opportunities may be challenging to impact in a meaningful way (they won’t come and they may not care).

Characteristics unique to family child care

- Space is shared between home and child care, making it hard to create ‘centers’, hang things on walls, do things on a regular schedule, etc. (they live and work in the same space, as does their family) – and children take a heavy toll on the living space
- Usually working with very mixed ages – and thus developmental ranges - all at once
- More likely to be isolated and alone – no one to share or network with
- Providers’ own children are often part of the mix – and “home rules” and “child care rules” may be different
- Often seen as less professional and thus less respected than other child care providers
- They are all parts of the business – manager, administrator, marketer, accountant, teacher, parent, cleaner
- More likely to develop closer, more personal relationships with the families and children they care for
- May need encouragement and help to utilize other public resources (libraries, universities, schools)

Conclusion

Child care providers who choose to engage in early literacy training understand and value the importance of this training to help boost their children’s knowledge and skills. However, the providers need time, practical ideas, tools and support to consistently implement what they learn. Practical realities of both center and home settings need to be taken into account for efforts to be successful over time.

*“You take what you can use and what works, and it becomes part of your tried and true.”
– family child care provider*

*“Eyes are being widened by this training, and it excites them.”
- SW Minnesota training coach*

“In the end, they want to be the best they can be. It takes time.”

- NW Minnesota training coach

APPENDIX A: **Notes and Quotes**

Summarized perspectives from those on the “system” side (trainers, training coordinators and training developers)

- Providers need time to share and network and reflect and plan (incorporate into staff meetings; offer gatherings with other providers; create social cohorts)
- Much easier if they have a curriculum or lesson plan framework (the “recipe”) – just plug things in – don’t have to recreate the wheel – and don’t have time to create
- While having “stuff” is nice, don’t need stuff as much as need the “recipe” – tell me what to do
- Need infrastructure support – directors who really “get it” and make this a priority and part of the center culture – resources, time, expectations and motivation and inspiration and leadership
- Practical realities – can’t do 1:1 IGDIs without extra staff
- MFIP rules – only need to be present periodically, so often absent if hard to get to child care (need to take 3 busses; late if on job search)
- Need to integrate throughout the day – not just at morning circle time
- Need to have accountability for early literacy outcomes – pressure on providers/directors to focus; pressure on parents to choose quality
- Connect early literacy opportunities and learning with improved behavioral outcomes – a “twofer” – integrate SEEDs, BEAM, PKPP
- FFN love this – usually so isolated, they crave ideas and contact
- Coaches are sometimes better if not a fellow teacher – can be hard to be “peer to peer”
- Don’t just provide “stuff” – help providers articulate a goal, and then get “stuff” to help reach that goal
- In a field of low pay, need emotional rewards: support, praise, seeing kids tangible growth
- Show providers demonstrated kid progress (esp. for “their” kids) – on easy-to-measure, easy-to-understand items
- Clear info to share with parents – not necessarily activities (many won’t or can’t take the time), but information about importance of early literacy and what the center is doing to support it
- Easier to support and sustain if there is a critical mass in a center who “get it” – doesn’t hold if there are only 1-2 champions
- Break goals into small chunks – provide easy ways to measure – tie measures to goals (ex., BKA is clear and helpful)
- Help them see that assessment is of kids’ progress, not of them as teachers – an instructional/lesson planning tool
- Huge variability among providers in terms of knowledge, commitment
- Hands-on, concrete learning in their own classroom is very helpful (that’s why on-site coaching is so helpful)

- Staff absence can be a barrier (they get sick around kids) – inconsistent care, and lack of enough staff
- Treat and view providers as teachers – they will respond
- Different racial and ethnic cultures view child care and teaching environments differently

Perspectives from the provider side (coaches and center directors)

- Be practical more than theoretical
- Need time to fit things in – activities and planning
- Sometimes have to recreate space every day (in homes or shared space)
- Love to get new ideas
- Ongoing discussions and periodic refreshers help keep it top of mind
- Helps to share with others beyond your own center – new perspectives
- “Show” parents – help them see how easy some things can be
- Continuity of care for kids matters – both provider and guardian (foster care kids; high mobility)
- Make it part of the culture, “This is how we do it; early literacy is key”
- Good training times are afternoons for centers (naptime) or evenings; helps if on a bus line; small fee is fine
- Have a “Big 5” video, with both home and center examples, to help show examples in action
- Ongoing coaching helps keep it going so not just a passing fad
- Be conscious of centers involved in multiple trainings/evaluations – can “over-test” kids in terms of time needed
- Things that are easy to do: add more books and respond to ELLCO findings
- Things that excite the children and are fun and easy are more likely to have staying power
- Kids all come at different times – hard to plan and schedule in ways that all have common experiences
- If they (home or center) does things that are “obvious” it helps set them apart and helps with marketing
- Need to train and offer ideas that work within providers’ skills and realities (ex., may not have access to computer or be very computer literate)

Perspectives from the provider side (home and center providers)

- Truly believe that early literacy skills are important
- Lesson plans and a structured framework/curriculum help a ton – everything is there for them
- Short attention spans of children make some things unrealistic – can’t sit for 40 minutes (maybe 10 minutes, depending on age) – they need to move
- Seeing changes in the children really helps
- When the kids are happy and having fun, it makes the providers’ job easier
- Songs are great tools – fun, easy, love to repeat, good for transitions and to control behavior
- Kids respond well to affirmations

- Need trainings to be “hands-on”
- If have a coach or child assessment, providers want immediate feedback
- Parents want to know kids are learning, even if they don’t support it much at home
- Providers who care will try hard to incorporate what they can; those who don’t care, won’t
- 1:1 and small groups not realistic for many
- Practical realities – can’t do small groups all day in a center
- Some kids need to simply understand how to be part of a child care setting before moving into early literacy skills
- Some kids may only get this environment at child care – not at home, even when parents are asked to support it (no time or ability)
- Coaching keeps it fresh and top-of-mind

Selected quotes from interviews

“As long as the kids like it, I’m fine.” (center teacher)

“The kids minds are like sponges, they absorb so much.” (home provider)

“I’m obligated to give the kids in my care the best head start I can.” (home provider)

“Early writing starts when babies can turn pages.” (home provider)

“The line between home and child care gets blurred.” (home provider)

“Asking kids more questions engages them more.” (home provider)

“You take what you can use and what works, and it becomes part of your tried and true.”
(home provider)

“We can’t ever have enough post-its and pencils.” (center director)

“Eyes are being widened by this training, and it excites them.” (SW MN coach)

“In the end, they want to be the best they can be. It takes time.” (NW MN coach)

APPENDIX B:
Interviews and literature sources

Name	Type	Affiliation	Date	Interaction
Cassandra	Provider	N Mpls coach (N Side Child Development)	7/6/05	Cohort meeting
David	Provider	N Mpls coach (Reuben Lindh)	7/6/05	Cohort meeting
Jan	Provider	N Mpls coach (East Side Services)	7/6/05	Cohort meeting
Hannah	Provider	N Mpls coach (NE Child Development)	7/6/05	Cohort meeting
Melanie	Provider	N Mpls coach (center)	7/6/05	Cohort meeting
Deb	Provider	Center director (N Mpls - Mary T Welcome)	7/29/05	Phone chat
Electra, Crystal, Pam, Shanice, Michelle	Provider	N Mpls center teachers (Mary T Wellcome)	9/8/05	In-person interview
Dionne	Provider	N Mpls family child care provider	9/13/05	Phone interview
Rhonda	Provider	N Mpls family child care provider	9/14/05	Phone interview
Kim	Provider	Center director (N Mpls - N Side Child Dvmpt)	9/15/05	In-person interview
Latasha, LiTeshia, Rachel	Provider	N Mpls center teachers (N Side Child Dvmpt)	9/15/05	In-person interview
Kate	System	SEEDs creator, trainer, coach	5/9/05	In-person interview
Vicki	System	SEEDs training coordinator, trainer	5/13/05	In-person interview
Carrie	System	SEEDs trainer and coach	6/22/05	In-person interview
Angele	System	SEEDs creator, trainer, coach	6/27/05	In-person interview
Lucy	System	SEEDs trainer and coach	7/18/05	In-person interview
Michelle	System	Baby's Space training coordinator	8/8/05	Phone interview
Beth	System	Words Work-St. Paul	8/8/05	In-person interview
Sandy	System	Words Work-St. Paul	8/8/05	In-person interview
Lori	System	Rural MN trainer of FCC (SW MN)	8/15/05	On-line chat
Jeannette	System	Rural MN trainer of center (central MN)	8/15/05	On-line chat

Literature Sources

- "Supporting early literacy development in family child care settings", Mei-Yu Lu (Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 12/03)
- "Promoting literacy activities in early childhood settings", Stephen Green (Family Child Care Connections, 2004)
- "Unique challenges of family child care provider: implications for professional development", J Trawick-Smith and L Lambert (Young Children, 3/95)