Early Childhood and Parenting (ECAP) Collaborative

The Developmental Stages of Teachers[1]

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The concept of development and associated developmental stages has a long history in the field of child development and early childhood education. However, several postmodern scholars have argued that the concept of development is of doubtful validity (Burman, 1994; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). As it is used here, the term *development* is used to indicate that both thought and behavior are learned in some kind of sequence and become increasingly adaptive to the tasks at hand and to the environment. In other words, no one can begin a professional role-such as a teacher or physician-as a veteran; in most cases, competence improves with experience and the knowledge and practice that come with it. It is unlikely that any experienced teacher believes and feels that he or she was more competent during the first month or year of teaching than during the fifth month or year, all other things being equal. Therefore, it seems to me meaningful as well as useful to think of teachers as having developmental sequences or stages in their professional growth patterns (Katz & Weir, 1969). The purpose of the present discussion is to suggest the tasks and training needs associated with each developmental stage and to consider the implications for the timing and location of training efforts that might be most responsive to the nature of the stages.

Stage I: Survival

Developmental Tasks

During the survival stage, which may last throughout the first full year of teaching, the teacher's main concern is whether or not she [2] can *survive* the daily challenges of carrying responsibility for a whole group of young children and their growth, development, and learning. This preoccupation with survival may be expressed to the self in terms such as "Can I get through the day in one piece? Without losing a child? Can I make it until the end of the week-to the next vacation? Can I really do this kind of work day after day after day? Will I be accepted by my colleagues?" Such questions are well expressed in Ryan's (1970) enlightening collection of accounts of first-year teaching experiences.

The first full impact of responsibility for a group of immature but vigorous young children (to say nothing of encounters with their parents) inevitably provokes some teacher anxieties. The discrepancies between anticipated successes and classroom realities may very well intensify feelings of inadequacy and unpreparedness.

Training Needs

During this survival period, the teacher is most likely to need support, understanding, encouragement, reassurance, comfort, and guidance. She needs direct help with specific skills and insight into the complex causes of behavior-all of which must be provided at the classroom site. On-site trainers may be principals, senior staff members, advisors, consultants, directors, or other specialized and experienced program assistants. Training must be constantly and readily available from someone who knows both the trainee and her teaching context well. The trainer/mentor should have enough time and flexibility to be on call as needed by the trainee. Schedules of periodic visits that have been arranged in advance cannot be counted on to coincide with trainees' crises, although visits may frequently be helpful. Cook and Mack (1971) describe the British pattern of on-site training given to teachers by their headmasters (principals). Armington (1969) also describes how advisors can meet these teacher needs on site at times of stress or during moments of crisis.

Stage II: Consolidation

Developmental Tasks

By the end of the first year-give or take a month or two-the teacher has usually come to see herself as capable of surviving immediate daily crises. She is now likely to be ready to consolidate the overall gains made during the first stage and to differentiate specific tasks and skills to be mastered next. During Stage II, teachers usually begin to focus on individual children and problem situations. This focus may take the form of looking for answers to such questions as "How can I help a clinging child? How can I help a particular child who does not seem to be learning? Are there some more effective ways to handle transition times?" These questions are now differentiated from the

general survival issues of keeping the whole class running smoothly.

During Stage I, the neophyte acquires a baseline of information about what young children of a given age are like and what to expect of them. By Stage II, the teacher is beginning to identify individual children whose behavior departs from the pattern of most of the children she knows. Thus she identifies the more unusual or exceptional patterns of behavior that have to be addressed to ensure the steady progress of the whole class.

Training Needs

During this stage, on-site training continues to be valuable. A trainer can help the teacher by engaging in joint exploration of an individual problem case. Take, for example, the case of a young preschool teacher eager to get help who expressed her problem in the question "How should I deal with a clinging child?" An on-site trainer can, of course, observe the teacher and child *in situ* and arrive at suggestions and tentative solutions fairly quickly. However, without firsthand knowledge of the child and the context, an extended give-and-take conversation between teacher and trainer or mentor may be the best way to help the teacher interpret her experience and move toward a solution of the problems in question. The trainer might ask the teacher such questions as "What strategies have you tried so far? Can you give an example of some experiences with this particular child during this week? When you did such and such, how did the child respond?"

In addition, during this stage, the need for information about specific children or problems that young children present suggests that learning to use a wider range of resources would be timely. Psychologists, social and health workers, and other specialists can strengthen the teacher's skills and knowledge at this time. Exchanges of information and ideas with more experienced colleagues may help a teacher master the developmental tasks of this stage. Opportunities to share feelings with other teachers in the same stage of development may help to reduce some of the teacher's sense of personal inadequacy and frustration.

Stage III: Renewal

Developmental Tasks

Often during the third or fourth year of teaching, the teacher begins to tire of doing the same things, offering the same activities, and celebrating the same sequence of holidays. She may begin to ask more questions about new developments in the field: "What are some new approaches to helping children's language development? Who is doing what? Where? What are some of the new materials, techniques, approaches, and ideas being developed these days?" It may be that what the teacher has been doing for each annual cohort of children has been quite adequate for them, but that she herself finds the recurrent Valentine cards, Easter bunnies, and pumpkin cut-outs insufficiently interesting! If it is true that a teacher's own interest and commitment to the projects and activities she provides for children contribute to their educational value, then her need for renewal and refreshment should be taken seriously.

Training Needs

During this stage, teachers are likely to find it especially rewarding to meet colleagues from different programs on both formal and informal occasions. Teachers in this developmental stage are particularly receptive to experiences in local, regional, and national conferences and workshops, and they profit from membership in professional associations and participation in their meetings. Teachers are now widening the scope of their reading, scanning numerous magazines and journals, viewing films and videotapes, and using the Internet as a source of fresh ideas. Perhaps during this period, they may be ready to take a close look at their own classroom teaching through videotaping themselves at work and reviewing the tapes alone or with colleagues. This is also a time when teachers welcome opportunities to visit other classes, programs, and demonstration projects. Concerns about how best to assess young children's learning, and how to report and document it, are also likely to blossom during this period.

Perhaps it is at this stage that teacher centers had the greatest potential value (Silberman, 1971; Bailey, 1971). Teacher centers were once places where teachers gathered together to help each other learn or re-learn skills, techniques, and methods; to exchange ideas; and to organize special workshops. From time to time, specialists in curriculum, child growth, or any other area of concern identified by the teachers were invited to the center to meet with them and focus on their concerns.

Stage IV: Maturity

Developmental Tasks

Maturity may be reached by some teachers within three years, by others in five or more. The teacher at this stage is likely to have come to terms with herself as a teacher and to have reached a comfortable level of confidence in her own competence. She now has enough perspective to begin to ask deeper and more abstract questions, such as "What are my historical and philosophical roots? What is the nature of growth and learning? How are educational decisions made? Can schools change societies? Is early childhood teaching really a profession?" Perhaps she has asked these questions before. But with experience, the questions represent a more meaningful search for insight, perspective, and realism.

Training Needs

Throughout maturity, teachers benefit from opportunities to participate in conferences and seminars and perhaps to work toward an advanced degree. Mature teachers welcome the chance to read widely and to interact with educators working on many problem areas on many different levels. Training sessions and conference events that Stage-II teachers enjoy may be very tiresome to the Stage-IV teacher. Similarly, introspective, in-depth discussions enjoyed by Stage-IV teachers may lead to restlessness and irritability among the beginning teachers in Stage I.

Summary

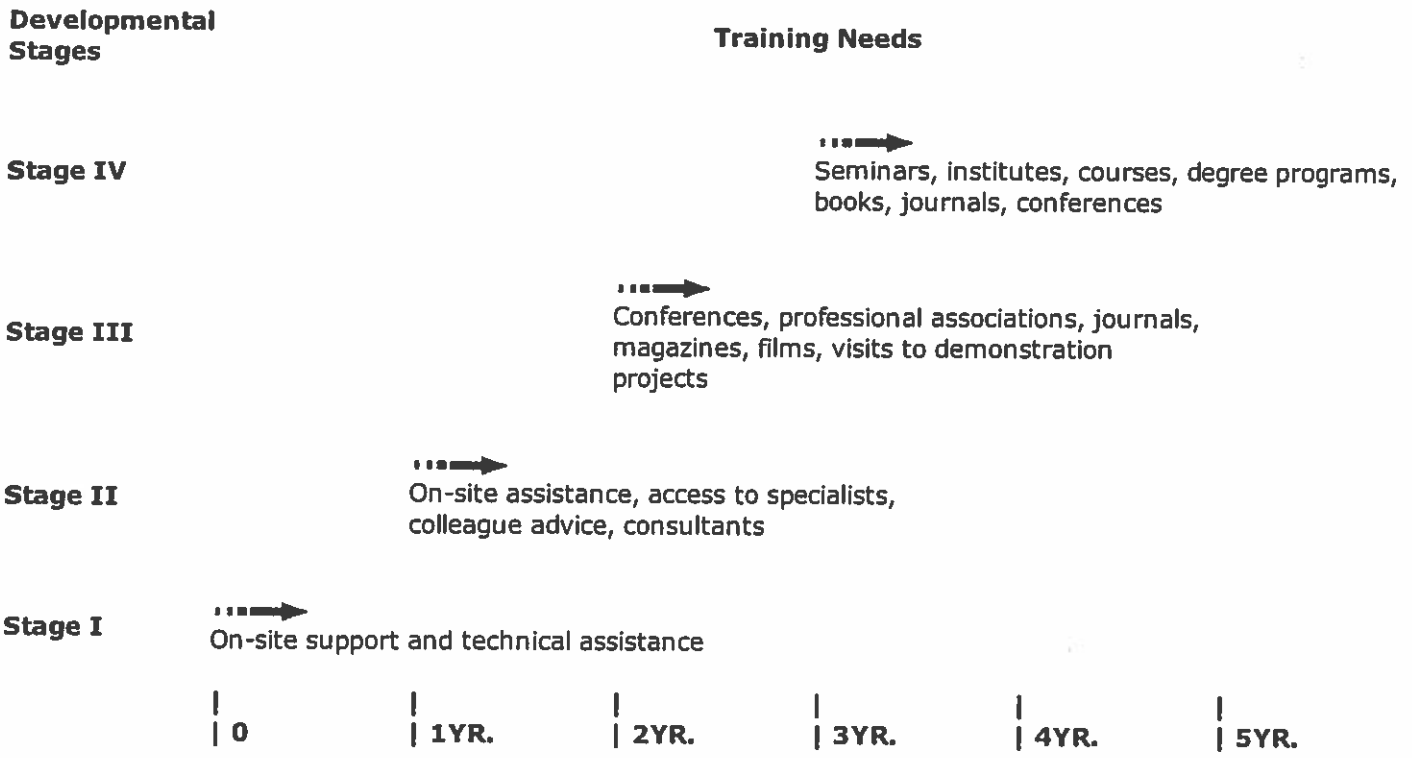

Figure 1. Stages of Development and Training Needs of Preschool Teachers.

In the above outline, four dimensions of training for teaching have been suggested: (1) developmental stages of the teacher, (2) training needs of each stage, (3) location of the training, and (4) timing of training:

Developmental Stage of the Teacher. It is useful to think of the growth of teachers as occurring in stages, linked very generally to experience gained over time.

Training Needs of Each Stage. The training needs of teachers change as experience accrues. For example, the issues dealt with in the traditional social foundations courses do not seem to address themselves to the early survival problems that are critical to the inexperienced. However, for the maturing teacher, attention to those same issues may help to deepen her understanding of the larger context in which she is trying to be effective.

Location of Training. The location of training can be moved as the teacher develops. At the beginning of the new teacher's career, training resources are most likely to be helpful when they are taken to her. In that way, training can be responsive to the particular (and possibly unique) developmental tasks and working situation, as well as the cultural context that the trainee faces in her classroom, school, and neighborhood. Later, as the teacher moves beyond the survival stage, training can move away from the school to a training facility or a college campus.

Timing of Training. The timing of training should be shifted so that more training is available to the teacher on the job. Many teachers say that their preservice education has had only a minor influence on what they do day-to-day in their classrooms; this claim suggests that strategies acquired before employment will often not be retrieved under the pressures of the actual classroom and school situation. It is interesting to note that the outstanding practices to be observed in the small Italian city of Reggio Emilia that are admired worldwide are implemented by teachers with only a high school education, but with extensive and intensive on-site inservice training and support (Filippini, 1993).

However, even though it is often said that experience is the best teacher, we cannot assume that experience teaches what the new trainee should learn. To guide this learning, two of the major roles of the mentor and teacher trainer and educator are to make sure that the beginning teacher has *informed* and *interpreted* experience.

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[1] This paper was first published in 1972 under the title "The Developmental Stages of Preschool Teachers" in *Elementary School Journal* [73(1), 50-54]. It was revised and reprinted in 1995 as "The Developmental Stages of Teachers" in *Talks with Teachers of Young Children: A Collection* (Stamford, CT: Ablex). This version has undergone further revisions, though the same central ideas are presented.

[2]The female pronoun is used throughout this discussion in as much as most adults who work with young children are females. It is hoped that the proportion of males among teachers of young children will increase substantially in the near future.

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