



Research and Evaluation: Evaluating a Professional Development “Cascade”



Evaluating a Professional Development “Cascade”: From Facilitators to University Faculty to Early Childhood Providers

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Caroline Wilkinson and Shelley Billig from RMC Research Corporation describe their evaluation of the New England Professional Development Initiative’s (NEPDI, from Mother Goose Programs) cascade approach to professional development in early childhood education.

The New England Professional Development Initiative uses a unique cascade approach to professional development for the field of early childhood education. In the first level of the cascade model, expert facilitators provide professional development to core university faculty members and early childhood specialists from three states—Maine, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. In the second level, this cadre of core trainers provides professional development to child care providers throughout their respective states. In the third level, the core trainers select additional faculty members and specialists from their states and train them to provide professional development for child care providers.

The Cascade Model

The cascade model has some unique advantages. It is designed to take advantage of specific levels of support within each state and to build on individual state standards for early childhood education. It is also very cost-effective and focuses on building a sustained infrastructure for support. In a field characterized by rapid turnover, the cascade model should yield longer term consistency and quality.

The New England Professional Development Initiative

The New England Professional Development Initiative is based on the successful National Science Foundation-funded project, *Mother Goose Cares About Math and Science*. The Mother Goose curriculum features in-depth lessons to help young children learn mathematics and science process skills related to content standards. The Initiative’s 2-day professional development sessions for teachers who will use the Mother Goose curriculum focus on using children’s literature to teach developmentally appropriate math and science concepts, such as collecting and using data, finding patterns, estimating and predicting, sorting and classifying, and recognizing relationships.

To date, 18 core faculty members have provided training to 36 other faculty members in Maine, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. As of December 2005, these faculty members have conducted professional development sessions with 203 child care providers. Over the course of the 2-year initiative, it is

expected that 900 early childhood educators will attend training and that they in turn will affect the lives of over 7,000 children.

RMC's Evaluation

Researchers at RMC Research are conducting the evaluation of this project. Using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, our evaluation examines the extent to which the project results in participants' acquisition of knowledge and skills at each level of the cascade. We are exploring the degree to which participants learn and utilize skills, fidelity to the original training approach, acceptable variation, and impact on practice. Data collection tools include surveys, interviews, and observations.

The quality of professional development is measured by the degree to which the training is aligned with the National Staff Development Council standards and benchmarks for instructional design, developed by RMC Research. We are also investigating the transfer of learning and impact on each type of provider/faculty member. To ensure that differences, if any, can be discerned, we use the same instruments for each level of the cascade. The evaluation will also identify factors that serve to facilitate or impede the effectiveness of the initiative, such as the context for support, experience and expertise of the individuals providing the training, competence and confidence in one's knowledge base in mathematics and science, and consistency of audience.

Overall, the evaluation will focus on scalability of the professional development model and the conditions under which the model works best, in order to provide a possible model for future professional development efforts. Results of the evaluation will be available in the fall of 2006 through the Vermont Center for the Book (www.mothersgooseprograms.org) and RMC Research Corporation in Denver (www.rmcdenver.com).

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