

The Search for a Sustainable Continuous Professional Development Model for Pre-School Teachers in Zambia

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Abstract

Key words: Early childhood, mentoring, leadership skills, learning, professional development, coaching, technology, education, web based training, workshops.

Context: In Zambia, pre-school education is in a precarious state with overcrowded classrooms, few or no educational materials with untrained or insufficiently prepared teachers who, in many instances, are unable to provide more than mere care-giving for the children. Though the Ministry of Education has committed to Training and Continuous Professional Development, they can only do it with the help of interested NGO's such as the Women's Global Connection (WGC). WGC is a non-profit internet-based organization whose mission is to promote learning and leadership development around the world. To that end, in 2004 WGC registered in Zambia and began the Children Under Seven project in Mongu, capital of the Western Province. The goal was to promote, in collaboration with local stakeholders, comprehensive, holistic Learning Centers to serve vulnerable children three to seven years of age and their caregivers.

In 2007, WGC conducted its first 4-week Teacher's Training Institute Workshop (TTI), four weeks of intensive training to 30 pre-school teachers from 20 different pre-schools in Mongu. The goal of all of these teacher training opportunities was to build the capacity of teachers to implement more comprehensive and holistic Learning Centers in pre-school programs. A more comprehensive Center would include: a) emphasis on children's development in all areas of cognitive and language development and psychosocial development and dealing with grief and loss; b) family and guardian's educational literacy in areas of child development, nutrition, and health; c) involvement and commitment of the surrounding community in the Center; d) increased utilization of appropriate technology to implement training and learning; and e) planning and consultation for long-term sustainability of the ECCED Centers.

The teachers who attended the Teacher's Training Institute went on to implement their new skills in their own classrooms and eight of them volunteered to become mentors for other teachers in the District. For over a year, these mentors facilitated additional workshops and conducted in-class mentoring with other teachers and logged their weekly experiences in a web based interactive forum.

Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore these mentors' journey of professional development and identify how they implemented new skills learned through the training and how they grew professionally through the process of learning and mentoring.

Rationale and significance: According to a model from the Center for Creative Leadership, the development of leadership and the capacity to mentor others flows from the ability to learn through a variety of developmental experiences. The mentors were provided training and on-going support in the form of face to face meetings, email contact, teaching materials, and an interactive web based forum. In terms of time spent, a significant portion of the support provided to the mentors happened online and on the phone. Additionally, the mentors went through a variety of developmental experiences. Using this model, the study focuses on the mentors capacity to learn and then to apply their learning in their own classrooms and in the mentoring of other under-prepared teachers. The study takes a close look at the mentoring process as it impacts the mentors' growth and consequent outcomes. The study aims to demonstrate a viable model of strengthening teachers' capacity to create a child-friendly classroom environment and engage in child-centered learning activities in regions where teacher training and learning materials are insufficient or unavailable. This can offer a major step in furthering sustainable professional development in Zambia.

Methodology: This qualitative exploratory study included three strategies: 1) analysis of the Manual used in the Teacher Training Institute; 2) analysis of the internet logs kept by the eight individuals who volunteered to become mentors, during their year of mentoring; and 3) analysis of a questionnaire filled out by the same mentors in regards to their situation before they got involved in the project. This data were coded and categorized into themes depicting the development evidenced in the mentors reporting.

Findings and conclusions: The findings confirm that the learning opportunities and support provided by WGC (Training workshops, online support & feedback, face to face support, access to coaching and resources) coupled with the opportunity for the mentors to participate in a variety of developmental experiences (Practicing their newly acquired skills, mentoring, online logs, planning, organizing, implementing and evaluating workshops) positively helped these eight mentors acquire leadership skills, such as increased confidence; ability to plan, manage and monitor; work collaboratively; exercise accountability; and creatively overcome challenges. Their ability to plan, manage and monitor and work collaboratively helped confirm peer mentoring is effective to provide ongoing sharing methods and strategies for early childhood classroom, as well as strengthening mentor and mentee skills and improve the competency of all involved. The mentors increased confidence, ability to plan and execute effectively resulted in eight more teachers volunteering to become mentors out of the workshop conducted by the mentors, thus pointing towards sustainability. The findings also point to the effectiveness of providing support

using a web based environment with limited face to face contact due to distance and despite the virtual non existence of a physical infrastructure, which has implications for viability and ease of replication to any other location provided the technology is reachable and there exists a limited budget for the participants to access it.