

Activity 5.1– Literature Review

From Training to Practice: Understanding Learning Transfer in Early Childhood

Education

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Introduction

This topic was chosen based on my professional role in supporting coaching and professional learning opportunities in early childhood education. Through my work with teachers, I have consistently noticed challenges in applying learning from professional development opportunities to consistent shifts in classroom teaching practices. This led me to explore how professional development is designed, supported, and implemented with a particular focus on the consistency of learning transfer.

Across the educational field, professional development is viewed as the primary strategy for improving teaching practice and supporting teacher growth, with substantial time and money devoted to its development. While it is acknowledged that these resources are important, how can they be justified if they are not linked to sustained change in classroom practice?

A growing body of literature suggests that the challenge lies not in the availability of professional development but in transferring learning from training contexts into everyday instructional practice. Learning transfer has emerged as a central concern in professional development research, with studies highlighting how design features, post-training supports, and contextual conditions influence educators' ability to apply and sustain new practices. These challenges are particularly pronounced in early childhood education, where workforce conditions, time constraints, and structural expectations shape educators' professional learning.

Findings

Professional Development and the Problem of Learning Transfer

Across the literature, a consistent theme emerges: participation in professional development does not guarantee changes in classroom practice. The challenge of translating professional development into practice is commonly described as a problem of learning transfer.

Learning transfer refers to the sustained application of knowledge and skills gained through professional learning, rather than a one-time outcome of training (Brion, 2020; Flores et al., 2024). The effectiveness of professional development cannot be evaluated solely based on participation or immediate learning outcomes. Still, it must also consider whether educators can generalize and sustain new practices over time.

Studies emphasize that multiple interacting factors, including the design of professional development, educator motivation, and organizational and peer support during implementation, influence learning transfer. Research examining collaborative approaches to professional learning demonstrates that even well-designed training requires intentional structures to support application in classroom contexts (Flores et al., 2024). Together, these findings underscore the need to view professional development effectiveness as a process that extends beyond training participation and into the sustained enactment of instructional practice.

Post-Training Supports and Instructional Coaching

Implementation support is a critical link between participation in professional development and the successful enactment of instructional practices (Brion, 2020; K20 Center, 2018; Flores et al., 2024). Professional learning is more likely to translate into practice when educators receive sustained support beyond the training event itself. One common form of post-training support is instructional coaching, often positioned as a way to supplement professional development by embedding learning within the classroom (K20 Center, 2018; Germuth, 2018).

Instructional coaching has been shown to support learning transfer by helping educators apply new knowledge, refine instructional practices, and receive ongoing feedback during implementation (K20 Center, 2018; Brion, 2020). Notably, the literature highlights that coaching is most effective when intentionally connected to professional development rather than

functioning as a standalone replacement for training (Germuth, 2018; K20 Center, 2018). This framing positions coaching as part of a broader professional learning system designed to support sustained instructional change. Recent research further supports the role of coaching as a critical mechanism for supporting implementation. For example, group-based coaching models that emphasize reflection, collaboration, and flexibility have been shown to support both professional learning and educator well-being in early childhood settings (Piedade et al., 2025).

However, coaching does not always unfold as intended. Studies examining coaching interactions reveal differences between how coaching is designed and how educators experience it, highlighting variability in enactment and perception (Elek et al., 2022). Effective coaching is characterized by ongoing, responsive, and grounded relationships that support educator autonomy (Elek et al., 2022; K20 Center, 2018). In addition to coaching, collaborative supports such as reciprocal peer observation have been identified as mechanisms that promote teacher agency and peer learning, further supporting learning transfer through shared reflection and practice (Flores et al., 2024).

Early Childhood Context and Educator Experience

Professional development in early childhood education is shaped by contextual constraints such as workforce conditions, time limitations, and structural expectations, all of which influence how educators access and apply professional learning (Yang et al., 2024; Lobman & Ryan, 2008). As expectations for training increase, there is a growing need for coordinated systems that extend beyond initial preparation to support ongoing implementation and instructional quality over time. These findings highlight the importance of understanding professional development within broader systems rather than as isolated training experiences.

Conclusion

If the goal of professional development is to support sustained change in early childhood classrooms, training alone is not sufficient. Effective professional learning must account for the context in which it is delivered and the supports available for implementation. Instructional coaching offers a valuable model for bridging the gap between training and practice by supporting ongoing reflection, feedback, and application; however, it is not without limitations.

Based on both research and my experience in the field, early childhood educators deserve professional learning experiences that are relevant, responsive, and directly connected to the realities of their work. This review reinforces the importance of designing professional development systems that extend beyond training events and meaningfully support educators in translating learning into practice.

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