Learning That Play is Learning

A Collaboration between the Children’s Museum of Manhattan and City University of New York Early Childhood Professional Development Training Institute

Leslie Bushara, Children’s Museum of Manhattan

For thousands of low-income parents in New York City who are struggling to make ends meet, raising a child is a day-to-day challenge, whether the child is cared for by a family member, at a daycare center or by a neighbor or other adult in their home. In New York City, there are roughly 26,000 informal child care providers caring for more than 170,000 young children daily. The majority of these providers are not licensed, few have training in early childhood development and all lack the financial resources and time to seek ongoing training. How can this large group of providers, many of whom care for children in relative isolation, be reached and provided with ongoing professional development?

The urgency of training providers is directly related to the importance of learning in the first three years of life. Children are born to learn. Babies and children have powerful learning mechanisms that allow them to spontaneously revise, reshape and restructure their knowledge. In order to maximize their natural and robust capacity to learn, grow, develop and be ready for kindergarten and beyond, five things are essential:

• time to play and learn;
• supportive and knowledgeable caregivers;
• safe, nurturing environments in which to play and learn;
• age-appropriate learning activities that children love; and
• a variety of opportunities for children to be creative and independent thinkers.

Professional development in early childhood education is a pressing issue across New York City, as thousands of young children are being cared for by adults who lack rudimentary training. Insufficient intellectual
stimulation during the early years can disadvantage a child throughout his or her life. By age three, the size of a middle-class child’s vocabulary is more than double that of a child on welfare. According to the New York City Department of Education, 50 percent of low-income children entering kindergarten are not prepared. These statistics are directly related to the quality of intellectual and social nourishment provided by the adults who are the child’s first teachers.

**Building a Partnership: CMOM and CUNY PDI**

Since 2005, City University of New York’s Professional Development Institute (CUNY PDI) has offered childcare providers training models that are sequential and competency-based. CUNY PDI works to ensure that all early childhood educators have access to a comprehensive system of professional development that supports high-quality early childhood experiences for New York’s children and families.

In 2007, after learning about the Children’s Museum of Manhattan’s (CMOM) intensive outreach work, Sherry Cleary, executive director of CUNY PDI, attended a free community access event at the museum for low-income families and community-based organizations. Cleary was impressed that the children’s museum’s outreach brought high quality educational resources to these underserved populations.

With more than thirty years of deep community partnerships and outreach work among afterschool programs, hospitals and shelters and professional development workshops, CUNY was inspired to work with CMOM to develop and pilot an early childhood training model that would provide a similar kind of access, this time with a focus on professional development for childcare providers. The program would be based on CMOM’s early childhood training curriculum and manual, Working with Young Children: a Resource for Early Childhood Educators, and CUNY PDI’s body of work in professional development. The program would also draw on CMOM’s expertise providing professional development for teachers, healthcare professionals and community-based organizations in arts, culture, health and science.

**Taking a Risk: Intensive New Program Model**

Within weeks of the community access event, CMOM and CUNY staff met to begin work on developing an innovative training model. Play is Learning would be the first of its kind in length, content and structure. While most training options for providers are ninety minutes in length, this interactive early childhood course would be developed as a comprehensive ten-hour curriculum. The training would combine hands-on experiential learning with practical professional development techniques.

The training curriculum flowed from the success of PlayWorks™, CMOM’s 4,000-square-foot early learning center, which opened in September 2006. PlayWorks is designed to inspire experimentation and discovery through an array of activities that appeal to multiple learning styles and levels. The Play is Learning curriculum for caregivers capitalizes on the learning opportunities available in the exhibit by demonstrating core educational concepts through simple and intuitive activities, rather than lectures. This combination of kinesthetic, visual and auditory teaching results in care providers grasping concepts rapidly and retaining them more successfully. As Grace, a participating childcare provider, noted while standing in PlayWorks, “I see it all—the math, the language skills and the fun!”

As a leader in family-based early childhood education, CMOM collaborated with CUNY to develop the Play is Learning program to help adults understand the crucial role they play in preparing young children for school and lifelong learning. Challenges to providing professional development to caregivers include: lack of formal training, limited financial resources, language barriers and time available in their schedules for such instruction. It was crucial that the program be time efficient, cost effective and bilingual.

Building off of CUNY’s knowledge and experience, the course was designed to meet
The Play is Learning Professional Development Program is a ten-hour training program comprised of the following:

- three three-hour professional development sessions at CMOM for providers;
- a guided sixty-minute exploration of the PlayWorks exhibition for providers and children;
- free one-year CMOM memberships offered to providers who complete the program; and,
- a joint CMOM/CUNY certificate that positions informal providers for anticipated pay enhancements from the city.

The overall goal for the program is to equip caregivers with an understanding of how core early childhood skills in literacy, art, math and science—all of which are essential for preparing children to enter and succeed in school—can be taught to young children and to provide strategies, resources and tools for use in classroom and caregiving settings. This is accomplished through a model that integrates knowledge, theory and practical application.

As part of the training program, providers attend three three-hour professional development workshops at the museum without children: Creative Mess Making, Science Learning is Everywhere and Math Through Art, Music and Movement. The sessions are unique in that the pedagogy is taught through modeling and hands-on activities rather than curriculum review. Embracing traditional didactic teaching methods, there are no lectures. Sessions are designed to engage, inspire and delight. As one provider, Viviana, remarked during a session, “I feel like a child again!” Many providers also have noted that these sessions were unlike other trainings they attended because of the rare opportunity to play, do art, sing and dance while learning to teach important early childhood development skills.

For example, in Creative Mess Making, the goal is to help providers understand the process and the importance of creative arts experiences. The active session helps them understand and support different learning styles while learning classroom management techniques, such as including children in the cleanup process and making smooth transitions from art activities to follow-up literacy and music activities. Through hands-on art workshops that include finger painting and collage, participants experience the importance of a nurturing and open-ended approach to art making. They learn how to build descriptive vocabulary through sensory exploration and then to guide children through that same process. They also learn the importance of setting up an art area, choosing materials and managing transitions between activities. Connections to pre-reading and literacy skill development are explored through interactive storytelling and music exploration.

This first session begins with finger painting. Care providers are always surprised at being asked to do such a messy activity right off the bat. Many ask if they have to paint. Some are afraid of getting messy, some feel that they aren’t artistic. It is the perfect opportunity to reinforce the importance of supporting different learning styles. As we explore ways to engage children at their comfort level, the providers relax and find ways to explore and express themselves through the art project. As one provider, Miriam, stated, “I never thought about how many emotions are involved in painting. I’m going to be more patient with all my children now.”

The same methodology is applied to the subsequent sessions, Science Learning is Everywhere and Math Through Art, Music and Movement. Providers learn firsthand how simple (and sometimes messy!) art activities can teach science concepts, how math skills can be found in everyday experiences and how art, literacy and music activities can help develop math skills.

In addition to the three professional development sessions, providers are invited to bring their children to take part in a sixty-minute guided tour of one of the exhibits when the museum is closed to the public. As part of the Creative Mess Making session, participants tour the PlayWorks exhibition to understand more about how children experiment, play and learn in different settings. This guided exploration provides an opportunity to observe how their children interact in a play and learning environment and a chance for the providers and children to bond. For the Science Learning is Everywhere session, providers and children tour the CitySplash exhibition and participate in hands-on art activities that include tissue paper painting and “magic” noodle collage with a focus on the properties of water (both in its solid and liquid states) that support science skills. As part of Math Through Art, Music and Movement, participants tour the Adventures with Dora and Diego exhibition and participate in hands-on art workshops that include three-dimensional wood sculptures, play dough exploration and pattern collages that encourage self expression and incorporate pre-math skill development.

Providers learn to encourage different core early childhood literacy skills through
The museum-based program model would attract and retain providers, regardless of background. A strong incentive would be to provide a free CMOM membership and certificate of completion for training hours covered.

PREMISE: Thirty childcare providers would enroll for the full ten-hour training program and earn a certificate for their attendance. Providers would be willing to come to CMOM on a Saturday. English and Spanish speakers would be accommodated.

OUTCOMES: Ninety-five percent of the participants completed the program. One hundred seventy-five providers were recruited to fill the pilot program’s thirty spaces. Forty providers responded and thirty-one were eventually enrolled. Informal care providers were identified through CUNY and then received a recruitment postcard mailing from CMOM and CUNY.

Of those enrolled, thirty attended the full ten-hour program and earned certificates of completion. The CMOM site and weekend schedule were not problematic for participants, and English and Spanish speakers were equally engaged, although additional bilingual trainers would bring an added benefit.

The experiential training methodology would be effective in providing childcare providers with skills, strategies, resources and tools for practical application in classroom and caregiving settings.

PREMISE: This target audience has a limited range of skills, educational credentials and experience. This audience has limited time and resources. CMOM’s hands-on experiential teaching methodology and utilization of the PlayWorks exhibition should be a cost- and time-efficient model for this group.

OUTCOMES: CMOM and CUNY staff observed that providers at all levels of education were engaged and successful in using training techniques, and all were excited and engaged in exhibition exploration. Based upon the evaluative report: 100 percent of the providers quickly observed the learning and teaching opportunities in PlayWorks, and 90 percent of the providers felt that the demonstration-based teaching approach allowed for ample discussion and full exploration of materials.

Providers would be able to successfully articulate and understand the value of lesson plans.

PREMISE: By providing guided lesson plans for each of the three sessions, including follow-up homework assignments (providers were asked to replicate lesson plans on their own, in the home setting), CMOM would reinforce teaching techniques for at-home use with children. In each session, providers benefit from practicing the activity they would be doing with their children. CMOM supplied materials for replication of the projects in the home care setting in response to providers’ limited budgets and lack of experience in structuring lessons with specific goals.

OUTCOMES: Eight-five percent of the providers could articulate how lesson plans help support the diverse needs of young children and the multiple ways children learn best. Ninety percent of providers felt renewed confidence and excitement about teaching after the first training session. The guided, structured lesson plans were successful in trainings, with all of the providers engaged and enthusiastic.

Training content and methodology could be successfully replicated in homecare settings.

PREMISE: A written report of the homework project would help providers summarize their successes and challenges and help CMOM address weaknesses in the presentation. CMOM and CUNY trainers would go over each provider’s write-up at the beginning of the subsequent session and give suggestions for improvement.

OUTCOMES: Based on evaluative reports, 75 percent of providers completed the homework assignments and felt they were successful. The remaining 25 percent cited lack of time, limited literacy skills and resistance to the idea of homework as reasons for not completing the assignment.

Thirty percent reported that they did not always recognize different learning styles when children objected to participating in a certain activity.

CMOM and CUNY staff observed that participants were enthusiastic and excited to share their outcomes, with many of them reporting that they had a better understanding of how to incorporate basic math techniques into everyday activities with children. Providers reported that the children in their care learned new vocabulary words related to the lessons taught and that children of all learning styles were able to express themselves with the lesson formats provided. There was not adequate time to discuss every provider’s experience. In retrospect, break-out sessions (five people per group) would have worked better.

Take-home lesson plans and materials would provide adequate resources to create an educational environment in the childcare setting.

PREMISE: With the guided lesson plan to take home and materials provided, providers would have good recall of techniques and use them consciously.
OUTCOMES: One hundred percent of the providers felt that the materials provided ample resources to create rich educational environments in childcare settings and helped them support multiple learning styles. 85 percent of the providers felt more confident in identifying and supporting diverse needs of children in their care. CMOM and CUNY staff felt that the providers were confident with materials and therefore experienced greater success with their management of daily activities for children.

6 HYPOTHESIS

Providers would observe learning opportunities in the PlayWorks exhibition.

PREMISE: Providers would commit to one sixty-minute provider/child class. Providers would associate/link classroom activities with specific school readiness skills.

OUTCOMES: Based upon evaluative reports, 95 percent of the providers were able to observe and articulate links to PlayWorks activities and preschool readiness skills. They felt that the exhibit helped make learning more visible and easier to understand, they were able to observe the multiple ways their children learn best and they felt this would help them in their daily activities with children. CMOM and CUNY staff observed that all the providers felt the guided tour and class exploration were enriching and bonding experiences for the provider/child relationship.

7 HYPOTHESIS

CMOM would serve as a resource for home-based childcare providers and the children in their care.

PREMISE: Providers would use CMOM memberships to bring their children to the museum. Providers would observe and better understand the importance of open-ended play through exhibit exploration. Providers would feel comfortable in a museum setting, particularly consulting with experienced CMOM educators.

OUTCOMES: CUNY and CMOM staff observed that 85 percent of the providers were surprised at how easy and fun coming to a museum could be. Responses from the providers themselves are listed below.

- Fifty percent said they would use the membership on a weekly basis.
- Thirty percent said they would use the membership twice a month.
- Twenty percent said they would use the membership monthly.
- Ninety-five percent saw the importance of interactive exploration as a way to support multiple learning styles.
- One hundred percent now feel comfortable taking their children to CMOM.
- Ninety percent said that they could understand and apply the methodology to their daily work with children.
- One hundred percent expressed an interest in returning for additional trainings.
- One hundred percent would recommend the program to other providers.

“I’ve been doing this for twenty-five years and suddenly I feel inspired to play and teach again”
—Marcell, Childcare provider

CMOM and CUNY have successfully completed three ten-hour professional development training courses. All ninety participants have received certificates of completion, thereby providing free museum access to more than 700 children. The fall 2009 professional development training session is underway. The program draws on CMOM’s expertise in providing professional development programs throughout the community. The retention rate and success of this program proves the deep value that children’s museum offer to a community in need.

Conclusion

CMOM and CUNY’s collaboration underscores the need for professional development for care providers of disadvantaged children to better understand early childhood development and age-appropriate activities. The collaboration also ensures that providers are familiar with the proper resources to create an engaging educational environment that lays the foundation for school readiness and lifelong learning.

For providers, it is a chance to break the cycle of isolation and loneliness that can be inherent in their work. Together, they build confidence and find value in their profession. For children in their care, it is an opportunity to receive an equitable and competitive start to their education and a chance to learn, grow, socialize and play with other children in a nurturing environment—whether that is at home or through the rich resources of a museum environment. For many children and providers it is their first and only museum experience. For parents, it provides a solution to the very real challenge of providing their children with high-quality childcare. Play is Learning provides a critical link in building a stronger community by crossing economic and cultural barriers and becoming an important and valuable resource for all families.

Leslie Bushara has been with the Children’s Museum of Manhattan since 1993. She is currently deputy director of education and oversees all early childhood programs; she was the content developer for the PlayWorks exhibition.

Promoting Children’s Museums

continued from page 9

caregivers usually remain in this occupation about five to seven years. Other biases include questioning whether caregivers can even benefit from training at all. Is it worth investing in preschool caregiver training programs, or is it just better to wait until kids enter kindergarten to deal with language and literacy weaknesses?

Despite this setback and our encounter with biases and a few doubting thomases, the museum remains committed to being a community resource and partner in early childhood education. This grant rejection has revealed how much more work needs to be done in educating community leaders about the valuable educational environment that exists in a children’s museum, about the resources that abound here in parent/child and caregiver/child observation opportunities and about the need for literacy and language development training, especially among caregivers for whom educational opportunities have been limited. It is a cycle we wish to break.

Sandra Redmond has been director of the Children’s Museum of Cleveland since December 2008. With a doctorate in early childhood education, she has taught in therapeutic preschools, directed childcare in center and home-based settings and directed a public preschool and early childhood education program at Cuyahoga Community College.