CASEinPoint
Insights into Early Childhood and Family Support Practices

# Practitioner Judgments of the Usefulness of Contextually Mediated Practices Training Activities

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ABSTRACT

This *CASEinPoint* includes findings from a survey evaluating the usefulness of different kinds of training activities for promoting practitioner understanding and use of an approach to early childhood intervention called *Contextually Mediated Practices* or *CMP*. The training activities were used by 17 early childhood practitioners who evaluated the usefulness of the training opportunities for addressing parent concerns about child learning, supporting parents' abilities to provide their children interest-based learning opportunities, and strengthening practitioner understanding and use of *CMP*. Findings indicated that several of the training activities were rated more helpful than other activities by the survey respondents, participatory training activities were rated more helpful than passive activities, and individualized training activities were rated more helpful than large group activities. Implications for promoting adoption and use of *CMP* are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this *CASEinPoint* is to present survey findings regarding early childhood intervention practitioners' judgments of the usefulness of different training activities for promoting parents' understanding and use of *Contextually Mediated Practices* or *CMP*. CMP is a promotional approach to early childhood intervention that uses everyday activities as sources of child learning opportunities and child interests as the basis for promoting child participation in those activities. This is accomplished by parents both providing their children different kinds of interest-based learning opportunities and using responsive, supportive, and encouraging interactional behaviors strengthening both child and parent competence and confidence as part of child involvement in everyday activities (Dunst, 2006a).

*CMP* was developed from research and practice conducted at the Increasing Everyday Children's Learning Opportunities Institute (www.everydaylearning.info). The research and practice at the Institute identified the sources of everyday family and community child learning opportunities (Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, &

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Bruder, 2000), patterns of infant, toddler, and preschooler participation in these activities (Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, & Bruder, 2002), factors associated with variations in patterns of participation in the activities (Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 2004), the development-instigating and development-enhancing characteristics of everyday learning opportunities (Dunst, Bruder et al., 2001), and the child and parent benefits of everyday natural learning opportunities (Dunst, Bruder et al., 2001; Trivette et al., 2004). Results from these different studies were used to formulate the key characteristics of *CMP* (Dunst, 2006a) and to develop methods and procedures for implementing this approach to early childhood intervention (Dunst, 2006b; Raab & Dunst, 2006; Swanson, Raab, Roper, & Dunst, 2006).

Other research conducted at the Institute indicated that parents and practitioners have somewhat different views of natural learning environment practices (Dunst & Raab, 2004), practitioners for the most part do not use everyday family and community activities as sources of child learning opportunities (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, & Hamby, 2005), and that natural learning opportunity practices are not a major focus of early intervention practitioner personnel preparation programs (Bruder & Dunst, 2005; Dunst & Bruder, 2005). The difficulties that early childhood intervention practitioners have understanding, adopting, and using *CMP* and other natural learning environment practices (see Dunst, Trivette, Humphries, Raab, & Roper, 2001) was, to a large degree, the basis for training opportunities described and evaluated in this paper. The training activities were developed as part of a model-demonstration project that was designed to develop, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of *CMP* and to design and field-test methods and procedures for promoting practitioner use of this approach to early childhood intervention.[1]

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The participants were 17 early intervention practitioners working at the Family, Infant and Preschool Program in Morganton, North Carolina. Selected characteristics of the survey respondents are shown in Table 1. Two thirds of practitioners had bachelor's degrees and one third had master's degrees. The backgrounds of the respondents included special education or early childhood education; speech, occupational, or physical therapy; and psychology, nursing or human services. The participants differed considerably in the number of years they worked in the early childhood intervention field, although the majority (76%) of practitioners had more than five years of experience working with infants and toddlers and their families.

Table 1

*Background Characteristics of the Survey Participants*

| Characteristic | Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| *Education* | | |
| Bachelor's Degree | 11 | 65 |
| Master's Degree | 6 | 35 |
| *Discipline* | | |
| Education[a] | 6 | 35 |
| Psychology | 4 | 23 |
| Therapy[b] | 3 | 18 |
| Social Work/Human Services | 3 | 18 |
| Nursing | 1 | 6 |
| *Years Working in Early Intervention* | | |
| < 1 | 2 | 12 |
| 1-5 | 2 | 12 |
| 6-10 | 6 | 34 |
| 11-15 | 2 | 12 |
| 16-20 | 1 | 6 |
| > 20 | 2 | 12 |
| Not Reported | 2 | 12 |

[a]Special education and early childhood education.
[b]Physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech and language pathology.

### *Training Activities*

Table 2 includes brief descriptions of the seven training activities constituting the focus of practitioner judgments. The activities were a mix of exercises and assignments that were designed to strengthen practitioners' abilities to respond to and reframe parents' concerns about child learning, support parents' abilities to recognize and use both their children's interests and everyday family and community activities as the context of early childhood intervention, and increase parents' and practitioners' understanding and use of *CMP*. The number of practitioners who participated in each of the training activities is shown in Table 3.

Activities 1 through 5 included the same format for addressing and responding to parent concerns about different aspects of child learning and early childhood intervention. Training activity participants were asked to describe or respond to different ways of: (1) Acknowledging and clarifying parents' concerns about child learning, (2) reframing the parents' concerns in ways

[1]The training activities were developed by a Family, Infant and Preschool Program *CMP* continuous improvement work group including the authors, M'Lisa Shelden, Christina Ginter, Karen Holbert, and Frances Davis.

Table 2

*Training Activities for Promoting Practitioner Understanding and Use of CMP*

| Activity | Description |
|---|---|
| 1. Addressing Parent Concerns | Practitioner responses to different scenarios where parents were requesting interventions inconsistent with *CMP*. |
| 2. Team-Based Application of *CMP* | Team members' collective responses to a scenario where a parent was asking for a noncontextual approach to developing child school readiness. |
| 3. Parent Understanding of *CMP* | Practitioner ability to discern the reasons parents do and do not understand the key features of *CMP*. |
| 4. Small Group Application of *CMP* | Practitioner ability to develop responses to a scenario involving a parent's request for noncontextual interventions. |
| 5. Practitioner Understanding of *CMP* | Practitioner small group responses to six scenarios asking for answers to specific questions about how to respond to parent concerns inconsistent with *CMP*. |
| 6. Interest-Based Activity Checklist | Practitioner use of an everyday activity checklist for promoting parents' identification of interest-based child learning opportunities. |
| 7. Interest-Based Child Photo Albums | Practitioner selection of everyday activities that provided three children having different interests contexts for interest-based learning. |

NOTE. Activities 1 through 5 were implemented by having the practitioners acknowledge and clarify parent concerns, reframe parent concerns or practices in ways more consistent with *CMP*, engage a parent in a process of identifying a currently used practice that was consistent with *CMP*, increase parent understanding of *CMP*, and engage a parent in the use of *CMP*.

more consistent with interest-based child learning, (3) using real-life examples illustrating key features of interest-based learning, (4) helping parents strengthen and increase their knowledge and understanding of interest-based child learning, and (5) engaging parents in processes identifying and using interest-based learning opportunities for strengthening child competence. The five training activities using this format were specifically developed in response to practitioners' requests for methods and procedures for responding to parents' requests for practices inconsistent with *CMP*.

The sixth and seventh training activities were both designed to promote practitioners' (a) knowledge and skills for using child interests as the basis for identifying everyday activities that would provide opportunities for interest expression and (b) to select everyday activities that would provide child learning opportunities that would be situationally interesting and provide opportunities to strengthen child competence. These activities were specifically developed in response to practitioners' requests for procedures for helping parents understand and use child interests and everyday family and community activities as sources of interest-based learning opportunities.

The seven activities were subsequently categorized and coded according to several characteristics to ascertain if the helpfulness ratings were influenced by different contextual and person factors (Matthews, 1999; Tennant, 1997; Tessmer & Richey, 1997). The contextual factors

Table 3

*Number and Percentage of Survey Respondents Participating in the Training Activities*

| Activity | Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Addressing Parent Concerns | 15 | 88 |
| 2. Team Application of *CMP* | 15 | 88 |
| 3. Parent Understanding of *CMP* | 7 | 41 |
| 4. Small Group Application of *CMP* | 15 | 88 |
| 5. Practitioner Understanding of *CMP* | 17 | 100 |
| 6. Interest-Based Activity Checklist | 9 | 53 |
| 7. Interest-Based Child Photo Albums | 6 | 35 |

Table 4
*Contextual Characteristics of the Training Activities*

| Activity | Participatory[a] | Individualized[b] | Type of Example[c] |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Addressing Parent Concerns | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 2. Team Application of *CMP* | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 3. Parent Application of *CMP* | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| 4. Small Group Application of *CMP* | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 5. Practitioner Understanding of *CMP* | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| 6. Interest-Based Activity Checklist | 5 | 2 | 2 |
| 7. Interest-Based Child Photo Albums | 3 | 2 | 1 |

[a]Rated on a 5-point scale ranging from minimally participatory (1) to maximally participatory (5).
[b]Classified as either a group (1) or individualized (2) activity.
[c]Classified as either a fictional (1) or a real-life example (2) of a child and family.

were the extent to which the training activities were participatory (required the learner to be actively involved in the learning process) vs. passive involvement, individualized vs. group training activities, and fictional vs. real life examples. Table 4 shows how each activity was assessed in terms of each contextual feature. The person factors included college degree (bachelor's vs. master's), professional discipline (education/psychology/social work vs. therapy/nursing), and years of experience working in early intervention.

*Survey*

Survey respondents were asked to assess the extent to which each training activity in which they were a participant was useful in terms of six *CMP*-related practices: (1) addressing parent concerns about child learning, (2) helping parents identify either or both child interests and interest-based everyday learning activities, (3) helping parents select everyday learning activities that matched child interests, (4) helping parents use interest-based everyday activities as contexts for early childhood intervention, (5) promoting parents' increased understanding of *CMP*, and (6) strengthening practitioner understanding and use of *CMP*. Each practice characteristic was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *not helpful* to *extremely helpful.*

## RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the mean percent of indicators that were rated *very helpful* or *extremely helpful* for each of the training activities. Parents' use of an everyday activity checklist for identifying interest-based child learning opportunities (Activity 6) (see Swanson et al., 2006) and practitioner identification of the reasons parents use or do not use *CMP* (Activity 3) were judged most helpful, whereas the use of photographs of three children engaged in everyday activities for identifying interest-based learning opportunities (Activity 7) and a team-based activity for responding to parents' concerns about child learning (Activity 2) were judged the least helpful.

The extent to which the different training activities were differentially related to survey participants' ratings of the outcome indicators is shown in Table 5. What is shown are the percent of respondents who rated the survey items *very helpful* or *extremely helpful* in terms of each of the six *CMP* practices. Activity 3 (Parent's Understanding of *CMP)* and Activity 6 (Interest-Based Everyday Activity Checklist) were uniformly rated *very* or *extremely helpful*. In contrast, Activity 2 (Team Based

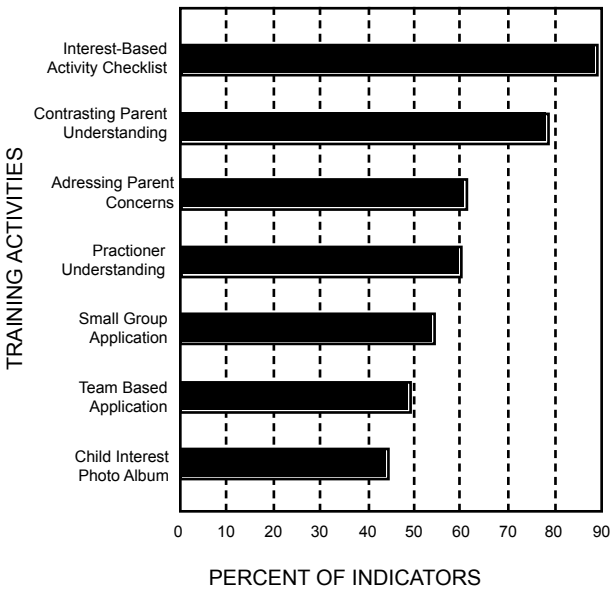


***Figure 1. Mean percent of outcome indicators rated either very helpful or extremely helpful by the study participants.***

Table 5
*Percentage of Survey Respondents Rating Training Activities* ***Very Helpful*** *or* ***Extremely Helpful***

| Survey Items | Training Activities[a] | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Addressing Parent Concerns | 73 | 53 | 86 | 73 | 77 | 78 | 17 |
| Parent-Identified Interests/Activities | 53 | 42 | 71 | 33 | 41 | 100 | 50 |
| Parent-Identified Interest-Based Activities | 67 | 40 | 71 | 47 | 41 | 89 | 50 |
| Parents Using Everyday Activities as Early Intervention | 47 | 47 | 71 | 27 | 53 | 100 | 50 |
| Parents Understanding of *CMP* | 60 | 53 | 86 | 73 | 77 | 78 | 50 |
| Practitioner Understanding/Use of *CMP* | 67 | 60 | 86 | 73 | 71 | 89 | 50 |

[a]See Table 2 for a description of each of the training activities.

Application of *CMP*) and Activity 7 (Interest-Based Child Photo Albums) were uniformly rated as *not helpful*. Activity 1, Activity 4, and Activity 5 were rated very helpful for some practices (e.g., addressing parent concerns) and rated not very helpful for other practices (e.g., helping parents use everyday learning activities as a type of early childhood intervention).

The relationship between the contextual and person factors constituting the focus of analysis and study participants' helpfulness ratings of the training activities was examined by (1) two regression analyses predicting the total helpfulness ratings from the two sets of predictor variables and (2) a path analysis of the direct and indirect effects of the contextual factors on the helpfulness ratings.[2] Findings from the regression analyses showed that the contextual factors (R = .28) were a more important determinant of the helpfulness ratings compared to the person factors (R = .09). Close examination of the correlations (Table 6) between the three contextual factors and helpfulness ratings found that the participatory and individualized nature of the training activities were related to real-life examples of *CMP* which in turn was related to the helpfulness ratings. The path analysis shown in Figure 2 confirmed the fact that there were direct and indirect effects of the contextual factors on the helpfulness ratings. Real life examples that were either or both participatory or individualized were associated with higher helpfulness ratings.

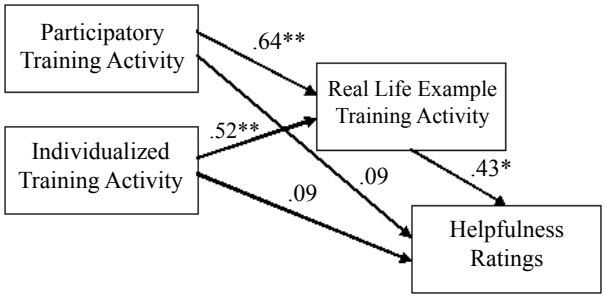


***Figure 2. Path analysis structural modeling results for the relationship between three contextual training activity factors and participants' ratings of helpfulness of the activities. (*p < .02. **p < .001.)***

[2]These analyses were performed on the 84 sets of ratings for all training activities for the 17 practitioners.

Table 6
*Correlations Between the Contextual and Person Measures and Helpfulness Ratings (N = 84 Ratings)*

| Predictor Variables | Predictor Variables | | | | | | Helpfulness Ratings |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | PAR | IND | RLE | MAS | THR | YOE | |
| *Contextual Factors* | | | | | | | |
| Participatory (PAR) | - | .05 | .65** | .10 | -.04 | .12 | .10 |
| Individualized (IND) | | - | .55** | .09 | -.01 | .10 | .10 |
| Real Life Example (RLE) | | | - | .08 | -.06 | .14 | .25* |
| *Person Factors* | | | | | | | |
| Masters' Degree (MAS) | | | | - | .11 | .33* | -.07 |
| Therapists (THR) | | | | | - | -.14 | -.01 |
| Years of Experience (YOE) | | | | | | | -.07 |

*p < .02. **p < .001.

Trainer observations of the participants' responses to and benefits from the training activities suggested that participatory activities were especially effective in eliciting positive appraisals of the training opportunities. This was confirmed by the pattern of the relationship between degree of learner participation and the survey items rated *very helpful* or *extremely helpful* (Figure 3). The more participatory the activities, the greater the number of indicators rated as very helpful or extremely helpful. The corresponding Cohen's *d* effect size for the trend line in Figure 3 is 1.81, indicating a strong influence of participatory learning opportunities on the helpfulness ratings.

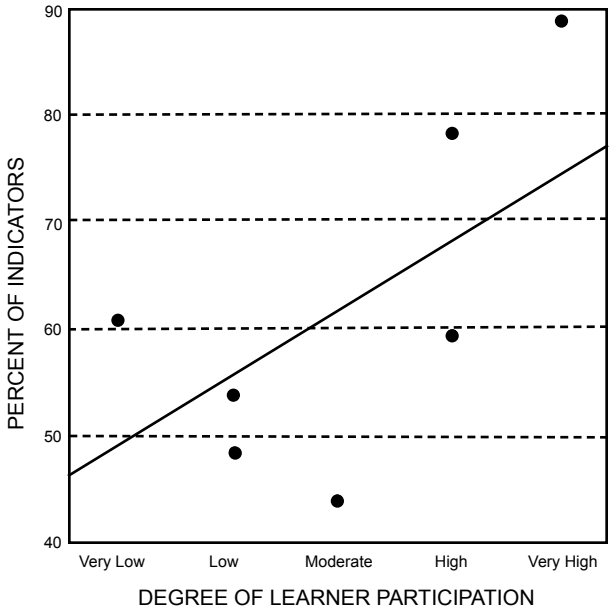


***Figure 3. Relationship between the types of participatory learning activities and the helpfulness scores of the training activities rated very helpful or extremely helpful.***

## DISCUSSION

Findings helped clarify the kinds of training activities and their characteristics that were associated with participants' helpfulness ratings. Training activities that were either or both participatory and individualized and which involved real life examples of *CMP* were rated as most helpful. More specifically, training activities that were participatory and individualized had indirect positive effects on the helpfulness ratings when the content of the training activities were real life examples of children and families. In contrast, training activities that were either or both passive and large group activities that did not involve real life examples were rated considerably less helpful. Large group activities by their very nature tend to be more passive learning opportunities and are clearly not warranted as a way of promoting practitioners' understanding and use of *CMP* (and probably other kinds of practices).

The methodology and approach to isolating the relative importance of different kinds of training activities, as well as the factors influencing participants' helpfulness ratings, constituted a modest attempt to discern the characteristics of training associated with perceived benefits. Notwithstanding the small number of participants, we were nonetheless able to isolate what mattered most in terms of optimal practitioner benefits. The approach we used perhaps can serve as a model for larger scale evaluations of the effectiveness of different types of training activities for supporting and strengthening practitioner competence adopting and using evidence-based practices like *CMP*.

Results from this study are highly consistent with findings from a research synthesis of how people learn (Bransford et al., 2000; Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999) and the key characteristics of adult learning (e.g., Dickover, 2002; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). The common thread of these as well as other sources is learning opportunities and experiences that actively involve learners in deeper understanding and immediate acquisition of new information and skills in ways that have capacity-building consequences. Training activities that have capacity-building characteristics and consequences should be the approach-of-choice in promoting the understanding, adoption, and sustained use of desired practices. The unique aspect of *CMP* training is that it is intended to build the capacity of practitioners who in turn strengthen parent capacity to provide their child learning opportunities which in turn are intended to promote and strengthen child competence and confidence interacting with and mastering important aspects of their everyday lives. Findings from this pilot study highlight the kinds of training activities and learning opportunities that are most likely to produce these kinds of indirect and mediational effects.

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