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The Best of Both Worlds: Partnering with the Community to Create the Guttman Center for Early Care & Education

Robin Hancock

The Guttman Center for Early Care & Education was established at Bank Street College of Education in the fall of 2016 with a gift from the Guttman Foundation. It aimed to provide quality professional development and support to mixed cohorts of family child care providers (early childhood educators running small private child care programs out of their homes) and practitioners working in early care and education center-based programs in Brooklyn, New York. Free to all participants, the Center sought to attract providers of all ages, education levels, and years of experience who were interested in deepening their understanding of early childhood development and addressing the needs of all the children in their care.

Family child care is the oldest form of child care in our society. It originated in a community-based approach to educating children in which young children were communally cared for by extended family such as grandparents and community members. In this context, a child's success in life was seen as the responsibility of the collective. However, these days, family child care providers are often among the least supported of early educators. Part of a vibrant community dominated by women but with more and more men joining the ranks, providers in New York City are dedicated to supporting children's well-being, safety, and development. There are significantly more family child care providers across the country than child care centers, and family child care programs are more likely to serve infants and toddlers (Howard, Malik, Workman, & Hamm, 2018).

Although there is sparse research on family child care programs, we looked to existing information for direction in creating a program to support adult learning. Effective professional development strategies that have proven themselves over time have been shown to be a combination of onsite coaching, professional development workshops, and peer support networks (Moreno, Green, & Koehn, 2015; Paulsell et al., 2010). Previous work with family child care providers had taught us just how difficult the work and family life circumstances are for infant-toddler practitioners working in their own homes. Apart from those supported by their unions or by individual networks, family child care providers have few opportunities for professional development.

The Guttman Center pushed forward with an ambitious plan to reach as many providers as possible. The strategies involved:

- Onsite one-on-one coaching, twice a month, with a professional trained in social work and a deep knowledge of infant-toddler development.
- A once-monthly, professional development course, set up in collaboration between faculty at Bank Street and the community of East New York, Brooklyn. The curriculum focused on infant-

toddler development, relationship-based care, family engagement, trauma and resiliency, and building responsive environments for very young children. The course was held in the community at times that were most convenient for providers. Meals and child care were provided to facilitate participation.

- Intentional and ongoing engagement with community members, community-based organizations, and leaders to ensure that the services provided were relevant to the needs of the community and stayed responsive to the needs of child care providers at all times. The goal was to develop a community of resources and a network of learning that providers in each community could cultivate and utilize to strengthen their practice.
- The facilitation of a community learning network in which providers continued to learn from and support one another through resource networking and informal get-togethers while maintaining a relationship with faculty and staff at Bank Street.

The Community Engagement Strategy

Our guiding philosophy for this work is that relationship building is the key to meaningful learning and that it takes time for relationships to develop. Bank Street's developmental-interaction approach informed our work. We knew that any intended support/program for improved quality must start with the knowledge and experience of the caregivers (Porter, 2017) and must use a strengths-based approach.

Developing a relationship with the community was a primary focus of the Guttman team's work as we built the center. A plan was designed to reach out to a wide range of community members. It involved identifying and engaging key community leaders invested in early education, along with child care providers and community members engaged in work which, while not directly related to education, affects the quality of life for very young children. We did this by:

- Creating a Community Advisory Board. This allowed us to reach out to community members, such as district council people, neighborhood counselors of infant-toddler mental health, directors of local daycare centers, senior leadership in the United Federation of Teachers, and caregivers of young children. The Board met quarterly to receive updates about the program, provide feedback, and ensure that the work of the Guttman Center continued to be relevant to the priorities of the community.
- Participating in one-on-one meetings with providers in their homes to hear about their individual needs. In the privacy of their own homes, we found many people were far more open and comfortable talking about both the challenges and the successes of their programs, as well as their life in a community that has historically undergone massive cultural and economic shifts.
- Asking for recommendations from daycare providers to build our network. Providers helped us identify who to talk to next, ranging from their colleagues in the neighborhood to community leaders.
- Providing membership and ongoing attendance at several community meetings, such as the Community Coalition of East New York and United for Brownsville.

The team noticed early on that, in addition to eagerness from some in the community, there was also a good deal of hesitancy. Many community members wanted to know who Guttman was and what the Guttman Center program was doing in East New York. The team learned over time that this was caused by these key factors:

1. Home-based care providers are inundated by agencies doing assessments of their site, sometimes with little or no notice. As a result, owners of family child care programs are on high alert to new faces who ask to see their sites. Visiting required a great deal of reassurance that we were not there to assess but to learn about their programs and offer support wherever it was needed.
2. Unbeknownst to Bank Street, a series of scams had been carried out against home-based programs in the recent past. These scams included fraudulent organizations promising services and requesting money up front only to disappear before delivery.
3. East New York is one of many neighborhoods in New York that underwent active redlining less than 50 years ago. Redlining is the denial of various services to residents of racialized neighborhoods or communities, either directly or indirectly, by raising prices. For example, redlining in East New York led to the removal of services and made home loans almost impossible for residents to come by. More recently, gentrification has taken hold of East New York with properties and businesses being seized by developers for a fraction of their worth.

A history of having their initiatives, property, and businesses undervalued made community members deeply protective of their programs. Seasoned practitioners would often call to confirm the Center's legitimacy on behalf of their colleagues. To the team's great relief, these seasoned veterans in the field became some of the center's strongest allies. A senior member of the community recommended the most effective methods for connecting and communicating with community members.

Finding these senior members was the key to building trust in the community. While they often put the team through a tough interrogation process, they became the center's trusted partners in making connections within the neighborhood and establishing strong relationships. Building these relationships was one of the most challenging, but also one of the most rewarding, aspects of a program co-constructed between Bank Street and the community.

The Curriculum

When the Guttman team set out to create a curriculum for the Guttman caregivers, two things were top priority:

1. Build in a strong sample of the infancy curricula provided to all Bank Street students.
2. Ensure that the work the team was doing to build a strong curriculum was done in conjunction with the community.

The goal was to guarantee that the material covered was both rooted in Bank Street's approach to early childhood education and responsive to the needs of caregivers. Finding this balance caused the

team to think outside of their own understanding of what is required to support educators in new and profound ways (see Brickley; Hancock & Newman; this volume).

Utilizing the intensive community engagement that was taking place, the team began to build in modules based on feedback from both the Community Advisory Board and the one-on-one meetings with potential participants. Some of the needs were clear from the beginning. There was a deep interest in how to create differentiated curricula that catered to mixed age groups. Providers from both family and center-based care programs wanted to understand more about how to support children with learning variations. The providers also expressed a near universal interest in how to care for themselves as providers in high-stress environments. All of these needs were incorporated into the curriculum and were revised based on the feedback we received from the participants. We changed the format of the meeting from 10 two-hour sessions over the course of five months to four daylong workshops, responding to participant needs in accordance with their very busy lives. The center provided lunch, child care during classes, and transportation support, considering that some providers had to travel from as far away as the north Bronx for these Saturday classes.

Coaching

The role of the coach at the Guttman Center for Early Care & Education was twofold. On the one hand, coach Rebecca Newman was charged with assisting each participant to successfully translate the content of the professional development course into his or her classroom. On the other, she was tasked with assisting participants to identify goals for their professional growth as early childhood educators and co-creating strategies for reaching those goals.

These two goals were in constant interplay. Below is an excerpt from one of Rebecca Newman’s coaching logs. Coach logs are written in this format to utilize the observing and recording principles of making clear behavioral observations without judgment (“what I observed”) before analyzing or taking action. The right side of the page (“what actions I took”) indicates how the coach helped the practitioner follow through in a meaningful way or notes the significance of the conversations.

Sample Coach Log (edited)

Coach	Rebecca Newman	Participants	Ms. Sharika, Ms. Lucy
Program	Our Children	Date and Time of Visit	5/17/18 10:00 – 2:00
# children present	10	Other Caregivers Present	

What I observed: (General description of what coach experienced with the caregiver that sparked an action by coach. <i>Add rows for additional observations/actions</i>)	Actions I took: (see chart at end for code and possible actions. Please describe action in this section and code to right. Add additional action if necessary)	CODE
<p>Ms. Sharika shared some of her observations about Luke (2.11) and his attachment to her. She shared that the staff commonly refer to him as “your other son.” She noted that at times Luke will tantrum if she leaves the room. She also shared the ways in which he has progressed over the past few months (sitting at circle time and his longer attention span seemed notable for her).</p>	<p>I joined her in discussing the strength of their relationship and what this could possibly mean. I referenced the love memory, noting that since she was an instrumental part of Luke’s adjustment to this classroom, he may be associating her with comfort, she represents feelings of attachment and security (<i>return to this</i>).</p> <p>I also suggested that she might display a picture of herself in the classroom, so that when she is not physically available, her picture will be. I also noted that since Luke is only beginning to develop verbal abilities, pictures are particularly helpful for him and could provide comfort in her absence, whereas words might not be as effective.</p> <p>Later, during our meeting, Ms. Sharika showed me a beautiful picture of her and Luke, which she seemed to be considering hanging up in the classroom, although she noted “that’s weird”, implying the deep level of closeness between them, replicating parent/child relationship.</p> <p>Would be good to explore the meaning of “weirdness” for her... the strong attachment between teacher and child? Also can emphasize that visuals of all the teachers (suggest to add picture of Ms. Lucy as well) will support all of the children, not just Luke.</p>	<p>Integration of Course Work (Love Memory from Attachment Module)</p> <p>Providing Information</p>

The example shows that the coach supported Ms. Sharika in gentle but significant ways, first noting the power of her relationship with Luke and then referring her back to course content that reinforces and reminds a teacher why she does what she does. Even positive teacher behaviors can become rote over time if their rationale is not refreshed and renewed. As a coach, she makes a “note to self” to consider what may be behind the intense attachment and what exactly Ms. Sharika perceives as “weird.” And finally, the coach provides a suggestion to help Luke when Ms. Sharika is out of the room, along with a developmental explanation.

For educators teaching very young children in their homes, having a coach spend dedicated time with them is not just a welcome addition to their programs, but also a learning experience. Many providers’ programs are small and often they only have one additional staff member to support their children. The

presence of a coach for several hours every two weeks supports the development of strategies and goals to strengthen practice and, ultimately, children's success. The coach was tasked with building strong and trusting relationships with caregivers. Embedded in this relationship-based approach is the nuanced work of holding up a mirror to the provider's practice. This allows them to see and understand what they are already doing well and helps them move forward into new realms of practice.

What We've Learned

Across five cohorts, the Guttman Center engaged 50 family child care providers and 14 center-based staff in East New York, Brownsville, Crown Heights, and Prospect Lefferts Gardens. Of the 64 participant providers, approximately 80 percent identified as Black (this includes Caribbean American, West African, and American Black) or African American, 15 percent identified as Hispanic or Latinx, and 5 percent identified as other. Seventy percent of providers identified as homeowners; and of the family child care providers, all operated their programs out of their homes. Participants' willingness to open up their programs to the Guttman team was a result of the team's efforts in building relationships in the community, the pride that providers took in their work, and the providers' faith in Bank Street's methods and motives.

The Guttman Center impacted not only the caregivers who participated in the professional learning initiative, but also the team members who designed and carried out the program. A large part of this work involved the team's collective examination of our multiple privileges and their impact on working with people with very different experiences and socio-economic, racial, and cultural assumptions. Our team was predominantly White and middle class and not from the neighborhoods we partnered with. What beliefs did we carry about education, about who is an "expert," and about what quality teaching looks like? How much of how we saw educating young children was informed by our own experiences of educating and being educated and how much was informed by racial identity? These are not easy questions, nor are they answerable in one sitting. The inquiry was ongoing and became more nuanced with every cohort the team worked with.

For anyone who engages in this kind of work, there must be an acknowledgment that the caregivers are the experts when it comes to their children's cultural and, in many instances, their social and emotional needs. Caregivers live in the same communities as the children they serve and are therefore deeply knowledgeable about their families and their traditions, values, and aspirations. If institutions are to successfully support children's education, they must work in partnership with providers and their communities.

The lack of professional development opportunities was again brought home to us. Based on conversations both at the start of the program and throughout, we saw that for many caregivers who work with mixed-aged children, this was the first time they'd had the opportunity to spend dedicated time thinking about their youngest children. Working closely with family child care providers reaffirmed to the team just how demanding the role of caregiver is. Many providers work 12- and 14-hour days, taking children early in the morning and keeping them until well into the evening. Although there are

hundreds of family child care programs in the East New York and Brownsville neighborhoods, the opportunity to gather with other providers for an extended period of time to learn, share resources, and network simply hadn't been possible for many prior to their involvement in the Guttman Center program.

Several measurements were used to determine the Center's effectiveness in supporting caregivers' growth over time. The Family Child Care Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (FCCERS-R) (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2007), a program quality assessment tool, and the Beliefs About Infant Toddler Education and Care Survey (BAITEC) (Anderson, McMullen, & Elicker, 2015), which measures caregivers' beliefs about infant-toddler education and care, were all utilized to assess data collected about participants' progress. Overall, it was found that participants showed consistent improvements in their programs through their participation in the Guttman Center programs. For instance, in the second cohort, which took place from September 2016 to January 2017, participants' skills in "listening and talking" with children and their own "personal care" showed improvement.

An interesting set of data are revealed in Cohort 4's BAITEC scores, where there is marked improvement for several providers. Dr. Jessica Charles noted, "The overall change in beliefs about infant-toddler education and care increased from 63.90 to 70.09, over 7 points on average. Of the 11 caregivers who completed both the pre- and post- assessments, only two did not maintain or increase their scores, and several individuals increased their scores by double digits" (Charles, 2019).

It was a privilege to engage with women and men so committed to the education and well-being of infants and toddlers. Over the course of 20 weeks, they committed their time to investigating their work as early childhood educators and their devotion to the children, families, and communities that they serve. They applied their skills, intuition, and knowledge to deepening their understanding of development, engaging families, building responsive environments for young children, and supporting one another. There is no doubt that they are prepared to build relationships with and educate young children in their most crucial first 3 years of life.

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About the Author



Dr. Robin Hancock joined Bank Street as Director of the Guttman Center for Early Care & Education in the Fall of 2016. She is an early education specialist committed to community organizing and strengthening the work of other educators. Robin began her career as a teacher and, after completing an MA in Social Anthropology at Brandeis University, she began to engage in social justice work with a focus on literacy programs and student-teacher professional development. In 2009, she completed a doctorate in Curriculum and Teaching with a concentration in Early Childhood Education at Teachers College, Columbia University.