

### NAEYC Interest Forums

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- Black Caucus • CEASE/Violence in the Lives of Children
  - Children of Incarcerated Parents (CHIPS)
- Children's Global Issues
- Community Collaboration
  - Diversity and Equity
- Early Childhood Education/Licensing Dialogue
- Ethics in Early Childhood Education
- Faculty in Associate Degree Early Childhood Preparation Programs
  - Family Child Care • Finance
- Health and Safety in Child Care
  - Infant/Toddler Professionals
- Intergenerational Caucus of Early Childhood Professionals
  - Kindergarten • Latino Caucus
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
  - Men in Education Network
- Nannies • Play, Policy, and Practice
- Primary Grades • Research, Practice and Policy in Early Care and Education
  - Student • Technology and Young Children • Tribal and Indigenous Early Childhood Network (TIECN)
    - Worthy Wage

**Student Interest Forum** facilitator William H. Strader wrote this column.

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# The Mentor-Student Relationship— From Observer to Teacher

**THE MENTOR TEACHER PLAYS A CRITICAL ROLE** in supporting the “new kid on the block”—the college student majoring in early childhood education. The student comes to an early childhood program to observe children learning (and teachers teaching), to complete one or more practicums, and eventually to student teach for a full semester in the classroom. In guiding future teachers, working classroom teachers serve as mentors; they establish good communication, provide rich environments for classroom observation, model best classroom practices, create opportunities for reflection, and support students’ participation in curriculum planning and teaching.

Many of us in the early childhood field find ourselves in mentoring roles. Teachers mentor assistant teachers. Program directors mentor new teachers. Teachers mentor each other. A look at teacher mentors who work with a college student can remind us of how much we can grow as teachers when we reflect on our own role in guiding and mentoring colleagues and peers in the early childhood field.

## Communication and building a positive relationship

Building a positive relationship with a visiting college student begins with open communication. It’s important for the mentor to establish regular, ongoing communication

with the assigned student by setting aside time each day to share information about classroom plans and activities. Most two- and four-year institutions design the early childhood major so college students have sufficient time to meet with their mentors during their practicum to reflect on what

has happened in the classroom and plan for the future.

A mentor teacher might encourage the student to take a look around the program, get acquainted with the classroom setting and the way the room is designed and laid out, and ask,

“See if you can identify all of the interest areas and learning centers where the children interact, explore, play, and spend their time. Let

me know what you think about the classroom environment. Are there ways you can see implementation of what you learned about in your classes?”

The mentor teacher needs to understand the early childhood major’s courses and practicum requirements as well as how to support the student’s expanding knowledge, skills, and dispositions. For example, a mentor teacher could ask to see reading lists and can help the student make connections between course work, child development readings, and observations of children playing and learning. When inviting the college student to explore the classroom setting, the mentor teacher sets

### Early Childhood Education College Students— Future Leaders

NAEYC’s Student Interest Forum offers future leaders in early childhood education opportunities to share ideas and discuss common interests. To learn more about the Student Interest Forum, contact Bill Strader at [whstrader@cox.net](mailto:whstrader@cox.net).

NAEYC members can also access NAEYC Online Communities to find the Student Community; there is information about college student organizations written by college students for college students.

the stage for the student to ask questions and reflect on knowledge gained through course work.

## Direct observations

College early childhood programs often require students to observe specific kinds of classroom interactions, such as two children interacting with each other, an adult talking with a child, and a child playing on his own. With these requirements in mind, the mentor teacher can suggest an indoor or outdoor area for observation, provide information about particular children's skills and interests, explain activity learning goals, or suggest a focus area for observation, such as language development, cognitive abilities, or gross motor skills. For instance, the mentor teacher could say,

"I suggest you to go into the block area and observe the kinds of play and exploration that go on there. Look for opportunities to connect what the children do with blocks to curriculum areas like math or literacy. We can talk about your ideas after class."

College students build their observation and reflection skills by talking to their mentor teachers about what they see and hear and discussing their observation notes. Mentor teachers can ask follow-up questions regarding differences in the ways children express emotions, cooperate during play, or solve problems. They can discuss children's different learning styles and other individual characteristics.

A prepracticum student might report to the mentor teacher,

"I really liked seeing what the children were doing with the blocks, and their conversations. It was interesting to see how serious they were about their play, how real it was to them, and how Sean and Nakiesha were definitely leaders in the block area. They even had me building walls for the garage!"

In this case the student focused on the group's social dynamics. The men-

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tor teacher could provide insight about the social skills children used and also point out connections to literacy and other learning areas. Such postobservation discussions are critical for students' reflection and learning.

## Active modeling and reflecting

Another important way students learn to become teachers is through observing their mentor teachers' approaches to planning the classroom day, interacting with children, handling transitions, and implementing the curriculum. Mentors can point out how they themselves intentionally interact and communicate with children. They can talk about why they select particular learning opportunities and make time for further discussion after the college student observes the children engaged in an

activity. For example, during class the mentor teacher may say,

"Children, today I would like to have you help me learn this new, silly song—'Who Likes Watermelon?' I've written the words up here on the chart paper. I'll first read the words, and then I'll sing the words to the tune. We are also going to sign some of the words. And then we're going to talk about some of the words in 'Who Likes Watermelon?' Yum! Let's talk about watermelons before we learn about the song."

Later, the mentor teacher can share with the college student why she wrote the words on the chart paper, incorporated sign language and singing, and introduced the topic of watermelons. She could explain how all the pieces of the activity relate to literacy and vocabulary development. Such conversations support students and encourage discussions about the teaching practices and methods observed.

## Examples of Emerging Competency Expectations for Student Teachers from First to Fourth Year

1. Observe children
2. Interact with children (communications, play, being part of the activities)
3. Try out an activity, conduct an activity in different interest areas
4. Develop, design, and implement lessons in specific curriculum areas (math, science, social studies, language arts, movement, music, art)
5. Develop, design, and implement units, learning centers, projects, child-centered approaches
6. Teach children a new song, rhyme, riddle, poem, joke, concept, or idea
7. Take over the responsibilities for various areas of the curriculum, activities, routines
8. Conduct the meeting time, circle time, or group time
9. Evaluate and reflect on lessons, unit teaching, other activities
10. Take over total classroom responsibilities (supervised student teaching)

## Taking a more active role

After observing the children and mentor teacher and gaining a sense of the daily schedule, learning goals, and classroom transitions, the future educator is ready to take on a more active role. The mentor teacher may offer direction by saying,

“I’d like you to go into the block area again. Feel free to interact in ways that will extend the children’s building and dramatic play or that will help them incorporate writing in their block play. Think about what you have learned in your classes about children learning through play.”

Helping the college student connect classroom observations with college course content and active teaching opportunities sets the stage for more extensive curriculum and lesson planning later on.



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## Curriculum planning

Next, the college student moves to more direct work in curriculum planning and implementation. Considering a student’s requirements, mentors can guide the preparing teacher in thinking through lesson planning. One student told his mentor teacher he needed to plan, design, and implement an activity related to math, science, or

technology. The mentor teacher asked him to first think about the children:

“Consider the size of the group you would like to work with. What have you observed about the interests, skills, learning styles, and special needs of the children in that group? It’s important to remember all of this when planning the learning activity.”

## Teaching

Typically, in their final year, early childhood students must complete a semester of full-time student teaching in an early childhood classroom. At this point the college student is responsible for specific activities and lessons plans, including designing and implementing a unit, a learning center, or child-centered project. The mentor teacher provides guidance and supports the student as he or she plans and implements activities in such areas as prereading, language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, creative arts, and movement.

With the guidance of the mentor teacher, the student develops plans and tries out activities in a positive and caring classroom setting. A mentor teacher will often ask the student to review the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and state early learning standards before selecting a focus for a lesson.

In one teaching practicum, the student chose to address the concept of time. After brainstorming some ideas with the mentor teacher, the student planned a lesson on watches for the 4- to 5-year-old group. The goals for the lesson were to provide the children an opportunity to explore the diversity of instruments that measure time (in this case, watches) and give them an opening for discussing time concepts. She asked each child to bring in a watch from home; children who did not bring in watches were able to use watches from teaching staff. The children came up with a wide variety of information by comparing, contrasting, evaluating, and analyzing 20 different watches.

**Helping the college student connect classroom observations with college course content and active teaching opportunities sets the stage for more extensive curriculum and lesson planning later on.**

In the classroom, the student teacher helped the children compare and contrast the features of the watches and create a large chart to categorize the different kinds of watches (digital, watches with hands, watches that show the date). The children discussed aspects of time as they experienced it in various routines and schedules throughout their day.

After the lesson, the student, her mentor teacher, and her faculty advisor met to discuss the lesson, what worked, what did not, and how the lesson met specific early learning standards. The student teacher talked about how this lesson fit into the National Council for Social Studies standard related to time, continuity, and change. The mentor teacher

shared how the children's discoveries and play related to time and their discussions about how time was seen in their family contexts fit in with the Vermont social studies standard as well. They discussed next steps and follow-up activities related to drawing, sketching, and creating stories. This meeting is an important part of the process and provides the student teacher an opportunity for reflection and further learning.

## Conclusion

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Mentor teachers contribute to the development of effective future teachers of young children. They provide opportunities for students to work

directly with young children and a positive setting in which to reflect on practice. In their role as mentors, they model best practices and guide, listen, and counsel. They give students opportunities to observe children, to reflect on their learning, to develop hands-on curriculum, and to plan and implement activities. Mentors support the growth of excellent teachers who in turn will enhance the development and growth of young children and their families.

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