

# Self-Efficacy and Transformed Practice: Using Family Child Care Provider Experiences to Create a Model for Sustainable Change

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## Abstract

I can still remember my “aha” moment as a family child care provider when I realized that I actually was making a difference in the lives of the children and families I served. It was the most empowering, life changing experience up to that point in my career; one that made me realize that being a provider actually *was* a career. A few years later I had the opportunity to provide technical

assistance to a group of family child care providers as they made quality improvement efforts within their own programs. During this time, I began to see similar mind shifts in three of the providers and became more and more curious in what I soon realized was an increase in self-efficacy (Bandura, 2010). Questions began to surface about how can we strengthen family child care provider's beliefs in their abilities to impact children's early learning experiences and possibly influence their trajectory in life because of their relationship and interactions with them?

We know from research that this does not happen by circumstance, but through intentional strategies carefully planned by thoughtful, reflective early childhood practitioners. Do current systems routinely incorporate activities that increase self-efficacy, or foster provider's beliefs in their abilities, and encourage them to reflect on deep-rooted beliefs that ultimately transform their practice? If not, what more can we do to help make this shift? In a time where advocates in early childhood continue to push for policy reform, make efforts to increase standards across the field and provide supports to meet those standards through training/technical assistance, it is essential that we also not lose sight of the providers, teachers, administrators and even those professionals that provide support to them. As part of our efforts, we must also ensure we are creating opportunities for cultivating deep-rooted beliefs within them of their effectiveness in the skills they have in order to transform practice that is sustainable.

## Introduction

In 2013, family child care represented approximately 20% of the child care community, with children spending an average of about 30 hours per week in family child care settings (Laughlin, 2013). While there has been a steady decline in licensed family child care providers in recent years (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2015), this type of care is still the choice for some families and state systems continue to identify strategies that focus on family child care providers and ways to support their professional growth and enhance program quality. Over the past decade, substantial progress has been made in identifying program and provider characteristics that are predictive of quality programming and strategies that promote quality improvement (Surdna Foundation, 2001; Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2005; Raikes, Raikes & Wilcox, 2005; Mathematica Policy Research, 2010; Weaver, 2010; Lanigan, 2011). While findings from these studies provide insight into structural aspects for supporting quality improvement, limited research has focused on the process and providers perspectives as they engage in systems designed for continuous quality improvement.

Studies conducted in other educational settings have examined self-efficacy and its relation to effective teachers (Yost, 2002; Garvis & Pendergast, 2011; Garcia, 2004), as "teachers sense of self-efficacy appears to be the most important motivational factor for explaining learning and teaching practices" (Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma & Geijsel, 2011, p. 497). Experiences that challenge deep rooted beliefs and points of view encourage one to reflect on these learning and teaching practices in a way that promotes changes in practice and may lead to transformed practice

(Taylor, 2007). In order for one to make sustainable changes in practice, a new frame of reference or point of view is therefore needed (Mezirow, 1997). One's sense of self-efficacy and experiences that may promote transformed practice are beginning to be explored and may prove to be valuable in supporting family child care and improving early childhood experiences for young children and their families.

## Theoretical Frameworks

This perspective paper explores a model that incorporates two well-known theories, theory of self-efficacy and transformative learning theory as a means for providing meaningful learning experiences for providers that ultimately increase their self-efficacy and transform practice with sustainable changes as they participate in activities for continuous quality improvement. In 1989, Bandura developed the social cognitive theory, with the theory of self-efficacy as its cornerstone. Self-efficacy refers to people's beliefs about their ability to influence events in their lives and make a difference as a result of their actions (Bandura, 2010). It is not about the skills one has, but the belief of how effective one is with the skills one possesses (Garcia, 2004). Four factors are identified in shaping personal efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological factors, according to Bandura's model of self-efficacy (1977), and can be applied to teacher self-efficacy and the context of early childhood programs.

Transformative learning theory is another significant theory to consider when working toward the goal of improving professional practice. Professional development that is based on transformative learning theory has the goal of fostering deep and sustainable changes in thinking and practice (Taylor, 2007). The field of early education provides a context in which those who work with providers or deliver professional development can employ the core elements found within the theory: critical reflection, dialogue, holistic orientation, appreciation for context, authentic relationships, and individual experience, both prior experiences and those experiences within the current learning environment (Mezirow, Taylor, & Associates, 2009). Within this paper and referenced study, transformed practice refers to sustainable changes in thinking and practice inspired by learning experiences in which providers question deeply held beliefs and ideals within the context of their own program.

The core elements of transformative learning theory are consistent with Bandura's factors identified in shaping self-efficacy as they are embedded within provider's experiences and can be used to inform specific strategies and present opportunities to increase personal efficacy. For example, through mastery experiences providers have the opportunity to draw on prior experience in the unique family child care context, critically reflect on the experience and begin to make connections between practice and feelings of success. These learning opportunities not only encourage quality improvement efforts but impact affective knowing, which can prompt reflective thinking (Mezirow et al., 2009) both for the novice provider, as well as the more seasoned provider who may serve as a mentor. Similarly, core elements of transformative learning can be found

within each of the remaining four factors identified in shaping self-efficacy. Wheatley (2005) proposes that “teachers’ efficacy beliefs about their ability to *learn* in new ways is often more important for teacher educators than is traditional teacher efficacy (p. 750). Both transformative learning theory and the theory of self-efficacy can be used as a framework for encouraging professional growth and transforming practice, with this paper introducing a model that utilizes the relationship between them within the context of family child care.

## Conceiving the Model

In order to try and capture this process, provider self-efficacy and transformed practice was the focus of a research study as part of a master’s thesis. Using a participatory research design, the intent of this longitudinal, qualitative study was to examine evidence of changes in family child care providers’ sense of self-efficacy, as identified by Bandura’s model of self-efficacy (1977), and evidence of transformed practice. Within this study, transformed practice was defined as sustainable changes in thinking and practice inspired by learning experiences in which providers question deeply held beliefs and ideals within the context of their own program. Three family child care providers who were part of a cohort within a state Quality Rating and Improvement System in which the researcher was also assigned as their technical assistant participated. Providers were interviewed, along with analysis of data recorded in the state’s QRIS database documenting their experiences within the QRIS over a three-year period. Audio recordings of Community of Practice meetings were also accessed in order to provide more detail into providers’ experiences and a focus group was conducted as a member check to discuss initial findings with providers.

Two notions emerged after three years of following these three women and documenting their experiences: one – it was one of the most rewarding, exhilarating experiences that transpired into a genuine relationship between professionals and continues to impact my career years later. Two – articulating and quantifying qualitative data is not an easy task. What does it look and sound like when someone has experienced a growth in self-efficacy? How do we know if their practice has been transformed or simply temporarily altered as a means to receive a rating within a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)? These questions and more continued to be at the forefront, but statements such as these began to make this phenomenon more real:

*Inexperienced, unaware, um, yes, I was not-I thought I was doing -I was doing the best that I, I knew how. But now, I am much more educated and qualified and if I don’t know, I know where to go to get the information, as opposed to just winging it. (Provider 3, interview)*

*I had the business, but I didn’t treat it the way I was supposed to. I was always good with children, but the paperwork part, no. The paperwork part, administration part, I didn’t handle right. And now that is a very important part of it. Taking time out to sit down and do it right. (Provider 1, interview)*

*I’m more responsible now. I don’t think I could have said that before, I was like ‘Whatever, another day will come and we will do something. It’s okay, kids always keep busy’. Now, I*

*am reading what are we going to do the next day. If I see the activity is not going to be like, so engaging, then I'll go during the weekend and buy something else that I think we can do, or I will read something, like that newsletter that gives really cool ideas, and um, I trust myself enough that I can pick- like the Zero to Three website. I like it a lot, and I was reading some things from there and I was like, 'Yeah, they're right.' And then in here, hum, maybe I can try. (Provider 2, interview)*

As a result of this work, evidence of changes in self-efficacy was found in three domains: business owner/administrator self-efficacy, teacher self-efficacy, and resource and advocate self-efficacy, along with strong evidence of transformed practice in categories that paralleled these three domains. Findings also suggested an additional domain in self-efficacy as a learner. While these findings provide useful information for the cohort's overall areas of impact, it was analysis within the domains that contributed to a deeper understanding of why these changes in self-efficacy may have occurred and how providers were inspired to transform practice. As a result of this second level of analysis, evidence suggesting a relationship between self-efficacy and transformed practice began to emerge. From a policy and systems perspective, this is an important insight in that it provides a possible connection between two theoretical frameworks that have the potential to inform approaches that result in sustainable, high-quality family child care programs and increased provider competence in the field.

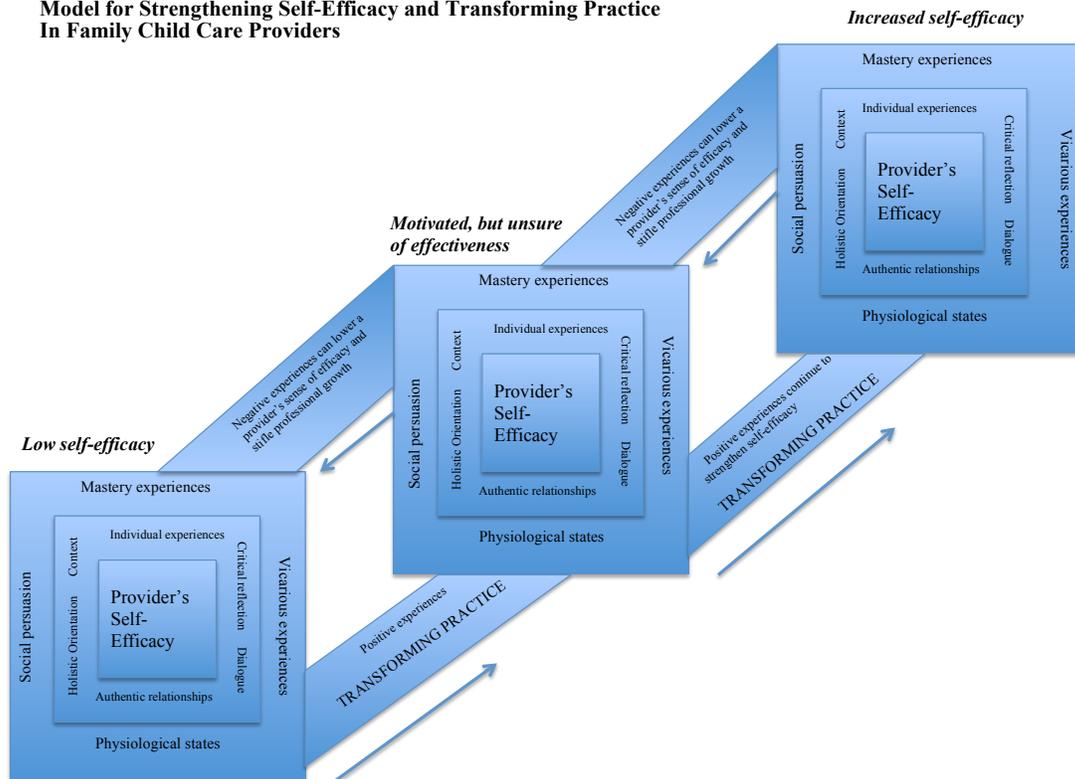
Second level analysis also suggested self-efficacy as a learner is another important consideration in designing systems to promote transformed practice in family child care providers. In general, family child care providers vary widely in education levels across the field and work in isolation from their peers on a daily basis. Evidence of a provider's sense of self-efficacy as a learner may be a powerful finding in that their beliefs in their ability *to learn* have the potential to transform multiple aspects of not only the family child care program, but encourage providers to begin investing in themselves and their educational attainment.

Based upon findings from the research study, my own experience as a family child care provider and in working with other providers to improve quality and increase self-efficacy, the below model was created. It portrays three phases of provider self-efficacy and the various factors that help influence and encourage self-efficacy and transformative learning that thus leads to transformed practice. While some of the elements within this model may occur within existing QRIS and other early childhood support systems, they may not be intentionally embedded with the goal of increasing provider self-efficacy or be implemented with fidelity across systems to promote transformative learning and thus sustainable changes in practice. In work since this study, evidence may exist that this theory and framework applies at all levels, including coaches and technical assistance that support those in the field.

To read more about this study visit:

[http://udspace.udel.edu/bitstream/handle/19716/19783/2016\\_CortesJennifer\\_MS.pdf?sequence=1](http://udspace.udel.edu/bitstream/handle/19716/19783/2016_CortesJennifer_MS.pdf?sequence=1)

## Model for Strengthening Self-Efficacy and Transforming Practice In Family Child Care Providers



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## Conclusion

This paper presents a model for promoting professional growth within the family child care profession and leaves the door open for further research in how training and support can be used effectively in encouraging sustainable strategies for quality family child care programs. More longitudinal studies in family child care are needed in order to capture changes in providers' beliefs about their abilities and changes in their practice over time. Future studies using Bandura's model of self-efficacy and transformative learning as a basis for promoting transformed practice provide frameworks and theoretical lens that can help inform state and local agencies in creating infrastructures and programs that support these professionals during pre-service and throughout their careers. While changes in self-efficacy and transformed practice were presented as separate accounts they did not occur in isolation, but in the context of the QRIS and all the ongoing and changing events in the providers' lives. Using frameworks and strategies that incorporate experiences contributing to increased self-efficacy and transformative learning experiences that may result in transformed practice, supports can be customized within an existing system to best meet each provider's needs and improve quality within the family child care home.

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