

# Quality Partnership as a Contextual Prerequisite of Successful Learning of Young and Preschool-Aged Children

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## Abstract

The paper discusses quality partnership as a prerequisite for the functioning of the institutions of early and pre-school education and for the child's overall development and learning. Considering that child's development and learning take place in different contexts (family, educational institutions, clubs, local and wider communities), the efforts of individuals and institutions should be coordinated in order to be more effective. The influences of various factors can be aligned only when all the stakeholders are familiar with and follow the same principles in education and operate synchronously, which can be achieved by building a quality partnership. Its prerequisite is professionalism and high level of competence of all of its stakeholders needed to ensure optimal conditions for child's overall development, learning and education. The imperatives of thus understood partnership (at all levels) are improving the quality and interest of the child.

**Keywords:** partnership, quality, responsible stakeholders, system(s)

## 1. Introduction

Adults are often amazed by the desire, dynamics and passion with which children learn from an early age. What and how many children learn largely depends on adults in charge of designing an appropriate context in which children's learning takes place. The final outcomes of their learning also largely depend on the support of adults, but also on the way in which the adults express this support (El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzai, 2010; Mashburn & Serpell, 2011; Pirchio, Tritrini, Passiatore, & Taeschner, 2013; Powell, San Juan, Son, & File, 2010). By their nature, young and preschool-aged children are enthusiastic, independent researchers, vigilant observers, creative experimenters, naive artists, hardworking participants... and much more. At the same time, they are also future creators and carriers of social development; therefore, adults should be significantly interested in what and how children learn and whether all the prerequisites for quality learning are provided. It is at this age that the foundations of lifelong learning are laid and that the habits, which will enable them to develop and to coexist in a quality way with the world around them, are adopted as well as higher academic achievement. A study by Marcon (1999, according to Pirchio et al., 2013, p. 146), demonstrated that the children's preschool experiences can be the bases of their future academic success. Although children usually learn by exploring and discovering independently (Mallaguzzi, 1998; Slunjski, 2011), they nevertheless need competent adults who will in a discreet, non-coercive and respecting manner guide them towards "The Zone of Proximal Development" (Vygotsky, 1930, according to Leach & Moon, 2008), i.e., enable them to transition from one developmental stage to another by ensuring appropriate conditions. Children's development occurs in sometimes very different social contexts (close and extended family, school, neighbourhood, clubs, local and wider community), i.e. in environments that are created and dominated by adults, and they will be more effective if the influences of adult on children are aligned. The alignment of influences is only possible when everybody is familiar with and follows the same principles in education, which thus become "a valuable compass in developing" (Note 1) a child's potential, and refer to:

Families-the first and most influential teachers of young children. Family functionality, high quality interaction and communication, healthy and whole family structure and overall atmosphere are the factors that create an appropriate context where the child finds safety, develops positive self-image and acquires competences

necessary for current and future integration and constructive participation in community life. The involvement of parents in young children's education is a fundamental right and obligation.

Institutions of early and pre-school education—are a form of institutional care and education of young and preschool-aged children. The educational policy directly influences their founding, organization, programs offered and philosophy in the institutions and they are required to comply with the mandatory minimum requirements and educational standards that are established and controlled by the relevant ministry, the Agency and other relevant institutions. The quality of the implementation of the programs offered and the functioning of the institution are continuously monitored and improved to ensure optimal conditions for the child's development and learning. One of the important aspects of modern institutions of early and pre-school education is educating children for a democratic society. For this very reason, successful institutions of early and pre-school education nurture democratic relations between all the factors of the educational process through the coexistence of children and adults in the institution. These relations are based on equality, joint decision-making, freedom and responsibility of all the members (Slunjski, 2012). They are daily practiced and cultivated in the institution. As children learn best by doing, so they learn about democracy by living it, because "only democracy raises for democracy" (Hentig, 2006, p. 121).

Child—every child develops at an individual rate, has unique characteristics and ways of expressing different talents and interests depending on the family context, special needs, experience and/or abilities. All children are capable learners, and they learn best when they are in quality interaction with their peers, and, when necessary, with adults. Beliefs about children, childhood, play and learning are development categories that depend on the socio-political structure, cultural customs, values and philosophy of life of the community, scientific knowledge, civilizational achievements, (not)knowing about and (dis)respecting children's rights and a number of other aspects of the particular social environment. Contemporary views on children are based on the belief he/she is: a reasonable person that has a lot of intuitive knowledge (Bruner, 2000; Malaguzzi, 1998), an entity of his/her own development, a social subject with specific needs, rights and culture, and active citizen of the world (Slunjski, 2012).

Learning—optimal learning occurs when all aspects of a child's development (social, emotional, cognitive, physical, spiritual, etc.) are engaged, are being adequately supported and are taking place through a combination of active exploration, play, social interaction and carefully planned activities that follow child's natural tendency to seek higher levels of development/competency. Competencies, understood as a set of skills, knowledge, values and attitudes of the individual that are appropriate to the given context of his/her life, can be acquired and developed only in an environment (family, institution) and an atmosphere that enables and supports the development of competencies. The European Union in 2006 adopted a recommendation on "Key competencies for lifelong learning" (Note 2) which was also adopted by the educational policy of the Republic of Croatia (Note 3). All individuals need them for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship and social inclusion, and form the foundation for his life-long learning. Successfully meeting child's needs, consistently respecting his/her rights and providing timely and adequate support by adults are prerequisites for a child's optimal learning. Focus on achieving competence in various aspects of a child's development significantly goes beyond mere recognizing and reproducing facts. On the contrary, it promotes and encourages analysis, synthesis and evaluation, i.e., those aspects of knowledge/learning that lead to a meaningful, useful and competent outcome.

Partnership—active engagement of all those responsible for creating a supportive context which enables child's early learning. Early childhood Education Centers widely recognize that the relationships with the parents are a central issue to guarantee the quality of children's experience (Pirchio et al., 2013, p. 146). Building a quality partnership of all the relevant factors of the educational process is a lengthy process with an uncertain outcome. If the underlying assumptions are met, then positive outcomes can be expected: equal and respectful communication, distribution of power among the factors of the process, a clear vision and being goal oriented, engagement of the parties and joint responsibility for achieving the goal. Many studies confirm the importance of the frequency of parent-teacher contacts (Thompson & Mazer, 2012). Pirchio et al. (2013, p. 146) stand out that the quality of the parents-teacher relationship is measured in terms of mutual trust and respect, willingness and ease to communicate and cooperate.

Science and practice—the practice of early and pre-school education is based on academic research. Permanent coupling of theory and practice allows the theory to "grow out of" practice and to be checked "in action" (Miljak, 1996). A well-conceived and well-organized system of continuing professional development implemented by many modern institutions of early and preschool education enables practitioners to develop research

competencies and prepares them for action research in order to improve their practice and encourage them to reflect on it. Thus, by directly researching their own practice, educators review scientific theoretical considerations, but also their own experiences and their own “theories” which build on the established theory of early and pre-school education.

Legislation—sets the framework, monitors and supports the efforts of science and early education profession in order to create optimal conditions for the “best start” (Jaekle, 2006, p. 3) of the child in his/her life. Regulated systems, which truly and not just declaratively take care of the education system, and in particular of the system of early and pre-school education, provide sufficient resources from the budget which enables educators and professional assistants to be well-educated. These systems regulate by law but also penalize non-compliance with educational standards, provide quality control system and create the necessary conditions for a quality functioning of the early and pre-school education system.

Quality—a dynamic category, with a tendency to continuously grow in all aspects of society (individual and systems). In recent decades, more attention than before has been devoted to the quality of institutions of early and pre-school education, their (social) environment and atmosphere, architecture, relationships, leadership style, programs, processes, etc. Carefully designed systems of external assessment (relevant institutions) and self-assessment of all the factors of the educational process are aimed at continuously monitoring the level of institutional quality, detecting “critical points” and offering concrete solutions for the identified challenges according to familiar criteria and areas of (self-) assessment. The ultimate goal of these efforts is to ensure optimal conditions for a child’s full and healthy development and learning and to create equal conditions for developing the potential of all children.

If these principles are clearly stated and if they are responsibly followed by all those who must create conditions for optimal child development and learning, it is very likely that the final outcome (a healthy, self-confident, self-reliant, competent and responsible child) will be satisfactory. However, in practice it often happens that the above principles are understood differently, so they are differently interpreted and/or, as it often happens, there is a consensus on them, but only a declarative one and they are not consistently implemented.

## **2. Using Quality Partnership of Individuals to Achieve the Quality of the Educational System**

Directly responsible (Note 4) for ensuring and improving the conditions needed for optimal children’s learning and development, and the overall qualities of the early and pre-school education are:

Practitioners (teachers, specialists)-constantly (self-)assess the level of their own competencies in various areas of educational work, and identify specific areas they need to focus on in their future professional development with the aim of improving them.

Directors and management of the institution-plan, ensure and enable specific educational programs for practitioners according to their (real) needs within the program of continuing professional development in and outside the institution. They also provide the means for rewarding staff according to their progress/achievements (for example, advancing into mentors or counsellors and/or mentoring novices and/or students require additional financial resources).

Trainers (individuals and organizations)-plan, organize and implement training/education and promote its advantages. The realization of the idea of lifelong learning is often much more acceptable to practitioners when competent individuals (coaches) and/or organizations develop educational programs whose content satisfies the practitioners’ actual needs and preferences. If practitioners are given an option to choose one of the several offered program, it allows them to improve their competencies according to their own wishes, so it is very likely that their intrinsic motivation and commitment will be significant. Having completed a training program, it can be expected that they will apply the newly acquired knowledge in practice and that it will produce positive effects.

Educators and state administration—assess current program content to determine course development and to agree on the following development aim in order to facilitate its implementation and unambiguousness. Although it is desirable that the proposed programs are verified by the relevant national authorities before being implemented, the programs are usually verified by individuals whose professional competencies are far below those of the educator (who creates and implements the program) and then it often happens that the program is not supported or is even rejected. In these situations, educator’s (Program Manager’s) scientific and professional competencies, successful implementation of previous programs and the interest of the institution to educate in the selected area should play the most crucial role. The bodies of state administration should be a quality

corrective, but by no means an obstacle for the implementation and improvement of the system of continuing professional development of staff in the institution.

State and local agencies and the Ministry (the creators of educational policy)—are responsible for the development and implementation of education policy that promotes professionalism in the field of early and pre-school education. They also make efforts to enable professional development by creating the “framework” for continuing professional development of practitioners which enables them to gain new and improve existing competences.

Parents—are an indispensable part of the entire educational system and are directly interested in the high quality of the institution and professionalism of the practitioners. One of the basic parental rights is to provide quality institutional education to young and preschool-aged children. This type of education is understood as an addition to family education, and matches the parents’ values and philosophy of life. Therefore, parents’ rights are guaranteed if they can choose among programs of specific pedagogical concepts and of different duration. A well-organized institution of early and pre-school education at the same time allows the parents to acquire specific competencies in parenting that enhance their parental role.

The prerequisite for achieving a high level of quality of the entire early and preschool education system is a partnership relationship of all these factors and their coordinated action following clear principles, and in child’s interest (Figure 1). Unfortunately, in practice this is often missing. For example, although both families and practitioners agree that quality partnership is extremely important for a complete and healthy development of children, with the dyad parent/family-educator/institution being the most prominent (Dewore & Bowers, 2006; Dunst & Trivette, 2010; Keen, 2007; Pirchio et al., 2013; Tolan & Woo, 2010), in practice there is resistance both from parents, as well as from educators. Parents sometimes do not like the way the institution requires them to be included in practice (having to cooperate because they were invited, direct approach, inappropriate demands on parents, etc.). Educators often due to subjective (lack of competence, lack of motivation, etc.) and objective reasons (leisure, low income, lack of understanding of the environment, etc.) resist more intensive interactions with parents.

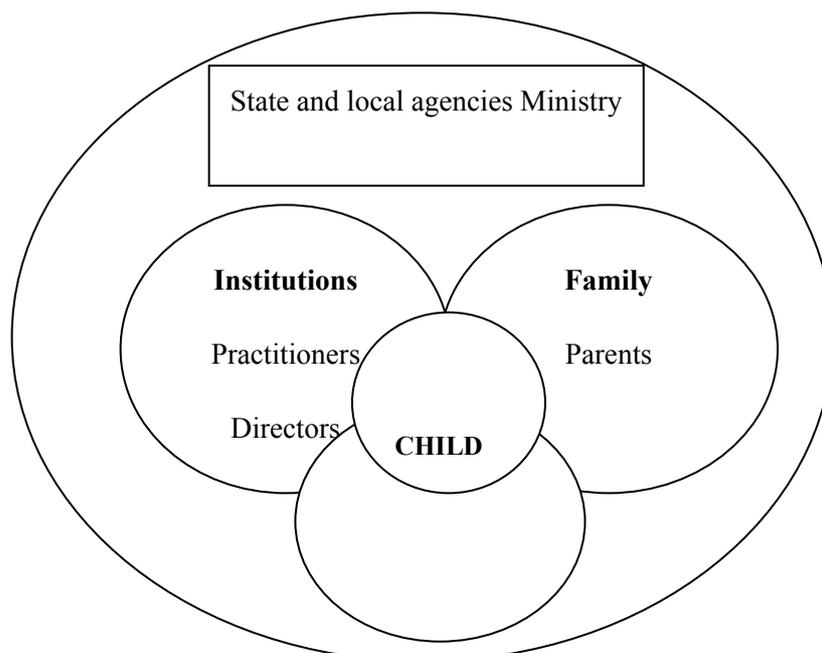


Figure 1. Stakeholders of the partnership in the interest of the child

One of the possible reasons for failing to achieve a quality partnership is the fact that practitioners, declaratively often accept the results of the latest scientific research on child’s development and learning, but at the same time,

they are not willing to be personally involved or they lack the necessary and timely support from “higher authorities” (i.e., Director of the institution, Education Agency, Ministry of Science and Technology) in order to create an appropriate context for the implementation of this knowledge into practice. Furthermore, parents who unquestionably want the best for their child most often do not have sufficient information on the achievements of the theory and practice of early and pre-school education, but also on the theoretical discourse of institutional pedagogical activities, thus often misinterpret the activities of practitioners which jeopardize their relationship. Practitioners however, because they are personally insecure or lack pedagogical competence, do nothing or almost nothing to help parents be fully informed and facilitate their understanding of complex pedagogical processes. Many similar examples corroborate the thesis on confusion and inconsistencies of the relevant factors when implementing the fundamental principles in the education of young and preschool-aged children. Why is this so? A possible answer lies in insufficiently quality partnership or differences in understanding it. What do the facts tell us?

Many authors (Albright & Weissberg, 2010; Church & Dollins, 2010; Hiatt-Michel & Hands, 2010; Shumow, 2010) emphasize the importance of quality partnerships on positive outcomes for children including their higher academic achievement but also the overall benefits. In support of this fact, Zygmunt-Fillwalk (2011, p. 84) stresses that the earlier this involvement begins and the higher the level of involvement is, the more positive outcomes are realized. Positive outcomes of family involvement in the educational institution go beyond academic results and achievements of children and have a positive impact on a child’s self-esteem, they improve behaviour at home and at school, it fosters positive attitude towards the kindergarten/school, improves interpersonal and decision-making skills (Pirchio et al., 2013). A research by Albright and Weissberg (2010) demonstrates that engagement in high-risk behaviour is less likely when adolescents perceive a strong affiliation between home and school. If we keep in mind that a good partnership provides significant benefits to a full and healthy development of the child, then the question is raised why it is absent at the very first instance, i.e., in kindergarten. It is possible that the reason lies in vague family expectations from kindergarten and vice versa, or non-existing vertical or support from other factors or different understandings of partnership. Quality partnership of all the factors responsible for the quality system of early and pre-school education can be understood as a “cooperative relationship between individuals or groups who agree to share responsibility for achieving a specific goal (Note 5)”, which is continually evolving and is continuously being improved, and includes “a broad spectrum of ideas embracing equality, consensus, harmony and joint endeavour” (Vincent, 1996, p. 3). It seems that the sharing of responsibilities is the key moment in building partnership, and it is often missing or is rather vaguely articulated.

Prerequisites for achieving quality partnership are mutual respect and appreciation, honesty and equality in the relationship, active listening, two-way open communication, flexibility, responsibility, sharing information and not judging (Dunst & Trivette, 2010; Pirchio et al., 2013) and the desire, energy and time that the participants invest in achieving a common goal, but also a number of other very personal experiences of individuals. Every quality relationship, including the partnership one in the family-school-community triad is characterized by care, effective interpersonal communication, respecting ethical principles and effective (timely and appropriate) help (OECD, 2006). Relationships built on these foundations are the basis for the development of a partnership that ensures the quality of the system and enables its steady growth. The development partnership is a dynamic category, and the partners expect an appropriate monitoring and support and concrete assistance on route to building quality institutions and the system as a whole. Quality system of early and pre-school education is the system in which all the institutions continuously work on improving quality, building their uniqueness and distinctiveness in order to optimally meet the needs of children and their families and that, as a result of the good partnership, timely receive support from the relevant factors of the narrower and wider community: faculties who educate staff, their founders (private individuals, associations and city administration) and departments of the relevant Ministry to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate programs. Understanding the developmental nature of partnership between families, institutions and communities indicates a need for a deeper reflection, analysis and research of the roles and tasks of the partners in the relationship (child-parent-practitioners-education policy-administration). Changing beliefs, values and overall philosophy of the general cultural environment commits stakeholders of the partnership to raise awareness and take more responsibility in building partnerships for the benefit of the child. However, the question is how ready and how well trained they are for it. Only competent experts (at all levels) can respond to the ever-increasing challenges of modern science and rise to the profession of early and pre-school education

### 3. Professional Competences as a Basis for Quality Professional Activities

If competence is understood as “the ability to carry out a task or resolve a problem in a professional context by bringing acquired knowledge and skills to bear” (Kelly, Grenfell, Allan, Kriza, & McEvoy, 2004), then it is assumed that in the system of early and pre-school education work those very practitioners (from educators to the director) who on a daily basis use the acquired knowledge and skills to timely respond to professional challenges. Equally high or even higher level of competence is expected from those who are in training for educational practitioners (faculties) and those creating the educational policy and supporting practitioners in their development (Ministry, Agency). The acquired competences that individuals are constantly developing, expanding or increasing are a prerequisite for high-quality professional performance at all levels. Professionalism (Note 6) in all the systems, especially in early childhood and pre-school education requires:

- a) Engaging in encouraging dialogue with others, both *within* and *outside* the field of activity in order to increase the state of knowledge through various types of observation, research and reflection,
- b) Communicating the importance of high quality care and education for young and preschool-aged children, and
- c) Constructing and monitoring compliance with guidelines for the implementation of best practice that goes beyond governmental requirements.

Professionalism includes continuing professional development as an ongoing process of maintaining current knowledge and practice, using the opportunity for professional development and engaging in the application and critical analysis of research and theory as it is applied in practice. The contemporary practice of early and pre-school education needs a competent individual at both professional and personal level. Such a professional is capable of understanding and explaining the importance of quality early and pre-school education with reference to recent scientific research and theory; he/she is an advocate of the interests of children and their families and is able to critically analyse, modify and improve his/her practice. At the same time, he/she is accepting, communicative, enterprising and open to colleagues, families and community members with whom he/she builds quality partnerships. Contemporary pedagogical challenges require a flexible, self-conscious, fast, decisive, independent, responsible, well-educated and well-informed practitioner-a manager, capable to overcome challenges “on the go”. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009, p. 37) take it a step further, stating that the modern educator should be a “knower and agent for educational and social change”. “Early childhood professionals must understand the laws and regulations that guide practice, as well as voluntary standards that exceed legal requirements. As individuals committed to improving the lives of young children and their families, early childhood professionals serve as advocates for policies and procedures that support (children’s) optimal development. Above all, professionals in the field of early childhood model high standards for ethical practice” (Note 7).

Critical reflection for the purpose of changing and improving the current situation involves asking open questions and sincerely answering them. Then, all the relevant factors should act in line with the adopted conclusions. Unfortunately, systems such as the relevant ministries, agencies, universities, and the very institutions of early and pre-school education are usually very slow and inflexible and require dozens of years to deal with the reported problems (and are often strongly influenced by the daily politics). Therefore, two fundamental questions are raised:

- 1) Are today’s educators educated in such a way that after graduation they have the necessary professional competences related to building and improving a partnership?
- 2) What changes should be introduced in the formal education system of educators and their continuing professional development so that educators are better prepared for partnership with families, but also other factors responsible for the well-functioning of the system?

Dotger and Bennett (2010, p. 129) state that “during their academic preparation, preservice teachers and future school leaders should receive foundational knowledge and skills regarding home-school partnerships” and emphasize the evident “discrepancy between what these institutions are promising to their students and what they do in practice”. It seems that the institutions that educate teachers recognize the importance of partnerships, and in practice they fail to adequately prepare them for this task, highlight Epstein and Sanders (2006). According to the results of research studies conducted in the US, 88.5% of educators suggest that during the study they “did not receive sufficient information about how to work with families in ways that promote effective communication between home and school” (Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2011, p. 84). In our region, usually only those students that take the *Partnership between families and institutions* course which is usually an elective course in their program of study, get some information on partnership with other factors, in particular, to

those outside the institution (OECD, 2006), while other students-future teachers get very little information on the topic. The question therefore is: how will those educators and teachers who did not choose this course in their program of study be prepared for the partnership with families and the wider community?

A possible way of bridging the evident gap between formal education of future educators and needs of modern practice most likely lies in reforming programs of study and adapting the programs of continuing professional development of educators and professional assistants. Reviewing and adapting programs of study should be directed at changing the status of the course *Partnership of families and institutions* (from elective into required), the name of the course so that it covers the local community, and the course content as well. In addition, radical changes should be directed towards increasing the total number of classes, changing the ratio of lectures, seminars and practice and increasing the number of practice hours so the students could acquire at least minimum skills in communicating with families and the community. It is very likely that students' and young practitioners' anxiety and worrying about and fear of contacts with families could be at least reduced, if not eliminated. "Unfortunately, anxiety, worrying and defensive attitude felt by some teachers and principals, are transferred to the families who are equally anxious, distrustful and discouraged" (Dotger & Bennett, 2010, p. 133). Such feelings do not allow the partnership to be either built or improved, and everybody, especially children, loose when it is absent.

#### 4. Conclusion

Quality partnership of all the factors in the educational process includes dialogue, negotiation of the issues stakeholders disagree on, responsibility, commitment and equality respect, active listening, acceptance of diversity, tolerance, democratic relations as a basis for building partnerships. It abolishes the practice of decision-making "from above", and supports the practice of creating theories *in* and *from* practice (Miljak, 1996; Slunjski, 2006). Comprehensively and well-educated practitioners in different domains of pedagogy are essential. One of these domains is to build and continuously improve partnerships not only with children's families, but also with all the relevant factors *in* and *outside* the institutions. A prerequisite for a well-functioning partnership (at all levels) are clearly declared value orientations and objectives, collaborative relationships based on esteem, respect and equality, communication skills, a high level of competence of all the relevant factors of the partnership and dedicated work to achieve common goals set.

Building quality partnerships of all factors should be approached systematically and raise awareness of partnership role in all instances. Furthermore, an effort should be made to raise awareness of partnership and its benefits for the child, the family, the institution and the community as a whole. An important role in sensitizing public to the need to build partnerships should take the media, as well as state policy, which should take more direct and stronger measures to promote high-quality partnerships. Education for partnership must be conducted in a partnership climate and atmosphere, because it is the only way that promoters of the partnership idea can be authentic.

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**Notes**

Note 1. Adapted from: [www.earlychildhood.virginia.gov/documents/competencies.pdf](http://www.earlychildhood.virginia.gov/documents/competencies.pdf) (Accessed July 24, 2013).

Note 2. Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December on key competencies for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC).

Note 3. NOK (The National Curriculum Framework), MZOŠ (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports), 2010.

Note 4. Adapted from: [www.earlychildhood.virginia.gov/documents/competencies.pdf](http://www.earlychildhood.virginia.gov/documents/competencies.pdf) (Accessed July 24, 2013).

Note 5. Online dictionary of terms available at [www.wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn](http://www.wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn) (Accessed: November 12, 2010).

Note 6. Adapted from: [www.earlychildhood.virginia.gov/documents/competencies.pdf](http://www.earlychildhood.virginia.gov/documents/competencies.pdf) (Accessed July 24, 2013).

Note 7. Adapted from: [www.earlychildhood.virginia.gov/documents/competencies.pdf](http://www.earlychildhood.virginia.gov/documents/competencies.pdf) (Accessed July 24, 2013).

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