Virtual training may be an effective, cost-efficient option for child educators

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Teachers and other child educators can benefit from regular professional development, but in-person training can be expensive. New research

found that virtual training can be a budget-friendly alternative—and especially effective for certain groups of educators.

The study—a collaboration between researchers at Penn State and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and published in the *International Journal of Professional Development, Learners and Learning*—found that educators who took a virtual training reported feeling more confident in their abilities to implement practices shown to support positive youth development.

In particular, after-school providers who did not have a four-year degree and were relatively new to teaching experienced the most growth in their feelings of self-efficacy.

Co-author Benjamin Bayly, assistant professor in family studies, child, and youth development in the College of Agricultural Sciences, said the work suggests that virtual professional development has the potential to be an effective way to reach a vast audience of educators who otherwise may not have the opportunity to participate in these trainings.

"Early care and education programs are often limited in financial resources and their workforce is often stretched thin, making it difficult to participate in professional development," Bayly said. "Virtual professional development represents an alternative that is low cost and can be completed on teachers' own time."

Education quality has a direct impact on children's development, the researchers said, and has been shown to predict future academic success and social and emotional well-being for children of all ages.

For teachers and other educators to provide high-quality educational experiences, the researchers said it's important they are trained in and feel confident implementing the most up-to-date pedagogical theories

and best practices in their classrooms. This can be achieved through professional development, traditionally completed in person.

For example, an early care and education program may bring in an outside expert to conduct a workshop with the aim of improved instructional and emotional support in the classroom.

"However, given the high rate of turnover in early care and [education programs](link), these teachers may leave and be replaced by new teachers who have not completed the workshop," Bayly said. "It may not be feasible for the program to continuously bring in an outside expert to train teachers every time new teachers come on board."

As an alternative, training can be done in an online setting. Penn State Extension, for example, offers virtual evidence-informed professional development to early care and education and youth-development professionals to improve the quality of their care and educational practices through its program, Better Kid Care.

"All of Better Kid Care's courses are on-demand, meaning professionals can take the course whenever they want," Bayly said. "The vast majority of the courses offered by Better Kid Care are designed to take two hours and are approved for professional development credits in 49 states."

But while virtual training can reach a larger audience and be more cost effective than in-person professional development, research on its effectiveness has remained mixed. Bayly said he and the rest of the research team wanted to better evaluate the impact of virtual training and whether certain groups may benefit more than others.

For the study, the researchers collected data from 3,535 educators accessing positive youth development courses through Better Kid Care. Educators varied in their specific roles, the ages of children they worked

with, the level of their own education and how many years of experience they had.

After completing the virtual course, educators completed a post-test that asked them questions about what they had just learned, as well as how they would have responded to those same questions before taking the training. This was designed to assess changes in the participants' learning.

Participants also were asked to rank how confident they felt in their ability to apply learnings from the course, for example, "When working with children and youth, I can recognize their individual differences and make changes to activities to meet these differences."

Taken together, the researchers said the study's findings suggest that on-demand professional development is a promising way to increase educators' self-efficacy, but the courses may have different impacts depending on factors such as education level, role and experience.

Bayly said after-school providers without a four-year degree appear to have benefited the most from the virtual training because they were relatively new to the field and likely had not received a comparable amount of training compared to the other educators who completed the course.

"Also, because the courses were dedicated to supporting positive youth development, it is likely that the content resonated with them, which has been shown to impact participants' engagement and the effectiveness of the professional development opportunity," Bayly said.

The researchers said because there is great variability in the quality of virtual professional development—and as a result, great variability in the effectiveness of the trainings—additional studies should continue to

evaluate the effectiveness of virtual professional development, both on its own and in comparison to in-person professional development and hybrid models.

More information: Benjamin L. Bayly et al, Who benefits and when? Understanding differential treatment effects of an online professional development program, *International Journal of Professional Development, Learners and Learning* (2024). DOI: 10.30935/ijpdll/14148

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