CHAPTER 1

Introduction

An Early Educator for the 21st Century

Melinda, the director of the Explorations Early Learning Center, pokes her head into the PreK room during one of her morning walk-throughs of the Center. She sees Jada, a second-year teacher, greeting children and helping them pull off their hats and mittens. The classroom is already abuzz with chatter and movement. Melinda is reminded of last week's Professional Learning Community meeting, where Jada had verbally expressed some frustration over implementing the new changes in the curriculum. "I wonder how Jada is doing," Melinda thinks to herself. "I know she has been struggling with managing her son's asthma. She looks tired." As Melinda looks around and takes in the activity in the room, she pauses and considers Jada's class this year; she has a group that feels especially "young," with several children exhibiting consistently challenging behaviors. Jada is also only in her second year of teaching, still learning about effective management strategies. Melinda greets Jada with a smile and a wave. Jada ekes out a smile and says, "Good morning!" as children tumble out of their coats toward the breakfast awaiting them. "What can I do to better support the teaching and learning in this room?" Melinda wonders, as she steps out to greet the next classroom of children and educators.

Today's early education classroom is a busy and bustling place. Like Melinda at the Explorations Early Learning Center, early education leaders across the nation strive to improve the learning experiences at their sites. They make daily leadership decisions that influence the extent to which children are provided high-quality learning opportunities and experiences. They are responsible for creating a setting that fosters the development of cognitive,

emotional, and relational skills. But early education leaders also have a significant responsibility to attend to the educators, like Jada and her colleagues, in these dynamic real-life settings. In fact, their decisions aimed at promoting children's healthy development often have the potential to likewise promote the professional skills and competencies of the early educator. When supported by core knowledge about the science of adult and child learning and a robust understanding of what makes for a high-quality learning environment, the daily leadership decisions made by Melinda and her peers across the nation can support enhanced professional knowledge and develop the capacity among educators and teaching teams to produce teaching and learning that leads to positive outcomes. Melinda and her peers—today's early education leaders—find themselves navigating their professional work in the context of dramatic changes over the last several decades.

In this chapter, we examine these changes, synthesizing both the changes in our early childhood populations and emerging research on the importance of early education and care for today's children and families. We consider the complexity of the early educator role, and we maintain that, especially in light of recent policy changes and the increasing expectations placed on these educators, the field will only improve *if we consider their professional needs as an essential part of any leadership or reform strategy*. In other words, achieving higher-quality learning environments for children means developing educator capacity—genuinely attending to the adults' skills and knowledge. We close the chapter by explaining our work and our approach to professional learning for the 21st-century early educator, along the way providing a road map to guide your reading.

What Is Today's Landscape of Early Education and Care?

The concept and purpose of early education and care has shifted tremendously from when it was first brought to the national stage. Stemming from the need to provide nonparental care for young children during the Great Depression and World War II, early programs provided options for our most impoverished and socioeconomically vulnerable children (Phillips, 2016). As part of the War on Poverty's effort to provide an early boost for at-risk children, Head Start was established in the 1960s. Since then, substantial growth in the number of families with two working parents has driven a much greater need for child care across all income levels, and the number of children in early education and care settings has increased exponentially. Today, 6 out of every 10 children in America attend some type of early education program (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Over the last decade, with federal support, the nation has begun to reconsider the traditional model of child care, coming to view it as early education—a means of developing children's minds and their capacities for learning. This shift in perspective is due in part to a dramatic expansion in the science of early learning and development; research focusing on the cognitive, social, and emotional development of young children has identified the long-term positive impacts of high-quality early education, highlighting the importance of these experiences at this critical stage of development (Barnett, 1995; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2017). The new conceptualization of the model corresponds as well with an emerging science of stress and adversity and with demographic changes in the childhood population. That is, today's young children are more linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse than ever before. They are also faced with challenges that have lasting negative effects on their learning and growth (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). For example, it is estimated that nearly 45% of children younger than 5 currently live in low-income households (Grant, Gracy, Goldsmith, Shapiro, & Redlener, 2013), and across all income levels, one in four children experience some type of significant adverse experience (e.g., parental divorce/separation, emotional or physical neglect or abuse). Consequently, access to high-quality early education has been shown to be a key strategy for buffering the effects of stress and adversity, ultimately better preparing all children, even the most vulnerable, for future success in school and life.

In response to these research insights and population changes, federal, state, and community agencies across the nation have ambitiously expanded public options for early education. States, cities, and towns nationwide are actively planning their early education and care strategies, even as conversations about universal prekindergarten abound.

This increased attention to early education represents significant opportunities and substantial challenges. Perhaps the most important challenge is that while access to the early education system is expanding, there is also a need for improvements in quality. For example, returning to the statistic that approximately 6 out of 10 children attend some type of early education program, we note only two or three of those six children attend a high-quality program (Barnett & Nores, 2012). In effect, today's challenge is to improve the quality of early education programs even as access to them continues to grow. After all, it is more than just *access* that counts; the body of evidence underscores that the *quality* of early learning environments, whether within the home, school, or community, and the relationships that are created in these environments, are fundamental to nurturing a healthy child (Carlock, 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013; Maurer & Brackett, 2004; Roeser, Skinner, Beers & Jennings, 2012).

What Are the Features
of High-Quality Early Learning Environments?

As we anticipate that improvements in these programs will be achieved at scale, how, exactly, do we describe high-quality early learning environments? Well, we understand them to be calm, predictable settings with established routines, where young children regularly engage in rich, stimulating learning experiences that promote cognitive development while building social and emotional skills. And we know that underlying all of them are warm, responsive adult–child relationships. In essence, high-quality learning environments share two fundamental characteristics. First, the environment is *rigorous*. There is a focus on stimulating and accumulating learning experiences that actively build and develop cognitive and social–emotional skills. Children are engaged in activities that center on developing understanding and language simultaneously. And second, the environment is *regulated*. It is routine oriented and predictable; it centers on the flexible, but consistent use of routines, appropriate setting of limits, and warm, responsive adult–child relationships.

In using the terms *rigorous* and *regulated*, we believe we are afforded an opportunity and a necessity to refine—or even redefine—what rigorous means in early education. We would challenge the assumption that "rigor" is synonymous with academics or an academic focus at the expense of the opportunity for discovery and exploration, and we would likewise suggest that all children deserve exposure to academic concepts and ideas in their learning environment. At its core, a rigorous early learning setting is one that engages children with stimulating content that grows over time into accumulated knowledge. In this environment, children are developing their social–emotional and academic competencies *simultaneously,* and educators are supporting them with instructional practices that are deliberately integrated.

This concept of an integrated approach to educating young children is not new to early education leaders and teachers. While many early education settings have long espoused the need to develop the whole child, there are two ways in which the field continues to fall short in implementation. First, in the typical classroom, there tend to be solid lessons and activities throughout the day that aim to build key skills. But these are often independent of one another; in other words, a lot of instruction is happening, but the lessons aren't aligned and don't *add up* to deep learning around a given topic. These lessons and activities are not sufficiently connected and integrated to transform children's development. For example, a classroom might focus for 20 minutes on a numeracy skill and then switch to a play-based activity, like the drama center, and then later engage in story time on the carpet. Each of these activities is important in and of itself, but without a clear through-line between them there are missed opportunities. Second, as also becomes clear,

the instructional design is such that the goal of each lesson or activity is most often linked to a single developmental domain, such as language, literacy, and/or social–emotional competencies.

What is becoming clearer from research, however, is that within our children, each area of development influences the other in profound and even unexpected ways; the evidence shows that social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic skills and competencies are intertwined in the brain and in behavior, and that interventions focused on integration show stronger effects than those targeting a single area. Therefore, while we vshould ensure that children have an opportunity to experience many different kinds of activities and lessons, the classroom scenario we have just described does not get us to the rigor that is needed and consistent with what we know from the latest findings about early learning, nor does latching on to fads like "academic-oriented" or "play-based" programs. Simply put, it is not enough to just make time for academics and social–emotional learning; understanding the core processes at work for children means embedding elements of these developmental domains within all learning.

What does this look like in a rigorous early learning classroom—where the competency building in the developmental domains is not only connected, but more important, *integrated*? While we address this question in detail in the chapters that follow, for now, imagine a classroom where the goals are to provide direct instruction and intensive support to strengthen literacy skills (e.g., vocabulary) and social–emotional competencies (e.g., emotion management, social skills). To support these goals, the educator creates a curriculum with units of study that are organized around a big idea (e.g., "the world around us") and that include detailed plans for the unit and for its specific lessons—and there are text sets that match the units of study. Integration is achieved when these rich texts (and their corresponding lesson goals) become a platform for discussing academic concepts and the ideas that arise from open-ended questions *and* from promoting language development, self-reflection, and empathy. Lessons are organized around these dual goals. For example, the educator comes prepared with open-ended questions to ask the children so that they explore the book's world, consider the alternative perspectives of the characters, and reflect on their own feelings. At the same time, she is cultivating children's consciousness of language *and* of their feelings and the feelings of others. Reflecting what we know from research, the underlying processes the educator is using in this scenario include exposing children to rich language, building emotional awareness, and cultivating strong teacher–child relationships, all of which lay the foundation for later learning and development.

Establishing rigorous and regulated environments for our youngest learners rests on the shoulders of our early educators, as well as on the early education leaders who support these adults. Getting to this rigorous, high-quality

early learning environment that is validated by the latest science means bolstering core knowledge and competencies among educators of young children and providing them with corresponding tools and structures that lay the foundation. As we look to early education as a foundational strategy for giving all children a strong start, one that boosts their early learning and development, we must focus on the cornerstone of the learning environment—the educator—and in many ways, the central determinant of quality. We turn now to the early educator and consider the complexity of that role within today's landscape. From there, we address what all of this means for effective leadership and improvement efforts.

The Professional Demands on Today's Early Educator

To cultivate and sustain a rigorous, regulated early learning experience, the educator must undertake the daily physical, emotional, and mental labor required to provide a stimulating, engaging, and nurturing environment—all while managing challenging behaviors and responding to unpredictability. Across the nation, policymakers and community leaders, along with children and their families, depend on early educators to deliver on this promise, day after day, year after year.

Specifically, by today's standards, the educator is responsible for providing content-rich learning experiences for children, while supporting the social–emotional development that is foundational to learning, and, in turn, cultivating the positive relationships that serve as the basis for healthy development (Joseph & Strain, 2004). Educators must have the tools to model positive behaviors and develop nurturing environments where children feel safe and secure, and where there are routines that give shape to the day's schedule and activities. This is especially challenging given that children this age are only just learning about building relationships and expressing feelings, and are often emotionally turbulent. At the same time, children are physically active, inquisitive, and not yet self-sufficient for many of their basic needs, heightening demands on the adult, who must manage her own emotions and behavior, and maintain calm, as she cultivates a nurturing environment. On a daily basis, drawing on key skills and competencies (as noted parenthetically below), the effective early educator is

- thoughtful about planning but also flexible enough to adjust plans (executive functions);
- emotionally regulated and adaptable in order to adjust her responses to meet challenging situations, and able to model ways to calm down and deescalate (self-regulation strategies);
- attuned to how each child's behavior and development reflects individual

experiences and relates to the child's strengths and weaknesses—while also understanding how adults' and children's behaviors influence one another (emotion awareness and relational skills);

- able to read and understand social cues, manage conflict, and maintain high-quality relationships with children and coworkers (relational skills); and

- able to use talk in intentional and specific ways to promote learning and positive classroom management.

The bottom line is that good teaching places huge demands on the educator in terms of skills and stamina. We might go so far as to say that the early childhood classroom is one of the most taxing professional settings, in the sense of testing the adult's ability to manage her own emotions and behavior. Yet just as the quality of early education programs does not meet our expectations, the quality of our professional development model does not currently match the high expectations we have for these educators. Investments in early educators' professional supports and knowledge, and ultimately working conditions, have not kept pace with their investments in our children, nor have these investments kept pace with what the science of early learning and development and the science of adult learning and of improvement tells us about what is needed.

As we look to early education as a foundational strategy for boosting early learning and development—and as we bear in mind its great potential—we must redouble our efforts to support educators professionally. One way to do this is to focus on key competencies that early educators need in order to cultivate and sustain a high-quality learning environment, meanwhile meeting their daily work challenges and the needs of an increasingly diverse population of children, including those facing stress and adversity. And getting there involves having strong leadership and professional supports—in many respects, a new model of professional development that will support the early educator in ways that are meaningful and lasting.

21st-Century Professional Learning in Early Education: The Inspiration for This Book

In most discussions about improving the quality of early education, and in the designs of many plans and strategies to improve practice, the paradox is this: There is a tendency to skip over the adults and focus overwhelmingly on the children, without considering educator capacity and needs. This is evident in the questions we typically ask: What kind of curriculum would be best for children? What is the right philosophy for classroom management? How do we ensure that we are exposing children to different cultures? What is our

plan for maximizing outside time during the winter months? Yet, of course, the success of these plans and decisions depends almost entirely on the educator's skills and competencies to create and sustain the learning environment, while simultaneously implementing and integrating any new specific initiative or program. Therefore, our own approach to improving the quality of practice, drawn from the science of early learning and development and adult learning and development has taken an exclusively adult-focused strategy. Our work recognizes the needs (skills and knowledge) of the educator and responds to these needs with a strategic, meaningful, and competency-based approach to professional development.

The content of this book is informed, in part, by our 3-year collaboration with educators at early education centers in two urban cities. The resulting professional learning program, *The Rigorous and Regulated Learning Environment,* embodies the methods discussed throughout this book. Designed to provide professional learning to early educators that is intensive, collaborative, and directly linked to classroom practice and site-level data, our approach focuses on four key educator competencies: executive functions, emotion regulation, relationship cultivation, and the use of talk for early learning.

The model we used comprised (1) site-based, weekly, 1-hour workshops that involved discussions anchored in case studies, reflective exercises, and the co-construction of professional practices and (2) classroom-based coaching sessions during which educators applied new practices and reflected on their use. By guiding these educators to notice and manage their own executive functions, emotions, and interpersonal relationships, we supported them in becoming more attuned to the learning environment and the reciprocity between their own emotion management and that of the children. Thus they came away with an enhanced understanding of the learning environment as a *system* of relationships and interactions. Additionally, as educators increased their capacities to create positive cycles of classroom interactions, we found that they were more inclined to embrace the professional learning approach. Enthusiastic about their own collaborative, professional work, they then engaged in professional learning communities to continue the discussions, learning from one another, while simultaneously cultivating high-quality early learning experiences and environments for their learners.

Throughout the book, we refer to our experiences working with early educators participating in the approach, and share the tools and strategies we used to develop their capabilities. While the majority of this work has been completed, some of it is ongoing, as we begin to share our learning with stakeholders in a variety of domains. As you read, you will see artifacts of our collaboration with early educators, and we hope that these descriptions and resources help you to link our work with endeavors at your site.

Our Case Setting: The Explorations Early Learning Center

Throughout the book, we visit the Explorations Early Learning Center, which is a fictional place, but a case setting that is grounded in our collective experiences in the early education field, particularly at sites serving high numbers of children facing stress and adversity. In each of the book's chapters, we include an introductory vignette that serves as a springboard for the discussion, as well as a lens through which to view and experience the content. Similar to the vignette at the opening of this chapter, the beginnings of subsequent chapters explore the joys and frustrations experienced in a typical early education setting, taking into account the stress that may come with working closely with other adults in what can often be chaotic circumstances, the energy and planning necessary to be both an early educator and an early education leader, the balancing of behavioral expectations with learning expectations, and the complexity of designing meaningful professional development.

The director of the Explorations Early Learning Center, Melinda, is motivated to invest in the educators at the center and, as a result, engages them in professional development experiences centered on collaboration and the increased use of classroom talk. Like many early education leaders, Melinda gathers and looks for patterns in site-level data to make improvements at the center. Still, she struggles with being an agent of meaningful change, and while she wants to best support the teaching and learning at the center, she experiences both optimism and uncertainty—the latter from being bogged down with daily operations, including compliance and regulation processes. Alongside Melinda, we look into professional moments with Jada, a prekindergarten teacher; Maria, Jada's co-teacher; and Karen, a Professional Learning Community facilitator and coach. The cases are based on actual moments we have witnessed in the field that we hope will provide you with connections to experiences in your own work.

The Book's Road Map

In the chapters that follow, we describe a new approach to professional development and include a set of strategies for improving the quality of early education settings. Written as a guide for leaders in early education—from coaches, to school leaders, to policymakers—this book supports improved teaching and learning in these settings by providing concrete and specific on-the-ground resources. Our intention is to help guide your strategic decision making in a user-friendly way that has the potential to directly help the educators at your site.

As Figure 1.1 shows, the book is organized into two main sections. In Part I, we focus on the adult competencies that are required for cultivating a rich, nurturing, and high-quality early learning environment. We call these competencies *cornerstone educator competencies* because they support educators' success, as well as children's learning and development (see Figure 1.2). If early educators can develop awareness of, monitor, and effectively incorporate aspects of these competencies into their work (through leaders' strategic vision and support for effective professional learning), based on what we know from current research, children's outcomes are very likely to improve.

Each of the chapters in Part I describes and discusses the educator competencies that contribute to prosocial, emotionally supportive, and cognitively stimulating learning environments (see Figure 1.3). We offer tools and
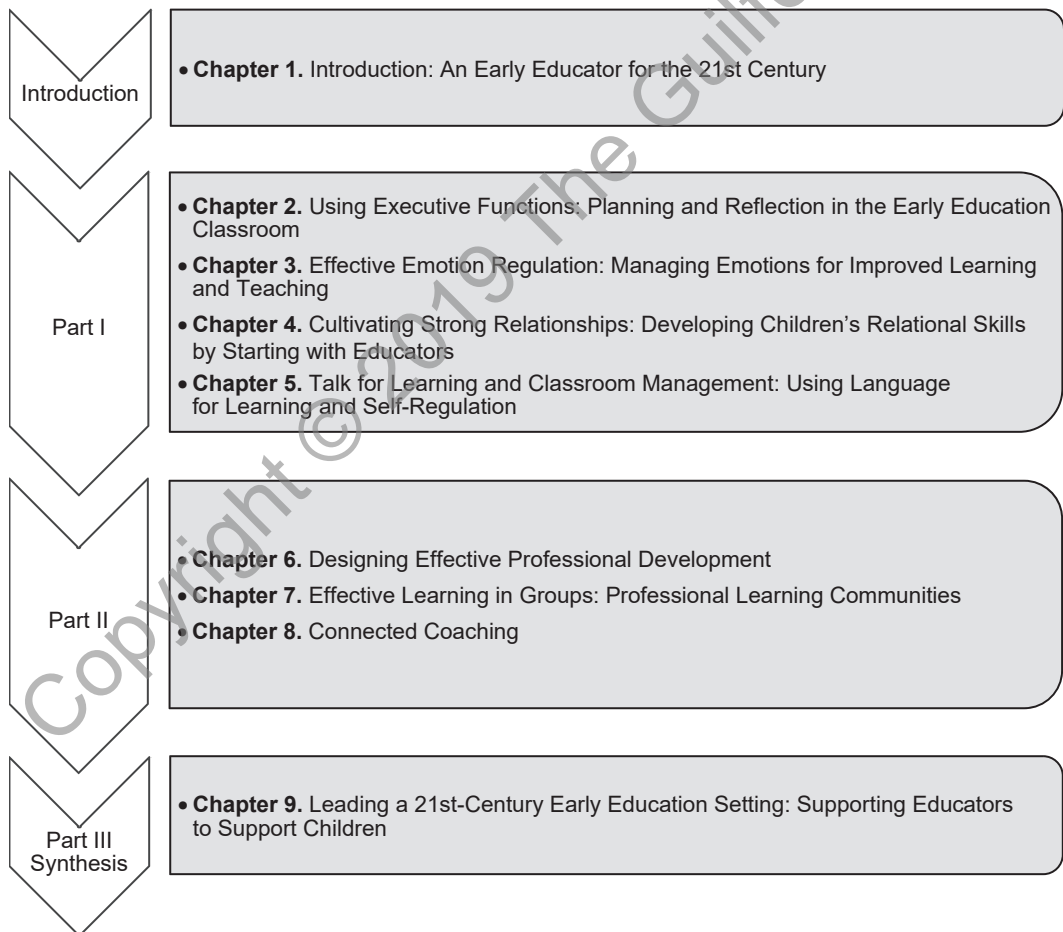
Introduction

- **Chapter 1.** Introduction: An Early Educator for the 21st Century

Part I

- **Chapter 2.** Using Executive Functions: Planning and Reflection in the Early Education Classroom
- **Chapter 3.** Effective Emotion Regulation: Managing Emotions for Improved Learning and Teaching
- **Chapter 4.** Cultivating Strong Relationships: Developing Children's Relational Skills by Starting with Educators
- **Chapter 5.** Talk for Learning and Classroom Management: Using Language for Learning and Self-Regulation

Part II

- **Chapter 6.** Designing Effective Professional Development
- **Chapter 7.** Effective Learning in Groups: Professional Learning Communities
- **Chapter 8.** Connected Coaching

Part III Synthesis

- **Chapter 9.** Leading a 21st-Century Early Education Setting: Supporting Educators to Support Children
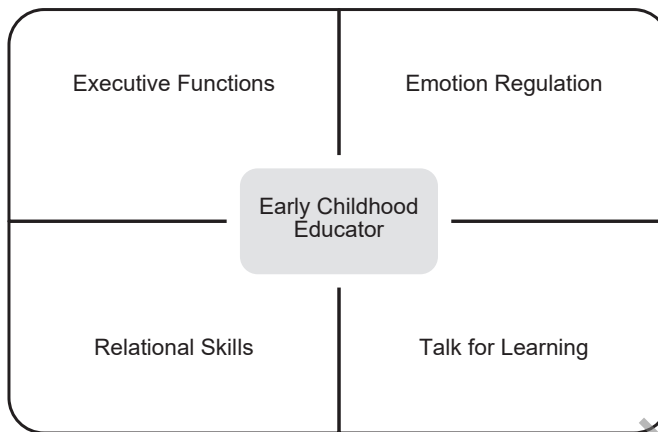
FIGURE 1.1. A road map for this book.

FIGURE 1.2. Early educator competencies discussed in Part I.

strategies to support early educators' use of executive-function strategies (see Chapter 2) and highlight instructional planning and reflection. We discuss what is involved in effective emotion regulation (see Chapter 3), address its impact on teaching and learning, and discuss practical strategies for emotion awareness and emotion management. We then focus on the importance of building strong relationships, starting with professional relationships, by identifying practical strategies for the on-site development of this educator competency (see Chapter 4). Finally, we define and discuss *talk for learning,* a strategy that enhances both early learning and classroom management, and

Executive Functions (Chapter 2)	**Emotion Regulation** (Chapter 3)	**Relational Skills** (Chapter 4)	**Talk for Learning** (Chapter 5)
• Planning • Focusing and following through • Using several skills at once • Reflecting • Thinking flexibly	• Emotion awareness and understanding • Emotion modeling (expression and labeling) • Emotion management (self and others)	• Perspective taking and responding empathically • Understanding social cues and behaviors • Managing conflict and behaviors (self and children) • Collaborating and cooperating with adults	• Using books as anchors • Asking open-ended questions • Prompting extended conversations • Using praise and positive language

FIGURE 1.3. Early educator competencies outlined by chapter.

Professional
Learning
Communities

Early educator
competencies

Connected
Coaching

Environment
characterized by
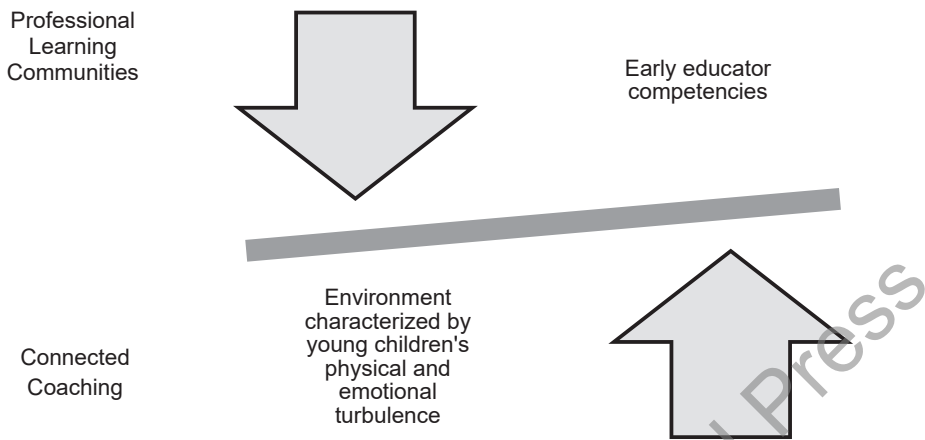young children's
physical and
emotional
turbulence

FIGURE 1.4. Promising professional development structures to support the educator within the early education environment, discussed in Part II.

provide strategies for shaping classroom talk to benefit children *and* educators (see Chapter 5).

In Part II, we discuss the ways in which leaders can cultivate these cornerstone educator competencies through professional development. We discuss the need for shifting professional development strategies and structures to encompass a 21st-century model of professional learning, and we consider the formats and approaches that have the highest impact for capacity building (Chapter 6). Included in this approach are two models of professional development: professional learning communities (Chapter 7) and connected coaching (Chapter 8). We also delve into the strategies and tools that are needed to integrate these structures into site-based professional learning (see Figure 1.4).

Part III features the concluding chapter (Chapter 9), which provides an opportunity for early education leaders to synthesize the content in Parts I and II and take the next steps toward directly applying learning at the site level. We discuss the role of the leader in establishing a culture of reflection and inquiry, and we support leaders in designing and rolling out a professional development system that is responsive to site-level needs. We recognize common pitfalls and discuss the problems encountered, and we offer resources for sustained capacity building.

Strategies, protocols, and additional resources are embedded throughout the book, providing practical tools for application in the field. At the conclusion of each chapter, we include a self-study section to support leaders in "taking the pulse" of their setting in order to determine appropriate and actionable next steps—at a single site or a network of sites.